Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins’s Widow

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# Chapter 1

Longbourn, 1807

The nightmare always went the same. She could never throw herself in front of her husband. Mr. Collins would strike Lydia. Elizabeth struggled to move as the sound of his blows echoed: knock, knock. Lydia’s tear-stained face and accusing eyes were vaguely deformed. Action and speech were impossible, and her screams would not come. Mr. Collins’s fist rose. Fell. She hurt when the blow struck. That awful sound echoed.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Collins awoke, soaked in sweat and with a racing heart. The person outside knocked on the bedroom door again. “I’ll be up presently,” Elizabeth cried. The knocks ceased.

Elizabeth took deep breaths but could not calm herself; she was very scared. Her father’s death six months earlier had made her life an endless nightmare. Jane had decided to listen to her mother’s demands and marry Mr. Collins. Elizabeth did the only thing she could to stop her. Despite everything, she could not repent that choice.

Elizabeth placed her hand on her stomach—she’d miscarried the previous afternoon. She mourned the child, but did not feel really unhappy that Providence had chosen to take him away. Motherhood terrified her; her husband would treat her child the way his brutish father treated him.

Mr. Collins became angry when he heard—very angry. Only once had Elizabeth seen him this enraged. While the doctor remained he maintained appearances, but Elizabeth saw his carefully controlled tone and clenched fist. Once alone he pushed his face inches from Elizabeth’s and exclaimed, as she forced herself to not gag at the alcoholic odor of his breath, “I told you to give me a healthy son!”

His manner frightened Elizabeth, and tears began as she responded, “It is not my fault. I tried—”

“You disobeyed me. You may pretend otherwise, but it was disobedience. Disobedience. If you were a good wife this would not have happened. You owe me. Elizabeth, *you owe me*. You promised to never disobey. Remember?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Elizabeth frantically nodded. The memory of the day he extorted that promise made her sick with anxiety. “I did all I could.”

“You should have done better. You should not have destroyed my child. You—you have not behaved as a wife ought. You must be punished. I do not know how—I must think on it. What you have done demands great severity.” He looked down with a curled lip. “I cannot bear the sight of you. You are not sorry at all. You shall be.” He walked to the door. “When I return, I will have decided how to correct this insult.”

Mr. Collins left the house. Elizabeth nervously waited for his return so she could beg forgiveness again, but when he had not come home by midnight Elizabeth fell asleep in his bedroom while she waited.

Elizabeth knew not how to act. Last time, the only time she’d disobeyed him, he hurt Lydia. In her dreams he would beat her again and again; really he had only struck Lydia thrice before Elizabeth threw herself on her knees between them and swore to Mr. Collins she would never, ever, do anything he did not wish. Elizabeth kept that promise. Mostly.

Elizabeth and Lydia had told their mother what happened. Elizabeth wanted Mrs. Bennet to leave and live with her brother, so Elizabeth’s sisters would be safe from the monster she’d married to protect Jane. Mrs. Bennet screamed at them, “Liars! You lie! You both lie. Lydia, you gained those bruises when you fell. You know that is what really happened. Do not lie! Not to me. Do not make up such stories about Mr. Collins. He is an excellent son-in-law; he treats me with respect, and he lets me stay in the house I was married in. You make up such stories because your father let you run wild, and now you hate that your husband expects you to act as a lady.”

Mrs. Bennet stood and dramatically pressed her hand against her forehead. “Oh! Lord! Lord, what is to become of me. You shall offend him, and break poor Mr. Collins’s heart. He then shall throw us all into the hedgerows. Oh! If only you had not stolen Jane’s place—she would have been a good wife; she would not have created such lies.”

Mr. Collins had beaten Lydia when Elizabeth visited Charlotte without permission. How would he punish her for losing his child? Who would he hurt? What would he do? Could he be convinced to only harm her and spare her sisters?

Elizabeth stared at the door, dimly visible in the light given off by the flickering candle on her bedstand and the red glow of the fireplace. She had no need to dress. When she fell asleep she had still been in her day clothes; the fine yellow silk of her dress was terribly wrinkled. Elizabeth hated how its quality had been purchased with his money. She would far rather be poor and unmarried.

He must have returned. It would be a servant sent to call her to the study so he could announce her fate. Elizabeth rehearsed a final time how she would grovel; he enjoyed it when she begged on her knees. While drunk, Mr. Collins told her his father always demanded he and his mother beg on their knees whenever they really wanted something.

Elizabeth had created a list of things she would intensely hate. She could suggest them to him. Mr. Collins was fair. If she was sufficiently punished he would not do anything to hurt her further. No matter what, she would protect her family.

Elizabeth’s pulse pounded as she walked to the door, and her footsteps sounded eerily loud in her ears. Mrs. Hill stood there, her countenance grave. This was no mere summons to her husband. “What—what is it!” Elizabeth cried. Had he already hurt one of her sisters?

Mrs. Hill searched Elizabeth’s face for an eternity, then stated baldly, “Mr. Collins is dead.”

The body lay on the parlor couch, the head tilted at a grotesque angle which showed his broken neck. The skin was chalky white in the flickering candlelight. Elizabeth’s stomach heaved and she clapped her hand over her mouth. But the nausea receded—and she’d been too nervous and sick to eat supper, so little could have come up.

His fat, toad-like face looked unusually ugly, and he lay there like a, like a—Elizabeth swallowed. There was no sufficiently vicious metaphor. He was the way he should have been born: dead. Elizabeth touched the frozen forehead. It was real. He was dead. He really was dead.

Relief flooded Elizabeth. She felt weak in her knees and couldn’t stop her smile as she collapsed onto the chair Mrs. Hill pushed behind her. Lydia was safe. Jane, Mary, and Kitty were safe. They all were. He’d not hurt anyone ever again. She could visit Charlotte freely. She could read novels and take solitary walks once more. He was dead, and could not hurt Lydia to punish her.

Elizabeth could do anything she wished. The entail had been for three generations; it died with Mr. Collins. As his wife, she inherited Longbourn. They were safe from poverty. Elizabeth felt an elated bubble of joy envelop her and she wanted to scream in happiness. She was free!

It would be terribly improper if she appeared happy, and the forms should be observed. Elizabeth attempted to be serious. “How did it happen?” Elizabeth asked with far too much smile in her tone.

The stable master had gone out to look for the master after Mr. Collins’s horse wandered home alone. The broken remains of his earthly dwelling place were found two hundred yards down the road from the manor house. Mr. Brown could not be certain why Mr. Collins fell, but the odor of alcohol that emanated from his clothes made a strong suggestion.

The apothecary and several local gentlemen, among them her Uncle Phillips, noisily arrived and woke the rest of the household. When she entered the room, Mrs. Bennet threw herself on the body of her son-in-law with sincere tears.

Elizabeth managed a stiff immobile expression which she hoped appeared proper. Her mother was contemptible. She sacrificed her daughters to that creature in exchange for money. It was unsurprising she’d mourn him.

Never. Elizabeth would never forgive her mother. She convinced Jane to marry him to save the family from poverty. Elizabeth would never forgive her for that. She cared more for her consequence in the neighborhood than what happened to Lydia and Elizabeth. Elizabeth would never forgive her for that. Elizabeth remembered the look in Lydia’s eyes when Mrs. Bennet called her a liar. Elizabeth would never forgive her for that.

Elizabeth’s sisters entered wearing their nightgowns and robes. Lydia ran and hugged Elizabeth. Since that day, Elizabeth had grown close to Lydia, and Elizabeth caught a flash of Lydia’s sneer at the body before her sister buried her face in Elizabeth’s chest. Jane sat to Elizabeth’s other side and squeezed her free hand.

Soon the rest of the neighborhood arrived, and the house became quite crowded. Mrs. Hill stayed busy offering refreshments, and Elizabeth could hear Mr. Phillips speaking to the parson about funeral arrangements. Everyone was all that was kind and sympathetic to the family, but no one really grieved. Mr. Collins had not been well-liked; most had noticed there was something amiss in his treatment of Elizabeth, and his manners did not create fondness. Only Mrs. Bennet wept.

When Charlotte Lucas arrived wearing a hastily thrown on morning gown and a heavy woolen shawl, Elizabeth flashed her friend a half smile. Sitting next to his body and attempting to appear sad was the oddest experience Elizabeth had ever had. Charlotte pulled Elizabeth up and embraced her tightly, whispering, “You should not have to play for everyone at a time like this.” She ordered Jane to keep company with Mrs. Bennet, then dragged Elizabeth to an empty room. Lydia came with them, and when the three were alone Charlotte embraced Elizabeth and said fervently, “The Lord has been kind.”

Elizabeth smiled widely as she whispered back through happy tears, “He has indeed.”

# Chapter 2

Meryton 1811

The evening was interminable.

 Darcy hated balls. They held little opportunity for good conversation. He was expected to dance with women he barely knew. And, even at the very best gatherings, the wine was invariably terrible.

He wanted to enjoy Bingley’s company—and keep an eye on him—as his friend settled into his first estate. He looked forward to the good hunting and milder weather that Hertfordshire offered; he was *not* here to meet the local gentry. So *why* was he in this ballroom, with its gaudy chandelier and scratched wooden floors? Why did he let Bingley drag him here? He was surrounded by dozens of self-important people of no fashion and little beauty. People who stared at him.

Bingley and his partner smiled happily at each other—unsurprisingly, she was the prettiest girl in the room. Darcy scowled. It always amazed him how Bingley could enter a room and be friends with everyone in it within an hour’s time. Usually it entertained Darcy to watch Bingley meet new persons, but now he was bored. With Bingley occupied there was no one he cared to talk to, and for the fifth time Darcy wished he was home with a book.

Miss Bingley came up as Darcy scowled at a violinist who missed notes in every passage with the slightest difficulty. “Can you believe it,” she pointed at a woman talking to an older man. “For the past year that woman has directly managed her land without a steward or estate agent. Have you ever heard anything so shocking?”

Darcy had been introduced to the woman as the widow of a Mr. Collins, and he would not have guessed she was eccentric from her appearance. “Surely it is a small estate? It would not be odd then.”

“No, indeed, her holdings are the largest in the neighborhood, except Netherfield. Can you imagine it? She negotiates contracts, she directs workmen; she even collects rents herself—it is the scandal of the neighborhood.”

The description fascinated Darcy more than appalled him. It was hardly feminine, but he approved of any landowner who took their duties seriously. “Is the estate well-managed? Do you know which it is?”

“Longbourn is the estate; I believe it is three miles or so from Netherfield. I can’t imagine she does well at all, though Mrs. Phelps was impressed. She is a woman, after all—it brings to mind Doctor Johnson’s quip: a woman managing her own lands is like a dog walking on hind legs, the surprise is that it is done at all.”

Miss Bingley clearly expected Darcy to share her amusement at the well-worn quote. He was still annoyed by how she hounded him during the carriage ride from London—he’d not come to Hertfordshire to marry Bingley’s sister either. Darcy decided to be contrary. “My aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is quite involved in managing Rosings Park. She keeps a steward, but she supervises him most closely.”

Lady Catherine was *not* in fact a good example of estate management; three stewards had left due to annoyance at her demands, and the primary qualification of the current was a remarkable ability to flatter and his willingness to never question orders, no matter how silly. Lady Catherine had been lucky to find him.

Before Miss Bingley recovered from his frosty tone, Darcy added, “I saw part of Longbourn’s lands during my ride this morning; it is a well-maintained property—was it managed directly by her husband as well?”

“Oh, he died some four or five years ago. The steward was old and, on his death last year, rather than replace him she took all the work upon herself.” Miss Bingley placed a critical eye on the young woman again. “She has horribly misused her time; that dress is three seasons out of date—and her hair! That poor hair! Its potential is all wasted, alas. With an estate of that size, she ought to have a better maid; all the Bennets are poorly dressed and coiffed.”

Darcy followed Miss Bingley’s eye; *he* saw no deep flaw in Mrs. Collins’s hair and dress. On the contrary, her black curls formed an elegant contrast to the white of her neck and they bounced prettily as she flung her hands about to emphasize her words. Her pale-yellow ball gown enclosed a light and pleasing form. While he deferred to Miss Bingley as his superior in matters of female *fashion,* Darcy thought himself her superior in the judgment of female *beauty*.

The favorable impression Darcy had of her lands and the prettiness of Mrs. Collins’s figure aroused his curiosity. “I must properly meet this marvel for myself.” Darcy left Miss Bingley and cast about for a stratagem to enter her conversation.

“Mr. Long, I have tried to convince you out of concern for your wife and nieces. If you considered my arguments, you would see borrowing to bring marginal fields under cultivation at this time is foolhardy. You should not attempt to clear that field.”

The florid gentleman patted Mrs. Collins kindly on her arm. “Nonsense, Lizzy, rents have never been higher—the increased income will pay off the mortgage in almost no time. As a woman, you are naturally timid—which does you credit. But your female fears lead you astray when you meddle in business matters best left to men.”

There was a clear flash of irritation in the woman’s momentary frown. But almost immediately she forced a polite smile onto her face. “Of course, we *are* the weaker sex, and while my advice was well meant, you may ignore it as you choose.”

When he entered the assembly hall, Sir William Lucas had introduced Mrs. Collins to him. Without preamble Darcy asked, “Why do you think this is a poor time to bring marginal lands under plow? Rents *are* higher than ever.”

Mr. Long laughed self-consciously. “Don’t let Lizzy give you the wrong idea of Hertfordshire society; humor her if you wish, but her father, God bless his soul, taught her she should debate like a man.”

Now her irritation was very clear: she wrinkled her nose, narrowed her eyes, and tightened her lips. Her face was expressive. Darcy also disliked Mr. Long’s reply. Darcy had not spoken to *him*. Once his intense gaze made Mr. Long flinch in embarrassment, Darcy turned to Mrs. Collins. “Your father taught you to debate like a man?”

She nodded.

“Then explain: what argument convinced you now is a poor time to enclose wasteland?”

Mrs. Collin’s lips turned up into a smile at his direct request. “I must warn you, I have given this much thought indeed. Grain is expensive, because the war keeps us from eating Baltic corn, and we have had several poor harvests. But the war will not go on forever, and even if it does, by my calculation at least a tenth more land has been brought under cultivation in Hertfordshire, and improvements have made the potential yield on already cultivated lands much higher. Our population has not grown nearly so much; should we have a few good years, the price of wheat could easily go back to where it was a decade ago—you’ll never pay off that mortgage, Mr. Long, if that happens.

“Besides—some land sells at simply ridiculous prices. I sold a field earlier this year for nearly forty times what it brought in rents.” The woman shook her head in exasperation and gave a small laugh, “Indeed, I have no desire to sell land which has belonged to my family for generations, but when my neighbors beg me to cheat them it is hard to say nay.”

The woman gestured excitedly as she spoke, and Darcy thought her fine, bright eyes were most fetching. He also agreed with her. The country was mad for improvements, but Mrs. Collins was right; the end of the war or increased production might reverse the sharp rise in agricultural prices, and to be overextended then would be dangerous. Darcy still plowed bone meal and lime into his fields to improve their fertility but avoided the more extravagant projects the boom in rents had convinced many of his neighbors to undertake. He also had sold all of his estates that were not part of the traditional family holdings.

Directly agreeing with her would not allow Darcy to see how deeply she’d thought on the issue. “It *is* true that should the war end prices likely will fall. Anyone can see that, but the war has continued almost twenty years; it might continue another twenty. While it does, it is likely that the Navy and Army shall absorb any excess.”

“Perhaps.” Mrs. Collins spread her hands. “But, even then I greatly doubt that prices will stay *this* high forever. And if they do, I would greatly prefer to have plenty of capital and be unhappy I did not use it than no capital and heavy debts should incomes fall.”

“Yes, but as the Romans said, *audentes fortuna iuvat*—that is, fortune favors the bold—you should not let fear of loss keep you from making investments likely to turn a profit.”

Mrs. Collins smiled. “I see what you mean to say; you agree with Mr. Long that it is merely womanly fears which lead me to think this way. Perhaps.” The woman’s smile deepened, and the corners of her eyes crinkled to show real amusement as she continued, “However, as one of our *English* poets said, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I will keep my angelic fears, and leave what fortune is to be gained from bold foolishness to men.”

To his surprise, Darcy laughed at Mrs. Collins’s sweet expression as she teased them. “In fact, I agree. To make large outlays in the firm conviction wheat prices shall never fall seems foolhardy to me as well.”

At that reply she gave a pleased laugh which brightened her face beautifully. “I see you delight in expressing opinions contrary to your own. I will remember that.”

“Only for the sake of argument; in life I abhor deceit. But, if I directly agreed with you it would have been impossible to see how well you had thought on the issue.”

Mrs. Collins responded with another charming smile, which Darcy could not help but return. “My father loved to make statements to discover how another party would respond as well—Mr. Long,” she nodded at the man who watched them bemusedly, “spoke rightly when he said that I was taught to argue.”

“Yes, but you do it so charmingly,” Mr. Long said. Then as the current dance had ended, he gave a small bow and said, “You must excuse me, I promised to dance the next with my wife.”

The brightness of Mrs. Collins’s eyes gave Darcy a sudden impulse. With his own bow he asked, “Are you engaged for this set?”

“I am not.” Her face dimpled as she replied.

“Would you do me the honor of dancing the set with me?”

“It would be a pleasure, Mr. Darcy.” With that, Darcy took her gloved hand and led her to join the line of couples.

As they danced, Mrs. Collins drew him out with a stream of questions—about Georgiana, about Pemberley, about how he managed his estate, about his thoughts on Hertfordshire. There was an intelligent look in her eyes, and her responses to what he said were invariably well-informed, and often humorous. Her manners were not those of the best society, but their playfulness—and how her lively smiles lit her face—delighted Darcy.

Mrs. Collins was claimed by another partner once the dance ended, and Darcy reflected with pleasure that he could not recall a more pleasant half hour spent in a ballroom. For the rest of the night the swish of her gown, or the flash of her eyes, or the merry tones of her voice caught his attention, and late in the evening they danced again. During the return trip to Netherfield Darcy smiled as the carriage bounced over the rural roads. The evening had started poorly, but in the end he enjoyed himself a great deal.

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning after the ball Elizabeth hummed the tune from one of the sets she had danced with Darcy, and settled into the large padded chair in front of her desk. Last night had been a joy. She could not recall the last time she had conversed with a clever gentleman who would really listen to her. Further, Darcy was very handsome *and* danced delightfully. Elizabeth grinned as she remembered how he spent half the night walking the edges of the room with a proud look.

She had never been so surprised as when he entered her otherwise fruitless conversation with Mr. Long—his nieces were very good women, and Elizabeth wished them well, but few men ever took a woman seriously on matters of business. At first Elizabeth thought Darcy was one of those supercilious gentlemen with definite ideas about what a woman should speak on, and that he wished to prove her stupidity. However, when he laughed it transformed his face; the pride disappeared, replaced by a good-natured sensibility.

Elizabeth smiled at the view of her garden through the window; it was the sort of overcast and drizzly day which made one happy to be warm in their own room. She briefly glanced over her study; Elizabeth loved how it showed a mix of masculine and feminine traits. The solid leather-bound account books and neatly organized piles of business letters on her heavy mahogany desk showed she conducted business here.

The pretty chintz curtains, the watercolors drawn by Kitty and Lydia which hung around the room, and the flowered tea set on the coffee table near a dainty sofa showed, while a midsized estate was run from the room, it was run by a woman. Mr. Collins had lectured her at length on the imbecility of women and their complete inability to manage their own affairs. Every time Elizabeth finished a negotiation with a tenant, or tallied up the rents from a successful year, or improved the drainage of a field for less than a neighbor had paid for a similar project—every time she succeeded, Elizabeth still felt the delightful thrill of proving him wrong.

It was a silly self-indulgence, but several times a year she took out the dusty old account books and compared the rents received under her management to those received under *his*. Men had managed Longbourn poorly. She beat both Mr. Collins and her father. The reduced expense and additional control were not the only reasons Elizabeth chose not to hire a new steward. Running the estate without help required hours of work daily, but the ability to throw her success at the memory of Mr. Collins’s voice was worth it. Incapable. Ha! Imbecilic. Ha! Only if an income six hundred pounds a year greater than his was incapable. Only if growing her rents every year was imbecilic.

A portrait of her father hung above the fireplace. Fine bookshelves whose dark mahogany matched her desk covered the walls. Expensive and rare books filled them. Elizabeth both loved and hated the collection her father had created.

She’d spent her childhood, those happy years before her father died, in this room. He let her read with him; he encouraged her to argue and think. She’d read most of the books on the shelves, and spent hours with her father very carefully admiring the rarer specimens, such as a first edition folio of Shakespeare’s collected works. He would call her a silly girl, but her father always *treated* her as a thinking creature and, more importantly, expected her to act as one. The books reminded her of his love.

And his failure.

He saved no money. They would barely have maintained their status as gentlewomen with the limited fortune settled upon her mother. It left Elizabeth no way to protect Jane from that odious man except to marry him herself. After Mr. Collins’s death, Elizabeth carefully studied the estate’s old account books. Her father spent an average of two hundred and fifty a year collecting books. If he saved that sum each year after Jane was born it would have doubled the amount settled upon his wife.

He could’ve economized elsewhere. And his habits of indolence—the time spent with his beloved books—reduced his income. The estate had been neglected. Improvements that should’ve been made were not; the steward was not properly supervised; contracts were not properly renegotiated. Rents had steadily increased everywhere in England since Mr. Bennet’s death, which explained some of the rise in Longbourn’s income, but Elizabeth judged that if properly managed by her father the estate would have yielded two or three hundred more a year—if saved, that too would have left his daughters well dowered and protected from concern.

Mrs. Bennet. The year she was too frightened of Elizabeth to speak to her had let Elizabeth’s anger cool. Still, Elizabeth thought very poorly of her mother. She had worried about the entail, obsessed about her daughters marrying well, and never economized. She then convinced Jane to marry Mr. Collins because she was unwilling to survive off the interest from five thousand pounds. Her behavior combined greed with imprudence.

Elizabeth knew her family’s situation after Mr. Bennet’s death was more her father’s fault than her mother’s. But, perhaps because she never could forget how her mother reacted when they showed her Lydia’s bruises, Mrs. Bennet was the one she never really forgave. Elizabeth’s body still tightened with anger when she remembered their argument after Mr. Collins died.

Elizabeth had promised herself, before Mr. Collins had even been buried, that no one she cared for would ever again want for money. She intended to save enough so, not only her sisters, but any daughters they might have, and any daughters those daughters might have would be able to marry or not as they pleased. Elizabeth immediately gave notice to half the staff, slashed their clothes budget, and sold the new carriage Mr. Collins had bought to purchase a much older one.

Mrs. Bennet had nagged Elizabeth to change her decision. Elizabeth had little patience for her at the time, and ordered her to be silent. Despite the passage of years, Elizabeth could clearly remember Mrs. Bennett’s shouted response. “You are selfish! A selfish child who cares nothing for Jane or Lydia or any of your family. Lord! I so wish you had not stolen Jane’s place.”

“One more word from you! One more, and I swear, I swear I will throw you out in the hedgerows you fear so much. I will tolerate no more of your demands. None. Another word and you will be turned out this evening. Do not speak to me again, ever.” Elizabeth had been serious. The only reason she did not actually turn Mrs. Bennet out was because the scandal would’ve hurt Jane’s prospects.

It had been years, and Elizabeth now regretted how she had treated her mother. Despite everything, Mrs. Bennet was her mother. It was not right for a daughter to control their mother through threats. It was something Mr. Collins might have done.

For a year after, the two had not spoken; Mrs. Bennet was too frightened to start a conversation, and Elizabeth too angry. Time, though, eased most wounds. They still spent little time together, but Elizabeth could now be polite to her mother. And her mother had learned to rarely ask for money. She could spend the interest from her own five thousand pounds as she willed, but otherwise Elizabeth would run the household as she chose.

The family lived most comfortably, and Elizabeth had only modestly reduced their show of consequence in the neighborhood. Still, she spent barely half what the family did during her father’s life. It was a slow process, but over the past four years between economy, increased rents, and the very good return on capital she had given to her uncle, Elizabeth had put aside six thousand pounds towards her sisters’ dowries. Another three thousand pounds had been gained from the fields she recently sold.

Several times a month Elizabeth took the Consol bonds, East India Company share certificates, and bank account books from her safe to look at the paper representation of the accumulated funds. They made her feel safe.

Jane clearly liked Mr. Bingley a great deal. And Mr. Bingley had paid more attention to her than any other girl at the assembly. It was very early, but Elizabeth wondered if she might soon lose her sister.

Mr. Bingley was worth four thousand a year. The number lit her mother’s eyes with avarice; it made Elizabeth apprehensive. She unlocked her strong box, and pulled the certificates and account books out. It was not a bad sum, but divided in four it would look pitifully small to a man with four thousand a year. Elizabeth would not mortgage the estate or give Jane funds which ought to go to her other sisters.

Elizabeth shrugged and put the certificates away. She wished her sisters to marry, and marry well, but a good husband was a good man, not a rich one. A man who scorned a girl of Jane’s beauty and kindness due to her relative poverty or her connections to trade was not a man Elizabeth wished for her sister.

As the lock clicked back into place there was a knock from her door and Jane entered. Elizabeth smiled and walked to embrace her sister. “What draws you here this morning?”

Jane seemed uncomfortable, and in a tense voice said, “Mama begged me to speak with you.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth refused to feel angry before she heard, but the fact that Jane was her intermediary proved Elizabeth would not be happy.

“She wants—Lizzy you know I wish nothing for myself, and entirely approve of how you run the house. I am only saying what Mama begged me to. She wants us to hire a new lady’s maid, a better cook, and lay out several hundred pounds to update our wardrobes and the house’s furnishings.”

“Does she now.” Tight anger leapt out of her stomach as Elizabeth bit out, “Did Mama give some reason for this application?”

Jane did not reply, her eyes unhappy. Jane always supported Elizabeth, but she did not like to see her and Mrs. Bennet at odds. It was that more than anything else which led Elizabeth to tolerate her mother.

Elizabeth gave the explanation Jane would not. “She wants to impress Mr. Bingley, no doubt. All this time I had thought she may have become more reasonable. But no, it was merely that there was no gentleman worthy of her avarice in the vicinity. But now there is, and she wishes again to sell her daughters.”

Elizabeth felt Jane take her hand and squeeze it. She slowly calmed and paid attention to the sensation of her breath leaving as she exhaled. She looked at Jane. “Do *you* wish new dresses? I will not spend a great deal of course, but—”

Jane shook her head, and Elizabeth added with a smile, “Not even to impress Mr. Bingley? You seemed to like him a great deal last night.”

Jane blushed. “He is just what a young man ought to be; sensible, good humored, lively.”

“He is also handsome, which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can.”

Jane laughed, and said, “I confess I was very much flattered when he asked me to dance a second time. But no, if I were to spend a great deal on clothes in hopes of attaching him—no, I would not wish to behave so.”

After some further words, Jane left Elizabeth to her correspondence. She refused to let her mother’s request ruin her mood. Mrs. Bennet had no power, and Elizabeth hoped she would know enough to not push.

Midway through a letter from Mr. Gardiner describing his purchase of a large set of drainage pipes for Elizabeth, Lydia entered the room.

She stood in front of Elizabeth. “You must tell me more about this man you danced with.”

After her mourning period ended it felt as if every unmarried gentleman in the neighborhood wished to court her. She had been just sixteen, and the nightmares which had ended months earlier returned as Elizabeth faced the sudden burst of male attention—and the idea of marriage. Lydia protected Elizabeth from much of this pressure. She acted like a brat in company to give Elizabeth an excuse to leave the room, and she never left Elizabeth alone with a man.

Elizabeth was grateful to her sister, but that time had passed. Elizabeth eventually became comfortable enough to politely and clearly make her disinterest known, and with that confidence her nightmares and nervous anxieties had faded; she no longer needed Lydia’s help to fend off unwanted suitors.

Lydia did not agree. She wished to know everything about any man who showed the slightest interest in Elizabeth. Then she would behave in a quite ill-bred fashion towards them.

Most times Lydia’s behavior amused Elizabeth. However, she did not wish Lydia to act in her customary manner in this case. Mr. Darcy was a delight to converse with, and Elizabeth liked him. Further, he was Mr. Bingley’s friend. It might hurt Jane’s position if Lydia offended him.

“He is a very nice gentleman—I enjoyed our conversation. He took my opinions seriously, and would take the other side of a debate simply for the pleasure of the argument. It reminded me of the talks I used to have with father.”

Lydia gave an unladylike snort. “He is still a man.” Elizabeth smiled at the way her sister’s face wrinkled in disgust. Despite the good example of the Gardiners, Elizabeth’s marriage led Lydia to loathe men and the wedded state. When Mrs. Bennet anxiously exclaimed, ‘Lord! All of you still unmarried, and Jane nearly an old maid!’ Lydia would inevitably reply, ‘Well, *I* have determined to never marry. *I* think it good we all are free of men.’

The amusement in Elizabeth’s eyes annoyed Lydia and she stamped her foot. “He certainly wishes to marry you to acquire Longbourn. Men are greedy—and none of them are perceptive enough to realize how clever you are.”

Elizabeth laughed at the compliment. “Now, don’t speak in that manner; while seldom as fair as the fairer sex, *some* men do have their own virtues. Mr. Darcy, I believe, did perceive my great cleverness—which is a great deal less than *you* assume it to be. Now, promise you will not bother him; we are barely acquainted and I’m sure neither of us desires to be more than friends—Mr. Darcy is more than wealthy enough to not have any desire to marry me for Longbourn.”

Elizabeth held her sister’s eyes until she nodded, and pouted, “I should have met him and Mr. Bingley last night; when will you let me attend balls?”

With a laugh Elizabeth replied, “Not for another six months yet—don’t show me that face, you’ll meet them in a few days. I heard Sir William ask Mr. Bingley to his party the day after tomorrow.”

“La! It will be so much fun to see your and Jane’s new suitors—can I borrow your yellow ribbon?”

“He’s not my suitor. Now run along, I have work to do.”

“The ribbon?”

Elizabeth laughed, “Yes, you can borrow the ribbon. Now go.” Lydia darted forward and gave her sister a quick kiss before she left.

Two of her sisters in one morning. Elizabeth smiled as she enjoyed the tactile pleasure of trimming her quill—as the total sum of money involved was so small, Elizabeth indulged herself by buying the very best feathers. Would Mary or Kitty decide to stop by as well? Her other two sisters were very different. Mary, serious and studious; Kitty, flighty and flirtatious.

Mr. Collins’s taste for sermons and improving works had destroyed Mary’s preference for them, but not her desire to read serious books. Mary idolized bluestockings such as Elizabeth Montagu, and her favorite book was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She had given herself an extensive program of study, and, somewhat to Elizabeth’s surprise, mostly carried it through.

For several weeks after she read Wollstonecraft’s book Mary stopped playing piano, as it was an ornamental skill taught to woman so they could entertain their future husbands. However, Mary explained very seriously when she resumed practicing, as long as she played for her own pleasure and improvement, it was not an adornment but a reasonable exercise.

Elizabeth did not get on well with Kitty at all. She was her mother’s favorite, and Mrs. Bennet saw their family as made up of competing camps, where Kitty was the only one really on her side. Kitty loved being the main recipient of her mother’s attention, and little Elizabeth or Jane said could influence Kitty’s manners. She was a terrible flirt, with little in her mind beyond men, society, and dancing. Still, Elizabeth loved all her sisters very much, and hoped Kitty would eventually mature. Though she did not really expect her to.

# Chapter 3

A few nights after the assembly, Darcy attended a small party at Lucas Lodge, the home of a jovial minor knight who talked more than Darcy enjoyed and was too self-important for his position in life. It took several minutes of stiff bows and short answers before he escaped the meaningless pleasantries of his host.

Darcy thought the red and orange pattern of the wallpaper and the profusion of shiny ornate decorations showed abominable taste. It was as if—Darcy believed this was what had actually happened—the owner had been so impressed by the decor of St. James’s that he decided to imitate it as far as possible on an income of a thousand pounds a year. The effect was gaudy, and made the cheapness of the furnishings more obvious.

Darcy looked for Mrs. Collins, as he hoped to continue the acquaintance. This quest was paused when he heard Bingley’s name spoken loudly. Mrs. Bennet said to Lady Lucas, “Bingley was most attached to Jane at the assembly, and now he has talked to her all night.”

“It does appear a promising inclination,” Lady Lucas replied in a not entirely happy voice.

“It will probably come to nothing,” Mrs. Bennet said peevishly. “Lizzy still refuses to hire a French maid or increase our clothes budget. And should we have Bingley over to dine, he will most certainly be disappointed with the cheapness of our cook. That girl lives to vex me. If only she had not stolen Jane’s place! Had Jane married Mr. Collins, *she* would have been a dutiful daughter.”

Darcy felt a start of surprise at this information. How had Mrs. Collins come to supplant her sister? Lady Lucas murmured sympathetically, before Mrs. Bennet exasperatedly added even louder, “I’ve told Jane to do everything she can to attach Mr. Bingley, but how can she if Lizzy refuses to let her look her best? I’d think Lizzy was jealous of Jane’s beauty if they weren’t so close.”

Lady Lucas noted Darcy’s presence, and gave Mrs. Bennet a pointed look and nodded towards him. Then she asked about a piece of neighborhood gossip which had nothing to do with Bingley. Darcy walked away; the conversation disturbed him. Bingley was in a corner eagerly speaking to Miss Bennet. He looked infatuated—but not more so than Darcy had seen him before. Miss Bennet, while she smiled, showed no symptoms of particular regard for his friend.

It was too early to be concerned, but Darcy decided to watch the two; if Bingley became more serious, he would warn his friend that he had heard Mrs. Bennet ordered Jane to attach herself to him. Perhaps he should also mention the conversation to Miss Bingley.

Darcy again looked for Mrs. Collins. She was across the room in a pretty rose-colored dress speaking to two other young women. Before he approached her, he himself was approached by Lydia Bennet, the youngest of the Bennet sisters. Due to her age, Miss Lydia was not fully out in society and had not been at the assembly ball, but since the Bennets were very close friends with all of the families at the Lucas party except Bingley and his guests, they allowed her to attend.

Like Georgiana, she was tall and well grown for her age, and she had a yellow ribbon threaded through her light-colored hair. “You are the one Lizzy danced with twice at the assembly.” She stepped back and looked him up and down. “La! You are tall!”

Darcy did not know how to reply.

“My sister likes you; she thought you could take a tease in good humor, and she said you were unusual as a man because you would let a woman argue with you. She said it reminded her of father. So,” the forward girl demanded, “what do you think of my sister?”

The impertinence of the request and Lydia’s manner shocked Darcy. The girl showed surprisingly poor breeding. Rather than reply Darcy gave her an impassive stare he knew to be intimidating. It worked, as the girl started to blush and turn away, but then she swallowed and firmed herself up and stared at him fiercely and asked again, “What do you want with my sister?”

It was quite the incongruous impression Darcy received from this. Lydia was a fifteen-year-old girl, yet her manner made him think of an old father demanding some young fellow explain his intentions towards his daughter. But the seriousness of Miss Lydia’s manner, and her undertone of real concern reminded Darcy of how he felt when he learned from Georgiana about her attachment to Wickham. The memory softened Darcy’s sense of the impropriety of Lydia’s request, and he replied honestly, “I found her a fascinating and challenging conversationalist, and I admire her willingness to work hard to maintain and improve the estate—I hope to know her better as I did enjoy our talk a great deal.”

“So you do not wish to marry her for her money?”

“No.” Darcy said flatly.

The girl in front of him relaxed, blushed, and turned away. “I’m glad to hear that. It was forward of me to approach you like that, but ever since *he* died,” she emphasized the word with a surprising amount of venom, “men have wanted to attach themselves to Lizzy as she owns Longbourn clear. If you just desire to talk, I won’t worry. She does love to argue!”

And with that the girl walked away.

Darcy did not know what to think. Her behavior was very improper, and he should feel offended to have his motives questioned like that—Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley a fortune hunter?—But… it was deeply amusing, and a little touching. While he did not smile, the image of a fifteen-year-old girl playing the protective guardian left him in very good humor. Further, Miss Lydia had some steel in her. In the back of Darcy’s mind, he wondered what *he* had done. It made him think there was more to the story of Mrs. Collins taking the elder Miss Bennet’s rightful place than was on the surface.

With a carefully maintained neutral face, Darcy walked to where Mrs. Collins now stood alone watching Miss Lucas play. “I just had the oddest conversation with your sister, Miss Lydia.”

Mrs. Collins’s face turned the darkest shade of red he had ever seen on a person. Darcy noted that it was becoming and set off the brightness of her eyes nicely. “She didn’t!”

Darcy nodded to indicate she, in fact, had.

Mrs. Collins clapped a hand over her mouth and shook her head. “I had made her promise to leave you be. Please don’t think her manners are always so poor; she was raised better than that, but,” as Mrs. Collins hesitated her blush faded, “something happened when she was much younger that gave her an odd idea that it is her duty to protect me from men. I am very sorry for her behavior.”

The woman’s embarrassment dissolved any lingering offense Darcy might have felt at Lydia’s behavior; it had not been proper, but there was no ill feeling behind it. Darcy smiled mischievously. “Will she negotiate the marriage settlement should anyone catch your heart again?”

The blush deepened once again, but this time Mrs. Collins mouth turned up into a genuine smile. “I daresay I will have her in the room.”

Before Darcy replied, Miss Bingley, wearing an orange dress and feathered hat, walked up to them and asked Mrs. Collins, “I just spoke to Lady Lucas about your relatives in Cheapside. Is it true they live within eyesight of their warehouse?”

Mrs. Collins nodded agreeably. “It is true—though they live on Gracechurch Street, which is near Cheapside, but not in the district. This will no doubt shock you, my dear Miss Bingley, but not only have I visited them there often, I have even toured those warehouses—I’m not at all certain you will survive the shock of this revelation, but my capital has even paid for some of the goods that fill those warehouses.”

“You brag of your connections to trade?” Darcy said, surprised.

“I do. My uncle and aunt are the best of people; without their help I would hardly have managed the difficult time after my husband’s death. And, above all else, I wish to see my sisters well cared for. The return on capital I can receive from my uncle is far greater than I could get from the funds, and ensuring my sisters and mother will never be in poverty—or forced to marry where they do not wish—matters far more than my dignity as a gentlewoman.”

She now turned to Darcy. “You said you abhor disguise of every sort; you surely can understand why I would not hide this.”

