

A woman in a purple dress and straw hat stands in a field, looking towards the right. The background is a soft-focus landscape with green grass and a hazy sky.

His
Choice
of a
Wife

HEATHER
MOLL

His Choice of a Wife

A VARIATION OF JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND
PREJUDICE

HEATHER MOLL



EXCESSIVELY
DIVERTED
PRESS

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*For John,
who will always be the creation I am the proudest of.*

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Chapter One

Elizabeth Bennet wandered the grove with tears on her cheeks as she clutched Mr Darcy's letter. While she still felt indignant at the style of his proposal, she had compassion for his disappointed feelings. It was gratifying to have inspired so strong an affection, however unconsciously done. The shock of Mr Darcy being in love with her, and anger toward herself for her poor conduct, left her too fatigued to continue her walk.

I was so mistaken about his character.

In the unlikely event she ever saw Mr Darcy again, she would make it clear to him that she was ashamed of her despicable actions. Her vanity, wounded six months ago, had prejudiced her against him so much that she rewarded an unscrupulous man with her favour and misjudged a good one.

On her way back to the parsonage, Elizabeth reviewed her conversations and debates with Mr Darcy. She *had* been unfair to him, no matter how improper his pride. She was surprised to realise he was her match in intelligence and wit, and she wondered if he had appreciated her for being a lively woman who never flattered him. Perhaps he had stared at her not because he found fault with her appearance or manners, but because he had admired her all along.

When she entered the house, she paused in alarm as she recognised Mr Darcy's and Colonel Fitzwilliam's voices through the drawing room door. She had not dreamed it possible she would encounter him again. How could he greet her civilly after what they said to one another last night? More

importantly, how could she communicate to him across Charlotte's sitting room, and in the presence of others, that she knew she had misjudged him?

She was ashamed of herself. And for that, her self-imposed punishment would be to walk into the room and find a way to tell Fitzwilliam Darcy that, although she did not regret refusing his proposal, she regretted her treatment of him. She would also leave him with no misgivings of her new, low opinion of Wickham.

With a sigh, and with no expectation of pleasure, Elizabeth walked into the drawing room, determined to correct one aspect of their many misunderstandings before she forever shut the door on their acquaintance.

DARCY CONSIDERED HIMSELF TO BE A STRICT OBSERVER OF THE proprieties of polite society, and civility called for him to visit the ladies of the parsonage before departing for London tomorrow. Of course, he had suggested to Fitzwilliam this precise time to call because he knew Elizabeth would still be in the grove and he could avoid her.

Did his letter make her think better of him? Sighing, he looked out the window at the path leading from the lane. Darcy felt his heart stop. There was Elizabeth, head downcast, clutching sheets of paper in her right hand as she wiped her cheeks with her left. He was relieved to see her moved by his words. It implied that she believed him—that she thought on her behaviour with regret. But what of his own?

His own regrets had prevented him, until now, from considering her criticisms. Had he, in truth, allowed conceit to rule his every interaction? She had held a mirror up to his conduct, and Darcy was not wholly pleased with the reflected image.

He was polite but rarely attentive to others' interests or desires. Darcy felt sick to his stomach as he realised that not only had he failed to compliment the woman he loved, but he insulted her by nearly every means imaginable. He was ashamed of the lack of respect he showed to those outside his

own circle and to the family of the woman he had proposed to. Elizabeth Bennet would never be his bride now.

She was not expecting my addresses. On the contrary, she has disliked me these many months.

Something other than Wickham's malevolence and his own interference regarding Bingley and Miss Bennet must have made her decided against him. Her heartless words stayed with him: that she had not known him a month before she felt he was the last man in the world whom she could marry.

"Tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me." Elizabeth must have overheard his remark at the Meryton assembly. Darcy suppressed a groan. He thought meanly not only of others, and their sense of worth compared to his own, but of the woman he had wanted to make his wife. It was little wonder she refused him.

When had she become *Elizabeth* in his mind? She had been Miss Elizabeth Bennet when he was trying to convince himself of her unworthiness, but since seeing her again in Kent, she was his *dearest Elizabeth* in every waking moment. He may have written in his letter that he had no intention of dwelling on his wish to marry her, but now, with his anger abated, Darcy could not deny the depth of his continuing attachment.

Is there any reason to hope that she could someday return my affections? Or should he gather what remained of his dignity and forget her?

The front door opened and closed; Elizabeth would enter the drawing room at any moment. He would show her, by every civility in his power, that he did not resent her and that he would attend to her reproofs. By some means, he had to ask for her forgiveness, and he had to do so in the company of his cousin, Mrs Collins, and her sister.

He schooled his features with a command of countenance that he hoped would mask his inner turmoil and rose as Elizabeth entered the room.

“WHY, ELIZA,” SAID CHARLOTTE, “I DID NOT EXPECT YOU home for some time!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam’s countenance brightened as Elizabeth sat. “We despaired of seeing you, Miss Bennet. I was almost resolved to walk after you until you could be found. Will you miss your morning rambles at Rosings after you return home?”

She could not help but look at Mr Darcy at the mention of early morning walks and was met with only a solemn stare. “I often prefer to be out of doors, and the company in Hertfordshire will certainly not be the same as here in Kent.”

“At least the militia will still be encamped near Meryton when we return,” Maria Lucas said. “The officers offer us lively society, do they not?”

Mr Darcy’s face turned white. Did he expect her to extol Wickham’s virtues again? She could disavow him of that notion easily enough. “For myself, I am pleased the regiment is leaving in May and we shall once again enjoy the companionship of only our dear neighbours.”

His expression now looked incredulous. “You are pleased to see the regiment removed from Meryton?”

“That is correct,” she said, meeting his eye. “While I found the officers diverting, my opinion of them has changed. It must be the great distance between Kent and Hertfordshire. I was too hasty in preferring their mere appearance of happy manners to our long-established friends in the neighbourhood.”

Mr Darcy had been leaning forward in his chair, and at this, he sat back and exhaled.

Elizabeth felt exquisite relief. Mr Darcy must understand she was ashamed of both her misjudgement of him and her former—and now contemptible—approval of Wickham. Mr Darcy was entirely blameless in regard to Wickham, although she still harboured some resentment over his interference with Mr Bingley. He might have been unconscious of her sister’s feelings, but he ought not to have separated them.

After a stretch of silence, where Mr Darcy stared at the carpet, Charlotte asked him if he was looking forward to being in London.

He blinked and forced himself into attention. “I happily anticipate reuniting with my sister whom I have not seen since February. Miss Bennet, is your elder sister still in town?”

Elizabeth started at being addressed so pleasantly. “My sister is staying with my mother’s relations—near *Cheapside*.” Mr Darcy looked embarrassed, and she instantly regretted emphasising the direction. She had no reason to antagonise him further.

“May I deliver your letters to your sister?” he asked, smiling. “I return to London tomorrow and am at liberty the next day to call on her on your behalf.”

Charlotte clattered her teacup against its saucer; Elizabeth stared in silence. Why would he call on her family after insulting her inferior connexions when he offered her his hand?

“I did not take proper leave of your family when I departed Hertfordshire,” he continued, “and I would like the opportunity to be of service to them.”

Elizabeth felt agitated beyond expression. He would call specifically on Jane after he had admitted she was not a suitable wife for Mr Bingley? “I am afraid my letters are unfinished.”

“I would be happy to retrieve them in the morning. I have no plans in town tomorrow, so it is of little consequence if we need to wait for you to complete them. Indeed, I am quite at my leisure until Tuesday when Bingley returns.”

He gave her a pointed look that she understood at once: he regretted his interference and would tell Mr Bingley that he called at Gracechurch Street to deliver her letter to Jane. Then Mr Bingley would know Jane was in town, and perhaps they would be reunited. “Thank you. That is kind of you.”

“I am glad to help.”

There was an unfamiliar nervousness in his manner. He normally commanded presence and confidence. Could Mr Darcy still hope for her good opinion? For a moment, she wondered whether it was in her power to make him happy. Even from the beginning of their acquaintance, something about him had made her intensely aware of him.

All conversation ended when Mr Collins rushed in, professing his lengthy apologies at having been kept so long by his illustrious patroness to have nearly missed the gentlemen's call. With a shared glance, the cousins decided to depart, and they were gone before Elizabeth had the chance to speak again about Mr Bingley.



ELIZABETH SAW MR DARCY PACING BY THE GATE THE following morning, and he appeared to be deep in reflection. He raised his head when he heard her approach. His dark eyes looked troubled, the set of his shoulders was tense, and it was plain that he had slept poorly, if at all, during the last two nights.

Elizabeth almost regretted walking out to find him to give him her letters to avoid having another awkward drawing room encounter.

“Do you have your letters with you?” he asked.

“Yes, I brought them.” Elizabeth handed them to him, and the silence stretched.

Their awkward silence persisted until he asked in a rush, “Did reading my letter make you think better of me?”

His question seemed impulsive and not conducive to a hasty parting. If they were to talk about it all, it would be easier to walk. They could at least avoid looking into each other's eyes when they strolled side by side.

“I was astonished—no, horrified—by your account. I behaved despicably, and I am ashamed of myself.”

“I know not of what he particularly accused me, but Mr Wickham has acted with a total want of principle for his entire life. You are neither the first—nor the last, I fear—to be taken in. I am only sorry for the tender sentiments he created.”

Did he think she was in love with Wickham? “Mr Wickham has not touched my heart,” she whispered.

Mr Darcy nodded but was silent. Much might have been said, but she hardly knew what. Did he know how much he had hurt Jane, and his friend, as well? Even though he seemed ready to atone, she felt so angry at his interference. Not only that, he had dismissed her as scarcely tolerable the moment he first laid eyes on her, ruined her entire opinion of him, and then imagined himself so much in love with her that he asked her to marry him. She felt such a torrid mix of dismay, confusion, embarrassment, and fury just walking alongside him.

Before he could ask another question and discompose her, she said, “I was surprised you offered to visit my relations. Mr Bingley, I hope, will have no trouble calling on Jane in such a part of London after you tell him she is there. Jane’s love for Mr Bingley is as strong as it was in November, and I am sure Mr Bingley’s feelings are the same. They would have been wed by now but for your interference. Theirs is a love you should emulate whenever you *really* fall in love, as I suspect resentment and embarrassment have driven away the brief regard for me that, for so long, you did not wish to acknowledge.”

It took her a moment to notice Mr Darcy had stopped walking. He stared at her, mouth slightly open and with no small amount of anger in his eyes. He swiftly crossed the distance between them and stood closer to her than propriety would allow.

“The serenity of your sister’s countenance in her every interaction with my friend led me to believe that her heart was not touched!” he cried. “And how can you argue that Bingley would certainly have married your sister? He was persuaded to leave because he relied more upon *my* judgment than his own.

Did he once call at Longbourn to see your sister? Is that the behaviour of a man ready to offer his hand?

“Their affection was out of the growth of a few weeks in which they were in mixed company. You and I spent those weeks in similar activities with the addition of several rousing debates while we resided in the same house. Yet you distrust that *I* formed an enduring attachment even though we also spent weeks together here? We walked through the park nearly every morning together! Bingley is often in and out of love, whereas I—”

Mr Darcy broke off, likely noticing her slackened jaw.

In one moment, she had the precious certainty of being loved, and in the next, the realisation that it must now be lost to her forever. For all his faults and the style of his address, he had a subtle fire of passion that pushed beyond his natural reserve. While she was realising the depth of his attachment for the first time, he shuttered his outraged expression and resumed his usual serious countenance.

“I will deliver your correspondence, madam. I hope your mother’s relations can survive the call without saying anything ridiculous. I offer my best wishes for your health.” He turned to leave.

His comment infuriated her. “Yes, turn away again from those of us who are not worth your notice!”

Mr Darcy quickly rounded on her. “I know not what else to do in the company of your family. Turning away in silence is the way a true gentleman should react to someone who is impertinent or ridiculous!”

The harshness of his words struck her, but he was right. He was right about her impertinence in taunting his feelings and her family’s ridiculous behaviour. Tears welled in her eyes. She could not even blame him for being ungentlemanly, not when she had brought this all upon herself. Every thought of it brought new humiliation for the pain she had caused a man who had been sincerely in love with her.

“I am sorry,” she cried, holding out a hand before he could leave. “It was thoughtless, no, cruel of me to dismiss your feelings, and I am sorry to cause you further pain. I acted wickedly just now. There is no reason for your initial disregard to still offend me.”

She could not be sure whether he was going to bow and leave or stay. After a heartbeat, Mr Darcy pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

“That you have more depth of character than Mr Bingley, I cannot deny,” she continued. She had laid too much blame for Mr Bingley’s leaving on Mr Darcy. Mr Bingley should have had more trust in his own judgment than in his friend’s. “I do not wish to hurt you, and I assure you that I shall temper my spirits should we ever meet again. Please forgive me before we part.”

“Neither of our conducts these past two days has been above reproach,” he said with surprising gentleness. “Let us both put the past behind us and act with greater kindness should we—when we meet again.”

If Mr Bingley made an offer to Jane, certainly their paths would cross. The thought of seeing Mr Darcy again did not distress her the way it had yesterday. “I know that our future encounters will be cordial. Before you depart, please allow me to thank you for calling on Jane.”

Elizabeth offered her hand in parting. Mr Darcy must have appreciated the courtesy; he took her gloved hand and, instead of bowing over it, brought it to his lips and bestowed the lightest of kisses. He released her hand and turned back to Rosings before she could respond.

Chapter Two

Darcy had assumed his call to Gracechurch Street would be a tax on his forbearance. However, Mrs Gardiner was elegant and intelligent—and not simply because she was from Derbyshire. She and Miss Bennet looked surprised on first seeing him, but after he delivered the letters, they passed a pleasant call by speaking of Elizabeth, providing Mrs Gardiner with fresh intelligence of the area in which she had grown up, and listening to her impressions of Pemberley.

After such enjoyable conversation, he was reluctant to mention a topic that might pain Miss Bennet, but he owed it to her and to Elizabeth to undo the damage he had caused.

“Your sister informed me that you have been here since January. I am certain Bingley is unaware of your presence in town. Would you permit me to tell him I saw you? I believe he would be very pleased to renew the acquaintance.”

Her cheeks pinked at the mention of Bingley’s name, and then her eyes went wide when he told her Bingley did not know she was in London. She looked unaffectedly hopeful, and he knew in that moment he had been wrong about her interest in his friend.

Mrs Gardiner was not as captivated as her niece. “Did Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst not mention to their brother that Jane called after she arrived in town? His family may not desire the connexion. They did not return her call for over a month. Such behaviour leaves one with the impression one does not wish to continue the acquaintance.”

Miss Bennet's gaze fell, and her shoulders dropped. Darcy watched her take a deep inhalation before she calmly returned her attention to the conversation. He had played a role in causing her that disappointment.

"Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst may have forgotten to mention Miss Bennet to their brother. I will be sure to tell him when I see him tomorrow that I found you to be in good health," he told her, treading a fine line between honesty and deceit.

BINGLEY WAS OVERJOYED TO LEARN MISS BENNET WAS A short carriage ride away and, aside from being angry at his sisters' neglect, had nothing more to say. Darcy confessed he was wrong about Miss Bennet's interest and had asked Bingley's forgiveness, which was immediately granted. Bingley was so dependent on his insight that he begged him to join him when he called on Miss Bennet to assure him that her attachment was unabated. Darcy hesitantly agreed, and the two gentlemen called at the earliest possible hour.

They were admitted to the drawing room but were surprised that, instead of two ladies, they found four.

Miss Bennet and Mrs Gardiner greeted them with two little girls in what appeared to be their best clothes. Darcy thought Miss Bennet looked paler than she had on Monday, though she seemed welcoming of Bingley's eager attention. Mrs Gardiner, content to leave them to as private a conversation as the room would allow, turned her attention to him.

"Today my neighbour will call with her daughter, who is the same age as my eldest," she said, gesturing to the girls. "We are giving the young ladies an opportunity to practise what they have learned from their cousin Jane."

Darcy was of a mind to return his attention to observing his friend interact with Elizabeth's sister. But that would not earn him Elizabeth's respect were she present to observe him. So with a wink to the younger girl, who was trying not to stare at him, he asked Mrs Gardiner to introduce him. The lady gave him a grateful smile.

“Frances, Isabella, this is Mr Darcy. He is a friend of your cousin Lizzy. Mr Darcy, may I present my daughters, Miss Gardiner and Miss Isabella Gardiner?”

The little girls rose and the eldest curtsied, but the younger only did so after her sister nudged her and whispered, “You must curtsy to Lizzy’s friend!”

“Ladies, I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Mamma, what do I do now? You already invited them to sit.” Miss Gardiner was clearly agitated that the proceedings had not gone exactly as practised. Her mother told her a good hostess would now introduce a topic of conversation.

“I can do it!” the younger daughter burst forth. “Mr Darcy, do not you think that cousin Lizzy is lovely?”

Darcy hoped his expression did not betray him, for Mrs Gardiner was watching. Miss Isabella possessed some of her cousin’s spirit. “Miss Elizabeth is delightful company.”

Darcy then saw two smaller children he had not noticed upon entering. The youngest Gardiner was masticating a biscuit with a grin on his chubby face. The older boy, not yet in breeches, was struggling with a cup and ball and, with no preamble, approached Darcy to ask him for assistance.

“My apologies,” said Mrs Gardiner as she manoeuvred her son back to the corner. “Young Edward often plays with his father.” Darcy gestured for the boy to come back and patiently showed him how to hold the cup and toss the ball out in order to catch it.

“Tank you, Midter Dawcy!” the little boy cried and ran off to play.

Darcy laughed, and he saw an amused Mrs Gardiner trying to look busy occupying her children. Miss Bennet watched him out of the corner of her eye with a tender smile, and Bingley stared with his mouth agape with what, Darcy hoped, was more admiration than astonishment.

The servant then showed in a fashionably dressed woman with a little girl, and Darcy and Bingley took their leave. Mrs Gardiner invited them to dine later that week, and they

accepted with alacrity. Bingley eagerly asked to call on Miss Bennet in the interim. Not until Darcy was ensconced in his library that evening did he realise Elizabeth would return to London in time for his dinner engagement at the Gardiners’.



WHEN SHE AND MARIA LUCAS ARRIVED IN LONDON, Elizabeth remained unsure what to communicate to Jane about Mr Darcy’s proposals and his letter. If she mentioned his involvement in detaching her from Mr Bingley, it might wound her sister’s spirits further. She did not want to grieve Jane by mentioning Mr Bingley if he never called—although she trusted Mr Darcy would tell his friend that Jane was in Gracechurch Street—so she said nothing about it.

She thought of Mr Darcy’s letter often and read it frequently, and every other free moment was spent passing a retrospective glance over the whole of their acquaintance. His manners were proud, and he was reserved, but with his friends, he was amiable. He was a clever, handsome man who had loved her enough to cast aside every family obstacle.

Her behaviour toward him was more to be abhorred with every recollection, and now she would never be first in affection with Mr Darcy. She could not feel disappointed in refusing his proposal, but on reflection, Elizabeth better understood what she had given up. Hopefully, Mr Darcy would not become an object of regret.

That first evening at the Gardiners’, her aunt said with a smile, “Lizzy, we have had a steady stream of gentlemen callers this week, and I believe it to be your doing.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

“It has been an agreeable week,” Jane said after she described Mr Darcy’s first visit, and then, with more animation, her two times meeting Mr Bingley.

Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner exchanged a look.

“Lizzy, you must not suspect me. I can enjoy Mr Bingley’s conversation without wishing beyond it.”

“His agreeableness will make him a favourite among us, but if he were your professed lover, we would enjoy him all the more!”

Elizabeth took delight in the prospect of their relationship and was pleased that Mr Darcy had kept his word to tell Mr Bingley that Jane was in town. She was amazed to learn that Mr Darcy had become a favourite of her cousins.

“Mr Darcy was amiable and courteous,” said her aunt. “From your description of him last Christmas, I feared he would be silent and solemn. Jane said he seemed altered from the last time she had seen him.”

Elizabeth listened, wondered, and was impatient for more, but she could not bring herself to ask. She said, in as guarded a manner as she could, that after their encounters in Kent, she found his manners were by no means faulty, and that Wickham’s were not as amiable as they had been considered to be in Hertfordshire.

It had once been her firmest opinion that Mr Darcy was not a good-natured man. Why was he so altered? *It cannot be for me. My reproofs could not work such a change.* “Perhaps Mr Darcy improves on further acquaintance.”

“He was rather serious at first, I suppose. All he wants is a little more liveliness, but perhaps, should he marry prudently, his wife may teach him.” Mrs Gardiner gave her a look, and Elizabeth feared her aunt might suspect that Mr Darcy at one time held tender feelings for her. “You may determine Mr Darcy’s amiability for yourself when he and Mr Bingley join us to dine.”

Elizabeth could not be certain whether seeing Mr Darcy answered all her hopes or gave her reason to fear. She suspected the answer would be clearer once she saw how Mr Darcy behaved in her presence.

THE BELL RANG PROMPTLY AT SIX ON THE APPOINTED DAY, AND the gentlemen were interrupted by a troop of little Gardiners whose eagerness for their appearance would not allow them to wait inside the drawing room. For a moment, Elizabeth was immovable as she and Mr Darcy gazed on one another.

Edward tugged on Elizabeth's hand and called out, "Lillibet, look! Midter Dawcy is here!"

Mr Darcy recovered first and greeted everyone with perfect civility, and Elizabeth received his compliments with relative ease. The children bustled around them before being taken to the nursery, the activity giving Elizabeth a moment to reflect, but the tumult of her mind did not allow her to think long on any one subject.

By the time the first course was removed, it was clear that Mr Bingley would be inattentive to everyone but Jane and that she was eager to receive his attentions. The remaining company did not feel the slight, and to Elizabeth's surprise, Mr Darcy took up the conversation and asked Mrs Gardiner whether she planned to return to Derbyshire to visit her friends.

"Our intentions were to take a tour of pleasure this summer to the Lakes with Lizzy—"

"I am delighted to go! I shall not tire of speaking of it when I return," Elizabeth interjected. She looked at Mr Darcy, impatient to include him in pleasant conversation. She was still grieved over every ungracious sensation she had previously directed toward him. "I certainly shall be able to recollect to you an accurate idea on everything I shall see."

Mr Darcy smiled, but she could not be sure whether he smiled at her enthusiasm for travel or her implication that they might see one another again. It was strange to think that she had once been pleased for any opportunity to avoid him.

"I hate to disappoint you," said Mr Gardiner, "but my business may prevent us from setting out until the middle of July instead of June. I also must return to London again within a month, so it is doubtful that we shall be able, in that short a period, to travel as far as the Lake District."

Elizabeth was saddened but was resolved to be satisfied. “Will a more contracted tour be planned instead?”

“The present plan is to give up the Lakes and go no farther north than Derbyshire. There is enough in that country to occupy the chief of our time, as Mr Darcy would no doubt concur, and Mrs Gardiner has a strong attraction to the area.”

“Lizzy and Mr Gardiner will want to take in all the celebrated beauties of the country,” her aunt said, “but the greatest object of my curiosity will be to visit Lambton. I have several old friends I long to see again.”

“And I am fond of fishing.” With a smile to his wife, her uncle added, “I hope my wife allows me time to pursue the activity if she does not schedule our entire tour to be spent at the homes of her friends.”

Mr Darcy extended an offer for him to fish as often as he liked at Pemberley and even offered to supply him with fishing tackle. “If I am in the country at the time of your visit, I will point out those parts of the stream where there is usually most sport,” he added.

Elizabeth beamed at Mr Darcy when their eyes met across the dining table. It gratified her to see him courting the good opinion of people with whom, a few weeks ago, any interaction could have been a disgrace. She could find no fault in the manners of *this* Mr Darcy.

The time came for the women to leave the table, and for Elizabeth and her sister, it would be the most tedious hour, thrown on their own resources in the drawing room with no male company. Fortunately, the young gentlemen were of equal mind and soon rejoined them. Elizabeth made tea, and all she could wonder about was whether Mr Darcy would approach her and whether she could not offend him. She had tried to provoke him so often in the past that she was now unsure whether she could engage him in pleasant conversation.

“Miss Elizabeth, you are a conversation in my debt.”

She started to find the object of her thoughts next to her. “I beg your pardon?”

“We are not in a ballroom. You owe me a conversation about books, and there is nothing present to distract you.”

“Perhaps the act of pouring your tea will occupy my attention.” Was Mr Darcy attempting to tease her? “I would hate to spill tea and ruin my gown while I quote Coleridge to impress you. I would hardly appear to my advantage, and you would not judge me as an accomplished lady.”

“I have already made it clear to you what I comprehend in ladies’ accomplishments.”

Elizabeth smiled at the memory of that conversation and wondered how it would have transpired had she not been trying to aggravate him. “Then let us talk of books. Gilpin’s travelogues on the picturesque have occupied me of late, given our plans to travel north.”

“Do not you find his descriptions vague? He concentrates too much on how the scenery has conformed to picturesque principles rather than the specific character of the country.”

Elizabeth refuted his opinion on Gilpin, and they continued in this manner until her aunt prevailed upon her to play. Mr Darcy and her uncle were engaged in conversation for the greater part of the evening, although Elizabeth noticed that the younger man’s eyes drifted toward where she sat at the pianoforte. It was Mr Bingley who had to tell Mr Darcy when the evening drew late, rather than the reverse. The carriage was called, and her aunt excused herself to check on her children. Her uncle attended to Mr Bingley and Jane’s conversation while Maria Lucas lounged sleepily in a chair.

Her heartbeat raced as she realised she had relative solitude with Mr Darcy while he awaited the carriage. She hardly knew this man despite all the time she had spent in his company, but she supposed that more time with him would gradually improve her estimation of him.

I want to learn more of him.

DARCY ENJOYED THE EVENING THOROUGHLY AND WAS NOT eager to see it end. He knew that, had Elizabeth not

admonished him for his conceit and ungentlemanly behaviour, he would never have considered her having connexions of whom he could not be ashamed. A fortnight ago, he never would have comprehended he could have passed a pleasant evening in Cheapside, nor could he imagine he would court the good opinion of a woman who had emphatically rejected him.

Darcy heard his pulse pounding in his ears as he approached Elizabeth. “May I call on you before you leave London?” His voice shook more than it did when he had asked her to marry him.

“Yes.” She addressed this reply to her own shoes after an agonisingly long moment. “Would the day after tomorrow be agreeable?”

Darcy said that it was, but Elizabeth did not appear at ease. He felt their awkwardness from Hunsford as a heavy weight between them. He wanted to vow that he would endeavour not to be the prideful, ungentlemanly man she had known. Despite her ill-founded accusations, he still admired her and hoped to earn her good opinion. He glanced at the others and, seeing that he and Elizabeth had a modicum of privacy, boldly grasped her hand and pressed it.

Elizabeth gasped at the contact of her bare hand inside his, and Darcy let it go. Her cheeks had turned pink, and her breath came faster, but she gave him a shy, tremulous smile.

Before he could say or ask anything more, Bingley came forward to wish her a cheerful good evening, and Darcy had to step away. His gaze never left her while he donned his gloves and hat, but she did not speak, and he did not know whether to feel disheartened or encouraged.



ELIZABETH WATCHED IN THE HALL, THE STAIRS, AND THE drawing room for the first sound of a carriage that would bring Mr Darcy. It was an agitating thirty minutes during which she did not know whether she should be happy or anxious. Neither

her aunt's conversation nor Frances and Isabella's chatter could keep her from looking out the window, pacing the room, and walking up and down the stairs.

Mr Darcy appeared and expressed an unaffected cordiality on seeing everyone again. Elizabeth was embarrassed. Recently she had told him, with a dreadful bitterness of spirit, that he was the last man in the world she could be prevailed upon to marry. That he would speak kindly with her and her family at all spoke of his generous nature.

“Mr Darcy, sit here by me!” Isabella took his hand and led him to the sofa. Frances immediately sat on the other side of him, and the three were packed as tightly as could fit, the girls' stockinged legs swinging back and forth as they looked up at their tall guest with admiration.

Elizabeth watched him try to talk to her aunt while her cousins offered to show him their alphabets, the artificial flowers they had made, and their needle books. He kept his patience, and only a bemused smile betrayed his thoughts on his newfound popularity.

“Girls, why do we not go together to get your samplers and work baskets, and you may show them to Mr Darcy before he leaves? We shall be back in five minutes.” Mrs Gardiner said this with an expressive look at Elizabeth as she took the girls from the room.

The girls did not need an escort to find their rooms, retrieve their work, and walk back down. The ploy lacked the vulgarity of her mother's tactics, but it was a ploy, nonetheless. She expected to see Mr Darcy shrugging his shoulders, but he looked at her with good-humoured ease that brought a genuine smile to her lips.

“You seem more comfortable with the attentions of lively eight- and six-year-olds than I would have thought possible.”

“I can remember when my sister was that small, though when she was that age, her interest in me went only as far as how high I could toss her toward the ceiling.”

She smiled at the picture. "I am certain that is not true. Miss Darcy must have known even then how lucky she was to have a caring older brother."

"I could not deny that I care about her, but as you know, I have not recently taken as good care of her as she deserves." His face fell. "She had the right to expect better from her guardian and only brother."

"You cannot hold yourself accountable for Mr Wickham's terrible actions, and I suspect that Miss Darcy would be the first to agree with me." To know how deeply he cared for his sister and for her happiness placed him in an even more amiable light. "You are certainly a good brother."

"Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance during your stay in London? Her companion is away, and she is staying with me for a few days."

He seemed to want her approval, but was it out of guilt for condemning her relations and separating her sister from his friend? Was she merely a means by which he would practise his newfound manners, or did he truly want to continue his acquaintance with her? No matter her fonder feelings toward him, Mr Darcy could justly hate her for the way she had treated him.

When he continued to look at her with a hopeful expression, she said, "I would be pleased to meet Miss Darcy."

His countenance brightened to a smile, and she felt her breath hitch. They sat for some time without saying a word, his warm gaze never breaking, when Elizabeth jumped to her feet. It was necessary to think of something to say and distract herself from her high flutter of spirits. "My uncle has let me borrow a book about excursions in the north, and you must tell me whether its descriptions of Derbyshire are accurate."

She went through the adjoining door to her uncle's study and stared blankly at the bookshelves as she took a few calming breaths. Elizabeth heard a noise at the door, and when she turned, she saw Mr Darcy moving toward her with his usual deliberation.

“Did you find your uncle’s book? What is the title?”

“It is *The British Tourists Pocket Companion*, but I cannot find it.”

He now stood directly in front of her, and when he moved nearer, she thought, for only a moment, that he was going to wrap an arm around her. Instead, he reached to the shelf at waist level and pulled off a book. “Is this it?”

Her heart beat faster, and all the while she wondered whether Mr Darcy’s voice had always sounded so deep and steady. Of course he was not about to pull her into an embrace! He would never act so inappropriately, and certainly not toward a woman who had refused to marry him. She had no right to feel disappointed. “Yes, thank you.”

Elizabeth looked into his eyes and watched as his attention shifted from the book, back to her face, and then, for the briefest of moments, down to her lips.

“Miss Bennet, my behaviour needed to be amended, and your reproofs have made a strong impression on me. I am grateful for them. Is it—is it at least possible that—”

They both heard the girlish voices calling out for Mr Darcy, and he stepped away and was back in the drawing room before Elizabeth could do more than clutch the book to her chest and wonder what Mr Darcy had hoped was possible. She composed her own feelings and rejoined the others, determined to make herself agreeable to Mr Darcy.

When she recollected the evening of his proposal in Hunsford parsonage, the difference—the change—in his manner was so great that it struck her mind forcibly. She no longer hated him—that had vanished after receiving his letter—and she could respect his admirable qualities and enjoy his company. Even more, she could not imagine pulling away if Mr Darcy had been about to embrace her rather than reach for a book. However, the extent of her own warmer feelings toward the man whose proposal she had refused could not be exactly defined.

After Mr Darcy left, promising to return with his sister tomorrow, Mrs Gardiner sent the children away and sat next to her.

“Mr Darcy was perfectly well-behaved and polite. Your uncle said that he had a stately air, but it is not unbecoming. But how could you tell us that Mr Darcy was so disagreeable?”



THAT EVENING DARCY WAS AT HOME WITH HIS COUSIN AND HIS sister, consoling Georgiana who was anxious about meeting Elizabeth.

“I do want to meet your friend Miss Bennet,” she insisted. “You have mentioned her in several of your letters these past months.” His cousin raised an eyebrow to Darcy and grinned at this piece of private information. “But you know how I struggle with strangers.”

Georgiana averted her tear-filled eyes. “What could Miss Bennet have to say to a foolish girl who considered eloping? She might say something kind and I shall be too shy to even respond, and she will then think me rude.”

“Miss Bennet is a gracious lady who will be pleased to make your acquaintance because you are Darcy’s sister and because she is a sociable woman,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said to reassure her. “She has an ability to mix with everyone and put them at ease.”

Darcy embraced his distressed sister and then looked into her face. He was struck at her resemblance to their mother and knew he was a poor substitute to a parentless girl. Not wishing to appear unhappy, he forced a smile. “Georgiana, would I ask you to meet someone who I thought could upset you? Have I been such a cruel guardian to you that I would force onto you the company of a malicious harpy?”

Georgiana gave a small laugh and shook her head. “Would you tell me more of her so I will be better prepared for tomorrow?”

“Eli—Miss Bennet has a rare beauty, and her appearance is centred about dark, very fine eyes.” Darcy kept silent on his thoughts on her lips and her figure. “She is capable of incredible powers of expression. She can be in one instant composed and then show amusement and joy. She is by nature generous and affectionate with easy, playful manners. I have no doubt that she will listen to you kindly, put you at ease, and make you laugh.”

Darcy remembered the warm way Elizabeth had looked at him in her uncle’s book room. He wondered whether he had any reason to hope. “One cannot help but admire her.”

Chapter Three

Elizabeth looked out the window and saw a gentleman and lady in a curricle stop in front of the house. She recognised Mr Darcy and was amazed at her own discomposure. She retreated from the window, fearful of being seen, and she saw a look of amusement in her aunt's countenance that made everything worse.

Mr Darcy and his sister entered, and Elizabeth saw that her new acquaintance was at least as embarrassed as herself. From immediate observation, she was convinced that Miss Darcy was exceedingly shy; Elizabeth and her aunt found it difficult to obtain a word from her. Miss Darcy appeared gentle and unassuming, not unlike Jane who was with Maria Lucas escorting the Gardiner children out of doors.

Elizabeth strove to make herself agreeable and to compose her own feelings. She noticed that Mr Darcy sought to put his sister at ease and Miss Darcy, despite following the conversation longingly, did not participate. Elizabeth decided to draw her out in an unconventional manner—by teasing Mr Darcy. “I have heard from our mutual acquaintances that you play exquisitely.”

“Thank you.”

“It is unfortunate that your brother is decided against music and chooses not to enjoy it,” she spoke archly while glancing at the man in question.

Miss Darcy looked at her brother in a panic, but Mr Darcy only smiled. “I—I had not heard that said of him.”

“I would wager not, for I know many of our friends are careful in courting your brother’s good opinion, but I must say that his lack of enjoyment of music explains a great many things.”

“Wh—what things?”

“First, he has expressed pleasure in hearing *me* play, but as I am well aware that I do not play half so well as you, Mr Darcy must have no understanding of music.”

“My knowledge of music has been demonstrated to you many times,” he said. “I listen with discernment to the ladies’ performances, and I only praise those I admire.”

Not to be put off, she smiled at Mr Darcy and went on. “I have further proof, Miss Darcy. Your brother despises dancing and avoids it wherever he can. The first time of my ever seeing him was at a ball where he danced only four dances! I conclude your brother avoids dancing because he is not fond of the music.”

Miss Darcy stared, and the silence prevailed until Mr Darcy answered.

“You have withheld information that you know will exonerate me.” He eyed her mischievously, and she was surprised but amused to see such an expression from him. “How do you rationalise my asking you to dance? Do you not remember that I petitioned you three times to dance and was successful only once? Since you so often decline to stand up with me, and with your self-professed lack of talent on the pianoforte, it appears *you* are the one among us who does not enjoy music.”

She grinned. “And we do know that leaves me wanting in consideration of being an accomplished woman.”

“I am afraid I do not comprehend either of you,” Miss Darcy whispered.

“I am only repeating an old debate and unfairly trying to show your brother at a disadvantage to provoke you to speak.”

Miss Darcy looked between Elizabeth and her brother then broke into a laugh. Elizabeth felt relieved to see her new

acquaintance at ease, and Mr Darcy looked more charmed than distressed by her playfulness.

After a quarter of an hour passed, Elizabeth began to dread the Darcys leaving, but their visitors were obliged to stay longer when Jane and Maria Lucas returned. With the addition of two more ladies and the children, the room was alive with conversation and activity, and Mr Darcy drew nearer to her.

“Do you ladies return to Hertfordshire tomorrow?” After she nodded, he told her that Mr Bingley intended to return to Netherfield in June and had invited him along.

“Perhaps you will better acquaint yourself with the families in the neighbourhood this time? I do look forward to seeing you again,” she added.

She watched his pupils widen. “I shall attend to that with warm civility. My real purpose, however, is to ask whether, in the meantime, I may call on *you* in Hertfordshire?”

Elizabeth knew what was implied and was gratified, but nervous. She felt shy of him after all that had passed between them. She could not account for what she felt for him yet, although, whatever it was, the feeling was intense.

“I do not know what to promise you.” Darcy’s hopeful countenance shuttered. “The change of my estimation feels the work of an instant. *Your* affection was not the work of a day, even if you at one time loved me against your reason. I know not yet how *I* should feel.”

“Do I have any reason to hope that your feelings for me could change? Is it at least possible that I could ever earn your affection?”

Her cheeks felt hot and her breath came fast. “I, I—”

Miss Darcy approached to say how much she had enjoyed meeting her, and then she and Mr Darcy left. He was gracious to all upon leaving, even the children, but he scarcely looked at her. Elizabeth longed for more time to sort her own thoughts before she had a private moment with him to answer his question. But she was leaving tomorrow, and they would have no further opportunity to speak.

Elizabeth lay awake for hours considering Mr Darcy. Did she feel what she ought for him in order to encourage him? His disposition was better appreciated, and the improvement in his manners was undeniable. She was drawn to him, and she cared for his happiness. He was attentive to his younger sister and loyal to his friends. He had a ready wit and a willingness to laugh. Mr Darcy had valuable qualities she could respect, and she was certain he respected her and held true affection for her.

When she considered her future, she could, for the first time, imagine Mr Darcy by her side.

And tonight I refused him again. He would surely abandon the renewal of his hopes. Elizabeth cried into her pillow where eventually sleep found her.

IN THE MORNING, THE LADIES WERE PREPARING TO LEAVE FOR Longbourn when a message delivered by one of the post boys from the inn said that all the horses were out and they would have to wait several hours for a new team. Jane and Maria Lucas were disappointed to wait longer to return home but offered to spend the morning out of doors with the Gardiner children, as Mrs Gardiner was unwell and remained above stairs.

“Lizzy, will you come with us?” asked Jane as she tied the ribbons on her bonnet.

Elizabeth formed a frantic idea; if she did not act now, she would regret the missed opportunity. “Since we are to be in town a few hours longer, we should return Miss Darcy’s call. Her companion is away, and Miss Darcy is with her brother instead of at her own establishment. She is a sweet, shy girl and would enjoy the company. It was a striking civility for her to call on us, and equal politeness on our side should be employed.”

“You wish to call on Miss Darcy today? But we only need wait a few hours for the horses. Besides, Miss Darcy called on *you*. She would not expect to receive Maria and me.”

Maria went pale and stammered that she preferred to take the children for a walk.

“Miss Darcy knows we are to leave today and would not be slighted if you do not return the call,” Jane added.

“I must try to—that is, he... Some exertion of politeness on my side would be welcomed by Miss Darcy. I shall return in time to leave.”

“You do not mean to call by yourself! And it is too early. Miss Darcy may keep late hours.”

Elizabeth would not be dissuaded; she called her uncle’s manservant to hire a hackney while Jane gaped at her. Elizabeth suddenly wished she had been less secretive about Mr Darcy. She pulled Jane to the vestibule and hurriedly explained about Mr Darcy’s proposal, her refusal, their resolve to act better, and her newfound interest.

“Do you not see? He will think me indifferent and will not come to Hertfordshire with Mr Bingley. I am wretched!”

“You are joking! Mr Darcy proposed to you and you do not regret refusing him in April, but now you wish to make known to him that you no longer dislike him? It is impossible.”

“I speak nothing but the truth. He may still love me, and perhaps I could love him, but our chance at happiness will be lost if I do not call on Miss Darcy.”

“You will use poor Miss Darcy very ill indeed if you use her to get to her brother.”

“It is not like that!” she cried, realising how her visit could be misconstrued. “I would be happy to call on Miss Darcy in any event. And I shall probably not even see Mr Darcy, but Miss Darcy will tell him of my visit, and then perhaps he will come to Hertfordshire. It will be the work of a moment to tell him my feelings are changed.”

“How little you have told me of what passed in Kent. Why have you been so secret with me?”

“I shall tell you all, but please do not ask me of it now.” She had never so honestly felt that she could love Mr Darcy.

Jane sighed. “At least take the maid with you.”

Elizabeth embraced her sister, and soon she and a maid climbed into a hackney on their way to Charles Street.

DARCY WAS SURE THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A LITTLE FEVER OF admiration for him in Elizabeth’s countenance when they last spoke, but he doubted she loved him. But *could* she? His pursuit of Elizabeth had not been an easy one, although he freely admitted that was his fault and not hers. His own conceit and arrogance worked against him, but his character was better for attending to Elizabeth’s reproofs.

Elizabeth could not have failed to understand his wishes when he asked to call on her in Hertfordshire. She did not say no; she did not say yes. Elizabeth was too generous to trifle with his emotions. Perhaps allowing Elizabeth the advantage of time and distance would be better suited to his purpose.

“Did you hear me?” his cousin said, startling him. They were seated in his library, and Darcy’s mind had wandered. “I said I enjoyed our sojourn to Rosings this Easter. Our three weeks there passed in more pleasant company than in other years, would you not agree?” his cousin asked.

Darcy nodded, but felt too much to speak.

“Lady Catherine no doubt believes that your attachment to Rosings increases, and the deferral of our departure so many times must make her think you sorry to leave cousin Anne.”

Darcy gave a short laugh and lifted his eyes. Fitzwilliam was intimate enough with him to know how to nettle him.

“I should tell you, I was partial to Miss Bennet,” Fitzwilliam said while gazing into his glass. Darcy stared at him, hoping his expression did not betray his alarm. “I trust she found me agreeable, but she was not unhappy when I made it known to her that I had no intentions at all. A younger son, you know, must marry with some attention to money.”

Darcy closed his eyes. How could he bear it if his cousin, his intimate friend and partner in the guardianship of Georgiana, loved Elizabeth?

“You need not harden yourself to any such circumstance.” Fitzwilliam spoke with such sincerity that Darcy opened his eyes. “I admired her well enough, but I was not in love with Miss Bennet. You are a man who will either be made or marred by his choice of a wife. Miss Bennet has an admirable inner strength as well as a great sense of joy. Do not allow any misguided sense of familial duty or the opinions of the fashionable world hinder you in forming your future happiness.” Fitzwilliam emptied his glass and left the house without a word.

Darcy sighed, knowing his cousin was right, but Elizabeth felt differently. He would not join Bingley in Hertfordshire this summer and would instead travel to Pemberley with Georgiana.

He tried to focus on his work, but the sound of the tittering young ladies engaged in dance lessons in his drawing room distracted him. He could hardly discern the music of the waltz over the laughter. The waltz was becoming popular at the highest social levels, and Darcy had allowed Georgiana to attend lessons with a Viennese master along with several of the other young ladies in the square. No doubt they giggled at the thought of clasping a young man for an entire dance while they twirled about the room in practice.

The music ceased, and he heard whispering and suppressed laughter as the girls tramped down the stairs. The dance master would escort them home, and he had only to hide in his library a few moments longer to be assured of not having to greet them. He wished to avoid their false smiles and unsubtle survey of his home and wealth.

Darcy’s library faced the street on the ground floor, and he could easily hear a knock, the front door open and close, and then quieter footsteps enter the hall. “Damnation,” he muttered. He meant to tell the footman to remove the knocker from the door since he and Georgiana were not available to

callers today. Darcy decided to remain ensconced within the walls of his library until the visitor left.

Chapter Four

Elizabeth and her maid alighted from the hackney at an impressive house near Berkeley Square and were admitted into a handsome hall with a grand staircase. A door on the right was closed, and down the hall she could see into the dining room. The furnishings were suitable to the fortune of the proprietor; Elizabeth saw, with admiration for Mr Darcy's taste, that they were neither gaudy nor uselessly fine.

She asked whether Miss Darcy was at home to visitors, and the footman replied in the negative. Disheartened, Elizabeth folded the corner of her card and placed it on the silver salver. All she could hope for now was that, when Miss Darcy reviewed her cards, she would mention her visit to Mr Darcy and he would know what she meant.

Elizabeth then realised she had neglected to ask the driver to wait and, mortified, was about to ask the footman whether he would go to the cross street and hail her another hackney when Miss Darcy appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Good morning, Miss Bennet," she said softly. "I am surprised but pleased to see you."

Elizabeth smiled at her. "I was at my leisure for some hours and wished to pay a visit to my newest acquaintance if you will have me."

Her maid went to the kitchen, and Elizabeth was shown into a pretty sitting room, fitted up with an elegance and lightness. "This is a handsome room."

“Thank you.” After a long pause Miss Darcy added, “My brother furnished the room to my pleasure last season. He is very considerate.” She then pressed her lips together and looked away.

Elizabeth suspected that Miss Darcy proceeded from shyness and the fear of doing wrong. “Do you miss school?” Miss Darcy only shrugged. “I have always been surrounded by sisters and would be at a loss without their companionship.”

“My brother removed me from school to give me the advantage of more genteel supervision by a companion.” Miss Darcy cringed, looking more like a little girl than a fashionable young woman. Elizabeth presumed she was thinking of Mrs Younge and Ramsgate and swiftly changed the subject.

“He is certainly a good brother, but I was enquiring whether you missed the company of ladies your own age. The companionship of an older brother is not equal to the more sisterly friendship of other girls.”

“I miss their company at times.” After a pause, Miss Darcy exerted herself. “Did you and your sisters attend seminary, or were you taught by a governess?”

“We had no governess, nor were we sent to school. We were encouraged to read, and those of us who wished to learn never wanted the means.”

“Did your mother take up your education?”

“No, but my father was supportive of the education of any daughter who showed interest and talent.” It was a shame he did not show that support to all of his girls. It felt like her father showed her too much preference, for she was the one who most often met his mind.

“Yet my brother has said you sing and play very well, and you converse with ease. You are obviously accomplished despite not having the regular instruction of a governess or attending a school.”

“Thank you, but some ladies of our acquaintance argue that my qualities as a proper lady are sorely lacking. I am poor at useless conversation and pretty wiles to win suitors. I have a

clever mind and a sharp tongue, and I am ashamed to say I have been cruel enough to use them both against those to whom I should have shown my respect and admiration.”

She fell into contemplative silence, wishing she had known Mr Darcy better earlier in their acquaintance and had been less quick to judge him.

“I spend Thursday mornings in dance lessons with other ladies,” Miss Darcy said shyly. “There is but one in the group for whom I felt anything akin to friendship. My brother may loathe dancing”—she offered a small smile—“but even he would agree to the importance of learning what is fashionable.”

“To execute perfectly the steps of an English country dance and polite conversation while remaining attentive to the demands of the dance requires skill. What did you and your companions review today?”

“The turning waltz.” They spoke animatedly about the intimate dance and its supposed affront to English morals. Miss Darcy declared she would be too mortified to clasp a gentleman so closely, but conceded the dance was graceful.

“It is fortunate that I am far too proper for such wickedness,” Elizabeth said playfully. “Otherwise, I might regret not learning the steps so I might scandalise my country neighbours.”

“There is nothing shocking in the side-by-side position, only in the closed.” Miss Darcy inhaled deeply and nearly tripped over her words. “Would you care for me to show you the steps?”

She is so eager for a friend. Elizabeth warmed to the idea of befriending both Darcy siblings. “Yes! I promise to be an attentive student.”

Miss Darcy walked to a table that contained a chest the size of a hat box. She explained that Mr Darcy had sent to Geneva for a musical box, and it would play a waltz for them while they danced.

Miss Darcy pushed back a chair, and Elizabeth moved a table to the far side of the room. Miss Darcy wound the mechanism, and it began to play. She demonstrated the steps with ease and grace. It was clear to Elizabeth that her new acquaintance was exactly the kind of accomplished lady Miss Bingley had described. She was beautiful and elegant, but Elizabeth decided that Miss Darcy desperately needed a laugh.

“You must show me the closed waltz. I will never shock my sisters if I only watch the side-by-side steps.”

“There are no gentlemen here to partner with.”

Elizabeth suppressed the desire to enquire after the master of the house. “Have you not had to stand up with another lady at a ball for lack of gentleman partners? I have often stood up with one of my sisters, and we enjoy ourselves thoroughly, although I never mastered the art of bowing.” Elizabeth did her best to demonstrate a solemn bow to Miss Darcy, who laughed and offered a deep curtsy.

“May I have the next set, Miss Darcy?”

“Yes, madam, I would be delighted!” Miss Darcy appeared happier and more relaxed than she was in the Gardiners’ drawing room.

They reached an impasse as Miss Darcy only knew the lady’s steps and did not know how to lead her partner. After much confusion as to where hands were to be placed, Elizabeth held out both hands and asked Miss Darcy to dispense with the position of their hands so they could focus on the slide-back-turn movements of their feet.

Miss Darcy stood across from Elizabeth and grasped her hands. “Always start with the outside foot.” Both ladies tried to step to the right and descended into giggles.

“Who is the gentleman, and who is the lady?” Elizabeth laughed.

“I only know the lady’s steps. The gentleman’s are the same but in a different order! It is the gentleman’s responsibility to lead the lady.”

“You must do the lady’s movements, and I shall try to follow you to learn the part of the gentleman.”

Elizabeth did her best to mirror Georgiana’s movements, but they both often moved wrong. Slippers were stepped on, and there was more apologising than attending as they giggled and twirled clumsily around the room. Elizabeth tried to assume the gentleman’s role and led her partner into the curtains. Miss Darcy attempted to guide Elizabeth, and although she danced the lady’s part with skill, she could not see behind her, and the pair bumped into the furniture.

DARCY WAS ENGROSSED IN WRITING LETTERS OF BUSINESS, BUT was interrupted by the ring of girlish laughter. Intermixed with shrieks and giggles came the muffled sounds of heavy items being jostled. The servants never made noise as they carried out their duties, and he was sure the dance lesson had ended half an hour ago.

Darcy threw down his pen and, without donning his coat, opened his door and found the laughter and voices got louder as he approached his sister’s sitting room.

“Ow, that is my foot!”

“I do apologise! I shall *never* learn this shocking dance.”

The chime of the musical box slowed as he opened the door. He could scarcely credit the sight before him, for there, with hands clasped and spinning about the room, were his sister and Elizabeth Bennet, laughing as if they had known one another all their lives. Georgiana was wildly smiling as she pivoted Elizabeth and narrowly avoided grazing a side table. Elizabeth had her eyes on the floor and was muttering “slide, back, turn, one, two, three” between giggles.

The music stopped, and both ladies looked at the table. Georgiana gasped as she saw him in the doorway, but Elizabeth had her back to the door and still did not see him.

“My dear Miss Darcy, you are a talented partner, but I fear I need further practice!”

Georgiana stifled her countenance and dropped Elizabeth's hands; Elizabeth asked whether she was well. When she received no reply, she followed Georgiana's gaze to the door. A deep blush immediately spread across her cheeks. It was then that Darcy realised he was only in his shirtsleeves and likely wore a similar expression of utter astonishment as she did.

He absolutely stared, but shortly after recovering himself, he advanced toward them. Every idea failed him, and after standing a few moments without saying a word, he recollected himself and greeted her.

"I, Eli—Miss Bennet, I thought you were to return home this morning?"

How could I have decided only an hour ago not to follow her to Hertfordshire? Until she explicitly sent him away, Darcy would use every power within his means to make Elizabeth Bennet fall as much in love with him as he was with her.

"We had to wait for a new team from the posting inn, and I found myself at my leisure," came her answer in a rush. "I thought I might further my acquaintance with Miss Darcy. We were speaking of dancing and, well, we have passed our time delightfully." Her eyes appeared bright and lovely.

His sister offered a timid smile. "We have enjoyed ourselves, although I am afraid, for all our efforts, Miss Bennet still cannot waltz."

"You offered...to teach Miss Bennet...a waltz?" Darcy asked, still trying to accept that Elizabeth was in his house and that she was smiling at him.

"I insisted," Elizabeth interjected, "although I can hardly credit the scandalous reputation of such a dance. We faced each other for fifteen minutes, and our moral compasses remain pointed true north."

While Darcy hoped that would hold true in his sister's case, the desire came, unbidden, that perhaps waltzing would

do violence to Elizabeth's invaluable notions of delicacy and she might throw aside all propriety and kiss him.

"Fitzwilliam, will you wind the musical box?"

"Do you wish to keep dancing?" he asked, confused.

"No, but since you are here, you may teach Miss Bennet. I am afraid that my skill at turning a partner is poor."

His younger sister could not know how affected he was by the suggestion of clasping Elizabeth in his arms. Since he could only stare at Elizabeth in silence, Georgiana wound the box herself. She then sat and waited for them to begin.

"As we discussed yesterday, Miss Darcy," Elizabeth stammered, "I believe your brother is fond of neither music nor dancing, and we ought not to put him on display."

"Do you again refuse to dance with me? My tally is now one success for four requests. Perhaps I should cease petitioning for your hand." The unintended double meaning of this was not lost on him, and Darcy winced.

"But you have not asked me. Your sister has put me forward as being in want of a partner," she said, adding with a tentative smile, "but perhaps you do not find me handsome enough to dance with?"

The thought that he would not dance with her was laughable. "Who could object to such a partner?"

MR DARCY LED THEM TO THE CENTRE OF THE ROOM. To cover her nervousness, Elizabeth teased, "I hope we do not offend Miss Darcy's sensibilities with this dance."

Miss Darcy laughed and said she saw no reason for two friends not to practise a dance at home. Elizabeth thought she detected an upturn to her lips, but the sight of Mr Darcy standing before her in his shirtsleeves distracted her.

"I have no gloves," she whispered.

"Neither do I—nor do I have my coat. Fortunately, Georgiana will keep our confidence, and you may return to

Hertfordshire more fashionable than all your sisters.”

“Very well,” she said and held out both hands for him to hold, just as she had done with Miss Darcy. “I trust you know who is to step to which side and you will not lead me into the fireplace.”

“It is unlike a country dance. It is a continuous whirl of amusement.” He still remained several paces away. Were they truly about to dance a waltz in Miss Darcy’s sitting room?

“Then you had best show me.”

His gaze at no time wavered as he held his left hand open and asked for hers. She had never been so close to him, and her left hand was trembling in his as she stood beside him, both of them facing the wall.

“Were we in a ballroom, would we not exchange partners?” Elizabeth hoped her voice did not betray her nervousness.

“No, you and I would dance face-to-face as a couple for the duration of the set.”

“How will you hold my right hand?”

“I— To begin, your right hand goes behind your back to hold mine.” Elizabeth thought this side-by-side position was not so shocking; he then turned her to stand in front of him. Mr Darcy raised his left arm above his head, pulling her left arm in a matching arch over her own. Now there was scarcely three inches between them. His right hand had let go of hers and was now on the small of her back.

“Does my right hand now hang at my side?”

“No,” Mr Darcy replied hoarsely, “your right hand rests... around me, high on my back.”

Elizabeth gave him a look of expressive wonder.

“I am not joking.”

Elizabeth moved her hand around him to rest her fingertips on his shoulder and felt the muscle contract. She slowly slid

her hand down the gentleman's shoulder onto his back. She watched him close his eyes and heard him swallow thickly.

Elizabeth's senses were in confusion; Mr Darcy was everywhere, and she knew not where to look. Directly in front of her was the white fabric of his neckcloth. Beneath the fingertips of her right hand, she could feel the strength of his muscles through his shirt and waistcoat. Elizabeth could not think long on where his right hand rested; otherwise, she might stop breathing. Her eyes flitted left and right, avoiding his piercing gaze, and she fought to suppress a giggle that threatened to announce her giddy bout of nerves.

She was in Mr Darcy's arms.

HE HAD NEVER BEEN SO AWARE OF ANOTHER HUMAN BEING IN all his life. He could hear her short, shallow intakes of breath through narrowly parted lips and feel her nervousness through his hands. She smelled faintly of lavender, and he wondered whether this was her gown or her perfume. It would be easy work to lean forward and kiss her forehead. Good God! How was he ever to let her go now that he had held her close?

"Your hair is not curled," he whispered.

"No, it is not."

"I have never seen you this way."

"I did not see the need to wrap my hair since we were to spend the day travelling." She added archly, "And I doubt the fashionable circles have seen you without your coat."

He was sure the others could hear the pounding of his heart. Why had she come? Was it only a civil call on a new acquaintance, or did she want him to come to Hertfordshire? The thought of never seeing Elizabeth again made his blood run cold, but if she was not at least willing to consider loving him, then he would rather never see her again than bear another rejection.

"Do you remember the steps?" Georgiana asked.

He started, having forgotten she was in the room. He asked Elizabeth whether she was ready to begin, saying she would start with her right foot, and he would pivot her in a quarter turn.

She nodded, and they began to waltz.

ELIZABETH WATCHED HER FEET AND OBSERVED THAT THE gentleman's foot would disappear from time to time under her gown in the midst of the dance. What seemed trivial with his sister was now overwhelmingly intimate with Mr Darcy as they circled the room in a near embrace.

"It is not such a challenging dance, is it?"

Elizabeth replied it was not and was again silent, keeping her head turned to the side as Mr Darcy rotated her around the room. After they whirled about the room once, he addressed her a second time.

"This is a well-appointed sitting room and just the right size for one couple to dance."

Elizabeth knew what he was about and looked at him. "You talk by rule, then, while you are teaching scandalous dances to young ladies?"

"I have little practice with dances at all, whether or not they are scandalous. However, I cannot stand with *you* and be silent. I shall not have you accuse me again of being unsocial and taciturn."

He said this without any bitterness, but Elizabeth felt a sting of shame. Not wanting to dwell on the past, she made an attempt at levity. "Can you imagine Sir William Lucas's reaction were he here to witness your superior dancing?"

"As long as Sir William would not detain me from dancing with you, he may speak with me as he pleases."

"There was a time when you did not always think so."

"My de— I think we may agree that Sir William is by nature of an obliging temperament, and I shall bear his comments with a calmness you could admire. Should you be

referring to my refusal to dance with you at the assembly, I can only now say that I am exceedingly sorry.”

Miss Darcy made her excuses to leave on an errand and promised to return quickly. They danced in silence, and Elizabeth was swept up in the music, the warm look in her partner’s eyes, and the firmness of Mr Darcy’s hand on her back.

The waltz playing from the musical box slowed to a halt, and Elizabeth suddenly stopped twirling. She found herself standing still in Mr Darcy’s arms as he gazed into her eyes with more than his usual intensity. Elizabeth attempted to remove her hands and step away, but he held her fast.

“Tell me, why did you come today?”

“Do you not believe I wish to continue my acquaintance with your sister?” Elizabeth felt too much to admit she had come for him.

“You are all goodness, and if that is the *only* reason you called today, then say so at once.”

“At the very least, I hoped if I left my card, Miss Darcy would tell you I called, and then perhaps you would come to Hertfordshire after all.”

“You wish for me to call on you?”

Elizabeth eagerly nodded.

“You must know why I would call. You act as though your feelings for me have changed, that I am no longer the last—”

“Do not repeat what I said! I am heartily ashamed of it. My conscience tells me I deserve no extraordinary politeness from you, and I hardly can expect more, no matter how much I might desire it,” she quietly added.

