

What if Mr Darcy does not give up after his failed proposal?

PASSION & PERSISTENCE

A 'Pride and Prejudice' variation novel



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Kinga Brady – Passion and Persistence



In this daring reimagining of Jane Austen's beloved classic, *Passion and Persistence* renews the intricate dance of love, pride, and misunderstanding between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy.

What if Mr. Darcy didn't give up after the infamous Hunsford proposal?

In this enthralling novel, Darcy's relentless pursuit of Elizabeth Bennet challenges the boundaries of social norms and personal pride. After a fateful proposal is rejected with scathing honesty, Darcy's persistence ignites a spark that cannot be quickly extinguished. As Elizabeth grapples with her own conflicted feelings, the pair's journey unfolds against the backdrop of Regency England's societal expectations and personal discovery.

From witty banter to heartfelt revelations, *Passion and Persistence* explores the transformative power of love and the courage required to embrace it. Will Darcy's determination win Elizabeth's heart, or will his past missteps prove insurmountable? Dive into this captivating tale of romance, resilience, and the relentless pursuit of true love.

Dear Reader,

The author warmly invites you to explore a dedicated story website, rich with additional content connected to the novel. You will find detailed explanations, images, illustrations, outtakes, and links to *Pride and Prejudice* and the Regency era.

This is where you find it:
passion-and-persistence.webnode.co.uk

A special thank you to Tish Holmes for her invaluable editing suggestions, which have made this novel a better read.

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Passion and Per- sistence

by

Kinga Brady



A Pride and Prejudice

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variation
novel
2024, 2025

Character List of *Pride and Prejudice*

Elizabeth Bennet is an intelligent and spirited young woman with a keen wit who enjoys studying people's characters. Although she initially dislikes Darcy, circumstances cause her to reassess her negative impression of him, and she eventually falls in love with him. She is 20 years old.

Fitzwilliam Darcy is a wealthy and proud man who falls in love with Elizabeth, revealing a generous and thoughtful nature beneath his somewhat stiff demeanour. 27 years old.

Mr. Bennet is Elizabeth's ironic and often apathetic father. Unhappily married, he has failed to provide a secure financial future for his wife and daughters.

Mrs. Bennet is Elizabeth's foolish and unrestrained mother, obsessed with finding husbands for her daughters.

Jane Bennet is a gentle and kind-hearted young woman who is Elizabeth's confidant and the oldest of the Bennet daughters. She falls in love with Bingley but is cautious about revealing her feelings for him, almost 23.

Mary Bennet, the pretentious third Bennet daughter, prefers reading to socialising. 18 years old.

Catherine (Kitty) Bennet is the Bennets' peevish fourth daughter. At 17, she joins her sister Lydia in flirting with soldiers.

Lydia Bennet, the Bennet's immature and irresponsible youngest daughter. Mrs. Bennet's favourite, she shocks the family by running away with Wickham. 15 years old.

Charles Bingley is a good-natured and wealthy man who falls in love with Jane. He is easily influenced by others, especially his close friend Darcy. He is 23 years old.

Caroline Bingley, Bingley's shallow and haughty sister, befriends Jane and later snubs her. She attempts to attract Darcy's attention and is jealous when Darcy is instead drawn to Elizabeth. Older than Charles.

George Wickham is a handsome and personable fortune hunter to whom Elizabeth is initially attracted. He eventually runs off with her and is forced by Darcy to marry Lydia. 28 years old.

Lady Catherine De Bourgh, Darcy's arrogant aunt, dominates Mr. Collins and entertains hopes that her daughter will marry Darcy.

Colonel Fitzwilliam Darcy's well-mannered and pleasant cousin is interested in Elizabeth but needs to marry someone with money.

Georgiana Darcy, Darcy's shy but warm-hearted sister. 16 years old.

Other Characters

Mr. Collins, Mr. Bennet's ridiculous cousin, will inherit Longbourn after Mr. Bennet's death. Upon Lady Catherine De Bourgh's recommendation, he seeks a bride, first proposing to Elizabeth and then to Charlotte Lucas. 25 years old.

Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's sensible and intelligent friend, disappoints Elizabeth by marrying Mr. Collins for money and security. 27 years old.

Sir William and Lady Lucas are Charlotte's parents and the Bennets' neighbours.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, Mrs. Bennet's intelligent and cultivated brother and sister-in-law.

Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, a country attorney and his vulgar wife, Mrs. Bennet's sister.

Mr. and Mrs. Hurst Bingley's snobbish sister and brother-in-law. Mrs. Hurst spends most of her time gossiping with Caroline, while Mr. Hurst does little more than play cards and sleep.

Miss De Bourgh, Lady Catherine's sickly, bland daughter.

New Characters in this novel

Phillip Fitzwilliam, Viscount Matlock, Darcy's eldest cousin, Lady Matlock's first son

Lord Fitzwilliam, Earl of Matlock, Darcy's mother's brother

Lady Matlock, Darcy's aunt by marriage, Richard Fitzwilliam's mother

Summary of *Pride and Prejudice*

The novel opens with one of the most famous lines in English literature: “It’s a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” The statement is seemingly what Mrs. Bennet thinks as she sets her sights on the newly arrived Bingley, who she is sure will make a suitable husband for one of her daughters. Bingley takes an immediate interest in the beautiful and shy Jane at a ball. The encounter between his friend Darcy and Elizabeth is less cordial. Although Austen shows them intrigued by each other, she reverses the convention of first impressions: the pride of rank and fortune and prejudice against the social inferiority of Elizabeth’s family hold Darcy aloof, while the pride of self-respect and prejudice against Darcy’s snobbery hold Elizabeth equally aloof.

The pompous Collins soon arrives, hoping to marry one of the Bennet sisters. Mrs. Bennet steers him toward Elizabeth, but the latter refuses his offer of marriage. He instead becomes engaged to her friend, Charlotte. During this time, Elizabeth encounters the charming Wickham. The two have a mutual attraction, and he informs her that Darcy has denied him his inheritance.

After Bingley abruptly departs for London, Elizabeth's dislike of Darcy mounts as she becomes convinced that he is discouraging Bingley's relationship with Jane. Darcy, however, has grown increasingly fond of Elizabeth, admiring her intelligence and vitality. While visiting the now-married Charlotte, Elizabeth sees Darcy, who professes his love for her and proposes. A surprised Elizabeth refuses his offer, and when Darcy demands an explanation, she accuses him of breaking up Jane and Bingley and denying Wickham his inheritance. Darcy subsequently writes Elizabeth a letter explaining that he separated the couple mainly because he did not believe

Jane returned Bingley's affection. He also discloses that after squandering his inheritance, Wickham tried to marry Darcy's then 15-year-old sister to gain possession of her fortune. With these revelations, Elizabeth begins to see Darcy in a new light.

Shortly after, the youngest Bennet sister, Lydia, eloped with Wickham. Elizabeth is alarmed by the news, as the scandalous affair, which is unlikely to end in marriage, could ruin the reputations of the other Bennet sisters. When she tells Darcy, he persuades Wickham to marry Lydia, offering him a substantial sum of money. Despite Darcy's attempt to keep his intervention a secret, Elizabeth learns of his actions. With Darcy's encouragement, Bingley returns, and he and Jane become engaged. Finally, Darcy proposes again to Elizabeth, who, this time, accepts.

NEW PROPERTY

Prologue



The meadow glowed green, soft with the touch of spring and speckled with the first buds of wildflowers, which promised to turn the open land into a colourful carpet soon. Above, a red kite glided lazily across the sky, its eyes trained on the ground, poised to swoop for any unwitting prey. Only a lone rider and his horse disturbed the silence of the landscape, moving with a steady, purposeful grace.

As he surveyed his new property, Darcy had to shield his eyes from the intense rays of the spring sun. The land stretched endlessly, its fertile fields and promising vistas assuring him that he had made the right decision. He perched high on his faithful friend, Devil – a beautiful, high-spirited stallion, sleek and black as midnight, standing over sixteen hands¹ high. The animal had the cunning ability to read Darcy's moods, and this time was no

¹ A horse is measured in *hands*, as originally the height was determined by the number of hand widths from the ground to the *withers* (the top of the shoulder, where the neck meets the back). A hand equals four inches (ten centimetres), roughly the width of a man's hand.

exception; he remained motionless, mirroring Darcy's solemn, reflective state as he gazed across the vast land now under his care.

After a few moments, Darcy's gloved hand moved quietly, comfortingly, patting Devil's neck. He dismounted with a swift, practised move, landing lightly on his feet, his boots pressing into the damp earth. He took a few steps and knelt on the ground. Letting his fingers trace the contours of the soil, his touch reverent, almost meditative, he caressed the earth with one of his hands, then ran his fingers through the earth. Scooping up a handful, he raised it to his nose. Deeply, he inhaled the thick, familiar, earthy aroma and examined the sample. He made the soil crumble between his fingers and nodded in satisfaction. The earth was good, as he remembered.

Darcy stood, dusting off his gloves, and called Devil, who went to him immediately. He nudged him with his head, and Darcy reacted as always by scratching behind his ears and stroking the animal along his neck with a smile that reached his eyes as his gaze drifted back over the meadow while he stroked Devil's neck.

“What say you, my friend?” he murmured. “Shall this land suit your liking?”

Devil snorted in agreement, drawing a smile from Darcy.

His smile faded as he cast another glance around the meadow and then turned his gaze westward. Though the dense canopy of the treetops obscured the view, he knew precisely what lay beyond those trees that framed the edge of the property. His heart beat faster, a quickening he both relished and resented for its lack of control. Of course, he knew – he saw it with his mind’s eye – *her* home was behind the treetops in that direction. He imagined the path winding from the meadow, cutting through the woods, and emerging at the grounds of the house. He could be there in less than half an hour if he walked swiftly, a mere quarter of an hour if he rode on Devil.

He remembered her as one remembers the sunlight breaking through spring foliage: clear, unexpected, and irrevocable. A single word, a single glance had been enough to burn her image into his memory forever.

The urge to see her, to be in her presence, tugged at him, and he closed his eyes against the longing. To ride there, unannounced, would be absurdly impulsive and reckless – a stark contrast to his character. Even unwise and indecent. Still, the thought remained, tempting him.

He shook his head to push the impulse to visit her aside.

With a deep breath, he mounted Devil once more, his hands sure on the reins. After a few steps, he paused, eyes still fixed on the distant treetops, his gaze lingering in the direction of *her* home, feeling the invisible pull. While still looking in that direction, he made his animal turn. He rode with renewed energy, enjoying the soft breeze sweeping across his face as if it carried a faint whisper of the promise before him.

As he rode on, only one thought occupied his mind, pressing with a peculiar weight upon his heart. The wind whispered as it brushed past, as though bearing the echoes of what could be – a future neither assured nor denied.

How might she react upon learning of his presence? So near? Would her face soften with pleasure, or would that arched brow rise in disapproval? Would she understand what had brought him so close or dismiss him as simply an uninvited neighbour, a bad memory from the past?

BROTHERLY TALK

Chapter 1



At Hunsford, Rosings Park

Darcy walked away in a hurry, his heart heavy with the weight of her rejection. He walked away from the woman who had scorned him; the pain of her refusal was like a knife wedged in his chest. He still saw the stubborn lift of her chin, the rigid set of her mouth – so resolute, so unyielding. That expression had seared itself into his mind more than the words that followed. He walked away before he might lose all sense of pride; he had endured enough humiliation. His steps were heavy with the burden of his unrequited love, each footfall a testament to the emotional turmoil he was experiencing.

Her indignant yet sweet countenance haunted him, lingering in his mind's eye with a torment he could scarcely dispel. He knew he was the last person she wished to see – *the last person whom she could ever be prevailed on to marry...* He could hardly utter the words asking her to read his letter. His voice

was deep and hoarse. He used her surprise to put the letter in her hand, and he turned and left her, knowing it might be the last time.

Possibly, I will never see her again.

The pain of this thought was so acute in his breast, so final, that he had to make an effort not to stop breathing and lean on his knees. She could still possibly see him, and he would not show weakness or glance back for a final look – he made himself walk away.

By the time Darcy reached Rosings, he felt almost lifeless, as though a part of him had died. Dead and hollow. His emotions were so tightly suppressed that he mercifully felt nothing at all. This numbness was a small blessing; he knew that if he allowed himself to feel, the weight of what he had just lost would crush him. Only a short while ago, he had been filled with nervous determination, eager to claim her as his own. Now, he was devastated, his thoughts unable to coalesce around anything but the aching void her rejection had left behind. It was a stark realisation of just how deeply he desired her presence in his life.

He had not meant to write. What good could possibly come of it now? And yet – if she never knew the truth... If she went on believing Wickham's lies, believing he had ruined her sister's

happiness... No. He could not bear it. The previous night, driven by a fervent need, he poured his heart into his letter, driven by his need to make her understand her mistake in his character. He wrote and wrote until several pages were filled with his role in persuading Bingley to abandon Miss Bennet and the painful experience of his history with Wickham. His heart had cried out in the solitude of the night, insisting that he was a good man, but his mind was clouded with the sharp sting of her refusal.

Later, they paid their respects at the parsonage at his cousin's urging. Despite the inner turmoil that made each step feel like a monumental effort, he could not think of a plausible reason for not saying goodbye to the people at Mr. Collins' abode, as he had visited them during his sojourn.

She was not there when they entered. Standing in the very room where his proposal had been rejected, where his love had been casually thrown away, was excruciating. His eyes fell on her embroidery on one of the chairs, and he had an errant thought to take it as a token, and for a moment, his hand twitched toward it. Would she miss it? Would she think him a thief or a fool? He did not touch it, but the urge lingered, shameful and oddly tender. He was both disappointed and relieved by her

absence, but he was eager to leave. When he excused himself to return to Rosings, he knew she was out somewhere with *his* letter.

As he climbed the stairs of Rosings for the last time, he felt numb in his heart, as if part of him had been extinguished. Without feeling, he bid farewell to his aunt and cousin, each word hollow and mechanical. He stood at the window, staring into nothingness while his valet packed his belongings. Below, rose bushes lined the eastern wall, where she had once strolled with Mrs Collins. He turned away before the memory could settle.

Even as he oversaw the final preparations of his carriage, ensuring everything met his usual standards, his mind remained a blank slate. He went through the motions without letting himself think about... *her*, not even for a moment.

The following day, everything seemed tasteless and devoid of colour. The coffee, which on other days stirred his senses with its pleasantly bitter vigour, now felt empty and dull; the toast, though baked to a golden crispness, appeared stripped of all salt, all enjoyment. Darcy sat at the table; his gaze fixed blankly ahead as though searching among the morning fare for something he had lost – something no flavour nor scent could ever restore. A dull weight pressed upon his spirit; waking

had brought no relief, only a quieter, more insidious form of sorrow. The silence of the room felt stifling, and in every sip lingered the same thought: without her, all was tasteless, all was meaningless.

They were ready to depart without delay.

On the way back to London in the carriage, he gazed absently through the pane, unseeing, as the beautiful countryside of Kent passed unnoticed, its quiet charm quite lost to him. Would he ever appreciate anything again? Would he ever find joy? Call it drama if one must, but for a man so long insulated by pride, the pain was novel, and no less keen for that. He thought of losing his parents, but their deaths were inevitable and expected when the time came. But this – this rejection – had stripped him of the possibility of a bright future with the woman he loved.

Her rejection, he winced, was unexpected and brutal. He felt it acutely: knowing she was lost to him made him comprehend just how overwhelming his feelings were and how inadequate his approach was – he had no idea she hated him so much. The look of condemnation on her face had been unmistakable.

How could he have misjudged things so completely?

He was wounded, yet a nagging thought persisted: he could have done better. His lady had

found him lacking, but Darcy did not feel ready to face it all. He needed time. For the time being, he was not in the right state of mind; he did not think he could handle facing what happened in any depth, the reality of his failure. For now, he preferred to wallow in his misery.

He sat there facing his cousin, the colonel, barely listening. Fortunately, his cousin never struggled to converse and chatted away. He praised the success of their visit, which Darcy received in silence, for it revealed far too plainly his partiality for Miss Elizabeth. Thankfully, Richard soon found another topic to discuss: his new army assignment. This time, Darcy did not even pretend to be interested. His cousin's voice was nothing more than background noise – it came through something akin to a waterfall.

Thankfully, Richard's voice and the steady rhythmic movement of his carriage soon rocked Darcy to sleep. The effort of writing several pages to her the previous day, stretching into the early hours of dawn, had drained him. Having slept little the night before, he had indulged in a morning brandy before their departure, hoping to dull the ache in his chest.

It worked – for a little while.

The brandy, combined with his exhaustion, granted him a dreamless sleep, giving his weary

body a brief reprieve before the full weight of his heartache descended upon him again.

His household was always happy to see him at Darcy House in London. They were very much attuned to him in their faithful service, so they sensed something was wrong immediately after he alighted from the carriage. Their master hardly said a word, and his expression was grave. When he arrived from somewhere, he usually engaged in conversation happily enough with some of his upper staff. This time, however, Darcy was not in the mood for small talk. He did not ask about their health; he did not ask about the house. He did not comment on his trip, nor did he mention the weather.

His staff, ever proficient, instantly mirrored their master's mood and got on, although speculation was rampant, especially after a few days. They speculated wildly: a quarrel with his aunt, a sudden business loss – until the butler delivered his valued opinion: a man only got into such a state for one reason, and that was a woman. Soon, the whole household agreed and began to fear for their master. What could be the problem for a gentleman like their excellent employer?

All this speculation was lost on Darcy – all he wanted was to be left alone. Unfortunately, he could not close himself completely, as Richard had asked him to stay with him rather than go to his apartment at the earl's home, as he still had a few days before he had to report back for duty at the headquarters. He did not want his mother to fuss about him, which would happen if he were under her roof. Darcy had no good excuse to refuse him.

Darcy, as any discerning Reader is by now keenly aware, was a taciturn fellow at the best of times; now, he veritably grumbled. His present silence plunged to such funereal depths that even the most seasoned footmen or valet might have tiptoed past it with trepidation. The strange thing was that he could see himself from the outside but was horrified inside that he could not control the fact that he did not *want* to regulate his behaviour.

For three days, he said no to his valet's every gesture to help him in any way. The poor man was beside himself. In his shirtsleeves, Darcy locked himself in his study during the day. He tried to work but soon gave up pretending and only stood from his chair to look out the window or pour another drink. The staff did not know what to make of him; even the housekeeper's delicious meals from Cook remained untouched on the tray. They

wanted to help him in any way they could, but they were at a loss for words. One of the maids even asked the housekeeper whether she ought to pray for him aloud. The housekeeper, though devout, advised against it.

On Sunday, he did not go to church. He did not go to breakfast, he did not go to lunch, and he only showed up for dinner because by that time, heartache or not, he was starving. A man had to eat, and Darcy, after all, was a healthy young man; eventually, his body demanded sustenance.

Richard did not know what to think either as he watched his cousin struggle with himself. Watching him, Richard wondered at the intensity of Darcy's feelings. He had seen men broken by battle, but this – this was a different kind of war, one waged within the heart. And from the look of it, Darcy was losing. Richard wondered, not for the first time, what sort of woman could bring his cousin so low – and whether she might still undo the damage.

First, he let him be, as, in his opinion, a man had the right to be left alone; he understood his need for privacy to sort out his troubles. He himself did not like to talk about the fact that he still had nightmares from his time on the battlefield.

He wondered why this was happening all of a sudden, however.

As an army leader, he had to use his skills to make his men open up if he was to help them in any way. He learnt that men tended to bottle up their feelings, thinking it a weakness to grumble. Darcy was no different, and he was especially adept at concealing his troubles. However, Richard had had enough by the third evening and confronted his younger cousin.

“Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy snapped his head toward his cousin, who hardly ever called him Fitzwilliam – that was his surname, Richard Fitzwilliam, so to avoid confusion, Darcy was always Darcy to him.

“What plagues you, Darcy? You look as though you’ve returned from battle and not the victorious kind. I have never seen you in such a state... You are sorely blue-devilled². Well, not since I had to rescue you from the Clementine debacle at university. Even then, you were up and fencing on the third day. What’s going on?”

Seated opposite Darcy, he at last understood that his cousin was not merely disappointed – he was all but undone by it.

The said incident involved a young woman. Darcy lost his young head only to learn that she

² Affected with the blue devils; depressed, melancholy, low-spirited.

favoured not only him but also Viscount Lancaster, a rival of his. Rather, she chose him over Darcy, although that relationship did not result in marriage. (When she was disappointed in marrying into a titled family, she thought of seeking Darcy's favour again, but she thought wrong; Darcy was not interested by then.)

He got awfully drunk when he found out about her duplicity. It was the first time in his life he wasted himself on drink, and it cost him the next day and a half in bed with a terrible headache. Richard was sent to talk some sense into him. When he was himself again, Darcy swore that no woman was worth getting sick over.

Darcy looked up for a moment but then returned to looking at his plate; he shrugged. What could he say? That he, Fitzwilliam Arthur George Darcy, had been rejected? By a country lass, nonetheless! That he put his heart on a plate for the lady, only to have it thrown back into his face? In the cruellest way possible? That he misjudged the situation terribly, and instead of expecting his addresses, Miss Elizabeth hated him with a vengeance? Besides the humiliation, he had not yet digested what had happened at Hunsford.

He looked up at his cousin and examined him. Could he trust him with his troubles?

Richard was his brother, he reflected. Of course, he was his cousin in truth, but their relationship had long transcended that family tie. Richard's elder brother, Phillip, was some five years older than him and three years older than Richard, so he was off to school and university before them. That fact prompted the cousins to spend a great deal of time together, but it was more than that.

Matlock and Pemberley, their family estates, were not far apart, so they often visited each other when they were younger. At Pemberley, they frequently shared their time with George Wickham, the steward's son, encouraged by Darcy's father (George being his godson). As both were older than Darcy, even if George was older by one year only and his cousin by two, they often conspired against Darcy. Richard had switched his loyalties to his younger cousin irrevocably by the time Darcy turned fifteen, however, seeing the other's strange enjoyment of the increasingly cruel pranks he came up with at Darcy's expense. That was the turning point in their relationship. That, and the fact that Richard never lamented or felt cheated, because Darcy was looking to inherit a considerable estate while he had to work for a living, although he received an allowance from his family. Richard understood his position within his own

family; he understood and accepted the way things were. On the other hand, Wickham resented Darcy and his lot more and more; by the time they went to university, they were estranged.

Darcy admired his cousin for his integrity. He knew Richard was also a proud fellow, making it exceedingly difficult for Darcy to offer him any assistance. And Darcy wanted to help him. When his father died some five years earlier, he used the guise of the will to bestow five thousand pounds on him. Richard accepted that with gratitude, but any further financial help was almost impossible – he simply refused. The only avenue left was Richard's birthday and Christmas, when he did accept gifts.

Darcy shook his head. If he did not confide in Richard, then whom? He would probably laugh at him and make silly jokes at his expense, but he would take his problem seriously.

For now, silence still seemed safer than pity and heartbreak, and it was easier to nurse alone.

Maybe the next day, he thought.

Breaking fast in the White Horse

Well, the next day, as if the colonel had known it was time, he barged into Darcy's bedchamber and rudely woke him. He ordered Wilkins, Darcy's valet, to clean him up because they were off to ride. Darcy moaned but offered no resistance. He knew it was time, and for once, he let his valet do as he wished with him. He strangely welcomed Richard's interference. This was also good for poor Wilkins, as a dishevelled master did nothing good to his reputation as a valet. He was glad to be busy again.

Without a word, the cousins went downstairs, mounted their horses, and started toward Hyde Park, an enormous park at the edge³ of London. The park was almost empty in the morning. They gave their horses a good gallop on Rotten Row⁴ and headed toward the less-visited parts. They even left the park to the west and rode into the countryside, eventually arriving at an inn called the White Horse. The establishment was busy, as all inns were next to a main road. Due to its proximity to London, this inn served as a resting place and was a popular choice for accommodation, as it was more affordable than city accommodations. With a few coins to assure their horses were cared for,

³ Although today Hyde Park is in the centre of London, in Regency times, it was at the edge of the city; there were empty fields to the north and west. See the story website.

⁴ Go to the story website for information, link at the front.

Darcy ordered them a large breakfast in the old establishment. They sat in one of the window alcoves, which was strangely crooked – time and the weight of the building had taken their toll on that corner – and ate with good appetites. The uneven floor made his teacup tilt slightly on the table – or perhaps his world had already tipped of its own accord.

The innkeeper’s wife served the distinguished guests. She poured them good hot tea as Darcy had asked. Since he had learnt how coffee should be drunk in Italy on his grand tour⁵, he preferred to drink tea at home.

“That was mighty good. There’s nothing better than countryside food,” Richard remarked, pushing his plate away. “Now, speak.”

Darcy set down his teacup, nodded, and took a moment to gather his thoughts. He gazed out the window, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and decided to be straightforward. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he began. “I asked her hand in marriage and was soundly refused.” He turned to gauge his cousin’s reaction.

⁵ The Grand Tour was a period of foreign travel commonly undertaken by gentlemen to finish off their education. It was popular from the mid-17th century until the end of the 18th century when the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars stopped most foreign travel.

Richard did not disappoint – his expression visibly went blank for a few seconds, clearly caught off guard. Although it had occurred to him that it must be some woman, he had not expected this. He raised his eyebrows. “Miss Elizabeth?” Richard blinked. “You proposed to her? Have you...have you fallen for her?” he asked incredulously.

“Why is it such a surprise?” Darcy countered. “Is she not ‘delightful’ as you praised her?”

“Well, I don’t really know. She’s...not one of us. Darcy, she has nothing to offer.”

“What more do I need?”

“True, true... But you barely said two words to her! I half expected you to marry someone from our circles, maybe one of Mother’s protégés... Good heavens, you must love her!”

“Keep your voice down.” Darcy looked around uncomfortably. “What are you talking about? Of course, I love her. What else would compel me to marry her if not love?” He had not meant to say it aloud. But now that it was out, he felt oddly hollow, no freer for the confession.

“It’s just...you never really...you never talked about... I always thought you would end up in a marriage of convenience.”

Darcy looked at him in dismay. “I *am* a man, cousin.” He shrugged. “I have just never met anyone who...moved me, anyone like her.”

“Well, I... It’s just that you always seem to be under good regulation... The only time I remember you losing your composure was back at university.”

“Uh, that was not even funny. No, in my defence, I was young and naïve. I didn’t know what I was about. She was so flattering, and I mistook it for love.”

“So, Miss Elizabeth appeals to you, huh? I never saw it. So not Anne, then?” Richard pressed.

“Do you know me at all?” Darcy scoffed. “Anne is out of the question. Can you imagine...you know...being with her?” He shuddered involuntarily.

Richard grimaced in agreement. “No, I’m sorry, I asked.” However, you never refute Aunt Catherine!” Richard admonished Darcy.

“What would be the point?” He shrugged. “I did at the beginning, but she just keeps at it. She will have to understand eventually – it will never happen.” Darcy broke off a piece of bread and stuffed it in his mouth with a sip of tea.

“But cousin, you’ve grown adept at hiding yourself. I had no idea! Wait, she refused you?” Richard’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“I am glad you got the gist of it.” Darcy rolled his eyes. The words still stung.

“Incredible! But how could that be? You are Fitzwilliam Darcy!” he exclaimed, half-laughing in disbelief.

“Well, by the look of it, that was not enough. She wants to marry for love, and it seems she does not love me. Quite the opposite, in fact.” He winced at the admission.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Women all around would die for the opportunity to become your bride.”

“Well, it seems I have found the exception,” Darcy said, looking away. The corner of his mouth twitched – not quite a smile, but something resigned.

“Come on, even for Miss Elizabeth, that’s just simply not done. One does not refuse an offer like yours. What was she thinking? Or maybe you misunderstood?” Richard speculated.

“Are you daft? How could anyone mistake a yes for a no?” Darcy bristled.

“Just thinking here...you must admit, it is really out of the ordinary.”

Darcy turned back to the window, his mind drifting to the memory of her at the pianoforte – her face alight with some impertinent remark she was about to make, her fingers gliding softly over the keys, and that impish half-smile playing upon her lips – a smile that held unconscious charm and

a hint of defiance. And now, that smile haunted him more than any scornful glance ever could.

“Yet she refused me. She is that woman.”

“Are you certain you understood her correctly?” Richard asked, still in disbelief.

Darcy’s jaw clenched. He looked away, as if even meeting his cousin’s eyes might unman him. He looked back at his cousin, his lips pressed tightly together.

“Of course, I understood her! There was nothing to misinterpret.” He shook his head. If Richard had known with what vehemence she attacked his character, *arrogance, conceit, selfish disdain...* He shut his eyes to it to protect himself against her accusations, even in memory. Never in a thousand years would he have thought she judged him in so decidedly a negative way.

Richard watched his cousin’s pain play out on his face. “Did she at least give you a reason? I mean, a connection to you would’ve meant a lot to her family.”

“I do not think she even gave it a thought. I had to persuade her to tell me her reasons. Well, I guess I asked for it because she lashed out in anger so violently that she almost bewitched me.” He gave a humourless laugh. “You should have seen her! No one has ever talked to me that way... She was magnificent!”

He recalled the young lady's stance as she stood before him, her little fists clenched, and the fierce power of her gaze upon him. Even now, thinking back, her devastating words had a strange effect on him; he shuddered. He was, of course, offended – but another, more primal response overtook him as she argued. His blood surged, his senses sharpened: desire, swift and unmistakable. His body and mind reacted to her challenge, making him feel more alive than he had in a long time. He had to force himself to keep his dignity and not pull her into his arms and kiss her as he had in his dreams so that they would both lose their selves. She had no idea of the restraint he had to use to remain a gentleman. *Maybe he should not have bothered.* She already thought he was no gentleman, and he would now know how that defiant girl tasted.

He imagined kissing her. He imagined how she would have felt in his arms as he drew her close, the heat of her breath, how she would have tasted and given in to his lips moving on hers... His body reacted, and he had to shake himself. He bitterly chuckled inwardly at what she would have thought of him if he had given in to his desires.

He was not welcome; he sobered. Such thoughts were futile now. She would never welcome his touch. Then, the pain came. That would never happen; he would never know the touch of

her lips. He would never know what it would feel like to be loved by her. He suspected that lucky would be the man upon whom she would bestow her tender feelings.

Darcy put his hand to his heart to stop the sharp pain.

“Darce!” the colonel called, snapping him back to the present. “Magnificent? You must be lost!”

Darcy shook his head firmly. “I am telling you as it is. I am serious. In her outrage, she did not even stop to consider what my proposal could mean for her. All she cared about were the perceived wrongs I had done to people she wanted to protect. Yes, she was amazing!” His voice faltered. “But she was right. I approached her with arrogance, thinking my position alone would suffice. I thought myself generous when, in truth, I was blind to what she needed most – respect and understanding.”

Richard nodded slowly. “Who was so important to her?”

“Her sister, for one. Somehow, she had learnt of my involvement in Bingley’s affair.”

“What? Bingley...her sister?” Richard’s eyes widened in shock. “Oh, no! Was it *her* sister Bingley was after?”

Darcy nodded slowly. “Was it—was it you? Did *you* tell her? Why?” Darcy straightened up, a hint of accusation in his tone. His chest tightened. Had his own cousin handed Elizabeth the sword she used to cut him down?

“Well, we were talking about you.” Richard stammered.

“You were talking about me?” Darcy’s expression darkened with a thunderous look.

Richard flushed with embarrassment. “Well, yes. She was quite harsh about... She misinterpreted something about you...”

“Something? She does not know me at all!” He scoffed.

“Yes, she thought you ordered me about.”

“Pardon, what exactly are you talking about? Focus, Richard. Tell me everything.” Darcy demanded, his patience wearing thin.

Richard hesitated but saw the determined look on Darcy’s face. “All right, all right. She seemed to believe that you were...how do I put this...overbearing, controlling, perhaps?”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “Controlling? How could she think that? I have never...”

So, the colonel tried his best to tell Darcy about his unfortunate conversation with Miss Elizabeth on his tour of the park. He just wanted to say something positive to Miss Elizabeth about him

after trying to disabuse her of the notion that he was at his cousin's beck and calling. He wanted her to know that Darcy was a good friend, that he could be one, and that he wanted to protect Bingley from a fortune hunter.

Darcy exhaled sharply, trying to keep his temper in check. "You idiot! You have less discretion than a debutante. Did it not occur to you that I had told you that in confidence? A fine pair of eyes comes along, and you sing like a bird. What kind of a soldier are you? You're meant to guard secrets, not spill them at the sight of a pair of fine eyes." He let out a sharp breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Do you have any idea what you've done? And I never said she was a fortune hunter. What must she have thought of me?" Darcy turned away, looking out the window again. The memory of Elizabeth's fierce, passionate expression lingered in his mind. He had known her to be spirited, but this—this was something entirely different. "I underestimated her," he muttered, half to himself. "I underestimated her greatly." And now he feared he might never be able to repair what he had so clumsily undone.

Richard squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. When he opened his eyes, they were full of remorse. He watched his cousin closely, realising

for the first time just how deep Darcy's feelings for Miss Elizabeth Bennet ran.

"That is why she did not come to dinner at Rosings," Darcy reflected aloud.

"Well, let me remind you that *you* have fallen for that pair of fine eyes. Did—did I lose you your proposal?"

"Well, it did not help, but no, she still had other things to throw at my face." Darcy looked down at his lap. He hesitated, hating the taste of the words before they even left his lips. "She thinks highly of Wickham."

"Whom? How could that be? I need a drink." He looked around for the matron. "My good woman, fetch us two pints, will you?"

"Right. How does she know Wickham? That son of a...!"

"He joined the militia, and they happened to be stationed in Meryton, where she lives, of all places. I saw him when he arrived, still dressed in civilian clothes."

"He is a pest! You never mentioned that you had seen him, you know, not since..."

"This was in November, Richard."

"I see."

"Anyway, there was a ball soon after, and Miss Elizabeth questioned me about him. She seemed

quite protective of him. I tried to warn her, but I could tell she was not ready to hear me about him.”

“He got to her?”

Darcy nodded.

“Then she is not as clever as I had thought.”

“That’s what I said to myself then, but since then... She is a sheltered gentlewoman, and even *my* father was fooled. He is skilled at telling a tale, spinning a good one. You know how it is – puppy eyes, flattery, half-truths – and people believe him. It worked on Georgiana for a time. It worked on my father. Why not her? I bet he made her feel sorry for his lot by my evil hands. A victim always gets sympathy.” Darcy reflected bitterly. “He told her I refused him the promised living, and she accused me of pushing him into his state of relative poverty. As if...” He snorted.

“So, he conveniently omitted the small detail of receiving compensation,” Richard said dryly.

Darcy shook his head. “Of course, he did. She seemed determined to provoke me; I’ll give her that much. She thought me a villain and was intent on putting me in my place.” Darcy exhaled sharply. “And the worst part? She believed every word he said. That I was the villain of the tale, that I destroyed him for sport. And all the while, I stood there, accused in silence, unable to defend myself. Unfortunately, her sense of righteousness barred

her from hearing my warning. I tried to tell her that Wickham makes friends easily and loses them just as easily, but I could not say much more without compromising my sister.”

Richard was dismayed.

Darcy was disappointed in Miss Elizabeth for falling prey to Wickham’s lies, but he knew how convincing he could be if he wanted to. At least, that was what he told himself in her defence. At the same time, he also used her favouritism towards Wickham as one more excuse to leave Hertfordshire. This weakness in her, not seeing through his arch enemy’s guiles, showed her in a poor light. Now, however, he found himself appreciating her courage to stand up to him.

“I wish I had gone with you to Ramsgate,” Richard said suddenly.

Darcy looked at him questioningly.

“I’d have broken the bastard’s nose.” He shook his head. “I should have beaten him up so bad that he could not make love to the gentle folk’s fancies. I should have ruined his pretty face.” He said indignantly, “You said he had joined the militia. Who is his colonel? Maybe I could write to him. I could make his life miserable. Is this why you asked me to answer any questions of Miss Elizabeth’s?”

He gave a brief nod of agreement. They stood, and Darcy left some coins on the table.

“Well, I am sorry I could not wait any longer. I should have told her the truth about her precious favourite.”

Darcy winced. “I wrote her a letter. She knows.”

Richard froze in his saddle. “You what? ... Are—are you out of your mind? What possessed you to put your sister’s story in writing? Especially after she had refused you and, by that, showed a lack of discernment! That was reckless, Darcy, I’m telling you,” Richard called after Darcy as he mounted Devil.

“I trust her. She may confide in her elder sister, but Miss Bennet seems to have a good heart. She will not gossip either.” It was madness, perhaps. But it was done.

“I hope so. For all our sakes.”

When they arrived back and were going into the house, Richard expressed his sympathy.

“For what it’s worth, I am very sorry for what happened. But you know what they say – plenty more in the ocean, there must be someone out there.”

“I shall never find another like her,” Darcy said, eyes fixed ahead. He did not say it for pity. He said it as a fact.

Richard stopped.

“If you lament her so much, why do you not go after her?”

REFLECTIONS AND INTERRUPTIONS

Chapter 2



“Oh, I’m not good at this! Why is embroidery deemed so essential for the fairer sex?” Elizabeth huffed at her handiwork.

But even her annoyance with the needle could not distract her for long.

She was sitting in the parlour, the very one, with Charlotte and Maria. They occupied themselves as ladies should. Charlotte was reading aloud from a London newspaper, though it was at least a fortnight old, as Lady Catherine graciously allowed the parsonage to keep her newspapers...well, after she finished only reading the headlines of most of the articles. Her guests were listening to her reading the next chapter of a novel while sewing or embroidering – in Elizabeth’s case, *attempting* was the better word.

For five days, Elizabeth’s mind had been wholly occupied, rendering her unfit for all other considerations. She was still in shock, still in disbelief about what had happened, and the following letter, which was incredible in itself, that Mr. Darcy

would breach propriety that way. At first, she had been too shocked to reflect on the impropriety, but in the days that followed, her indignation grew. The fact is that if people had known a letter from a gentleman was in her pocket, they would have found it most scandalous, and her reputation would have been ruined. That flared her indignation at the gentleman.

The letter burnt a hole in her pocket as she had it with her day and night. She had meant to destroy it. Yet still it lay, folded and softening at the edges, like a wound she refused to close. By now, she could quote much of its content; so many times, she had read it already, despite swearing, she would not after her first perusal. She had a morbid fascination with the letter. She punished herself with every new reading, as she disliked what she read. Yet, there were so many things to consider, so many things to decipher.

Her chief concern was Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy's account. Acknowledging and accepting his description of their past was a slow and painful process. Realising that she had been duped was like a bucket of icy water. How could she have fallen for his lies? She called on her memories of their conversation, and she had to admit that she hungrily drank his poisonous words then. Why?

She knew the answer. She had wanted to believe Mr. Wickham, not despite Mr. Darcy's insult, but because of it. His tale had been a balm to her wounded pride; she wanted confirmation that he was an immoral man, jealous and hateful, so that she could discredit his insult to her person as not worth her bruised ego. It was not merely that Wickham's charm was intoxicating but that his tale aligned so perfectly with her own prejudices. Now, the cracks in that narrative widened, and with them came a painful awareness of her own folly.

She had always considered herself intelligent and took pride in it. One who could think for herself. Why did she not recognise the contradictions in his tale? Did he not say that he was not afraid of seeing Mr. Darcy, yet it was he who stayed away from the ball? Then, she put all the blame at Mr. Darcy's door. She recalled that even Miss Bingley warned her, but she dismissed her based on her dislike of the lady. A strong aversion now stirred within her at the recollection of her former credulity.

Young ladies are sometimes inclined to be content with the sweetest version of the truth – at least until a lengthy letter, a measure of wounded pride, and much reflection persuade them otherwise.

A greater contradiction still was that, once Mr. Darcy had left the neighbourhood, Mr. Wickham

saw fit to recount his sorry tale to anyone willing to listen. Elizabeth, who had once believed herself the sole confidante of that unhappy story, now felt both foolish and stung. Now, she realised she had been only one of many – and perhaps not even the most gullible.

Had he not declared he would never speak ill of the son, for the sake of Mr. Darcy's father? And yet she had believed Wickham. How could she have been so credulous? So eager to assume the worst of a man she barely knew! Fury at herself would rise, sudden and hot, only to cool into something far more painful. Shame.

She had wanted Wickham's story to be true. That was the most humiliating part of it all.

Her disdain for Mr. Darcy only compounded her folly. Wickham's countenance, voice, and manner had established him at once in possession of every virtue⁶ – not seeing through him made her question her ability to discern character. How much Mr. Darcy must have laughed at her proven naivete!

She could not sleep well for many a night. She was mortified. The image of Mr. Darcy's face during his proposal haunted her – the barely concealed hopefulness, the quiet certainty that he would not be refused. She had shattered it without a second

⁶ Verbatim from *Pride and Prejudice*

thought, and now she wondered: had she been cruel in her indignation?

That image – his eyes searching hers, the pause before the final words – returned with cruel precision.

To be so humbled in her own eyes – she, who had once prided herself on her intelligence – was agony indeed. Of neither Mr. Darcy nor Mr. Wickham could she think without feeling she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd⁷.

She recalled one night at Netherfield when she and Mr. Darcy bantered. How superior she felt then when she accused him of vanity and pride...and hating everybody; oh, what did he say in return? He said that her failing was to misunderstand people wilfully. That sad example proved Mr. Darcy a better observer of men, she bitterly admitted. She did not want to think well of him. How embarrassing! If anything, this revealed her own faulty judgement.

The shame she bore was acute, stirring within her a quiet but undeniable resentment towards the gentleman privy to her lapse in discernment.

⁷ Verbatim from *Pride and Prejudice*

“If you lament her so much, why do you not go after her?”

Darcy first just stared at his cousin, unmoving and unblinking, and then his eyes bulged. “Richard, are you out of your mind? How could I?”

“You... Well, you said yourself, she doesn’t really know you. Her arguments against you were mistaken. Give her a chance...pay her the proper attentions.”

Pay her the proper attentions? Darcy was reeling. Surely, this must be a most impossible course! Despite his incredulity, the possibility of trying again, seeing her again, made him shiver traitorously. It seized him with such force that it nearly took his breath away.

Hope was a dangerous thing. And yet – there it was, breathing again.

“Think about it, Darce. If it does not work out, you can be satisfied you tried.” His cousin patted Darcy’s back as he went past him. “You know, Cousin,” Richard added, pausing at the door, “sometimes the greatest battles are fought not on the field but within ourselves. And sometimes, the bravest thing we can do is risk losing.”

“A gentleman does not ask twice,” argued Darcy.

Richard turned back. “Does he not? Do you not remember my parents’ story? My father asked my mother *three* times! Father always said that his persistence won her over.”

“But he was titled, why did she refuse? I cannot remember.”

“My father had to give up his loose ways.”

“Oh.”

“Mother always gets what she wants. Think about it, Darce. This could be your saving grace! It could even work out well.” Richard winked and turned to go to his room.

The first utterance of his suggestion was said without thinking, but then it sounded like a clever idea to him; what was more, it would considerably ease his conscience if he really were *not* the cause of his cousin’s failure.

Darcy stood rooted at the entrance for a moment, then went straight to his study and told his footman that he did not wish to be disturbed. When he closed the door behind him, he sagged against it.

Go after her? He could not possibly... Could he do it? Or was it merely recklessness whispering within him? What would she even think – to see him again? To be pursued by the very man she had rejected so completely? Could he open himself to another possible humiliation? Should he try again?

But was such a pursuit noble or selfish? Was he seeking her forgiveness or his own redemption?

Ah, sweet temptation! It was so utterly outrageous, so divinely attractive an idea... He was of two minds. He pushed himself from the door and went to his desk. Without thinking, he checked his correspondence, separating them into three piles, as he was ever organised, but then left them on his desk.

He went to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows that let plenty of light into his study. He let the sunlight warm his face. He supported himself against it with his hands and looked out the window, unseeing. His mind was quickly turning around his cousin's suggestion.

Yes, it was obvious that Miss Elizabeth did not know him despite her claiming to be an observer of people. Indeed, for some reason, she refused to see him correctly. He was not a villain, for heaven's sake! He was not an evil man... *Why did she think the worst of me?* Then, he wondered if she had given credit to his letter. Did she know now that she had misjudged him? That her favourite was the worst cheater and seducer? *Oh, my*, he thought, what if she never read his letter? His throat constricted... That letter had become his one defence, his final plea. And what if she had never even seen it? It was highly inappropriate of him to demand that she

read it. He knew that. Of course, he did. At the same time, what was he supposed to do?

He could not live with the knowledge that the lady he most esteemed judged him wrongly.

Unless her hatred of him was more potent than her curiosity, she must have read the letter... – he decided.

At the time, at the parsonage, he berated his tongue, which often failed him in her presence. At Netherfield in November, it had been simpler and easier. He had been an observer then, content to study her from a distance – the playful curve of her smile, the fire in her eyes as she sparred with him. He had held the upper hand, or thought he did. Back then, she was merely intriguing. Now, she has unsettled everything. She had become a tormenting delight, a living riddle that defied his reason. Then, he was intrigued by her and wanted to engage her in conversation. But at Rosings, when he still fought his attraction, he tried to avoid her. However, once he gave in and accepted his fate, he suddenly found himself unsure of how to approach the lady. That fascination had deepened into yearning, fierce and unbidden, and he was utterly unprepared for the strength of his feelings.

At that most crucial moment – well, he was quite distracted by the picture she made in her indignation – he could not refute her accusations; he

had to be satisfied that he could utter some words of courtesy at the end. He could not leave her quickly enough. In her absence, however, his thoughts were flooding his mind. What should he have said in his defence? After a few drinks, he gave in to his need to communicate to her clearly that she was wrong.

He committed his thoughts to paper. He did not plan to give it to her *per se*; it was more like letting his ire out, a private purge. However, it became a confession, and as the letter took shape, the original purpose of a letter to the intended recipient took hold of him, and he decided to make a clear copy.

As he wrote and wrote, his need for justice and recognition calmed, and he felt justified by the means. In his mind, his accuser must have been in need of the truth so that she might form a fair estimation of his character. A tiny part of him felt hope that she would change her mind about him, but then he quickly killed that idea and strived to be satisfied by her giving credit to his confessions.

What a mess! Why did Richard have to utter that idea?

Exhausted, he sank into his armchair and closed his eyes, seeking reprieve from the turmoil within.

She did not expect his proposal. *How lamentably vain he had been!* Why did he think otherwise?

He opened his eyes, as if struck by lightning. The truth seared through him: he had never honestly tried to know her; he only listened to his own certainty.

It was not that he thought otherwise, but that he assumed... He never really considered her! It was all about him and what *he* wanted. He wanted her, and he thought she was there for the taking, believing she would be grateful for the offer. *What an arrogant fool!* Painful as her rejection was, it was a humbling experience.

A crashing voice tore through the hallway: “Get out of my way, man!” The door flung open a second later, as if jolted by command. “Darcy! There you are.”

Darcy groaned at the interruption. His cousin did not know the meaning of ‘no.’ He dismissed his footman with an obliging wave of the hand.

“Hello, Phillip. I should like to say welcome, but you are, in fact, not welcome. I am busy.”

The viscount, apparently unimpressed by his cousin’s mood, looked around. “Busy? No, you are not. Is this a way to greet your favourite cousin?” He smirked. “What is so important?”

“None of your business, Cousin. And you are not my favourite,” Darcy said petulantly, then sighed. “What do you want?”

“It is not what *I* want per se. You should imagine I have better things to do than play a messenger. Mother sent me to get you to join her for tea.”

Darcy looked up at his cousin.

“She knows you are in town.” He shrugged.

Darcy groaned. Of course. When had he ever been free of family interference for long?

“Richard paid her a visit yesterday. Where is he, by the way? I also need to speak with him. I have a new venture...but we can talk about that another time.”

Darcy concurred. He stood and went to his desk. “Can you not say that you did not find me?”

“You wish me to speak an untruth to my mother? Have you gone mad? Surely you know better! She would pry it out of me in a matter of moments, as you very well know. And besides, I would not lie on your behalf – not even for you, cousin. Look at you. You need to leave your study. You appear quite fatigued.”

Darcy was about to reply, but the viscount interrupted.

“Four o’clock. Do not disappoint Mother; she would not appreciate it.” As he finished, he was out the door, and Darcy heard him asking the footman to direct him to his brother.

Darcy sat in his chair and wondered how her aunt did it – she, indeed, always got her way. If Phillip was the hammer, Lady Matlock was the velvet glove – and she was always more dangerous.

Richard and Phillip’s mother, Countess Matlock, had adopted Darcy when his own mother, her sister-in-law, died many years ago. She was a treasure trove of memories about his mother, as they had been very close. They knew each other from finishing school, though not in the same year, as the countess was two years older. She had always liked the shy but clever little boy, so as Darcy and his sister were orphaned, she appointed herself as the surrogate mother of the Darcy siblings. She loved them as she loved her own two boys.

The lady was a force to be reckoned with. Everybody knew that her word was law. The earl ruled in his politics, but at home and in society, his dear countess ruled the roost. The earl adored his gentle but firm wife; unlike many upper-echelon marriages, theirs was one of genuine affection, having grown into it.

Darcy heard the command behind the courtesy even before arriving at Matlock House. His aunt

had summoned him, and when Lady Matlock summoned, men obeyed. She had ruled her household and half of Mayfair with the same gentle iron for over thirty years.

At precisely four o'clock, he presented his hat and walking stick to a footman at Matlock House. He was announced.

“William, welcome! Thank you for coming,” a handsome, elegantly dressed woman greeted Darcy. Though in her early fifties, her complexion retained a startling youthfulness – thanks, she insisted, to ‘those miraculous oils of the Mediterranean,’ a belief she repeated often enough to have made it true. Her eyes sparkled with life, and her famous warm smile was now directed at Darcy. She welcomingly opened her arms, and Darcy kissed her offered cheek.

“It is not like I had a choice, but it’s good to see you, Aunt.”

Her ladyship chuckled. “Watch your tongue, young man. Who knows when you would have shown yourself if I had left it to you.”

“Well, I am here.”

“Yes, come, sit. Tell me about Rosings. How is my dear sister-in-law?” She poured tea as she was speaking.

“Rosings is pleasant as always in the spring. Aunt Catherine is very well, as ever.”

“Did she cajole you this time around?”

“She did. That never changes.” Darcy shrugged. “But I changed the subject, and once I even left the room. I got a reproachful look, but that was all, thankfully.”

“I think, deep down, she knows this marriage with Anne will not happen; she just cannot let it go. Stubborn to the core.”

“That she is.” He sighed. “Her estate is not in good shape; she always believes she knows best. The earl must make my suggestions happen; otherwise, they will find themselves in dire straits soon. I managed to accomplish a few things, but it was not enough to bring about change. Nothing lasting. Her pride is the soil her estate grows in, and it bears poor fruit. When it is convenient for my uncle, I would discuss them with him.”

“I am sad to hear she does not take your advice; you are good at these things; she should know, too. It is a great kindness on your part to take on the burden of looking after her interests. I shall send a note when your uncle is available to talk to you. We plan to visit there sometime in June. To be honest, I’m not looking forward to it; she started to criticise the way I dress, as if she were some fashion expert.”

Darcy smirked. His aunt had no place to criticise anyone with her wardrobe of over-decorated

gowns, lace everywhere. Lady Matlock was elegance herself, so she was rightly insulted.

“Richard said that he enjoyed his stay more than usual. He said that you had company,” she said nonchalantly, but she was looking at Darcy.

Darcy’s face straightened immediately.

Her ladyship was alert about the guests at the parsonage because her son had praised one of them, especially a Miss Elizabeth; what a ‘delightful addition’ she was to their group. She wanted to know if Darcy agreed. What she observed was a surprise. His adopted son stiffened and looked away uncomfortably. He was hardly fazed by anything.

“Yes, Mrs. Collins, the parson’s wife at Hunsford, had visitors from home, her sister and friend. We spent some time together.”

“And? I understand the sister was young, but what about Miss Elizabeth? What did you think of her?” Her voice was mild. Her eyes were not.

Darcy blinked. The sound of her name hit him like a dropped pin in a silent room – small, but sharp.

Her guest was affected, her ladyship marvelled. *Could it be?* The countess had been urging Darcy to settle; it was time, she had said. Her own children were impervious to her in this, while she was eager for grandchildren. The viscount especially worried

her, as he was now in his early thirties. When Darcy cleared his throat, she was sure that Darcy had found the lady delightful, too...and maybe more?

“Miss Elizabeth is a...lovely young lady.” That pause did not escape Lady Matlock. Nor did the sudden softness in his tone.

“What is she like?” She pretended indifference. Lady Matlock did not miss the flicker in his eyes either. She had spent years reading men too proud to admit they were caught. This one was no exception.

“She...is kind-hearted, clever, well-read, a good conversationalist,” ...*and maddening*, he almost added, but caught himself. “She loves the outdoors. She is unafraid to share her opinions – even with Lady Catherine.”

So, these are the traits that attract you... No wonder you have difficulty finding someone in the ton. “Even with Lady Catherine?” Her ladyship’s eyebrows arched high. She noted that one approvingly. Courage and wit—her nephew had never gone for dull women. “Good heavens, this Miss Elizabeth sounds like a force of nature, indeed. Even I mostly just let her barbs stand and do not argue with her... And is she good-looking?”

Darcy closed his eyes. Her face appeared at once – unbidden, unwelcome, unforgettable.

Poor boy, he is lost, her ladyship thought.

Her heart-shaped face, speaking eyes, and those kissable lips appeared before him. “Yes, she is very good-looking,” he answered in the end.

“Hmm. I think I would like to meet her.”

“That is unlikely,” he said, too quickly. “She lives on a small estate in Hertfordshire; the family does not come to town.”

“How do you know it is a small estate?”

“Last autumn, when I was a guest at Bingley’s leased estate, we neighboured theirs, Longbourn.”

“What a coincidence!”

“Yes, well, Aunt’s parson will inherit the estate. Miss Elizabeth is his cousin and Mrs. Collins’s friend.”

“I see.”

“Lady Catherine hinted that she was the parson’s first choice as she suggested Mr. Collins to offer for one of his cousins; there are five of them.”

“You do not say! Did she refuse him?”

“It seems so.”

“That was not wise of her. Refusing security is a luxury few can afford – unless she hoped for something better?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said there were five daughters in the family and that this parson would inherit their estate.

She could have ensured that her family would be safe.”

Darcy thought about this. “That may be, but Aunt, the man is a sycophant. And unintelligent. Miss Elizabeth deserves more than such a husband.” He gulped. He heard the words as he spoke them and knew they revealed far too much.

“You seem to know Miss Elizabeth very well.”

Darcy visibly winced.

“We spent some days under one roof at Netherfield when her sister fell ill after a visit; she was caught in the rain. Miss Elizabeth came to take care of her sister. There were also some soirees and a ball...”

“You attended a ball in the country?”

“Yes, we danced.”

“You danced? With Miss Elizabeth? Of your own volition?”

Darcy looked up, cornered but defiant. “Well, yes.”

“That is not like you.”

“Not like me? What of her?” Darcy’s voice was sharp, his pride pricked. “It took me asking her three times!” He huffed. Looking at his aunt, he realised he had said too much. Again. The room went quiet. Even the ticking of the clock seemed louder. Why did he have to confess that?

Her ladyship was speechless.

“Are you-are you saying that she refused to dance with you?”

Darcy nodded sharply.

Her ladyship blinked – as if hearing the laws of nature reversed.

“And you asked her several times?”

Lady Matlock stared at Darcy in silence for a few more moments, then laughed an elegant but startled laugh.

“I am glad you find this funny.” His lips pinched together in a hard line.

“Oh, William! I never thought I would get to see this. I thought I would have to rely on Divine Providence to instil love into your heart – but it seems Miss Elizabeth has accomplished the task in its stead. You *like* this lady. You like this lady. More than that – she’s your equal. Your match. And I dare say, your undoing!”

Darcy’s face was expressionless as he looked at her.

“Oh, my boy! Heaven help you! Do you plan to take this further?”

Darcy groaned. Suddenly, he looked at his aunt with chagrin.

His aunt tried to figure out his motives. “Do you think you cannot have her?”

Darcy had known it was not a good idea to meet his aunt. She had the cunning ability to make people speak.

“I have asked her.”

The countess gasped. But then, she did not understand his morose expression.

“She refused.”

Her eyes widened at this travesty. *Is she not right in the mind? Maybe she is not suitable for him after all. Refusing two offers? And one that's most sought after? She suspected that even some wives and widows would give half their teeth for it.*

The countess was motionless, then set down her teacup with deliberate care, as if she feared that one sudden movement might shatter reality itself. “I do not understand. No, I cannot fathom it,” she said, her voice low with incredulity. “You, refused? What could possibly induce a young lady – any young lady – to refuse you?”

She stood, went to the cabinet and poured two drinks. As she sat down again, she put one glass into Darcy's hands like a general issuing orders on the battlefield.

“Drink first, and then you shall tell me all. I want to know everything!”

NEW ENERGY

Chapter 3



“... What a tale! I am quite intrigued. I think I do not have to tell you that you botched that proposal.”

Darcy slowly nodded his head.

“Had I not raised you better than this?” she added with a half-laugh. “Oh, my dear boy! The ton has spoiled you. Being rich, clever and handsome did not do you much good, did it? You never had to work for a maiden’s favour. You have always been admired, Fitzwilliam – but admiration is not affection, as you well know... Fitzwilliam, Richard is right. You cannot give up. Not if she makes you feel like this. Life is too short to go through it without some happiness.”

Darcy was about to protest.

“No, do not deny it. This feeling inside you is so precious. Many people never find love, my dear; they often do not recognise it, or if they do, they often do not act on it because of society or ruin it with greed and debauchery.” She took a sip of her drink. “If she were not gently born, it may be a

problem. But she is a gentlewoman, and you are a gentleman. We will deal with the ton if it comes to that. I shall relish the scandal. It shall do them good to be scandalised by something worthy.”