Miss Bingley replied before Darcy could, “I see what you attempt; you defy common standards for self-interested reasons and claim it to be a virtue, as you are merely being honest. This is a pretense which will not work with me.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Collins replied, “but I do not claim my behavior to be virtuous, merely self-interested. So, there is no pretense.”

Darcy suspected it was jealousy that drove Miss Bingley to attack Mrs. Collins in this way, and he could not disapprove of Mrs. Collins’s attitude. “I do see why you openly own your relatives, and I do approve. For myself, I always wish to let the world see me as I am and it may draw what conclusion it wishes. I do not perform for strangers.”

Mrs. Collins dimpled at his words. “To hear that you do not perform for strangers fits my perception of your character perfectly.”

He was not entirely sure how to take Mrs. Collins’s reply. Miss Bingley said, “Surely, Mr. Darcy, you would not associate with tradesmen yourself.”

“I would not,” Darcy replied immediately. “But the situations are entirely different. My connections are of a much higher sort; my grandfather was an Earl, my aunt married a baronet, and the Darcy name, though untitled, has a long and distinguished history. To associate directly with tradespeople would be unfitting the dignity of my connections and name. I live as I ought, given my station in life. People should not pretend to be in a different condition than they are. I would disapprove of you,” nodding to Mrs. Collins, “if you disdained those whom bonds of blood and affection tie you to because you wished to appear greater than you are. That would be far worse than if someone in my situation condescended to associate with such persons.”

Mrs. Collins raised her eyebrows. “That is very liberal of you, to think it a worse crime to disdain one’s relatives than to dine with a tradesman.”

“That is not a very charitable construction of my words,” Darcy said with a smile.

With a small laugh Mrs. Collins replied, “Perhaps it is not. Though there are those who would disagree with you, and see dining with a tradesman as the greater crime. In any case, I cannot blame you for your attitude; still, the view one ought to only associate with those near themselves in station has always struck me as odd.”

“Surely you think some separation must be maintained to keep order. Look at what has happened in France when they tried to abolish all distinctions of rank.”

“The revolution is a great warning, no doubt, but of what, I’m less sure. I confess that I do not see the path between thinking my uncle would be excellent company for anyone, and an English version of the Committee for Public Safety.”

Darcy shrugged, “Perhaps there is none, and I do not doubt your uncle would be excellent company, but, in any case, there is still reason to avoid intimate association with tradespeople if possible. After all, they are constantly engaged in the handling of money, and buying and selling. The need to appeal to their customers damages their sense of independence, and the close association to profit can weaken their moral fiber. I am certain from your affection for him this has not happened to your uncle, but it does to many tradesmen.”

Mrs. Collins smiled and shook her head. “Now, I do not believe *that* proves your point at all.” She laughed, “I admit commerce may damage the character of some tradesmen; I *have* done business with merchants who found their highest joy in cheating honest persons out of their money. But your idea is that the gentry or aristocracy are superior and ought to avoid merchants to protect themselves. Why, not a week goes by when you do not hear a new story of scandalous behavior, or how a Duke lost enough money to feed a thousand persons for a year on a game of cards. Idleness clearly is as great a danger as running after profit.”

Darcy started to reply when Mrs. Collins interrupted him with an arch smile. “Be serious, you do not *really* think being wellborn and well-educated is a guarantee of virtue.”

After a moment Darcy laughed in defeat. He certainly knew too much of his peers to think *that*. He felt a bit foolish about the argument he had made, but the triumphant look Mrs. Collins gave him was too happy for him to not smile back at her. “I confess you have convinced me. Now that we have established both gentry and tradesmen are contaminated by their way of life, where can we find virtue? Should we perhaps emulate cottagers?”

Mrs. Collins laughed, and Miss Bingley reentered the conversation. “Maybe breeding does not guarantee virtue, but the refined pleasures *are* preferable to those of the lower classes—surely you,” she looked at Darcy, “would not wish your sister to act as a cottager’s daughter.”

“Certainly not. But then, I have no real belief in their superior virtue.” Mrs. Collins laughed again and Darcy gave a pleased smile at her amusement.

Miss Bingley said, “In most cases, the manners of tradesmen are deficient so as to give general disgust. They do not have the same education or standing, and cannot easily mingle in good society.”

Darcy loved the way the good humor was visible in the shape of Mrs. Collins’s mouth, as she raised her eyebrows and said, “In truth, I am surprised to hear *you* disdain tradesmen so. I had understood that your father had gained his fortune transporting coal to the mills of Manchester—I certainly would not expect you to *brag* of your connections, but…”

Miss Bingley’s irritation was clear as she stared at Mrs. Collins for a moment before replying, “It is education and breeding which matter; my father may have chosen to go into trade instead of a more respectable occupation, but my grandfather’s estate is quite as good as *yours*. The Bingleys of Lancashire are an old and respected family. *We* have been educated in the very best manner possible. We show all the means and manners of gentility.”

“Now, now, you have no need to prove anything to *me*,” Mrs. Collins waved her hands and laughed. “*I* would never disdain someone for their connections to trade.”

This reply did nothing to improve Miss Bingley’s mood, and Darcy tried to hide his smile. Though from how Mrs. Collins caught his eye he could see *she* perceived his amusement. He did think Miss Bingley was correct in essentials: Mr. Bingley was a gentleman due to his education and behavior. So long as a person acted the gentleman, few would really disdain them because their fortune was new. Unlike France before the revolution, the higher tiers of British society were open to capable families of the lower ranks.

Charlotte Lucas approached them, perhaps because she had noticed the tension that had come over the conversation as Miss Bingley gave Mrs. Collins a cold smile. “My dear Eliza, now that I have, you must display for our new friends,” Miss Lucas nodded at Darcy and Miss Bingley.

Mrs. Collins laughed, “If you decree I must, I must. I will warn you,” she said to Darcy, “I am only competent, though I do take great joy in playing.”

The picture made as she sat at the piano with her eyes on the sheets of music and her face twisted in concentration was very pretty. She had spoken truly that she was not a great artist, but the emotion Mrs. Collins imbued the song with caught Darcy in its spell and nearly brought tears to his eyes. Besides his sister, he could think of very few performers he had enjoyed more.

# Chapter 4

Mr. Bingley and his company would attend a dinner party hosted by the Bennets. Mrs. Bennet had been in a flurry of agitated activity all week, and her hope to acquire Mr. Bingley for Jane made her beg again for extra money to improve the entertainment.

In fact, Elizabeth wanted the party to go very well, though not as much as her mother. She never thought it important to impress her neighbors, who had known her from birth. But Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were from excellent London society; they often ate more extravagant meals, in more expensively decorated rooms, than the environs of Meryton could supply. Longbourn should show its best face to them. Besides, Jane liked Mr. Bingley. For that, Elizabeth would go out of her way to make them welcome.

Elizabeth gave her mother far more money than she usually would, and supported as best she could the flurry of preparations. However, despite her desire that the party would go very well—and though she enjoyed hosting her neighbors immensely—Elizabeth did not care for the details of preparing an entertainment. It seemed pointless to her to spend an hour, as her mother did, debating what flower arrangement would best match the color of the new tablecloth that she had purchased.

Heartened by Elizabeth’s uncharacteristic worry about the evening, Mrs. Bennet incessantly asked questions about this or that, which she could answer perfectly well herself. The moment Elizabeth finished her business for the day, about one hour before noon, she escaped the house and set out to call on Charlotte. It was not a particularly pretty day; white clouds blocked the sun, but it looked unlikely to rain. The cold early winter breeze made her shiver when she first stepped out. Elizabeth enjoyed the exercise and walked for a good ten minutes past Lucas Lodge before she turned back to visit her friend.

Elizabeth’s cheeks were rosy and her nose red from the cold when she entered Lucas Lodge. Charlotte laughed when she saw Elizabeth. “I’m not surprised to see you this morning. I can well imagine what a state your mother must be in, since you are to host Mr. Bingley and all four thousand pounds of his income today.”

“I do believe she is worse than you picture. I gave her some twenty guineas to spend as she would—the extra money has thrown her into quite a tizzy.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened theatrically, “You? Spending so much on an entertainment? No! I do not believe it. Unless—” Charlotte leaned forward with a teasing smile, “is it possible you wish to impress one of your guests?”

Elizabeth blushed, as Charlotte had caught her out, but responded with a smile, “I do. Though I fear it is a pointless effort—Mr. Bingley’s sisters will be determined to dislike the entertainment no matter what, and I daresay that Mr. Darcy is impossible to fool.”

“And Mr. Bingley himself is too agreeable to care how poor the meal is,” Charlotte said.

“Yes, still, I wish to make the effort, for Jane’s sake.”

“Only for Jane’s? You have no interest yourself in a gentleman of the party?”

Elizabeth blushed slightly, unsurprised her friend had noticed her conversations with Mr. Darcy. She replied, “I do confess I like Mr. Hurst very much indeed—but he is married already and rather short in any case.” When Charlotte laughed Elizabeth added, “I admit I like Mr. Darcy and wish him to think well of me, but he’s rather too proud for my tastes. You saw how he greeted your father at your party. He shows no desire to be friendly to those who do not interest him.”

“Perhaps he is shy?”

“I daresay he is, but he is also very proud and sees no reason to make the effort. In any case, while he may enjoy our conversation, whatever my feelings may become, *he* will always be too proud to look at a girl who boasts of her connections to trade.”

“I confess that is likely—his situation is very good indeed.” Charlotte frowned, and added while tracing the white flowers embroidered into her sofa, “I worry something may go wrong between Jane and Mr. Bingley; it seems a most promising inclination, but Jane shows very little of her feelings, and I worry Mr. Bingley may not perceive how much she really likes him. There is so much of vanity and gratitude in any attachment that very few persons have the heart to become really in love without encouragement.”

“Surely you do not expect her to display herself to all the world?”

“Perhaps she should if she wishes to secure him.”

“No, no—I cannot approve of such a plan. To secure him? We have not known him a full month; there’s much of his character that might yet be revealed with time, and a woman should not marry unless she has good reason to trust in the man’s character. You know this to be true.”

“You are right. It is a conundrum; to put off a man until you know enough of him to marry may cause you to lose your chance, but to marry a man you do not know well is even more dangerous. Nevertheless, I think Jane should endeavor to show Mr. Bingley *at least* as much affection as she actually feels and then allow what follows to follow.”

“I suppose I cannot dispute that, and really, I do not worry very much about Mr. Bingley’s character—everything we have seen shows him to be good-natured, and I doubt Mr. Darcy would be his friend if he showed any vicious propensities—yes, I see your smile, I have no more basis to think well of Mr. Darcy’s good nature than we do of Mr. Bingley’s. Still, they both *seem* excellent gentlemen, and there is little one ever can be entirely certain of. In any case, your advice for her to show her affection more openly will not work; Jane will not cease to be Jane-like just because she is in love.”

Charlotte smiled. “You certainly do put great stock in Mr. Darcy’s virtues.” She sighed. “You are right about Jane. We can do nothing but hope the best for her.”

“And give Mama twenty guineas so she can buy a new tablecloth, and send to London for the ingredients for a fancy French soup.” Elizabeth laughed. “Mother’s enthusiasm convinces me *that* will be what makes the difference.”

The youngest Lucas son, a lad of fourteen, entered the room. “What are you two speaking about?”

The boy blushed when Elizabeth smiled at him, while Charlotte responded, “We were speaking of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley.”

He puffed out his chest and exclaimed, “If I were as rich as Mr. Darcy, I would keep a pack of foxhounds and drink a bottle of wine a day.”

Elizabeth laughed in reply, “I daresay your stomach would not thank you for that—though I do believe it *is* common practice among those with great wealth.”

He blushed again, and said to Charlotte, “Mama wants to speak to you.”

Elizabeth rose at that. “It seems you must attend *your* mother, and I have escaped my own for long enough, and I am sure she shall have some terribly important question which I must answer. I will see you for dinner.”

\* \* \* \* \*

During the meal, Elizabeth arranged for Darcy to sit next to her, in part because she enjoyed his company greatly—when he made the effort, he was the most interesting gentlemen of her acquaintance, though she could not call him *charming.* More importantly, Elizabeth had seen he disliked conversation with those less clever than himself and thought himself above the local community. While *she* would enjoy conversation with almost anyone at the table, *he* likely would only enjoy it with her or Mr. Bingley.

The uniformed footmen came and went, bringing and removing platters of food. Two of them had been borrowed from the Lucases for the evening. As she chatted with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth tasted each dish with a critical tongue and wondered how Mr. Darcy received it. When she gained control of the estate, Elizabeth had dismissed their French cook who, with his two assistants, cost the family the best part of two hundred pounds a year before the price of the ingredients was accounted for.

While Mama would never forgive her, Elizabeth could not repent; it seemed far better to her to spend fifty pounds a year on a local woman and one assistant and to hire additional help only when required for a large party. However, an occasion of this sort showed the pitfall of such an approach: there definitely was too much salt in the soup.

It seemed the fancy soup, with its French recipe that her mother had insisted upon, had been beyond Mrs. Brisbane’s capacity. Elizabeth saw the half grimace Darcy quickly controlled at his first spoonful, and said, “I am certain *you*, with your ten thousand pounds a year, never need eat a dish so ill prepared in your own house.”

Darcy smiled, laying down his spoon. “It has in fact happened. My cook, though excellent, is not perfect. Besides, the soup is by no means very bad. Still, perhaps you should stick to simpler recipes when entertaining. I cannot blame you for not purchasing the service of a more expensive cook—I could afford to have my table set much better than I do as well.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You may blame my mother for the recipe; she wished it to impress your party, and certainly the soup *does* make an impression. But tell me honestly, is your cook French? For my mother was certain he is.”

“I confess he is English. Though very expensive—my father disliked the sauces the French use. We Darcys have always tended to be contrary.”

“Ah, the greatest difficulty the very wealthy face—how to avoid the madding crowd.”

“I believe there are many annoyances and stresses brought on by such wealth whose severity you have not considered. Besides,” Darcy’s face had a serious expression, but his eyes crinkled in a manner Elizabeth had seen before when he hoped to amuse her, “I am not so very wealthy; in fact, I believe my situation in life is quite modest.”

Elizabeth replied dryly, “Not so very wealthy? That is a surprise; there cannot be above one or two hundred gentlemen in the country with a greater income than yours.”

“Yes,” he returned, in that same serious voice, “that is my point—there *are* those one or two hundred gentlemen. So, I am sure you see why I have no choice but to consider myself essentially impoverished; I am poorer than every one of them.”

Darcy’s effort to maintain an unamused countenance was imperfect, and his face had an almost boyish appearance of poorly hidden mischief. Elizabeth pressed her lips tightly together to restrain her laughter. When she had control enough to speak without showing her amusement she said, “Your argument has convinced me entirely. Your poverty is such that you should be greatly pitied.”

With a grave nod, Darcy replied, “I am deeply indebted to you for your concern. I fear without *your* pity I would have none. For my own part, I have no turn for self-pity. And I daresay were I to explain this to most persons they would—well, I imagine they would laugh in my face. But since I have *one* person who pities my poverty—I believe I have no cause to repine.”

Elizabeth nearly dissolved into helpless giggles, but with great difficulty she restrained them and at length responded, “I am very pleased to be of service to one life has placed in such a very difficult situation. Could you speak more on the real annoyances a man of your relative poverty, not to mention poor connections—merely the nephew of an Earl—faces?”

Darcy’s cheek twitched at the question, but otherwise he kept his face admirably solemn. “Well, the annoyances are serious indeed—for example, at Eton I knew a boy who was a year behind me, and short even, whose uncle was a Duke.”

The manner in which Darcy said, “and short even,” made Elizabeth finally break down in laughter which despite her efforts to control lasted for some time. Darcy smiled at her, and then, in a pleased manner, energetically ate his soup.

When she recovered Elizabeth asked, “Tell me seriously, is there anything you dislike about your high position—and I do not mean an annoyance such as, ‘the simple life of a cottager is more virtuous,’ or ‘oh, to be a shepherd—*that* would be so romantic.’”

“As Pemberley does have many thousands of sheep, in a manner of speaking I *am* a shepherd.”

Elizabeth snorted, and at Darcy’s questioning look said, “I had a sudden image of you with a shepherd’s staff attempting to make love to a lady by quoting Marlowe, ‘come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove, hmmm—or steepy mountain yields?”

“That valleys, groves, hills, and fields, woods, or steepy mountain yields.” Darcy inclined his head to Elizabeth’s appreciative exclamation, then in a low voice Darcy said, “I will say, the way those who wish my favor agree with all I say and endlessly flatter me really is unpleasant.”

“Oh, come now, I admit to be praised and agreed with by someone who gives no thought to the merits of your case would be a tragedy indeed—I would certainly hate to bear such a burden—but I cannot believe your situation is so *very* bad.”

 Darcy smiled. “I shall prove this evening that I can cause people to agree to quite stupid opinions merely by stating them.”

When the parties came back together after dinner, Darcy sought Elizabeth out and settled into a brown leather armchair next to the settee Elizabeth was seated on. Miss Bingley saw the two together and, delicately holding her coffee and saucer, walked over. She sat next to Elizabeth.

Miss Bingley smiled at the two. “My goodness, Mrs. Collins, the decorations here are decidedly something, and the meal was… Yes, it certainly was.”

 Elizabeth’s eyes brightened at Miss Bingley’s insinuation. “I’m glad you approve—I especially liked the soup. I asked my cook to put rather more salt in it than the recipe called for. I do believe it’s far better that way.”

Miss Bingley seemed unsure how to reply. Darcy spoke, “I agree, it was an excellent course, I daresay that was my favorite part of the meal.”

The feather in Miss Bingley’s hat quivered in confusion as she startled at Darcy’s statement. She said uncertainly, “It was a fine soup. Many cooks do not use enough salt.”

Darcy gave Elizabeth a significant look. She nodded back at him and raised her coffee cup and saucer to hide her smile.

Miss Bingley seemed to realize a joke had been made at her expense and frowned. After a moment, she asked Darcy, “Have you received a letter from Georgiana of late?” When Darcy indicated he had, Miss Bingley inclined towards Elizabeth. “Miss Darcy is the most accomplished young lady I have ever met; she is superbly educated and bred, her watercolors show true taste, and her playing—her playing is the best I’ve ever heard. Far beyond what is normal for young ladies who wish to display.”

Elizabeth smiled to Darcy. “In that case, I must hope to hear her someday—you must be very proud of her.”

“I am, she is a most beloved sister.”

Miss Bingley asked Darcy, “Do you not agree it takes an excellent education to produce a really accomplished lady?”

“I do.”

She now returned to Elizabeth. “I have not asked you—what languages can you speak? I have fluency in French, Italian, and German.”

Elizabeth laughed, amused by Miss Bingley’s evident desire to put her in a poor light. “I fear I only speak French—at one time I could read my way through a Latin text if I had a dictionary next to me, but it’s been years since I exercised that skill. I daresay you are far more accomplished than I. We did not have a governess or go to a school. Our education really did suffer for the lack.”

“Latin?” Miss Bingley exclaimed in surprise, then added, “You cannot fix the deficiencies of your education, but, were you to put forth the effort, it is hardly too late for you to acquire *some* feminine graces. Oh! But I forget; you choose to spend your time otherwise.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and took another sip of her coffee to hide her smile. She enjoyed ridiculous characters, and Miss Bingley was unusually transparent. “I do—I cannot, indeed, find it in myself to mourn their lack. I play—some—because I enjoy it. I maintain my French because I enjoy the language, and enjoy their novels, and enjoy their music. But really, I did draw a little as a child, and never liked it at all. I do not find pleasure in knitting, and would far prefer to while away the idle hours with a book or upon estate business. I am in such a fortunate position that I need not pretend an interest in activities I dislike merely because a well-bred young lady is supposed to engage in them.”

Darcy spoke, “You have employed your time far better; no one admitted to the privilege of your conversation could imagine anything wanting.”

Elizabeth colored at the praise; the approbation of a man such as Mr. Darcy was worth a great deal. Miss Bingley now proved she *could* disagree with Darcy. “Surely you do not think her choice to manage her lands directly is preferable to more feminine pursuits?”

Darcy shrugged eloquently. “Surely I do not think it is my place to judge her for it. Certainly, I do not manage my own affairs so closely—it must take a great deal of time, and seems rather more effort than the savings are worth. I cannot believe you add more than two hundred pounds to your income for all the effort. But if you enjoy the work, its efficiency is not really a matter of concern.”

“I do enjoy it. And I acknowledge it is not a very great sum of money. I am accumulating towards my sisters’ dowries—an additional two hundred pounds is something.”

Darcy bowed his head to acknowledge Elizabeth’s response and Miss Bingley said, “You must have no wish to remarry, for a husband surely would force you to stop.”

Elizabeth felt her hand tightly clench the armrest of the sofa as she snapped, “That shall never happen.”

Background conversations paused as Elizabeth’s sudden loudness caused clumps of people nearby in the room to gaze towards them. Elizabeth blushed in embarrassment at the scrutiny Darcy now gave her. As the conversations near them restarted, she said with forced calmness, “I confess I have no desire to remarry; my life is perfectly pleasant—I do not need a husband to make it complete. But if I did, I would never marry a man who thought it his right to dictate how I spend my time.”

“Now that is a shocking declaration,” Miss Bingley said and smugly looked at Mr. Darcy. “It necessarily would be his right—the wife’s duty is to submit to her husband; philosophy, religion, and common sense all agree on this point. Given an opinion like *yours,* it is good you have no plan to marry. You would make a poor wife.” Miss Bingley’s eyes shot back to Darcy, to see how he took the conversation.

“Perhaps I would make a poor wife,” said Elizabeth. “But if a husband wished to deny his wife a pleasure which is moral and just, if he wished to determine every detail of his wife’s behavior, well, he would be a very poor husband indeed.”

Elizabeth felt as tense as a tightly pulled violin string as she recalled demands Mr. Collins made of her.

She startled when Darcy gently touched her arm. “I agree. A good husband would not demand anything his wife did not freely offer out of affection.”

Darcy’s warm eyes looked steadily at her, as though he wished to make her feel his approval through them. Elizabeth felt warm all over when she broke their gaze in embarrassment.

“Still, what if—” Elizabeth paused, unsure why she wished to question Darcy further. “Suppose you married, and your wife enjoyed some behavior you disapproved of, would you really not demand she cease it?”

Mr. Darcy frowned, still leaning forward in his chair. “I would hope such a situation never arose. In a good marriage there ought to be such bonds of affection and respect that either she would cease it out of affection for me, or I accept it out of respect for her.”

“Yes, but what if such a situation still arose.”

“I feel I must know more details. What is this behavior which she wishes to engage in? And why? And what is my basis for disapproval?”

“Oh. That matters not.” Elizabeth said, frustrated, “Suppose you’d been wholly mistaken in her character when you married, and she wished to do something you thought immoral. What then would you do?”

Miss Bingley said from Elizabeth’s side, “Well, *that* is a decidedly shocking question.”

The other two ignored her as Darcy gave Elizabeth a long knowing frown, which made her feel as though he could see through her. “I see,” Darcy said at last. “Mrs. Collins, any behavior which might *force* a really unwilling woman to do something is abhorrent to me. Further, I intensely dislike the many ways the laws of England allow husbands to harm their wives, and how there is no way for a woman to escape once married. I approve of little that the revolutionaries did in France, but we should adopt their divorce laws in England.”

While she still felt tense, Elizabeth looked at Darcy in pleased surprise; despite his cleverness, many of his opinions were rather traditional.

Darcy colored slightly under the gaze of both ladies and shifted uncomfortably. “I cannot detail particulars, but a girl whose family I’m acquainted with nearly married a fortune hunter. It made me think hard on the subject.”

Darcy leaned forward. “Thousands of girls. Every year, thousands of girls marry vicious reprobate men who conceal their true character.” He gestured angrily, his face hard. “Once legally married, unless there is a settlement to protect her interests, the vile husband can take everything which is hers. And, since theft of her property was not enough, the law supports him when he chooses to beat her, so long as he keeps his abuse ‘withinreasonable bounds’. A married woman is not a child, but a rational creature like any other. The law should not strip her of her rights, and should let either party dissolve the bond.”

Elizabeth greatly approved of Darcy’s opinion, and said so in very warm terms. She enjoyed the way his countenance shifted as he accepted her praise.

Miss Bingley looked at Darcy with a combination of frustration, betrayal, and disappointment. “A husband who beat his wife—though I doubt such a shocking creature exists outside of the poorer classes—would be a poor husband, indeed. Surely, though, you can see that a *woman*”—Miss Bingley looked at Elizabeth—“who intends to ignore *his* wishes whensoever she pleases would be an even worse wife. *You* could not wish to marry such a woman yourself.”

The implication of the speech offended Darcy. “I have no plans to marry at present,” he replied sharply, “but when I do marry, it *certainly* shall not be to a woman who attempts to attract a husband by pretending to agree with every opinion he offers, and who insults any unattached woman in his vicinity.”

The three fell silent. Elizabeth could not avoid a stab of sympathy for the hurt look on Miss Bingley’s face. Darcy’s face was red, and his manner agitated. Before the silence had gone a full minute, he stood and bowed gruffly. “I recalled a matter I ought to speak to Bingley about.”

The two ladies watched Darcy’s tall form stride away; he was caught by Sir William Lucas, and listened to the words of the knight, gravely nodding when appropriate. Miss Bingley tightly gripped the fabric of her dress as she stared at him, and Elizabeth could see tears begin to gather in the edge of her eyes. “One of the flowers in your headdress has fallen out of place,” Elizabeth said abruptly. “You could refresh it in a room right out that door.”

Miss Bingley stared at Elizabeth and said in a teary, high-pitched voice, “Thank you for telling me, I shall do so immediately.” She rose, walked to where her sister sat, pulled her up, and exited the door Elizabeth had pointed to.

Elizabeth slumped against the cushions. And the party had gone off so very well until this. Elizabeth felt tense and anxious. She wondered if Miss Bingley’s implication was correct, and Mr. Darcy had some interest in her. Elizabeth forced herself straight and took a deep breath. She laughed; of course it was not true. The green-eyed monster had whispered a ridiculous fantasy to Miss Bingley. Mr. Darcy was Elizabeth’s friend and nothing more.

# Chapter 5

Darcy led his limping horse towards a well-maintained two-story farmhouse with ivy growing over the walls. It had a large red brick barn. He was perhaps a third of a mile from Longbourn. Darcy had chosen to ride across a field without inspecting his path properly, and for his lack of care his horse had stepped into a rabbit hole and nearly thrown him.

While he had kept his saddle, the shock had twisted the horse’s leg. Darcy thought it was just a sprain, but he could not ride the horse further for fear of worsening her injury. A farmer whittled at a piece of wood on a bench in front of the house. He was a middle-aged man whose hair had begun to go gray, and he had the beefy appearance of a prosperous farmer.

Darcy called out to him, and the man started up and put away his woodwork. He immediately saw the problem. “Let’s get ‘er into the barn, so we can properly take care of the poor girl.” The man shouted to his sons, “Robert, John—get out here and help me open up the barn for this gentleman’s horse.”

The two boys were youths, one about sixteen and the other thirteen. They both had a healthy, active look and hastened to open up the barn door and prepare an empty stall with straw and hay before they crowded round to admire Darcy’s horse.

“My thanks,” Darcy said as he led his horse into the stall and pulled off her saddle.

“She is a beauty of an animal,” the man replied. He then asked as Darcy felt along the leg to see how much swelling there was, “What happened?”

“Rabbit hole.”

The farmer nodded seriously. “Nasty pests. Eating roots, and getting into gardens, and leaving holes for horses to stumble in—say, that don’t look so bad. I think she should be fine with a week’s rest.”

Darcy smiled slightly in agreement, as he finished his examination and went to sit on a bale of hay. Dim light filtered into the barn, bouncing off motes of dust, and Darcy was surrounded by the pungent, yet pleasant, smell of animals packed together for the winter in stalls that were regularly cleaned.

The farmer turned to his youngest son. “John, run on up to Longbourn, and tell them that—what was your name, sir?”

“Darcy.”

“Oh, yes. You are the friend of the young gentleman who took Netherfield on. Run up to Longbourn and tell them Mr. Darcy’s horse has gone lame—have them send down Mr. Brown to give her a look and wrap up the leg.” He turned to Darcy apologetically, “Unless you wish to wrap it up yourself, sir, or call your own groom to do so—while he hasn’t worked with such a fine animal as this, Mr. Brown is a wizard at keeping Mrs. Elizabeth’s animals healthy and productive.”

Darcy recalled the middle-aged man who took his horse when they called on Longbourn, and the well-cared-for look of Mrs. Collins’s stables. “I’m sure Mr. Brown will do an excellent job.”

The farmer’s young son, instead of immediately running off, continued admiring the horse. His father turned a stern look on him and shouted, “Go!”

Darcy smiled at the boy’s disappointed expression, and pulled a shilling out of his pocket to hand to him. “You will have plenty of opportunity to admire Brownie when you return.”

As the boy ran off Darcy saw a glint of amusement in the farmer’s eye and responded to it. “My sister gave her the name; she was but eleven at the time.”

“It was kind of you to let her name the horse.”

The three sat in silence for a minute while the remaining son stroked the horse’s back. Sending for the stable master brought Darcy’s mind back to Mrs. Collins; she had clearly been unhappy during her marriage. Even a reminder made her tense and sad. How had she been mistreated by Mr. Collins? Darcy had hinted more closely about what happened to Georgiana than was prudent, but he had no regret. The look in Mrs. Collins’s eyes; he had needed to comfort her. He had needed to convince her *he* at least would never behave in that manner.

Darcy also should not have snapped at Miss Bingley, but he was pleased that she had left him alone since the Longbourn party. Every time he thought about it, Darcy felt angry again that she had seen Mrs. Collins’s distress only as an opportunity to score against her perceived rival. The character of Bingley’s sister was far poorer than he had realized before.

The farmer suddenly said, “I’ve not introduced myself, Robert Simpson at your service.”

“Fitzwilliam Darcy.” Darcy shook the man’s hand heartily and asked, “Are you a tenant of Longbourn?” Darcy was desperately curious to know more of how Mrs. Collins was seen, and—if he were honest with himself—hoped to hear her praised.

“I am, though I also hold a small field which Mrs. Elizabeth sold to Mr. Goulding a year ago.”

“Have you been here long?”

“Aye, I was five-and-twenty when I first took the lease, that would have been, oh—some twenty years ago now. Mr. Bennet—that would be Mrs. Elizabeth’s father—had only held the estate for a few years at the time.” The farmer shook his head. “It astonishes how quickly time passes.”

Darcy nodded at the truism; he was young, but it still surprised him how it had already been a full five years since his father died and he became master of Pemberley. “How does Mrs. Collins differ from her father, or Mr. Collins?”

“In truth, it was a surprise. I don’t believe she was yet sixteen when Mr. Collins died, and she is a woman. I rather thought she would be very like her father; so long as nothing went awry, he was happy not to be bothered. And when something did go awry, he was *not* happy to be bothered. He was almost always resident but still left most everything to the management of his steward. And Mr. Rowland—I daresay he was not the most active steward either. He did not enjoy it, not at all, when Mrs. Elizabeth demanded he show her every inch of the property, and go over every record book with her.”

Mr. Simpson shook his head with a smile. “I remember when she visited here, a little thing of just sixteen and, bold as you please, she asked me question after question about everything I did. Dragged me around every corner of my fields, and demanded I justify each choice I’d ever made. The entire time Mr. Rowland stood as though he’d swallowed something unpleasant. I always thought, the only reason she never dismissed him was because her father had promised him a pension, and she’d be damned if she paid him for doing even less work.”

Darcy smiled at the image this story conjured—it fit his picture of her character perfectly. The farmer laughed at his memories. “She is a good woman though—always polite and kind to her inferiors. She has been especially kind to my daughter; Mrs. Elizabeth bought her several books and a shawl last time she was in London.If a woman or a child is in trouble anywhere in the parish, she will make sure their basic necessities are cared for and they are put in the way of some employment.”

The farmer now gave a rueful smile. “As a landlord, she is very active—and not one of those foolish youngsters who think they know everything because they read a book on crop rotation once—she knows what the land is worth, and how to get the most out of it. This always turns to *her* benefit, but not always to *mine*. She’ll provide help to make sure we succeed. But, she knows *exactly* how much the land is worth.”

Darcy smiled broadly. “I daresay she gets the full value when leases are renegotiated.”

“That she does. That she does. I would have had the better of it, had Mr. Rowland negotiated it when I renewed my seven years lease—still, I cannot complain. She is fair, and she knows the value of an old tenant who understands the soil.”

There was a sound from the entryway to the barn, and the man Darcy recognized as Mrs. Collins’s stable master walked in, followed by the smiling Mrs. Collins herself. All of the men rose to greet her. Mrs. Collins looked around, while her eyes adjusted to the barn’s dim light. She wore a dark blue pelisse and gray gloves to ward off the early winter cold, and when she noted Darcy’s position her eyes lit up, and she gave him a bright smile which made Darcy’s nerves twist uncomfortably, before Mrs. Collins stepped closer and quietly said, “I’m very, very sorry to hear about your horse. You are entirely unharmed, I hope?”

Darcy warmed at the concern in her wide eyes, and he hastened to reassure Mrs. Collins. She caught sight of the horse. “Oh! She is beautiful. I hope the injury is not serious?”

“I believe it will heal quickly,” Darcy replied as the stable master knelt and made soothing noises as he carefully felt at the area of swelling.

“That is good,” Mrs. Collins said as she walked forward with her gown billowing around her to stroke the forehead of the horse. Brownie appreciatively pushed her head into Mrs. Collins’s hand, and Darcy smiled as he saw that his horse liked her. “What is her name?”

Darcy had a slight sense of embarrassment as Mr. Simpson grinned at his response. “Brownie. Georgiana named him.”

Mrs. Collins smiled. “I think it is a beautiful name for a beautiful horse.”

The stable master finished his examination, “I believe it is just a strain; if you keep her off her feet for a couple of days she should be fine. An excellent animal, Mr. Darcy. My compliments—it may be best if I wrapped the leg up and have her stay here for a few days. I will look in on her each morning and evening, and exercise the leg to keep it from stiffening.” He looked at the two boys who enthusiastically watched the horse. “I’m sure the Simpson boys will be happy to take good care of Brownie.”

Darcy gave the young men a serious look as they eagerly looked back at him, before he nodded. “That would be acceptable.”

As the boys cheered, the stable master said roughly, “This is like to be the finest horse you two will ever lay hands on; you will act responsibly, keep the stall warm, clean, and well stocked—and you’ll not annoy or stress Brownie, or I swear I’ll have your father thrash you. Even you Bobby, sixteen though you may be.”

The way they vigorously nodded their heads made Darcy smile as Mrs. Collins cried out as she fed Brownie an apple she’d brought with her, “Oh! I’m sure that will not be needed.”

Darcy pulled two half crowns from his money purse and handed one to each boy. Hiding his internal amusement he said seriously, “I expect you both to do an excellent job.”

At this, Mrs. Collins stroked the forehead of the horse one last time and said decidedly, “I am certain they will. Now that *that* is settled, I wonder if you might join us for dinner at Longbourn; afterwards we can fix you up with a horse from my stables and send you back to Netherfield.” When Darcy nodded, she added, “I’m afraid I keep my table rather simple when I do not expect any guests, but, given your eloquence on your relative poverty the last time you dined with us, I suppose you shall not mind.” She stepped close with a bright and mischievous smile. “I even—as you said it was your favorite part of the meal—told Cook to *properly* salt the soup.”

It felt oddly natural to Darcy to smile back as Mrs. Collins teased him—before he met her, he never laughed at himself. He replied, “I would be delighted to join you—though I *had* meant that my favorite part of the *conversation* was while we consumed the soup.”

Mrs. Collins’s delighted laugh gave Darcy a pleasant sensation which wriggled in his stomach, and which he did not desire to think on.

“It *was* quite amusing. I nearly hurt myself keeping my laughter to a level appropriate for a dinner party.”

The moment Mrs. Collins stepped out of the barn there was a child’s cry of, “Mrs. Elizabeth!” And a small black-haired girl about ten or so ran up to hug her.

The two made a pretty picture as Mrs. Collins laughed, embraced the girl back, and fished a wrapped chocolate treat out of her pocket to give her. “How have you been, Millie?”

The girl responded shyly, and Mrs. Collins proceeded to speak to her for a few minutes, praising her and making her laugh in equal measure. The scene exuded a sense of pretty domesticity. He’d not thought on it before, but Darcy had a sudden certainty that the passionate argumentative Mrs. Collins would make an excellent mother. The odd flutter in his stomach intensified, as he watched her fine mobile features shift as she spoke and the way the girl beamed after her once Mrs. Collins embraced the girl a final time and walked to join Darcy.

“I apologize for the delay, but she is such a dear and—”

“Say nothing of it,” Darcy interrupted. “She is an adorable child, and thinks the world of you. As I daresay she ought.”

Mrs. Collins blushed and laughed, and leapt into a funny story about a prank Millie Simpson performed last Easter. With Mrs. Collins’s laughter and Darcy’s smiles, the two walked to Longbourn.

# Chapter 6

One day, about a month after Bingley and Darcy arrived in Hertfordshire, Elizabeth spent several hours discussing plans for improving the selection of seeds with one of her largest tenants and his wife. It had been overcast all day, and when Elizabeth was in sight of Longbourn it began to rain. She rushed and within a minute was under the roof of her home. When she looked out it was clear that this would be a heavy rain, and had she been out only five minutes more she would have become soaked.

Elizabeth went to the sitting room to greet her family, and after she looked around asked, “Where is Jane?”

Mrs. Bennet replied with a smile, “Miss Bingley sent her an invitation to spend the afternoon with her and Mrs. Hurst while the gentlemen dine with the officers. She set off on horseback fifteen minutes ago.”

“In this weather? Good heavens! Why did she not call for the carriage?”

Mrs. Bennet smugly replied, “I reminded her that you think it is important to make sure the horses are available for the farm.”

“Not much work could be done in this weather in any case—besides, do you not usually wish us to use the carriage?” Her mother’s pleased expression told Elizabeth what her game had been. It was a transparent ploy. Darcy would see through it; Elizabeth’s face heated—what would he think?

Elizabeth scowled at her mother. “Bingley might call for his own carriage to send her back; then your scheme would come to nothing.”

“Oh! Not likely. Bingley is half in love with Jane already, he will be eager to have her there. Besides, the gentlemen will have taken Mr. Bingley’s chaise to dine with the officers, and there will be no horses for the Hursts’ carriage. At the very least, they will now see each other.”