“We are not the same people as we were that night in Hunsford,” he said softly, “and more to the point, we are not the same people who met in Mrs Collins’s drawing room the following morning. The feelings of the man who wrote and the lady who received that letter are so widely different from what

they were. Perhaps every unpleasant circumstance attending to it ought to be forgotten.”

“You would have me think of the past only as its remembrance gives me pleasure?”

“It should be no trouble for you because your actions are void of reproach, but with me it is not easily so. When I wrote my letter, I imagined myself to be indifferent, but I had only been angry because you would not have me.”

“No, we have both been wrong. I came here to profess that I think my heart could be yours if you give me the time to know you better.”

Mr Darcy gazed at her in silence, and she was terrified that she was too late. *What if his feelings for me are no longer the same?* Her voice dropped and was almost inaudible. “Do come to Hertfordshire with Mr Bingley in June. Please come—you must come.”

“I shall join Bingley after he reopens Netherfield, but I will call on you before then. Now that you are not decided against me, I cannot bear the thought of not seeing you for another month.”

Their eyes locked, and Elizabeth felt her tension and fears slip away. She smiled at him and hoped he understood the difference between this smile and all the teasing grins she had given him before. An expression of heartfelt delight diffused over his face, and his gaze fell from her eyes to her mouth.

The door opened, and when Miss Darcy entered, Elizabeth realised they were still entwined; they hastily moved away from each other. While they were speaking, they had lowered their hands from above their heads; Elizabeth’s left hand had been resting around his neck while Mr Darcy had allowed his to wrap around her waist to draw her closer. Elizabeth was unsure of what might have happened if her hostess had not interrupted, but she was certain she would have enjoyed it.

“Miss Bennet, your maid says it is time for you to be at home.”

Mr Darcy looked meaningfully at his sister, but she remained silent, and he ultimately offered to have his carriage return her to Gracechurch Street. He exited the room to make the arrangements, and Miss Darcy approached her.

“I have been delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“As I have yours, Miss Darcy. I enjoyed my dancing lesson, but I am sure the next time we meet we may pass our time without resorting to moving the furniture.”

Elizabeth felt guilty for neglecting her new friend as soon as Mr Darcy made an appearance. She suspected many women had feigned friendship with the sister hoping to secure the brother. “Please forgive me for deserting you. I cannot deny that I was pleased to encounter your brother, but I hope you will overlook my rudeness and continue our acquaintance.”

“Fitzwilliam has written and spoken of you for months, and I suspect he was just as pleased to see you as you were to see him.”

This knowledge gave her an unexpected thrill, and she tried to hold back a smile. “Be that as it may, Miss Darcy, I would like to see you in particular again.”

“Please call me Georgiana. I feel as if we know each other well now.” In anyone else, these words may have appeared haughty, but coming from this faint-hearted girl, Elizabeth took it to be a gesture that she did not bear her any ill will for taking advantage of their visit to speak to Mr Darcy.

“Thank you, Georgiana. I ask you to use my given name, or Lizzy, if you prefer.”

After several more minutes of conversation, Mr Darcy returned, this time wearing his coat, and said the carriage was ready. Mr Darcy attended Elizabeth and her maid to the carriage, and when it drove off, Elizabeth saw him standing before his house watching them drive down the street.

Chapter Five

Jane's impatience to learn what happened with Mr Darcy could no longer be overcome once they were alone at Longbourn. Elizabeth suppressed every particular where Jane and Mr Bingley were concerned and related only the chief of the scene at Hunsford between Mr Darcy and herself. Jane was sorry that Mr Darcy had delivered his proposals in a manner so little suited to recommend them, but she was ready to forgive him, given his immediate efforts to attend to her reproofs.

"He must have been so unhappy when you refused him."

"He appeared shocked. He was so sure of his success." Elizabeth was still impressed at how improved he had become in so short a time. He was now the sort of man she could envision sharing her life with, one who would respect her and consult her happiness in all things.

"What happened after he handed you the letter?"

Elizabeth repeated the whole of its contents as far as they concerned Wickham and his disgraceful behaviour. She spoke of her shame and her decision to tell Mr Darcy that she credited his account when he called on Mrs Collins. Next, she described how he acted with more civility and offered to visit Cheapside for her sake.

"Poor Mr Darcy! Such a disappointment, and with the knowledge of your ill opinion too."

"Had we not met in Charlotte's sitting room, we might have parted ways forever." She was grieved at the thought of never meeting him again.

“He took your admonitions to heart and still desires your favour,” Jane cried, smiling. “But you must tell me what happened in Berkeley Square.”

Elizabeth did not feel equal to expressing what it felt like to waltz with Mr Darcy and be held in his arms. “I spent a lovely half an hour with Miss Darcy, and before I left, I saw her brother. Mr Darcy was kind enough to offer his own carriage to take me home.”

“But did you tell him you would be happy to receive him here?”

“I did.” However, after listening to their mother’s raptures on Jane’s renewed acquaintance with Mr Bingley, Elizabeth had chosen not to mention to her parents Mr Darcy’s intentions of calling. “In fact, he led me to believe I could expect him before your Mr Bingley takes residence.”

“He is not *my* Mr Bingley,” Jane demurred.

It was the last week of the regiment’s stay in Meryton. Kitty and Lydia’s misery was extreme, and her mother shared all their grief and desires to follow the regiment to Brighton. Of course, her father would never stir to do anything for his family, although he teased them terribly over it. Elizabeth felt anew the justice of Mr Darcy’s objections to her family’s behaviour. When she thought of seeing him again, she was irrepressibly happy until she remembered that, in order to see her, he must come to Longbourn. Elizabeth feared that her family’s conduct might remind him of his previous misgivings.

The ladies were in the parlour when Lydia received a note from Mrs Forster, and she and Kitty ran outside to read it. Elizabeth glanced out the window to see their reaction, and instead saw Mr Darcy ride into the paddock. She fell into her seat, her fingers trembling when she tried to pick up her workbag.

“Lizzy, has something distressed you?” Jane asked, taking the needle and threading it for her.

Elizabeth shook her head but was unable to speak. She was absolutely happy and anxious at the same moment. Elizabeth

had told no one, save Jane, of her improved opinion of Mr Darcy, and he was about to enter the house.

“There is a gentleman riding up to the house. Who can it be?” their mother asked as she walked past the window. “It looks like that man who used to be with Mr Bingley before—the tall, proud man.”

Jane looked pointedly at her, but Elizabeth was overwhelmed and said nothing. It was one thing to imagine him calling and entirely another to know that he was here. Jane answered their mother that it was likely Mr Darcy.

“Mr Darcy! Well, any friend of Mr Bingley’s will always be welcome here, to be sure. But else I must say, I hate the very sight of him.”

Elizabeth knew she must speak, uncomfortable as it must be. “Mr Darcy visited his aunt while I was with Charlotte in Kent. We— Mr Darcy has an attachment to me...perhaps as tender as Mr Bingley does for Jane. He asked permission to call on me, and I granted it.”

“Oh, you vex me, Lizzy, for we all know how little Mr Darcy favours you. He is shockingly rude to be sure, but we shall endeavour to greet him civilly.”

“Mamma! He is not the same as he was last autumn; indeed, he has no improper pride. I am better acquainted with him now, and—and I have grown fond of him. I—I even think that we could be well suited to one another.”

She shared a look with Jane, who added, “The Gardiners and I were pleased with Mr Darcy when he called in Gracechurch Street. He was perfectly amiable.”

“So high and conceited that there is no enduring him!” Mrs Bennet refused to listen and fluttered around the room. “You need not stay, Lizzy. Perhaps he is here to see Jane. He might hope to make his intentions known before his friend returns. Jane, do not encourage him, but you may have to talk with him to spare Lizzy the trouble.”

Elizabeth entreated her mother to be silent and tried to assure her that Mr Darcy wanted to see *her*, but she would not

be convinced.

THE HOURS ON HORSEBACK WERE A SMALL PRICE TO PAY TO see Elizabeth before Bingley reopened Netherfield next month, and it had the added benefit of requiring him to stay in her company longer while he baited his horse. He would not dwell on the others he would meet since he was determined to show Elizabeth's family every respect for her benefit.

He heard raised voices from the parlour and, upon entering, was struck by Elizabeth's smile of delight. The animation of her countenance was striking, and he was so intent on looking at her that he nearly forgot to acknowledge the others. Darcy was thankful that only Mrs Bennet and her two eldest children were at home.

"Did you have an easy journey, Mr Darcy?" asked Mrs Bennet when he sat. "It is a great distance. I wonder what might have induced you to make the trip."

He gave Elizabeth an expressive look and a warm smile that ought to have answered the question for any sensible observer.

"It is not such a great distance, as I am sure Mr Darcy would agree," Elizabeth said. "He would say it is an easy distance, so long as the roads are good."

"It was little more than a few hours' journey across fields and streams. I was encouraged to cover the distance quickly."

"Well." Mrs Bennet sighed. "I cannot see why you would take the trouble, but I suppose you are welcome."

She treated him with a cold civility. Did she know about his interference with Bingley and Miss Bennet? Or was it because he had treated her family and friends as though they were beneath him? Not only did he need to court Elizabeth's favour, but he would also have to court that of her family.

"Bingley intends to reopen Netherfield by the middle of June, Mrs Bennet. He is quite desirous of meeting you all again."

Mrs Bennet only nodded. After a long silence, she said, "Your friend will see a great many changes in the neighbourhood when he returns. Miss Lucas is married and settled."

"I had the pleasure of meeting with Mrs Collins often while visiting my aunt, Lady Catherine, at Easter. She appeared to be content with her situation." He would not say he thought Mrs Collins to be happy, for who could be happy with such a man for a husband, but Darcy put forth the effort of saying something agreeable when he would have otherwise remained silent.

"Mamma, I told you that Mr Darcy often called at the parsonage. In fact, in one of our *many* conversations, we discussed marriage and the Collinses' happiness." Elizabeth spoke slowly and clearly. Since Mrs Bennet dearly wanted her daughters advantageously settled, Darcy had expected she would be his greatest supporter, but she was scarcely civil to him. Mrs Bennet must not understand he was here as Elizabeth's suitor.

"The regiment will soon leave for Brighton, Mr Darcy. I should think it will break my daughters' hearts! It is a shame that some of those men, accustomed to the life of a gentleman, must be reduced to such poverty as to join the militia. If only they had some friends." She sniffed, and he knew this remark was for him.

"Mr Darcy, you have ridden so far, and we would be remiss if we did not invite you to dine with us," Elizabeth said pointedly. She then looked at Mrs Bennet, and her mother coolly invited him to stay. Darcy hoped Elizabeth was as eager to avoid discussion about Wickham or hear him praised as much as he was. As he politely accepted, Elizabeth's two youngest sisters burst into the room. One shrieked with delight while the other followed in tears.

"I am going to Brighton! I am going to Brighton!" Miss Lydia sang rapturously.

"Mamma, it is not fair!" the other girl cried. "I have just as much right to be asked as she does!"

“Mrs Forster has asked to me to accompany her to Brighton. My dear, dear Harriet! Brighton comprises every possibility of earthly happiness, and *I* get to go!” Miss Lydia flew about the room in restless ecstasy, and her mother jumped from her chair to join her.

“What fun you will have, my dear. Perchance you will find a husband before you return!” The noise level increased so abruptly and dramatically that Darcy could not prevent himself from cringing. Their mother talked on about the many new gowns Lydia would need and what eligible men she may meet.

“I cannot see why Mrs Forster should not ask me as well as Lydia, for I am two years older!” Miss Catherine peevishly threw herself onto the sofa next to Darcy without bothering to acknowledge him.

“Harriet is *my* particular friend. She is nearly my age and lately married, and we shall have such parties and fun! Lizzy! Jane! You must congratulate me. I am going to Brighton!”

Miss Bennet wished her well, and Elizabeth closed her eyes as if willing the scene before her to disappear before she opened them.

Darcy was sure this invitation was the death warrant of all possibility of common sense for Miss Lydia Bennet. The improprieties of her general behaviour shocked him. His instinct told him to take his leave or, barring that, remove himself to the window. However, that would not endear him to Elizabeth, and he was determined to please her.

As he sat calculating the distance between Pemberley and Longbourn, he realised Mrs Bennet had addressed him. Not wanting to appear inattentive, he promptly agreed with whatever had been asked of him. He realised she had invited him to walk out with her daughters.

“Go, my dears, and show Mr Darcy about the different walks.”

Miss Lydia declared herself eager to call at the Lucases’ to make known her good fortune while Miss Catherine still sat next to him, weeping from vexation and envy and was not fit

to be seen. Elizabeth and Miss Bennet rose to collect their bonnets and gloves when Mrs Bennet spoke again.

“Lizzy, you need not go. Lydia will call on Lucas Lodge, and Jane may accompany Mr Darcy on a walk.”

“I would rather accompany Lydia,” Miss Bennet said quickly. “Lizzy may show him the hermitage.”

Mrs Bennet replied it was unnecessary and again entreated him to walk with Jane.

“Mamma, I would happily go with Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth insisted.

“Yes, my dear, but I say you need not.” Mrs Bennet winked at Elizabeth, who looked appalled.

“Mrs Bennet, I would enjoy Miss Elizabeth’s particular company should she choose to walk out.” Darcy then rose to collect his hat and gloves from the hall. He knew his manner with Mrs Bennet had turned cold, but Elizabeth was distressed, and he would do what he needed to remove her from this situation. He would explain himself outside should she accuse him of being uncivil.

Miss Bennet passed down the hall to retrieve her parasol while Darcy waited for the ladies. The door to the parlour remained open, and he heard Elizabeth speaking to her mother in hushed tones.

“What is your meaning?”

“You need not spend time in the company of that man. Not handsome enough to dance with, indeed! You may not have Jane’s beauty nor Lydia’s liveliness, but I shall not have it be said that I instructed you to walk out with a disagreeable man who dislikes you.”

“Mamma, please! Mr Darcy will hear you. And he does not dislike me.”

“We owe him no particular civility other than he is friend to Mr Bingley, who we all believe will do nicely for Jane. Mr Darcy has done nothing to recommend himself.”

“For heaven’s sake, speak lower. There is no advantage for you in offending Mr Darcy. His reason for calling is to further his acquaintance with *me*.”

“I find it difficult to believe that you would suit his fancy. I thought he might have come for Jane, but he does not appear to fancy her either.”

Darcy heard a loud exhalation and swift footsteps that grew louder. By the way she looked at him as she entered the hall, Darcy knew Elizabeth was aware of his overhearing. Miss Bennet returned with her parasol, and Miss Lydia bounded out the door still gleeful about travelling to Brighton.

Elizabeth did not speak but eyed him with serious scrutiny. Her fingers played with her watch chain, and she appeared restless. Did she fear the loss of his esteem due to her mother’s behaviour? He had already decided he would not be deterred because of her connexions. Elizabeth’s happiness was worth every effort he could put forth.

I shall have to love her mother for Elizabeth’s sake and have her happiness be as dear to me as that of my own mother; rest her soul; I shall have to love all of them.

ELIZABETH WAS MORTIFIED BY THE APPALLING DISPLAY MR Darcy had just witnessed. If he had been wavering before, he must certainly consider giving her up now. While in London, she had thought his affections and wishes were still unshaken, but she could not now be secure.

They walked toward Lucas Lodge, where Lydia and Jane left them. Mr Darcy had not spoken since he quit the drawing room, and she dreaded what was to come. She feared to speak to him lest her emotions should overmaster her, for her regret at the idea of the loss of Mr Darcy was formidable now that she had begun to appreciate him.

“Your mother is misinformed.” His steady voice interrupted her silent heartache.

“How do you mean?”

“She implied you lack your sisters’ attractiveness and vivacity and I would therefore not take your notice. I know not what I may do to inform her that you are of frequent notice to me, but I have for many months now considered you to be the handsomest woman of my acquaintance.”

Elizabeth stopped and looked up at him in astonishment.

“Do you not have sufficient confidence in my affections to believe me?” he asked.

She could hardly say, since she questioned the strength of her own precious feelings for him, that of course she could doubt his. “We are so different. You have splendid property and noble connexions, and I cannot offer you the like. My mother’s behaviour to you bordered on uncivil, and all your doubts concerning my family’s lack of propriety and inferiority—”

He seized her hand and pressed it fervently into his chest. “I have no doubts about my intentions toward you. I may have considered your family’s situation and behaviour, but there was no reason for me to speak of them when I was petitioning for your hand, and I am ashamed. I beg you to forgive me.”

Elizabeth nodded, but Mr Darcy was not done.

“I would have you know my every thought and feeling had I the right to confide them to you. For the present, you need to know that when I am assured your regard for me matches what I continue to feel for you, I *will* ask you again to be my wife.”

When Mr Darcy last made an avowal of all he felt for her, he had no doubt of a favourable response. The way he now looked at her made Elizabeth believe he was truly apprehensive she would ever accept his hand, and she strove to give him an understanding of her intensifying attachment to him.

“I have never been more sensible of your good character. I have a genuine interest in your happiness, and I want it to depend a great deal on me. I ought to tell you, though, that I feel marriage is much more than just an anxious concern for the well-being of one’s companion.”

“After all that has passed between us, I am grateful that you at least now have an interest in my happiness.” Elizabeth’s heart raced while Mr Darcy still held a gentle grasp on her hand. Whatever feelings she had for him, they were more than simply wishing him health and happiness. She could see him as a devoted husband, a doting father, and a responsible landlord concerned for the happiness of everyone in his care. “What else do you feel an equal marriage of respect ought to entail?”

She knew she was blushing when she said, “I believe that marriage must entail love and depth of attachment.”

“You are a romantic.” It was not a question, and he was not wrong. “Do you—is it possible you could—do I have any reason to hope—”

“Yes.”

Mr Darcy gave a joyful smile; Elizabeth could never remember seeing him so vibrant. His dark eyes never left hers as he removed her glove and raised her bare hand to his lips. He kissed her delicate wrist and then turned her hand to bestow the lightest of kisses on each of her fingertips.

They heard approaching voices and broke apart to see a group of militia officers drawing near. Mr Darcy took her hand under his arm and led her toward Longbourn. Elizabeth wished he would resume his previous activities but knew not how to ask. Mr Darcy seemed content to cover her hand with his and would neither relinquish it nor return her glove.

To hide her nervousness, she admitted that, when they rambled in the park in Kent before the disastrous proposal, she had met him unexpectedly. “I am very desirous of your company now, but at the time I thought it your wilful ill nature, or a voluntary penance, that you chose to remain in my company.”

Mr Darcy laughed and disbelieved that she thought it mischance that he would meet her on her walks. “You took great care to inform me it was your favourite haunt!” he replied, still laughing.

“I thought you may want to avoid me in the future and gave you the means by which to do so! How could I explain your presence when you rarely spoke? And you must remember, I was not pretty enough to even dance with.”

“Did you not realise I came to the parsonage to be near you?”

“Charlotte suggested you were partial to me, but I always laughed at the idea. Even she admitted that, although you looked at me a great deal, she could see little admiration in your gaze.”

“You must have been utterly amazed to see me that evening,” he breathed. She reminded him of her own hubris and errors in judgment, but neither would he hear of this. Elizabeth then decided to tease him and told him there would be another assembly on the night of the next full moon.

“And if you come, you need not dance with me nor sit again near Mrs Long. You might play cards with the old men who do not care for frivolity.”

“I do not recall Mrs Long.”

“You sat close to her for half an hour without opening your lips. We thought she made you angry by speaking to you, and perhaps you chose not to speak to her because she does not keep a carriage.”

His shoulders fell. “I must have continually given offence wherever I appeared.”

“You will not act that way in the future. And there is an excuse for some of your pride. One cannot wonder that so handsome—that one with family, fortune, and everything in his favour should think well of himself.” Elizabeth coloured at nearly calling him a handsome man to his face. She changed the subject to one point on which she wanted advice.

“I want to be told whether I ought, or ought not, to make my acquaintance in general understand Mr Wickham’s character. He deserves to be exposed, but if I endeavour to undeceive people, who will believe me? I would not disclose

Georgiana's particulars, and as to the rest, the general prejudice against..."

"Is there a general prejudice against me so violent that the people of Meryton could not place me in an amiable light?"

Elizabeth said nothing, for he was not incorrect, but she reached over with her hand and laid it on his upper arm as they walked along.

"It is due to my reserve that Mr Wickham's character has been so misunderstood, and he consequently has been well received."

"It is not your responsibility to follow Mr Wickham through the world and warn the unsuspecting populace," she assured him.

"To have his errors made public might ruin him forever. I admit this would please me, but I would not make him desperate while he is near to you, nor would I expose my sister. Mr Wickham will soon be gone, and therefore it will not signify to anybody here what he really is. Have you spoken with him since you returned home?"

"I have been in his company, but we have not had a conversation. I no longer take pleasure in finding myself selected as an object of his idle and frivolous gallantry. The officers will dine here on their last day in Meryton, and then we may part forever."

They walked in the spring sun in silence, and she wondered if he was loathing the existence of George Wickham or rejoicing in her presence. She supposed it could be both. After a time, Elizabeth asked after her favourite dance partner, and upon realising she was not referring to himself, Darcy responded that Georgiana was well and had returned to her own establishment with Mrs Annesley.

"It is a pity she does not have sisters or cousins close to her own age." She wondered if perhaps his sister was a little lonely.

"Her companion is with her, and Georgiana is often part of a large party of mine that includes women who are fond of

her.” Elizabeth gave him a knowing expression. “Yes, those ladies may not be interested in Georgiana for the sake of her friendship.”

“Do you intend to return to Longbourn again before Netherfield is open?” She tried not to betray how impatient she was for an affirmative reply.

He smiled and said, “I am already eager to visit again.”

“Then you must bring your sister when you return. I think a household of five daughters sufficient to educate Georgiana on the wonderfulness of sisterly companionship, and she might take a liking to one of them. I have a surfeit of sisters, and she may take one back to London with her, should she choose it.”

Mr Darcy frowned and made no answer, and she was disheartened. Would he tolerate her younger sisters for her sake but not permit Georgiana to know them? She withdrew from his arm and walked in quiet introspection. His manners may have improved, and he may have promised not to mention his former misgivings, but it all meant nothing should he shield Georgiana from her relations.

No matter the strength of her new affections for Mr Darcy, she would not allow herself to be courted by a man who could not respect her family.

DARCY WAS LOST IN THOUGHT AS ELIZABETH SPOKE OF enjoying Georgiana’s company at Longbourn. He knew Georgiana to have bouts of melancholy and loneliness since Ramsgate. She had been eager to throw herself away and threaten her family’s reputation by eloping with Wickham simply because he claimed to love her. Professions of love to an innocent, orphaned girl were a powerful incentive.

He would not allow for the possibility of her encountering Wickham. He might seek to ingratiate himself again, to say nothing of the distress it could cause her to even lay eyes on the scoundrel. Once the regiment was removed, it would be safe to bring Georgiana to Hertfordshire to further her acquaintance with Elizabeth and her sisters.

Elizabeth had dropped his arm and was striding purposefully toward the house. He lengthened his gait to catch up with her. She seemed displeased, and he guessed that he had made some sort of error, although he knew not what. A mistake in his tone? In his judgment? Had he presumed something he ought not to have? He had been silent, but somehow Elizabeth seemed irritated.

Darcy felt his heart being trampled underfoot with each step she took and did not know whether to proceed in silence or blatantly ask her why she suddenly avoided him. Nothing had prepared him for how to enquire about the innermost thoughts of a woman with whom he had no understanding and who now seemed disappointed by him. Ultimately, he chose discretion, and they entered the house without a word.

Darcy judged that the meal might have gone worse, and other than Miss Mary's inelegant solemnising about female virtue, there was little said that would offend. Mrs Bennet and Miss Lydia spoke of Brighton while Miss Catherine complained of her mistreatment. Miss Bennet engaged him in conversation, but he was too preoccupied with Elizabeth's silence to better acquaint himself with the woman his closest friend was likely to marry.

The worst part of the visit, in Darcy's opinion, was the conversation between Mr Bennet and Elizabeth in the parlour after the meal. Before Mr Bennet withdrew to the library, Elizabeth asked to speak with him privately, and he said, "No, no, my library is my own, but speak with me over here away from your mother's voice."

They moved farther from the ladies but nearer to where Darcy sat.

"Now, I presume you want the next volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Lizzy, but you cannot read farther until you dissuade me from believing that Trajan was the greatest emperor. I am still not convinced Hadrian rivals him."

"I do want to read it," she said impatiently, "and I shall argue you out of your opinion if I can, but now I want to talk

about Lydia and Brighton.”

Mr Bennet scoffed. “I would prefer a debate about Rome from the only person in this house with an original thought in her head.”

Elizabeth lowered her voice so Darcy could no longer hear, and she spoke to her father in quiet but earnest tones. After laughing loudly and attracting the attention of most of the room, Mr Bennet said, “Oh, no! Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we shall have no peace if she does not go to Brighton.”

Mrs Bennet and Miss Lydia appeared to pay Mr Bennet no mind and carried on as raucously as before while Miss Mary was in another room plodding away on her instrument. Elizabeth whispered to her father again, and everyone heard Mr Bennet’s amused reply.

“You will not appear to less advantage for having several very silly younger sisters! Or a silly mother. Not that my little Lizzy has any interest in making a match and leaving her poor father all alone with them.”

“I fear for our respectability in the world by Lydia’s folly,” Elizabeth said, growing louder in her distress. “Kitty will follow wherever Lydia leads, and my mother will support them both. Please do not let her go.”

“You had hoped to marry and leave your father’s house after all!” Mr Bennet’s eyes danced in amusement. “I am glad it came to nothing. Has one of your sisters frightened away your lovers? If that be so, then he who cannot bear to be connected with a little absurdity is not worth your regret.”

Darcy could not help but look at Elizabeth, nor could she avoid seeking him out. Her father left, and Elizabeth stood dejected, all the while a ponderous melody came forth from Miss Mary’s pianoforte. He would have thought that Elizabeth could find some humour in this. Her lively disposition was one of the things that endeared her to him. As he looked around him, he wondered what his sister would make of this family but decided there could be advantages on both sides.

A poignant realisation struck him. Elizabeth had stopped speaking to him when she mentioned furthering Georgiana's acquaintance with her sisters. He had been lost in his own thoughts and had not replied.

That is why her mood is so altered; she assumes I would not allow my sister to know hers.

A bitterness fell over him that was devastatingly similar to what he felt after she refused his proposal in Hunsford. Elizabeth continued to think the worst of him. Was she so quick to judge that she did not consider that Wickham's regiment was still encamped nearby and all that could mean for his sister?

And more insulting, she doubted his regret for abusing her relations and disregarded his attempts to act with greater civility.

Chapter Six

Elizabeth stood in the paddock apart from Mr Darcy while he readied his horse. His motions were slow and deliberate, and she could not be sure whether he was simply fastidious or whether they were an occupation that allowed him to avoid her. They had not exchanged a word since their walk, but she regretted his leaving, however necessary it was. Elizabeth felt too heartbroken to be angry that she must let Mr Darcy go after she had come to admire him. But she could not marry anyone who felt his sister should not be acquainted with hers.

Mr Darcy's unyielding voice interrupted her reverie, his expression stern and serious as he mounted his horse.

"Your mother may be the silliest husband-hunting butterfly I have ever encountered. Your father is incorrigible regarding his breach of both marital obligation and decorum, and your youngest sisters remain idle and ridiculous. That being said, I respect all of them because they are your family. I desire to understand them better because of your love for them. I love you too well to allow *their* actions to deter me.

"But I am wounded that you continue to doubt me. Could you not infer my reluctance to bring my sister to a small country town that is still quartering Mr Wickham's regiment?" Elizabeth only had time for a blush of surprise, still focusing on "I love you too well." "You persist in assuming the worst of me, and my dignity cannot handle your continued disparagement of my character."

His lips parted, but he said nothing further. He pivoted his horse and rode away. She wanted to cry out to him not to

leave, that she was ashamed of herself for hurting him again, but he was already too far away for her voice to carry.

Elizabeth stood outside Longbourn, silently cursing her headstrong ways. He had every right to be angry, and she could not blame him for losing his patience. It frightened her to think how rapidly she had come to love him.

Yes, those precious feelings that had been steadily building since she read his letter could be nothing less than love. Her feelings had changed from real dislike to real love, and it wounded her self-respect to acknowledge how quickly her opinion had altered. It was easier to believe that Mr Darcy remained arrogant and unkind, that he would never approve of her family, than to believe she found herself irrevocably in love with him.

Not feeling equal to conversing with the others, she left the lawn for the seclusion of the trees and the privacy to sob over all she had lost.

DARCY RODE HIS HORSE HARD FOR A MILE UNTIL HE WAS OUT OF sight of the village of Longbourn. He would be hard-pressed to maintain this pace, but he was furious and despondent and determined to put as many miles between them as quickly as possible. Darcy would have continued in this vein had an animal darting across his path not frightened his horse. His horse reared, and he was nearly thrown. "What the devil!"

Darcy dismounted and allowed the spirited horse to tramp its forelegs in protest of their near-accident. His attempt to remount made the animal rear again, then bound away. Giving up for the moment, Darcy surveyed his surroundings and realised he was on a knoll west of Netherfield. Darcy peeled off his gloves, tore off his hat, and raked his hand through his hair. Sighing, he leant against a tree with his arms crossed over his chest, glowering at the earth in front of his feet.

The vehemence of his emotion, stirred by sorrow and love, was claiming mastery over his self-discipline. Elizabeth doubted his constancy, doubted his willingness to act with

civility toward those outside his circle. He struggled for the power to rid his heart of Elizabeth Bennet and found it could not be done, not now that he had seen some hint of affection for him.

He had not intended to highlight her family's foibles but to illustrate that he would love them unconditionally because they were her family. He ought to go back to apologise for being ruled by his temper, but how much more could his pride suffer?

He resolved not to return to Longbourn today or next week. He might return with Bingley in June, but if Elizabeth had such little respect and regard for him, what did it matter?

Returning to Longbourn would be the nail in the coffin of his self-respect. He was a better man for heeding her reproofs, but he had nothing left to give if Elizabeth always thought the worst of him. He felt tempest-tossed and almost gave in to the desire to sink to the ground and hold his head in his hands.

"Devil take me!" he muttered to the trees.

HER TEARS HAD DRIED BY THE TIME SHE SAW HIM LEANING against a tree near the top of the rise. His hat was near his feet, and his horse was nowhere to be seen. His wavy hair was appealingly dishevelled and looked lighter in the afternoon sun. His forbidding countenance was focused intently on the ground. Despite his stern demeanour, Elizabeth found him striking. She recalled the strength of his arms when they danced, and she wished they were now wrapped around her.

She heard him curse and knew she must approach him, but Mr Darcy was so deep in thought he did not notice her. Elizabeth stood directly in front of him before he looked up, startled to find her so near. She gently laid her hands on his upper arms that were still crossed over his chest, tilted up her head, and lightly pressed her lips against his cheek. She pulled away to arm's length but kept her hands softly touching him, feeling the fabric of his coat more so than the limbs underneath.

Mr Darcy had done little to react to her presence other than raise his eyes from the ground. She felt shy of him, but he had already put forth all he could for her. She gathered her courage and drew on her love for him. "Please do not send me away."

Mr Darcy only stared, alternating his gaze among her hands, her lips, and her eyes, but he said nothing.

"I know you said your temper is too little yielding, resentful perhaps. I have been just as easily offended and unforgiving. What must I do for you to forget my folly? How can I earn your forgiveness?"

He did nothing but look at her with dark, fathomless eyes. Amazement, resentment, indignation? She knew not what he felt, so she became more hurried and anxious as he did nothing but stare. She dropped her hands from his arms and stepped away from him.

"I have long regretted my actions toward you, but never more so than I do at this moment. My self-respect has been challenged. You must see that. Not a month ago I hated you. And now my soul aches at the thought of separating from you." Her voice broke a little. Elizabeth knew she had hurt him, and she could only hope she had not lost him forever. "You were the arrogant man who disdained all who were close to me, who would not lower himself to dance with me, who separated my beloved sister from Mr Bingley, and who wilfully blasted the prospects of a man who flattered me."

Elizabeth, fearful of his silence, rambled. "Can you not imagine my surprise to learn that, despite my efforts to provoke you, I had attracted your attentions? My love for you has come upon me so suddenly and so powerfully that I was frightened by its dominion over me. In a short time, you have come to mean very much to me, so much so that, when I envision my future, you feature prominently in every picture I imagine. It was easier to believe you remained conceited and callous than believe that I could so suddenly be completely in love with you."

The trees and sky in her field of vision unexpectedly blurred past her and she felt the warm pressure of Mr Darcy's

lips against hers. He had uncrossed his arms and used them to pull her into his chest and kiss her.

Her eyelids fluttered closed when one of his hands wrapped around her waist and the other lightly traced along her cheek and jaw. Elizabeth was deliriously happy, and she gave in to the wondrous feeling of his lips lingering against hers. One of her arms wound its way around his waist beneath his coat, while the other rose to rest on his shoulder. Mr Darcy moaned against her lips as he pulled her tighter, so close that she could feel the pounding of his heart.

THE MOMENT DARCY SENSED HER RELAX INTO HIS EMBRACE, he allowed himself to drown in the feel of her. The feel of her full lips on his and her hands touching him was exquisite. He indulged himself in the hope that Elizabeth might want him as desperately as he did her. All reserve was gone as his hand moved from her cheek and down her back to pull her closer. He would have continued in this vein had not the moan of desire that escaped her lips reminded him of their location.

He had been caught unawares when she appeared in front of him, and it was not until she begged his forgiveness that Darcy realised she had kissed his cheek. After he heard her declaration of love, he could not help but take her into his arms and kiss her soundly.

Darcy pulled his mouth away and rested his forehead against hers as he caught his breath. He was not capable of speech, but he held her close and bestowed kisses everywhere. Her hair, her eyes, her cheeks, her jaw, and her neck begged for his attentions, and they were received while she smiled dreamily. After such a sharing of pure intimacy, Darcy was unsure what to say. He longed to tell Elizabeth the value he felt for her, but as she gazed lovingly on him, he supposed she might already know.

“My purpose in riding to Longbourn today was to see you,” he said breathlessly, “to show you I am properly humbled and do ardently love you, and that I shall do anything in my power to earn your love.”

“I am the happiest creature in the world if you would love me as I love you!”

“Tell me at once that you will consent to be my wife, and I shall endeavour to love you as you deserve to be loved for the rest of my days.”

“Yes, you have my affection, my devotion, my love. Nothing would make me happier than to marry you.”

The happiness that this reply produced was such as he had never felt before. He wanted to claim her lips again, but felt that he would not be strong enough to stop once he had begun. She was far too tempting, and there was much to be thought and felt and said.

“When you did not answer me regarding our sisters’ association, it was an excuse for me to deny my affection for you. That will never happen again,” she assured him. “But why did you not say what was on your mind when I spoke of your sister’s visit?”

“You may add it to my list of defects. Though my tongue is often prompt enough with an answer, there are times when it fails me. I am unaccustomed to sharing my thoughts with anyone until I have made a decision. In almost all matters, I keep my own counsel.”

“You would not exclude me from your confidence if you admit me to your heart?”

Darcy found the thought of Elizabeth’s familiarity with his concerns to be a welcome relief from a lonely existence. “You are welcome to all my confidences worth having, Elizabeth.”

“Let us assume I find all of your confidences worthy of sharing with me.” He gladly nodded his acquiescence. “If I had not come across you, would you have gone to London and forgotten me?”

“I could as soon forget you as I could forget my own existence. I would have ridden to London in anger, but once I arrived, there is little doubt in my mind that my desire to see you again would have overruled my temper. Why did you not confess your affections for me sooner?”

“You cannot imagine how suddenly it has come on me, how unprepared I was! After you arrived today, I knew my only wish was for us never to be parted.”

He now realised the lateness of the hour and the necessity of his return to town. They walked arm in arm to find his horse, and she began speaking of his next visit.

“Let us explain and understand one another. The officers will dine at Longbourn the last Wednesday in May, the very last day of the regiment’s remaining in Meryton. Might I enquire when I shall again be graced by your presence?”

“Georgiana and I shall call on you Thursday at the earliest possible hour. I should like an interview with your father when I arrive.”

“Must you speak to him so soon?”

Darcy frowned. He wanted to tell everyone that Elizabeth loved him and make their engagement public as soon as possible.

“Do not make yourself uneasy,” she assured him. “It is only that I have railed against your character at every opportunity since the moment I met you.” Her eyes fell, but not before he saw the mortification in them. “I wish my opinions had been more reasonable. After what he said today about disbelieving I would even want to leave home, I would like to explain my attachment to you before you speak to him. And would you not enjoy one more call without having to endure my mother’s raptures on your ten thousand a year or my father’s disbelief that we are devoted to one another?”

He thought of another call where he might find time alone to kiss her. “Another unchaperoned visit could be pleasant.”

They found Darcy’s horse in a clearing, and he offered to escort Elizabeth home.

“No, the hour is late, and I am already reluctant to part with you. You have a long ride to London, and it will be too long before I see you again. I would prefer you to take leave of me here, so I might say good-bye properly.”

His heart raced as she boldly placed her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was some time before Darcy mounted his horse to return to town.

Chapter Seven

Elizabeth did not admit their engagement to her family, but in the days after he left, she repeatedly explained to them that Darcy was neither an arrogant nor an unpleasant man, that she admired him, and that she had a marked preference for his company.

“Mamma, Mr Darcy will call with his sister after the officers leave Meryton,” she tried again when they were all together in the drawing room. “He has excellent understanding and principles. He and I enjoyed a great deal of unreserved conversation when he was last here.”

“I do not see how!” her mother cried. “He is rude and proud, but we must endure him for his friend’s sake.”

Mr Bennet turned a newspaper page without looking up. “I think our Lizzy enjoys the sport in drawing out a silent, taciturn, unsocial man.”

“No, Papa, I admire his taste and his abilities. When Mr Darcy returns, I hope you take the opportunity to know him.”

“The fools with whom you suffer to pass your time are of no interest to me.”

“He is the least foolish man I have ever met.” Elizabeth tried to keep her tone patient. “His mind is very well-informed, and his enjoyment of books is exceedingly great. I think if you took pains to get to know Mr Darcy, you would like him as much as I do.”

“I have not had as many opportunities to estimate the minute propensities of his mind, but if you think I shall enjoy

provoking such a proud man to speak, I am happy to take on the challenge.”

She had imagined Darcy’s riding all the way from London would speak to his intentions toward her, but her parents did not understand her hints. Perhaps they had to see Darcy and her interact with one another before they would be willing and able to understand the depth of their attachment.

Even her sisters, save Jane, would not listen to Elizabeth’s approval of Darcy. Lydia could not spare time to think of anything but the enjoyments Brighton would offer, Kitty was too despondent over Lydia’s good fortune, and Mary preferred a book to any conversation with her sisters.

On the last day of the regiment’s remaining in Meryton, the officers dined at Longbourn, and Elizabeth saw Wickham for the final time. She found him sickening now that she knew what he was. She attempted to make it clear that his attentions annoyed her, but he would not withdraw them. After dinner, Wickham came upon her after Jane stepped away, and he sat by her and leant forward to block her view of the room.

“I see I find you alone, my dear friend.”

“My sister will return presently.” She tried to rise, but Wickham held out his hand and asked her to remain.

“We were always good friends, were we not?”

“Yes, I believe we *were*.” Elizabeth was little disposed to part from him in good humour.

“And so we must remain. I shall miss our talks when we remove to Brighton. ’Tis a shame you cannot follow the regiment along with your sister.”

They looked together to see Lydia in boisterous conversation with several officers. Elizabeth turned back when Wickham rested his arm against her chair and leant closer. He seemed mildly amused as a smirk played across the features she once considered handsome.

“Tell me of the manner in which you passed your time visiting Mrs Collins at Hunsford. Was Lady Catherine not exactly as I described?” he asked.

“Yes, she was,” she admitted. “Her nephews, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy, spent three weeks at Rosings. Are you acquainted with the former?”

Wickham looked alarmed at the mention of the colonel, but after a moment’s recollection, he calmly replied that he had formerly seen him often and that he was a gentleman-like man. “But I do not care to speak of the colonel. I am more interested in hearing about Darcy.”

“I am surprised that you would take an interest in that man’s affairs, given your history.”

“You know so well my feelings toward Mr Darcy. At one time, I thought we were of a similar mind.”

“I do not think our opinions of everybody still coincide,” she said firmly to confirm what he must by now suspect. How could she ever have believed this man to be the model of all that was amiable and pleasing?

Wickham appraised her with a calculating countenance that could not hide his agitation. He bit his bottom lip and tapped his foot feverishly. Elizabeth attempted to see beyond him to determine whether Jane was on her way back, but he abruptly leant back into his chair and crossed his legs in front of her, his arm on the back of her chair and his legs preventing her from standing.

“I heard an interesting report from Denny and Pratt last week, and I have been eager to speak of it to you.”

Elizabeth nodded but said nothing.

“They were returning from Meryton by way of Lucas Lodge, and both men say they saw you walking on the arm of none other than Mr Darcy, having an intimate tête-à-tête! They thought he might have even kissed your hand. They were adamant, although I told them they could not have suggested a more unlikely couple. After all, Mr Bingley and his party have been removed from the neighbourhood for six months.” Here Wickham lowered his voice, but Elizabeth heard his contempt. “So do now tell me, my dear Miss Elizabeth, how could it be

that Fitzwilliam Darcy lent you his arm to stroll about Hertfordshire?"

Darcy's letter had asserted that Wickham had followed Georgiana to Ramsgate by design, induced by both fortune and revenge. A shiver of revulsion ran down her spine. *Could he be so angry about my knowing the truth that he tries to exact revenge upon me?* She now knew Wickham to be a man without scruples, but surely he was not dangerous and desperate? She was too poor to be an object of prey, and she held too much disgust for him to continue their acquaintance, let alone be duped by his lies.

Surely, he could have no power over her.

"Are you asking that I account for my whereabouts?" She affected an air of indifference. "Such a responsibility falls to my father."

Wickham scoffed. "Yes, Mr Bennet is very alert to his family's cares and concerns." Elizabeth blushed with shame; it was well known in their neighbourhood that Mr Bennet was a careless father. "I am...surprised that you would choose to pass your time with a man whose foul misconduct has caused me such suffering. You yourself have said how little you can tolerate Darcy, for he does so despise his fellow creatures in general."

"Mr Darcy improves on further acquaintance. At Rosings, I had the opportunity of knowing him better, and I now understand his true nature."

Wickham's complexion heightened and his eyes narrowed as he, for a moment, sat silent. He exhaled loudly and nodded, then said in a low voice, "To whom, may I ask, do you owe this newfound information? Perhaps the good colonel?"

"My knowledge of Mr Darcy and the quality of his character comes from the gentleman himself." Her patience was wearing thin, and she was in no humour to indulge Wickham. He knew her to understand the truth behind his connexions to the Darcy family, but he did not appear embarrassed, only angry. Elizabeth wished he would be gone.

“I can imagine few inducements that would drive a man as private and reserved as Darcy to discuss his intimate dealings with one wholly unconnected to him.” He paused and allowed his gaze to linger over her in a manner that could only be described as lecherous. “Or perhaps you are not as unconnected to Darcy as you would have me believe?”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in affront, but before she could reply, Wickham rose and left to give the other ladies their share of his attentions. Elizabeth was unsettled, and she desired never to meet him again.

When the party broke up, Lydia left with the Forsters, as they intended to depart early the next morning. Elizabeth was forced to accept that her father refused to exert control over Lydia. Elizabeth had frequently united with Jane in an endeavour to check the imprudence of Kitty and Lydia, but as long as the younger girls were supported by their mother’s indulgence and suffered their father’s disregard, there was little chance for improvement.

She was disappointed but consoled by the knowledge that Darcy would not be a disinterested husband and father.



DARCY MISSED ELIZABETH. MISS BINGLEY AND MRS HURST had called while Georgiana visited with him, and after Bingley announced they were at their leisure, Darcy was imprisoned in his own drawing room. Miss Bingley refused all attempts to direct the conversation to more pleasant topics and protested against her brother’s summer plans to return to Hertfordshire.

“Charles, I prefer to travel to Bath and then on to Pemberley as planned. Perhaps we might convince Mr Darcy to accompany us to Scarborough at the end of the summer.”

“You and Louisa and Hurst may go on to Bath, but I will return to Netherfield. Imagine, Miss Bennet was in town all winter! You are both fortunate that Darcy learned this from Miss Elizabeth, and I could call on her.”

Darcy was attempting to read his book, but upon hearing this, his guilt made him meet Miss Bingley's eyes. The ladies had been the recipients of Bingley's short-lived anger for their involvement in the affair. Miss Bingley may have longed to tell Bingley that *Darcy* had also hidden Jane's presence, but her desire for his good opinion kept her silent. Still, he would soon have to confess the truth himself.

"How insupportable to pass another evening in such society as we found in Hertfordshire!" she cried. "I was never more annoyed than when I was there. Miss Darcy, you cannot imagine the nothingness, the insipidity of such people."

"Miss Bennet was your dear friend while we were in the neighbourhood," said Bingley.

"Jane is a sweet girl, despite her inferior connexions, but I still do not think that she admires you."

"She was attentive when I called at her uncle's house. Even Darcy agreed that she favours me."

"Far be it from me to question the judgment of Mr Darcy!" she insisted, smiling at him. "But need I remind you of all the follies and absurdities of the entire Bennet family?"

Bingley spoke on of Miss Bennet's loveliness while Miss Bingley harangued her relations. However little Darcy liked her address, he attempted to remain cool and unaffected. If Bingley were to pursue Jane, he should act with conviction. If he could not limit his sister's disparagement of his intended love, what would Bingley do in the face of the fashionable world?

His notice of the conversation was captured again when he realised that Miss Bingley had proceeded from maligning the Bennets' connexions to discussing Elizabeth.

"I cannot abide that Eliza Bennet! She is unconventional and not in a fashionable way, which is intolerable. Such an impertinent girl with no taste, no style, and no conversation."

"I found Miss Elizabeth Bennet kind and charming," Georgiana whispered.

Miss Bingley looked confused, and Georgiana explained she had met Elizabeth at the Gardiners' home and the visit was promptly returned.

“Eliza Bennet called here? I am all astonishment. She did not walk here from Cheapside by herself, did she? Was her petticoat covered in mud when you received her?”

Bingley commended Elizabeth's affection for Jane, but his sisters lambasted her manners and lack of decorum. Darcy was conflicted; he could not allow Bingley's sisters to censure Elizabeth in his presence, but he had not yet secured her father's blessing and could not announce their engagement. Yet, in his heart, he felt that his silence betrayed her.

Georgiana looked questioningly at him. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet's manners were pleasing, Miss Bingley,” she murmured.

“You are a sweet girl to speak kindly of one so beneath you. I believe, Louisa, there was a time when we were all amazed to find that Eliza Bennet was a reputed beauty. Mr Darcy eventually found her eyes to be fine, but I find them to have a shrewish look. I particularly recollect Mr Darcy saying one evening, ‘She a beauty? I should as soon call her mother a wit.’”

At the pained look on his sister's face, Darcy wished his former opinions of Elizabeth had been more sensible. He must do what he could to atone for his mistake. “Her eyes are not only fine, but striking, and there is a general sweetness in her countenance that those who know her well can readily perceive.”

Miss Bingley steered the conversation back to Bingley's summer plans. “Can you be sure that Jane wishes to continue her acquaintance with you? You could come with us to Bath instead.”

“You have no reason to believe that Miss Bennet no longer wishes my company, do you?”

“Jane is serene and mild. Perhaps she is just as welcoming to any man's attentions. Perhaps it is her nature.”

Bingley pursed his lips but reaffirmed that she appeared pleased with him when he called at Gracechurch Street. He then asked his sister to come to Netherfield to be his hostess.

“You may return to the country, Charles, but I will not. I am fond of Bath and am determined to stay there until we adjourn to Pemberley with Mr Darcy in August.”

“You may do as you please, Caroline, but I am removing to Hertfordshire in June and shall stay there indefinitely.”

“Miss Bingley,” Darcy interrupted, “my plans for the summer have changed.” She looked at Darcy in alarm. “I will join Bingley at Netherfield and shall not be removing to Pemberley until a desirable event takes place.” Without elaborating on what event he desired, Darcy asked Georgiana to speak with him privately.

Darcy led his sister into the library and closed the door. He sighed at the sight of his sister fidgeting with her hands and her gaze on the floor. She clearly wanted to speak to him, but knew not how to broach the subject. Again he wished Georgiana would not be so anxious but did not know how to encourage her. Elizabeth would be better suited for such a task.

“Georgiana, what is on your mind?” He tried not to sound harsh. “It is all over your face, so you might as well come out with it.”

“Did you truly speak poorly of Miss Elizabeth Bennet to Miss Bingley?” His sister looked as though she was on the verge of tears.

“I am ashamed that I did, and I can say nothing in my defence.”

“Lizzy likes me and never once made me feel as if I were a means by which she could win your attentions.” Her words came forth in a rush and grew louder as she became more distressed. “Why would you insult her and her family to Miss Bingley when you admire Lizzy? Do not deny it,” she cried as Darcy opened his mouth to speak. “You have never encouraged me to know any woman of your acquaintance, yet

you introduced Lizzy to me and encouraged me to know her family. You are staying in Hertfordshire for the summer because she is there, not because you desire Mr Bingley's company."

"I do not deny it." His voice was low. "I admire Eli—Miss Bennet and was wrong when I spoke to Miss Bingley. Miss Bennet and I...quarrelled in the past and misunderstood one another grievously. She has taught me a lesson regarding my behaviour to others, hard indeed at first, but advantageous. I have earned her forgiveness. Now, may I ask for yours?"

"You do not owe me an apology, and if Lizzy does not think less of you, then it is not my place to do so."

"She is 'Lizzy' to you, then?"

"Do you not approve?"

Darcy could hardly explain his jealousy at being unable to refer to Elizabeth by her given name yet. "I am pleased you have become friends, and she would be proud of you, I am sure, to have defended her so valiantly."

Georgiana appeared shy at the memory of her outburst. "Is there any truth to Miss Bingley's comments about Lizzy's family?"

"Some of them can be indecorous, yes," he admitted. "Her immediate relations are not as fashionable as the Gardiners or her elder sister; however, they are her family and must be respected."

Georgiana nodded and walked toward the door. "Fitzwilliam?" she said, turning back to him. "So long as you are happy and she loves you, I am exceedingly gratified by your choice." She offered a small smile and hastily exited before Darcy could do more than wonder when his younger sister had become so perceptive.

Chapter Eight

After the late evening with the officers, Elizabeth and Jane were the first downstairs for breakfast. Elizabeth had treasured her newfound happiness with Darcy as a precious matter best kept to herself, but she could no longer justify refraining from telling Jane of her engagement.

“You are engaged to Mr Darcy?” Jane was absolutely incredulous. “Good heavens! Can it really be so?”

“I speak nothing but the truth. He still loves me, and we are engaged.”

“I do congratulate you. But are you certain? Your feelings have undergone a drastic change in such a short time.”

“There can be no doubt of that.”

“You know for certain that you love him?”

There was nothing of which she was more certain. “I hardly know when it began. It has been coming on gradually. As soon as I gave credit to his letter, I understood him better, but I assure you he is a good man, and I love him. I am grieved when I think about what we came so close to losing.”

“Good gracious,” cried Mrs Bennet as she came into the breakfast room. “I just came from the window, and there is someone arriving in a chaise and four. Lizzy, my love, go see whether you recognise it.”

Although she knew who must be arriving, she went to the window to allow herself a moment alone to gain her composure. Her heart fluttered at the sight of Mr Darcy

alighting as he turned back to offer his hand to his sister. Elizabeth grinned as she told her mother who was expected.

“That disagreeable Mr Darcy is coming again! What can he mean by being so tiresome as to be always coming here?”

“Can you not think of any way of accounting for his attentions?” Elizabeth struggled to keep her patience. “I have been speaking well of him since he last came to Longbourn. Mr Darcy now brings his sister to be known to us. He has been overflowing with attention for me. Is it so difficult to believe he admires me?”

Mrs Bennet stared and allowed herself to be guided to the drawing room by Jane to receive their guests. Her mother sat in stunned silence, and no one spoke until the servant announced Mr Darcy and Miss Darcy.

Darcy appeared just as he had been used to look and paid his compliments with his usual reserve, but Elizabeth could discern, from his gaze on her, that his appearance of composure was a pretence. Georgiana looked nervous, and Elizabeth hoped for an opportunity to put her at ease.

Mrs Bennet received Darcy and his sister with the utmost politeness and begged them to be seated. This was a remarkable change from his last visit.

“Miss Darcy, I am honoured you came to call on us in Hertfordshire. I am sure your beaux are disappointed on not finding you at home today.”

“My sister is not yet out,” Darcy replied before his sister could do more than turn pink.

“Not out? Why, my dear, you must be sixteen! I see no reason for a pretty girl like you, with no sisters, to remain at home. My girls were out at fifteen, and they are all the better for it. I am resolved to see my daughters well settled. Your brother must agree how necessary it is for you to catch a husband before you are too old.”

Georgiana looked mortified, and Darcy changed the subject. “My sister and I called on the Gardiners before we left and found them in good health.” The conversation about the

Gardiners led to that of Derbyshire, and Mrs Bennet eagerly asked about Pemberley.

Elizabeth was ashamed her mother wished to hear about Darcy's house only because she hoped to see her daughter as its mistress. However, both Georgiana and Darcy spoke with affection of their home and of Derbyshire. This visit was an improvement over the awkwardness and cold civility of his previous call.

“Are you much at Pemberley in the course of the year?”

“Not as much as I might wish, but I may spend half my time there.”

“If you marry, you may see more of your home,” Mrs Bennet said, turning her gaze heavily toward her second daughter.

Elizabeth looked apologetically at Darcy, who only shrugged after her mother had turned to enquire of Miss Darcy as to the latest fashions in town. Darcy took the trouble to speak to Jane. It satisfied Elizabeth that he attempted to know her sister better, and she hoped that, when Mr Bingley proposed to Jane, the four of them might often be together.

Before half an hour had passed, Kitty came into the room and complained that she had no amusements. Elizabeth suggested they might all walk out. Jane and Mrs Bennet declined, while Kitty accepted because she had no other activity to entertain her.

The younger girls walked ahead and, although Kitty's voice could be heard oftener than Georgiana's, they appeared at ease as they talked. Darcy took Elizabeth's hand and tucked it under his arm while they walked in companionable silence. She smiled at him for his familiar gesture, and her heart rejoiced with the sensations of exquisite comfort it produced.

“One hundred forty,” he said abruptly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Miles, Elizabeth. Pemberley is one hundred forty miles north of Longbourn. It would take two days to travel from Hertfordshire to Derbyshire, although if there was little hurry,

it could be made into a pleasant trip of three days.” He offered her a smile, and she told him how she looked forward to being with him at Pemberley.

“Then we are of a similar mind because there is nothing in this world that I want more. I intend to speak to your father as the first step in achieving that end.” Elizabeth knew it would make her father unhappy to part from her, but finding her own happiness with Darcy was at the forefront of her mind. After a moment, he asked, “Of what are you thinking?”

“How is it you know me so well as to know that I am preoccupied?”

“I attended to your movements and conversations long before I spoke with you myself. And since then, I have been captivated.”

She smiled. “I think I want to hear a more specific answer.”

“When you walk, you keep your head upright. You do not demurely keep your eyes downcast as some women do when with a man. I know you are not distracted or sad. You are, however, pursing your lips and darting your eyes back and forth. You are considering something and are unsure whether you will share it.”

Elizabeth was both impressed and bemused. “And I thought *I* was the studier of character. I shall have to make my character more deep and intricate to be a more challenging study. How fortunate I am that you have already humbled my excess of pride in my ability to read one’s character; otherwise, your adept analysis would put me to shame.”

“Is my understanding of your behaviour enough to earn me the subject of your thoughts?”

“Yes, of course—I was considering our future. Aside from time spent with my aunt and uncle Gardiner, I do not have a pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. My parents have no affection for one another. Respect, esteem, and confidence are missing from both sides. I was thinking how

fortunate I am that I shall be able to respect my partner in life.”

“I hope, dearest Elizabeth, that you might feel more for me than respect.”

She stopped and looked up at him, eager to assure him that her love for him was beyond mere deference, when she determined a slight upturn to his lips. “You are teasing me! I was about to profess my love for you in the very fondest of terms, but I see you require no assurance.”

“On the contrary, you should reassure me of your affection and partiality as often as possible.” Elizabeth could hear the intensity of emotion in his low voice.

Elizabeth knew she was blushing. They were in full view of the house, and Kitty and Georgiana sat on a bench near to them. How she wished to ask him whether he wanted a kiss to prove her affection for him.

“For the present, you must be content when I tell you that I am marrying you for affection. I love you sincerely. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than to marry without love.”

“You are thinking of your parents’ marriage?”

“Yes, as well as Mr and Mrs Collins’s. You asked me once what I thought of their happiness, and I can tell you now that, although they might be content, I would not wish for a loveless union.”

“Then you are fortunate that I have a steadfast love for you. I cannot remember the time when I did not.” Darcy reached for her hand and held it in his own for a long moment before he wrapped it under his arm and they walked again.

“Your mother is more disposed to tolerate my presence than ever before, so I presume you told her of our engagement. Did you speak to your father as well?”

“Not explicitly. That honour falls to you, since he does not take me seriously when I tell him how I admire you and prefer your company. I only suggested to my mother that you are my suitor, and now she regrets having ever disliked you.”

Kitty and Georgiana joined them. Forwarding Elizabeth and Georgiana's conversation required Darcy to walk with Kitty, though little was said by either. Elizabeth heard Kitty and Darcy speak on the weather, the ride from town, the date of the next assembly, and then nothing at all. She suspected her sister was too much afraid of him to talk, and Darcy, although improved in civility, would never be a man who could be described as loquacious.

DURING DINNER, MRS BENNET WAS IN GREAT SPIRITS WHILE she sang Elizabeth's praises and officiously flattered Darcy. He knew Elizabeth's misery increased with such unnecessary attention, but Darcy kept his countenance for her sake. His sister did not speak more than a monosyllable as she listened with undisguised astonishment while Mr Bennet mercilessly teased his daughters.

"So tell me, Lizzy, have you any further warnings of your sisters' imprudent manners? Have additional gentlemen been kept aloof by Lydia's folly? If I believed you had any inclination to marry and leave home, it would be to your advantage to make a match now while she is at Brighton." Mr Bennet gave a sardonic smirk that made Elizabeth wince.

Darcy, while keeping his self-importance in check, could not help but share his opinion. "Your daughters' behaviour ought not to be the subject of sport. Should one daughter be censured, the other sisters, wherever they are known, will also be involved in the disgrace."

"This is hardly a matter with which you need to concern yourself, Mr Darcy. You never noticed any of my daughters in all of your life."

Darcy shifted his gaze from Mr Bennet to his second daughter. "I disagree, for I must admit that one of your daughters caught my attention from the very beginning of our acquaintance."

"I am surprised there was one of us tolerable enough for you to notice," Elizabeth interjected archly, to which Darcy could only smile in response.

“Of what are you talking, Mr Bennet?” called his wife from farther down the table.

Mr Bennet peered at Elizabeth, and then he gave Darcy an icy glare. “Regardless of any daughter who may or may not have been worthy of your attention, Lizzy is not a young girl that has been spoilt for home by great acquaintance.”

Did Mr Bennet not approve of him, or think his daughter would be swayed by fortune? “I suspect that, when Miss Elizabeth leaves home, it will not be for one who offers her more advantages than Longbourn has, but because she feels the gentleman who has the good fortune to earn her love and respect is worthy of her.”

“Mr Bennet, I cannot hear of what you are talking!”

“Mr Darcy was talking of Lizzy, and he has exhausted that subject.” Before Darcy could refute this ever being possible, Mrs Bennet continued it for him.

“Oh, Lizzy is so good-natured! She may not be half so handsome as Jane, but she is a good girl.” Her mother continued in this manner for the rest of dinner.

After the meal, Darcy and Elizabeth sat together, discussing the book he had brought for her.

“I remember your defence of Gilpin’s travelogue, so I bought this yesterday. The protagonist sets out on a quest for picturesque scenery and remains ignorant to the realities of the world.”