“You would accept her?” He asked, half incredulous, half hoping. “You would approve of her?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. Let us face it: you have wandered the ton like a ghost for years, Fitzwilliam; you have shied away from forming an attachment. If this young woman makes you feel alive, that alone is a miracle. If she is everything you want, and you can convince her to accept you, I will support you. I want you to be happy, Fitzwilliam. Your mother married for love; she was devoted to your father, and although her years on this earth were cut short, she was happy while they lasted. She would want that for you. Give your lady a chance to know you and make her fall in love with you.”

“That is easy to say.” He sighed.

“If you wish to pursue this lady,” she paused, fixing him with a pointed look, “then do so with purpose. You are Fitzwilliam Darcy. The world bends for men like you... It may be unjust – but since it is so, you might as well use it wisely.”

Seeing her nephew's eyes widen, she continued warmly. "Just be yourself, well, your better self. Tell her about yourself and ask about her. Show her that you care and are genuinely interested in her. Some genuine compliments would also go a long way. As you have learnt, her family is important to her, so treat them well. She cannot stay aloof if you keep at it after being rejected."

"If I am persistent?"

"Yes, exactly."

Darcy stood and went to the window. Looking out the window when he was uncomfortable or had a heavy mind had become second nature to him. After a while, he turned back to his aunt and said, "I do feel for her a passionate regard." He had never said the words aloud. Now that he had, they rang with terrifying truth.

Her ladyship stood and went to him. "You are blessed, Fitzwilliam. I hope this for my sons, too," she said after she hugged Darcy. "How are you going to do this?"

"I do not know. I have only just come to accept that I must. There is the option of visiting her regularly from here, but that would put her under pressure. It would be obvious to anyone what I am doing there."

“Yes, if she is such an independent spirit, she might just oppose just because she is pushed. Is there any other way?”

Darcy walked back to his seat, lost in thought.

“She stays with her relatives sometimes, here in London. However, I am unsure when that might be. Her sister has just stayed here for months, so I do not think it would be soon.”

“Then you may have just to pay her a visit.”

“Hmm. Bingley’s estate is still leased... If I had a reason...” He trailed off, the idea crystallising mid-thought.

A reason. A venture. A future.

He thought of the possibility. He could take the lease from Bingley. Better yet, he did believe in the autumn that the land and the house could be a worthwhile investment; however, Bingley was not interested and did not want to invest in case a better property came along.

“Maybe I could invest in buying the estate... I need to perform some calculations, but if my hunch proves to be valid... I might start a new venture there!” His face lit up.

“Really, would it be a good investment?”

“Yes, I think so. At present, the land may yield maybe two thousand a year, if that, including the rental income from the house. It could be purchased for a good price. On the other hand, I could

make it much more profitable, and then if I were to sell it, it would yield a decent return. Let me work this out.” By the time he had said this, his eyes brightened.

“Well, if you could do this, you could work on your side project without being obvious... If this happens, I shall visit you.”

His fingers steepled under his chin. If he went to her, it would not be to grovel. He would go not as a supplicant, but as a man transformed—because of her, for her. It would be to show her who he indeed was – a man of integrity, a man worthy of her esteem. But was he ready to face her again? The thought of standing before her, meeting her eyes, and risking her rejection once more... It was both terrifying and strangely invigorating.

Darcy walked home with a spring in his step. A force radiated throughout his body; he felt it overtake him. He had a purpose, one of the most sacred. He, Fitzwilliam Darcy, was going to woo his lady.

I shall behold her again!

For the first time in days, a sense of clarity replaced the turmoil in his mind. Where despair had gripped him, purpose now took root, steady and

unyielding. If her rejection had humbled him, he was now invigorated by the challenge before him – a chance to become the man she could respect, not merely the one he thought himself to be.

And just like that, he knew it was the right thing to do. He felt it in his bones that they would make a great match if only she could see the possibilities. He felt drawn to her passion for life...as he realised, he always surrounded himself with people like Richard and Bingley. Richard had his bravery, honesty, and enjoyment of life, and Bingley had his fresh naivete, positive outlook on life, and easy manners.

His nature more restrained, levity was more elusive to Darcy yet desired. He was friendly and easy enough with close acquaintances, whose mannerisms and characters he was familiar with; however, in company, he preferred to observe rather than take part. Miss Elizabeth's joyful nature would blend with his gravitas, allowing them to help each other – he could offer her consequence, knowledge, and a mature perspective. In contrast, she could help him navigate social settings and help him take life less seriously. And now he ached to be loved as his mother loved his father. Steadily, fiercely, without condition.

Yet, he knew better than to try to mould her into something she was not. Her vibrancy and candour were not flaws to be tempered but treasures to be cherished. He must tread carefully, allowing her to remain herself, not just in spirit, but in voice, in wit, in her quicksilver glances, while showing her the man he could be for her.

As he considered the practicalities, he thought her kind heart and cleverness would make her a good mistress of his houses and his tenants. Even if she had grown up on a minor estate, he was sure she could quickly learn the complexities of his estate. His aunt would teach her how to navigate in the ton. She, with her velvet command and effortless social mastery, would know just how to prepare her. He did not want her to lose her authentic *joie de vivre*, only to learn to handle herself with more control. That made his thoughts go to his aunt.

He was somewhat mortified that he had confessed it all – all his feelings, his turmoil, his heartache – to his aunt. He was even more surprised that she had given her blessing in such an easy manner. This had been one of his arguments in his head not to proceed. He should have known better. Her sentiment touched him, that she would rather see him happy with a country girl than unhappy with a bride the ton considered proper.

As he walked, the sun came out from its hiding place. He looked up and basked in its warmth on his face. He removed his hat to enjoy better what the sun had to offer. Only then did he think to look around to see if anyone had caught him in this small rebellion. He grinned.

At Darcy House, the word spread like fire that the Master had come home smiling. The cook took it to put a more elaborate menu on the table, and the maids sang again as they worked.

With a new purpose, Darcy took up residence in his study for the next few days. He sat and wrote; he wrote and calculated; he calculated and planned. There were papers everywhere. Charts, letters, maps, ledgers – Darcy had made a kingdom of his desk, and he ruled it with ink-stained fingers. Messengers took and brought letters all day.

Richard gave up on talking to him as, even at dinner, he could see that Darcy's mind was elsewhere. Richard muttered something about 'lunatic devotion' and retreated to his camp without protest. Darcy did not even notice when he moved back to his camp.

He sent out messages with his card to several places. He contacted his banker. His valet, Wilkins, was tasked with locating three reputable builders

who could begin immediately. Preferably yesterday.

His first letter was to Bingley at Scarborough, his friend, who had leased Netherfield. He gave up on it when his sisters insisted that he stay in London. When he heard Darcy's judgement on his latest love interest, Miss Bennet, that he did not think that her heart was easily touched, he forgot why he had leased the estate in the first place, which was to see how he could fare as a landlord, and he abandoned the place altogether. He sent the letter with his messenger; unfortunately, it would take a week to get back and forth.

Next, he requested an appointment with Bingley's attorney to discuss his offer to assume the lease and a meeting with the owner to negotiate a takeover.

He wrote to Pemberley about his intentions and whether Georgiana would join him in London and possibly settle in Hertfordshire for a while. He asked if she could bring Hussar, his dog, with her.

He wrote to his steward explaining the new adventure and asked him to be ready to join him for two weeks with the house gardener, a knowledgeable lad from the stables, and three more willing hands interested in working for him there.

He examined the family jewellery catalogue, a beautiful hand-drawn book, and chose several old

items that were valuable but either too elaborate or simply old-fashioned for use. Some of them were at Pemberley; they would be sent for so the jewellers could look at the items and bid on them.

He started to get excited at the prospect of a new adventure, a big one besides his courting mission. His mind swirled with different ideas on how to make the most of the land there.

When he took a break, he sat on the terrace with a hot drink and a biscuit and considered Miss Elizabeth. How would she take his presence in the neighbourhood? He presumed... *No*, he admonished himself. He could not presume anything, especially where she was concerned. Pride had failed him before. He would not make the same assumption error again.

He *hoped* she had read his letter. Did what he wrote make a difference? Did she believe him? Did she think better of him? The worst thing was to imagine her thinking ill of him. Then, he imagined standing before her. What would, what should he say?

These and other questions occupied his mind.

How does a man court a woman?

He had never had to practise such an endeavour. Until now. He did not see himself as the moon-eyed, lovesick fool who gives empty gestures of romance. Nevertheless, images of giving her flowers came to mind. He imagined as she took the bouquet and inhaled the scent of the flowers. She would close her eyes and smile.

But then he realised he did not know her favourite flower, or what if he gave her some flowers with the wrong meaning⁸? He racked his brain with what he knew about the subject of flowers... A red rose meant love and passion... What about yellow? Or pink? Some long-forgotten comedy floated back to him – something about pink roses and first affections. He would have to acquire a book on the topic. *Oh, how embarrassing!* He saw himself blushing to the roots of his hair as the shopkeeper smiled upon seeing the book. He could also imagine how the gossip would spread – that Mr. Darcy was preparing to court someone. All of a sudden, he knowingly smiled to himself. The solution was to send his valet to buy one.

In the next minute, he realised that giving flowers would give away his intentions to the whole family and the neighbourhood. He stifled a sigh.

⁸ Link to article on the meaning of flowers in the Regency Era can be found on the story website, see in the front.

He reasoned that Miss Elizabeth would not appreciate such a gesture, not at the beginning, at least. Maybe offer it to the ladies of the house?

Subtlety. That was the key with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

His household could not be happier for their master. He seemed to be on high ropes⁹. The whole house felt something was afoot; he appeared to be very busy in his study. His cook offered delicious food on a tray to their busy master. Everything changed, and having a purpose brought on his appetite.

As he contemplated the prospect of Netherfield, Darcy became more and more ambitious in his plans. At Pemberley, he inherited a quite efficient working system that almost worked independently. He only changed things that could make a significant difference, yet the changes were more technological. Now, he rubbed his hands together in excitement; he had a clean slate to work with!

Pemberley had taught him stewardship. Netherfield could teach him vision.

⁹ In great mood (Regency expression)

He took the notebooks he had used over the years and consulted them for ideas – ideas that he had learnt on his grand tour, reading all kinds of books, visiting other estates, and talking to other farmers, tradesmen, and so on.

The house itself was a handsome building. With an investment of effort in the surrounding gardens, they would present a lovely sight. He did not wish to live there permanently, so the house could be used for lease, or a better idea formed in his head – renting out rooms with service for prosperous tradesmen and families. This could offer them a taste of the good life they were so after, to live like gentlemen. Their wealth increased by the year, and so too did their appetite for the refinements of the upper classes. But this was for maybe next year. He would have to hire a builder to inspect the building and identify any easy changes that could be made to better suit a hotel-like service.

He found the idea increasingly appealing, especially when he calculated that the return could potentially be double that of a regular lease, although it was too early for exact figures. Netherfield's proximity to London was a significant advantage, making it easily accessible for those seeking respite from the city. Additionally, the estate boasted a forest ideal for shooting and a

lake well-suited for fishing. These amenities would cater to their desires for both leisure and sport.

His plans to use the land were based on its excellent climate and proximity to London. He planned to grow vegetables and raise poultry, pigs, and cows to supply the wealthy households of London with select deliveries. Darcy House could serve as a hub for requests, at least initially. Food was a good commodity as it was quite expensive compared to labour.

Already, visions of transformation filled his mind – a thriving estate, its lands yielding not only profit but purpose. This would be more than a financial venture, he thought; it would be a legacy, shaped by his hand and reflective of his ideals. Perhaps, in time, even she might see the value of his efforts here.

As he considered the possibilities, especially since few tenants were on the land, he began to think of something new. He felt that more significant profits could be achieved if he employed people to do his bidding rather than quarrel with the tenants. He was considering bringing in some expert farmers who could establish an area and teach labourers in the meantime. He thought that instead of tenants working his land, he and the steward or stewards would plan and direct the work, and he would entice good workers from the

orphanage he sponsored or young people from the streets of London. He would not call it charity; it was good business. But if it mended lives along the way, so much the better.

Many tried their luck in big cities, but few became successful. For many, it was a daily struggle to make ends meet. Having given up on country life, it was difficult for them to return; often, simply paying for the travel was beyond their means. He wanted to offer decent, better-than-average wages, accommodation, food, and clothing, significantly improving their quality of life. They could even marry and have families of their own on the estate.

“Wilkins, I think I want some new clothes for Netherfield.” Darcy addressed his valet while he dressed him. “I shall need several new items for working around the estate. Work with a tailor for that. Find someone new. I want them to be comfortable; please don’t have those tickly materials. I shall need some work gloves and new boots. Have two, no, make it three habits for riding. How many would I need for visits?” He cleared his throat. “I need to look my best. You may order some of the waistcoats you have been nagging me about. Please

arrange a visit to my regular tailor. Also, maybe three outfits for the evenings. Order some undergarments as well. I hardly want to take anything from here. Create a new wardrobe. Order new things for yourself, too. Oh, and buy new supplies. I do not want to pack every time I travel.”

Wilkins, Darcy’s valet, blinked, froze for a moment in sheer delight. He very nearly dropped the cravat he had been balancing upon his arm. The man who once thought beige daring had just ordered an entire new wardrobe. It appeared that Mr. Darcy, after long years of patient effort, had at last begun to show some genuine interest in his wardrobe. *What a blessed moment! Could it be that the young master had finally come to see that appearance was not merely a necessity but an art?* He was almost moved to tears.

He swiftly retrieved his notebook – a small, well-worn volume in cracked leather binding that he carried everywhere – and began to review the items they had just discussed.

“Well, sir, if you have decided to become a proper beau, I stand ready to assist in every way,” he said with solemn composure.

“What? No! Ah, you’re amusing yourself at my expense, I see. No, I merely wish to look respectable. For heaven’s sake, Wilkins, I almost believed you were serious.” He shook his head at the man.

“Good God, I have not got four or six hours a day to dedicate to dressing. At most, you may persuade me into a cravat of a different colour if you are so set on something new.”

Darcy had always taken a practical view of attire; he saw no sense in spending more time on it than absolutely required. The very thought of resembling one of those London dandies, who spent hours preparing each curl with meticulous care, made him recoil.

“Sir,” Wilkins intoned with ceremonial gravity, launching into vigorous note-taking, “I am ready, do instruct me! Three riding habits, two pairs of boots, waistcoats, undergarments...and at long last, a new cravat! This day shall be entered into the annals of history, sir – may you never live to regret it!”

Darcy cast him a weary glance, which Wilkins received with something akin to rapture.

“And if I might be so bold,” he continued with cheerful enthusiasm, “should you truly be venturing into new colours, I might suggest a pale green silk cravat to pair with your dark brown coat. It quite brings out the complexion!”

Darcy was about to object, but upon seeing the hopeful expression on his valet’s face, he gave a resigned nod.

Wilkins blinked at such unheard-of indulgence. Then, as though renewed with fresh purpose, he resumed his notes with renewed vigour. His mind already raced with considerations of what colours and cuts best suited the ideal of rustic elegance – and if the master was not watchful, an embroidered waistcoat might well find its way into the order, *strictly for country afternoons*, of course.

“Also, arrange for one of the footmen to buy lengths of material for the labourers, good quality, mind you. For undergarments, shirts, trousers, and the rest. Suppose you want to be involved, by all means. Perhaps consider buying several ready-made clothes for the start. Then, hire two women who would move there to make clothes for the staff and do other household chores. Promise a quarter more than the going rate. No, hold on to that. Perhaps we could hire some locals upon our arrival. Yes, let’s wait with this.”

His mind was in planning mode. No detail was too small. He had a notebook with him all the time now to scribble anything in it that needed to be sorted out. He had it with him when he went out to stretch his legs; he had it with him when he went to bed. He quickly took it out and wrote about his ideas of supplying the staff with clothes and boots.

What a difference a sense of purpose made in a man's life! It was not love alone that revived him, but love had lit the path. Only days ago, he had believed his world on the verge of collapse – and now, he found himself invigorated, alight with energy for two distinct reasons.

Foremost among them was Miss Elizabeth.

He needed only to close his eyes, and she was there. *My bellibone*¹⁰. *You are a diamond of the first water*¹¹. He tested the complimentary phrases silently, trying their cadence. Then, he groaned. Flattery did not suit him. He would rather show his heart than sing it—but would that be enough for her? Why must women require such constant flattery? He felt utterly inadequate in the face of it.

The other cause of his renewed spirits was far less daunting than courtship. The prospect of establishing a new enterprise stirred within him a quiet excitement, tempered, of course, by the unshakeable restraint befitting a gentleman.

¹⁰ A delightful term for a lady rich in personality as well as physical beauty

¹¹ A beautiful woman, a sparkler among society, both from the Regency Era

ATTEMPTING NEW THINGS

Chapter 4



It was time to consider finances. His first thought was of the Viscount Matlock, his cousin. He was Darcy's senior by five years, but the age difference started to mean less and less as they aged. They developed a healthy respect for each other, even if they often moved in different circles. Phillip, as Darcy called him, was at home in the upper echelons. The earl, his father, was in good shape, so the viscount had many years to wait, not that he lamented it.

Phillip presented himself as something of a dandy, yet Darcy knew well that beneath the surface, he held little affection for the beau monde¹². Beneath his jovial personality, although restrained as befitted a viscount, was an intelligent, well-read, even philosophical character with a quiet disdain for the very world he so gracefully adorned. He

¹² *Beau monde* – a French expression meaning “beautiful world,” commonly used in Regency and earlier periods to refer to high society or the fashionable elite. It typically encompassed aristocrats and wealthy socialites known for their extravagant lifestyles and prominence in society.

could have fallen to the illness of first sons – he could have led an idle life squandering the family wealth in trifles, but his cousin proved shrewd in his dealings.

From an early age, when he started receiving an allowance, he frugally saved most of it. During his university years, he began investing his money. He had no regular expenses as he lived under his father's roof in London and at their estate, so he always had sufficient funds. Nevertheless, he never gambled with large sums, and he did not live to spend, which made him somewhat of an oddity. However, as a scion of one of the aristocratic families, most thought of his habits as eccentricity.

What many did not know or care to know was that he understood his world very well, and as he was not supposed to have a profession, he still found a way to occupy himself. He made investments and made money. Indeed, his cultivated air of frivolity might well have been a deliberate façade, crafted to disguise the shrewd businessman beneath. Those who knew him, whom he let in on his business, regarded him highly, and over the years, he had become a sort of broker, an advisor – unofficially, of course. He always knew of businesses to invest in and men of means who were in need of profitable ventures. He helped them find each other for a gratuity. Oh, he was good. Very

good. To be sure, such dexterity was not emblazoned on the family crest – but it proved vastly more profitable.

“Oh, now I am welcome in your home, Darcy?” The lord’s tall figure appeared at the door of his study.

“Forgive me, Phillip, but that was not the best time.” Darcy stood.

“You were brooding like a Greek statue... You seem to feel better.” His guest observed.

“Yes, I have been very busy over the last few days. I have asked you to come because...”

“Ah, straight to business, I see. How refreshing.” The viscount sat in the chair before Darcy’s desk without invitation.

“Yes, I am planning to start an enterprise, and I need you to raise some money for it.”

His lordship took his lorgnette off his eye. This sounded like serious business. “Is that so? I am all ears.”

“There’s an estate called Netherfield...” Darcy explained his plans, the circumstances, and the prospect.

Phillip’s straight face hid a man intrigued.

“I hope to buy the estate for forty-five thousand pounds and raise a further fifteen for improvement and the initial year’s outlay. The lease

expires at Michaelmas¹³. I intend to have half of the business, which is thirty thousand. I need investors to cover the rest. I believe the idea of supplying affluent households in London with high-quality food, including prepared or semi-prepared meals later, is sound. I estimate that the land could yield between four and five thousand annually, and if we also let the house, then around £5,000 or even more. I should say about a 7-7.5 per cent return after expenses and labour. Perhaps even eight per cent, but it is too early to say. Once it has run for some years, the place could be sold for at least double the investment¹⁴. Small investors would have to wait until the big ones decide to sell; otherwise, if they leave, they lose on the sale of the business. They could leave at any time, though.”

The Viscount, who had been lounging with an air of indolent amusement, straightened at once. He folded his hands, resting his elbows upon the arms of the chair.

“Well, well,” he murmured with raised brows, “this is no modest undertaking. You’ve thought this through with the precision of a banker. Seven per cent return, reliable investors, and the potential

¹³ 29th September, it signifies the end of the harvest, the start of autumn and the beginning of the shorter days.

¹⁴ An estate with an annual income of five thousand pounds was worth about 150.000, thirty thousand for every thousand income.

for double the capital in a few years – My dear Darcy, I must say, I am rather impressed.”

He leaned forward, his voice low and thoughtful. “And the house, you say, may be turned to further profit? That is not often accounted for in such schemes. You intend to attract both landed men and the newly affluent?”

Darcy gave a firm nod.

Phillip chuckled softly. “Then I should be a fool not to give this due consideration. Pray, continue.”

“I seek a partner – another principal investor – who might contribute, say, twenty thousand. If needed, we would have to take over the rest of the investment, but when sold, we would get back what we invested, plus at least another such amount.”

“Do you have some figures?”

“Yes. Let me see. Based on the income, the estate will be worth between £130,000 and £140,000. If sold for only £130,000, I should receive another £35,000; the other would receive an extra £23,000. The surplus would be proportionally divided.

“Now, that seems a most promising venture, particularly considering the eventual outcome. Would you run the enterprise?”

“Yes and no. Once established, I shall leave it to capable hands, though naturally, I shall oversee its progress.”

“Good, good. Seven per cent yearly, you say?”

Darcy nodded. “In the worst case.”

“Hmm, that would be between twelve and fifteen hundred for a twenty thousand pounds investment.” He withdrew a folded chart from his leather pocketbook and ran a gloved finger across the numbers.

“That is about right.”

“Well, I find myself intrigued. May I ask how you plan to raise your share of thirty thousand?”

“I have yet to invest money from last year’s income; I shall use ten thousand from savings at the bank. The rest will come from the sale of some family jewellery.”

“I see, so you are entirely invested in this to make it a success.”

“Yes, the more I think about it, the more viable it looks.”

“All right. Give me till tomorrow to chew it over. I am thinking of putting in the twenty thousand share myself.”

“Really? You are interested?” Darcy’s eyes lit up with quiet satisfaction. Phillip had always been astute in matters of business. His endorsement reassured him that his thinking was sound.

“Yes, if you can get the estate for the money you want. I tell you what – I shall go with you to negotiate. Maybe we could get the owner to invest himself with the promise of earning more money with his estate.”

“That is not bad thinking. Maybe we can push the price down more...” Darcy considered the idea.

“When do you meet him?”

“I have received word that it will be tomorrow at two.”

“All right. I will be here at noon; let’s have lunch and discuss the negotiation strategy. I shall see myself out. Shall I expect to see you at the ball?”

Darcy sighed and inclined his head in resignation.

Darcy, as he tidied the papers upon his desk, paused for a moment. This venture promised not merely financial profit – it marked a new beginning. Something of his own making, of his own choosing, and perhaps a step closer to becoming the man he had longed to be ever since Elizabeth’s words.

The other half of the conversation with Lady Matlock a few days ago

Lady Matlock glanced at Darcy with a knowing smile as they sipped their tea. “You will attend my season opening ball, Darcy. I am well aware of your reservations about such events.”

Before Darcy could respond, his aunt raised a hand to silence him. “I promise not to push any introductions upon you, but there may be instances where they are necessary. The nature of society requires some degree of visibility, and I trust you understand this.”

Darcy regarded her with a mixture of reluctance and resignation. “I do not relish the prospect of the ton’s scrutiny, but I concede the necessity of social engagement.”

Lady Matlock’s eyes softened with understanding. “Indeed, I know you find such gatherings tiresome. However, you must show yourself a little among the ton. It is crucial, particularly if you will be away for a significant part of the season. People must be given a chance to see and know you, lest they question your absence.”

Darcy sighed, conceding the point. “I suppose there is some truth in that. It is as you say – one cannot remain in seclusion and expect to be remembered favourably.”

“Exactly,” Lady Matlock agreed, nodding with satisfaction. “A brief but noticeable presence will suffice. Engage in conversation, make the necessary polite gestures, and then you may retreat to your private mission. It is a delicate balance, but one that must be managed.”

Darcy took a thoughtful sip of his tea, considering her words. “I understand the need for compromise. I shall attend, though I shall limit my participation to what is strictly necessary.”

Lady Matlock’s expression brightened. “Splendid! I assure you, it will not be as dreadful as you anticipate. And who knows? You may find yourself pleasantly surprised by the company and the atmosphere.”

Darcy gave a half-smile, his resolve settling. “Very well. I shall make the effort. I appreciate your understanding and for not pushing me too hard.”

“Of course, my dear,” Lady Matlock said with a warm smile. “And remember, the ball is as much an opportunity for you as it is for me. It is a chance to make connections and, perhaps, to find a touch of enjoyment amidst the social obligations.”

Darcy nodded, a slight hint of a smile on his lips. “I shall keep that in mind.”

Lady Matlock raised her cup in a gesture of encouragement. “To making the most of the season, then.”

Darcy raised his own cup in return. “To making the most of the season.”

Monday, 20. April, Matlock House

You will attend... repeated Darcy inwardly. His aunt did not ask him or demand that he attend; she simply stated it as a matter of fact. *What mastery she possesses!* Darcy thought as he waited in line to greet his family – they welcomed all the guests at the door. Darcy had learned how Lady Matlock manipulated him, yet he could not resist her, or perhaps he did not want to, out of respect for her.

The countess, naturally, would take offence at the suggestion that she employed such artifice. Things had simply unfolded exactly as she had envisioned—quite on their own, of course.

Balls were, perhaps, Darcy’s Achilles’ heel¹⁵. He was always his most uncomfortable at such events. First, there were too many people to his taste, which inevitably led to chance encounters that discomfited him. Second, one could not properly

¹⁵ weakness

converse in a ballroom, and he found small talk utterly tedious and beyond his skill. The noise of the people around him and the music did not lend to conversations either, and he specifically did not like it when people leaned toward him to hear better.

In London, he was known, so many found him and wanted something from him. He was really not interested in most of these people's concerns. He had enough of his own. And third, the ladies. He bore no ill will towards the fairer sex – indeed, like any man, he appreciated their grace and elegance. It was the pursuit, however, that compelled his retreat. Since he appeared on the scene, and especially since he became his own master, the ladies and their parents had become relentless in trying to gain his favour, just like Lord Farringham, who was now advancing with the unmistakable urgency of a man about to offer his daughter. He could already see that his family was not far behind.

“Mr. Darcy, what a pleasure it is to see you. We had been wondering whether you might make an appearance this season. But, of course, you could not avoid your dear aunt's ball, I see. I know what it's like for young men; I was one once.” He winked at Darcy and slapped his left arm in camaraderie.

Darcy took a deep breath to keep his reaction to the unwelcome greeting to a minimum. His Lordship, a short and quite round man in his forties, was one of those peers who incurred considerable debt due to bad business decisions. His estate was in need of an infusion, which he tried to secure by selling his daughter to the highest bidder.

“You must surely remember my daughter, Evelyn. She has blossomed into a most charming young lady, would you not agree? Come, my dear,” he turned to his child. “You must remember Mr. Darcy. We met him last year in the park. He was with his sister.”

Lady Farringham was in her second or third year, not a debutante, and it showed in the way she carried herself. She held her head high and looked straight into his eyes. She curtsied with grace and was the first to speak. “Of course, I remember the gentleman, Papa. We met him at the theatre, too. Good evening, Mr. Darcy. How is your sister? Is she coming out soon? You are in our debt for a dinner, you know. Mother sent you several invitations last season. I hope we will see you soon this year.”

“Good evening, Lady Farringham.” He nodded to her parents as well. When she mentioned

the invitations, he decided to ignore the lady's forward speech. With his eyes, he was searching for his aunt.

There was no need; she was coming from behind him. When Lady Matlock noticed Lord Farringham speaking to her nephew, she knew she had to intervene on his behalf. After she freed him, Darcy thanked her with a nod when she looked back at him as she led the family away to meet someone else.

Not long after this encounter, however, Mr. Hainley from his club greeted him and introduced his wife and daughter. Mrs. Hainley used the conversation to recommend her debutante daughter to him.

The young lady was handsome enough. Her hair was a dark shade of blonde, coiffed with ringlets at the sides of her face. He knew from Georgiana that such an arrangement would take at least an hour. His sister simply refused such torture, and together with her maid, she had used and created hairstyles that were much easier to make. The young lady wore a white dress that was too tight at the top, as it looked like it would burst at any moment. He knew mothers made their daughters wear dresses like that with thoughts of drawing men's eyes to their bosoms. He found the tactic

vulgar in its calculation and unbecoming of those who claimed refinement. The only thing worse than this was when mothers made their daughters' dresses slightly wet so they would show their forms better. He shook his head at the errand thought. Men appreciated the spectacle but shied away from pursuing ladies with such cheap stratagems.

The poor girl hardly dared blink as she looked at him like a scared doe. He recalled Miss Elizabeth's scorn for hollow compliments and false airs. That echo made him pause – and look again at the nervous young woman before him. With Miss Elizabeth's words echoing in his mind, Darcy felt a sudden pang of sympathy and sought to temper his reserve. He stepped aside, subtly encouraging her to shift her gaze away from her mother's watchful eyes.

“Miss Hailey,” he said gently, “I assure you I do not bite... I am merely somewhat out of my element in a ballroom.” He found himself admitting.

The young lady blinked once, then gave a soft, slightly uncertain laugh – not the polished mirth expected of good breeding, but a genuine, light, feminine gleam of amusement. Something within her had eased, and the change surprised even Darcy.

“Sir, thank you for saying that. I am sorry, but my mother insisted you talk to me.”

“Ah, but is it not a mother’s duty to promote her daughter’s prospects?”

A spark of amusement lit up the debutante’s eyes.

Darcy, encouraged by her reaction, leaned in slightly and lowered his voice. “If you promise to keep my secret, I shall ask you to dance.”

Miss Hainley gasped, her eyes widening in surprise. “But – surely – you do not dance!”

“Is my reputation truly that dreadful?” Darcy asked, his tone light but tinged with self-deprecation.

The girl’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I—I am sorry. I did not mean to imply...”

“Not at all,” Darcy interrupted, his smile reassuring. “I did not mean censure, Miss Hainley. I merely meant that I know my behaviour can sometimes be less than amiable. I am working to improve it.”

Her eyes softened with admiration. “Indeed? That is – that’s very commendable, sir.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said, feeling a warm sense of satisfaction. “So, will you keep my secret?”

She nodded, her lips curving into a genuine smile. “I promise.”

“Splendid,” Darcy replied, bowing with a flourish. “May I have the honour of your next available dance?”

His reward was a radiant, broad smile that seemed to light up her face. *What an ogre I must have become!* And worse, scarcely twenty-eight, he had descended to such folly! Darcy could not help but reflect on how a few kind words could transform his interaction with others. He felt a pang of regret for his previous aloofness and recognised the truth in Miss Elizabeth's observation about his 'selfish disdain for the feelings of others.' Even in her absence, she proved to be his tutor.

The mask, which had shielded him for so long, had now become his curse: it had cost him the admiration of a respectable young lady. The memory surfaced unbidden – how she had turned away, laughing at some witticism of her friend during their visit to the Lucases. That laugh had been so natural, so sincere that Darcy had been left simply to gaze at her. Was this not what he had always sought? A moment such as that – a touch of such lightness? He sighed softly and returned Miss Hainley's smile.

During their dance, he became aware of more than one pair of eyes observing them. He sighed once more – he knew this small scene would soon become the subject of much discussion. It seemed that nothing could escape the notice of the ton.

As the evening drew to a close, Darcy made a point of seeking out Miss Hainley before they departed.

She turned to him, her expression brightening. “Mr. Darcy! Did you...enjoy yourself this evening?”

Darcy chuckled, a genuine warmth in his voice. “Well, let me say, I have made an effort, but I must confess, I thoroughly enjoyed our dance.”

“Oh, thank you, sir,” she said, her cheeks glowing with pleasure. “I should not despair. These things do come with practice.”

“That sounds wise,” Darcy replied with an encouraging nod.

“That is because it is true: ‘repetitio est mater studiorum,¹⁶’ she added with a hint of mischief.

Darcy could not speak for a moment. “You speak Latin?” he asked with rounded eyes.

Miss Hainley’s face flushed as she looked down, then she straightened and met his gaze with a touch of embarrassment. “Just a few phrases my brother taught me – I cannot claim to be a true scholar, only a performer.”

Darcy veritably laughed, and those around them did not know what to think. But that had

¹⁶ Repetition is the mother of study/learning

never yet prevented them from forming an opinion.

“Well, you certainly did that; you shocked me to silence. I am definitely impressed, Miss Hainley.”

She released a soft, delighted laugh and once more spoke in a conspiratorial undertone. “I must confess, Mr. Darcy, that my dance card filled rather quickly after you danced with me, and I think this little exchange has not gone unnoticed either.” She cast a swift glance about the room, a nervous little laugh escaping her lips.

“Indeed?” Darcy said, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “Then I am pleased to have been of some small service.” He gave a formal bow. “It was a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Hainley. I wish you all the best for the remainder of the season.”

As she followed him with her eyes, Miss Hainley wondered at her luck that such a gentleman was kind enough to dance with her, knowing what that gesture would mean for her. When Mr. Darcy danced with somebody, it was noticed, talked about, and often written about in the gossip columns. The incident instilled in her a quiet confidence – one which would sustain her through the uncertain, often perilous, course of the season. Which, it must be added, was worth more than any string of pearls or letter of recommendation.

Her mother told the tale of Mr. Darcy singling her daughter out, but she just smiled and made a great match with the second son of a respectable titled family. When she met Darcy at a dinner party the following year, she happily introduced her husband to him.

When his valet at last left him alone, Darcy sank into an armchair before the fire. He turned his thoughts to the evening's encounters, weighing them with unexpected satisfaction. He was quietly pleased with himself for having braved the ballroom a while longer than his custom, ere retreating to the comparative sanctuary of the card room.

Little had he imagined that his conduct might render such service to the young lady's social prospects. Of course, he was not ignorant that his dance partners were frequently the subject of speculation. Yet now, with a flicker of triumph, he recognised that, for once, he had not considered the effect of his actions upon himself. What had mattered most was the quiet assurance that he could attend to another's comfort, and the realisation had pleased him more than he had anticipated.

He had actually enjoyed his time with Miss Hainley. He concluded that once he realised she

was not in pursuit of him, not in that common way anyway, he shared an intimate piece of information about himself with her to help her relax. One step at a time, he reminded himself.

Until this evening, he had always resisted recalling his disastrous proposal; he had shied away from examining and confronting his words, his tone, his conduct. Yet now, he could no longer deny that for Miss Elizabeth to have spoken with such unforgiving finality – that he was the last man she would marry – his own conduct must have warranted it. And yet, even then, he could not just retreat and lick his wounds. No. He had compounded the offence by saying something foolish, that he was ashamed of his feelings for her. What a travesty that was!

For in truth, he was not ashamed. Never before had he been so exposed, so undone: for the first time in his life, he was vulnerable. He had known admiration, trifling infatuations perhaps, but none had ever stirred in him the wish to offer his name. Only this slip of a girl from the countryside had brought him to his knees. For the first time in his life, he felt alive. No, she was deserving of his feelings...only he arrogantly thought she would be his once he brought himself to ask. *What a wretched fool he had been!*

She had claimed he insulted her with his proposal! And how could such sentiments injure someone? For days, he did not want to see things from her perspective. But then his very words came to the fore in his mind as he explained to her that her inferiority had stopped him from declaring himself sooner...and did he say that her connections would be a...degradation? He paled. What possessed him to utter such wounding truths? Did he think she did not know her place in the world? That she needed reminding?

Rising in sudden agitation, he commenced to pace the chamber, unable to contain the tumult within. He could hear himself as he told her how his family would oppose his choice. And all these things were true... He righteously tried to defend himself by telling himself that he just wanted her to understand his strong feelings toward her and that he would go against all that. He cast himself onto the bed and shielded his eyes with his arm. Only it was no use; for the first time, he considered her. Would he happily accept someone's proposal when they claimed what he already knew – that he was inferior in station and money – and would he have rejoiced in being called a degradation? And yet he had expected her to smile.

Had he not always been disgusted by the sense of entitlement among the ton? The way Aunt Catherine thought she could arrange the world to suit her fancy? How did he not notice that he behaved just like them? Had he, indeed, become like them? *Heavens!* He had always prided himself on being better – and now realised he had only been subtler.

She had called him ungentlemanly. In truth, he had earned her disapproval – not with the Bingley debacle, not with Wickham; it was *his* words, *his* reprehensible behaviour. And if that was not enough, he had to have the last word after her rejection, and he attacked her, questioning her integrity by challenging her vanity. Why did he do that? Could he not just take his leave in dignity? Wounded in pride as much as in affection, he had lashed out in a manner wholly unworthy of the gentleman he aspired to be. He had affronted the very woman whose regard he professed to value above all things.

He rose with the reluctance of a man bearing twice his usual weight – whether from shame or sorrow, he could not say. He was so occupied with his station, his riches and what he was entitled to that he was almost angry at Miss Elizabeth for the feelings she generated in him that he assumed what...that she would love him? He could hardly believe his thinking. What conceit!

It struck him with painful clarity that he had never once considered whether *she* might love him in return. Had she, in truth, flirted with him – or had he only imagined it? He could no longer discern. The fire in her eyes as she rebuked him, the chilling composure with which she pronounced that final, damning sentence of him being the last man... He shuddered at the recollection. Heaven help him – he understood nothing of women!

He thought back to their encounters, and those instances when he felt he was paying too much attention to her, all fell apart in his realisation that he never said anything complimentary to her and never really showed himself to her out of fear that he was showing too much. He allowed himself a rueful chuckle. How misguided he had been!

Had he imagined it all? As hard as it was to admit it, he did not think she was flirting with him anymore. Her sharp comments – but why? *Why was she antagonistic?*

Why did he not consider her feelings before, and now that he knew them, why did he still want her love? He was thinking about trying again in the afterglow of her brutal rejection! He believed gaining such a woman's love would be a royal prize.

He recalled, with vivid clarity, those rare moments when she laughed without restraint. Maybe he was jaded, but it was a rare occasion a woman

would give in to the urge to laugh – he wished to laugh with her. He thought back to when she turned away in her mirth, hardly restrained – he wanted to join her in her inside joke. He thought back to when her eyes would flash, and she would straighten before issuing a subtle rebuke – he wanted to hear it and support and defend her.

He instinctively knew what he was missing.

He had everything one could wish for. He had an enviable status; his family enjoyed a certain level of independence, as his ancestors had refused any titles they were offered; this also brought them a certain level of respect from the crown. He inherited extensive land and property and had considerable wealth from his ancestors, who managed their estates with care. In the years since he took over, Darcy had also proved to be an efficient and effective landlord. He had a good standing among the ton; he was considered an honourable gentleman of great understanding. And, as the Reader well knows, he was a target of most ton mamas as a marriage prospect for their offspring. In summary, he had it all...except for one thing. He instinctively knew what it was.

The love of a good woman.

It was too bad that his epiphany came all too late.

“... when she considered how unjustly she had condemned and upbraided him, her anger was turned against herself, and his disappointed feelings became the object of compassion. His attachment excited gratitude, his general character respect; but she could not approve him; nor could she for a moment repent her refusal, or feel the slightest inclination ever to see him again.”¹⁷

Elizabeth arrived at the Gardiners’ on Saturday, the 18th day of April, from Hunsford. She was glad to see her family, especially Jane. How she had missed her sister! For the next two weeks, they enjoyed the many activities her aunt had prepared for them. It was not until the beginning of May that they finally left for Hertfordshire.

Elizabeth used the time in London to come to terms with what happened at Hunsford and how she felt about it. She vacillated about what to share with Jane. Jane was happy enough during their time in London, but every now and then, Elizabeth would catch a glimpse of her melancholy. She sighed, put her sewing work down, and stared outside the window. Her heart ached for her sister. At

¹⁷ Quote from *Pride and Prejudice*

the same time, her resentment toward Mr. Darcy appeared again – well, sharing her resentment between him and the Bingley sisters. Whether Mr. Darcy believed her indifference did not matter much, as the result was her sister’s broken heart. However, she did not broach the subject with her, as she was afraid to open the slowly healing wounds.

Wanting to protect her sister’s sensibilities, she did not tell Jane about Mr. Darcy’s interference; she only shared his proposal and Wickham’s duplicity. She shared her tale on the day after their arrival home.

Poor Jane listened to her sister in alarm as she revealed Mr. Darcy’s proposal. She could not help but feel compassion for his disappointment. “I agree that he should not have been so sure of your acceptance, but Lizzy, can you not see the extent of his feelings that drove him to propose? His disappointment must have also been great.”

Jane was incredulous that such a high-society man as Mr. Darcy would offer for her sister, a country nobody, even if he danced with her at the Netherfield Ball. She was of two minds about her sister’s refusal. Such a marriage could have meant a great deal to their family, and Elizabeth did not even consider it. Jane never thought Mr. Darcy unworthy, nor did she consider him too arrogant. His

friendship with Mr. Bingley, who was from trade, proved that in her eyes.

Still, the idea of such a man offering for her sister struck her as extraordinary. She could not help but wonder: what had Elizabeth done to inspire such devotion? She knew her sister's charm, her quick mind, and her lively spirit, but to elicit an offer from a man so far above their station... It spoke of a depth of feeling Jane could scarcely comprehend. And yet, that same depth made his disappointment all the more poignant.

She thought he would have been a good husband to her sister, but when Elizabeth asked her if she blamed her for saying no, she saw that Lizzy wanted reassurance in her choice, and as a good sister, she gave it.

Her face was truly stricken afterwards as she listened to Mr. Darcy's account of Mr. Wickham. It was another blow to her worldview after learning about the Bingley sisters' fickleness in how they treated her. Initially, she tried to find some redeeming qualities in him, but she needed Elizabeth's perspective to accept their lack. Even then, she dearly hoped that now that he had joined the militia, a worthy occupation, he would want to change his ways.

It also occurred to her in passing that she had mentioned to her sister that Mr. Darcy was not

evil. However, she thought better of bringing that up at present.

“Well, Lizzy,” said Mrs. Bennet as she sat heavily in an armchair, “what do you say about this unfortunate business of Jane’s?” She lamented about the ‘undeserving’ Mr. Bingley and how ill he used her daughter.

Elizabeth felt the injustice of her situation all over again. What could she say to her mother that would give any consolation? Fortunately, Mrs. Bennet kept talking, never noticing her daughter’s lack of answers. “I have tried to learn when or if he returns to Netherfield, but nobody knows anything. The only news I found out about was that unpleasant man, you know, his friend, is having a great time, that Mr. Darcy.”

“Mr. Darcy?” Surprise stole the air from Elizabeth’s lungs. “What did you learn about him?”

Her mother pointed to the corner table, where a pile of newspapers lay. “He was mentioned in the paper attending a ball and dancing. Apparently, Meryton was the only place where he didn’t have a taste for dancing with the locals. Come to think of it, at least he asked *you* at the Netherfield ball. Mr. Bingley was not mentioned, but he must have been

with him. I imagine he is not important enough.” That was new ammunition for Mrs. Bennet to complain about the young man – that he enjoyed himself around London while her daughter pined away.

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and turned away, yet the thought echoed within her, and a bitter flush crept across her cheeks. No! Nonsense. What concern was it of hers? Why should she care with whom Mr. Darcy had danced in London?

And yet, when her mother fell asleep in the armchair, her gaze strayed repeatedly to the side table where the newspapers lay in a tidy stack. She hesitated for a moment, as though uncertain of her own intentions – then, as though betrayed by her own hand, she stepped towards them. The paper beckoned. Her fingers trembled as she leafed through the society pages.

And there it was: Mr. Darcy, present at the Countess of Matlock’s ball, was observed conversing and dancing at length with a Miss Hainley, described in the column as ‘charming.’ *So, Mr. Darcy has moved on.* Elizabeth froze. *Well, that was swiftly done.* She had no right to feel wounded, and yet the sting was real. She bristled at that. So, he enjoyed himself. And already... in the company of another. A bitterness she had no wish to acknowledge surged within her. Why should it

wound her so? She had not expected him to mourn her absence. She had not wished for him to miss her – indeed, she ought to rejoice if he had indeed forgotten her.

And yet. What kind of young lady had so captured Mr. Darcy's notice? Was she beautiful? Clever? Or – and here Elizabeth thought with almost defiant bitterness – did she possess a considerable dowry? The idea struck like a blade, and she knew even as she felt it that she was being unfair, for Mr. Darcy had made his offer to her, who had little to bring to any union. He had not been drawn by wealth.

She did not know how she was supposed to feel about this knowledge, and she became angry with herself for wanting to find out about him. Yet, the image of him dancing, engaging so quickly with another, unsettled her. She had not expected to occupy his thoughts after Hunsford, but neither had she imagined him so unaffected.

She pushed the thought aside, reminding herself firmly that she had no claim on his attentions.

He is free to act as he wishes.

NEW NEIGHBOUR

Chapter 5



“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady as soon as she arrived home from visiting her neighbours, “Have you heard that Netherfield Park has a new owner at last?”

Mr. Bennet, who was reading the newspaper seated comfortably, replied that he had not.

“But there is,” returned she, “for Mrs. Long has just told me about it. Her cook got it from Mrs. Nicholls, the housekeeper of Netherfield.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

“It would seem that Mr. Bingley has, at last, relinquished all thought of it. What a man! “He did not even take the trouble to bid a proper farewell to the local society,” she said with lingering hurt in her voice.

“Pray, what do you mean, Mother? Does Netherfield have a new owner? I wasn’t aware that it was for sale. Were you, Father?” Elizabeth inquired as she glanced at Jane worryingly.

Again, Mr. Bennet confirmed that no, he did not know about it at all.

“And do we know who the new owner is?” Jane joined the conversation. Her voice did not tremble, and for that, she was grateful.

Elizabeth looked at her mother, too, to hear her answer.

“That is just it. I should love to inform you as I am curious myself, but the housekeeper didn’t say,” their mother lamented.

“That is curious indeed. Father, are you going to visit him when he arrives?” Elizabeth asked with a mirthful tone in her voice.

Mr. Bennet lowered his newspaper and looked meaningfully at his favourite daughter. “I am afraid I shall be obliged to, unless I wish to endure, for weeks on end, that particularly artful variety of reproach which only my wife is capable of performing.”

“Of course, you must visit him, my dear! We’re one of the leading families in the neighbourhood. What would people say if we neglected our duty to the community, I ask you. Of course, your father will visit the new owner, whoever he is.” She said the last, turning to Elizabeth.

With a sigh, Mr. Bennet continued, “Yes, I shall visit him when he shows himself, although he’s possibly married with children.”

To this, his wife had the following to say: “Oh, my dear Mr. Bennet! Although he may be married,

indeed, such men can have single acquaintances whom they could invite. But I know on good authority that the new owner is without family.”

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged a meaningful glance, their unspoken thoughts echoing in the air.

The only person, other than Mrs. Nicholls, who was aware of the new landlord of Netherfield’s identity was Mr. Phillips, the local attorney. They were sufficiently shocked at that development. Alas, he was obligated not to say a word due to his confidentiality agreement, although the fact nearly drove him to despair. His wife and others kept nagging him to share this vital information. It seemed people would veritably die if they did not learn the identity of their new neighbour soon. He had sent messengers to and fro, finalising the deal on the previous owner’s behalf.

It was a profound relief to be home, Elizabeth mused as she stepped out into the fresh May air. She had been away for a long time, and her wish for excitement before the trip was more than fulfilled with everything that happened. Her recent experiences, brimming with unexpected encounters and unresolved sentiments, seemed to dissolve

into the serenity of her surroundings. She stepped out with a resolute smile and was determined to enjoy her walk, not thinking of undeserving handsome gentlemen, letters, or sentiments that stirred her emotions.

She adored the month of May. The world seemed to awaken in a riot of colours and fragrances as if nature itself were celebrating the end of winter's restraint. The air was neither too chill nor overly warm, creating an ideal setting for leisurely strolls. Elizabeth delighted in the familiar sights of her home and let the bushes and trees comfort her. She revelled in the sight of blossoming flowers and the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze. Each step along the well-worn paths of Longbourn brought her a sense of tranquillity, as if the land itself were embracing her with its reassuring familiarity. There, on the well-trodden paths, she was home; she was safe, and nothing untoward could affect her.

As she ascended Oakham Mount, a modest hill that offered a sweeping view of the surrounding countryside, Elizabeth let her eyes wander over the picturesque landscape. The vibrant greens of the meadows and the distant outline of Netherfield, newly acquired, seemed to blend harmoniously with the azure sky.

Suddenly, her reverie was interrupted by the distant, rhythmic pounding of hooves against the soft earth. Elizabeth turned her gaze toward the sound, her curiosity piqued. Across the field at the base of the hill, she discerned the sight of two riders, their figures silhouetted against the backdrop of the meadow. Their horses, magnificent and powerful, moved with a grace and speed that spoke of both their training and the riders' skill.

The sight was unusual and captivating. The riders were approaching Netherfield at a brisk pace, and Elizabeth's mind immediately leapt to the possibility that these were the new owners of the estate. The new owner's apparent enthusiasm and the impressive manner of their arrival hinted at a man of considerable presence and means. The gentlemen exhibited such a display of vitality and purpose that a tremor ran through her. She could not help but admire their grace and skill.

Elizabeth's mind was jolted back to last November, a time when the sight of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley racing across the fields had filled her with a mixture of admiration and envy. She had been captivated by the sight of Mr. Darcy on his magnificent horse, their powerful forms and the effortless grace with which they moved. At that time, before Mr. Darcy had so dramatically altered

her opinion of him, she had admired both the horse and its rider with a deep-seated longing.

The memory of that day was still vivid in her mind. She wished she could experience the exhilaration of riding such a fine animal, feeling the wind rush past her as she rode with unrestrained freedom. But, alas, her family had not considered it necessary to teach their daughters the art of riding. The horses they owned were practical, suited for work in the fields or pulling carriages. Nelly, their faithful but ancient mare, was a gentle creature but hardly the kind to indulge in spirited gallops. *Gentle Nelly, bless her, would not have galloped even for her supper.* Harnessing her for a slow trot was a far cry from the thrill Elizabeth yearned for.

Elizabeth had always maintained that she preferred walking, a preference she had long professed to conceal the sting of disappointment. The truth was, she had envied the gentlemen who roamed the countryside on horseback, their spirits as free as the wind. The challenge and excitement of controlling a spirited horse were experiences she could only dream of. Her father had promised a few times but never took any action to buy a horse suitable for his daughters. It was not that she did not like walking, but she would have liked the option. In her pride, she convinced even herself that

walking was her true preference. But it had only ever been her only option.

As she stood on the hill, her gaze fixed on the two riders, she watched in awe as the dark-coloured horse moved smoothly from a trot to a gallop. Its sleek, almost black coat shimmered under the sunlight, and the rider appeared to merge seamlessly with his mount, leaning forward and embracing the horse's neck with a natural ease. The sight was mesmerising, and Elizabeth felt a rush of warmth that contrasted sharply with the coolness of the spring air. Her heart quickened as she watched, enraptured by the scene before her.

Suddenly, the rider's head turned toward her, as if sensing her gaze. Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat, her body frozen in place. Her eyes locked onto the rider's face, and she could scarcely believe what she saw. The recognition was immediate and shocking.

"Mr. Darcy!" she exclaimed in a stunned whisper. The name left her lips before she could stop it. It felt like a spell broken – and cast again. Her mind raced as she struggled to process the impossible revelation. There was no mistaking it – this was indeed Mr. Darcy, and that horse was unmistakably his. The very same majestic creature she had admired so long ago. The shock of recognition was immediate and overwhelming.

This is impossible! She screamed inwardly as she gasped. The man looked straight at her for a few long seconds, then turned back to catch up to the other rider.

Mr. Darcy! Mr. Darcy? Her eyes must be playing tricks on her! Her chest heaved with thoughts of what this might mean. *Oh, my lord! Could he be the new owner of Netherfield? But why?* Her pulse raced with a mixture of disbelief and anxiety. The idea of Mr. Darcy being the new owner of Netherfield was inconceivable, yet the evidence before her was undeniable.

No, no! He wouldn't come here; no man would... Not after all that had passed between them. Not to this house, this village, this life.

Elizabeth's hands trembled as she tried to grasp the enormity of the situation. Her feelings of admiration were now intertwined with a deep sense of confusion and turmoil. The familiar landscape of her home had suddenly been invaded by the very man who had once so profoundly affected her, as though Mr. Darcy's appearance had not only unsettled the accustomed order but shaken the very foundations of her inner peace.

As Mr. Darcy and his companion disappeared into the distance, Elizabeth remained rooted to the spot, her mind reeling with the implications of his

presence. She shook her head to dispel the strange, disorienting sensation that had overtaken her. “No, this cannot be happening,” she muttered, trying to steady her breathing.

The sight of Mr. Darcy, so unexpectedly close and so dramatically different from her memories, left Elizabeth in a state of bewildered agitation. The quietude of the countryside seemed to mock her turmoil, and she was left to grapple with the overwhelming realisation that her life, once again, was on the brink of unexpected change.

The viscount reached Netherfield first, his horse’s hooves echoing on the gravel as he dismounted with practised ease. Darcy followed a moment later, his mind preoccupied with the startling encounter he had just had. He had lost his edge in the race, distracted by an unexpected sight.

“It is not like you to get sidetracked by a skirt, Darce,” Phillip remarked, his tone light but laced with amusement as they got off the horses and started toward the entrance.

Darcy cast him a dry look, his expression a mix of annoyance and embarrassment. He cleared his throat, still slightly breathless.

“It was a lady I know. Our neighbour.”

Phillip looked back at Darcy dubiously.

“And does she have a name?”

Darcy looked away and cleared his throat. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” *What was it with the Matlocks?* He felt a familiar stir of irritation at how easily the Matlocks seemed to pry into his affairs. His cousin, like his mother, had a knack for interrogation that could be quite vexing.

Darcy’s thoughts were still consumed by the brief but intense moment when he had seen Miss Elizabeth. His heart raced uncontrollably when he saw her on the hill. It was as if an invisible thread had tugged at his chest, drawing his gaze irresistibly toward her. He looked – as if her gaze had summoned him. The sight of her had affected him more profoundly than he had anticipated. Her figure, silhouetted against the landscape, had elicited a visceral reaction from him, leaving him breathless and momentarily disoriented.

As they approached the grand entrance of Netherfield, Darcy’s mind churned with questions. Had she recognised him? What had she thought upon seeing him? He had tried to gauge her reaction from a distance, but it was not easy to decipher her expression. All he could discern was that she had been looking at him, seemingly unmoved by the sight of him.

The realisation that she now knew he was here – at Netherfield – sent a ripple of anxiety through him. The knowledge that she was aware of his presence left him unsettled. He could not help but wonder what she made of it all. Did she see his arrival as an intrusion? Did it change her perception of him? He would find out soon enough. And this time, he would not hide behind silence.

Well, the cat is out of the bag. She knows I'm here.

He wished she would welcome him with open arms, but he knew that was wishful thinking. He hoped, though, that if she had read his letter, at least she would not look at him with hatred in her eyes – that maybe she would be open for him to prove himself. As the image of her standing on that hill, her gaze fixed on him, lingered in his mind, he prepared to see her again, more composed.

A few days before

Georgiana arrived in London promptly. She did not hesitate to pack when she received her brother's letter. The siblings, as always, were happy

to be reunited. Once she arrived, they found themselves in Hyde Park with Hussar, where they fed the ducks and the elegant swans. Darcy's dog did not understand the concept of feeding them; he thought his master made the birds come to gather for his pleasure, and not once did he invade the shallow waters.

On their way home, they made a detour to Gunter's for ices. This establishment was their favourite place; well, to be truthful, all of London seemed to agree. The almond-sweet aroma lingered in the street, a scent that had drawn half of London into indulgence. Few things in London could rival the pleasure of the owner's creations – except perhaps a second helping. And indulge they often did whenever in the capital.

In the days before travelling to Hertfordshire, the brother and sister were often seen in the shops, and Wilkins and the footman frequently accompanied her to make last-minute runs for her brother. They placed orders for lengths of cloth and shoes of every measure.

Georgiana caught her brother's enthusiasm about his venture. She had seen him absorbed before – but never alight with this kind of purpose. At dinner, the topic was mainly their plans, sometimes joined by their cousin. Sometimes, however, she saw Darcy looking distracted, gazing out the

window or ahead, ignoring a letter. Sometimes, he had a hidden smile on his face that only she saw. She was curious about what he was thinking at such times. Whatever it was about, she had not seen her brother so alive, which made her forget her own troubles.

Darcy and all his company arrived on Thursday, at the end of the first week of May, just a few days after Elizabeth and Jane's arrival¹⁸. The last fortnight had been hectic for him and the viscount.

The Reader may wonder about Darcy's cousin, but as things happened, he became quite involved in this new enterprise. He caught Darcy's enthusiasm, too, and he joined his cousin for several dinners, and they talked in detail about the plans. Phillip had some ideas of his own that he shared with Darcy excitedly – one, namely, to produce speciality cheeses for the upper class. As a connoisseur¹⁹ himself, he knew a fellow whose business he had financed during his university years in Cambridge, and he still regularly bought from the man.

¹⁸ In *Pride and Prejudice*, they arrive home in the second week of May, but I made them arrive about a week earlier to have some time for things to happen before Lydia and the regiment left.

¹⁹ An expert judge in matters of taste

Darce, I have given further thought to our plan regarding Netherfield. How do you feel about introducing a line of speciality cheeses? I have a contact who could be invaluable.”

Darcy looked up from his plate, intrigued. “Cheeses? You mean to cater to the upper class?”