There was a burst of noise as the tempo of the rain increased, and Elizabeth heard the waterfall pouring off the eaves. It was gray and foreboding. Time and years of controlling her own life had dissipated much of Elizabeth’s anger at her mother, but Mrs. Bennet’s smile as she stood in a well-heated room, wrapped comfortably in her warm blue shawl, while dear Jane was out in the rain reminded Elizabeth of all the reasons she had to dislike her mother. “It was ill done. Very ill done. You ought not have sent Jane out uncovered in this weather.”

“I merely wish the best for my daughter.”

Angry words bubbled up in Elizabeth’s mind and she pushed them down, ‘you merely wish what is best for your own consequence.’ She did not wish to be a woman who shouted with her mother. Instead, Elizabeth retreated to her study. Mrs. Bennet had learned long ago Elizabeth would tolerate being followed there no more than her father would have.

Though she normally took pleasure in the view from her window, now all she felt was worry. It was very wet. Certainly Jane was well, certainly. This was only a pointless idle anxiety. But Elizabeth could not suppress it; each blast of thunder jangled her nerves. In most matters, Elizabeth put problems she could not control out of her mind with a laugh, but when it involved Jane’s well-being the worry stuck. Elizabeth would not be happy until Bingley’s carriage had returned Jane.

It rained far too hard for there to be any expectation of Jane’s return, and the next morning, rather than Jane, a runner from Netherfield brought unwelcome news: Jane was ill. Elizabeth’s anger against her mother from the previous evening flared again. She ought not have convinced Jane to go without the coach.

While Elizabeth gathered clothes to take to Jane herself and asked Mary if she would be willing to stay at Netherfield and nurse her sister, she tamped down her annoyance. Her mother was, and always would be, her mother. Jane ought to have known better than to listen to her. For a second Elizabeth wished her sister was less docile and persuadable. Jane, though, was Jane.

While Elizabeth and Mary waited in the front of the house for the carriage to be brought round, Mrs. Bennet stepped out and joined them with a smile that showed her to be pleased by the outcome of her scheme. “Mary, you must be in no hurry for Jane to recover and leave—why, I would like you to stay at Netherfield a week entire if possible.”

“Pay her no mind,” Elizabeth snapped. “It was on her advice Jane became ill.”

“Oh! You are making a much greater deal of this than you ought. It is only a trifling cold; she will be taken good care of as long as she stays there. It is all very well.”

The anxiety Elizabeth had felt all evening, which had disrupted her sleep the previous night, led her to step close to her mother and say in a hard voice, “You make much less a deal of this than *you* ought—you have yet again sacrificed your daughter’s well-being to your selfishness.”

“Nonsense!” Mrs. Bennet replied in a hurt voice, as tears began to grow in her eyes. “You have always wronged me, always. I desire nothing more than what is good for my children. Bingley would be a very, very good husband for Jane, and that you call me selfish because I attempt—”

Mrs. Bennet turned away as her emotion choked off her words. “Oh! Oh!” She wailed, “Were your father or your husband still alive, I would not be treated so. You should not treat the mother who bore you, who raised you, who loved you, in this way. I know you believe you can do no wrong, Miss Lizzy, but you should not treat me so. If only—if only—” and with that Mrs. Bennet turned and rushed back into the house in tears.

Mary and the coachman both had neutral expressions which did not show their thoughts. Elizabeth shrugged and, with her anger still simmering, entered the carriage, sitting stiffly against the blue velvet cushions. Elizabeth watched the muddy fields pass through the carriage window with her nerves tightly clenched. How dare she still mourn that awful man; how dare she wish Mr. Collins still controlled Elizabeth’s life.

Elizabeth saw Mary take her copy of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* from her bag and flip through it. When she found the page she had looked for, Mary said, “To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands.” Mary put her book down. “Really, Lizzy, you ought to be angry at the society which taught her. And in any case, ‘the best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury.’”

Her ill mood broken, Elizabeth gave a small laugh. “I daresay you are correct; it certainly does me no good to feel unhappy.” She began to feel a little guilty. She did not think Mary was right; there were many, many women educated just as Mrs. Bennet had been who were prudent and sensible. But despite everything, Elizabeth knew her mother did care for them in her dangerous and foolish manner. And, in any case, it was not proper for a child to treat her mother so.

Elizabeth sighed again as she neared Netherfield. She wished she could stay at Netherfield and nurse Jane till she was well. Unfortunately, since she acted as her own steward it would be best for her to stay at Longbourn where she would be available to her workers and tenants when matters requiring her attention inevitably arose. Unless Jane’s condition was far more serious than her brief letter indicated, Elizabeth would need to return to Longbourn that afternoon.

Darcy had thought the savings from not keeping a steward simply could not be worth the cost in time and inconvenience of managing everything on one’s own. Elizabeth had laughed in reply, and said that, as she enjoyed the work, it was no matter. Perhaps he was right.

Bingley greeted them effusively, and Darcy calmly. When Elizabeth asked about Jane’s condition, Bingley’s evident agitation and worry did not help Elizabeth’s nerves, but Darcy’s kind repetition of the apothecary’s assurance they had little to be concerned with did. He showed a steady calmness and evident desire to comfort which left Elizabeth with a feeling of safety.

Much of Elizabeth’s remaining worries were banished when she saw Jane. She was ill, but in a common manner. It was not worrisome.

While Elizabeth spent the next hours mostly focused on Jane, as she and Mary took turns reading to their sister or in quiet conversation with her, Elizabeth’s mind occasionally wandered to Darcy. He was below her in the same house. What task had he busied himself with? Did he think of her presence at all?

He had been really kind this morning. As always when Darcy crossed her mind, she thought with great satisfaction on his friendship; he was a most excellent man. Elizabeth wanted to find a good way to thank him. When Jane fell into a slumber, Mary and Elizabeth left her room to go downstairs and briefly join the party in the sitting room. The Netherfield sitting room was a fashionably decorated room, with an expensive Persian rug on the floor and a half dozen vases filled with fresh flowers spread around the room.

The stateliness of her hosts intimidated Mary, who settled in a chair near the marble fireplace with its bas-relief of a classical scene and began to read. Miss Bingley busied herself with knitting, pointedly not looking at Elizabeth. Ever since the dinner party at Longbourn, the two women had avoided speaking. Elizabeth noted Darcy was engaged in writing what appeared to be business correspondence. He wrote with a handsome hand. It would be best to leave him to it, thought Elizabeth, though she dearly wished they could have a conversation before her duties at Longbourn forced her to leave.

There was a small collection of books on a shelf in the sitting room, and when Bingley saw Elizabeth approach it, he said with a smile, “I am certain you shall be disappointed in my collection—but it, such as it is, is yours.” Elizabeth laughed and turned to consider the books, and after a second of reflection selected the first volume of *Paradise Lost*.

Unconsciously, she chose the chair second closest to Darcy’s and began to read. Mr. Collins had demanded Elizabeth read nothing but religious or improving works during their marriage. As *Paradise Lost* had a religious theme, he allowed it. While there were passages in the great poem Elizabeth disliked, she had drawn resolve and fortitude from reading certain famed sections repeatedly.

She now turned to one, and as she mouthed the well-remembered lines everything faded away, even Darcy’s presence a few feet away.

Hail horrors, hail …

The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n.

What matter where, if I be still the same,

And what I should be.

Elizabeth quite believed without the inspiration of that screaming defiance to the situation, no matter how dire, she’d not have survived her marriage. For endless months, she submitted herself to every minor whim of Mr. Collins to protect her sisters; at the time, she really believed it would never end. She had expected her life would be an unending hell where she never could act freely or laugh as she wished.

Mr. Collins would say, “You owe me, Elizabeth,” and she would obey and think, “Hail horrors, hail—what matter where, if I be still the same, and what I should be.”

Elizabeth was startled out of her absorption when Darcy asked, “Do you have a great regard for Milton?”

His eyes were bright and he had a pleasing smile as he leaned towards her. Elizabeth startled and put down the volume as she returned his smile. “I do, though my feelings about *Paradise Lost* are too mixed for me to simply say I admire him.”

Darcy asked her to elaborate with a curious look.

“It is the treatment of Satan, to have one who spoke so nobly of resistance turned into a serpent forced to slither on the ground for opposing a tyrant. Satan through his words shows more of true nobility and merit than any other in the poem. It does not sit well with me. Not at all.” Elizabeth sat forward in her chair and caught Darcy’s eyes as she said passionately, “To punish an intelligent creature for wishing to have its merit acknowledged, to force the weaker to slither before one who demands worship and obedience. It is wrong.”

She looked away from Darcy, towards the leaping flames of the fire. “There are passages of surpassing beauty in the poem; moments that provide true inspiration and nourishment for the soul. At a dark time in my life, Milton was the only poet I could read. I will always honor him for that—I perceive you disagree somewhat with my interpretation.”

“I do; you say through his words Satan showed true nobility, but these are merely words. His actions show him to be a jealous creature who wished to take that which did not belong to him, merely because he could not stand to see another have it. And when cast out, through fault of his own, instead of attempting to make the best of the situation, he tried to gain revenge through hurting innocent creatures, merely because they were beloved by his enemy.”

Darcy spoke with a passion similar to Elizabeth’s own, and as he continued Elizabeth wondered if he might also have some particular person in mind. “Satan merely showed superficial charm; you know there are men who show every appearance of goodness and who can speak words which easily make them friends, but who underneath are snakes as Satan was. Milton merely showed the true nature of Satan, when he stripped away his seductive surface.”

Elizabeth felt something like anger at Darcy’s dismissal of what she saw as a heroic figure. “There is such a thing as tyranny; it exists, here, now, in these modern times, in this country, in many of our households. There are many who reason has made equal that are subject to the tyranny of those force has made supreme. The laws of our country support the enslavement of the Negro to the white in the Caribbean, and of the wife to her husband at home. To defy such tyrannies, to demand—even if only in one’s mind—to be seen as equal to those who use legal force to oppress—it is right. It is right to resist. It is the master’s claim, the claim of unjust power, that the one who resisted, by their very resistance, proved deserving of punishment.”

The intensity of her speech shocked Elizabeth. She wondered why when she spoke to Darcy she often revealed more of her emotions and inner self than she wished. Darcy contemplated her for a minute. “I perceive neither of us,” Darcy said, “speak only of Milton’s poem and his characters. There is something deeply noble in Satan’s words, and his resolution. It was perhaps an act to charm his followers, but the words have power. I recall how I felt when made to memorize them during my Eton days. And—I know there is tyranny, legal legitimate tyrannies which continue in this modern day. I have already told you what I think of our marriage laws.”

Darcy hesitated and, looking Elizabeth intently in the eyes, said quietly, “I told you I know a girl who—who nearly married a dissolute and vicious man who wished to gain her fortune. I have thought upon ways he may have been able to hurt her, things allowed by law, had the marriage not been stopped—should someone in such a situation gain inspiration from Milton’s Satan, I would not say nay to them.”

Elizabeth felt ill at ease due to Darcy’s words. Clearly, he understood she had her husband in mind. It was widely known, and impossible to hide, that her marriage had been poor, but—she did not like that she said it so clearly. Also, somehow to hear Darcy agree her feelings during her marriage had been just reminded her what she felt then. She felt again like she was reduced to that pitiable creature controlled by Mr. Collins, and no longer herself.

Darcy recognized her discomfort and he continued, rubbing his thumb over the edge of his writing desk, “I—it would be imprudent to speak too many details, but my dislike for the beauty of Milton’s Satan is because I know a man who shows every appearance of gentlemanly charm, and whose words convince many of his goodness, but who underneath is completely unprincipled. A man who claims to be injured by those better than him, but who, in real fact, wasted his opportunities and sought more to hurt those he blamed for his misfortune than to better his own situation.”

Darcy’s discomfort at discussing such a personal matter, even in indirect terms, was clear in his manner, and Elizabeth felt a rush of affection for him as she knew he had done so to relieve her own discomfort at having hinted at the nature of her marriage. Feeling happier, Elizabeth smiled and gave her hand to Darcy. “Let us agree: cruel tyranny should be opposed, and deceitful snakes exposed. It is no surprise we are both right—*Paradise Lost* is a great poem; it is the nature of great art to be ambiguous, and to say many true things at once.”

As they shook hands, Elizabeth felt a strong sense of companionship with Darcy as she saw the intelligent look of understanding in his eyes. However, she needed to return to Longbourn, so Elizabeth arose. “I am afraid I must leave now if I am to visit both tenants I should see before dark.”

Elizabeth felt Darcy’s eyes on her as she walked to the door, and when she turned around she blushed in pleasure at the admiration she saw in them. He was very handsome. Their gazes met and Elizabeth felt a pleasant jolt. Blushing, Elizabeth gave a curtsy and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Collins’s face floated before Elizabeth, his hand pulled back to strike. She saw Lydia, her face a combination of a child’s and the young lady she now was. Elizabeth tried to get in front of her, but could not move. There was a soft whoosh that in fact sounded little like a blow; Elizabeth felt as though she had been struck. Her eyes turned back towards Mr. Collins. But instead of her dead husband’s face, it was Mr. Darcy’s! He looked as he had the previous afternoon, his intense dark eyes held on her, staring from under the striking black eyebrows vivid against the white skin of his forehead.

With a startled shriek of terror, Elizabeth awoke.

She lay alone in her bed. She felt cold due to the November weather, despite her pile of blankets. Her heart raced, and Elizabeth knew she could not sleep again for some time. She gave a startled gasp as her stocking feet flinched away from the cold floor when she stepped out of bed and, with a shiver, felt around to find her slippers. Elizabeth pulled them, and a heavy blue woolen robe, on. She tended to the fire, adding fuel until it became bright and cheery.

Holding her hands out to warm them, Elizabeth sighed at the nervous tenseness she felt yet. No longer cold and shivering, Elizabeth stepped over to her window to look out; the very first light of dawn was visible in the gloom. She knew from previous times a nightmare had kept her awake that with a few minutes more it would be light enough for her to safely walk.

The air of her room was cold despite the fire, and Elizabeth shivered again as she pulled off her night things and quickly dressed in several petticoats and a brown woolen dress, which could easily be put on without aid. Elizabeth tightly laced up her boots, grabbed her heaviest pelisse, and quietly snuck out of the house by a side door she kept specially oiled for this purpose.

Early morning in Hertfordshire, even in winter, was glorious. Bits of snow and ice sparkled as the first rays of sunlight bounced off them; lines of proud trees who had shed their leaves became visible as the mist cleared. The birds loudly sang their welcome to the day, and at times the beauty of the landscape visible through the now crystal-clear air caused Elizabeth’s breath to catch and her feet to stumble to a stop.

Once Elizabeth had walked long enough to feel entirely warm and calm, her mind wandered back to her dream. It had mostly faded. But she recalled that it was her normal nightmare—but Mr. Darcy had been part of it. Why?

Elizabeth’s mind flashed back to the previous afternoon, how she had felt connected with Darcy; her pleased awareness of him as a handsome man as she turned to curtsy and caught his dark eyes upon her; the way she knew he had admired her form.

Instead of pleasure, the recollection now gave Elizabeth a stab of anxiety; why, they had behaved as a couple forming an attachment. An unpleasant feeling tightly clenched Elizabeth’s stomach; she did not plan to ever remarry. She did not want to. She did not want to form an attachment with anyone. To be with her sisters and to care for them was everything she desired.

Elizabeth let out a deep breath and focused on that thought—she planned to never marry; she had always planned to never marry. There was no reason for her to marry. Slowly, the anxiety let go, and Elizabeth began to feel tolerably cheerful again.

Then her far too clever mind pointed out she was being stupid. Anxiety and an instinctive repugnance to the idea were not a sound basis to plan her future life upon. Maybe it would be best to never marry again—but she should think rationally on the subject before deciding.

She liked Darcy. She liked him a great deal. He was handsome and clever and always showed her the greatest respect. He seemed perhaps the exact opposite of Mr. Collins.

At that thought, the anxiety exploded again in her chest and Elizabeth set off again, walking over the dirt pathways as fast as her feet could carry her without breaking into a run. Once, she stumbled over a rock in the path and nearly fell, but hurried on without pause as soon as she regained her balance. She desperately tried not to think as she felt pulsing stabs of anxious pain radiating from her chest into her throat and arm.

After more than ten minutes, Elizabeth clambered up a steep hill set in a meadow and, leaning against an oak tree at the top, sat breathless, watching the clouds of mist from her pants dissipate into the air. It was not as though *he* loved her in any case.

This at last was a thought which relieved the tension. Elizabeth felt a pleasant warmth as her anxiety began to dissipate. Fitzwilliam Darcy, grandson of an Earl and possessor of an income of ten thousand a year, and very likely more, thought much too highly of himself to ever stoop to marry a country girl with a modest estate whose uncle was in trade. Certainly, he did admire her—as was natural; they were excellent friends, and Elizabeth knew herself to be a handsome woman. But, she was not the sort of woman whose mind leapt from admiration to love, and from love to marriage in an instant.

Besides, and Elizabeth smiled in relief at the cows meandering the meadow below her, *she* did not love him either. Oh, certainly he was handsome. And certainly he was clever, and certainly he was an excellent friend. But that did not make love.

After all, if she loved him, she would not be terrified at the thought *he* might love her. In any case, she could not possibly be attached to a man who would disdain the connection to her dearest aunt and uncle. And genuine love was shown by two persons who stood together and whispered happy pretty words to each other. And in its maturity, love looked like what Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner had, an awareness of each other’s mind and a love of their presence combined with a happy tolerance for their faults.

No, Elizabeth had seen no couple behave as she and Mr. Darcy did, with their sharp clever debates and word games, and the way he could make her laugh so hard it hurt with his wry manner. No, what they had was a very good friendship.

Elizabeth gave a small laugh as she stood, stretched, and looked over the neighborhood. She saw bits of movement in the distance as people began to wake and go about their business. Elizabeth turned towards home with a smile. Though she did not like the necessity, she ought to be somewhat more reserved in Mr. Darcy’s company, to ensure *he* did not gain any false idea about *her* feeling more than she did.

# Chapter 7

Over the next days, Darcy’s concern for Bingley’s heart was overtaken by concern for his own. Each morning, he sat by the window in the first floor sitting room and eagerly awaited the sound of Elizabeth’s horse or carriage. In the midst of writing a piece of correspondence he would suddenly realize the past five minutes had been spent contemplating the curve of her neck and the shape of her chin. Elizabeth rarely left his mind.

Elizabeth Collins was everything he desired in a wife: she was witty and beautiful, she challenged him, and made him feel as though he were a better version of himself as they spoke. The brightness of her smile made Darcy’s stomach flip every time she turned it on him.

Elizabeth was perfect, except—her connections were deplorable. A Darcy with relatives who lived near Cheapside, in sight of their own warehouses?

Never.

It was impossible. Perhaps, if he thought it possible to avoid them after marriage—but he knew Elizabeth would never distance herself from relatives she praised so highly. If he married Elizabeth, he would have no choice but to be as intimate with Elizabeth’s uncle as he was with his own.

So Darcy felt the acute danger of paying too much attention to Elizabeth and thinking too much of her. In fact, he already did. He *ought* to turn colder and speak with her less. He should make it clear through his behavior she could have no expectations from him. But—they were friends. He could not treat her so.

She was not merely a woman Darcy found deeply attractive, yet unsuitable. She was one of the most challenging conversationalists Darcy had ever encountered, and she was by far the most interesting person in Hertfordshire. Bingley was an excellent friend and always good company, but he hated argument. His conversation was pleasant, but never a joyous challenge. Elizabeth, though, would always happily take the other side of an interesting question merely for the fun of the conversation—to keep up with her agile mind brought out the best in Darcy.

Darcy did not wish to stop speaking to her. And—were he to treat her as he ought, *she* would be hurt. He could see Elizabeth enjoyed their conversations and depended on their friendship as much as he did. The thought of the unhappiness in her eyes were he to withdraw made it impossible.

For more than an hour, Darcy wrestled with this conundrum before he saw his path forward: if Elizabeth knew he had no intentions towards her it would be safe for them to continue to act as they had. What made too-close conversation with an unmarried woman potentially dishonorable was that a man could arouse unwarranted expectations. If Darcy made it clear to Elizabeth they could only be friends, then they could be as close friends as they chose.

Though he did not *say* it to himself, Darcy strongly felt that if he told Elizabeth he would not marry her, it somehow would reduce his desire to. He was too tempted. He needed an additional barrier.

Later that day, after dinner, Darcy took a stroll around the gardens with Elizabeth. They walked arm in arm, admiring the better specimens of flowers the grounds displayed. It was winter, but the excellent gardener at Netherfield had a variety of late blooming flowers—and many of the hedges were evergreen.

While Elizabeth bent forward to more closely examine a plant cut into the shape of an elephant, Darcy recalled his thoughts of the morning and decided to now make it clear he was not contemplating a closer connection between them. “I recently thought about how you very openly acknowledge your relatives in trade,” Darcy said, bringing up the conversations in which she had mentioned them.

“Oh!” Elizabeth straightened and turned to Darcy. “And toward what end did these thoughts turn?”

“Merely that, whatever their virtues, such a close connection must have many associated disadvantages.”

Elizabeth laughed. “In what way am I supposed to be disadvantaged by my relationship to Mr. Gardiner? In fact, in purely monetary terms, I am ahead. If I wished to move in London society, I daresay I would be sneered at for who my uncle is, but I would *also* be sneered at for the smallness of Longbourn. Here around Meryton I certainly lose nothing for it.”

“Yes, but such a connection must materially reduce your ability to marry a man of consequence in the world.”

“Which would be a great disservice to me,” Elizabeth replied with a smile, “had I need to marry—but, one turn about the married state left me with a fine estate to manage. I have told you before, I hardly need, or wish, to attempt the state a second time.”

Elizabeth drew her arm around Darcy’s again but maintained a silent, absent frown as they strolled. Darcy, in no hurry to interrupt her thoughts, remained quiet as well. Suddenly, with surprising violence, Elizabeth’s hold on his arm became viselike, and she dragged Darcy to a more secluded pathway, which could not be seen from the main house.

When her eyes grabbed his, their intensity unnerved Darcy. “If you mean to say your friend Mr. Bingley will not offer for my sister due to her poor connections, speak plainly.” Darcy’s mouth fell open, surprised by her manner and that she had drawn such an implication from his words.

Darcy could not immediately reply due to his surprise, so Elizabeth continued with her eyes clinging to his, “My sister likes your friend a great deal. A very great deal—she may hide it when in company, but to someone who knows her as well as I it is very clear that she feels deeply. I have given up too much for Jane’s happiness, far too much, to see it wrecked by a superior gentleman who finds it entertaining to flirt with a poor country maid when he has no intention to make an offer.”

The fury in Elizabeth’s eyes reminded Darcy of a story he read in a school primer about the fierceness with which a lioness would protect her cubs. She had never seemed so beautiful. It was impossible for Darcy to organize his thoughts in response to this unexpected question quickly. So he stood dumb and looked at her with wide eyes. After a pause Elizabeth’s face fell. “Please, Mr. Darcy, we are friends, I trust you. If this is just a flirtation for your friend, please, I beg you: tell me.”

Elizabeth’s distress prompted Darcy to speak, and with all the seriousness required by the situation Darcy replied, “Bingley had not at all been in my mind when I spoke. I know my friend well enough to know your connections with trade, and Jane’s small dowry, will be no issue for him. He has relatives in the north who still are in trade, and he is but one generation removed from it himself.”

Darcy took a deep breath, as Mrs. Collins lost some of her tension at his reply. “I do not know how serious Bingley is—he often flirts, but I have never seen him so intensely interested before. His concern, especially in these past few days, is unprecedented. My friend is a good man—I can assure you he would never knowingly lead a woman to believe his intentions more serious than they were. But it is possible for a man on accident to imply more than he intends. I will speak with Bingley to make sure he knows what he is about.”

 The tension flowed out of Elizabeth, and she closed her eyes for a moment and breathed slowly in relief. “Thank you,” she said. Then Elizabeth opened her eyes and her face went very red as she clapped her hand over her mouth. “I should not have spoken to you so, I am—”

Darcy stopped her with a hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “Do not apologize. I—” Darcy felt choked with emotion as he said, “I have a beloved sister as well.”

Their eyes met, and then Elizabeth smiled in a manner which Darcy felt through his chest and took his arm again. “Do note, I only wish for Bingley to be serious, not for him to be certain. Marriage is a most serious business, and I think the two barely know each other well enough to decide upon it. If Mr. Bingley found, on further acquaintance, he did not believe he would be happy with Jane, it would do no one any favors to force them to marry. Neither would it make Jane happy for him to avoid her because he is not yet certain.”

Darcy gave a small laugh. “You have chosen to give me a most difficult task I must navigate between the Scylla of scaring my friend off, and the Charybdis of not focusing him at all.”

“Maybe you should say nothing. So long as you are certain your friend does not intend to trifle with my dear Jane, it may be best to leave them to their own devices. Marriage not only is a serious matter, it also is one perhaps best managed by the parties themselves. However, you know your friend best.”

The two fell silent again. Darcy was aware of Elizabeth to his side. She appeared contemplative. Darcy felt tense. His attempt to hint that he would not offer for her had failed. But he could not be sorry for it, as without the information about Jane he might have made a serious mistake. He had no doubt that Elizabeth was correct about Jane’s feelings—she would know far better than he.

Darcy did not want to attempt another hint to Elizabeth. He thought he should. Nothing had changed. He had not found the words, or even the intention, when several minutes later Elizabeth turned to him and said, “I apologize, but I really ought to return to Longbourn.”

Darcy nodded, and they parted.

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The scene played in Darcy’s mind again and again. That Elizabeth misunderstood his intentions in such a way disconcerted Darcy. But it surprised him not at all that a woman with Elizabeth’s goodness would care more for Jane than herself. What lingered in Darcy’s mind was the intensity of that moment, Elizabeth’s desperation, and her words, “I have given up too much for Jane’s happiness.”

Her words confirmed what Darcy already surmised; she had suspected Mr. Collins would be as poor a husband as he subsequently proved to be and married him to protect her sister. Darcy wished to know more. However, he knew her husband was a subject which distressed Elizabeth, and thus he could not bring it up.

The day after Miss Bennet had recovered sufficiently to return to Longbourn, Darcy and Bingley went shooting for birds with several of the local gentlemen. Darcy took this opportunity to see if Sir William Lucas could satisfy his curiosity.

“I heard something which made me wonder about how Mrs. Collins’s marriage to her late husband came about. As both were unattached, it would be expected that Mr. Collins would have married the elder Miss Bennet.”

“I daresay that is correct. There had been an expectation he would marry Miss Jane. I do not know the full story; Miss Elizabeth may have told my Charlotte, but if Charlotte knew how it came about she kept in confidence. Mrs. Bennet told us Mr. Collins and Miss Jane were as good as engaged a few days before it was announced he would marry Miss Elizabeth. It was a great surprise to learn of the switch. “

At that moment, a flight of birds and a minute of shooting interrupted the conversation. Once the two pheasants which the hunters had successfully hit were collected by the dogs and then placed in the brown leather bags, Darcy turned again to Sir William as they reloaded their guns. “Was Miss Jane disappointed by this? She ought to have been the mistress of the estate.”

Sir William hesitated before he answered. “Mr. Collins was not, oh, how should I put it, he was not the sort of young man to attract a young lady’s fancy. His features were quite poor, which of course is no disgrace upon him, and his manners were—not of the highest breeding. I do believe Miss Elizabeth thought she did her sister a favor by attracting his attentions away.”

This confirmed what Darcy thought, but he wished to know more about Elizabeth’s evident unhappiness at his memory. She thought he had been a tyrant. How had he tyrannized her?

After another round of shots, as Darcy busied himself with examining his gun, he said absently, not looking at Sir William so as to hide the depth of his curiosity, “What manner of marriage did they have?”

“Oh, ho!” Sir William said with a laugh. “You are curious about our Mrs. Collins. She is a quite attractive woman; I do understand.”

Darcy felt his face heat as he looked at the older man who had discovered his brief subterfuge, but he quickly brought his embarrassment under control and said haughtily, “I only wish to know more about a friend. I assure you, I have no intentions in that direction.”

Under Darcy’s stern look, Sir William’s humor fled, and he nodded. “Indeed, I see; it is likely for the best. She has never shown any interest in the gentlemen who have tried to court her—you see,” he said more solemnly than Darcy had ever seen the jovial gentleman speak, “While one should not speak ill of the dead, and—though he had many virtues, I cannot believe Mr. Collins was a good husband. Miss Elizabeth, you see, was a very merry girl of just fifteen, who delighted in society and music and dance. Mr. Collins expected his wife to at all times be somber and solemn and maintain a certain dignity. I recall he would not allow Eliza to visit my Charlotte alone, and she was never allowed to attend any balls.”

“She simply followed his dictates?” It was hard for Darcy to imagine Elizabeth without her laughter and playfulness.

“She did,” Sir William rubbed at his face uncomfortably. “In fact she eagerly fulfilled his every whim.”

Darcy felt a stab of fear at that. He remembered the conjecture he made during the dinner party at Longbourn that she had been abused. “Do you think he—beat her?”

Sir William took some time before he answered, “No. In fact, several of us observed her carefully to see if we could find any signs of it. Miss Elizabeth had grown up around us; if we thought Mr. Collins was mistreating her in *that* manner, we would have endeavored to make things uncomfortable for him.”

 A call signaled that the next flight of birds was about to be released, and both gentlemen shouldered their guns again. After they had fired, Sir William said, “I think he threatened to throw her family out of Longbourn if he did not stay pleased with Miss Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennet had only a few thousand pounds to her name, and she would have been desperately unhappy if forced to live on it.”

Darcy tried to imagine Elizabeth’s marriage. She would have been Georgiana’s age. Darcy pictured Georgiana under the control of a man who forced her to forgo every pleasure. He shivered, as he always did, when he imagined what might have happened to his sister had he been a day later. But he found it difficult to imagine *Elizabeth* as that girl. The woman he knew always appeared too confident and capable for him to see what she had been like as a helpless girl.

# Chapter 8

Just as the scene in the Netherfield gardens played in Darcy’s mind, Elizabeth’s mind lingered on how she behaved. She could not regret her behavior; she would do anything for Jane. Still, it had been most improper. She ought to have found a more polite way to demand Darcy’s meaning. As Elizabeth turned the moment over and over in her mind to determine how she best could have handled it, she realized what Darcy had really wished to say.

He *had* meant to warn that a gentleman had no intention to make an offer—but it was not Bingley whose intentions he wished to specify. It was his own.

The tension Elizabeth had felt since her nightmare dissolved as she became certain. They had danced together twice every evening it was possible; they spoke together at length any time they were together in company; while Jane had been at Netherfield sick, they saw even more of each other. She had noticed they were behaving as a couple. Of course Darcy had as well. He wished to protect her from disappointed hopes. In her mind and heart Elizabeth thanked Darcy for his belatedly understood meaning.

Given she always knew he would not offer for her, and did not wish him to, Elizabeth was surprised to find that, in addition to her relief, she felt so hurt by the rejection as to nearly come to tears. For a moment she felt angry that he would not ignore all the considerations that stopped him. Was *she* not good enough?

Elizabeth eventually laughed at herself—it always amused her to note these inconsistencies in her own mind; she did not wish him to be attached, but still was disappointed when he told her he was not. It was a silly vanity.

Elizabeth thought further about this, two days after Jane returned from Netherfield, as she walked back to Longbourn after a visit with some tenants. Her initial disappointment was entirely gone. She only felt a sense of satisfaction about her friendship with Mr. Darcy and pleasure that it had been settled as merely friendship—but why that “merely”? Friendship, all the philosophers and poets agreed, was of great import; life without friends would hardly be worth living. And, now that she considered it, the idea that the only affection which could exist between a man and a woman was marital affection offended Elizabeth. It ought to be possible for any rational creature to be friends with any other rational creature.

She and Darcy were friends, and would remain friends. And that was perfect. In a pleased mood, Elizabeth hummed a popular Irish air she had danced to with Darcy one afternoon when Mary played at Netherfield.

Upon Elizabeth’s return to Longbourn, she was rushed by Kitty and Lydia. They had met a gentleman named Mr. Wickham in Meryton when they walked out to visit Aunt Phillips and the milliner. Mr. Wickham was a friend of Mr. Denny, a young officer who had already made a favorable impression on the neighborhood. Wickham intended to enroll in the militia on the next day.

According to Kitty, Mr. Wickham was a paragon: the most charming, the most handsome, and the easiest mannered man she had ever seen. Lydia, while still committed to disliking any man, admitted he looked very well and behaved equally well.

“Oh! He sounds most impressive,” Elizabeth smiled at her sisters’ description. “Will I have an opportunity to meet this astonishing gentleman?”

“You will!” cried Kitty. “Aunt Phillips invited him to cards tonight, along with us—and he accepted!”

Lydia added, “Something strange occurred. As Mr. Denny and Mr. Wickham walked away from us, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley rode up; Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham recognized each other. Then Mr. Darcy refused to acknowledge Mr. Wickham—he turned and rode the opposite direction when Mr. Wickham tried to greet him.” Lydia paused in her narration. “I wonder why they mislike each other so—perhaps Mr. Darcy mistreated him horribly.”

Elizabeth laughed, “You may choose to dislike Mr. Darcy merely because he is my friend, but for my part I am convinced, if they do indeed dislike each other, the fault is on this Wickham’s side. We do not know the situation, though, and should not speculate.”

After her sisters’ story, Elizabeth was all curiosity for the party that evening. Not only would she meet an exemplar of charm and looks, she might discover the real relationship between this Wickham and Darcy.

When Mr. Wickham entered her aunt and uncle’s rooms, Elizabeth found him to be quite as handsome as promised. In easiness of manner and the friendliness and charm of his countenance, Elizabeth had seen no man better. Though Elizabeth rather thought Darcy’s features were superior.

Wickham was the happy man to which every female eye turned, and Elizabeth was the happy woman to whom Mr. Wickham’s eye turned. Elizabeth expected as much. Since she inherited Longbourn from Mr. Collins, most single gentlemen entering the neighborhood showed a decided preference for her company. It perhaps explained why she found it easy to like Darcy; as she’d told Lydia once, he was too rich to be attracted by Longbourn.

Wickham was all charm and flattery and, despite Elizabeth’s innate suspicion of both any young man, and especially of a man who Mr. Darcy appeared to dislike, she found herself laughing and smiling with him. And he was an excellent player of the card game Mrs. Phillips had provided for amusement. However, Elizabeth’s curiosity burned. She could not think up a good stratagem to indirectly ask her question and had just resolved to directly ask it, when Mr. Wickham brought the subject up himself.

“I have been told you are friends with Mr. Darcy,” Wickham said in a hesitating manner. “Is he likely to remain in the area long?”

“I hardly know,” Elizabeth replied. “I do believe he intends to stay at least several weeks more.” Elizabeth felt sad as she reminded herself that his presence in the neighborhood was not permanent.

At this, Mr. Wickham hmm’d and was silent for a minute in evident thought. They completed a full round of the game with the only noises made being requests for cards. Elizabeth at last asked, in further curiosity, “Will his presence in Meryton affect your plans?”

“Oh! No—*I* have no need to avoid his company.”

 At this, Elizabeth inquired, “From what my sisters told me, it is evident the two of you are acquainted; might I ask how?”

“In truth, we have been connected since infancy,” Wickham replied.

Elizabeth was all astonishment at this and begged Wickham to tell the full story. However, Mr. Wickham demurred. “As you must have heard from your delightful sisters, Mr. Darcy and I are on poor terms, and it would hardly be proper for me to lay out my complaints against him to one of his friends.”

Such a reply hardly was what Elizabeth’s curiosity wished to receive, and she hoped, or rather suspected, from his manner that with encouragement he could be brought to speak. “Come now, I may consider myself a friend of Mr. Darcy, but I’ve not known him for much more than a month. Besides, you say you were connected with him from infancy—it hardly would be a complaint against Mr. Darcy to explain *that*.”

Mr. Wickham inclined his head to accept her argument. “My father was old Mr. Darcy’s steward, and due to their closeness I was the godson of Mr. Darcy’s father. We were childhood companions.”

“What sort of man was his father?” Elizabeth asked, most curious about her friend’s parentage.

“The very best; you could ask anyone in Derbyshire and they would agree—he was the best master, the best landlord, and truly my best friend.”

“Why then are you and Mr. Darcy opposed?”

“It would hardly be proper for me to speak against the son of my beloved godfather and to air our quarrels in public. However, as we grew, Mr. Darcy came to dislike me. I believe it was, in part, jealousy over his father’s affection for me. Though his father truly loved his son, I believe the younger Mr. Darcy disliked how my charm and easiness of manner could entertain his father more than Darcy’s own stiffness.”

While it sounded petty, Elizabeth had spent too much time with her own mixed feelings about her parents to be surprised if Mr. Darcy had been hurt, perhaps accidentally, by his own father. And though it would be *irrational* to dislike Mr. Wickham for his father’s preference, in Elizabeth’s view, it would hardly be *blameworthy*. Still. “I can see how Mr. Darcy might come to dislike you for that, but he would hardly refuse to acknowledge you or mistreat you—I’ve seen enough of his character to know that he is scrupulously proper in his behavior.”

“He is; however, after his father’s death we quarreled over a living old Mr. Darcy intended for me. My godfather had intended me for the church, and my education had tended toward that. But Mr. Darcy did not wish for me to become his clergyman, and, while the intention of my godfather was clear, the terms of the will had sufficient vagueness to allow Darcy to interpret them as he chose. Darcy gave me some compensation for giving up the living—I am sure he considers himself as having acted properly in the matter—but the value given was woefully insufficient to maintain the manner of life I have been brought up to expect.”

While Elizabeth acknowledged it was her own prejudice that led her to feel this way, she thought the story hardly put a good light on Wickham’s character. A single man, with no dependents and a solid amount of capital—and Elizabeth did not doubt at all that the value Darcy gave was more than sufficient to allow a man a good start in life—should not complain about an inability to meet their expected standard of living, but rather should reduce their expected standard of living and set out to build a greater income if they wished to achieve it later in life. Elizabeth certainly knew had she been in Wickham’s situation that is what she would’ve done.

Also, the story seemed incomplete. “That hardly explains how he came to cut a childhood companion in the street.”