Elizabeth laughed as she read the title, a cheerful and sincere sound that Darcy would never tire of hearing. “You have brought me a satire! I have egregiously underestimated your sense of humour.”

While Elizabeth flipped through the pages of her new volume, Darcy realised he had no greater ally in securing Elizabeth than her mother. She was visibly anxious to get Elizabeth alone with him. Mr Bennet had retired to the library, as was his custom, and Mary went upstairs to her instrument. Two obstacles being thus removed, Mrs Bennet sat looking

and winking at Jane and Kitty for a considerable time without making any impression on them.

When at last Kitty observed her, she innocently asked, “What is the matter, Mamma? What do you keep winking at me for?”

“Nothing, child, I did not wink at you.” Then she said in a rush, “Why do you not show Miss Darcy your new bonnets? I am sure that Miss Darcy knows the latest fashions and could help you trim them up nicely.”

Georgiana looked surprised, but when Kitty politely asked for her assistance, they left together. Now only Jane and her mother remained, and after sitting still for five minutes, Mrs Bennet got up and demanded her eldest daughter speak with her in private, taking her from the room. Elizabeth, who had been sitting in the window seat with Darcy, shrugged, forcefully leant her head back, closed her eyes, and let out a sigh of exasperation.

Although Darcy could never condone Mrs Bennet’s contrived spectacle, he kept his silence and instead watched as the sunlight brightened Elizabeth’s complexion. Her dark eyelashes swept across her cheekbones, and he admired her sun-kissed ringlets. His arm was resting on the window casing, and almost of their own volition, his fingertips stretched out to stroke her cheek. Elizabeth visibly relaxed and smiled as she reached out her hand, placed it on his knee, and slowly stroked her fingertips back and forth.

Darcy’s face grew warm, and his tongue appeared to be fixed to the floor of his mouth. He considered the possibility that Elizabeth’s gesture was an innocent display of regard and wished he knew the manner in which to proceed that would give the least offence. Their first kisses were impulsive actions in an emotional moment, and he was uncertain how receptive she would be if he attempted to repeat that wonderful experience.

Her eyelids opened, and when her eyes fixed so expressively on his, Darcy could see they plainly denoted how well she understood him.

He was unsure who moved first, but in a heartbeat, his hands moved to hold the sides of her face while she brought her hand around his neck. This kiss differed from the ones they had shared before. There was nothing timid about it, and excitement shot through Darcy when Elizabeth parted her lips and gave herself freely to the passion of his kiss. She leant in closer, and Darcy easily lifted her onto his lap. When his tongue explored her mouth, he abandoned himself to a rush of delightful sensation. Her hand lifted from where it lay across his shoulder and he moaned in delight when she ran her fingers through his hair.

Darcy did not know how much time had passed—minutes, hours, days—he could not be sure. Raising his mouth from hers, he gazed into her eyes and willed her to know how much he loved her. He felt a small stab of guilt as he looked down on her swollen lips and remembered he had yet to obtain her parents' consent to marry. After he had finally earned Elizabeth's respect and affection, he could not allow his desire for her to frighten her.

“I am sorry for being carried away.”

She refused to move from his lap. “A woman's reputation of virtue is one of her most precious possessions. I hope I have not lost your respect because I wish to kiss you as much as you wish to do the same to me.”

Darcy shook his head. “Elizabeth, you must have prayed for me to be punished for my thoughtless words at that assembly,” he said. “You have been duly avenged. I am certain that I shall always find you to be handsome enough to tempt me.”

“But will you think me handsome even when I am old and nearly past everything but tea and quadrille and cannot see without spectacles?”

“Always, dearest Elizabeth.” His voice was ragged, and she caressed his cheek. “As tempting as you are, I am surprised at being left alone for so long.”

“I am certain my mother wants to give you ample time to petition for my hand, Mr Darcy.”

“You have always called me Mr Darcy. It is so formal.”

“What do those closest to you call you?”

“Darcy.”

“That is hardly a relaxed form of address for your wife to use.” They both grinned at the word “wife.” “How does Georgiana address you?”

“She stands so much in awe of me that I wonder whether she would not prefer to call me Mr Darcy.”

She laughed. “I would like to call you Fitzwilliam when we are alone.”

“I have no objection.”

“Well then, Fitzwilliam, will you kiss me again or go to my father to obtain his consent?”

“The former is more to my liking, but I should like to kiss you anytime I wish.” Darcy shifted her off his lap and rose. “I must go instantly to your father. You might speak to your mother. She has been gracious to give us ample time.” He parted from Elizabeth with a kiss to her hand and purposefully strode toward the door. Upon opening it, he halted, for Mrs Bennet, having dawdled about in the vestibule to watch for the end of the conference, was directly in front of the door.

“Will Mr Bennet see me, madam?”

Mrs Bennet quickly rang for Mrs Hill to enquire where Mr Bennet was and was told that he had retired above stairs with specific instructions that he would see no one.

“What do you mean? Mr Bennet has no compassion for my poor nerves.”

“Mr Bennet said he would not see Mr Darcy, and neither was there any reason for any ladies to bother him.” The housekeeper then gently suggested that if Mrs Bennet wished the master to be available, she might ask him herself. Darcy stood in silence as the bizarre scene unfolded.

“People who suffer as I do from nervous complaints can have no great inclination for talking! Mr Bennet cannot

wonder at Mr Darcy's desire to see him. Why must I make Mr Bennet speak to him?"

At the sound of her mother's shrill voice, Elizabeth came into the hall, and no sooner had she seen her daughter than Mrs Bennet congratulated Elizabeth on her good fortune. Elizabeth attempted to silence her mother as she prattled away about pin money and carriages in front of him. Mrs Bennet then left with Mrs Hill, complaining all the while.

"What has happened?" she asked when they were alone.

"Your father will not see me."

"What!" she cried. "Why ever not?"

"I do not know, but your housekeeper says he will not speak to me or anyone." Darcy paced in the vestibule. Mr Bennet could not have mistaken his expressed interest in Elizabeth during dinner. Could the man be so uninterested in the dealings of his family that he had failed to notice that a gentleman had ridden from London twice in two weeks to spend time in conversation with his second daughter?

"Mr Darcy?"

Was Mr Bennet so decided against him as a suitor for Elizabeth that he would not give him the opportunity to petition for her hand? *As if anything in this world could prevent me from bringing Elizabeth home to Pemberley as my wife, now that I am assured of her love.*

"Fitzwilliam?"

Was refusing to grant him an interview a source of amusement for Elizabeth's father? Must they wait until Elizabeth turned one-and-twenty so her father's refusal would no longer be a hindrance?

"Dearest! Stop pacing!"

Elizabeth grabbed his arm. He had forgotten she was with him in the hall. She let go of him but then wrapped her arms around his waist and stared at him with expressive eyes that, at this moment, communicated her alarm.

"You must suppress that desire, Fitzwilliam."

“I do not understand.”

“You are attempting to solve our problems yourself. I admire your decisiveness, and I am sure it has served you well, but I insist we address the issue of my father together.”

He felt astonished. Not since he was a child had anyone insisted he do anything. “I am not accustomed to being spoken to in such a way.”

“Did you admire me for my compliant nature?” His expression answered for him. “No, I did not think so. I cannot watch you attempt to resolve a problem that is connected to me without my being involved in its solution.”

“Elizabeth, I have hundreds of tenants and servants under my protection. Do you know the number of people’s happiness in my guardianship—the number of decisions I make in the course of the year that I must make authoritatively and unaided?”

“I do not doubt your ability to make those decisions, nor do I wish to intrude upon them. But this matter with my father concerns me, and I insist on our addressing matters that concern me *together*.”

He allowed a smile to grace his lips. “You are a singular woman, Miss Bennet. Does a husband not have the right to expect obedience from his wife?” Elizabeth’s countenance relaxed as he teased her.

“Husbands may have the right to expect obedience from their wives, but they should treat wives as their best earthly companions. Can you agree to that?”

He raised an eyebrow as he tightened his hold on her. “You would not prefer to be unbothered by my masculine concerns and left to netting purses and spending your pin money?”

“I am a rational creature, and before you are resolved to carry me off to Gretna Green, I suggest you allow me to speak to my father.”

“The hour grows late, and Georgiana and I must leave. Do you not wish for me to secure your father’s consent today? I

will not be able to return until Bingley opens Netherfield in a fortnight.”

“Perhaps my father thinks you are partial to me while I still dislike you. I suspect he finds this entertaining. I had been pointed in my abhorrence of you for so long that he may think I would marry you without affection. But if that is true, then he does not know me at all.” Tears had welled up in her eyes, but Darcy could see she had no intention of allowing them to fall.

“You need not keep up appearances with me, Elizabeth. I may require obedience, but I do not require you to appear perpetually cheerful,” he teased. She gave an empty laugh, placed her head against his chest, and held him tighter. Darcy’s heart swelled at the thought of her taking comfort in his presence. The exciting novelty of being able to touch and hold Elizabeth had not diminished yet.

“Convince your father of our attachment, and I shall ask for his consent when Bingley and I return.” He wished he could resolve this now, but forcing the issue would only infuriate Mr Bennet and show Elizabeth he did not trust her judgment.

Chapter Nine

It was not until two days later that Elizabeth found the opportunity to speak with her father. He had retired to his library after every dinner with instructions not to be disturbed and had not taken breakfast with his family. Mrs Bennet attempted to speak to her husband about Mr Darcy every moment she encountered him, but he always refused to heed her. When she returned from her solitary morning walk, Elizabeth heard her mother shrieking at the closed library door.

“You tear my nerves to pieces! Mr Bennet? Mr Bennet!”

“I have no desire to listen to your effusions on this subject” was the reply from behind the door. Mrs Bennet, seeing Hill bearing the tea things on a tray for the master, begged her for the smelling salts. Elizabeth offered to take in the tray and left her mother to the tolerable care of Hill. Her father’s eyes narrowed when he saw his daughter, and not the servant, bring his tea, but he said nothing. She laid the tray on a side table and sat uninvited.

“I am anxious to have my library to myself,” he said sharply. “It is the one place in this house I may be sure to have leisure and tranquillity.”

“Papa, I would speak to you on a matter of great importance.”

He did not raise his eyes from his book.

She did not wish to cause pain to anyone, but her father must be brought to reason. “Papa, I must speak to you

regarding Mr Darcy.”

Mr Bennet tossed his book to the table, removed his spectacles, and rose. He scarcely opened his lips when he spoke. “What would you tell me about the proud and disagreeable Mr Darcy?”

“You have mistaken his character. Do not upset me by speaking of him so. You do not know him.”

“I thought you knew better than to fall for a handsome face. Of all the foolish reasons for a daughter to leave her father and her home, that is by far the most reprehensible. You could have fallen for one of those officers if all you wanted was some attention.”

She looked at her father in dismay. “When have you known me to flirt with men to trifle with their affections? Do you believe me to require a gentleman only to be handsome in order to accept him?”

“Other than being taken in by pleasant features and a full purse, I can see no other reason for you to encourage Mr Darcy. From the first moment of your meeting him, you and your mother told me, with much bitterness of spirit, I might add, how shockingly rude you found him. You only pretend to admire him now, but he is a proud man who does not love you.”

“He does love me, and I am not pretending. He asked me to marry him, and I accepted!” Her father’s face went pale. “He attempted to ask for your consent when he was last here, and I beg you to grant it when he returns.”

Her father stared for a long moment, and even before he spoke, she knew he would not agree.

“You are but a temporary amusement to this man.” Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief. “Mr Darcy might be like other rich men. He visits the country to partake in the company of a country miss and has no scruples in returning to town and leaving the lady with disappointed hopes. Consider Mr Bingley from last autumn and tell me you mean more to

Mr Darcy than Jane did to Mr Bingley.” He crossed his arms and smirked.

“He courted my attentions in Kent and in London, and he is returning to Netherfield to be near me. How do you explain his calling on me and making his sister known to us if not because he loves me?” She would avoid explaining Fitzwilliam’s first proposal and her vehement refusal as she could not bear to open them both to further sport.

“His own enjoyment or his own ease must be his ruling principle, just as any other wealthy man. Your sisters are all silly and ignorant, but I thought you had something more of quickness than them.” He shook his head at her disappointingly. “Clearly, I was in the wrong.”

Elizabeth’s misery increased at her father’s cruelty. His odd mixture of sarcastic humour and caprice had never troubled her as it now did. “Pray tell, what have I done to deserve such a description?”

Her father threw up his hands. “Have you not always hated this man? You would leave your home only for riches and pin money?”

“I disliked him before I knew him better! And if all I cared about was wealth, I might have married Mr Collins for the security of my family.”

“Instead, you would marry a man who, although not foolish like Mr Collins, is proud and unpleasant. You have been lured by his ten thousand a year. Why else would you wish to leave Longbourn?”

“Because I love him.” Why was this impossible for her father to understand? “He has no improper pride, and he is a perfectly amiable man. I was mistaken by my first impressions of him. He has admired me for a long time. You might see that I care for him and you might even find him likeable if you ever left your library.”

“Likeable?” he cried. “I do not need to know him, Lizzy. All he is to me is the man trying to lure you from home. You mean nothing to him.”

Elizabeth jumped to her feet. “I respect him just as he respects me, and there is no doubt in my heart or my mind that he loves me.”

Mr Bennet sighed and returned to his chair. Elizabeth had hoped that, once her father knew of her affection for her betrothed, he would have no reservations. She could no longer blame her father’s misinformation; she was in every way reasonable in explaining her feelings.

Her father gazed out the window. After several moments of silence, he asked, “You are determined to have that man?”

“I am.”

“How fortunate for you that Mr Darcy is the kind of man to whom I could never refuse anything that he condescended to ask. In the unlikely event this man returns for you, I shall grant my consent.”

Elizabeth felt no joy upon hearing these words but thanked her father all the same. He still would not look at her. She willed her tears not to fall and walked to the door when her father’s voice made her turn back.

“Lizzy, I congratulate you. You will be a happy woman with your fine carriages and expensive clothes.”

After a lifetime of praising her intellect, soliciting her opinion, and appreciating her humour, her own father thought her mercenary and superficial. “I am not marrying Mr Darcy for his fortune or for his consequence. I thought that you knew me better than that.” With her eyes cast down and her disappointment rising, she left him.

Elizabeth tried to take pleasure in her mother’s positive response, but to have her mother extol Fitzwilliam’s affluence reminded her that her father thought her to be a fortune hunter.

Her life at Longbourn now involved avoiding her father’s critical eye and limiting her mother’s effusions. One parent believed her to be a heartless fortune hunter while the other could not wait to announce that her daughter would marry a man worth ten thousand a year.

By the middle of June, Fitzwilliam's return was the only object of Elizabeth's happiest thoughts. It was her best consolation for the uncomfortable hours that the discontentedness of her father and the ignorance of her mother made inevitable. Summer activities arose, and the gossip of the neighbourhood predominantly focused on Jane and the return of the amiable Mr Bingley.



FOR A MAN NORMALLY LIVELY AND UNRESERVED, BINGLEY had grown disconcertedly quiet, and Darcy felt all the awkwardness of their situation. There remained an hour left in their journey to Netherfield, and Bingley's irritated silence filled the carriage.

One quarter of an hour had passed since Darcy made his confession, one that he ought to have made long ago. He had to tell his friend that he concealed Miss Bennet's presence from him for three months, well before Darcy delivered Elizabeth's letters and brought Bingley to Gracechurch Street. Bingley deserved to know the truth of his interference last winter, and now he struggled to understand Darcy's deceit.

"Why did you call on the Gardiners and Miss Bennet?" Bingley's tone was accusatory.

"You asked me to join you so I could judge whether she held you in any special regard."

"No—before that. Why did you take Miss Elizabeth's letters to Miss Bennet in the first place? You were already aware of her being in town. If you only wished to apologise for your interference, you did not need to call in Cheapside beforehand."

Darcy sighed. He had acted despicably. "My pride caused all that you and Miss Bennet have suffered," he began haltingly. "I had strong objections to the Bennet family, and I then truly believed that Miss Bennet did not return your affection. I had my own motives for wishing her to be

indifferent to you, but my conviction was based on reason and not hope.”

Bingley gave him a puzzled look. “What other reasons could you have held?”

“I was concerned with the utmost force of passion required to overcome those objections in my own case.” Bingley’s eyes narrowed. “I found a lady in Hertfordshire whom I was attracted to and whom I deemed an improper candidate for marriage because of her lack of fortune and low connexions. I felt utterly bewitched by her. I knew if you returned to Miss Bennet, I would often be thrown in the company of her sister.”

“Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy nodded. “You were *in love* with Miss Elizabeth last autumn?”

“I was, although I can say with great feeling that I love her better now than I did then.”

“She was the sister I attempted to obtain for you as a dance partner at the assembly. I said she was pretty, but you barely allowed her to be tolerable—and not handsome enough for *you*.”

Darcy winced; his harsh remark would haunt him until he was in his grave.

Bingley continued with more energy. “But you and she argued at every opportunity! If truth be told, I would have assumed she disliked you. She never courted your attention. I daresay she preferred to provoke—” Bingley gave him a shrewd look. “Ah, I see. Yes, I can understand the allure she must have held. So you removed me from Miss Bennet because Miss Elizabeth has relations in trade and no fortune. Not suitable enough for your noble and honourable family?”

“Let it never be said that you are deficient in understanding.”

“This still does not explain your delivering Miss Elizabeth’s letters or even speaking to her about Miss Bennet and me while you were both in Kent.”

He did not want to mention his ill-worded—nay, unkind—proposal. Nor did he want to share his innermost thoughts with

anyone, save Elizabeth, but seeing Bingley's habitually jovial countenance turned into an angry glower convinced him he could not remain silent.

"I came upon Miss Elizabeth alone one evening and asked her to marry me." Bingley's eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. "I told her I liked her against my will and that my sense of her inferiority had finally been conquered. She said she could not accept the man who had ruined her sister's chance at happiness. She had many other reasons for refusing me that I do not care to discuss, but she was entirely justified. She told me I was the last man in the world whom she could be prevailed upon to marry."

"Oh, Darcy." Bingley sighed heavily. "Why on earth are you coming with me to Hertfordshire? You will often encounter Miss Elizabeth. And you still have not answered why you delivered her letters to Gracechurch Street."

"It was a way to begin to earn her forgiveness for my interference in her sister's affairs." He could not deny that he also wished to give her happiness in the hopes of lessening her ill opinion of him. "I gave her a letter explaining myself the morning after my proposal, and it gradually removed her former prejudices against me. I have attended to her reproofs and believe I am now a gentleman worthy of her. We misjudged one another since the beginning of our acquaintance, and I have been properly humbled. During these past six weeks, we have come to know each better than we did throughout all the rest of our relationship."

"You intend to petition for her hand a second time?"

Darcy allowed himself a smile. "I have already been accepted and need only to obtain her father's consent." He sighed with contrition. "Meddling in your affairs was beneath me, Bingley, and I beg you to forgive me."

"It is not in my nature to be spiteful or merciless. I forgive you."

Bingley spent the rest of the journey speaking of Jane. Darcy knew he owed it to his friend to smile and agree that his "angel" was all that was lovely as he continually asked for

Darcy's assurances of Jane's regard. Although he preferred to tell his friend to decide for himself, he was so pleased at having been forgiven that he readily eased Bingley's mind.

"When I wrote my orders to Nicholls to prepare for our arrival, she responded with the goings-on in the neighbourhood. You will be delighted to know that Wednesday next is the midsummer assembly." Bingley kept his tone neutral, but there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. Darcy attempted not to betray his displeasure, but based on Bingley's roaring laughter, he assumed his opinion on public assemblies was well-known.

"Come now, Darcy, I never met with pleasanter people than at the Meryton assembly. I promptly became acquainted with everyone in the room, and it could be to your advantage to attempt the same this time if you are marrying Miss Elizabeth."

"I concede that I should speak more and not appear as if the event was a punishment."

"Miss Elizabeth's criticisms must have been addressed for you to promise such a thing!" He laughed at his expense again. "And will you dance?"

"I will act civilly to everyone. Must I also dance?"

"Yes, I think you must. And after you have danced with Miss Elizabeth, you must seek an introduction with young ladies not of your acquaintance."

Their conversation waned as they neared Meryton. Darcy's thoughts turned to Elizabeth's father, the final impediment to him bringing Elizabeth home as his bride. He would call on Mr Bennet at the earliest possible hour the following morning.

Chapter Ten

When Darcy was shown in to Longbourn's library, Mr Bennet scarcely opened his lips and gave all the appearance of wishing he could indulge in a strong drink. He bypassed the social niceties and said abruptly, "You want to marry my Lizzy."

The possessive "my" caught his notice. As it became clear that Mr Bennet would not speak further, Darcy willed himself to act with forbearance. Nothing was more important to Darcy than marrying Elizabeth, and for her sake, he preferred to have her father's blessing.

"I have asked Miss Elizabeth to be my wife, and she has consented to make me the happiest of men. I am here to ask for your consent."

The silence that followed Darcy's request stretched out. Mr Bennet appeared to vacillate between wanting to slump in his chair and wanting to forcefully remove Darcy from the room.

"Mr Darcy, Lizzy has always disliked you," he finally said. "She accepted you for the considerable material advantages you can provide. As for you, you have never looked on her with anything more than, at best, a temporary enthrallment. I am surprised that you returned at all."

Darcy slowly exhaled, furious at the insult. If this were any other transaction or social discourse, he would quit the room to keep his honour intact. But this man was Elizabeth's father, and he wanted to secure his consent, if only to ease her mind. He would not, however, reveal what had happened in Kent. To

mention it to his closest friend was torturous enough; to speak of it to Mr Bennet, a man who did not understand his own children nor hold *him* in any respect, would be unthinkable.

He aimed to speak resolutely but with civility. “I have admired her since last autumn, so I assure you my interest is not fleeting. And I have every confidence that your daughter returns my affections and was not induced by wealth to accept my proposal.”

Mr Bennet scoffed. “Neither of you will escape discredit nor misery should you proceed with this marriage. A woman as spirited as my Lizzy will be unhappy with a husband she cannot respect, and she will seek comfort outside of your marriage. You cannot wish to marry such a woman, and if you withdraw your suit, none could blame you.”

It shocked him that her own father would presume she would be an unfaithful wife. Elizabeth had a passionate temperament—a trait that was a manifold attraction rather than an aversion—but Darcy knew the only man on whom she would ever bestow that ardent attention would be *him*. He did not trust himself to speak without raising his voice and contented himself with silently glaring at Mr Bennet.

“You will come to resent her lively mind,” he went on, “and she will grow weary of your proud manner. All your wealth in Derbyshire will bring neither of you comfort.”

“I cannot believe that Miss Elizabeth has told you nothing of the depth of her attachment to me.”

“Lizzy has convinced herself that she loves you and sings your praises.” He shook his head in dismay. “I will not oppose the match. I shall have no peace from my wife if I do, and I cannot argue that you cannot provide for my daughter. I offer my consent but no blessing. This match will ruin my Lizzy.”

Mr Bennet did not deserve the compliment of a rational opposition. Darcy had imagined a different conclusion to his petition. He had envisioned thanking Elizabeth’s father and promising to cherish her always, but now he could barely conceal his anger at Mr Bennet’s capriciousness and disrespect.

Mr Bennet coolly observed, "I see no reason for you to remain."

Darcy promised to provide the settlement papers at his earliest convenience and, with a slight bow, strode out the door. He might have enquired of the servant in the hall after Elizabeth, but he was not master of himself enough to speak without anger. He mounted his horse and rode off.

ELIZABETH WAS IN HIGH SPIRITS AS SHE RAMBLED ACROSS THE fields to return to Longbourn. Contemplation in the noisy Bennet household must be reserved for private hours, and not a clement day went by without a solitary walk to enjoy both physical and emotional freedom. It was only when she was with Fitzwilliam that she felt similarly unrestricted.

She cleared a stile and then tilted her head to the sky and removed her straw bonnet. On hearing a rider approach, she turned and was greeted by a surprising and welcome sight. As the rider readied to jump the fence, Elizabeth attempted to catch his eye. She watched as his stern and serious expression brightened into something akin to delight as he recognised her.

He dismounted, and Elizabeth found herself crushed against Fitzwilliam's chest as he buried his face in her hair. When he pulled away, he held her face between his hands. He appeared weary but elated as he brushed a stray tendril of hair from her cheek.

"Elizabeth," he whispered.

She had expected he would kiss her and was disappointed when something over her shoulder caught his attention. Upon perceiving a farmer with his horse and cart approaching, he stepped away. He gathered his horse's reins and offered his other arm to Elizabeth, and they walked toward Longbourn.

"What is the matter, my dear?"

She was tempted to give a little falsehood here, but decided that perhaps he could handle a bit of teasing. "I fear that I have fallen in your esteem, Mr Darcy. You come upon

me after a long absence, but choose not to kiss me in greeting.”

His eyes were steadily fixed on her face, and his gaze showed a mixture of adoration and longing. “It would not do for me to greet you as I desire on an open country road,” he said in a low voice. “I may have lost my heart, but I have not lost my self-control. As much as I should like to kiss you, it would not benefit your reputation or mine to do so here.”

“You are fortunate to have ready so reasonable an answer.”

“It is also challenging for me to kiss one who continues to call me *Mr Darcy*.” He kept a straight face for a moment that turned into a wide grin when she laughed.

She longed to say that he had kissed her several times without caring how she addressed him, but thought it would be more gracious of her to address him by his first name at every appropriate opportunity.

“You are correct, Fitzwilliam.” She laid her head on his arm as they walked. “However, you accept the risk I may be absent-minded and wrap my arms around you and call you ‘my darling Fitzwilliam’ in front of Lady Catherine.”

He smiled, but it faded and a pensiveness took its place. “I have been to see your father.”

The merriment she felt upon seeing him again vanished. She did not want to ask how the interview had passed; she only wanted to walk with her beloved and feel the sunshine on her face. To ask about the interview, to walk back to Longbourn, and to put her bonnet back on her head meant abandoning the joy and freedom she felt when she was alone with him.

“He did not refuse my request, but he...” He hesitated. “He takes no pleasure in our union.”

Elizabeth briefly wished her father had refused. It would have given her the privilege of feeling righteous indignation. But to learn that her father had not the conviction to refuse, but merely showed interest enough to express his ignorant displeasure, was painful.

“I told him how I have come to love you, but he chose not to hear me,” she said, her voice soft. “I know not how to convince him of your worthiness. After all you have endured to have me fall in love with you, I do not know how you could bear to have him accuse us of not being devoted to one another.”

“I am displeased, but the result is the same. You and I are free to wed, and the banns may be published beginning this Sunday.”

“My mother will prattle on about the necessity of a common licence. She finds elegant all things that signify an additional expense.”

“If it would please you, I would purchase one.”

“No, it is not necessary. It is not as though we must marry in a hurry.” When she saw the slight pink on his cheeks, she realised another interpretation of her statement and grew mortified at her implication. “I mean, we would not marry until the end of August after my trip with the Gardiners, so a licence is not necessary. Will you not return with me to the house?”

He kindly overlooked her embarrassment and said he would return with Bingley soon. “I need time to steady my emotions if I am to encounter your father again. Will you inform your mother before I return?”

“Her manner of receiving the information will be that of violent delight. I could not bear that you should hear her joy,” she wryly agreed, and at the gate they parted.

NOT THREE HOURS LATER, THE GENTLEMEN CALLED. HER mother received them with a degree of civility that made Elizabeth ashamed. Fitzwilliam looked serious as usual; she knew he could not be in her mother’s presence what he was when they were alone. She saw Mr Bingley looking both pleased and embarrassed. With Elizabeth’s future now secure, Mrs Bennet undoubtedly felt that Mr Bingley required all of her attention to obtain the same for Jane.

“Mr Bingley, I beg you and Mr Darcy to come here and fish in Mr Bennet’s trout stream on Saturday. It would please him to show you all the best places, and you must take home as much as you wish. Mr Bennet will even provide you with tackle if you do not bring your own. I am sure he will be vastly happy to oblige you both!”

Mr Bingley readily agreed, to Mrs Bennet’s delight. Elizabeth knew Fitzwilliam had no desire to spend time with her father, but he also agreed. He bore the ill-judged officiousness of her mother and heard all of her silly remarks with a command of countenance for which Elizabeth was grateful.

Elizabeth observed how much the beauty of her sister rekindled the admiration of her former lover. Every five minutes seemed to be giving Jane more of his attention. Mrs Bennet focused all her energies on Mr Bingley and Jane, and as Kitty took no interest in anyone’s conversation and Mary had returned to her instrument, she and Fitzwilliam were left in relative privacy.

“Georgiana requests I send you her compliments and asks whether she may write to you.”

Elizabeth could listen to the sonorous sound of his voice until the sun set. It was deep and steady, and, although he could often be abrupt, Elizabeth decided there was no other voice that could sound as sweet. “Will Georgiana be surprised when you tell her she is to have a sister?”

“No, she quickly perceived my affection for you. Your friendship will be good for her; she could use some of your confidence.”

“She is a kind-hearted girl, and I am lucky to soon be able to call her my sister.” He grinned proudly, and Elizabeth saw the strength of the affection he held for his sister. “You have done well by her. All she wants for is assurance.”

“She has already defended you to Miss Bingley, and she was critical of me when she learned of my former opinions. Your influence has already improved her timidity.”

Elizabeth smiled at the compliment. “Miss Bingley did not come to Hertfordshire? We are all aware of her low opinion of Jane and our relations, but I shall miss her company.”

“Given the awful attitude of superiority she displayed, why would you wish for that woman’s presence?”

“You know how I do so love a laugh. I might have been amused at the hopelessness of her designs on you.”

Fitzwilliam covered his mouth with his hand to disguise his amusement. “She has assiduously courted me for two years,” he whispered as he shook his head.

“Then it is little wonder that you became captivated by the one lady who wanted to provoke you at every turn.” Elizabeth touched his hand that rested between them on the sofa. His eyes turned to where the others sat; upon seeing everyone’s attentions otherwise engaged, he turned his hand over and threaded his fingers through hers. “I am so fortunate you saw some good in me, despite my efforts to aggravate you.”

Far too soon, the gentlemen rose to leave, and Mrs Bennet engaged them to dine at Longbourn in a few days’ time.

“You are a visit in my debt, Mr Bingley,” she insisted, “for when you went to town last winter, you promised to take a family dinner with us as soon as you returned. I have not forgotten, you see.”

Mr Bingley looked abashed at this reflection. Mrs Bennet turned her attentions to Fitzwilliam and told him of her inclination to ask them to stay and dine there that day, but she did not think she had enough courses to satisfy a man worth ten thousand a year. Fitzwilliam, ever mindful of Elizabeth’s feelings, smiled his thanks and lifted his eyes only after her mother turned away.

AS SOON AS THE GENTLEMEN WERE GONE, ELIZABETH AND Jane walked out to dwell without interruption on those subjects that two sisters must discuss at length. Elizabeth had seen enough of Mr Bingley’s behaviour to be sure that he would soon propose, but Jane, ever reserved, only replied, “He

is blessed with great sweetness of address and such a desire to be generally pleasing.”

Elizabeth could not help but laugh. “You know he acts that way hoping to please you.”

“That is unfair to Mr Bingley. He has so much ease and perfect good breeding that he would be just as pleasant to anyone.”

Elizabeth thought back to Fitzwilliam’s explanation of Mr Bingley often being in and out of love, but chose not to speak of it. Mr Bingley had been reassured of Jane’s regard and had come back to win her, so there was little to be gained from supposing how pleasant he may have appeared to other young ladies.

“He will ask for your hand before the week is out.”

“I am yet surprised at your being engaged to Mr Darcy,” Jane said as they walked on. “Oh, do not look at me that way. He loves you, and for that reason alone, I like him. But do you feel what you ought?”

“You must put your mind at ease! I feel what I ought for him.”

Jane’s affection for Mr Bingley seemed placid by comparison. Elizabeth could not imagine Mr Bingley bursting into the drawing room with the words, “*You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.*” She could not envision Jane and Mr Bingley having fervent disagreements and then laughing about their misunderstandings. Jane was more likely to demonstrate her regular composure, and Mr Bingley, his uniform cheerfulness.

As much as she adored her older sister, Elizabeth knew they would never have the same ideas of marital happiness. Fitzwilliam had enough heart to be in love with her without her encouragement. Mr Bingley’s affection for Jane was swept aside because his sisters and friend suggested Jane had nothing more than a slight preference for him. Elizabeth admired her betrothed’s decisiveness, his cleverness, and his unwavering loyalty to those he loved, and she was again grateful they had

encountered each other at the parsonage after she read his letter.

When Elizabeth and Jane returned to the house, they found Mr Bennet arguing with his wife about the fishing expedition. He attempted to ignore her as she insisted he entertain the Netherfield gentlemen.

“How can you be so tiresome?” her mother cried. “You must allow Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley to fish in your stream.”

“They may come if they like,” he said without looking at her, “but I see no reason to join them.”

“Mr Bennet! It is your trout stream. You must accompany them. Mr Darcy is to marry Lizzy, and Mr Bingley may offer to Jane.” Mrs Bennet’s voice became increasingly piercing.

“I shall accompany Mr Bingley out of consideration for Jane, but as Lizzy has done enough to capture the wealthy Mr Darcy, there is little more the arrogant man can be to me.”

“Nonsense. You cannot invite one without the other. You ought to become acquainted with both young men.”

“My daughter may spend enough time with Mr Darcy for both our sakes, I assure you.”

Elizabeth did not wish to hear any more slights against her or her intended, and Jane led her into the other room where Kitty reclined on a sofa with an air of idleness. After several moments of silence, Kitty asked, “Does Miss Darcy come to Netherfield with her brother?”

“No, she did not choose it, perhaps since she is not yet out. She will summer at Pemberley.”

“Oh.” She slumped in her seat. “She seemed shy, but we might have had fun while she stayed at Netherfield through your engagement.”

Elizabeth, trying to make an advantage of the opportunity presented, offered that Kitty could spend time with them at Pemberley, and hoped Fitzwilliam would not mind. Kitty would be improved for being out of Lydia’s influence, and

Georgiana could benefit from time with a friendly young girl near her own age.

“When Lydia went away, she promised to write often and thoroughly,” Kitty said, tossing aside a single sheet of paper, “but her letters are always long expected and always very short. All she speaks of is her—” Kitty broke off suddenly.

“What does Lydia say?” asked Jane.

“She wrote in confidence. I should not speak of it.”

“If it was to be a secret, say not another word on the subject,” said Jane. “You may depend upon us seeking no further.”

Elizabeth agreed but wished to know of what Lydia had written. Kitty was always taking Lydia’s letters to read privately, and she feared that her youngest sister had become an embarrassing flirt in Brighton.



DARCY AND BINGLEY WERE PUNCTUAL TO THEIR APPOINTMENT on Saturday to join Mr Bennet and his neighbours to fish. Darcy vowed to do his best to appear agreeable spending the morning with a man for whom he had no respect. Mr Bennet’s disregard for Elizabeth—in fact, for all of his children—was deplorable. That he exposed his wife to the contempt of her own children was equally reprehensible, however silly that wife may be.

“Well, gentlemen,” Mr Bennet said when they met him, “let us get this delightful endeavour over with as soon as possible. How fortunate for you, Mr Darcy, that fishing is such a solitary undertaking and you need not speak to those of us beneath your notice.”

Bingley glanced between them and looked as if he wished to say something, but he knew not what. Some of the other gentlemen exchanged knowing glances as they cast their lines. Darcy was keenly aware that he had amends to make when it came to the people of Meryton. These were Elizabeth’s

neighbours, and he would be civil and gracious. If anything, he would prove to the caustic Mr Bennet that he was not an unlikeable man.

Darcy took it upon himself to speak to the elder Mr Goulding and asked whether he would be gracious enough to point out those parts of the stream where there was usually more sport. The man looked astonished at being pleasantly addressed but walked with Darcy farther down the stream. Bingley joined them, and Darcy asked Mr Goulding about Haye Park. Soon, a small group of men were speaking amiably of the attics and drawing rooms of their respective homes. As the morning went on, Darcy even bore all of Sir William Lucas's hopes of seeing him dance at the next assembly with tranquillity.

Mr Bennet watched him in silence as Darcy interacted with the other gentlemen for over an hour, then moved nearer to him. He resigned himself to his future father-in-law entertaining himself at his expense.

“Mr Darcy, you must tell my wife that you enjoyed this day's sport. Both her and Lizzy have harassed me to show you further courtesy than I believe you deserve. If you would condescend to tell them we chatted amiably, I could return to my library in peace.”

I shall behave in a gentleman-like manner; I shall behave in a gentleman-like manner. He was certain the others nearby could hear, and he would have preferred to ignore such an ill-mannered speech. “I enjoyed the sport and shall say so to Mrs Bennet.”

After a pause, Mr Bennet chose another line of questioning. “Did you feel such guilt about paying my Lizzy too much attention that your sense of honour now obliges you to offer for her?”

Darcy took a deep breath and ignored him.

“I can think of no other reason you would choose a country girl with no fortune to be your wife,” he went on. “You need not fear I would be bound by such an outdated manner of thinking and force you to marry. If you left her with

disappointed hopes, she would at least have the distinction of being crossed in love like her sister Jane.”

Thankfully, Bingley had moved down the stream and did not hear this scathing speech. Darcy felt that nothing Mr Bennet said warranted a response and kept his eyes on the water.

“You seem aloof for an engaged man, and you have yet to demonstrate genuine affection for her. I think my Lizzy is too lively for you. I fear for the respectability of you both. I am certain that my neighbours would agree that she wants only your fortune.”

Darcy’s eyes turned sharply from the river. “Do you know that you are extremely rude?”

Mr Bennet’s eyebrows rose in amusement, and Darcy realised he had played directly into his hands. He noticed the gentlemen nearest to them were embarrassed by their conversation.

“My disposition may not be affectionate, but my feelings for Miss Elizabeth are strong and sincere.” The other men could hear them, and Darcy thought perhaps this could be to his advantage. “And, as she and I have assured you before, your daughter is marrying me for love and not for prudent motives.” The men would return home and tell their wives that Elizabeth Bennet was not marrying for mercenary reasons after all.

Mr Bennet made no answer and cast his line. The morning wore on, and there was no further communication between them. Aside from briefly replying to Bingley’s unending questions about Jane’s regard for him, Darcy fished in silence.

Bingley and Darcy returned to the house and scarcely needed an invitation to stay to dinner. Not long after arriving, Darcy sat next to Elizabeth, wishing for the privacy of a walk where he might speak to her openly. If he were more honest with himself, his reasons had less to do with speaking and more to do with enjoying the feel of Elizabeth in his arms and her lips on his.

“How did you enjoy the excursion, Fitzwilliam?” She sounded reluctant to ask the question.

“The sport was fine, and your neighbours were amiable company.”

“Did you speak with my father?”

“I think there cannot be too little said on that subject.”

“One hundred forty miles, my love, remember that.” Elizabeth squeezed his hand and grinned.

Chapter Eleven

Monday morning, the gentlemen arrived early at Longbourn. Elizabeth saw how Mr Bingley looked upon Jane; and her mother, whose energies had been directed toward seeing Jane married since she was fifteen, was also not blind to his attentions. The fastest means to achieve her desired end was to suggest Mr Bingley and Jane chaperone Lizzy and Mr Darcy. “You can join the couple on a walk to Oakham Mount. It is a nice long walk, and Mr Darcy has never seen the view.”

Fitzwilliam said nothing, but Elizabeth discerned in his eyes that he took little pleasure in the idea of being attended by Mr Bingley. For Elizabeth’s sake, and likely also for his friend to be with Jane, he professed a great curiosity to see the view.

Elizabeth tried to contain her laughter as she and Jane hurried upstairs to get ready. It was apparent to all that Mr Bingley wanted to be alone with Jane, and everyone was willing to throw them into each other’s company. Elizabeth promised her sister she would walk slowly to allow her and Bingley to outstrip them, but Jane was mortified at her suggestion.

“I see no reason we cannot all walk to Oakham Mount together.”

Elizabeth gave her sister an expressive smile and lowered her voice. “I can admit to knowing a perfectly good reason to find oneself alone with the object of one’s affections.”

“Lizzy!” Jane gasped. “If Mr Bingley should ever wish to speak privately with me to ask a particular question, he will do so without resorting to any scheme.”

Elizabeth had not been thinking of receiving a marriage proposal but rather of passionate kisses, though Jane’s conservative nature would not allow her to consider such a thing.

The foursome left the house, and despite the silent wishes of three of them, Jane kept the group together. Jane and Mr Bingley spoke about Bath and his sisters’ plans for the summer while Elizabeth leant on Fitzwilliam’s arm, content with their comforting, intimate silence.

“What say you, Darcy?”

From the startled look on her intended’s face, he had been paying little attention to Jane and Mr Bingley. With his free hand, he had been gently stroking the back of Elizabeth’s wrist that lay on his arm. He apologised and asked Bingley to repeat his question.

“I was telling Miss Bennet how enjoyable I find Bath and that she ought to visit if she has the opportunity. I assumed it was not the sort of place you would wish to pass your time.”

“Certainly not.”

Fitzwilliam’s abrupt answer drew Mr Bingley’s laughter. “It is too lively a place for you, I imagine. Miss Bennet, you should see the beautiful buildings, the assembly rooms, and constantly shifting society. There are always new persons arriving, and there is dancing nearly every night.”

Elizabeth knew Fitzwilliam well enough to know he did not share Mr Bingley’s enthusiasm. He would persist in a very determined, though silent, disinclination for Bath, and it was only after Jane asked for his opinion that he addressed the subject.

“It is not its exuberance that deters me. The city is depressing and inhabited by hypochondriac dowagers and bachelor invalids. All who visit Bath are preyed upon by either dissolute gamesters or fortune hunters.”

“You are too severe, Darcy,” said his friend, laughing. “You must enjoy it.”

“You are fond of Bath and its society,” said Fitzwilliam, shaking his head, “therefore you are predisposed to think that it must suit for everyone.”

“Just as you believe that because you enjoy your library, everyone should prefer a book to any other activity. Do not scowl at me. You may always be buying books, but I know I am an idle fellow. Despite that, I remain a happy man.”

“There are many pleasant ways by which one can pass one’s time,” Jane interjected, likely afraid their disagreement might become a dispute. “I see no reason for us to attempt to place a higher value on another’s preference for society or reading.”

The group had ceased walking as their conversation grew more animated. The bottom of the hill, where they remained, was a cheerful spot, and Jane found a comfortable seat for herself on the step of a stile. Elizabeth could see that her sister was rather tired and was glad to sit. She suggested that Mr Bingley and Jane remain while she and Fitzwilliam continued to the summit to see the view. Jane gave Elizabeth a look that spoke her distress at such premeditation to leave her alone with Mr Bingley, but she conceded to remain since she was too tired to press on.

Fitzwilliam offered his arm to Elizabeth, and they ascended at a leisurely pace. The increasing incline of the hill concealed their view of the prospect, and as the path looped round Oakham Mount, they were likewise obstructed from view. Their path was shaded with bright green trees and brightened by blooming flowers, and the relative privacy brought a smile to Elizabeth’s lips.

“What will you think of me when I tell you how very pleased I am to have your company all to myself?” Elizabeth said with a mischievous smile when they were out of earshot of the others. “I do hope that I have other redeeming qualities that will outweigh my scandalising boldness.”

“I think you are intelligent, lively, attractive, and clever,” he spoke slowly and deliberately, “but with a tendency to judge on first impressions.”

Elizabeth laughed at this picture of herself. “That might have one time been true of both of us, my love, but we have both improved in civility since then. We are very well suited.”

“I had always thought so, but my preference for reading to cards or for conversation to dancing is no secret. I hope my vivacious wife will not become unhappy or jaded.”

She heard the faintest hint of disquiet in his usual confident tone. “I am well-read enough to be a companionable wife to you, and I expect many lively discussions to pass the cold Derbyshire winter evenings. I care little for cards, but perhaps you might one day ask me again to dance a reel.”

Fitzwilliam smiled mildly, but Elizabeth wanted to further assure him of her confidence in their compatibility.

“Where my opinions coincide with yours, I shall delight in your good sense. Where they differ, I shall respect the uncompromising nature of your defence of that difference.” She saw his tight expression relax. “I am confident we shall be happy together.”

It did not take them long to reach the summit. She felt the outlook’s exhilarating influence and looked at Fitzwilliam to assess his response to the view. He was not gazing toward the horizon but was fixed on her.

“You have very fine eyes. I am unsure whether I have told you before, but they are so full of soul and intelligence, bright and clear.” His warm, steadfast gaze was enticing. “I wish—I wish I could show...” Fitzwilliam shook his head. “I want you to know how much I feel for you.”

Elizabeth felt so much for this passionate man who tried so hard to express his love. A quickened pulse and a desire to pull him as near as she could were her immediate responses to this confession. They were unfamiliar feelings, but she was exceedingly and impatiently interested in exploring them further if only he was as willing as she was.

Fitzwilliam's gaze fell from her eyes to her throat. He reached out his fingertips to trace her skin along the lace that trimmed the collar of her gown. It dipped no lower than her collarbone, but the intimacy of the act nearly overwhelmed her. He ran his fingers slowly across her skin from one side of her neck, down to her throat, and then back up the other side. Fitzwilliam normally had a calm and commanding manner, but there was a restless energy to his subtle movements. Elizabeth's breathing hitched. He stood so near, she could feel the heat emanating from his body.

Fitzwilliam brought his hands to tenderly cup the sides of her face, and a bold thought came, rapid and unbidden: the two of them unclothed with limbs entangled. She was stirred to act in a way he would find shocking since they were not yet married, and she pushed it away.

Elizabeth saw adoration across his handsome features as he lowered his mouth toward hers. She closed her eyes, waiting to feel his lips press against hers, but the kiss did not come. Elizabeth opened her eyes to see Fitzwilliam looking at her, his lips hovering so close to hers that she could nearly taste them. He leant forward and, before his lips met hers, whispered, "You are the delight of my life, Elizabeth."

She could not have uttered another sentence in response; her heart was too full. Elizabeth trembled when his soft lips met hers, and a thrill of excitement passed through her body. She wished more of the ardour she felt for him could come across in this sweet, affectionate kiss. Elizabeth ran her hands across his back and repressed the desire to press herself closer.

When he pulled his mouth away, she felt the familiar deprived sensation that always followed when he ended the kisses that she wanted to continue. Elizabeth could see the same intensity that she felt for him play across his features, but he, unlike her, seemed frustratingly unwilling to indulge in them further.

Perhaps it is better for our reputations that one of us is in complete control.

"I still cannot believe that we are to be married," he said.

“Are you more surprised by your marrying me or marrying at all?”

“After your vehement refusal, I have some reason to be astonished that you eventually accepted me.”

Before Elizabeth could apologise again for calling him the last man in the world she would marry, he said he had never considered marriage before meeting her. Once he decided he wanted to marry her, he went directly to the parsonage and asked her.

“From a young age, my family expected me to marry my cousin Anne, long before I understood what marriage meant. But even before my mother died, I realised I could never marry Anne. After suffering the pursuit of every eligible heiress between sixteen and thirty, and the manoeuvrings of their mothers, it was no sacrifice to suspend the idea of matrimony.”

“You never considered bestowing your hand on your cousin, even for your family?”

“Anne is sickly and fancies herself indisposed. She is foolish, irrational, and very awkward. The only thing that varies with Anne is the degree of her insipidity.”

“Unequal marriages remind me of Charlotte Collins. She is your age and has a large family with no fortune, and her opinion of matrimony is not like mine. She wanted only a comfortable home, and when Mr Collins proposed, she agreed because she feared no one else would ever ask her. His regard for her, I am sure, was quite imaginary.”

“Mr Collins is not without respectability, and Mrs Collins’s prudent character makes it an eligible match.” Fitzwilliam gave her a shrewd look. “Given Mr Collins’s connexions to your family, I am surprised he did not choose one of your sisters. I would have thought that your mother would do all in her power to see him married to one of you.”

Elizabeth started; her future husband was too clever. He studied her as she attempted to remain unaffected. He raised an eyebrow and smirked. “When did he offer to you?”

Elizabeth sighed and felt her cheeks burning with embarrassment. “Perhaps we ought not to be discussing the failures of another gentleman?” His gaze did not waver, and Elizabeth gave a resigned smile. “The morning after the Netherfield ball.”

“Yes, he opened the dance with you.” Fitzwilliam nodded as he remembered. “Tell me: Were you as vehement in your refusal of him as you were with me?”

“I was kinder to Mr Collins than I was to you. You were easier to convince, however.” She laughed. “At least you had no trouble believing I was a rational creature who knew my own mind.”

“When did he offer to Miss Lucas?”

“He made two offers of marriage within three days.”

Fitzwilliam shook his head as he looked out over the horizon, and Elizabeth read all his signs of attempting to suppress some powerful emotion. Elizabeth saw he was tense, and stepped closer to place a reassuring hand on his arm.

“Your proposal still had the advantage over Mr Collins’s. You began with confessing your ardent admiration and love. You must not dwell so much on what has passed. Think instead of how fortunate we are that we met later that morning, after I read your letter.”

He met her eye with a sad smile. “You misunderstand my reticence, although I regret what I then said. My thoughts now linger on how I might have felt if I arrived in Kent and discovered you to be the new Mrs Collins.”

“You cannot believe I was tempted to accept him!”

“Not at all,” he said quickly. “I spent the winter in town trying to forget you. When I learned in January that your sister had arrived, I secretly both wished and feared you might join her. Despite my reservations, I scanned every crowd, hoping to see your face. Every time I heard a woman’s cheerful laugh, I turned to see whether it was yours, and despite my every effort to rid my mind of you, your memory would not leave me. With every opinion I heard, I wanted to learn your thoughts.

Not only that, but I found myself curious about all of your concerns, although I had no reason to believe I would see you again.

“By the time I left for Rosings at Easter, I thought I had conquered what I had deemed to be an inappropriate passion. Imagine my surprise to find that, once again, I would be thrown into your company. Had you been married to that ridiculous man, I know not how I could have abided it.”

“There is no reason for you to be so sombre, my love. I did not accept Mr Collins, and I *did* accept you.” She threaded her fingers through his to lead him back toward the path down the hill.

“Let us speak no longer of disadvantageous marriages,” she insisted. “I have already decided we are to be the happiest couple in the world, so we need not discuss ourselves. Perhaps this might be a good time to speak of your friend and my sister,” Elizabeth said sportingly. “Our marriage will bring them frequently together, so he may as well ask her to marry him now.”

He initially refused to speak on the subject, saying it was not their place to discuss such private subjects, but when Elizabeth reminded him about the suitability of discussing Mr Collins’s proposal, he conceded and said he felt Bingley should ask Jane soon.

“Then you have given your permission? I should have guessed as much.”

“Bingley needs no such approval from me! I have interfered enough.”

“You said and did nothing to help direct your friend?”

“Not at all. When he asked, I told him that I could perceive that his attachment to Jane was unabated, and she looked to be much in love with him. It would delight me should they become engaged.”

They arrived at the bottom of the hill, still holding hands, to find their schemes ineffectual. Elizabeth had expected Mr Bingley would make the most of the opportunity of a private

tête-à-tête with Jane, and she was disappointed that they had no news to impart as the foursome walked back to Longbourn.

Chapter Twelve

The assembly room was splendidly lit up, full of company, and insufferably hot. Darcy and Bingley greeted the Bennet women immediately upon their arrival and asked their respective ladies to dance. Mr Bennet, thankfully, had remained at home with a book. Memories of their waltz were fresh in his mind as Darcy led Elizabeth to join the dancers. Their hands touched, and Darcy's lingered on hers as they passed one another.

"Do you recall our last dance, Elizabeth?" He would rather be waltzing with her held close in his arms and looking directly into her eyes.

"Indeed, I do."

"And how does it compare to this one?" he asked when the dance brought them together.

"It is remarkably similar," she said playfully as she passed him by, purposefully brushing against him.

"Is that so? I remember our last dance quite differently."

"You mean because this is a Boulanger and we last danced a quadrille at Netherfield? I am sure we have not danced since then. Whatever are you hinting at?" she teased.

While they waited for the next set to begin, several of her neighbours congratulated them on their engagement. Elizabeth received their well wishes with grace, while Darcy bore it with calm, even after Sir William Lucas complimented him on carrying away the brightest jewel of the country.

As the dance resumed, Darcy noticed Mrs Bennet and Mrs Philips holding court on the far side of the room. Despite the distance and the crowd, he could discern the words “pin money” and “rich as a lord.” Darcy strove to remember how sensible and pleasing he had found the Gardiners. No matter his determination, reformation of character was not the work of an instant.

Darcy watched Elizabeth’s figure as she weaved in and out between the couples. She smiled softly at him when they met, and he finally relaxed in the crowded room, admiring the glow of her smooth skin in the candlelight. The animation of her features as she danced was enchanting, and he was helplessly drawn to her. It was a familiar feeling he was experiencing now, an aching need that she so easily provoked in him.

The set ended, and Darcy escorted Elizabeth to where Bingley was speaking to Jane. His friend asked for Elizabeth’s hand for the second set; Darcy felt obliged to petition Jane. She was a pleasant partner, although Darcy found his attention wandering to wherever Elizabeth was. The half-hour set could not pass fast enough, and Darcy returned Jane to her mother. Having no desire to be paraded by Mrs Bennet to her neighbours, he bowed, though with a smile, and was about to walk away when he saw that Elizabeth’s hand was claimed for the third set.

What am I to do now? Elizabeth would tell him to give himself the trouble to ask another woman to dance. Kitty and Mary sat with their mother, and a gentleman should not allow young ladies to sit if they wished to dance. He interrupted their gossiping to ask Mary, with great solemnity, if she would dance the third with him and then engaged Kitty for the next.

After he danced with Mary and then Kitty, Darcy walked the room and spoke with some of the gentlemen from the fishing excursion. But more often than not, his attention was on Elizabeth for the remainder of the evening. The power of his desire for her struck him as she laughed and danced with her partners. She unknowingly challenged his resolve to act in the manner befitting a gentleman. After despairing that she would never forgive him or think well of him, it still amazed

him that she loved him. Darcy took in the way her gown clung to her body and outlined her curves, and all manner of immodest desires came to his mind.

When he met her loving gaze across the room, he wondered whether she knew what he had been thinking.

AS ELIZABETH FACED HER PARTNER, SHE FELT FITZWILLIAM'S stare from across the room. He was likely scowling at her partner for keeping her from his side, but the intensity in his look made her wonder if he was in truth thinking about something else. Something involving his hands around her waist and her arms around his shoulders, pressed against one another. She blushed, and hoped her partner would not notice. Fitzwilliam would never think something so indecorous at a ball.

Elizabeth was working her way up from the bottom of the line and was at leisure to look around. When she caught his eye, he smiled at her. At the end of the dance, she directed her friend to take her to him. He scarcely inclined his head toward the man escorting her and glared at him after he left.

“Did you not find good company to entertain you while I danced?” She tucked her arm into his.

“I would say that I found acceptable company in your absence.” Elizabeth felt his tension through his arm.

“I did as well. My partners were pleasant, but I prefer *your* company to all others.” He looked at her in some surprise, as if realising that she was at his side and on his arm, smiling at him and squeezing his hand in emphasis. “So you must stop frowning at those who ask me to dance.”

“You intend to dance every set?”

“You would curtail my enjoyment?”

“Instances have been known of young ladies passing months without being at any ball, and no material injury accrued either to body or mind.”

“I am fond of dancing, and since I know you are not, I do not feel slighted that you do not ask me again. However, I could not refuse to stand up with other gentlemen. They all have a long acquaintance with me, and I shall soon be happily gone away with you over one hundred forty miles from here.”

“I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours,” he said in earnest. “If you are not otherwise engaged, would you do me the honour of dancing the last with me?”

“Yes, happily, my taciturn and unsocial dear.”

He looked more serious than her playful manner warranted as his gaze travelled over her body. He opened his lips and looked as though he fervently wished to say more, but the next dance was about to begin. She wondered what Fitzwilliam might have said. She had a secret hope that it might have been more flirtatious and provocative than she had yet seen from him.

When they had a moment to speak after the dance began, he murmured, “Do you wonder how our lives might have changed if your overhearings last autumn were more to my benefit?”

“How do you mean?”

“Had you not overheard me tell Bingley that it would be a punishment for me to stand up with anyone?”

“I think it would be preferable had you not said such an intolerable remark at all.”

“Once again, I concede to your better judgment. I wonder then how things might have passed had I not said anything cruel, and instead you overheard me speaking to Miss Bingley at Lucas Lodge.”

She tried to remember the evening in question. “I recall you attending to my conversations and Sir William putting me forward to you as a dance partner.”

“When you heartlessly refused to dance with me?” he teased.

“Yes, I did not find you tolerably handsome enough to tempt me, but do not worry, for I certainly find you so now.”

“Had you remained near, you might have heard Miss Bingley attempting to guess the subject of my reverie. I told her I was agreeably engaged in considering the great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow.”

She looked up at him lovingly, but with no small amount of surprise. “I never thought I inspired affection so early in our acquaintance.”

“I could not live without you, Elizabeth,” he whispered into her ear when the dance brought them together, “and I know by what slim chance I was spared that unhappy lot.”

His eyes were dark brown but now appeared black as he fixed a look on her that expressed the intensity of his love. Elizabeth was conscious of nothing other than him. His presence filled the hot, crowded room until the walls seemed too close together. She was well aware that, as they paused during the dance, his eyes swept up and down her form. The room seemed oppressive under the weight of his gaze amidst all the other people, and Elizabeth was compelled to step away before the dance resumed.

She was overwhelmed, not by his clear desire for her, but by her own equal, thrilling response to him; it was too much for her modesty to bear. *His ardour for me has been restrained all this time, but he is as much affected by me as I am by him.* She said nothing to him as she abruptly left the dance.

The musicians struck up a fresh dance as Elizabeth made her way out of the crowd and into the quiet tearoom. As she charged into the room, she found, as the evening was almost at an end, that it was not merely less crowded but empty. Elizabeth stood still with her eyes closed and her back to the entrance and attempted to catch her breath.

“Elizabeth?”

She jumped at the sound of his soft voice and whirled around.

“Elizabeth, why did you run from me? Have I frightened you?”

She shook her head. *I could never be afraid of him, but my own desires are overpowering me.* He tugged loose the cord that let the curtain cover the entryway to give them more privacy.

“I did not know...” How could she find the words to explain such a thing?

“You did not know what?” he asked gently.

“How much you loved me. I had not known all that it meant until now.” Her cheeks felt hot. The impropriety of asking what she wanted to know was not enough for her to stop speaking things to her intended that ought not to be spoken. “Tell me: When did you first think of me as more than a tolerably pretty neighbour with lively manners? When did you first desire me?”

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat and looked embarrassed. “My candid response might paint me in an unfavourable light.”

“I swear your answer will not diminish my regard for you.”

He sighed heavily. “At Netherfield.”

“At the ball? When you asked me to dance?”

He shook his head. “No, that might be more acceptable an answer, but it was before then—when you came to tend to Jane.”

Elizabeth was astonished. “Were all our debates the driving force in elevating me in your esteem?”

“Yes, in part, but I know that is not what you mean.” He seemed to comprehend what she was trying to ask. “At the time, you attracted me more than I liked, and the strongest foundations of such an attraction were laid when you walked into the breakfast parlour and demanded to see your sister.”

She blushed as she remembered what she must have looked like after jumping over stiles and springing over

puddles. “I was not fit to be seen. I thought you held me as much in contempt as did Mr Bingley’s sisters.”

“I doubted the need for you to walk so far alone, but I was too busy admiring the brilliancy that the exercise gave to your complexion.” He spoke haltingly, but then something in her look must have emboldened him. “I thought you looked beautiful. And alive. Your eyes were joyful, your cheeks were pink, and moisture clung to your forehead. Wild strands of curled hair had fallen from their pins, and my first coherent thought was something to the effect of wondering what your hair would look like spread out over my pillow. From there, it was not a great leap to imagine you in my bed,” he said, his voice rough with emotion.

“I never realised...until now—I never fully understood how much I want”—she looked away, mortified, before continuing—“how much I want to be your wife or that you felt the same desire for me. You have appeared so calm and cool that I assumed I was alone in these feelings.”

“You still have not explained to me what drove you from the dance to find solitude.”