“Yes,” Phillip replied with a nod, already picturing elegant hampers and seasonal fairs.

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “You intend to tempt the ton with Stilton?”

Phillip smirked. “You scoff, but wait until Lady Jersey starts demanding a monthly delivery.” He leaned forward, his tone shifting. “I financed a cheese maker during my time at Cambridge. He still produces excellent quality, and I am certain he’d be willing to join us. It would set us apart from the competition.”

The viscount himself had knowledge of farming; it was his future, after all, and he was intrigued by Darcy’s plans. He decided to divide his time between Netherfield and London for the time being. It was his mother’s condition that he still attend significant events of the season.

After the ball, the two cousins indeed met the owner of Netherfield, an older gentleman who had purchased the estate primarily for entertainment and hunting, as well as to establish a foothold in the gentry. The man was a wealthy tradesman who

owned several grand inns in the country and two new taverns²⁰ in London. Country living and making money from the land proved more than the man could handle, and after a few years of trying, he gave up the endeavour. He used the money from the lease and the reduced land income to expand the business with which he was familiar.

When Darcy and the viscount offered to buy the estate off him and offered the opportunity of further income and doubling his money in five years or so if he invested, he could not resist. His wife had a new summer residence in mind; she wished for the seaside. With this offer, he could fulfil her desire.

The cousins decided to make an offer of thirty-eight thousand, explaining that they needed substantial capital to make the developments. When the man understood that there was more to come if he invested ten thousand, they reached an agreement of forty thousand after a few days (he used to learn about the gentlemen through a professional). Then, a separate contract was drawn up for the investment. The gentleman became the first investor in the enterprise.

²⁰ Taverns sold wine, and since wine was far more expensive than ale or beer, taverns catered to richer patrons who could afford it. At the time they were being replaced by or converted into coffee houses as social centres for the wealthier classes.

Bingley's surprised agreement to Darcy's request to take over the rest of the lease arrived, and things could proceed. He mentioned in his letter that Miss Bingley thought it must be a mistake that, surely, Mr. Darcy would not be interested in such a provincial estate.

Still, if that was the case, she insisted that Bingley convey her message, urging Mr. Darcy to reconsider his move. Bingley also wanted to know if he intended to be in town for the season. Darcy knew immediately that he was asking for his sister because it was Darcy who could obtain invitations to ton events for him and his sister. However, he did not mind doing this favour for his friend; Bingley's constant requests to include his sister, the older sister, and her husband grated on him. It was one thing to enjoy Bingley's company and another to tolerate his relatives at every event. He also inquired whether they were still invited to Pemberley in August.

Darcy groaned. He had almost forgotten about that invitation. No matter: he would have to go to Pemberley for the harvest regardless, so he could still do that. He was, quite rightly, annoyed by Miss Bingley's presumption that he would be interested in her opinion on the matter of business – but he was also, truth be told, rather pleased. Miss

Bingley's confusion was a fine reward for his discretion.

Additionally, he felt a quiet satisfaction at having thwarted Miss Bingley's plans for the season, however ungentlemanly that sentiment might be. Still, he suspected that Miss Elizabeth would not take offence. Indeed, she might even smile, with just the sort of mischief that had undone him from the first, at *such* ungentlemanly thoughts.

FIRST MEETING

Chapter 6



It was the morning of Sunday, the 10th of May, when the church at the edge of Longbourn and Meryton seemed to await its congregation in quiet solemnity. It was a modest but handsome stone building, crowned with an old, flat tower. Though not grand, but dear to the people who lived around it. The parson walked around inside, checking if everything was in order before his parishioners started to arrive.

Darcy, seated next to his sister in the carriage, was consumed with thoughts of the impending meeting. He patted her hand in encouragement, his mind several miles away. He was determined to make a favourable impression upon Miss Elizabeth's family, to demonstrate his ability to behave civilly towards her relations and neighbours. His request to his valet to make him look more approachable was a testament to his eagerness. Darcy wore a simple, dark blue waistcoat, and instead of a tailcoat, he wore a long, light brown coat. He

wore his new high boots and chose a pale blue cravat, which complemented his eyes and looked rather well on him, contrasting with his white shirt. His cousin had no such motivation and looked every inch the aristocrat.

“I understand why Georgiana looks nervous, but why do you, Darce?”

“I am not nervous,” he grunted.

“Nonsense. You were fidgeting; you have adjusted your attire several times.”

Darcy shrugged. “It’s all new. I feel a bit uncomfortable in it.” Demonstrating this sentiment, he adjusted his cravat.

“Oh, I see.” He turned to Georgiana. “Little dove, don’t worry; these are country folk, just like at Pemberley. They do not bite.”

She took a deep breath and nodded to her cousin.

“Yes, these are country folk. Could you behave in a more... restrained manner?”

“Are you asking me to curb my tongue? You?” The viscount snorted.

“We need to make a good impression if we’re to be successful here. I do not think these people have ever met a peer.”

The viscount smiled smugly but answered Darcy’s reproachful look, “You’re right, of course. I shall aim to earn the goodwill of the parishioners.

And you, my dear cousin, you need to relax. After all, you already know them. There is no reason to fret.”

Darcy nodded sharply in acknowledgement but inwardly worried about his reception. Miss Elizabeth had just reprimanded him, among other things, for being condescending to the locals, he sighed.

As they arrived at the church, Darcy took a deep breath and entered.

The church was already full. They did not wish to parade to the front in front of everybody, so they sat in the back. He knew he would be expected to sit at the front next time. They were among the first people to be out when the service finished. They stood away from the entrance to meet the neighbours officially.

The parson was the first out and, with pomp, officially met the neighbours himself. He gasped when he learnt that a peer had just listened to his preaching. He welcomed them to the neighbourhood and assured them a front pew would be reserved for them each Sunday. Darcy asked if he could meet with him in the next few days – he wanted to let the parson know what they were planning at Netherfield and, as he knew the neighbourhood, to ask him to send people their way for

work who needed it. By this time, most of the parishioners were outside.

At that moment, Sir Lucas's stout figure appeared on the church steps; his brow furrowed slightly as he recognised one of the gentlemen of the waiting party. A look of puzzled curiosity settled on his face – clearly, he had not expected to see Mr. Darcy again.

“Mr. Darcy? Is it truly you?” he exclaimed, hastening forward. “What a surprise, sir! I confess, I never imagined we would see you again in this neighbourhood. Might I ask – where are you staying?”

“Sir Lucas, it *is* a pleasure to see you again as well. I am staying at Netherfield.”

“At Netherfield? Has Mr. Bingley returned?” He frowned.

“No. *We* are the new owners of the place.” He gestured to his cousin. “Cousin, this is Sir Lucas, one of the prominent members of the neighbourhood.”

The older man, taken aback at being introduced first, bowed in response.

“This is my cousin, Phillip Fitzwilliam, the Right Honourable Viscount of Matlock, Derbyshire.”

“Oh, it–it is an honour to welcome you to the neighbourhood, my lord.” Sir Lucas was quite

speechless and confused. *A peer here in Meryton! Did Mr. Darcy say they bought Netherfield?*

Sir Lucas appeared at a loss for words – noblemen of high rank seldom deemed Meryton worthy of their notice.

“I had the honour to be a guest of his when I was here in the autumn,” Darcy explained to his cousin. Then, his attention was arrested by the heavenly sight of the church’s entrance.

It was her.

Elizabeth’s breath faltered the instant her eyes alighted upon Mr. Darcy. His presence in that place, so unexpected yet inevitable, sent a jolt through her chest. She had fortified herself against this moment, yet her carefully rehearsed indifference faltered when faced with the reality of his calm, composed figure. *What could have brought him here?* And why did the mere sight of him unsettle her so?

He beheld Miss Elizabeth standing near the church entrance, her figure gracefully framed against the backdrop of the ancient stone edifice. As their eyes met, she averted her gaze at once, her movement a swift and instinctive withdrawal from the long-anticipated encounter. Darcy did not begrudge her reaction; he understood that meeting

again was destined to be fraught with unease after all that had passed between them.

He observed her from afar as she descended the shallow steps leading from the church's entrance, her carriage elegant yet subtly marked by the unease of their shared past. Darcy's heart ached with a mixture of regret and longing. This encounter, so long anticipated and so heavy with memory, was threaded with unspoken words and unresolved feelings.

Darcy stood still, a knot of quiet trepidation and restless hope tightening his chest. As Miss Elizabeth moved further away, Darcy's gaze lingered upon her retreating figure, his thoughts a whirlwind of restless contemplation. The promise of a new beginning at Netherfield seemed inextricably linked to the possibility of mending the past. With a heart buoyed by cautious optimism, he watched her go, hoping that this decision – this deliberate step into an unwritten chapter – would not only prove to be a sound investment but also offer a way forward in their personal li

Mrs. Bennet, ever the tireless architect of social advancement, nudged her husband forward with a decisive gesture to join the newcomers. As Mr. Bennet began approaching the newcomers, her own gaze was drawn to the tall, impeccably attired young man accompanying Mr. Darcy. A look of

curiosity and mild disapproval flickered across her face before she could even purse her lips at the sight of Mr. Darcy. Determined to make the best of the situation, she followed her husband, ushering her daughters into an orderly procession, including the reluctant Elizabeth.

Darcy's hand grew uncomfortably warm and damp at the prospect of meeting the Bennets, a stark reminder of the lingering tension between them that still stretched, taut and unresolved. His past words echoed faintly – proud, wounding, ill-judged. As Mrs. Bennet approached with her daughters in tow, he drew himself up, determined to maintain his composure.

“Mr. Darcy, is it? How fortunate we are!” Mr. Bennet's voice rang out; his tone tinged with a cheerfulness more practised than sincere. “Welcome back to Meryton, sir. And may I ask who your companions are?”

Darcy bowed with deliberate formality.

“Mr. Bennet, I am obliged to you for your kind reception.” He turned to his cousin, presenting him with a matching ceremony. “May I introduce the Right Honourable Viscount Phillip Fitzwilliam of Matlock, Derbyshire – my cousin on my mother's side.”

Upon hearing the title of the other young gentleman, Mr. Bennet could not help but note that,

contrary to the usual dictates of etiquette, it was the nobleman who had been introduced to him – *a curious reversal, to be sure.*

Phillip blinked once, then allowed a slow smile to curve his lips. So, Darcy was breaking the rules of precedence? Perhaps Hertfordshire had more wonders in store than expected.

“He, too, hails from Derbyshire. Phillip, this is Mr. Bennet of Longbourn, a respected neighbour and one of the more prominent gentlemen in the area.”

As Mrs. Bennet joined them with her daughters, she listened with surprise as Mr. Darcy spoke of her husband.

Darcy continued, “And the lady beside him is his wife, Mrs. Bennet. Madam, it is a pleasure to see you again,” he addressed the matron with courteous formality. And these are their charming daughters, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary and...”

“Miss Catherine and Miss Lydia, my lord.” Mrs. Bennet interjected with unmistakable maternal pride, executing a modest curtsy. “Mr. Darcy.” *What courtesy!* She thought.

Darcy returned her gesture with a courteous bow, extending it to each of the daughters. He was careful not to allow his gaze to rest too long upon

Miss Elizabeth, though he could not entirely suppress the quiet hope that she might offer him a glance. “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, it is a pleasure to see you both once more. I trust you well?” he said, his voice measured and composed as he addressed the elder sisters. Inwardly, he hoped – perhaps against reason – that Miss Elizabeth would look at him, though he dared not expect much.

Elizabeth offered a curt nod, her gaze unreadable. Darcy could not tell whether it was indifference or defence.

Jane, ever gracious, was the first to speak after a glance at her sister. “Mr. Darcy, welcome to the neighbourhood again. We are quite well. And you? What brings you back to Hertfordshire?”

“My cousin and I have recently purchased Netherfield...” Darcy began, his gaze briefly drifting to Elizabeth when her head lifted sharply at the mention of Netherfield, a clear sign of her surprise.

Darcy met her eyes and offered a slight bow. Then he turned back to Jane. “Yes, Miss Bennet. We acquired it as an investment and hope to make significant improvements there.”

“Are you indeed the new owner of Netherfield, sir?” Mrs. Bennet asked in wonder.

“Yes, madam. We are very hopeful about the potential there and look forward to becoming part of the community.”

“Indeed?” Mr. Bennet was also taken aback by the news of the purchase of Netherfield. “That is indeed a considerable undertaking.”

“Yes, sir. We also look forward to enjoying the company here,” Darcy added, glancing back at Jane and then at Elizabeth, who was still observing him with a curious, if guarded, expression.

Mrs. Bennet found her opinion of Mr. Darcy shifting with surprising swiftness – indeed, in a matter of mere moments. *He must have taken quite a liking to the neighbourhood after all*, she mused to herself with growing satisfaction.

Phillip had been observing the Bennet daughters with the discerning eye of a gentleman well-versed in society’s expectations, paying particular attention to the two eldest, who, by virtue of their age and demeanour, might naturally draw interest. Yet it was not mere propriety or eligibility that held his gaze. No – something altogether different had arrested his attention. For standing before him was, quite simply, the loveliest woman he had ever beheld.

There was a quiet elegance about her, an un-studied grace that needed no adornment. Her features, though turned away from him, conveyed

a serenity that was somehow all the more captivating for its lack of artifice. That she was not looking his way seemed, to him, a grievous oversight of fate – one he felt compelled to amend. With a resolve born of sudden and unaccountable fascination, he stepped forward, unwilling to let the moment pass unnoticed.

“Darcy, would you introduce me to these lovely ladies? I do not think they heard the introduction,” Lord Fitzwilliam called out, his tone both warm and inviting.

“Of course,” Darcy replied, his voice tinged with relief. “Misses Bennet, allow me to introduce His Lordship, the Viscount of Matlock. Phillip Fitzwilliam. Miss Elizabeth, he’s Colonel Fitzwilliam’s older brother.”

The three of them exchanged polite greetings, the formality of the introductions momentarily easing the tension. The young ladies, however, composed in manner, could not entirely conceal their surprise at finding themselves in the presence of a titled gentleman; the Viscount’s appearance had introduced a degree of gravity and distinction to the encounter they had not anticipated.

The viscount observed Miss Bennet’s reserved, almost shy demeanour as she rose gracefully from her curtsy. Her head remained bowed for a moment, and a quiet sigh escaped her lips – a breath

of hesitation, perhaps, or composure reclaimed. Then, with a soft and deliberate motion, she lifted her gaze to meet his. There was nothing coquettish in her manner, no artifice to her expression – only a quiet dignity and an unguarded sincerity that struck him with unexpected force. He found himself blinking, as though to steady his thoughts, caught off guard not only by her beauty, but also by the gentle fortitude that shone through her modesty. He had seen beauty often. But never, until now, something that seemed so quietly invincible. For a fleeting moment, Darcy’s words faded into a distant murmur, so entirely had she captured his attention.

“You are acquainted with my brother, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Miss Elizabeth?” Lord Fitzwilliam inquired, clearly intrigued.

“Yes, my lord,” Elizabeth responded, her cheeks flushing slightly as she met his gaze.

“Colonel, who, pray?” Mrs. Bennet asked, blinking in confusion. “How do you know him?”

Elizabeth hesitated, searching for the right words. “I—I...” She faltered, unsure of how to navigate the unexpected question.

“We were also in Kent when Miss Elizabeth visited her friend, Mrs. Collins,” Darcy offered, his tone measured, stepping in gently to spare her the

awkwardness of explanation. He turned slightly toward her, offering a brief smile – one that bore more humility than triumph and which he hoped would not betray the unease coiling in his chest.

That she had not spoken of him was hardly unexpected. She had every reason to wish his name unspoken. But that she had kept silent even about Richard – his affable, good-humoured cousin – was something else entirely. It could not have been forgetfulness. No, Miss Elizabeth’s mind was far too exacting for that. It was a choice – one made deliberately, perhaps even painfully.

It was difficult for him to read her expressions. He was afraid to see things there that were not meant, only desired.

He inclined his head with quiet grace. “Colonel Fitzwilliam asked me to convey his warm regards to you, Miss Elizabeth.”

There it was – a simple courtesy on the surface, but beneath it, a tentative offering. Not an apology, not yet. But perhaps a bridge. And if her eyes lingered on his a moment longer than civility required, he dared believe – for the space of a breath – that forgiveness, while not yet spoken, was not beyond reach.

“Oh...thank you, Mr. Darcy. I remember him affectionately.”

Darcy's lips curved into the faintest suggestion of a smile.

“And...and of course, I am glad to see you again,” Elizabeth added quickly. “Are you well? I must confess, I was surprised to hear you intend to settle here...”

The viscount, while others conversed around him, took the moment to steady himself, quietly regaining composure after the unexpected impression left by the woman before him. His gaze, unbidden yet unwavering, was drawn once more to Jane's willowy figure, her elegance understated and sincere. It struck him that Darcy had made no mention of the elder sister – an omission he now found decidedly curious.

He had not expected to be affected. Yet something in her manner – the quiet fortitude with which she met the moment – moved him in a way that unsettled his usual detachment. The way she gathered herself to look at him, to meet his eyes with composed sincerity, left an imprint. He could only hope he appeared approachable enough, aware as he was that his title often inspired more trepidation than ease. He wished her to feel neither daunted nor deferential.

And then, as though in silent answer to that hope, she glanced his way. To his astonishment, she did not look away. Instead, she offered a small,

unembellished smile – not one of those practised, coquettish expressions so familiar in London drawing rooms but a genuine one, gentle and unforced. It was a smile that felt like a gift.

“And who is this young lady?” inquired Mrs. Bennet, gesturing with polite curiosity toward Georgiana.

Darcy shut his eyes for a brief moment of inward mortification – he could scarcely believe he had committed such an egregious lapse in decorum. “Oh, my manners! Do forgive me, dearest.” He turned back to the assembled company. “Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, ladies, allow me to present my beloved sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy. She is not yet out but is expected to make her debut in society within the next two years. And this is her companion, Mrs. Annesley.”

“Your sister? How utterly delightful!” cried Mrs. Bennet with effusive warmth. “A brother and sister together – how utterly charming! Welcome, my dear! You shall find no shortage of young ladies here – as you may observe, I have five myself. We shall take excellent care of you, never fear. Mrs. Annesley, welcome to the neighbourhood.”

Phillip, meanwhile, had taken quiet note of the exchange. He observed that Miss Bennet’s attentions were directed chiefly toward Darcy and that the smile she offered Georgiana held not only

courtesy but a kind of quiet relief. His eyes then shifted to Miss Elizabeth, who had, with a sister's tenderness, reached for her sibling's hand. The simple gesture, so full of feeling and mutual understanding, intrigued him – it was a glimpse into the deeper currents that flowed between them, and it held his attention far more than any forced display of gaiety ever could.

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet,” Georgiana said, her voice trembling slightly. “My—my brother sent several long letters from here in the autumn, and when he told me he would be returning, I could not resist joining him. I wanted to meet the people myself.” Her voice trembled slightly, but she hoped she made her brother proud.

“Indeed, how very kind of Mr. Darcy to mention some of us.” Mr. Bennet quipped.

Darcy glanced toward Elizabeth, and their eyes met.

Elizabeth wondered if Miss Darcy was merely being polite or if her brother had really written to her about them. If he did, and favourably, then that would be another proof of her misunderstanding of the man. She could not welcome the information.

“Yes, I specifically remember your family. Fitzwilliam mentioned your hospitality, and I remember him saying how he had enjoyed Miss

Elizabeth’s playing on the piano. I practice that art, too, you see.” Georgiana braved to say.

Elizabeth felt speechless. Gratitude and confusion warred within her. She was thankful for her mother’s response.

“Mr. Darcy honours us with his attention to us.” Mrs. Bennet thought she was right to have reevaluated her opinion of him. If he wrote about the family to his sister, he could hardly believe they were so beneath him.

Meanwhile, Sir Lucas left the group and returned with his wife and younger daughter. “Gentlemen, my wife wishes to welcome you, too. May I present Lady Lucas and my daughter, Miss Maria Lucas?”

“A pleasure to meet you, madam, Miss Lucas. Lord Fitzwilliam, at your service.” The viscount bowed gracefully.

“Madam. Miss Lucas, it is a pleasure to see you again so soon.” Darcy added, mirroring the viscount’s respectful gesture.

“Oh, that’s right. You visited my daughter in Kent. What an honour! Thank you.” Lady Lucas said warmly.

“Not at all, madam. We enjoyed our time there. Your daughter and her husband were gracious hosts.” Darcy replied sincerely.

Elizabeth watched on with wide eyes. Elizabeth's eyes widened. Mr. Darcy's civility toward the Collinses was nothing short of astonishing. She cleared her throat, uncertain whether to laugh or object.

“Well, this has been pleasant. My lord, Mr. Darcy, would tomorrow be convenient for you to accept my visit? I am interested in how this venture of yours came about.” Mr. Bennet was hungry and wished to leave.

“Yes, Mr. Bennet. It would be our pleasure.” Darcy responded, relieved to have the opportunity for a more formal discussion.

Elizabeth looked back at the two gentlemen before she stepped into their carriage. Darcy's heart skipped a beat that at least he had captured her attention.

After saying goodbye, all the participants left. In the carriages, they all reflected on their meeting. In the Lucas carriage, Sir Lucas and his wife agreed that the newcomers would be an excellent addition to the neighbourhood and marvelled that a peer was now among them.

“I shall call on Miss Darcy with Maria.” Lady Lucas declared. “If Mr. Bennet is visiting them tomorrow, why don't you follow his example the day after?” Her husband nodded solemnly.

In the Bennet carriage, which was now mighty crowded, conversation erupted, and almost everybody spoke at the same time, so it was difficult to hear what was said amid the cheerful din.

Concerned for Elizabeth, Jane had eyes only for her sister, forgetting momentarily about Mr. Bingley's absence. She watched closely, searching her countenance for signs of unease.

Elizabeth, for her part, scarcely heard the chatter around her. She was doing her utmost to block out the clamour, both within and without, while grappling with the startling truth of Mr. Darcy's return. *So, it was indeed he, and he had taken Netherfield!* When she had not seen him in the church, she wondered if he had departed once more. Not that it mattered to her, she reminded herself with quiet defiance. Or so she wished to believe.

Then, she had seen him in the churchyard, standing among the gravestones and late spring shadows. She had only followed her mama with the greatest reluctance – she did not feel ready to face him. Before that strange, charged meeting on Oakham Mount, she could never have imagined setting eyes on him again, much less so soon.

Well, it was done now. They had met. She even conversed briefly with him without dissembling. They could meet again now as indifferent acquaintances.

In the carriage bound for Netherfield, silence reigned. Each passenger gazed pensively out the window, their thoughts as veiled as the soft countryside passing by.

“I daresay our introduction to the neighbourhood went rather well,” Phillip remarked at length, his voice cutting through the quiet.

“They were most welcoming,” Georgiana added softly; she was cautiously optimistic.

Darcy, however, remained inwardly preoccupied. Though the conversation stirred around him, his thoughts lingered elsewhere – on a certain figure whose presence had not left him since their meeting outside the church. He reminded himself: he had no claim. Barely a month had passed – the wound was still too fresh, the feelings still taking shape.

Yet his resolve had not wavered. If anything, it had deepened upon seeing her again. He recalled the passion in her voice, the fire in her eyes when she confronted him at Hunsford. He had never met a woman who challenged him, who forced him to look inward and confront the flaws in his character. Elizabeth Bennet was unlike anyone he had ever known, and he was determined to prove himself worthy of her regard. If that required patience, humility, and perseverance – so be it.

For her, he would become a better man. He wished to be deserving of her.

“Yes,” he said at last, drawing a breath. “It went quite well.” Then, glancing affectionately at his sister, he added, “Pumpkin, I am sorry again for my clumsy introduction. In all the commotion, my manners deserted me.”

“Darce, pray tell me about Miss Bennet.” Phillip inquired, his curiosity evident. “You have never mentioned her.”

“Pardon? Oh, no! Not you as well,” Darcy muttered, a hint of frustration in his voice.

Phillip raised an eyebrow. “Not me, too? What on earth do you mean?”

“She is not a woman to be trifled with,” Darcy insisted firmly, his voice edged with protectiveness.

Phillip’s lips pinched together in a hard line. “Are you questioning my honour, cousin?”

Darcy exhaled, quickly softening. “No, of course not. Forgive me,” he glanced toward his sister. “Let us speak of it after we have eaten.”

Phillip inclined his head in concession, though his curiosity clearly lingered.

“I assure you, I do not trifle with ladies, Pumpkin,” he said with a roguish smile. “Your brother does me a disservice – though I confess, I have been known to inspire a flutter or two.”

Georgiana gave a light, genuine laugh – the first sound of ease since they’d stepped into the carriage – and in its gentle echo, the atmosphere thawed just a little.

“So,” Phillip began, settling more comfortably into his chair, a glass in hand, “what was that accusation in the carriage? Have I unwittingly encroached upon sacred ground?”

“What? No! Certainly not,” Darcy replied, a flicker of confusion crossing his features.

“You speak as if it is an impossibility for a man to admire her beauty.”

At that moment, Hussar padded over, nudging Darcy’s leg for attention. With a quiet command, Darcy called the dog to lie down at his feet beside the armchair. He shook his head.

“Then what, pray, was the meaning of it?” the viscount pressed, studying him with mild curiosity and expectation.

Darcy leaned back slightly, his expression turning grave. “It is a delicate matter,” he began quietly. “When we were last here in the autumn, Bingley became infatuated with Miss Bennet, and of course, he singled her out. You know his nature;

he is rather enthusiastic and unwittingly created expectations, not only within the Bennet family but apparently in the entire neighbourhood, too.”

“And where is he now?” Phillip asked, his curiosity piqued.

“In Scarborough. He hosted a ball here but then departed for London the next day, having promised to return in a few days. His sister closed Netherfield in his absence, so his family and I followed. His sisters were eager to keep him in town, away from entanglements. Temptation, if you will.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow. “And why such urgency?”

“They did not wish him to pursue Miss Bennet any further,” Darcy answered plainly. “He consulted me on the subject as well, and at the time, I did not believe she was genuinely affected by him. I did not think she was attached. Given her family’s situation, I thought she might accept him out of obligation despite her own feelings. Consequently, Bingley withdrew from her and from Netherfield. From the perspective of the local society, he vanished without a word after the ball. He never returned – neither to the house, nor to Miss Bennet.”

Phillip stared at him.

“He left everything behind?” he asked, disbelief evident in his voice.

Darcy nodded solemnly. “Yes, the decision was made for him; he just acquiesced, without protest. The house has stood empty ever since.”

He moved to the fireplace, his dog following closely. As he adjusted the logs, his gaze lingered in the flames, and the flickering light danced over the features of a man caught in the grip of self-reproach.

His cousin observed him, shaking his head in disapproval. “A disgrace, frankly. To abandon a lady in such a fashion... That is not the act of an honourable man.”

Darcy’s gaze remained fixed on the fire as he continued, “When I later saw Miss Elizabeth at Rosings, I came to understand Miss Bennet had indeed formed an attachment. She retreated to London, seeking refuge among her relations. She fled not only heartache but the cruel pity of a society that had already labelled her jilted. Or so I surmise. That’s why I am so concerned about repeating such a scenario.”

Phillip’s expression darkened. “I would *never* play with a lady’s affections!

Darcy nodded. “Yes, I know that. I just reacted without thought.”

“An honourable man does not engage a woman’s affections only to vanish the moment uncertainty arises. To abandon her, regardless of her feelings, is cowardly.”

He remembered how Miss Bennet braved looking at him...so that was why. *She does not want to get hurt again. Fool*, he thought bitterly of Bingley.

“Yes, that is exactly what I have come to understand. Bingley’s actions were thoughtless. Unfortunately, there is more...” Darcy admitted, a note of regret in his voice. “I am not proud of it, but I learnt that she was in town – this was before I learnt that she had feelings for him...”

“Deep feelings? I see. And Miss Elizabeth told you. Curious.”

Darcy gave a brief nod. “Yes, and as I was saying, she had been in London, but I agreed with his sisters not to tell Bingley.”

Phillip’s gaze sharpened. “You did what?”

“It seemed the right thing to do at the time,” Darcy explained, the words tasting of regret. “Bingley appeared out of sorts, and I did not want him to enter a marriage of unequal attachment. I believed it was for the best.”

Phillip was silent for some time. Then, with a slow shake of his head, he said, “You overstepped the role of a friend there, cousin. He is a grown man. You took the choice from him to proceed or

not. You had no right. Well, hindsight makes wise men of us all. You were not malicious, but you did a disservice to your friend. Not to mention Miss Bennet. It could have meant everything to her and her family. Most marriages are not about love, yet many couples find happiness – or at least contentment.”

He paused, picturing Miss Jane Bennet standing among the gravestones, sunlight catching in her fair hair, her composure like a veil drawn over quiet strength. There had been sorrow in her eyes but not bitterness – only the dignified endurance of one who had learned to carry disappointment without complaint. Bingley was too young, too careless, too easily led. She deserved more than charm and half-promises. She deserved someone who would see her fully, and value not only her beauty but the constancy beneath it – someone who would cherish her worth, not simply admire it from a distance.

Phillip had found himself drawn to Jane’s quiet dignity, her serene beauty masking an underlying strength. There was something captivating about her, something he could not quite place. It had been years since anything – or anyone – stirred such interest in him. He resolved to learn more about her during their stay in Hertfordshire.

“You are right,” Darcy admitted, his voice heavy with regret. “I do not know what possessed me. I intend to apologise.”

Phillip took a thoughtful sip of his drink. “Does she know of your role in separating her from him?”

“She must. Miss Elizabeth must have told her.”

“I do not understand; how does *she* know?”

“That is a long story. Suffice to say, we argued, and the truth came out.”

“Arguing? When, pray, did it become fashionable for a gentleman to quarrel with a lady?” Phillip asked, incredulous.

Darcy’s lips curled into a rueful smile. “Don’t ask.”

Phillip chuckled dryly. “Perhaps another time then.” He rose from his seat. “I shall be in my room. I think I shall retire. We have a lot to do next week.”

Darcy just looked into the fire, but before his cousin left, he called to him. “Phillip, before you go – there is something else you should know.”

Phillip paused mid-step. “Yes?”

Darcy turned to him, his voice low. “It is only fair to tell you that I am also here because I am interested in Miss Elizabeth.”

That made the viscount stop in his tracks, his expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity. “I

beg your pardon?” He looked at Darcy. “You are not jesting?”

“I am not,” Darcy said simply.

“This is that long story.” A hint of amusement coloured Phillip’s tone.

Darcy sighed deeply. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

Darcy took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “In Kent... She refused me.”

“You mean... You mean you have offered for her?” Phillip’s eyes widened in astonishment.

Darcy nodded, feeling the weight of his admission.

“And you have come after her?”

Another nod.

Phillip did not know what to think. He was taken aback, struggling to reconcile the idea of Miss Elizabeth refusing someone as respectable as Darcy. He was among the most respectable men he had ever known. He was wealthy and quite handsome, did not drink to excess, did not gamble much, and was clever. What did that woman want? What could she possibly have found wanting? ... His cousin must have had it bad if he did all this for her.

His heart thudded with astonishment.

“So,” he began slowly, “do you mean to pursue her still? Or do you merely intend to suffer nobly in her presence?”

Darcy gave a faint, self-mocking smile. “I want her to see me clearly, free of false impressions. And to know that I heard her.”

“A rare thing – that a woman makes a man want to better himself.”

Darcy nodded.

Phillip studied him for a long moment, “And she was the one on the hill that distracted you.”

Darcy looked up, meeting his gaze. “Yes, she was.”

A HEARTFELT APOLOGY

Chapter 7



The next day, Mr. Bennet arrived for his morning call at about eleven, just as the hosts finished their breakfast. The gentlemen went into the library, which was now more amply supplied, as Darcy had brought two crates of books, including several volumes on farming, crop production and animal husbandry – Darcy’s idea of light reading. Mr. Bennet perused the books with a discerning eye before sitting.

The author will not bore the Reader with business talk among the men, but it should be noted that even Mr. Bennet was impressed with the plans and felt outdone by these young men.

“Hmm, cheese, you say, I daresay I should not mind becoming a customer myself.” Mr. Bennet leaned back in his chair, a faint smile playing on his lips. “It seems I am being outdone by the next generation. I only hope my tenants will forgive me for not having considered such ventures myself.”

As they continued discussing the matter, Mr. Bennet suggested that they inquire about other estates to see if there were young people who would otherwise move away or to town. Families would likely appreciate the opportunity for their children to stay nearby, rather than having to relocate. Darcy acknowledged the idea and said they were planning to do so.

Additionally, if they were to establish a clientele in London, they could collect products from the neighbouring estates and farms, as they often had a surplus. It would initially help them, as they did not have much of their own, and they could provide some income to the locals. Darcy thought it an excellent idea, especially since they had many mouths to feed. They could do much good for the neighbourhood. Darcy and the Viscount discussed this idea in detail later.

Phillip and Darcy began the day early, accompanied by the steward. The man was briefed on the plans and hired on a trial basis. The prospect greatly pleased him, for it offered increased earnings and the chance to make a tangible difference, rather than just maintaining the estate.

One of the things they had to do immediately was to establish sleeping arrangements for the men, both theirs and the builders'. Womenfolk

would stay at the house, and some men even had to be accommodated in the guest wing. Feeding so many people required organisation, too, and people needed to be hired. Several were expected to arrive in the coming days. In the afternoon, they surveyed the land with the estate manager's animated guidance, and options were drawn for the construction of the new buildings and the land parcels. Animals had to be bought...well, they would be busy.

The day's work and the country air had exhausted them. Both men went straight to bed, tired after their evening meal. Even Georgiana followed their example, as she too was exhausted, having spent the day sorting through the materials, clothes and shoes they had brought from London, and with Wilkins calculating what else she would need.

On Tuesday morning, the two gentlemen arrived at Longbourn. Their appearance caused considerable discomposure among the ladies of the house, for Mr. Bennet had neglected to mention that visitors were expected – this despite his family's eager attempts to elicit every detail of what had transpired at Netherfield and his repeated insistence

that the matter had concerned business alone. Perhaps the old gentleman deliberately did not share that information with his dear wife, as he was known to enjoy causing her vexation on occasion.

Had the visitors arrived but half a minute earlier, they would have been met with a scene somewhat less composed. Kitty was still kneeling upon the carpet, desperately attempting to scrub a muddy stain from Lydia's shoe – an unfortunate blemish discovered at the very last moment. Mary, arms full of books, was dragging a chair back into its proper place beside the pianoforte, stumbling with every other step as she struggled to maintain her balance. Jane was adjusting the picture above the fireplace in the hope that it might finally hang straight, while Elizabeth searched for her embroidery – the one not left half-unravelling. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bennet was endeavouring to place a sprig of fragrant rosemary into a vase with all the ease of someone who wished it to appear it had always been there, all the while calling instructions to a maid and straightening the bow of her cap with a hand that trembled just slightly.

Thus, before tranquillity reigned, the drawing room had been in a state of mild chaos – but by the time the door-handle turned, all was miraculously in order. The ladies of the Bennet household received their distinguished guests with an air of

serenity, as if they had been seated thus the entire morning.

A somewhat awkward silence prevailed after the formalities were completed, and everyone took their seats. Even Mrs. Bennet, whose tongue was seldom still, appeared momentarily bereft of words. The heir of an earl was sitting in her parlour. Elizabeth studiously concentrated on her sewing, so it was left to Jane to carry the conversation.

“Our father told us some of what you plan to do with Netherfield. It was fascinating to hear.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” the viscount replied with a smile, glad he had a chance to talk to her. “We are very excited about it. Darcy, here is the mastermind behind it all, though I must say, he makes it look deceptively easy. I am just as enthusiastic. It is a challenge to determine how to implement his ideas. Yesterday was only our first day, but after everything, I slept soundly. There is so much to consider, and yet, I find it invigorating,” shared the viscount with a broad and genuine grin.

“Indeed? Now that is good, I think,” Jane smiled back at him. “Tomorrow, Mother and I plan to visit our tenants. If you’d like, we could inquire if anyone among them or someone they

know would be interested in working for you. Anyone who has worked on farms would have valuable skills and knowledge.”

“Would you? That is very kind of you,” the viscount said, clearly pleased.

“Not at all. This would be of great assistance to some families. Mama mentioned the Farlings and the Thompsons, who have many children and struggle somewhat.”

Mrs. Bennet nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

“Mrs. Bennet, we would indeed appreciate your help. You may tell them we offer decent accommodation, generous wages, clothing, regular meals, and the care of a doctor. We are also considering profit-sharing for the workers.” Darcy addressed Elizabeth’s mother.

Elizabeth’s needle paused mid-stitch as her eyes flicked toward him. His words were so far removed from the proud man she thought she knew that she found herself at a loss. Her gaze lingered on his face, searching for traces of insincerity, but she found none. There was no condescension in his tone – only quiet resolve. And something else. Something almost...kind. Elizabeth felt her heart quicken, the corners of her mouth softened into something dangerously close to a smile, though she quickly bent her head again, lest he notice.

“That is most generous of you, Mr. Darcy. Your whole enterprise is quite unusual, almost revolutionary.”

“The potential of this concept is considerable,” Darcy said, his tone thoughtful. “I have been mulling over this concept for some time. Because of the high expected profits, I can afford to be generous in my approach, Miss Elizabeth. It is also beneficial to *us* if the people working with us are content.”

She nodded but then turned back to her work.

“And how—how do you find Netherfield, my lord?” Mrs. Bennet ventured to ask.

“It is a handsome property, and Darcy assures me that the land is fertile.”

“It sounds like you are invested in quite a venture. Do you plan to stay long?”

“We will establish everything, but then our men will take over. Darcy, here is the primary decision-maker; I am merely here to lend my support.”

“Do you not fear the possibility of failure? What if this new venture does not succeed? Many new businesses fail, I am told.” Elizabeth interjected. She did not want to examine why she wanted to prolong their conversation.

“You must not know Mr. Darcy well enough to suppose he might fail,” the viscount said, with a touch of admiration in his voice.

Elizabeth felt a flush of heat rise to her cheeks.

“Darcy has never failed in any endeavour to which he has truly applied himself. I have seen him weather challenges that would have undone men of lesser resolve. When Darcy sets his mind to something, he does so with meticulous intent and unwavering determination. You may rest assured, Miss Elizabeth, that the Netherfield venture will not only succeed, it will flourish under his guidance.”

Darcy, seated just to the side, gave a slight inclination of his head in acknowledgement, though a faint colour rose to his cheeks. Compliments, particularly of such directness, rarely sat comfortably with him, and for a moment, he seemed more intent on studying the teacup in his hand as though the pattern on the porcelain required the closest inspection than returning the viscount’s gaze.

“You are too generous,” he said at last, his voice low. “I only do what I must.

The viscount nodded toward Darcy, then his gaze lingered on Elizabeth for a moment. What was this lady about? She really must have no understanding of his cousin. She was handsome enough to make his cousin lose his head over her, but...was it her impertinence? If she crossed swords with Darcy, it may well have been the very

thing he found irresistible after the insipid attentions of society ladies.

She glanced at Darcy. It was true, she did not really understand this man. There was a quiet force about him – a strength of conviction that unsettled her. She felt keenly the weight of his power to prove her in the wrong. Elizabeth, unable to summon a suitable reply, was momentarily rescued by the arrival of refreshments.

As tea and biscuits were served, Darcy cleared his throat. “Mrs. Bennet, may I request the pleasure of Miss Bennet’s company for a turn in the garden? There are some matters I should like to discuss with her.”

All the ladies looked at him as if he had grown a second head. Elizabeth, in particular, was entirely at a loss to understand his request. What did he want with her sister?

“Cer—certainly, sir. Jane, dear, get your shawl. Lizzy, would you walk out with them?”

“I should not dream of imposing upon Miss Elizabeth, madam. A servant will do. We shall not stray far from the house.”

Jane rose and glanced at Elizabeth, their eyes meeting for the briefest moment. It was a silent question and answer all in one – sisterly trust mingled with quiet curiosity.

Elizabeth felt a surge of frustration. *What could be his intent?* Her mother might get the wrong impression and think he was interested in Jane. Or did he? For a moment, the absurd thought occurred to her that he might want revenge. But no – she dismissed it at once. *Then what does he want with Jane? What does he think of dismissing me so pointedly?*

Elizabeth remained seated, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of Darcy's intentions. A dozen conjectures jostled for prominence, none wholly satisfying. Was it Jane who had captured his interest after all? Or was it something else entirely – something to do with the past they had both tried, and failed, to forget?

Her needlework forgotten in her lap, Elizabeth struggled to regain her composure. She told herself it did not matter – that it could not matter – but the strange twist in her chest told a different story. Why should his preference trouble her now when she had already resolved to think no more of him?

“Darce, while you are talking, I shall visit with Mr. Bennet. Thank you for the tea, madam.” The viscount bowed to the ladies and left the room.

Elizabeth remained seated, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of Darcy's intentions.

“Miss Bennet, thank you for granting me a few moments.” Darcy began, his voice slightly hesitant. “I hope I am not causing any problems for you with your mother.”

“Well, my mother can easily jump to conclusions, but I’ll do my best to dissuade her from any misunderstandings. I would have thought, if anybody, you would want to speak with my sister,” Jane remarked, her tone edged with curiosity.

Darcy’s expression tightened slightly. “Miss Elizabeth? No, I do not think my request would be welcomed at this time.”

Jane tilted her head, intrigued. “You may be right.”

“So, you know.”

Jane looked at him with feeling. “Yes, sir.”

Darcy nodded.

“I am curious what it is that you would like to discuss with me, sir.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “Yes, well, this is not easy for me to bring up, but... Has Miss Elizabeth acquainted you with...”

Jane nodded. “I am aware of some of it.”

Darcy sighed. “I suspected as much. Not that I blame her for it,” He said quickly. “Anyway, it is easier to address these matters that you know. I asked to talk to you because I wanted to apologise for my role in your situation with Mr. Bingley. It

has caused me considerable distress – and not only because of its consequences, but because I regret my part in it deeply.”

“Your part? Mr. Bingley? I am not sure I understand,” Jane said, confusion evident in her voice.

Darcy stopped and turned to Jane, his expression troubled. “You do not know what I am referring to?”

She shook her head.

Darcy tried to gather his thoughts. “Well, maybe your sister did not share everything with you after all. You do know about my proposal to her, I assume.

“Yes.”

“And...” Darcy prompted.

“And the things you told her about Mr. Wickham.”

“I see. Please keep what you have learnt about my sister strictly confidential. It could harm her.”

“Of course, though, if you let me, I would like to express how devastated I was to hear such condemning news about him. He acted with all sweetness and politeness in our company. With hindsight, I should say he was overly polite, even ingratiating to the ladies.”

“Yes, that is his way. Few can withstand his charms only to be sorry later... I think your sister

did not want to cause pain...and now I must. How ironic,” he looked away. “She did what I did. She tried to spare pain. And now I must cause it.”

“Sir?”

“I feel I must be honest with you. I fear I am partly to blame for your heartache.” Darcy blurted out.

Jane stood unblinking, her face pale as she tried to absorb the gravity of his words.

“I am very sorry for being indelicate. During the ball at Netherfield, Sir William let it slip that there was a general expectation for Bingley to offer for you. I found the notion premature as we had been in the neighbourhood only for a short time, and to my knowledge, he never even called on you. I observed you to see if you had feelings for my friend, but, and please forgive me for saying this, I didn’t see any particular sentiment on your side... I am beginning to understand that maybe that’s just your disposition; you are kind to everyone.” He took his handkerchief to pat his face with it.

During Darcy’s speech, Jane’s face started burning. It was incredible that others were aware of her feelings – feelings she had tried so hard to conceal.

“After we followed him to London, his sisters worked on him to stay in London, bringing up several arguments against you and your family. I regret

to say that I advised him against pursuing you when he sought my opinion.”

“Are you suggesting that he thought I was...indifferent towards him?” Jane’s voice quivered, her emotions laid bare.

“Yes,” Darcy admitted, his gaze downcast. “Or at least he became uncertain enough to abandon his pursuit.”

“That is why he never returned.”

“Yes.”

Jane’s face fell, and her hands trembled slightly as she clutched her shawl tighter around her shoulders as if it might shield her from what she had just learnt. The truth, so plainly spoken, was not easy to bear. Her heart ached with the memory of his attentions. “I spent several months in London after the new year and visited his sisters. They returned my visit very reluctantly. I suppose they neglected to inform him of my presence.”

“No, they did not. However, they told me. I agreed that it was best not to tell him.”

“You? Why? You—you did not want him to call on me either?”

“With hindsight, I do not know what I was thinking. He did not seem as jovial of late. I just wanted to protect him from...from what I perceived as potential trouble. At the time, I thought

I was protecting him...from uncertainty, from disappointment...”

“You believed I might still marry him. Did I appear mercenary to you?” Jane’s face was ashen.

“No, no, you conducted yourself with all the propriety one might expect of a true lady.”

“Then what?”

Darcy was in agony, and he did not want to hurt her feelings further. “I feared your mother would compel you to accept him, whether you truly wanted to or not,” he said in the end.

“Sir!” She gasped, her lips trembling. She turned around, taking a deep breath to calm herself.

Darcy felt a deep pang of guilt. He hurt a kind, unassuming lady. “How can I make amends?”

“Amends, sir?” Jane turned back to him.

“I have wronged you. Would you like me to write to him?”

“Sir, you assume too much responsibility. You acted in service to a friend, however misguided.” She looked away; her expression was conflicted. “It was wrong of you to keep my presence a secret from him. In that, you owe more to your friend than to me... Oh, my God! Was this all discussed when you proposed?”

Darcy nodded reluctantly.

“That is how you know about my heartache. Was it Elizabeth who conveyed it to you?”

“Well, we argued and...”

“And Lizzy fought for me like a lion. Bless her! That is her. She guards those she loves with a lioness’s heart. But how—how did it come up?”

“My cousin brought it up to her in my defence as a good friend that I saved Bingley from a fortune hunter.

Jane drew in a soft breath.

“I never said you were one.” Darcy hurried to reassure her. “My foolish cousin made that assumption. Then Miss Elizabeth quickly figured out that it must be you and confronted me about trying to separate you and my friend.”

“Oh, my! Surely you realise that, had there been any hope with her, injuring me in her eyes would have sealed your fate. I should do the same for her.” She nodded to herself. She sighed. “Shall we continue our walk? I need a moment to compose myself.”

Darcy bowed and gestured for her to lead the way. They walked in silence for a while.

“Your words are indeed true.” Jane eventually spoke up. “Mr. Bingley did pay me much attention, but that was the extent of it. His attentions were obvious to anyone as he did it publicly, in front of our neighbours. Unfortunately, I was swept away

with it all, too... Mr. Darcy, we have been speaking candidly. May I?"

"By all means. Please speak freely, Miss Bennet."

"Am I correct in thinking that you were...attracted to Lizzy in the autumn?"

Darcy's mouth fell open. He nodded.

"And you left because..."

"I did not think I could have her," Darcy admitted.

"Because of her station."

"Yes."

"And yet you surmounted that and made her an offer. She refused you in no uncertain terms, and you had a terrible argument."

Darcy inclined his head, his expression pained.

"It must have hurt you deeply... For that, I am sorry."

Darcy's wounded eyes were looking at her now.

"And yet you are here...for her?"

Darcy looked away in embarrassment. "Do I have your confidence?"

Jane nodded.

Darcy sighed and nodded back. "May I ask what these questions portend?"

"Your presence here puts things in a different light for me."

"How so?"

“Do you not see, sir? You were so cruelly rebuffed but a month past, and yet you are here now, resolved to try again. Mr. Bingley had many of my smiles, enough that he should have known that I welcomed his attentions. Yet, a conversation was enough to deter him from his course.”

“Mr. Bingley, well, he may rely too heavily on my advice. In his eyes, I am never wrong.”

“Sir, that is even worse. He believed your observations, not his experience with me. It was ultimately his decision. Even if he thought me indifferent, he did not think me worthy of the pursuit. I do not suppose you locked him in his chambers.”

“Well, no.” He chuckled.

“As a gentleman, after the way he behaved here publicly, he should have returned even if he thought my heart was not touched as deeply. No, I do not think I want you to reassure him of my feelings. At this moment, I do not believe it would be true. I believe I prefer a man who would fight for me. Perhaps I...err, but it seems to me that happy manners are not sufficient, not anymore.”

“You humble me, Miss Bennet.”

Her voice grew steadier as she spoke, her eyes meeting Darcy’s with quiet determination. “I am beginning to see that respect and admiration must

accompany affection, else it falters. Without them, even the warmest smiles can grow cold.”

“You are wise, Miss Bennet. My friend still has lessons to learn. Are you sure? For me not to contact Mr. Bingley.”

“Yes. Lizzy often laughs at me because I like to think well of everyone, but I am learning that people are not perfect. Not perfect, and some act maliciously. Learning that high-society ladies, his sisters, would act callously was a blow. Learning about Mr. Wickham shook my worldview. I did not consider Mr. Bingley’s character fully either. Lizzy mentioned a conversation where he boasted about how easily he could change his mind about things. At the time, I found it beneficial that he made quick decisions. But I was wrong. His character is simply not mature enough... I can no longer close my eyes to the truth. However painful, I must see things as they truly are. I am glad you decided to talk to me, sir.”

Darcy, deeply moved, could only manage a quiet, “I—I do not know what to say. You are a lady worthy of admiration. You humble me.” Darcy swallowed hard, his throat tight with emotion. He had underestimated Miss Bennet’s silent resolve. That she could forgive him and speak so candidly after all he had done filled him with both shame

and a renewed sense of purpose. He bowed his head deeply, feeling unworthy of her generosity.

Jane smiled at him. “I wish you success in your endeavour, Mr. Darcy. Please do not give up on her easily.” Jane’s expression softened as she added, “You are a man of integrity, Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth may not admit it easily, but she will see it in time. Trust her heart and be patient. She will resist you at first to protect her pride, but you must persist. She is worth it.”

“I know. That is why I am here.”

From the parlour window at Longbourn, Elizabeth happened to catch sight of Jane and Mr. Darcy returning from the garden. At first, she saw only a stirring among the garden trees, and then, by degrees, two figures emerged from the shelter of the foliage. The afternoon light bathed them in a soft, golden glow as they made their way back along the gravelled path, side by side, yet without drawing close. The distance that lingered between them was enough to tell Elizabeth that some deep, perhaps painful, conversation had passed between them. Mr. Darcy walked with a heaviness of step, as though burdened by thought, while Jane’s countenance, though composed, bore the traces of

solemn reflection. As they passed near the rose arbour, Elizabeth found herself drawn nearer to the window, almost in spite of herself.

They did not speak as they approached the house, and yet something in their manner suggested a conversation of weight had just passed between them. Elizabeth tilted her head slightly, watching. Her sister was composed, Mr. Darcy sombre. Whatever had transpired, it had not been trivial.

Elizabeth turned away from the window, her heart troubled by questions she dared not yet name, nor fully understand.

The sun had silently begun its descent, casting long shadows over the grounds of Netherfield. Darcy sat in the drawing room, staring pensively at the swirling amber in his glass of brandy. Phillip entered, his casual stride belying the sharp curiosity in his eyes.

“You look like a man returning from the gallows,” Phillip quipped, pouring himself a glass of brandy before joining Darcy by the fireplace. “How did it go with Miss Bennet?”

Darcy sighed, leaning back into his chair. “Better than I deserved.”

Phillip raised a brow, intrigued. “Do tell.”

Darcy hesitated, swirling the liquid in his glass. “I owed her an apology. For Bingley. For my role in – no, my interference with their courtship.”

Phillip’s brows lifted in surprise. “You admitted to it?”

Darcy nodded. “I did. She deserved the truth, and I could not, in good conscience, withhold it any longer.”

“And how did she take it?”

Darcy’s lips twitched into a faint, wry smile. “With far more grace than I expected. She was hurt, of course. Who wouldn’t be? But she bore it with a quiet strength that was...humbling.”

Phillip leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Miss Bennet strikes me as the sort who would value honesty over pretence. Still, it could not have been easy for her to hear.”

“It was not,” Darcy admitted, his voice heavy. “But she forgave me, or so she said.”

Phillip studied his cousin, his expression softening. “Grace, strength, and forgiveness? She sounds like a remarkable woman.”

“She is,” Darcy replied simply, his voice carrying an unusual note of reverence. “Her composure in light of such revelations was truly admirable. I expected anger, perhaps even disdain, but instead, she showed understanding.”

Phillip leaned back, considering Darcy's words. "I must admit, you have surprised me, Darce. I did not think you capable of such humility."

Darcy shot him a sidelong glance. "Do not mistake it for virtue. My actions were misguided, and the consequences hurt not only her but also my friend. I cannot undo what I have done, but I can try to be better."

Phillip smiled faintly, raising his glass in a mock toast. "To self-improvement, then. You have certainly set a high bar for the rest of us."

Darcy snorted softly but did not reply. After a moment, Phillip tilted his head, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "And? Did she say anything else of interest?"

Darcy hesitated, then admitted, "She spoke with clarity about her expectations in a partner. She wants a man who would fight for her, who would not yield at the first obstacle."

Phillip raised a brow, his interest piqued. "She said that, did she?"

Darcy inclined his head. "Yes. It was a quiet but firm declaration. She places respect and esteem even above affection, I daresay."

Phillip's lips curved into a thoughtful smile. "Wise words. A woman who knows her worth and will not settle for less. Admirable."

Darcy studied his cousin's expression. "I thought you might think so."

Phillip leaned back, swirling his brandy. "I do. The more I hear of Miss Bennet, the more I see that she is no ordinary woman. Beneath her serene exterior lies a depth of character that many would overlook. Bingley was a fool not to see it."

Darcy inclined his head. "You are not wrong. She is all those things and more. I was blind to it myself."

"And now?" Phillip asked, his tone casual, though his curiosity was evident.

"Now, I see clearly. She is no less remarkable than her sister, albeit in a quieter fashion. Both Bennet sisters have qualities that command respect. She has figured me out; she knows my intentions for coming here.

"Did she?" Phillip nodded slowly, his gaze distant. "She deserves a man who sees her, truly sees her clearly, and cherishes her not for what she seems, but for who she truly is."

Darcy raised a brow, his tone turning lighter. "A man like you, perhaps?"

Phillip laughed, though the sound carried a touch of awkwardness. "Now, now, Darce. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I only meant she deserves better than what Bingley offered."

Darcy chuckled softly. “Of course. I did offer to write to Bingley, but she declined.”

The conversation soon returned to the plans concerning Netherfield, yet Phillip’s thoughts continued to circle Miss Jane Bennet. The dignity and quiet strength evoked by Darcy’s words had left a profound impression upon him. He had scarcely met her more than twice, and yet, on both occasions, a curious shiver had passed through him whenever their eyes had met as though the young lady had answered a question he had not dared to voice. In his mind’s eye, he saw again her gentle smile and the delicate elegance of her manner, and he found himself longing for the next occasion on which he might speak with her once more.

CONFRONTATIONS – THE AFTERMATH OF PRIDE

Chapter 8



“Oh, I knew you were so beautiful for a reason! Mr. Darcy! Who would have imagined such a notion? Might he have orchestrated his friend’s departure solely to pursue you?”

Jane closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before meeting her mother’s eyes. “Mother, Mr. Darcy didn’t ask me for this walk for any such reason. He simply sought my advice about his sister, as I have four of my own. That is all. Please do not make more of it than it was.” Jane surprised even herself with the smoothness of the falsehood. The truth, however, lodged heavily in her chest.

“Are you sure, Jane?” her mother asked, a note of scepticism in her voice. “What if this is his way of making his intentions known?”

“No, Mother. I can recognise when a gentleman’s attentions extend beyond mere civility. Mr. Darcy was only concerned about his sister. He is

her guardian, and he finds his duties sometimes challenging.”

“Oh, that is too bad. He would be a good match. Maybe...”

“Mother, please leave it,” Jane interrupted firmly.

Mrs. Bennet had always been prone to weaving grand futures out of the flimsiest threads, scarcely pausing to consider reality. Jane, therefore, well knew that, despite her own intentions, it would not be easy to rid herself of her mother’s wishful thoughts. To do so required far more courage than she generally displayed – for she had not only to contend with her own emotions but also with her mother’s clever conjectures.

Jane was astonished by her ability to lie so easily. She had always felt uncomfortable with dishonesty, especially since it was a sin according to God’s law. Yet now, she found it necessary, and her voice did not tremble a bit.

Elizabeth was looking at her with her eyebrows raised in astonishment, forming a high arch. “Jane?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Not now, Lizzy,” Jane said tersely. “I’m too unsettled for a conversation at present.” Without looking at her sister, she took her embroidery and retreated to the window bay seat alone.

Elizabeth endured several tense hours, her mind teeming with questions, before Jane would allow her to ask them.

“How could you, Lizzy? How could you keep this from me?” Jane demanded without greeting when she let Elizabeth into her room.

“Keep what from you?” Elizabeth was afraid to be correct. She followed her sister to the bed.

“About Mr. Bingley. Why did I have to hear it from Mr. Darcy?” Jane asked, her voice tight with frustration.

Elizabeth halted. The words, though spoken without raised voice, struck her like a sudden storm. She had not expected that Jane, ever so gentle, ever so forgiving, would look upon her with such reproach. A tightness seized her throat, and for a moment, she could not think how to defend herself.

“He... told you?” The words burst from Elizabeth’s lips, and for a moment, it felt as though her stomach had twisted into a knot. This was what she was afraid of deep down.

“Yes, he showed me more kindness than my sister!” Jane said, her voice sharp.

“How can you say that, Jane?” Elizabeth asked, her voice trembling. “The reason I kept that to myself was to protect you.”

“Protect me?” Jane said incredulously. “You mean like Mr. Darcy not telling his friend I was in town? Congratulations.”

Elizabeth’s voice faltered, her throat tightened with something that could perhaps be called remorse – and yet it seemed to rise from a place even deeper. “That is not quite the same,” she said quietly.