Mr. Wickham shifted in his chair and nervously rubbed his thumb along the edge of his cards. His manner clearly told Elizabeth he regretted allowing the conversation to go in this direction. “I said some most intemperate things to Mr. Darcy. I believe I insulted him in a manner that was most unbecoming his consequence, and my interests. It was the foolishness of youth, and I heartily regret my actions, but Mr. Darcy is a harsh man and his dislike, once earned, is permanent.”

Elizabeth had heard Darcy say as much about himself once, which did make Wickham’s story more plausible. However, Elizabeth was still sure he hid something, and his charm no longer charmed. In their conversation a week earlier at Netherfield, Darcy talked about how some men were charming and appeared good, while being snakes underneath. Darcy said he spoke of a specific person. Elizabeth thought it likely that person was Wickham—certainly, he was all goodness and charm on the outside, but at the very least his story showed a definite want of character.

The two continued to converse about other topics; the weather, the society, and the geography of Meryton. However, Elizabeth’s heart was not in it, and Wickham, seeing the distance which had grown between them, soon turned to others for conversation. For her part, Elizabeth resolved to apply to Darcy about Mr. Wickham. If he was to be resident in Meryton for the next months, it would be best for her and the local society to know more of his character.

However, it proved unnecessary to worry, as the next day when Elizabeth’s sisters returned from Meryton—Kitty had hoped to see Mr. Wickham again—they burst into the sitting room and Kitty exclaimed in tears, “The most horrible thing has happened; Mr. Wickham decided that he no longer wished to enter the militia here in Hertfordshire, and is already returned to London! I fear I shall never be happy again!”

Elizabeth’s countenance was pleased at this news. The extravagance of Kitty’s sadness at the loss of a man she had known for barely a day was amusing, but more importantly Elizabeth was really pleased to hear Wickham would not join the neighborhood. The more she had thought on his story, the worse she had thought of him, and the event of his leaving suggested he feared what more Mr. Darcy might have to say about him.

The day after this, Darcy came with Bingley and his sisters to deliver the invitations to a ball which Bingley intended to hold at Netherfield. Darcy had earlier expressed some interest in the rare volumes which Elizabeth’s father had collected, so while Bingley and Jane happily ignored everyone else in the sitting room and Miss Bingley endured Mrs. Bennet’s conversation, Elizabeth took Mr. Darcy to her study to show him the books.

Elizabeth pulled several of her most impressive volumes from the shelves and watched as Darcy carefully fingered through the yellowed paper of a first edition folio of Shakespeare’s works. He really was very handsome in his green coat. With a smile, Elizabeth brought up Mr. Wickham. “The other day I met a very old acquaintance of yours.”

“Oh,” Darcy said in a concerned manner.

“Yes, he was quite possibly the handsomest and best mannered gentleman I have ever met.”

Darcy’s face grew pained, “Elizabeth, while Wickham may be blessed with the semblance of goodness, he has none of its substance. Should you meet him again, do not let yourself be deceived by his happy manners—he is a fortune hunter and has many vicious propensities. It would pain me very deeply if I were to see you taken in by him.”

Elizabeth stepped forward and touched the arm of Darcy’s coat. “I merely wished to tease you, as it was clear you were not on good terms—his conversation about you had already shown he was not of good character. I apologize for my joke. I should not have made it. I am not surprised to hear how serious his failings are.”

Darcy studied her face then relaxed. “I’m glad to see you were not imposed upon by him—it would be no fault if you had. He has taken in many good people with his happy manners; my father was one.”

They were silent, and Darcy pretended to examine the folio, then he looked at Elizabeth with a sigh. “You wish to hear the story of our acquaintance.”

Hoping to lighten the mood and show Darcy that he truly had no obligation to expose his affairs, Elizabeth smiled impishly at him. “Of course not; after all, I am entirely without curiosity.”

As Elizabeth hoped, Darcy laughed at her description of herself; the frown the thought of Wickham had given him disappeared, and his good humor shifted his face into a very handsome expression greatly superior to Wickham’s.

“I know *that* to be quite the opposite of the true case. I am not surprised you would claim such though—we have been acquainted long enough for me to discover that youoccasionally find great enjoyment in professing opinions which in fact are not your own.”

Elizabeth now laughed heartily herself. “Please, do not spread this knowledge around, it would destroy my credit in the neighborhood if they learned my true character.”

After another smile, Darcy’s expression flattened and he spoke of Wickham. “I do not know what he told you, however, his connection with my family goes back to birth.”

As Darcy paused, Elizabeth said, “He told me as much, your father was his godfather. Your father hoped him to enter the church, but you did not wish him to be your clergyman and instead gave him a—how did he describe it—*woefully insufficient* compensation for the value of the living intended for him. At this point, his intemperate words earned your eternal dislike. As he fled at the possibility I might beg you for more details, I am certain there is more to the story.”

Darcy blinked, “That gives a better picture of myself than I expected; I had believed him to normally imply he received nothing for the living, and perhaps that I have actively sought to stymie his career—which I assure you I have not. I have better uses for my time and resources. That story is true in essentials, though he received three thousand for the living, which hardly seems *woefully insufficient* given that the holder of Kympton was not yet sixty and could easily have lived—though sadly he did not—for another two decades.”

“I rather believe he would have exaggerated the story, were it not clear I intended to ask you for confirmation. Three thousand is hardly a small amount of money; my uncle started in business with less than twice that amount.”

“I agree, and Mr. Wickham had four thousand, as he also received a one-thousand-pound bequest from my father. I had, before my father’s death, seen him to show a decided want of principle in his behavior; my father saw nothing of this as Wickham was far more guarded in his presence. When my father died, Wickham claimed he was decided against taking orders and wished to study law. I knew Wickham ought not to be a clergyman, and readily agreed to his proposal. At this time, we agreed on a sum of three thousand to compensate him for the loss of the living, and we did not communicate for the next three years. Upon the death of the incumbent of the living, though, he contacted me again. He had somehow spent the entire sum—”

“Four thousand pounds in three years!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “As a single man!”

“I knew him to gamble in college—and his tastes can be expensive. He had lost the entire sum but not established himself at law and was in some distress. He now wished to take orders. He entreated me to respect my dear father’s intentions and provide him with the living; you certainly can understand my refusal. However, following this, in his later letters he abused me violently, and I have no doubt he attacked my character to others.”

At this point, Darcy stopped, and then said with a solemn manner, “There was one further incident between us; however, as it involves the good name of another party, it is not a story to share lightly, and as Mr. Wickham seems to have left the neighborhood merely on the threat of exposure, I think there is no need to share it.”

Elizabeth suspected much of Darcy’s true dislike for Wickham came from this last incident, but she certainly would not push him to speak. Instead, after a quiet period where Darcy pretended to read one of her books, Elizabeth chose to tell Darcy she had, eventually, understood his message a week prior.

“I have thought on what you said regarding my connections to trade, and how it will affect our ability to marry.”

Darcy grew still as he waited for Elizabeth to continue, and when she did not, he said, “I hope you did not find it horridly forward or insulting for me to speak such.”

Elizabeth smiled, hoping to show she really was not insulted. “Not at all; I am sensible you really did me a favor by speaking so. And *friends* ought to be able to speak anything to each other. In truth, it relieves *friends* of worry when they know where they stand with each other, and what they ought to expect. It allows you to behave as you wish, since there is no worry of misperception.”

Darcy nodded, though Elizabeth thought she could perceive something vaguely disappointed in his manner. “I agree, I am—most sensible—of your worth as a *friend*. And I hope for us to remain close friends always.”

Elizabeth smiled and felt a small bubble of warmth at Darcy’s declaration of her worth; he was a clever man of great consequence. Every time he showed his approbation of her, she felt as though his good opinion was worth more than that of anyone else she knew.

While Elizabeth still smiled, Darcy’s lips quirked up, and with a small bow he asked, “Would my dear friend be willing to give me the first set, and then the dinner set, at Bingley’s ball next week?”

“Certainly.”

# Chapter 9

Darcy thought Bingley’s ball had been a smashing success.

He’d danced the first set and the dinner set, as planned, with Elizabeth. The shared knowledge that they were friends and would not become more than friends freed them from an invisible constraint which had been present before.

Elizabeth had been in fine form. Her eyes had never been so bright, her jokes had never been so clever, her figure never so light and pleasing. During dinner, Elizabeth had produced a stream of quiet, wry observations on those around them at the dinner table, and Darcy nearly hurt himself suppressing his laughter.

Darcy knew he’d shown himself in good form the previous night as well, as he and Elizabeth jumped from topic to topic, and he kept her laughing the entire night.

The host had been equally pleased by the ball, though perhaps he’d paid more attention to just one guest then was perfectly proper. Bingley stayed close to Jane most of the night, and danced with her three times. Now that Darcy knew it was there, Jane’s attachment to Bingley was clear. It was not overt, but she glowed in a certain way when she looked at Bingley, and when she spoke to Bingley there was a certain warmth and meaning that was absent otherwise.

As a private man who did not wish to hang his feelings out for all the world to see, Darcy could appreciate Jane’s reticence. He had abandoned the barely formed thought that Bingley might be the man who he could safely entrust Georgiana to.

Darcy would have preferred for Bingley’s new connections to be better, but he could not be unhappy about Bingley’s fate; Bingley would marry where there was strong affection and similarity of temper and manner. There was every hope for happiness in the expected union.

The morning after the Netherfield ball, Darcy and Bingley chose to play billiards after breakfast. They both were in excellent moods and were absorbed in their own thoughts. Neither spoke much, but when they did speak, it invariably was with a smile. They traded games, and Darcy lost his with perfect good humor.

He’d only lost because he remembered, as he made a key shot, a joke Elizabeth made the previous night which compared billiards to knitting. Bingley himself laughed every time he missed a shot. In fact, Darcy thought with a smile as they began a third round, both of their play had been abominably bad today.

Miss Bingley entered the room and grabbed her brother by the arm; she looked at Darcy and said in a hard voice, “Come, we must all talk.”

Bingley raised his eyebrows in surprise as his sister pulled him along, “Certainly, Caroline.”

Miss Bingley pushed them into the sitting room where Mr. Hurst already sat on the fine stuffed couch with a half-full glass of port and a bored expression, while Mrs. Hurst scowled at her brother from the other side of the couch.

Miss Bingley pushed her brother into a red wingback armchair which she’d placed so the other seats in the room faced it in a half circle. She stepped back and angrily looked down on her now-seated brother. “Charles, you must drop this foolish infatuation while there is still time!”

Bingley stared back at his sister. “This foolish infatuation?—Oh. Do you speak about Jane?”

“Miss Bennet!” Miss Bingley twirled to the watching people and said, “See, he is infatuated.” Then she looked at Bingley again. “Miss Bennet may be a sweet girl, but she is completely inappropriate for you. Her mother is openly mercenary and horridly bred, the sister whose house she lives in wishes to be a man, her youngest sister is a wild inappropriately forward girl, her connections are to trade, and her dowry is small. She is a very pretty sort of girl, and her face has turned your head, but I would be a very poor sister, indeed, were I to let her appearance lead you into such a serious mistake.”

At the end of Miss Bingley’s speech, her brother sat silent for half a minute as he nervously rubbed his hand against the arm of his chair.

When she tired of waiting for Mr. Bingley to speak, Miss Bingley asked, “Do you now realize you should give her up, and ought to leave Hertfordshire entirely to set yourself beyond temptation?”

“I’d not realized you felt this way about Jane. In truth, I thought you friends.” There was an accusation in Bingley’s tone, as though his sister had given him permission and, now that he was attached, wished to withdraw it.

Miss Bingley replied, “My friend? Yes, she is a dear friend, and a sweet girl, but there is a great distance, a very great distance, between friendship and marriage. She is genteel, and a gentlewoman. To have her for dinner hurts us not at all. To have her for a sister would harm us all greatly.”

“You worry too much about status.” Bingley’s response was unusually firm. “A large dowry and connections in the *ton* will not make me happy. They will not make you happy either. I remember how our father and mother were; they had deep affection for each other, and I wish that. I am surprised by you, Caroline. That you should wish to detach your brother from a woman he loves, and all the happiness that will provide, so you can say to your friends—friends you met at a school paid for by your father’s money, money gained through trade—so you can say to these *friends* that your new sister is such and such and is related to so-and-so, and was worth some odd thousands of pounds.”

Miss Bingley’s face rapidly cycled from an irritated frown at Bingley’s accusation into a sorrowful look. “Charles, Charles, you misunderstand me. Were Jane really attached, I would not speak so. Good connections do matter, but if there is mutual affection it is nothing. But I cannot believe Miss Bennet more than likes you.”

“What do you mean? Speak plainly!”

Despite her sympathetic tone, Darcy thought there was something pleased in Miss Bingley’s manner as she said, “I am sorry, but I have observed her—she smiles for you, but she smiles for everyone. She is a very sweet girl, after all. There is no specific mark of regard or great difference in how she acts in conversation with you, and how she acts in conversation with me, or with anyone. She accepts your attentions, but she would be a fool to do otherwise. Her mother openly says she ordered Miss Bennet to attach you. As a dutiful daughter, should you offer, she would be forced to accept whether she will or no.”

When Miss Bingley saw the effect of her speech and the indecision that came over Bingley’s face, she commanded, “Leave Hertfordshire. You will do Miss Bennet a favor and not only yourself.”

The doubt was clear in Bingley’s voice as he replied, “No. That is wrong. Jane does love me. She must. She simply must love me. I have—her behavior is such. No, I cannot believe you. And Jane, she would not marry if she did not have affection for her partner. She has said as much.”

Darcy was pleased to see Bingley had straightened during the course of that speech and now seemed more assured. Were Miss Bingley to convince her brother Miss Bennet did not feel for her, after his conversation with Elizabeth and his own observations, he would be honour-bound to speak. However, Darcy did not wish to interfere in another’s private doings in such a way.

Sadly, as soon as Darcy became sure he would not need to speak, Miss Bingley forced him to. With a manner that suggested she knew she was likely to regret it but had no other choice, Miss Bingley looked at Darcy. “It is not just me; I know Mr. Darcy has heard Mrs. Bennet speak of her orders to Jane. He was the one who told me of it in the first place. And I am sure he has seen how little her behavior shows regard for you.”

Darcy kept his eyes on Miss Bingley for a moment, and, as he allowed his annoyance to show, she slightly flinched. Turning to his friend, Darcy said, “You can do much better. You are only one generation removed from trade, and it will do no good for your social standing to add an uncle in trade to a father. Also, Elizabeth—Mrs. Collins—I know her mind, she will try to give you as small a dowry as possible to reserve more for her other sisters whose husbands likely will be poorer than you. And you would let her.”

Bingley nervously swallowed and looked down to pull at the sleeve of his coat as Darcy held his gaze on him. “They would be my sisters as well.” He brought his head up. “In truth, I thought it might be a good gesture to refuse any dowry. But those things matter not at all,” Bingley now said with a pleading voice. “Do you think she loves me?”

The desperation in Bingley’s expression showed that he thought what Darcy said now would determine his fate. In fact, it annoyed Darcy. In a case of this sort, a man ought to keep his own counsel. Darcy himself would certainly not depend upon the opinions of his friends to guess at the feelings of his lady.

For an instant Darcy thought to meander towards his response, to speak first of what he had heard Mrs. Bennet say, or to agree with Miss Bingley that Jane’s countenance was similar no matter who she spoke to. But Bingley’s worried eyes convinced Darcy that to tease him right now would be similar to kicking a puppy.

“Bingley, you should trust your own judgment in a case such as this, but for my part I am convinced Miss Bennet loves you.” Darcy saw Miss Bingley make a startled interjection and she opened her mouth to try to speak. Darcy thought, after she had forced him to this, it was perfectly proper to speak over a lady. “Mrs. Collins told me she thought her sister to have a deep affection for you, and afterwards I watched Miss Bennet closely, both with you and with others, and, though she is not open or overt, her feelings are clear. In truth, the way her eyes linger on you and the way she appears pleased when you approach is quite sweet.”

Bingley brightened as Darcy spoke, and by the time Darcy finished he positively glowed. Any annoyance Darcy felt with Bingley’s lack of resolution and need for reassurance was overcome by the contagiousness of his pleasure. Darcy smiled back at his friend, while Miss Bingley stood with a defeated scowl to the side.

“Well, then,” Bingley said, “I believe I have a call to make.” He stood and, without ceremony, half ran out of the room and closed the door rather too hard. They all could hear Bingley’s shout, “Saddle up my horse, and bring me my best jacket—the blue one.”

Darcy smiled as Bingley’s enthusiasm came clearly through his voice. He looked around; Mrs. Hurst had a similar scowl to her sister’s, but Mr. Hurst had looked up from his port and said, “He may be a puppy, but he certainly is a happy one.”

With a mischievous thought, Darcy turned to Miss Bingley. “I know you did not wish this, but you ought to bring yourself to feel happy for your brother. He will marry where there is strong affection.”

Miss Bingley gave an unladylike snort and turned to leave the room. As she reached the door, though, she turned around. “You and Elizabeth—I mean Mrs. Collins. When am I to wish you joy?”

Darcy’s good humor fled, and for a sad and aching moment he desperately wished he could marry Elizabeth. “That shall not happen.”

Miss Bingley’s bright smile at his response left Darcy even sadder. She then curtsied and left the room.

Then, with a bow of his own, Darcy exited. As he walked to the stables, planning to go on a long ride, he thought that it would be so easy to forget what he owed his family, his name, and their illustrious history. He could so easily ask Elizabeth, and then she would always be there to tease him and lighten his mood with her laugh. He would always be able to look at her bright eyes and smile with her. And—for a moment Darcy imagined holding her in his arms, kissing her, a wedding night, her body on his bed—Darcy forced his mind away from that image.

He’d not disrespect her so.

And it was impossible. Right?

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning after Bingley’s ball, the Bennet woman all gathered in the sitting room; Kitty eagerly described her dances, while Mrs. Bennet expressed her happiness again and again at Mr. Bingley’s attentions to Jane. Mary spoke less, but had been pleased by the reception her playing received. Lydia sighed jealously. “I so wish I could have gone! It was such a bore here at home!”

Elizabeth laughed, “A few more months only, dear Lydia. You’ll enjoy it all the more for the wait.”

Good cheer bubbled through Elizabeth as she heard Jane hum the tune from the last dance of the night. Soon, very soon, Elizabeth hoped Jane would be engaged to the man she had chosen. Everyone was happy, even Lydia, who almost accepted Elizabeth’s reasons for delaying her coming out: she was still really young.

While they all still remained in the sitting room, they heard the surprisingly early sound of horse hooves rapidly coming up the drive. A glance out the window showed it to be Bingley’s horse, with Bingley attached. Jane colored at Elizabeth’s knowing look, and the ladies quickly rearranged themselves to receive their visitor. Bingley was announced, and he wore a handsome blue coat which Jane had admired before. For a moment, he seemed flustered to be met by the gazes of six women, but Bingley quickly recovered himself and, with passable manners, engaged in the pleasantries and listened to Mrs. Bennet’s pleased greeting with patience.

The entire time, though, his eye and manner showed him to be fully focused on Jane. At this marked attention Jane reddened and showed a pleased embarrassment. After Bingley sat next to Jane, Mrs. Bennet found an excuse to send Kitty and Lydia off and suggested to Mary that she ought to practice, as everyone had liked her playing so much the night before. Bingley added, “Your performance was really excellent, Miss Mary. It is astonishing how you young ladies can become so skilled; it must take a great deal of time. I certainly would not wish you to lose the opportunity to surpass your current level due to a need to entertain me.”

Mary gave a pleased smile at Bingley’s compliment and, with a curtsy, left the room. Elizabeth smiled as she saw Bingley wished to clear the room as much as Mrs. Bennet did. Now that it was just the four of them, Mrs. Bennet gave Elizabeth a pleading look, as though to say, ‘please, just this once, do as I ask,’ before she stood and said, “I just recalled that I must make sure our cook has all of the stores she will need for Christmas laid in. Lizzy, could you come with me to speak to her?”

Elizabeth smiled, and as she stood Jane shot her a worried look. Elizabeth thought Jane’s look said she half wanted Elizabeth to stay and half desperately wished her away. Elizabeth winked at her sister and followed her mother. In the hallway she found that, while Mary had gone off to practice, as the sound of the piano could be faintly heard from the music room, Kitty and Lydia were both in the hall hoping to listen to Jane and Bingley’s conversation. Elizabeth silently shooed them away and then pushed her mother towards the kitchen. “Let us give them their privacy.”

It was a good thirty minutes before Jane and Bingley found the rest of the family in the music room, where Elizabeth and Mrs. Bennet sat nervously. Kitty and Lydia were very excited, as they talked to each other about whether Jane might convince Bingley to throw another ball when Lydia would be able to attend. Mary had stopped practicing to listen to their conversation.

Jane and Bingley both were red in the face and held hands, and by their manner and expression it was quite clear they had reached an understanding. Elizabeth smiled brightly as her mother stood. “Oh Jane, my dear, dear Jane! I am so happy for you!”

Mrs. Bennet embraced her daughter and then turned to Mr. Bingley who, with the broadest smile Elizabeth had ever seen on a person’s face, asked, “Mrs. Bennet, may I have permission to marry your daughter?”

“Oh yes, oh yes! My dear, dear Mr. Bingley, I am so pleased, and Jane is as well. And you are so handsome! And rich! Why, I am so happy I might go distracted!”

Elizabeth embraced Jane and shook Bingley’s hand heartily with a broad smile. “I will be very pleased to call you brother.”

The other sisters gathered around and talked excitedly, and asked Jane and Bingley question after question. Bingley, and his perpetual smile, stayed the rest of the day and handled Mrs. Bennet’s constant expressions of joy admirably. He and Jane glowed in their closeness. Elizabeth saw that, whenever the two thought they were not observed, Bingley would grab Jane’s hand and hold it, and Jane would blush prettily.

Elizabeth could not stop smiling at the tenderness and affection between the two, and the one time Jane caught Elizabeth looking, she smiled defiantly and squeezed Bingley’s hand harder. Elizabeth thought that, right then, she was quite possibly as happy as the couple. All she had ever wanted was for her dear Jane to be happy and find love, and every time Bingley looked at her sister with his heart in his eyes, every time Jane blushed or smiled, Elizabeth swelled with happy satisfaction.

Though Bingley stayed the entire day, none of the other Netherfield party showed. Elizabeth had hoped to see Darcy but was too pleased by Jane’s happiness to feel disappointed. When Bingley left well after supper Elizabeth said to Jane, “I think you two will be very happy, with your similarity of temper and mind, and with the kindness and generosity you both display. I really am so very pleased to see my Jane settled well.”

Later that night, after they had prepared for bed, Jane came to Elizabeth’s room in her nightdress and said, “I really ought to be quite cross with you. You should not have spoken to Mr. Darcy of my feelings.”

Jane’s continued smile and radiant look showed she was not really unhappy, but Elizabeth was sensible that she had betrayed her sister’s confidence and reddened. “I ought not have. I had misinterpreted something Darcy said, and replied without thought.” Elizabeth adopted a pleading expression. “I hope you will not hate me for this.”

“Oh, I never could hate you!” Jane smiled brilliantly again, sat on the bed next to Elizabeth, and seized her sister’s hand. “I am so happy! I cannot stop smiling. I only wish you were as happy as I!”

“We could never expect that, dear Jane; till I have your disposition and temper I could never be as happy as you. Were you to give me forty such men as your dear Bingley I could not be so happy.”

“Now, I want to be serious—you deserve to be as happy as I am.”

Elizabeth squeezed Jane’s hands, “Jane, dear Jane, I am truly happy. I have never been happier than I am right now. All I now wish is to have many nieces and nephews who I can spoil.”

Jane blushed brightly. “Oh, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth laughed at Jane’s embarrassment. “It was so very pretty the way you held hands; I know you caught me watching you the one time.”

Jane’s blush deepened, and Elizabeth drew her arm around Jane to pull her sister close. “You know I so loved to see you happy.” The two sisters spent half the night in happy conversation during which Elizabeth teased Jane and praised Bingley in equal measure.

# Chapter 10

The day after Bingley proposed to Jane, Darcy called on Longbourn with him. While very happy to see his friend’s pleasure in the settled relationship, Darcy could not avoid envy. He liked Elizabeth very much. Why should Bingley be permitted to marry as he wished, and not himself?

Then he received a letter of business the next morning from his steward which indicated he needed to leave for Pemberley within a few days. The thought that he would leave her gave Darcy a sick empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He did not wish to. He really did not wish to. And a growing part of his mind thought he would be a fool if he did. But… he also did not wish to be publicly and intimately associated with a man in business who lived within view of his own warehouses in London.

Shortly after they arrived at Longbourn Bingley proposed a walk, desiring more privacy to speak with Jane. Elizabeth and Darcy quickly agreed to walk with them, and the other girls also followed them to Meryton. Soon, only Elizabeth and Darcy strolled slowly behind them. They carefully maintained a twenty- or thirty-yards distance so Bingley and Jane could say what they wished without fear of being overheard.

The day was cold, but not unpleasantly so. After a few minutes of light conversation, with a heavy heart, Darcy said, “I received a letter from my steward this morning which says I will need to travel soon to Pemberley on matters of business.”

Elizabeth’s face fell, and her feet dragged. “Oh.” She spoke tonelessly, “Of course you would need to leave eventually; your estate must be cared for.”

Darcy’s throat tightened in response to the sadness in Elizabeth’s manner.

After she took a deep breath Elizabeth turned her face fully to Darcy. “I shall miss you a very great deal. A very great deal. Our conversations have been—” her voice caught, and Elizabeth looked away. Her eyes were wet when they returned to his. “I have never known such a good friend as you. Hertfordshire will be empty once you are gone.”

Darcy felt very melancholy as he fervently replied, “I shall miss you very much as well.” He looked to the side. “I can think of no time I have been as happy as these past months. I shall think often on you and Hertfordshire.”

“You will at least return for the wedding? Oh, please say you shall. I must be able to count on seeing you then.”

“Yes, I definitely shall—I’d not miss Bingley’s wedding for the world. And, and—I hope we will always be good friends. I shall look forward to seeing you as much as I will Bingley.”

They both were silent for the next minutes and watched the couple ahead of them happily converse. Sadness cast a pall over both of them. Elizabeth suddenly spoke. “Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind?—Promise we shall never forget to keep the other in mind. Life and friendship require partings. But if we keep our friends always dear to heart, it is no true parting.”

His voice thick with emotion, Darcy replied, “And surely ye’ll be your pint-stoup! And surely I’ll be mine! And we’ll tak’ a cup o’ kindness yet, for auld lang syne. Never shall I forget you. I swear. Never.”

Elizabeth’s head bobbed in reply. “And this is no final parting; we shall meet again—many times. Then, let us not waste what little time we have in *this* occasion of togetherness in sadness.”

Darcy nodded, and the two proceeded to talk more lightly, but there was a desperation in both their hearts which lent an unusual meaning to the conversation. Fifteen minutes later, as Elizabeth paused to think up a reply to Darcy’s most recent statement, he saw Bingley dart in for a kiss on Jane’s cheek. He sighed jealously. He wished instead of being forced to leave her, he could take the same liberties with the woman by his side.

Elizabeth misinterpreted his sigh and asked, “Are you so very unhappy about Bingley’s choice?”

“I cannot be unhappy; he will marry where there is strong affection and similarity of mind. Still, he is my closest friend; I cannot rejoice in the inferiority of his new connections.” Almost immediately, Darcy thought better of his words and apologized. “They are your relations as well, I really should not speak ill of them to you.”

Elizabeth begged off his apology with a wry smile. “I certainly understand how the world works; you need not apologize to me for openly stating it. Though—it might be wise of you to choose to be cautious in how you describe such things. Not everyone has seen the truly excellent gentleman you are, despite your tendency to insult everything beneath you.”

The tease had more bite than usual—which was deserved. As they ambled down the rural lane, Elizabeth added, “You apologize to me because we are friends, and are sensible of the wrongness of treating a friend in such a manner, but I have watched you; when you are with those not your friends you make no effort.”

Elizabeth pulled him to a stop and made Darcy look at her. “We have little time together now, and I know you will not wish to hear what I say, but you are my friend. Because I care very much for your well-being, I must try to speak. I fear you do not realize how you often appear. When you give offense through your assumption of superiority, you do not correct that offense. It can give the impression that you are a disagreeable and arrogant man.”

Darcy felt hurt. He cared for Elizabeth’s good opinion greatly; to hear her claim his manners were lacking was unpleasant. “I do not wish to perform to strangers; you know that my grandfather was an Earl, and the Darcy line, though untitled, has been prominent for many generations. If I wish to maintain distance from my social inferiors, it is my right.”

“I know it *is* your right, but—” Elizabeth pursed her lips in frustration, then smiled mischievously, “Why, Mr. Darcy, I do believe you are vain about your family name.”

Darcy reddened under her teasing gaze and straightened in preparation to respond, but Elizabeth continued first, “Don’t look like that, there is positively nothing wrong with your vanity; were I the possessor of ten thousand a year and very possibly more, and the—” her voice took on a snobbish cadence, “grandson of an Earl, why, I’m sure I would go quite mad with how deeply impressed with myself I would be.”

“I do not think myself to be vain,” Darcy replied stiffly. “I am proud, but I have good reason to be, and where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation.”

Elizabeth gave him a delightfully arch smile. “Oh, I am certain your pride is under good regulation.” Darcy could not resist her teasing him and, almost against his own will, smiled back.

Once she saw his mood had improved Elizabeth said with a smile in her voice, “Even though you *are* a very superior gentleman, your manners might *appear* better if you let others know of their inferiority less often—and really, I cannot understand why you *wish* to maintain distance. You are perfectly aware that inferior condition does not imply an inferior character. I cannot help but suspect your attitude is some weird and unconsidered vanity which you use to excuse your innate desire to avoid keeping company with those you do not know well.” Elizabeth caught his eye. “Just why, *really,* do you wish to avoid those of inferior social status?”

Elizabeth’s question returned Darcy to the matter foremost in his mind: her and her connections. He looked down and grimaced. Why *really* did the idea of having a tradesman for an uncle bother him so? An image of himself in his club in London popped into Darcy’s mind, several young gentlemen pointing at him—they would say, “Did you hear? Darcy married a woman whose uncle is in trade. He even dines with them.” They would laugh, and one would add, “And he always seemed so superior; it seems Fitzwilliam Darcy is as much a fool as the rest of us.”

He saw himself breaking the news to his uncle; his uncle’s face would be stiff, his eyes disappointed, and he would say, “I expected better of you.”

Was that really it? Surely, he must have a better reason for disdaining Elizabeth’s connections than a fear of being thought poorly of. If he did, it eluded him. He asked himself, but could find no serious reason. Why, he did not even like most of the people he imagined laughing at him for marrying poorly. ‘I do not perform for strangers. I have no vanity.’ Darcy felt stupid. He’d always been thought very well of by his peers and flinched away from doing something which would make him appear silly to them.

Elizabeth jostled his arm to gain his attention and said, “I apologize if I offended you. I really do only wish the best for you.”

“No, not at all. It is just—I fear I *am* deeply vain. I look in my mind for an answer to your question, and can find no stronger reason than this: if I were on intimate terms with a tradesman, persons who have always thought highly of me would think less of me. It is an uncomfortable sensation to realize something so foolish has driven my behavior.”

Darcy felt Elizabeth squeeze his arm and she said, “Social approbation is no minor thing.”

“Perhaps it is not, but I bragged that I do not perform for strangers; I thought I cared only for principle and not the approval of the world. I believed I did not have any such vanity.” Darcy trailed off, and Elizabeth squeezed his arm again. Her sympathetic smile took some of the sting out of his frustration with himself.

The two walked slowly behind Bingley and Jane in silence. Darcy’s thoughts were a jumble; he was glad to have Elizabeth’s comforting presence next to him. Then she giggled and Darcy turned to look at her with a question in his eyes.

 Elizabeth smiled. “I was looking at Bingley and Jane and I imagined the manner *you* would show, if you fell in love with some girl with poor connections.” Darcy startled at her words, and Elizabeth laughed. “Don’t claim it would be impossible; we all know love can make the wisest men foolish. I have a clear image in my mind of how you would propose: you would treat her coldly for weeks, to ensure she could not have any expectations. Then you would—completely confident in your reception—go to declare your love.”

The smile widened, as Elizabeth said, “Now, it would be important for her to know the depth of your affection. So you would explain at length how you had fought against your inclination, because of the poorness of her connections, and—” Elizabeth giggled, “you would say that your offer of marriage was contrary to your reason, and even your character. Of course, this should not offend her, after all, she could not expect you to, ah—*rejoice in the inferiority of her connections*.”

Darcy did laugh with Elizabeth, but it was a small uncomfortable thing. The picture was too accurate.

Elizabeth continued, “If you had fallen in love with a girl like Jane, you’d be safe. She is too nice. She always believes the best about everyone; she’d not realize you had insulted her. But if someone approached *me* in that manner, well, I’d insult them myself before sending them off.”

At the moment Elizabeth refused his imaginary proposal, Darcy *knew*. Elizabeth stood with her sweet, impish, teasing smile. For a moment that hung forever, Darcy only saw her: the fine expressive features of her face, the curls of black hair peeking out around the lace trim of her bonnet, her dark hair against the white skin of her forehead, the blue ribbon she tied her bonnet with pulled across the tanned skin of her neck, a small red spot on her skin almost covered by that ribbon. Darcy’s heart caught in his throat; it felt like the air had been knocked out of him.

Darcy knew he would always remember this instant. Darcy knew he loved her.

As Darcy stared, Elizabeth blushed and smiled. “Is something amiss with my appearance?”

“No! Nothing is amiss! You are perfect.” Darcy took Elizabeth’s arm again, suddenly far more aware of the feel of it through their clothes and thrilling at the contact. “You are right. I can be a silly foolish man who is too impressed with his own consequence.” For a moment Darcy thought to speak of his feelings, but the moment was not right, the emotion was too fresh; he wanted to consider and find the right words first.

Instead, he roundly insulted himself. “I have been vain of my family name. I can see that clearly. It is vanity, and it is not under good regulation. I have been a fool in how I treat those beneath me; it was the barest accident I did not insult you the night we met. I was given good principles, but I have been spoiled and brought up to always expect the best for myself and to think meanly of those who are beneath me. Family, wealth, and lineage do matter, but I have always known they do not create good breeding, good manners, or true worth. Yet I have acted as though they do. I have been a fool. In the future I shall strive to be better.”

Elizabeth smiled at his manner, as he insulted himself thoroughly with a happy tone. “I must admit myself pleased to hear my reproaches taken so well, but I also must admit I am surprised. I thought it would take at least half a day of contemplation before you could admit a fault in yourself.”

“Were the reproach to come from any other mouth, no doubt that would be true, but from you—from you it merely took half a minute.”

Elizabeth laughed—it was silly and trite, and Darcy knew it, but for him—for him, her laugh was the most beautiful sound in the world. Darcy continued, “Really, Elizabeth, my behavior has been abhorrent; I expected to be displeased by Hertfordshire society and found what I expected. I know I did not trouble myself to hide that disdain—I am surprised I am not hated by the neighborhood.”

This drew another of those beautiful laughs. “Really you were, for at least a good half the night at the assembly you were, until you danced with me.” Elizabeth gave a good impression of her mother’s voice and manner. “Lord! He may have ten thousand a year, but I have never seen someone so ill favored. Why, he stood next to Mrs. Long for twenty minutes without saying a word.” Darcy felt his face heat as he returned Elizabeth’s pleased smile. “Once you were friends with me, though, it turned out you are merely eccentric, not rude—after all, anyone who would dance with one of the local ladies cannot be all bad, and odd behavior from the very rich is to be expected.”

Darcy laughed at this, loving how she freely teased him. “I will need you to instruct me further on how to behave in a ballroom so as not to give offense in the future.”

“Oh! I certainly will instruct you. You must smile. And laugh more—as you are now, it turns your face quite handsome; no one could dislike a gentleman with a face such as yours right now. And when in a ballroom, you must always dance at least half the dances—and you must not avoid a girl because you mislike her appearance—though they might not have an Earl for a grandfather, most girls still are quite wild for others to recognize their consequence. Mainly though,” and now Elizabeth’s eyes brightened, and her mouth turned up into one of her arch smiles, “you should always remember to tease everyone in that wry manner you have. If they see your joke and yet do not become offended, it means you are to be friends for life.”

Elizabeth had caught Darcy’s high spirits, and the following hour of happy conversation as they trailed Bingley and Jane at a great distance was the happiest of Darcy’s life.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Eliza please, listen to me—Mr. Darcy watches you a great deal, and I think he might take his friend’s example and propose to you.”

The two women sat together on the familiar white sofa in the Lucas’s sitting room, and Charlotte’s tone and manner were quite serious, but Elizabeth did not wish to think on the subject. “Nonsense. A Mrs. Darcy with connections to trade who live near Cheapside—he may be willing to speak to such a person, but marry her? Never.”

“I know you have no wish to think on this. I understand. But you do like him a great deal—and you are far too clever to never marry again because you expect all men to be like your first husband. If he should ask you—”

“That will not happen—in fact, he once hinted as much to me quite directly, though at the time I missed his meaning.”

Elizabeth’s laugh and assurance that Darcy himself had said he would not marry her did not create the desired reaction. “Oh, that is serious. I had not realized he had said as much. When was this?”

“I daresay it’s been several weeks—oh, yes. It was when Jane was sick at Netherfield. Indeed, for a moment I thought he meant to hint Bingley would never offer for Jane; I quite embarrassed myself then.”

“What exactly did he say?” The intensity in Charlotte’s gaze showed that it was not idle curiosity which led her to ask.

Elizabeth did not wish to be serious. “Oh! It was the usual statement of a wealthy gentleman—” Elizabeth lowered the pitch of her voice to imitate Darcy’s. “Your relations in trade. I am certain they are excellent people, but surely you must realize they will prevent you from marrying men of great consequence in the world.”

Elizabeth laughed. Charlotte did not.

“Yes, I see. And he mentioned no other objection besides your connections?”

Elizabeth felt a stab of anxiety as she nodded.

Charlotte bit her lip. “You must see that a man needs to feel *something* before he would tell a woman that her connections are too low for them to marry. He almost declared he would *like* to marry you but could not. There’s not much distance between the desire to marry, and a decision to ignore all objections to a marriage. Mr. Darcy is not the sort of man who would let the disdain of the world stop him if he decided marriage to you would constitute his happiness.”

A cold wave of dread crashed through Elizabeth, and she nervously rubbed her face. She remembered their conversation this morning. She remembered Darcy said he could not find any good reason but vanity for his disdain of social inferiors. Elizabeth felt sick. After that, his mood became very good.