“Do you not see, Fitzwilliam? You have loved me for so long, and have had time to come to terms with your desire for me. I am not even supposed to think of such things, let alone say them to you, but I... I desire you as much as you do me. That provoked such a flood of emotions that I wished for nothing more than to be outside, alone, away from the heat and the press of others.” She felt breathless and vulnerable, but said in a rush, “But, now I know that what I needed was not to be alone, but to be alone *with you*.”

Only his shallow inhalations indicated he was alive and not a statue. He neither moved nor spoke. *What is wrong with me that I am the only one overwhelmed by this intense desire?* He loved her just as much, but somehow her betrothed was always in perfect control, stopping every kiss before it became too wild, and content with loving words rather than a passionate embrace. How could she tolerate it if he thought less of her now? She absolutely regretted voicing such intimate thoughts before they were married.

“This is not a time for you to be grave and silent, Fitzwilliam Darcy. I cannot bear your disapprobation.”

ELIZABETH’S WORDS AND PASSIONATE GAZE HAD BROKEN HIS long-standing self-control. Although his experience with the fairer sex was limited, the idea of touching her was irresistible. He tried to regulate his breathing as he watched her chest rise and fall in the dim candlelight. Darcy wanted to feel this moment with her and allow himself a sense of what it might be like to be with her.

He covered the distance between them, caught her by the waist, and tilted his head down to look directly into her eyes.

“You think I disapprove of your feelings? Elizabeth, I have not spoken because I am afraid I shall awaken from this dream.”

Darcy had intended his kiss to be delicate, an endearing gesture in this impassioned moment. However, when his lips touched hers, he gathered her close into his arms, and as he deepened the kiss, they merged as intimately as their clothing would allow. He repressed the small voice in his mind that suggested his heightened arousal might alarm her. Every part of his awareness cried out to caress her all over, but with great effort, he kept his shaking hands locked on her waist, just below her ribs.

Elizabeth said breathlessly, “Please, I want you to touch me.”

Rational thought disappeared as he lowered his mouth to her neck. She gasped at the touch of his lips on her bare skin as he nibbled where he could feel her pulse pounding. Elizabeth moaned softly and clung to him while he tentatively slid his hand up to cup her breast. His imagination was a pale comparison to the reality of touching her. He felt her grip on his shoulders tighten as she thrust herself against him. Elizabeth pressed her body closer as he gave in to his longing to allow his hands to roam over her every curve.

The realisation of her taking such pleasure in his touch unleashed his own desire. Two quick steps had her against the wall while she clasped him tighter. His hand at her breast became more demanding, and their kisses lost their tender nature. Her moans of pleasure increased as he rocked against her, and soon the movement of her hips matched his own. His mouth consumed her lips as he stifled her soft cry. She shuddered down her entire body and gasped into his mouth while he continued to kiss her. His arousal grew with every tiny moan.

Two hands pressed against his chest, and Darcy immediately jumped back as Elizabeth threw herself into the nearest chair. He looked questioningly at her, acutely feeling her loss while their chests were still heaving from the need for air. Then he heard what had driven Elizabeth from his arms: muted sounds through the open window of groomsmen calling to one another as they readied the carriages. The musicians had ceased playing, and the party was breaking up for the evening.

The reality of their precarious situation came crashing down on him. Engaged or not, her reputation would be damaged should they be discovered.

Elizabeth looked drawn and not a little anxious. Whether or not she regretted what had happened, he could not tell. For his part, he regretted placing them in a situation where they might be discovered, but he could not regret knowing that Elizabeth desired him. The memory of her soft and yielding body against his was something he could never lament. Now he faced either apologising to Elizabeth for what happened or telling her how happy it made him.

She looked sad and lonely, seated at the empty table amid the discarded tea things with overturned cups and half-eaten cakes strewn around her. Darcy knelt at her feet and clutched her hands within his. At this moment, he wished nothing more than to gather her in his arms and take her home to Pemberley.

“Elizabeth, dearest, I—”

“Now is not the time.” Elizabeth pulled her hands away and unsteadily rose. Darcy resisted the urge to embrace her again. “What are we to do? The dancing has ceased, and my mother will be looking for me.”

“Will your mother’s carriage be amongst the first called?”

Elizabeth gave a shaky laugh. “No, she is determined to give Mr Bingley ample time with Jane, and our party will be the last to depart so long as he remains.”

“Bingley will remain until he knows I am ready to leave, if not to stay with Jane. I will exit first and tell him that I wish to depart. If your mother is determined to keep them together, she will not be searching for you. You can return while she is focused on Bingley and Jane. There are people still about, and your absence might not be noticed yet.”

She nodded, and when Darcy bent to kiss her good-bye, she turned her head, and his lips landed on her cheek. He hated to leave things strained between them.

“Will you walk out tomorrow morning? Might I meet you on the walk toward Netherfield?”

Elizabeth gazed at the floor. “No, I think not, Mr Darcy. Mr Bingley intended to call on Jane tomorrow afternoon. You may call on us at Longbourn with him.” She smiled, but Darcy saw the tension in her eyes. Wounded at being summarily dismissed by a woman who had been so inviting not a moment ago, Darcy stiffly bowed and left the room.

Chapter Thirteen

Elizabeth slept little that night and, in the morning, focused on the consequences of all that had passed with Fitzwilliam at the assembly. The knowledge of what she had done—and of what more she had wanted to do—plagued her. But she loved him, and did not think she could regret it.

What happened was wonderful; there was no other word to describe it. *But my respectability is defined by my virtue, and Fitzwilliam must call it into question after last night.*

Yet, if she did not fear his total loss of respect for her, she would do it again—and more—in a heartbeat. They would be married by the end of the summer, but had anyone seen them locked in a heated embrace, he would be mortified, as would she.

And she would be the one to bear the blame, not him.

For weeks, she had felt her loyalty shifting away from her parents and sisters toward Fitzwilliam. All she lacked was a ring on her finger, and in her own mind and heart, she felt more like Mrs Darcy than Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Her confession last night had provoked him to admit that he desired her just as desperately and led him to indulge in an intimate moment that he must now regret. Fitzwilliam was nothing if not an arbiter of proper behaviour.

But Fitzwilliam would never despise her. Perhaps his reproof would not be a scathing reprimand full of disappointment in her behaviour, but rather a gentle admonishment. She could promise not to be passionate and

bold until after they were married. Hopefully he would not ask for an apology. How could she apologise for actions that not only did not feel wrong, but she would happily repeat if only he were willing?

The only thing to be done is to avoid any time alone with him until we are married.

Given their cool parting the night before, Elizabeth was surprised that Fitzwilliam, along with his friend, called at Longbourn as early as he did. She ventured one embarrassed glance at him and saw that he was watching her intently, as he often did. The last time he appeared so grave, and yet desperate to engage her in conversation, was in Charlotte's drawing room the morning after his first proposal.

"Ladies, shall we all walk out on this fine day?" Mr Bingley asked with his usual good cheer.

Jane and Kitty agreed, and, predictably, Mary did not. Kitty wished to call on Maria Lucas and left with Jane to get their bonnets. Fitzwilliam rose and offered Elizabeth his hand. The memory of their embrace the last time they climbed the hill made her feel warm. A private moment would either be too enticing for her or allow him to express his disappointment in behaviour he must now, in a calmer moment, find offensive in a woman who was not yet his wife.

"I prefer to remain here. I have letters to write."

He looked astonished, but he recovered and offered to stay with her, saying he had letters to write as well. Elizabeth had never been so pleased to sit with Mary; she was not prepared to be left alone with him. She was not equal to apologising for actions she could not fully regret, nor was she ready to hear his censure of that less-than-chaste behaviour. She could avoid it all while Mary sat near them making extracts from *Fordyce's Sermons*.

"Are you well, Elizabeth?" he asked with concern as he sat next to her. "I do not know you to decline a walk."

"I am busy, but you need not stay, Mr Darcy."

“Elizabeth,” he murmured after seeing that Mary was preoccupied, “why do you avoid me?”

“I do not avoid you,” she whispered. “How can you say so when I am seated near you?” She checked to be sure that Mary had not heard them.

“You avoid me by refusing to walk out with me, you avoid me by not addressing me by my name, and you avoid me by not speaking plainly with me. And I do believe we have some things to speak of.”

Elizabeth hung her head and laid down her pen, but did not raise her eyes. *I cannot avoid his criticism forever.*

He heaved a resigned breath. “Very well—you need not speak now, but I leave for town soon to arrange the marriage articles, and we must speak before I do.” In a louder and more conversational tone, he asked, “To whom do you write?”

“Mrs Gardiner. I have been overdue in telling her of our happiness. She was taken with you, and not simply because she cannot think ill of a man from Derbyshire,” she added in an attempt at levity. “I should also write to Mrs Collins, but it would not do for my letter to arrive before yours to Lady Catherine. I fear she will be made angry to learn that you will not marry your cousin. Shall you ever have the courage to tell her what is to befall her?”

“I am more likely to want time than courage, Elizabeth. I have been pleasantly engaged as of late. But it ought to be done, and if you will give me a sheet of paper, it shall be done directly.”

“And if I had not a letter to write myself, I might sit by you and admire the evenness of your writing, as Miss Bingley once did.”

Fitzwilliam asked her to send his greetings to Mrs Gardiner and to tell her that he would call while conducting his business in town.

“How delighted she will be to receive such a letter,” he said as he began his own. “How can you contrive to write so even?” he asked a moment later.

She knew what he was doing and tried not to laugh. He did not appear disapproving, but perhaps that was only because they were not alone.

“Do you need me to mend your pen?” he asked. “I mend pens exceedingly well.”

“Only if you rewrite your letter to Lady Catherine to include my compliments and questions about how she gets on.”

“I think not.”

Mary grew tired of their talk and gathered her books and papers, then left in search of a quieter place in which to complete her studies.

As Elizabeth felt nervous about being alone with him to face his reproach of her behaviour, he brought up the subject of Mr Bingley and Jane. “I feel Bingley will soon propose as long as my friend remains confident of her regard.”

“I do not think there is much more Jane can do to encourage Mr Bingley.” Elizabeth coloured as she thought what he would say about what *she* had encouraged last night.

“As we rode here today, I assured him that Jane still admired him despite his departure last autumn. I told him that everyone expected him to offer to her, and he would soon find himself entangled and must regard himself as bound to her.”

She gaped at him. “You sound as if you do not believe he loves her.”

“I do not know the strength of his feelings now, but had Bingley loved Jane enough to marry her last autumn, neither his sisters nor I could have compelled him to leave.”

“He thinks highly of you.” She spoke without malice. “He looks to you for guidance, and you, lamentably, caused him to doubt her preference for him.”

“Part of me fears he may not love Jane as well as she deserves.”

Elizabeth was shocked, and as she could only doubt and stare, Fitzwilliam continued. “I do not doubt Jane’s

worthiness, but I wonder whether Bingley, decent as he is, loves her enough.”

“You do not think he will propose to her after all that has happened?”

“No, he may even be doing so at this moment.” He took her hand, the first time he had touched her since the prior evening. “But if I were him, Elizabeth, there is nothing my friend or sister could say to keep me from you. Neither your impertinent remarks, nor your injudicious opinions on my character, and not even your reluctance to speak openly with me would keep me away.”

Was it possible he had not lost all respect for her after last night? She squeezed his hand and held his gaze.

“I have another subject that I would discuss with you,” he said. “I leave for town in two days to retrieve the marriage articles. Your father is ignoring my repeated attempts to move things forward, and so there is something I need to ask you: Would you feel slighted if I did not accept your marriage portion and left it to be divided amongst your sisters?”

This was not what she thought he wished to speak of. He must have thought her surprised silence meant she was dismayed because he quickly continued. “I do not wish to appear arrogant in that we do not need your portion. I simply thought it would be better suited to improving the eligibility of Mary, Kitty, and Lydia. It would also allow me to present the settlement contract to your father for his signature with the least amount of discussion on his part.”

“He might be determined to be displeased with whatever you settle on me and argue with you for his own entertainment.” Her father still made known his unhappiness at their engagement at every opportunity. Nothing she did or said could end her father’s misguided contempt of them both.

“He has already said that he could not argue with my ability to provide for you. Once he sees the marriage settlement, he will know that as fact.”

This piqued her curiosity. “What will you settle on me?”

“Twenty thousand pounds on you, and for our daughters, so that you might maintain the manner of living to which you will be accustomed.” Fitzwilliam looked a little embarrassed. “I would like to have settled more on you and our future children.”

Elizabeth understood what he tried not to say. “You were expected to marry a woman with a fortune. By marrying me instead of Miss de Bourgh, you sacrifice thousands of pounds as well as a second son’s inheritance of Rosings.” She thought of them as equals, and although that might strictly be correct, she was suddenly aware of his greater consequence.

“It is no sacrifice, Elizabeth,” he insisted. “I choose to spend my life with you because it is entirely in your power—and no one else’s—to make me happy.”

Elizabeth would have thrown herself into his lap and kissed him had she not thought back to last night and the correct behaviour an unmarried lady ought to demonstrate. She kept her affection in its proper bounds and said only an earnest, “I love you.”

Fitzwilliam, with a soft smile, reached out and touched her face, his warm fingers tracing the outline of her cheek. Elizabeth wondered how his bare skin would feel sliding against hers.

“Must we wait until the end of the summer to marry?” Fitzwilliam whispered.

Did he assume that she could not control her desires until then? *If he can, then so can I.* “I am looking forward to travelling with the Gardiners. It would disappoint me to give it up.”

“I am not asking you to give up the trip. The settlement will be signed when I return next week, and after the following Sunday, the banns will have been read a third time. What say you to marrying when the Gardiners come to collect you in July? Then we might all travel north together, and when the tour is over, we can return to Pemberley.”

“You would not mind touring with the Gardiners for three weeks?”

“Not at all. We four are well suited. Most couples bring company with them should they take a wedding tour.”

“I hope you are not intimidated by the prospect of total seclusion with only me for occupation and conversation, Mr Darcy.”

“No, Elizabeth,” he said, emphasising her name. “I simply want to marry you and bring you home as soon as possible, and this is the simplest way to accomplish that while pleasing everyone concerned.”

“My mother will wish for more time to shop for my wedding clothes, and she has to plan the wedding breakfast and make the wedding cake.”

“If I imply that this is what I prefer, your mother will move heaven and earth to see that I am satisfied, so long as I marry you.”

Elizabeth agreed, but before she could say more, the door opened, and Jane ran into the room. Jane instantly embraced her and acknowledged with the liveliest emotion that she was the happiest creature in the world.

“’Tis too much!” she added. “By far too much. I do not deserve it.”

Elizabeth’s congratulations were given with a sincerity, a warmth, a delight that words could but poorly express. Fitzwilliam took Jane’s hand and wished her joy with much affection.

“I must go instantly to my mother! He is gone to my father already. Oh, Lizzy! How shall I bear so much happiness?”

Jane then hastened away, while Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam grinned at one another in enjoyment of Jane’s excitement and with ease in knowing that the affair was now settled. Bingley then joined them; his conference with Mr Bennet had apparently been short and to the purpose.

“Where is your sister?”

“With my mother upstairs. She will be down in a moment, I daresay.”

He then shut the door and, coming up to them, claimed the good wishes and affections of a sister and brother. Elizabeth heartily expressed her delight in the prospect of their relationship. Fitzwilliam shook his hand with great cordiality, and then, until Jane returned, they had to listen to all he had to say of his own happiness and of Jane’s perfections.

Mrs Bennet could not give her consent or speak her approbation in terms warm enough to satisfy her feelings. When Mr Bennet later joined them, his voice and manner showed how happy he was with this daughter’s engagement.

“You are a good girl,” said Mr Bennet to Jane, “and I have great pleasure in thinking *your* being so happily settled. I have no doubt of your doing well together. At least *your* tempers are by no means unlike.” He turned his eyes toward Elizabeth who, for the sake of Jane’s happiness, did not run from the room.

The gentlemen took their leave for the night, and for once, Mr Bennet did not accompany them for the purpose of annoying Elizabeth’s betrothed. Bingley and Jane loitered in the hall while Elizabeth walked outside with Fitzwilliam. When they were alone, he pulled Elizabeth into his arms and held her fast.

“Dearest,” he spoke into her hair, “why do you shy away from me? Will you not speak to me about last night?”

It was not regret that made Elizabeth’s heart race and bring heat to her cheeks; it was the thought of wanting him before she was supposed to.

“I will, but Bingley will be here in a moment. It cannot be done now.” Elizabeth leant into him and rested her head against his chest.

His body lost some of its tension. “Can we speak tomorrow?”

She shook her head. “My mother wishes to discuss my wedding clothes in the morning, and we have an engagement

with my aunt Philips in the evening. You need not attend if you do not wish it.”

“Of course I shall attend. Although Mrs Philips might often be a tax on my forbearance, I know you will do all you can to shield me in your own way,” he said with a smile. “I like to think that you do so because you are keen to keep me to yourself.”

That was all too true. “Why do I not walk out early on the morning after, so we can speak alone before you leave for London?”

“I can be outside of your father’s property at sunup.”

“That is likely to be five o’clock in the morning!” How much time would he need to tell her he was ashamed of her, as any respectable man would be, and that any other amorous embraces would have to wait until after they were wed?

“I am exceedingly anxious to speak with you alone before I leave for town,” he said as Bingley came outside. “Tell me at once whether you will meet me Saturday morning.”

“Yes, of course.”

They stepped apart when Bingley approached, speaking of his eagerness to see them all at the home of Mrs Philips the following day. Bingley cheerfully said how much he looked forward to a noisy, comfortable game of lottery tickets and was pleased that, since Mrs Philips had promised a hot supper afterwards, it would be a late evening. Fitzwilliam’s and Elizabeth’s eyes met, and she laughed when she saw him lift his eyes behind Bingley’s back.

Chapter Fourteen

Darcy did not enjoy cards, and only Elizabeth fathomed his preference for reading or conversation over gambling, but he put forth the effort at Mrs Philips's card party. Whatever he said was said good-naturedly; whatever he did was done graciously. Thankfully, Mrs Philips and her guests were predominantly interested in Jane and Bingley's engagement, and Darcy had the pleasure of having his betrothed at his side for most of the evening. They had no opportunity to speak privately, but he did introduce his future mother-in-law to the idea of his marrying Elizabeth sooner rather than later.

"I quite agree, Mr Darcy. There is nothing I so abominate for young people as a long engagement," said Mrs Bennet. The conversation ended with Elizabeth giving him a smile that told him she would marry him in July instead of September.

He held that memory in his mind as he readied himself in the dark morning hours to go to Longbourn. Darcy knew his valet would be appalled if he left without his coat, but he doubted he could put on the form-fitting garment without help. He donned his greatcoat to cover his shirtsleeves in case he was seen, and bypassed the stables, intending to walk. He needed time to order his thoughts and to determine what to say since Elizabeth was apprehensive about being alone with him.

Darcy had been irritated at the manner in which Elizabeth left things between them two nights ago, but such feelings did not last long. If Elizabeth's withdrawal proceeded from her fear of doing wrong, it was a sentiment with which he could readily identify. Darcy had been equally uncertain of their

behaviour, although incredibly eager, but if she was angry with him for his loss of control, he would have to beg her forgiveness. He could not honestly regret the encounter in the tearoom—only their location and timing.

Truth be told, it would take little encouragement on her part to convince him to repeat the experience.

She greeted him with the familiar smile he knew she gave only to him. The sweetness of her address was most welcome after the uncertainty of the past two days. Still unsure of her feelings, instead of kissing her lips, he settled for her hand. “Might we walk again to Oakham Mount?”

“No, I always walk that way. Let us walk toward the fields.”

Elizabeth mentioned a vacant tenant home by fallow fields that might need a new roof. Darcy, who normally attended to her every word, found himself distracted as he looked at her. Something was different about Elizabeth’s clothes.

“I once thought I drew your notice because there was something about me more wrong, according to your ideas of right, than any other person. The way you are staring at me leads me to believe that I may have been correct.”

“You appear different today. Your clothes do not fit you the same, and I am certain of that since I have seen you in the same gown and spencer on several occasions.”

Elizabeth stopped walking. She did not seem angry, and after his first proposal, he was well aware of what Elizabeth looked like when she was angry. “Tell me precisely: How do I appear different to you?”

“The skirt of your gown clings to your legs while you walk. And your...the bodice...where your spencer...*they* are...” He trailed off as he attempted to keep his gaze on Elizabeth’s rapidly pinkening face instead of the parts of her body he was struggling to describe. Darcy closed his eyes and wished he was better practised at being deceitful when the ringing sound of Elizabeth’s laughter filled his ears.

“I am sorry to laugh at you, Fitzwilliam, but you have made me feel better about speaking with you today. I have been so afraid of what you must think of me, of what you must have to say, but your mortification will make mine easier to withstand. Anything I say will be markedly easier after having listened as you tried to explain yourself.”

Darcy set his jaw and resigned himself to being laughed at as he asked her, with some attempt at dignity, why she appeared altered.

“I saw no reason to wake the poor housemaid before dawn to help me dress.”

The last thing he wanted to imply was that her clothes fit her ill because she could not dress herself.

“To think there was a time when I found your features unreadable.” Elizabeth laughed again. “Yes, I can dress myself. What I cannot easily do is tie the stay laces, and that is why—well, that is why I appear altered. And on such a warm morning, I forwent the petticoat as well. There, have I sufficiently shocked your sensibilities? Now despise me if you dare—that is, if you do not already.” The humour had faded from her expression, and she looked contrite.

“Why would I despise you, for that or for anything else?” He was entirely perplexed.

“You might despise me for my shameless behaviour the other night. You fell in love with the daughter of a gentleman, and I ought to act like one. I could not bear to lose your respect.”

“I found nothing in your actions to be ashamed of,” he said forcefully.

“That is simply not possible. Any respectable man would criticise the woman he had not yet married for speaking openly about her own desire, let alone acting on it. You would not be blamed for falling victim to the temptation I gave you, nor would I blame you for censuring me. I am prepared to hear it now.”

“This is why you have avoided being alone with me?” he asked, incredulous. “You think I judge you harshly for what happened and that you alone were responsible?”

“The only way to prevent that behaviour again is to maintain a distance from you. We were fortunate that we were not observed. Any impropriety of the kind that happened in the tearoom may engender comment.”

“I hope to persuade you not to alter your behaviour now or ever.” That was the last thing he wanted from his wife. “My one regret is that I let my self-control slip in a time and place that put us in danger of being seen. At the risk of again being accused of behaving in an ungentlemanly manner, I must tell you that I would like you to come to me any time you wish. I enjoy your affections, and I do not want them to change.”

“You would not be ashamed to have me again act as I did that night?” Her surprise was evident. “It is bad enough that I confessed how much I—” She bit her lip and looked away.

“Elizabeth,” he said slowly, “I am unsure what expectations you have for our future together. You said that your parents and the Collinses gave you a poor example of marital bliss, and my own parents, while well suited and fond of one another, married for connexions and wealth rather than for love. I do not want there to be any distance between us.”

“I do not want to alter my behaviour toward you either.” She blushed, but her voice sounded relieved. After a thoughtful pause, she said, “It is unfair.”

“What is that?”

“That as a man you might parade with a mistress on your arm, and no one would question your honour as a gentleman. But if I were seen in your arms as I was the night of the assembly, even though we are engaged, I would be liable to be called a whore,” she said, whispering the last word.

He well understood that she sought to protect their reputations, but at the moment, all Darcy wanted was for her to love him. His notions of dignity and proper behaviour

seemed wholly inconsequential when it came to his feelings for Elizabeth Bennet.

“Say precisely what you want from me, Elizabeth.” He gazed steadily into her eyes with all the affection he held for her. “Do not say what you think I want to hear, or act as you think I believe a lady ought to behave. I have loved you for a long time, and when I recall the sensation of your lips on mine, I feel a white-hot fire course through me. Nonetheless, one word from you, and I promise not to so much as touch you until we leave the church on our wedding day.”

“You do not hold me in contempt for my words or my actions at the assembly?”

He gave her a pleased smile. “It does not make you less respectable in my eyes.”

“And what about the eyes of society?”

Darcy looked around in the stillness and dawning light. “No one else’s opinion matters when we are alone.” He took one of her hands. “What are your true feelings and wishes?”

“My feelings have been in a state of indecision,” she said carefully. She toyed with the buttons on his waistcoat. Darcy’s throat hitched, but he repressed the desire to wrap his arms around her. “A socially correct bride ought to be repressed by delicate sensibilities. But I look forward to making you feel as I did in the tearoom. I know the effect I have on you when you hold me in your arms, and I am thrilled by it.”

Darcy knew, however inappropriate the world might say it was, that they both eagerly wanted the same thing. If her words alone were unclear, then the subtle downward glance of her eyes was far more explicit.

“How...what do you know...?”

She gave a wry smile. “What do you think married women speak of while the men remain at the dining table?”

“That might be fine for the married ladies, but how does that explain your knowledge?”

“The word ‘knowledge’ gives me more credit than I deserve. You have spent enough time with my mother, my aunt Philips, and Lady Lucas to answer your own question. Have you known them to be a soft-spoken and decorous group of women?” A short, dry laugh gave her his answer. “I thought not.”

Still laughing at his expression, Elizabeth took his arm. She was comfortable with him again, and this in turn put him fully at ease for the first time since they parted at the assembly. On such a lovely day, in so secluded a setting, happiness and love were stronger forces to contend with than decorum and proper modesty. The sun was barely above the horizon, and they walked until they found themselves before a patchwork of fields bordered by hedges where a small cottage sat.

“A tenant will inhabit the cottage this autumn, but the roof is damaged,” Elizabeth explained. “Since it need not be done immediately, my father has, of course, neglected to take action. As I am here, I might determine whether it should be patched or entirely replaced.”

“When I asked you to marry me, I did not know that I was also engaging a steward.”

“I am a very accomplished lady, after all.” She returned his smile. “I shall suggest to him what needs to be done, as I am already here. He will be more pleased at being left to his library than irritated that his daughter overstepped her place. He finds me useful,” she added before going inside.

Darcy wondered whether Mr Bennet’s complete contempt for their engagement had less to do with him and more to do with wishing to keep his cleverest and most helpful daughter at home.

He shrugged off his greatcoat as he followed her inside. One step brought them into the sizeable sitting room without any introductory lobby. It had only an uncomfortable-looking sofa and a sturdy table in the room, along with a large fireplace. Darcy offered to go to the next floor to better consider the roof, and Elizabeth said she wished to see it for herself. She led the way to the narrow staircase and, upon

climbing, entered the single room with a field bed and an empty washstand. The curtains were gone from the bed's canopy arch, as were the window coverings, but when properly furnished, it would be a bright and cheerful room.

Elizabeth strode toward the window, and Darcy watched the dust particles float through the sunbeams that came in from the window and the trifling holes above him. His focus then shifted to Elizabeth, and the vision before him stole his breath. He swallowed thickly while she removed her spencer and tossed it aside, looking out the window and saying something about how hot it was. Then she turned around to look up and contemplate the roof. Darcy stared. With the morning sunlight all around her, Elizabeth's pale gown was virtually transparent.

Darcy could see nearly every curve and shadow, and his imagination had no trouble envisioning the few details still unseen. He abruptly sat on the bed with his back to her and tried to regulate his breathing. The thought that Elizabeth had not been handsome enough to tempt him to dance was unequivocally laughable amid the temptations she now presented. It would require but a slight effort on her part to connect his desires with his actions.

"Fitzwilliam, did you hear me? I think we might repair the roof after all."

Darcy nodded but still stared at the empty wall. He willed his mind to think about the responsibilities awaiting him in town—anything to distract him from Elizabeth's pleasing figure and the way her curves would feel beneath his hands. Despite all they said during their walk, years of ingrained modesty and decorum made him adhere to proper behaviour.

Her hand gently touched his shoulder. "Are you well?"

"I am perfectly well, I thank you!" He rose and kept his back to her. He was engrossed in suppressing his passionate desire and could not spare her feelings. Two arms wrapped around his waist. He spun about in alarm and gently pushed Elizabeth from him by her wrists.

"Elizabeth," he pleaded as he noted the wounded look in her eyes, "you know not what you do to me!"

A smile crossed her features. "Is your resolve to act like a gentleman rapidly failing?"

Darcy nodded.

"Then I ought to assist you in removing what remains of your determination." Darcy looked on her in wonder as she unfastened the buttons of his waistcoat and pushed the garment off his shoulders. The gravity of their situation was plain; they were alone in the most compromising position imaginable. Elizabeth's sparkling eyes, playful smile, and occupied hands led Darcy to believe she was perfectly happy.

"I know I told you to come to me any time you wish," he breathed, "but should we not wait until you are my wife?"

Elizabeth pulled her hands away from where she had untied the knot of his cravat. "I comprehend the distinction between being one's intended and being one's wife, but I cannot help feeling more like the latter. We may not have said the vows in the church, but in my mind and in my heart, there is nothing to prevent us from being together. I was only afraid to be alone with you because I did not want to deny you any part of myself and feared you would question my virtue."

Darcy was slow to realise what she was offering him and unable to speak. It was unnatural for him to have so little control over himself, but love and desire overcame him. Elizabeth Bennet was the one person in the world who could exercise such command over him. As he attempted to connect the appropriate words to the swirl of emotions coursing through him, he was aware of her apologies over the thrum of his own pulse pounding in his ears.

"I did not intend to coax you into compromising your values," she stammered. "I only wanted you to understand all I feel for you. Let us return." She bent to pick up his waistcoat and held it out to him. Her movement startled Darcy out of his contemplation. He took the garment from her hands and threw it aside, then held her upturned face in his hands.

"What I want most in this world—what I need most—is to be your husband. You think too little of your power over me. In my heart, you are already my wife, and to hear you say that

you feel the same for me...” Darcy lacked the words to express all he felt. “Elizabeth, I want to make you mine in every possible way.”

They found themselves locked in an ardent embrace, and when the need for air parted them, her fine, dark eyes looked lustily back at him. Her kisses were just as demanding, and her hands roamed his hair and then down to his chest. Darcy groaned at the pleasure of having her in his arms, and he released her mouth only to turn his attentions to the line of her jaw and then down her throat. He ran his fingers through her dark hair, carelessly tossing away any pins that were in his way.

Elizabeth pulled his shirt from his trousers, then slid her fingers under the white linen to trace up and across his chest. He pulled the garment over his head and flung it aside, then returned his lips to her neck. It startled him when she pulled away, but she was pausing to look at him. Darcy found her gentle scrutiny exciting; she laid her hands flat against his chest, gazing up and down, and he was certain she could see the pounding of his heart. Elizabeth leant into him to put her lips to the base of his neck and began to nip and suck at his skin. He tilted his head back, allowing her full liberty to touch him anywhere she pleased. He groaned aloud as she pressed her body fully against him, making him writhe with desire, and he tightened his hold on her hips.

Darcy released the ties of her gown until he could pull it off her shoulders. Elizabeth pulled her arms out of the sleeves, and he swiftly tugged it down her hips and let it fall to the floor. His lips now had full access to the skin above her chemise, and he made it his purpose to taste every inch of her. The feel of her warm breath on his neck was exhilarating, and he felt her shiver as his hands roamed the length of her back from her shoulders to her waist.

She hungrily pulled his lips back to hers when his hand caressed the soft firmness of her breasts through the thin fabric. Elizabeth moaned against his mouth and pushed her chest into his hands. Her fingertips scraped against his scalp as she pulled her mouth away from his lips and trailed kisses

across his jaw. He shuddered when her teeth gently followed the outside of his ear, and he gave a growl of pleasure when her tongue darted into his ear.

“Elizabeth,” he breathed into her hair, “how do you know so well how to please me?”

She withdrew to look into his eyes. “I could not say,” she said shyly. “I only touch you the way I want you to touch me.”

The culmination of all his daydreams and the reality of Elizabeth’s responsiveness made coherent thought nearly impossible. “I want to see you,” he gasped, “all of you.”

Elizabeth looked disbelieving at his near demand, but perched herself on the edge of the bed. She bent at the waist and untied the laces on one small boot and slipped it off her foot. Then she lifted the hem of her chemise to tug at the small ribbon holding her stockings at her knee. Darcy stood at rapt attention as Elizabeth’s shapely leg came into view. Elizabeth peeled off one stocking but stopped and looked at him.

“You do not intend to watch me undress, do you?”

Darcy’s mind screamed *yes*, but from the tone of her voice, he knew this was not what Elizabeth wanted. He mutely shook his head and turned away. He picked up Elizabeth’s gown from the floor and tossed it and her spencer over the washstand. When he had pried off his own shoes and stockings, he dared to look toward his betrothed.

She stood by the bed, holding her chemise crumpled in her hands in front of her chest. Darcy could only see the outline of one breast, part of her bare stomach and hips, and most of her legs from below her thighs. He raised an expectant eyebrow. An anxious smile tugged at her lips as she dropped the fabric to the floor. When Elizabeth could meet his eyes, he marvelled at her in complete delight.

Darcy crossed the distance between them, but stopped before he got within arm’s reach. “You are perfect.” His eyes raked up and down her body, and his breath hitched.

“You are very welcome to do more than look at me.”

Darcy laughed aloud at her playful manner that he loved so. His amusement was short-lived as Elizabeth let her hands trail across his chest and then carefully move farther down. Darcy's laugh dissolved into a moan before he quickly brought his lips to hers.

Some part of his mind was grateful that her touch was gentle because he was unsure how much restraint he could show. Quickly, he gathered her into his arms and laid her on the bed, then tore off his trousers, nearly ripping off the buttons. Darcy heard her amused laugh as he kicked them away.

“I suppose, given your enthusiasm, that you must laugh at me for being so worried you would despise me for what happened at the assembly.”

He noticed her eyes had drifted lower as he joined her on the bed, and he gave her a smile. “I can assure you, laughing at you is not at all what I have in mind.”

Darcy caught her hand and brought it to his lips, slowly kissing every fingertip and sucking on her wrist before she pulled it away to touch him again. He tenderly ran his hands over her body, eager to touch every part of her that had been cruelly hidden from view. He heard her soft gasp when he lowered his head and brought a taut nipple into his mouth.

Their curiosity and desire to please each other quickly won out over uncertainty, and when he eventually moved his hand from her breasts to where her legs parted, the way she sighed and whispered his name made a desire blaze in him to show her all the enjoyment he could give her. Soon her hand fell away from him, and she clenched the fabric beneath her. While her hips began a rhythm of their own against his hand, she roughly pulled him closer to kiss. Darcy was just as desperate to taste her lips again and kissed her fiercely as he felt his own passion rising. He could sense her beginning to tremble, but nothing prepared him for the excitement he felt when she suddenly pulled away from his mouth and arched her back with a gasp. None of his lustful imaginings ever approached the delight he derived from hearing high-pitched cries from her swollen, parted lips.

She was still breathing fast when she opened her eyes, gave him a satisfied smile, and pulled him to lie atop her. Darcy chuckled softly as he trailed kisses over her jaw and down her neck. When Elizabeth trailed her foot along his calf and hooked a leg around his waist, he shuddered with a desire he could no longer repress.

“Are you cer—”

“Yes.” Her eyes showed a burning eagerness for him. “If you are,” she added quietly.

He felt too much to speak, but nodded and brushed her lips with his.

The feel of her fingernails scraping his shoulders, the sound of her moans in his ear, the very sight of her moving beneath him, was more intense than he had ever imagined. Later, Darcy was transported to another place when Elizabeth called out his name, and he felt waves of pleasure coursing through his body.

His eyes opened to see Elizabeth looking back at him with love and delight.

Darcy kissed her fiercely on the lips, his throat nearly choking with emotion. “I love you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth.”

He had never known such intimacy. Elizabeth Bennet had given herself to him fully, and they were united in a powerful way that he had never known was possible. And never in all his twenty-eight years did he imagine that such love and happiness would ever be his.

Chapter Fifteen

Elizabeth awoke feeling short of breath, as though her stays were laced too tight. She blinked in the bright sunlight and realised it could not be her stays because she was not wearing them; she wore nothing at all. The weight over her was Fitzwilliam's arm. He had rolled onto his side in his sleep and had wrapped her in his embrace.

While she had not intended this outcome when they set out on their walk, Elizabeth was thoroughly delighted with the result. It felt like a reasonable progression in a relationship that, although suffering misunderstandings and conflicts, had steadily developed into an unfaltering and passionate bond. She did not, could not, feel an instant of regret.

She restrained a chuckle as she admired the view of the unclothed master of Pemberley. Her amusement then shifted to a more tender emotion as she regarded his sleeping face, inches from her own. His features were relaxed in the early morning sunlight, and his hair was charmingly dishevelled. His unshaven jaw was not set in determination, nor was his forehead creased in thought. Elizabeth was elated that, in a matter of weeks, it would be her privilege to awaken by his side every morning.

Needing to breathe, she lifted his arm and rolled to face him. He stirred with her movement and raised his head, bleary-eyed and confused, but she saw in his eyes the precise moment he recognised his surroundings. His smile widened, and he leant over to brush her lips with his.

“You smell like lavender.”

“Good morning to you as well.”

“I have often wondered whether it be your gowns that smell of lavender or your perfume.” He pulled her closer, and a thrill travelled over her skin. “As I have removed you from all of your clothes, it must be you.”

“You are a clever man.”

“That I am. I have decided to marry you.”

He rolled onto his back and brought her with him as Elizabeth shrieked with laughter. He pressed his smiling lips against her cheek and shoulder and ran his fingers through her hair. He drew back to look into her eyes, his face filled with a tenderness she had rarely seen.

“You are not a dream after all,” he said before he pulled her into his chest. “I had no sense at all that being with you would be as wonderful as this. I have never been happier.”

Elizabeth thought of how delightful it was to be pressed so close to his heart, to know him as no one else would. She was now more sensible than ever before of the tie between them. “If I did not know that you love me as much as I do you, I could not tolerate feeling dependent upon you for my happiness.” After gathering her courage, she continued. “The description I heard from the neighbourhood matrons was a poor depiction of what we did. However, I shall not tell them what they are missing.”

She felt Fitzwilliam’s soft rumble of laughter as she rested her head on his chest and wished never to leave his side. She did not realise that she had spoken those words aloud until her betrothed replied.

“I would like nothing more than to stay here with you, and after you become Mrs Darcy, I think a fortnight in bed might satisfy me, but if we do not return soon, you could be missed.”

“But I do not want to leave you yet.”

“Very well—as your father already hates me, we might as well stay here until we are discovered.” Elizabeth was swiftly overturned, and Darcy lay above her, smiling widely as he placed kisses across her face. She had never seen him so

unrestrained, and she felt herself falling even more in love with him.

“I would rather stay here with you, but we ought to go back. Would you check your watch?”

He rose and crossed the room to search through his discarded clothes, and Elizabeth admired him. As she recalled their lovemaking, she was flooded with sensations that she never previously imagined were possible.

“What can you mean by looking at me so?” he asked.

“I am simply admiring your figure. It appears to the greatest advantage while walking.”

Fitzwilliam blushed as he gathered his watch and clothes. It was seven o'clock, and they needed to return. Fitzwilliam fastened her dress with marginal success, and she impressed him by showing that she could tie a simple, but not altogether striking, knot in his cravat. Quitting the cottage, they walked among the blooming flowers toward Longbourn.

The surrounding fields bustled with labourers, and a horse and cart were coming down the lane as they neared home, which forced them to part in less private a manner than they might otherwise have enjoyed. Fitzwilliam would not return to Netherfield until Saturday.

“Despite what happened,” Elizabeth said quietly, “it would not do to throw all convention aside to kiss you in full view of watchful eyes.”

Fitzwilliam stepped closer, clutching her hand. “You do not regret it, do you?”

She smiled, hoping the sparkle in her eyes and the animation of her voice would be enough to assuage his fears as they held a private conversation in a very public place. “You are the very best of men.” She squeezed his hand in return. “I love you, and I have no regrets about anything we have shared.”

Darcy looked at her with a passion she suspected he could not communicate in words. “Nor do I.”

They parted quickly, and Elizabeth returned to her room unseen, feeling like a different person than she had when she awoke. Fleeting, she wondered, as she glanced in the mirror, whether anyone could notice.

She had begun their walk in restless anxiety, fearing his disappointment and his reprimands. Now she felt an exhilarating happiness that she had never before known and a fierce relief that the strength of her precious feelings for him had not made her lose his good opinion. She had judged him wrongly again. Not only did he approve of her boldness, but while she had been unknowingly tempting him, he was suppressing the same desires as she was. What had happened was not an unpardonable folly for which either of them had to bear the sole blame, but the natural, affectionate actions of two people in perfect accord.

What a relief not to have to hide those feelings or desires from Fitzwilliam—not when he feels the same way.

Elizabeth was not prepared to speak to Jane—nor anyone, for that matter—about what had passed, and she was therefore pleased that when Jane came in she took up the conversation.

“I did not have the chance to tell you yesterday, but Caroline wrote to me.”

“What does she say?”

“She articulated her delight on learning of my approaching marriage to her brother and repeated all her former professions of regard.”

“Do not tell me you believe her? After all she has done to keep you and Bingley apart?”

“I am not deceived, but I am affected by her words. I ought to write her a kind answer for Bingley’s sake.”

“So long as you know that your generosity is far more than she deserves.”

Elizabeth would not tell Jane that Georgiana had written to her with far more sincerity. Four sides of paper were insufficient to contain all her delight and earnest desire of being loved by her new sister. Elizabeth would miss Jane

terribly when she left for Derbyshire, but the comfort of knowing that Georgiana eagerly awaited her softened her sadness.

“Is not Bingley the most amiable man of our acquaintance?” Jane said dreamily as she sprawled out on Elizabeth’s bed. “I have nothing to fear and nothing else to hope for. It is such a comfort after being disappointed over the winter.”

“You are fortunate to have found such a partner in life. We both are since we have a poor example to follow in my mother and father. They have neither affection nor respect for each other.” She gathered her thoughts and her courage before speaking again. “But do you not feel that something else is to be had in one’s marriage beyond fondness? Something more akin to excitement...or passion?”

“I do not understand,” Jane asked, sitting up.

“I mean that you and Bingley enjoy one another’s company, but I hope for more than just a sensible marriage with an agreeable partner.”

“Well, of course, Lizzy! What a silly notion. I love Bingley as I am sure you love Darcy. Tell me now, how long have you truly loved him?”

“I wish I could say that the first moment I beheld him, my heart was irrevocably gone, but now when I set my mind to remembering, I believe that I hated Darcy for longer than I have loved him!”

Elizabeth remained deep in thought after Jane left. Passion, as she could fully understand and value now, was not a word she would apply to her sister and Bingley. Jane only longed for the company of an affable man.

Elizabeth knew that she and Fitzwilliam would have verbal battles and would argue their difference of opinion. But she admired his intelligence and powers of perception, and he admired her wit and liveliness. Jane would be shocked at the idea of taking pleasure in arguing with Bingley.

Bingley lacked substance, but in an amiable way, for there was nothing laughable about him, and Jane was too good-natured to believe ill of anyone, no matter the evidence before her.

Such a marriage would never suit Elizabeth. What she felt for her own betrothed was more than attraction—more than ardent love. She had Fitzwilliam’s love, his respect, and his confidence. She felt the compliment of being well loved by such a man, and she was satisfied that she meant as much to him as he did to her. As she thought back with a contented sigh to the morning’s events, she was even more assured that she had made an excellent choice.

How soon could she obey the first impulse of her heart and repeat them? She felt a deep glow spread over her cheeks at the hope of it.



THE WEEK WITHOUT FITZWILLIAM PASSED SLOWLY FOR Elizabeth. Her mother’s prattling about how handsome Darcy was, how amiable Bingley was, and how rich they would all be drove Elizabeth to distraction. Her father sported with her by suggesting that her “unsocial man” would jilt her. She found little solace in Jane’s company, for she was always with Bingley, and Elizabeth preferred to be by herself rather than be with Mary or Kitty. It was consequently necessary to have another point on which her hopes might be fixed to console herself: Fitzwilliam would return on Saturday, and in a fortnight, they would be married before travelling north with the Gardiners.

Bingley omitted no opportunity of being with them, threw himself in Jane’s way, and called at all hours. Friday evening, Mr Bennet and Bingley played backgammon after supper while Mary attempted a piece of music that was beyond her skill, and the other ladies sat at their work. It was late when a rider was heard approaching the house to deliver an express. After reading it in stony silence, Mr Bennet passed the letter to his wife and returned to his chair. The Bennet girls looked up

from their needlework only when they heard their mother's wails of misery.

"Oh, Mr Bennet! What is to be done?" she sobbed, but received no response from her husband.

The door to the hall remained open, and Hill, the express rider, and the footman were still in sight. Bingley dismissed them and shut the door. Elizabeth noticed his disdainful glance toward Mr Bennet as he comforted her mother.

"Mrs Bennet, whatever the letter contains, I presume it is not for the servants to overhear," Bingley said kindly as he led his future mother to sit by Jane.

Mrs Bennet could only sob into her handkerchief. Elizabeth, seeing that all attempts at reasonable discourse with her mother would be futile, addressed her father for information.

"It is from Colonel Forster, informing us that Lydia has gone off to Scotland with one of his officers." He did not look up from the backgammon board as though the game held more interest to him than the safety and reputation of his youngest daughter. "She has left her friends and thrown herself into the power of Mr Wickham."

Everyone cried out in alarm, and too many hands grabbed for the letter. Jane, ever the peacemaker, took the letter from her mother and reviewed for the others what Colonel Forster had written.

"They were off Thursday night about twelve, he conjectures, but were not missed till this morning at eight. He will come himself tomorrow to speak to us further. Lydia left a few lines for Mrs Forster informing her of their intention to go to Gretna Green to be married."

"Such an imprudent match on both sides," said Mary.

"Yes, for he must know that I can give her nothing." Mr Bennet tipped over the dice cup as he spoke without looking at any of them.

"This is so unexpected," said Jane to Bingley, who sat beside her, shaking his head.

“Well, it is not so wholly unexpected to me!” Kitty cried, taking pleasure in her triumph for knowing more than the rest of them. “I was the only one who knew of their being in love with each other, and for many weeks. Her last letter prepared me for such a step.”

When Mrs Bennet wailed again, Bingley suggested they retire for the night and be ready to hear from Colonel Forster the next day. Mr Bennet went to bed without a word to anyone, and Mary and Kitty reluctantly attended to their teary-eyed mother. Bingley, before excusing himself, guaranteed his silence and cautioned them to be silent before the servants in the hopes that they could report the marriage as an accomplished fact and the word “elopement” need not cross anyone’s lips. Soon Elizabeth and Jane were alone, stunned and sadly grieved.

“I am willing to hope for the best, Lizzy. Perhaps his character has been misunderstood.”

“How can you say that?” she cried. “You are far too good if you believe that of Mr Wickham. After all we know of him from Darcy’s accounts, how can you doubt that he is a philanderer, a gamester, and a liar?”

“It does not matter, if he is married to our sister. But how Lydia could ever have attracted him appears incomprehensible. I never perceived, while the regiment was in Hertfordshire, that Lydia had any partiality for him.”

Elizabeth remembered Wickham’s demeanour toward her youngest sister when they last parted and how he had taken notice of Lydia’s unrestrained flirting with his fellow officers. “Mr Wickham was angry with me for discovering his true character and favouring Darcy. I am surprised he would place himself in a position where he might be worked upon to marry my sister, although I doubt that is his intent.”

Jane’s eyes went wide. “But can you think that Lydia is so lost to everything but love of him as to consent to live with him on any other terms than marriage?”

How she hated to see her sister think the best of a man like George Wickham. There was never a man more undeserving

of her generous heart. “What I do know is that Mr Wickham is profligate in every sense of the word. That he has neither integrity nor honour. That he is as deceitful as he is insinuating.”

“I believe they will yet marry and then we must forget all that we know of him, for he will be our brother.”

Rather than lash out at Jane, who could never stand to think unkindly of anyone, Elizabeth left for bed, and it was not until her head hit the pillow that she realised with horror what she must relay to Fitzwilliam when he returned to Netherfield tomorrow.

SATURDAY EVENING FOUND DARCY IN HIS CARRIAGE, FEELING the journey into Hertfordshire to be a lengthy one, and he was weary enough before the close of it. He was tired, and he felt he was being slowly dragged and cruelly shaken over the rough roads. His journey left him in a foul mood, and the one thing that would bring him comfort was to see Elizabeth.

Bingley was nowhere to be found when he arrived at Netherfield, but that did not surprise him, for he knew Bingley spent every moment at Longbourn. While waiting for his host, Darcy sorted his stack of correspondence, stopping only to read the expected disapproving reply from Lady Catherine regarding his letter announcing his engagement. The language of it was so abusive toward Elizabeth that it was not fit to be repeated. He tore it to pieces, promising himself to cut ties with her until her ladyship apologised, and returned to the others, nothing critical catching his eye until he reached the last letter. It was first sent to his house in town and was then forwarded to Netherfield before he arrived back in London. He immediately recognised the handwriting, and his stomach lurched. His first instinct was to set it afire as if, by burning the paper, he could burn away the existence of the man who wrote. Inquisitiveness won out over wrath, however, and Darcy broke the seal.

Brighton, East Sussex

25 June 1812

Dear Sir,

The disagreement subsisting between us cannot be refuted, but you must pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention. You have thrown me off and have left me with no other dependence in this world. I hold you responsible for my ruined prospects. That you disagree with this assessment I cannot deny, but know this: I shall take from you what is owed to me.

I have it on good authority, as well as from my own observations of the lady, that you are enamoured of Elizabeth Bennet. I have the highest opinion of your taste. I might have been successful had she not believed your version of our history upon her return from Kent. Your attachment to her must have induced you to unfold it, and knowing all I do of your character, I suspect you will make her an offer of marriage.

Her sister Lydia, who followed us to Brighton, eagerly gave herself over to me. I depart the militia Thursday for London as my debts have moved beyond my ability to repay, and it will be the work of a moment to induce her to come with me. I have no intention of marrying the foolish girl, but she would think it a great adventure to go to town and then to Scotland to marry. However, if you compensate me for the funds I ought to have had by marrying your sister, I shall make the journey to town alone. Otherwise, I make no guarantee as to the condition of Lydia Bennet and her reputation when I leave her in London.

I know your damnable sense of integrity will protect Elizabeth's credit and feelings, and therefore I expect you to write to me indicating your compliance.

G. Wickham

Darcy was fixed in astonishment, feeling ill to his stomach and dizzy with shock. This was a letter of which every line was an insult, and it proclaimed its writer to be deep in hardened villainy. No honourable man would allow himself to be extorted even if he had the thirty thousand pounds to pay off Wickham.

He cursed the mischance that prevented him from receiving this letter the day after it was sent. He would have gone straight to Brighton and brought Lydia home himself had he read this in time. The sunlight was fading fast into the horizon as Darcy left for Longbourn, his fatigue replaced by heightened anxiety as he rode as fast as he could to Elizabeth.

Chapter Sixteen

Darcy rode into the paddock, jumped from his horse, carelessly tossed the reins toward the servant, and strode into the house. He had to know whether Lydia had eloped. It was likely Wickham had already fled his regiment, but perhaps Lydia had not been convinced to leave with him. *It is my own fault that Wickham's worthlessness was not known here as to make it impossible for any young woman of character to love him.* He was too gentlemanly to question aloud whether Lydia Bennet was such a woman, but she was to be his sister, and it was his duty to step forward.

He approached the drawing room door and saw the curious glances of Hill and the footman. Something was amiss, and the servants were aware of it. Whatever unhappy truth he was to learn, he did not know how long it could be concealed. He was about to enter when Bingley came from the room and nearly collided with him.

“Darcy! I am thankful you are here.” Bingley cast his eye around the hall and, seeing the servants attempting to look busy, drew Darcy to the empty and unlit breakfast room. In whispered tones, he informed Darcy of the situation he had already feared: Lydia had eloped with Wickham, and Colonel Forster had traced them along the London road but not beyond.

“Lieutenant Denny expressed a belief to Colonel Forster that Mr Wickham never intended to go to Gretna Green or marry Lydia at all. Jane believes they might marry privately in

town, and I dare not distress her, but I do not believe he could form such a design on a woman as poor as Lydia.”

“What is widely known?”

“The militia knows Mr Wickham deserted to escape his debts, and that Lydia is returned home. Colonel Forster ordered his wife to convince everyone that Lydia was suddenly called home and was already on her way before Mr Wickham fled.” Bingley lifted his eyes. “Mrs Forster purposefully left them alone whenever Mr Wickham visited Lydia at Colonel Forster’s home! It seems Mr Wickham began calling on Lydia the very day she arrived at Brighton. The servants here know nothing yet, but they are suspicious.” Bingley looked fatigued after a day of dealing with this crisis. “I am glad you are here.”

Darcy’s mind spun with possibilities. Wickham might yet be worked on to marry Lydia for less than thirty thousand pounds, but if she was not known to have eloped, he might yet save her reputation. He need not pay Wickham a shilling if Lydia could be persuaded to return to her friends. It would be best for her happiness if she did not marry that scoundrel. He might discover where Wickham was hiding in London before he purposefully ruined Lydia’s reputation, and if she could be recovered before the truth came out, her virtue and that of her sisters might remain unquestioned.

“Darcy, stop pacing!” Bingley said with a huff. “I know that you are thinking, but stand still.”

“What has been attempted to recover her?”

“Jane wrote to her uncle Gardiner for his advice and assistance, but other than the colonel’s attempt to track their progress, nothing has been done.”

Darcy stared. “What do you mean nothing?”

“Mrs Bennet keeps to her rooms, tended only by her daughters, which—given her propensity for senseless talking—is a blessing.” Darcy knew, and he was glad to see that Bingley agreed, Mrs Bennet had too little prudence to hold her tongue before the servants.

Bingley spoke hurriedly as his agitation grew. “But Mr Bennet believes the worst and has given her up for lost. He is determined not to go to London because he does not believe she could be recovered before it is too late.”

Darcy was shocked and grieved that the man took no action to recover his child. “We must be decided and without the loss of another minute.” Someone must resolve on being off for London to find Lydia. Mr Bennet’s indolence was no secret, and perhaps Wickham counted on that fact to aid his objective. “Return to Netherfield and make arrangements for us to go to town at the earliest possible hour.”

Bingley was relieved to be given a purpose, and Darcy went into the drawing room. He found Jane and Elizabeth seated together on the couch, their eyes red-rimmed. His betrothed looked so miserably ill that he gave no thought to the presence of Jane and crossed the room to pull her into his arms. Elizabeth burst into tears as she placed her head on his shoulder. Over her head, Darcy saw Jane rise and quietly leave the room. At length, Elizabeth’s tears subsided, and she finally spoke.

“I suppose Bingley has told you the dreadful news.” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money—nothing that can tempt him to marry her. She is lost forever.”

“We are not without hope. The unhappy truth might be contained, and we can be assured of Colonel Forster’s secrecy.”

“How Lydia could ever have attached herself to him is incomprehensible.” Elizabeth shook her head and sank back into the sofa. “Although her understanding would not preserve her from falling prey.”

Darcy walked the room in solemn meditation. He knew how it had happened. Thoughtless as she might be, Lydia had been pursued as a means by which Wickham could exact revenge on him. What would Elizabeth say if she knew her sister’s disgrace was due to his mistaken pride?

“Of what are you thinking, Fitzwilliam?” She looked at him sadly, and he stopped pacing.

“Of what might be done to recover her,” he answered, not wishing to hurt her and divulge the contents of Wickham’s horrible letter. “Lydia is by no means friendless or unprotected, no matter your father’s apathy.” Elizabeth winced, but nodded. “Mr Wickham will never marry a woman without some money. He cannot afford it. But it is not too late to persuade her to return to her family before her elopement is known.”

Elizabeth looked hopeful. “Thanks to Bingley’s management of my mother and the servants, we and the Forsters are the only ones who know the entire story.”

“Bingley and I will depart in the morning. Wickham intended to leave Brighton for London on Thursday, and I am confident I can ascertain where they went when they arrived. The sooner I get to London, the more likely I am to find them before Mr Wickham leaves Lydia behind to her ruin.”

“You think you can find them and persuade her to leave him? How is such a—” Elizabeth broke off and tilted her head. “Fitzwilliam,” she said slowly as her words followed the thoughts that had just entered her mind, “how did you know he intended to leave Brighton on Thursday?”

Darcy was caught off guard by his mistake. He did not wish to lie—he doubted that he *could* lie to her—but he also could not hurt her by telling her of Wickham’s plans. If Elizabeth learned, before Lydia was safe, that his silence on the matter had led to her sister’s being seduced and that his own admiration for Elizabeth had turned Wickham to this desperate plan of extortion, she might never forgive him.

He would spend the rest of his life paying for his insufferable pride.

“And what makes you certain Wickham would soon leave her to her ruin?” She spoke faster and with more confidence. “Do you not think he would remain with her until her money ran out? It could last weeks. If Lydia believes herself to be married soon, she would have no reason to wish him gone, and

Wickham would keep her close for the sake of her money, if nothing else.”

It had been in Darcy’s power to prevent Wickham being well received in Hertfordshire, but he had chosen not to sacrifice his privacy. He would tell her of Wickham’s letter after he returned with Lydia.

“Elizabeth, we do not have the time to debate this,” he said firmly. “It falls to me to remedy this distressing situation. I refuse to wait and allow my reputation to be ruined.” He saw her flinch at his harsh words, but he had to leave before she drew the truth of the letter from him. “I must recover Lydia from Wickham before the world knows what he has done.”

“Yes, of course, Mr Darcy.” Elizabeth coloured as she avoided his gaze. “I am grateful you do not leave us exposed, given the humiliation, the misery that Lydia has brought on my family.”

She crumpled a handkerchief in her hands, and her breath came in and out in rapid puffs. He had only wished to withhold the contents of Wickham’s letter until Lydia had been restored to her friends. When he spoke of ruined reputations, he included himself in that group, for there was never any doubt in his mind that he would marry Elizabeth—scandal or not. Her eyes were expressionless, her arms wrapped around herself, and she was nearly trembling.

His irritation crumbled under the sight of her so miserable. Did she truly think he would leave her over this? Keeping Wickham’s letter from his future wife would be impossible.

TO LOSE FITZWILLIAM NOW FILLED ELIZABETH WITH unspeakable dread. Elizabeth thought back to the morning in the cottage and wondered whether there was any difference between herself and Lydia in his mind. They both gave themselves to men they loved without the protection of marriage. It had felt perfectly right and natural, but Fitzwilliam’s grave looks made her fear he might now think upon their actions with shame. She was sorry to focus on her

own private cares in the face of the public ruination of all her family, but she could not help it.

And if everyone in Meryton learned that I had given myself to Fitzwilliam, would it matter that I am engaged and Lydia is not? Would anyone see her choices and actions as acceptable as she did because Fitzwilliam loved her and had promised to marry her? Or if anyone found out, would she be condemned the same as Lydia would be?

She covered her face with her handkerchief and wept.

She was recalled to the present when Fitzwilliam sat by her. "Elizabeth, your sorrow over Lydia has clouded your judgment, and you have mistaken my frustration at this situation for disappointment with you. Nothing will prevent me from marrying you. In my heart, you are my wife. I would not give you up over this or anything."

She knew better than to assume him capable of only the most severe judgments, and she ought to have learned by now not to judge hastily. She released a shuddering sigh of relief.

"Forgive me, dearest, for adding to your anguish. I intended to spare your feelings, but instead I have hurt you even further."

He tugged the handkerchief away from her face, and Elizabeth felt the warm pressure of his lips against hers, and the familiar sense of belonging when he pulled her into his arms. He sighed and pulled a letter from his pocket, turning it over in his hands as he looked at it in distaste.

"This was waiting for me when I returned to Netherfield this evening. It is not for the eyes of a lady, but I cannot deceive you, and now I must let you read it and suffer your anger at having disappointed you."

Elizabeth was, for a moment, transported back to an April morning in Kent when he handed her a letter with a look of haughty composure. She took the letter and read, and her pulse raced as her stomach sank to the floor. She bounded from her seat to pace, overcome with nervous energy as she read. Her astonishment was beyond expression. Wickham had seduced

Lydia as revenge on her and Fitzwilliam, and demanded recompense to preserve Lydia's reputation.

"I did not know such villainy persisted in this world!" she cried.