“Not quite the same? It was very much the same. You both wanted to protect, not to cause pain. What you both didn’t consider was that we are responsible for ourselves, and at the very least, I would have appreciated being told the truth. However painful. I am not a child, Lizzy.” Jane’s voice was heavy with disappointment.

Elizabeth drew a deep breath, but the tightness in her chest would not let her exhale fully – Jane’s words had struck precisely where she was most vulnerable. How similar she and Mr. Darcy had been in their misguided attempts to shield others from pain. The realisation stung, as did the knowledge that she had underestimated her sister’s resilience. “I am so sorry, Jane.”

“How can I trust you now? We have always been truthful to each other. I believed there were

no secrets between us. Yet you withheld the most significant event in your life for weeks and then decided for me by not sharing what you knew about Mr. Bingley.”

“I know; it is just that even *I* hardly believed what had happened. I needed time to come to terms with it. I really thought I did the right thing, not telling you...”

“It was embarrassing to learn it from Mr. Darcy,” Jane said, her voice laden with hurt.

“I never considered he would tell you. Although I never even thought we would see him again.”

“Well, it looks like he is a better man than you thought. He was sure you had told me and wanted to apologise.”

“Apologise? He apologised to you?”

“Yes, he wanted to make amends.”

“How could he make amends?”

“He offered to write to him.”

“Really?” Elizabeth asked, her eyes widening.

Jane nodded.

“Oh, Jane! I’m so happy for you!” Elizabeth clasped her hands.

“I told him no.”

“Pardon? Why?” Elizabeth asked, taken aback.

“I have thought about it, Lizzy. We have both sworn to marry for love. I am uncertain whether I

hold any love for him still.” As Jane spoke, her own words took her aback – she felt the strange clarity of a wound closing. How could love so fervent fade so quickly? But when she thought of Mr. Bingley’s absence, his silence, the way he had not fought for her, a hollowness filled the space where affection once resided. She yearned for a love that remained steadfast, even in the face of adversity.

“How can you say that?” Elizabeth asked, disbelieving.

“But it is true. I see everything differently now – as if I had stepped out of a thick fog. The outlines of my hopes are still there, but their colours have changed. And I cannot deny what I see. I want a man who will fight for me, or at least one who doesn’t give up on me at the first hurdle. For too long, I have placed others’ expectations above my desires. I have learnt that a love worth having must be earned, not merely given. Also, I am not welcome in that family. Caroline and Louisa made that abundantly clear.”

“You would not be marrying them,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“I know that. Only I should have to watch their sour faces for the rest of my life. Anyway, I also thought about our oath. The reality is that we have nothing to offer other than ourselves. If we want to marry, I do not think I can hold onto that oath.”

“What are you saying, Jane?” Elizabeth asked, confusion in her voice.

“Nothing. I am in a dark mood. But it is true: Our father did not add to our dowries, even as he had time, so our chances of making good matches are slim, especially here.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Well, you can still dream. You are younger than I.” Jane said with a sad smile.

“I refuse to acknowledge that we are hopeless.” Elizabeth declared.

“As you should, sister.” Jane, for the first time, felt their age difference. “I wish to be alone, Lizzy. I do not want to speak of this anymore tonight.”

She sat in front of her table mirror, undid her hair and absentmindedly combed her hair.

It was a sweet thing to dream, but their circumstances determined what they could afford to dream about. She had nothing to her name, and her beauty, no matter how her mother believed that would be their saving grace, turned out to be useless. Practicalities demanded to be considered. She was deemed unworthy because her parents, her father in particular, did less than they could, less than they should have. Their father had neglected his duty to his daughters. There was nothing to it. She felt the reality of their situation more and more acutely.

Then, there was her sister, Lizzy, who had a man follow her after her cruel rejection...to try again, to give her another chance to see him clearly. She never thought Mr. Darcy was as bad as her sister considered him to be. Even in the face of his interference, she could not find it in her heart to condemn him. This time, though, she did not do so blindly; she believed Mr. Bingley's sisters would have had the same success without his contribution. The way Caroline closed the house and left to follow her brother showed how independently they could act without the fear of their brother's wrath – if ever he could express his displeasure that way. The act showed a total disregard for their brother's wishes.

Nevertheless, the fact that Mr. Darcy, a wealthy landowner, had returned to the neighbourhood in the hope of changing Elizabeth's mind, and in doing so, his purchase of Netherfield was everything astonishing. To have the love of such a man, who not only had disregarded their lack of dowry as not important when he could have her, but then to come after her like this was the height of romance.

Compared to this, Mr. Bingley had proven lacking. He showed disrespect to the neighbourhood by not returning as he said he would and not taking his leave. Not to mention leaving Netherfield to be

neglected during his lease showed a lack of responsibility. And, after the way he acted, so publicly no less, his total lack of consideration for what situation he had placed her in showed him not a gentleman of honour. Well, he was not a gentleman after all.

She considered writing to her aunt to see if they could mention her to Mr. Hogarty, to whom she had been introduced during her time in London. He was a new business associate for her uncle. He visited there several times, and Jane knew that he liked her, but then she was not in the right frame to entertain any man other than Mr. Bingley. He seemed pleasant, and Uncle Edward told her he was quite successful despite being relatively young.

It was not until Friday that the two parties met again. The gentlemen were received with civility by the ladies. After the customary exchange of pleasantries, they expressed a wish to speak with Mr. Bennet, to the general surprise of the household. Nevertheless, they were conducted to his book room without delay. Elizabeth did the honours.

Mr. Darcy maintained a composed, if somewhat reserved, demeanour, yet beneath that studied calm, there lurked a quiet intensity, not of

pride but of hope restrained. He offered little more than a courteous inclination of the head when addressed. Yet beneath that studied calm, there lurked a quiet intensity – a vigilance directed not toward the general company but toward one particular pair of eyes. He had come not merely to discuss business with Mr. Bennet, but to allow Elizabeth, by degrees and without imposition, to witness the substance of his character in more ordinary light. Elizabeth, though outwardly calm, could not entirely conceal the flicker of curiosity that animated her gaze, following the gentlemen until the door closed behind them. Something in his manner – the restraint, the steadiness – touched a chord she had not expected.

Meanwhile, the viscount, ever attuned to the atmosphere of a room, cast a brief, sidelong glance toward Jane, who, on catching it, permitted herself the faintest smile – so fleeting and delicate, it might have seemed no more than a trick of the light. The memory returned to him then – of Jane calmly refusing Darcy’s offer to intercede with Bingley. Such quiet resolve was not commonly found in young ladies of her rank. It intrigued him more than he cared to admit.

Before taking their seats, the gentlemen exchanged a few remarks concerning the progress of their enterprise, Mr. Bennet listening with a raised

brow and faint amusement as Darcy outlined recent arrangements with characteristic precision.

“...Thank you for suggesting it. During the week, we visited all the principal estates and farms. We can expect several people from the neighbourhood. We also arranged to send around a cart to collect produce from our neighbours once a week. Would you like to participate in that?”

“Talk to my steward; he can speak to our tenants. I shall give you his direction.” Even Mr. Bennet could not deny that this new enterprise could boost his own. Easy money, he thought to himself.

Mr. Bennet and Mr. Darcy soon settled before the chessboard – a game proposed by the younger gentleman, following the elder’s admiring remark upon a finely carved set displayed in the drawing room during his last visit.

The two became so involved with the game that the viscount found himself entirely excluded. He did not mind. He knew how he wanted to spend his free time. He quietly stood and left the gentlemen to themselves.

“Madam, I find myself quite forsaken. Might I presume to intrude upon your company for a while?”

To this, the answer was much enthusiasm from the matron, but before she could direct him where to sit, he took himself to the big round table where Jane was sorting out her sewing basket.

“May I?”

Jane nodded with a smile. “How is your venture, milord?”

“We are only at the beginning, but it looks good. I appreciate your help. The two lads appeared yesterday, along with a third from Meryton, I think the butcher’s second son. They liked our offer, and we hired them for a trial period.”

“Oh, that is so good to hear. But what can they do at this time?”

“Well, they will work in the construction, smaller jobs as they learn. When we left, they were learning how to ride horses. That will come in handy in the future. We are purchasing horses for the staff to enable them to quickly navigate the estate and the surrounding area. Darcy insists they are taught their letters and numbers in the mornings. Some know more than others, but Darcy’s mission is to teach them to care for themselves in the coming years.”

Jane looked at Elizabeth, who sat reading at the table.

“Mr. Darcy gives them an education?” Elizabeth spoke up.

“Well, there is not so much for them to do now, so preparing them makes sense. They will also learn about different farming techniques.”

“Kitty, my child, tell Hill we would like tea and cake. Make her send some refreshments to Mr. Bennet’s room. He is with a guest.” Mrs. Bennet directed her daughter.

“You are very kind, madam,” the viscount bowed his head. He looked around.

“And you, ladies, how do you occupy your time? I already know that you visit tenants with your mother, which is admirable.”

Elizabeth returned to her book.

“Let me see. I think we do all those things that ladies do – read, embroider, as you can see, she gestured, and we try different arts. We have been experimenting with preparing scents, doing some gardening...”

“Jane, dear, don’t forget to mention that you have been setting menus and calculating purchases. And what about the herbs?”

The viscount looked at Jane with interest.

“Yes, I do all that,” she said quietly.

“Herbs?”

“We have taken over the herb garden with Lizzy and Mary. When it’s time, we dry them and prepare them for storage. Some we share with the tenants in the Christmas basket.”

“And you bake,” added Lizzy.

Jane flushed; working in the kitchen was not something ladies typically did.

“Yes, I sometimes bake, and Lizzy reads a lot.”

“What about you?”

“I read, but Lizzy always has a book in her hand. I like it when she reads to the family in the evening.”

“I see. So, you bake. Indeed? That is somewhat unexpected in a lady such as yourself. Might I ask – do you excel at it?” He considered Jane with a glint in his eyes.

Just then, the tea arrived. His lordship was served. He enjoyed Jane’s graceful movements.

“Would you like some cheesecake?”

“Did you make this?”

Jane nodded shyly. “It is made of blanched²¹ almonds pounded down with a spoonful of orange flower water.”

“Orange flower water, you say? I should love to have some.” There was a light in his eyes that betrayed a growing admiration for the composed young lady seated beside him.

²¹ Whole Blanched Almonds have undergone a process of boiling and then rapid cooling to produce this product. The action taken removes the natural coating on the Shelled Almonds, leaving you with a white nut product, which is quite literally the meaning of “blanching”. See the cake on the story website, the link is on page 2.

“Oh—ho, this is very good, Miss Bennet! Well, I say, more ladies should learn how to bake.” He said with a grin.

Elizabeth, without looking up from her book, remarked dryly, “A notion that would no doubt delight many a gentleman.”

Mrs. Bennet looked as though she would burst with pride.

Jane, on the other hand, demurred. “You are too kind, milord.” She had never imagined a compliment about cheesecake could warm her more than poetry ever had.

“Nonsense. I speak as I find.”

“Then I accept your compliment.”

The viscount happily finished his cake.

“Do you ride, Miss Bennet?”

Jane, smiling, answered. “I should say I *can* ride, but we do not ride as such.”

“You do not enjoy...”

Jane shook her head. “No, that is not it. There are no horses for us. There is Nelly, but she is old and no longer much fun. The rest of the horses are used on the land mostly.”

Elizabeth fidgeted in her seat.

“That’s a pity. Riding is one of my favourite activities while in the country. We could have gone... We will have some horses in the stable...maybe we

could put together a riding company. Let me think about it.”

“That would be nice, even the thought.”

Phillip nodded.

At that moment, the door opened forcibly, and in charged Lydia, followed by a wailing Kitty. Mrs. Bennet was about to tell Kitty to let Lydia have what she wanted when she saw a severe disapproving frown on his lordship’s face, looking at Lydia in horror. She swallowed and turned scarlet, looking at her two daughters. She stood and took the ribbon from Lydia. She was so surprised by her mother’s actions that she let it go without a word.

“Lydia, this is unseemly. Go to your room and stay there until I come to see you.” Her voice was uncharacteristically firm. “Kitty, here is your ribbon.”

“But Mama...”

“Hmm, thank–thank you.” Kitty reeled in astonishment.

“Now, child. Don’t make me say it twice.”

Jane and Elizabeth watched the scene before them in awe. They were preparing themselves for feeling mortified at their guest’s censure. Instead, they saw their mother look toward the viscount, and he nodding in approval. When the young girls left, he turned to her.

“Mrs. Bennet, I would like to invite your daughters for a short walk in the garden. After this wonderful cake, I need some exercise.”

So, the three of them – Jane, Elizabeth, and the viscount – went outside.

“Are you not joining us, Miss Elizabeth?” The viscount asked when he saw her sit on a bench at the wall near the entrance with her book.

“You two go ahead; I shall be here reading my book.” She arched her eyebrow meaningfully and gave an impertinent smile.

She wanted to be close to the house to catch Mr. Darcy when he finished with his father. What was he about? Acting all so neighbourly all of a sudden. Was he so over his feelings that it did not bother him a bit that she lived here? As if they did not have a past? Why this place? Must she watch him now, getting on with his life... without her?

“Well, shall we, Miss Bennet?”

After walking in comfortable silence for a while, Jane addressed the viscount. “It is your turn to talk about yourself, my lord.”

“Is that so?” He rested his eyes on her face. “You do not seem to be cowed by my presence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Me being a member of the peerage.”

Jane looked up at him. “Should I?”

“I do not know; most are.” He shrugged.

“Do you *want* me to cower?”

“Oh, no. You misunderstand me. I am just accustomed to people reacting in a certain way. Some people forget how to speak. It becomes very tiring. Your and your sister’s stance is quite refreshing.”

“Your Lordship can be assured that we understand your status, and we are honoured by the distinction. I do not think I have ever met an aristocrat. At least, I have never spoken to one, not like this. Maybe I do not know how we *should* behave.”

The lord laughed. Jane chuckled, too.

“I do not think that’s it.”

“No, it is not. I treat others as I would like to be treated. Oh, my grandmother used to say this! She would say that a gentlewoman is such not because she treats her betters well but because she is kind to *all* folks.”

“You mean you behave the same way to a peasant and a lord?”

“In essence, yes. Peasants work hard to put food on our table, and lords deal with country matters so we can live in peace.”

Phillip stopped and looked at Jane. Her words caught him off guard – not in their boldness but in their clarity. A strange warmth stirred in his chest.

Jane, mistaking his expression, reflected on what she had said. “Oh, I apologise. I did not mean to say that a peasant is equal to you!”

Phillip shook his head dismissively. “I am amazed by your sentiment, Miss Bennet.”

Jane bit her lip, embarrassed. “I am afraid I sound like a preacher.”

“Not at all. You are very...refreshing.”

In the evening, Jane reread her letter to her uncle about mentioning her to Mr. Hogarty. After some hesitation, she decided to put it in her drawer for the time being. She wanted to dream a little longer.

Elizabeth endeavoured to read whilst sitting on the bench, but her thoughts shifted to her father’s book room. *What is he doing there? What is his business with my father? This is not to be borne! Must I be constantly reminded of what has happened between us?*

The very gentleman appeared from the house. He looked around and was about to approach his cousin when he heard his name called.

“Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy!” She rose and beckoned for him to follow. She led him away from her

sister at an angle to a place without windows facing them.

“Miss Elizabeth.” Darcy smiled at her.

She was momentarily affected by the unusual sight, but then she shook herself. “Mr. Darcy, what were you thinking, confiding in my sister? She was not supposed to know. Now she is all melancholy again and... Have you not done quite enough already?”

Darcy’s smile faded, replaced by a deep frown. “I had to apologise to her. That was the honourable thing to do,” he said, his voice carrying a weight of regret.

Elizabeth faltered, her anger wavering. She had always thought of Darcy as proud and self-serving, yet here he was, admitting fault and seeking to make amends. It unsettled her to see him in such a different light. Her frustration flared. “*Now* you want to behave honourably!” Her words were sharp, but the pain in Darcy’s eyes gave her pause. She turned away briefly, unable to contain the bitterness that surged. She softened her approach, trying a different tactic. “But she did not know! She was in the dark about everything!”

Darcy’s expression remained troubled. “Yes, it was not comfortable to discover. You did exactly what I did to Bingley. You took away her choice.”

Elizabeth gasped, stunned by the comparison.

“I wanted to protect her from the heartache that *you* caused!”

“Your sister graciously forgave me because she realised it was not maliciously intended,” Darcy replied, his tone laced with chagrin.

Elizabeth’s eyes flashed. “But now she says she does not love him anymore.”

Darcy had to bite his tongue to stop himself from revealing the painful truth – that Miss Bennet’s change of heart might be rooted in Bingley’s lack of resolve, his inability to fight for her in contrast to himself. Instead, he remained silent, his face a mask of conflicted emotions.

When Darcy did not react, Elizabeth pressed on. “Well, what do you have to say to that?”

Darcy, ever a man of few words, looked down, his voice low yet resolute. “I have come to understand her reasons well.”

“Why are you even here?” Elizabeth’s voice wavered with a mix of anger and confusion. “You were not meant to return and unsettle everything again.”

“But I am here,” Darcy replied simply.

“Yes, but why? Why are you here, Mr. Darcy?” she demanded, her voice rising. “Surely, you must have known that if you moved here, we would meet again!”

Darcy looked away for a moment, gathering his thoughts before he spoke. “Yes, I knew... You must hate me very much still.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught in her throat. She had not expected this turn. “I—I do not hate you,” she stammered, the admission surprising even herself.

“You do not?” Darcy’s voice was softer now, almost vulnerable.

She shook her head, her emotions in turmoil.

“Is it so awful that I am here?” Darcy deliberately softened his voice.

“You misconstrue my meaning, sir!” she reproached, though her tone faltered slightly.

Darcy stepped closer, his gaze never leaving hers. “Can you not imagine why I am here?” He searched her eyes. “You know how I feel.”

Elizabeth’s heart pounded in her chest, her mind racing. “What? No, I do not know. I would have thought you must hate me now after... you know.”

Darcy’s eyes softened as he recited, “*Love is not love/ Which alters when it alteration finds.*”²²

The line rang out – a sonnet, yes – but spoken not with affectation, rather with startling simplicity. Elizabeth stared at him, the words sinking in. Darcy’s gaze held hers, and for a fleeting moment, his expression was stripped of its guarded pride,

²² Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

leaving only a raw sincerity. Elizabeth felt her heartbeat quicken, a strange warmth stirring within her. This was no hollow declaration but rather a vulnerable confession that he laid at her feet. The words between them hung in the air, thick and charged, as they stood there, each grappling with their emotions, both unsure of what would come next. She struggled to match his intensity, to remain unfazed, but she chose to be impertinent.

After what felt like an eternity, she gathered herself, mustering a touch of levity. “Did you truly just quote poetry to me?” she asked, her tone playful but betraying the faintest quiver.

Darcy sighed. “Miss Elizabeth, you know my sentiments. It is you who must now examine your heart to see if you should grant me a second chance, if you should let me in. I wish you would,” he added.

Elizabeth wanted to reply, but Darcy lifted his hand and, with scarcely more than a breath of contact, laid a finger upon her lips. That silenced her. It was the lightest touch – yet it silenced not only her voice but her thoughts. She could neither speak nor breathe. She clenched her hands at her sides, torn between frustration and intrigue. Darcy’s words, his very presence, so near, unsettled her.

“No, not now. You are upset, and I do not want you to say something you might regret. I want you to know: I have heard you, at Hunsford. I am trying to be better; I am trying to make amends. Think about it. That is all I ask.” He lingered for a few seconds, his eyes on her lips where his finger still hovered. Then, he turned away and stepped out of their cover. He unconsciously raised his finger to his lips.

He called out to Phillip that it was time for them to leave.

Elizabeth remained rooted to the spot, her lips still tingling from where his finger had touched. Her heart raced, her thoughts a chaotic jumble. She wanted to call after him, to demand answers, but her voice failed her. Instead, she watched him walk away, his broad shoulders disappearing into the sunlight, leaving her with only questions – of him, of herself...

PRIDE AND PERSISTENCE

Chapter 9



“I have been meaning to ask,” the viscount began, breaking the comfortable silence as their horses trotted toward the planned construction site the following day. “Did I see correctly that you had a private tête-à-tête²³ with Miss Elizabeth?”

Darcy remained silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the horizon. The question seemed to hang in the air before he finally nodded, his expression unreadable.

“And? Come on, man, do not leave me in suspense.” The viscount pressed, a hint of amusement in his tone.

Darcy exhaled, his voice steady but edged with something unspoken. “She questioned me about apologising to her sister. She was not happy that I told her what happened. She said I had made Miss Bennet melancholy.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow. “Melancholy? She did not seem so to me yesterday.”

²³ One on one conversation (French) [tet u tet]

Darcy turned to look at him, curiosity flickering in his eyes.

Phillip cleared his throat. “We had a pleasant conversation. Darcy, when you were here in the autumn... did you have any discussions with Miss Bennet?”

Darcy’s brow furrowed slightly as he thought. “No, I cannot say I had. No, a few words in company at most. Why do you ask?”

“If you think your Miss Elizabeth is unique and a treasure, then her sister is one also. She rendered me speechless yesterday – not with beauty, though she possesses it, but with a kind of calm assurance I have rarely seen.”

Darcy’s mouth twitched in surprise, a flicker of amusement creeping in. “She made you unable to speak?”

“Yes, and she gave me pause. Made me reflect.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, though not in suspicion but in curiosity. “Are you serious?”

The lord nodded thoughtfully. “And she spoke with no intention to impress me; she is unassuming. No wonder Bingley fell for her. Mind you, I think he liked her for the wrong reason. He has no idea that he let go of a diamond.”

“A diamond?” Darcy’s tone was sceptical. “No, are you lost to her, too?”

Phillip rolled his eyes. “I am telling you, Darce, she has something about her.”

Darcy’s expression softened, his thoughts briefly elsewhere. “When I apologised to her, she did show an admirable character... She was gracious... I thought at the time that she smiled too much.”

Phillip seemed to turn that over in his head. “I think that is for her what is arrogance for you. Defence.”

“What are you talking about?” Darcy’s head snapped toward him, fists unconsciously clenching as he tensed.

Phillip gave him a sidelong glance, amusement still evident in his eyes. “You use arrogance as a shield, my friend. She smiles; you growl.”

Darcy’s gaze drifted ahead, his jaw tightening imperceptibly.

Then, the vikomt added, “She also believes that everybody deserves kindness, no matter their standing or past actions.” He smiled to himself.

Darcy’s tension eased, but his mind raced, processing his friend’s words. Then, almost as an afterthought, he asked,

“I am not arrogant... am I?”

The words escaped before he had quite meant to speak them, and at once he felt the heat of self-consciousness rise.

Phillip grinned broadly, shaking his head in mock exasperation. “I have seen you act arrogantly. Maybe...maybe, you are simply misunderstood.”

But Darcy was not entirely convinced, and the look in his eyes showed that Phillip’s words had struck deeper than he had expected.

Sunday came about quickly. After the service, several people greeted the newcomers. As the most prestigious individuals in the neighbourhood, they were approached by neighbouring families to show their respect, and some welcomed them to the area. In contrast, others extended invitations to their homes. The news of Mr. Darcy’s return and that there was a peer in their midst circulated rapidly. Darcy did his best to present a friendly face this time around. After exchanging polite greetings, our gentlemen approached the Bennet family, who felt the honour of such a show of preference. Mrs. Bennet looked around to see if they were observed by the other parishioners.

“Miss Bennet, it is lovely to see you on this fine day,” the viscount said as he greeted Jane.

“My lord, it’s indeed a beautiful day. It is nice to see you, too.” Jane beamed at the man.

Phillip sucked in a breath at the picture she made. Her smile was infectious, and he found himself smiling of his own accord, not that smile he used to put others at ease. This smile was for himself. He felt as though the heavens had opened up with their blessings, not in triumph but in peace.

Unaware of her effect on the lord, Jane happily chatted away. “... that we planted several young herb plants outside. This weather is perfect for making them strong.”

Phillip only caught part of what she said; he hoped it would go unnoticed. “That sounds...nice. Maybe you could show them to me next time.”

“Miss Elizabeth.” Darcy bowed before her. His resolution to seem friendly failed miserably when he stood in front of her. He felt oddly parched, as if words had dried in his throat.

“Mr. Darcy.” She curtsied prettily.

“... Do you fare well?”

“Yes, and you?”

He nodded. He was angry with himself for not being able to greet her as his cousin had greeted Miss Bennet. And now, she looked at him with an arched eyebrow and that cheeky, small smile. Darcy prepared himself for a challenging remark.

She could not resist the urge to challenge him – not after he had unsettled her so thoroughly the day before.

“Mr. Darcy, I could not help noticing that you have yet to bring your sister to Longbourn.” She gestured toward his sister, who stood a few yards away with Mrs. Annesley, her companion and Maria Lucas chatting. “I wonder why that is. What could be your reason?”

“That sounded like you already have a reason in mind, and you find it offensive. So, what possible ungentlemanly reason do you think is behind my delay in bringing Georgiana around?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps you do not wish her to mix with *the likes of us*.”

“The likes of you?” Darcy gawked in disbelief, but then his words when he proposed intruded. “Maybe I deserve that. I said some terrible things to you. I do apologise if I made you think that is the reason.”

Something in his voice made her pause. She had not expected such quick – or such sincere – contrition.

“Then what is it?” she asked, her tone softened almost in spite of herself.

He looked down and away. “Tell me, Miss Elizabeth, is Mr. Wickham welcome in your home?”

Elizabeth snapped her head up to look at him. Her mouth opened, then shut again, stunned by the sharpness of the question. She crimsoned in the next moment.

“Miss Elizabeth, I would appreciate it if, in future, you would refrain from assigning the worst motives to my actions. If ever in doubt, I beg you to ask me. I hope you might judge me not by suspicion, but by inquiry, and allow that I am capable of improvement.”

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As though fate favoured Mr. Darcy, three militia officers, including Wickham, appeared at Longbourn the following day. They had had a series of military exercises over the previous ten days. They were happy to be able to socialise with the ladies again and perhaps eat better than they had in the camp.

Elizabeth felt sick at the sight of her previous favourite. He had an expression of pleasant innocence – an illusion, she now recognised, greatly aided by his handsome features. Knowing that behind that mask was an immoral, indolent person

²⁴ On the story website, the conversation between Darcy and Elizabeth continues, as a thought experiment.

who was willing to seduce an innocent child for mercenary reasons made her eyes flash with resentment and anger. She was disgusted that he had fooled her and that he was too selfish even to notice her disdain. He would have ruined Miss Darcy for her money... Now that she had met Miss Darcy in person, his scheme against that young lady became more real. Her sense of justice demanded that he be publicly shamed. She fumed that her family save Jane...well, and Mary welcomed him with such enthusiasm.

Actually, she noticed with surprise that her mother was distracted. She sat down with her.

“What are we going to do, Lizzy?” She whispered to her daughter. “Mr. Darcy and probably his cousin wouldn’t be happy to know that we hosted Mr. Wickham.” Her hands were torturing her poor handkerchief.

“Why, Mother, why the change of heart about him? You always liked him, did you not?”

“Oh, dear! If I must choose between him and the gentlemen from Netherfield, I shall choose the latter. They carry more consequence. They have more consequence. Maybe Mr. Wickham is partly responsible for his fate. He should have remained friends with Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth marvelled at her mother's ability to justify anything that suited her aims. "Do you like Mr. Darcy now?"

"We cannot afford not to like him." Her words might have been pragmatic, but her tone betrayed genuine admiration. "Now that I think of it, he's been everything polite since returning. Your father is impressed with him. They said at the church they would call today. They cannot find the officers here. Right, I shall not serve refreshments; if I do, they'll never leave."

Elizabeth could only look at her mother in astonishment.

"It's true that we only know his side of the story," she tried to help her mother with her new sentiments. "He told me he would not defame the son because of his warm feelings for his godfather, yet when Mr. Darcy left the neighbourhood, he told his tale to everyone who would listen."

"Indeed. That is..."

They both turned their heads as they heard Lydia's loud voice.

"Wickham, have you heard who is back in the neighbourhood? You will never guess, so I'd better tell you..."

"Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy is back." Kitty interrupted. Then, seeing Lydia's anger, she enjoyed her triumph.

“Kitty! How could you? *I* wanted to share!”

“Dar – Mr. Darcy is back?” He asked with a shocked face.

And that was when Elizabeth saw it. Wickham paled exactly as he had when she had first witnessed them together in Meryton. She recalled the memory as if it had happened the day before. She witnessed as Mr. Darcy became aware of his presence. He reddened in anger or maybe even outrage, now Elizabeth thought. All the while, Wickham stood there, and he visibly became whiter. How did she not give that any significance? That moment should have told her everything.

“What is he doing back here?” Wickham asked.

“He is the new owner of Netherfield!” Lydia supplied.

“What?”

“With his cousin, Liddy,” Kitty corrected.

“Cousin?”

“A real viscount.” Lydia shared. “And he brought his sister. Wickham, you must know her.”

Both Elizabeth and Jane straightened and looked at each other in alarm.

“Miss Darcy? Are you saying Miss Darcy is here, at Netherfield?”

“Yes, we met her at church. She looks like a fine lady. I would not have minded taking a closer look at her bonnet...”

“Lydia, would you please fetch my white shawl from my room? I feel a bit chilly.” Jane interrupted.

“But I am busy.”

“Do as you’re asked, Lydia. Jane’s your elder sister.” Their mother surprised them all.

Lydia huffed but complied and left the room.

Mrs. Bennet stood, and so the officers had to stand, too.

“Gentlemen, it was very nice to have you here. It was good to see that you are all in good health after the exercises. You must excuse us; we have a prior engagement for which we must prepare.”

The three soldiers were awkwardly looking at each other at the sudden dismissal. They had to follow through and say goodbye.

“Erm, that was abrupt; we weren’t even offered anything to eat or drink!” Denny complained as they left the house.

Wickham forgot that he did not even have a chance to properly greet Miss Elizabeth after her absence. All his thoughts were occupied with the young lady at Netherfield. That Darcy should be so imprudent as to bring her here – it was scarcely believable. Could this mean something to him, after all? Wickham did not have much time...

Not long after the officers left, the matron was told that the two gentlemen from Netherfield were approaching on horseback. She had one of the servants watch the road; this time, she did not want to be caught unawares. By the time the gentlemen were announced, they were all very composed. After everybody sat down, Mrs. Bennet expressed what an honour it was that they were visiting again and told Mary to call for refreshments.

Still fuming over the abrupt dismissal of their guests, Lydia spoke up with defiance.

“We just had Mr. Wickham visiting,” she announced, directing a challenging gaze at Darcy.

Several gasps were heard.

Darcy fixed Lydia with a steady look. “Oh, did you mention that for my benefit?” he asked coolly. “Why would I be interested in knowing that, Miss Lydia?”

“You’ve known each other for ages,” Lydia persisted, her tone insistent. “You are friends, aren’t you?”

Darcy’s expression grew colder. “We are no longer friends.”

“And why is that?”

The viscount, growing weary of the exchange, interjected sharply, “Child, you should observe and listen, not question adults.”

The room fell quiet. Lydia opened her mouth, but for once, thought better of it. Mrs. Bennet, fanning herself in agitation, muttered something vague about taking her impertinent daughter to task. She then turned to Darcy, attempting to salvage the situation.

“It is all right. Miss Lydia, I take it you heard Mr. Wickham’s tale of his sorry fate from my hands.”

Lydia opened her mouth to respond but found herself at a loss for words.

“It’s admirable that you seek justice for a – may I say, friend?” Darcy continued, his tone measured. “Only if it were true. You must be vigilant about what you believe and what you do not.”

“Why would he lie?” Kitty asked, her tone tinged with confusion.

“That is for him to know. People lie either for gain or out of fear.” He shrugged.

Lydia seemed poised to argue further when Elizabeth stepped in, her face flushed with embarrassment. “That’s enough, Lydia.” Elizabeth admonished. She was mortified – Mr. Darcy had just proven that she was as silly as her youngest sister. She did not care for that.

“Yes, Lydia, it’s not your place to question Mr. Darcy. I apologise in her stead, sir.” Mrs. Bennet tried to save the situation.

“Thank you, madam. But if I may, Miss Lydia should ask him what he did with the three thousand pounds he received in lieu of the living that *he* declined.”

“Three thousand pounds! He said you had denied him the living!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed.

Darcy shook his head with the ghost of a smile. “He said he wished to study the law.”

Lydia’s eyes blinked with disbelief, even if she could only imagine the money’s worth as how many dresses she could have.

“And a thousand was left to him in my father’s will.”

“Four... That – that’s a fortune! Did you hear that, my dears?”

“Anyway, to accept the living, he would have had to take orders, which he did not. And perhaps it is just as well. Do you not agree, madam, that Mr. Wickham’s perhaps too worldly for a clergyman?”

Mrs. Bennet could not speak; instead, she nodded her head.

In the days following, the news of Mr. Wickham’s duplicity in the neighbourhood would spread like ripples from a stone cast into a still pond.

When the refreshments arrived, Mrs. Bennet invited the guests to sit around the big round table

in the corner. She felt gratified that she had sent Mr. Wickham away. *What a two-faced...* She sat back in her armchair and let the conversation flow among the young people. She sent Lydia and Kitty to occupy themselves upstairs. She did not want any repetition of inappropriate behaviour in front of her highly regarded guests.

They discussed the arts and the ones they had attempted to learn. Elizabeth's poor drawing skills came up.

"I do not know why I keep trying. I just cannot seem to put to paper what is in my head. And believe me, I have the most beautiful images in here," she pointed to her head, "but somehow, it never turns out as I want it."

Everybody laughed.

"Determination that blinds one to realise when they should give up is foolish." Elizabeth finally stated.

"Surely, persistence must be a virtue. Do you not think?" Darcy remarked as he took a shortbread from the plate Jane had offered.

"Do you?" Elizabeth's eyes flashed.

"Any person would. You cannot think otherwise, Miss Elizabeth. Nothing would be achieved in this world if not for persistence. There would be no change, no progress. Nothing would be

achieved if one gave up on every hurdle and obstacle. Why, even learning any new skill requires persistence.”

“Have you any idea how much paper I have wasted? I concede that in most of these cases, one needs to persevere. But when does one know when it is futile to continue? When does perseverance become destructive? One could ask why persist when...everything is against succeeding.”

Darcy felt she was now speaking about a different topic. He frowned inwardly. *What is she saying?*

“Your argument seems very weak, Miss Elizabeth. I side with Darcy. A gentleman does not give up easily, and they should not if it is worth it.” The viscount joined. “Would you know, my father, the earl, had asked my mother three times to marry him before she accepted him. True story. I should not be here now if he had given up, which most men would have.”

“Oh, he must have loved her very much!” Jane exclaimed. She looked at her sister with meaning.

The viscount caught that. “One would think so, but my father told me that although he was very taken with her, love came later.”

“Then why?”

“He said he knew my mother would be the making of him, Miss Bennet. My father always says

that a man needs a good woman to direct and support him.”

“What a clever man!” Mrs. Bennet could not help gushing.

“That perspective is intriguing. It gives a wife’s role intrinsic importance.” Jane reflected.

The lord smiled at Jane and nodded.

Darcy looked at Elizabeth to see how she took his cousin’s tale.

She glanced at him. She had not intended to imply that Mr. Darcy should give up on her, yet she found her present sentiments would not allow her to yield to his wishes. She did not understand why he insisted on pursuing her.

“Do you suggest, Miss Elizabeth, that if I had not succeeded in my endeavour immediately, I should give it up?”

Elizabeth looked him in the eye and cleared her throat. “I’m just saying that some endeavours, especially ones that have already failed, may not be worth the effort.”

Darcy sat frozen, his thoughts in turmoil. So this was her answer – she would not allow him to try again. *Is that it then? But why?* Darcy found it hard to focus on the rest of the conversation. He was left feeling numb and bewildered.

Elizabeth did not understand herself. She kept glancing his way. It was only natural, she told herself, that she would feel compassion for one's misery.

“Do you give up things so easily, Miss Elizabeth? Tell me, are there many things at which you have failed to become a true proficient for lack of effort or resolve, for lack of persistence?”

“His lordship has got you there, Lizzy. She has given up on several things. Let me see... You have oft lamented your lack of diligence with the piano-forte, and as for embroidery...well, there lie several abandoned pieces in your basket.” Jane thought her sister needed to be put in her place. Her heart bled for Mr. Darcy. How could her sister be so clueless, what's more, cruel?

Elizabeth crimsoned and fidgeted with her embroidery. “Well, my hands are just not cut out for the delicacy of movement and coordination it demands.”

“Not if you don't stick to it,” Jane replied.

“Do you truly not give credit for trying? Fighting for what one wants?” The viscount was dismayed by Elizabeth's viewpoint. He worriedly glanced at Darcy.

“Oh, my lord, Mr. Darcy will tell you that I often share opinions that are not mine.” She laughed.

“Why would you do that?”

“For argument’s sake, for fun, what else?”

“I cannot say. It is a strange habit. I value sincerity.” The viscount questioned Miss Elizabeth’s suitability. If she could not appreciate Darcy, she was not worthy of him. Phillip’s brow furrowed as he considered Miss Elizabeth’s words. Could she truly not see Darcy’s worth, or was her stubbornness born of something deeper? He was tempted to dismiss her entirely, yet there was a spark in her – a defiance that, while vexing, was intriguing. Perhaps she was testing Darcy’s resolve, or perhaps...she was testing her own feelings.

“I am sorry; I did not mean anything by it.”

“Not at all.” The viscount let it be. “Miss Bennet, would you care for a short walk in the garden? I have sat enough.”

Elizabeth and Darcy were left alone, the silence between them thick with unspoken words and the weight of his lordship’s disapproval. She now felt silly for standing her ground about persistence as a fault – her father’s way of creating debate had backfired. Elizabeth’s mind was in turmoil, her thoughts racing as she avoided Darcy’s gaze. She felt a sharp pang of discomfort, unsure of where to look or what to say.

Finally, Darcy spoke, his voice low and measured,

“Miss Elizabeth, if your argument was a message for me...” He paused, giving her an opportunity to protest.

But she remained silent, her gaze fixed on the floor. The stillness in her response confirmed what he feared.

Darcy looked at her with a mixture of longing and resignation. Every fibre of his being ached to reach out to her, to beg her to reconsider. He wanted to shake her to see how great they could be together. But pride and dignity demanded otherwise; he forced himself to maintain composure, even as her rejection cut him deeply once again.

“Well, then, this is it,” he said, his voice strained. “Let me say that I understand your meaning. I shall importune you no longer.” He rose from his seat, the finality of his words hanging heavily in the air. “Thank you for the tea. I think I shall take my leave now.” He bowed stiffly, first to Elizabeth and then to Mrs. Bennet, who looked on in bewilderment. Without another word, Darcy turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing in the silence.

Elizabeth watched him go, a strange feeling of detachment washing over her. Throughout the entire scene, she felt as though she was observing it from the outside and had no effect on the events. She chewed on her bottom lip, a bad habit she had

worked long to abandon. Her satisfaction with being very clever in expressing her sentiments was lacking. As she sat there, left to her own thoughts, a creeping emptiness settled within her, leaving behind a bitter taste.

Was this truly what she wanted? To push Mr. Darcy away and have him leave her alone? She told herself that her resolve was firm, yet the quiet warmth in his voice had unsettled her in ways she could not quite understand. *This is what I wanted, is it not?* she asked herself. But the expected sense of relief never came. Instead, a nagging doubt began to form in her mind. *Have I made a mistake?*

Elizabeth's thoughts were a chaotic swirl of indignation, guilt, and something she could not name. How could a man like Darcy elicit such contradictory emotions? He was proud, overbearing, yet... genuine in his affection. She straightened in her seat. Perhaps it was his sincerity that unnerved her most. She had convinced herself of his faults, yet his unwavering determination to make amends stirred an unsettling warmth in her heart. *Am I being unfair?*

Her hands began to tremble, a visible sign of the turmoil inside her. She placed them on her stomach, trying to steady herself, then took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm her racing heart.

I shall not be made unhappy by Mr. Darcy! She thought fiercely. Only a month ago, she had never dreamt that he would have tender feelings toward her. *Only a month ago, I loathed him – heartily.* How could he think she would change her mind so easily, as if her emotions were so fickle? *He is nobody to me,* she insisted to herself, trying to reaffirm her resolve.

Desperate to distract herself, she picked up her embroidery and focused on the delicate stitches. But her hands were unsteady, and her thoughts were elsewhere. “Ouch!” she exclaimed as the needle pricked her finger, drawing a tiny bead of blood. She stared at the crimson dot, feeling the sting of the wound, but it was nothing compared to the turmoil in her heart.

Frustrated and flustered, Elizabeth cast her embroidery aside, unable to find comfort in her usual pursuits. She could no longer sit still, the oppressive weight of her emotions too much to bear. Rising to her feet, she strode out of the room with a righteous air, as if walking away from the scene could also banish the confusion and doubt swirling within her.

But as she left, a single, unwelcome thought lingered in her mind: *What if I’m wrong?*

Darcy maintained his composure as he left the Bennet house, his mind reeling from the uncomfortable encounter. Once he stepped outside, he felt an overwhelming wave of fatigue and despair wash over him. He leaned heavily against the stone wall by the entrance, his breaths coming in shallow, uneven gasps. Shutting his eyes tightly, he pressed his right hand firmly against his chest, willing his heart to steady its frantic beating.

The weight of it all pressed against his ribs, making breath itself a battle. He should not have come. What had possessed him? It was a foolish idea, and now he was left to grapple with the realisation of his own vulnerability. Who was he fooling? *Oh, heartless creature... Was I speaking of her, or myself?* he thought, feeling the sting of his own folly. He felt like crying. *Has it come to this? Am I going to cry over a woman?*

Darcy's fists clenched at his sides as he forced himself to breathe deeply, his chest aching with pent-up emotion. He had never felt so powerless, so undone by a single individual. Her rejection, spoken with such conviction, echoed in his mind, threatening to unravel him entirely. He cursed himself for his persistence, for daring to hope that she might soften. *How foolish I am! You cannot compel the heart of one who does not want you,* the bitter realisation flashed through his mind. But more than

anything, he cursed the weight of his feelings for her – a love that seemed determined to consume him despite her unwillingness to share it.

His chest felt like it was tightening with every breath he took, and he struggled to fend off the rising tide of distress. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to dispel the tears that threatened to spill. Opening his eyes, he saw the leaden sky above him, a stark contrast to the turmoil within. With a heavy sigh, he pushed himself away from the wall, the motion more forceful than necessary; then, he made his way toward the stables.

SISTERS AND SUITORS

Chapter 10



“What was your sister about, Miss Bennet?” The viscount asked as they strolled through the garden, surrounded by vibrant tulips and fragrant hyacinths.

Jane sighed and glanced at the neatly tended flowerbeds.

“Lizzy? She does that sometimes.” Jane smiled faintly, though with an air of apology. “She really does not mean anything by it, but she enjoys the reactions she gets... I do not think she does it on purpose. She is accustomed to it, often engaging in conversations like that with our father. The only unfortunate... My lord, may I ask – are you aware of the reason Mr. Darcy has returned to the neighbourhood?”

The viscount’s expression tightened slightly. “Are you?” he asked, his breath sharp with curiosity, although Darcy had revealed that Miss Elizabeth understood his intentions.

Jane nodded. “I am worried how Lizzy’s arguments must have sounded to him.”

“Does your sister understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy spoke to her the other day.”

The viscount shook his head, his voice laced with frustration. “To be honest, I am baffled by her refusal to my cousin. He’s one of the best men I know. For whom does your sister wait, a prince? ... I am sorry for being blunt.”

Jane was grateful for his frankness. “No, I am glad we can talk without pretence. When she refused him, she was furious at him. I do not think she thought it through. I do not think it even occurred to her what this marriage could mean to her or her family. They met under unfortunate circumstances, and my sister formed a lasting impression of him but based on unfortunate beginnings.”

“How so?” the viscount inquired, leaning in with interest.

Phillip watched Jane, noting the soft yet firm conviction in her tone. She possessed a quiet dignity that commanded respect without needing to seek it. Her gentle nature was disarming, and yet there was a strength beneath it – a determination to protect her family and uphold her principles.

Jane hesitated before speaking.

“Please, I would like to help Darcy. I would understand what had happened between them.”

“They met at an assembly. It did not seem like Mr. Darcy wanted to be there. Mr. Bingley suggested asking Lizzy to dance, but he declined in no uncertain terms. He made a derogatory comment that my sister heard, and she was deeply offended.”

The viscount’s eyes widened in disbelief. “No!”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Jane confirmed.

“I wonder if Darcy knows this,” the viscount mused aloud.

“I do not know. Anyway, it is unpleasant for anyone to be told that she is merely “tolerable” by a handsome and wealthy man. She was deeply hurt that she was not handsome enough to even dance with. She denies it, of course, but I know my sister. Her poor opinion was formed after that, as well as how he behaved at the assembly. Your cousin was quite...standoffish. ... Affection matters. Especially in marriage. We must at least like the men we wed, must we not?”

Phillip raised an eyebrow, his expression a mixture of curiosity and amusement. “And you feel that men do not also wish for affection in marriage? I assure you, Miss Bennet, we are quite particular about that ourselves. Darcy would not have proposed without feeling.”

Faint flush coloured her cheeks, caught off guard by his response. “Of course, sir, I did not mean to suggest otherwise...”

Phillip held up a hand, a teasing glint in his eyes. “No need to defend yourself. I find your sentiment quite admirable, actually. Many marry without kind feelings. It’s just... What a pity it would be to marry someone and feel nothing for her.”

He paused, his gaze softening as he studied her. “I cannot imagine enduring a life without affection. It would be like a fine estate with no sunlight, no warmth. Such a place could never thrive.”

Jane’s blush deepened. The sunlight, perhaps, had reached her, too. “I suppose we agree on that, then.” She managed a small smile.

“Indeed, we do,” Phillip said, his voice quieter now, as though the weight of the conversation had settled over him. “Affection and admiration, Miss Bennet – without them, no union, no matter how advantageous, could ever be truly happy.”

“Lately, well, I have come to a view that love cannot be the only consideration.”

The viscount looked at her questioningly.

“I mean, circumstances could make one consider practicalities. Not everybody can afford...” Suddenly realising that the conversation had turned too personal, she tried to change the subject. “Well, that is, I also question Mr. Darcy’s beliefs on my sister’s sentiments. It was not as if he had courted her properly. My sister had no idea that he felt strongly for her.”

Phillip, smart as he was, caught Jane's meaning and understood why she suddenly withdrew. He appreciated the fact that she felt so comfortable sharing her thoughts and worries aloud with him.

"I see. Well, now he definitely desires her affections. I wonder if his being constantly pursued made him think no woman would ever refuse him. Her previous rejection might have served a purpose. If they ever resolve their issues, it would be a more equal marriage of sentiments."

They walked in silence for a while, thinking about what they had just discussed. It had been years since a conversation unsettled him in such a pleasant way.

"Before I distracted you, you said something curious. What do you mean by the way he behaved...at this assembly?"

Jane wrinkled her brow. "Oh, I hate to speak badly of others!"

"Please, Miss Bennet," the viscount urged.

"He was not...friendly," Jane said hesitantly. "To be honest, he was quite dismissive. The people here wanted to welcome the Netherfield party, but he kept to himself and only danced with the ladies who came with them. Our small community felt slighted. He seemed as though the people around here were not pleasing enough for him."

The viscount raised an eyebrow. “You mean he was arrogant and acted as if better than anyone else?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it quite so harshly.”

The viscount nodded thoughtfully. “Knowing my cousin, there may have been some truth in that, but you just described him at any assembly when he is in London.”

“Really?” Jane asked, surprised.

“Indeed. Darcy is reserved by nature and struggles to fit in among strangers, even in London society. He is not for chit-chat. He tries if he must, and you would not know that he struggles in social settings, but he would much rather be at home with a good book.”

“Oh, poor man. He must be misunderstood all the time!” Jane said sympathetically.

“Indeed,” the viscount agreed. “Also, do not forget that Darcy is much sought after. He is rich, owns a vast estate, and he is single, so even in the ton, people would give anything for a connection to him. He is pursued by women *and* men of business.

“Oh, no!” Jane exclaimed. “I have not realised it was this bad. Are – are you, too?”

“Yes, after the initial feeling of grandeur, it becomes rather tedious,” the viscount admitted. “But

we were talking about what happened; please continue.”

Jane hesitated, then said thoughtfully, “Hmm. Then she heard some condemning tales about him, and just before he asked her to marry him, she learnt that...well, she...”

“I know,” the viscount interrupted.

“Pardon?” Jane asked, her eyes wide with shock. “What do... You know about me? How?” She clutched her chest, feeling her heart race.

“I enquired about you,” the viscount said simply, his gaze steady.

Jane did not have time to crimson as they saw Darcy just then. “Forgive me, Your Lordship. I must say something to Mr. Darcy.”

“Mr. Darcy!” Jane called after him as he was mounting his horse. “Are you leaving already?”

“Yes, I think I must.” He looked away.

“Please do not abandon your pursuit of her lightly. She—she needs time.”

Darcy gave a small nod to her. “Phillip, you may stay if you wish. I shall see you back at Netherfield.”

“Mr. Darcy, I called you back because, as you know, Mr. Wickham visited earlier. For some reason, our mother did not invite them to stay long;

she soon sent them away, but not before Lydia blurted out that your sister was here.”

“Pardon? Does Wickham know that she is here?” He looked around as if he would find Wickham in one of the bushes.

“I am afraid so.”

“Then I really have to leave.” He nodded to Jane and his cousin. “Thank you, Miss Bennet.” He mounted his horse and galloped away.

They both looked on as Darcy and his horse disappeared at the turn of the road.

“Is there something I don’t know? Wickham. Is that George Wickham, my uncle’s godson?” His tone was incredulous. “Surely not *that* Wickham?”

“Yes, he is. He is stationed here.”

“In the militia? I would have never thought.”

Jane looked at him questioningly.

“I do not know him well but rather know of him. He lived in London and was known in the gambling establishments. Not a lucky fellow. I know that Darcy completely cut ties with him, which to me means that he lacks good morals. Well, you seem to know what is going on. Are you going to tell me?”

“It is not my story to tell, my lord. You will have to ask Mr. Darcy. I can tell you, though, that

he was the one spreading falsehoods about Mr. Darcy to Lizzy.”

“I see. Would you say you are discreet in the matter of confidences, Miss Bennet?” The viscount asked playfully.

“I never had the urge to gossip.”

“Another admirable quality.”

Jane demurred. “I have been the subject of gossip and have seen others singled out. I know how harmful it can be. It is one of the reasons why Lizzy would not have Mr. Darcy; she thought him a dishonourable man. People with half knowledge claim to know it all, and some do not consider what they cause with their thoughtless remarks.”

“Yes, you must be right. I would also add that some enjoy when another is brought down by their comments. Like Wickham. I have also seen it done.”

Jane was silent for a while. “It is difficult for me to acknowledge that people could behave so badly, but I concede it happens.”

“That is because you have a kind heart.”

Jane’s breath hitched.

The viscount looked into her eyes, losing himself in their depths, then cleared his throat. “Shall we continue our discussion? There is a question lingering in my mind. When we met at the church,

that is when you saw Miss Darcy for the first time, am I right?”

“Yes.” She looked at the viscount to elaborate.

“You were considering her person.”

“Oh, yes, I guess I was. It’s nothing important.”

“Tell me.” He looked into her eyes. He wanted to understand her.

Jane trembled at his forcefulness. “When Mr. Bingley left, his sister sent me a note, and in it, she callously implied that his brother was interested in Miss Darcy and that they hoped for a formal connection of their families.”

“No! She is still a child! How dare she?”

“Well, seeing her, that is exactly what I thought.”

The viscount nodded. “On a more pleasant note, your sister is very attractive, but that alone does not explain Darcy’s fascination. I would love to hear your insights about the two of them.”

“I was perfectly fine without him here. How dare he come to disturb my life? Why can’t he just move on? Why can’t he take no for an answer? He resembles Mr. Collins in more ways than one!” Elizabeth indignantly exclaimed later in the day.

But even as she said it, a part of her felt oddly shaken by his quiet persistence.

“How so?” Jane turned away from her sister and rolled her eyes.

“Mr. Collins did not accept that I knew my mind and that I knew what I was doing when I refused him. Now, Mr. Darcy thinks he can come here and prove I was unreasonable to refuse him. Yes, I read his letter and am ashamed of how I railed against him. I accept that he is not the evil man I’d thought him to be, but that does not mean I have changed my mind. He will just have to accept it.” She had hardly accepted that she was somewhat wrong about Mr. Darcy when he appeared in her life again. Learning that he wished for a second chance was a shock to her.

Her sister just stared at Elizabeth and shook her head. “Oh, Lizzy! You disappoint me. Where you profess indignation that he came after you, every maiden out there would see romance, love. To be loved by a man who persists despite obstacles, one who gives me another chance to rethink my mistaken judgements. One who thinks I am worth it to try again...”

“Oh, Jane!”

Jane waved her sister’s sentiment away. “Mr. Bingley did not keep his word, Lizzy! He did not even bother to say goodbye; he simply stayed away.

You keep saying you believe he is in love with me, but what manner of love can his be? *Your* Mr. Darcy, after being soundly rejected,” she looked at Elizabeth admonishingly, “*bothered* to write a letter, *went* to the parsonage to say goodbye. Now he is here to see if you can change your mind if you give him another chance, and he has gone through great trouble. Are you so heartless that you cannot imagine what it must have cost him to take this risk again? You have no idea how lucky you are. If he is really here for you, you must be a simpleton to refuse him outright. That would mean he has grown more than you; he is trying to make amends while you, Lizzy, are stuck in your first impression. Think about that.” She turned and left Elizabeth standing by the May bushes, speechless.

Elizabeth walked to the edge of the garden, her hands clutching her shawl. Her words echoed stubbornly in her own ears. Could she really justify her persistent rejection?

In the evening, when everybody retired, Elizabeth knocked on Jane’s door. “Do you truly regard me a simpleton if I...”

“Yes.” Her sister looked at her sharply. “Look, I understand that you were more than hurt when

he insulted you. Oh—ho, do not dare say that you were not affected. Your blind hatred of him stems from there. I tried telling you he was not a villain, but you didn't want to listen. You liked Mr. Bingley; well, Mr. Darcy is his best friend. That should have told you something. You liked the Colonel, did you not?"

Elizabeth nodded reluctantly.

"Well, he admired his cousin. He tried to defend Mr. Darcy in your eyes, did he not? And do you know what the viscount had said about him? He remarked that he esteemed him as the best of men! The best of men.

"Lizzy, I think sometimes you are your own worst enemy." She sighed. "You were so hurt that you did not want to see anything good in him. I trust you agree that he has since altered his opinion of you; he must have been very attracted to you to propose and now follow you here. I don't even think he spoke seriously at the assembly; I would much rather believe that he just wanted to be left alone. So, cease, Lizzy."

"But he hurt you!"

"Really? Did he? Was it not Mr. Bingley? Was he not the one who let others convince him that I didn't care for him? Against his own eyes, his own experience? When we were alone, we talked intimately; he should have known that I had all but

said my feelings aloud. Mr. Darcy apologised, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy of Pemberley requested to speak with me, Miss Jane Bennet of Longbourn, and apologised. I asked him what was said. And you know what, it didn't take ten minutes for Mr. Bingley to abandon the idea of me; however, he may have been pining over me. He did not act as a gentleman should. It was Mr. Bingley who hurt me, not Mr. Darcy. Can you begrudge him the role of a good friend, which I might say you tried to be to Charlotte?"

Elizabeth gasped.

"Yes, Lizzy."

"Well, I admit his thoughtless comment rather hurt me."

Jane nodded. "I know it did. And it was badly done. Is there a chance you were attracted to Mr. Darcy at the assembly, and that's why his comment hurt so much?"

"What are you saying? That's going too far. He was most disagreeable to all; do you not remember?"

"Before that, Lizzy, before that. Before we saw his behaviour, I remember finding him most handsome, but Mr. Bingley seemed more approachable; he was already smiling. I did, however, have an errand thought that Mr. Darcy would appeal to you."

"You did?"

“Aye. He is an exceptionally good-looking man.”

“I—I cannot remember.” She averted her eyes.

“Well, do you know what I *do* remember?”

Elizabeth looked at her sister questioningly.

“I remember the only time we heard Mr. Darcy compliment you. Quite remarkable it was. I needed to fan myself at his remark that he wouldn’t join you because he could admire your figures best from his seat!”

Elizabeth crimsoned on cue. “I thought he was provoking me.”

“Oh, he was, but not out of malice, quite the opposite. His actions seem quite different now, do they not? Now that we know he admires you?”

“I thought him always looking my way to find fault.”

Jane looked at her. She reeled in astonishment. “Are you truly a simpleton? Why would a man look at a woman merely to find fault? Do you spend your time looking at people you don’t like? I am no longer surprised by your failure to notice his attraction to you. Even ever practical Charlotte noticed it. Miss Bingley, on the other hand, I hadn’t seen them much together; well, the poor gentleman made every effort to disregard her. Now, that is how one behaves with one they do not care for.”

“Must you be so clever to see my faults so clearly? Have I lost my intelligence?”

Jane shook her head. “Come on, sister, did his asking you *three* times to dance not clue you in? You say that I am the most beautiful woman, and he never looked my way twice, and he certainly did not ask me to dance.”

Quirking her eyebrows, Elizabeth observed,

“How unfortunate for my equanimity for you to bring up such reasonable arguments!

“Lizzy,” Jane sighed. “His persistence is not an insult to your independence but a testament to how deeply he values you. How many men would go to such lengths to prove their worth after such a rejection? You told me once that you admired constancy and resolve in a person. Is that not precisely what Mr. Darcy has shown you? Perhaps—perhaps, the question is not what you want from him – but what you fear in wanting it... All right, go to bed. I’m pretty tired. We can talk more tomorrow if you wish.”