He had used her Christian name. And she had not noticed. It felt natural.

“I see you understand me—I urge you to think how you would respond if he offered for you. Perhaps you truly wish to remain unmarried; were I in your position, I might, but I urge you to know your own mind.”

Charlotte was right. Elizabeth imagined what she would feel or think were he to offer. It would be rather like what she’d suggested this morning; he’d stand near her with that silly pompous manner of his and say something insulting which would be terribly sweet if thought about in the right way. And then? She would say yes, and they would marry.

Marriage. She saw it again, the image arose and danced uncontrollably at the thought: Mr. Collins next to Lydia. It was in the study; he had brought them both in after he discovered Elizabeth’s visits to Charlotte without permission. The meaty thwack of his fist as he struck Lydia in the stomach. Herself screaming at him to stop. “Please don’t! Please don’t. I’ll never disobey again.” Mr. Collins’s voice, each phrase punctuated by another blow, “Elizabeth, you owe me. You owe me.”

Charlotte’s sad eyes watched her as Elizabeth’s awareness of the sitting room returned. “It won’t happen, he won’t ask me. He can’t. I don’t want him to.”

Elizabeth stood shakily. “I apologize. I have business I must attend to and I need to go.”

As Elizabeth pulled on her coat at the front entry, she noticed that her hands trembled and her stomach felt tight. He couldn’t offer, he simply couldn’t. Their friendship was perfect. She didn’t want it ruined.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Darcy and Bingley returned to Netherfield late that afternoon, Darcy was too agitated to sit at home, so despite the lateness of the hour he saddled his horse and rode hard along one of the cold country roads. His mind filled with the memory of Elizabeth’s manner and expression and beauty.

Had he really been so foolish this morning? He hardly liked half the people whose hidden sneers had played in the back of his head. In many cases, if they expressed an opinion on politics or business it would be a sign it was wrong. Yet, he still took seriously their good opinion of himself.

Bingley had been wiser and more sensible—the only thing he cared about was whether he was loved.

What would Elizabeth think when he spoke?

Did she love him? Darcy could not believe she did—he had been quite clear; she should not expect him to propose to her. Only a vain, foolish man would expect a woman he warned off to eagerly expect a proposal. And only an immoral, careless man would hope that a woman who had been told there was no chance of a marriage was in love with him nevertheless.

Darcy’s elated mood from earlier in the day reversed itself as he reached the far point in the ride and dismounted Brownie to let her rest before he returned. He was atop a hill which let him look several miles round. Darcy sat against the back of a tree, mostly protected from the winter chill by his heavy greatcoat. When he thought back on his behavior in Hertfordshire, he could not like what he saw.

He consistently had focused upon his own feelings alone and shown a decided contempt for those of everyone around him. Not only people such as Sir William or Mrs. Long, who would never be more than acquaintances, but even his dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. Never before had Darcy seen his own flaws so starkly. Though he had lived to eight-and-twenty, he was not at all sure that prior to this day he had ever thought meanly of himself.

He did not enjoy seeing his flaws so starkly. In the future, he vowed, he would strive to show more consideration to the feelings of everyone around him. His behavior until now had been unchristian and ungentlemanly. For some twenty minutes, Darcy thought unhappily of himself, as he reviewed instance after instance where he had shown disdain for the feelings of Elizabeth and others.

Then worry set in. Darcy stood and anxiously paced as he asked himself: might she refuse him? Perhaps she ought to. He was not as good a man as he had thought himself to be. The sense of superiority he had always carried with him had been vanity.

She would be surprised. He could not expect her to give him an affirmative reply immediately. A wise woman such as Elizabeth would not enter into marriage without careful thought. Also, her first husband had hurt her, and she had repeatedly said she had no desire to marry again. Darcy knew that was no mere affectation. But—could he hope that it was a prejudice on her part, no better grounded than his own vanity had been? If so, Darcy was certain it would not govern her decision.

Would she accept him? She would not marry him for his lands or name.

Elizabeth clearly had affection for him. They were friends; good friends. Darcy’s person was not objectionable. Elizabeth had laughingly referred to him as handsome on more than one occasion. As the shock of realizing he had behaved poorly faded, Darcy’s sense of his own merit rallied. He had more flaws than he had realized, true. His virtues, such as ownership of Pemberley, were of less value than he had thought them. He was not nearly as superior as he liked to fancy himself.

Yet—he *was* handsome, clever, and rich. And now that he knew he thought meanly of others and ignored their feelings, he could correct that. It would not be the work of a day, and perhaps he would always be a little vain, but he would become better.

He could not—should not—be certain. But Darcy thought, more likely than not, he could convince Elizabeth to accept his suit.

The question now was: how could he best show his concern for Elizabeth’s feelings? Darcy decided that, while he would on the next day go to Longbourn to speak to her, he would make it clear he did not need any immediate response. Though, he hoped for one.

The sun had begun to set when Darcy remounted his horse, and he rode slowly back to Netherfield in the fading orange light. It was too cold to be pleasant, but Darcy felt warm as memories of Elizabeth went through his mind. Her laughing tones, her bright flashing eyes, the way her curls bounced as she danced, her smile. Especially her smile; that arch look in her eyes as she found a way to tease him and puncture his natural pomposity. Darcy loved her.

# Chapter 11

Darcy hoped for an opportunity to speak with Elizabeth privately the next day when he called at Longbourn with Bingley. However, the day opened very wet and continued such well into the afternoon. The rain was too heavy and the roads too muddy for Bingley to risk the carriage. Darcy impatiently paced the sitting room, glancing out the window every minute or so.

Bingley noted his mood, and with a knowing manner said, “Why, you’re almost acting as though it is *you* who is the suitor.”

Late in the afternoon the rain stopped, and, while the sky remained overcast, Darcy chose to risk a trip to Longbourn. He knew he ought not delay his return to Pemberley but, if necessary, he would.

Pulled between anticipation and anxiety, the brief ride to Longbourn seemed to take far longer than it did. The sun would not set for another hour, but the clouds made it dark. Brownie occasionally sunk into the soft ground, and when she escaped, splashed mud onto his legs. Though he wished to appear his best, Darcy knew he did not. He rode into the well-maintained fields around Longbourn and leapt off Brownie in front of the house. As he stood in the entry and scraped the mud off his boots, Darcy found himself more nervous than he ever had been in his life.

His heart’s rapid beat pattered uncomfortably through him, and he nearly clawed at his snuggly-tied white cravat to loosen it. His arms felt odd, almost as though they did not belong to him.

Darcy followed Mrs. Hill down the hallway to Elizabeth’s study in a dizzy haze, and registered nothing until he entered the room. Then he saw a large account book, an ink pot with a goose feather quill, and Elizabeth’s smile. She stood and briskly greeted him, “I am very pleased to see you; indeed, I would have been extremely disappointed if I missed you before you returned to Pemberley. I planned to wake early tomorrow so I could call upon you at Netherfield before you left.”

Darcy nodded stiffly and forced out of his tight throat, “I have something to speak to you about.”

Elizabeth nodded, her face serious in response to his tone, but for the first time in his life Darcy was completely speechless. When he opened his mouth he could feel the words in his mind, but no sound came. In a near panic, he paced between the fireplace and the window in agitation as he tried to get his dry mouth to work. The portrait of her father stared down at him.

He had never felt like this.

Finally, Darcy turned to the wide-eyed Elizabeth who tightly gripped the back of a chair. “Elizabeth—dearest Elizabeth, I must tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” The grip on the back of her chair tightened further, and Darcy could see her white knuckles, where the strength of her grip had forced the blood from her fingers, and she stared with complete intensity at Darcy.

Though her manner did not give encouragement, Darcy continued with an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. “I foolishly spent weeks struggling against the rightness of this feeling. I thought, like the vain fool I am, you were somehow beneath me. I was wrong. Your words yesterday punctured my arrogance and conceit and let me see myself for what I truly was. Until I met you, I was a man who ignored that which mattered most to look at things which matter far less.

“Elizabeth, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth; your intelligence and laughter have made my life bright since we met; your wit and willingness to challenge me has caused me to think, and showed me flaws in myself I had not known. Your company has made me a better person. I can think of nothing that would make me happier than to have you and your brightness with me forever.

“I know this must be a surprise. I know you have never thought to marry again, but together—together I am certain we both would be very happy. I see your manner and know here,” Darcy pushed his hand against his heart, “you feel some affection for me. If you should marry me, I swear I will never attempt to control you or constrain you, but only seek for us to be happy partners together. I love you. I love you more than my own soul, and just wish you to be happy. I will wait however long you need to reply, but know this heart, my heart, despite its flaws, is yours.”

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest protectively and turned away from Darcy. Though she did not speak, her foreboding expression gave Darcy a nauseating certainty it had somehow gone terribly wrong. With eyes fixed out the window Elizabeth said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Darcy. It is impossible for me to marry. I’m *very* sorry. And I wish—I am sensible,” Elizabeth’s voice cracked with incipient tears, “I am sensible of the very deep honour you’ve given me.”

Elizabeth fell silent. They stood silently as Darcy looked at her and realized he had been refused unambiguously. In that moment, he understood he had not *really* thought there was any chance she would refuse him; she might need to be persuaded, given time to think, but in the end she would accept him. Darcy plaintively asked, “Can you not say more?”

Her stiff figure refused to look at him, and she did not speak. Darcy’s anger and pride rose. “Is this all the response I am to expect?”

Elizabeth flinched and pulled her arms more tightly together over her chest at the question, but still made no response. Could she not at least look at him as she broke his heart? As he spoke Darcy, knew he made a mistake. “Elizabeth,” he snapped. Her eyes turned towards him and he continued, “You owe me some explanation for this dismissal.”

At those words, Elizabeth changed; her eyes grew unfocused and distant as she stared through him at somebody who was not there, and Darcy felt a sharp sense of remorse as she trembled. “I don’t owe that,” she shouted. “I don’t, I don’t.”

Then Elizabeth stepped forward and, to Darcy’s deep confusion, cried out, “Don’t hit her, don’t, don’t, please don’t, I’ll do what you wish, just don’t hit her. I’ll do anything.”

Though he understood nothing, the desperation in Elizabeth’s tone touched Darcy’s heart, and he placed his hand on her arm softly and said, “Elizabeth.”

At his touch and voice, she startled and looked at him with wide eyes like those of a terrified deer, and she pushed away and ran to the door, flinging it open. Her rapid footsteps quickly receded. There was a muffled bang as a door to the outside was thrown open.

Darcy was too confused and concerned to be hurt. Elizabeth had acted like nothing he had ever seen before. She seemed hysterical. What about his offer did that?

He’d been refused.

She refused him completely; she’d run from him.

Darcy felt a lump in his throat; his eyes began to tighten, and tears tried to force their way out. With an angry jerk he beat the feeling away; he stood straight and stiff, and forced down the lump in his throat.

He was Fitzwilliam Darcy; he would not cry.

His cheeks were pulled tight against his eyes, and water already pooled in them. Furiously, Darcy brushed it away with his sleeve and used his fingers to manipulate his face into a neutral expression. He took several slow, shallow breaths before he could confidently hold the mask.

With a stiff gait—his legs did not work right, and he had to focus on each separate step—Darcy left the study and headed for the entrance. But before his escape Miss Lydia blocked his way. “What did you do to my sister?”

Darcy could not trust himself to reply without tears so he stared at her. Lydia held his gaze fiercely. He attempted to walk past her without speaking, but Lydia moved to stay in his path. “What did you do?”

“I asked her to marry me and then she ran.” Darcy’s stomach clenched again at the finality of the fact, and he desperately fought his facial muscles as they tried to break his emotionless mask.

Lydia’s stare added sympathy to continued hostility. She stepped aside. “Oh.”

The rain began again as Darcy rode back to Netherfield. So he would not cry, Darcy tried to feel angry. He had been treated abominably. A respectable woman would not have acted so. It was part of her eccentricity. It was fortunate that he had been refused.

She would have loved Pemberley. Her eyes would have lit up; she would have said it was beautiful, and they would have explored the grounds together. He would have been happy and proud as he delighted in her happiness. He was not fortunate. Elizabeth had treated him abominably, but—but he loved her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth whimpered as she ran from the house; flashes of when Mr. Collins struck Lydia burned uncontrollably through her mind. She had relived that moment many times, but never had she *spoken* during such a spell.

Poor Mr. Darcy! She should not have lost control of herself, and it showed she was quite possibly mad. Elizabeth felt a twisting anxiety; what if she spoke at someone not there again? And again, and again. What if she entirely lost control of herself? What if everything but that moment faded away?

Her feet hurt. The evening slippers she wore were not designed for running, and each pebble ground painfully into her soles. Elizabeth stopped and, rapidly panting, leaned against an oak tree whose forest of bare branches arched above her.

Her feet hurt; it was dark and it was cold; she had shown herself to be a fool.

Uncontrollable sobs wracked her, and it started to rain.

He was the best of men; his words—his words had been so wonderful. “You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you”—Elizabeth’s sobs redoubled; she *liked* Darcy. Maybe it was not too late; she could find Mr. Darcy; she could explain her episode, and he might accept her despite how she had behaved, and—and Elizabeth saw Mr. Collins’s face again, and a fist held back to strike.

Elizabeth swore using an obscene word which had never passed her lips before. She needed to strike out; she needed to make something hurt. Elizabeth seized a long heavy branch from the wet ground and swung it against the tree trunk.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

The branch shattered. Elizabeth threw its remains aside, and grabbed another. She had no bonnet, and her hair had become soaked. A hairpin was fallen out, and wet strands of hair fell over her face and shoulders. Soon the new branch broke as well; Elizabeth gaped at the broken stick in her hand as her breath slowed. Her muscles hurt, and her hands were scraped. But she was nearly calm.

Damn Mr. Collins. Elizabeth hoped he burned in hell. And damn the horse which threw him. Her fists clenched. She ought to have killed him herself instead of leaving it to a drunken nighttime ride.

A cold breeze drove the rain into her, and Elizabeth shivered violently. She was soaked and would sicken if she stayed out long.

Elizabeth half ran back to Longbourn to escape the freezing rain. It hurt to think about Mr. Darcy, so she thought about her clothes—the dress was a total loss, as were the slippers. They would not even be fit to gift to the servants or a tenant. Her feet hurt with each step.

Warm lights radiated from Longbourn’s windows, and Elizabeth rushed to a side door as she hoped to avoid notice. The first-floor corridor was cold, but it was much warmer than the outside and she was no longer in the rain. Elizabeth peeked around; perhaps none of her family had seen the display she had made of herself.

Alas, they had. Elizabeth barely saw her in the corner of her eye before Lydia barreled into Elizabeth and tightly embraced her, with no concern for the state of her own clothes. “I worried so!”

Behind Lydia stood Jane, whose anxiety showed through her natural placidity. And her mother and other sisters joined them seconds later. Mrs. Bennet shouted, “Goodness, girl, what were you thinking running out in this weather? That dress is ruined. I swear you will be the death of me!”

Lydia grabbed Elizabeth by the hand. “I had the servants prepare a hot bath for you; we must get you out of those clothes fast.” The concern of her family eased the ache in her soul, and she submissively let Lydia pull her along.

Forty minutes later Elizabeth was warm and dressed again, but her thoughts were as unhappy and jumbled as ever. One thing was clear: she had hurt Mr. Darcy. The expression on his face as he realized she’d refused him haunted her along with Mr. Collins’s image. She didn’t want him to hurt.

He had looked so sad. If it would help him, she *wanted* to explain. She would write a letter: it would explain everything. It would tell him why it was impossible for her to marry, and show how grateful she was for his esteem.

Lydia had waited for Elizabeth and followed her into the study.

Elizabeth set out her best writing paper. Then, while she stood trimming a quill, she said to Lydia, “I’m sorry, but I must write a letter.”

“It’s to him, is it not? I always knew he would hurt you.”

“Lydia! Mr. Darcy is a good man; I treated him abominably. I ought to apologize.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have asked you to marry him.”

Elizabeth’s mouth opened. “How do you know that?”

“I would not let him exit ‘til he told me what he had done to you.”

Lydia’s words pushed the tears which had never really left to the surface again. “Oh, you should not have done that. I’d already pained him greatly.”

This did not move Lydia, and she stared unrepentantly down at Elizabeth from her few inches of extra height.

There was a deep ache in Elizabeth’s heart, for her sister, as well as herself. Mr. Collins had caused so much pain. “Oh, Lydia,” Elizabeth seized her sister’s hand, “please believe me; not every man is like Mr. Collins. You must not judge all marriage by what you saw between us. Many women find great joy and affection with a husband. Mr. Darcy is a good man, and I like him a great deal. He is—” Elizabeth choked on her tears, “he is the man I have liked most of any I have known.”

“Then *why* did you not marry him?” Lydia showed confusion and a little anger.

“Because, every time I think I might say yes, I see Mr. Collins again, in this room, and I—I feel too frightened.”

“Oh Lizzy.” The younger girl threw her arms around her sister and held her tight. “You recall when he hurt me—I’m so sorry.”

The sisters stood with arms around each other for some minutes, then Lydia hesitantly said, “If you really wish to marry him, do not worry about me; I am sure I could find way to protect myself *now* from a man, even one so very tall as Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth gave a short, though real, laugh. “I do not fear Mr. Darcy. He would never act so. He is a good man. It is—it is marriage I am scared of—indeed, I feel so very frightened at the thought.” As she spoke her stomach tightened again, and the horrid anxiety clawed up her throat. Her sister’s face showed nothing but a desire to comfort; Elizabeth’s voice took the pitch of a baby’s wail, “I fear you have always been right; I ought never remarry.”

“Lizzy?” The question in her sister’s eyes made Elizabeth think that, though this had *been* Lydia’s advice, she no longer was sure.

In an almost composed voice Elizabeth said, “Your presence does comfort me, but I must write this letter. I must—and I wish to be alone to do so.”

Lydia tightly hugged Elizabeth again and did not let go until Elizabeth pushed her away and sat in her chair. “I promise I shall be fine—I am certain I shall.”

# Chapter 12

Darcy slept little, and woke early to direct the loading of his carriage. Bingley woke with him to keep his friend company and silently stood next to Darcy. They watched as the footmen carried one trunk out after another, and tightly fastened them onto Darcy’s large chaise. Though it did not rain, the sky was gray and the drive still muddy.

The rejection hurt. What about him made Elizabeth flee? Had he misunderstood her feelings entirely?

The sound of quick footsteps turned Darcy’s head, and he saw Elizabeth rapidly walk up the drive. She was disheveled; when she’d fastened up her pelisse, one of the buttons had been placed in the wrong hole. Her dark hair was wound tight into a bun which pulled the skin of her forehead painfully back. Several locks of hair had been missed and hung down her neck. When she came near, Darcy saw she had received no more sleep than he; her eyes were red from tears and had large bags under them. She stared at him with painfully sad eyes, held out a letter, and tonelessly asked, “Would you do me the honour of reading this.”

Without thought, Darcy took it from her. Elizabeth gave a very brief curtsy and turned to walk rapidly away. Darcy called after her, “Elizabeth.” She started at his voice and redoubled her pace. Pain and loneliness radiated through Darcy’s chest as he watched her disappear around a corner. Then he looked in confusion at the front of the letter.

Bingley spoke from his side, “Darcy, she is to be my sister—you had best tell me what you two are about.”

Darcy looked at his friend’s firm expression and thought, he’d already told Lydia—how could it matter if one more person knew his humiliation? And Bingley was correct: it *was* his business. “I offered her my hand, and she refused me.”

“Oh.” Bingley’s face fell. “Jane thought your interest might have turned towards her. But I never believed you would lower yourself so.”

Darcy replied automatically, “It would not be lowering myself. Elizabeth is an excellent woman; there’s nothing the matter with her.” As his mind caught up to his words, the intense sadness swelled again and choked off further speech.

With a sad expression, Bingley clapped Darcy on the shoulder. “You need not convince me—I am to marry her sister. Do not take it so hard; Jane said enough for me to know Elizabeth’s first husband was bad in a way far beyond the usual. Jane believed she might refuse a man who she’d otherwise accept due to those memories.”

At Bingley’s words Darcy felt a surge of shame. Despite what he knew about Mr. Collins, Darcy had only considered how *he* had been rejected. He was suddenly certain Elizabeth’s behavior the previous night had very little to do with how she saw him, and very much to do with memories of Mr. Collins. Darcy felt sick; his self-centered vanity had governed his behavior and thoughts again.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the carriage began its long journey to Pemberley, Darcy opened the letter from Elizabeth with some apprehension and the strongest curiosity. The letter was dated from eight o’clock at Longbourn and proceeded as follows:

I beg you to let me explain my abominable treatment of you tonight; the pain my refusal must have given you hurts me terribly. My only desire now is to do anything I can to reduce it. Though I might wish otherwise, I now believe it impossible for me ever to marry. The cause goes back many years to my first marriage.

At the time of my father’s death I was barely fifteen years of age. I had always believed my father to be a good man, and he had been a loving father for me, encouraging me in whatever pursuits I wished. I believe he saw something of himself in my wit and intelligence, and often thought of me as the son he never had. He was a clever man who delighted in making sport of the characters of others. He never attempted to force me to act and think as a proper young lady ought, and always encouraged me to think and debate—as you know. Whatever his failings, and they were serious, I loved him dearly.

Our estate was entailed away from the female line and on a distant cousin. My father knew this, but though he had nothing but daughters, habits of economy neither appealed to him nor to my mother, and upon his death the only fortune left to the family was the five thousand pounds settled upon my mother. It would not have been pleasant, but we could have survived on that sum with the aid my uncle Gardiner might have given us. However, such was not what my mother wished and upon the arrival of the heir to the estate it fast became apparent it would not be necessary to do so.

Mr. Collins was a young man, of only one-and-twenty, whose father had died less than six months before my own. His father was an illiterate and unpleasant man, who delighted in demanding complete obedience from his wife and son. The deficiencies of this upbringing gave Mr. Collins very poor manners. To add to this, he was a most unhandsome man, with a heavy face.

When he arrived to take possession of Longbourn he immediately showed he was not opposed to marrying Jane. You have seen my sister; her beauty is exceptional, and was not less when she was sixteen.

Jane and I had promised each other we would only marry when the deepest affection was present. However, I soon saw that when faced with the prospect of, as my mother repeatedly cried out, “destitution,” which would affect not only herself, but her mother and sisters, Jane would not stand on principle.

In the manner with which Mr. Collins treated our servants I already had reason to suspect his character was not the best. I tried to convince Jane she ought to refuse him when Mr. Collins made his offer. However, as she told me when we cried together one night, were she to marry for the sake of her family, she would marry where the deepest affection was present. Further, Jane has always believed the best of those around her, and thought my concerns about Mr. Collins’s character were specious. She was convinced he could hardly be as poor of a husband as I thought.

After this conversation I determined I could not allow my dear Jane to marry such a man, and seized upon the only expedient which promised to stop her. I chose to convince Mr. Collins to marry me instead. I rated Jane’s claims to happiness higher than my own, and with the arrogance of youth believed my temper was such that I could laugh off being tied to a stupid gentleman far better than she.

Mr. Collins was not unaware of my true motives when I begged him the next morning to choose me out of my sisters. Initially he laughed in my face. “Why,” he asked, “should I take the uglier sister when I can have the prettiest?”

I am not ashamed to say, since I acted out of love for my sister, that I dropped to my knees and begged him to reconsider. Remember, Mr. Collins had been raised by an abominable father, who in fact often forced him to kneel and beg for what he wished. I believe Mr. Collins found the experience of being shown similar deference thrilling. For whatever reason he agreed to marry me, however he said, “Remember, Elizabeth, you owe me for this—you will always owe me for this.”

So I married him. Mr. Collins immediately demanded I change my behavior to please him. He ordered I visit my friends only if he was present, he required me to curtail my walks, and he demanded I cease to play music. For the first weeks I followed his dictates—I considered them almost amusing, and expected his concern would fade with time. Further, I had married him and thought it my duty as a wife to follow my husband’s commands.

However, those commands grew increasingly ridiculous and intrusive. He was of a religious turn, and had intended to take orders before my father’s death left him a landowner. One afternoon Mr. Collins returned from his ride to find me in laughter at a scene from a novel—I believe it was one of Fanny Burney’s. Upon inquiring at the source of my amusement he declared novel reading to be improper, and demanded I cease to read anything but improving sermons, the Bible, or other religious works.

At this point I chose to rebel. This demand, with its implication that I ought never laugh, was too ridiculous for me to treat seriously. I continued to read as I pleased, though with some effort to hide it from my husband, and in mornings when he was out I began to take my walks again, and I visited Charlotte. Upon my return from such a visit I was called into Mr. Collins’s study.

What I speak of now—it is shocking, but with God as my witness I assure you it is true. I was quite anxious when I entered the study, but did not intend to allow Mr. Collins to dictate my every behavior. I do not recall the exact words we spoke, but when Mr. Collins accused me of disobedience I laughed at him and told him his rules were silly and said I would not subject myself to them anymore.

Mr. Collins shouted back at me, “You owe me, Elizabeth—you owe me obedience.” Mr. Collins then raised his fist and stepped towards me and I feared he would strike me.

He did not. Instead, Mr. Collins called for my sister Lydia, who was but ten at the time, to be brought to join us. Then once the three of us were alone he turned to me with a diabolical light in his eyes and said, “You owe me Elizabeth! You will become a proper wife!” He struck my sister several times with his fist; I cried out for him to stop. With each blow he shouted, “You owe me, you owe me.”

Almost immediately I threw myself in front of him and, again falling to my knees, swore I would never disobey him in anything, and would always act as he wished me to.

At this he smiled, and accepted my promise. “I am happy to see you are not so morally depraved as to be insensible to the well-being of your sisters.”

You can well imagine that I never again acted against his wishes. For the remaining months of my marriage I strove to be exactly as he wished in outer behavior. Inside, my sole hope was for Jane to marry a good man who could take in my family, so they would no longer be hostages for my good behavior. And, though it was unchristian, upon his death in a drunken nighttime ride I felt nothing but pleasure and relief.

Now I come to the present; when you asked me to marry you, all I could see in my mind was Mr. Collins, and his actions. I am not some foolish woman who thinks because one man was a brute every man must be. I do not believe that because a first marriage was unhappy, any marriage must be. I know you are a good man; I know you would never act so. That I cannot reply to your offer as a rational creature shows me to be a womanly coward.

 But when you spoke tonight, my stomach tightened, my fears rose and I felt terribly sick; I could do nothing but reject you. It was emotional, it was irrational, but I am too much a fool and coward to act otherwise.

Even were I able to respond rationally and think on your proposal without these stupid fears controlling me, it is impossible we should marry, for you see I may be going mad. When you asked for me to explain myself, you said, “you owe me Elizabeth”—those were his favorite words. He repeated them to me again and again, and when you spoke them I no longer knew where I was. I felt as if I was back in that very room all those years ago as he struck my sister. I smelled the alcohol on his breath once more, I heard the force of his fist again, and when I looked at you I saw his features and cried out as I had then.

So you see it is impossible. I regret the necessity of my refusal. I never had thought you might make me such an offer, but you are the man of all I have known I would most wish to marry if I could. I do hope—I very much hope you have all possible happiness in your future life; I very much hope the pain I have given you will not be of long duration. God bless you.

Elizabeth

Darcy saw she had begun to write her last name, but stopped and scratched it out such that the “Co” was completely unintelligible.

The letter finished and reread, Darcy’s hands put it aside, but his mind could not. He had no desire to think of anything but Elizabeth. The letter and Elizabeth’s evident pain extinguished any resentment he felt, which occasioned some anger at himself.

He had let his pride run away with him during the conversation, despite his prior commitment to only think of her feelings. “You owe me Elizabeth,”—he hated himself for those words; had he not been suffused with a sense of his own injured merit, had he paid attention to the woman he claimed to love, perhaps—his case was hopeless—but perhaps he would not have caused her such pain.

His pride and resentment had hurt the woman he loved. He hoped never to forget this. But with his own failings settled upon, Darcy’s mind returned to Elizabeth’s sad story. He could not expect her to act differently than she had. He had known for some time her first marriage had been very bad; he had known memories of it still stuck with her; he had known that this might make her hesitate to attempt the state again.

But, when she rejected him, he only felt his own pain and did not see her fear. Indeed, he had yet again shown no consideration for her feelings. If he had, he would have been kinder. His thoughtless failure to pay attention to Elizabeth’s feelings was abhorrent, and showed him to really be selfish.

 What sort of horrid creature had Mr. Collins been? How could he treat a woman, any woman, but especially his wife and sister-in-law, so? And when he had a wife as excellent as Elizabeth. In a flash of anger, Darcy wished to tap his cane on the roof to stop the carriage so he could turn back to find Mr. Collins’s grave and desecrate it.

An alternation of hedges, market towns, and open fields ran past Darcy’s window, but he noted none of them. That night, Darcy settled down at his inn and looked at papers related to the business which called him to Pemberley. But his mind refused to leave Elizabeth, and eventually he stopped trying to read and went to bed early.

Elizabeth’s fears were too sensible given her situation for him to expect them to be overcome. He knew how an unscrupulous husband could harm his wife. The laws were wrong, but they were real. Elizabeth was right to be scared; it was rational, not cowardly.

The lump in his throat returned. Tears attacked Darcy, and, though he did not sob, some water escaped his eyes as he lay in bed. A future with Elizabeth would never happen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth’s eyes blurred with tears as she walked away from Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. For a bright instant before she handed Darcy the letter, she thought she might speak; she could beg him to let her explain, and say she did wish to accept him and just needed time. Then anxiety exploded in her stomach, and words would not come, and she handed him her letter.

Foolish, foolish girl. Why, *why* could she not control these irrational emotions? It was not rational, it was stupid to refuse a good, honorable man, a man she greatly liked, because her first husband had been a brute.

Elizabeth did not return to Longbourn and instead kept to solitary paths and rambles. Human company was the last thing she wished. Her thoughts were dark, especially when they turned to Mr. Darcy. She went over their acquaintance, and images of his handsome, noble face flashed one after another. Every thought of Darcy raised him in her estimation.

Anxiety and the awareness she would refuse him prevented Elizabeth from thinking on his words the previous night, but her intense emotion left them etched upon her mind. The manner and fact of Darcy’s proposal showed his worth. He could see and acknowledge his own faults and strive to correct them. He was a man who had listened to her and indeed changed his opinions in response to her words.

And his words of affection and admiration for her. The memory of his intense, emotion-filled eyes as he spoke brought unhappy tears to Elizabeth’s eyes. She yearned to respond likewise to him.

Each fresh realization of his worth and the depth of his affection depressed Elizabeth further. Oh! How she wished the circumstances had been different.

He truly was a man more than any other she had met she would have wished to marry.

Elizabeth remembered the confusion and pain in his eyes when she ran. She hurt him, and she despised herself for it. Foolish, weak, emotional girl.

When Elizabeth became fatigued, she found a sheltered spot to sit and sulk. No business was transacted all day; instead, Elizabeth devoted herself to the melancholy task of feeling as miserable and unhappy with herself as possible.

It was late afternoon when Elizabeth woke from a doze caused by her lack of sleep the previous night. She was hungry, which propelled her to return to Longbourn. Mr. Bingley had already returned to Netherfield when Elizabeth returned home, and Jane quickly found Elizabeth and pulled her into the gardens for a private conversation.

Once they were alone, Jane embraced Elizabeth and said sadly, “My dear Lizzy, you look so unhappy. Bingley said you refused Mr. Darcy.”

At this Elizabeth began to sob again, and Jane pulled her into her arms. Elizabeth cried into her sister’s shoulder. Jane rubbed her back slowly and murmured comforting words. The warmth of her sister’s presence made Elizabeth feel comforted and calm when she ceased to cry.

The two sat on a cold wooden bench in silence for some minutes more before Elizabeth said, “I did not wish to refuse him, not truly—but, the thought of marriage and the memory of Mr. Collins frightened me. I could not say anything else.”

“Oh, Lizzy.”

“I hate how these memories control me—I hate his memory. I hate that I still can’t escape him. I believed I was free of him when he died. But no. It seems he must remain. Mr. Darcy—the more I think on him, the more I really like him.”

Elizabeth looked away from her sister to stare at the gaunt stick of a tree which had shed all of its leaves; it was maudlin and a foolish sentiment, but her life felt like that—as if the winter Mr. Collins had brought to her had stripped off all growth from her. She was young, but her spring and summer were already past and winter come. “I am a foolish, foolish, cowardly girl to act as I did.”

“Lizzy,” Jane snapped with a far sharper tone than her usual. “Do not let me hear you speak such of yourself. You are no coward. You are the bravest, best woman I know.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth, “But—”

Jane cut her off. “I will not hear you abuse yourself. It was not cowardly. You are not cowardly. I will not permit you to think otherwise. You are brave and you are good. Indeed, no reasonable creature could expect or wish you to have acted differently.”

Elizabeth settled against the dark wood of the bench. Jane’s confidence comforted her. “I suppose I can rely upon my Jane to think well of me when I cannot.” Elizabeth smiled warmly at her sister.

Jane grasped her hand. “Always.”

They sat in silence for several minutes before Jane said with a hesitant manner, “I am sensible your fears are no minor thing, but—” Jane paused here, and Elizabeth saw where her line of thought tended.

“I see what you mean to say; you think I might on sober reflection learn to overcome those fears and choose to marry if I really wish to.” The simple statement of the words, ‘to marry’ gave Elizabeth an unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach, so she hurriedly said, “It is of no moment. No rational man would make a second offer to a woman who shouted nonsense at him, and ran from his first.”

Jane pondered this and squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “I hardly think the case is as irretrievable as you think. Mr. Darcy is not a man to propose marriage on a whim; his affection for you must be quite serious. Were an explanation of your actions to be made—” Jane caught Elizabeth’s eye, “Just what, dear sister, was in that letter you handed Mr. Darcy this morning?”

“I felt—I wished him to feel no more pain than necessary at my refusal and to think no worse of me than he must. I told him the whole of my history with Mr. Collins, and my reasons for my actions last night.” At Jane’s pleased expression Elizabeth added, “Oh, you must understand, it really is hopeless—I think I may be going mad. I—last night I lost my sense of where I was, and shouted at him as though he were Mr. Collins. What if that were to happen often? Even should he wish it, I could not give him a mad wife.”

Jane’s manner as she gripped Elizabeth’s hand tightly and contemplated her words was quite serious. But then Jane brightened. “It is merely memory. You are not mad. Any person can lose themselves in their memories. Your memories are merely more intense, and the emotion of the moment triggered it. I—we’ve never spoken of it, as you and Lydia tried to hide what happened, but—it was a horrible time for us all—I could not bear to see how you suffered due to the sacrifice you made for me. There was so little I could do to help, and you never wished to pain me by showing how unhappy you were.

“I deduced he hurt Lydia to ensure your obedience. It was—” Jane looked away. “Till then I had never believed in human depravity. I always chose to think the best of everyone. I still wish to think well of those around me, but Mr. Collins was an abominable man. The intensity of such a moment; it is natural your mind would return to it when reminded so. Neither you nor Mr. Darcy have anything to fear from *that*.”

Without Jane, without her dear, dear Jane, Elizabeth knew her life would be far emptier. Those words, the conviction she was not mad and not a coward, touched Elizabeth. Jane was right. A tight fear that she would lose herself and become nothing but those memories had lingered in the back of her mind all day. It now dissolved. “Jane, you always know what to say. Your words have relieved much of my fear.” Elizabeth gave a half laugh, and asked, “I had not known you knew what happened?”

“I do not really know the details, but I know enough. And Lizzy,” Jane tightened her grip on Elizabeth’s hand, “you are no coward. I know this. I saw the manner in which you behaved then; ‘tis not some idle flattery when I say you are the bravest woman I know. It is straight fact. Whatever fears, whatever memories you have, you can face them.”

Jane’s confidence in Elizabeth gave her an elated confidence in herself. She could face Mr. Collins’s memory, just as she had faced the man himself. She would not allow her mind to make a hell of a possible heaven. What if, as Jane thought likely, Darcy renewed his proposals? The anxiety was still there, and if she imagined herself married to him it intensified—the image of Mr. Collins—but, Elizabeth now felt it from more of a distance. She was scared. She might always be scared. But, Jane spoke right: she was no coward. And—“If I never marry again because of what he did, why, then Mr. Collins will have won. I’ll not allow *that* to happen.”

“Why Lizzy, it is quite unchristian to speak so of the dead.” But Jane’s smile showed she was sensible of the sentiment herself.

The smile was infectious, and while Elizabeth could not yet feel really happy, she smiled back. “It is hardly certain Mr. Darcy will ever renew his proposals, and though I like him a great deal, I am not at all sure I should wish him to—marriage is a serious, a very serious state to enter upon and I ought to think carefully before I do. But, though I am certain I will be anxious, I think I could rationally respond should he—or another desirable gentleman—offer for me in the future. However, I may need to borrow your comforting presence and confidence in me again, should the case occur.”

A sharp breeze reminded the two that it was too cold at this time of year to sit outside late in the afternoon, so they stood to walk inside. Jane embraced Elizabeth again and said, “I always, always believe in you.”

# Chapter 13

The next morning was bright and cold, and the fresh smell from the previous night’s rain lingered. After a brisk walk which carried him twice around the market town and to a prominence from which he could see several miles round, Darcy’s mood improved. When the bouncing carriage ride began, he once more ignored the scenery and his papers to reread the letter.

Now Darcy began to feel some hope; it was a tentative thing to be sure. But—he had her affection and esteem. She wrote, “You are the man of all I have known I would most wish to marry.” She regretted the necessity of her refusal.

Was it truly necessary? Darcy knew sometimes actions which appeared impossible or terrifying on their first suggestion might, after they had sat on the mind for a while, take on the flavor of the easy and appealing. Could that be the case here?

It was clear the main reason, the real reason, Elizabeth refused him was fear. Would that fear still be as strong in three months? Might familiarity with the idea of remarriage make it seem comfortable?

Besides, Elizabeth was the bravest woman he knew. If any person could bring themselves to face the horrid phantasms the mind could conjure, it would be she. For a second Darcy felt certain that if he showed her that his affections were unchanged, she would eventually come to accept him.

And yet—to think her mind would change, and that those fears would recede—to ignore the clear meaning of Elizabeth’s words, when she said it was impossible for her to marry; that smacked of foolishness and disrespect. He could not know whether her anxiety would ever dissipate. Besides, to think in the manner he had, to consider whether she could overcome those fears only insofar as they impacted him was precisely the self-centered attitude he wished to overcome.