Fitzwilliam met her gaze with a serious look. "I ought to have learned by now not to be surprised at the lengths to which Wickham will go to achieve his desired end, which most times is enough funds available to him to gamble as much as he chooses."

"Why did you not tell me this immediately?" Her voice shook as she held up the letter. "After everything we have said, everything we have done, why would you keep such a thing a secret? It shows a want of confidence in me."

Fitzwilliam sighed and leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees. When he spoke, he looked at his hands. "The whole of this sad affair may be imputed to my mistaken pride. Had I lain bare what I knew of his character, Lydia might not have been so easy a target. When we discussed informing the neighbourhood, I thought he would soon be gone, and it did not signify whether people knew what he was. I did not want to disclose my private dealings."

"That is why you feel responsible, Mr Darcy, but it does not explain why you kept his disgraceful attempt at coercion to yourself." Had they not spoken of his irritating tendency to control every situation and arrange the business of everyone to his own liking? Had he not promised to involve her as an equal?

"Do you not see, Miss Bennet?" He stressed her name in response to her own detached style of addressing him. He rose and stood before her. "You have already accused me of being devoid of every proper feeling, of being too prideful. How could I bear to lose your affection when my selfishness is the reason Wickham targeted your sister?"

The tumult of her mind was now painfully great. She knew not how to support herself and, from actual weakness, fell back to her seat. Fitzwilliam was just as frightened of losing her regard as she had been of losing his.

“I hope to recover Lydia before the world knows that she eloped,” he spoke quietly and carefully. “I have no intention of paying him thirty thousand pounds, especially if I can convince her to return to Longbourn. If she refuses to part from him, I shall do what I can in order for them to marry and support themselves in tolerable independence. I wished to spare your feelings, but I now see that, in trying to keep this from you, I have done more harm than good. I am exceedingly sorry.”

He knelt and grasped her hands as he had tried to do in the tearoom at the assembly. This time she did not pull away; rather, she raised an unsteady hand and ran her fingers through his hair. With a sigh that released the burdens of the world, Fitzwilliam closed his eyes, and Elizabeth watched the tension drain from his face. He took such comfort in her touch; she marvelled that it was in her power to make him happy.

“I did not think you could forgive me for not making Wickham’s character known.” His eyes were still closed.

“I cannot blame you for Wickham’s misdeeds any more than you might blame me for Lydia’s thoughtlessness.”

He opened his eyes and rose to sit next to her, holding her hands within his own. “I could not leave you to think my affections were changeable, even if it meant you would hate me for what Wickham had done.”

“I do not think that your reserve, or anybody’s reserve, can be answerable for the event,” she said sadly. “They have only themselves to blame, though we all must bear the consequences.” Elizabeth hesitated to ask her next question, but she would speak her mind. “Fitzwilliam, if Lydia refuses to leave him and we compel him to marry her, how could you endure it?”

“What do you mean?” He raised his arm and pulled her to rest her head on his shoulder.

“How could you stand to be brother-in-law to Wickham? And Georgiana—what would she suffer?”

“I would not receive him at Pemberley,” he answered quickly, “but Lydia and the rest of your family will always be welcomed in our home. As for Georgiana,” he said, deliberating, “I think she and I are of a similar mind: she has the highest opinion in the world of you and would not give you up for anything.”

They sat together in silence and drew from one another the strength to face the following days. Elizabeth rested her head on his shoulder until sleep finally found her, and Jane discovered her in the morning lying on the sofa, tucked beneath a blanket with Wickham’s letter folded in her hand.



“DARCY, THIS CALAMITY WILL REFLECT POORLY ON THE Bennet family should we not find her in time,” Bingley said as Darcy’s carriage carried them into town.

“I shall do whatever is required to ensure the honour and respectability of the Bennets.” Darcy stared out the side glass. He tried to remember who, among his servants, had been well acquainted with Mrs Younge.

Bingley cleared his throat. “The more time that passes before we recover Lydia, the more likely the scandal will break.”

Darcy caught the tone of Bingley’s voice. “Speak plainly, Bingley. It is what you are best at.”

“I only...that is to say, I am fearful of bringing dishonour to my family should Lydia’s reputation not be preserved.”

“What other option do you see before you? You are engaged to Jane. To withdraw from an engagement would be shameful as well.”

“Our engagement is not known outside of Meryton.” Darcy stared in mute astonishment. “The banns have not been read, and no settlement papers have been drawn up, let alone signed.”

“Your honour is engaged,” Darcy said in a low voice. After all that he and Bingley’s sisters had done to keep him from Jane, Bingley could not truly consider breaking it off. “I am shocked that you are now considering how easy it might be to end your engagement.”

“I do love her! It is only that I now have...reservations about Jane’s respectability. You cannot deny that Lydia’s actions call into question the virtue of all the Bennet girls.”

“Tread carefully, Bingley.” Darcy’s voice dropped low. “I am engaged to one of those girls, and I see no reason to question my choice of a wife. The Bennet girls will be my sisters, and I would thank you not to question their virtue within my hearing. I will not listen in silence while you allow the foibles of one to be applied to them all.”

“Forgive me—you are right.” Bingley flinched and looked away. “But society will think more as I do than you. Louisa made a fine catch marrying a gentleman like Hurst, and Caroline could do the same. They rebuked me enough for Jane’s low connexions. I can only imagine what Caroline and Louisa would say should they learn the truth about Lydia’s departure from Brighton.”

“Then you ought not to tell them. I have every intention of recovering Lydia before they know she is gone!” cried Darcy, and they did not speak until Bingley said good-bye when the carriage left him at the Hursts’ door. Darcy pushed Bingley’s inconstancy from his mind as he entered his own house.

With less politeness than he habitually used when addressing those in his employ, he told the housekeeper to speak to all the servants and determine who had the closest acquaintance with Mrs Younge. He then stormed into his library with instructions not to be disturbed for any reason other than an answer to his enquiries.

How could Bingley question Jane’s respectability—indeed, all of the Bennet girls’ respectability—because of Lydia’s scandal? Lydia was thoughtless and idle, but she had genuinely thought that she was to be married in Scotland. If Bingley could question the respectability of his “angel,” then

what hope did the Bennet daughters have should they not discover Lydia and persuade her to return to her friends?

There came a rap on his door, and Darcy turned from the window. His housekeeper entered and behind her followed a young girl, her hands fidgeting with her apron. She was introduced as Nelly, the first kitchen maid, and at Darcy's nod, the housekeeper departed, leaving the maid trembling with fright at being summoned by the master. Had Darcy not been so anxious for information, he might have pitied her more.

“Do you know the whereabouts of Mrs Younge?”

The maid opened her mouth to speak but only nodded as her face drained of colour. Darcy sighed as he realised he needed to show more patience than was his wont. *Elizabeth would be far better at this. She could put anyone at ease.*

Suppressing his impatience, he sat behind his desk, hoping it would diminish his height and he might appear less imposing. “Nelly, you are not dismissed, I assure you. I need to find Mrs Younge. Can you assist me?”

This helped because she finally whispered, “Yes, sir, I knew Mrs Younge.” When he nodded, she continued in a slightly louder voice. “We were friendly while she was here, sir. I would bring her tea when she came with Miss Darcy and we would talk. She wrote me once after she left and said she keeps lodgings in Edward Street.”

“Are you in contact with her?”

“No, sir! She left too quickly. We all know what that means. Mrs Younge must'a done something dreadful.”

He dismissed her, and she nearly ran from the room. He would bring Bingley with him when he called on Mrs Younge tomorrow. If Lydia was to be convinced to leave Wickham, his amiable friend must be the one to do it.

Chapter Seventeen

Darcy rode in a hired hackney for the short drive to Grosvenor Street to retrieve Bingley, all the while hoping that the tension between them had dissipated since yesterday. Bingley could not truly doubt Jane's character; he was only suffering from depressed spirits over what they needed to accomplish. Darcy was shown to the breakfast room where Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley sat at the table, their heads together in private gossip. Mr Hurst said nothing at all and did not look up from his breakfast.

Darcy declined their invitation to join them. The less he said, the sooner he and Bingley could leave to settle this unfortunate affair. Let Elizabeth call him unsocial and taciturn, but he did not have the patience for Miss Bingley this morning.

"We were sorry to leave Bath, but it is such a pleasure to see you," Miss Bingley fawned. "I had thought you and Charles remained in Hertfordshire. We were only staying in town a few days before we travelled to Netherfield to join you. And Jane, of course." Her tone showed she expected little pleasure in it.

"Yes, I wrote to Caroline to tell her of my engagement, and she insisted on coming to keep house for me. Did you not, Caroline?" Bingley added heavily.

His sister feigned her liking for the idea.

"Tell us, Mr Darcy, what think you of Charles's choice of a wife?" Mrs Hurst asked.

“Miss Bennet is lovely, and her sense and gentle nature will be a credit to Bingley.” How many more minutes of idle chatter would be necessary?

“We were just speaking of dear Jane, were we not?” Miss Bingley never removed her eyes from Darcy, although she addressed her sister. “Would you not agree that she has done well to receive an offer from Charles, given the Bennets’ poor connexions?”

To this speech, Bingley gave no answer and looked remarkably uncomfortable. Darcy simply stated that it was, in his opinion, a beneficial match for both sides.

“Oh indeed, beneficial for our friend Jane—I had often despaired of her being well settled. It is a shame her other sisters will not be so fortunate.”

For the life of him, Darcy could not imagine that Bingley had been foolish enough to mention Lydia. However, his friend looked just as amazed as he felt. Miss Bingley went on unabated. “I, of course, mean Miss Eliza, in particular. With her lack of fashion and dreadful country manners, it is unlikely she will marry.” After a pause, she added, “No matter how handsome some gentlemen might find her.”

While Mrs Hurst nodded in agreement, her brother’s jaw dropped, and Darcy stared at Miss Bingley in undisguised revulsion. He could not fathom that her intentions toward him were by no means over. Before he could scold Miss Bingley, Darcy’s attention was caught by the look of contemplation on Bingley’s face.

Darcy tried to rein in his annoyance. “Bingley,” he said, “did you not write to your sisters that I—”

“Good gracious,” Bingley stammered, “I do not think I did! My ideas flow so rapidly when I write that I often do not adequately express them.” Bingley looked at Darcy, then looked at his younger sister, and then let out a hearty laugh that even drew the attention of Mr Hurst. Darcy stared at Bingley in angry silence as Miss Bingley asked, in a higher and higher-pitched voice, what exactly it was that Bingley had

neglected to mention. Soon enough, even Darcy could not deny the humour of the situation and smiled.

“Miss Bingley, nothing you say against the Bennet family could elevate your hopes of influencing my felicity. Bingley, I shall meet you at the carriage after you inform your sisters.”

As the footman opened the front door for him, Darcy was sure that he heard a shriek and the sound of a cup and saucer crashing to the ground.



“LYDIA IS NOT THE KIND OF GIRL TO DO SUCH A THING AS this! And now here’s Darcy and Bingley gone away, and I know Darcy would fight Wickham, and then he will be killed, and what is to become of us all? Who will take care of us when your father passes if not Darcy?”

“Do not give way to useless alarm.” Elizabeth tried to dissuade her mother against such outrageous ideas. Mrs Bennet kept to her room, where she blamed everybody but the two people whose ill-judging indulgence the errors of her daughter must principally owe. “No one knows Lydia has eloped. Darcy and Bingley may recover her, and she need not marry Mr Wickham.”

“Oh, she is likely ruined, just as your father says! You must write to Darcy and tell him to find Wickham and make them marry. But keep him from duelling. Your father does nothing, but we cannot allow Darcy to fight Wickham and be killed!”

Elizabeth’s mother continued in this vein until Jane returned with her mother’s tea, and Elizabeth was free to seek out her father. Mr Bennet had made no mention of the business that had called his future sons away. Although he might provoke her by insulting Fitzwilliam, she hoped to convince her father to be appreciative and gracious to him when he returned with Lydia. Even if he felt Lydia’s case a hopeless one, Fitzwilliam did not, and her father ought to show him gratitude for helping his family avert a scandal.

“Lizzy, it will do you no good to speak to me about your wedding clothes,” he said after she entered his library. “Your mother has spoken to me on the subject, and I shall not be dissuaded. You will receive no such mark of affection from me.”

Elizabeth attempted to mind her temper. He knew very well she was not worried down by wedding clothes. “I came here to speak of other subjects.”

“Have you come to revel in your prudence and foresight? Your advice to me in May, considering the event, shows some greatness of mind. Perhaps you do have something of cleverness, your attachment to Mr Darcy notwithstanding.”

She felt frustration build in her chest. “Papa, why do you continue to be severe upon me?”

“You do not know the character of this man who has suddenly captured your fancy. His wealth and connexions have blinded you.”

“Do you know enough of him to do justice to his worth? Have you taken any pains to know Darcy at all?”

Her father pressed his lips together before deciding on a different attack. “I am surprised that this affair with Lydia does not have him begging you to release him from his promise.”

“It would insult him to hear you speak disdainfully of his honour and his attachment to me. He is gone to London in *your place* to protect Lydia. I have had the pleasure of Darcy’s acquaintance for months, and although I may not have admired him in the beginning, I have no reservations about his character.” After her last conversation with Fitzwilliam, she would never again doubt his commitment to her.

“You will be happy, then,” he retorted drily. “How fortunate for you.”

Unwavering loyalty to her father no longer came as easily as it once did. “I am sorry for the unhappiness you have endured in your marriage, but I have confidence in my choice of husband. You ought not to be jealous of the happiness you know I shall share with Darcy. I will marry him, whether or

not you read those settlement papers he left. Should you not wish to suffer an estrangement from me, you will sign them and thank Darcy for his efforts when he returns with Lydia.”

Elizabeth turned on her heel and stormed from the library.



THEIR HACKNEY PASSED CAVENDISH SQUARE, AND DARCY AND Bingley alighted at a large house in Edward Street. Given the curious glances they received from passersby, Darcy was relieved he had hired a carriage instead of arriving in his own with the Darcy livery for all to see. Murmured voices carried down the hall after he gave his card, although he could only discern their tone; the maid’s voice was steady, but Mrs Younge’s voice was at first alarmed, then angry.

The maid returned to say that Mrs Younge was not at home. Darcy exhaled his frustration and, ignoring Bingley’s entreaties to be patient, pushed past her, strode down the hall, and threw open the parlour door. The woman inside leapt to her feet upon seeing him and gave a little cry—whether from fear or anger, Darcy could not tell. She recovered, however, and the worry in her features was replaced with a veneer of refinement that Darcy knew by now not to trust.

“Mr Darcy, you must be eager to speak with me since I did not invite you in. But as you and your friend are here now, please join me.” Mrs Younge spoke evenly, but her eyes flitted toward the open door. She dismissed the maid, who shut the door as she left.

“I am looking for Mr Wickham.”

“I cannot help you. I have not seen Wickham since last summer. Why ever would you search for him here?” She spoke with grace and ease, and Darcy knew he would have to unnerve her in order to convince her to tell all she knew.

“Mr Wickham is the sort of man to keep women to fall back on when his gambling funds run out. I know that you have made yourself available to him in the past, and I am confident he has...visited you recently.”

“Darcy!” Bingley exclaimed in shock. Mrs Younge’s face reddened, but Darcy knew it was from anger and not from shame. He was rude, yes, but this woman was his only means of finding Wickham in a timely manner, and he would exploit every advantage.

“I will not allow myself to be insulted by you,” Mrs Younge said with affected outrage.

“Come now, we both know you are the first person Mr Wickham would turn to when he needs money or a warm bed. If he is not still here, where can I find him?”

“Why should I help you?”

“Because I shall double any amount Mr Wickham has promised you.”

Mrs Younge rose and paced, idly touching the furnishings as she walked. At first glance, it was a well-appointed parlour, but upon closer examination, Darcy could see its wear. The wall coverings had peeled near the window, the carpet’s edge was frayed under frequent use, and Darcy noticed the overstuffed sofa had faded in the sunlight. Mrs Younge’s gown was fashionable, but the silk had lost its soft lustre. Her consequence in the world had fallen since he dismissed her from his employ.

“I am certain I do not know what you mean.” Mrs Younge recovered some of her poise. “You may show yourself out.”

Darcy remained standing before the door. “Mr Wickham owes you money, does he not? We both know he will gamble away everything he has before he pays you. It is expensive to keep a house this large in Edward Street. As I said, I shall pay you twice what he owes you if you tell me where I can find him and the woman with him.”

“So it is about her, is it? I had not thought a foolish girl would be the sort to attract him, let alone you.”

Darcy smirked. Mrs Younge held an unrequited love for a profligate gamester who would never marry her. Darcy almost pitied her for her disappointed hopes. She sat rigidly in her chair, avoiding his eye. “We both know your funds hold more

importance than your loyalty to an unfaithful gamester. Where are they?"

"George arrived on Friday with the girl, looking for lodgings while he conducted business. It is quiet since the Little Season has yet to begin, so I gave them a room for which she paid for the week."

"She is here!" Bingley interrupted.

"She thought herself on an adventure and kept talking about being for Scotland and being the first of her sisters to marry." She gave a derisive laugh. "As if George would marry her."

Her tone raised his suspicions. "Where is he now?"

"George left the morning after they arrived. I know not what he told her, but she has kept to her room since he left. He told me he would not return for some time, but that has always been his way. I never know where he goes or when he intends to return."

"And the girl with him—what did he intend for her?"

Mrs Younge looked at him expectantly, and Darcy reached into his coat pocket to retrieve his coin purse. He withdrew several gold guineas and tossed them on the chipped side table nearest to her. Mrs Younge clutched her hands in her lap rather than immediately scooping up the coins and made no attempt to hide her triumph.

"At the end of the week, in return for what he would pay me when I next saw him, I was to turn her out on the street near Covent Garden at nightfall."

Bingley gasped, and Darcy set his jaw as he bit back his anger. A woman wandering the streets at night would be assumed to be a prostitute. She was liable to be robbed, raped, or killed, and any who heard of her sufferings would say she deserved what happened to her. Mrs Younge held her head high as Darcy quelled his disgust at being forced to contend with such a rapacious woman.

"Call her down."

“I might remind you that I am well aware of your young lady’s name.”

Bingley looked anxious, but Darcy held her gaze. He was not about to pay this woman a shilling more.

“And allow me to remind you, madam, that I might tell any of your lodgers about your dissolute ways and ensure that no one will let from you again. You would no longer be able to keep up appearances in this wealthy neighbourhood. One word from me, and it will be you who are forced to earn her keep outside Covent Garden.”

Mrs Younge, unable to cling to any remaining dignity, rang for the maid to bring down “Wickham’s girl” and to pack her belongings. “I want her gone! She is of no use to me now.” After snatching the guineas from the table, she stomped from the room.

They did not wait long before Lydia Bennet appeared in the doorway, her high spirits and self-assurance undiminished. She bounded into the room, threw herself into the nearest chair, and asked why they had called. Bingley looked too shocked by her display to speak, but Darcy was not about to spend another moment longer in this house.

“Lydia, we are here to persuade you to quit this disgraceful situation and return to your family.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “Aye, that is just like your formality and discretion, Mr Darcy. I need no help of yours!”

“Mr Wickham has abandoned you with no concern for your welfare. You desperately require the help of your friends.” Darcy tried not to let his exasperation show.

“My dear Wickham left to secure the funds necessary for us to marry! Perhaps if you had not treated him so horribly, we might have gone on to Scotland by now. Even so,” she said, twirling a strand of hair, “we should be married some time or other, and it does not much signify to me when.”

“You threaten the reputation of your entire family the longer you remain here!” He took a breath and controlled his patience. “I regret to tell you that Mr Wickham has no

intention of marrying you. An honourable man would not abscond with a lady and deny her family their due respect in being addressed for his permission for them to marry.” The feeling of already having had this conversation struck Darcy. It was eerily similar to what he said to Georgiana when he removed her from Ramsgate last summer, though Georgiana had been much easier to convince.

At the mention of her family, Lydia’s smile slipped. “Did my father join in your search for me?” she asked in a hopeful voice.

How could he tell a young girl about her father’s complete unconcern? His neglect was shameful—nearly criminal. When Darcy replied that Mr Bennet remained at Longbourn, Lydia’s untamed and unabashed manner returned.

“Well, since my father takes no notice of my actions, it can be of little concern to you. You are strange to appear so interested in my affairs! After all, you are not yet married to Lizzy, and neither are you, Mr Bingley, married to Jane, so if my father is happy to see me with Wickham, then what importance is it to the world? My mother will be pleased to have another daughter soon married. ’Tis what she always wanted for her girls.”

With these words, Lydia had summarised all the dangers associated with having one’s father be perpetually absent and one’s mother incapable of exertion and sense. Despite Wickham’s actions, it was clear to Darcy that Lydia would have exposed herself eventually. But he was not about to allow an indulged sixteen-year-old girl, bent on disregarding propriety, to ruin the Bennet family’s—and by extension, his—honour.

“I would have you understand that Mr Wickham is not a righteous man, and he had no intention of marrying you.” He never wanted prove Wickham’s betrayal by showing her Wickham’s letter. He simply wanted Lydia to return to her family before it was too late and without destroying her faith in the goodness of all men. “I regret to cause you pain, but Mr Wickham frequently accrues debts of honour he cannot repay.

I fear he has used you to fund his escape from Brighton and will not return to marry you.”

“I have no reason to believe you. George said he loved me! I intend to wait here until he returns. It will not be long—a matter of days at the most. I shall see you both in Hertfordshire when I return as Mrs Wickham!” She crossed her arms in front of her chest with a childlike pout.

“Lydia, I have been remiss in congratulating you on your upcoming nuptials,” Bingley suddenly contributed to the spectacle. Lydia looked at Darcy with a smugly jubilant grin and thanked Bingley heartily.

“Would you not prefer to marry from your father’s house?” Lydia looked surprised and did not answer. “Your mother would be pleased to share your good fortune with the entire neighbourhood. Do you not long to have Mrs Philips, the Lucases, and all your other neighbours congratulate you and to hear yourself called Mrs Wickham?” He gave her a knowing wink.

“Yes, I suppose I would,” she said with a giggle, her ease and good spirits returning.

“Then why do you not wait at Longbourn for Mr Wickham? Since he will marry you, then he would come for you whether you were here or half a day’s journey away in Hertfordshire.”

“Wickham told me to remain here with Mrs Younge. It would not do for me to disrespect his wishes.”

Darcy lifted his eyes at the notion of anyone owing respect to that unworthy scoundrel. He was about to suggest so to Lydia, but Bingley caught his eye and shook his head. Darcy conceded, and stepped aside to let Bingley continue, resigning himself to stand by the fireplace mantel and watch the proceedings.

“I admire your desire to obey your intended’s judgment. Perhaps you might stay with your aunt and uncle here in London while you await his return.” Bingley never allowed his smile to waver. “Mr Wickham could not fault you for passing

your last days as a single lady with your own family. Should Mr Wickham be delayed in returning for you, the Gardiners would return you to Longbourn in the middle of the month before their northern tour begins. When Mr Wickham returns to marry you, a carriage drive to Hertfordshire would be a small price to pay for the sake of his lovely girl.”

Lydia looked thoughtful, and Darcy was certain he had never seen that expression cross her features. As quickly as it came, it was gone, and petulance took its place.

“It would only be such fun to marry from home if I were the *first* of my sisters to marry. As it stands now, he”—she gestured her chin toward Darcy—“and Lizzy will marry before I do. I might as well stay here to wait for Wickham and come home already wed.”

Darcy felt his control over the situation was rapidly slipping, but Bingley was ready with an answer.

“That may not be the case,” Bingley said, looking pointedly at Darcy, who kept silent although his jaw hurt from clenching it so tightly. “You are aware how close Jane and Elizabeth are, and perhaps they would prefer to share their wedding day. Your sister and I shall not marry for six weeks, and I am sure that Lizzy and Darcy would be overjoyed to wait until we could be wed in the same ceremony.”

Darcy could not feign pleasure at the idea of having his wedding postponed, but under Bingley’s persistent stare, he nodded once in agreement.

“There, do you not see how wonderful this might be for you?” Bingley gave her a jovial smile. “I see no reason you ought not to return to your family and marry Mr Wickham from your father’s house. You will be the first of your sisters to marry, your parents will have the pleasure of sharing your joy, and you may proudly show yourself to your neighbours as the new Mrs Wickham.”

Lydia hung on Bingley’s every word. She sent for Mrs Younge, who, under Darcy’s icy stare, promised to deliver her note to Wickham explaining where she had gone. Lydia then loudly demanded Bingley and Darcy’s congratulations on her

upcoming marriage. Her ease and good spirits increased, and Bingley bore all her exuberance with a patient grace that Darcy marvelled at.

“And you, Mr Darcy, if you love Lizzy half so well as my dear Wickham loves me, I am sure you will be very happy.” Before Darcy had to give an answer that might undo all Bingley had accomplished, she capered away to oversee the packing of her belongings.

Bingley sank into a chair. “On the whole, that went not so horribly after all.”

Darcy, too single-minded to relax until Lydia was with her family, addressed the issue at hand. “We must deliver her to her uncle. We want to say to anyone who asks that she left Brighton and arrived directly at Gracechurch Street last Friday.”

“Mr and Mrs Gardiner will be made unhappy at having to receive her, but they will for the sake of their other nieces. Her aunt might help her to see the shame of what she has done.”

He scoffed. “Mrs Gardiner could speak to Lydia in the most serious manner, representing to her all the wickedness of what she had done, and I doubt Lydia would repent. Only when she realises that Mr Wickham will never marry her will she change her manner.”

Bingley agreed and rose to wait in the hall, muttering as he left, “Such behaviour as hers is highly irregular. She gave herself over to Mr Wickham almost as soon as they met in Brighton. What sort of woman, even an ignorant girl like Lydia, allows herself to be ruined so easily?”

Darcy had little respect for Lydia, but Bingley was too harsh. She had genuinely thought Wickham would take her to Scotland to marry her. Her father had scorned her, and her mother’s single purpose in life was to see her married. It would have been easy for an experienced seducer like Wickham to convince Lydia he would marry her, and it made Darcy loathe the man even more. A man who would prey on the innocence and ignorance of a girl for monetary gain was a fiend.

Bingley's words gave Darcy pause for another reason. Society would condemn both Lydia and Elizabeth if it was known they had anticipated their wedding vows, while neither he nor Wickham would be thought any less for it. Bingley might say there was no difference between the sisters if he knew the truth, but Darcy felt otherwise. Unlike Lydia, Elizabeth had the security of a public engagement, settlement papers, and an honourable gentleman who would care for her always. Still, he could not suppress a small amount of self-reproach at having committed an act that, should anyone learn of it, might allow Elizabeth to be subjected to gossip and censure.

Chapter Eighteen

Elizabeth and Jane were finally able to be outside by themselves while Kitty and Mary took their turn to listen to Mrs Bennet's complaints—and keep her from talking about Lydia to the servants. For Elizabeth, even the warm July sun on her face and the company of her dearest sister brought little comfort to the tumult of her mind. Until Lydia was safely returned to her family—without her elopement becoming common knowledge—Elizabeth was continually anxious.

They soon saw the housekeeper coming toward them. “I beg your pardon, madam, for interrupting you, but there is an express come for you from Mr Darcy. The master received it, but I see he has not sent for you, so I took the liberty of coming to tell you.”

Elizabeth suspected Mrs Hill's entreaty was due to curiosity since none of the servants knew what the confusion at Longbourn was about, but she thanked her just the same. The girls ran through the vestibule and into the library, where their father sat staring out the window. Jane, who was not so much in the habit of running as Elizabeth, panted for breath and held onto the door frame while Elizabeth cried out, “Papa, what have you heard from Mr Darcy?”

“I have not read your correspondence, Lizzy, for what good is to be expected from it?” he said, taking the letter from his pocket. “But perhaps you would like to read it?”

Elizabeth caught it from his hand, asking whether he would like her to read it aloud, but was summarily denied. She and her sister went to the empty breakfast room. As she broke

the seal, she remembered the last time she had read a letter written in the same neat hand, its sharp pen strokes demonstrating the thought the writer put into every word.

Charles Street

Wednesday, July 8

My dearest Elizabeth,

At last I am able to send you tidings of your sister that, I hope, will give you and your family satisfaction. Soon after Bingley and I arrived in town, I learned in what part of London Mr Wickham and Lydia were staying. The particulars of this discovery I shall reserve till we meet. They are not married, nor can I find there was any intention on his part of being so. Nevertheless, she has been returned to the Gardiners' home. I am confident we have accomplished this without the truth of her whereabouts from Friday last to Monday afternoon being known.

Your sister keeps her hope that he will return. Bingley, with ingenuity and pleasing manners, convinced her to await him at her uncle's home. When the Gardiners depart for Longbourn to begin their northern tour at the end of next week, they will bring Lydia with them. The story will be that Lydia left Brighton to visit with her relations in London before they embarked on their trip.

At Bingley's request, he and I shall remain in town until Friday so that he can accompany Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley to Netherfield as Mr Hurst has returned to Bath. It is my earnest hope that when I return, we might place this distressing situation behind us, since Lydia and Mr Wickham's brief living together is not common knowledge. I look forward with delight to our approaching marriage, and I know your loving heart will forgive my impatience for us to be gone from Hertfordshire.

I remain, with compliments to your family,

Yours affectionately,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

“Is it possible?” Elizabeth asked her sister. “Can it be possible this dreadful situation is over?”

“It appears the gentlemen have succeeded in every way. Lydia is to return home, and no one, save for the Forsters and ourselves, knows of Wickham’s involvement in her leaving Brighton.”

“Darcy does not write of encountering Wickham. Do you not wonder where he has gone and what he might do?”

“You fear he might expose Lydia?” Jane shook her head. “I comfort myself with thinking he is ashamed of what he has done and would be too mortified to admit his involvement in the whole of it.”

It occurred to them that their parents were ignorant of what had happened. They went back to their father to make the letter’s contents known. He was reading, Elizabeth noticed, her marriage settlement and, without raising his head, he allowed Jane to tell him that Lydia was discovered and would soon be returned. He nodded once.

To Elizabeth’s complete disappointment, he did not look interested, disturbed, melancholy, or anxious.

“How will you manage Lydia after she comes home?” she asked him. Every previous attempt of hers and Jane’s to check their youngest sister had failed, and Lydia was as likely to laugh and talk with the same wild volatility as she did before she went to Brighton.

“Lydia seldom listens to anyone more than half a minute; in fact, she rarely attends me at all. I am not inclined to waste my time on irremediable daughters. Besides, you told me all I need do is thank your Mr Darcy should he bring her home. I would settle for that if I were you.”

“I think Lydia should be allowed no liberty, no society, until we can be certain that she is reformed.”

“I do not need to hear your opinion,” he said sharply. “She is found, and no one is the wiser for what she has done. My further involvement is not necessary.” There was a note of finality in her father’s voice, but Elizabeth ignored it.

“You cannot assume that she will no longer be self-willed or careless! Lydia may—”

Jane laid a firm hand on her arm. “Perhaps she will not be as boisterous or unguarded after this distressing event, Lizzy. We should tell the others Darcy’s news.”

Elizabeth went with her, wounded to the core that her father would never exert himself for the sake of his daughters and was instead content to either laugh at them or ignore them.

Mary and Kitty were both with Mrs Bennet. After a slight preparation for good news, the letter was read aloud. Mrs Bennet was pleased to hear of her daughter’s impending return, but dissatisfied that Wickham could not be discovered.

“But why does he not search for Wickham?” Her mother was not ready to give up the right to be fidgety and nervous. “Darcy might yet fight Wickham and make him marry her. It would be delightful to have three daughters married before the summer is out.”

“Mamma!” Elizabeth cried. “We are fortunate Lydia’s reputation is undamaged. Now listen, all of you, we cannot mention this before anyone. Darcy and Bingley have suffered enough mortification in order to bring her home, and I will not have their efforts be in vain by gossiping.” Mary and Kitty mildly nodded; Mary never spoke to anyone unless she was quoting from her extracts, and Kitty had attention for only fashion and officers in red coats.

Elizabeth took refuge in her own room, where she might think with freedom. Her patience for social engagements, her father’s apathy, her neighbours’ gossip, her sisters’ insipidity, her mother’s nervousness, and Lydia’s spectacle had reached its end. Fitzwilliam had been right about her in Kent: Elizabeth never had a strong local attachment to Longbourn. She may not have seen much of the world, but she had always known that she lived in a small part of it.

Her allegiances felt closer to the Darcys than the Bennets, and her actions with Fitzwilliam in the cottage only added to that feeling. She smiled as she remembered the details of that morning—the warmth of his breath on her neck, her rush of

excitement when he entreated her to undress, the surprising comfort of his weight on top of her. Her marriage to Fitzwilliam, in her mind and in her heart, had already begun.

But if anyone learned what they had done, she could be nearly as embroiled in scandal as Lydia would be.

SATURDAY MORNING, ELIZABETH TOOK HER SOLITARY WALK toward Netherfield, although the clouds had yet to be burned off by the warmth of a July sun. Her purpose was to put herself in Fitzwilliam's way. The Netherfield party arrived late last night, and although he would waste no time in calling, Elizabeth little liked the thought of sitting at home and gazing longingly out the window. She laughed aloud at the memory of her desire to avoid encountering him in all her morning rambles in Rosings Park.

"Might I rouse you from your daydream to enquire what makes you laugh?"

Elizabeth gave a little start of surprise and looked down the lane to see her beloved standing not twenty yards away.

"My love for solitary walks has changed its purpose. I once sought the privacy for contemplation, but now my real purpose is to seek you out."

He drew closer and, after glancing up and down the tree-lined lane, took her hand and pulled her from the path. The sound of their boots crunching against sticks and leaves rang loud in her ears. Before she could ask him where he was leading her, Fitzwilliam stepped around a large oak tree, tugged her in front of him, and pressed his lips against hers in a searing kiss. Elizabeth pushed his hat from his head, wrapped her arms around his neck, and clung to him.

Elizabeth was struck by the desire she felt for him, and she did not protest when she finally felt his hands on her body. She pressed closer against him, her hips rushing forward as a low moan escaped her mouth.

The bark of the tree pressed into her back as Fitzwilliam pushed closer, and she revelled in the pleasure of his weight

against her. His teeth scraped her skin as he kissed along her jaw and neck, his hand clutching at the skirt of her gown near her hip. His voice was hoarse and near trembling with passion as he moaned her name.

Her breathless reply was lost, however, when a crack in the woods and a rustling of leaves startled them away from one another. Her lips felt swollen, and she had to lean against the oak because she doubted her legs could hold her. Her heart still pounded with desire, but they were only a few yards away from the lane, and one large tree was not enough to conceal them from sight. Fitzwilliam turned away and ran his hand through his hair.

Elizabeth felt for him as he tried to keep his emotions and desire under good regulation. She watched him wage his own private battle as he calmed, and she had to admit a thrill of excitement at knowing she was the one person who could overpower the reason of Fitzwilliam Darcy. His desire outpaced his control, but it would do him no good to believe that he alone was to blame. She bent to retrieve his hat and offered it to him, interrupting his silent self-condemnation.

“Forgive me, Elizabeth?” He shook his head, as if scarcely believing he had found himself in such a position. “Not a month ago, I would not kiss you on an open road, and now you would be entirely justified in saying I have behaved ungentlemanly.”

“There is nothing you could do to lose my esteem.” He took his hat and followed her back to the lane. “You know I love you,” she added, “and I have missed you dreadfully. You take too much upon yourself. What kind of helpmate would I be if I did not shoulder some of the blame for our shameless ways?” She grinned, and Fitzwilliam offered a wan smile. “We are not the first engaged persons to forget themselves. Perhaps that is why courting couples are kept to parlours under the watchful eye of chaperones. You and I have more successful conversations outside and in less conventional places.”

“Today I did not have the strength of mind to restrict our interactions to simply conversing. It would not do for such actions to gain public notice.”

“I think we are merely suffering from a natural progression of intimacy that has outstripped the length of our engagement.”

He took her hand. “You have made me very happy.”

She returned his ardent gaze with equal strength of feeling. “We shall have to part here,” she said, keeping a light tone, “unless you give me the pleasure of your company and walk me home.”

“That I will—with all my heart. I have some things to tell you.”

“I presume Bingley’s sisters will not call on Jane immediately? Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst would not wish to bestow too prompt a greeting on one so beneath them.”

He confirmed this accurate sketch of Bingley’s sisters and his friend’s docile nature. Whereas Fitzwilliam had walked out to see his intended at the earliest possible hour the morning after his arrival, Bingley deferred to his sisters and would wait until Monday for a formal call. Fitzwilliam then told her that they had found Lydia with Mrs Younge, and how they restored her to her uncle’s home. Since Wickham had unsurprisingly not returned, she would be brought to Longbourn with the Gardiners.

“I do not doubt that bribery and corruption were employed to gain Mrs Younge’s compliance.” Given the rigid set of his jaw, she knew the less said of the matter, the better. “I am impressed you could reason with Lydia. She becomes defiant with any attempt to check her behaviour.”

“Bingley was kinder and more patient than I could have been. He had to convince her that you and Jane would prefer to marry in the same ceremony later this summer, and as such, Lydia could be the first to marry.”

“Let us hope Lydia’s spirits will be tempered when she has to accept that Wickham had no intention of marrying her. I would love to share my wedding day with Jane, but part of me wonders whether, perhaps for both our sakes, we ought to end this prolonged engagement and marry sooner. I saw my father

looking over the settlement several days ago. Given what I know of his habits, maybe in several more days he will sign it.” Elizabeth could not keep the sting of contempt from her voice.

“We may as well have all of our unpleasant conversations regarding our relations now and be done with it. I had the displeasure of receiving a letter from Lady Catherine. I had not the opportunity to speak of it to you before.”

Seeking to save him the trouble of recounting what would likely cause pain to them both, she asked wryly, “We shall not be naming Pemberley’s heir after the Fitzwilliams?”

He barked a mirthless laugh. “No, that is not likely.”

“Have you heard from your other relations regarding our marriage?”

“Georgiana is delighted, as you know. Colonel Fitzwilliam, who I believe long suspected my regard for you, writes that he does not know to what trickery I resorted to induce you to accept me, but he wishes us joy.”

“Mrs Gardiner does the same, as she likely told you when you arrived with Lydia. I told her she must spend Christmas with us at Pemberley.”

“You will enjoy Pemberley,” he said as the house came into view. “The grounds are delightful. I think you will pleasure in exploring its windings.”

“I hope you will take prodigious care to show me every sheltered copse, shielded dale, and private path you own.” She winked and satisfied herself with the faint blush on his face as he understood her meaning. Not ready to join the others, they retired to the gravel walk, where the power of conversation and a few stolen kisses would make the present hour together a blessing.



“YOU KNOW WHAT I EXPECT FROM YOU BOTH TODAY.”

As Darcy entered the breakfast room Monday morning, he realised too late that he had interrupted a heated family discussion. Miss Bingley glowered at her brother, who looked at her sternly. Mrs Hurst was staring down at her bracelets, her cheeks pink. Miss Bingley had spent the two days since they arrived at Netherfield refusing to speak to Darcy any more than necessary. As resentful as she was over Darcy's engagement, her avoidance had been a refreshing change from her constant, simpering attentions.

"Caroline, now that Darcy has joined us, was there not something you desired to say to him?"

"What do you mean?" Miss Bingley took an unusual interest in her teacup. However, under the pressure of her brother's stare, she banged down her cup and looked at Darcy. With outward calm, he set aside his newspaper and braced himself for her insincerity.

"Mr Darcy, allow me to wish you joy," she said in a dull voice. He thanked her and returned to his paper.

"Darcy, Caroline and Louisa would like to call at Longbourn with us. They both know how important their call is for Jane. It will demonstrate their eagerness to improve their relationship with my future wife."

Darcy was pleased to see that, since Lydia's scandalous departure from Brighton was kept quiet, Bingley would see Jane treated properly by his sisters.

"Elizabeth says the Gardiners are arriving today with Lydia. I am sure Mrs Bennet would be pleased to have you join their family gathering." Mrs Hurst fiddled with her bangles and nodded while Miss Bingley's attempts to feign cheerfulness made her look sullen.

JANE'S RECEPTION OF BINGLEY'S SISTERS WAS MORE welcoming than they deserved. Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley noticed the others only by a curtsey. Under Bingley's persistent gaze, Miss Bingley exerted herself to speak to Jane.

The gathering had broken into smaller private conversations when Miss Bingley came to where Darcy sat with Elizabeth and Kitty. With an expression of civil disdain, Miss Bingley accosted his betrothed. “Miss Eliza, I understand you will not long bear the name of Bennet.” Darcy noted that, while Miss Bingley had recognised their upcoming nuptials, she had not congratulated her. “I fear your new elevated station may present a substantial challenge. Let me recommend to you, as a friend, that you conduct yourself with fewer of your typical country manners after you marry.”

Darcy was about to lecture her, but Elizabeth stopped him with a touch. “My dear Miss Bingley, since we are, as you say, friends, allow me to tell you how I dislike being called ‘Eliza.’ Only Mrs Collins addresses me as such, and I permit her out of deference to our long-standing acquaintance. I am sure you understand.” Elizabeth smiled, but Darcy saw it did not reach her eyes.

“Very well.” Miss Bingley looked annoyed that her barb had not had its desired effect.

“Although we ought not to concern ourselves with that, since soon you will address me as Mrs Darcy.”

Elizabeth stared hard into Miss Bingley’s face. Her utterance made Miss Bingley turn red and choke back a reply before returning to sit by Mrs Hurst. Elizabeth never let her countenance falter, but after Miss Bingley had turned away, Darcy felt some of the tension leave her. Through Bingley, he would ensure Miss Bingley paid off every arrear of civility to Elizabeth, or else she would lose the right to visit Pemberley.

“I, too, am eager to call you ‘Mrs Darcy,’” he told her. “Have I told you today how much I admire you?”

“I think not.” She pretended to consider the matter. “You have been remiss in showering me with affection today, and were we in a more private setting, I would demand recompense.” She smiled playfully as she stroked the back of his hand with her finger.

A servant entered to tell Mrs Bennet her brother’s carriage was arriving. For such a large gathering, the room became

eerily quiet. Darcy was grateful that Lydia's sad business had been so well hushed up, and he hoped never to speak of it again. Bingley nervously laughed to himself and was then silent while Jane sat still as she looked to the door. Even Mrs Bennet's fluttering seemed restrained as the nerve-racking moment approached. Darcy noticed that Mr Bennet had left the library to join his family.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner were shown in with their children bursting with energy after being confined for so long to the carriage. For several moments, the party focused on the good humour and cheerfulness that only small children might provide. After the children were taken to the nursery, their collective eyes turned toward Lydia, who had hung back near the door.

Someone from her family needed to welcome Lydia home. Mr Bennet adhered most conscientiously to his newspaper, and Mrs Bennet chatted nervously with her sister, both parents choosing to ignore the problem instead of addressing it. It was Jane who rose to welcome her youngest sister home after her nearly two-month absence. She demonstrated a sweetness and concern that, in Darcy's mind, was truly angelic.

"Lydia, how glad I am to see you!" She took her sister's hands in her own. "You must be famished from your carriage ride." She showed Lydia the table of cold meats, fruit, and cakes.

Lydia, normally unguarded and spirited, refused a plate with a shake of her head. Darcy considered it a welcome surprise to see her altered and thought perhaps her near ruin had tempered her wilful nature. He was about to lean toward Elizabeth to ask her opinion when he noticed the apprehension on Mrs Gardiner's face. On every occasion he had previously encountered Mrs Gardiner, she appeared congenial and open, but Darcy discerned the lady was quite ill at ease.

"Do you notice how carefully my aunt observes Lydia?" Elizabeth discreetly asked him after Kitty had moved away to join her younger sister.

“Perhaps she is as surprised as I am to find her so subdued.”

“She is altered, but I do not think it is because she has learned to be ashamed of herself. I do not think Lydia is well.”

Darcy could not speak openly in the crowded room, but he observed Lydia’s actions more closely. Kitty showed her a bonnet she had recently trimmed up, but Lydia only looked on under half-lidded eyes. Her complexion was pallid, and she appeared fatigued, an odd state for a young lady who had spent the morning in a comfortable carriage.

Mrs Bennet, finally ready to engage her wayward daughter in conversation, crossed the room to sit by Lydia. She embraced her and welcomed her with enthusiasm. Lydia smiled but now appeared nearly incapable of remaining upright in her chair.

“My dear Lydia!” Mrs Bennet cried. “It is delightful to have you home. Had I been able to carry my point in going to Brighton with all my family...well, enough on that. I have not seen you for two months! You must tell me of the shopping and sightseeing you had in Brighton.”

“Lord, how tired I am!” Lydia gave a violent yawn.

“You must be hungry, my dear. Here, let Hill fix you a plate, and you will soon be in good humour.”

Lydia shook her head and paled. It shocked Darcy when she jumped from her chair and ran from the room. Mrs Gardiner, her face pinched with worry, rose and followed her while Mrs Bennet shrilly asked what the matter was.

“Allow me to tend to Lydia. You do not want to leave your guests.” Mrs Gardiner was firm as she attempted to move past her.

“But whatever is the matter with the girl?” she asked.

“She is merely indisposed, I am sure.” Mrs Gardiner gave a look toward the Netherfield ladies, whose attention was captured by these strange goings-on. “Why do you not invite the young people to walk out? It is a lovely day.” She then left the room. Mrs Bennet would not be dissuaded from knowing

all and followed close on her heels. The door was wide open, and the assembled party could hear Lydia grumbling in discomfort just outside.

“Lydia!” Her mother’s voice carried. “Why did you run from the room? It is unladylike.”

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, who met his eye and, he was certain, agreed with him on the irony. Jane leant toward Miss Bingley and, in a louder voice than before, attempted to draw her into conversation. The voices in the hall, however, carried into the room.

“She is tolerably well.” Mrs Gardiner’s muted tone did not disguise her waning patience. “You ought to see to your guests. We can discuss this later.”

“You will not discourage me from tending to my own child. Lydia, are you unwell? I must send for Mr Jones. Hill! Where are my smelling salts?”

“That is not necessary! She does not need an apothecary.”

“Do you know what is the matter with her? Should I send for a physician from town? Lydia? What ails you? Hill? Hill! I need you!”

“Now is not the time. Please, think of your company.”

“If something is the matter, her mother ought to know it at once. Lydia! Are you ill, my dear? I insist you answer me!”

“Lord! Stop shouting!” Lydia’s sullen voice entered the verbal melee. “My aunt Gardiner told me what ails me. I am not ill—I am with child!”

Chapter Nineteen

The whole house was thrown into confusion. The situation in the Longbourn family could not long be a secret. Even without considering the servants' gossiping, it was too much to be hoped for that Lydia's condition be kept quiet as Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst had heard it all. Upon hearing Lydia's announcement, the Netherfield ladies demanded their brother escort them from such a shameful scene.

After Bingley departed with his sisters with little more than a rueful parting smile to his betrothed, Jane left to tend to her mother, whose wails of malcontent were louder than Lydia's complaints of nausea. Mr Bennet, showing more interest than ever before in what was going forward in his family, said he would be for London to call out Wickham. Mr Gardiner directed him to the library to pour him a brandy while they considered more realistic options.

"This is an unfortunate affair and will probably be much talked of," Mary said from her corner of the room. "The loss of female virtue is irretrievable. One false step involves endless ruin." When she received no response, save for Elizabeth's incredulous stare, she scurried away. Kitty was crying from the chaotic stress that surrounded her and left for her own apartment. In a matter of minutes, Elizabeth and Darcy were alone.

"I am sick of this folly, Fitzwilliam. This is in every way horrible!"

Darcy embraced her and shook his head in silent acquiescence. Like her, he was too shocked that their efforts

had been in vain. His last and best source of information on Wickham's whereabouts had already been exploited. Darcy doubted Wickham would be foolish enough to return to Edward Street. He was certain, however, that if he found Wickham, it would cost a small fortune to induce him to marry Lydia.

"Please, just hold me."

Darcy looked at her in confusion, for he thought that was what he was doing. She must have felt his questioning gaze because she continued, "You are forming a plan to restore Lydia's honour. I can feel you turning ideas over in your mind."

He watched her face for signs of her misery, but before he could ask what she needed, she brushed her lips against his in a longing kiss that made Darcy hold her closer. She seemed to seek whatever consolation he could give in a situation of despair and unease.

He pulled his lips away and rested his forehead against hers. "I would like to continue, but after Lydia's shocking revelation, your family would be distressed to find you in a situation where anyone might question your virtue. But," he whispered, "as I told you that spring day, you always tempt me."

"And shall I tempt you even in the winter of our days?"

"In every season, Elizabeth. Surely you know that I admire your roots even more than your blossoms."

She kissed him once quickly. "I am a selfish creature, it seems. I ought to think of Lydia—of our reputations—but I was thinking of bringing myself comfort."

"I am more than happy to oblige." Darcy tucked a stray curl of hair away from her cheek and gave her one more lingering kiss.

"Neither rational happiness nor worldly prosperity can be justly expected for Lydia now." She sighed and still held him close as she rested her head against his chest.

“I shall not torment you with vain wishes. I am at a loss where to begin the search for Wickham.”

“How could such a man be worked on even if you discovered him?”

“With money, Elizabeth,” Darcy said abruptly. “It is the only thing Wickham is interested in and the only thing he would never neglect.”

“Everyone in Meryton will know Lydia’s condition by tomorrow. It does not matter whether they know Wickham to be the father or that he is a man who leaves debts wherever he goes. All the blame will fall on her.”

“It is unjust to you and your other sisters, but Lydia’s disgrace will mean more dreadful news for your family. The gossiping minds will jump from assuming Lydia has come upon the town to wondering whether her sisters are just as immoral.”

He saw a cloud cross her eyes, but as fast as it appeared, it was gone. “Elizabeth, I do not think you wicked,” he offered quietly, fearful of being overheard. “It would be hypocritical of me. The world might shun you the same as it will poor Lydia if they knew that neither of you were maidens, but then where might that leave me? If I thought you to be as foolish as Lydia, then am I no better than Wickham?”

Elizabeth linked her fingers through his and brought his hand to her lips. “I do not believe that you and I were brought together only because our passions were stronger than our virtue. I know enough of your character to know that you wish to find Wickham and make him marry Lydia, but I am tempted to let it go.”

“What do you mean?”

“The first desire of my heart is not to see my sister’s reputation preserved but to be gone from Longbourn. Does that make me a heartless person?”

“No, you could never be unfeeling,” he said earnestly. “You are simply being honest—and with the one person who would wish for nothing but the truth from you.”

“Then I feel perfectly justified in admitting that I want to be Mrs Darcy rather than Miss Bennet, and I want to be rid of every obstacle that stands in the way of that. Other than Jane, there is nothing here for me. I wish to begin our life together.” She rested her head again on his shoulder.

“Someone must defend Lydia, both for her sake and for the child she carries. I cannot believe you truly would have me do nothing,” he said as he stroked her hair. “You could hardly respect me if I did.”

“The selfish, foolish girl has no idea who will be hurt by what she has done! She did not even have the sense not to announce her condition where everyone would hear her.” Some of Elizabeth’s tension seemed to leave her after this exclamation. “I know you would help rather than marry me and abandon Lydia and the rest of my family to their ruin. But do not expect me to be happy about it in this moment. I am too furious with Lydia.”

“We shall marry soon enough with Bingley and Jane. In the meantime, he and I must leave as soon as possible to find Wickham. Even as angry as he is now, your father will take no action, and your uncle does not have the funds to buy Wickham’s compliance. You are my family now, and preserving Lydia’s honour protects us as much as it does her.”

“I know. You are the very best of men.”

“I ought to join the others.” He sighed; he would rather remain in Elizabeth’s arms.

“You mean to return to Netherfield?”

“No, I meant your father and uncle in the library. Will you ask Lydia whether she has any knowledge of where Wickham might be?” She nodded, and Darcy carefully wiped away her remaining tears. “I will write to Colonel Fitzwilliam. He might remember something of Wickham’s acquaintances or habits that I do not. We can depend on his discretion. After I speak with your father and your uncle, I will speak with Bingley. He was helpful when we found Lydia, and after he has placated his sisters, I expect he will return to London with me.”

With a parting kiss, he walked toward the library, hoping that he could behave civilly toward Mr Bennet and that Mr Gardiner might be amenable to the plan he was forming for Lydia.

BEFORE SHE ENTERED THE ROOM, ELIZABETH HEARD SOMEONE being sick. Lydia sat on the floor with her back against the bed and a chamber pot on her lap.

“I feel wretched! If only I waited for my dear Wickham in London. That carriage ride was hideous.”

“Your dear Wickham!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “Surely he is still not ‘your dear Wickham’?”

“Of course he is.” Lydia sounded incredulous. “You cannot be jealous. I know he was once a favourite of yours, but I do not hold it against either of you.”

Elizabeth had never before felt so astonished. Her life with Fitzwilliam could not move forward until they dealt with Lydia, and she lost her patience. “You are with child! You are unmarried, and your seducer has abandoned you. Do you have no shame?”

“Oh, Lizzy, you sound like Aunt Gardiner, preaching and talking away just as if you were reading a sermon.” Her sister was as insensible as ever. Fitzwilliam had chosen not to burden Lydia with the proof of Wickham’s treachery, but Elizabeth was tempted.

“Mr Wickham’s flight from Brighton was necessary by the distress of his circumstances. He is a gamester and could not resist the opportunity of having a companion. He will not marry you.”

“Of course he will. So long as we are married before the baby arrives, it will all end well enough. He was so affectionate the month we spent together in Brighton. He called every day, and we spent many hours alone in each other’s company from the day I arrived. And do not speak of hiding me away, either, to await the child. I am fond of society and do not—” Lydia bent her head over the chamber pot again.

Elizabeth left the room and ran to her own to retrieve Wickham's letter that Darcy had left with her. When she returned, the entire room was in disarray, as Lydia had seen fit to rummage through her belongings, searching for some ribbon she favoured. Fitzwilliam might not approve of sharing Wickham's letter, but she could think of nothing else to withdraw Lydia's loyalty from the man who ruined her.

"Read this. Wickham wrote it to Darcy a week before you left Brighton."

"I feel so ill. I have no sense for reading now."

Lydia had little sense for reading at any time; nevertheless, Elizabeth read it aloud. After the mortification Fitzwilliam and her family had suffered, she could offer her youngest sister no sympathy. Lydia fluttered around the untidy room, but soon Lydia paid attention, sitting quietly as Elizabeth neared the end and read slowly and clearly.

"...I have no intention of marrying the foolish girl, but she would think it a great adventure to go to town and then to Scotland to marry..."

"Give me the letter!" Lydia shrieked as she pulled it from Elizabeth's hands to read for herself.

"You know his hand, I daresay—a charming one it is."

Lydia's already sallow complexion turned to a death-like paleness as she read, and she dropped the letter before throwing herself onto the bed in grief-stricken tears. Elizabeth suddenly regretted how heartlessly she had acted, no matter how just her motives were. She drew near without saying a word and, seating herself on the bed, took Lydia's hand and stroked her hair. She knew that such grief, shocking as it was to witness, must take its course.

"Lizzy, does everyone know?" Lydia asked after a time, her cheeks still covered in rivers of tears.

"Only Darcy and I know of Mr Wickham's attempted bribery, and most were unaware that you left Brighton together. But we all know the unhappy truth that you are with child and not likely to be married."

“I cannot suppose George capable of this. Once he knows about the child, he will return to marry me, won’t he?” Lydia looked so earnest in her hope that Elizabeth almost wished she could give a falsehood.

“He is a cruel man. If he does, it will be because Darcy has repaid his debts and settled enough money on you.”

“Oh! I am miserable,” Lydia said in between sobs. “I felt myself to be engaged to him! The day I arrived in Brighton, he called on me, and not a day went by that he did not court my attentions. He is so handsome and charming, and all the ladies in Brighton fancied him, but he showed *me* particular interest. I love him. How could I not believe he felt the same for me? I know he did—he must have! I must have been dear to him in some way.”

“Do not torment yourself. We all know you expected to be married.”

“What is to become of me? I do not wish to be sent away!” Lydia became more frantic. Elizabeth advised her to lie down, and for a moment, she did so. But in restless pain of mind and body, she grew more desperate to know what was to become of her.

“Where shall I go? I want to stay at Longbourn!”

“If Mr Wickham does not marry you, you will likely be sent away until your child is born. All of our reputations are at risk.”

“I cannot tend to a child if I am not married. Wickham must marry me! Darcy will make him, won’t he?”

“Darcy must first find him. Do you have any idea where Mr Wickham might have gone? To whom he would turn?”

Lydia could think of no one. She was too restless for employment, too anxious for conversation, and walked from one window to the other or sat down by the fireplace in melancholic meditation. Elizabeth truly pitied her sister. She picked up Wickham’s letter from the bed so poor Lydia would not have to reread the proof of his villainy. She was about to

find Jane to sit with Lydia when she called out for Elizabeth to wait.

“Lizzy? Last autumn, did Wickham speak the truth about Darcy cheating him?”

“No, he did not. I was too ready to believe the worst of Darcy and took Mr Wickham at his word. Darcy is a gentleman who values his privacy, and he saw no reason to lay bare his dealings with Mr Wickham. After you eloped, Darcy believed it was owing to him, to his reserve and want of proper consideration, that Mr Wickham’s true nature was not known to us. That, and his love for me, I suppose, is the reason he takes all this on himself.” That he still loved her after all the trials she and then her family had made him endure spoke to a generosity that she would not have credited to him three months ago.

“Someone must care for us, and it might as well be your Darcy. I cannot imagine Papa finding Wickham to make him marry me. But Darcy is so very reserved. There is no attraction in formality. I am surprised that you could love a reserved person. I hope you will be happy with such a husband.”

Elizabeth stared at her sister for a moment in indignant silence. “I shall enjoy the absolute confidence of having an honourable husband who both respects and loves me.”

Elizabeth’s sympathy for Lydia could not yet tolerate her unfounded criticism of her future husband, her sister’s sole advocate. She decided it was best to leave Lydia to the considerate affections of one of her other sisters, and she went to tell the gentlemen that Lydia did not know of Wickham’s whereabouts.

“BENNET, DO YOU MEAN TO TELL ME YOU WILL TAKE NO action?” Mr Gardiner was nearly yelling as Darcy entered the library. Upon recognising the hopelessness of Lydia’s situation, Mr Bennet had apparently returned to all his former indolence. “You have always been detached from your girls. Why do you avoid dealing with Lydia when she and your family need you the most?”

He shrugged his shoulders. "Jane never needed any correcting, and Elizabeth was clever enough that I could affect change by watchfulness and a little admonition. But the younger ones were neither agreeable nor intelligent, and severity was never effective with them. It has been more agreeable to my feelings to let my daughters have their own way and leave me to what peace and tranquillity I could find in my library." Mr Bennet gave Darcy a bleak look before adding, "And with whatever conversation Lizzy could provide."

Mr Gardiner shook his head sadly. "You have to act, Bennet. This is not a problem that can be ignored."

"I hardly think that Lydia is worth much exertion, but if you can think of some solution, by all means proceed."

"Your dislike of exertion is why we are in this situation!"

Mr Bennet's eyes flashed. "Be careful, Gardiner. This is my house, and I shall act in the manner I see fit."

"Darcy, can you believe this? He thinks if he keeps to his books then he need not face the very real dangers of Lydia's exposure!" Mr Gardiner winced as though he made a mistake. "Forgive me, Mr Darcy," he corrected himself, "my emotions have got the better of me."

"Please call me Darcy." Mr Gardiner invited him to call him by his last name as well, then they both turned to look at Mr Bennet.

"Well, Mr Darcy," he said, scowling, "I am surprised you did not run off to Netherfield with your friend Bingley in the face of our little scandal."

"Despite your hints to suggest otherwise, Elizabeth will soon be my wife, and my place is here." Darcy attempted to hide his waning patience. "Lydia's actions are certain to bring shame and dishonour to our families, such that no respectable man would marry your other daughters."

"As Lizzy and Jane are already promised, and Lydia is now unmarriageable, I shall content myself with having

secured the futures of two out of five and leave Mary and Kitty to shift for themselves.”

“Do not sport with Darcy,” Gardiner said with an exasperated sigh. “You know he is right. Who will connect themselves with such a family? I have four children to think of as well.”