The same evening, the viscount knocked with one hand while he balanced a whisky bottle and two glasses in the other. He did not wait for the permission; he opened the door. “I’ve come to check

on you. It seems you find your dog's company more agreeable than ours. It's not like you to mope to the extent of disregarding the cook's excellent efforts. Is this a new habit? I had to eat two portions so that it would not go to waste." He put the decanter and the glasses on the small table between two armchairs in front of the fireplace. "Come, drink with me." He called his cousin, who stared out the window.

Darcy did not move, but Phillip did not let him sulk. He went to him with the drinks.

"Here. Drink." Phillip offered Darcy the golden liquid.

Darcy took it. With his next move, he let the fiery drink burn his throat.

Phillip followed him. As a connoisseur, he shook his head at Darcy for not appreciating its colour or smell before he gulped his down. Phillip admired the deep golden colour of the summer barley and enjoyed the scent of the woody pear and cinnamon as they hit his nostrils. He had the perfect notion of how to bring his cousin out of his defeated state. "You won't believe what I heard today from Miss Bennet."

Darcy did not even look his way.

"When Bingley left the neighbourhood, his sister wrote to her suggesting that his brother was expected to propose to Georgiana."

“Pardon? What are you talking about?” Darcy did turn his way then.

“As I said. This Miss Bingley is quite the manipulator, is she not?” the viscount continued, taking a sip of his drink.

Darcy swore under his breath. “It is one thing for her to use my name to get into places, but it’s quite another to claim such a connection.”

“Yes, quite reprehensible.” He took another sip. “So, what happened after we left you two alone?”

Darcy shrugged, moving to a small table to pour himself another drink.

The viscount joined him, pouring a drink for himself as well.

“She does not want me to pursue her.”

His cousin figured as much. “Are you thinking of giving up on her?”

“I do not know. There is nothing else left for me to do. I have exhausted every honourable path.”

“I disagree,” the viscount said firmly.

“Pardon?” Darcy looked at him, puzzled.

“You heard my meaning. It would be a mistake to give up now.”

“It was a mistake in the first place to think I had a chance with her.”

“Can you not imagine what a shock it was for her for you to reappear again less than a month after you proposed? Since then, she’s learnt that she was mistaken in her accusations.”

“How do you...?”

“Miss Bennet told me.” The viscount replied with a shrug.

Darcy’s expression grew tight. “I am glad I am fodder for your conversations.”

“Oh, come now,” the viscount said with a slight smile. “Surely, cousin, you do not imagine I would idly pass my time speaking of you, even to a lady of uncommon charm?” He shook his head. “You’re mistaken, Darce. We discussed you two so that we could assist you. To be honest, I did not care for Miss Elizabeth’s performance in our conversation at the table. As a result, I wanted to dismiss her entirely. It was Miss Bennet who made me rethink it.”

“How so?” Darcy asked, leaning forward with interest.

“Let me just say that I am beginning to understand why you admire her. Even I can see that she is full of life. You are attracted to that quality.”

“Well, that is all a moot point now,” Darcy said, his tone tinged with resignation, leaning back in his chair.

“Darcy, Miss Bennet wanted me to remind you that she had said you needed to be patient. It has only been a few weeks. It took Miss Elizabeth over two weeks to share what happened between you with Miss Bennet. She thought you hated her as she hated you, no matter how misguided that was. I learnt from Miss Bennet that her sister’s cleverness has two disadvantages; for one, she thinks she is mostly right and is stubborn in her beliefs. Imagine the blow to her ego. She told you Miss Elizabeth needed time, time to acknowledge that she might be wrong. Then, she has to accept it, and only then can you expect her to start to change her mind about you. It is much easier to dismiss you than to realise most of her beliefs were wrong about you and that you are, in fact, an excellent man.”

Darcy listened intently. “This is your conjecture?”

“Indeed,” his cousin said. “Do not get discouraged because once she lets you in her loving circle, she’ll love you fiercely.”

“Miss Bennet said that?” Darcy asked, raising an eyebrow. His treacherous heart beat faster at the sound of that.

Phillip nodded. “Yes, she said that. She cannot stay indifferent – merely caught in the tangle of pride and uncertainty. Just remain steadfast in your

purpose – to make her change her mind. Give her time. Show Miss Elizabeth your preference; show her who you are.”

“That is what your mother said.”

“My mother? She knows?” Phillip seemed surprised. “Of course, she knows. She made you sing like a canary, did she not? What did she think of all this?”

“Surprisingly, she encouraged me to pursue her.”

A faraway look appeared on Phillip’s face. He shook his head. “What? Even if she is not of the ton?”

Darcy nodded and stared into the fire, the flickering flames mirroring the turmoil in his chest. “I cannot shake her words, Phillip. She accused me of arrogance, of selfishness...and perhaps she was right. Yet, I cannot give up – not when every part of me is convinced that she is the one person who could make me better, who could challenge me to become a man truly worthy of her.”

“All right. That sounds like a plan.” He stood. “We had better turn in; tomorrow, the construction starts,” Phillip concluded.

Phillip, his head full of restless thoughts, closed the door behind him. He paced the room; his noble face turned serious, and he looked intensely focused on some inner matter. He stopped suddenly and looked around, as though seeking an answer. Then, he lit several candles and sat down at his desk. Still with a solemn look on his face, he took out a sheet of paper and placed his pen in the inkwell.

Dear Mama,

We are well in Hertfordshire. Darcy and I have been working very hard, and things are starting to take shape. Construction will begin tomorrow. I must say that my cousin has an excellent mind, and his ideas are truly unique. They spur me on, and together, we are a pretty good match. It is still in its early days, but I think we will make a success of it. We are currently discussing hiring a secretary to develop a system for tracking finances.

I thought this venture with Darcy would offer me a fun distraction, but I must say I am enjoying myself immensely. I should think you would like to hear about Darcy's other mission. You have surprised me, Mother. The lady is a little spit of fire. I can see why Darcy is attracted to her. She is a brunette and possesses handsome features. On second

thought, maybe I am not being fair to her; she is rather lovely. Darcy is in love with her eyes, and yes, they are her face's best features.

She frustrated me today with her flippant manner of speaking about a subject today. It also turned out that she argued thoughts not her own, for fun, she said. Unfortunately, the topic was persistence, and she used it to tell Darcy that he should not pursue her. Understandably, Darcy did not take it well. I suggested to him that he should just be patient, as she needed to reconcile her former notions of him being wrong and see him for who he really was.

Miss Elizabeth has an elder sister, Miss Jane Bennet. Mother, I mention her to you because I find that I am attracted to her. She is beautiful, both within and without. I know that you would like me to settle, and yes, I admit, it is time to think about family, my family. I am, of course, aware that the Countess of Matlock is a position that I must consider closely.

I like her, Mother. I never thought I would be in this position when we arrived here, but this lady takes my breath away. She is quietly intelligent, offers thoughtful insights, and is kind to everyone. When she smiles, the sun shines. I find it increasingly difficult to maintain self-regulation and avoid raising expectations. Please, Mother, come to meet her.

*Your loving son,
Phillip*

Lady Matlock stilled when she read the last two paragraphs from her son at breakfast the following day. (The express rider left with the message for London at dawn.) She stopped breathing as she read. Then, she hungrily reread them.

“Oh, sweet Lord!” she exclaimed. “Could it be?”

She blessed Darcy in her thoughts for returning to Hertfordshire and for taking her son with him.

She reread his lines. Her heart yearned to expand beyond its confines. *Always to the point*, she thought.

At almost three and thirty, her son was a steady bachelor. He had had a few dalliances over the years, and those were the worst, as he then refused to even talk about settling down. He had two serious affairs, one with a Covent Garden actress that lasted three years when he was five and twenty, and the widow Countess Selby, admittedly a beautiful woman, for two years around when he turned thirty. In the last year or so, she had not heard any gossip about her son, so she started to push him again, although without much success.

She could hardly believe that his son had found someone and actively sought her permission to pursue her. She thought he would have to be coaxed into courting anyone. She pondered upon the nature of a woman who could inspire such fervour in her son...*intelligent, kind, she must be beautiful then*, she thought.

As Miss Elizabeth's sister, Miss Bennet was basically penniless, though a gentleman's daughter. What else did she know about the family? *Five daughters, no son, and the estate was entailed to Catherine's pastor – a dire combination in society's eyes. Oh, my... Oh, the mother was the daughter of a local lawyer and had relations in trade. Well, not ideal, not in the least. If William manages to woo his lady and wins her hand, Miss Bennet will become his sister. Marrying the sister of Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, now that sounds more acceptable.* If this Miss Bennet could indeed inspire such deep feelings in her son, Lady Matlock vowed she would not stand in the way. If she could love her son...

She folded the letter and pressed it to her heart. Oh yes, she would go to Hertfordshire herself. And soon.

TORTUROUS THOUGHTS

Chapter 11



Tuesday morning found Elizabeth the same way as when she finally fell asleep the previous night – in deep thought.

Old and new images flashed through her mind. Although she did not show great interest in the newcomers, she was curious about them back then, as it was not every day that new people visited or joined their restricted community. She let her mind drift back to that first time she saw him in Meryton, before the insult, before the resentment, when Mr. Darcy was merely a handsome stranger with unreadable eyes.

Of course, she considered him handsome and hoped he would notice her... *Who wouldn't think such thoughts in the presence of an important gentleman?* But then he was rude to her mother... She recalled how she felt when she was dismissed as only *tolerable*. Coming from *that* gentleman, its bite was sharp and painful. The man did not want to know

her. She knew she was not as handsome as her elder sister, but she still considered herself pretty enough. Her mother, of course, did not help with her unfortunate remarks about how she was only half as beautiful. She was hurt. Could anyone blame her for developing uncharitable thoughts toward him?

How was she supposed to notice his interest? He always looked at her with his penetrating, stern manner. She honestly thought he was looking at her to find fault. After being deemed only ‘tolerable,’ she perceived him as antagonistic toward her, or at least contemptuous, just like she felt toward him. It was incredible to her to think that he was developing an admiration for her.

Elizabeth had no experience with the opposite sex other than polite, innocent compliments. She had not experienced a burning desire for anyone. Interest, yes, naturally, but nothing more. In her rural environment, most of the men she met were married or significantly older. Suitable gentlemen were scarce. Her few London sojourns so far had been fruitless, especially as her uncle was from trade. A few gentlemen called after the few assemblies their relatives took them to attend, but calls ceased when they learnt that either Jane or Elizabeth had only a thousand pounds to their name, especially since that amount was only to be paid

upon their mother's death. At the time, neither girl lamented, though it gave them pause more and more. They learnt that a pretty face or a happy countenance would not be enough. Their pledge to marry for the deepest love seemed out of reach.

She recalled the events at Netherfield and the ball. She was so annoyed with the gentleman, so busy winning their arguments, that she never registered his interest in her. On top of that, Miss Bingley targeted her with her barbs for some reason. Mr. Darcy asked her to dance three times, indeed, which she interpreted as a mocking gesture. She shook her head at how silly that notion now appeared.

An idea gave her pause. If he developed feelings for her or at least interest, in the end, he decided she was not worth it. He left, just like Mr. Bingley. Her spirits fell when she recalled his letter about her family's behaviour. They and she were wanting in his eyes. She left her bed and sat in her armchair before the fireplace. She stared into the ashes and thought of Mr. Darcy again in the neighbourhood.

Now that he was back, he still looked at her with that intense, demanding look. Her first reaction was still defence. It was the strangest feeling to have him there and know it was for her. Strange and startling.

After Mr. Darcy plainly told her about his intentions and silenced her with a forefinger, Elizabeth felt overcome and a little intimidated, if she were honest with herself. At their next meeting, it was easier to fall back on the familiar, her impertinent self. Questioning him about his sister, she chastised herself for not thinking it through and immediately suspecting the worst of him. Then, on Monday, she argued for the sake of it. When it created the opportunity to give a response to Mr. Darcy's question, she lost her courage and thoughtlessly hurt the man, again. Although she then felt his misery and disappointment, when he asked her again, she became still. She impatiently left her favourite armchair and collapsed back on the bed. She looked up at the ceiling of her four-poster bed.

After thinking the worst about him, how was she supposed to forget it all? As she reflected on her feelings of righteousness, she felt a sense of shame. She never gave him the benefit of the doubt. Jane was right. She did not want to see him in an advantageous light. She was so sure she had good reasons to loathe him that she did not listen to any advice. Now that she knew the truth about all her accusations, it was difficult to admit that he seemed to be an excellent marriage partner once these were taken into account.

The realisation that she had misunderstood him so profoundly made her heart ache with an unfamiliar pang of guilt. Could it be that her pride had prevented her from seeing the truth of his character? And if so, what did that say about her own judgment?

Now that she knew she was held in the highest regard, Elizabeth could not help but feel that Mr. Darcy overlooked her many faults. She did not consider herself a paragon. Her beauty could never rival Jane's serenity; her sense of duty was no match for Mary's constancy. And Lydia – well, Lydia at least had the enviable talent of never doubting herself. Elizabeth had only her wit, and even that had lately proved unreliable. Her sole redeeming qualities, she supposed, were her quick mind, her love of the written word, and her curiosity about the world – traits hardly ideal in a young woman meant for admiration.

What she could not comprehend was how he could still feel anything for her, least of all affection, after all that had passed between them, after the way she had spoken to him at Hunsford. That he might still love her seemed almost inconceivable. Though she no longer felt what she had felt during that ill-fated proposal, she remained, at heart, a reasonable creature. Yet reason alone

could not persuade her to surrender. She acknowledged her many misjudgements of him but to allow herself such vulnerability – to admit that she might welcome his addresses – would demand a relinquishing of the last, stubborn vestiges of pride.

The problem was that if she let Mr. Darcy convince her he was a good man... Yes, Mr. Bingley, the colonel, and the viscount all had high opinions of him. Even Wickham, she recalled, said he was a good brother. If that was all true, she had refused a worthy gentleman who could offer her much, who could change her life.

Elizabeth was not mercenary, not by any means. Of course, as any gentle maiden, she imagined living in relative comfort but not more than that. No. She had a vague idea that love would find her and imagined it overpowering her... The man she had always imagined would appeal to her was a sociable, full-of-life character, somebody like Wickham (at least on first impression) or a better version of him, the colonel. With a gasp, she realised that her heart was not really touched by either of the men. She sat up. None of those men made her heart beat faster other than enjoying their attentions.

Something was missing – something she had perhaps never dared to name until now.

In comparison stood Mr. Darcy. Although Wickham was handsome, neither he nor the colonel came close to the impressive physique of Mr. Darcy. His presence demanded attention from women and men. He was tall, taller than most. His face was angular, with aristocratic features, including his nose and lips; his expressive eyes and unruly dark hair gave his expressions the power to silence anyone. He was well-built, lean and muscular. To all this, he was always impeccably dressed without becoming a dandy. Elizabeth had forgotten or suppressed, she comprehended, what an attractive man Mr. Darcy was because of her animosity. She thought of Charlotte, who had to endure her odious husband's attentions. Now, she closed her eyes and imagined him standing before her, stepping closer and touching her lips. Her breath caught, and she shivered, so she pulled on the cover.

His presence compelled her to consider Mr. Darcy. She instinctively knew that he also had power. None of the men of her acquaintance wielded as much power as he, and she suspected she was not close to understanding his actual circumstances. She found the notion strangely...exciting. She knew that he was responsible for the livelihoods of many people. According to Miss Bingley, he was an avid correspondent, unlike her father, whose

correspondence often waited in his tray for weeks. That suggested that he was aware of his duties and fulfilled them.

Ten thousand a year meant that his estate brought in at least five times as much as Longbourn. She wondered with a chuckle if his house was also five times the size of theirs. *What does one do with so many rooms?*

Being a wife of such a man must be something – her consequence would grow substantially; she would have much power herself... She could hardly imagine the life he must live. The only existence she knew was her own insignificant life as the second daughter of a minor estate owner in a community of perhaps twenty families.

Elizabeth got out of her bed. She sat in front of her mirror. She observed herself. Her dark eyes looked back at her with wonder that she could generate such tender feelings unknowingly in a man, in such a man. What did he say...an ardent admiration and love. He said he *ardently* loved her. She crossed her arms protectively. Until this morning, she had not considered deeply what those words meant. In her indignation and other self-castigations and self-discoveries, his sentiment, not understood, was not appreciated. The most feeling she allowed herself was compassion. Now, however, maybe for the first time, she considered the

man. A man educated and well-read, at home in high society, wanted her. *What does he see in me?* A man who had access to the most sophisticated, beautiful ladies of the ton...what did he want with her?

A knock interrupted her torturous thoughts about Mr. Darcy.

“Enter.” She called out with one last look at herself in the mirror.

Jane’s face appeared framed by her dishevelled blond braided hair. No matter the time of day, her sister was a beautiful sight.

“I thought we could do each other’s hair. I knew you would be up already.”

“That was not a difficult conclusion, Jane; I’m an early riser, but why are *you* up so early?”

Jane took Elizabeth’s brush from her toilette table and loosened her hair so that she could brush it out. She looked at her sister in the mirror. “Lydia.”

“Oh, forgot about that.”

Jane looked at her questioningly.

“My mind has been otherwise occupied.” She shrugged.

“I see. We can talk about that later if you wish. Now, what shall we do about Liddy?”

“Do?” blinked Elizabeth.

Jane nodded with a stern look. “Lydia’s conduct grows increasingly unruly. Just recall how she behaved when the gentlemen were visiting. She isn’t fit for polite company. The viscount called her out on it. Heavens! I felt so ashamed. We have hardly anything to offer. I shall not allow Lydia to jeopardise what little chance we have at stability – at a future. If she behaves this way in our company, how will she perform when there are no restrictions at all? Mrs. Forster may not be the...ideal chaperone for her.”

“Oh, Jane, so unkind,” Elizabeth teased.

“This isn’t a joke, Lizzy. All she sees are the officers!”

“Jane, I don’t recognise you! Do you want to stop Lydia’s fun? That sounds rather uncharitable from you.”

“Joke as you wish.” Jane sighed. Having the esteemed gentlemen witness her sister’s spoiled behaviour indeed troubled her. For some reason, it was important for her what the viscount thought.

“No, no. I am sorry. It is not that I disagree with you, but you usually leave such prudence to me,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile. “Now I hardly recognise you.”

“Well, many things happened; a lot has changed. I spent a night thinking about the danger Lydia in Brighton would mean.”

Elizabeth nodded. “We should talk to Father. I do not know about Mother. She was not as enthusiastic as I would have thought when Lydia brought the news. Maybe she could be worked on, too.”

“All right. You talk to Father; maybe he’ll listen to *you*, and I shall talk to Mother...maybe not today. She’ll be busy getting all of us ready for the evening at Lucas’s.”

Elizabeth nodded. She looked at Jane over her shoulder.

“Jane? The viscount. Am I right to...”

“No, stop, Lizzy. I know what you were going to say. Please, let it go.”

“But why? Do you like him?”

“What is there not to like? I enjoy his company, and it seems he enjoys mine. That is all.”

“But...”

“But he is the heir of an earldom. I have learnt my lesson; I am guarding my heart.”

“Guarding your heart?”

“Well, I’m trying to.” She blushed. “I must say it’s a nice feeling that he takes me seriously... He knows about Mr. Bingley.”

“What? How?”

“He said he had asked about me from your Mr. Darcy.”

“He—he’s not my Mr. Darcy.” She looked down.

“Well, he could be.

Elizabeth’s heart skipped a beat as she involuntarily recalled the moment Darcy had lifted his finger to her lips – and the pained expression in his eyes as he looked at her before departing the previous day. *Could he?* The very idea made her chest tighten.

At Netherfield, Darcy and Phillip rose early. They wanted to be there as the buildings were marked on the land. The planning on paper was different from the actual measures. Several buildings were planned for construction in the first phase. One wing of the greenhouse system would be constructed to test its functionality. They planned a cross-shaped greenhouse with a heating system at its centre. The stable for carts and horses was to be built next.

The staff needed accommodation, which they wanted to make comfortable and somewhat spacious so that it would invite employees to their estate. There would be a mix of single and double bedrooms if couples joined their enterprise or if someone wanted to get married.

Darcy wanted running water available in all rooms and had the builder design a heating system with copper pipes running in a shallow ditch in the floor at the outer walls, covered with punctured metal sheets that allowed warmth to permeate the rooms. For this, a central fireplace would be built separately where water in the pipe would be heated and circulated in the rooms. A small woodstove would be added to each room if the weather turned too cold for the system to heat the rooms. A room for bathing and washing clothes would be built at the end of the building.

The viscount also had an idea for making things even better. He suggested using a double layer of glass for the windows. He said he had seen it in Scotland and was told that the trapped air served as insulation.

“If it makes a difference here, I shall introduce it at Pemberley,” Darcy thoughtfully said about the double-glazing idea.

The builder nodded that he had heard about the solution. It would initially raise the cost but would require less wood for heating.

Both were most excited to replace the necessities²⁵ with water closets indoors. Several would be built on the farm, too.

²⁵ *Necessary* used to be the name for the outhouse with a toilet.

They also decided to build a connecting, covered corridor to the rooms that would be open on one side. If they built it wide enough, it could serve as a terrace for sitting outside on a nice day.

The builders caught the gentlemen's excitement. As soon as they saw the opportunities while discussing the plans, they agreed to call in their network for skilled professionals to join them, including an expert in water systems to utilise the land's water and rain. There would be a great need for water on the estate for people and plants, and animals. They appreciated the challenges. And they all marvelled as the gentlemen came to the site, and after half an hour of spectating the work, they undressed to their shirtsleeves and asked what they could do.

They had been working hard for several hours when they heard a cart approaching. Only then did they realise it must have been around two in the afternoon, and lunch was coming. As they looked up, they saw that the barouche Darcy had sent for so that Georgina could enjoy the countryside was following. As the vehicle approached, they saw Georgiana with Lady Matlock. The cousins exchanged looks, stopped working, and stepped toward them.

“Phillip, William! What is the meaning of this?” she asked, pointing at their appearance. “You both look like you have been... working!”

“Good day to you, too, Mother! Thank you for coming.”

“Do not play games with me, son! Answer me!”

“Aunt, it is nice to see you at Netherfield. Welcome. As you see, indeed, we have been working.”

“But—but why?”

“This is not a mystery, Mother. It’s our venture, and we want to be part of it. William started it, and I followed. I’m enjoying myself. I did some labour on our land when I was young, but I forgot how satisfying it can be.”

“Well, I have never heard such a thing!” She huffed. “If you must, but at least wear gloves next time. I do not want your hands to show hard work; what would people say?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Yes, Aunt.”

Everybody stopped working and gathered around the cart that brought fresh water. The labourers washed their faces and hands; some even washed their upper bodies. Bread²⁶, cheese, fatty bacon, onions, and radishes were offered.

²⁶ Read an interesting article about the state of bread at the beginning of the 1800s, link on story website.

After the men had eaten at tables and benches set up, Lady Matlock alighted from the barouche.

“Oh, do not let this dog jump on me. It would ruin my dress! Now, if you have eaten enough, show us around. What have you been working on?”

Her ladyship was proud of her son and Darcy as she listened to them recount their plans. She had always known Phillip to possess a sharp mind and adventurous spirit, but to see him collaborate so seamlessly with Darcy, whose methodical nature balanced Phillip’s boldness, was a revelation. Together, they were a formidable team – visionaries in their own right.

They interrupted each other so as not to miss anything in their enthusiasm, she smiled to herself. She could tell the young men were in their element here, and if they had found their life partner in this little haven, too, she would thank the Lord every day for the rest of her life.

“What do you think, Georgie?”

“It sounds like a big undertaking.” She said as she looked around. “If you are involved, it could only be a success.”

Darcy beamed at his sister.

“What do you think you are doing?” Her ladyship demanded as the cousins approached, clearly intending to join them in the carriage.

“We need to go back to the house,” Darcy replied, trying to maintain a polite tone despite the tension.

Her ladyship raised her brow, unimpressed. “Well, then, go back as you came. You will not soil this beautiful carriage with those muddy boots. You may walk back, gentlemen, with honour intact.”

“Yes, Mother,” Phillip answered dutifully, stifling a sigh.

“Yes, Aunt,” Darcy echoed, equally resigned, bowing slightly before stepping back.

With a huff of approval, her ladyship turned away as they watched the door shut. The cousins exchanged a knowing glance, resigning themselves to the ride back and suppressing their amusement at her ladyship’s fierce protectiveness over Darcy’s fine vehicle.

At the house, they met with the steward, who brought his suggestions on where they should obtain their livestock at bargain prices. Additionally, they met with the remaining tenants, offering them

the option to stay in their houses but work their lands cooperatively. They could contribute their knowledge and experience, with the additional satisfaction of leading and training other workers. Ultimately, this would bring in more revenue and provide their families with more opportunities.

Both gentlemen took a much-needed bath and relaxed in their rooms until dinner.

Dinner was accompanied by quiet conversation and the delicate chime of silver cutlery. Lady Matlock observed the two young men with keen eyes – Darcy’s expression was guarded, though his voice betrayed the faintest trace of uncertainty. Phillip, on the other hand, seemed to overcompensate with cheerful humour, as if trying a bit too hard to dispel the tension.

Darcy contemplated the possibility of going to Lucas’s. “You go, Phillip. I think I shall skip this one. Please, make up an excuse for me.”

“That will not do, cousin.”

“I cannot face another evening in her company so soon. It may undo what little resolve I have left.”

“You will persevere.”

“It is not indifference or reluctance – it is fear. Fear that I may falter again, that I may betray the

depth of my feelings when she has made her position so clear.” *And what if she rejects me again? What if, once more, I see only pity in her eyes, not affection? The very thought... is unbearable.* “Give me time, cousin, to steel myself. Why not take Aunt?”

“A lady does not just appear at someone’s soiree, Fitzwilliam. But, by all means, invite the elder Misses Bennets with their mother for tomorrow. I should like to meet them.” Lady Matlock suggested.

Darcy swallowed at the prospect.

“Do not worry. I shall not say anything, for now.” She reassured Darcy by putting her hand on his, then added with the faintest hint of a smile, “But do not expect this state of affairs to last long.”

“You see, you must come.” Phillip insisted.

“I do not think I can.”

“Remember, you want to show your constancy. You need to demonstrate that you can be civil.”

“Brother?”

“It is nothing, Georgie. I was not at my best last time I was here.”

“Oh, I see. Or rather, I do not,” Georgiana said. “But did you not tell me last summer that a Darcy never retreats when things get difficult?”

Darcy opened his mouth to reply – to explain that this was not the same – but, seeing the challenge in his beloved sister’s eyes, not a single sound escaped his lips.

DOUBTS AND GLANCES

Chapter 12



“Kitty and Lydia, I want you to behave yourselves. We’ll have elevated company, so I cannot have you behave in an undignified manner.”

Mr. Bennet opened his mouth to speak at his wife’s comment, then seemed to think better of it and said nothing.

“But Mama!”

“Don’t but mama me, child! I’ll remove you if you cannot behave as a young lady should.”

Both Kitty and Lydia blinked at the harsh threat. Their shock all but lasted until the officers arrived.

Darcy wiped his gloved hand across his lips. He cast a furtive glance toward the Bennets’ party, his gaze lingering for a moment on Miss Elizabeth. A pang of longing struck him, mingled with the sharp ache of uncertainty. How often had he imagined her as his partner in life, her sparkling wit and fiery spirit matching his own intensity? Yet here he was,

torn between his vow to honour her wishes and the insistent pull of his own heart.

He uncharacteristically fidgeted, which doubly irritated him as he was usually very composed. *This woman will be the death of me!* He both wished and feared that the Bennets, or perhaps Miss Elizabeth, would stay away. Still, he questioned if it was the right thing to do for him to make his appearance, as it was only the previous day that he promised her he would abide by her wishes – that he would not pursue her. His stomach constricted at the thought. Why did he want her so much? To question why he desired her so was as fruitless as pondering the colour of the sky or the hue of grass; his inward chuckle was slightly bitter. She had become necessary for him. He took a deep breath and looked at their company again.

She stood next to her sister. Although Miss Bennet was a strikingly beautiful lady, in his eyes, she paled in comparison to Miss Elizabeth. How could he have ever thought that she was only ordinary? Maybe he had already been denying his attraction. Even then, he had been captivated by her beautiful laughing eyes and the way she interacted with people around her – with ease, with grace, with humour.

He started to understand himself, why he was so powerfully affected by her, and why he wanted

her as a life partner. He instinctively knew that Miss Elizabeth could love him with the intensity with which she lived. She radiated life. Her intelligence matched his own – they would not get bored with each other. She was genuine; she did not ask for pardon. He remembered when she appeared at Netherfield, breathless and dishevelled after her long walk to see her sister. He remembered the jealous thought, how he wished someone would walk three miles to see him and that *she* would do that for him. She did not apologise for her scandalous appearance.

As the Bingley sisters put it, she looked them in the eye and dared them to criticise her for not placing propriety over her caring feelings for her sister. And those sparkling eyes! They penetrated his defences and reached his hungry soul. Miss Elizabeth, now he knew, was everything. She was worth fighting for – he would let her know him. With one last longing look in her direction, he turned to Sir Lucas.

They greeted the hosts. Phillip signalled to him to smile. He groaned but tried to look more friendly. Next, they stopped to greet two gentlemen, a Mr. Harris and a Mr. Thorn; who had visited them to welcome them to the neighbourhood and to learn more about their adventure. Among others, they had offered wood for the

building. They agreed to meet again to discuss a possible collaboration.

Phillip glanced in Jane's direction several times while talking with the gentlemen. As they finished, he moved to greet the Bennets. Darcy followed reluctantly. After the greetings, he moved to speak to Mr. Bennet. He congratulated himself for avoiding looking at her...well, except when he greeted her with a bow.

“Darcy, could you join the ladies and me?” Phillip had drawn Jane and Elizabeth to the side as both ladies seemed tense. “The ladies just told me that their youngest sister, Miss Lydia, had been invited to Brighton by the colonel's wife. We were exchanging our opinions on the subject. Miss Elizabeth said she was unsuccessful with Mr. Bennet when she tried to share her reservations about the trip with him. What do you think?”

Darcy's mind was flooded with images of *his* sister in Ramsgate, and he imagined Miss Lydia in her place, laughing and crimson at Wickham's flattery. Brighton also had the reputation of being a mixed society and a place of frivolity. He looked at Miss Elizabeth.

She hesitated and lowered her gaze to her hands. She had protested that the viscount would

call his cousin. She felt ashamed of this new evidence of her father's improper neglect.

“Did you try to warn your father?”

She looked up at him with evident pain in her eyes. She nodded.

“You did very well, Miss Elizabeth. Brighton is not for young ladies, especially not without parental supervision. I know the dangers.” He looked at Elizabeth with meaning. “May I ask what your father's objections were?”

Elizabeth shut her eyes.

“I am not trying to judge; I just want to understand.”

“He—he thought we, Jane and I, were jealous of the invitation, and he did not want to listen to her tantrum if he didn't let her go. He did not think there was a real danger of her... doing...”

“I understand. Say no more.” He thought for a while. “Your mother, does she wield power over what happens?”

Jane and Elizabeth looked at each other and both nodded. “I was going to speak to her tomorrow.”

“In that case, would you allow me to try to talk to her? Maybe I can impress on her how dangerous this place is.”

“You wish to talk to my mother? You—you would do that?” Elizabeth asked in open wonder.

Darcy bowed. “There is very little I would *not* do for you, Miss Elizabeth.”

Her lips parted in silent surprise. Elizabeth’s chest tightened as his words sank in. She had never heard anyone speak with such quiet sincerity, much less directed at her. For a moment, she felt exposed, as though he could see past her defences to the conflicted emotions she kept buried. She struggled to compose herself under the weight of his steady gaze. She looked into his eyes and saw, for the first time, a heart laid bare.

“May I have a word with you, Mrs. Bennet?” Darcy asked, standing before her.

The matron was struck speechless at the request. “By—by all means, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy just kept looking at her standing.

It occurred to her that he wanted to speak privately. She became flustered at the thought but stood and led him to one of the window nooks.

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet, for indulging me. I’ve been talking to your excellent daughters, Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. They mentioned that your youngest had been invited to Brighton with the Forsters.”

Mrs. Bennet wondered why Mr. Darcy would be interested in that. “Yes, Mrs. Forster and my Lydia have become great friends.”

“Am I to understand you plan to let Miss Lydia go to Brighton alone?”

“Oh, that is, yes, well, why could she not?”

Mrs. Bennet started to doubt herself. Lately, she had noticed things about her youngest daughters that gave her pause. When Lydia’s news came, she was of two minds about it.

Darcy gave a slight nod.

“Mrs. Bennet, I understand you only want the best for your girls.”

“Oh, yes, yes, only the best.” She agreed.

“But do you agree that a child of fifteen doesn’t always know what is best for them?”

She searched his face, seeing not the aloof, disdainful gentleman she had once suspected but a man deeply troubled by a sense of duty and protection. Mrs. Bennet sighed.

He nodded to her in encouragement.

“Well, yes.”

“And you would be indeed in your right to decide what is best and what would be detrimental to your daughter.”

“De – detrimental?” Her hand flew to her mouth, muffling an involuntary gasp.

“I do not wish to speak out of turn, Mrs. Bennet, but I have come to value your family. I only address this out of respect.”

Mrs. Bennet straightened at the praise.

“Oh, please, sir, tell me what is on your mind.”

“I implore you to talk to your husband and re-think your permission to Miss Lydia. I’ve been to Brighton, and let me warn you, it is not a place for a child without proper supervision.”

“But the colonel’s wife...”

Darcy shook his head. “No, she is only very young herself. Mrs. Bennet, I saw it happen. May I speak plainly, madam?”

Mrs. Bennet nodded repeatedly.

He lowered his voice as if wanting to share a secret.

“Brighton is a place where all kinds of people go. It is a place of fun and frivolity. People relax their moral standards. A young lady like your daughter has no defences against the wickedness of men. She does not know who is genuine and who has an evil intent. And they will take advantage of her. The result is a child ruined before her life can really begin. She may be safe here, but for all good purposes, she should not be out. She is too young.”

“What? You really think she would be in danger?”

Darcy solemnly nodded. “And if anything like that happens, your whole family will be ruined. There is too much at stake. You have four other

daughters.” He knew this argument would make an impression.

“Oh, no! That cannot be! Oh, my precious girls! What would happen to all of us? You are right, Mr. Darcy. One wrong step...”

“I do not mean to frighten you, but it happened to someone I know. At the age of fifteen. She had no chance against the flattery which she thought love.”

“Oh, poor child!”

Just then, they heard Lydia laugh out loud with one of the officers. Their eyes met in a shared and silent understanding.

“Officers cannot keep a wife but will take what they can.”

She gasped. She remembered her youth and how naïve she had been, too. Thankfully, she escaped the unfortunate situation.

“As soon as we get home, I’ll speak to Mr. Bennet. I appreciate your care, sir.”

“I am honoured to be of assistance.”

Mrs. Bennet collected herself and looked around for her youngest child.

“Lydia, come and sit by me.”

As Darcy finished his mission with Mrs. Bennet, he turned around. To his surprise, he saw Miss Elizabeth approaching him. His heart beat faster.

On second glance, though, he could not read her expression. “I have talked...”

“You need to leave.” She interrupted.

“Pardon?” Darcy paled.

“You need to leave, Mr. Darcy.” In a hushed tone, she continued, “I have just had some words with the officers, and as you can see, Mr. Wickham is not here. They said he left with them but then excused himself when they arrived. He told them that he would meet an old friend of his. They were snickering, so I’m sure they meant a woman.”

“You mean...you mean he went to see her?” he asked with panic.

“It is only a hunch, but you cannot risk it. If he knows you are here, and Miss Darcy is left unprotected... Where else would he have gone? Old acquaintance?”

“Your sister warned me yesterday that he had learnt of her being here. I ordered two of my trusted footmen to watch her. Nevertheless, you are right. I should go.” His facial expression softened. “Thank you for your care... Before I go, today, my aunt, my cousin’s mother, Lady Matlock, joined us at Netherfield. She asked for your mother’s and your company, with Miss Bennet and maybe Miss Mary. If you have no other engagement, would you visit her and my sister tomorrow?”

“You wish my mother to meet a relation of yours...a countess?” She clutched her arms to her chest. “How does she even know about us?”

“Surely, your family is among the most esteemed in the neighbourhood?” Darcy was grateful for the quick thought.

“Oh.”

“Well, that is to say, she has heard about your family.” He cleared his throat and straightened.” On second thought, Darcy wanted her to know. “I must leave now. I shall speak to Sir William. Could you tell my cousin that I had to leave? I’ll send the carriage back for him.”

Darcy bowed with a lingering look and turned to leave.

Elizabeth called after him. “Be careful, sir.”

Darcy turned back and looked at her. He saw that Miss Elizabeth surprised herself with her sentiment. Darcy smiled faintly, as though touched by her words more than he dared admit.

“Darce, wait. I am coming, too.” Phillip reached Darcy in front of the assembly building. “I hope you appreciate it; I have just left a beautiful woman behind.”

Darcy shook his head at Phillip. “There’s no need. Why don’t you enjoy the evening?”

“Miss Elizabeth has sent me after you. She thought you might need me. Now, which is it?” asked Phillip, perplexed.

“Miss Elizabeth wanted you to come with me?” Darcy blinked.

“Yes.”

Darcy’s grin spread, irrepressible and sudden.

“What?”

“She is worried about me.”

Darcy’s heart felt a renewed warmth at Elizabeth’s unexpected sentiment. The moment lingered in his mind, a fragile thread of hope that he dared not pull too tightly for fear it would snap. Her concern for him, however fleeting, was a balm to the wounds of her earlier rejection. It was a small thing, yet to Darcy, it meant everything. It filled him with a hope he scarcely dared acknowledge.

He had paused, allowing himself one more lingering look at her before he inclined his head, his voice quiet yet resolute. “I shall, Miss Elizabeth. Thank you.”

“Jane, I hope you don’t mind it very much that I sent the viscount after Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said, her voice filled with anxiety and determination.

“No, of course not. It’s safer together.” She tilted her head slightly. “Are you concerned for Mr. Darcy?”

“Me? Well, no. Why would I?” Elizabeth answered, attempting to sound nonchalant.

“Indeed. Why would you; you hate the man.” Jane remarked, a hint of teasing in her tone.

“I do not hate him.” Elizabeth snapped at her sister indignantly.

“Do you not?” Jane raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued.

Elizabeth looked away, huffing.

“There is nothing wrong about worrying about him,” Jane said warmly but added, “After all, he is going to face his archenemy, who used to be a favourite of yours... Oh, I’m not being fair. I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. He was not my favourite, but I thought, too, he was an amiable man... I hope they get there in time. What that man did is beyond words! And now he is trying again. Are you sure?”

Elizabeth sighed. “I cannot know for sure, but the way the officers spoke gave me pause. He must have uttered some coarse remark about his intentions. He told the others he would meet an ‘old

friend'; he does not have 'old friends' here. It must be her."

"Thank goodness for your quick wit," Jane said with relief.

Elizabeth demurred, acknowledging the compliment with a slight nod. "Before Mr. Darcy left, he asked if Mama, you, me, and maybe Mary could visit Netherfield tomorrow. The viscount's mother, Lady Matlock, arrived today. Apparently, she would like to meet us."

"She has asked us to visit?" Jane's eyes widened as she clutched her arms to her chest. "A—a countess?"

"That is what he said."

Jane was deep in thought. "He must have told her about you."

Elizabeth was gratified that her sister had the same thought.

"Or perhaps the viscount wrote to her about the most beautiful woman he had ever met."

"Lizzy, be serious," Jane chided gently but blushed crimson. *Could it be?* She asked inwardly. Her unassuming nature did not let her entertain the idea for long.

"I've never met a countess. Do you think one can tell?"

Jane chuckled in amusement but then turned serious. "He honours us by introducing us to his

aunt. Do you think he is trying to show that he doesn't think of our family as when he..." – she looked around to see if they could be overheard – "... proposed?"

"Maybe," Elizabeth replied, her tone thoughtful.

"Does that make a difference to you?" Jane asked.

Elizabeth groaned. "Jane, when you left us alone yesterday, I told him not to hope," she admitted, looking down in regret.

"Oh, Lizzy! No! Did you really? Is that what you want?" Jane's eyes were wide with concern.

Elizabeth turned to the drinks table, her mood heavy. "Let us have a drink," she suggested, hoping to ease the tension.

A glass of refreshment is at times the perfect deflection in any argument, particularly when one is fleeing from one's own emotions. And all the more so when one cannot quite decide whether to fall in love with one's former greatest enemy.

Jane followed with a frown on her face.

"I was up all night after we talked. I—I ... don't know what I want."

Jane tried to understand her sister's turmoil. "At times, I believe I know what I want...and then the viscount smiles at me, and all my certainties

dissolve. But your case is different. It is high time you made peace with your heart, Lizzy. You'd better figure it out and soon. You cannot keep rejecting him. He *will* give up. But he is still here. He still hopes," Jane murmured, her tone soft yet firm. "He does not seem to hold a grudge. He could have just left, you know. Instead, he's just told you he would do anything for you. If someone said that to me, I would possibly melt." She looked at her sister, shaking her head. "He sees you – truly sees you – and still believes you are worth the effort."

Elizabeth felt a pang at Jane's words. She had the same strong reaction as when he told *her*. It was not just the disbelief, but she marvelled that she meant so much to him that he could utter something so profound, even after her behaviour toward him the day before. She frowned. The way he looked into her eyes, so earnestly, shook her. Moreover, after that, he went and spoke to her mother about a delicate and embarrassing topic to help her. She would have to be made of iron not to be affected by those words.

And she was affected.

Such strong sentiment, such conviction to do well by her even after being rejected now twice, could not be ignored. Elizabeth's defences were crumbling, piece by piece, under the weight of

Darcy's steadfast devotion. The memory of his earnest eyes and resolute words stayed with her, haunting her thoughts as she wrestled with the unfamiliar stirrings in her heart. For the first time, she allowed herself to consider what it might mean to let him in. And should she allow herself to yield...she might not only accept him but discover a happiness she had never dared to hope for.

A growing compassion stirred within her, and with it, an emerging sense of regard. When she recalled that silent yet fervent gaze with which Mr. Darcy had taken his leave, a warm shiver ran along her arm – a sensation that left her at once flustered and strangely thrilled. She found herself blushing as she confessed,

After a long silence, Elizabeth murmured, “I can admit...his sentiment was...gratifying.”

And now, for the first time, she dared to admit it to herself: it had not merely pleased her – it had moved her to the core.

WICKHAM – NO MORE MERCY

Chapter 13



“We’d better take the horses. It will be quicker.”

“Without a saddle? Darcy, I am not dressed to play the brute!” Phillip huffed.

Darcy ignored him. “Carter, I shall send you horses. Watch out for them. Now, I need you to unhook yours. I’m in a hurry.”

Carter did not even blink at his master’s strange request. And the two cousins were quickly on their way. To the viscount’s relief, Carter gave them two fleece blankets to put on the horses; it was better than nothing.

“Darce, wait! Why such haste?”

Darcy was already cantering. “Wickham! He’s after Georgiana. I am certain of it!”

“Wha – how? ...the rascal! What kind of a snake would...” Phillip made his horse go faster, too. “I should’ve asked about him yesterday.”

“He tried it before, last year.”

“The rogue!” Phillip, having no sister of his own, had a strong brotherly attachment to Georgiana. To think that someone was out there, bent on harming her, boiled his emotions. He urged his horse to go faster.

They were soon galloping in the twilight. The horses must have enjoyed the gift of being ridden and being able to run freely. As if they understood what was at stake, the two horses spurred each other on. Their hooves hardly touched the ground.

As the cousins arrived at the main entrance of their new estate, the house seemed eerily lifeless and quiet. Only the faint sound of horses shifting in the stable and the distant chirp of a night bird reached their ears. Darcy’s breath quickened, his chest tight as he scanned for movement, his mind racing with grim possibilities. They exchanged worried glances, scanning their surroundings for any sign of disturbance, anything unusual, but everything appeared in order. Without wasting a moment, they dismounted their horses and hurried up the stairs.

The hall was silent and empty, the stillness amplifying their growing anxiety. They listened to hear any noise. Darcy dashed up the stairs, his heart pounding in his chest, and headed straight for his sister’s room. There was no footman! His

pulse quickened at the absence of the footman stationed at the door. He tore the door open, but the room was deserted. His heart almost gave out. “She’s not here!” Darcy exclaimed to the arriving viscount, his voice filled with desperation, as Phillip arrived beside him. The lack of any immediate solution fuelled his anger, his nostrils flaring as his breathing grew heavy with frustration and worry. His mind raced with a single, grim thought: *I shall kill him this time!*

The viscount, seeing the distress in Darcy’s eyes, quickly suggested, “Let’s try my mother’s quarters. Perhaps they are together. I should also go to my room to retrieve my walking stick. It has a concealed sword that could be useful.”

Grateful for his cousin’s logical suggestion, Darcy nodded and then approached the guest wing. Turning in the corridor, he saw his trusted footman, Johnson. *Thank the Lord!* But his aunt stormed out of her room before he could address his man.

“What kind of a place is this? Somebody is throwing pebbles at my window!” She raised her voice at nobody in particular, but then she saw Darcy.

“Is Georgiana with you?” Darcy asked eagerly.

“Yes. We tried to read by the fire, but we were disturbed. What are you doing back so ear...?”

But Darcy hurried into the room and hugged his surprised sister. Hussar was at attention.

Her ladyship huffed at being ignored. She followed Darcy. The conversation and the strong emotions confused her.

“Georgie, are you all right?”

“Yes, brother. What is going on? There is some...”

“It’s Wickham.”

Georgiana gasped; her eyes looked into Darcy’s with horror. She gripped her brother’s arm, and her fingers dug painfully into it. “Here? Is that him outside?”

Darcy nodded.

“Why – what does he want? I swear I have no...”

“I know, Georgie, I know. He just cannot help himself. He saw an opportunity when he learnt you were here. It looks like our precautions were justified. I did the right thing telling you about him, did I not?”

“Yes, William. Thank you for confiding in me. I–I never imagined he would come here. Does he think I shall fall for his lies again?”

Her ladyship gasped. Georgiana shut her eyes in shame. Phillip arrived just then with his stick. He sighed in relief when he saw Georgiana.

“He thought me a foolish child, but I am no longer the girl he deceived. I will not let him manipulate me.”

Darcy felt a swell of pride at her words but also a pang of guilt for not protecting her more fiercely before. “It’s all right, Georgie. Well said. Listen. Do you think you are up to showing yourself in the window? Just so that he sees you, to make sure he stays there. It would give me time to go down to catch him.”

“You—you want me to stand in the window?”

“Just if you are up to it.”

“Who is this Wickham?” asked the countess, perplexed.

“A friend turned enemy. He is trying to get back at me for some imagined injury by compromising Georgie and getting access to her dowry,” Darcy answered his aunt.

His aunt was a countess through and through. Her anger rushed in the moment the shock faded. “Are you telling me that a man is here to ruin my niece?”

Darcy and his aunt stopped and watched as Georgiana went to the window.

“Hurry.” She plainly said.

Darcy kept his features deceptively composed.

“Go, William. Phillip, go with him. You teach this man that nobody can try something like this

without being punished! How dare he!” She went to stand next to her niece, out of sight.

“Wickham is outside in the back. I go from the right; you find the back door from the left.” Darcy instructed. Phillip nodded, and they hurried downstairs. Hussar followed his master, feeling his anger.

Wickham did not have an exact plan in mind. When he saw Darcy inside Lucas’s, it occurred to him that Georgiana was left alone at Netherfield. He rubbed his hands together and laughed at Darcy for making it so easy for him. He was giddy with the prospect of seeing Darcy broken. He took someone’s horse from the back of the building and left to find the estate without thinking it through. Once he got there, he looked around until he saw some light in one of the upstairs rooms in the back. He figured it must be Georgiana’s. He had to persuade Georgiana to come down and see him. He had to persuade her. He could say he wanted to apologise and that he still had feelings for her... If he managed to beg her down, he could grab her, make a scene, and wake up the house. Darcy would have no chance of quieting everybody.

There she is. He recognised her delicate form in the window. She looked more mature than a year ago, rather lovely in the candlelight. *Oh, she is smiling at me. Naïve little girl. Not so mature after all.* He put a broad smile on his face and gestured to her to go down to see him. He rubbed his hands when she nodded and disappeared from the window.

“That was easy,” Wickham muttered to himself with a self-satisfied grin, adjusting his position behind a thick bush that concealed him from view.

After a short wait, he heard a door creak open and close some distance away on his left. He peered around the bush and started toward the source of the noise, his anticipation growing. “My blossom, you have come!” Wickham spoke before seeing her, his voice full of false tenderness. “You cannot possibly know how I missed...” He stopped abruptly, his face falling as he saw Darcy standing before him. “Darcy!”

“Wickham,” Darcy said with a cold, measured tone.

“Wha – what are you doing here?” Wickham stammered, taking a step back in surprise.

“What? No greetings? What am I doing here?” Darcy’s eyes flashed with anger. “I think it is you who should be asked that question. You have no business here.”

“But...” Wickham glanced around, his face growing pale as he looked up at the window incredulously.

“She is not coming.” The smirk on Darcy’s face was chilling, his eyes hard as steel. “You underestimate her intelligence, Wickham,” he said, his tone laced with quiet menace. “You thought she would fall for your lies again? You thought wrong.”

Wickham’s bravado faltered for a moment, the shadows on his face deepening as he realised his miscalculation.

He stepped closer. The faint scent of sweat and stale tobacco reached him, Wickham’s dishevelled figure half-hidden in the shadow, yet every hostile movement accentuated in the moonlight.

“Wha... You’ll see. Even after a year, she smiled at me!”

“I was in the room with her. *I* told her to stand in the window.”

“No!” His face twisted as he looked up again and saw only darkness at the window. He had been outplayed.

Darcy just smirked at him. “It’s quite astonishing that you think you could come here, and she would do your bidding after all you have put her through. Do you think I stayed silent about your misdeeds?”

Wickham’s face contorted with rage. “Why do you have to ruin everything?”

Darcy’s laughter was sharp and bitter. “You mean, why don’t I just stand aside and let you ruin my sister?”

Wickham’s lip curled in frustration, his voice rising as he shouted, “You’ve always stood in my way! You, with your estate and your name, handed everything on a silver platter, while I’ve had to claw for every scrap!”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, his anger icy and controlled. “And whose fault is that, Wickham? You were given every opportunity and squandered them all.”

“It’s all *your* fault! You owe me, Darcy! You have ruined my life!

Hussar, Darcy’s loyal dog, growled menacingly and positioned himself before his master, eyes fixed on Wickham.

“I?” Darcy’s tone was incredulous.

“Hold back your hound! Yes, you and your father!” He spat, and his mouth contorted grotesquely.

“I am very sorry to hear that, considering that you had a privileged upbringing, you had the goodwill of the master of a great estate. You could have had a friend in me. You even got substantial capital

to start your life with, even if not deserving.” Darcy retorted, his voice dripping with contempt.

“I deserved it!” Wickham spat, his venomous eyes narrowing. “After all my attentions, I should’ve gotten more!”

Phillip arrived quietly and stopped a few steps behind Wickham.

“Your sense of entitlement is astonishing.”

“Your father loved me!”

“Or liked to be entertained by you.”

“You’re just jealous. You could never stand that he loved me more than you.” Wickham retorted, his voice trembling with a mix of anger and desperation.

“You’re delusional, Wickham,” Darcy said, shaking his head. “The fact is, he was *my* father. And he did a lot for you. He tried to provide you with a future, but all you did was squander it.”

Phillip was agitated. Darcy carelessly angered the man.

“He didn’t do enough. Here I am, penniless.”

“Why am I not surprised? Nothing would be enough for you. You haven’t learnt that the world does not owe you anything. *We* don’t owe you anything. Face it, Wickham, you are entitled to nothing.”

Phillip’s eyes bulged at the sight of Darcy actually seeking to provoke Wickham.

Darcy subtly quieted his dog with a small gesture, keeping his eyes on Wickham. Hussar was getting very nervous for his master.

“How dare you! Not everybody is born into money,” Wickham sneered.

“I wager I would have done well with what you had.”

“You think yourself above me, as always. But now *I* have the advantage.” Wickham’s face darkened with a menacing cloud of warning.

“How so?” Darcy asked, his voice steely.

“I have a sword.” Wickham pulled out his weapon, his body trembling with rage.

Hussar, ready to jump, started barking furiously.

“Please, George. Do not make it worse than it has to be,” Darcy said, his voice steady. “You are a manipulator but ultimately a coward.”

Darcy’s eyes flicked once to the sword in Wickham’s hand. Unarmed, yet unafraid, he stepped forward.

“I’m no coward, you son of a bitch!” He launched forward, sword raised. The metallic scrape of Wickham’s sword cutting air clashed with Darcy’s steady breathing, his muscles tensing instinctively. The dog’s fierce bark was a heartbeat of warning, a sharp reminder of the threat Wickham posed.

With the agility of a skilled fencer, Darcy side-stepped the attack, the sword slicing only into the fabric of the outer garment on his arm. Darcy quickly lurched forward and grabbed Wickham's hand that held the sword. They engaged in a fierce struggle. Hussar leapt at Wickham's leg, biting down hard in defence of his master.

Phillip, delayed by the shock of Wickham's attack, jumped from behind Wickham and pulled him into a headlock with his arms. "Drop your weapon, you scoundrel!" Phillip hissed into his ear.

Wickham staggered and dropped his sword on the grass, which Darcy kicked away from him.

"Wickham, Wickham. Always the fool." Darcy taunted, patting his dog's head. The dog remained on high alert, reluctant to release its hold.

"Hussar, enough!" Darcy commanded, his voice firm.

"What shall we do with him?" Phillip asked, still holding Wickham firmly.

Wickham struggled against Phillip, but he tightened his arms around his neck.

Darcy's expression hardened. "That's just it. I take care of his mess; I let him go every time. But then he keeps coming at me."

"Well, now we have trespassing and assaulting a gentleman against him."

“Come on, Darcy. Let me go. It was only a joke.” Wickham pleaded, his voice muffled with desperation. He had realised his case was not a good one.

Darcy looked at him in contempt.

“If you don’t let me go, I shall tell everyone how I seduced your sister. Her reputation will be in tatters!”

“Wrong move, man. You shouldn’t have said that.” Phillip fidgeted with one hand. “Oh, look, what have I found in his pocket? My silver watch!”

“What? No!” Wickham protested.

“Oh, yes. How did it get there? Stealing from a peer, Wickham?” Phillip continued, holding up the watch.

“Phillip,” warned Darcy.

“You devil. I’ve done nothing wrong!” Wickham spat.

Phillip ignored his prisoner. His grip on Wickham tightened, his voice low and fierce. “You dare to threaten our family? Our Georgiana? You have no shame.” He turned to Darcy, his eyes blazing. “This ends tonight, William.”

Darcy hesitated, the weight of his cousin’s words pressing heavily on him. He knew Phillip was right, yet the thought of sentencing anyone – even Wickham – to such a fate stirred unease

within him. Still, he steeled himself, his resolve hardening.

“Darce, think about why he is here. This wasn’t a social call. He would have ruined her without remorse if he had gotten his way. As you said, if you let him go, he’ll keep coming back.”

“Stealing is a hanging offence,” Darcy said with doubt in his voice.

“Exactly! The earth doesn’t need vermin like him,” Phillip declared.

“I will do what must be done,” Darcy said quietly, more to himself than anyone else.

“Darcy! We were friends at one time. Don’t listen to him.” Wickham croaked, his voice filled now with fear.

Darcy looked at his cousin, who nodded to him. He slowly turned back to Wickham. “You never learn, Wickham. Phillip is right. You keep creating havoc. I am done with this.” He straightened. “As I see it, you have three options. I can call in your debts that you left behind in Derbyshire, and you go to debtors’ prison. You hang...or you go to Australia as a convict and never step on England soil again.”

Wickham gasped, his struggles intensifying as he realised the gravity of his situation. He gurgled in protest, but Phillip’s grip remained unyielding. “You weasel! Would you do this to your father’s

godson? What would he say? Huh?” Wickham’s voice was filled with false bravado.

Darcy’s jaw clenched. The invocation of his father felt like a final betrayal.

“I think, Wickham, he would applaud us. You lost all the mercy I had in me when I learnt what you tried to do with my cousin.” Phillip barked at him.

Two footmen appeared on the scene. “Her ladyship sent us. Can we be of assistance?” one of the footmen inquired.

“Yes, thank you. Take this man and lock him up. He trespassed on my property, even got into the house and stole my cousin’s watch.” Darcy instructed.

The footman looked at his master for a long time and then nodded. He knew the man was never in the house. Darcy acknowledged his man’s silent agreement in their scheme.

Wickham struggled, but the viscount kicked his knees from behind, causing him to buckle. Phillip tightened his hold on Wickham’s neck and whispered menacingly, “If you say even a single word, I shall ensure you hang for your crimes. The next word out of your mouth will be a confession of guilt to the magistrate. If you comply, I’ll request that your sentence be commuted to transportation.

That’s the only leniency you can expect. Do I make myself clear? Nod if you understand.”

Wickham, feeling the pressure, nodded weakly against Phillip’s arms.

Phillip released and shoved him toward the footmen. “He’s all yours. First thing in the morning, someone should go to fetch the magistrate.”

The gravel crunched as Darcy stepped back, releasing a slow breath he had not realised he had been holding. The cold night air seemed sharper, clearer now that Wickham’s threat had been subdued.

“Hussar, guard!” Darcy commanded, and the loyal dog followed the footmen, barking intermittently at Wickham to ensure he stayed in line.