He loved Elizabeth. The letter only strengthened his affection; it added to his intense admiration of her strength and brightness, and showed him her vulnerability. He felt a rush of tenderness and an intense need to see her happy and well.

Elizabeth’s happiness was what mattered. Never his own.

But *she* was not happy that she had refused him.

Elizabeth would approach him at dinner parties with a light in her eyes and a ready joke. He remembered her satisfaction, the first evening they met, when he listened to her arguments. He recalled the way she would laugh at his jokes, and their happy camaraderie. Darcy really believed she would be happy if they married.

He needed to show her she still had that choice. He could be patient, and he could show Elizabeth his continued affection. He could let her see more of his character so she might come to trust herself to him.

In the end, though, it would be Elizabeth’s choice.

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Darcy felt sadness as the horses pulled to a stop in front of Pemberley’s marble columns. He had hardly gotten over the shock of his rejection, and at moments he’d see Elizabeth’s face as she turned to run again and be sure it was hopeless. He would feel certain she would always be too frightened to accept him and that, even if she could overcome those fears, she would not really wish to marry him.

He desperately hoped somehow in the end they might share a future together. He wanted to show Pemberley to her. He wanted to see her in it, wanted to watch her get lost during her walks among the endless trails in the park. He wanted to see her eyes as she admired the paintings and sculptures in the galleries. He wanted to make her laugh.

Darcy wanted his neighbors to meet her—and to know she was his; he wanted to see others admire her, and come to understand how, though her social standing was lower, *he* was the lucky one. He wanted to hear what she would say about his neighbors, to hear her wry observations on their eccentricities, and to watch her come to know their virtues.

Elizabeth was always present in Darcy’s mind. He’d discuss the household accounts with Mrs. Reynolds and wonder what painless economies she might find in them. He’d discuss a tenant issue with his steward and remember some problem Elizabeth had asked him for advice on. He’d watch Georgiana play and remember his delight at Elizabeth’s playing—and then he’d look forward to introducing the two. He felt certain they would love each other.

When he spoke with Georgiana, he often mentioned Elizabeth, or Mrs. Elizabeth when he remembered himself. But never Mrs. Collins; Darcy had committed to never use “Collins” in relation to Elizabeth again.

Pemberley was beautiful in the winter. The sunlight gleamed off the level expanses of white snow-covered fields, edged by the darker color of the hedges which separated them; the park had a forest of hundred-foot-tall trees with snow-laden branches; the house was resplendent with Christmas decorations and the eternally nostalgic sound of carols and Christmas guests.

Colonel Fitzwilliam usually spent a week with Darcy and Georgiana in December before he went to Matlock for his parent’s celebration. Upon his arrival, it quickly became clear to him Darcy’s manner was not as it normally was. The two were close, having been only two years apart in age, and often together as children. While Darcy tried to hide it, and perhaps succeeded with his sister, it was impossible to conceal his agitation and sometimes depressed feelings from his cousin.

So, one night Colonel Fitzwilliam pulled Darcy into the library after Georgiana had retired for the night and, settling onto a comfortable leather sofa with deep buttons, put one of Darcy’s best bottles of brandy on the table between the two. After he poured each of them an overfull tumbler, he pushed one into Darcy’s hands and said, “Now, Darcy, what has bothered you so these past weeks?”

When there was no immediate reply, Colonel Fitzwilliam prodded, “I daresay it must be about a woman. Perhaps that pretty Elizabeth Collins you have written and spoken so much about? Eh, Darcy?”

Darcy nodded somberly and took a swig from his glass.

“Hah!” Colonel Fitzwilliam slapped a hand on his thigh before taking a further swallow from his glass. “It was about time some dress caught your eye. But what is the problem? If you feel so bad about it two weeks after you left her, you should just marry the woman. Damn her connections and all. There’s no chance any of us but Aunt Catherine will cut you over it. And *that* would be a mixed curse at worst.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed slightly at his joke, and his face grew worried as Darcy continued to collect his thoughts. “Though—in that case, I would need to make our annual trip to visit her alone. Perhaps you should not marry this Mrs. Elizabeth.”

Darcy gulped back the rest of his tumbler and exhaled heavily as he set it on the table. “You assume it is a matter of *my* choice.”

After a few seconds Colonel Fitzwilliam’s eyes widened. “By Jove, you mean to tell me she refused you? Why? Every story you told me of her indicates she likes you, and, well—you are not a poor catch.”

The discussion reminded Darcy of how he felt during those minutes in her study when he had no idea why she had run from him. He half-filled his tumbler again and drank the burning liquid in one swallow, not savoring the expensive liquor at all. “Yes, she refused me.”

“Despite how she had behaved, I daresay she rather led you on. You should—”

“No! It’s not like that at all; let me explain.”

Darcy poured out the entire story of his relationship with Elizabeth. He felt it would be a violation of her confidence to describe precisely how Mr. Collins had harmed her, but beyond that he told his cousin everything.

As Darcy finished speaking, Colonel Fitzwilliam leaned back into the couch and pushed his legs forward while holding his glass contemplatively in front of him. “Well. Well. I now can understand your manner. Sounds like a fine woman, I daresay, and I hope to meet her one day.” He shook his head. “I do not know what to say of comfort or strategy you have not thought of already. I can say this, though, your Mrs. Elizabeth certainly is not going mad.”

“Oh?” Darcy leaned towards his cousin in interest.

“Aye.” Colonel Fitzwilliam did not speak for some minutes; instead, he slowly swirled the liquid around in his glass and stared at it with a stiff expression. Eventually he looked up and seemed almost surprised to find his cousin watching him intently. Colonel Fitzwilliam quickly swallowed the remaining brandy and said, “You see, sometimes when a person goes through a terrifying event it impresses itself upon the mind and never lets go. This often happens to soldiers.”

Darcy felt a sympathetic chill go through him as his cousin paused again to pour himself more brandy. “I never speak of my battles—I hate to bring up the memories—but at Bussaco, my bugle player was struck by a cannonball not ten feet from me.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam fell silent and drank more. He shook himself. “At the time I just cursed, and as the bugle was undamaged I took it from his hands and pulled a man off the line who I knew could play, and ordered him to serve instead. But afterwards—” Colonel Fitzwilliam paused to drink half of what was in his glass. “The boy was fifteen; he was the fifth son of a cottager who still lives on my father’s estate. I knew his parents, and had seen him as a boy—the look of surprise on his dead face as I grabbed the bugle from his grip haunted me every night for weeks.”

They both were silent again, Colonel Fitzwilliam staring once more into his alcohol. “When the Regiment was rotated home, something like what you say your Mrs. Elizabeth experienced happened to me. I was taking my walk in Hyde Park and there was a sharp crack, I believe a work team dropped a heavy piece of marble, and it startled me. I cannot remember any of it, but when I came back to my senses, a person who’d watched me swore I spent five minutes yelling at those walking the park to form a neat line and hold their fire until the French came fifty yards closer.”

Darcy blinked in surprise. “I had no idea.”

“Well. We usually prefer not to talk about it.”

The two sat grimly in silence for some minutes. They sat comfortably on expensively upholstered seats, with a warm fire blazing, and surrounded by Darcy’s thousands of books. Yet something of the terror of a battlefield was present. Eventually Darcy broke the silence. “I must find some opportunity to speak to her of what you told me.”

His cousin nodded. “That likely would be best; it is an unsettling experience even if you know others who have gone through it. To go through it when you have no idea what it means; that must be really terrifying.” Colonel Fitzwilliam drained what was left of his glass and after a few minutes stood unsteadily. “It is time for me to sleep, but I do sincerely wish you the best of luck. You deserve it. And so, I think, does your lady.”

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A few days after Colonel Fitzwilliam left for his parents’ house Darcy received a letter in Bingley’s scrawl. Half the letter was a combination of unimportant comments on Netherfield and comments which *Bingley* thought were important on Jane’s angelic perfection; the other half was about Elizabeth.

Bingley wrote:

It seems to be my turn to provide information about the feelings of a lady which were conveyed to me by her sister. I am hardly sure I should intrude myself into your affairs the way that I asked you to intrude into mine. I know you are a private person, who wishes to make such decisions on your own without consulting the feelings of your friends. But my dear Jane thinks I should write this letter. She has told me about a conversation she had with her sister which made her quite sure that, while Lizzy will not say so directly, she hopes you ask again and will give a positive response if you do.

For my part, I am not a man who can tell what a lady such as yours thinks. But when I do bring up your name she is certainly affected, and she speaks of you in the warmest terms. I daresay I’ve always thought highly of you, Darcy, but she is a far stronger defender of your virtues than I. I would not dream to tell one such as you what to do, but I hope we shall one day be brothers.

C. Bingley

Darcy did not like that his affairs, and his rejection, had been widely discussed—but the content of the letter still left him elated. It was written in a far neater hand than Bingley generally used, and at least one line had been crossed out and corrected in a neat feminine hand. It seemed Miss Bennett had been rather directly involved in the letter’s composition.

Darcy needed to write a response. What he wrote would be passed on to Elizabeth, and if Jane was correct and she *did* desire him to renew his proposals, she likely felt anxiety that he had been put off permanently. But—though he might like to, and gave the idea some thought, he did not feel he could renew his addresses by letter.

He had hurt Elizabeth with his first proposal and could not bear to offer another unless he saw in her eyes that she was eager for him to do so. And, he was scared she would refuse him once more. He wished to keep some hope at least till he saw Elizabeth again.

The question sat with Darcy for several days, and he tore up several pages of paper as he attempted to find words to convey the exact message he wished. As he knew he must send something, Darcy gave up his attempt to find the perfect words and settled on a short paragraph which he placed at the bottom of a letter he immediately sent to Bingley:

Please tell Elizabeth her letter only increased my great esteem and affection for her. I eagerly look forward to seeing her, and hope for us both to be very happy when we speak next.

Darcy was not at all pleased with the message, and felt certain his intention—to state that he wished to offer for her again, but would not unless she appeared to wish it—would be completely lost when Bingley attempted to convey it.

Two weeks after posting his letter a response arrived from Bingley, which included the following:

I showed your last letter to Elizabeth. I judged your message to her might mean more (and be clearer) directly from your hand, rather than through the medium of my words. She colored very prettily, and smiled a great deal after she read it. She sat with your letter and thought for several minutes, and told me I must in my next letter to you say that she very much looked forward to seeing and speaking with you again, and wished to very warmly thank you for your kind message.

The message was as encouraging as one mediated through a letter from Bingley could be. And, even more than he had after Bingley’s first letter, Darcy felt for the next day and a half as if he floated on a cloud. He quickly penned a reply, in which he asked after Elizabeth’s well-being again and included another small message for her. She replied in a like manner, again through Bingley, whose correspondence became rather more frequent than was his usual pattern over the next months.

So passed the end of the winter, and the start of spring. A fortnight before Bingley’s wedding Darcy set off to Netherfield, with a great deal of hope in his heart. He could not feel certain until he had heard his lady directly say yes to him, but there was good reason for hope.

The carriage ride from Pemberley to Netherfield seemed endless. Every mile marker left hundreds more to be crossed before he could see *her.* Georgiana chattered more than normal and asked many questions about Hertfordshire and its society.

The second night of the trip, despite the inn having an excellent bed in its best suite, Darcy barely slept because his mind was too full of the thought that tomorrow he would be sure to see Elizabeth. His dreams were filled with her smiles and laughter, her light figure and bouncing curls.

They started very early the next morning. Darcy eagerly stared out the window for the entire trip as he sought landmarks; here the road to Meryton broke off from the road to London; here was the second to last market town before Meryton. Darcy exclaimed when he saw Oakham Mount in the distance, and the intensity of Darcy’s eagerness came to its highest point when the road took them past the fields of Longbourn. He could barely see the red bricks of the manor house and for a second wished to tap his cane on the roof of the carriage so he could exit and run to the house where his heart lived.

Darcy’s enthusiasm waned as the carriage now took him away from who he wished to be with. They pulled into Netherfield’s drive two hours after noon. Bingley was yet at Longbourn. He had left a note which informed them, upon decipherment, there was to be an assembly ball that night should Darcy and Georgiana wish to attend.

Georgiana was now sixteen, and this was not a big London affair, so Darcy felt no compunctions about allowing his sister to attend, and there was never any question that they *wished* to attend.

After a quick meal, Darcy bathed and dressed with far more than his usual care. Bingley had returned from Longbourn upon hearing the Darcys had arrived and finished dressing for the ball shortly after Darcy. He immediately joined Darcy, who sipped at his second glass of port to calm his nerves. Darcy’s pleasure at seeing his friend after a long absence was muted by his anxiety.

Bingley beamed as he clapped Darcy on the back. “My dear chap, I am so terribly glad to see you here. We’ve *all* eagerly awaited you.” Bingley gave Darcy a knowing look and added, “I daresay the Longbourn party is *very* eager to see you.”

Darcy felt too nervous, and was too pleased by Bingley’s reassurance, to be properly annoyed by his presumption. Bingley had a definite air of enjoying Darcy’s uncertain manner. After a few minutes Georgiana came down, dressed in a pretty blue ball gown.

Bingley greeted her with a smile and deep bow. “Georgie, you are looking more like a lady than ever.”

Georgiana replied with a curtsy. “I am much obliged for your compliment.” Then she giggled, “I’m very eager to meet your bride and her *family*.”

Bingley was the only one to speak during the carriage ride to the assembly hall. Both Darcy and Georgiana were too nervous to speak—though for different reasons. This would be Georgiana’s first ball not at Pemberley, and she thought she was likely to meet her future sister. Darcy’s mind lingered on the last times he had seen Elizabeth—her eyes as she ran away from him, and her retreating form as he called to her the morning she handed him the letter.

Though Bingley took some delight in Darcy’s nervousness, he also attempted to relax his friend with a steady stream of the gossip from the surrounding countryside; Elizabeth’s name, of course, was liberally mixed in.

Miss Bingley had returned to London shortly after Darcy left. She did not want to watch Bingley’s happy courtship of Jane. Thus no one acted to ensure the Netherfield party was fashionably late, and Darcy arrived some twenty minutes before dancing began. He found a spot near the entry and stood next to Georgiana like a dour statue except when he looked hopefully towards the door every time there was the noise of a new party entering.

Bingley stood a few feet away and repeatedly flashed insolent grins at Darcy which showed him greatly amused by Darcy’s behavior. Darcy knew he was behaving like a lovesick fool, but that was no surprise since he *was* a lovesick fool. Endless minutes passed, and then more minutes passed and the first dance began. To pass the time, Darcy tried to plan his words and in what manner he should behave. How could he best show Elizabeth he still cared for her but wished to make no demands? She must feel at least as nervous as he. How might he calm and comfort her?

And five or ten minutes after the dance started, *she* arrived.

The Bennet family tumbled through the entrance with Lydia eagerly coming in first, and then Kitty and Mrs. Bennet followed by Jane and *her.* For a moment Darcy could observe her form as Elizabeth looked first to her right and then towards the center of the room before she turned towards him. Their eyes caught and Darcy felt a jolt go through him.

Elizabeth’s lips were slightly parted and her eyes were wide; nervous light flutters ascended from the pit of Darcy’s stomach as, without breaking eye contact, she walked to him.

# Chapter 14

The first weeks after Darcy left, Elizabeth felt a mix of anxiety and longing. For the first month, she had several nightmares about her marriage. She worried Darcy would never ask her again, and she worried he would. When she forced herself to imagine saying yes, Mr. Collins’s face would show itself. But Elizabeth refused to let him keep a hold over her life.

He had occupied a place in her mind unbeknownst to her, and wished to make a hell of heaven. But Elizabeth would not allow it. When she felt anxious, when she remembered the horrid things he had done, she forced herself to laugh at him and his memory. The thought he was dead and she was happy helped her laugh away the anxiety. And the thought that he would be appalled at how his wife had behaved since his death helped even more.

After a few weeks, Elizabeth could think on Mr. Collins with tolerable good humor. It was past. *He* was past. In truth he had been a silly stupid man, though also a malicious and capable one. Elizabeth was glad he died, and felt a chill at the thought he might not have, and then dismissed him. He was not worth her attention.

Now that Elizabeth could imagine herself married to Darcy without also imagining Mr. Collins, she felt anxious for a different reason—would Darcy propose again? She was mostly sure she wished him to. It was clear Bingley and Jane thought it likely he would. And Elizabeth also, if she were honest with herself, thought that if she showed him she wanted him to he would. As Jane had said, Darcy was not a man who would propose marriage on a whim.

Then Bingley received a letter from him with a message to her. It was short and full of meaning. He said quite directly that he still cared for her. Elizabeth felt a bubble of happiness and relief on reading his words. And yet—her mind could not help but gnaw on what he said endlessly. He hoped they would be happy when they spoke again. He carefully did not say he would *speak again*. What was she supposed to make of that?

The easy interpretation, the one Elizabeth mostly held to, was that he wished to see for himself, when he saw her again, what *she* desired, and would only speak if she indicated she wanted him to. But—maybe it meant he only wished to return to their earlier friendship. Maybe it meant he thought she would never wish him to ask again, and therefore he would not. Maybe, whatever his sentiments were now, they would change over the next two months.

But to dwell on the question could only lead to anxiety and possible heartbreak. It was not part of her disposition to fret over matters which she could not affect. So Elizabeth resolved to think no more on it until Darcy was here again, and she could see for herself if his inclinations still turned towards her, and judge again where her own pointed.

Still, Elizabeth lived for the near correspondence she carried on with Darcy. They could not speak too warmly or freely under the circumstances, but each time she read one of Darcy’s sweet restrained messages her insides warmed, and she smiled for a full half hour. And to not obsessively think on Darcy and the possible interpretations of his words was a resolve easier to make than to keep. Elizabeth did not while away endless hours in thought about her absent lover—she usually caught herself before ten minutes had passed—but she was forced to catch herself many a time.

Thoughts about a possible future with Mr. Darcy recurred; what would it be like to leave Longbourn? Elizabeth was sure Darcy would be amenable to spending a month or two each year—perhaps immediately before or after the London season—at Longbourn. She made a fragmentary plan on how she wished the settlement to be written. Perhaps, as Pemberley was much closer, they could visit the Lake District in a year or two. Elizabeth began to set her local affairs in order; she even started inquiries for a new steward.

In this way Elizabeth passed the three months of Darcy’s absence, and though they seemed unusually long for three months, they eventually passed.

The Bennet family and Mr. Bingley were all gathered in the sitting room at Longbourn when the news of Darcy’s arrival reached them. Elizabeth attempted to read a novel after lunch, but she found it difficult to focus. She smiled at how Bingley and Jane good-naturedly listened to Mrs. Bennet enthusiastically prattle on about some trivial matter of wedding preparations. Mary played the piano, while Kitty and Lydia argued over clothes for the evening. At this point, the runner from Netherfield came: Darcy and his sister had arrived at Netherfield, two hours earlier than expected, and would attend the ball.

Elizabeth’s spirits were thrown into agitation at this absolutely positive intelligence that he had arrived and she would see him this very evening. Bingley immediately stood and left to greet his friend after fondly kissing Jane’s hand goodbye. The next hours were a blur, and Elizabeth knew she very, very much hoped he’d be unchanged in his feelings and desires.

She took far more care with her appearance than she ever had before and was convinced she looked quite handsome. It was Lydia’s first ball as well, and with six ladies to prepare they took rather longer than Elizabeth wanted. *She* had started quite early, and hence finished her preparations before her sisters, but that only meant Elizabeth was left to pace the sitting room in her new ball gown, the first she had purchased in years, for more than half an hour.

The letters. Every letter Darcy asked after her, wished her well, and said how eager he was to see her again. Certainly, he would not write so unless he intended to offer again. Certainly.

Elizabeth sourly thought they would arrive late when Kitty finally finished her preparations and came down. She impatiently hurried her sisters into the carriage, and on the ride Elizabeth eagerly waited for each turn in the road and building along their path; she so hoped Darcy would already be there when they arrived.

Then they were there. Elizabeth glanced at the familiar façade of the building before she entered and hurriedly looked around to see him.

Their eyes caught; all besides his eyes and face faded out, and she walked to him.

At first, they stood awkwardly; neither knew what to say, or how to speak. Darcy recovered faster, and stated, “I believe you have been well; at least, that is what Bingley told me. I was glad to hear it.”

“I have been.” Then, with no clear sense of what she said, Elizabeth added, “It is Lydia’s first ball.”

“Oh. If she still has space on her card, I must ask her for a dance.” This reference to Elizabeth’s sister pushed Darcy’s mind to his own, and he turned to the tall girl who awkwardly stood next to him. “May I introduce my sister to you?”

After Elizabeth’s nod Darcy said, “Georgiana, this is Elizabeth…. Elizabeth, my sister, Georgiana Darcy.”

Once curtsies had been exchanged, Elizabeth focused on Georgiana; with her high emotions, and mind full of their last meetings, it was easier by far to speak to the sister. “Your brother told me a great deal of you—all of it good of course.” The last added at the girl’s alarmed expression. With a quick glance at Darcy, who watched them with a smile, Elizabeth added, “He is very proud of you.”

Georgiana appeared very shy, and it took her several seconds to force out her reply. “Fitzwilliam has told me much about you as well.”

“Has he now! Do tell me what horrid calumnies he’s made against me—I promise I shall not let him know that you have broken his confidence.”

Elizabeth darted another quick glance at Darcy as Georgiana struggled to reply; her tease did seem to have settled him into a good mood.

Georgiana gave her words too much weight. “Oh, no. No, everything he said about you was most kind and complimentary.”

“Everything?” Elizabeth turned to Darcy. “And here I thought you always told the truth—” Elizabeth swallowed nervously before she continued without the laughter present before. “I know I have behaved most foolishly in your presence.”

Darcy’s eyes held hers and he replied softly, “Perhaps the lady misjudges her own character; for my part, I have never seen anything which was not completely admirable in your behavior.”

Elizabeth was too affected to respond to such a statement, though his manner pleased her greatly. Darcy added with a straight face, “I believe you are aware that I am an excellent judge of character, and that I pride myself on always making correct judgments.”

Elizabeth laughed and turned back to Georgiana. “It appears I was mistaken—your brother, after all, is never wrong.”

Georgiana nodded seriously, as though she agreed that Darcy was always right. It was really sweet the way she looked up to him.

“Elizabeth,” Darcy said, which brought Elizabeth’s eyes back to his now serious face. He held her eyes and said with an intent deep voice, “I have never seen you to act foolishly, but quite the opposite; every time you have hesitated or shown fear it was reasonable and, I think—angelic.”

Elizabeth felt happy relief; she already knew from his letters that he did not think poorly of her for her refusal and the manner of it, but to hear it confirmed in his own voice meant more. Elizabeth nodded. “Thank you—Oh! That was an allusion to Pope’s line, ‘fools rush in where angels fear to tread.’”

Darcy indicated assent.

A wide, fond smile spread over Elizabeth’s face. “I used that line the first time we met, in this very room, twenty feet from this very spot.” Elizabeth pointed to where they had spoken with Mr. Long the previous October.

Darcy nodded agreement, eyes bright and pleased. “You did.”

“And you remembered!”

“Yes, I even took your advice and refrained from borrowing money to undertake major improvements to the estate.”

Her smile was too wide to allow Elizabeth to laugh, and she watched as Georgiana exclaimed in confusion, “You never planned to borrow for improvements, you’ve said for years it would be foolish!”

Elizabeth touched Georgiana’s arm and leaned close to her with bright smile. “I fear I must repay Darcy’s proof I am without flaw by revealing to you that, while he always tells the truth, he occasionally makes statements he does not believe for the sake of seeing how others will respond.”

Georgiana smiled back. “Oh! He sometimes does that to me too.”

In a few minutes more they had all begun to dance, Georgiana with Colonel Forster—Elizabeth and Bingley had arranged for several married gentleman to ask Georgiana to dance should she come to the ball, so Darcy’s sister would not lack appropriate partners.

Elizabeth, of course, danced with Darcy. But her feelings were in too much of a flutter for her to speak. It was silly, it was girlish, but that Darcy remembered the line she’d teased him with the first night they met made her feel as though she were made of a happy melted pudding. The silly grin stayed on her face as she kept her eyes on Darcy’s pleased features, and it widened each time she thrilled at the touch of their hands. Each time the dance had them twirl around her stomach leapt when she met Darcy’s eyes again.

Darcy took the effort to speak. “I hope to meet your aunt and uncle. Will they be in Hertfordshire for the wedding?”

It was a compliment to her. It was a further sign of his continued interest. It showed the change in his treatment of social inferiors that he had promised three months ago had not been forgotten while they were apart. He wished to know her relatives in trade.

With pleased, rosy cheeks Elizabeth replied, “They will be here, though only for a few days as my uncle wishes to set his business in order so he can take an extended trip to the Lake District this summer. They look forward to meeting you as well, as I have spoken to them about you at length.” Elizabeth blushed to a stop here, as she wondered what Darcy might think she had said to her aunt and uncle.

“I am sure you gave a full depiction of all my flaws, and they will expect an arrogant, demanding, superior man. But I will disappoint them. I have committed myself to show the patience of Job and the easiness of—Bingley.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You may aspire to the patience of Job, but Bingley’s easiness—” she shook her head. “No, that would be too much. You would hardly be Darcy if you had that. Perhaps you should merely strive to be a very little easier, and then you will disappoint those who expect to think poorly of you, but not disconcert those who like you.”

“I will be guided by you in this. Your aunt and uncle, will they travel through Derbyshire on their journey to the Lakes?”

“They will—in fact, they will come very close to your Pemberley. My aunt—during that lengthy description of your flaws you imagined me to give—said she was a girl in Lambton, which is but five miles from Pemberley. They plan to stay there for at least a week during their journey.”

“I must ask them to stay with me at Pemberley for at least some of that time.”

Elizabeth blushed at the compliment. “My aunt would enjoy that greatly.”

“Then it is settled.”

Sadly the dance finished far too quickly, and Elizabeth was handed off to Bingley, while Darcy danced with his sister. Elizabeth had an absent happy smile as she walked through the steps without thought. Her mind was too full of Darcy to think on anything else. Bingley startled her out of her absorption when he used *his* name.

When Elizabeth begged him to repeat his words, Bingley laughed and gave a teasing smile, “I daresay you and Darcy are as much friends as you ever have been.”

Elizabeth colored, and Bingley spoke again. “And what might you have talked about so intently, that it still absorbs you ten minutes later?”

At this Elizabeth’s eyes brightened. “In fact, we spoke of Darcy’s intention to model his future behavior upon you.”

Bingley’s amazed expression made Elizabeth laugh. “Indeed we did, though to be candid, I discouraged him from the attempt. He would hardly be Darcy if he was as easy in company as you are.”

Now Bingley laughed. “Ha! I daresay he would be remarkably improved with my manners. In fact, from what I have seen of his behavior tonight—that is, after you arrived; before, he was as Darcy as ever—why, he stood there quite like a stiff statue—almost as if he were nervous. He is Darcy, though. So it was merely the seeming of nervousness. But after you arrived, he has been quite as easy as I have ever seen. I wish I could say my manners had at last rubbed on to him, but I believe the truth is very different.”

The dance with Bingley left Elizabeth with a smile—she liked her future brother a great deal. After she drank a glass of punch, Elizabeth entered the floor with her next partner. It was a delightful party, and she always was aware of Darcy’s place in the room. After his sister, he danced with Charlotte. This, like everything else, spoke to Elizabeth further of Darcy’s merit and attachment. During Darcy’s first trip to Hertfordshire, Elizabeth was the only local woman Darcy regularly chose to dance with, and Jane was the only other he had danced with ever. Now, though, he chose to dance with all Elizabeth’s sisters and her friends. It showed a desire to be friendly, a greater concern for the feelings of those around him, and a desire to make himself agreeable to those *she* cared for.

When her dance with Mr. Darcy finished, Charlotte approached Elizabeth and exclaimed in a pleased manner, “Eliza, I like your Mr. Darcy very much indeed. You must have me to visit.”

Charlotte laughed at Elizabeth’s stammered reply, “He is not my Mr. Darcy.” At Charlotte’s knowing look, Elizabeth added with a bright blush, “Yet.”

Elizabeth and Darcy danced a second time; a dance filled with happy conversation about nothings that felt like everything.

When Elizabeth had a brief minute alone, she felt as though she would burst with good feelings; she felt as though a dozen happy kittens wrestled inside her stomach. She had never been so happy. So, this is what it was to be in love. This was how it felt. No wonder Jane had smiled without break for the past three months. Elizabeth had never enjoyed a ball so much; *this* is what a ball ought to be: violins, sore feet, a hot room, and a girl in love for the first time.

As Elizabeth sat out the second-to-last set of the evening, she felt almost concerned as she watched Georgiana and Lydia. They had now sat out two full sets to speak to each other. Elizabeth approached the two, but Lydia motioned her away. Darcy was nearby, and Elizabeth walked to him. “I wonder what they are so intent about.”

Darcy shrugged in a manner that showed his pleasure. “I do not know either, however, Georgiana rarely speaks so much. She is shy in company and has few friends her own age. It is good to see Miss Lydia draw her out. Besides, your sister is a very good sort of girl—I know she is odd and somewhat improper, but she is solid.”

“I am proud of her,” Elizabeth said. “Over the past four years, I have raised her more than my mother.”

Elizabeth felt sad at the memory of why. And for a second, she saw Lydia there with Mr. Collins again. She was startled out of the memory when Darcy’s hand darted forward and grabbed hers. She looked at his face, and his manner showed he was as surprised by his forwardness as she was. Elizabeth squeezed his hand back and smiled at him. Darcy stepped so close to her, as they turned to look at Lydia and Georgiana, that their shoulders brushed each other, and Elizabeth was really sensible of Darcy’s presence and the feel of his coat’s wool fabric against the bit of bare skin between her glove and the sleeve of her dress.

They stood together silently for several minutes as the current set ended and the musicians prepared to start the last of the night. Darcy inclined his head so close to her ear that the warm air from his breath made her shiver. “Would you dance the last with me.”

This would be their third dance. From a man like Darcy, that was as good as a declaration. Elizabeth’s stomach tightened. If she nodded it would be as good as a promise to accept him. She froze for a long moment and, in a panic, scared he would misinterpret her inaction as refusal, vigorously nodded. “I very much wish to dance it with you.”

Darcy took her hand and brought it softly to his lips. Elizabeth shivered at the sensation. Then he led her to the line of couples. Elizabeth’s nerves were tight, and she looked up to see Jane and Bingley glow at each other. As the music started she slowly relaxed, and soon the mild glow from the wine she had drunk earlier made every moment seem more intense as Elizabeth boldly kept her eyes on Darcy and felt herself thrill and tighten with every touch of their hands and every spin of the dance. Darcy’s eyes stayed on her, caressed her.

It ended far too soon, Elizabeth thought longingly, as the final passage of the dance played through. She wished they could keep dancing forever; she wished she could meet the morning, and then the noon, and then the next evening in Darcy’s arms. Elizabeth laughed at the silliness of the conceit as Darcy led her from the dance floor.

The happy pair quietly spoke as they waited for the carriages to arrive—they had certainly not spent nearly enough time in conversation. And there were private matters to discuss which they could not speak of in a ballroom. They quickly decided to meet early the next morning for a walk.

The carriage ride home was quiet; Elizabeth had a happy smile but her mind was too full for words, and everyone else was too tired for them. Elizabeth’s spirits were too agitated for her to fall asleep, and when she slipped into bed she lay there nearly an hour as her mind turned over each moment, image, and incident from the ball.

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Georgiana had a pleased expression in the carriage, and Darcy roused himself from his thoughts of Elizabeth to ask how she enjoyed the ball.

“Oh, very much indeed. Lydia is such a spirited, forward girl; I very much enjoyed meeting her. I rather wish I was as confident as she is.”

Bingley spoke from his side of the carriage, “I had believed young girls were supposed to enjoy the dances at a ball, and not the company of other girls.”

“Well, except you and Fitzwilliam,” at this Georgiana briefly squeezed Darcy’s arm, “my partners were mostly old. Oh, I know why you introduced me to such, and do not mind; besides, Lydia was so interesting, and her conversation was very informative.”

“Just what did you two talk about?” Darcy asked.

Georgiana looked sidelong at him. “Mostly you.”

“Oh.”

“Oh yes, she was most curious about your behavior, in what manner you behave at home, and she had many other questions. We also did talk about Mrs. Elizabeth; I asked her to say more of her sister. Oh, I liked Mrs. Elizabeth very much indeed. She is very amusing, and kind. When she sought me out during a break in the dancing, she quickly put me at my ease.”

“I was pleased when I saw you two speak.”

Georgiana nodded. “Lydia said she is always like that, very clever and kind.” Georgiana looked at Bingley. “I also like Miss Bennet very much. She’s really sweet. I look forward to knowing all of the Bennets better.”

# Chapter 15

The next morning, Darcy woke early and walked towards the place where he would meet Elizabeth. It was a pretty spring morning, slightly overcast but with some sunshine. There was a profusion of rapidly growing green. The path was bordered with weeds and wildflowers; the new grasses made a sea of green speckled with flowers in the meadows. Spring was always a happy season, and Darcy hoped a mated pair of birds he saw swooping circles round each other was a good omen.

It was too early to speak of marriage again. Elizabeth had tensed when he asked her to the third dance last night. While Darcy thought she would accept him if he spoke this morning, he did not believe she was completely ready. He wanted her to never feel uncomfortable due to him again. There was time; he had no hurry—he had arranged matters at Pemberley so he could be gone for many months, and Bingley would happily allow Darcy to stay at Netherfield as long as he needed.

Beyond his concern for Elizabeth, there was just a bit of doubt. Darcy remembered Elizabeth’s wide, scared eyes when he proposed to her. She would not have acted as she had the previous night if she did not mean to accept him, but what if, when the moment came, she could not bring herself to do it? Darcy was scared. He would not let it control his behavior, but it added weight to his knowledge that he should not push Elizabeth.

He would court Elizabeth. He would show, without directly speaking, his love and concern for her. He would show how he had changed in response to her reproofs, he would reveal more of his character, and he would do everything he could to make Elizabeth more comfortable with him.

Darcy soon saw Elizabeth’s neat figure walking towards him on the road, the light wind billowing her dress around her legs. She saw him and beamed. Darcy smiled in return, and the brightness of her expression blinded him to all else for a minute; he felt on seeing her as though he’d entered a brightly lit building after wandering in the dark.

When they met, neither spoke for a minute; Darcy’s eyes stayed on her, her delicate eyebrows, her red enticing lips, and the bold way her radiant eyes studied him in turn. Elizabeth blushed, laughed, and curtsied at last. She said, “I am so very happy to see you this morning.”

Darcy bowed, offered Elizabeth his arm, and said, “I am very pleased to see you as well—in fact, there is nothing I could want more.” Then he added, “You look particularly well this morning.”

She laughed, “That is kind of you to say, though I received hardly any sleep and I’m sure my eyes show it—you look particularly fetching yourself in that green coat.”

Elizabeth nestled close to Darcy, holding his arm tightly, and Darcy found it difficult to think; his mind was too full of the look of her hand in its blue glove, her face in profile framed by the lace edges of her bonnet, and the happy expression which showed his company pleased her.

“I must thank you for the messages you sent me in your letters to Bingley. They—I loved to read them very much.” Elizabeth’s eyes were bright and pretty.

“I am glad for that. Very glad.” Darcy laughed. “It was deuced odd, though, to communicate through him in that manner.”

“I know.” Elizabeth laughed merrily. “Though Bingley gave me to understand *he* enjoyed the experience greatly. Even though it made him write somewhat more than was his usual.”

“I never before had any idea Bingley could be a prompt correspondent. Or that his letters might become legible.”

“I believe Jane stood over him as he wrote them.”

“I suspected as much. There were some corrections in her hand.”

The two fell silent as Darcy helped Elizabeth over a stile so they could walk towards a hill Elizabeth had pointed to on the far edge of a field they walked past. Darcy had decided to tell Elizabeth how he first met Bingley, when she began to speak.

She swallowed, and looked at him with anxious eyes and began in a halting voice, “You said how—in your messages you said, you said you looked forward to when we would speak again. I—” Elizabeth’s breaths came fast. “I will say—yes—to anything you wish to ask me.”

Her face was white and stiff, and her eyes wide. There was a distant look in her eyes, which Darcy now recognized as the one she had when her memories were present. Her hand tightly clutched at his arm.

Darcy took her hand, and drew it up to kiss it. He had never loved her so much as right now, when she spoke to him despite her fears. He softly caressed her hand. Darcy said, “You are not comfortable. Not yet.”

“That matters not, I wish you to know, I—” her eyes were haunted, and her voice caught. She turned her head away and tried to pull her hand out of Darcy’s grasp. “I thought I had conquered this feeling.”

Darcy continued to hold her hand and rub his thumbs over her knuckles. “You shall. I know it. And I *know.* You need not tell me; I see it in your eyes, and in your smiles. I said I wish us both to be happy when we spoke. You are not happy now. I will not ask until you are. There is no hurry; I will be here as long as you need.”

“But, what if I never am—” she said with fear in her tone.

Darcy placed a finger on Elizabeth’s lips. “Then I’ll be here, with you, when we know that.” He wished he could convey all of the love he felt for her through his voice. “No matter what. Elizabeth, no matter what I will not go anywhere, I will always be here for you.” Intense dark eyes held him, and seemed to pierce through Darcy’s soul. She breathed hard, and nodded.

Elizabeth grabbed one of Darcy’s hands, pulled it to her face, and kissed it. Darcy was caught in an intense rush of emotion, as she held it against her cheek and her breaths calmed. She let go, and gave Darcy a small half smile. Darcy smiled back at her, taking her other arm into his, and asked, “Have I told you how I met Bingley?”

Elizabeth shook her head to say no, and Darcy began the story, exulting inside when he managed to make Elizabeth laugh. Elizabeth soon relaxed and entered the conversation with all her usual liveliness, but Darcy could see in her words and gestures that she wished to make her affection for him clear.

After they had walked for two hours, they decided it was time to separate, but they planned to meet again the next day. Each day after, they walked together in the morning, except once when it rained too hard to venture out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Most mornings Elizabeth met Darcy with a bright smile. So he worried when, a week after he returned to Hertfordshire, she stomped towards him with a scowl. Had he unknowingly offended her the previous day? When Elizabeth reached him, she roughly grabbed his extended arm and said with fake cheer, “Is it not a wonderful morning?”

After Darcy’s reply, Elizabeth fell silent. Most days she chose their topics of conversation, and as they quietly walked towards the path decided upon the previous day, Darcy searched his memory for something wrong he may have done.