“Very well. I shall throw off my unworthy child forever. Would that end all our sorrow and disgrace, and will you leave me in peace?”

“This squabbling does nothing to resolve the issue,” Darcy interjected. “Our best solution for restoring Lydia’s respectability is to see her married to Mr Wickham. I regret that we must prevail on the most unworthy man in Great Britain to be her husband, but I see no other option. Until then, Lydia ought to be removed from the neighbourhood.”

“Where do you suggest I send my daughter? I do not think Mr Collins will accept her.”

Darcy was pleased to finally speak of actions instead of senseless arguing. “In two days, Elizabeth and the Gardiners are travelling to Derbyshire, and Lydia should join them. She will be away from your neighbours’ prying eyes for a month while I attempt to locate Mr Wickham. I hope that Lydia can keep her condition to herself while she travels, and the rumours will not spread beyond this neighbourhood.”

“I agree she ought to be removed, and we shall take her with us, but what will we do if you cannot find Mr Wickham when our tour ends? And let us not forget that we are not dealing with a gentleman. Should you find him, how will you prevail upon him?” Gardiner was clearly disheartened.

“Mr Wickham is a gamester whose dissolute ways have left his finances in a wretched state. I will offer to settle his debts and provide him with the means by which he can support Lydia. Perhaps a commission might be purchased for him.”

“How fortunate Lizzy has captured your attention, Mr Darcy. I ought to congratulate her on a very important conquest,” Mr Bennet muttered sarcastically. Darcy’s resolve

to treat Elizabeth's father in a gentleman-like manner was quickly unravelling.

Gardiner must have sensed his growing fury and stepped in. "You are generous, Darcy, and your commitment to your new family is to be commended. However, we must still address the real possibility of Mr Wickham not being discovered. What will be done with Lydia if you do not find him before the child arrives?"

Darcy suspected this sad likelihood. "It would be ruinous for everyone if she stayed with any of us. I own an estate from my mother's family in Ireland that I let, but I keep use of the lodge for hunting parties. After we find Lydia a suitable companion, she may stay there for the duration of her confinement."

"What is to be done with my daughter after that?" Mr Bennet spat contemptuously.

"I leave that for you to determine. I do not know if I could cast off my child, no matter how far she had fallen. But your whole family will be spurned if she returns, and her child with her. Instead, Lydia ought to be maintained away from the rest of her family. An unwed mother is liable to turn to prostitution or infanticide, and Elizabeth's sister deserves better than that."

"You are more generous than Lydia deserves."

He hoped Lydia would never hear her father say such a thing about her. "Let us not forget that Mr Wickham is equally culpable, and if he does not marry her, he ought to at least be pressed to provide for his child. It would be detrimental to all our families if Lydia returns here with a natural child. It does not follow, however, that we should allow her and her child to suffer."

"Mr Darcy, my youngest daughter is little more than an ungovernable child. I shall not be further inconvenienced."

"If you will not maintain her, then I will, and gladly!"

Mr Bennet threw his spectacles on the table and stood. "So I must pay for her myself or be in debt to you for her maintenance? I see what you are attempting to do. You wish

for me to agree with your scheme to maintain her abroad to keep me in your debt. Who do you think you are to come in here and manipulate me?”

“Would you prefer to abandon Lydia at a lying-in hospital in town where she would likely die? Or have her live off the charity of some public institution that would teach her needlework so she could find employment in service?” Darcy suggested with equal ferocity. “Where she could be abused by a master who would think he can take liberties with his servants? You would prefer to have your grandchild left at a foundling hospital to an anonymous and uncertain future?”

Mr Bennet gave no answer, but his eyes glowed with irritation.

“If you have a solution that would minimise your family’s disgrace and offer Lydia a secure future, I would be pleased to hear you out,” Darcy said in a clipped voice. Mr Bennet heaved a sigh but said nothing, and so, after a pause to collect his composure, Darcy continued. “Rumours and vile stories will now follow her wherever she goes. She will be an outcast if she remains here, as will her sisters, and she will suffer far worse if we do not provide for her and her child. Lydia ought to stay in Ireland, and I will support her.”

Mr Bennet looked away. “You and my brother may resolve the matter however you please, for I have nothing to contribute to Lydia’s well-being.”

There was a knock on the door, and Elizabeth entered. She was outwardly calm, but Darcy could see that her normally lively spirits were oppressed to the utmost. Elizabeth looked at her father, whose uncharacteristic agitation was apparent, and asked him what the matter was.

“Your young man has formed a plan in the expected event that Mr Wickham cannot be bribed into marrying Lydia. Mr Darcy intends to hide Lydia away on his Ireland estate to await the arrival of the little love-child. Lydia will never come home because her presence will be ruinous to us all. He has generously offered to pay for it all himself.” Mr Bennet returned to his chair, putting on his spectacles.

Elizabeth thought for a moment and then gave Darcy a pleading look. “Her greatest fear is to be sent away from those who love her.”

“If Lydia stays, she would be forced to live in shame and obscurity, and you and all your sisters will share in her disgrace.”

“Can you not suppose that Lydia’s disposition will be altered after all of this? That she might share our values and meet all our expectations?”

Gardiner attempted to placate her while Mr Bennet ignored them all. “I think what Darcy is suggesting is that it is too late for Lydia, no matter how penitent she might be. Maintaining her and the child in Ireland might be the best option.”

“How will she be convinced to agree?”

Darcy took her hand, not caring who saw his affectionate gesture. “The sad truth is that, if I cannot find Mr Wickham soon, Lydia has few options. We need to consider her and her child’s future and your family’s reputation.”

Elizabeth looked at their joined hands in an attitude of deep meditation and seemed not to hear.

“You look grave, Elizabeth. You disapprove of my plan?” he asked quietly in the hope that the others might not hear. “I believe this is the best way to keep your family from disgrace. Your father is reluctant, but I am prepared to pay for Lydia’s upkeep abroad. Your sister and her child must be taken care of.”

“No, Fitzwilliam, I am ashamed to admit I was thinking of something else entirely,” she whispered with a small smile. “Poor Lydia can never return home unless Mr Wickham marries her, and even then it might be wise if she did not. I was thinking of a time not so long ago when you were very much concerned with rank and order.”

He thought back to his first proposal, to the man he had been. “Elizabeth, you taught me a significant lesson in Kent. The value of one’s character means more to me than wealth or

status, and your relations are as much my family as they are yours.”

Elizabeth smiled and leant toward him, and he thought she might have kissed him before she stopped and blushed. Gardiner cleared his throat and mentioned something or other about checking on his children. Darcy spoke of returning to Netherfield to speak with Bingley and write to his cousin, and with a bow, he took his leave.

NOT WISHING TO BE ALONE WITH HER FATHER, ELIZABETH quickly walked toward the library door when Mr Bennet asked her to remain.

“Your betrothed still seems inclined to marry you. I suppose you will do that when Jane and Bingley marry? That is all the better since Mr Darcy seems determined to settle the matter with Lydia before he begins his life with you.”

“He will take care of Lydia if you will not.”

“Well, that is for the best,” he said through a sigh. “Lydia’s behaviour has proceeded from a faulty degree of indulgence on my part. I ought to have been the one to ensure she knew better than to conduct herself in such a way.”

Elizabeth felt shocked to hear her father admit it. If he saw Lydia’s situation so clearly, did he understand her as well? “Do you still think me a fortune hunter marrying for social position?”

He remained silent for a few moments, but when he spoke it was with none of the bitterness Elizabeth had previously heard from him. “No, you and Mr Darcy know that wealth and grandeur have little to do with happiness. It has been my opinion, as of late, that you and he are well suited.”

Elizabeth looked up sharply at this admission. He looked so much in earnest that she bit back her distrusting retort.

“Mr Darcy has knowledge of the world and strong feelings of family attachment and honour,” he continued. “He seems steady, observant, moderate, and candid—almost to a fault. He

is not like the wild men nowadays who think of nothing but themselves. Your cleverness and playfulness will be a credit to him.”

“If these are your true feelings, why have you allowed me to believe that you doubt our attachment?”

He gave her a sad look. “After closely observing you and Mr Darcy, two things became evident. The first is that your solemn young man would follow you to the ends of the earth, and you are so fond of him that you chose not to abuse the great power you hold over him.”

“And the second?”

“The second is that you will be happy with a man who is nothing at all like me.” Her father, sitting in his favourite worn chair with his spectacles perched on his nose, suddenly appeared to be a lonely old man. “No father, no matter how indolent, relishes the thought of marrying off a beloved daughter. I have always thought of you and me as kindred spirits, and did not wish you to leave home.” The silence stretched out before he spoke again. “The pain is all the greater when I am forced to acknowledge that you have chosen a better man than I ever was, or even aspired to be.”

She could not disagree, but after the manner in which she informed Lydia of Wickham’s duplicity, she did not have the heart to further strain her relationship with her father. “Let us not dwell on such things, for we have greater concerns now.”

She placed a soft kiss on her father’s head, and with a careless swat of his hand, he shoed her away with a quiet “Off you go.”

Chapter Twenty

Netherfield Park

Tuesday, July 14

Dear Cousin,

I wish my occasion for writing was to reply to your well wishes on my engagement. Regretfully, I have had the misfortune of again encountering the vengeful Mr Wickham. He seduced, then abandoned, Elizabeth's youngest sister and left her with child. I feel it my duty to discover Mr Wickham and do what is necessary to promote their marriage or, barring that, see him acknowledge and provide for his child. In my attempt to discover Lydia, who fled with Mr Wickham nearly a fortnight ago, I have already taken advantage of Mrs Younge's knowledge.

I ask for your assistance in any form it may take, but particularly whether you can recall anything of Mr Wickham's previous whereabouts or acquaintances that might lead me to him. You may write to me in town, for this task will soon remove me from Elizabeth and Hertfordshire.

I remain, dear sir, your cousin and friend,

Darcy

It was a disheartening thought to leave Elizabeth again, but the longer Darcy stayed in Hertfordshire, the less likely it was he would discover the scoundrel.

He had not seen Bingley or spoken to his sisters since they decamped after Lydia's announcement. Bingley had shut

himself in his own apartments. He had gone riding in the morning and then returned to his rooms with instructions not to be disturbed. Darcy had studiously avoided Miss Bingley. He had no desire to hear her opinions on the scandal, but was not surprised when he heard from the servants that the women wanted to close up the house and leave Hertfordshire as soon as possible.

Darcy expected Bingley to visit Longbourn with him today, but when he knocked on Bingley's chamber door for a third time, Bingley's valet told him that his master would see no one. Darcy found this inexcusable; fretting would not lessen the threat to the Bennet family's respectability.

When he arrived alone at Longbourn, he saw the Gardiner children in the garden with their nurse and thought it was rather hot for them to be out of doors. They saw him approach, and the elder girls scampered to his horse, looking bright and lively as they shouted their welcome. He could not help but smile at such open-hearted girls and greeted them with equal warmth.

"Miss Gardiner, Miss Isabella, I hope I find you well?"

"Mr Darcy, you can call me Bella and you can call her Fanny," the younger girl cried. "Lizzy says she will marry you, and since you are family, you can be more familiar!" She proclaimed this as if nothing in the world would bring her greater joy.

"You are most kind, I thank you. Why are you ladies out of doors on such a hot day?"

"Mamma says we are noisy and not under as much order as we ought to be. When we are well-behaved, we can return." With this, she ran back to play.

"Mr Darcy," the older girl said, "what does 'jilt' mean?"

Darcy started. "Fanny, where did you hear that word?"

"Aunt Bennet has been saying it all morning. Would you tell me what it means?"

Mrs Bennet either felt that Wickham had jilted Lydia or that he and Bingley might do the same to their respective

intendeds. If it were the former, it would not be accurate, since Wickham had no formal understanding with Lydia. If it were the latter, he was saddened that Mrs Bennet, or anyone, would assume that he and Bingley could so easily break their engagements.

“I am sure that is a word with which you need not concern yourself.” She gave him a dissatisfied frown. “To jilt means to capriciously end one’s relationship with a lover. To break the promise to marry someone without reason,” he simplified.

She seemed satisfied with this answer, and after offering a ladylike curtsy, she ran back to her sister and brothers. Shaking his head at the trouble Mrs Bennet’s nervous fluttering had caused, he entered the house.

He was startled at the bustle of activity. Mrs Gardiner hurried past him and ran up the stairs with only a nod of greeting, and Mrs Bennet’s wails of malcontent were audible from two floors above him. He heard someone sobbing in the parlour and Elizabeth’s consoling voice in reply. Darcy presumed it was Lydia, and after debating the strength of his desire to see Elizabeth against the impropriety of coming upon Lydia while she was in tears, he entered the room.

Elizabeth was on the sofa, her arms around the shaking shoulders of one of her sisters. It was not Lydia she comforted, but Jane. She hung on Elizabeth while sobs of grief wracked her body, her pale face and red-rimmed eyes making her normally lovely features look heart-wrenchingly depressed. Jane did not look up when he opened the door, but Elizabeth did, and he could see that her eyes were also filled with tears.

“Good God! What is the matter?” Darcy cried with more feeling than politeness. “What has happened to Jane?”

“You mean you do not know?” Elizabeth’s voice cracked with emotion.

He mutely shook his head in commiseration. Darcy waited in wretched suspense to learn what horrible event had come to pass.

“Bingley has withdrawn his offer of marriage,” Elizabeth exclaimed, and Jane—sweet, mild, serene Jane—wept anew.

Darcy’s sensations on this discovery made him perfectly speechless. His blood ran cold, and he thought he might actually be ill. He fell into a chair across from them, unable to understand how such a thing had come about. Bingley had jilted Jane? A breach of promise by a gentleman after securing a lady’s affections was wholly unacceptable.

“Are you certain, absolutely certain, that Bingley reneged on his engagement?” There must be some sort of terrible mistake—a disagreement that had been misinterpreted. It had happened often enough between Elizabeth and him.

“Yes, he was perfectly clear. He spoke of our lamentable connexions to a woman of doubtful character—that he had not known of Lydia’s bad behaviour when he made his offer. He said Jane’s dignity had been misrepresented!” Elizabeth’s eyes blazed with righteous anger at Jane’s misery.

As he watched Elizabeth rock and soothe her sister, Darcy realised this was a situation he could not fix. There was nothing he could do, and his authoritative and determined manner could not be a credit to him now. He could not ease Jane’s suffering with money, influence, persuasion, or decisive action. Darcy could only witness her torrent of unrestrained grief in silence.

“You must speak with him, Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth pleaded. “He respects your opinion. Tell him he need not do this!” She looked beseechingly at him over Jane’s head. What could he possibly say to persuade a man who had broken his engagement? It was a worse evil that Bingley was of too yielding a character, and Darcy doubted his own influence could ever change that.

“I cannot,” he whispered, sadly shaking his head in defeat.

“How can you say that? Bingley is easily led by you. It would be the work of an instant to suggest that he return to Jane.”

“Have I not already done so once? I have interfered far too much.”

“You would say nothing and let Bingley break Jane’s heart? How can you be so uncaring?” she cried as she looked down at Jane’s shaking shoulders.

Were he not aware of Elizabeth’s charged feelings, he might have left the room after being unjustly accused. His heart broke for Jane, whose quiet civility, kindness beyond words, and sweetness of temper made Darcy feel she deserved ever so much more than Bingley’s fickle affection.

“I am not devoid of every proper feeling, Elizabeth. Bingley has done a despicable thing, but I cannot and will not dissuade him.”

“That is amusing coming from you!” she spat.

“You despised my interference last autumn! Or might I only manipulate my friends when it suits your purpose?”

“Your bickering is senseless,” a weepy voice interrupted them, and their gazes turned back to Jane. Darcy exhaled sharply and raked his hand through his hair as he rose and stepped away. Until now, his life had been well-ordered, predictable, and steady, and never had he been forced to contend with such powerful emotions amid such vexing circumstances. Under greater control, he turned back to where Elizabeth was sitting and found her looking contrite and weary.

Jane wiped her teary eyes with her hands. “Darcy is not responsible for Bingley, Lizzy. Let this not come between you. Bingley—Mr Bingley had valid concerns about the reputation of his family should he marry into ours. Everything must sink under such a proof of family weakness as Lydia’s situation.”

“Jane, no. Mr Bingley did not act honourably in leaving you. It is shameful.” Elizabeth pushed Jane’s hair from her face.

“He spoke at length of his doubts, of his fears about our reputations, of his ever being considered a gentleman, of Caroline ever marrying—that he was from a respectable

family and had to think of his future. I had to, Lizzy. I had to release him.”

“Oh, tell me you did not!”

“His countenance appeared so relieved when I offered to let him go.” Jane’s voice was lost in sobs.

Darcy went to Jane, and when she saw him approach, she attempted to rein in her tears. He lifted her hands gently, and his voice broke when he attempted to speak, the sight of such a kind soul in agony almost too much for his sensibilities to handle. “I wish I could say anything to comfort you, but it is wholly out of my power. I am, dear sister, your most obedient and humble servant. I shall add only that he does not deserve you, Jane.”

Darcy squeezed her hands and let go. Giving Elizabeth a meaningful look, one that he hoped conveyed his desire to speak with her privately, he quit the room. He entered the vestibule, ready to enquire after Gardiner, but found Lydia instead, seated on a stool in a window recess. He might have passed her by had she not called to him.

“Is it true? Has Bingley jilted Jane?” she asked, with less of her regular composure.

“Yes.” How could his friend act so dishonourably?

“Whatever Bingley may have heard against me, it is inexcusable that he should abandon Jane.”

“While much of the blame falls on Mr Wickham, you might have considered all the possible ramifications of your elopement before you disregarded our social mores and gave yourself over to him.” He regretted his rudeness, but Lydia did not appear offended, merely resigned.

“And what about you, Darcy? Are you not fearful of the scandal intruding on your family honour?”

“Of course I am, but I would never give up Elizabeth.” It occurred to him that perhaps no one had ever advocated for Lydia. “I have a sister your age, and I will care for you just as I would for her. I shall do all I can to see that Mr Wickham marries you.”

“And keep me out of sight, should he not. I will only marry Wickham, you know. You will not pass me off on some tenant farmer. Oh, not because I love Wickham, but he ought to do right by me, and I would have such fun provoking him. But I would much rather stay at home. I would do nothing like this again. Please, Darcy, I do not wish to be sent away to Ireland. Papa and Uncle Gardiner will do whatever you suggest.”

“Your well-known”—Darcy struggled to find the suitable words—“departure from chastity leaves us no choice. Sadly, your entire family must suffer along with you, and their disgrace is all the worse the longer you remain in their company. Surely your family has explained that you can no longer move in the same society as they do. Bingley’s abandonment will, sadly, not be the last.”

Lydia sighed miserably, but did not challenge him.

“I feel badly for Jane,” she whispered. “She deserves better than this. If even kind-hearted Jane hates me, I might as well leave Longbourn, whether or not Wickham marries me.” Lydia paused to consider him before continuing. “I suppose you are wealthy and important enough to weather a scandal if you still want Lizzy. Your being handsome likely helps as well.”

Darcy was mercifully saved from replying because Lydia was not finished. “I could not say for certain where Wickham is, but he often spoke of taking me to Bath. If you find him there, you must make him promise to take me to a dress ball in the Upper Rooms.”

Lydia, although suffering from remorse, still felt equal to address him on such a topic. After looking at her in unconcealed astonishment for a long moment, Darcy, with grave propriety, begged to take his leave. Lydia curtseyed and left to return to her own apartment. He could only shake his head at her back as she ascended.

ELIZABETH WANTED TO SCREAM AGAINST THE INJUSTICE suffered by Jane. The shock upon entering the room soon after Bingley quit it and seeing Jane overcome with grief was not

soon to be recovered from. Every moment she held Jane brought fresh agitation for her sufferings.

“Lizzy, when will I cease to regret him?” Jane asked pitifully when her tears temporarily subsided.

“You will be happy again, I promise you.”

“I thought all my cares were over. I thought all was safe for a lady who was engaged and that no harm could come to us when we learned of Lydia’s situation.”

“He might change his mind. Perhaps when Mr Wickham marries Lydia, when all the gossip has ceased, and there is some other scandal to occupy the collective—”

“No! I could not bear it. To be brought together *again* and risk being separated another time? No, ’tis too much. Mr Bingley does not want me, and we shall never marry. I am only pained because I know I shall never be happy without him.” Her tears began anew.

There was no way she could leave with the Gardiners and Lydia in the morning, not when Jane needed her. They sat together for some time, much longer than Elizabeth realised, until Mrs Gardiner entered to check on Jane. Their aunt had come to be of use to one more deserving of her attentions than Mrs Bennet. She persuaded Jane to return to her own room and promised to spend the rest of the day comforting her and reminding her of all of Mr Bingley’s dreadful qualities. With a small smile, Jane agreed, and Elizabeth remembered Fitzwilliam was still somewhere in the house.

She discovered him in the dining room—alone—and Elizabeth was sure she could never forget the sight of him. He sat at the table, leaning over it with folded arms, his face concealed as if overpowered by the feelings of his soul. He did not look up when she entered, but Elizabeth could see from his shifting weight and the movement of his shoulders that he knew he was no longer alone.

“I regret criticising you,” she offered quietly. “You are not at all unfeeling. I was so heartbroken for Jane that—”

Fitzwilliam lifted his head and waved his hand as he rose. "There is no need. We are both under undue strain and shocked by this morning's events. I have not spoken to, nor even seen, Bingley since yesterday. He has avoided me." He cursed quietly. "I cannot think well of a man who sports with any woman's feelings."

"Not only will we all suffer for having a fallen sister, but Jane will suffer the added burden of being a jilt. It will further impugn her prospects should she try to marry from this neighbourhood. Since the banns have not been read and Jane released him, I doubt that Mr Bingley's reputation will be much affected."

"He has used Jane ill, deserted and disappointed her, and worse, he has shown a feebleness of character in doing so."

Elizabeth knew that Fitzwilliam's own decided and confident temper could not endure such weakness. "Jane's feelings will prey upon her. Mr Bingley, as a man, will have continual occupation that will weaken whatever little remains of his affection for her."

"I hope you do not imply that all men are so inconstant."

Perhaps not so long ago she might have been quick to judge, to assume the worst of him. "I should deserve utter contempt if I supposed true attachment and constancy were known only by women. You yourself are proof of that. I can now agree with you that Mr Bingley never truly loved Jane. I would not have believed him to be overly concerned with rank and reputation, considering his family background."

"On the contrary, it explains a great deal." Elizabeth's face must have expressed her disbelief. "Bingley is from a respectable family, and his father left him property to the value of a hundred thousand pounds, all from the cotton industry. His father had sufficient money for his son to be brought up as a gentleman."

"If he was raised as a gentleman, it is even more despicable for Bingley to break his engagement."

“Bingley has always desired to join the landed gentry. His father’s greatest wish was to see his family settled in an estate and sever all ties with the trade that made him wealthy. Marrying the daughter of a gentleman would have aided him in achieving a desirable status. He undoubtedly fears that, as a newly wealthy man, his reputation would suffer for having a wife whose sister has a natural child.”

“I suppose I should be grateful that you inherited your landed estate over many generations. Thank goodness your family is old enough to withstand the scandal,” Elizabeth answered wryly.

“Lydia spoke to me of much the same thing.”

They stood together in sad silence for a moment before she told him of her decision to stay behind. “I decided not to join the Gardiners on their northern tour when they leave tomorrow.” Elizabeth did not try to hide her disappointment. “I need to be with Jane now. I can shield her from all of our mother’s criticisms and be of some comfort to her. Lydia will accompany my aunt and uncle. They are not happy with having only her for company, but they understand why I ought to remain with Jane.” She ached at the idea of sitting idly at Longbourn, but she could not leave Jane alone at a time like this.

“I will leave for London to search for Wickham immediately after the Gardiners depart. Will you meet me again tomorrow morning?” His voice was just above a whisper, and he gave a glance toward the door. “I do not wish to say good-bye to you in front of all the others.”

“I had not expected you would ask me that,” she replied slowly.

“Must I always do what is expected of me?” His tone was urgent. “Must I always do what is decorous and correct? Can I not simply be a man who longs for the company of the woman he loves?”

Elizabeth remembered his passion the morning in the cottage: unreserved, wildly happy, joyful. That morning he had not been Mr Darcy of Pemberley with hundreds of people

dependent upon him and responsibilities laden upon his young shoulders. She thought for a moment that perhaps he might have been lonely amid so much obligation and civility.

“Of course you can,” she said, and the tension left his eyes. “I feel the same. I will meet you at daybreak. The Gardiners will not leave until after ten o’clock, so we shall have plenty of time.”

He absolutely blushed. “No, you have entirely mistaken my meaning. I am not asking...I do not mean to imply that we must...I simply want to spend time alone with you, Elizabeth.”

She found his embarrassment endearing. She smiled indulgently as she settled herself in his arms. “Are you prepared to suffer all the gossip should your efforts to find Wickham be in vain?”

“Having you as my wife will offer me such happiness that I shall have no reason to repine. I will return soon to marry you, my dearest Elizabeth, no matter where Wickham is, no matter Lydia or Jane or anything else. I love you, and unless you send me away, nothing will keep me from you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

U pon entering Netherfield, Darcy faced the exact situation he had hoped to avoid. Miss Bingley greeted him as the footman relieved him of his hat and gloves and, while clutching his arm as if she were drowning, asked whether she might speak with him privately. Unable to dismiss a lifetime of well-bred manners, he showed her into the drawing room, purposely leaving the door open.

“Mr Darcy, I am shaken at the news from Longbourn, and I simply had to enquire after your well-being.”

“I am disappointed and grieved, but determined to do all that I can to right the situation.”

Miss Bingley’s eyes glowed, and she smiled demurely. “Quite so—I had expected nothing less from a man of your integrity. Charles has already been to see Jane, and although Eliza has not her sweetness of character, she will not be unreasonable to your request.”

Did Miss Bingley suggest he would petition Elizabeth to release him? He knew not whether to laugh outright or unleash the full extent of his anger. “I am a happily engaged man. I could not declare off now if I wanted to, which, I assure you, I do not.”

She raised her eyebrows, her expression souring. “I assumed this scandal would compel you to acknowledge that your respect was not engaged—only your fancy. I hoped that I might comfort you at this trying time. Eliza Bennet has always been very forward. Considering her sister’s...I must say, I lack

the words to describe such a shocking affair. I presumed that to continue an engagement with such a woman would be at a variance with your good breeding.”

“Your presumption is offensive.” Darcy was in a foul temper. “You fail to consider the possibility that I am in love with Miss Elizabeth and that she is too in love with me to release me. In addition, my honour as a gentleman requires that I both respect my intention to marry her and do what I must to preserve the reputation of her family.”

“In love? Such romantic language!” She laughed. “I can imagine an underbred woman like Eliza making a habit of falling in love, but I would have thought that a man of your birth and education would prefer to see more restraint in the lady he married.”

He stared at her incredulously. “I will no longer suffer your impudence or simpering attentions.” He gave her one last, stony look and left the room.

Darcy wandered Netherfield’s principal rooms looking for Bingley. It surprised him to find him in the library; it was the last room Darcy had thought to search. Bingley sat in one of the upholstered chairs before the tall windows facing the lawn.

He had intended to behave with courteous dignity toward Bingley, for there was a steady friendship between them. But upon seeing Bingley’s composed features as he gazed out the window, and remembering Jane’s sorrow, Darcy could barely control his anger.

“What the hell have you done?”

Bingley let out a groan at the sound of his voice and sank farther into his chair. “I have done what is in the best interest of my family and my reputation.” He leant on the chair arm and rested his head on his hand.

“I am not convinced that this is in the best interest of your reputation!”

Bingley stood to face him. “There is nothing you can say to change my mind. I am resigned to my fate. Jane”—he cleared his throat—“Miss Bennet generously offered to release

me from my promise in the face of the scandalous nature of Miss Lydia's situation."

Darcy shook his head. "I have no right to interfere, and I am sorry to have done so in the past. I am simply trying to understand how you could have done this. You were an engaged man who has jilted a respectable lady. You know Jane is nothing like Lydia." Darcy was struck by another thought. "Have your sisters convinced you to give her up?"

"I did not give her up to oblige Caroline and Louisa. I am not so easily persuaded, at least not any longer. I was warmly attached to Jane, and it will be some time before I see another woman whom I think to be her equal. I had to consider my respectability."

"A gentleman's respectability is intrinsically linked to the dependability of his word." Darcy tried to keep his voice calm.

"I am not as fortunate as you." Bingley spoke without any hint of malice. "I wish to make my way in the world as a gentleman, and if I marry the sister of a fallen woman with a natural child, the disgrace would be insupportable. A fortune made from trade already speaks against me. I am not blind to Miss Bennet's connexions, and the behaviour of her family is—well, perhaps there cannot be too little said on that subject. Miss Bennet's attractions do not outweigh the denigration of Miss Lydia's situation. She has caused me to doubt Miss Bennet's respectability. How can I enter into a marriage with that sort of doubt?"

If society learned that Elizabeth gave herself to me, it would hardly matter in their minds that we are engaged, and she would be thought morally weak.

His reputation would not suffer at all, but they would condemn Elizabeth nearly as much as Lydia. The unjustness of the woman bearing all of the criticism and consequence for an act that took two people to complete weighed on Darcy's mind. Wickham, as a man, would be received anywhere with no disapproval for his role in the affair, but the scandal and shame would ruin Lydia for the rest of her life.

“Jane would have given more consequence to your character and more usefulness to your habits and pursuits.” Darcy now feared that Bingley would do nothing with much zeal but sport and society, and his time would otherwise waste away without the benefit of books or the company of a refined partner. “She would have been a respectable wife.”

Bingley shook his head. “Mrs Goulding has already stopped receiving the Bennets, and it won’t be much longer before other families shun them. It might be a temporary ostracism until the next public scandal, or it could be irreparable. I have to think of my credibility and that of my own sons as they become gentlemen. What if you cannot find Mr Wickham and make him marry Miss Lydia? You will have no other options left to maintain the Bennet family’s honour, short of calling him out. I am grief-stricken and will not soon recover.”

“You will return to good spirits before the summer is out, I have no doubt,” Darcy reflected coolly. “Your autumn will be spent in sport, and then you will throw yourself into the pleasure of the Season. Undoubtedly, you will find a young lady with the usual stock of accomplishments who will be fashionable, pretty, and fortunate enough not to have a sister who was seduced by a scoundrel.”

Suspicion was not in Bingley’s inclination, and he gladly accepted Darcy’s view of his future without hearing the acrimony in his voice. His friend could not be that racked by grief if he was already imagining a revival of his spirits. Bingley would recover in due time, find some beautiful girl of good family, marry her, and be reasonably content. To Darcy, Elizabeth was irreplaceable. His heart ached at the thought of ever separating from Elizabeth, but Bingley, although dispirited now, would leave Hertfordshire and never look back.

“I ought to find enough company and recreation in town to keep me thoroughly engaged,” Bingley said in a more hopeful tone. “I shall fall into melancholy and drink should I remain idle. I will be in better spirits when I next return to Netherfield.”

“You are joking, Bingley!” It was incomprehensible to Darcy that Bingley would consider remaining anywhere near Hertfordshire, but then it was also unimaginable to him that a gentleman would abandon his betrothed. “You must give up Netherfield.”

“Miss Bennet would not begrudge—”

“Your jilted intended and her family live three miles away!” Darcy’s anger at Jane’s suffering boiled anew. “If you remain, Jane will always wonder whether you are going to renew your addresses. You cannot place her in a situation where you might be tempted to bestow affection and confidence on one who must now be nothing to you but the object of distant civility. I will not have you torment a respectable lady who will be my sister.”

“Yes, you are right. I shall give up Netherfield.” No debate or conflict was worth Bingley’s attention. “In any event, I shall leave in a few days to escort Caroline and Louisa to Hurst in Bath.” Bingley paused and, after looking away embarrassed, said, “I know you will still marry Miss Lizzy, and of course you must consider her feelings, but I would regret to lose our friendship.”

Darcy made some short, polite wish for the same and then took his leave. While he hoped that his friendship with Bingley could be maintained, he knew that, no matter the result of his search for Wickham, he would align himself with Elizabeth and her family. His loyalties ought first to be given to his new family, and this, Darcy felt, was where he and Bingley would never be of a similar mind.

DARCY’S EAGERNESS TO SEE ELIZABETH HAD HIM STALKING the edge of Mr Bennet’s property the following morning before dawn. Elizabeth’s eyes squinted against the morning sun, but that did not keep her from giving him a dazzling smile as she approached him. Without hesitation, she put her arms around his neck and pulled him close. Nothing seemed more natural than to have her pressed against him, and Darcy softly laughed.

Elizabeth missed nothing akin to amusement coming from him. “You may have convinced everyone else that you are stern and reserved, but I know the truth. I require that you tell me all.”

“I am remembering,” he said with a smile. “I recall a time in Georgiana’s sitting room when I was both eager and uneasy to put an arm around you. I was certain that my heart would burst from my chest—it was pounding so hard at the thought of touching you, let alone waltzing with you. And now there is nothing more calming and more necessary to me than to hold you as close as possible.”

“My dear Fitzwilliam, that was nearly your prettiest speech yet.”

“Only nearly? Do you challenge me to improve upon that? I would compose a few lines in your honour, but I remember how you oppose the pairing of poetry and love.”

“I was terribly misguided to think so, and you must not hold it against me,” she replied with mock seriousness. “Your task, while we are parted, will be to write me a sonnet to feed our fine, stout, healthy love!”

By unspoken agreement, they walked in the general direction of the empty tenant cottage. Darcy looked at her, intending to continue their conversation but was distracted by her straw hat. Its wide brim might be useful for keeping the sun from her face, but it inhibited an intimate tête-à-tête. He stopped and plucked the ribbon beneath her chin that held the bonnet in place, and pulled it off her head.

“You disapprove of my hat?”

“I have no opposition, but it prevents me from viewing your face.” He was about to press on when he looked at it again. Darcy felt a twinge of sadness when he remembered that the last time he had seen her wear this bonnet was in the grove of Rosings Park when he had handed her his letter.

“You wore this hat in Kent.” He held Elizabeth’s gaze, and the hard edge to his voice must have told Elizabeth the instance he was remembering. Then, more quietly, he

continued, "There was no doubt in my mind that, after you took my letter, I would never lay eyes on you again in all my life."

"Then it is a wonderful relief that I returned to the parsonage early and that you and your cousin were still there to greet me. Although I believe our paths ought to have crossed again."

"You think I might have visited Netherfield? I do not think I could have borne it to risk encountering you. To be near you and know that I would never be as precious to you as you were to me..." He trailed off and shook his head.

"Thankfully, your anger toward me abated after you wrote to me, and I thought better of you soon after reading your letter. Otherwise, had you not come back to Netherfield with Mr Bingley, when would I have been fortunate enough to see you again?"

"Perhaps we might have met when you travelled to Derbyshire with your relations this summer."

Elizabeth laughed. "You think I would have encountered you sightseeing in Dovedale, or when we both were applying to see Chatsworth?"

"Perhaps, since Mrs Gardiner preferred to visit with friends in Lambton, you might have been persuaded to visit Pemberley."

"That is even more unlikely," she said with a blush. "It would be a mortifying indecency to be found touring Pemberley when I had thrown away your offer to be its mistress. You would think I had intentionally put myself in your way and would hate the sight of me."

"I am unsure what I might have felt if I saw you and the Gardiners there, but it would not have been hatred. I am sure that, had fortune smiled on me and put you in my way, I would have done everything possible to obtain your forgiveness and lessen your ill opinion of me."

"Perhaps I might have encouraged you if I had any inclination that your feelings and wishes toward me were

unchanged.”

As they walked in companionable silence, Darcy wondered how their lives would have unfolded had they followed that improbable longer road to reconciliation. Wickham might not have been intent on revenge, but Lydia may have exposed herself in some way in Brighton.

When they were nearly at the cottage, Elizabeth said softly, “My father is ashamed of his treatment of us.”

“He ought to be.”

“His actions were derived from jealousy and disappointment over my leaving home. I thought he envied the happiness we would find in each other, but his real regret was that I shall marry a man who is not only nothing like him but in every way a better man than he could even wish to be.”

Darcy considered this in silence as the vacant cottage came into sight. He still remembered the tears she held back when she spoke of her father’s heartless teasing. He might be more agreeable in company, more civil and humbled, but his temper he could not yet vouch for. Elizabeth would want him to forgive Mr Bennet, but he could not so soon forget, particularly when his offences were against his dearest Elizabeth.

“In time, all will be forgotten, but not yet. I am still of a resentful nature when those closest to me are wronged, and it would be a falsehood to say I can forgive him now. I will be respectful, but do not ask me to absolve him today.”

Elizabeth opened the cottage door but paused. “You are resentful for my sake. I know you are not cold-hearted, as I once believed. You have happily made me an object of your tender affection. I have never been first in anyone’s life before, Fitzwilliam,” she added quietly.

Darcy smiled and led her inside. “That is a position in my life to which you will simply have to resign yourself.” He closed the door behind them.

AFTER HAVING MET WITH FITZWILLIAM AT DAWN, ELIZABETH had to hurry back to Longbourn so she would not be missed. He would arrive in a little more than one hour to say good-bye to the Gardiners and take his leave of the Bennets as he left for London. The entire house was an uproar of activity as the Gardiner children made free use of every room they came upon, the servants bustled up and down the stairs, Mrs Gardiner comforted a teary Jane as best she could, and Mrs Bennet was in fidgets making certain that Lydia was comfortable.

Elizabeth saw nothing—thought nothing—of the commotion of the house. She glowed with happiness from within. She thought only of the last three hours at the cottage. Fitzwilliam's words, his expressions, and still more his manner and look, had been such as she could see in only one light: he loved her and would love none but her. The scandal of Lydia's child and Jane's jilting would not deter him, and he pledged his love and promised to return in the course of a month for her, no matter the results of his search for Wickham.

The absolute necessity of seeming like herself before the others produced an immediate struggle. Elizabeth could not forget the serious troubles facing her family, but she thought only of *him*. She once discerned Mrs Gardiner looking upon her with a critical eye and felt a wave of guilt, as if her adoring feelings about Fitzwilliam were printed across her countenance, but the moment passed.

The time of the Gardiners' departure had come, and Mrs Gardiner kissed her children good-bye while Mr Gardiner teased them and promised to carry them all away in his coat pockets. Mr Bennet stood apart from the family, looking solemn and impatient, but Elizabeth supposed his silence was better than anything he might have to say to Lydia. Mary and Kitty said good-bye to their sister, and Mrs Bennet was forced to submit to the idea of separating indefinitely from her youngest daughter.

“Oh, my dear Lydia,” she wailed, “when shall we meet again?”

“I do not know! This tour will last three weeks. How dull. Darcy must find Wickham soon and make him marry me.”

“Oh, but what if he cannot be found? Darcy and your uncle tell me you must be kept away in Ireland. Write to me very often, my dear!”

“As often as I can—I expect to be kept busy with some society,” she said confidently.

Elizabeth strove to part from her sister in good humour, and from an unwillingness to quarrel, she ignored Lydia’s demand for her to make certain Darcy returned with Wickham in a timely manner and simply hugged her good-bye.

Lydia then approached her eldest sister and quietly wrapped her in her arms. Lydia whispered into Jane’s ear, then pulled back with unshed tears in her eyes. Jane offered a sad smile and whispered in return. Elizabeth longed to know what Lydia could have said.

The Bennet family’s collective attention was turned to the sound of a rider galloping toward the house. Fitzwilliam appeared hurried, and she could imagine why. He had barely had enough time to return to Netherfield and make himself presentable before he needed to see the Gardiners off and leave himself.

“Good morning, Darcy.” She spoke calmly as she turned pink at the memory of their recent encounter. He returned her greeting with equally moderate enthusiasm, although she saw a sparkle in his dark eyes that meant he wished to say more—to do more than bow over her offered hand—but he went to her father.

“Good day, Mr Bennet. I trust you are in good health?”

Fitzwilliam moved on to address the rest of her family while the Gardiner children cried out to him and pulled at his coat, asking whether they might join him on his trip to London. Elizabeth watched him be engaging and courteous with everyone. She would not have believed him capable of it months ago. Fitzwilliam invited the Gardiners to visit with Georgiana at Pemberley while they were in the area, then he

placated Mrs Bennet as she fretted over the fate of her youngest daughter, and then he quietly tolerated Lydia's desire that, should he find Wickham, he tell him how much she would like to travel to Bath. Elizabeth felt that his social graces had become more genuine in recent weeks.

Elizabeth stood apart from the others to watch the Gardiners' carriage depart and was disappointed that she was not joining them. She understood the necessity of Lydia's immediate removal from the neighbourhood, and Elizabeth wanted to stay to be of comfort to Jane. Nothing could move forward with Fitzwilliam until he found Wickham, and until he returned, she would not even have the pleasure of a northern tour to distract her.

Fitzwilliam came up behind her. "I might have married you yesterday, Elizabeth," he remarked quietly so as not to be overheard. Jane was trying to calm her mother's loud complaints, and her father was farther removed from them. "The banns have been read three times, and your father has signed the wedding articles, but it honestly did not occur to me until this moment. I was entirely focused on Lydia and the task at hand."

"Why does that matter?"

He sighed and shifted his feet. "I presume you are not wilfully misunderstanding me, so I must speak bluntly. Have you not considered that you and Lydia could be in the same situation?"

Elizabeth stared at him in confusion, and, upon finally realising what he meant, was surprised. "I am not."

"You are certain?" he asked quietly, his eyes rising above her head toward where her family waved after the Gardiners' carriage.

Elizabeth did not feel comfortable discussing this in full view of her assembled family. "No, but Lydia is showing signs while I am not." She did not raise her voice above a whisper.

"How are you certain as to what those signs are?"

“Charlotte,” she whispered. “She suspected her condition. She did not wish to worry Mr Collins any earlier than necessary, although I think she feared Lady Catherine’s advice more than anything else. She was eager to speak of it to someone who would keep her confidence and respond with an even temper. Besides, one cannot be entirely sure until the baby quickens.”

“Then you might be,” he murmured.

“Wickham spent the entire month of June seducing Lydia. You and I...”

“If a child comes two months early, they might believe that I married a poor woman only because she carried my child. Or worse, it could be suggested the child is not even mine. There will be those who find it hard to believe that I married without consideration to connexion or fortune, and given Lydia’s fall, they may presume the worst.”

“It is also possible that I am not with child. You will find Wickham, work upon him to marry Lydia, and return to marry me and all of this will soon be behind us.” She gave him a smile, attempting to ease his mind. “There will be rumours regardless of when we marry. We cannot escape the censure that Lydia’s child and Jane’s abandonment will bring. We already resolved to be the happiest couple in the world, so this cannot affect us.”

Elizabeth could see that his mind was spinning with all the possibilities of what could go amiss. She wanted to enfold him tightly in her arms and bury her face in his neck, but could hardly do such a thing in full sight of her parents. She took his hand in hers instead.

“All will be well.” Her throat caught, and she was no longer certain who required the convincing. She was wonderfully aware of some powerful and tangible bond between them. Eventually, she felt some of the tension leave his body, and he exhaled heavily. He softly brushed his fingers against her cheek.

“Remember what I told you this morning.” She saw his expression was one of pure control, and she recognised his

struggle to keep his emotions in check. All that he had said and promised did not make the pain of his leaving any easier to tolerate.

She looked toward her family and saw that her father, mother, and Jane still remained. "I find that I am suffering some momentary apprehensions of our happiness being impossible to last."

"You are not made for melancholy. Do not allow this to dispirit you. Our potential happiness does not end with my departure."

She saw something in his features she had not seen before. He was not as invulnerable as he appeared. She attempted to speak lightly. "Then I must endeavour to accept my good fortune and learn to brook being happier than I deserve."

This made him smile. "Write to me often? I anticipate few other pleasures in the weeks ahead."

They both wished to say more, but all the important words and deeds had been said and done hours before. Now there was only the necessity of bowing to polite convention under the eyes of her family. Fitzwilliam promised Mrs Bennet to do all he could for Lydia and avowed that he would, of course, return to marry Elizabeth. He then took Jane's hand, looking as if he wished he had more to say to comfort her. He inclined his head toward her father, who gruffly thanked Fitzwilliam for his efforts.

In the turn of a moment, Fitzwilliam was gone, and Elizabeth was left outside with Jane.

"Lizzy, do not be so downhearted." Jane stood on her toes to rest her chin on Elizabeth's shoulder as she wrapped her arms around her. "He will return in a matter of weeks, and you will be mistress of Pemberley before the end of the summer."

"Oh, Jane." Elizabeth laughed. "This will not do! I am here to be of comfort to you. Do not waste your breath trying to gladden me."

It spoke volumes of Jane's state of mind that she could not deny that she needed comforting. Elizabeth reproached herself

for her temporary sadness when faced with Jane's more enduring heartache.

“Shall we go for a walk? I can divulge the many reasons why I dislike Caroline Bingley. It is good she is not to be your sister, for now, I might speak plainly.”

“That is uncharitable of you.” Jane gave a restrained laugh. “Mr Bingley was simply too afraid of a choice that would be disagreeable and inconvenient to the principal part of his family and give bad connexions to those who have not been used to them.”

Elizabeth thought her sister was too generous, but kept her silence. Other than Colonel Fitzwilliam and Georgiana, her betrothed's family found his choice of a wife to be disagreeable and inconvenient, but that had not prevented Fitzwilliam from making her an offer. They walked for a while before she remembered Lydia's parting words to Jane and asked, if it would not violate a confidence, what she had said.

“Lydia apologised to me. She said her greatest regret about running away with Mr Wickham was that it caused Mr Bingley to...” Jane struggled to speak for a moment. “I was honoured that she regrets my pain most of all.”

“Lydia has many things she ought to regret. Perhaps this is a start.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Horse Guards, Whitehall, London

Friday, July 17

Darcy,

I have received your last. I am dismayed to hear further proof of Mr Wickham's treachery. I am at liberty to call on you Monday. In the intervening time, might I suggest you search the gambling hells near Covent Garden? His two preferred vices would be in proximity.

Yours,

Fitzwilliam

On Sunday night, Darcy stared again at his cousin's characteristically pithy letter. For a loquacious and unreserved man, Colonel Fitzwilliam's letters were always brief and to the point. Unfortunately, he did not suggest a possibility that Darcy had not already considered. After visiting a few of the respectable clubs in town to which Wickham might have gained access, Darcy had spent Thursday and Friday enduring the unpleasant task of visiting those more sordid gambling dens that he felt safe entering alone. He encountered every variety of law-breaker and degenerate gamester but not the particular one he needed to find.

How shall I locate this irredeemable man?

Darcy prowled his library with nothing to do and too much to think about. His mind wandered, as it often did, back to Elizabeth. The clock struck nine o'clock and interrupted his

self-indulgent reverie. After rubbing his hand across his tired eyes, he saw yesterday's unread *Times* on his desk and decided to spend what remained of his prolonged Sunday evening in a more productive manner. He examined an article that relayed news of the battles of the Peninsular War. Darcy knew it was only a matter of time until his cousin's London-based Royal Regiment of Horse Guards would be called to serve.

Darcy skimmed over the gossip and announcements, then tossed the paper aside. The Bennets' scandal would never make the gossip pages, but that did not mean his sister-in-law's sad affair with Wickham would not eventually be talked about in London. Between Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, there was no way to hope the scandal would remain in Hertfordshire. Darcy could also imagine the gossip of the Bennet family's misfortune spreading like a plague from Lucas Lodge to the Hunsford parsonage and then on to Rosings Park.

After he put the *Times* aside, Darcy realised that he might have seen a familiar name after all. He snatched the paper and held it close to the Argand lamp on the table so he could read the marriage announcements more clearly. There it was; he had not been mistaken after all. Darcy felt light-headed. There was no denying the words printed in front of him in cold, black, undeniable ink.

On the 10th inst., George Wickham, Esq. to the Honourable Miss Catherine Hareton, niece of Lord Hindley, of Gimmerton, Yorkshire.



THE LOSS OF HER YOUNGEST DAUGHTER MADE MRS BENNET dull for several days. Now that Jane was a jilt and Lydia hidden from public view, their mother was miserable. Only one daughter, her least favourite, was to be married, and she could not even gloat of that success. The enjoyment of gossiping with her neighbours was now curtailed due to the shame and discredit brought upon them by the daughter whose absence she now lamented.

“I often think there is nothing so bad as parting with one’s friends.”

Elizabeth sighed. “You must acknowledge that Lydia’s departure was necessary.”

“Well, I can focus my hopes on Darcy finding Wickham and making him marry Lydia so she can return home.” Elizabeth then had to listen to her mother ask repeatedly when she expected her “tall and handsome man” to write with news.

Her intended had not been gone a week, yet it felt like she had been alone for months. Several families stopped calling and refused to admit the Bennet girls into their homes. Dining engagements were cancelled, and ladies’ voices quickly silenced and heads turned away when Kitty and Elizabeth ventured into Meryton. Later, when Elizabeth had railed against the fickle hearts of their neighbours, Jane attempted to pacify her.

“Lady Lucas has been kind, Lizzy. She walked here on Thursday morning to condole with us.”

“She had better have stayed at home! We both know Lady Lucas to be a self-satisfied woman. Let her triumph over us at a distance.”

Jane still cherished a tender affection for Mr Bingley and cried herself to sleep for several nights in a row. Such violence of affliction could not be supported forever; it sunk within a few days into a calmer melancholy. Elizabeth wanted to tell her that Mr Bingley was not worth her tears and she would find a worthy man to love her. But Jane was not ready to hear such things. However much Jane might now regret it, the relationship *had* existed, and she could not comprehend a rapid recovery from the awful idea of its being permanently dissolved.

“I do not know how she could have released him,” Mrs Bennet wailed to Mrs Philips. “What a silly notion for a little thing like Lydia and her child to get in the way of Bingley marrying Jane. The man had four thousand a year!”

Elizabeth threw down her work and prevailed upon Jane to go out of doors for the first time in days. Jane did not share Elizabeth's great enjoyment in being outside but agreed if they could walk in silence. She and Jane went to the gravel path along the shrubbery, and Elizabeth's mind wandered as she walked arm in arm with her unhappy sister.

The tenant cottage was as dusty as it previously had been, but she was happily seated across Fitzwilliam's lap and could not care. He absently stroked her legs carelessly thrown across the couch, her skirt pushed back to her knees. Elizabeth leant to the floor to pick up a small box from her reticule and handed it to Fitzwilliam with a shy smile.

"My aunt and uncle Gardiner undertook a commission in town on my behalf since I could find nothing in Meryton that would suit. I had not planned to give these to you so soon, but I want you to have them before you must leave me again."

He gave her a bemused look before opening the box to see the four bright-green oval sleeve buttons set in silver. He picked up one linked pair and held the delicate stones between his finger and thumb.

"I insisted my aunt not leave the jeweller without something green, and when he told her that moss agate represented good luck and a long life, she thought it an appropriate present for one's betrothed." Fitzwilliam's eyes adhered to the sleeve buttons. His countenance showed he felt some emotion, but Elizabeth struggled to name it. "My uncle teased he could remember reading that, in ancient times, moss agates were thought to protect warriors from harm, but I said that all you needed protection from was the cuff of your shirtsleeve opening by accident."

He traced a finger over one of the tiny stones but still did not speak. "You are silent, I see. I thought the smooth grain and rich shade would be to your liking. Even if it is not, you could pretend that you like them for my sake, like any good husband ought to do."

"Elizabeth, I cannot remember the last time anyone gave me...how did you even guess my favourite colour?" His

astonishment was obvious.

“That was perfectly simple: you prefer a green cutaway coat when you ride, and many of your waistcoats have a green stripe, brocade, or pattern. And when your carriage returned me to the Gardiners’ after I called on Georgiana, I noticed you chose as much green wool and silk upholstery trim as good taste would allow.”

He was struggling for the appearance of composure, and rather than speak, he clasped her around the neck and pulled her closer to give her a fierce kiss. She laughed against his lips. “I assume you like them?”

“Very much.” Fitzwilliam removed the sleeve buttons that held his shirt cuff closed and pressed the new moss agate ones into place. “They are handsome, but I like them more because you thought to give them to me. Thank you.”

Elizabeth was pleased to see his delighted countenance and how he admired the glint of the small green stones on his cuffs before her spirits turned low.

“What is the matter, my dear?”

“Jane had my aunt bring a pair of sleeve buttons for Bingley,” she said quietly. As much as she wanted to enjoy being entirely alone with Fitzwilliam, they could not help but speak about Jane and Bingley. “She never had the chance to give them to him.”

Fitzwilliam sighed sadly. “I do not have the words to express my regrets at the loss of their relationship. Shamefully, Bingley is already looking forward to the distraction of sport and the Season to help him to forget Jane.”

“All Jane has to look forward to now is my mother’s constant reminder that she lost a man worth four thousand a year.”

“Jane might sink into melancholy should she remain at home, but what will you do while I am gone?”

“Comfort Jane, listen to my mother’s complaints and my father’s rebukes, and all the while be spurned by my

neighbours. You too would suffer under such stagnation. All I can do is sit by the windows and pine for you."

"Fear not—we will soon be married, and I promise to put your talents to use at Pemberley. You have proven yourself to be an adept steward. If that does not occupy your time, then shall I dismiss the housekeeper so you might take over her role as well? Perhaps you would also like to be my secretary?" His eyes crinkled with good humour.

"You do well to tease me out of my depressed state," she retorted. "It shows that your sense of humour is improved." She leant her head against Fitzwilliam's shoulder. She felt his quiet rumble of laughter and allowed herself a smile. "In a very short time, you have become necessary to my ultimate comfort."

"As have you to mine." He ran his fingers through her hair. "As landlord, master, and guardian, I have been unaccustomed to sharing my thoughts with anyone. I am private by nature. Having you to confide in, a wife to love me, I must admit that these are things I did not know I needed until I found you, dearest, most beloved Elizabeth."

Elizabeth considered her own feelings of isolation amidst a household who did not understand her, and she realised that Fitzwilliam might have endured some of the same. To be a young man with so much obligation binding him and duty to uphold must have been isolating. Perhaps there had been an emptiness in his life, too.

"Where have you gone?"

Elizabeth's eyes refocused on his. "Do you know that you are a good man? You bear so well the many duties before you." She shifted her position on his lap to look directly into his face. "It must be lonesome."

He shut his eyes, almost as if he were in pain. She wondered whether she had insulted his masculinity, that a man of his rank and position would not consider such a thing as being alone. Fitzwilliam steadied himself before he opened his eyes to look at her with that now-familiar sincere and

unwavering gaze. "Perhaps it was," he breathed, "but it is not any longer."

"Your countenance informs me you are thinking of the person whom you think the most agreeable in the world, the person who interests you more than all the rest of the world put together," Jane said wistfully.

A blush overspread Elizabeth's cheeks; she could say nothing in her defence. Her purpose in staying at Longbourn had been for the sake of her sister's spirits, and all Elizabeth could do was complain about her isolation and reminisce about the man who loved her. Elizabeth was ashamed and resolved to be a better companion to her sister.



DARCY PACED HIS LIBRARY LIKE A CAGED ANIMAL ON Monday. By the time Fitzwilliam was shown in, he was certain he had worn an irreparable path in the carpet. His cousin entered with his mouth set in a grim line. When Darcy snatched Saturday's newspaper from the table, the colonel shook his head while he threw himself into a chair.

"I know—I have heard all about it."

Darcy sat across from his cousin. "How did this happen? How did George Wickham ally himself with a titled family?"

"The very nearly only surviving member of that family, no less."

"Do you know her?" he asked, surprised.

"No, but it is all over town. I know you loathe gossip, but you really ought to better acquaint yourself with what is being spoken of. I have just come from my mother's morning at home, and all the ladies are discussing it."

Darcy felt his patience slipping away. Fitzwilliam must have sensed it as well and explained the latest scandal to overtake the drawing rooms and clubs of London. "Cathy Hareton is to inherit an unimaginable fortune when her uncle, Lord Hindley, dies. There is no other family, so his title will

become extinct, but the lady will be a wealthy woman. My mother says it must be above fifty thousand pounds.”

“That explains Wickham’s interest in her as he always hoped to make his fortune through marriage. But it does not explain why Lord Hindley would allow his ward to marry that reprobate.”

“There is more!” His cousin relished his role as storyteller. “The lady is some sort of invalid. She is often in Bath taking the waters and is quite on the shelf, but some months ago she came to fancy herself in a love match. She had been secretly engaged to some doctor in Bath, and from what the gossiping ladies say, they almost convinced Lord Hindley to agree to the marriage. I guess the earl is not long for this world and wanted to see his sickly niece hap—”

“Get to the point! What has this to do with Wickham?”

“Miss Hareton and her uncle were in London when she somehow caught Wickham’s notice. After he learned about her fortune and the likelihood she might be married, he seems to have formed a desperate resolution. He paid the lady’s maid to let him into their house. Wickham purposely allowed himself to be found in her bed, and there was not a servant in the house who did not know about Miss Hareton’s tainted reputation by the end of the morning. They say her screams of outrage could be heard three houses down the square, and Wickham eagerly told all who would listen how he—”

“Spare me the shocking details.”

Fitzwilliam smirked at his modesty. “Whether or not Wickham was successful, Miss Hareton was considered ruined, and her uncle insisted they marry immediately. Apparently, even Wickham was better than a lowly surgeon. The earl purchased a special licence. They were married on the tenth, and the newlyweds have gone on to Bath.”

Fitzwilliam crossed his ankles and placed his hands behind his head. It was all well and good for Fitzwilliam to be entertained by a scandal, but Darcy was preoccupied with poor Lydia Bennet. George Wickham had left debts with tradesmen and debts of honour wherever he travelled; he had blackened

Darcy's reputation at every available opportunity; he had attempted to seduce his sister for her fortune and had successfully seduced Lydia for revenge; and now he had ruined a lonely invalid. Darcy needed to think, so he rose and paced.

"That man's manoeuvres of selfishness and duplicity are revolting," Darcy muttered as he walked by. "He is a dreadful man."

"You look as though you are planning something, but I cannot comprehend what," Fitzwilliam interrupted after Darcy paced by a third time. "Wickham cannot be worked on to marry Miss Elizabeth's sister—he is a married man. I am sorry to be blunt, but your soon-to-be sister-in-law is ruined, and the stigma will follow her and her bastard child."

Darcy stalked up and down the room, and Fitzwilliam knew enough of his character to leave him alone to think. By the time Fitzwilliam walked to the brandy decanter and poured himself a glass, Darcy was standing in the centre of the room, his jaw set in determination.

"I must go to Bath."

"Why?"

"Lydia is resolved against marrying anyone else, and her father will never exert himself to force her. Wickham cannot marry Lydia, but he ought to acknowledge his transgression and be made to provide for her child."

"What do you propose to do? Appeal to his sense of honour as a gentleman? Tell him to take in the child? I recommend you go back to Hertfordshire, marry your pretty betrothed, and then shun the rest of her family as everyone else must and undoubtedly will."

Darcy heaved a heavy sigh and idly touched the sleeve buttons Elizabeth had given him. "I could not do that to Elizabeth. I will not resign the Bennets to social ostracism without having tried everything. The only way to now preserve part of the Bennet family's honour is to have Wickham recognise the child. Now that he has access to Miss

Hareton's fortune, Wickham cannot argue that he cannot provide for it."

"You cannot expect him to bring up the child in the same household with whatever legitimate heirs he produces," his cousin cried. "The invalid bride already hates Wickham. She would never permit his sideslips to be brought up on equal terms with her own children."

"The father of an illegitimate child has the duty of maintenance of that child," Darcy replied firmly. "I will go to Bath to see that Wickham acknowledges it. It is all I can do—save for calling the man out—to see Elizabeth's family maintain some semblance of respectability." If Wickham was now married to an heiress, her wealth alone would improve his own social standing. Wickham's wealthy gentleman's status as the acknowledged father would determine the acceptability of the illegitimate child. It was not as much as Darcy could have hoped for, but his sense of justice told him to do whatever was in his power to see that Wickham did one good thing in his dishonourable life and recognise Lydia's child.

"I know you will arrange the business just as you please," Fitzwilliam replied, "and if you wish to go to Bath to convince the gamester to acknowledge this girl's bastard, then I wish you well. Shall I accompany you?"