Wickham, dazed and disoriented, struggled against the footmen as they led him away. *How did this all happen?* One minute, he was waiting for Georgiana to go down, and now he would be shipped to Australia! As he realised the full extent of his predicament, he fought desperately, but a punch to the stomach from one of the footmen subdued him. They shoved a dirty handkerchief into his mouth to keep him silent and prevent any disturbance to the household.

“It’s a damn good thing that you are an excellent fencer, cousin! You almost gave me a heart

attack. He could've killed you." He examined Darcy's arm.

Darcy shrugged. "He had no chance. He must've been really angry with me. I didn't think he would actually come at me as I had no weapon, but he *is* a coward at heart. He always finds the weak to work on."

"Well, this time, you were the weaker one with no weapon."

"But he did not know that you were behind him. I knew." Darcy looked around and sighed.

Do you not regret what we decided? You should've dealt with him the first time he attempted to force your hand."

"I was afraid for Georgie's reputation. She *had* agreed to elope with him."

"Pardon? Did she not know any better?"

"She was on her own at Ramsgate with a governess, who was Wickham's accomplice, as it turned out. She was only fifteen, and she remembered only good things about him from her childhood."

"So that's why she had become so reserved."

"She is improving."

"Still, I think you should have taken care of him. Anything could've been arranged. Richard knows people; even I could have helped. That's what family is for."

“Thank you, Phillip, but you are talking about murder.”

“Oh, not necessarily. I think a good beating would have done the trick. You know, decorate his pretty face.” He shook his head. “What did your father see in him?”

“That is a good question. I think he made him laugh.”

“Do you think...you know.”

“I do not know, but it is hard to imagine as my parents loved each other.”

“True. I caught them kissing more than once, you know.”

“Really?”

Phillip nodded.

“Well, we must get our stories straight before the magistrate arrives. We could say that my valet caught him in the act and called out for yours to handle him. One of them went to notify you...and that’s why we left so abruptly. He has to be taken into my room so that he knows where it is with a reminder not to go against me, a peer.”

“God, I hate this.”

“Let me do this for you. We must protect the family. Who knows what he will do next if he gets desperate? He can still make a life for himself down there if he puts himself to it.”

When they returned to her ladyship's room, they found Georgiana in her embrace. She nodded to Darcy's silent question. Lady Matlock was satisfied with Phillip's suggestion.

“Now that I know what this scoundrel did, he deserves what he gets. He will rue the day he thought of harming Georgiana. He forgets: we protect our own.”

VISITING NETHERFIELD

Chapter 14



Two significant events occurred the next day before the Longbourn ladies visited Netherfield. They deserve mentioning, but this author does not wish to burden her readers with the details, as both events were unpleasant to the extreme.

One such event, of course, was Wickham's case. The magistrate came in the morning in the person of Sir William, and as Wickham begrudgingly confessed, his trial in London was quick. He was also charged with stealing a horse. After his arrest, it quickly became known that he had left considerable debt among the officers and the local establishments, especially the inn. The populace of Meryton then promptly concluded that the officer was desperate for funds, which was why he tried to steal. Colonel Forster had to meet almost all local tradesmen, who demanded payment. He was also encouraged by the gentlemen of the neighbourhood to pay Wickham's substantial debt to the local tradesmen, as they considered it partially the

regiment's fault for letting their officers act so immorally. All debts to other officers were subsequently called in.

The local militia's disgraced officer rued what happened but believed it was all the Darcys' fault. Such reasoning was not uncommon among men whose vanity outweighed their virtues. Why had he been raised as a gentleman if they did not provide the funds to support him as one? He asked himself for the hundredth time. It was rather remarkable how he could blame Darcy for all his misfortune. This crooked blindness to his own decisions would bitter the rest of his life in Australia, and many men (and women) would have to listen to his tales of misfortune. As he leaves our story, that is all we need to know. As compassion is lost on him, let us leave him be. How he lived or died is not our concern.

The other event took place at Longbourn. After Mrs. Bennet invited her husband into her bedchamber the previous night, where she impressed upon him what a mistake it would be for him to let their youngest daughter go to Brighton (to Mr. Bennet's greatest surprise), one might imagine what calamity followed the next day. Well, Lydia was called into Mr. Bennet's book room, where both her parents waited for her. She was

then told that, as kind as it was from the Forsters to invite one of their daughters to visit them in Brighton, they could not oblige, as Lydia was their youngest. It would be unseemly to ignore their older daughters. Mr. Bennet did not reach his second point, that she was too young to attend social events in an unknown place, especially since Brighton was not a suitable destination for young ladies without parental supervision. What followed was heard outside the walls of the house.

Lydia jumped from her seat and looked from one parent to the other. First, she could not speak as shocked as she was that she would be denied all the fun that Harriet, Mrs. Forster, had promised sank in. Then she accused them of being the most awful parents and insisted that they change their minds. She claimed that it was most unfair that she would be treated as a child. When this did not produce any result, she changed tactics and started begging. Her tantrum was a spectacle if tiring to the limit. She begged, she accused, she threatened, she bribed, she shed tears, she cried her eyes out and did that with an ever-rising voice that, by the end of it, became a high-pitched sound that, to Mr. Bennet's ears, was most unbearable. He almost cursed the interfering Mr. Darcy for talking to his wife. However, seeing his daughter's more or less

expected reaction displayed before him, he begrudgingly acknowledged that she was still a child, an uncontrolled one at that. God knows what trouble she could have ended up in!

Lydia tried every stratagem, which meant more and more accusations, tears, and begging. This went on for half an hour. Mrs. Bennet constantly shook her head and rolled her eyes occasionally. She was increasingly mortified that she needed Mr. Darcy and the viscount to point out that her youngest, her little treasure, was a spoilt child. She was not about to let her behave inappropriately and disgrace the family. Amid Lydia's shrill promises of defiance that she would go against their will, Mrs. Bennet sighed, stood and called to her husband to follow her. He did, confused. Mrs. Bennet ordered their footman to stand before the door and not let Lydia out.

Lydia stopped her tirade for a moment, but when it occurred to her that she was trapped in the room, she renewed her screeching two-fold. The house seemed to reverberate with her cries, each plea and accusation a reminder of their failings as parents.

“Thomas, what are we going to do? We have raised a monstrous child! Oh, my little girl! She could disgrace this family.” How many times she ignored her elder daughters' warnings! It took an

aristocrat's disapproving look to open her eyes to her neglect and her husband's neglect.

Her husband just stood there, thoroughly bewildered. Bewildered because his wife, this time, showed more sense than he. He had mocked his Lizzy for warning him. He ignored all her arguments and accused her of being jealous of her sister. He would have let Lydia, a fifteen-year-old child, go to a place of debauchery alone just to have peace in the house. He winced at his own behaviour. He did not think about the possible consequences; he probably did not want to.

He felt ashamed.

What they had just witnessed shocked him to the core. His daughter wept, wailed, and whined as if they were giving her a beating. She shouted and screeched as if going to Brighton was a question of life and death. He let his daughter down. The way she fought their decision showed that she did not have much respect for her parents. For the first time, he truly saw his youngest for what she was: indulged, naive, and dangerously unprepared for the world beyond her immediate surroundings. His wife was right – something needed to be done about her.

Mr. Bennet led his wife upstairs and closed the door behind them. He ordered tea. They settled on his bed and consoled each other. There was no

mocking or ridiculing; he talked to his wife as an equal.

“Mama, what will happen to Lydia?” Jane asked as they were in the carriage toward Netherfield later in the day.

When her daughters told her at the breakfast table that they had been invited to visit with a countess, Mrs. Bennet needed her salts. After they left the table, she personally chose the dresses for her daughters to wear. Kitty and Lydia, in vain, begged to be included. Their wailing at the injustice of not being allowed to join the party was another incident in her eyes that began to open her to the inappropriateness of her younger children. She admonished herself that, as their mother, she had let her daughters down.

She sighed. They had agreed with her husband that they would both think about what they could do, and they would decide on the morrow.

“Lydia, as you know, was invited to Brighton. With your father, we decided it would be imprudent to send her alone to that place.”

Jane and Elizabeth looked at each other. Mr. Darcy succeeded, it seemed.

“What we witnessed today, as we told her our decision, was...monstrous. Maybe it was a mistake to let her come out. You,” she looked at all her daughters in the carriage, “have always behaved with decorum, but she...she was not ready. We concluded that what Lydia requires above all is education, not just in books but in sense. This, to an extent, will affect Kitty as well.” She looked out the window.

“In earnest, Mama?” Elizabeth asked.

She nodded. “It will be difficult; she’ll resist us at every turn.”

“Are you prepared to do this?”

“Well, let us hope our resolution will last.”

“We shall assist,” offered Jane.

The ladies were announced, and Lady Matlock welcomed her guests. Elizabeth appreciated that her ladyship acted without pomp and immediately greeted them as friends. She mentioned that both Mr. Darcy and her son mentioned them to her. Curious, she observed the lady and found that she radiated elegance; even her speech sounded musical. Her dress and jewellery were remarkable, indeed, but it was the way she held herself that implied that she was used to being listened to. She, unaware of the fact, also straightened.

They were invited to sit.

“Mrs. Bennet, why do you not sit here with me? You ladies may sit there.” She gestured to the other settee. “Georgiana, darling, would you like to sit with our guests?”

Georgiana shyly sat on a chair closest to where the sisters sat.

Lady Matlock was a social person; part of it was reading people well. Her sons and husband often lamented the fact. While she served the ladies with Georgiana’s help, she had already drawn her first conclusions.

The Bennet ladies were a pretty bunch. Mrs. Bennet still retained her beauty. She was clearly affected by being in her presence; she smiled inwardly. Her priority, Miss Bennet... Well, she was lovely. Her son wrote that she was beautiful, but she was still surprised how her beauty appeared entirely natural, unadorned by artifice. It warmed one’s heart to look at her, maybe because she also had this serenity about her; she could imagine her son adoring her. The combination made her look almost angelic. It did not escape her that she was quite the opposite of his previous liaisons. Could it be that his son instinctively knew she was wife material? What Lady Matlock was most intrigued by as she observed her was that she did not seem to be aware of how stunning she was, or, better to say, she did not put her beauty on display.

She was also more than curious about *William's lady*. So, *this is the lady to whom Darcy lost his heart!* She noticed that she herself was also the object of *her* observation. Inquisitive. Miss Elizabeth did not seem intimidated by her, but her posture was rigid and defensive. She smiled at her. Lady Matlock thought her features to be almost just as attractive. Her intelligent eyes made her quite stunning.

Miss Mary...seemed uncomfortable; she looked everywhere except at her. Her features, although not as stunning, were unfortunately overshadowed by those of her elder sisters. Lady Matlock imagined what it must be like to grow up beside two such striking sisters. She wondered what the other two girls looked like, although still young.

“Mrs. Bennet, you have lovely daughters.”

“Thank you, Milady. I have two more at home.”

“Indeed? How lucky you are, even if your hands must be full! I have only two sons. I have always wished for a daughter, but I must be satisfied to get one when one of my sons finally marries.”

Mrs. Bennet nodded. She was unsure of what to say.

“Well, three daughters out; that is quite something. Do you go to town?”

“My husband does not care for town, Lady Matlock, but I have a brother in London who hosts my two elder daughters every year.”

“And how do you like town, Miss Bennet?”

Jane was startled by being addressed. “I—I enjoy my time there. My aunt and uncle always organise some outings for us. Lately, including the theatre and a few assemblies and dinners.”

“I see. Your dress is exquisite. Was it made in London?”

Jane looked down at her dress and caressed the silk outer layer.

“The material is from London, but I cut it and stitched it with Elizabeth.”

Her ladyship could not mask her surprise. “That’s marvellous! And the embroidery? It looks very fine.”

“That is also my work.” She crimsoned under the scrutiny.

“And you designed it, did you not?” Elizabeth added.

“My Jane is very skilled with her hands.” Mrs. Bennet boasted.

Her ladyship acknowledged her with a nod.

“Tell me, Miss Bennet, do you sew all your clothes?”

“No. My aunt has treated me a few times by ordering a gown or a dress for me in London.

Sometimes, I purchase excellent materials in London and have them made here. Our local seamstress is very competent.

“Clever.” On the one hand, Lady Matlock was mortified that they made their own clothes, but she was also impressed that the young lady used economy, and her ability to make a dress was remarkable. “My niece, Georgiana, enjoys embroidery. Perhaps you could show her some new stitches or help her design a new pattern while she is here. Would you like that, Georgiana?”

“Yes, it would be nice.”

“I should be most pleased to display some of my work for your selection.”

Georgiana nodded.

Lady Matlock asked about the young ladies’ accomplishments. She was taken aback that they never had a governess. When she inquired about the other two girls, she was unimpressed.

“Well, Mrs. Bennet, you have put a great burden on yourself having all your daughters out. In London, it would not do. One or maybe two daughters would be allowed to be out at the same time. This way, the money spent on them allows the mother to show her daughter in the best light, and all the effort to find a suitable partner can focus on one at a time. What made you decide to let

even your youngest daughters out? At fifteen and seventeen, are they not too young?”

Mrs. Bennet felt all the censure of a peer, even if she was very polite about it. Did she make a mistake? Lydia and, to some extent, silly Kitty were proof. She was mortified that she could hardly mention anything their two younger children excelled at. The fact that her ladyship’s first questions about the girls were about their accomplishments is likely significant. Did she let her daughters down in this as well?

“I—I thought... Well, I thought it could do no harm if they enjoy themselves.” She looked down. “Lately, I have been faced with some proof that you are right, milady; my younger children still need some education.” She fidgeted in her seat. She did not dare share that her main reason for letting her daughters out was her desire to see them married. This constant fear of what would happen to the family if her husband died preyed on her mind.

The conversation turned to Netherfield and the gentlemen.

“... I was unsure what I would find here when I arrived, but I am amazed at how much Mr. Darcy and the viscount have already done. Mr. Darcy is an industrious young man. I was there when this idea occurred to him.” She glanced at Elizabeth.

She had to school her features not to react. *Is this meant for me?*

“... he worked relentlessly to make this venture happen. I can only bless him for it, as it seems that it has been beneficial for my son, too. He enjoys their sojourn here, although it takes both away from the season.

“You may imagine, Mrs. Bennet, I have been trying to find good matches for them, but they are challenging.” She shook her head. “It is high time that they marry. As you are aware, my son is the heir of the earldom, so it is imperative that he settles soon, and he needs to weigh his options as the position of the mistress of the earldom is no small task.” She observed Jane as she spoke. She saw her posture straighten, and she fidgeted a little. Was that a sign of her interest in her son? *Does she think she is not good enough?* “My nephew is younger, but I have noticed he seems lonely. He needs a good wife. Only a woman can see that. Am I right, Mrs. Bennet?”

She nodded repeatedly.

“Nevertheless, so far, he has not found an appropriate mate. Although not titled, he is one of the most sought-after bachelors in the ton, and as such, he is pursued relentlessly. He is not handsome for nothing.” She laughed. She saw Elizabeth steadfastly looking elsewhere; was she trying to

hide her interest? Her ladyship decided to speak more about him. As she spoke, her gaze lingered on Elizabeth, gauging her reactions with the precision of a hawk. Was that the faintest blush she detected, the slightest shift in posture? Beside her, Jane sat poised yet fidgeting subtly, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. The countess's lips curved into the hint of a smile; she had found her answers without asking any direct questions.

“The poor boy hates any gatherings for a reason. I must persuade him to make him attend a ball...” She noticed that Jane looked at her sister with meaning. She wondered about the reason. “I think he is not looking for a marriage of convenience. These young men strive to be happy these days, but I understand him; I do. His parents loved each other despite having little time on this earth. He needs the love of a good woman, I say. I have tried to help him over the years; I offered him the best that the ton can offer but to no avail – he has not found the one. Partly, I have come to make them join me in attending an important event of the season. Who knows, they may find someone there. I have several ladies in mind to introduce to them.” She sighed dramatically. “It is difficult to watch our children still to find happiness. My heart breaks for him. He is such a good man, not perfect,

but he did not have an easy life. He deserves to be happy.”

Jane looked at Elizabeth to see how she was taking it all.

The gesture did not escape her ladyship.

Elizabeth refused to show any reaction. She looked at her feet.

“Ladies, do not mind us. You may converse among yourselves.”

So, the ladies did with Elizabeth addressing Georgiana. After a few minutes, Georgiana asked if she could show the ladies her music sheets.

“By all means. Go, enjoy yourselves.”

She left with Mary and Elizabeth.

Her ladyship appreciated that Jane stayed. She smiled at her.

“His lordship told me of what they were doing here. Indeed, it is very impressive. What is more, their venture will also benefit the neighbourhood.” Jane braved to speak up.

“How so?”

“They have already employed people from the area, which keeps these men and women here. We also gave them some contacts at Mother’s suggestion. They purchase materials for the building, as well as food and various goods, from the estates and farms in the area. His lordship also told me

they would act as middlemen for produce from the estates around here to sell in London.”

“You talked about these? Not many ladies would be interested.”

“Why yes, I find it fascinating. His lordship also learnt that I grew herbs in our garden, asked for some plants, and asked me to explain how we grow them so they could start their own herb garden. I already cut some and put them in the glasshouse to root.”

Her ladyship no longer questioned his son’s fascination with the lady. She was studious and active in her quiet way, and she got things done. She had a good understanding of her world, which boded well for the future.

“I hope he offered something in return.” Her ladyship laughed.

“There is no need for that. It makes me happy that I can help.”

“Very admirable, Miss Bennet.”

When Georgiana and the others returned, Lady Matlock suggested they take the barouche and visit the gentlemen.

“I am sure they would welcome the interruption. You may learn more about what they are doing, Miss Bennet. I have asked the kitchen to prepare some bottles of cooled lemonade. Offer it

to the gentlemen and the other workers. While you are away, Mrs. Bennet, would you like to see the house? I have not seen it. We could ask the house-keeper to show us around.”

“Oh, it would be lovely! Yes, I would like to see the house.”

It was then settled. The barouche was miraculously already waiting for them. Elizabeth shook her head. She was good, she thought. Did this mean that she approved? If yes, whom – herself or Jane? But then she recalled wanting the gentlemen to attend a ball in London. As her stomach reacted, she allowed that she did not appreciate that prospect.

So, the four ladies found themselves travelling in a luxurious vehicle to see Darcy and his lordship. From afar, they could hear the men working.

Phillip was the first to notice the vehicle and, in them, the ladies. He called to Darcy with triumph. “Darce, we have company! We do not need to go after all.” He had been badgering Darcy to go back to the house. He wanted to be there when Miss Bennet was introduced to his mother.

Darcy argued that it was best to leave the ladies to their own devices. He looked up...and there she was in a pretty hat. His heart jumped at **the sight of her**. He wondered if it would always be so.

Elizabeth looked around, and soon, she identified Darcy's tall figure. She tried to tell herself that it was not like she was looking for *him*, but even she did not believe herself. It was easy to find him – there was no question that he stood out from all others.

Her gaze was arrested on its own volition; she gasped at what she saw. Scandalously, he was not properly attired as she expected, but same as the labourers, he was in his shirtsleeves, hard at work. His shirt clung to his broad shoulders, damp with effort, and his brow glistened under the sun. There was a rawness to him she had never seen before, a stark contrast to the polished gentleman she thought she knew. Her heart quickened against her will, each breath shallow as she struggled to reconcile this image with the Darcy of her imagination, all so proper.

He was placing a big cornerstone in place with a labourer! He looked up, and it looked like his eyes found hers immediately. A flash of energy ran through her. It was the strangest feeling to have Mr. Darcy's undivided attention and know she was loved. Her understanding of his feelings came to her late, but it was more overwhelming for it.

Darcy immediately tried to make himself decent, but other than wiping his hands, he could not

do much as his garments were with his horse some distance away. They approached the ladies.

“What a pleasant surprise! Ladies, Georgie.” Phillip helped Jane and Georgiana down from the carriage with a cheerful smile.

Darcy then stepped forward to assist Elizabeth and Mary, his hands brushing against Elizabeth’s as she descended. The last time he touched her hand was at the ball the previous November. His hand tingled afterwards, though a thin layer of leather covered her hand, just like then, and the memory of that contact still sent a thrill through him.

“It is a nice surprise, indeed,” Darcy said, grateful to address Miss Elizabeth directly. “Thank you for seeking us out. As you can see, we have been at work. I—I apologise for our attire.” By the time he finished, Darcy was glad he could utter all that at all, as Miss Elizabeth, instead of demurring, was looking at him with interest. The feeling of being the object of her scrutiny was unexpected, unsettling, and exciting for him in equal measure. He involuntarily shivered under her observations.

Fashion and polite society covered the male body from top to toe. Ladies never saw more of a man than their face and maybe their hands. Seeing any more was almost scandalous and, therefore, exciting. On the other hand, men were allowed to

see much more of the female form – some of the arms and a low neckline were allowed.

Therefore, Elizabeth, caught unaware, could not help but notice his hand and lower arm, free of layers of clothing. She covertly observed his flesh, which was strong and muscular. The most intriguing was his neck, though, without the restricting cravat. The contrast between his neck's robust, solid nature and her delicate one left her crimson with embarrassment.

Darcy swallowed, feeling both flattered as he watched Elizabeth, trying not to look at his neck. *Bless Aunt for sending them our way!*

Elizabeth's blush deepened, but she managed a smile. "Not at all. We cannot expect you to labour in your best. Well, I did not expect to see you doing labour in the first place."

"Surprised?" Darcy asked, his voice betraying a mix of amusement and nervousness.

Elizabeth nodded bashfully, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. "You offer me opportunities to overturn many a misconception about you."

Darcy blinked, momentarily at a loss for words. "I am glad to hear that." He responded slowly. "I can only hope to continue proving myself to you, Miss Elizabeth," he said softly, his voice rich with sincerity.

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed anew, her heart warring with her pride.

Jane, noticing the moment's awkwardness, stepped in with a gesture. "We have brought some refreshing lemonade. Lady Matlock had charged us to serve it to you." She gestured toward the bottles at the rider's seat. She did not fare any better than Elizabeth. She tried not to look openly. "My lord, could you help with it?"

Phillip noticed the awkward looks, the red face. All the ladies tried to cover their embarrassment. He stepped up to get the bottles down while Darcy and Phillip exchanged knowing glances. He hoped Miss Bennet liked what she saw. A part of him wanted to tease her about it, but he was no cad.

"If you'll excuse me, I shall return shortly." He started toward his horse. It looked like Darcy had the same idea. They both hurried and put on their waistcoats, then ineptly tied their cravats with a simple knot. Their valets would probably faint at the sight of them.

When they got back to the carriage, Elizabeth offered Darcy a drink. He gratefully took it from her, but not before their fingers, now without gloves, brushed together. Their eyes snapped to look at each other. Darcy lingered; he did not want to give up the unexpected gift.

Elizabeth's breath caught, her fingers tingling from the brief contact. Darcy's intense gaze seemed to pull her in, a silent declaration of his feelings that she could no longer ignore. For a fleeting moment, the world around them faded, the clinking of glasses and soft chatter of others nothing more than a distant hum. Both were acutely aware of the sensations their touch created. Hardly breathing, Elizabeth then watched Darcy drink, the strong curve of his jaw emphasised in profile, and her own pulse quickened.

"Thank you." Darcy's voice croaked. He gave back the cup. Elizabeth stepped away to offer drinks to others, still barely breathing. When she turned away, Darcy closed his eyes and relived the moment. *She did not pull away... Maybe it was a surprise, but she did not pull away.*

Elizabeth gave the bottle to her sister to distribute. She hesitated but then straightened and called to Darcy.

"Mr. Darcy, would you show me around?"

Darcy turned around and just stared at her.

"Your aunt said that she was quite impressed with the work you were doing here."

"Work?" His mind went blank.

"What are you doing here?" She gestured. She wanted to know more – about the plans, about his vision, about the man behind them.

“Oh, of course, by all means.” *What is she doing?*

Darcy did not understand what was happening. What did she mean by this? Two days ago, she rejected him again and now sought his company. He did not let himself analyse it much. Any interest in him or his work would be treasured. He gestured to Elizabeth, and they started walking around the site. He explained what they were building and outlined their immediate plans. At least it was a neutral subject he could talk about for hours. As they walked around, the workers stopped one by one and bowed to Elizabeth. She graciously, but with a bit of embarrassment, acknowledged the greetings.

“... I understand all this, and it is indeed impressive, but why did you join the labourers?”

“Does it seem out of character to you?”

“Well, I never considered, but yes, I would not associate hard labour with a gentleman like you.” She looked away. Each word he spoke added depth to the image she had once painted of him, shattering misconceptions she had clung to. She could not help but feel an inexplicable pride in his accomplishments, as if his success reflected on her in some small way.

“I see. Then, you would be even more surprised to know that I have done extensive manual labour at Pemberley, especially when I was younger. I think a good landlord must know what

work his men do. Even now, sometimes, I care for my horse in the stable. I regularly participate in sheep shearing, and I might say I am quite good at it. At the yearly competition, I usually get one of the first prizes. I...cut wood, which is good exercise. I assist my animals during birth and participate in processing the meat after a hunt, as well as other tasks, even if only in a demonstrative manner. You have only seen me as a guest in someone's home. I am not an idle person.”

Elizabeth stopped as she imagined Mr. Darcy doing all those things. She just stared at him as if awaiting an explanation.

“To answer your question... I want to be in the field to change anything that makes sense and that we did not think of on paper. It also feels more real this way. I do not plan to always do manual labour, but for now, it is, as my cousin said, very satisfying.” He sighed. “If you thought me a lazy landlord, you couldn't be further from the truth. My wealth does not create itself. It *is* hard work. I plan, I negotiate, and I oversee what is being done. I educate myself to improve things. That, too, is labour, though of a different kind. I visit Rosings every year to help my aunt. As much as she claims to be proficient in many things, estate management is not one of them. It's not so much of a holiday for me.”

“I—I apologise. I believe I have accustomed myself to how my father arranges things. He is hardly involved in the land. He leaves most things to the steward.”

Darcy nodded in acknowledgement. “I am not that kind of estate owner.”

“No, I can see that now.” *An industrious young man*, his aunt had said, she thought. She fidgeted with her hat. She removed it as the sun was at its strongest to let the breeze cool her.

Darcy’s face flushed, watching her movements.

“Mr. Darcy, may I thank you for your intervention with my mother? Today, they told Lydia that she could not go to Brighton. I could hardly believe it. Moreover, they are planning some changes at home; I believe they now realise that she lacks maturity and accomplishments. Your aunt also impressed my mother on the subject.”

“I am glad I could help.”

“You did. Thank you.”

At this point, they were away from everybody else. Elizabeth worded what she most wanted to hear.

“Mr. Darcy. I would hear about yesterday evening. Did Mr. Wickham come here? I have been worrying about it.”

“First, let me thank you for your presence of mind and, most of all, for warning me about it. My cousin joined me, and yes, we found him here.”

Elizabeth gasped. She examined his body from top to toe. “You are unharmed, are you not?”

Darcy smiled at her concern for him.

“What happened? That’s if you do not mind me asking.”

“I do not mind. He was trying to get Georgiana’s attention by throwing pebbles at her window; only the light was up in my aunt’s.”

“Oh, no!” She chuckled.

“I asked her to show herself at the window, so he thought he had her, except *I* appeared in the garden. We had some words. It was very disappointing but expected. He’ll never change. He believes that my father and I ruined his life. He disregards all that he received from us, or that, to an extent, he could be part of my family. He disregarded it all. Then, I must admit I provoked him a bit, and he attacked me with his sword.”

“You—you fought?”

“Not really, especially as I had no weapon.”

Elizabeth recoiled in horror.

“I disarmed him. Phillip was then there, and he made him give up his weapon.” He hurried to assure her, but his face turned stern. “He was charged with stealing a peer’s watch from the

house. The magistrate has taken him, and he will be prosecuted. Phillip will ask that his sentence be deportation.”

Elizabeth just stared and swallowed. Darcy watched her to see how she would react to this news.

“That is...terrible.” Her mind worked quickly to understand his meaning. “Stealing from a peer. If you had not caught him, he would have tried something worse.”

Darcy nodded. He was glad she understood and seemed to accept their actions. It was necessary subterfuge. “It was a difficult decision for me, but he is a menace to society.”

Elizabeth nodded. Inside, she shook at the gentlemen’s power. It strangely excited her that she had her part in punishing that scoundrel. She looked at him for the hundredth time with new eyes. He did not apologise for protecting his family.

“The other day, when they visited, was the first time I saw him since – since I learnt of his true nature. I was boiling inside that he was welcomed into my home. I wanted to shame him. I have no sympathy for him. He made me question many things. About myself, too.”

“How so?”

Elizabeth looked uneasy all of a sudden.

“You know *my* faults.” He encouraged her.

“Hmm.” She hesitated about how much to share of her thoughts. “I was so sure of myself.” She looked away, cheeks warm with shame she had not fully named before. “It was difficult to admit that he played on my naivete. I should have known. I should have seen through him, but in my resentment toward you, I did not see. He—he used me. Your letter – it humbled me.” She looked up at him in chagrin.

Just then, a beautiful dog approached Mr. Darcy, running and, with a bark, looked at Elizabeth.

“Hey, have you escaped from the kitchen? His new favourite is our cook, who always has something for him.” He squatted, embraced, and played with his eager dog. “This is Hussar²⁷. Hussar, meet Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth laughed and stroked the dog’s head. It was an almost rusty golden colour, with a sleek and short coat. It was striking. It had expressive eyes and floppy ears, very endearing.

“Aw, I’ve never seen a dog like this before. It is so lovely.”

²⁷ A *hussar* was a member of a class of light cavalry, originating in Central Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, and it spread from there. The thought here is that Darcy, knowing that word, named his dog after the then-famous Hungarian Hussars. See more on the story website.

“You hear that, Hussar? You’re lovely.” Darcy talked to his dog affectionately. “He bit Wickham. Good dog, good dog.”

Elizabeth laughed at that.

“It is a Hungarian Vizsla²⁸. I saw him at a market in Vienna on my Grand Tour. I couldn’t possibly leave him behind. He was the most gorgeous little puppy. I was heading home, so I bought him. He’s a great hunter, are you not?” He turned back to his dog.

The dog, as if understood, barked in answer. Elizabeth laughed, charmed beyond reason by both man and beast. Elizabeth saw him unrestrained, happy. When he turned to her, she stopped breathing for a moment, his grin so became him.

Not for the first time, Darcy was mesmerised by Miss Elizabeth. Her eyes sparkled in levity as she looked at the dog and then at him. Darcy watched her, the laughter in her eyes a balm to his weary soul. For the first time in weeks, he felt the faint stirrings of hope – hope that perhaps, one day, she might see him as more than the man she once misunderstood. And, as Elizabeth turned her gaze back to Hussar, her fingers brushing his sleek

²⁸ Pronounce: zs = measure. You can find a picture of the breed on the story website.

fur, she felt an unfamiliar warmth blooming in her chest, a sensation she was not yet ready to name.

Phillip and Jane had a similar conversation. They discussed the building. He showed her the plans at the headquarters, a tent with only one wall. From there, the whole building site could be seen. And he stole glances at her whenever he dared, struck by the ease of her presence. He explained that an expert would take their case and would come to plan the watering system in a few days. The head gardener also had some good ideas that he described with such enthusiasm that it made Jane laugh.

The viscount enjoyed the lady's attention and interest. She asked questions that demonstrated her understanding and genuine curiosity. When he could tear his eyes from her lovely face, he imagined a similar conversation walking around the family estate.

“I hope I did not miss much last night.”

“Not much. There were some performances and then some dancing.”

“Oh, no! Did you perform?”

“I, sometimes, I do for family. I can carry a tune if I must, but in front of a big audience, I am afraid that's out of the question. My heart couldn't take it. I am sorry to disappoint. I am not much of

a performer. Lizzy and Mary played on the piano-forte.”

“I can understand your reluctance. It is a good thing that men are not required to perform. We would make fools of ourselves. Mind you, after a few drinks, we think our song is the best of all.” He laughed. He was not put off because of Jane’s reluctance to perform – it was expected of young ladies in the ton always to perform. Instead, he wondered if he would ever have the privilege of hearing her in an intimate setting. “However, I am sorry to have missed the opportunity to dance.”

“Oh, well, we had to make do with our other neighbours and the officers.” She teased. When Phillip gaped at her, she just laughed an open laugh. That is, until she checked herself.

“Would you hear of last night? I do not wish to upset your sensibilities.”

“Did he then come here?” She asked, worried. Phillip nodded solemnly.

“I would hear it from you, then.”

He explained the situation briefly, paying attention to his choice of words. Even so, Jane was horrified, especially hearing that Wickham attacked Darcy, who had no weapon.

“Must he be punished so?” She asked agitatedly. Jane’s hands tightened around her reticule, the horror of Wickham’s actions clashing with the

compassion ingrained in her nature. ‘It seems so harsh,’ she murmured, though her voice lacked conviction.

“I am afraid, yes. Darcy had given him every leniency, but he kept coming at him. Suppose Miss Elizabeth had not warned us, who knows what could have happened? He did not come here to have tea. And this was after he almost ruined her once, as you know. I would have dealt with him after that.”

Jane, dear Jane, could only nod in understanding. These new revelations about the world at large made her heart ache.

THE VERDICT

Chapter 15

Once back at the carriage, Hussar wanted to meet all the newcomers. He was made for the ladies, and Jane and even Mary were charmed by him.

“Enough, Hussar. Off with you.” But even Darcy’s words did not affect him as he could not get enough of the ladies’ attention.

After the ladies left, the gentlemen did not linger long; they were both eager to hear Lady Matlock’s verdict.

“Mother?” Phillip called out.

They discovered her ladyship in the parlour, calmly reading.

“I refuse to address you while you appear thusly. Go and make yourselves presentable. I shall await you here.”

Like errant schoolboys, the two men shifted awkwardly before offering their apologies. They then hastened to their rooms, calling to the footmen on their way to prepare bathwater.

Lady Matlock’s lips curved in a hint of satisfaction.

In no time, both were sitting on a settee facing Lady Matlock, who had set aside her book and was now regarding them with an expectant expression.

“Did you have a fruitful day?” Lady Matlock inquired, her gaze shifting between the two men.

“Yes, exceedingly so, Mother. So...what – how did you find the guests?” Phillip, eager for his mother’s opinion, spoke with urgency.

“Do you mean to ask my thoughts on your ladies?” Lady Matlock responded with a knowing smile.

“Please, Mother,” Phillip begged, his impatience showing.

Lady Matlock’s eyes twinkled with amusement as she looked at her son. “Well, I only met them for a short time...”

“Mother!” Phillip protested with a touch of exasperation.

Lady Matlock chuckled, clearly amused by her son’s eagerness.

Darcy remained silent, though inwardly tense, as he awaited his aunt’s remarks.

“She is lovely, Phillip, as you wrote.”

“And beautiful?” Phillip asked, his tone hopeful and earnest.

“Indeed, quite beautiful.” Lady Matlock’s smile widened, her gaze becoming thoughtful as she considered her response. “But, beauty is not so rare within the ton. I believe what sets her apart is her innate beauty. She grew up in the countryside with only a shadow of a taste of what London is about. I think she will struggle with that; she will have to learn to protect herself. At the same time, she is quite clever; she was quiet but not intimidated by me overly. After a while, she addressed me with a comment of her own, which was promising. She had some good insights; she has understanding.”

“Yes, conversing with her is most satisfying.”

Her ladyship nodded thoughtfully. “Men will flock to her. She bestows on them a sense of importance.”

Phillip sighed in reluctant agreement.

“Jealousy already? Come, son. If you marry her, you know she will be in the centre of attention.”

“I would protect her.”

“You cannot. Not from the women. I shall teach her.”

Phillip looked up at his mother, who was already speaking of the future.

“Did you know that sometimes she even fashions some of her own garments alongside Miss

Elizabeth?” Lady Matlock observed Darcy’s widened eyes. “She makes the very best of her circumstances and is as industrious as you are.”

“She makes her own dresses?” Phillip asked incredulously. She should wear the best that London has to offer! *What kind of a father allows his daughters to work away to be able to wear decent clothes?* The thought unsettled him. A woman of her grace and beauty deserved to be adorned in the finest fabrics without lifting a finger, yet the image of Jane bent over her needlework tugged at his heart. It spoke of her resourcefulness, her quiet dignity. He resolved that if she became his wife, she would never have to fashion another garment unless it pleased her.

His mother nodded.

“The dress she wore today was of their making.”

He immediately pictured the very fine dress he had noticed, which he had probably chosen for the meeting with his mother. His mother saw this as admirable. He still wanted to provide her with the luxury of not having to do that.

He stopped breathing. He realised he was thinking of Miss Bennet as his intended. “So...do you approve?”

“My dear, if I am candid, I would countenance a woman half as suitable at this juncture. It is high

time you settled. To my relief, however, you have unearthed a hidden treasure. Her lack of dowry may present some difficulty should it become known, but, really, you have your own fortune already; you do not need more money. With the backup of the estate, you can well afford to keep a wife. And I know you would be generous. Her family's situation may be less than ideal, and some may claim you married beneath your station. Yet, should Darcy wed her sister, such criticism will be greatly mitigated." She looked into her son's eyes. "What are your plans?"

"I thank you for your support, Mother. It means a lot to me that you like her. She will need your help." He straightened in his seat. "I plan to ask if I can call on her. If we both find we suit, I shall court her."

"Well, once you start to call, you might as well call it courting."

"But from courting, there is almost no coming back."

"And would you let her go? In a small place like this, it will quickly spread that you are interested. If you leave her, she will be considered jilted."

Phillips shared a look with Darcy. "What do you suggest then, Mother?"

"Proceed only when you are certain she is indeed the one you desire."

Lady Matlock’s gaze shifted to her nephew, causing Darcy to tense. “My boy, do you still love her? Is she still the one?” She asked earnestly.

“Yes, for me, she is the one.”

“I heard that you had a setback. What happened?”

“She asked me why I was here.”

“She is clever.” Lady Matlock commented.

“That she is. I did not want to lie, so I told her. A few days later, she advised me not to hope. I felt devastated, but yesterday and today...she... I do not know and do not want to presume much, but it’s as if she... She showed interest in me. Worry... she was worried about me. *She* warned me about Wickham; that was why we came home last night earlier.”

“I see. Exercise patience. Remember, you have just recently arrived, after all. It appears your situation is far from hopeless. Allow her time; bestow your attention upon her. She shall be won over in time. For truly, no one can remain unmoved in the face of such constancy.”

“What—what do you think of her, Aunt?”

“She is a beauty on her own, and she seemed very intelligent. As I was observing her, she did the same. She very quickly made Georgiana converse with her. I talked a little about you. Well, she was all ears. She pretended she was not listening, but

there was such a change in her that it must have been a pretence. That is all I can say. Knowing your past, I admire that she has convictions. At least, if she says yes, you can be sure it's because of you, not what you have. If she receives some education, she could do well in society and assist you in managing contacts."

Darcy stiffened slightly. He had never thought of Elizabeth as someone who needed 'polish' to be worthy. To him, she already outshone the best of society.

"Yes," Lady Matlock continued her musings. "I think she could be an asset, and she knows what it's like living in the country."

"She likes walking."

"Good, that's healthy. If she is anything like her mother, she can give you children without much problem. I meant more about the lifestyle. I doubt you will want to spend much time in London once you are married. You need a partner who also prefers living in the country."

"I do not think that would be a problem. But you are right. I shall ask about that."

"Now. I suggest you return with us to London and attend the Rochester ball. It is one of the biggest events of the season. Let Miss Elizabeth contemplate that you have other options."

Darcy's eyes widened. "I—I cannot go. What about Georgiana?"

"I understand Mrs. Annesley is leaving for a while. You may ask her to postpone her leave, or better yet, you could invite the Bennet ladies to stay at Netherfield for a few days with her."

"That is not a bad idea, Darce," Phillip commented.

"Go to a ball just to make her what...jealous?" Darcy did not like the idea of that. "I abhor deceit," he grumbled.

"Well, she could use a little bit of competition or uncertainty. After all, she was harsh with you." Phillip said.

"Knowing you are out there dancing, chatting with the best of the ton might just do the trick. Jealousy *is* a powerful emotion." Lady Matlock leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone. "Remember, my boy, the ton is not kind to those who hesitate. Show her what she risks losing. Sometimes, a touch of uncertainty is all it takes to solidify one's affections."

Darcy frowned, but her knowing smile left him uneasy.

Her ladyship stood up, moved toward Darcy and sat next to him. "Shall we ask the ladies to join Georgiana here? The ball is on Saturday, so we

leave on Friday afternoon. I am sure you have some business in London you can take care of.”

Back at Longbourn, after bidding farewell to their visitors, Mrs. Bennet dismissed her daughters, retreating to her room with the weight of the day’s revelations. Her conversations with the countess took their toll, and she was exhausted. After the maid helped her change, she stayed in her room and sat in her favourite place at the window. It was difficult for her to admit that she erred. Why did her husband, a gentleman, not tell her how things should be? However, as she sat there and looked at the blooming garden, she could not deny that she should have done better. The echoes of Lydia’s tantrum still rang in her ears, a painful reminder of her failures. She vowed, for the sake of her daughters, to mend what could be repaired.

The stark difference between her daughters was possibly thanks to the fact that Jane and Lizzy spent much time with her brother’s family. She knew no better and never thought a governess could do so much. Her ladyship was quite taken aback when she learnt her daughters never had a governess. Her ladyship said decorum was the mark of a lady when she confessed that she had

trouble with her youngest daughters. But how was she supposed to know what that meant? Maybe it was not too late. She did not trust that her husband would continue to educate them for long. She would suggest hiring a governess even if it meant less pin money for her.

Mary sat down at the pianoforte and practised. Her thoughts were with Georgiana and how she gushed about her music. She never considered her playing music a joy, something to delight in. She had always considered it a skill that she ought to have as a gentleman's daughter. She tried to close her eyes and listen to the melody she made. As she played, she began to notice the abruptness of the sounds, so shyly yet determinedly, she lightened the pressure on the keys. The music softened. She shivered, and a teardrop escaped from her eye.

For the first time, she felt the music rather than simply playing it. Each note resonated with her soul, speaking of a longing she had not dared acknowledge. Perhaps there was beauty in imperfection, in letting herself feel rather than striving for perfection.

Jane quickly changed and went into the kitchen. She smiled at Cook and quietly took her recipe book, choosing one. She liked to be busy. It was the best way to think about what happened at Netherfield. Cook knew her little mistress, and without a word, she cleared half of the big kitchen island for her use.

Her hands moved instinctively, measuring, stirring, kneading, while her mind wandered to the viscount. His laughter lingered in her memory, warm and genuine. How easily he put her at ease, how effortlessly he drew her out of herself. She wondered, not for the first time, if such happiness could ever truly belong to her.

She had told Elizabeth that they enjoyed each other's company with the viscount, but it was increasingly difficult not to hope for more. He was an excellent man; she could see that. It seemed he understood her. He knew when to make a joke and when to be serious. She thought fate cruel to introduce to her a gentleman she could admire when, by every rule of society, they were so distant from each other as their provincial life was from the grandeur of London.

She thought about the countess – how elegant and graceful she was. She handled her mother with ease. She imagined... she allowed herself to imagine being in her place. Would she have all it takes?

She assumed that she had a busy social life during the seasons. Many people must look to her for direction. She imagined their estate... A couple of years earlier, they had visited Wrotham Park²⁹, a Palladian mansion, on their way to London when their uncle took them. That was the only great estate she had ever seen. It was grand with Greek columns and staircases, and its surrounding park was never-ending. She envisioned checking on the dinner table as her mother did before an evening event. She shook her head. She should not dream of impossible things, she thought to herself.

Still, she remembered the vast halls, the echo of her footsteps against marble, and how small she had felt. But now, the idea no longer intimidated her – if she were to step into such a world again, it would be not as a guest...but as a woman with a place of her own.

Not long after, Elizabeth found herself seeking solitude in the gardens, the quiet paths offering her the solace she craved to sort through the whirlwind of thoughts. As they arrived home, Elizabeth did

²⁹ See on the story website. Palladianism was an architectural style fashionable in Britain between 1715 and 1760. It was based on the designs of the 16th-century Venetian architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), widely considered one of the most influential individuals in the history of architecture.

not even enter the house; she was off to wander about the garden, and when that was not enough, she explored one of her favourite paths. Mrs. Bennet was so occupied with her own thoughts that she failed to admonish her daughter for going on a stroll in one of her best dresses.

For Elizabeth, this had become her escape. She often avoided the crowded household to concentrate on her own thoughts. When there were many things on her mind, she chose nature's constantly changing beauty to calm her enough that she could sort things out in her head.

Even if she was not fully conscious of what she wanted, Mr. Darcy greatly preoccupied her thoughts. A mere fortnight earlier, she had been quite content with her lot. She had congratulated herself that she had stood by her convictions. Granted, some of those convictions had since unravelled – at least one had – yet she still found comfort in the notion that she had repelled the arrogance of a man who had dared to look down on her and her family. And now? Not even two weeks since she first glimpsed him again from this very path, her world had shifted beneath her feet. Her thoughts, her emotions – all had been turned inside out.

She hugged herself as she recalled how well dishevelment suited him. The memory of his broad

shoulders, his rolled-up sleeves, and the sheen of honest labour on his brow unsettled her. This was no idle gentleman of privilege, no aloof master of ten thousand a year. This was a man who worked, who cared, and who, inexplicably, had returned. She still reeled at the fact that she saw him do hard labour... It challenged every assumption she had formed.

As she contemplated, she had to conclude that she felt that way because it was difficult to reconcile her previous assumptions of him with reality. It was always so easy to call him proud. But had she not clung to her own judgement with just as much obstinacy? She had mocked his pride while defending her own, blind to the mirror he had held up to her. Her cheeks coloured at the memory – not with shame alone but with something like regret. It astonished her how ungenerous she had been with the gentleman. Jane's gentle theory that she had been so out of sorts with him because she had been attracted to him now seemed less outrageous. She would never admit that publicly, but her secret was safe up there on Oakham Mount.

She liked how their conversation unfolded. With a reluctant grin, she realised this had been their first real conversation. Not an argument, not a battle of wits but a real conversation – words

freely spoken and honestly received – and she enjoyed it. She liked listening to him as he spoke about all that was happening at Netherfield. His ideas about the whole enterprise were novel, even radical, and revealed a keen mind and a heart invested in the well-being of those in his care... Her father would never undertake such improvements, never rise from indifference to make better what he already possessed. There was nothing to it – he was utterly indifferent about his property, the source of his income. The contrast was stark. She wondered how much more the land could have brought in if he had applied himself, like Mr. Darcy.

And it was not only the conversation. It was the man himself. The pride she once mistook for arrogance now seemed more like reserve; the aloofness, a shield for a heart that cared more deeply than she had ever imagined. She had thought him a gentleman of cold reason, and yet, here he was, speaking with warmth and vision about a venture designed not merely to enrich himself but to uplift others. The way he spoke, although she did not understand everything, showed that he loved the land; he loved making things better for his people. The excitement with

which he spoke about the plans to make their accommodation the best that it could be touched her the most.

And again – her father would never have considered such a thing – improving tenant conditions, training boys, offering education. That Mr. Darcy did so unprompted shook the foundations of her previous judgement. There was something almost enterprising in his manner, a kind of practical idealism that stirred her admiration.

Her thoughts wandered to her uncle Gardiner. He, too, was a practical man with a generous mind. He had often supported local efforts in his neighbourhood and helped others find discreet paths to success. Surely, he would take an interest in what Mr. Darcy and the viscount were attempting. Perhaps she might write to her aunt and uncle about the gentlemen's endeavours and see if Mr. Gardiner had any suggestions. Her uncle might know of someone in town who would take an interest in their goods once the enterprise began to yield results.

A few days earlier, she had allowed her emotions to triumph over her judgement – and in her fear, she had rejected him a second time. No man of sense and pride would endure such humiliation

more than once, let alone twice. What reason could he possibly have to try again? Yet, the viscount's remark drifted back to her – his father had proposed three times before the countess relented. *Would Mr. Darcy show such constancy?* And, more unsettling still – would she deserve it if he did? She pressed a hand to her chest. *In his place, would I persist?*

A CHANGING VIEW

Chapter 16



But life did not wait for Elizabeth's feelings to settle. Thursday arrived, bringing with it an important luncheon at Netherfield.

The steward, together with Darcy's butler and the housekeeper, had organised a luncheon for the neighbouring landlords and farmers to show and explain once again what they were doing on their land and how they could benefit the local farms. They proposed a spirit of cooperation, not solely at the outset of their venture but with the intention of establishing a lasting, mutually beneficial agreement. The countess greeted the guests on behalf of her son and nephew; being greeted by such a noble personage as the beautiful countess almost put the men in a stupor.

By the end of the meetings, which lasted well into the afternoon, local landlords and farmers were encouraged to expand their capacities. Netherfield would take fine vegetables, fruits, and

livestock. They intended to pay for vegetables and fruits by the pound at three set prices and for animals at quarterly agreed prices to make purchasing easy to administer. Netherfield would undertake the sale of the produce, assuming all risk upon itself. Darcy and Phillip had devised prices below the local market rates, as all the risk was theirs. They intended to sell to households with a ten to fifteen per cent markup on London market prices for the personal delivery of high-quality produce. The head gardener outlined three scenarios illustrating the potential for increased income from the sale of produce if they simply sold the present surplus or increased the farming. He also gave tips on what vegetables and animals would be most desirable.

“I must say, cousin, today has afforded me immense satisfaction. There is little more gratifying than the success of a business deal.” The viscount said while he poured a drink for Darcy and himself after dinner.

“Indeed. Our staff have performed admirably as well. I believe this could prove to be most successful, and it was not even part of my original business plan. This will yield a significant increase in profit, possibly more than we initially anticipated. Mr. Bennet unknowingly did us a good

favour with his suggestion. Miss Elizabeth mentioned to me yesterday that her father took little part in overseeing the estate beyond what was necessary. Nevertheless, he attended today's meeting."

"Well, he brought his steward."

"Oh, yes. Still, the agreement will supply them with extra profit. Perhaps it may serve as an inspiration."

"If you marry Miss Elizabeth, maybe you can help him more. If he is an idle landlord, I am sure the land is not used to its capacity."

"You may be right. Well, we'll see."

"We should pay a visit to the ladies before we depart for London."

Darcy sighed. "Yes, we should. We have that invitation to deliver."

The next day, the Darcy carriage stopped in front of Longbourn House at eleven o'clock. Georgiana liked the quaint building. The ivy clinging to the walls of Longbourn glimmered in the sunlight, casting playful shadows that danced across the neatly tended garden. The faint aroma of blooming roses mingled with the earthy scent of fresh-cut grass, a serene contrast to the grandeur of Netherfield.

Its nine bedrooms upstairs and two big reception rooms downstairs, among other spaces, made it a comfortable home for the Bennet family. They were announced and found Mrs. Bennet and the two eldest daughters in the parlour.

“Nice of you to return our visit, Miss Darcy. With your brother’s permission, would you like to visit with Miss Mary? She is at her instrument and she might show you what music sheets *we* have.”

Georgiana looked at her brother, and he nodded. He gave Elizabeth a grateful look.

“I should like that very much. Thank you, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth led the young lady out of the room.

The others left in the room took their seats when the door slammed open, and in rushed Lydia with a murderous look.

“It was you! You are the reason I’m not allowed to go to Brighton!” Her voice rose in pitch, a discordant note shattering the room’s fragile calm. Her cheeks burned with indignation, and her words cut through the air like a whip, leaving an uncomfortable silence in their wake. “Hateful man!” She pointed at Darcy, who rose from his seat.

“Lydia, hush!” Jane jumped up.

Lydia paid her no heed. “Wickham was right. You don’t know how to have fun, so you ruin other people’s lives. Lizzy was right to reject your suit! Who wants a miserable bore for a husband!”

Jane gasped. “Lydia!” She tried to stop her talking.

“What are you saying, child?” Mrs. Bennet asked, confused.

“I overheard Jane and Lizzy talking about...”

“Young lady, you will stop talking now. This is most unseemly.” The viscount stood and stepped before Lydia. His eyes demanded obedience.

Lydia gaped as she was startled into silence.

Mrs. Bennet looked at Mr. Darcy, who shut his eyes. She clutched her arms to her chest for a moment, then stood and spoke with a calm voice, although she was shaking inside.

“Lydia, go to your room.”

“But, Mama, it...”

“Lydia, if you don’t stop talking and won’t go to your room immediately, there’ll be consequences. Now!” She raised her voice at the end.

Lydia’s breath hitched when she saw that nobody went to her rescue, but she shook herself and defiantly huffed as she stormed out of the room.

Mrs. Bennet closed her eyes in shame. A storm of conflicting emotions brewed within her – embarrassment, indignation, and a growing sense of

dread. She clutched her arms as if to steady herself against the weight of her youngest daughter's folly. She would never forgive her if she ruined a possible match for the family. "I—I apologise for my daughter's behaviour. My lord, Mr. Darcy, please don't mind her; she usually talks nonsense. I'll see to it that she is punished for her outburst and make sure she doesn't repeat her nonsense in front of others. I am sorry she attacked you, Mr. Darcy. I had let it slip that you suggested it. She is vexed that we withdrew our consent for her to go to Brighton."

Darcy nodded to her.

"Excellent, Mrs. Bennet. That child should not be out."

Mrs. Bennet winced but nodded toward the viscount.

"Mrs. Bennet, I am glad you decided so. Although she doesn't appreciate it now, you did well by her as parents." Darcy bowed to the matron. He still stood on shaky legs.

Mrs. Bennet gestured for the guests to take their seats.

"Perhaps it would be best if we took our leave," Phillip said.

"Oh, please don't leave on our account. Let us take tea and make the most of this visit. Maybe I

could have Mr. Bennet join us. Please sit.” She left to bring her husband.

She was glad to be alone for a moment. Her thoughts were occupied with the startling information. Mr. Darcy and her Lizzy? *God bless us! How did this happen? She refused him? Oh, Lizzy, you’re going to be the death of me, child! One doesn’t refuse such an advantageous offer. Oh, and it was her second! He is... so tall and handsome...and rich! Lydia, you stupid child! Mr. Darcy proposed to my daughter? When? He refused to dance with her... oh, but he did dance with her at the ball. Oh, my! An offer from the ton!* She tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths. She approached her husband’s study.

“Mr. Bennet! Mr. Bennet! Oh, you’ll not believe this!” She opened the door, shut it and sagged against it.

Her husband looked up from his reading. He refrained from rolling his eyes but only just. Before he could ask what possible news he would not believe, his wife went to the window and, uncharacteristically, remained silent. She seemed to be turning something over in her mind. He put his glasses down and observed his wife.

“Lydia has once again proved why we must do something about her. I despair! She burst into the room, attacked Mr. Darcy, and blamed him for her inability to go to Brighton. She then let it slip that

she overheard Jane and Lizzy talking about her rejection of Mr. Darcy.”

“Lizzy and Mr. ...”

“Yes, our daughter has now turned down two eligible offers. Oh, Mr. Collins’ offer was nothing to what Mr. Darcy could offer! Oh, my lord, she refused ten thousand a year! What does she mean by this conduct? Does she not want to marry? Does she not understand our situation?”

“I—I don’t know, my dear. When did this happen anyway?”

“I don’t know, only that he must’ve proposed to her, and she said no. Do you think he is here...here for her?” She looked at her husband wide-eyed as the thought occurred to her. “He’s been everything polite since he arrived. The two gentlemen have shown our family great respect and attention. Would it be because of Lizzy?”

Mr. Bennet furrowed his eyebrows as he examined the question.

“If he’s here for her, he’s gone to great trouble to do so.” He thought of all he had learnt the day before.

“Oh, what are we going to do, Thomas?”

“We? I don’t think *we* should do anything. And if you want this to have any chance at all, you will *not* speak of it either.”

“Not speak of it?”

“No, not even your sister. Actually, especially not your sister. If she knows, she’ll let it slip somehow, and the whole town will talk about it.”

“Oh, you’re cruel, but you are right. I couldn’t live with myself if I were the reason he left without our Lizzy. This will kill me.”

“As long as you are not talking, my dear.”

Meanwhile, three very affected people did not know where to look in the parlour. Darcy sighed, and his shoulders started to shake.

“Well, I walked into that one.”

Jane looked up at him. Was he amused? “Mr. Darcy...”

“Do not worry about it, Miss Bennet. It is not your fault.” He put his hand up and sat with a sigh.

The door opened, and Elizabeth returned. The viscount consoled Jane, and Darcy stood again.

“Did I miss anything? Where is Mother?” Feeling the room, Elizabeth asked, perplexed.

“Oh, Lizzy!”

Darcy took the word from Jane. “I am very sorry to cause you discomfort, Miss Elizabeth. Miss Lydia, being upset about the trip, blamed me for ruining it for her. At the same time, she divulged that she overheard you and Miss Bennet

discussing me being rejected by you, which she approved of, as she put it, because I am a ‘miserable bore.’ Darcy’s mouth trembled as he tried to play down the events.

Elizabeth just stared, and her lips formed into a mute O. Phillip tried his best but chuckled at Darcy’s performance.

“She just barged in here!” Jane added.

Elizabeth paled, and her voice shook. “In front of Mama?”

All three nodded.

“She—she knows!” Elizabeth gasped.

“Actually, your dear mother was very graceful about it. She made it appear that it was just Miss Lydia’s nonsense. She went to get your father.” The viscount spoke up.

“My father? Why?”

“Just to appease us.” Darcy tried to calm her.

The other door opened, and the hosts walked in.

Elizabeth’s stomach clenched, and she could hardly breathe as her parents took their seats and started talking. She observed her mother but saw nothing untoward. She did not gush over Mr. Darcy; she did not talk nonsense constantly.

“There you are. I’ve ordered refreshments, gentlemen. They’ll arrive momentarily.” Mrs. Bennet was all smiles.

Mr. Bennet greeted the guests.