When nothing came to mind, he cautiously asked, “Is something the matter?”

Darcy’s apprehension was relieved as she burst out, “Oh! Mama makes me so angry at times. How can she still say such things? Hasn’t she already seen the harm her obsession can cause?”

When Elizabeth paused Darcy hesitantly asked, “What—ah, what exactly is it that she said?”

Elizabeth’s eyes blazed as she turned her face towards him. “Jane, dear,” she mimicked her mother’s voice, “once you’ve married Bingley, you must be sure to throw your sisters in the way of other rich men.”

Elizabeth growled and turned forward to walk rapidly along the pathway shaded by trees whose spring leaves were half grown in. Darcy needed to lengthen his stride to keep up with her. “Affection and the well-being of those you care for is what matters. We already have all the money needed to live comfortably, no matter who my sisters marry. She only wishes us to marry well so she can brag to Lady Lucas, and Mrs. Long, and Aunt Gardiner, and every other woman who knows of her existence. She is happy Jane marries Bingley, not because they care for each other, and not because their temperaments match and they should be very happy together—no, she is happy because it is such a great triumph for her daughter to marry a man with four thousand a year.”

Darcy agreed with Elizabeth and thought quite as poorly of her mother as she did, but while he hoped Elizabeth gained some value in him *listening* to her complain about her mother, he felt it best not to add his own insults. Instead, he pulled her to a slower pace and paid close attention.

Elizabeth calmed as they walked more slowly. They were surrounded by the wonderful smells of spring and birds finishing their morning songs. A brightly colored butterfly flapped its way across the path. Elizabeth then said, “The problem has always been that Jane is too persuadable. You know of one time. I think you could’ve guessed at another; remember when Jane became ill and had to stay at Netherfield—that was Mama’s doing; she convinced Jane to take the horse, instead of the carriage, so she would not be able to return when it rained. And she became happy when Jane was sick, since people do not die of trifling colds. Except sometimes they do.

“At least I have convinced her to not say such things in public,” Elizabeth ended with a sigh. “She would when my father was alive.”

Even as he spoke Darcy was sure his words were a mistake. “I believe you are only successful in causing her not to say such things when you are in earshot. The second night we met, at a party Sir William held, she rather loudly told Lady Lucas, even though she saw me standing nearby, that she had ordered Jane to use any means at her disposal to attach Bingley. I confess, the conversation had led me to worry until you spoke to me about Jane’s feelings.”

“She said that? While you stood close?” Elizabeth said in a low dangerous voice. She stopped walking, and pulled her arm away from his and clenched her gloved hand into a tight fist. Her face was red, and Darcy almost heard her teeth grind.

He did not know what to do, so Darcy took her hand and slowly rubbed it. After a minute, Elizabeth relaxed her fist and her breathing steadied. She took his arm again. They walked some distance before Elizabeth said, “I don’t like when I hate her—and I do, I sometimes hate her.”

Elizabeth caught Darcy’s eye. “I am a woman who sometimes hates her mother. I shouldn’t. I know I shouldn’t. It is not proper to dislike my mother so. I—when Mr. Collins first died, I threatened to throw her out, and we did not speak for a year. I should not have done that. Even now, when we argue about expenses, I constantly say no to her. I sometimes derive a joy from her disappointment.”

Tears appeared in Elizabeth’s eyes as she continued. “I am a horrible daughter. Papa would not have been happy to see me treat her so. I do *now* mostly show the respect due her position, but there is no love in it. And my attitude is not fair—she *does* wish to appear well before our neighbors, but there is nothing really wrong with that, and she also cares for us. She acts as she does because she is anxious and foolish. I should not disdain her for that. She is who she is; why can I not accept her for it?”

Darcy thought Elizabeth’s dislike of her mother was perfectly reasonable, but he knew she could not. He also remembered how he felt when Colonel Fitzwilliam told him he was not to blame after Georgiana’s near elopement. Words would not relieve Elizabeth’s distress, and in any case, Darcy was not a man given to speaking empty platitudes.

With a blush at his own forwardness, Darcy brushed the tears off her cheeks and kissed Elizabeth’s forehead. When he pulled back, their eyes met and he said, “You are as you ought to be.”

Their gaze held, and Elizabeth gave him a smile—it was not one of her arch smiles as she laughed at some bit of cleverness, or the happy smile she had when she greeted him; it was a soft, warm, and slightly sad smile. Elizabeth grabbed Darcy’s arm again and nestled closer to him, and they walked down the green shaded country lane again.

“No matter what you say, I *should* be more accepting of my mother. Though I’m glad it has not destroyed your esteem for my character that I am not.”

“I cannot blame you for your sentiments; I am only impressed that you should desire them to be different.”

Elizabeth gave a short laugh at that response. “I daresay she appears poorly to you as well.”

Darcy replied dryly, “That might be so, but it hardly seems proper for me to *say* it.” Elizabeth smiled at that response, and Darcy added, “You are not the only one with unpleasant relatives; you must meet my Aunt Catherine. I think you shall like her a great deal; she is famous for her frankness and advice.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “I shall look forward to the occasion.”

The implication in Elizabeth’s response that she expected to meet the rest of his family could not help but please Darcy. The two strolled amiably along, mostly in silence, only pointing out the occasional bird or squirrel running across the path, or a particularly pretty bit of scenery.

Elizabeth had told him something she disliked about herself. She had been unguarded with him and showed her inner feelings. It made Darcy desire to reveal himself to her in a like manner. He ought to tell her what happened to Georgiana last summer. However, as he searched for the words, Darcy found he really did not wish to speak about it. He had failed to protect his sister. How would that seem to a woman who would do anything to protect her own?

Elizabeth noted his discomfort, and squeezing his arm softly asked, “What is it?”

Darcy began hesitantly, “Do you remember Mr. Wickham?”

“The charming snake? I do.” Her tone was light, but Elizabeth’s eyes were serious.

“The charming snake? An apt description.”

“Perhaps you recall a conversation we had about Milton, when you said there was a man you know, who, while he showed every appearance of goodness, was a snake underneath—Mr. Wickham had a very charming exterior, but clearly was deficient inside, so I believed he was the person you referred to.”

“He was.”

In a serious voice, Darcy narrated how Wickham convinced Georgiana to elope with him. Darcy dwelled on each point in the story where he ought to have acted differently—he should have checked Mrs. Younge’s background more thoroughly; he should have sent trusted servants from Pemberley with Georgiana, instead of hiring the staff in Ramsgate; perhaps he should not have allowed his sister to be alone at all—though she had dearly wished the opportunity. Maybe even, instead of ignoring Wickham when he asked for the living, he should have paid the man off again, so he would not wish revenge.

Elizabeth kept her large sympathetic eyes on him and squeezed his arm whenever he became particularly distressed during the narration. Darcy had never spoken at length about this; Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mrs. Annesley were the only persons he had told the full story to. He could not freely describe how he *felt* about his failures to another man, even one as close and involved as Colonel Fitzwilliam.

As he saw Elizabeth accept his words, it felt as if the burden he’d held since last summer lightened. When Darcy finished speaking Elizabeth was silent for a few minutes. At last, she said, “Well, it was a very good thing he did not enroll in the regiment here. I’m glad to see Georgiana and Lydia get along so well; they seem good for each other.”

“I agree. You do not blame me then for failing to protect Georgiana?”

“No, never.” Elizabeth peered more closely at Darcy. “I daresay it is each person’s particular duty to feel their own failings more seriously than anyone else will. It is the duty of their friends to tell them they are excellent people nonetheless.”

For a moment Darcy wished to push Elizabeth to reassure him further, but he silenced himself and instead took Elizabeth’s hand and briefly squeezed it in thanks. After they had walked on a bit Darcy thought it best to lighten the conversation, and said, “I have done my particular duty; I believe it is your turn.”

It took Elizabeth a second to parse his meaning, and then she laughed merrily. “Certainly—you are a most excellent creature; tall, which I am certain you know any gentleman should be if he can arrange it; rich—which any gentleman also should be if they can; very handsome, which possibly is a gentleman’s most important accomplishment.”

Darcy smiled back, “I believe I meant you to speak on the excellence of my character, not my person and situation.”

“Oh! And I had not yet mentioned that you are the grandson of an Earl. Let me see, you are scrupulously honest, except when you wish to provoke an argument. You show all the humility to be desired from a man who is so poor that he can point to at least a hundred gentlemen with greater income, and you do have a delightful smile—no, wait, I believe that is a reference to your person, not your character. You do not smile often enough in company—but that is not a praise.”

Elizabeth shook her head with an arch smile. “I fear that I am not at all qualified to praise you properly, and now that I have castigated myself, it is *your* turn.”

Darcy replied in like manner, and laughing, the two passed the remainder of their morning walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days before Jane’s wedding, Elizabeth peeked her head out the door as she prepared to set out on her morning walk. It was gray. Very gray. She made an unhappy face at the clouds; it seemed certain to rain.

Well… Maybe not certain. If it were to rain, would it not have started already? And the ground *was* muddy; perhaps the clouds had emptied themselves over the night. And even if it did rain, if she took a heavy wool coat, large umbrella, and thick shawl it might not be so bad.

Elizabeth acquired those articles, and set off to meet Darcy—certain he would think like she had. She was being a bit irresponsible, but it was not so bad. And over the past week and a half, the mornings which were their best opportunity to speak privately had become Elizabeth’s favorite part of the day.

Sure enough, when she reached the secluded grove of trees slightly off the main road where they had planned to meet, Darcy was there in a handsome green overcoat. Elizabeth now reveled in the pleasure the view of his tall straight form gave her. She always liked Darcy’s appearance well enough, but now that she knew she loved him it was different.

His hair—the way it fell over his ears, the thin lines around his knuckles, the way he had a hint of stubble at supper time, his mannerisms, the angle at which he would hold his saucer while drinking tea, the steady way he paused before he spoke when he desired to be serious. Elizabeth felt an astonishingly strong rush of tenderness when she thought about any of these, or many other quirks of Mr. Darcy. She was surprised that she could feel so sentimental about such small things, but was wise enough to enjoy her silliness.

Elizabeth was *now* pleased Darcy had not spoken again that first morning they had met after the assembly ball. She had been sure after her first dance with Darcy that night—or, to be honest with herself, she had been certain after she spoke to Jane the afternoon Darcy left Netherfield at the end of November. But, that certainty had been an uncomfortable thing. She *knew* she wished to marry Darcy, but despite that, her own attempt to speak showed there was still much anxiety attached to the idea.

But over the past mornings, as Darcy listened to her and comforted her, and told her of his failures and emotions, as she had grown to love him more and understand him better, Elizabeth stopped feeling tense when she imagined herself committed to be near him always. She would not be entirely comfortable with the idea of marriage until the vows were said and the license signed, but she now felt *mostly* comfortable.

The smile Darcy gave upon seeing her, the way his face lit up and let her see the affection in his eyes, made Elizabeth feel warm and fluttery inside. His greeting as he bowed gallantly and kissed her hand with a flourish made Elizabeth giggle and blush.

“I fear we ought not have ventured out this morning,” Darcy opened the conversation.

Elizabeth laughed. “I am certain of it—though we brought umbrellas, and are very warmly dressed. However, I would not have left you out here alone for all the rain in England.”

The way Darcy’s countenance filled with added pleasure and pride at her declaration made Elizabeth happily squeeze the arm he had given her more tightly. Darcy chose to tease Elizabeth. “Where were you then Tuesday last, when I waited out for you in a really drenching rain.”

“Shame on you, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth smiled. “Shame. I have on the authority of no less a personage than your sister Georgiana, that you breakfasted with the Netherfield party that morning and had a frighteningly ferocious scowl. I had thought deceit to be your abhorrence. Perhaps I ought to ask where were *you* when *I* stood out in the rain?”

Darcy’s reply was interrupted by the first large cold drops of rain as the sky which had been threatening now delivered. Darcy immediately pulled open his large black umbrella and pulled Elizabeth closer to him as he held it over them. The rain quickly became intense, and the wind blew sprays of frigid water under the umbrella. “I ought to walk you back to Longbourn,” Darcy said.

Elizabeth shook her head. “It is above a mile, and the rain is very heavy.” She pointed, “Behind that cluster of trees is a small Grecian temple Mr. Goulding set up. It is covered, and there is some seating.”

With Elizabeth in the lead, the two quickly ran and got under the shelter of the marble building while laughing together. It was reasonably dry under its cover, and neither had gotten particularly wet. Though Elizabeth thought the damp strands of hair which stuck to Darcy’s forehead appeared particularly fetching.

With that thought, she splashed a bit of water from one of the waterfalls pouring off of the temple’s roof at Darcy. He laughed, and may have replied in kind, but a cold gust of wind made Elizabeth shiver as the wind penetrated her layers of clothing.

Darcy pulled her towards a more sheltered spot, and a minute later the two were seated on the floor against one of the large pillars which held the structure up, looking out at the pouring gray rain. Elizabeth’s shawl had been rearranged to keep both of them slightly covered and Darcy’s warm arm had pulled her against his side.

Now that she was no longer moving, Elizabeth began to feel drowsy; she had stayed up late many of the previous nights talking to Jane, and then woke early in the morning to meet Darcy. She laid her head against Darcy’s shoulder and said, “Tell me more about spring in Pemberley.”

Darcy responded with stories about planting, and rainstorms, and the beauty of the landscape as green proliferated, and his comforting, warm voice combined with the patter of rain lulled her quickly to sleep.

Elizabeth was startled awake when Darcy shook her. It no longer rained, and the wet ground was bathed in sunlight. She looked around in confusion; her head had been on Darcy’s chest, and she saw a wet spot where she suspected she had drooled onto his greatcoat.

Elizabeth felt her face heat with embarrassment, but when she met Darcy’s eyes, he looked at her with a deep tenderness. As their eyes held, Elizabeth felt the now familiar flutters in her stomach explode more intensely than they ever had before. “Elizabeth, I—”

Darcy paused to swallow. Elizabeth’s nerves tightened anxiously. Was it to be this moment?

Darcy must have seen her anxiety, for something in his eyes changed, and instead of speaking further he brushed at Elizabeth’s cheek with his hand, and then leaned in, as he had the day she complained about her mother, and kissed her on the forehead. Elizabeth shivered with emotion and longing at the touch and closed her eyes.

Then Darcy stood with a groan and offered his hand to pull her up as well. “Come, we must return.”

Elizabeth nodded and took Darcy’s arm, and as they walked towards where their roads parted, she felt an intense rush of disappointment. Why couldn’t he see that she *did* want him to ask?

Elizabeth snarled back at herself; it was unreasonable to expect him, given how she had refused him once and what he knew of her past, to speak to her when she showed a clear sign of distress. Her Fitzwilliam would never act so. She ought to show the eagerness she truly felt.

Really, it was her place to speak, and to tell Darcy clearly that despite some lingering anxiety, she was comfortable and very much—very, very much—wished him to pay his addresses to her again.

Unfortunately for Elizabeth, the Grecian temple they had sought shelter at was only a few hundred feet from where they parted to return to their separate abodes, and immediately after she formed this resolution, with no chance to find the words to express her desire—or work up her nerve—they exchanged their parting words.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow she *would* speak.

\* \* \* \* \*

About noon that day, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived at Longbourn. Darcy made a point to talk to them both. As he expected since Elizabeth loved them, they both showed excellent manners. Mr. Gardiner was very clever; Darcy knew he had been quite successful in his business, and they spoke a little about it. But, Darcy knew little of Mr. Gardiner’s trade, and Mr. Gardiner knew little of what Darcy had begun to privately consider his own trade, estate management. They found common ground in a shared passion for fishing.

This was a subject Darcy believed he could use to his advantage, and he waxed poetic about the well-stocked ponds and streams of Pemberley; he hoped to encourage Mr. Gardiner to agree to a long stay at Pemberley. He wished for this not merely as a compliment to Elizabeth, and also not merely because he expected to enjoy their company a great deal, but also he hoped that by the time of their vacation Elizabeth would live at Pemberley, and he knew she would enjoy a visit from her favorite relatives a great deal.

Mrs. Gardiner was also a delightful woman, and Darcy spent a full hour answering as best he could her questions about the state of affairs in Lambton, and exchanging memories of landmarks and events. There was one great tree near Lambton they both were quite fond of.

Near the end of the evening, Darcy saw Lydia and Georgiana rapidly speaking to each other; the two girls had become very tight friends. Lydia pointed at him once, and Darcy idly wondered what they were saying.

By the time Darcy, Bingley, and Georgiana left Longbourn, the Gardiners had given Elizabeth a knowing look and promised they would spend at least a fortnight at Pemberley, though it would reduce the time they had to explore the famous sites of the Lake District.

On the carriage ride back to Netherfield Georgiana exclaimed, “Hertfordshire has been so delightful! And I am so happy to have met Lydia. I feel like she is a sister.” Georgiana paused, reddened, and stammered out in an embarrassed voice, “Is the—I mean, if two people were sister-in-law’s of the—of the same person, would not that make them sisters as well?”

Darcy put his hand against his mouth as Bingley gave an amused reply. “Yes, I do believe it would make them sisters.” Had his sister just hinted he should ask Elizabeth to marry him?

“Oh. That is what Lydia said. I thought so too. Fitzwilliam would—” Georgiana gave a small giggle, “If—do you agree that when you marry, the sisters of your bride would also become my sisters?”

Georgiana gave him a pointed look, which was somewhat marred by her clear embarrassment. His sister just had hinted he should ask Elizabeth to marry him. Clearly it had been Miss Lydia’s idea. Perhaps he had been wrong about their friendship being a good thing. Bingley’s broad smile, visible in the dim light, did nothing to reduce Darcy’s awkwardness.

Darcy remembered this morning, when he had *nearly* spoken. Elizabeth had been relieved the first morning after he returned when Darcy made it clear he would wait to ask her. This morning, the only way to describe her reaction afterwards was disappointed. Even though Elizabeth might yet have some anxiety, Darcy felt sure it was time. Still, while he was near certain she would give a positive reply, Darcy felt very anxious as he decided he would ask Elizabeth tomorrow.

There had been a sustained pause while Darcy made this resolution. But Darcy now replied to Georgiana’s question, “Yes, I believe they would become your sisters.”

# Chapter 16

Lydia Bennet had always known two things: marriage was unpleasant because men were brutes, and Lizzy was the best person in the world. Lydia had not been permanently affected in the way Lizzy was when Mr. Collins hurt her to ensure Lizzy’s obedience. In fact, Lydia could barely remember that day. What she remembered was her terror that he would hurt her again, and how Lizzy flattered Mr. Collins and acted upon every whim of the ugly little toad, so he would not.

Lizzy always would be the best, but the past months left Lydia unsure about her first belief. Lizzy had really desired to accept Mr. Darcy. And, Lydia overheard a conversation between Jane and Lizzy that showed they hoped he would ask again. Lizzy thought Mr. Darcy was a good man. And Bingley, Jane’s suitor, had always been kind to everyone, much like Jane was. Perhaps, some marriages might be happy. Aunt Gardiner certainly seemed happy. But she was happy because Uncle Gardiner was a very good man.

Also to Lydia’s great surprise she had, over the past three months, felt the beginning of an affection for Captain Denny. He was very handsome in his regimentals and always great fun when they spoke. Lydia knew her feelings were not serious and it was just fun, and the idea of marriage still seemed ridiculous to her. But—the way her stomach fluttered pleasurably when she caught sight of him, and the way she could not stop imagining places and times they might meet—Lydia now understood why, despite the awfulness of being under a man’s control, a woman might desire to marry.

Lydia was still not sure that it would be good for Lizzy to marry Mr. Darcy. Was he special enough for the best person in the world? And, *was* he a good man? What if, even though Lizzy and his friend Mr. Bingley both thought he was a good man, what if Mr. Darcy *wasn’t* good? What if he tried to hurt Lizzy like Mr. Collins had? Lydia would kill him if he did—she would buy or steal a gun and shoot him dead. But, since Lizzy wanted to marry him, it would be best to know whether he was a good man *before* Lydia needed to flee to the Americas to escape the noose.

Lydia knew it was her task to make sure Darcy would treat Lizzy kindly. Her mind uncontrollably returned to Denny, even though she *knew* that she did not wish to marry—at least, not till she was almost an old maid. Lizzy liked Darcy a great deal more than Lydia liked Denny, and her feelings must be correspondingly stronger. Lizzy could take care of herself in most cases, but if Lydia had irrational ideas about Captain Denny, Lizzy certainly had them about Mr. Darcy. She could not be trusted to make a good decision.

Elizabeth had, in fact, said as much herself; Lydia had once heard her tease Jane, “It was his easiness of manner and handsome features that first drew you—you knew no actual good of him at the time, but no one thinks of *that* when they fall in love.”

Love, Lydia thought, was a form of insanity. And just as the mad King required a regent during his spells, so Lizzy needed someone to take care of her during *her* spell of madness. Lydia was not sure *how* to perform this duty. Then she learned that Mr. Darcy’s sister would come to Netherfield with him for the wedding. Miss Darcy was almost the same age as Lydia, and Lydia decided it would be easy to force her to reveal everything about Mr. Darcy’s behavior at home. After all, Mr. Bingley would certainly be kind to Jane since he was never mean to his sister Caroline—even though Miss Bingley was the most annoying and superior woman Lydia had ever met.

If Miss Darcy was treated well, then Lydia would not need to stop Darcy and Lizzy from marrying.

The assembly night when the Darcys arrived was her first ball, and of course Lydia was expected to, and in fact wished to, dance a great deal. However, Lydia only paid half attention to her first partner as she sought out her prey.

There she was. La! She was even taller than Lydia herself. And while Lydia knew her to only be sixteen, she looked very well grown for that age. She also looked awkward and ill at ease. As Lydia plotted her approach, she felt uncommonly pleased with herself. She would be Lizzy’s protector this time! She would ensure her normally rational and clever sister was not led astray by the insensibility love created.

The dances were great fun. Denny asked her twice, and Bingley, though he was less interesting, as they had danced at family parties before. Darcy himself asked her. He was very amused by her questions and her attempt to get him to show any ill humor he might hide.

Near the end of the night, Lydia found her opportunity. Georgiana sat alone in the edge of the room, watching the somewhat diminished number of couples twirl colorfully on the dance floor. No doubt her feet hurt; Lydia’s certainly were sore. Georgiana had not talked very much all night and acted stiff, almost scared, of her partners. Had Darcy ordered her to behave in that manner? Like Mr. Collins had ordered Lizzy to never laugh in company?

Lydia sat next to Georgiana. “Hello.”

There was a long pause before the yellow-haired girl said quietly while looking away from Lydia, “Hello.”

Georgiana did not say anything else, and before the pause became long Lydia exclaimed, “La! You are so quiet. So, tell me about your brother.”

Her head snapped to look at Lydia. “About Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, tell me about Mr. Darcy.” Lydia leaned forward and pulled her chair closer to Georgiana and excitedly whispered, “Do you not say much because he ordered you to rarely speak in company? Is he a tyrant who demanded you behave in that manner?”

Miss Darcy was shocked. “He would never—”

Lydia enthusiastically spoke over her as she described a few of the scenarios her imagination had conjured up over the past weeks. “Oh, and does he lock you up in a high tower? Are you never allowed to leave the estate to visit friends? Are you forced to stay at home all of the time? Is he mean to the servants? Does he drink too much?”

Miss Darcy listened to Lydia open mouthed without response, but as Lydia continued her face reddened and she scowled. “Fitzwilliam is the best brother imaginable! He is always kind, he is never mean to anybody—even those who deserve it—he always takes the best possible care of me, even when I do not deserve it. I have never seen him drunk, and it is horrible, horrible that you could suggest such things about him. He is the kindest, best man ever.”

Miss Darcy raised her chin up and prepared to stand. At her reaction Lydia thought maybe she should not have asked in *quite* that way, and grabbed Miss Darcy’s sleeve. “Do not go, I do not want to insult your brother. I am very pleased to hear what you said. You see, my sister Lizzy wants to marry him and I must be certain that he will not hurt her.”

“Oh!” Some of the offense faded from Miss Darcy’s face, but she remained stiff and angry. “I can understand that concern, but it is still horrid that you imagined such things about Fitzwilliam.”

“Yes, I see why you are offended—were someone to speak so about Lizzy—I should not have asked in such a manner, but you must understand that I need to be sure. You see,” Lydia lowered her voice again and leaned forward, “Mr. Collins acted in a very like manner to what I suggested. So I *know* men can behave so. I cannot let Lizzy go through such an experience again, and I cannot trust her in this case to look after her own interests—love makes people foolish. And while your brother *appears* good, one cannot trust such appearances—but as his sister, as a woman entirely under his care, you would *know* how he behaves.”

Miss Darcy vigorously nodded agreement when Lydia finished. “Yes, I know you cannot trust the appearance of goodness. Why, I once—” She stopped. “I will tell you whatever you wish to know about Fitzwilliam.”

Lydia began to speak, but Miss Darcy said, “No, first, I have already told you something of my brother; you must tell me about Mrs. Elizabeth. My brother has spent the last three months speaking constantly of her, but you are right, a sister’s view must be more sensible than that of,” Miss Darcy blushed, “a lover.”

“Lizzy is the best, bravest, cleverest, and kindest person in the world. She can do anything—she runs Longbourn without help, she reads really difficult books, she dances and sings; everyone agrees she is the wittiest woman in Hertfordshire.” Lydia paused. “And she will do anything, *anything*, to care for us. So surely you see why I must be sure any man who takes her fancy is most excellent.”

Georgiana nodded and said firmly, “I see. But my brother *is* most excellent.”

The two spent the rest of the evening in conversation, and continued when Georgiana called at Longbourn with her brother and Mr. Bingley the next day.

It had been less than a fortnight since they met, but by the time Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived with their children, Lydia and Georgiana were the best of friends. They had decided that since Elizabeth and Georgiana were to be sisters, and Elizabeth and Lydia were sisters already, that meant Lydia and Georgiana would be sisters. Georgiana never annoyed Lydia in the way Kitty, who was mother’s favorite, would. And Mary, while more sensible than Kitty, spent all of her time with her books, the piano, and her boring quotations.

Georgiana was somewhere between the two; she was great fun to talk with, unlike Mary, but she was not a wild flirt with no thought in her head but officers, like Kitty. If Elizabeth was not there to keep an eye on Kitty, she quite likely would do something foolish like run off to Gretna Green with one of the officers. Lydia was happy to know *she* would never act so. And Georgiana played beautifully. Lydia knew she would never have that level of skill, but she practiced with Georgiana so she could become good enough to occasionally perform a duet with her friend.

The two girls had shared confidences; Lydia told Georgiana about Mr. Collins and how he had hurt her to control Elizabeth, and Georgiana told her about Mr. Wickham and how she had nearly eloped with him. When told about Wickham, Lydia exclaimed, “Why, he nearly enrolled in the militia here! I saw him once, he was very handsome. But Lizzy knew there was something wrong with him. I do not know what they said, but Lizzy spoke with him for half an hour the night he came into Meryton, and the next morning he left right away.”

Only one problem worried Lydia and Georgiana: Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had not yet announced their engagement. They compared notes, and Lydia and Georgiana found that Elizabeth and Darcy both left the house at the same time each morning and often would not return for hours. They had been seen walking together several times. And they primarily talked to each other in company; their behavior clearly showed an attachment, but there had been no announcement yet. At first Lydia thought Lizzy wanted to wait for the Gardiners to arrive.

However, the day Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived came, went, and supper was over, and no announcement had been made. Maybe the two had not yet come to an understanding? Lydia decided something needed to be done.

“I agree,” Georgiana replied, “but what can we do?”

“We must tell them that it is time to reach an understanding, and that we all expect them to do it.”

Georgiana blushed. “I could never speak so to him; besides, I should not interfere in my brother’s business.”

“Nonsense, Georgie, it will be easy.” Lydia leaned forward eagerly. “You see, you need not say anything directly. You just need to hint; your brother is clever, and he will know what you really mean.”

“But—”

“Do not worry; on the carriage ride home, just ask whether your brother thinks two girls become sisters if the sister of one marries the brother of the other. And then say how you would like to have many sisters.”

“Oh.” Georgiana blushed. “Maybe I could say that.”

Lydia grabbed Georgiana’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “I know you can! And while you do that, I will find a chance to talk to Lizzy and tell her that she must make it clear to Mr. Darcy that it is time to ask her.”

“But, is it not the man’s choice?”

“Well, maybe it is supposed to be, but a girl can make very clear when she wants someone to ask. She could just say, ‘oh, it would be wonderful if we were together forever,’ or something else in that manner.” Lydia laughed and put her head closer to Georgiana’s. “Lizzy could say, ‘Georgie is such a dear, I wish she were my sister.’”

Georgiana blushed and giggled. She *was* such a dear; it was so much fun to tease her. Lydia knew she could not rely on Georgiana to do her part, so she would have to make sure Elizabeth hinted to Mr. Darcy.

After everyone had prepared for bed, Lydia went to Elizabeth’s room and said, “Lizzy, I have decided that I like Darcy. I just wanted you to know. Georgiana and I have talked about this a great deal, and he seems to be a really excellent brother.”

Elizabeth smiled. “My goodness, I thought you were completely set against him. I am sure he will be pleased to know he finally has your approval.”

“La! I expect to soon be told how he will be *my* brother as well.”

Elizabeth blushed and laughed. “Do you mean to order me to marry Darcy?”

“You know that you love him, and the two of you have met every morning since he arrived in Hertfordshire, so you have had plenty of opportunity to speak already, and—”

Elizabeth went bright red. “Enough, enough. I will not pretend indifference to him, and I have heard what you said.”

“So you will speak to him tomorrow?”

“Lydia, this is a terribly improper conversation, but I admit, I had already decided to do so.”

“Good.” And Lydia walked over and kissed Elizabeth on the cheek. “I hope to hear something about it tomorrow morning after your walk, and you know Jane and Bingley would be most disappointed if they left for the wedding trip without it being settled.”

Elizabeth laughed in embarrassment and pushed her away. “Go to sleep.”

# Chapter 17

Elizabeth felt a half-happy anxiety twist through her body when she walked out to meet Darcy the next morning. Though it was a bright, sunny morning, Elizabeth gave no attention to the scenery, absorbed as she was in her thoughts.

Her nerves fell away as she saw Darcy eagerly looking out towards her, in his handsome green coat. His face brightened once she became visible. A quick step brought her immediately to his side, and after their greetings they both fell silent. Despite their mutual happiness, the air felt tense between them. Each knew *this* morning would be different.

Both were silent until Elizabeth decided—if she were to speak of her feelings it might be easier, or at least a better story afterwards, to do so in a picturesque location. “There is a very pretty glen I just recalled; it is some thirty minutes’ walk from here, but much worth seeing.”

Darcy nodded and kissed her hand, as had become his habit, before taking her arm.

They made light conversation on the walk, but were more silent than not.

Elizabeth led them to a place where a stream ran through a coppiced wood, and next to a small waterfall the owner had placed a bridge, with a wooden bench right past it that had become stained with time. The woods had been cut to create a small clearing with a profusion of flowers.

The morning sun brightly lit the clearing, and sparrows flitted to and fro, looking for seeds. Elizabeth and Darcy sat on the bench in a soft green shade. Elizabeth was not sure whether she grabbed Darcy’s hand, or he grabbed hers. But as they sat close she drew in her breath, pushed away her hesitation, and began to speak. “Fitzwilliam—”

At the same instant Darcy said in a strained voice, “Elizabeth.”

They smiled at each other over the coincidence, and the humor of the moment relaxed Elizabeth’s nerves. Darcy nodded for Elizabeth to speak first, and she began, “Fitzwilliam,” enjoying the way his Christian name sounded on her lips. “Fitzwilliam,” she said it again with a smile, “I—I no longer feel anxious, I am comfortable with you, happy in your presence. I—you are the best man I know. I love it when you smile. I love—I love the shape of your nose, and the way you let your hair fall over your forehead.”

Darcy’s eyes on her were intent, and she saw his color rise and the dark look in his eyes deepen as she continued. “When I fell asleep yesterday morning, I felt safe and warm in your arms; I hope to do that again, and again—I want to fall asleep in your arms again. I—when I wake, I desire it to always be with you. I wish to start my morning walk with you, instead of towards you.” Elizabeth felt her eyes begin to tear with emotion, and Darcy placed the hand which was not squeezing hers against her cheek, and with his thumb slowly brushed her tears away. “Fitzwilliam, I love you. I love you; I want to marry you.” She felt suddenly shy and lowered her eyes, nestling her cheek closer into Darcy’s hand. “There’s nothing I so desperately wish as to marry you, and live with you.”

Darcy continued to brush her cheek, and pulled her face up so she looked at him again. Their faces were less than a foot apart. “Elizabeth, I love, love, *love* you.” Elizabeth felt his low voice vibrate in her middle. A smile broke through his impassioned gaze. “I can do nothing but accept your proposal.”

Elizabeth giggled through her tears, and bringing his head even closer, Darcy said, “Your laugh is the dearest sound in the world to me.”

“I believe you shall hear a great deal of it.”

“Why do you think I agreed to marry you?”

Elizabeth’s laugh cut off as she realized how close Darcy’s face had come to hers and saw how he looked at her mouth. She felt nervous tingles all over and half consciously licked her lips. She leaned her head forward to meet his kiss.

She had never felt so happy, safe, or pleased as when their lips met.

\* \* \* \* \*

They spent some twenty happy minutes with their mouths against each other; when they slowly stopped and pushed their foreheads against each other Darcy felt an elated lightness in his stomach. He had never been so happy. Elizabeth’s rosy cheeks, bright eyes, and delighted expression proved her happiness. They silently agreed to stand and return to Longbourn. Darcy’s stomach swooped, and his knees felt unsteady as he stood.

Elizabeth nestled herself against his side and tightly held his arm as they began to stroll back towards Longbourn, along the shaded path through the woods. Darcy had a wide, happy smile. Though he still dearly, dearly loved to hear Elizabeth laugh, Darcy thought he might enjoy kissing her even more.

She laughed, “That was a new experience.”

“Had you never been kissed before?”

“Never like that.”

Darcy felt himself puff up at this victory over Mr. Collins, and Elizabeth laughed. Darcy felt too happy for words, but several times a minute their eyes would meet, and Elizabeth would blush and widen her smile. Each time Darcy felt his happiness bloom again.

After a few minutes of silent communion, Elizabeth began, “Come, Fitzwilliam,”—he loved the sound of his name in her voice—“We must speak, and speak on a serious matter—did Georgiana order you to marry last night?”

Darcy laughed, remembering the previous evening. “I daresay I have rarely been so embarrassed, as when my shy little sister began to speak on how she wished a sister, and how she thought Lydia would become her sister should I marry *one* of hers. And with Bingley the entire time laughing in the background.”

“Oh, I at least was alone when Lydia gave me her orders—which were somewhat more direct. She gave the impression she worried Georgiana would fail to perform her part creditably, and it might depend upon me.”

“Hardly. We must tell Lydia her *sister* performed her task with exceptional skill and forwardness. Now I must speak on a serious matter of my own. Did you intend all along to be the one to propose? For I had a quite pretty speech planned out and was not able to use it at all.”

Darcy loved how her clear skin flushed when she became embarrassed and the direct way she always found to turn the tease around. “Oh! If it is that pretty, I must hear it. I am quite ready to let you make love to me for howsoever long you wish.”

“Nay, nay—I believe I shall save it for some special occasion, and in any case,” Darcy lowered his voice and leaned his head to Elizabeth’s, “now that I have kissed you, I must first add some lines to my description of your virtues.”

Elizabeth turned very red, and lowered her eyes. But then she looked directly back at him, bit her lip, and said in an alluring tone which Darcy felt in his stomach, “Then I shall expect it to be a very pretty speech indeed.”

Her expression was such that Darcy felt he had no choice but to kiss her again, and he did.

When they turned to walk again, breaking out of the woods and into the open sunlight, Elizabeth spoke. “It is my turn to ask a question; when did you find you loved me?”

“I must say, it began from our first conversation; however, when Jane was sick at Netherfield, I first realized how attached I had become. I decided, to my shame, your connections to trade were too far beneath my own for us to marry. I thought it best to tell you I had no serious intentions. But—”

“I believed as much,” Elizabeth interrupted. “Charlotte pointed out to me that a man likely feels a great deal if he cares enough to make it clear he does not feel enough to marry.”

“Yes, I believe I spoke more to convince myself to feel less, than to warn you. Though, in fact, I would wish you to forget all I said at that time; I cannot think of my attitude and behavior then with anything but abhorrence. I can see your next question in your eyes; I realized I had been a fool to think such considerations mattered when you smiled at me the day after Bingley proposed to Jane and explained how you would have refused the arrogant proposal you imagined me giving.”

Elizabeth laughed again. “It fits my picture of your character completely that being told decidedly a woman might refuse you would convince you that you must marry her.”

“If you did not promise the refusal in such a charming manner it may not have worked as well. I believe your mischievous smile at that moment will stick in my mind forever; I daresay a week has not gone past since then when I did not bring it to mind.”

It appeared such a statement deserved a kiss, or at least, that Elizabeth believed it to.

A minute later they began to stroll towards Longbourn again, and Darcy asked, “It is my turn to learn: how did you come to be in love with me?”

“Why, I must confess, my pleasure in your company has grown steadily since I discovered in our first conversation that you sometimes take opinions not your own for the sake of being contradictory. After that trait was established, everything else combined to convince me no other man could be so suitable for a woman such as myself.”

“I will acknowledge few men could be as suitable as myself for you,” Darcy replied with a smile.

“Oh my! And your vanity had just begun to recede. I fear I will be forced to tease you dreadfully and constantly to fight its resurgence.”

“I fear it may be a hopeless case; it is impossible for a man attached to such an excellent woman as yourself to do other than think well of himself.”

Elizabeth’s laugh and pretty blush delighted Darcy, as she said, “My goodness, I believe I may be the one who becomes vain if you continue to speak of me in that manner. We will make a fine couple, far too self-satisfied by our cleverness—as proven by finding such a fine companion—to be good company anywhere. Though, at least we shall always have each other to praise and flatter.”

Darcy laughed, and was joined by Elizabeth who added, “To continue my own story, after *that* night I believe from the first I wished I had accepted you, but I refused to allow myself to feel completely certain until you had returned and I saw you again. I *knew* when you remembered my words from our first conversation, and then turned them against me.”

At the pleased look in Elizabeth’s eyes, and her upturned mouth, Darcy leaned over to kiss her again. They found as they looked away from each other they were in the view of an amused farmer who was bringing a cart laden with vegetables towards Meryton.