He felt enormously grateful to his cousin. "That would make an unpleasant venture more palatable, thank you. We should leave immediately."

His cousin laughed. "Some of us have employment. My royal regiment will not allow me to join you in Bath until Friday."

"Your duties with the Blues are largely ceremonial," Darcy scoffed. "Can you not leave just as you please?"

"We do not all possess your means to have our own way all the time." His cousin winked. "Be thankful my expensive commission is in a regiment stationed in London and not the Peninsula."

Darcy immediately apologised for his thoughtlessness. If Fitzwilliam found this humility at odds with what he expected of Darcy's behaviour, he was too generous to mention it. He told Darcy to go on to Bath alone and promised to join him by Friday.

“Do refrain from running Wickham through with your blade when you first encounter him, Darcy,” the colonel said with a laugh as he rose to leave. “Or, at the very least, wait until I have arrived before you do.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Darcy hated Bath. It was already the last place he wished to visit, and that he was travelling to this wretched city to find George Wickham made his approach all the more distressing. He was arriving on a scorching afternoon, and driving to the lodgings he had acquired in Camden Place in such heat, amidst the noisy dash of other carriages, had given him a headache.

His hand came up to his coat pocket and lingered over Elizabeth's letter folded therein. He had read it twice, devouring her sweet and witty words as a man starved for sustenance. Her spirits seemed improved over what they had been when he left Hertfordshire, but his last letter reporting the devastating news that Wickham was married had yet to arrive in her hands.

Darcy knew he ought to go to the Grand Pump Room, where he was most likely to encounter his quarry. Now that Wickham was married to the niece of a wealthy and prominent earl, Darcy was unlikely to find him in a hidden gambling hell since he could now afford to play with more affluent gentlemen. Darcy would almost certainly be barred from admittance if he followed social niceties and called at Laura Place, where he had learned the new Mr and Mrs Wickham had taken residence. His only option was to engage Wickham socially, and so he resignedly made his way to the centre of Bath's social life.

The crowd and the heat were unbearable. The Pump Room was full of customers and those wishing to see and be seen,

and all the while, the orchestra played from one side of the room. There was a mixture of invalids taking their daily dose of medicinal water alongside parading young ladies attempting to catch a man's eye. He hoped to avoid being asked to sign in to the subscription book and keep his name out of the newspaper. He did not wish to make Wickham aware of his presence by having his name published along with the other visitors to Bath.

Darcy loitered in and around the Pump Room for the greater part of the day, but did not see Wickham. Today was Wednesday, and tonight's amusements would be confined to concerts instead of dancing. Darcy had little reason to hope that he might find Wickham in a concert hall. He walked back into the brilliant sunlight, too tired and in too distressed spirits to loiter in the card rooms tonight to look for Wickham. Unwilling to draw attention to himself by visiting every place in Bath that might have a card table, he instead left his card for Bingley, who was still in Bath with the Hursts.

The first instinct of Darcy's heart had been to give in to his resentful nature and cut all ties with Bingley, but he had thought better of it. While he could not condone Bingley's treatment of Jane, Darcy could at the least let him know he was in Bath; it was the civil action to take. He walked in the heat and humidity, which kept him in a perpetual state of inelegance, from the Pump Room to Hurst's lodgings near the Crescent to leave his card.

That chore being done, Darcy hired a carriage to take him home instead of walking up Bath's steep hills. It allowed him the opportunity to reflect on what lay before him. Since Wickham now had the funds to play in any game he wanted, Darcy knew where he would be sure to encounter him tomorrow night: the Upper Rooms. Bath's wealthiest gamblers would gather there to play high into the early hours of the morning. Then he would need to have a dialogue, in full view of Bath's gossiping and prominent visitors, with a man whose name was a punishment to pronounce. The only comfort Darcy had was in knowing that he was acting in favour of a righteous cause. Now that Wickham was married, the greatest actions Darcy could take for the preservation of

the Bennet family's reputation would be to marry Elizabeth and ensure that Wickham would be held accountable.

In between the glare of light reflecting off the buildings, he caught a glance of Beechen Cliff. The brief hint of an expanse of green made him think of Elizabeth and their walks. He would write to her tonight and send a servant directly to Hertfordshire to deliver it. He hoped that, before his servant returned with her response, his business with Wickham would be concluded and he would be on his way back to her.

CAMDEN PLACE, BATH

Wednesday, July 22, 8 o'clock in the evening

My dearest Elizabeth,

I received your letter at the very moment of my departure from London. I know by its uplifting words that you had not yet received my last. By now, you know the sad news that Mr Wickham has married and I am in Bath to speak with him. My sense of what is just can allow me to do no less. I have written to Mr Gardiner, and I leave it to his careful consideration to relay the news to your sister.

I have seen no one since I arrived. You might say I think myself above my company, but I assure you it is not arrogance but single-mindedness that keeps me aloof. I wish to encounter Mr Wickham, persuade him to do all that he must to ensure the protection and respectability of Lydia's child, and then return to you. I shall waste no more than a week in Bath.

I went to the Pump Room, secure within myself of seeing Mr Wickham before the afternoon was over, but he did not appear. I called on Bingley as a courtesy, but did not stay for the Bingleys and Hursts are people for whom I do not care as I once did.

I detest this place. Amid the scandals, waging, posturing, parading, and matchmaking, there is a steady stream of hypochondriacs, Bath chairs, crutches, and canes. The devil himself could not have arranged a worse punishment for my mistaken pride. Had I shared what I knew of Mr Wickham's

character, perhaps I would not be here alone and instead would be with you at Pemberley. Please believe my honest regret in allowing Mr Wickham to proceed in your family's company unimpeded.

I have reread this letter and have determined it is too despondent to send, but its sentiments are too true to deny. I have spent the last quarter hour attempting to think of one sanguine comment. Excellent walker that you are, if you were here in Bath, you might enjoy walking round Beechen Cliff, whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking an object. But unless you explicitly ask it of me, I would never return here. Would you mind if, after we marry, we adjourn to Derbyshire and spend all of our time in a manner not unlike the morning of my departure?

Say everything from me to your family that is necessary and proper, and extend my particular concern and regard for Jane. I remain, my dearest and beloved Elizabeth,

Yours affectionately,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Elizabeth blushed on reading Fitzwilliam's reference to their last morning together. His messenger remained at Longbourn, and he was waiting for her to pen a response. Thankfully, she could attend to that directly. After the disastrous affair of relating Fitzwilliam's previous letter, her family was not eager for further news from that quarter.

She had paused over that letter and its news of Wickham's marriage for some time with indignant astonishment, then read it again and again, every perusal serving to increase her abhorrence of the scoundrel. Elizabeth could not long keep the details of Fitzwilliam's account a secret and read it in its entirety to her family. Mr Bennet went white and left the room while Mrs Bennet wailed and cried at Wickham's breach of promise and his abandonment of any affection for Lydia.

"Mamma, I think Mr Wickham had no true fondness for Lydia and never intended to marry her," Jane had told her mother. But their mother continued to believe that Wickham must have married for money instead of where his heart lay,

and that other things being equal, he would have, out of love and affection, returned to Lydia.

“When a man promises marriage, he has no business to fly off from his word only because a richer girl is ready to have him!”

“You forget that Mr Wickham made no promise to Lydia,” she had reminded her mother. “And he ruined the reputation of this Cathy Hareton solely to make his fortune by forcing her to marry him.”

“Oh, Lizzy, I cannot bear to hear the name of that woman mentioned. Wickham had such agreeable manners, such a pleasant countenance. Of course, he was fond of Lydia.”

“He is hatefully mercenary!”

This was not what Mrs Bennet wanted to hear, and therefore, instead of making any answer, she went on insensibly as before. “I shall only be content when Lydia returns.”

Jane could not contain a gasp of shock. Mary lifted her eyes and, with a countenance of grave reflection, recited her moral extractions to a fretful Kitty.

“If Mr Wickham, who through his marriage is now a man of fortune, acknowledges his child, *its* illegitimacy may not always be scandalous,” Elizabeth sputtered when she found her voice, “but Lydia’s reputation will never recover. We can only hope that our connexion to Darcy’s excellent name may be enough to allow us to move in the company of our neighbours again.”

“Darcy will see that Wickham acknowledges his connexion to the child, and that will help significantly,” Mrs Bennet sniffed.

“Even if Darcy convinces Mr Wickham to claim responsibility, it is too much to believe that Lydia’s reputation will be entirely restored. So long as you wish to visit with your neighbours and marry off your remaining daughters, Lydia ought never to return to Longbourn.”

Jane and Elizabeth had attempted to explain to her the nature of Wickham's treachery and the consequence to her daughters' reputations, but it was a subject on which Mrs Bennet was beyond the reach of reason.

This recent letter had no news to share with the rest of her family, and Elizabeth put it away as her mother entered. Jane put down her embroidery and lifted her gaze to the window, but even from across the room, Elizabeth knew that Jane's eyes saw nothing. Her bright eyes were empty, and her face held no expression. She was about to distract Jane from her heartache when Mrs Bennet reached her eldest first. Elizabeth watched in surprise as her mother placed a kiss on Jane's hair and gently gave her upper arm a reassuring squeeze.

The pallor of Jane's face remained unchanged, but the light came back into her eyes as Mrs Bennet said, "You are a good girl, Janie." As soon as the tender moment had come, it was gone, and her mother flitted out of the room, calling for Hill.

I must learn to be more gracious toward my own mother. Elizabeth knew her mother would never be sensible and well-mannered, but if Fitzwilliam could engage her mother with improved and inviting manners, then Elizabeth could be more charitable to her.

Her mother had long lost the esteem of her husband—if she had ever had it—and genuine affection had been equally lost early in their marriage. Her father thought his wife's unenlightened mind made it acceptable to make her an object of ridicule. Mr Bennet was as capable of respecting his wife as any other husband, but he chose to find amusement in her ignorance rather than do what he could to gently improve it. Had he treated her as every wife deserved to be treated by her husband, it might have made her mother less nervous and more sensible. Sadly, Mrs Bennet would never have the benefit of a husband who loved and respected her.

Fitzwilliam's desire for this sad affair with Lydia and Wickham to be over and done with was clear. She remembered sitting across his lap, smiling while they chatted amiably and lightly, and then spoke on more sombre topics. Elizabeth

recollected the look of adoration in his eyes when he told her that she had saved him from a lonely existence.

Fitzwilliam held a tightening grasp around her, and Elizabeth leant in to meet his lips. She opened her mouth at the insistent caress of his tongue and returned his kiss with equal ardour. Elizabeth felt a rush of pure desire shoot through her. He pulled her toward him and she straddled his lap, facing him. She watched his pupils dilate and heard his laboured breathing, and the feel of his hands roaming her body added to her building excitement.

His warm lips left hers, and she arched her neck as his mouth moved down the column of her throat, while he cupped one breast firmly in his hand.

“I want you,” she whispered.

Fitzwilliam’s insistent mouth stopped, and his hand slowly slid away back to her hips. Her breathing was shallow and her vision hazy, but when she realised he had pulled away, she focused her gaze on his face.

“I did not intend this, Elizabeth,” he said, still breathing heavily. “I simply wanted to say good-bye to you alone, without the eyes of your family on us. I wished to speak freely with you without any regard to propriety.”

“It does not follow that this is unwelcome.”

He shook his head and seemed not to know where to rest his eyes. His white shirt clung to him from the heat of the room, and Elizabeth had a sudden need to tear the garment off of him. Something in his eyes made her pause.

“What changed for you since the last time we found ourselves here? Wickham’s treachery and Lydia’s situation do not change the way I feel for you.”

“What I ought to do and what I want to do have never been more at odds,” he answered in a controlled voice.

“We are not like them,” she murmured. “You cannot compare what we have to Lydia and Wickham.”

He met her eye but did not answer.

“Fitzwilliam,” she breathed with a sigh, “I have had enough formal civility, and I suppose that you have as well. You cannot believe that what we have done is entirely wrong, given our feelings for one another, given that we are engaged. If you thought it was immoral, then you would not have done so the first time. Your carefully prescribed manners serve you well in every other interaction, but you cannot be that way with me. Do you no longer think of me as your wife?”

“Of course not. I love you. You have been the wife of my heart for a long time.”

“Then there is no need for gentlemanly restraint when you are alone with me. While we neither of us wish to have our actions here spoken of by the outside world, with me you can simply act in the manner that will most constitute your happiness.” She leant closer and focused intently on his face. “There is no need for you to hold back from me.”

His eyes widened; then he gave her a roguish smile. There was a noise of rustling fabric, and her skirts were pushed up to her waist. His fingertips traced along her stockings and then finally reached the bare skin of her thighs. Fitzwilliam lifted his hands beneath her and forcefully pulled her closer.

“That is just as well, madam,” he said, his tone all confidence, “because I simply must have you.”

His words sent her pulse racing, but it was his look of reverent desire that made Elizabeth intoxicated with the knowledge that he was hers.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Darcy estimated there were five hundred people in and around the Upper Rooms on this blistering Thursday evening. He avoided the train of carriages and went inside, taking his share of the heat and inconvenience by mingling with the crowd. A fancy ball was always held on Thursdays, and Darcy arrived just as the second cotillion began. He made swift work of crossing the vestibule and slipping down the corridor to the octagon antechamber, eager to avoid being welcomed by the master of ceremonies.

The assembled company passed by him on their way to and from the ball room, the card room, and the tearoom. He paused before entering the card room to gather a calming breath while he steadied his mind. He acutely felt the difference between the expectation of an unpleasant event and the certainty of it. With his heart beating rapidly in his chest, Darcy strode into the crowded room.

There were a multitude of tables in the card room, but it did not take long for Darcy to locate Wickham. He simply had to find the most crowded, boisterous table, and at its centre would be the man he needed. Near the middle of the room was a table of six rowdy men with Wickham revelling in his role as dealer at vingt-et-un, wearing a fine cut of clothes that Darcy was sure he could not have afforded a fortnight ago.

Wickham raised his smiling countenance from the cards he dealt and met Darcy's cold stare. He paused with the last card still in his hand, and the laughter instantly died in his eyes. It was not until one of the men called his attention to the game

that Wickham tore his gaze from Darcy. By the time Darcy approached Wickham's side, he had regained his easy manner and finished dealing, but his pallor remained. Darcy was still recovering from the thought of having to address this poor excuse for a man, and Wickham took the advantage and spoke first.

"I have been in Bath these two weeks and have not encountered you. You must not have been here long enough to enjoy the evening parties." Wickham displayed a false friendliness that turned Darcy's stomach.

"No. The usual character of them holds nothing for me. I am no card player."

"You always did prefer books to cards. Might I introduce you to my companions?" Without waiting for a response, Wickham addressed his compatriots. "May I present Fitzwilliam Darcy? All you need know of him is that all of his actions may be traced to pride, and pride has often been his best friend. It has connected him nearer with virtue than any other feeling."

"I would speak with you privately, Mr Wickham." He spoke in a measured tone, ignoring the assembled men.

"Do you hear this, my friends? So full of improper pride he cannot condescend to acknowledge you." He gave an exaggerated frown and shook his head. "You can be on your way, Darcy."

Wickham called for his companions to place their bets. Darcy watched in a controlled fury at Wickham's audacity to ignore him. Wickham's confidence had increased exponentially in correlation with his new wife's fortune. He had known that Wickham would not be easy to deal with, but he had not expected outright disrespect.

But since when has George Wickham acted in a manner befitting a gentleman?

The men went around the table, placing their bets, and then Wickham checked his card and doubled the stakes. After watching Wickham, Darcy addressed the entire table in a

blighting tone: “Mr Wickham always doubles his bet when he has an ace.”

Groans were heard as the men shook their heads and tossed their cards on the table. Wickham’s shoulders tensed, and he exhaled angrily as he slowly set down his cards. He looked up at Darcy, and all pretences of polished manners were dropped.

“You think so little of me as to interfere with my play! Is this the reason you have come to Bath?”

“I think you have turned out very wild, but that is not what brings me here. I again ask to speak with you privately, Mr Wickham.”

“I think not, *Mr Darcy*. The distress of my circumstances, prior to my marriage, was entirely your doing. I shall not interrupt my game for your convenience.”

A few gentlemen nodded to one another, and others whispered to the man next to him. Watching the rising tempers proved far more entertaining than a high-stakes game. Pairs of eyes from the neighbouring tables had also turned their way. Perhaps having an audience for this interview could be to his benefit. If Wickham preferred to save face in front of the wealthy and influential, Darcy might shame Wickham into doing right by Lydia.

“I am here to see that you acknowledge the young woman you seduced and who is now carrying your child.”

Wickham’s confident demeanour slipped, but his gentlemanly attitude was soon put back in place. “Perhaps you have not heard, but I am a married man.” He gave an unaffected smile. “You ought to be careful what you say of me. My wife’s uncle is an earl.” Darcy lifted his eyes at this inanity from such an insecure man.

“You can still be held accountable—easily done now that you have control of your wife’s money. I know that you will spend her fortune to set up your mistresses and gamble to your heart’s content. However, I will see you use some of your ill-got fortune to provide for your child by Miss Lydia Bennet.”

“Lydia Bennet is a strumpet and a senseless flirt!” Wickham then lowered his voice so only Darcy could hear. “You had an opportunity to preserve her honour, but chose not to act.” He shrugged before raising his voice so the crowd could once again hear him. “What does it signify to me or the world whether a slut has a bastard?”

“Unless you are royalty, illegitimacy is frowned upon. Perhaps you have been removed from the realm of gentlemen for too long. You ought to have remained with the regiment in Brighton.”

“Soldiers play high, Darcy, and I have always been expensive,” Wickham answered with a disarming smile. “I was a dove—plucked of all my money. My fortune, due entirely to your cruel neglect, has never been large.”

“From what I understand of your new wife’s fortune, that is no longer a distress under which you must suffer. I am here to see that the Bennet family name is restored to some respectability by your public acceptance of the connexion between you and Miss Lydia Bennet’s child.”

“You mean to say that you are here in a cause of compassion and honour?” Wickham asked in a tone of mock surprise. “No, you are here for the sake of your family pride since you have become entrapped by that whore’s sister.”

However little Darcy might have liked such an address, he contented himself by coolly replying, “I will see you meet your obligation to your child.”

Emboldened by his newfound wealth and perhaps by the desire for dominance over him, Wickham rose and stood nearly eye to eye with Darcy. “I acknowledge no child, and you have no right to accuse me!” His voice was piercing, dripping with contempt. “I think you are here because that whore’s sister has taken you in and you must preserve your family name. Why else, but for your own sake, would you concern yourself with Lydia?”

Darcy felt the gazes of the nearby parties and knew he was losing the upper hand in this disgraceful conversation. It went against his character to hold a private conversation in view of

the gawking public. Leaving now was not an option, and Darcy had no alternative but to see this confrontation concluded, preferably without giving in to his building rage. There was no way he could return to Elizabeth unless he had done all he could to see that part of her family's reputation would be restored.

He answered with a calm he did not feel. "I am not here to discuss anything other than your open acknowledgement of Lydia Bennet's child and your promise to provide for their upkeep."

Wickham then clapped him on the shoulder, giving every appearance to their assembled audience that they were long-parted friends. Speaking quietly so that only Darcy could hear, Wickham leant closer with a cold glint in his eye and murmured, "I have *despised* you for a very long time, and I finally know how to have my revenge over you."

Wickham smiled broadly and stepped away and, in a louder voice, said, "I hear you are to be married! Lizzy Bennet is a prime article."

"Refrain from speaking about Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"Come now! She is lovely. Any man who has seen her would agree—charming, pretty, though poor with bad connexions. I was surprised to learn of your engagement. I was certain you were destined for your cousin. You must have been willingly tempted by Miss Elizabeth's...alluring femininity." Wickham gave a knowing smile to the crowd, and Darcy bit back the bile that was rising in his throat.

When he finally spoke, he knew his accent had none of its usual sedateness. "I will not tell you again: do not speak of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I am enduring this mortification only to see that you preserve what is left of Miss Lydia's respectability and to ensure the protection of your child."

"It is a shame that Lydia is a fallen woman!" Wickham smiled with unrestrained amusement. "The virtuous among us are so eager to apply the term 'prostitute' to an unmarried woman who has mislaid her virginity."

Wickham's merriment as he maligned the Bennet women deepened the wounds of his vicious insults. All of this brought anew to Darcy's mind the rage he felt when this man had attempted to elope with his own sister. *How much farther beyond all decency would this wretched man go?* "It was 'misaid' because you seduced her and left her with child," he replied through gritted teeth.

"I acknowledge no child! If Lydia Bennet sprained her ankle, it is no fault of mine. You are here because you have become entangled yourself and do not want your proud family name sullied by a connexion to a household with such fast daughters. You need someone to take responsibility for ruining Lydia Bennet, and you have chosen me." Wickham winked at Darcy, and then continued in a loud, clear voice, "Elizabeth Bennet is a lively young lady. She has much in common with her forward youngest sister. Is she foisting a bastard child on you as well? It would not surprise me if it were true."

He felt his heart pounding faster. "I will not allow you to defame that lady's good name!"

"I speak only the truth, Darcy. Lydia Bennet is a wicked whore, and so is her sister Elizabeth. If you allow Elizabeth's child by another man to inherit Pemberley, it is no concern of mine. Now go back to Derbyshire, and leave me to my game." Wickham returned to his chair, and Darcy felt the ungovernable outrage that had been building within his chest burst forth.

"Mr Wickham," cried Darcy, "I expect your apology in person and in writing tomorrow morning, or you will answer for your words!" Darcy promptly turned on his heel and exited the room.

Darcy passed from the assembly rooms—with no memory of the journey—to discover himself outside near the sedan chair entrance: dazed, nauseous, and with trembling hands. The night air was still sweltering, but Darcy felt inexplicably cold.

How did I let this happen?

Darcy tried to pace with nervous energy, but his motion was prevented by the ambling crowd. He stood astonished and knew not where to go or where to look, rage and bewilderment battling for the dominating feelings crossing his mind. It was in this confused manner that Bingley found him not long thereafter.

“Come, Darcy.” He led him away from the crowd. “You must tell me what happened. It is all anyone can talk of. Hurst left his card game to find me in the ballroom. Hurst! Abandoned his game! What did you do?”

Darcy had genuinely believed that he could reason with Wickham and persuade him to acknowledge his child. Was that hopeful rationalising on his part or arrogance? Upon hearing Bingley’s entreaties and realising he was being led away before a gaping crowd, Darcy recovered his deportment and steadied his features. It would not do to appear shaken and outraged. He needed to act with a level head if he was to recover from this disaster.

“Bingley,” Darcy said, choosing his words carefully, “I request a favour of you.”

“Yes, just tell me what has happened!”

“I am going to write a letter, and I need you to deliver it in person for me first thing in the morning. You then must wait for a reply.”

Bingley laughed pleasantly. “Have you left all your servants in London? Why do you ask this of me?”

Darcy stopped walking to meet Bingley’s eye. “I need you to deliver a letter to Mr Wickham and await his response. You have my consent to accept his apology. If he does not concede and agree to my terms, you will be obliged to hand him a second letter containing my challenge.”

Bingley’s brow creased, and then a heartbeat later, his eyes widened in shock. “Darcy! You cannot be serious.”

“I have never been more in earnest! Aside from what that man owes to Lydia, Mr Wickham just insulted Elizabeth’s reputation to a room full of the wealthy and influential. I shall

not stand by yet again and let that man proceed unimpeded. If he does not retract his slander and recognise Lydia's child, I see no other option for preserving their honour and mine. I will not allow it to be said that my wife—" Darcy broke off, too angry to continue.

Bingley looked down Alfred Street and into the night, sighing heavily and shaking his head.

"Do not ask this of me, Darcy. I cannot be your second." Bingley's face showed his regret. "Do you not see why I needed to distance myself? There is no hope of keeping this silent—for God's sake, even Hurst noticed. This will be whispered about in every gentlemen's club. I cannot be known to have defended the Bennets after..."

"After your breach of promise to Jane."

"Miss Bennet released me!" Bingley insisted. "Although I won't deny that was what I wanted, I must detach myself for the sake of my family's reputation."

"It is as likely that, in the sober light of morning, Mr Wickham will recant and do what I require of him. If it comes to a meeting between us..." Darcy hung his head at the thought. "Bingley, I am offended you will not stand by me." He could not keep the injured tone out of his voice.

"I am certain that you will act honourably. Your cause is a just one. But I must think of my own name, and there can be no connexion between my family and the Bennets. What about Caroline's future? What of my intention to live the life of a gentleman? I shall make a clean break of it. I am soon to return to Netherfield—do not look at me that way! I have an eligible purchase offer and need to meet with my agent. From that point forward, I will not return to Hertfordshire or interact with any member of the Bennet family."

Darcy stared at Bingley for a long moment before coldly replying, "Then I regret that here we must part ways, Mr Bingley."

Darcy made his way back to Camden Place. Nothing could restore Bingley to him with a faith unbroken, a character

unblemished. Nothing could take away the knowledge of what Jane had suffered or remove the truth of Bingley's conduct toward himself. Bingley had forsaken him in his hour of need, and after so carefully, if not always appropriately, looking after Bingley's interests, Darcy could admit to feeling wounded.

Darcy was in no state of mind to entertain and was put out when his servant told him, upon entering his house, that he had a visitor. Considering that perhaps Wickham had sent a man with a letter of apology, Darcy agreed to see the caller.

"There you are, Darcy!" Colonel Fitzwilliam stood with a smile to greet him. "I had feared you might spend your evening dancing and gaming. As you see, I have arrived earlier than promised." His cousin peered at him as he came closer. "I say, whatever is the matter?"

"Forgive me—I am truly pleased to see you." He offered a wan smile along with his handshake, then said in an impatient rush, "I require your immediate help, and if you forsake me as well, then I am at a loss."

"Anything—how might I help you?" His voice showed his grave concern at seeing him distressed.

Darcy hesitated to say the words aloud and glanced at the window. He saw his reflection in the glass, the vision looking back at him appearing pallid and weary. He turned back to his cousin. "I have challenged George Wickham to a duel, and I need you to be my second."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Longbourn

Thursday, July 24

My dearest Fitzwilliam,

My impatience to be gone from Longbourn increases daily. The Gardiners have written to me about the loveliness of Pemberley and Derbyshire, and I am eager to see it myself. Shall I sit outside the church every morning in the hope that you return sooner than expected? I do not wish to waste a precious moment before becoming your wife. You would not mind marrying me on short notice, I hope.

My aunt wrote that Georgiana, with the help of Mrs Annesley, was a delightful hostess. When your housekeeper learned that Miss Darcy was entertaining the relations of the soon-to-be Mrs Darcy, she could not help but speak to them. Mrs Reynolds has never heard a cross word from you, and she has known you since you were four years old. She adds that you are handsome and wonders whether anyone is good enough for you, that you are the best landlord, the best master, affable to the poor, and so on. You ought to have brought Mrs Reynolds to the assembly in Meryton. Had I spoken to her before I met you, my first impression would have been more to your credit.

My aunt also wrote that Lydia has become increasingly difficult. My first thought upon reading this report was that my sister was as self-absorbed as she has been known to be. It seems I am still too quick to judge. Upon hearing that Mr

Wickham was lately married and learning the disgraceful terms by which he was wed, Lydia has fallen into melancholy. I understand my uncle wrote to you, and the arrangements for her removal to your estate in Ireland are underway. I have no doubt of your success in Bath, and once Mr Wickham openly acknowledges his child, we might put this affair behind us. Lydia may not be able to return home, but there is now reason to hope that the rest of my family may again be received by our neighbours.

I believe you are capable of everything great and good and that you will do all that is possible for Lydia, and thereby my entire family, to preserve us from infamy. While you likely do not want it, you have my gratitude.

Know that I love you and remain forever yours,

E. Bennet

To read that Elizabeth had the utmost faith in his ability to ensure her family's respectability disheartened him. He was certain that never in his beloved's wildest thoughts did she imagine he would challenge George Wickham to a duel. He could still hardly believe it of himself. He had waited for hours with no small amount of trepidation for Colonel Fitzwilliam to return with Wickham's answer.

Darcy was staring into the empty fireplace, his arm slung over the mantel, when his cousin strode in. Without looking up, he asked, "What was Wickham's reply?"

"When and where you please."

He had suspected that Fitzwilliam's being gone for so long meant that Wickham had declined to resolve this peaceably, but hearing the truth was still a blow.

When Darcy failed to respond, Fitzwilliam continued, "I had to wait two hours before Wickham would see me, though I heard his carriage arrive and suspected he was only just coming home from whatever hole in which he passed the night. Can you believe that, when he came in to see me, he was carrying a walking stick and flipping open his gold watch? And I swear to you that the clothes he wore cost more

than my commission. Such overt signs of imagined superiority were mortifying to witness. He has confused opulence with elegance. I know his calm demeanour was an act because, before he met with me, I overheard him cry out in alarm when his man handed him my card.” He laughed at the memory.

Darcy could make no reply, and Fitzwilliam schooled his features and tone to fit Darcy’s sombre mood. “Wickham told me in no uncertain terms that he would tell anyone who asked that Miss Lydia Bennet was a fallen woman and he would not acknowledge any connexion to her.”

“And what of Elizabeth?”

“He said he would be proud to take out a notice in the newspapers advertising the supposed lax morals of the Bennet girls. The man is determined to ruin your reputation and your future wife’s. He is eager to confront you.”

He could scarcely believe that Wickham refused to apologise for his lies and insults. Darcy was still staring into the empty grate while he thought of that man’s cold-hearted viciousness. *In order to preserve my family’s honour and settle this dispute, I will actually have to engage in a duel.*

“Darcy, do you hear me? I am confident Wickham wants to kill you.”

Darcy ground his teeth and was deep in silent contemplation. That he needed to engage in the most elaborate and dangerous form of conflict resolution was no less astounding this morning than it was last night.

Fitzwilliam sat near the fireplace and said, “It shocked me that Wickham chose to defend his conduct. I was confident that he would withdraw rather than meet you. Instead, he seemed delighted by the idea of staring at you over the barrel of a pistol. He wants you ruined, and if he can kill you, then he will leave the field a happy man.”

Darcy finally looked up, his determination to face what had to be done back in place. “One fights a duel in order to say that one has done so. It is for a moral purpose, to defend one’s honour. I am not fighting to kill.”

“Tell that to George Wickham! You are the only one who considers this an affair of honour.” Fitzwilliam sighed as he sank into his chair. “What in heaven did you say to each other?”

“How do you mean?”

The colonel flushed but met his eye. “You are a loyal friend, a liberal master, an honourable man...but you are used to having your own way. You are not always at ease with people. You do not have a welcoming way with them.”

“Do you suggest I walked into the card room intending to challenge Wickham to a duel? That my disdain for him and my reserved nature are the reasons I find myself here?”

“No, I want to comprehend how your conversation unravelled into a quarrel that resulted in you having no other honourable option but to call the man out. I do not doubt he deserves it. I simply am surprised. You did not challenge him last summer after Ramsgate,” Fitzwilliam added quietly.

“I could not risk exposing Georgiana. It was for her credit and feelings that I did nothing but write to Wickham and persuade him to keep his silence and his distance. But in this instance, the damage is already done. He has taken worse liberties with a girl who will be my sister, and then he defamed the character of my future wife.”

“What did he say of Elizabeth Bennet? You cannot fool me, Darcy. You would not be in such a state if Wickham only refused to acknowledge his responsibilities to her ruined sister.”

“He insinuated to all who could hear that Elizabeth entrapped me, that she was with child by another man, and that this was the only reason I was engaged to her.”

“But there is no truth behind what Wickham claimed.”

“Such claims do not need to be absolutely proven. That they are suspected will cause gossip, and innuendo will be accepted as evidence. I will not have my wife’s reputation called into question by that poor excuse of a man.”

“Did you not consider that, when there is no Darcy child born early, there would be no reason to give credence to Wickham’s claims?”

Darcy turned away and hoped his cousin would presume he was embarrassed for not considering such an obvious fact in the middle of a heated moment. Their near relationship and constant intimacy made that an unlikely expectation. Seconds ticked by before Fitzwilliam cursed quietly under his breath.

Darcy heard his cousin rise and take two steps closer. “Miss Bennet is not the sort of woman to ensnare you in order to provide a name for her child by another man. I am forced, therefore, to conclude that there is genuine reason to fear that Pemberley’s heir will arrive less than nine months from the day you marry her?”

How was he to put into words that their actions had at the time seemed perfectly natural, more than an appropriate expression of love and devotion, and unequivocally necessary? *My choices with Elizabeth could lead to Wickham’s lies being accepted as truth.* The greater blame for the whole affair, of course, fell to Wickham’s unprincipled behaviour, but he had to accept his own role in finding himself in this lamentable situation. He could feel the eyes of his cousin piercing his back, and the uncomfortable attention compelled Darcy to turn to meet Fitzwilliam’s incredulous stare.

“You are suggesting something that is only possible—not an absolute certainty.”

“I am almost ashamed of you,” he cried. He shook his head before he resumed speaking. “I am not surprised at the notion of a man being tempted by his betrothed. I am not a fool,” Fitzwilliam spoke in a calmer voice. “What I am amazed at is *you* being enticed. I cannot comprehend the notion of the very proper and fastidious Fitzwilliam Darcy seducing his wife-to-be. You are not the sort of man to keep mistresses and engage in careless dalliances. Darcy, you could count all the women you have been with on one hand!”

Including Elizabeth, the number is definitely less than that. And I was equally seduced by her. He suppressed a smile but

said nothing.

“Well, that does explain some of your motives.” Fitzwilliam fell back into his chair. “But it does not change the fact that tomorrow morning you have an appointment at dawn with George Wickham, and he wants to kill you. We spoke only briefly before he had a note sent to the man he chose to be his second, a Mr Kenneth. You and Wickham will have no interaction but what the commonest civility requires. I have already seen Mr Kenneth, a sycophant hoping to hang on Wickham’s wealthy sleeve. He will not attempt to avoid a meeting. Neither he nor Wickham has any interest in resolving this before shots are fired.”

“I have no reservations about defending my honour and that of the Bennets. I enter this with a clear conscience, and I am determined to remedy this evil.”

“Wickham’s second and I have selected the location of your engagement and the firing distance, as well as the number of shots. You will both fire one shot at the same time, and you will fire weapons immediately upon raising your arms, without taking aim. Neither of you are expert marksmen, and I will not give Wickham further opportunity to do you grave harm. In any event, I have employed a surgeon for the occasion, although I dearly hope he is not needed.”

“I imagined there might be trouble engaging a surgeon willing to agree to be present at an illegal duel.”

“A doctor was at Wickham’s home this morning, tending to the invalid wife.” They both shook their heads in sympathy for poor Mrs Wickham. “The woman suffers from severe rheumatic fever that has made her nearly unable to walk. On that account, she is tended by this doctor who, either from his own overhearing or from that of the servants, knew of your challenge. His name is Lockwood, and upon my leaving, he offered his assistance. I told him the time and place, and he will be ready to render his services.”

Darcy considered the virtue in his pursuit of Wickham. Wickham did not regret any of his vicious actions: not for amassing gambling debts in the thousands, not for fooling

Georgiana into believing she was in love, not for seducing Lydia, and not for defaming his and Elizabeth's reputations. This was an honourable way to settle a problem that had no other solution.

He was not left to ruminate for long before Fitzwilliam spoke after pouring them both a glass of brandy. "Is Elizabeth Bennet worth the potential loss of your respectability and the strain of your familial connexions? Is she worth dying to defend?"

How could his cousin ask him such a question? "You are the one who told me Elizabeth had a sense of joy that would be to my credit and not to allow the expectations of others to detract from the happiness she would give me. I had already formed a serious design before *you* endorsed it." Darcy slammed his glass down and rose. "How could you imply she is not worth defending? Her independent character is kept within the bounds of decorum. She does not put herself forward inappropriately, and you may fall in line behind Wickham if you suggest she deserves his slander." His voice lost its usual calm. "So, yes, her charm and intelligence and beauty and everything I love about Elizabeth Bennet are worth my challenging George Wickham to account for his malicious misconduct!"

Darcy stood with his hands clenched at his sides. While he regulated his breathing, he realised that, although Fitzwilliam was staring at him in wide-eyed surprise, there was a smile tugging at his lips.

He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Forgive me, Darcy, but I have never seen you rant and storm. If I ever thought to see you in such a state, I certainly never imaged overwhelming love for a woman would be its cause!"

Darcy realised all that he professed and looked away in embarrassment, hoping the heat he felt in his cheeks was not visible.

"There are harsh punishments for duelling. Should you kill Wickham, you may have to immediately flee to the Continent

or to Scotland with no time to return to Hertfordshire. If you are tried for murder, you could be hanged.”

“We both know that is unlikely even if I do kill him, which is not my intent. Respect for proper conduct is felt by everybody, and I may be absolved should he be mortally injured. This is an affair of honour—at least it is for me. I only hope that Elizabeth will still have me after all is said and done. She will not look kindly on my engaging in a duel.”

“If she will still have you? Miss Bennet is not a fool. She would never refuse you.”

Darcy did not feel it necessary to mention a previous outcome when he discovered that his suit might not be acceptable to any lady whom he chose to honour with a proposal. Instead, he asked his cousin about the likelihood of the duel remaining a private matter.

“There is no way to prevent this from getting abroad!” said his cousin, laughing. “Do not visit the Pump Room today; everyone in Bath is talking of it. Of course, there will be no one on the field tomorrow morning who ought not be there, but do not fool yourself into believing that no one knows that the scheming new husband of the pitiable former Miss Hareton has run afoul of Mr Darcy of Pemberley.”

“Seduction, elopement, illegitimacy, scandal, duels: these are the improprieties the gossiping *ton* seizes upon.” He hated gossip, he hated this despicable place, he hated George Wickham, and he hated being forced into a position to defend his honour.

“I must acquire two decent pistols for you before tomorrow morning. I think there is a fellow in the Market Place who sells capital guns. Too bad there is no time to teach you how to use one.”

“I resent that. Simply because I am not a marksman does not mean that I cannot fire a weapon.”

“This is not the same as grouse shooting with your dogs! Duelling pistols have a hair-trigger as part of the flint-lock. Let us hope you do not shoot yourself before your duel.”

“Your confidence in me touches my heart,” he said drily. “Have you anything else to propose for my success on the morrow?”

“Promise me that you will not touch the pistols before I hand them to you on the field in the morning. I will inspect them, I will load them, and all you need to do is stand exactly where I say and shoot in the direction I tell you.”

“I thank you for taking prodigious care of me,” he muttered.

When Fitzwilliam rose to leave, Darcy called out after him to wait. “I am indeed sincerely and forever grateful for your aid.” They shook hands, and Fitzwilliam left.

Darcy reflected on the ordeal he would face tomorrow. He would have preferred to have influenced Wickham another way: encouraging a sense of duty in him, convincing him that he would make his life miserable if he did not acquiesce, or bribing him with a substantial amount of money. But Darcy would face Wickham with the same unyielding determination he had faced every challenge in his—until now—well-ordered existence.

He wondered whether Elizabeth might be grateful for his heroic attention to duty and honour, but he could understand full well her anger at placing himself in the position of Wickham aiming a pistol at him.

Her eyes would flash in anger, and her entire face would crumble in disappointment when he returned and told her exactly how he had met with Wickham. He sighed heavily and forced himself to think of fonder memories of Elizabeth when she had not at all been cross with him.

He pulled her toward him and met her lips, delighting in her gentle moan and eager response. Darcy entwined his fingers in her dark hair. He wanted to touch her everywhere, to show her every way he felt about her. Elizabeth's skirts were gathered at her hips, and the sight of her stockings and boots peeking out from beneath them was curiously exciting. Darcy bent to kiss her neck, basking in the feel of her breasts pressed against his chest.

Elizabeth whispered his name as she tilted back her head. He had never heard anything sound so sweet. "I love you."

She had said the words many times—as had he—but in this moment, she looked so beautiful, so full of desire for him that he could not find his voice. He pulled her into a crushing, soulful kiss, desperate to express all the love, passion, and faithfulness he felt for her. If he lacked the words to tell her all that she meant to him, then he would be sure that his actions left her in no doubt.

Fine eyes blazing with desire, she thrust her tongue into his mouth as she raked her fingernails through his hair. Darcy returned her ardour equally and roughly held and touched her with an urgency that had not felt necessary their first time together. They kissed wildly, their breathing erratic. The low moans she made against his mouth and her instinctive movements against him were almost more than he could stand.

Darcy relished her sharp gasps of pleasure when he brought his hand beneath her skirts. Elizabeth's mouth fell away from his, and he saw a look of naked hunger in her eyes before she rested her head on his shoulder, her breath hot and moist as her teeth grazed against his neck. His arousal was nearly painful in its intensity, and out of a baser instinct that had long been suppressed, he begged her to touch him. Elizabeth fumbled for his buttons, and then Darcy felt more alive than he had ever been.

His lips came crashing back to her mouth with an unrestrained groan; his body burned where she caressed him. A fear of never being with her in this way again struck him, and his distress manifested itself in his actions. He kissed and stroked her with an impatient need, whispering endearments of devotion, how he adored her body, what pleasures she brought him, and how desperately he wanted to be inside her.

His eyes met hers possessively when she pulled away to look at him in ardent desire. Darcy kept her gaze, and then both of them shuddered at the blissful contact. They eventually fell into rhythmic movements, and Darcy could barely hold on amid the blinding pleasure she gave him. Elizabeth clung to

him, her eyes closed, her fingernails digging into his shoulders, and they moved together faster.

“Elizabeth,” he gasped, and she met his fiery gaze. “Say it again,” he begged as his hips surged upward, his grip on her waist tightening. “Please, tell me again.”

Without dropping her eyes, Elizabeth breathed, “I love you,” and Darcy became undone.

It was some time before their heartbeats slowed and their breathing calmed. Elizabeth’s head rested on his shoulder while Darcy ran his fingers through her damp hair. It was even longer before he was capable of coherent speech. He gently pushed her back to look into her face and took no small amount of pleasure in her dishevelled appearance and satisfied smile.

“‘Love’ is not a strong enough word for all that I feel for you.”

The increased noise on the street brought Darcy’s attention back to the present. Thoughts of Elizabeth’s happiness and their families’ reputation had influenced him in everything he had said and done—or omitted to say and do—in the last four-and-twenty hours. As he considered what he would face at dawn, he realised the sad fate that would befall her and her family should he be bested by Wickham. But now that he was alone, with the remembrance of his betrothed waning and without his cousin’s company, the resolute determination to do what was right, to do his duty as a gentleman, had faded.

Darcy then felt the first stab of terror at facing a dishonourable man who eagerly sought to kill him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It had been a week since anyone other than Lady Lucas or Mrs Philips called at Longbourn and nearly as long since the Bennet ladies had been received elsewhere. Mrs Bennet sat in the parlour with Jane and Lady Lucas. Elizabeth was about to enter the room when the tone of their conversation made her hesitate, and she hovered in indecision outside the door.

“But, Mamma, my reputation cannot, in rational expectation, survive such a blow as this,” she heard Jane say.

“Only should you stay in this neighbourhood,” said her mother. “This trifle with Lydia will be too insignificant to be held against you in London. Lizzy will be in a better position to put you in the path of men far richer than that changeable Mr Bingley. Darcy is so very rich and moves in much higher circles. I am certain our dear Darcy would be very satisfied to host a ball in London for your sake.”

“That does not coincide with what I know of Darcy’s nature. He is generous, to be sure, but I do not believe—”

Elizabeth stepped away to lean against the wall. Although her mother had ceased speaking on ways to bring Lydia home, she had now moved on to securing the future of her eldest daughter. Mrs Bennet’s plans fluttered between using Fitzwilliam’s influence to introduce Jane to wealthy bachelors or to throw her in the path of Mr Bingley again in the hopes that the match might yet be recommenced.

“You ought not to lurk in doorways,” Mr Bennet teased as Elizabeth jumped in surprise. “Mr Darcy would not want his

future wife to act indecorously.”

“Darcy is kinder enough than you realise.”

“I suppose you are correct; he has been generous thus far. Although, I would not test his patience as far as your mother is concerned. I would not invite her to Pemberley. As grand as it may be, it will not be large enough for your husband to hide from the sound of her voice.”

While her mother was a silly woman, there was no reason for her father to be cruel. “You could show her more respect.”

“Come now! Your mother is too ignorant and silly for my respect.”

“And you are too mocking and hurtful for mine!” Elizabeth left without another word.

The joyfulness of family love had long been subdued in the Bennet household. Kitty grumbled of having no amusements now that the only one who would receive her was Maria Lucas. Mary still sought commendation for her mediocre talents and was summarily ignored. Jane’s spirits were not yet recovered enough for her to shower her family with her usual kindness and goodwill. As for her father, he chose to be diverted by provoking the frayed nerves of anyone who crossed his path.

Such were Elizabeth’s days while she waited for Fitzwilliam. She had begun, regretfully, to care less about their reputations the longer he stayed away. Every day passed in the same manner as the previous, and the monotony was torture to her active mind. Elizabeth decided to walk to Meryton. If her aunt Philips were at home, she could, for lack of any other company, call on her.

Elizabeth felt the eyes of Meryton’s citizens following her as she made her way to the circulating library. She held her head high and did her best to affect Fitzwilliam’s stern and disinterested demeanour as she passed them by. She had not yet received a reply to her last letter to him, and she was in the midst of composing a second letter in her mind when a gentleman on horseback called her name.

“Mr Bingley!”

He touched his hat in greeting, and Elizabeth saw his eyes glance behind her, as if searching for another Miss Bennet. “I hope I find you well, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth was glad she had not asked Jane to accompany her. The mortification of this encounter was dreadful enough without having to consider her sister’s fragile feelings. “Since you are no longer to wed my sister, I must insist you refrain from addressing me informally.”

He looked embarrassed. “Please forgive me. I would not wish to offend you. My meeting you here must be something of a surprise.”

Elizabeth struggled to find something to speak of. She was unprepared for such an encounter, for there was not one article of news to reach her of Mr Bingley’s being in the neighbourhood. Although, given the Bennets’ relative isolation of late, this was nothing to be surprised at. She felt anew all her anger at his fickle nature and her sister’s broken heart.

“I did not know you were coming down again. I am shocked you would presume to take residence in our neighbourhood.”

“I was recently in Bath and have only just arrived. My agent has been in contact with a gentleman who seeks to purchase the lease to Netherfield, and I have returned to meet them. So you see, I shall not long be in the neighbourhood and have no plans to return.”

“I believe that would be for the best.”

After another silence, Mr Bingley said, “I saw Darcy in Bath two days ago.”

“I am pleased that he is well. I have not had a letter from him for several days, and so I do not know what trouble he has got in to.”

Her comment was to be taken as an amusing idea, for Fitzwilliam was not the sort of man to find himself in misfortune. But Mr Bingley refused to meet her eye, grew

visibly paler, and gave every impression of wishing to be elsewhere. Elizabeth was immediately suspicious.

“Do you know something of Darcy’s movements this past week? Did he encounter Mr Wickham?”

“Miss Elizabeth, I must take my leave. You will forgive me if I do not offer my compliments to your family. I fear they would not be well received.”

Elizabeth threw aside all propriety and stepped in front of Mr Bingley’s horse, no longer caring a whit what the gawking folks of Meryton would say about her recklessness. “I insist you tell me what you know! Has Darcy seen Mr Wickham?”

Elizabeth could have sworn she heard him mutter something about her likeness to Darcy.

“Yes,” he replied gravely, “they met once Thursday night and...will have a second meeting if they have not had it already, one that was unavoidable.”

Mr Bingley could not possibly be implying that the only way for Fitzwilliam to preserve their honour and settle the dispute was with pistols. “What? Will Darcy challenge—”

“I am certain Darcy could meet Mr Wickham’s depravity no other way.” With a touch to his hat, Mr Bingley was gone.

Fitzwilliam was going to duel Wickham? She did not know whether to be proud of him for his defence of her family or furious that he would place his life in danger. Shock and confusion won out over any other emotion. She was bewildered, and the thought of sitting in her aunt’s parlour now seemed far too stifling. Elizabeth pensively made her way back to Longbourn.



AT THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF DAWN ON SATURDAY, DARCY and Colonel Fitzwilliam sat in Darcy’s landau, the only sound in the cool morning air the occasional rattle of the horses’ reins. As Darcy looked out the left side glass, he could just make out the Green Park Buildings and, through the right, the

river toward Beechen Cliff. It was an enchanting prospect if one were not on Kingsmead Field for a duel.

Fitzwilliam shifted in his seat and gazed across the open field. "I see a gentleman not far off; I believe that is the surgeon. Wickham has not yet arrived, but we are early. Shall we take the field?" He reached out to open the door.

Darcy had been sitting in silence, staring at his moss agate sleeve buttons. Upon hearing his cousin's voice, Darcy's hand shot out and clutched Fitzwilliam's arm as his hand rested on the handle. His cousin looked up in surprise. For a moment, Darcy did not speak, nor did he remove his hand, his breathing coming in quick shallow intakes of breath.

"Georgiana," he said in a harried tone, still gripping his cousin's arm.

His cousin interrupted him with a shake of his head. "Darcy! You cannot think that—"

"Promise me! She is such a lonely child. You must promise me to care for her should—"

"Yes, I shall make sure Georgiana marries the most vain, self-absorbed, cash-strapped, widowed baronet who comes to call her first Season. Pemberley will be bankrupt in two generations, fear not."

Darcy knew his cousin was trying to distract him, but he stared intently with a gaze known to intimidate lesser men.

Fitzwilliam nodded. "Georgiana will want for nothing. You have my word."

Darcy released his cousin's arm. Fitzwilliam removed his hand from the handle and sat back to wait for him to speak. Darcy reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a letter, toying with it in his hands for a moment before passing it to his cousin.

"It is for Elizabeth. Her direction is on the envelope. You must deliver it to her should Wickham—" Darcy paused and glanced at the field. "Should Wickham kill me," he finished in a faltering voice.

His cousin, in a dignified manner, inclined his head and placed the letter in his inner glove pocket.

“There is more I need to tell you,” Darcy said with burning entreaty. “I have settled twenty thousand pounds on Elizabeth, and as you are the executor of my will, I look to you to ensure that she receives it.”

“Darcy, you are not actually married to her! As generous a man as you are, you do not owe her such a legacy.”

“I am a man of honour. This is not a conditional recommendation. It is my explicit wish that Elizabeth receives it.” His cousin stared, disbelieving. “I cannot allow her to remain at Longbourn and be neglected by her irresponsible parents. She has a thousand pounds to her name only on her parents’ deaths and no connexions of any consideration. She is so lively, so intelligent, but if she remains in that neighbourhood, there is no doubt in my mind that she will waste away. With a fortune, she can live in town and be someone of consequence, no matter what damage Lydia has done to her reputation. I trust you to help her arrange things to her satisfaction.”

“I know you are immovable, so I will aid Miss Bennet. I must suggest to you, however painful it might be, the probability that she will not long retain the name of Bennet. With such a fortune, her family’s reputation notwithstanding, a pretty and vivacious woman like her will not remain single in London.”

It was exactly what Darcy had hoped he would say. “Yes, of that I am well aware.” After a lengthy pause and with an unwavering stare, Darcy repeated, “Elizabeth will have twenty thousand pounds, enough to attract a man with no fortune of his own.”

Fitzwilliam waited for him to continue. When he did not, it did not take his cousin much longer to comprehend Darcy’s presumption. “You cannot be in earnest!” He pulled back into his seat, trying to create more distance between himself and Darcy’s idea.

“You admire her, and she will be a very wealthy—”

“It is quite a leap from admiration to matrimony!” Fitzwilliam interrupted. “Your betrothed is diverting, but I would prefer a sweeter, milder-natured woman to be my wife. More importantly, I reserve the right to make such a choice for myself!”

“You have always said you needed to marry with consideration to fortune, and twenty thousand pounds should suit you both well.”

“I know how your mind works,” he cried, pointing at him. “I suppose the fact that I am the only man in the world who would still have her if she is carrying your child has factored into your plan? Not to mention she is no longer intact and therefore unmarriageable should the truth be known?”

“You are being needlessly crude.”

Darcy felt the awkward intensity between them as if it were a living and breathing thing. It brought Darcy no pleasure to discuss Elizabeth marrying another man. But he could not think of his own comfort at a time such as this.

“Her father will mock her and her mother will criticise her, and she deserves better than that. She will have no prospects should she remain penniless at home with one sister a jilt and the other fallen. How worse would it be should Elizabeth also be with child? The Bennets’ ruination would be complete. I am not telling you to marry her. Elizabeth would certainly not marry without affection, and I know she would resent being spoken of in this way. I am simply doing all that I can to preserve her respectability and offer her a future beyond what Longbourn has to offer.”

“You are giving me your blessing to marry your intended, to provide a name for her child if necessary? How gracious of you,” Fitzwilliam sarcastically replied as he glared.

Darcy sighed and then covered his eyes as he leant against the side of the carriage. He would have to speak plainly and admit his shortcoming. “I cannot walk onto that field and take my life into my hands without knowing she will be provided for.” He considered his moss agate sleeve buttons again rather than meet his cousin’s eye. “I could be dead before the sun is

fully over the horizon, and my greatest fear is that I leave Elizabeth vulnerable.”

When in his life had he ever admitted to being afraid? The desire to put one’s affairs in order before facing death was justified, and he always took prodigious care of those he loved. Although he said his greatest fear was leaving Elizabeth to an uncertain fate, he was feeling great anxiety about his own.

“I swear to you,” Fitzwilliam said quietly, “that your sister and Miss Bennet will be provided for. I shall do what is necessary to ensure their comfort and shall protect their good names at whatever the cost.”

Darcy closed his eyes; when he opened them, he was in control of his emotions. Before he could speak, before he could further think on Georgiana and his dearest Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam brought his attention back to the present.

“A gentleman defends his honour with a cool head in a controlled manner.” He leant forward and stared at him. “You are to alight with your head held high and conduct yourself with the same discipline and respectability that you always command.”

His cousin threw open the door and stepped out, and by the time Darcy stood beside him, he once again gave every appearance of being a stern, respectable gentleman. The early morning fog was burning off, and some thirty yards away stood a man fidgeting with a bag as he stared at the river. A modest carriage was behind him, its blinds drawn against the rising sun.

“That must be Mr Lockwood.” Fitzwilliam retrieved the cherry box containing Darcy’s pistols. “Excuse me, but I shall check your weapons again.”

“I ought to greet the surgeon.”

“There is no need.” Fitzwilliam’s gaze was still on the finely crafted weapons. “The only person on this field you need to speak to is me.”

“I cannot be near the man and be silent. My approaching him would not be an impertinent freedom.”

Darcy walked over and bowed to the doctor, whose eyes darted around with worried energy as he shifted his bag. He was a frail-looking man a few years older than himself. “Forgive me for speaking to you without an introduction. I am Fitzwilliam Darcy. May I presume you are the surgeon Colonel Fitzwilliam engaged for our meeting?”

“Edgar Lockwood, sir, at your service,” he answered pleasantly with a bow. “Although I hope *you* do not require my services, Mr Darcy.”

“Our opinions coincide, Mr Lockwood.” Darcy considered what he ought to say to continue their conversation. Darcy supposed he must be a sociable man because he took pity on Darcy’s inability to continue the conversation and volunteered that he had been a surgeon in London but now treated patients in Bath.

“Most of my patients take the waters for the benefit of their joints. I have been treating Miss Hareton, for example, for rheumatic fever for several years.”

“The lady is now Mrs Wickham,” Darcy corrected politely.

His pleasant expression fell. “Yes, I suppose that is her new title.” All discourse was now at an end, and after several moments of uncomfortable silence, Darcy took his leave and returned to his cousin, who was admiring the matched set of duelling pistols and asked his impression of the surgeon.

“I am hesitant about forming an opinion. He spoke well and appears to be a genteel, if docile, sort of man. At the first he was affable, but then he grew silent. I could not catch the tone of his conversation.”

“You are not the most talented at understanding people. I am surprised you took the trouble to make yourself known to him at all.”

The rumbling of an approaching carriage caught their attention. It was undeniably new, pulled by a team of six horses, and glistened in the early morning sun.

“What an ostentatious show of wealth.” Darcy shook his head as the large carriage came to a stop. “Most residents of Bath do not even need to keep carriages.”

The surgeon stood nearby and did not remove his gaze from the man who stepped out of the ridiculous carriage. George Wickham gave every appearance of enjoying himself as he took the field, bowing with a flourish toward Darcy and Fitzwilliam. He was followed by another man carrying a pistol case under his arm, who then engaged Wickham in hurried conversation.

“Darcy, remember, there is no need for you to speak with Wickham,” said his cousin. “That is why I am here—to represent you. I will make one final attempt to resolve this peaceably with his second.”

Fitzwilliam was speaking with Wickham’s second, Mr Kenneth, when Wickham turned his attention down the field.

“Come now, Darcy, let us speak plainly!” Wickham called to where Darcy stood next to his horses. “Will you apologise for calling me a liar and a rake?” he asked with a smirk.

“Your second may speak with Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“I find your attention to propriety a dead bore!”

“It is you, Mr Wickham, who must recant. You attacked my integrity and the reputations of the ladies of my family.” Fitzwilliam caught his eye and shook his head, but Darcy paid him no mind as he stared Wickham down.

Wickham swiftly crossed the distance between them. “I have no intention of apologising. I will proudly tell anyone who cares to listen that the future Mrs Darcy is a whore like her youngest sister. Your sister by marriage will always be a whore, and I can look forward to the day when polite society will question whether your wife’s children have Darcy blood.” In a quieter voice, Wickham continued so only Darcy could hear. “Exposing you and those you care for to gossip and contempt is second only to the joy of looking at you over the barrel of a gun. I have little other means of revenge at my

disposal, and I do so wish to see you suffer as you have left me to suffer all these years.”

“Your trials are due to your own extravagant ways and dissolute habits. I shall not stand by and allow you to ruin the reputation of ladies under my protection.”

Wickham merely shrugged. “You ought to know: Lydia’s lovely person could not but please me. I endeavoured, by every means in my power, to make myself pleasing to her without any design of returning her affection.”

Darcy refused to allow him the pleasure of seeing him angry. Wickham winked then continued to insult him. “Now that I further reflect, the same could be said about our fetching Georgiana,” he said with mock consideration. “I do hope that, when I left her in Ramsgate, she felt as though she would never be happy again.”

From deep inside Darcy’s soul, he found the fortitude not to strike Wickham for speaking of his sister. “For the sake of your own selfish interests and convenience, you would perpetuate any cruelty or any treachery. You have no feelings for others. If you refuse to apologise and seek reconciliation, I have no recourse but to see you meet my challenge.”

“With pleasure.” Wickham bowed and made his way across the field. After several paces, he shouted over his shoulder, “Your future bride and I were at a time such good friends. ’Tis a shame she did not go to Brighton instead of her sister. I would have enjoyed taking a flyer on her. Lizzy would have enjoyed it too.”

Fitzwilliam crossed the field back toward Darcy and gave Wickham a stare of unrestrained loathing as he passed him. Darcy’s feelings changed gradually from indignant contempt to a composed and steady gravity.

Fitzwilliam told him how the barrels of Wickham’s weapons were smoothbore, not rifled, and they had been loaded with only a single charge. The firing distance was twenty-four paces, and after asking whether all was ready, the signal to fire would be the drop of a handkerchief. It took all

of Darcy's self-control not to pace with volatile energy while he glowered at Wickham.

"Once begun, you will both fire one time. If Wickham does not offer an apology that you wish to accept, you both will fire once again unless, of course, one of you takes a severe hit after the first round. Your second pistols will be at the ready, but I do hope you will not need it. Darcy? Darcy!"

He dragged his eyes from Wickham and looked at his cousin. "I heard you."

"I never imagined saying these words to you, but *do not* allow your emotions to master you. You are a gentleman preserving yourself in an affair of honour. If there was ever a time for your propensity for steady purpose, resolution, and impassivity, it is now."