“My lord, Mr. Darcy, how are you this morning? Yesterday was quite a day, was it not? I guess your enthusiasm is catching. This morning, I’ve already met with my steward and discussed how we could make the most of this offer of yours. It appears that there is some unused land, and the tenants may also produce a surplus on their home farms. We’ll encourage them.”

“Yesterday was a good day, indeed, Mr. Bennet. I am glad to hear that you are with us. It’s a good opportunity for all of us,” the viscount answered.

“Your mother, milord, was very proud of you two when we visited, was she not, girls?”

“Yes, the countess talked very warmly about you and your enterprise.” Jane nodded.

The viscount bowed his head toward Mrs. Bennet and Jane.

During the conversation, Elizabeth and Darcy remained quiet, exchanging furtive glances with each other.

Tea arrived; the cook had been at work as soon as the guests arrived. Jane served.

“This is nice, thank you.” Phillip smiled at her as she prepared his tea just as he liked it.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. I have a favour to ask if I may. My aunt had requested our company at a London event this Saturday.”

“Oh, she is leaving already?” Mrs. Bennet asked.

“Yes, it was only a short visit. She...wished to see what we were up to.” He glanced at his cousin.

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged a look, seeing this.

“We’re leaving this afternoon and will be back on Tuesday or, at the latest, Wednesday. I’ll use the trip to take care of some business, too. I wouldn’t wish to take my sister with me as she has just settled, so I would request that your daughters, if they agree, spend these few days with her.” He looked pleadingly at Jane and Elizabeth.

“Oh, certainly, Mr. Darcy. I’m sure they have nothing pressing to do, do you, girls?”

“Would you, Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy turned to her. Elizabeth smiled at him, which made Darcy’s skin tingle.

“We would be happy to spend a few days with her.” She did not know how she felt about Mr. Darcy going to a ball, which was perplexing in itself. On the other hand, she was gratified at his request; he trusted his sister with them.

“And maybe Miss Mary, if she wishes. Georgiana mentioned that she enjoyed her company as well. Further, my aunt asked if we could take the

ladies with us so that we could share luncheon together before we had to depart. Would that be all right with you?”

“Well, girls?”

They both nodded.

“Why do you not go and change then? My dears, if there is anything you’d like to take, please place it on the bed. I can choose your wardrobe, and I shall send your trunks to you. I shall talk to Mary. Would that be acceptable, Mr. Darcy?”

“That would be perfect. I’ll send my man to pick those up; I do not wish to inconvenience you too much.”

“As you wish. Excuse me.” Mrs. Bennet left the room.

It so happened that the three Bennet daughters accompanied the gentlemen back to Netherfield in half an hour.

“This is a very comfortable carriage, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth commented as she adjusted her position in her seat and looked around. She was sitting with her sisters in a row and did not feel cramped at all. Her legs had enough space, a miracle since the gentlemen were tall. The inside was luxuriously fitted with heavy, dark red silk³⁰, and the seats were cosily padded. “Is it new? It has this

³⁰ See the carriage on the story website.

new smell.” A new carriage, Elizabeth reflected, was usually a gift to the new wife if it could be afforded... She looked around again at the luxurious interior with that in mind. She had never really considered the riches Mr. Darcy could offer her. It was not so much that she was unaware that he had ‘ten thousand a year,’ but more that it was just an abstract concept for her. As he sat opposite her, she had a new appreciation for the gentleman – that he would bestow it all upon her; it made her feel ungrateful.

Darcy chuckled. “New smell? Yes, it is rather new. I bought it just before my trip to Rosings...” Darcy adjusted his body in the seat, trying to avoid the possible negative associations.

Phillip gave an exaggerated sniff of the air. “Ah, yes, I believe I detect it as well,” he said, making the ladies laugh.

The ladies of Longbourn were greeted warmly by the countess.

“Before luncheon is served, I am going for my constitutional,” the Countess of Matlock announced, glancing at Jane with a welcoming smile. “Miss Bennet, would you accompany me? We did not have much time the other day to converse.”

Jane schooled her features and politely nodded. “Of course, your ladyship. I’d be delighted.”

As they departed for their walk, Phillip observed Elizabeth’s anxious demeanour and approached her with a reassuring smile. “Do not worry about your sister; she is in good hands. My mother does not bite – well, not often,” he said with a playful wink.

Elizabeth managed a faint smile, though her concern was evident.

Darcy, who had been watching from a short distance, stepped forward and bowed. “Miss Elizabeth, could I have the pleasure of your company for a stroll on the grounds? A bit of fresh air would also do me good before I am confined in the carriage for hours.”

Elizabeth looked at him with curiosity and surprise. “I would be glad to, Mr. Darcy. I welcome any opportunity for a walk.”

They made their way outside, Hussar trotting beside them with an enthusiastic wag of his tail. As they walked along the path, Darcy gestured towards the grounds about them. “I am grateful for your company.”

She looked up at Darcy with a question in her eyes.

Darcy chuckled softly. “You might have declined.”

“I should never turn down an opportunity for a walk, sir,” she returned with a playful tone. “Especially when the weather is so agreeable.”

“I see. I thank you all the same.” Darcy’s gaze lingered on her, a mixture of admiration and amusement in his eyes.

“In this case, I do not find myself opposed to the company either,” Elizabeth glanced away, her cheeks warming with a delicate blush.

Darcy almost gasped. He looked down at her. *This woman’s going to be the death of me. She rejects me, then worries about me, and now says things like this.* After a moment of hesitation, he offered his arm to her. How different she was from other women! Miss Bingley would hang on his arm immediately, whether he offered his or not.

Elizabeth’s eyes met his with a flicker of surprise. After a moment’s pause, she accepted his arm, her touch barely grazing his sleeve.

Darcy let out his breath, he had not realised he was holding. She took his arm! Her nearness was intoxicating. Every light touch of her hand on his arm sent a surge of warmth through him, a heady mix of exhilaration and restraint. The sensation was both unfamiliar and thrilling. Before, he always felt uncomfortable with ladies’ advances as they claimed his arm. Now, however, he never wanted it to end.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth’s voice trembled as Mr. Darcy looked at her with emotion. “I—I wanted to apologise...for Lydia. Jane and I should have been more careful.”

Darcy’s expression softened with understanding. “You need not apologise, Miss Elizabeth. I do not blame you. One needs to confide in a friend every once in a while.”

“Still, I was mortified that my mother had learnt of it. I could see her sharing the information with gusto, and soon, everybody would know. I do not want to embarrass us...you.” She glanced at him with chagrin. “But you were right; my mother was uncharacteristically quiet about it.”

“Maybe she knows that would only cause trouble.”

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully. “I managed to have a short conversation with her before we left. She had told my father, but otherwise, she swore to keep it a secret. Lydia and Kitty will not be let go anywhere from Longbourn for a while.”

“I am sorry you had to have that conversation.”

Mrs. Bennet looked in on her daughters as they were getting ready.

“Mama?”

“Yes, child?”

“Erm.”

Mrs. Bennet sighed. “Yes, I heard.” She closed the door behind her. “Honestly, Lizzy, I don’t know what you are about. Refusing Mr. Collins’s offer made me very angry, but I can understand that. The man *is* obnoxious. But Mr. Darcy? How could you? A man with his consequence... So handsome... He could have saved us all if anything had happened to your father. But, no, you didn’t think of that. He is Mr. Bingley’s friend. He could have brought him back to Jane. Did you think of that? No. I despair of you! You always do what *you* want.”

“I had my reasons, Mama.”

“Well, I hope you are satisfied then.”

“Mama, please don’t tell anyone.”

Mrs. Bennet looked at her daughter sharply. “Why would I spread that my daughter was senseless and refused an offer anyone would dream of?”

Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears.

“Your father and I wondered if he came to Netherfield because of you.”

“Mama...” She said with a keening voice.

“Don’t Mama me, Lizzy. Is he here for you?”

“Possibly,” she reluctantly answered.

“Possibly? Are you so clueless? A man doesn’t put himself in the way of rejection for no reason.

Your father says he went to great trouble... Lizzy, I know his rude comment in the autumn hurt you, and I supported you in your dislike, but if he wanted to marry you, he mustn't have been serious."

"No, he just didn't want to dance with a stranger. I know that now."

"What then? Why did you refuse him?"

"Well, I didn't know it then. I had several reasons for disliking him. I—I thought him arrogant and rude. I never saw any partiality toward me; he didn't court me... I – I believed he persuaded Mr. Bingley to give up Jane...which was partially true...and I believed Mr. Wickham's claims that he was dishonourable. Oh, it was so awful, Mama! At Hunsford. He said I was a degradation, and we argued, and I said terrible things to him..." She could not say more because she choked.

Mrs. Bennet stared in shock. She stepped up to her and hugged her daughter.

"Oh, Lizzy, Lizzy. I see. I see... Is there any hope?" Tears welled in her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away. This revelation was a puzzle – a mix of pride in her daughter's independence and fear that her choices might lead to ruin. "You must make things right, child. For all our sakes."

"Mama, I do not know if he'll offer for me again. But if things get out, he *will* be humiliated."

“I’ll make sure it does not. You mend things with him. You are a clever girl. By the look of it, he likes that. Smile at him.”

Elizabeth’s voice was barely a whisper, her resolve faltering. “What if I cannot, Mama? What if I’ve lost my chance?”

Her mother’s firm grip on her shoulders steadied her, a silent reassurance that it was not too late. “He is still here.”

“It was not so bad. Let us hope she leaves things to be – she said she would.”

Darcy would not have objected to gaining an ally in Mrs. Bennet – however vulgar the notion might seem. The image of her boasting about Jane at the ball came to his mind. However, he was not ignorant that Miss Elizabeth would not appreciate being pushed, and he wanted her to accept him on her own; he wished ardently for her love. Thinking of her mother, he had to acknowledge that he had not seen any inappropriate behaviour from her, only perhaps enthusiasm since his return.

“She surprised me with how well she handled the intelligence and Miss Lydia.”

“I am surprised myself. They are going to hire a governess for her and Kitty, we were told. But

even until that can be arranged, my father plans to work with them in the mornings, and in the afternoon, Mother and Hill, our housekeeper, will take them in hand. They will not be allowed to socialise for the time being. They, or at least Lydia, will be hard work. Maybe it's a good thing that we, the elders, will be out of the way for the coming days." She smiled at the thought.

"It is for their benefit. They could ruin things for you, the elder daughters."

Elizabeth nodded, becoming serious. "Thank you again for talking to Mother."

They walked in silence for a while. The peaceful greenery framed their path, lending a picturesque backdrop to their walk.

"What is this ball on Saturday? Why must you attend?" Elizabeth closed her eyes as she asked the questions. She blurted them out before she could stop herself.

Darcy glanced at her, noting her concern. "It is an annual event with royalty present, very prestigious. The Regent and his circle will be there."

"Really?" Elizabeth's curiosity was piqued.

"At the moment, things are quite in an uproar in London due to the assassination³¹. Political figures will be there; they are all eager to gain favour with the Regent."

³¹ The Tory Prime Minister, Perceval, was killed on 11 May 1812.

“I see.” Elizabeth nodded, absorbing the information. “May I ask what you think of the Prince Regent?”

Darcy hesitated, weighing his words carefully. “Do I have your confidence?”

“Of course.” She demurred.

“My family had introduced me to the royals and their circle. I do not seek their company. There are few good men among them. I think the power, their riches, and their titles did no favours to most. I do know a few good men among the peerage, but they are rather the exception. At least, this is my opinion. Although the viscount sometimes looks it, he cannot stand most of them either. Sometimes, he has to be present in their circle due to his status but not with much pleasure, especially the Regent’s crowd.”

“Why?” Elizabeth asked, intrigued.

“It is almost as if these people were constantly competing against each other. They live a life of dissipation and wild extravagance. They drink heavily and live dissolutely, including...mistresses and escapades,” Darcy explained, his disdain evident.

“And you do not approve?”

“Certainly not. The Regent should embody the virtues of his position, yet he does not act as a royal

should.³² He thinks of himself as privileged when he should serve his country. The kind of debt he has created for the country is outrageous, as, of course, it's the country that will ultimately bear the burden of his excesses.”

“My father shares your sentiments,” Elizabeth remarked, her voice tinged with relief.

Darcy smiled slightly at the alignment of their views. “It is unfortunate, but it seems to be a common perspective.”

Elizabeth’s face brightened with a memory. “Once, I saw a caricature of him in a shop window in London. He was portrayed as a stuffed sausage!”³³ Elizabeth reddened at how her impertinence could be taken.

Darcy’s laughter was genuine and warm. “I am not surprised. He likes his food, and a lot of it.”

Elizabeth’s curiosity continued. “When you said the viscount sometimes looks it, what did you mean?”

“He can dress like one of them if he chooses.” He chuckled. “Though he is not truly one of them, he has the ability to blend in when necessary.”

³² Jane Austen hated HRH due to his debauchery and mistreatment of his wife.

³³ Even before the Prince became the Prince Regent, his antics had made him a popular joke in the British tabloids, while some drawings even portrayed him as a stuffed sausage. James Gillray’s 1792 caricature of the Prince Regent, titled ‘A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion,’ serves as a specific example of how the Prince was often mocked by the press.

“And you?” Elizabeth asked with a playful tilt of her head.

“God forbid!” Darcy replied, his tone both amused and resolute. “I am no dandy. Useless, the lot of them. I have important work to do. I’m quite content to avoid their frivolities.” He huffed, and Elizabeth laughed, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“You do always look impeccably dressed...well, except when you work the land.”

“There’s a difference. I do not spend hours getting dressed.”³⁴

“God forbid!” Elizabeth teased, mimicking his earlier tone.

“Just so.” Darcy’s heart soared. Miss Elizabeth was indeed a gem. He looked at her sweet face, flushed from their walking, and her eyes alive with mischief.

Gathering her courage, Elizabeth ventured, “Mr. Darcy, I think I can safely say that you’re not a ‘miserable bore.’” The wind caught a strand of her hair, and for a moment, he was too overcome to speak. She kept looking ahead. She only felt as Mr. Darcy gaped at her. Before he could react, she asked, “Are you planning on dancing at the ball?”

“Pardon? Dancing?”

³⁴ Some of the dandies of London were reported to spend four to six hours getting ready for the day or an evening.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, her tone growing more tentative. “Not long ago, I read in the papers that you attended a ball recently where you...” she half-chastised herself for daring to ask.

“Where I?”

“You were observed talking intimately with a lady, a Miss Hainley...and danced...”

Darcy stopped in his tracks, his mind trying valiantly to take her meaning. Miss Elizabeth had read about him dancing with Miss Hainley, and it...*bothered her?* “Are you asking if I intend to dance with her again?”

She groaned inwardly, and her cheeks flushed with regret. “I am sorry. Please, forget I asked. I do not know why I brought it up.”

Darcy searched her eyes, trying to grasp her feelings. “I do not believe Miss Hainley would be at this ball. Even I am a nobody in their eyes, with no title, and am invited purely based on my connection to the Fitzwilliams. She is not part of the top echelon.”

Elizabeth looked away but nodded. She cursed herself for not having refrained from asking about the lady. For some reason, she wanted to know what made her special. Was she pretty? Was she rich?

Darcy resumed walking, gently pulling Elizabeth along with him. “I attended that ball at my

aunt's insistence. She argued that it would be unseemly if I didn't show myself at all this season. As you may know, I was not in the best frame of mind."

Elizabeth nodded in understanding.

"It was *you* who made me dance with her."

"Wha...? Pardon?"

"Your admonishment at Hunsford, 'your selfish disdain of the feelings of others' – that prompted me to act differently," Darcy confessed, his voice tinged with sincerity.

Elizabeth's eyes widened in surprise. "You...acted on my words?"

Darcy nodded. "When I saw her uncomfortable at being pushed at me by her mother, instead of trying to protect myself, I wished to ease her discomfort. I am trying to change."

Elizabeth blinked not once and not twice. Mr. Darcy had taken her words and acted on them?

Darcy started to walk again, pulling Elizabeth with him. They were silent for a few moments when he began to chuckle in remembrance. "She surprised me. Miss Hainley. She recited a Latin proverb in Latin to me. She suggested I practice my social skills."

"Indeed? And what did she say, pray?" She did not know if she was amused or irritated.

"Repetitio est mater studiorum."

“Repetition – mother – study. That’s too easy, sir. Everybody knows this, do they not? Repetition is the mother of learning.”

“You know...I did wonder. You are a most intelligent lady, Miss Elizabeth.”

She had to turn her head away from his gaze for a moment to avoid showing her self-satisfied expression.

As they neared the house again, Darcy ventured to ask, his tone tentative yet hopeful. “Would it appease you, Miss Elizabeth, if I did not dance at the ball?”

Elizabeth hesitated, feeling her heart quicken at his question. There was a part of her that longed to say yes, that wanted him to reserve himself, to remain untouchable to others, as if he could be hers alone. But after her previous behaviour – her thoughtless, cowardly rejection – she could not bring herself to ask him to make such a gesture. Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I—I do not have the right to ask you that.”

Darcy’s gaze held steady, his eyes reflecting a depth of feeling that made her breath catch. He murmured, stepping closer, his voice low and sincere, “I wish you would claim that right.”

LADIES ONLY AT NETHER- FIELD

Chapter 17



Feeling somewhat neglected, Phillip invited his cousin and Miss Mary to join him at the billiard table, graciously offering his instruction in the game. The young ladies, clearly enjoying his attentive company, applied themselves earnestly, though their efforts frequently dissolved into laughter.

Phillip's laughter rang out as Georgiana attempted a shot, the cue wobbling in her hands. "Steady, Cousin," he encouraged, his tone light but tinged with genuine fondness. "This game requires patience and a keen eye, much like navigating society, wouldn't you say?"

Georgiana laughed, her usual shyness melting in the warmth of his humour.

Phillip, though seemingly engaged in their amusement, found himself somewhat distracted – he kept glancing toward the window. He was aware that Miss Bennet was in conversation with his

mother. He fervently hoped she would refrain from embarrassing him with tales of his childhood indiscretions.

The late morning sun cast a bright, cheerful light over the now well-manicured garden as Jane accompanied the Countess of Matlock on a leisurely stroll. The gravel path was bordered by neatly trimmed hedges and vibrant flowers that had been freshly planted.

“Miss Bennet, I trust you shall not mind this little diversion before luncheon,” the countess remarked with a warm smile. “I always find a stroll invigorating, but after eating, I feel more like a nap.”

“Not at all, your ladyship,” Jane replied with a soft, serene smile. “It is a lovely morning, and the garden is quite enchanting.”

The countess nodded, her eyes twinkling with curiosity. “I am glad you think so. I find that a walk is an excellent opportunity to engage in more relaxed conversation.”

As they started their walk, Lady Matlock gestured to a vibrant bed of roses. “Do you enjoy

tending to flowers, Miss Bennet? I find them a curious metaphor for life – delicate, requiring care, yet resilient.”

Jane smiled softly. “I do enjoy the quiet solace of the garden, your ladyship. Nature often speaks when words fail.”

The countess studied Jane thoughtfully. “A poetic sentiment, my dear. My son often speaks of the serenity he finds in such simple pleasures.” Her words lingered with intent, causing Jane to glance away, her cheeks warming faintly.

“Miss Bennet, I find myself eager to learn more about you and your family.”

Jane’s interest was piqued, and she maintained a pleasant demeanour. “It would be my pleasure to share; we are most grateful for your interest.”

The countess glanced sideways at Jane. “Your mother has been blessed with five beautiful daughters.” She said wistfully. “At the same time, it is quite a burden for her. She is worried about how you all will find a husband.”

“Yes, Mama has been worrying about this since I came out at fifteen,” Jane said with a sigh and a faraway look. “She puts a lot of hope in how we look, but I’ve come to understand that is not enough. The countryside is a tranquil place to live, and it was adequate when we were children, but there are no prospects in the neighbourhood. With

Papa not exerting himself to go to London for the season, we don't have much choice. Our relatives have tried to help somewhat lately, but they have their own children to think of."

The countess nodded thoughtfully. "I see. You're not attached?"

"No. As I am not getting any younger, I've contemplated my options."

"Indeed?"

"This winter, in London, I have met a man..." Jane could hardly believe how easily she shared her thoughts with the countess.

Her ladyship's gaze shifted sharply to Jane.

"... He is in trade but seemed pleasant. So, I might write to my uncle to..."

"What? To broker a marriage for you?" Lady Matlock was aghast.

"I have but little to offer..."

"My dear, you must not surrender your hopes so quickly. A lady of your grace has much to offer – far beyond wealth. You have years before such a step would become necessary. When the right man comes along, you have plenty to offer. Money is not everything." Her ladyship fanned herself in agitation. Her son had better hurry. It was a disgrace that this beautiful maiden should contemplate such thoughts.

Following a light and pleasant luncheon, the travellers were shortly prepared to depart. Phillip took a private moment with Jane before leaving.

“I regret that we could not spend more time together, Miss Bennet. Did you find your walk agreeable?”

“Yes, your mother and I had a very enlightening conversation.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, I learned, for instance, that boys like to put frogs into their governess’s boots,” Jane said innocently.

“Mother! What kind of tales, false, mind you,” he turned to Jane, “are you telling Miss Bennet? How am I supposed to show myself here as a distinguished gentleman? Miss Bennet, I assure you, I was a model of decorum as a child.”

Jane’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Oh, I am sure, my lord, that you were an angel.” Her tone was honeyed, but her knowing smile betrayed her amusement.

Lady Matlock interjected with a laugh. “Do not let him deceive you, Miss Bennet. Phillip was a terror. Though I suppose it made him the man he is today.”

“Is there anything I could bring you from London? Anything you wish.” Darcy asked boldly as the group descended the stairs when the ladies were to see the travellers off.

Elizabeth looked down at her shoes and shook her head.

Darcy enjoyed her blush. Learning that she did not like him dancing with other ladies, well, that knowledge helped heal his wounded heart. She was warming up to him. He grinned with satisfaction. What could he bring her that would not be frowned upon? He would think about it in the carriage. “May I?”

Elizabeth looked up and saw Mr. Darcy asking for her hand with his. She swallowed a lump in her throat. His gloves were in his other hand, so when she put hers hesitantly into his, it was their skin that touched. Mr. Darcy’s hand was steady and strong against her soft and shaky one.

Darcy had moved and turned away from the group and bowed and raised her hand slowly so as not to frighten her. He bestowed a light touch of his lips on her hand. He had to close his eyes at the moment of touch to concentrate on the feel of her soft skin on his thirsty lips. As he straightened, he looked straight into her eyes. Was there any other feeling on her face than surprise?

Elizabeth almost fainted from not breathing. No one had ever kissed her hand like that – not with such reverence, such fire. His gaze pinned her in place. He looked at her with such intensity that she could not help but reciprocate. Maybe it was better that he did not know that he could have asked anything of her at that moment, and she could not have denied him. As Darcy was called upon to leave, she had to shake herself out of the trance his penetrating gaze put her in.

Darcy reassured her by squeezing her hand slightly, nodded, and then turned to enter his vehicle.

Two carriages left Netherfield, one carrying the masters and the other the servants. Both gentlemen left their hearts with their ladies.

The ladies waved and stayed until they could no longer see the carriages. Then they looked at each other and started to laugh. They hurried up the stairs into the parlour. They were free to do whatever they wanted. There were so many options. At dinner, they agreed that each could suggest an activity in which the others had to participate.

The first day finished in Jane's bedroom. All four were on her bed and talked about goodness knows what. Once in her own bed, Georgiana reflected on her time with the Bennet sisters and sighed in quiet bliss. She thanked God for her only sibling, her much-loved brother, but it was heavenly to be among young ladies. The seminary came to her mind. This was how it should have been. Maybe she had been too young, but her experience in school was not pleasant.

Elizabeth sprawled across the plush bed when the younger girls had retired. "Jane, do you think they'll fare well in London? I cannot imagine Mr. Darcy enjoys the hustle of it all."

Jane chuckled softly. "Perhaps not, but his devotion to his family and responsibilities seems to outweigh his preferences." She hesitated before adding, "And you, Lizzy? Are you glad they'll return?"

Elizabeth turned her head, her expression thoughtful. "I do not know what to feel, Jane. Mr. Darcy is...complicated."

"Complicated or intriguing?" Jane teased, earning a playful swat from her sister.

The next day was a lot of fun. Jane made everyone join her in the kitchen. They all got aprons from Cook, and with Jane's directions, they baked. By the time they put the trays in the oven, they were all covered in flour. The kitchen was a mess, but the giggles, the laughter, and the new experience brought the girls together. Even Mary enjoyed herself immensely after she resigned herself to having sticky hands. Their masterpieces, well, that is a slight exaggeration; mostly, they were sent to the workers. They kept some for the gentlemen. When they tasted their cakes and biscuits, they had a new appreciation for the work that went into them.

“Could I put chocolate into mine?” Georgiana was already thinking further about the recipe she used.

“Certainly. You could add both walnuts and chocolate. I can just imagine how heavenly that would be. You can always tweak the recipe,” Jane smiled.

On Sunday, after church, they all joined the Bennets for lunch, except for Lydia, who did not take very well to the changes; her tantrums were cut short by being locked in the nursery.

Mary's challenge that day was to create their own music together, so they spent the afternoon at the piano forte. Jane's inability to play the instrument was no excuse, so it was great fun as she tried

her hand at playing. Georgiana suggested starting with writing lyrics and then trying different melodies for them.

On Monday, it was Elizabeth's turn. She took the ladies out to a meadow. They all had to create a bouquet of flowers and paint or draw the creations. Now, that was fun. None of them was perfect, but they did not let themselves be intimidated by the fact, and the paintings became quite imaginative. Elizabeth never excelled at this necessary skill for ladies, so she challenged the others to give her suggestions on how to improve.

“Be brave with your colours, Lizzy. You don't have to be careful not to cross a line. It's a water-colour. That's almost impossible.” Jane suggested.

“You may add imaginary flowers to make the design more substantial. Especially some greenery, with that, you do not have to be so careful. Here, you see?” Georgiana looked at her painting knowingly.

Mary suggested that Elizabeth should not use the brush like a pencil but hold it loosely and higher to give the brush freedom.

To her own astonishment, Elizabeth found herself rather proud of the result. No matter how careful they were, paint appeared on their hands and faces, which also served as a source of laughter.

On Tuesday, Georgiana took the girls to the stables. When she learnt that the Bennet girls did not ride, not for pure enjoyment anyway, she decided to have a day with the horses. Sturdier dresses and boots were sent for, so in the morning, they fed the horses, stroked them and worked them with a brush. She had done that with her brother many times. After luncheon, it was time to have some riding lessons. The men in the stable were asked to assist in the endeavour.

Darcy and his cousin arrived in the afternoon and immediately asked after the ladies. To their surprise, they were told the ladies were at the stables. They did not waste any time; they approached.

“...Georgie, I don’t think I can do this,” Elizabeth whined.

“Lizzy, I’m surprised at your sentiment. You can do anything! You cannot be afraid of a horse called Daisy. Look at her; she is so gentle. Imagine if I wanted to make you sit on William’s horse. Now, Devil could be a little spirited for a beginner but not her.” She nuzzled the horse in affection. “See?”

“I don’t know. I’m already so high.” She looked around as she stood on the mounting block.

“What is happening here?” Darcy spoke up.

Georgiana beamed at her brother as she turned.

“William! You’re back! I have been trying to get Lizzy on Daisy, but she is a mouse.”

Elizabeth jumped from the block as soon as she turned. She turned red all over. Could they not have arrived a bit later so that her humiliation would have gone unnoticed?

“I am not a mouse! It is just that this horse is too tall. I’m a small person.”

“Miss Elizabeth, would you give up riding before trying it? For a woman who values perseverance, that smells of cowardice.” The viscount laughed.

“Oh, now you have done it!” Jane shook her head.

“What?”

“Nobody can call Lizzy a coward. At least not when we were children.” Jane expectedly looked at her sister.

Elizabeth looked at the viscount with a look that could kill. She huffed and turned back toward the horse. She examined whether she could...

“Miss Elizabeth, may I be of assistance? Let me help you. I shall not let you fall,” Darcy offered and stepped closer to her.

Elizabeth looked at Darcy as if examining *him* to see if she could truly trust him. She hardly noticeably nodded to him.

He stepped up to the horse and checked the girth and straps, making a show of adjusting them. Darcy's voice was calm, his movements deliberate as he steadied the horse. "You have faced greater challenges than this, Miss Elizabeth. Trust your horse."

Elizabeth exhaled sharply, her nerves fraying. "It is not the horse I doubt, Mr. Darcy."

His gaze softened, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "Then let me be your assurance."

Her breath caught at the intimacy of the words. For a heartbeat, neither of them moved. She glanced at him before nodding. "Very well." Her tone was steadier now, her trust in him implicit.

He moved the mounting block away.

"What are you doing?"

"It is simpler without the aid. Now, step here. Put your hand on my shoulder. Use it to steady yourself." He leaned down. "Very good. Now step on my hand with your left foot."

Elizabeth tried to calm herself, but the whole riding business and Mr. Darcy's presence were so close, they unsettled her.

“Good; when I push you up, move your right leg over the fixed head³⁵.”

She was not convinced of the success of this endeavour. “What if you throw me over, and I end up on the other side?”

Darcy shook his head, trying to suppress a laugh. “Phillip, would you do us the honour to catch Miss Elizabeth if she goes over?”

“Trust Darcy, Miss Elizabeth. He knows what he is doing.”

“Yes, Lizzy, he taught me, too,” Georgiana added.

Phillip placed himself on the other side of the horse.

“All right. Miss Elizabeth, on three, push yourself up. One, two, three.” Darcy used her inertia to get her to a level where she could easily put her right leg over the head. “Well done! You see, you are up.” He put her foot in the stirrup and adjusted her skirt over it.

Elizabeth distracted herself by adjusting her seat.

“Oh, Jane, Mary! Look! I am up.” Elizabeth exclaimed.

Darcy beamed up at her.

³⁵ The upper protruding object on a lady’s saddle, around which the lady’s leg goes to keep her in the saddle.

“Now take the reins. You use this to direct the horse, so it must be taut. Don’t worry; I am here. Now, give a slight nudge with your leg. Good. Now, let us go around the paddock here. Straighten your back and look ahead.” He held on to the horse and led Elizabeth on a slow walk. She trusted him; he grinned inwardly.

The viscount shook his head and went to where Mary and Jane sat on their horses. He took the place of the stableboys holding onto the horses.

“And you, ladies? Have you had your turn? Miss Mary, have you ridden before?”

“I already had a lesson with Georgiana.”

“But not before?”

“Not since I was a child.”

“Well, you are sitting on this horse as someone born on it. Well done! Just loosen your back; you do not have to be rigid. That’s it. And you, my lady? I can see you are in control of the horse.” He turned to Jane. He found her ever so sweet as she perched on the horse, blushing. Her hair, let down like golden waves, was tied back from her face with a pink ribbon. They obviously did not count on them arriving without their hats and all. “Do you still wish to ride?”

“I would not mind a little more as I’m on the saddle,” Mary said shyly.

His lordship waved one of the stableboys back.

“I think I have had enough for today. It was fun, though.” Jane said.

Phillip stepped up to Jane’s horse and helped Jane down. Phillip had to steady himself and make himself busy with the horse. He was affected by Jane’s closeness and the fact that he gripped her delicate waist to help her down. *What am I, a school-boy?* He chastised himself, though he wanted to do it again.

“If your sisters are up to it, maybe we could organise a ride in the countryside,” Phillip said, offering his arm to Jane.

“That would be nice. Let us know when it’s convenient. We find ourselves at leisure.”

Phillip nodded. He looked at Jane, his voice softening. “I shall endeavour to make it so. A ride in the countryside would be far more agreeable with such charming company.”

Jane’s cheeks flushed, her fingers fidgeting with her skirts. “You are too kind, my lord.”

Phillip hesitated, then added quietly, “Kindness has nothing to do with it, Miss Bennet.” After registering Jane’s sweet reaction to his words, he turned to his cousin. “Georgie, are you staying?”

“Mary left the paddock with one of the stable boys, and I’m sure Lizzy will be fine with Brother. Yes, I shall join you.”

Darcy and especially Elizabeth could not look at each other after Darcy helped Elizabeth off her horse. Darcy cleared his throat as they started to walk toward the house.

“I heard Georgiana call you Lizzy.”

“I hope it is not a problem. After four days together, you can hardly expect us to still be formal with each other.”

“Oh, no. Please, it’s not a problem at all. I hoped she would enjoy her time with you.”

“Well, *I* have enjoyed my time with her. She seems shy at first impression, but she hasn’t stopped talking since she started.”

They both laughed.

“Well, that’s a balm to my heart to hear. Even with me, she had become quite reserved.”

She knew Darcy referred to the Ramsgate incident. Realising she was the victim of lies must have been hard on Georgiana. She herself was furious that Wickham used her, and love was not even involved. Elizabeth changed the subject. “And how was your time away, Mr. Darcy?”

“It was busy except for Sunday. Upon arrival, we visited our club, where we spoke with many people about our enterprise and generated some positive interest. On Monday, I visited a carriage maker to have two purpose-built vehicles built for transporting goods to London. I need them to be

sturdy and light at the same time. I trust the man. He has a workshop outside of London.”

“You think of everything.”

“Actually, the head gardener suggested that we needed a good vehicle, and I had this contact, so... I cannot claim that I think of everything, although I try. The more you consider, the fewer the surprises on the way.”

They entered the house and were told the others were already in the parlour.

They had just sat when Darcy’s valet brought four pretty boxes on a tray.

“Oh, Wilkins, thank you.” Phillip took two of the boxes, and Darcy took the rest. “We brought you sweetmeat³⁶ from London, ladies.” He gave one box to Mary and one to Jane.

Darcy decided that the best gift would be some sweets from a good shop in London. He gave one to his sister and the other to Elizabeth.

“There is marzipan, lemon drops and sugar plums in it.”

“Darcy personally chose the ribbons.” Phillip shared with mischief.

³⁶ Sweetmeats (meaning “sweet food”) were immensely popular in the Regency period and one of the few gifts a gentleman could, without fear of reproach, give to a lady to whom he was not betrothed. Apparently, the theory was that as candy was perishable, it left no obligation on the lady to accept the gentleman’s advances.

Darcy turned red immediately before he could look at his cousin murderously. He coughed. “I thought...the colour might make it more personal.”

Elizabeth was speechless at his taking the time to choose the ribbons. She tried to imagine him at the millinery as he perused the different colours.

Jane wanted to protect Mr. Darcy. “How very kind of you, sir! You’ve succeeded admirably. This blue complements my eyes well. I believe it will make the perfect adornment for my bonnet. Thank you.”

Darcy gratefully nodded to her.

Phillip smirked. “Perhaps I should seek Mr. Darcy’s advice next time I require a gift for a lady.”

Darcy shot him a warning glance. “I assure you, Cousin, my talents do not extend to matchmaking.”

“Thank you kindly for the delightful gift, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth gently fingered her ribbon, which was primrose yellow. Did he observe that she wore a lot of yellow? She blinked, surprised that something so small could mean so much. Elizabeth suppressed a smile, her fingers tracing the delicate primrose ribbon. “I must commend your taste, Mr. Darcy. This shade is most charming.”

“Well, we have something for you, too. Every day, we did an activity one of us suggested, and

when it was Jane's turn, she made us bake. You should've seen all of us baking together; it was so much fun! What you see here is all our making." Georgiana offered enthusiastically.

"The rest went to the workers; I hope we did not poison them." Elizabeth laughed.

"You made all this?" Darcy asked with genuine wonder. There were several kinds of biscuits and cakes.

"Yes! Not many can boast that they can bake." Georgiana beamed.

"Indeed. It ought to be included in a lady's education, as gentlemen are oftentimes rather partial to confections," Phillip observed, taking one into his mouth.

Darcy asked, "Which did you make, Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth crimsoned. "The – the sugar cookie."

"Um, and you decorated it with walnut? Unusual." He took a bite and made an exaggerated sound of enjoyment.

Everybody laughed.

"Now, try mine, brother! I made the pound cake also with walnuts."

Darcy made an even bigger show of his enjoying the cake.

"It is a good thing I like walnuts." He chuckled.

Elizabeth could not help but marvel at Mr. Darcy's playfulness. His demeanour was so unlike in the autumn. *Is this what he is really like? Why could he not have been like this back then?* Did it make such a difference that he was in his family's company? As Lady Catherine's company intruded on her mind, she agreed that nobody could be jovial in her ladyship's presence. Even the colonel usually used a disguise. *Could it be that he lets himself be more of himself?*

Darcy noticed her reflection. He looked at her questioningly.

Abashedly, she smiled and shrugged.

"How was the ball? Tell us all." Georgiana asked as the laughter subsided.

"It was very extravagant. They created an enchanted forest theme." Phillip shook his head.

"I agree; it was ridiculous. All that fuss for a few hours of entertainment!" Darcy commented wryly.

"I can imagine the ladies' gowns," Georgiana said dreamily.

All the ladies looked at the gentlemen.

"Don't look at me. I am a man. How am I supposed to describe the gowns?" Phillip defended himself.

They looked at Darcy in the hope of some information from his quarter.

“You must have taken notice of something, surely!” Georgiana implored.

Seeing her hopeful expression, Darcy tried to recall at least one dress.

Elizabeth started to laugh at his serious concentration.

“Give up, Georgie. You will have to ask your aunt. These gentlemen are hopeless. Next time I prepare for an evening, I shall be considerably less worried about my attire. It looks like it does not really matter what we wear.”

“I—I apologise, Georgie. Even if I can recall a few gowns vaguely, I do not have the vocabulary to give them justice.” Darcy finally admitted defeat.

“And did you dance? Aunt has been worried about you.” Georgiana said to his brother.

Elizabeth stopped breathing.

“Darcy? He did not dance at all! Mother was at her wits’ end. As soon as possible, he disappeared to the card room.”

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, who was already looking at him. He hoped she understood that he did it for her, not that it was a big sacrifice for him.

“By Jove, he did well there, too. He secured three future clients for us.”

“How?” Elizabeth asked. She could hardly hide her satisfaction at Mr. Darcy making sure he did

not dance with any ladies, even if she had not dared to request it of him.

“Instead of payment for winning, I gave them the option to start buying from us. It was a good night. I still came away with a considerable winning. One of the reasons I went to London was to bring back coins. There is a lot to pay out.”

“You left the table when the Regent sat down to play.”

All the ladies were curious as to why.

“It is better not to be involved with him. He does not like to lose.”

“Do you always win, Mr. Darcy?”

“Not always, no, Miss Elizabeth, but often enough. I do not prattle; I observe, which helps. Also, one must know when to stand from the table.”

“Well, as much as we are enjoying this tea, we should be going. My lord, could you have a carriage prepared?”

With one look at the footman who stood at the door, the viscount requested the carriage.

“Thank you.”

“Must you go?” Georgiana tried.

“Yes. Mother would have us return home, as tomorrow is assembly night.”

“Really?” His lordship straightened from his seat.

“Yes. Shall we see you there?”

“Oh, certainly you will, will they not, Darcy?”

“I shall not miss it for the world.” He said with just a little hint of sarcasm.

“Now, everybody knows you are fibbing, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth looked at him in delight.

He chuckled. “You are mistaken, Miss Elizabeth. I assure you, I am quite looking forward to it.”

“Somehow, I doubt that, but I give you that it is very politic of you to say otherwise.”

“You think you have worked me out, do you?”

“No, I would not dare say that anymore, but your aunt spoke of your dislike of balls.”

“Did she?”

Elizabeth smiled coyly, tilting her head. “I believe you remain a puzzle, Mr. Darcy. One that is perhaps worth solving.”

Darcy’s breath caught. No witty retort came – only the sudden hope that she might truly want to know him. “And if I offered you the answer, Miss Elizabeth?”

She glanced away, her voice barely audible. “That would take all the fun out of it.”

The viscount enjoyed their banter, but he was impatient to show his preference to the elder Bennet sister.

“Miss Bennet, may I secure a dance with you?”

“As you wish, Your Lordship. Is there a particular set you desire?” Jane’s stomach clenched at the request. She wanted to imagine that the request had no significance, but the thought that it did was too attractive to her. The only reason she pushed that thought away was her fear that the lord only tried to spend his time at Netherfield with good cheer, and that was all.

“We’ll have a busy day tomorrow, and I am not sure we will arrive on time. The third, please.”

Elizabeth was convinced that his lordship had a tendre for her sister, but she decided to support Jane, believing that he just enjoyed his time with her... that’s... until he declared himself. She was aware of the chasm that existed between his station and theirs. The third set was a safe option, she reflected.

“The gates open at six thirty; the dances start at seven.” She offered.

“Might I request your fourth set, Miss Elizabeth? And Miss Mary, may I have the honour of your company for the fifth?”

Both ladies smiled and nodded.

“Brother?” Georgiana glanced at her new friends to indicate her question.

“I—I am not sure if...”

“Georgie, don’t push your brother.” It’s enough that he will be there.” Elizabeth tried to ease the situation. *This is my doing*. She knew he was afraid of her rejection, or perhaps he did not want to put her in a position where she would reject him. If only he had known that, she would have accepted his request.

“The carriage awaits, my lord.” The footman reported.

“That was quick.”

“Miss Bennet notified the stable of her need for one of the carriages when you arrived.”

“Very organised, Miss Bennet. Thank you, John. Well, ladies, shall we?” He gestured toward the door.

Everybody stood and started toward it.

CLEARING THE AIR

Chapter 18



Darcy and Elizabeth lingered at the rear of the group, the distance from their companions providing a semblance of privacy. Darcy’s expression grew thoughtful as he collected his thoughts. “Miss Elizabeth,” he intoned softly, his voice scarcely above a whisper.

Elizabeth paused and turned to face him, a curious yet cautious look in her eyes. Her gaze held his with an unwavering steadiness, though the faint flush in her cheeks betrayed her internal turmoil. It was a look he had come to admire – forthright, challenging, yet undeniably captivating. She waited for him to continue, sensing the importance of his words.

Darcy hesitated for a moment, grappling with how best to express his feelings.

“I refrained from asking you in the presence of others as I would not wish to cause you any discomfort,” he began, his tone brimming with sincerity.

Elizabeth’s gaze softened, and she gave a small, understanding nod. “Mr. Darcy, I appreciate your consideration. That’s why I intervened. I knew you were reluctant – for me. I am sorry if my previous responses caused you to hesitate. They were not...encouraging,” she said, her voice carrying a hint of regret. She forced a smile, which lacked its usual warmth.

Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth summoned her courage. “If it matters, I wish you to know that I am not opposed to dancing...with you,” she confessed, her cheeks flushing slightly as she spoke the words.

Darcy’s breath caught at her admission. He studied her face intently, noting the slight blush and the way she avoided his gaze after her declaration. His heart quickened with anticipation. “You would not?” he asked carefully, his eyes searching hers for confirmation.

Elizabeth met his gaze, her own filled with nervousness and hope. She swallowed hard before replying, “No, Mr. Darcy. I would not.”

Darcy's expression grew more serious as he considered her words. "But you are aware of my reasons for wishing to dance with you."

Elizabeth's eyes fluttered down to the ground, her resolve wavering under the weight of his question. After a moment of silence, she whispered, "Yes, Mr. Darcy."

He studied her with an intensity that made her feel both vulnerable and exposed. The space between them seemed charged with unspoken emotions.

"Miss Elizabeth," he began slowly, "please do not trifle with me. Does this mean that you are no longer opposed to my advances?"

Her courage wavered after a moment, and she looked down at her shoes, her fingers twisting the fabric of her skirt nervously. She nodded slightly, a barely perceptible gesture of acquiescence.

Darcy was not having it; there was too much at stake. He stepped closer, gently tilting her face upward with a finger beneath her chin. He almost drew his hand back, fearing he had gone too far, but she did not retreat. It was a daring gesture, but he needed to meet her gaze. His heart was pounding with the intensity of his emotions.

Elizabeth's eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"Please, do not shed tears, for my heart overflows with joy," he said, placing his hand on his

heart, “and I would know my fate. Since you told me in not-so-many words not to hope, I—I have seen a change in you toward me. Am I right?”

She nodded hesitantly.

“I appreciate that this is hard for you, but at the same time, know that you are making me ever so happy, whatever the reason. Please answer. Would I be welcome in my attentions toward you?”

Elizabeth answered, her voice wavering, “Yes, you would be welcome, and...before you deem me a silly girl, uncertain of her own mind. You must understand – I was unprepared for your constancy and did not yet comprehend you. Or myself. I felt it safer to hold fast to my previous assumptions. I needed time to understand you, without my prejudices.”

“Thank you for explaining it to me. I understand; I do. It was too soon and too sudden. I would wager you never thought to see me again. The truth is, I could not stay away. You mean far too much to me. I wished to grant you time to know me anew, yet when you inquired as to my purpose here, I found I could not dissemble.”

She smiled slightly.

“Miss Elizabeth, know that I am deeply gratified by your words. To hear that you might reconsider is more than I had dared to hope.”

Elizabeth looked up at him, her eyes meeting his with a mixture of shyness and sincerity. “I never intended to cause you pain, Mr. Darcy. My feelings have been...uncertain. But your persistence, your sincerity, it has made me reconsider.”

Darcy’s expression softened as he reached out to take her hand, his touch light but reassuring, gently. “Then perhaps we might begin anew. I promise to respect your pace and your feelings.”

Elizabeth nodded, her heart racing at the contact. “I should like that,” she said quietly.

He puffed his chest out.

“Then, Miss Elizabeth, with your permission, I would beg the honour of your third dance.”

“I shall take a ride,” Darcy announced decisively as the carriage rolled out of sight.

Phillip, who had expected to accompany Darcy to the construction site, looked up in surprise. “A ride?” he repeated, bemused. “I thought we were to visit the site together.”

“I need some time alone,” Darcy replied, his voice betraying a hint of urgency. “You go ahead with the others. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Darcy could hardly contain himself. He needed to get away to rethink their tête-à-tête³⁷. His eyes sparkled with an energy that contrasted sharply with his usual composure. *Bless her heart, she was so shy with me, yet she spoke her mind with courage.* He felt a surge of exhilaration that he needed to process away from the prying eyes of the people around him.

Without waiting for further discussion, Darcy turned sharply on his heel and headed briskly towards the stables. His steps were light, almost as if he were floating, as he mentally replayed their conversation. Each word, each look, resonated with him, and he found himself buoyed by a newfound hope.

Phillip, observing Darcy's uncharacteristic exuberance, raised an eyebrow. Something significant must have transpired during their private conversation. He had noticed the delay in joining the group and was now piecing together the reason for Darcy's sudden departure. The smile on Darcy's face was telling – something had clearly gone well. He hurriedly followed Darcy's retreating figure with a knowing smile. This was going to be an interesting day.

³⁷ French, meaning a private conversation, head-to-head.

“You certainly took your time with Mr. Darcy, Lizzy,” Jane remarked as she settled into the carriage beside Elizabeth, her eyes scanning her sister’s face with curiosity.

“Did I?” Elizabeth replied, her fingers deftly adjusting her gloves. “He asked for my third set.”

“Really? And?” Jane’s voice held a note of excitement.

“I accepted.” She looked up at Jane.

“But you know why he would like to dance with you,” Jane said slowly.

“That’s just what he said.”

Jane looked at her expectedly.

Elizabeth met her sister’s gaze, her expression thoughtful. “We cleared the air between us. He was quite earnest in his words.”

“What do you mean, Lizzy?” Mary asked.

Elizabeth was lost for words.

“Mr. Darcy would like to court our sister,” Jane answered.

Mary blinked. “Such a gentleman!”

“Yes, he is.”

Elizabeth added, feeling a bit shy but resolute, “I—I gave him permission to call on me.”

Jane grinned widely. “Well done, sister. You spoke with honesty and courage – I am proud of

you. You'll not regret it. He's devoted to you. Mary, dear, it's good that you know, but please keep it to yourself. We do not want any untoward attention or gossip."

Mary nodded solemnly. Though she was not one to spread rumours, she understood the need for discretion. She had few confidants and even fewer sources of gossip in her own small circle.

As the carriage began to move, Jane reached out and took Elizabeth's hand in hers. "I am so happy for you, Lizzy. This could be the start of something wonderful."

Elizabeth squeezed her sister's hand gratefully, her heart swelling with a mix of hope and anticipation. "Thank you, Jane. I hope so, too."

Darcy enjoyed the breeze on his face. He did not look where he was going; he let his horse take the lead. His mind was most pleasantly occupied with the image of a sweet maiden, and he could finally breathe. He took a deep breath and let it out through his mouth. Were his sufferings over? When they left for London, he was moderately hopeful after his fruitful conversations with Miss Elizabeth, but he thought it would take much longer to hear her agree to his advances. He felt

sovereign over his own fate and believed he could handle anything then. He sat straighter on his horse and beamed at the sky.

The world around him felt brighter, the air sweeter, as if nature itself celebrated his newfound hope. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Darcy allowed himself to dream – not of the man he had to be but of the life he could share with her.

She spoke on her own accord. That was most important to him, he realised. It was ironic that after he had not given a thought to her feelings (he had assumed he would be accepted based on who he was and what he could offer), now it was a different story. Since his rejection and his decision to try again, her changed feelings were paramount to his own happiness. Love could not be selfish, and he had been.

He was cognizant that he had received a precious second chance with a woman worthy of pursuit. No, she was not perfect; he was not blind to her faults, but she was perfect for him. He nodded to the trees in his conviction. She could vex him, yes – but she could move him, rouse him, make him better. No, he could not do with a meek woman by his side; he was invigorated by her keen mind and dazzling beauty. Elizabeth's fire, her unflinching honesty, had captivated him from the start. She challenged him and pushed him to be

better, and he welcomed it. She was not simply the woman he loved – she was his equal in every way that mattered. His feelings were already attached. He would love her fully, help her to mature without quenching her curiosity, and keep her safe. *Oh, Miss Elizabeth! ... Elizabeth!* He called her by her Christian name for the first time.

His horse carried Darcy instinctively toward the building site. The rhythmic clip of the horse's hooves matched the racing of his heart. The open air seemed to amplify his emotions, the countryside stretching before him as boundless as his joy. There, he joined his cousin, who told him of the developments. It was easy to see, though; the men made good progress in the last few days. The hot-house, or part of it, was well on its way, and next to it were crafted tables and wooden trays of soil filled with seeds on them. They were covered with glass sheets to help the seeds prepare for planting in time for the season.

“They are working on another row of tables and trays; tomorrow, those will be planted, too,” Phillip explained. “Mr. Thompson did a good job with his team. He is anxious for the water specialist to arrive tomorrow so that they can plan the watering system.”

“Uhm–uhm,” Darcy said as he looked around.

“Darcy, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, yes, I am. The watering system.”

Phillip shook his head. He regarded his cousin with penetrating eyes. “Something good has happened. Out with it.”

Darcy looked at his cousin. He produced a grin that made dimples. “I am also engaged for the third set on the morrow,” Darcy announced with a grin that revealed his joy.

“You asked her? Well done, man! How nice that a dance can make you so happy. Mother will be overjoyed.” He rolled his eyes.

“She—she has changed her mind.”

“About?”

“About me.”

“No! Really? Are you engaged?”

“No, not engaged, but she said she would welcome my pursuit.”

“Well, that *is* a change. This means you are half there. That’s why you cannot concentrate. Miss Bennet was correct, after all. I’m glad. Now, get a grip, Darce. We have work to do. You will see her soon enough.”

“Not soon enough for my liking. Now that I know she welcomes me, I wish to be with her.”

Elizabeth Rose Bennet retreated to her room, claiming she needed some rest before dinner. She closed the door softly behind her, the hum of the household fading to a distant murmur. Alone at last, she let out a breath she had not realised she'd been holding. The truth was, her mind and heart were in a whirlwind, caught up in the turbulence of her recent conversation with Mr. Darcy. Even the memory of their last conversation made her shiver. She sank onto her bed, bouncing lightly as she closed her eyes, trying to calm the storm of emotions within her. The quilt beneath her hands felt cool and grounding, a contrast to the warm flush that spread through her as she recalled the intensity of Darcy's gaze. How could a single conversation leave her so utterly changed?

As she replayed their conversation, she marvelled at her own bravery. She felt...relief. A relief that everything was not lost after all. In such a short time, Mr. Darcy had managed to shift her perspective, challenging nearly every reservation and piece of antagonism she had held. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore her growing admiration for the gentleman.

She had never been wanted – desired with such intensity and perseverance. She had never been pursued – cherished – with such sincerity. The notion that someone could love her so much, for

herself alone, undid her. Elizabeth stifled a laugh as her earlier judgments now seemed almost petty when weighed against her newly softened feelings. The thought of having potentially lost such a good man's attentions was sobering.

The realisation of what her acceptance of his advances might mean for their future sent a tremor of excitement through her. Her stomach fluttered as she considered the gravity of their potential future together. Mr. Darcy wanted to court her, to win her favour until she said yes, to be with her, to marry her. The vision of a life together stretched out before her, filled with the prospect of marriage, shared experiences, and, eventually, a family. The thought of creating a life together, of building a future with him, was both exhilarating and humbling.

Elizabeth's heart swelled with emotion as she grasped the profoundness of Mr. Darcy's intentions. The idea that he had chosen her, Elizabeth Rose Bennet of Longbourn, as the woman he wished to build a life with was overwhelming. It defied all expectations of society – he had gone against it all. It filled her with a sense of worth and purpose that she had never experienced before. With a deep breath, she allowed herself to savour the hopeful possibilities of their shared future, feeling both honoured and inspired by the sentiments he had expressed.

As she lay on her bed, Elizabeth's thoughts wandered further, leading her down a path of reflection she had not dared tread before. She felt a pang of guilt as she remembered her earlier opinions of Mr. Darcy – how quickly she had allowed herself to believe the worst. She recalled every judgment she had passed, every unkind thought she had harboured about his pride, his reserved nature, his apparent disdain for her family. How foolish and small those thoughts seemed now, indeed! Each slight she had perceived was being re-evaluated now that she understood more of the burdens he bore, of the kindness beneath his stern exterior, and the fierce loyalty that had driven his actions.

With each memory, her self-reproach grew. The realisation that she had almost allowed her prejudices to ruin what might become the greatest happiness of her life was difficult to accept. How close she had come to losing him! Elizabeth's cheeks warmed as she remembered her encounter with him at Hunsford and the vehemence with which she had rejected him. She had been so quick to judge him, so quick to think herself in the right. And yet, he had returned – he had returned with more understanding, more compassion, and no hint of bitterness.

The constancy of his feelings astonished her. He had faced her initial dismissal and her unrelenting criticism without withdrawing his love, without retreating into anger or pride. Instead, he had sought to change, to amend his behaviour, to win her regard again. This resilience, this commitment to be better for her sake, only deepened her admiration. She had never considered that someone might love her so deeply, so unconditionally.

A small smile tugged at her lips as she thought of Mr. Darcy. How blind she had been! And how merciless in her judgment. Yet he had forgiven her. She realised, with a wry laugh, that in accusing him of pride, she had revealed her own. She, who had thought herself so discerning, so observant, had been humbled. And now, at the very heart of her reflection, she felt her own emotions towards him changing. What had started as reluctant respect had blossomed into something warmer, something filled with hope.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, letting herself drift into this new sensation – this tender and thrilling awareness of a future with him. Mr. Darcy, her heart whispered, was a man she might come to love.

UNEXPECTED GUESTS

Chapter 19

“Brother, do you think...might I attend the assembly?” Georgiana asked softly the following day during luncheon.

“To the assembly?” He was surprised his sister would ask that.

“I know I am not yet out, but Lizzy, Jane, and Mary have been out in society for some years. They will be there. I do not have to dance, but it would be nice to see...”

“We could dance with her,” Phillip said.

“My first instinct says no...however, it’s true, your new friends will be there. All right, you can come,” he said at last, though his instincts cried caution.

“Really?” Georgiana shrieked. “Oh, thank you, William, thank you, Phillip.” Her face turned ashen in a moment. “Oh, what am I going to wear? Oh, would you excuse me?”

“Go.” Darcy waved. They both watched as Georgiana practically flew out of the room.

“Oh my! ‘What am I going to wear?’ She is on the verge of womanhood!”

They both laughed until Darcy sobered.

“She can dance only with us.”

Phillip chuckled softly, leaning back in his chair. “She’s growing up, Darcy. You might need to prepare yourself for a new chapter in her life.”

Darcy sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I just wish she wouldn’t grow up so quickly. She was a child not so long ago.”

Phillip smirked. “You could say the same about all of us, cousin.”

They both turned their heads when they heard a carriage arriving.

“Are you expecting someone?” Phillip asked.

“No. Oh, no! That’s Bingley’s vehicle. What brings him here? I saw him at the club. He was interested in what I was doing with Netherfield. I could not say no when he asked if he could visit. I didn’t realise he meant now!” He stood and went to see him.

Bingley descended from the carriage as Darcy, followed by the viscount, went down the stairs to meet him.

“Charles! What are you doing here?”

“What? No greeting? Are you not happy to see me?”

“I just saw you in London. I did not expect you.”

“I did ask if I could come to visit.”

“Yes, but I thought you meant later, maybe after the season. This is an inopportune time. I am ill-prepared to entertain guests.”

“I thought you exaggerated about the work,” Bingley said, taken aback.

“No, in fact, I played it down. We’re reinventing the farm. There is a lot of building going on; we have to supervise.”

“Well, we are here now.”

“We?” Darcy’s expression was deceptively composed, his surprise given away by a brief gasp.

Bingley stepped back to the carriage and helped his sister alight from it.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, this has been an age since we were in company!” She was already talking while alighting.

Darcy froze. He could not believe his friend would bring his sister. He looked at Bingley, who did not meet his eyes.

“And is that His Lordship Viscount Matlock? Good day, my lord! How do you like Netherfield? I guess it is a good enough property...”

“Cousin, you remember Mr. Bingley, and this is his sister, Miss Bingley.” Darcy reluctantly made the introductions.

Phillip met them with a neutral face. He did not often get offended when people failed to observe

the etiquette of meeting a member of the peerage, waiting for them to address the one with a lower station, but this time, he was annoyed. This was the woman who tried to manipulate her brother and Miss Bennet, he remembered with disgust.