With a deep blush Elizabeth called out. “I must have your congratulations, Mr. Smith.”

At that, the farmer doffed his cap. “I am very happy for you Mrs. Elizabeth, you as well Mr. Darcy.” The farmer added in a hesitant voice, “Will this change the—”

“No business today! None till Jane is married. But do not worry, the arrangement we made regarding your rents will not be changed; it was on Mr. Darcy’s advice I offered to modify the lease in that manner. In fact, Mr. Darcy and I think alike in all matters where it is not entertaining for us to think separately.”

The farmer appeared relieved by Elizabeth’s statement and bowed his head again. “The best of happiness to you both!”

As they walked towards Longbourn again Darcy said, “It is a very serious matter for many people when a major landowner marries. I know all of the tenants and servants at Pemberley will be very pleased at how well I have chosen as they discover your merits.”

Elizabeth blushed prettily at the comment, and Darcy chose to tease her further. “I had no idea my words at the ball had such an effect. Though, in fact, it does not surprise me. I always have seen you to be one who wishes to be so well spoken that her words are remembered and passed down among the hearers with the force of a proverb.”

As Elizabeth opened her mouth to reply, Darcy silenced her with a kind pat on her hand. “Do not worry; as your husband it shall be my study to memorize your words and turns of phrases, and repeat them back to you at appropriate moments.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I certainly shall get a big head from your praise. Come, we are almost to Longbourn, you will need to talk to my uncle; he is my closest male relative, and will wish to be there when we speak about the settlement—though I heard enough of your conversation yesterday to know that, with the bribe of Pemberley’s ponds in the back of his mind, he will hardly be a fierce defender of my interests.”

“Which is why we will have Lydia there as well.”

Elizabeth turned to Darcy. “What?”

“When I asked, I believe it was the second evening we met—at Lucas Lodge—you said you intended to have Lydia there when your marriage settlement was negotiated. And just now you acknowledged the necessity of it since your uncle, though I would not have guessed such from his manner, is easily corruptible. I’m certain I shall not be able to corrupt Lydia.”

With a laugh, Elizabeth shook her head. “Now, now, my uncle is an excellent man. You merely have found his weakness.” Then she turned her eyes prettily on Darcy from under her bonnet and exclaimed in surprise, “Oh! You are serious about Lydia.” Elizabeth giggled. “This shall certainly tickle her fancy.”

They now entered the familiar grounds around Longbourn, and before they walked to the entrance Darcy pulled Elizabeth off to the side. In an enclosed space behind a tall hedge Darcy kissed her again, and the two kept themselves pleasurably engaged for some minutes.

Rather sooner than Darcy would’ve liked, Elizabeth pushed him away and said, “I must let Jane share in my happiness.” Then with a quick step, Elizabeth walked to the entrance and opened the door. Mrs. Hill was there to help Elizabeth and Darcy take off their outerwear, and tell them the entire family, along with Bingley and Georgiana, were gathered in the parlor. The housekeeper realized from their body language and smiles, and with her own wide smile said, “Oh!”

“Indeed, we do have a most special announcement to make,” laughed Elizabeth. A happy, wide grin pulled at Darcy’s cheeks as the housekeeper shook both their hands, and said, “I know you’ll both be very happy. I am very, very pleased to hear this news, ma’am.”

It proved unnecessary for the happy couple to *say* anything. The moment they entered the room, Lydia and Georgiana stood and shrieked. Lydia’s shriek sounded like: "It worked.” Moments later, Elizabeth and Darcy were mobbed by their happy family, who hugged and congratulated them.

Darcy loved seeing how Georgiana and Elizabeth happily embraced each other, and he listened as Elizabeth laughed in reply to Georgiana’s question. "You and Lydia certainly shall be able to visit a great deal. You shall be sisters, after all.”

Georgiana blushed brightly, but despite her embarrassment her countenance was very pleased.

Bingley heartily shook Darcy’s hand. “I am very, very happy I shall be able to call you brother.”

“And I as well.”

Darcy watched Mrs. Bennet step up to Elizabeth with some worry. Mrs. Bennet embraced her daughter and said, “I am so pleased—so happy. And—my dear Mr. Bennet would have been as well.”

Elizabeth said with a happy smile, “Yes, Papa would have been very pleased.”

When Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner came up to shake their hands and embrace Elizabeth, Darcy said to Mr. Gardiner, “I will be very proud to call you uncle. You are Elizabeth’s closest male relative, and”—Darcy took Elizabeth’s hand again and squeezed it—“She respects you very much. Would you give me your blessing to marry your niece?”

“Most heartily.” Mr. Gardiner smiled. “We all trust Lizzy’s good sense, but everything I’ve heard or seen shows you are a man of very good character who I will be proud to call nephew.”

Darcy smiled at the man’s words and thought how a few months earlier he would have never cared for the good opinion of a tradesman. Elizabeth really had made him a better man.

After they shook hands again, Elizabeth embraced her uncle. Darcy added, “Elizabeth thought you would wish to be there when we spoke on the settlement.”

Mr. Gardiner nodded. “I do not believe you would abuse Lizzy’s interests—or that she would allow you to—but, even when a woman is competent to manage the affair on her own, it is best to have an older party who is—unattached—present to make sure her interests are cared for.”

Darcy turned to Elizabeth and caught her eye with a smile. She blushed rosily, knowing what he was about to say. “I agree completely. However, Elizabeth feared my ability to bribe you with access to my ponds meant she could not trust you to fiercely defend her interests.”

The older man’s eyes danced merrily, and in his mischievous expression Darcy clearly saw the family resemblance. “Why, Lizzy, I’m shocked you would think so little of my integrity. I would at least hold out for your aunt to be taken round Mr. Darcy’s park in a phaeton.”

Everyone laughed, and Darcy said, “That is a capital idea. I have just the cart for it and a nice pair of ponies. We shall be certain to travel round when you are in Derbyshire this summer. However, Elizabeth clearly needs someone else present to look after her interests—Lydia, we can trust *you* not to accept bribes.”

Lydia’s eyes widened. “Mr. Darcy, Lizzy was joking about Uncle Gardiner.”

Darcy grinned widely. “I daresay she was. I, however, still wish your presence. Elizabeth needs someone who will not be charmed by my ponds to look out for her interests.”

Lydia brought her eyebrows together in thought then nodded seriously. “I’m glad you suggested it. My uncle can be trusted, but a woman should be present. Most times Lizzy could handle her own affairs—but, she does love you, and love is a form of insanity.”

Lydia reddened as everyone except Georgiana laughed at her. “It is! It may be pleasant, but one hardly acts as they normally would once in love.”

“I could hardly deny that,” Darcy said, “but it still is better to be in love. Bingley, the scheme I have in mind involves you as well.”

Elizabeth had told him that after Mr. Collins had died she swore no one she cared for would ever again need to worry about money. Darcy was certain Elizabeth had put thought into how to guarantee her sisters’ interests in the marriage settlement. But he wanted to surprise and please her by offering an even better plan than hers.

The group went to Elizabeth’s study, and Darcy sat next to Elizabeth on the pretty white and pink embroidered sofa. Mr. Gardiner, Bingley, and Lydia all pulled wood backed chairs around the table in front of the sofa. Darcy spoke, “First, I wish to put up twenty thousand pounds to add to the sum Elizabeth and Bingley collected for Mary, Kitty and Lydia. That will bring their dowries to about thirteen thousand pounds each—while not a great fortune, it is a very respectable amount.”

Mr. Gardiner laughed. “It may seem little to *you*—but in some circles thirteen thousand pounds *is* a great fortune.”

“I’m glad to have your support; I shall ensure your wife is taken round the park each morning, if she so wishes, while you are at Pemberley.”

Mr. Gardiner grinned widely in reply as Elizabeth poked him with her elbow. Darcy smiled at her, and she said, “Be nice to my uncle.”

“I do think,” Darcy added, “while the income should be irrevocably settled upon the sisters, the capital should be only released if each of us agree.” He smiled at Lydia, “Surely you cannot object to *that* clause; after all, you think, should you wish to marry, you would be insane.”

Lydia blushed at everyone’s laughter, but said, “You *are* right. It is a good idea.” She looked at Elizabeth. “Women in love really cannot be trusted with their own interests.” With a serious voice Lydia asked, “And what plan for Longbourn? While a large amount, I know twenty thousand pounds is much less than its value.”

Darcy approved of how she tried to take seriously her role as Elizabeth’s defender. Her closeness with Georgiana was a good thing. “That was the second part of my scheme. One third of the income from the estate and use of the house would be settled upon Mrs. Bennet during her life, and—”

“Why settle anything upon her?” Lydia interrupted in a clipped voice. “She does not need much.”

Darcy frowned and looked at Elizabeth. A third was the traditional widow’s portion; any deviation from that would be Elizabeth’s choice, not his.

Elizabeth smoothed her dress along her legs and looked down. “Lydia,” Elizabeth’s eyes turned to the portrait of her father above the fireplace. “She is our mother.”

“So? *I* recall what she did when he—” Lydia stuttered to a stop as she recalled the presence of the three men in the room.

Darcy saw that Elizabeth had grown pale, and he took her hand and slowly kissed it. Elizabeth took a deep breath as Lydia said, “I’m sorry, Lizzy, I should not have—”

Elizabeth shook her head and said, “No. You more than anyone have a right to remember that time.” She looked down and flicked a speck off her dress. Darcy squeezed the hand he still held. Elizabeth turned to him with a smile then looked to the side with a frown. She held her free hand up and said, “Allow me to think.”

Her lips moved, and Elizabeth’s eyes grew unfocused as she whispered slowly to herself. Darcy admired the way her forehead wrinkled in concentration. At last, she said, “I think five hundred pounds. Her income would then be greater than seven hundred pounds, which is one third of what father and she had when he was alive. But, it is much less than one third of the estate.”

Lydia leaned forward with a tense posture and opened her mouth to argue.

“No.” Elizabeth cut her off. “I shall not do what you desire.”

 Lydia stiffly sat back and Elizabeth gave her a wry smile, “Mary once told me—you shall have to ask her just *who* she quoted for I did not recognize it—the best revenge is to be dissimilar to the one who performed the injury. We have no need to act in the way you suggested.”

At last Lydia nodded. Darcy continued to hold Elizabeth’s hand; he felt her squeeze his hand in return. He settled himself so he sat a bit closer to her and could feel the warm line of her leg against his own. Bingley appeared confused, but aware it would not be proper to ask why both Lydia and Elizabeth disliked their mother. Mr. Gardiner frowned, looked between Lydia and Elizabeth, and with an unhappy sigh busied himself scribbling notes onto a sheet of paper he acquired before they sat down.

Elizabeth broke the silence. “Well, Fitzwilliam." The novelty had not yet worn off. Darcy felt a happy flutter deep in his stomach when she used his Christian name. Elizabeth leaned her head against his shoulder. “Let us hear it: What nefarious scheme have you planned for the rest of Longbourn’s income?”

Darcy blushed. It was silly, but explaining his idea embarrassed him. He hoped Elizabeth liked it. “I know you worry for your sisters and wish to ensure that they are always well cared for. You—you told me once that you hoped to guarantee that not only your sisters, but their children also—and the generations after would be safe. You wanted to guarantee no girl related to you ever would need to marry to avoid poverty.”

Elizabeth squeezed his hand and gave him a soft smile when Darcy paused.

“Well.” Darcy cleared his throat and looked into her eyes. “I want us to establish a fund to support any female relative of yours who might ever be in need. It would be left alone for at least two decades, since your sisters will have sufficient dowries. The fund would grow to a substantial sum. Then, no matter how many daughters your sisters or their children might have, none would ever be in real need.”

Elizabeth looked up at him with luminous eyes but said nothing, and Darcy began to babble. “I know due to the laws against perpetuities and the difficulty of controlling future generations, I can’t guarantee *all* descendants of the family will always be well cared for but—I do have some thoughts on what can be done—and my, our, lawyers are very good, and—”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth put her fingers against his mouth. “I like your idea very much.” She began to tear up. “Very much. You—you really are the best man I know.”

Darcy looked at her with a soft smile and forgot the rest of the room.

Mr. Gardiner harrumphed from the background to catch the couple’s attention. “That is a very generous scheme, Mr. Darcy. Very. If you put Longbourn’s rents into such a fund, you will gain no income by marrying Lizzy. And you plan to give up some twenty thousand pounds in ready cash.” He leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps, it is *you* who need someone present to protect their interests?”

“I am a wealthy man"—Darcy half shrugged—“and not an extravagant one, and neither was my father. I have put aside thousands of pounds every year since I took the estate—I assure you, this does not harm me.”

Mr. Gardiner frowned and bounced the back of his pencil against the table. Darcy had not anticipated any objections to his scheme as it *was* very generous. However, if he had imagined an objection, it would not have been that he intended to cheat himself. He began to better understand why Elizabeth held Mr. Gardiner in such high esteem.

“Uncle,” Darcy spoke firmly, and held Mr. Gardiner’s eyes. “I will do this. It is a plot which has been in my mind for several weeks, and not a sudden thought. Elizabeth’s happiness is all that matters to me. This will not hurt me, and I will not regret it.”

They stared at each other, then Mr. Gardiner shrugged and relaxed. “Well. You violent young lovers always wish to carry everything your own way. There’s nothing *I* could say to convince you.”

Darcy openly put his arm around Elizabeth and pulled her closer to his side. “There is not. Besides, I am gaining Elizabeth’s services—you know she is a most excellent estate manager. She will be involved in making all *our* future decisions." The strength of his smile nearly stopped Darcy from speaking as he said ‘our.’ “In the long run, I shall come out ahead.”

“Oh!” Elizabeth exclaimed from his side. Her eyes were still teary, but she smiled happily. “The truth comes out. Despite all your pretty words about the sound of my laughter, it seems you marry me for money.”

Her eyes were just six inches from his, and Darcy held them as he replied, “Of course, we Darcys are pragmatists. You can have no cause to complain; *you* were the one to propose.”

The fine skin of her cheeks and forehead turned a very pretty pink. “I fear you shall repeat that story endlessly.”

“Of course I shall.” Darcy’s voice was low, and he almost whispered, “Your boldness in acting so—that is part of who you are and what I love about you. I never would wish to forget it.”

Elizabeth’s face softened, and her lips parted as she held her bright eyes on him. Darcy had begun to lean forward to kiss her, when Mr. Gardiner coughed loudly. “Ahem. Not that your lovers' talk is not fascinating—it is.” He grinned. “It surprises me not at all that *you* would be the one to speak first, Lizzy—but you are in company.”

Darcy felt himself blush like a schoolboy while Elizabeth jumped several inches away from him and took her hand back. Mr. Gardiner continued, “I also must insist your engagement last a month at the most.”

Lydia’s eyes were wide. “I had known a girl could encourage a man to speak, but I had no idea it might be proper for her to ask herself.”

“I daresay it is not *quite* proper”—Darcy laughed—“But any man who would take offense, should you ask them, would make *you* a poor husband.”

“La!” Lydia replied, “I would never marry such a man, in any case.”

Elizabeth said, her face still very red with embarrassment, “I am pleased you now think you might wish to someday marry.”

“Perhaps. Though not ‘til I am almost an old maid.”

Everyone smiled at Lydia.

Mr. Gardiner said, “I am entirely satisfied by your plans, Mr. Darcy. And I daresay I would be even if I were not to receive an excellent bribe. Lydia, what think you?”

Lydia stilled, surprised to be put on the spot. She frowned and looked at Elizabeth, who nodded and smiled. Lydia said, “I have no objections to your scheme. As far as I can tell, it seems to be a very good one.”

Darcy smiled and stood, offering his hand to pull Elizabeth up. “I’m glad to hear it. Shall we rejoin the rest of the family?”

As they walked out of the room, Darcy was surprised when Lydia rushed up to them and very quickly embraced him. Stepping back and flushing, she said, “I will be very pleased to have you as a brother.”

Darcy felt touched and with emotion in his voice replied, “And I will be very pleased to have you as a sister.”

# Chapter 18

Elizabeth awoke a day before her marriage with a small scream. She’d had that nightmare again. During the whole time since she’d become engaged, Elizabeth could not remember thinking of Mr. Collins once. And now, when she was to marry on the morrow, that dream again.

Elizabeth’s shoulders drooped as she slowly pulled on her morning clothes. She had hoped he was gone.

In this depressed mood, Elizabeth wandered out. Ten minutes later, she stood by the Meryton churchyard. She’d always avoided the graveyard. It gave her unhappy thoughts and memories, and not merely of Mr. Collins. This time she let herself in through the gate and looked around. There it was: a stone on which was written, ‘William Collins, Requiescat in Pace.’

Elizabeth felt an unpleasant certainty his shade would always be with her. She was happy, far happier than she had ever felt before—she looked forward to tomorrow. She wished very, very much to be married to Darcy. So why the nightmare? Why could he not at last leave her alone?

With a sigh, Elizabeth turned away. Her eyes were caught by another grave marker: ‘Thomas Bennet, loving husband and father.’ With a choked sob, Elizabeth realized she almost never visited him. Perhaps because he was buried next to *him*; perhaps because she always had been a little angry.

Tears sprang to her eyes; Elizabeth realized how terribly much she missed him. She wished it was he, not Uncle Gardiner, who would give her away tomorrow. “Papa, oh papa—I’m to be married tomorrow. To a very good man; the best I have ever met. I wish—oh, I so wish you could meet him. I wish you were here. I—let me tell you how I met him.”

For half of an hour Elizabeth talked to her father about her courtship, Mr. Darcy, and how happy she was. As Elizabeth finished, she heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Darcy. He gave a soft smile and stepped up behind her. Elizabeth leaned back into him so he could put his arms around her. He felt solid and warm, safe and happy.

“Papa, this is my Mr. Darcy, and I wish you to meet him.”

Darcy spoke, and Elizabeth felt his deep voice vibrate. “Mr. Bennet, I wish I could meet you. You raised a magnificent daughter. She is the best person I know; she is the loveliest, kindest, the most graceful, elegant, and brave woman I’ve ever met. I love her. I love her more than my own self.”

Darcy pulled Elizabeth closer in his arms as his voice thickened with emotion. “I love to hear her laugh, I love to see her smile, I love to touch her and be near her. Every day I feel my affection for her grow stronger. I wish you could be here and see how she smiles and her happiness. I swear, I swear upon everything in me, I will do all in my power to keep your daughter always happy. Mr. Bennet, I—I believe your spirit is somehow here, watching us. I feel I can sense your presence right now. So I ask your blessing, your permission to marry. For I promise with all my soul to always love and treasure Elizabeth as she deserves.”

Elizabeth smiled at Darcy’s words and stepped back so she was nestled closer against him. It may have been fancy, but with a chill, she too felt the presence of her father near them. And she felt him give his blessing. The two stood silently and listened to the birds chirp and the breeze blow through trees. Elizabeth’s eye followed a butterfly bouncing from flower to flower.

Elizabeth felt Darcy start and stiffen. She looked at him and followed his gaze to Mr. Collins’s grave marker. “Yes, he is here as well.” Elizabeth’s voice was flat as she remembered her nightmare.

The two looked at it, and Elizabeth added, “I had another dream about him and what he did to Lydia last night—I had thought or hoped he was gone.”

 For a time, Darcy said nothing but pulled her close and slowly rubbed her forearms and hands. After Elizabeth relaxed into his comforting hold, Darcy said, “When I first read your letter, I thought to stop my carriage and turn around so I could desecrate his grave.”

A small smile worked its way across Elizabeth's face. “Indeed. And how were you to accomplish that?”

“Ah—that is to say, I mean.” As Darcy stammered, Elizabeth turned to look up at him; he looked redder and more embarrassed than Elizabeth had ever seen him.

“Well?” She asked with a mischievous smile. “Do tell me.”

Darcy looked away from her. “I had some thought to—well, to empty the chamber pot on him.”

“You what!” At the expression on Darcy’s face, Elizabeth glanced between him and the grave several times before she dissolved into helpless giggles. “That. That—was not what I had expected you to say.”

Darcy had a stiff expression as he watched her continue to laugh. “Well, I did not do it.”

“No—and that is probably for the best, but only because someone might have seen you. It is the thought that counts.” Elizabeth started to laugh again at the image in her mind.

Darcy shook his head with a smile that showed that, despite his embarrassment, he was pleased to have improved Elizabeth’s mood. “Come. We have spent enough time here.”

Elizabeth nodded and let Darcy take her arm to lead her out of the cemetery. She giggled a half-dozen times on their walk back to Longbourn as she continued to imagine her dear stiff and proper Darcy ‘emptying the chamber pot’ on Mr. Collins’s grave.

When the two reached Longbourn, before they entered the house, Darcy pulled Elizabeth into the garden. “Elizabeth, I hope—I hope this was the last time his memory ever bothers you, but it may not be. I cannot promise—I wish I could make it so you never thought on him anymore—I wish I could make it so that no unhappiness ever touched you. Alas, I cannot. Whether it be Mr. Collins or something unimagined, we will face some trial in the future. But, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, I will always be with you. When troubles come, we will face them together.”

Darcy’s intent eyes gave Elizabeth the familiar happy flutters in her stomach, and she remembered how he had dissolved her ill humor this morning into laughter. With an intense rush of affection for this wonderful man who was hers, Elizabeth stepped forward and tightly embraced him. “Together,” she whispered into his ear standing on her toes, “we will face everything together.”

# Chapter 19

Now to settle the fates of our characters.

After some few adventures, Mr. Wickham enrolled himself in a regiment of the regulars. As a result, he was present at the great battle of Waterloo. Unfortunately for Lieutenant Wickham, his seduction of a major’s wife had been discovered less than a fortnight before.

The evening before the battle, Wickham was approached by the officer. “It looks to be a very serious battle on the morrow.”

“Yes, sir,” Wickham replied nervously.

“A lot of people die during battles of this sort. Occasionally accidents even happen. You know, people sometimes get shot by their own side.” The major leaned his head closer to that of the wide-eyed Wickham and added in a conspiratorial voice, “I have even heard of men who take the opportunity of a battle to settle scores. To off someone they dislike.”

Wickham gulped.

“I don’t believe in that sort of behavior, not at all. It’s the same as how I don’t believe in duels. Deprive his majesty of a brave soldier when he is most needed? No, indeed. I would never act so. You understand?”

Wickham nodded vigorously, not at all relieved.

The major displayed a feral grin. “A coward though, to shoot a coward who fails to give his all for God and country, *that* would be right. Don’t you agree, Wickham?”

Wickham stared aghast at his commanding officer. The major grabbed Wickham by the shoulders and jerked him so their faces were inches apart. “Wicky, listen carefully: If you are not the goddamn model of a modern British officer tomorrow, if I see you in the slightest hesitate to do your duty or attempt to save yourself when you ought to fight, by Gad, I swear I’ll shoot you.”

So inspired by this short speech, and more terrified by far of Major Thorpe than the French, Wickham fought bravely the next day. So impressive were his exploits that they were published in newspaper accounts of the day, along with the announcement of his posthumous award for valor. Upon reading those accounts Darcy was surprised; perhaps he had thought rather worse of his childhood companion than he deserved. At least Wickham died well. His father would have been pleased.

Anne de Bourgh, who has not been mentioned in this text at all, was so charmed by the excellent flattery of her mother’s steward that she ran off to Gretna Green with him. Then, much to the surprise of everyone who knew her, the man’s continued flattery effected over a period of some months such a change in Lady Catherine’s attitude that eventually she became reconciled to the match and was as fond as ever of her former steward. As Elizabeth was far less skilled in flattery, Lady Catherine never did become fully reconciled to her nephew’s marriage.

Jane and Bingley lived very happily together, had many children, and eventually Bingley purchased an estate close to Pemberley. The companionship between the two families remained close as long as they lived.

Caroline Bingley settled upon a middle-aged man with more fortune than fashion and, as a result, quite forgot her dislike of connections to trade.

Lydia Bennet married a smart young Colonel—in fact, Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Richard Fitzwilliam had been left at loose ends following the final end of the conflict and found himself greatly attracted to the liveliness of Mrs. Darcy’s young, and somewhat improper, sister. She, however, led him on a merry chase that took the better part of a year before they were finally, and happily, married.

The marriages of Mrs. Bingley and Mrs. Darcy gave Mrs. Bennet such extravagant expectations for her children that she hardly considered Colonel Fitzwilliam, though the third son of an Earl, rich. Mrs. Bennet was therefore disappointed that Elizabeth failed to throw her sisters in the way of other rich men. However, Elizabeth was greatly pleased when, through their friendship, Charlotte Lucas was thrown in the way of a wealthy man. Charlotte met, during her frequent visits to Pemberley, a recently widowed gentleman in his late thirties who owned an estate which bordered Pemberley.

Mr. Mayhew was impressed by Charlotte Lucas’s sensibility and desired to acquire a new mother for his children, the youngest of whom was but four. He proposed. Charlotte accepted. She liked everything she had seen of the gentleman and felt certain from his kind treatment of his children and his reputation in the neighborhood that he would be safe as a husband. While neither had hoped or planned to find love, within six months of their marriage the two were deliriously happy with each other.

Added to that joy was the happiness both ladies received from Charlotte’s near proximity to Elizabeth. Once again the women, now happily married, could easily walk to see each other—which they did nearly daily.

Lydia and Georgiana remained the closest of friends, and this closeness only increased when Georgiana married a fine young officer who was a protégé of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s. Darcy, despite the man’s lack of fortune and connections—he was the fourth son of a clergyman—was pleased by the quality of his brother-in-law’s character.

Kitty did not achieve her ambition of marrying an officer; however, she found no cause to repine as she married a very handsome—though not particularly sensible—clergyman. This clergyman was a near copy in manners and appearance of his cousin, a Mr. Elton of Highbury. None of her sisters *liked* him, but they were all relieved as Kitty could have done much worse. She had three daughters, all of whom ran away with smart young army officers of no fortune, whose careers were then supported by the preference provided by their uncle, General Fitzwilliam. One sadly died in Crimea during the charge of the light brigade. It had not been his to question why, but to do and to die.

Mary never married but instead established a school to train young girls, along lines laid out by Mary Wollstonecraft in her essays. The school was surprisingly successful, and Mary had a lifelong close and intimate friendship with one of her senior teachers. When her sisters or mother worried about her unmarried state, she would insist she was completely happy and wished nothing else.

Mrs. Bennet lived long enough to have many grandchildren and to annoy more than a few granddaughters with the lamentation that, “My goodness, you are already twenty. Why, that is practically an old maid. We must find you someone to marry you immediately!” She rarely visited Pemberley as relations between her and Elizabeth never were happy. She never visited Lydia as her youngest daughter explicitly told her not to. Jane and Bingley accepted her visits, though they were usually pleased when they ended. Mrs. Bennet spent most of her time, often three or four months in a year, with Catherine, who was the only daughter who really welcomed her.

As for Darcy and Elizabeth, they lived happily together to a shockingly old age. Their lives were always filled with laughter and happiness. Following the peace England entered a prolonged depression during which rents *did* sharply fall, and Darcy and Elizabeth expanded their holdings substantially by purchasing land from indebted gentlemen. Rents slowly increased again in the decades following and the Darcys turned a very good profit on this. As a result of this, and many other good decisions they made over the course of their long lives, the Darcy family went from being merely very rich, to very, very rich.

Elizabeth never lost the habits of economy she developed as Mistress of Longbourn. Thus the expenses of the family did not increase with their growing income, and as a result to this very day all of the many female descendants of Mrs. Bennet have trust funds such that they need never work a day in their lives if they so chuse.

In summary, everyone who ought to have been happy, was quite as happy as they deserved, and most who did not deserve to be happy, were still happy. Except for Mr. Wickham, who was not able to enjoy, or ruin, his excellent posthumous reputation, being dead.

# A Request from the Author:

Elizabeth and Darcy lead charmed lives. When we finish a story, we know Elizabeth will not die a year later in childbirth, and her children will escape the diseases which killed so many. She is a fictional character, whose wellbeing is protected by the will of the author.

The real persons who lived in Regency England had no such guarantees. The research I have done suggests one in two hundred full-term pregnancies ended in the mother’s death. At least a fifth of children would die before they became teenagers *in rich families*.

These facts should only be a sad part of history. But they are not. They are a terrifying reality. More than a billion people today live without access to medical care. Right now there are places where pregnancy is still among the most common ways for a woman to die. Places where one in five children do not see their sixth birthday.

Each month I give money to Doctors Without Borders. I enjoy knowing my actions may keep another human alive. You should support them, or another organization that provides healthcare in the poorest countries. Donate ten dollars a month, or twenty dollars a month, or one percent of your paycheck, or two percent— or any amount you feel comfortable giving. But donate something.

If we act, in twenty years, there will be a mother who survived childbirth because a doctor stopped her from bleeding to death. She will feel nostalgic, yet happy, as she watches her child, who survived an ear infection because of antibiotics we paid for, fall in love for the first time.

Help me make it happen.

http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/

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# My Other Books

At this point I have written so many novels that a simple list of all of them with a brief blurb is rather awkward to read through and put here – but at the same time, I of course, strongly want to encourage all of you to read more of them.

So I’m going to use a more conversational format for writing this, and before I start, I should make a quick apology: I’m going to copy paste this list into the back of all my books, so it will probably include a recommendation to read the book that you just read.

First, as an experiment I’ve published a collection of three of my earlier novels, *The Return*, *Mr. Darcy’s Vow,* and *A Dishonorable Offer*. So those three can be purchased for one price that is a bit more than half what it would cost to buy each book separately. You can buy it [here](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09GBD8ZMG).

As for my other books, several of the most popular and consistently best-selling books are [*Colonel Darcy*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01L2RAYD2), [*A Compromised Compromise*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07KYRV8BT), and my first book: [*Mr. Collins’s Widow*](https://www.amazon.com/Mr-Darcy-Collinss-Widow-Elizabeth-ebook/dp/B00UEY9O4U). All three of them also have audiobook versions available if that is the way you like to read your books.

[*Colonel Darcy*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01L2RAYD2) has action, danger, and a very cute romance arc involving letters that Elizabeth sent to Darcy while he was a prisoner of war. I’ve had an [audiobook](https://www.audible.com/pd/B078YD63QP/?source_code=AUDFPWS0223189MWT-BK-ACX0-105545&ref=acx_bty_BK_ACX0_105545_rh_us) version made for those of you who prefer to read while walking the dog, driving the car, or doing dishes.

[*A Compromised Compromise*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07KYRV8BT) starts with Elizabeth tripping into Darcy’s arms at the Netherfield ball; kissing follows inevitably, and then they are seen. Later my favorite (somewhat over the top) Colonel Fitzwilliam shows up, and then things go sideways as the two of them fall in love. You can also buy the [audiobook](https://www.audible.com/pd/B07XFKMTPB/?source_code=AUDFPWS0223189MWT-BK-ACX0-163626&ref=acx_bty_BK_ACX0_163626_rh_us) version.

[*Mr. Collins’s Widow*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00UEY9O4U)My first Elizabeth married Mr. Collins when she was fifteen after her father died, and following an awful year she became a widow. Her traumatized memories from that experience may keep her from ever being able to accept Mr. Darcy’s proposals. There is an [audiobook](https://www.audible.com/pd/B09RDSJW61/?source_code=AUDFPWS0223189MWT-BK-ACX0-295582&ref=acx_bty_BK_ACX0_295582_rh_us).

If you have read a lot of my books, you may have already read all three of these, so here a couple of recommendations from some of my less popular books that I think deserve more readers:

[*Reader, I Married Him*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08G1ZS8NX): This one *definitely* deserves more readers. I think it actually has the fewest readers of any of my books. It is a *Jane Eyre* inspired variation, and I think the way that I initially marketed it specifically as a *Jane Eyre* variation pushed away readers who hadn’t been craving reading something like that. But honestly, it is a great P&P story. First person from Elizabeth’s pov, with a comic tone often maintained, despite the dramatic events. Elizabeth is forced to become a governess after her father died, and Mr. Darcy is her mysterious widowed employer. Drama, passion, and romance ensue.

[*The Missing Prince*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079CY1QYZ): Perhaps I just showed up at the enchanted P&P game too early, or something about the book didn’t click with everyone, but I have always been proud of this emotionally intense fantasy regency, where Elizabeth and Darcy have a mystical bond that lets them feel each other’s emotions.

[*Overhearings Less to the Purpose*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B084FGXGFC)*:* When writing I thought it was really, really funny. However, from the reviews it is clearly a very hit and miss. Some people love it, and you might be one of them, but apparently the humor simply did not work for a lot of readers. But if you don’t mind reading something that is somewhat absurd, with Darcy being a bit OOC, you might really enjoy the book. Or maybe you won’t, but you should give it a try anyways.

[*Mr. Darcy’s Vow*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01D3VL93O)and [*The Trials*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B071ZS52KF): My angstiest stories, and the first two of my books to sell half as many copies as my other books. Some readers really like them though. So if you want to watch our dear couple go through emotionally intense events, drama, and lots of ups and downs and twists and turns, these two will be for you. Also, spoiler, but in one of them Lady Catherine gets killed.

And *now*, to complete the list of my books:

Two of my more recent books, [*Disability and Determination*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09W7JTLL7), and [*The Netherfield Fire*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08JKCCZDP) both involve illnesses, references to early nineteenth century medical practices, and dealing with the consequences of awful things happening. They are also two books that I plan to permanently keep in Kindle Unlimited as a long-term experiment.

[*The Return*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B015HZ49H2)happens to be the book whose plot I refer to the most often when I’m explaining to people who I meet in the wild what I do for a job. It can be easily described very quickly: Mr. Bingley returns from London to marry Jane immediately; Darcy and Elizabeth argue at the wedding breakfast. It has been made into an [audiobook](https://www.audible.com/pd/B09V3KFSL8/?source_code=AUDFPWS0223189MWT-BK-ACX0-300223&ref=acx_bty_BK_ACX0_300223_rh_us).

[*Too Gentlemanly*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0784ZCSZY)is a delightful story about a twenty five year old Elizabeth meeting a Darcy who went through a great deal of strain after Georgiana had Wickham’s illegitimate child. I’d thought I was writing a comedy while I was writing it, but I then learned from the reviews that what I’d actually written was something that was a bit too angsty for *that* title. So, a mix of funny and emotional. It also has an [audiobook](https://www.audible.com/pd/B0B6GQYY54/?source_code=AUDFPWS0223189MWT-BK-ACX0-315405&ref=acx_bty_BK_ACX0_315405_rh_us).

[*A Dishonorable Offer*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01HN82EPA) is one of my favorites out of my own novels, but I really like this book, but it is not for everyone since some people cannot stand the idea of Darcy asking Elizabeth to become his mistress. Mr. Bennet died, Mrs. Bennet spent all the money from her settlement, the girls are very poor, and then Lydia married a hunky blacksmith. She is happy, but everyone else is socially ruined. Trained by his cousins to be charming, Darcy is looking for a new mistress. But Elizabeth is not willing to give up her honor in that way.

[*Mr. Bennet’s Daughter*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07QBBXHZ9) is, in my opinion, one of my best books, it is a romance between Elizabeth and Darcy, but more than that it is about Elizabeth’s relationship with her father. Mrs. Bennet fled Longbourn with her lover shortly after Elizabeth was born, leaving Mr. Bennet to raise his daughter alone.

[*Elizabeth’s Refuge*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07TS2WC23) is made of drama and adventure. I’d written a couple of novels in a row where Colonel Fitzwilliam had been used as either a villain or an ambiguous character, and I decided I wanted to do right by him by making him the hero of a bunch. Elizabeth is a governess whose employer tries to rape her. She bashes him over the head with a vase and flees to Mr. Darcy. Then Colonel Fitzwilliam does awesome things.

My meta novel is [*Writerly Ambitions*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082TQXQBR), where Elizabeth had been forced to live in London in disgrace for years after an unfortunate event involving Mr. Wickham. While there she started writing novels and has become a success. Now that all her sisters are married, she is allowed to return to Longbourn, but she is not sure if she wants to be in her family home again. But Mr. Darcy, the friend of Jane’s husband, is a man who she enjoys coming to know.

I think that’s it, except for [*Mr. Bennet’s Illness*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JBCCW1Y), which is just ten thousand words of funny nonsense about when Mr. Bennet decides he despises noise, Mr. Collins falls passionately in love with Lydia, and Mrs. Bennet is the sensible parent.

And of course, my mailing list bait: *Darcy’s Dance with Jane*, which you can get just by signing up for my [mailing list](https://b23331fe.sibforms.com/serve/MUIEABEHyixv7-QPpVHU1eWtEwO32i2HAFU5LVz8MfP9cf3tgyF6VazyN4P-8xs8TbvuML5Yfe0lz2ItqlwvEEogPRHvO4XczKKb8w8BKhVXX_85r_6ovRwqPLk1sOtE_iWlhGpPXUXli2duO5QlPvgbwYpAx00mghprTMzwGf0EfH29sQ9b8BSxXSZgUDcVA4AupBQqi3jfocxy) (and then immediately unsubscribing if you really don’t want to hear about all the great new novels that I’m writing).

A quick final note: The audiobook version links are the bounty links, where if you purchase the book as the first book from a new audible subscription, I’ll get extra money.

# About the Author

After spending happy childhood days in the desolate neighborhood of a suburb of a suburb of Los Angeles, the author at present resides in a fashionable (but not *too* fashionable) district of Budapest. He lives with his wife, their dog, and their cat, and they currently are awaiting the arrival of the continuation of his esteemed, though untitled, line.

Mr. Underwood first discovered the joys of Pride and Prejudice on a long ride in a horseless carriage during his youthful years when he still had that much coveted ability to read in a moving vehicle without becoming ill. He was most impressed with himself for noticing all the clever humor, and immediately followed his consumption of Pride and Prejudice with the pursuit of many other novels, from that greatest century of English literature, the nineteenth.

It was only later when he began to read Pride and Prejudice fanfiction (in fact after reading a Harry Potter fanfiction written by Jann Rowland). But once he did, he passionately pursued every opportunity to acquaint himself with more of these lovely tales about Our Dear Couple. It was a natural sequel from this to his current occupation of writing more of these trifling tales inspired by the lovely writings of A Lady.

He enjoys the perusal of letters from those who have read his novels (though, sadly, he sometimes forgets to reply, even though at present his business does not occupy him sufficiently to provide a satisfactory excuse for not doing so, sorry!) and you can send him such letters at [timothyunderwood.author@gmail.com](mailto:timothyunderwood.author@gmail.com).