Darcy nodded once in agreement. Fitzwilliam went on as he marked out the firing distance. "You and Wickham are merely tolerable shots, so the distance is short. I will hand your pistol to you already cocked and ready to fire. You will salute one another after you approach your mark. I know you do not wish to be told what to do, but your life may depend upon it. I want you to turn sideways as you extend your arm and offer the smallest target area possible. Wickham will not admit his fault by deloping, nor is he going to aim to inflict a non-fatal wound. He will fire intending to kill. Stay on your mark until both pistols have been fired, and whatever you do, do not lower your arm until both shots are fired." He handed him his pistol.

"Is there anything else you wish me to do or not do? I have never been given so many orders in all my life." Darcy watched Wickham take his weapon. His own pistol felt heavy in his hand, and he had to forcefully close his fingers around the handle so as not to drop it.

"Only one: Do not get killed." With that, Fitzwilliam walked thirty yards back to stand with Wickham's second and the surgeon. A neutral third party, agreed upon by their seconds to preside over the matter, stood between them and

held the large white handkerchief. Darcy watched Fitzwilliam speak to the doctor, who turned his back to the proceedings.

Darcy stood at his place, his implacable resentment for Wickham pushed aside only far enough to allow him to think on his cousin's instructions. With cold civility, he inclined his head to Wickham, who only smirked. His heart rate felt too rapid, and he could hear his blood pounding in his ears. His eyes widened despite the early morning sun rising in the east. He felt cold, resolved, tense, but he only felt a brief flash of dread when they both raised their arms.

The handkerchief dropped, and the sound of two pistols firing at once blasted through the quiet tranquillity of the morning.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Darcy's fingers still shook when Colonel Fitzwilliam took the pistol from his hand. The world had shifted out of focus after he pulled the trigger, and it was not until his cousin clapped him on the back and congratulated him that Darcy could take stock of his surroundings. Wickham's second was leaning over that gentleman in uncertainty. The surgeon stood motionless with his medical bag in hand away from the others, although he had turned back around to face the assembled men.

The roar of the pistol blasts finally dimmed in his ears and allowed Darcy to hear the string of curses coming from Wickham's mouth. The man was flat on his back in the grass, his left hand up at the side of his head, and his neckcloth soaked in bright red blood. Wickham's head rolled from side to side as he spat invectives against Darcy's character and lineage in between hisses of pain.

"Doctor!" Darcy called when he finally found his voice. Mr Lockwood continued to watch Wickham suffer. "Your services are required, Mr Lockwood." This provoked him, and with a heavy sigh and shake of his head, he took up his bag of instruments and knelt next to Wickham.

The whole of the morning's events seemed too fantastic to be real, and Darcy was not yet master of himself enough to reflect on them. He tried to regulate his breathing as his cousin and Mr Kenneth conferred. Fitzwilliam spoke animatedly and gestured at Wickham while the other man only nodded. The doctor was attempting to dress Wickham's wound. The sight

of so much blood caused Darcy to feel ill. *What have I done?* Fitzwilliam talked briefly with the surgeon and then trotted back to his side.

“You can leave the ground with your honour, Darcy. I congratulate you!” Fitzwilliam gave an unrestrained grin. “Wickham is not in a position to retract and apologise at present, but his second has done so on his behalf. One certainly could not argue after seeing your shot.”

“How is Wickham?” Darcy asked in a strangled voice as he stared across the field at his adversary.

“There is always the risk of infection, but the poor excuse for a man ought to recover.” Darcy’s stomach turned at the sight of the blood-soaked bandages, and he looked at his cousin in disbelief. “Mr Lockwood says the bullet tore off most of Wickham’s left ear. He will carry the proof of today’s punishment for the rest of his life. A brilliant shot, Darcy!” Fitzwilliam was positively beaming.

“You will not wish to know for what I was aiming,” he muttered dryly.

Fitzwilliam’s jovial countenance fell. “*Do not* ruin this for me. I shall proceed in the belief that you intended to inflict such a precise, non-fatal injury.”

Darcy could just acknowledge within himself the possibility of ending the life of George Wickham. That truth made him shudder at the idea of the guilt at taking another’s life that must have followed. He would have been plagued for the rest of his life by both the memories of their shared childhood and the sight of Wickham, as undeserving as he was, dying at his feet. Had he killed him, he would never have forgiven himself.

“Let me speak one last time with Wickham and settle this. I wish to leave for Hertfordshire within the hour.”

Mr Lockwood had slowed the bleeding, and Wickham now waved the surgeon off and attempted to rise. He managed so far as to sit upright until his eyes rolled and he tipped backward. Mr Kenneth was still holding the unnecessary

second pistol and hovering uselessly. Wickham glared as Darcy approached. He might have cursed him more had the attempt to lift his head again not caused him to grimace.

“Can you not give him something to ease his pain?” Darcy asked.

“He is not suffering exceedingly,” Mr Lockwood muttered coolly while he replaced the blood-soaked bandages with new ones.

“We are both fortunate that flint-lock pistols are not terribly accurate.” Darcy leant over where Wickham lay.

Wickham’s eyes blazed with hatred as he tried unsuccessfully once again to rise. “I ought to have aimed for your stomach instead of your heart! I might have had the pleasure of watching you die slowly and painfully.”

Darcy could no longer be surprised to hear such vitriol from George Wickham. “To do the best only for yourself no longer passes as duty. I will be in contact with you regarding your duty of maintenance to Miss Lydia Bennet and your child. You will retract and apologise for your slander about Miss Lydia and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You cannot deny in front of these witnesses that this matter is settled.”

He touched his hat and walked toward his landau, his steps swift and determined until Fitzwilliam caught up to him.

“You ought to speak to your valet, Darcy. He should not let you out with loose threads dangling from your coat.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed in confusion as he followed his cousin’s gaze to the tear on the left side of his dark green coat. With a shrug, he carried on, but he was stopped short when Fitzwilliam suddenly grabbed his lapel and spun him around. His cousin patted at his side and held him still while he frantically tore at his open cutaway coat and attempted to tug it off.

Darcy tried to step away. “Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“Damn it, Darcy! Take off the coat!”

He stood stunned as his coachman ran forward and helped to pull away the coat from his shoulders. Darcy's protests were ignored while Fitzwilliam's fingers fumbled on his striped waistcoat's single-breasted buttons. That, too, was ripped from his body.

"Unhand me!" No one paid him any heed. He had just shot off a piece of a man's ear, and now he was stripped down to his shirt on Kingsmead Field by his cousin and his servant. His cousin then swiftly exhaled and stepped away, muttering a quiet "thank God" under his breath.

Darcy's eyes darted between the coachman, who had retreated to his horses, and his cousin, who was now bent at the waist with his hands at his sides, cursing to himself. He was about to harangue Fitzwilliam for his crazed behaviour when he moved his arm and cringed at the motion. Darcy looked down and saw a red stain contrasting sharply against the crisp white shirt. There was a ragged tear in the shirt along his left side, and Darcy flinched when he ran his finger across the shallow wound where Wickham's bullet had grazed him three inches below his heart.

Fitzwilliam had controlled his own countenance and handed Darcy his waistcoat. Then he offered him the handkerchief he pulled from his pocket.

Darcy focused all of his attention on inhaling and then exhaling. He was light-headed and nauseous, and if he stopped to think about how Wickham had nearly killed him, he might collapse. After several more breaths, it once again became natural. He set his jaw as he took the offered handkerchief to blot the trickle of blood at his side. Methodically, he put his arms through the waistcoat and slowly put each button through its hole before managing to put on his own coat. It was only then that Darcy could meet Fitzwilliam's eye.

"'Tis only a scratch." His voice was filled with false bravado.

Darcy righted his hat atop his head, and when he spoke, his tone was grim. "Let us leave."

Darcy adjusted his coat sleeve so he could see the sleeve buttons Elizabeth had given him. He did not regret doing all he could to defend the honour of his future wife and sister, but what he wanted now was to marry Elizabeth and never think of this terrible affair again. He could not tolerate a moment longer on this field. Every sight and sound reminded him of how close he had been to death. Darcy squared his shoulders and moved with a hurried air that showed his impatience to be gone. He would never set foot in Bath again.

They were near to the surgeon's carriage when Darcy saw the curtain flicker and knew more people had witnessed this morning's events than he would have preferred. The knowledge that he had bested Wickham in an affair of honour would be to the benefit of the Bennets' reputation, but that hardly meant that he was not mortified to have spectators circulate their first-hand accounts.

While he resigned himself to this distressing truth, he realised his cousin had stopped walking and was glancing around at the ground. Fitzwilliam absently patted at his pockets, and Darcy walked back toward him. He was about to ask what was the matter before the raised voices distracted them both.

Mr Lockwood had stumbled back, and Wickham had raised himself unsteadily to his feet and was quarrelling with his second, his voice filled with rage. Darcy started when he heard his own name and observed Wickham wrench his second pistol from Mr Kenneth's hand.

“Darcy, go to the devil!”

Time seemed suspended as Darcy watched Wickham raise his arm and pull the trigger. The next thing Darcy was aware of was the unyielding impact of the earth.



LATE TUESDAY, JANE AND ELIZABETH SAT ON THE LATTER'S bed, where they had passed the chief of the evening in girlish conversation. Elizabeth was thankful for the distraction from

fretting incessantly about Fitzwilliam, and it was good for Jane's spirits too. She pulled a letter from Georgiana from her dressing table drawer and handed it to Jane with a playful grin.

"She included a drawing of Pemberley so that I might be familiar with my new home. My new sister thinks she does me a service, but all she has done is to frighten me."

"How can you say that? It is a fine-looking house. Look at the ridge of high woody hills behind it and the stream swelling in the front. I think such a place will suit you well."

"Look at the size of that large stone building."

"Perhaps Miss Darcy does not have an eye for scale." Seeing her sister's incredulous gaze caused Jane to dissolve into a fit of giggles.

Elizabeth huffed and rolled her eyes as she fell backward onto the pillows. "We both know that is unlikely. I do not know how I shall ever become acquainted with all of Pemberley's rooms. I shall have to tie myself to the housekeeper's apron strings so I do not become lost."

Jane had placed the Pemberley sketch aside and was now eyeing the one behind it. She peered at it and then blushed and set it aside so forcefully that it caught Elizabeth's attention. "Georgiana was kind enough to include a sketch of her brother since I have no miniature keepsake of my own. She based it on a portrait of him at Pemberley that was drawn in his father's lifetime. Do you not think it like?"

"No, Miss Darcy has done well; it is a striking resemblance." Jane averted her gaze from the paper. "It is strange to see that expression of Darcy's fixed on me as the viewer of the picture—that is all."

"How do you mean?"

"She drew Darcy with a very arresting gaze, and he looks that way, with such a smile over his face, when he looks at *you*."

Elizabeth blushed at her sister's words. She had become accustomed to the way he smiled at her when they were alone, a heartfelt expression that was openly affectionate. Elizabeth

realised that his earnest gazes last autumn, in Kent, and sometimes even now were of fascination and desire; but she was surprised to learn that modest Jane discerned such a difference. Would she see that fond smile again if Darcy duelled Wickham?

“Lizzy,” Jane began, drawing Elizabeth from her contemplation of Darcy’s likeness. “What is the matter?”

“I must tell you what happened on Saturday. Mr Bingley has once again most painfully obtruded on our notice. I encountered him on my walk into Meryton. He is here to sell his lease to Netherfield.”

Jane made a quiet whimper. “He is here to show Netherfield and then leave forever? I could not stand to meet him as an indifferent acquaintance.”

“He was here to show Netherfield to the new family, and he intended to quit the neighbourhood immediately thereafter.” Jane exhaled and nodded resolutely. “There is more. Mr Bingley saw Darcy in Bath and said that he would meet Mr Wickham in an affair of honour.”

Jane shook her head, not understanding.

“Mr Bingley intimated Darcy had challenged Mr Wickham to a duel. And I have not heard from him in days, Jane.” She did not wish to think Fitzwilliam capable of such a thing but at the same time could not doubt that Wickham was a despicable man who would not act honourably.

“I cannot believe it, Lizzy! Darcy would never entertain such an idea.”

“At first I believed as you did, but Mr Wickham has seduced and cruelly deserted our poor sister. You must not forget his treatment of Georgiana, and he slandered Darcy’s reputation shamelessly. Perhaps if Mr Wickham adamantly defended his conduct, a challenge such as this was the only way Darcy could respond to Mr Wickham with his reputation and honour intact.”

“A duel is not necessary,” Jane said with a sigh.

Elizabeth replied, "I would censure it also, but Darcy would not have challenged Mr Wickham unless he felt he had no other recourse. They were to meet on Saturday, and I have not had a letter from him." Her resolve to remain unaffected crumbled.

"My dear Lizzy." Jane gathered Elizabeth in her arms. "Have you been thinking on this since Saturday? In the unlikely event such a meeting took place, both gentlemen would return unwounded. I can hardly credit Mr Wickham or Darcy wishing to injure one another."

"Do you truly think so?" Elizabeth wished that to be true more than she believed it likely.

"Certainly! Darcy has had much on his mind. I would expect a letter from him any day now. I daresay Darcy himself will follow soon after his letter arrives."

"Now you must think me silly." Elizabeth wiped away a few tears. "You see how I ought to have told it all to you from the first. You have assured me there is no reason to worry for him, and instead I will think of how I must vex the man for causing me such a fright." She tried to laugh.

"You are not at all silly. I think you are cautious with your feelings. In your own way, you are as reserved as Darcy, though you are livelier and your manners more welcoming. Although others freely take you into their confidence, you do not seek out the like. I know Darcy has become less severe for knowing you, but do not tease him for this. I imagine he has suffered enough and wants to be assured of your affection."

Jane kissed the top of her sister's head and left with one last reassuring smile. As she settled in for the night, Elizabeth repressed the thought of what her life would hold should Wickham kill Darcy. Elizabeth looked at Georgiana's drawing of him longingly for some time before setting it aside and blowing out the candle.

THE NEXT MORNING, ELIZABETH AWOKE READY TO LET JANE'S assurances remove every doubt of Darcy's never returning. It

was a cool day, and a thick summer rain blotted out the few objects to be discerned from the windows. The sound of the post being brought in was a welcome distraction.

There was a brief letter from Lydia to her mother that was read to a disinterested room. Lydia had parted from the Gardiners and was making her way to Darcy's small estate in Ireland. Then her mother dropped a letter on her lap as she fluttered by in her usual noisy attitude.

"You have had a letter as well, Lizzy. I believe it is from Mr Darcy, although why it looks trampled, I do not know."

Elizabeth eagerly caught the letter and noticed its poor condition. It was written in his familiar hand in neat, sharp pen strokes, but the hot-pressed paper looked as if it had been trod upon.

"Darcy's other letters were sent by his own rider. Why did this one come post?" Kitty asked as she sat in the window seat, blowing on the glass and lazily drawing shapes on the pane.

"Perhaps Mr Darcy is anticipating the expense of providing for all of you when I die." Mr Bennet did not glance up from his newspaper. "He is practising his economy."

"As if Mr Darcy would ever need to economise," said her mother. "How could they exceed their income? The man is worth ten thousand a year!"

Elizabeth happily tore the seal to read news from her beloved. News from him in his own hand would end her doubt and suspense. The letter was from Camden Place and dated the previous Friday evening.

My dearest Elizabeth,

I have melancholy news to relate and sincerely lament for your feelings under the shock of it. I wish I could better prepare you, but there is no way your mind could forestall the event I have to communicate. Mr Wickham was not only unrepentant but eager to ruin us all, and my only recourse to preserve our dignity and our family's reputation was to challenge him to defend his conduct in an affair of honour. If

this letter has been placed in your hands, it is because I was mortally wounded in the attempt.

All that was undertaken by me was necessary and done out of a desire to protect you and your family from being further maligned. I am remedying an evil brought on only by myself, and I accept the possibility of paying the ultimate of sacrifices. My one regret in meeting Mr Wickham is that I have taken the chance of never returning to your side. I do not regret challenging Mr Wickham; however, I do regret that righting this wrong has cost me a future with you.

Your affectionate heart will be greatly wounded, and I wish the shock of this could be lessened. I have made arrangements for your future security, and I beg you to accept them. See them not as the actions of a proud and dominating master, but those of a love-struck man who wants to care for you in the only method now available. I have done all that I can to see you become an independent woman. I wish for you to have the opportunity to be someone of great importance in the world, as you have always been so valued by me. I have placed my trust for arranging these affairs in Colonel Fitzwilliam, and I ask that you do the same.

Please remember my sister as your life moves forward, as I know that it must and it will. Nearly everyone who loves her best is now lost to her. Perhaps she might be of some solace to you, and there is little doubt in my heart that Georgiana would thrive if fortunate enough to have your friendship and devotion.

Before I departed for Bath, you charged me with composing poetry in your honour, and I fear that I once again must disappoint. I find myself thinking only of Shakespeare's words, a sonnet, wishing I could name the beauty of your eyes, and in fresh numbers number all your graces. I selfishly wish the final lines of that sonnet may hold true, knowing full well what such a blessing would cost you. Once again, I ask that you consider allowing Colonel Fitzwilliam, who admires and esteems you, to aid and comfort you in years to come, now that I am gone.

I remain thankful that we encountered one another in Mrs Collins's drawing room on that April morning. You are most cherished, and the short time in which you have loved me has been my happiest on this earth.

*Yours in love and devotion,
Fitzwilliam Darcy*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Elizabeth sat with her arms wrapped tightly around her, Fitzwilliam's crumpled letter still in her hand. She soon realised she was making quiet keening sounds, but no one was paying her any mind. Elizabeth focused her gaze and looked at her family. Mrs Bennet was arguing with her husband about Lydia; one parent was fretful, the other patronising. Mary was furiously copying extracts that would never be incorporated into her knowledge of the world. Kitty sat languid and dull by the window, and Jane half-heartedly offered an idea to amuse her.

Not one soul in this room has the emotional capacity or the strength of mind to console me. They would first consider their own concerns upon hearing the news. Her father would be glad that his favourite daughter would stay at home. Mrs Bennet would take to her rooms and loudly lament what sad fates might befall them now that Fitzwilliam would not provide for them. Mary might offer some commonplace proverb to condole, and Kitty would cry by her side until it became tiresome. Jane would offer uplifting words, but Elizabeth could not bear to hear Jane compare their grief, as if her loss of Mr Bingley was in any way the same as facing the death of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

“Are you ill, Lizzy?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth answered in some distress that she was. The walls of the room crept in toward her. Her grief could not be spoken; there were no words available to do them justice. She was not equipped to speak of Fitzwilliam's death to anyone in

this room. Somehow, Elizabeth stood and placed one foot in front of the other and hoarsely said she was going for a walk through the grounds.

“But Lizzy, it is only just stopped raining. You will be dirty and...” Mrs Bennet talked on about the imprudence of having one’s shoes and stockings become wet.

Elizabeth stopped listening and raised her eyes to the window in time to see a chaise and four driving up the lawn. She did not recognise it, but her heart stopped cold when she saw Colonel Fitzwilliam alight. Her stomach turned, and she immediately withdrew from the window. What reason could he have to call at Longbourn other than to tell her of Darcy’s death? She was unprepared to meet with him, irrationally hoping to make the wretched truth less real by not speaking of it.

“I have no patience for a visitor and am going for a walk,” she cried before running from the house.

She walked over the grounds to the most distant part of them where the trees were oldest and the grass was the longest. Elizabeth had waited for days for news of Fitzwilliam, and she had known from Mr Bingley that he would duel Wickham, but nothing could have prepared her to cope with the letter she grasped in her hand. Her thoughts became more chaotic, jumping from one miserable idea to the next.

Fitzwilliam is dead.

All I have left of him are two letters: one bitter and the other tragic. Two letters to capture all that I was to him.

It is my fault he is dead. If only I had never seen him in Charlotte’s drawing room that morning. It would be better him living in this world and thinking ill of me than dead.

I shall have to go to Georgiana. The poor girl has been orphaned too many times. Perhaps I can contribute to the recovery of her spirits. I need some purpose, some reason to go on breathing.

How does that Shakespeare sonnet begin? “Who will believe my verse in times to come...”

Fitzwilliam is dead!

The final lines... "But were some child of yours alive that time, you should live twice; in it and in my rhyme." Good God, do not let that be true.

I take it back; I was utterly wrong. His child would be worth any public shame.

He wants his cousin to marry me and give his child a name. If I am not to be Mrs Darcy, then I shall not be wife to anyone.

That quiet, precious intimacy between us is lost.

Half an hour's leisure for such heartbreaking reflections as these found her wet, cold, and ravaged by grief. She stopped wandering and fell slowly in a crumpled heap on the damp grass. In her mind's eye, she could imagine him perfectly: professing an ardent love in the most arrogant of ways, waltzing around a sitting room, in a dusty cottage with his dark eyes hovering over her and calling her his dearest and loveliest.

"Elizabeth?"

Now she was hearing his voice. What wild, extravagant delusion was this? She choked back a sob. Her anguish played tricks on her mind. She tightly shut her eyes and felt tears streaming down her face.



HE HAD ALMOST WALKED PAST HER WHEN HE GLIMPSED HER within a grove of overgrown trees. At first glance, she appeared to be resting beneath a tree while gazing at the vista of rain clouds rolling away. When he approached, he realised that the fine eyelashes that swept across her cheekbones were wet. Curls of auburn hair hung limp around her shoulders. Her lips were pursed, almost as if she were in pain. She was not dressed to be out of doors, and her slippers and the hem of her gown were soaked.

"Elizabeth?" he asked with heartfelt concern.

Instead of seeing her eyes turn toward him, she winced and wrapped her arms around herself, whimpering as tears rolled down her face. He was instantly worried and called to her again, but Elizabeth did not respond. He moved closer and knelt in front of her. He reached out and tenderly wiped away the tears from her wet cheeks.

She gasped, as if she had been trapped underwater and was desperate for air. In shock, Elizabeth fell back on her hands and scrambled backward. There was a heartrending, almost broken aspect to her countenance that was painful for him to see. He could in no way comprehend the cause of her strange and frightened behaviour. He suppressed the urge to wrap her in an embrace, suspecting that would startle her further.

“Elizabeth, why are you crying?” he asked as gently as he could.

She sat up and eyed him with unrestrained wonder for so long he was unsure that she had heard him. Her lips moved silently, and when she was capable of speech, her words sounded hoarse and strangled. “Your letter.”

Darcy followed her gaze down to the crumpled sheets that lay on the wet grass. “I hoped that you would have destroyed it. There was one part, especially the opening of it, which I have dreaded your having the power of reading again. I presumed some expressions therein might justly make you hate me, but that does not explain why you are weeping.”

Elizabeth did not answer but watched him curiously and slowly shook her head. She swallowed heavily and, in a voice more like her own, replied, “No, not *that* letter.”

Darcy leant nearer, and Elizabeth pulled out of his reach, as if she could not bear the contact. He opened his hands in passive surrender, and he picked up the damp sheets and realised that he held the crumpled letter he had written last Friday evening before he faced Wickham. His jaw was clenched so tightly that his teeth hurt as he realised what she must have suffered. “How did you come to receive this?”

“Came in the post,” she mumbled into her hands. A cloud of despair still loomed over her.

He sighed and turned to sit next to her. “Fitzwilliam looked all over the field for this letter. We presumed it fell out of his pocket when he pulled out his handkerchief, but when he went back it was nowhere to be found. One of the servants must have discovered it and placed it in the post.” He spoke more to himself than to her. “You were never meant to read that. My cousin was to bring it to you if—if Wickham killed me.”

After several moments of silence, Darcy considered all that had happened since he arrived at Longbourn. Had Elizabeth suffered the agony of grief all alone?

“Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam and I have been in the house above half an hour. Neither your parents nor sisters were shocked to see me. I could scarcely keep my composure through their empty civilities until Jane took pity on me and said you had walked out. Did you not share the letter with them?”

“How could I tell them? It was too painful to speak of yet. What could they have said to bring me comfort?” Elizabeth then shifted her weight to look toward him, the light coming back to her eyes; Darcy realised this animation would precede a torrent of anger. “I thought you were dead! Of what were you thinking? This letter confirmed my greatest fear since I spoke with Mr Bingley in Meryton. I have been in agony, fearing your death. Since Saturday, I have dreaded that Wickham might kill you, and then”—here her voice broke—“then I received your letter!”

“I am sorry, exceedingly sorry,” replied Darcy, “that you were worried on my behalf. I intended to tell you all that had occurred in Bath—in person—when I returned.”

“How could you have taken such a senseless risk?” she cried, still not looking at him.

Darcy repressed his desire to jump to his feet and pace in anger. “Wickham denied all responsibility toward Lydia and then publicly claimed that you were likely with child by another man. You did not see him in Bath. He was farther removed from the realm of decency than I had ever thought possible. Any stranger listening to him would have supposed that I was wealthy at his expense and that the future Mrs

Darcy was a common harlot trying to pass off her natural child as mine.”

Elizabeth made no reply.

“Since failing to extort me through Lydia and then marrying into money, he proved himself to be more ruthless than I had ever thought possible. He put forth every effort to have the fashionable world think you a fallen woman. Wickham refused to acknowledge his child, and he wanted all of us to suffer. He has wished to punish me for his own failings all of his life, and he realised his best revenge on me was to ruin your reputation.”

“What would respectability matter to me if you were dead? Did you not think of me at all?”

“I thought only of you!” His temper blazed in indignation.

Elizabeth finally met his gaze, and Darcy regretted his loss of equanimity. She had believed him dead. Shock and ire at her needless grief would be powerful emotions raised by his sudden appearance. He could remember the withering heartache facing a future in which Elizabeth would have no part, and that was only when he knew she did not like him.

“Had we not anticipated our vows, Wickham would not have been able to provoke you so easily,” she whispered into the silence.

“I cannot deny that, but I do not regret what you and I have shared. Our actions, proper in our eyes but inappropriate in the eyes of others, did not justify Wickham seducing Lydia and slandering your reputation, nor his desiring to kill me.”

Darcy pulled off his gloves and reached out to hold her small, cold hands in his own. She seemed recomposed at this tentative contact and clung to his fingers.

“I ought to only think of how grateful I am that you returned to me,” Elizabeth said. “You met Wickham and defended our honour, such as it is, and now it is over. You were both unharmed, so it little matters now.” She leant into him and exhaled a shuddering breath of relief.

He was quiet for a long time while he embraced her and rested his chin on her head.

“No, we did not escape unwounded.” He felt her stiffen in his arms. “For the briefest of moments, I wanted to kill Wickham, to prevent him from ever being in a position to harm my family again. But, by the time our arms were raised, my sense of justice would not allow me to kill another man, even one as terrible as George Wickham. I could not aim with the intent of hitting him, although by some stroke of fortune I inflicted enough injury to satisfy all the witnesses and force his concession.”

“How severe was his injury? Did he hurt *you*?”

“Only a graze.” He hoped that the wound on his side healed before Elizabeth had the chance to see for herself his close brush with death. “Fitzwilliam would be beyond delighted to regale you with the finer details, should you ask him. Suffice it to say, my shot was severe enough to end our meeting with our reputations preserved. Given the gossip surrounding the duel, it will all be known before long.”

“A vindictive spirit has overtaken my charitable feelings, and I think he deserves greater punishment,” she replied with a bitterness Darcy had not previously heard. “But I am grateful you did not kill him. He has caused us suffering, and he is a cruel man, but you would never have forgiven yourself had you ended his life. So Wickham is known to be culpable regarding Lydia, but will return to being someone of consequence in Bath and gamble away the fortune of his ill-gotten wife.” She shook her head. “How is that justice?”

Darcy sighed heavily and held her tighter. “Wickham is dead.”

She gave a start of surprise while she gaped at him. “You said that you did not inflict a mortal wound! What happened?”

The thunder of another pistol blast, so soon after the first, rang in Darcy's ears. He was disoriented, and he could not explain how he found himself on the ground. There was a crushing weight against his chest that made it difficult to breathe. After the turbulent distress of the morning, he gave up

struggling against it, rested his head on the grass, and once again closed his eyes. He was grateful for a moment's respite against thinking about pistols, death, revenge, and fear.

"Darcy? Darcy!" Fitzwilliam's voice was all around him, at first muffled, and then louder, but at least the pressure was removed from his chest. The frantic tone of the voice made Darcy realise that whatever was happening, it would not be proper for him to rest and forget about the day's burdens. He sat up and saw that Fitzwilliam was in the process of rising to his knees, his face filled with terror.

Darcy then realised how he must have come to be lying on Kingsmead Field. His cousin had rushed toward him and tackled him to the ground. With a sickening turn of his stomach, he realised why Fitzwilliam had thrown him aside. Wickham, appallingly, had grabbed the pistol and, in a fit of rage, attempted to murder him.

"I am well; I am not hit," he said as he rose to his feet, pulling Fitzwilliam up with him. Gratitude, loyalty, and fraternity were expressed through grasped hands and a poignant stare.

Darcy looked toward Wickham, his blood boiling and his eyes blazing. A righteous anger and the desire to see the wretched man punished overpowered him. However, when his mind ultimately comprehended the scene in front of him, his anger dissipated. The sight he beheld was so implausible that he turned to his cousin in disbelief. Fitzwilliam had no reply. He stared agape at the man on the ground and the man with the gun, looking between the two in silent confusion.

George Wickham was flat on his back, his pistol dropped at his side and a splatter of red staining the front of his waistcoat. Since Wickham's eyes were open, Darcy thought he might be alive, but then he saw the dark pool of blood slowly spreading wider. His stomach lurched, and he had to close his eyes to regain his composure. When he blinked, he focused his eyes on Mr Lockwood, who stood looming over Wickham, a pistol still in his hand.

“It is unfortunate that your aim was too far to the right, Mr Darcy. You might have saved me the trouble of having to shoot the scoundrel myself.” When Darcy could only doubt and stare, Lockwood continued with more of the courteous unease that marked their previous interactions. *“You need not express any gratitude to me, sir, for saving your life. Dispatching Mr Wickham was as much to my benefit as yours,”* he said with a slight bow.

“Why?” Darcy asked in a voice that was not quite his own. *“Your benefit? Why, why would—”*

He heard a carriage door slam, followed by the noise of dragging feet and a plodding cane. A plain-featured, impeccably dressed woman limped toward the men clustered around Wickham’s body. Without a glance toward the body on the ground, she threw herself into the doctor’s arms, crying, “Edgar!”

He returned her embrace, dropping the pistol to wrap both his arms around her. “I asked you to stay in the carriage, Cathy.”

“We have to leave now!”

“It is a justifiable homicide. He might have killed Mr Darcy.”

“You cannot take that risk. I will not be parted from you now that we are finally rid of him. You could be hanged!”

“I do not understand. Who was the woman?” Elizabeth interrupted. *“And why did the surgeon bring a pistol of his own?”*

Darcy thought back to the confusion and chaos that followed the arrival of Mrs Wickham onto Kingsmead Field. *“It took us time to sort out the details of the sordid business. I was grateful for Fitzwilliam’s interest in society gossip, although perhaps we ought to have been suspicious when Mr Lockwood eagerly offered his services.”* He paused in his narrative, and Elizabeth did not prompt him to speak. She settled into his arms, her fingers still entwined with his own, and waited for him to continue.

“Mrs Wickham, the former Miss Hareton, was secretly engaged to her doctor before Wickham ruined her reputation and her uncle forced them to marry. Mr Lockwood continued to see her as his patient after Mr and Mrs Wickham removed to Bath, and he was with her when Fitzwilliam gave Mr Wickham my challenge. We never did learn for certain whose idea it was, the lady’s or the surgeon’s, but he presented himself to Fitzwilliam so that he could be sure Wickham died of any injury I inflicted. However, since he brought a pistol of his own, I can only surmise that he hoped for the opportunity to dispatch Wickham himself should the opportunity present itself.”

“There was little chance the wound you caused was fatal?”

“The wound was severe enough to end the duel, but Wickham would have recovered.”

“And when Wickham attempted to murder you after the duel was concluded, the surgeon shot Wickham to save you? How extraordinary! You do not think he will be prosecuted, do you?”

Darcy coughed and became interested in his boots. “It was suggested to Mr Lockwood and Mrs Wickham that they leave England immediately. They might be on their way to Ireland.”

Elizabeth knowingly smiled. “Is there an estate in Ireland where they might stay while they consider their prospects?”

“I am sure I do not know their plans. I do know that Mrs Wickham’s servants were happy to oblige her now that her dishonourable husband was dead. My own servants are keen to tell anyone who asks that I bested Mr Wickham in a duel of honour. Mr Kenneth, compensated for his trouble by Mrs Wickham, told everyone that, after I left the field, Wickham was disconsolate after being defeated by me and suffered an unfortunate fatal accident with his own pistol. At least that is the rumour circulating amongst Bath’s residents.”

“Indeed? I say there was nothing done in this whole affair that you did not do yourself.” She picked up his letter. “I would not have married your cousin, whatever my situation. I would not have forgotten you so soon.”

“That is just as well, since he was disinclined to have you,” he replied with a smile.

“Why did he come with you to Hertfordshire?”

“He said, after this miserable business in Bath, he was going to deliver me into your hands, see me wed, and be glad to be rid of me. Your sisters are escorting him to Meryton where he is to collect what remains of Wickham’s debts so I might discharge them.”

They sat quietly together until the grass beneath them had nearly dried. Darcy broke their silence. Although he wished he could express himself sensibly, the tumult of his mind only permitted him to ask the simplest of questions.

“Marry me, Elizabeth?”

She pulled one of her hands out from under his and raised it to his cheek while offering him a glowing smile. “I am sorry that I gave you any reason to doubt me. I was only devastated by the thought of losing you. Though we have reason to think my opinions of you not entirely unalterable, they are not, I hope, quite so easily changed as you imply.”

“I never doubted you. What I mean to ask was whether you would marry me tomorrow. The banns are read, the articles are signed, and I have already asked Fitzwilliam to enquire at the church.”

“Tomorrow? That is impetuous.”

“Elizabeth, after all that we have suffered, I know not how much longer I can wait. I want you to tease me and laugh with me. I want to fall asleep every night with you in my arms. You must know how urgently I wish to begin my life with you.”

She smiled softly at him. “What would the world say if they knew, as I do, that you are an impulsive romantic?”

“None would believe you.” Darcy stared deeply at Elizabeth, hoping that his desire to move his life forward with her came through in his gaze.

“Fitzwilliam, I should very much like to go home.”

Disappointed not to have the reply he wished, he nodded and rose, offering his hand. “Certainly, you have been out in the cold for hours.”

Elizabeth stood in front of him with bright eyes and the wide, loving smile he knew she gave only to him. Her hair was loose and now tangled around her shoulders, and her eyes were still red from her earlier tears, but to Darcy, she appeared lovely. “We have misunderstood one another yet again. We will be the happiest couple in the world, and we ought to begin as soon as possible. Let us marry tomorrow and leave for London from the church door. I want to go home—to Pemberley.”

Darcy’s smile upon hearing these words matched hers. He tugged Elizabeth firmly against him and kissed her with wild abandon. When he released her mouth, he held her close to him, relishing in the joyous excitement of knowing they would finally be together, able to appreciate one another’s worth and make one another truly happy until the end of their days.

Epilogue

Ellendean Grange, near Dublin

3 January 1813

My dear Lizzy,

I hope you had a lively Christmas with the Gardiners at Pemberley. What a relief it is to be situated in Ireland, although I am a fine size by now. Darcy's estate here is much smaller than Pemberley, but it is still fine, and if it were not so far out of the way, I would be happier. I suppose it little matters that we are so far from Dublin because Mr and Mrs Lockwood have asked me not to leave the house. They hope to pass the child off as their own. Mrs Lockwood says I may stay with them after the child comes for as long as I please. I am glad that it will have such a mother. I could never love it enough. It would always remind me of W., but the Lockwoods will adore it. Mrs Lockwood is shy, but we get on well. If I stay in Ireland, the Lockwoods will tell everyone that I am a companion to Mrs Lockwood because she is an invalid. But she happily spends all of her time with Mr Lockwood, so as soon as my lying-in is over, I shall be able to go out as I please. Mr Lockwood asks me to add his thanks that Darcy is generous enough to allow him to let his estate's lodge at such a reasonable expense. Speaking of expenses, I have little allowance of my own, and I do look forward to being out in society again. Any money you could send me would do because, even if I am to act as a companion, I ought to have nice things. However, do not speak to Darcy about it if you had rather not.

*Your loving sister,
Lydia*

HORSE GUARDS, WHITEHALL, LONDON

January 8, 1813

Darcy,

The 1st Marquess of Wellington was appointed Colonel of the Regiment 1 January. This is the first step in the elevation of the Blues to the status of Household Cavalry, and my regiment will leave for the Peninsula. Please express my regrets to your wife and sister for not being able to see them in town next month.

*Yours,
Fitzwilliam*

ELLENDÉAN GRANGE, NEAR DUBLIN

18 March 1813

Dear Mr Darcy,

It is with great joy that I inform you that your wife's sister was delivered of a boy yesterday. Mrs Lockwood will send her letter of ceremony to your wife as it is our intention for the world at large to believe that young Edgar is my wife's child, but I would be remiss not to inform you directly of the good health of Miss Bennet and the baby. Miss Bennet, her youthful exuberance notwithstanding, is a good-humoured girl to whom my reticent wife has taken a liking. She has provided us a blessing that Mrs Lockwood's health would not have allowed, and Miss Bennet is welcome to make her home with us for as long as she chooses.

*I remain, dear Sir, your humble servant,
Edgar Lockwood*

VITORIA, NEAR ZADORRA VALLEY, NORTHERN SPAIN

June 23, 1813

Dear Darcy,

I am unsure when these lines might reach you, but news of the battle will soon be known, and I would be negligent if I did not tell you that I survived the day. The Blues were brigaded with the other two regiments of Household Cavalry, and we fought with them in a decisive victory. I am wounded, but it is a scratch although it has earned me furlough. The French aim just as poorly as you do.

Yours,

Fitzwilliam

GRACECHURCH STREET

Friday, July 21

My dearest Lizzy,

I am sending you a few lines to announce our safe arrival in London. My father spoke of writing to tell you that he would escort me to Pemberley, but upon arriving in town, I have learned that he has not written yet. We all know my father to be a dilatory correspondent, but I am surprised he would slacken when he knows how distressing to you his sudden appearance might be. I would not wish for his accompanying me to be wholly unexpected to you and Darcy. You must not worry because he intends to stay only a day at Pemberley before returning home. I believe that accompanying me north is the extent of the effort my father will put forth.

To think it has been four months since I last saw you in town. At the time, I was eager to return to Longbourn, but I must admit that home is not as I remember it. I believe Kitty feels the same after her visit to Pemberley. I agree with Darcy that she has shown improvement under your family's proper attention and management.

Most of our neighbours have resumed calling. Given Lydia's absence, your prosperous marriage, and their short

memories, the scandals of last year have been overlooked. Mary has even begun to mix a little more with the world. My mother has learned not to speak about Lydia before company, but instead she boasts of you with delighted pride. I feel that I have little to contribute to what is going forward at Longbourn and can draw little comfort from the society in Meryton. I am thankful for the diversion of a summer at Pemberley with my dear sister and brother.

I am glad that you have such pleasant accounts of Miss Darcy, and I happily expect furthering our acquaintance. As for Colonel Fitzwilliam, I do recall meeting him when he came to Hertfordshire with Darcy last summer, and I am pleased that he will be returning from the Peninsula. I do so look forward to spending the summer with you, although I shall tell you again not to throw me a ball. I miss you, and Longbourn is not the same without you.

Your loving sister,

Jane

ELIZABETH STORMED INTO HER ROOM AT PEMBERLEY, THE flowing skirt of her riding habit over her arm, and tossed her whip onto the floor. She roughly peeled off her riding gloves. Her jaunty cap was wrenched from her hair, and in her haste, some of her curls were pulled from their pins. Inside—on a lovely July day—was the last place Elizabeth wanted to be.

“Insufferable man!” she muttered. “Thinks only of himself.”

She heard the swift, dull thud of his boot heels, and she had already spun around to glare at her husband by the time he threw open the door. Fitzwilliam strode into the room, his gaze unwavering. There was a fierce and outraged energy between them as they stared at one another in livid silence.

“Need I remind you, madam, who is the master of this estate?” Fitzwilliam uttered in a low voice. “What on earth possessed you to speak to me in such a manner? And in full hearing of the servants!” He was attempting to use the full

strength of his personality and position to assert his will, but he would never intimidate her.

“You presume to criticise me? You are too accustomed to arranging things to your own liking with no consideration for your wife.”

“What are you speaking of?” His seething annoyance was obvious through gritted teeth.

“You ordered them not to let me ride! Not one groom would saddle my horse. When I offered to do it myself, they suggested I speak to you because they were not permitted to let me near the stables. I am not a child to be managed and scolded.”

“Perhaps I might have informed you of my decision before,” he replied with haughty detachment, “but I do not regret it. If you wish to be out of doors, the entire park and the gardens are at your disposal.”

“I *would* walk—I prefer walking—but what pleasure will that bring me when you have instructed a footman to follow me whenever I step out of doors! When you pronounce edicts such as these, you do not think of my feelings at all.”

His temper was as little yielding as hers, so it surprised her when his eyes softened as she planted her hands on her hips hard, pulling her skirt taut across her stomach.

“I am thinking of you,” he replied in a quieter tone, as he bravely took a small step toward her. “I am thinking of *both* of you.”

Elizabeth exhaled forcefully and then looked down as Fitzwilliam grazed his fingertips across her stomach before taking her hands in his. Most of her anger fell away when she saw the look of tenderness and reverence across his features. “I will not remain confined for the next five months, regardless of what Lady Catherine says.”

“You could follow Lady Catherine’s advice and take up rolled-paper work,” he said, a smile tugging at his lips. “She wrote that if you panelled a tea caddy with filigree paper, she would display it in Mrs Jenkinson’s room.”

“I would prefer to be out of doors than rolling decorative paper.”

“I will not have you ride a horse.”

“You like to have your own way too well,” she said with a huff, “and I think you seek to have me at your disposal.”

“I shall not say you are mistaken, because you could not possibly believe me to have any desire to control you.” Elizabeth knew this to be true and felt it in vain to keep hold of her anger, but did not speak. “Nor do I believe that you truly feel that riding is the safest activity now.”

Elizabeth silently agreed, but was not yet ready to concede the point. Her husband made the first concession. “If Georgiana, or Jane when she arrives, joins you on your morning walks, I will tell the footmen they need not chaperone you.”

“I only fainted once, and you are ungenerous to keep reminding me of it. Besides, Jane and Georgiana walk too slowly, Fitzwilliam.” Elizabeth pouted, and he laughed.

“If you will have me, I will join you every morning, and we can walk as swiftly as you can manage. I ought to have talked with you about not riding. I am too accustomed to having my own way, but you know I only thought of your well-being. I have been a husband for little over a year, and you cannot expect me to know everything that a husband who loves his wife ought to say and do.”

She grinned, and her husband’s tentative smile brightened into a sincere ray of sunshine that warmed her heart. “You do rather well. You began by choosing to marry the one woman who could have made you happy—even if you did not find me handsome at first.”

He placed his hands on her waist, slowly sliding them down to her hips and pulling her close. “Although I foolishly looked on you without admiration at that long-ago assembly, soon thereafter I acutely realised how mistaken I was in scarcely allowing you to be pretty.”

“What a mortifying realisation for your self-respect,” she murmured as she brought her hands to the back of his neck.

“Your figure caught my notice, as did the beautiful expression of your dark eyes.” Fitzwilliam brushed a gentle kiss across her forehead, on her cheek, and then finally on her parted lips.

The eager press of his lips on hers still sent a thrill of desire through her, and he moaned when Elizabeth slipped her tongue into his mouth. She relished in that familiar—and still wonderful—feeling of belonging that washed over her when she was in her husband’s arms.

“Will you forgive a proud but well-intentioned man?” he whispered.

“Only if you will forgive the ungovernable temper of the termagant that has taken the place of your wife. I do not know what has come over me as of late,” she added, “but I suspect this little one has made a tangle of my emotions. I am so sorry to be a trial to you.”

“You are a joy to me, Elizabeth. Come, we can take a turn in the garden before Fitzwilliam arrives.”



THREE WEEKS AFTER JANE’S ARRIVAL, ELIZABETH SAT IN HER parlour, her sister sprawled out on the chaise, both ladies laughing. Since Jane had arrived at Pemberley, Elizabeth passed many hours with her and Georgiana. She could tell by the look on Fitzwilliam’s face, when he came in at the end of the evening to find them still talking, that he missed her. He said good evening to Jane and offered his wife a lingering gaze that suggested he would be delighted to see Elizabeth join him sooner rather than later.

“Our practice this afternoon was not the first time you waltzed?” Jane asked with a gasp. “I do not believe it! You danced a waltz with Darcy last spring? You could not even claim a friendship with him at the time.”

“Georgiana is not here, so let us blame her, for it was she who offered to teach me. How could I not agree to dance with her brother? It would have been rude to refuse.”

“It is a pretty dance when done properly. I fear I made a poor impression on Colonel Fitzwilliam with all my missteps.” Jane coloured. “I could hardly reply to his conversation without blushing for being held so closely. I do not think I shall dance at your ball.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think, at my age, I should give up dancing. I shall sit to the side and watch the younger girls.”

“You must dance. We are welcoming you to the neighbourhood.” Elizabeth hopped from her chair to sit on the chaise next to her sister. “And eight neighbouring families is not the social event of the Season.”

“Very well, but only because you and your husband have already gone to the trouble. I am so glad to see you and Darcy happy together.”

“Oh yes, our attachment has not grown less fervent with time and familiarity,” Elizabeth offered flippantly. She could not express such private feelings to anyone other than Fitzwilliam, not even to Jane. “I daresay he would admit that he is happy in his choice of a wife.”

“Do be serious, Lizzy. If you are not in the room, Darcy raises his eyes every time the door opens. It would take a fool not to realise that he is hoping that it is you who will walk in.”

“Since you give me leave to say so, I am richly blessed,” she said softly. “I have no weariness of his society, and he has none of mine.”

“Darcy gives every appearance of being thrilled with your joyous news. I daresay he will think it the finest child in the world—son and heir or not.”

Elizabeth merely nodded in agreement. Knowing that her husband would be mortified if she spoke about the animated conversations he had with his unborn child, she changed the

subject. “You have spent a lot of time in conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam. What do you think of him?”

“His manners are to be admired,” she answered primly.

“What a dull description of a man who seeks every opportunity to join you on a walk around the garden, who keeps a chair by himself for you wherever we are, and is all animation when you join him and speak with him.”

Jane’s cheeks turned pink. “I must be—that is, I shall not be disappointed again. In the past, I have been blind to the true character of people who ultimately do not deserve my concern. Darcy’s cousin is pleasant company that I might enjoy while I am at Pemberley.”

“I am pleased that you are more willing to be critical of people, but how do you honestly feel about the colonel? You must have no reserves from me.”

“He is not handsome, but he has a pleasing countenance and an intelligent and lively eye. He gives every appearance of preferring my company, and I believe he is genuinely interested in what I have to say. I enjoy dancing and speaking with him very much. I shall even go so far as to say I shall regret his leaving next month.”

Elizabeth had thought there was a depth of attraction on both sides. “Perhaps you should make him aware of your attachment.”

“No, Lizzy,” she said, shaking her head. “How awful it would be if a persuasion of my partiality for him had been the only cause of his giving me a serious thought.”

Elizabeth suspected her husband’s cousin already harboured a tender regard for Jane. It had been a rather long time since she had seen Jane so animated about anything or anyone.



DARCY LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW AND WATCHED JANE AND Georgiana ambling across the lawn. Aside from the Gardiners,

whom he really did love, all the people for whom he felt a strong regard were with him in the place that meant the most to him. His wife was radiant with happiness, his sister and Jane were cheerful and loving, and his cousin's safe return from the Peninsula was a blessing.

Fitzwilliam joined him at the window. "Miss Bennet is not as despondent as you made her out to be."

This drew Darcy's surprise. "I wrote that I suspected her attachment and regrets regarding Mr Bingley had, for a long time, clouded her nearly every enjoyment."

"You made it sound as though she had suffered a loss of bloom and spirits and that it would be of a lasting effect. Her face and figure are perfection." Darcy pulled his gaze away from the ladies to glare at his cousin. He coughed and looked away before adding hurriedly that he also found Miss Bennet's manners to be pleasing.

"I shall thank you not to speak in such a familiar way about Jane," Darcy said. "She has patience and humility, she is everything that is good and lovely, and she is dear to my wife. I suggest you keep your flirtatious tendencies under good regulation."

"I am offering my observations—nothing more. Her understanding is excellent, and her manners captivating," he answered in a tight voice as he turned from Darcy's stare and moved into the billiard room. "There are few in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money."

Elizabeth had observed to him that his cousin admired her sister and that those sentiments could be returned. Until now, Darcy had not considered that Fitzwilliam's interest had been stronger than enjoying pleasant conversations while he and Jane resided in the same house.

Darcy followed his cousin to the billiard table where Fitzwilliam aggressively took his shot, missing his target. He suspected the failure had nothing to do with the French musket that had left a long scar on his leg. To speak about his cousin's affections seemed entirely unfitting, but he knew Fitzwilliam's adroitness. If the colonel did not wish to acknowledge his

interest in Miss Bennet, he would have kept his opinions to himself.

“What attention to money do you need? Your situation in life is eligible.”

“A woman like—a gentlewoman would not wish to follow the drum. I am sure symphonies will be composed extolling our victory, but it is a matter of time before I return to the Peninsula.”

“Perhaps your wife would be content to remain in England and wait for you. Then you can return to London, retire from active service, and live on half-pay with your wife.”

Fitzwilliam considered this but shook his head and turned his attention back to the game. After grossly missing his shot again, he answered, “A thousand a year would not keep a wife in Mayfair.”

“You could rein in your habits of expense if you found a woman worth the effort. A thousand a year could afford you four servants, a carriage, and a pair of horses.”

“Not in Grosvenor Street. A woman who marries into a titled family would rightfully have higher expectations.”

“That depends entirely on the character of the woman and her love for you.” Fitzwilliam gave no reply, but Darcy knew that none was needed. It would be to his cousin’s advantage, as a younger son who would not inherit an estate and title, to marry a wealthy woman. It did not follow, however, that he could not spend less and afford to marry elsewhere. Darcy did not wish to be involved with his cousin’s suit or his withdrawal, but foremost in his mind was the preservation of Jane’s delicate feelings.

“Do not trifle with my wife’s sister.” His tone brooked no opposition. “If you do not anticipate making your honourable intentions known before you leave, then confine your interactions with Jane to those of only the most detached civility.”

Fitzwilliam glared across the billiard table. “You presume too much in telling me how to act in a manner befitting a

gentleman. *I am well aware of what qualifies as proper behaviour between a man and a lady who is not his wife.*”

Harsher words might have been spoken had not the door burst open. Elizabeth ran breathlessly into the room to his side with a beaming smile.

“Fitzwilliam! Here you are; I have been looking for you. I felt—” Elizabeth tore her eyes off him to see they were not alone. “Oh, forgive me. Darcy, when you are at your leisure, would you meet with me in my sitting room? I would speak with you privately.” Her words implied Elizabeth would await him patiently, but Darcy curiously observed that she was nearly bouncing with enthusiastic energy.

His cousin placed his cue on the table. “Pardon me, Mrs Darcy, but I was about to go to the stables. I shall leave your husband to your immensely preferable company.”

“Do not leave on my account. And you may call me Lizzy.”

“I thank you, but Darcy takes such pride in hearing you addressed as Mrs Darcy that, so long as he is near, I shall indulge the besotted man and call you as such.”



IT HAD BEEN SOME TIME SINCE PEMBERLEY WAS FULL OF company, and Darcy was not used to the bustle of activity. In the past, he did not talk freely enough to be considered agreeable, but he now was often asked precisely what his new wife had done to him. He may have become more conversant, more amiable, but Darcy was still eager to have quiet and exemption from the thought and contrivance that any sort of company gives.

While he waited for his wife to make her appearance before the evening began, he sought his cousin for some conversation. Fitzwilliam was reading in the library, dressed for the ball and waiting for the guests to arrive.

“There you are. I thought you would skulk outside your wife’s dressing room, waiting to catch an early glimpse of her in her evening finery.”

Darcy made no reply; he *had* been hovering nearby, and she had summarily sent him away. “I do not know what you mean.”

Fitzwilliam’s eyes gleamed as he gave him a knowing smile. “I can well imagine the words Mrs Darcy used to send you on your way.” In a more serious tone he said, “Georgiana will be one-and-twenty before we are ready for it. She will have no need for one guardian, to say nothing of two. Did you ever consider why your father placed her in the care of us both?”

He shrugged, having never considered the reason. “He was merely cautious and named two custodians.”

“That explains why there are two guardians, but not why I was selected. My brother, who will someday be an earl, would be a more eligible guardian.”

“The viscount is an ineffectual fop.”

Fitzwilliam laughed heartily. “That he is, and I would call him worse.”

Their amusement faded, and Fitzwilliam now spoke in earnest. “I think I was chosen so I could be of aid to you rather than Georgiana, as there could have been no doubt in your father’s mind that you would take proper care of your sister. I always thought that my uncle Darcy wanted you to have someone nearby to draw you out, to confide in, someone to remind you to seek your own happiness in life. You have been more like a brother to me than my own, and by having us both be guardian to your sister, it would force us always to remain in some contact. Not that such contrivance was ever necessary, and for that, I am thankful.”

To hear such strength of emotion from his cousin, and the allusion to his late father’s pride in his capabilities, was almost too much to bear. Darcy was relieved when Fitzwilliam spoke

again, sparing him the necessity of assigning the proper words to his swirling emotions.

“And now that you are happily wed to Mrs Darcy, I can say, without any bitter reproach or sorrowful regret, that my position has been supplanted. I think your father would be pleased with your choice of a wife; you are a different man.”

“I am not so changed, am I? In essentials, I believe I am the same as I ever was.”

“There is a laugh in your eyes and a warmth that was never there before. Now I can content myself with being your shooting partner and drinking my fill of your brandy and leave the difficult work to your wife. Let us go see where the ladies are, shall we?” Fitzwilliam led Darcy toward the stairs. “It would be mortifying to the feelings of the ladies could they be made to understand how little the hearts of us men are affected by what is costly or new in their attire, do you not agree?”

“I do. I am little affected by the texture of a muslin gown. Neatness and fashion are enough for me.”

Darcy had just uttered these words when his wife appeared at the top of the staircase and began her descent. She smiled fondly at him, a vision of loveliness. Though he would have been hard-pressed to describe the finer details of the gown, he nonetheless stood at the bottom of the stairs, breathless and entranced.

“Little affected, indeed.” His cousin lifted his eyes as he made his excuses to await Georgiana and Miss Bennet in the drawing room.

“Fitzwilliam, have you nothing to say to me? Do you dislike my gown?” she said in that arch and sweet manner that he so loved.

Darcy ultimately found his voice and could not disguise his desire as he quietly answered her. “I think it displays perhaps rather too much of the bosom, back, and shoulders. I want to take you to bed and tell all of our company to go home.”

His wife laughed, and Darcy knew he would never tire of that cheerful sound or the sight of her face smiling up at him lovingly. It took all of his self-control not to press his mouth against hers with a fervent energy. Darcy did not make a habit of kissing his wife outside the privacy of their chambers and contented himself with stroking her cheek with the back of his fingertips. Promptly, her smile of amusement fell away, and she leant against his hand while a more tender emotion crossed her features.

A romantic interlude at the bottom of Pemberley's main staircase, where any servant or sister might soon come upon them, could not be long-lasting. She stepped away and needlessly smoothed the skirt of her gown.

She gazed down. "Fitzwilliam," she asked, "you cannot tell, can you?"

Darcy looked at Elizabeth's stomach and the high waist of her gown, then raised his eyes back to her face. He felt such a mixture of love, pride, and delicacy when he thought of his wife and child that he could not express it well with words. "I can, I am pleased to say, but I doubt that anyone who does not know the truth would be able to."

"Will you not ask me to dance this evening, my love, instead of standing to the side all night and watching?"

"Will you not retire early with me this evening, dearest, instead of spending the night in private conversation with our sisters?"

Elizabeth blushed, but her eyes gleamed, and she boldly stepped toward him. Her flirtatious reply was lost with the arrival of Jane and Georgiana.

IT WAS A MERRY, JOYOUS PARTY, AND DARCY SMILED AS HE led his wife down the set when the dancing began. He stood up with his sister-in-law for the second, then did not dance again. But he spoke agreeably with every one of his guests, and since there were enough gentlemen for the ladies who wanted to dance, his behaviour satisfied the company.

Georgiana watched the dancing, and she was soon joined by Jane, who had danced once with her host and once with Fitzwilliam. Darcy stood nearby, feigning interest in his neighbour's tedious conversation. He spied Elizabeth from across the room, where she had been speaking with some of the ladies, but she soon left them to join him and further his languishing discussion.

While Elizabeth spoke, offering him a reprieve, Darcy observed his cousin. He was walking with quick steps from across the room. Although he had so far danced every set, Fitzwilliam's eyes had never wavered far from where Jane sat near Georgiana. He immediately addressed Jane and applied for her hand for a second dance.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said, blushing, "but there are other young ladies here this evening that have greater claim."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"We have already danced once, and I ought to allow some of the younger girls—"

"My dear Miss Bennet, what strange ideas have you been welcoming? Surely you are not classing yourself upon the shelf? I would be honoured to partner with you a second time."

Darcy's attention was caught, and although Elizabeth's eyes never left the man to whom she was speaking, he could tell by her body language that she, too, was listening. There was no mistaking his cousin's marked attentions. Jane again hesitated, her eyes engrossed in the paintings on the tiny fan she clutched in her hand.

"Colonel, you ought to ask another lady to stand—"

He smiled at her, holding out his hand. "I will dance with you or no one."

Jane could no longer resist and rose, giving Fitzwilliam her hand along with a glowing smile.

Darcy caught Elizabeth's eye and could not contain a smile in the face of her own dancing eyes and beaming grin. He

suspected his wife had already jumped from the idea of Jane and his cousin living a few streets away from them in town to spending the summer months together at Pemberley and their children playing together.

LATER THAT EVENING, ELIZABETH AND DARCY STOOD together in the centre of the main hall where their guests were loitering and chatting. They were scattered about the room as they gathered coats and gloves and said their good-byes. Jane and Fitzwilliam stood to the side, engaged in earnest yet quiet conversation, and Darcy presumed that before the week was out, his cousin would travel to Longbourn to speak with Mr Bennet.

“We hosted a splendid event, dearest,” Elizabeth told him.

“It is more to your credit than mine,” Darcy answered quickly. He knew very well that the success of the evening had more to do with his wife’s careful planning and charming personality than any contribution on his part.

“Perhaps, but I have become accustomed to saying ‘we’ instead of ‘I.’ ‘We’ better expresses the harmony between us, and that is the way that I prefer to consider matters now. I know that you feel the same way. ‘I’ sounds cold and selfish when compared to our perfect happiness. No, Mr Darcy, ‘we’ is so much more precious and endearing than ‘I.’”

Darcy was all attention, looking and listening to his wife with his whole soul. Not for the first time did he find his ability to express himself with words to be sorely lacking. Elizabeth read his feelings in his eyes and, with a smile and a gentle squeeze of her hand, let him know how well she understood him. Her hand fell from his arm, and she stepped away, likely considering the presence of nearly forty other people with them in the hall. Seized by the need to express his ardent love, Fitzwilliam Darcy, a gentleman of dignity, well known for his reserve, pulled his wife strongly against him and, in view of all of his neighbours and servants, kissed her fully on the lips.

THE END

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Bristling at her forced proximity to her spurned suitor, Elizabeth is pleasantly surprised at how well they work together. But even as they disagree on whether or not to risk an escape, Darcy suspects their survival may not lead to him winning her heart.

Can they fix their cascade of misunderstandings to find happily ever after?

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About the Author

Heather Moll writes romantic variations of Jane Austen's classic novels. She is an avid reader of mysteries and biographies with a masters in information science. She found Jane Austen later than she should have and made up for lost time by devouring her letters and unpublished works, joining JASNA, and spending too much time researching the Regency era. She is the author of *An Affectionate Heart*, *Nine Ladies*, and *Loving Miss Tilney* among others. She lives with her husband and son, and struggles to balance all the important things, like whether to buy groceries or stay home and write.

Connect with her on social media or on her [blog](#), and subscribe to her [newsletter](#) for updates and free stories.



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