Darcy's indignation was great, too; he had specifically told Charles that he did not want to host anyone from his family. He had had enough of being taken advantage of. *What was he thinking?* Then he looked at his friend's sister. He knew Miss Bingley often invoked his name to gain entry to events and households. It was one thing when he offered his name, but it was quite another when it was used without his consent. It seemed they did not get many invitations this time, as he was not in town. He was certain Bingley could not refuse his sister. He must have told her he saw him in town, and she made him join him immediately. *How rude to ingratiate oneself so!* She was counting on his politeness not to say anything. Her presence was all he needed when he was on a mission. She was antagonistic toward Miss Elizabeth after his confession about her eyes. Who knows what she would do when she realised that he was calling on her?

Darcy's shoulders tensed imperceptibly, though his tone remained civil. "Miss Bingley, your

arrival is unexpected. I trust your journey was comfortable?”

Miss Bingley’s lips curved into a saccharine smile. “Of course, Mr. Darcy. I simply could not resist the opportunity to see Netherfield again.” Darcy’s gaze flicked to Bingley, his friend’s sheepish expression confirming Darcy’s suspicion: this visit was not Bingley’s idea.

“How nice of you to accompany your brother on his journey so he would not be bored with his own company. Why do you not come inside and refresh yourself before you depart? As you can see, Netherfield is as it always has been.”

Miss Bingley looked at him, not comprehending, and then gaped at the unexpected edict. “I—I planned to stay here.”

“You did? Bingley, was I not clear about my wishes?”

“My friend, surely Caroline’s staying would not be a burden.”

Darcy’s mind turned quickly; he was trying to find an excuse. *Decorating? I could say... Ugh, Georgina, she will have to suffer her constant praises... She doesn’t even have Mrs. Annesley with her to be a buffer. That’s it!* “You forget, *my* friend, that both my cousin and I are bachelors, and we do not have a hostess at present. I cannot possibly host a lady by myself. It would be unseemly and would jeopardise

both our reputations.” He thanked the Lord for his help in quickly devising the most reasonable argument. He turned back to Miss Bingley. “I am very sorry, but you cannot possibly remain.”

“Charles told me that dear Georgiana was here with you.”

That triggered the memory of her using Georgiana as Bingley’s interest. He clenched his fists. “That does not change anything. As you know, she is not yet out. She is here without her companion. We have no married lady present to serve as chaperone.” He no longer wanted to be polite about it, seeing that she still tried to have her way. He did not owe her any explanation! “But that is not the main point, Miss Bingley. I am very busy with estate matters as I am trying to establish something new. I have no time to socialise; what is more, I do not wish to. Did your brother not tell you that the invitation was for him alone?”

“I thought that was an oversight.”

“It was not. You may come in, refresh yourself, and have tea, but then I respectfully expect you to return to London.”

“But Darcy, it’s already afternoon. Be reasonable. She cannot travel in the dark.”

“It is two o’clock. She would be home by eight, the latest.”

“I do not understand how you could do this, Mr. Darcy! How is it now different to when you will host us at Pemberley in August?”

“Miss Bingley, this is unseemly. For one, I have invited you, which I am beginning to rethink. Two, your sister, Mrs. Hurst, will be there, and so will Georgiana’s companion.

“Oh, I feel sick.” Miss Bingley moaned.

Darcy pressed his lips together and slightly shook his head to her as if in a warning.

Miss Bingley’s expression faltered as she processed the rebuke, her usual confidence giving way to visible unease. She opened her mouth to protest but quickly closed it again when she met Darcy’s steely gaze. For once, even she recognised when she had overstepped. She hesitated and looked away.

“Hey, you there?” he addressed the coach driver. “Go and have something to eat in the kitchen. Be ready to return to London with Miss Bingley in two hours.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Darcy turned toward the house but then turned toward his guests.

“After you.” Nobody was going to take advantage of him. At the moment, he was not happy with Bingley either.

Within the house, Mrs. Nicholls cast a horrified glance through the window. Miss Bingley had been one of the most difficult mistresses she had ever known. She was disrespectful to the whole staff. Many of them had sought her counsel and relief while Miss Bingley had ruled Netherfield. She never expressed gratitude as if she were owed servitude, nor did she acknowledge her sometimes unreasonable requests. She could not suppress the sigh of relief when her new master told her she was not staying. Her relief was palpable, her normally composed demeanour softening as she gave her master a small, approving nod. The housekeeper's silent gratitude spoke volumes about the past grievances she and the staff had endured under Miss Bingley's fleeting rule. Darcy allowed a small smile and a nod at his housekeeper's reaction to the news.

“I am sorry, Phillip. Bingley will stay for a few days. He will be quickly gone when he gets bored.”

“Tonight, it's the assembly.”

“Oh, I forgot momentarily. Oh, no! I – I must warn Miss Bennet.” Darcy saw that his cousin was not happy. “I am sorry, man. There is no way I can leave him here tonight. He is acquainted with these people.”

Phillip nodded, but he was indeed not happy. It is one thing that Miss Bennet did not want him to be contacted, but now that he was there, would that make a difference?

“I’ll have Georgiana send her a message.” With that, Darcy went upstairs.

“I remember attending this very assembly last autumn. I enjoyed it immensely. Darcy, here, not so much; he refused to dance, well, except for with my sisters. The people of the area were very welcoming.” Bingley prattled in the carriage. “What a coincidence that I came on this day!”

Miss Bingley was soon sent her way; Darcy did not let her emotionally blackmail him, though she tried. With a frosty look at the men and her brother, she did sit back in the carriage. Her brother appeared to forget all thoughts of his sister shortly thereafter.

The cousins exchanged an annoyed glance. Phillip was troubled, and Darcy was vexed, fearing this might spoil what promised to be a perfectly good evening. He had sent the message to Miss Bennet, and he hoped fervently that his friend’s presence would not ruin her evening.

“Charles, your welcome may be cooler this time.”

Bingley’s lips twisted into a perplexed frown; his eyes asked for an explanation.

“After all, you left without taking your leave of them and closed Netherfield, never to return.” Darcy could not let his friend walk into the assembly thinking he had done any wrong.

“Why would that be a problem for anybody?”

“You told people you would be back. Your departure without taking leave of them was rude and will be remembered. And, in their eyes, you basically jilted Miss Bennet, one of theirs.”

“You think so?”

Darcy nodded. “Relationships are more important in the country than in town, maybe because they rely on each other more. Your promise to return spread, and it was noted when you did not return, almost as if you disapproved of the place. Even now, you are here only because your sister made you, am I right?”

Bingley looked down. He never considered that his actions would have such a lasting effect. Was he too hasty in leaving the neighbourhood behind? He did wish to go back then, but his sisters appeared in London, demanding that he stay. He thought of Miss Bennet. If she were at the assembly, how would he look into her eyes? He had

promised her that he would return in a few days. It was easier to give in to his relatives and abandon her, especially when Darcy shared his opinion. He looked out the carriage window and shifted incessantly in his seat.

They arrived during the second half of the first set, earlier than they promised. Darcy was most eager to behold his Bennet lady. It was a fortunate circumstance indeed that his height made it easier for him to find her. He searched the dance hall and spotted her dancing with an officer. It was the end of May; the militia were to leave for Brighton. The evening was their last social event as he learnt from Mr. Phillips.

He edged closer to the dancers with his sister, who hung on his arm like the grapes on the life-giving branch. In reassurance, he petted her hand on his arm half-consciously; his attention was drawn to Elizabeth's face. For a moment, time seemed to stand still as Darcy watched Elizabeth glide gracefully across the floor. The pale-yellow gown she wore complemented her vibrant complexion. He breathlessly awaited the look on her face when she noticed him. He ached to see the confirmation of her change of mind on her pretty face.

Then it happened. She looked up and saw him looking in her direction. She looked down rather bashfully, but not before Darcy saw her smile. His heart soared, and his eyes lit up upon seeing her, radiating sheer happiness. Darcy felt every lingering doubt dissipate like morning mist under the sun.

Fortunately, Elizabeth did not miss that, as she looked in his direction as she turned in her dance step. Her partner forgotten momentarily, she looked into his eyes. He had caught her unawares moments before, and she demurred on instinct, but she did not want to play that role. She made herself greet him properly. With a slight nod, she acknowledged him.

“Miss Elizabeth looks very nice in her gown. This pale yellow suits her... You chose a yellow ribbon for her.” She examined her brother and then looked at the dancing Elizabeth.

Darcy looked down at her.

“Are—are you...?”

Darcy smiled at her. “Yes, Georgie. I am interested in her.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, brother!”

“Hush. I don’t want to be overheard.”

“Oh, William!” She giggled and whispered. “Why did I not see it? You wrote about her! I should have known. Oh, I like her.”

“I am glad.”

They were both watching the dancers.

“Does she know?”

“Yes, and before you ask, I am indeed welcome.”

“Naturally! How could anyone refuse you?”

Darcy opened his mouth to speak, but words eluded him.

“She is wearing your ribbon in her hair!” Georgiana exclaimed and looked at her brother. “Oh my! Is this a message?”

“I—I hope so.”

“Oh, the dance is finished. Oh, she is coming here!” She started to dance back and forth on her toes, just like when she was a little girl.

Elizabeth asked her partner to take her to Mr. Darcy and his sister. When she arrived in front of them, she curtsied. Her eyes danced, mirroring the flutter of butterflies in her stomach.

“Mr. Darcy, Georgiana. Jane told me you would attend. It’s very nice of your brother to accommodate your request. I know he is very protective of you. This dress looks lovely. Good choice.” Jane had told her that she was worried about her attire.

“Thank you, Lizzy.” She crimsoned.

“Miss Elizabeth, I must say that if you did not put much effort into your appearance, I wonder

what you'll look like when you put much effort into it. You look lovely." He surprised himself how easily he flirted with his lady.

Georgiana beamed at both.

"Why, Mr. Darcy, that sounded very much like a compliment."

"If I recall, this is not the first time."

She looked at him as if in doubt. "Maybe you could remind me of those incidents during our dance, Mr. Darcy." She laughed.

"It would be my pleasure." His eyes danced.

"This colour indeed looks perfect on you, Lizzy. Is that my brother's gift in your hair?" Georgiana boldly asked. She wanted to know for her brother.

"Erm... yes. It complements my dress, does it not?" She glanced at Darcy demurely. "You—you arrived earlier than you said you would. I'm engaged for the next set."

Darcy was walking on clouds... "That's all right. I shall take my sister to dance."

"Oh, of course. You are a good brother."

He bowed to her. "I am looking forward to our set, Miss Elizabeth."

Bingley was received with much less enthusiasm than he would have liked. He did not know

how to handle the almost rude welcome and the furtive glances around him.

Although they liked to gossip about each other as much as anybody in England, regarding severe issues, the neighbourhood closed its circle. The resentment partly stemmed from the fact that he had given up on Netherfield after only two months of occupying it. He left for good without taking his leave or providing any explanation. In the neighbourhood's eyes, he left because he found the area and its people wanting. The other reason for the resentment was that a slight to one of them was a slight to the whole neighbourhood. Mr. Bingley's attentions to one of their lovely daughters were noticed. His attention was arrested by Miss Bennet, and he hardly paid attention to others. His failure to return was judged as being inconstant at best and rakish at worst. Mr. Bingley did not know any of this, though, as he tried to catch people's glances.

And then he saw her. She was just as lovely, if not more, as he remembered. His heart skipped a beat. Suddenly, he could not remember why he had abandoned her. To have a woman like her at his side would be something. She had made him feel important by the way she listened to him. She stood out from his previous angels, and he did feel

melancholy for quite a while; thankfully, London offered distraction.

“Miss Bennet, Miss Bennet!” He called her name as soon as the first set finished. “How good to see you. I hope you can forgive me for returning just now. How have you been? Are all your family in good health?” He was eager to reestablish their easy relationship.

Jane turned around. She was thankful to Mr. Darcy for sending his warning about Mr. Bingley’s appearing at Netherfield.

“Mr. Bingley.” How many times did she imagine seeing him again? How many times did she imagine him approaching Longbourn? Then, visiting her at her uncle’s house in London? Her heart beat faster at the sight of him for a moment or so, but then she remembered that he *chose* not to return. The man before her looked as affable and charming as ever, yet she could not forget the silent rejection that had left her heart bruised. Why he was there, she was sure, had little to do with her. Did he think she would welcome him? Did she mean so little to him that he did not realise that he had broken her heart? Her smile remained polite but guarded, a reflection of her determination to protect herself from further disappointment.

Seeing that she would say no more, he uncomfortably started to prattle. “We’ve been very busy

in town. Fancy that Darcy asked to take over Netherfield. I'm most pleased he did. And now here I am. Caroline came too, but unfortunately, she couldn't stay. It would indeed be inappropriate for her to remain at the residence of two unmarried gentlemen, absent a chaperone. She would have liked to see you again, I'm sure. Oh, the second set is starting. Are you engaged? I mean, may I have these dances?"

If she wanted to dance later, she could not deny his request. She nodded.

Bingley shifted uncomfortably as he took Jane's hand for the dance. Her composed demeanour unsettled him, and for the first time, he wondered if he had underestimated the depth of her feelings – or the hurt his actions might have caused. The warmth he remembered in her gaze was absent, replaced by a civility that felt colder than he expected.

Phillip saw their exchange while talking to a gentleman from the neighbourhood. He could not help but examine Jane and how she welcomed Bingley. His stomach clenched as he awaited her reaction to him. It was Bingley who did the talking. Something was not right. Her smile: she always smiled. That was what was different: she did not smile. She was looking at him but did not smile.

He started to relax, but then she put her hand in his offered one. No! He was taking her to dance! As Phillip watched Bingley lead Jane onto the dance floor, a flicker of jealousy burned in his chest. He distractedly excused himself and approached the dancers. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. He wanted to step up to Bingley and tear him from her.

Jane noticed his lordship as the dance began. He did not seem himself. He was looking in her direction with a stern look on his face. That was not his general demeanour. He seemed positively hostile. She looked at her partner... Could it be because of him? Her thoughts swirled in a chaotic whirlwind. She caught his eye and offered him a beautiful smile. He stared at her, but then he slowly relaxed his features. As Jane turned in the dance, she could hardly credit that a simple smile from her could have such an effect on his lordship. When the dance made it possible, she searched for his eyes again. She was not disappointed; the viscount was looking at her. This time, he nodded toward her. Warmth spread through her body as he added a slight grin toward her.

She is smiling at me. Take that, Bingley! He tried to loosen his cravat as it was constricting his breathing. He needed a drink. *Blasted Bingley!* He turned to search for the drink table. As the set finished, he

joined Mrs. Bennet, who was still incredulous that Mr. Bingley was suddenly dancing with her daughter. She did not know whether to be happy about it or not. Her daughter did not seem very happy. She noticed the exchange between her daughter and the viscount. She did not know what to think. Before she could go in search of her husband, his lordship joined her.

“Good evening, Mrs. Bennet.” He bowed. “Nice turnout, is it not?”

“Yes, yes, my lord.” Her eyes were still on her daughter. They were approaching. She noticed his lordship also looking at the couple. She looked at the viscount speculatively. “She is radiant, is she not? My Jane.”

Phillip answered without taking his eyes off her. “Indeed, that she is.”

The matron had no time contemplating what all this could mean as she was addressed by the wayward Mr. Bingley.

“Mrs. Bennet, how nice to see you again. I take it you are in good health.”

“Mr. Bingley, you are back. You took your time.” She said coolly.

Bingley, taken aback, frowned. “Well, that’s – I’m visiting. As you know, I’m no longer the landlord at Netherfield.”

“Yes, we know as much. We found your disappearance rather sudden in the autumn, sir, and only after two months. We were to believe that you wanted to learn about being a gentleman. Or did you find a better property elsewhere? Netherfield is an excellent property, I’m told.”

“It is, indeed, madam.” The viscount commented with a nod.

“In that case, what made you quit it in such a hurry?” Mrs. Bennet insisted.

Phillip beamed inwardly at Mrs. Bennet for putting the pup in his place.

“Erm, we were needed in London, Mrs. Bennet.”

“Excuse us. Miss Bennet, I believe this is our set.” Phillip offered his hand to Jane.

Darcy led his sister to Mrs. Bennet. “Madam, good evening. Could you look after my sister while I dance with Miss Elizabeth?”

“Oh, by all means. Good evening. Miss Darcy, how lovely you look!”

“As you know, she’s not out yet. I’ve just danced with her, but she’s not supposed to dance with anyone but my cousin.”

“Oh, really? That is – that’s quite appropriate.” Her brow furrowed as she was reminded of her negligence in this matter. She congratulated herself

that her two youngest were left at home for the evening, though not without a fight. Mr. Darcy dancing with her Lizzy? *Oh, God has been good to us.*

Darcy led Elizabeth to the group of dancers who were forming lines, and they took their places. When it was their turn, they moved together in harmony. Their gazes locked, and time seemed to pause. Both were aware that this was the first time they acknowledged and understood each other.

Elizabeth broke the intimate atmosphere. She cast him a sidelong glance, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Mr. Darcy, surely we must engage in some conversation.”

He chuckled at her repeated comment. “By all means. What would you like to discuss?”

“You could try to recall those non-existent compliments.”

The dance then took them away from each other. As they came together, Darcy tried to recall.

“Let me see. I shall prove you mistaken. At Netherfield, maybe the first evening, we played cards. Miss Bingley asked about Georgiana. And instead of her, I compared her height to yours.”

For a moment, Elizabeth regarded him in disbelief. “That is hardly a compliment, Mr. Darcy; you are clutching at straws.” She rolled her eyes in mock exasperation at his nonsensical reasoning.

“But it is, don’t you see? Miss Bingley expected me to compare Georgiana to her. All right, maybe it was more about annoying her, but it did achieve one thing.”

She gazed at him quizzically.

“I am not sure if I should say.”

“Mr. Darcy, you cannot leave me in suspense.”

“It let me freely peruse your figure,” Darcy whispered as they parted again.

Elizabeth lost her step at his daring comment. *Mr. Darcy is openly courting my favour!* She could not blame Mr. Darcy for setting her up to want to know – she had fallen for his bait. Who knew? Mr. Darcy had looked at her figure with interest! By the time they came together, she was crimson in the face, to the gentleman’s satisfaction.

“I thought of another instance; that was a real compliment. Do you remember when we talked about ladies’ accomplishments?”

Elizabeth nodded, wondering where he would take this next occasion.

“Well, I added that an accomplished lady should read extensively.”

She tried to see the possible endearment in the comment. “How is that a compliment?”

“You had a book in your hand.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed, but her voice remained steady.

“You meant me?”

“Yes.”

“I hardly count myself among those accomplished ladies.”

“Oh, but you are where it counts. I do not care about ladies speaking foreign languages. You are intelligent, full of life, and a master of handling social situations. You have grace. And you read,” he added. “I have never seen Miss Bingley with a book.”

Elizabeth was speechless. It was incredibly gratifying to hear Mr. Darcy describe her so. Wrongly, she had thought he was provoking her while, in reality, he wished to compliment her subtly.

“I do speak some French and Italian.” She said demurely.

“Really? You see, you are more than accomplished.”

“Am I among the half a dozen ladies you mentioned?” She arched one of her eyebrows.

He laughed. “Most definitely.”

“Well, you exaggerate, but it *is* a nice compliment.”

Darcy bowed.

A new dance started. It was not suitable for talking because it involved so much skipping. Afterwards, Elizabeth felt like she should compliment him.

“Please, do go on – I am eager to hear your thoughts.” After the abuse of his person at Hunsford, he was hungry to hear any positive description from Miss Elizabeth.

“Well, you are...very clever, a good landlord, and although you do not think it, you are an excellent conversationalist, and... You are quite handsome.” She mumbled the last sentence.

Darcy, of course, heard. “You think me handsome?” For some reason, Darcy was surprised and affected that Miss Elizabeth thought him handsome. He knew he was good-looking, but coming from her meant so much more.

Just then, a gentleman brushed too close in the tight lines of the dance, forcing Darcy to step aside and shield Elizabeth instinctively.

“My apologies,” the man muttered, scarcely glancing at them as he passed.

Darcy’s hand hovered protectively near Elizabeth’s back for the briefest moment before he let it fall again.

“Country balls,” he said wryly, “are far livelier than I had remembered.”

Elizabeth gave him a sidelong look, her lips twitching. “And here I thought you disapproved of lively assemblies.”

Darcy looked at her with an expression that made her laugh.

“Where were we? Ah, you think me handsome. Thank you.” After a pause, he continued. “Although, if we count compliments, you are still in my debt. There was one more occasion when I complimented you. It was just not to you. I made the mistake of revealing my thoughts to Miss Bingley.”

Elizabeth was taken aback. “You talked about me with her?”

“Well, you just finished playing on the piano-forte...”

Elizabeth furrowed her brows. “When was this?”

“I believe at the Lucas’s,” Darcy explained.

“Lucas’s? That—that was at the very beginning! Just after the assembly... You were listening to my conversations,” she accused playfully.

“I admit I did,” Darcy confessed, a hint of embarrassment in his voice. “I could not take my eyes off you.”

“Mr. Darcy, you have become quite forward,” Elizabeth remarked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

“I have nothing to lose and everything to gain,” he said earnestly. “I might as well be truthful. I should not think you miss my old self.”

Elizabeth shook her head, her thoughts a whirl. “So, what was the compliment?”

Darcy’s gaze softened as he spoke. “I told her that I found your eyes beautiful.”

Phillip did not wait for the beginning of the third set; he wanted Jane away from Bingley. He escorted her to the dance floor and examined her face. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, still a bit tense. “He came here without considering how that would affect me. He has no idea what consternation he caused. The pity I received from our neighbours was unbearable, to say the least, and it only added to my feelings. They must be gossiping about us again.” She looked around.

“Forget about them. We’re going to have a wonderful dance.”

“Yes, thank you.” She considered the viscount. “I never thought I could confide in a gentleman so easily. It—it is nice.”

“I am glad I am here.”

The music started. They moved around each other with elegance. Phillip’s hand rested lightly on Jane’s waist as they moved in perfect synchrony.

“Miss Bennet,” he said softly, his voice low enough to be drowned out by the music, “it is a privilege to dance with you tonight.”

Jane’s cheeks flushed faintly, and for the first time that evening, her smile reached her eyes. “The privilege, my lord, is mine.”

Many spectators looked at the handsome couple. Mrs. Bennet, among them, wondered if the viscount was attached to her beautiful daughter. Looking at the other couple, she marvelled at Mr. Darcy’s demeanour. They were conversing with smiles on their faces.

Bingley watched Jane and the viscount from across the room, a pang of regret tightening his chest. He was rooted to his spot as the viscount was dancing with *his* angel. He did not like what he saw. He had always admired Miss Bennet’s serenity, but now, seeing her with another man – a peer, no less – he realised how much he had taken her for granted. He scolded himself for leaving her. He clenched his jaw, determined to reclaim her favour, though the odds seemed increasingly stacked against him. If a peer was paying her attention, she was worthy of pursuit. *He* had noticed her first!

UNEXPECTED DEVELOP- MENT

Chapter 20



“Can you believe that pup? He asked Miss Bennet for a second dance last night.” Phillip gritted his teeth, the handle of his coffee cup gripped tightly. “He left her without a word, Darcy. And now he returns, expecting to pick up where he left off? The gall of the man! Miss Bennet deserves better.”

Darcy and Phillip had a light breakfast early in the morning before going to the building site. They were dressed in sturdy work clothes and nursed their hot coffee. Bingley was still in his room, sleeping.

“No! Did he truly? I must have missed that.”

“You were understandably occupied. It was for the last set, so she told him she was tired. I would have told him it wasn’t appropriate to appear after all this time and think he could just continue his attentions to her as if nothing had happened.” Phillip huffed.

“I agree with you. Whatever could he have been thinking? The problem is that he doesn’t think. He just goes with his desires.”

“What are you doing being friends with a man like him? I mean, if nothing else, he is considerably younger.”

“Yes, there are nearly four years between us. When we first met, I found him most agreeable – easy in his manner, which endeared him to me. He sought nothing from me, and that alone was a welcome relief. You know well how I struggle with new acquaintances, but with him, it was effortless. I appreciated his lightness of spirit. But somewhere along the way, I let myself become a crutch for him – a guide for decisions he should have made himself. Yet, as of late, I perceive I have become his means of access to society, and I suspect his family, particularly his sisters, have urged him to secure invitations through me. It has left me feeling a certain obligation towards him. Alas, he lacks the inclination for deeper thought.”

“Well, he has now become a nuisance for me,” Phillip remarked with a wry smile.

“Are you truly resolved to pursue Miss Bennet?”

Phillip nodded as he took a measured sip of his drink. “Indeed. She is perfect for me.” Phillip set

his cup down and leaned back in his chair, his expression growing serious. “She is unlike anyone I have ever known. She has no airs, no guile. She is genuine, Darcy.

“As strange as it might sound, I like that she is not of the *ton*.”

“Hmm. I do not find it strange at all. I think I feel the same. Not strange at all.” Darcy mused.

“The *ton* can be exhausting, filled with artifice and ambition. With her, I would find peace.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. “I must confess, in the last two years, I have given more serious thought to the ladies of my acquaintance, but something always kept me back. And you?”

“Mother has long despaired that I should never marry. I admit, I have tarried. I am in my thirties now. My relationships were not of great consequence per se. I enjoyed their company for a while and even felt some fascination, but I would not have fought for them, which was not my purpose. If I had met someone worthy, I would have left those dalliances behind. They offered companionship without much attachment. Maybe I was not ready... I know you disapprove.”

“Your way is simply not my own.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow. “Surely, you are not untouched by experience.”

Darcy shifted in his chair, his expression measured. “No, I have some experience.”

Phillip looked at him encouragingly.

“During my Grand Tour, I did indulge... My father spoke to me on the matter...”

Phillip chuckled. “I can imagine that conversation.”

“Well, it was not without embarrassment,” Darcy admitted with a faint smile. “But he said something that stayed with me. He advised that I should learn how to please a woman, cautioning that seeking pleasure from paid women could foster selfishness. It was something I had never considered. So, in London, I sought...instruction...”

“Madame Dupree?” Phillip interrupted with a grin.

“No,” Darcy replied with a slight shake of his head. “Monreau. She is more discreet. I was tutored there. I did become a client there for a while but not often. Yet, over time, the experience became quite unfulfilling. I have not returned in more than a year.”

Phillip nodded thoughtfully. “It appears we are both prepared for something substantial.”

Darcy leaned back in his chair, a rare glint of resolve in his eyes. “Indeed. I am ready; it feels as

though I've been waiting for Miss Elizabeth all along. So, Miss Bennet?"

"Yes. Her being speaks to me. All she has to do is look at me with those gorgeous eyes." He looked away for a moment. "I never felt the need to protect someone besides Georgiana, but that's different. I want to take her from here and give her the world. I want to make her safe where she can flourish. And Lord, I want to *love* her."

Bingley was still in bed when the cousins joined their men on the field. They were rapturously listening to the expert, the steward, the head gardener, and two ex-tenants hotly discuss the water system to be built. There was a lake on the property, and they were talking about connecting it to the stream that ran through the land, as it seemed to be losing water. The expert suggested a second, smaller lake in the vicinity of most of the land they were to use for plants for emergencies. Not much excavation was needed as the land there had a dip. Wells would be dug, and roof systems would be strategically placed to collect water.

The head gardener designed a marvellous system for the hothouse where the water would be

collected on highly placed barrels. From them, delicate ceramic tubes with holes would take the water into the building and to the plants, basically making watering child's play. The tube parts, they said, could be made on the estate. The expert suggested the same method in the field, making the whole process less labour-demanding. Darcy and Phillip were taken to see how it would be set out and where it would be built. They were so engrossed in the planning that it took Darcy's stomach to rumble to return to the house.

Upon their return to the house, they found Bingley waiting in the dining room, looking bleary-eyed but eager to speak. "Where have you been?" Bingley demanded, foregoing any greeting.

"Out in the field," Darcy replied evenly. "I told you we were occupied."

"You could've left a message."

"We are to have something to eat. Join us?" Darcy refrained from rolling his eyes.

"All right. Do you have plans for after?"

"We are obligated to call on the Bennets." Darcy shared reluctantly.

"You could go for a ride. We have good weather," Phillip suggested, annoyed.

But Bingley seemed to hear nothing after the mention of the Bennets.

“*Obligated?* Since when do you associate with the Bennets?”

“I spent several weeks in Miss Elizabeth’s company while at Rosings. She was also visiting relatives, and since we’ve taken over Netherfield, naturally, we want to be on good terms with our neighbours. They’re becoming part of our enterprise as we pledged to sell their goods, including Mr. Bennet.”

“This enterprise of yours sounds much more complex than I imagined. Is there a prospect of a good return?”

“You would invest? Darcy inquired, his eyebrow raised.

“Why not? If it was worth it for you to invest in it...” Bingley trailed off, intrigued.

Darcy glanced at his cousin, who very subtly shook his head.

“I shall keep you in mind. At present, we have all the capital we require.”

“You could’ve involved me at the start.”

“I am sorry, my friend. Seeing as you left the place behind, I did not think you would be interested.”

“That’s true. On your suggestion.”

Scorn danced in Darcy's eyes in silent judgment. "That is not entirely accurate. I merely observed that I doubted Miss Bennet's heart had been touched."

Bingley, visibly taken aback, let out a frustrated breath. "I shouldn't have listened to you...or my sisters." He acknowledged, a note of regret softening his voice.

Darcy rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze thoughtful. "Do you regret it?"

"Regret it?" Bingley's voice grew fervent. "She is an angel! She outshines all the women I know."

Phillip stiffened at the declaration, exchanging a glance with his cousin.

"It was enough to see her again."

"Bingley, you cannot be serious!" Darcy's voice turned stern. "You cannot just come and go and take your attention as you wish. It's not fair to her. Leave her be, Bingley. I am serious."

Bingley drew back, unaccustomed as he was to hearing Darcy speak so forcefully.

"I'm going with you." He declared petulantly.

"I think we will need more hands," Darcy said, pushing his plate aside to examine the plans spread before them better after they finished eating and

everybody calmed down. “Some of the staff accommodations will be completed shortly, which means we could house the surplus workers there.”

Phillip, carefully considering the implications, nodded. “I agree. I’ve already sent notices to the neighbouring inns to direct any available men our way.

“Additionally, my staff in London could offer work to some more lads if needed. How about ten more for now?”

Phillip, glancing over the plans again, nodded approvingly. “That should suffice. It is important to maintain our progress. I shall coordinate with the foreman to ensure everything is ready for their arrival.”

Bingley, initially keen to contribute, found his attention waning as the conversation became more technical. His gaze wandered around the dining room, and his mind went elsewhere. Realising he had little to add to the discussion, he focused on enjoying the delectable spread before him.

It never occurred to him that if he had stayed, it would be he who could be thinking of all kinds of improvements to the estate.

“Are we not to go on horseback?” Bingley asked when he saw the carriage in front of the house.

“No, we have a load to take.” As Phillip said, two footmen brought a trunk down the stairs. “It’s for the ladies.”

When they arrived at Longbourn, Phillip and Darcy waved away the servants, took the trunk handles, and took it inside the house themselves.

“Are you moving in, gentlemen?” Mr. Bennet, who was about to join his family in the parlour, joked.

Elizabeth was gratified to find that Mr. Darcy’s eyes sought hers without hesitation, as though drawn by some invisible thread that had long connected them. There was no surprise in his gaze, only a quiet recognition. Her heart stuttered in response, for in that moment she was reminded of his remark from the night before – that he had found her eyes beautiful. Such a simple compliment, spoken in his low, earnest voice, echoed within her with surprising force. It had not been uttered to flatter, nor to impress but rather slipped forth with the honesty of a man no longer afraid to speak from the heart.

The girl who had once dismissed him as proud and disagreeable now felt herself yearning to understand everything behind that quiet declaration

– the admiration, the constancy, the long-held affection he had scarcely allowed himself to show. What had once seemed unlikely now felt inevitable. Her breath caught as she realised that she no longer wished merely to be seen, but to be *known* by him, fully and without pretence.

After the greetings, Phillip immediately explained as the ladies regarded the trunk with interest. “Ladies, my mother, the countess, had charged me to bring this for the three elder Bennet ladies. She was very touched by the fact that Miss Bennet sometimes made her own clothes, and so she sent these as a gift. She asked me to explain that she did not mean any slight; these dresses she had in her wardrobe from last seasons were too fine to throw away, but she would probably not wear them again. She believes they deserve a second life and thought of your talents in particular. She thought that with the skills you ladies have, you could make some adjustments and wear them or use the fabric and create something new. If you like.”

All the Bennet ladies, including Mrs. Bennet, were silent in shock.

“Oh, heavens!” Their mother broke the tension.

Jane stepped to the trunk and opened it. She found numerous very fine gowns. When she stood, she was crimson from head to toe. “Please thank...or if I may, I would thank your mother for her generosity in a letter.”

Phillip bowed to her in answer.

“This is... I do not have words.” She spoke.

“Please, Miss Bennet. My mother would be thrilled if her once-loved gowns could serve some deserving ladies.”

Elizabeth thought that if the gentlemen valued her ladyship’s opinion, which they must, they had just received her endorsement. She saw the emblem on the trunk. “This trunk is your mother’s, I believe. We’ll get it back to you.”

“Thank you. Indeed, it is hers.”

“Oh, please thank your mother for me; what a nice gesture for my girls!” Mrs. Bennet gushed.

Mr. Bennet called his footman to take the trunk upstairs to Jane’s room. The lord offered to help, and against all the opposition, he left the room with the footman. He was giddy inside to see where Miss Bennet slept. When he reappeared and looked at Jane, she could not meet his eyes.

Only Elizabeth noticed that the pink silk rose from the lord’s jacket lapel was missing. According to her knowledge, the flower meant admiration.

Just as she had thought, though, she did not expect such a bold gesture from Mr. Darcy's cousin.

“So, Mr. Bingley. I was surprised to hear from my wife that you had returned to the neighbourhood. As you had given up Netherfield, I wonder at your purpose of appearing among us.”

Darcy gestured to Elizabeth, and they took seats in the window alcove. He did not want to participate in Bingley's and Mr. Bennet's conversation; he came to see Elizabeth. He was gratified by her easy agreement.

His lordship took Elizabeth's place next to Jane; her smile was his reward.

“I—I was curious about Darcy's work here.” His eyes followed his lordship as he started to converse with his Jane quietly. Bingley's tightening jaw was the only sign he did not appreciate that.

“Well, truth be told, they have made a good beginning. The whole neighbourhood is talking about it. They involve us in their business, so everybody wins. Didn't you want to be a landlord yourself?”

Bingley kept nodding as Mr. Bennet spoke.

“Yes, yes. I want to be...a landlord.” A chuckle from Jane arrested his attention. He studied them with a critical squint.

“Then I do not see why you left.”

Bingley was dismayed by the lord. It was unseemly to be so...intimate with a country maiden. He sat too close to her. He could not possibly mean anything by it!

“That’s exactly what I asked of him yesterday.” Mrs. Bennet commented.

“Erm, it was just not the right time. I became busy in London.” A lord would not marry a penniless woman. *But he is paying attention to her.* The evening before, he danced with her and stood with her until the end of the evening. If a lord wanted Miss Bennet, why could he not? He pushed away the inconvenient doubt about her feelings. Even if she had them in the autumn, she must be angry at him now. She did not show any of that, though, at the ball. He could make her like him again, he was sure.

The door opened then, and refreshments and tea were brought in. Mrs. Bennet stood, and Jane excused herself to serve. Bingley tried to catch Jane’s eye. Elizabeth was about to stand, but her mother told her to stay put; she and Jane would serve.

“Your mother is very gracious toward me,” Darcy said in a low voice.

“*You* are gracious toward her for saying so.”

They both chuckled.

Jane prepared a cup of tea. Bingley turned in his seat to take it, but Jane stepped toward the lord and offered it to him with a big smile. He took the cup with both hands, brushing his fingers against hers. Only he heard Jane's small gasp.

"Mr. Bingley, how do you take your tea? I cannot recall." She finally turned to him.

He looked first at Jane and then at the lord. The latter he aimed a look at that could kill. He had a smirk on his face. *Am I to lose her?*

He jumped from his chair. "Mr. Bennet! I—I should like to ask the privilege of a private interview with Miss Bennet." He spoke loudly.

Several gasps could be heard. Darcy stood. "Bingley, what are you doing?"

"What I should have done months ago. Mr. Bennet, do I have your permission?"

"Oh, Mr. Bennet!" Mrs. Bennet did not understand what was happening. Better to say, she understood, but it was so unexpected that she did not know how to react. She had started to suspect that his lordship might like her eldest daughter. Mr. Bingley was nothing to him... But how could she be sure? She could hardly breathe.

"Mrs. Bennet, drink this tea. It will calm your nerves." The lord offered his cup. He was still in denial as to what Bingley meant.

“Young man, now? We have just been served tea. Ugh, you better come with me. Jane, dear, wait here.” Mr. Bennet stood heavily and unwillingly.

Jane had been standing in the same position since she heard Mr. Bingley’s request. She closed her eyes. *What is happening? He cannot possibly...* She looked at Elizabeth.

“Jane.” She stood and took her hand.

Her mind was a whirlwind of emotions. She had imagined this moment countless times – Mr. Bingley kneeling before her, asking for her hand. Could she truly trust a man who had abandoned her so easily?

“I am so sorry, Miss Bennet. I don’t know what got into him. You do not have to speak to him...” Darcy’s voice quieted by the end. He was uncertain what to do.

Mrs. Bennet was watching the lord. He was almost white, and his hand shook as he offered the tea. He was not looking at Jane or the others. He visibly tried to school his features. He was affected. “Jane, my dear. Come, sit. Here, drink this.” She stood and offered her half-drunk teacup.

Jane did as her mother instructed.

“Jane, listen.” She leaned close to her ear. “If you are asked, answer with what is in your heart. You don’t have to rush into anything.” She glanced

not too subtly at the viscount, who was observing the scene with a guarded expression.

Jane's eyes widened slightly. "You—you would accept if I said no?"

Mrs. Bennet nodded in reassurance with a smile that wavered just a bit. "Of course, dear."

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged looks of surprise. Elizabeth's eyes were filled with concern as she noticed the interplay between her sister and mother.

"Mama?" Elizabeth's voice was astonished that she would show understanding.

Mrs. Bennet met her daughter's gaze with a look of regret, mouthing the words, "I am sorry." She appeared genuinely remorseful, her eyes glistening with unspoken apologies.

Darcy, feeling sympathy for his cousin, considered speaking up. He wanted to intervene, to share that Phillip was also interested in Jane, but the words seemed to stick in his throat. Instead, he looked to Elizabeth for support, silently asking for her guidance. Did she understand that his cousin was also interested in her sister?

Just then, the door opened again. Mr. Bennet, with his usual calm demeanour, called out, "Jane, would you please join me?"

"Oh, Mr. Bennet!" Mrs. Bennet exclaimed, standing up in a flurry, only to sit back down, then

rise again, her anxiety palpable. “What is to be done?”

“Mrs. Bennet, drink some tea and try to calm yourself. We will soon see what happens. After you, my dear.” Mr. Bennet gestured to Jane.

From the door, Jane turned her head straight toward the lord. Their eyes met. She held it for a long second and then left with her father.

Phillip pursed his lips and went to the window. His gaze was fixed on the view outside. Darcy stepped to him, his voice low but insistent. “Are you just going to stand there?”

“What can I do?” Phillip shot back. “He’s asking; she has to answer, one way or another,” Phillip replied, his voice strained with frustration. “She must make her decision. It is her right.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed in frustration. “But she does not know she has another option!” He hissed. “Have you made your intentions clear?”

Phillip’s expression was as hard as a stone, with only a muscle twitching around his mouth, betraying his inner turmoil. “She has the right to answer for herself. She must choose freely.”

“Are you willing to risk it?” Darcy asked, his tone urgent.

“I have no other option.”

Darcy, feeling the weight of the situation, moved away to pour himself a cup of tea. Elizabeth

went to sit with her mother and held her hand tightly, her eyes full of concern for her sister.

“Oh, bugger!” Phillip muttered under his breath before he stormed out of the room.

Darcy closed his eyes, exhaling deeply as he struggled with his own feelings of helplessness.

“Oh, where is he going now?” Mrs. Bennet worried.

Phillip first felt he had to honour another man’s pursuit. A part of him also wanted to know where she stood and what she would say, but then he asked himself if he had shown her enough to indicate *his* interest. *What if she thinks that I would never marry so low as a lord? Jane! What if I lose her? Why should I step aside for that pup who doesn’t deserve her?* That did it. He found himself in the hall. *Which room?* Then he saw Mr. Bennet sitting on a bench with all the outer garments on the wall. They must be in his room. He strode to the book room, and before Mr. Bennet could stop him, he reached for the handle.

In the next moment, he found himself pulled forcibly into the room and collided with a body. He had to help himself to regain his balance by using the other hand on the door frame. He was pushed aside as Bingley, he recognised, hurriedly

came out of the book room. He left without looking back. When he straightened, he saw Miss Bennet standing at the window. She just turned at the commotion.

“Are – are you all right?”

“I shall be. And you? What are you doing here?” Jane asked.

“Yes, my lord, what were you thinking, barging in on them? Did you not know what was going on in here?” Mr. Bennet shook his head. He was worried about his daughter. She had to have said no because Mr. Bingley did not acknowledge him on his way out. Before he called her, he begrudgingly listened to Mr. Bingley. He could not deny him the chance, but he told his daughter she did not have to answer immediately.

“I came to check on Miss Bennet. She deserves better.” He straightened.

Jane clutched her arms to her chest.

“Does she?” Mr. Bennet narrowed his eyes at him. “What do you know of the matter? This has nothing to do with you, sir.”

“I know that the man did not come back because of her. He is only here now because his sister, Miss Bingley, had learnt that Darcy was here, and her brother was given an open invitation. She urged him to show up as soon as possible. He got

infatuated with Miss Bennet again at the ball.” He looked at Jane.

She looked back at him. Tears appeared in her eyes.

“Jane?”

“I—I said no, Papa.”

He sighed. “I see.” He hoped his daughter knew what she was about. It was a good offer. He hoped she would not come to regret it. “Why do you not go upstairs and look at your gift? Leave your mother to me; I shall tell her.” Later, he was taken aback at his wife’s reaction, or the lack thereof. She just accepted the negative answer.

Phillip watched her leave and could breathe again. *She said no!*

The gentlemen looked for Bingley outside, and then they left with him.

Taking two steps at a time, Elizabeth ran up the stairs to join Jane. She found her sister in the middle of the room, looking at a pink silk rose in her hand.

“How interesting, did the viscount lose his rose?” She asked impishly.

“Pardon?”

“That silk is from his lapel. He wore it today. Where did you find it?”

Jane gestured toward the bed. “It was on my pillow.”

“Interesting place to lose one’s decoration.”

Jane gasped. “Do you think he put it here?”

“He must have.”

The tears came anew. Elizabeth hugged her sister and consoled her. When they detached, Elizabeth spoke. “There was no announcement, so... I take it you said no to Mr. Bingley.”

Jane nodded. “Do you blame me for refusing him? You were so convinced he had loved me.”

“Blame you? After you didn’t blame me for refusing Mr. Darcy?”

“Truth to be told, inwardly, I thought it a terrible decision.”

“I understand that now.”

“You were lucky that he couldn’t live without you even after your terrible rejection.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I am lucky indeed. I would’ve missed learning about him. Once I put my pride aside, I could start seeing *him*.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. And thank you for your lecturing. I needed that.”

They both chuckled.

“Yes.”

“So, would you like to talk about Mr. Bingley?”

“Not really.”

Elizabeth nodded. She sat kneeling on the floor next to the trunk. “Why don’t we have a look at these gowns then? I cannot believe the countess would offer such a gift!” Elizabeth smiled at her sister. They opened the trunk, and Jane took the one on top. It was an empire ball gown in burgundy taffeta with a train. Elizabeth gasped as she saw it in Jane’s outstretched hands.

“Oh, my! This is beautiful!” She said with wonder in her voice. “I do not dare touch it!”

Jane lowered her arms.

“I looked at him and imagined saying yes. I had dreamed about that... I—I could not see it. I do not think I could have respected him. Not any more. As he kneeled in front of me, I knew I didn’t love him. *He* is not enough, and he had no idea he had broken my heart.”

“Oh, Jane.”

“I should’ve been more careful. I—I just enjoyed his attentions.” She caressed the material. “Maybe...if your Mr. Darcy hadn’t come after you, if I hadn’t been faced with what real love is... But I cannot look at him with the same eyes. He was wanting.”

Elizabeth listened to her sister with wide eyes. That was why she told Mr. Darcy no when he offered to contact him. “I wonder why he felt he needed to propose so suddenly.”

Jane shrugged and took the next gown out. It was her turn to gasp. “Oh, my!”

“And the viscount?” Elizabeth asked.

“What about him?” She crimsoned.

“I think he took it very hard. He looked out the window for some time; Mr. Darcy tried to talk to him...then suddenly, he marched from the room.”

“Yes, he fell through the door as Mr. Bingley was leaving.” She smiled bashfully.

“No! That is not a very dignified rescue... I think he swore on his way out. I think he said...” She leaned into Jane and whispered the word. She giggled.

Jane joined her sister, and then she sobered. With a dreamy face, she said, “He told Papa that I deserved better.”

“You do, sister.”

“My hunch was correct. Mr. Bingley did not return for me; he is here because Caroline made him.”

“What? I am beginning to regret all my positive thoughts about him. It looks like Mr. Darcy did you a favour.”

“He never meant to propose to me; even this was done in the spur of the moment. Am I someone who can be left behind without an explanation, and now I should jump for joy because he found me irresistible after all?”

Elizabeth shook her head. In an effort to divert her attention, she held up the pink silk rose with a sly smile. “And what do you suppose *this* means, dear sister?” Jane’s cheeks flushed as she glanced away.

“I—I don’t know what to think.”

Elizabeth laughed softly, her tone light. “Oh, Jane, I think you know exactly what it means.”

Darcy was the one to reach Bingley first.

“What the hell, Bingley? What was this spectacle about? What were you thinking?” His voice was thunder. “Do you even understand what you’ve done? You abandoned her without a word and now expect her to forgive and forget? Relationships do not work that way, Bingley!”

“You can relax; she said no,” Bingley responded, putting his hands up.

After he blinked, he resumed his outraged manner. “Damn right, she did. You left her without a word!” Darcy’s voice was sharp, cutting through the tension.

“Because you suggested she didn’t care for me!”

“Not that again. Bingley, I am not responsible for your decisions; you are.”

“Gentlemen, shall we leave? Let us not discuss this in front of the Bennets.” The viscount tried placating them.

Darcy looked back at the house and saw almost all of them looking at them, even the two youngest, from an upstairs window. He stormed to the arriving carriage. Bingley followed.

“It’s like you are out of your mind, Bingley. This conduct exceeds all bounds, even for you. Spontaneity has a place when you want to decide whether to walk or ride. You do not just jump up on a whim with a life-changing question. Don’t you understand how society works? You did not even return because of her, for goodness’ sake!”

“That’s irrelevant, Darcy. It took me a moment to know she was the one for me. I was stupid to leave, but I would’ve been back without your interference.”

“Then you shouldn’t have asked for my opinion, and you shouldn’t have listened to it. But I

wager you still would have abandoned her because you cannot deny your sister, just like now you've come at her urging."

Bingley's lips pulled back to expose his clenched teeth.

Even the viscount was taken aback.

Bingley tried to speak, but nothing came out of his mouth. "Ugh, you always know better, don't you?"

"That's because I use my head for thinking."

"I thought you were my friend!" Bingley's mouth pinched shut as though holding back what he really wanted to say.

"I *am* your friend, you peacock! You just make it impossibly difficult to be that right now. Face it, you had left her. If she loved you, you must have hurt her. Did she give you a reason?"

Bingley huffed and puffed. The veins in their neck stood out in livid ridges as he looked out the window. He recalled that she said she did not think he really loved her and that she expected consistency from a man. She said he did not fight for her or stand up for himself when others tried to convince him to leave her behind. He winced. How did she even know about that?

"She knew about your interference." Bingley ignored Darcy's question.

“Gentlemen, must I be part of your argument? Could you please wait until we arrive; then you can jump at each other’s throats.” Phillip interrupted. He knew Darcy, ever the gentleman, would confess.

“... How could you? Who are you to decide for me?” Bingley bellowed. His eyes blazed murderously, and his whole body shook with repressed fury.

Phillip rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Bingley had jumped from the carriage as soon as it stopped and, with a sharp look, gestured to Darcy to follow him away from the courtyard. As his cousin had predicted, Darcy confessed that he had apologised to Miss Bennet as he had learnt from Miss Elizabeth that her feelings had been engaged. He then admitted that he kept Miss Bennet’s stay in London to himself.

“Charles, *you’d* decided to leave her behind. *You’d* decided not to go back. What, then, did her being in London matter?”

“If I had a sword, I would run you through!” Bingley shouted with frustration.

“I am aware that I did a disfavour to you,” Darcy began, his voice strained.

“Disfavour?” Bingley’s voice was sharp. “That’s putting it rather mildly, don’t you think?”

You've ruined my life!" he spat out. "I trusted you, and you have betrayed me! Oh my God! I could be married by now! I would know what it's like to be loved by a woman like Miss Bennet. Instead, she thinks I'm inconsistent and a man who cannot stand up for himself."

"Well, you didn't."

"That's because I trust in your advice." Bingley snapped back.

"You forget about your family."

"They are family, but you were my friend. Or at least I thought you were."

Darcy's eyes narrowed at the word. "Were?"

Bingley looked at him with resentment.

"I don't know if I can call you such."

Darcy puffed out his chest. "I acted in good faith, Charles. Yes, I was overprotective. You decided to leave her behind, without a word, I might add, so I did not see the point of reopening wounds by telling you about Miss Bennet. Do not forget that your sisters didn't share that information with you either. In hindsight, I would not have done that, but I lack the gift of foresight. I have apologised. I am not going to beg you. If you think this one thing overrides our friendship, so be it. You send your card to Darcy House if you change your mind. For now, it would be best if you

left. Maybe we can talk with cooler heads when we meet again.”

“The honourable Fitzwilliam Darcy betrayed his friend and cost him his happiness. Don’t be sanctimonious now, saying you acted in my best interest as if that should console me!”

With pain in his eyes, Darcy turned and left him. Bingley still shouted something after him, but he was no longer listening. He had admitted his sin to the harmed and himself. He understood it was yet another proof of the arrogance of his ways, thinking he knew better. However, it was easily so as Charles relied heavily on his counsel. He should not have let that happen. On the other hand, Bingley did not want to take any responsibility for his failure.

OPEN CONVERSATIONS

Chapter 21



After his quarrel with Bingley, Darcy retreated to the quiet of the house and found his cousin in the billiard room past dinner time. “I am sorry. I went to my room, and somehow, I fell asleep.”

“It’s all right. We had an eventful day.” Phillip waved Darcy’s concern away.

“I am in complete agreement.” Darcy sighed.

“The cook has kept dinner prepared,” Phillip said, putting on his jacket. They left for the dining room.

“Bingley?”

“Please tell Miss Darcy that we are ready to dine.” Phillip turned to the footman. “He left some time ago.”

Darcy nodded.

“Has your friendship remained intact?” Phillip asked.

“No, I cannot say it is. It is unfortunate. I suggested he cool down and send his card around if he still wants to be friends.”

“That is rich!”

“He feels I have wronged him greatly. He believes he’d be married by now if not for my interference.”

“Do you agree?”

Darcy shrugged his shoulders. “I do not know. I don’t think so. Even if he did not get bored quickly, his sisters would have put up a fight, and I have yet to see him resist their demands.”

“A weak mind knows no honour.”

“It’s not that Bingley is not clever; he is. He is just the youngest in the family, and he has difficulty having the upper hand against his sisters.”

“You know, even if he sends his card around...”

“Which will happen. If for nothing else, they need my connections. Miss Bingley would not let him have peace. It might not be the same, though. I feel as though I failed him in some way. By advising him poorly, by underestimating his feelings.” He paused, his gaze distant. “Yet, how much responsibility should I take for his choices? He is not a child.”

Phillip leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful smile on his face. “You always hold yourself to a

higher standard than others. It's admirable, but even you cannot carry the weight of every consequence.

“Well, my point is that when you marry, you can decide whether to send him your card.”

“I did not think of that,” he stopped. “Yes, I shall have to think about whether there is anybody I wish to drop from my acquaintance.”³⁸

“Miss Elizabeth, I bid you good morning.” Darcy greeted the hurriedly approaching Elizabeth the next day after lunch. He still could not believe that she was happy to see him, if her smiles were any indication.

Darcy stood at the edge of the garden, observing the Bennet household's morning bustle. His heart leapt when she finally appeared, hurrying toward him with her bright smile. *There she is*, he thought, a warmth spreading through his chest. She was like sunlight breaking through a cloudy sky.

“Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth curtsied prettily.

His gaze held a warm intensity that whispered of deep affection. Elizabeth was arrested by his

³⁸ A social tradition of the time. The new husband would send out his cards to those he still wished to associate with.

look, but she could not match his stare. She was the first to break the atmosphere.

“I see you brought Daisy.”

“I received no word otherwise, so indeed, we are here. Your father gave his consent, I take it.” In the nook of the window bay, they had agreed the day before to continue Elizabeth’s equestrian education.

“Yes, although he was very surprised on two accounts.”

Darcy looked at her questioningly.

“Well, he was surprised that I wished to learn, and he was surprised that you wished to teach me.”

“Aha.”

“Mr. Darcy. Good day to you.” Jane caught up. Elizabeth had left her as soon as she saw Darcy arriving.

“Miss Bennet, good day to you, too. It’s a lovely one at that.” Darcy smiled back at her.

“The viscount...is he not with you?” She looked around, searching.

Darcy cleared his throat. “I am afraid not. He found himself busy today at the site. I am sure he’ll come tomorrow.” He saw the disappointment on Miss Bennet’s face.

She nodded. “I was just worried...if he was all right. Well, have a nice time. I shall go back into

the house. Please ask the stable hand to be around to chaperone.”

Both Elizabeth and Darcy watched her leave.

“Mr. Bingley? I was told you quarrelled.”

“Yes, we...exchanged some words. He has left. We did not part on good terms.” He was still looking in the direction of Jane’s leaving.

“I see. Well, he did cause quite a stir yesterday.”

Darcy, however, had had enough of his friend’s situation. His mind was otherwise occupied. “May I speak frankly?”

Elizabeth looked up at him in surprise. “Please do.”

“Your sister seemed disappointed that my cousin did not come today.”

Elizabeth glanced back toward the house, her brow furrowing. She looked down and around, deciding what to share. She chose to be bold. “Yes, she was. Why did your cousin not come?”

Darcy and Phillip had had a small argument before he left for Longbourn. His cousin suddenly turned hesitant. He told Darcy he needed some time before seeing Miss Bennet again. Darcy disagreed, but he knew better than to try to convince him. He almost understood him; he was possibly afraid of rejection, however unreasonable that fear was.

This was a new experience for Darcy – talking intimately about others like a married couple, as he had heard the earl do with his wife. He looked down at Elizabeth with wonder. “Do you know?”

“Is there anything to know?” She smiled at him impishly.

Darcy looked away, guilt shadowing his features. “I think he is unsure of his welcome and needs more time to convince himself that his fears are ridiculous.”

“I see.” Elizabeth considered the information. “Did you see the silk flower attached to my sister’s dress?” She gestured with her hand to show the place. “Above her heart?”

“Yes? Does that have some significance?”

Elizabeth looked away and then back. She leaned toward him and whispered, although nobody was around.

“Your cousin left it in her room yesterday. He wore it when you arrived.”

“Pardon?”

Just then, a rooster crowed noisily from the yard, as if demanding attention. Elizabeth glanced toward the sound with a small laugh. “We really must do something about that fellow,” she muttered. The sudden intrusion of farm life brought a faint smile to Darcy’s face – this was her world,

real and unpretentious, and it charmed him more than he cared to admit.

“Are you saying my cousin left her the flower?”

“Yes. On her pillow.” She nodded, crimsoned.

“Oh, my!”

“Oh, indeed.”

“And she wore it today. Oh, good heavens! She expected him to come! Oh, the fool!” He shook his head. “I shall see to it that he attends tomorrow.”

She smiled at Darcy.

“Shall we?” He gestured toward the paddock.

“So, you knew.”

“After the flower, yes. I had suspected, but because Jane did not dare hope, I kept my thoughts about it in check.”

“Why would she not dare hope?”

“Come on, Mr. Darcy... A lord offering for a penniless country girl?”

“Is that how you see yourself, too?”

“Why? Are you a lord, too?” She laughed at his reaction but then said, “It is not a question of viewpoint. It’s a fact.”

“There is so much more about you both.” He said firmly.

“There was a time when you thought otherwise.”

They arrived at the stable and entered one of the fenced areas. A muscled lad approached.

“Tom, could you stay in sight? We need a chaperone. Mr. Darcy has graciously brought one of his horses and will teach me to ride.”

Tom looked at Darcy worriedly.

“Relax, Tom, I shall take care of your little mistress. All right, Miss Elizabeth, just like the last time. Put your foot in my hands. One, two, three. Push... Ho–ho, good. You take to this quite naturally.”

Elizabeth beamed at him.

“Just like last time. Remember, straighten your back. We just walk around for a while.”

Daisy gave a tiny, rebellious buck as Elizabeth adjusted her seat, causing her to grip the reins a little tighter. “Whoa, steady girl,” Elizabeth murmured with a nervous laugh.

Darcy stepped instinctively closer but stopped himself just in time. “She’s just testing your confidence,” he said. “You’re doing well.”

Elizabeth gave him a wry look. “You may find me less graceful than you imagined.”

“Never,” he replied simply.

Tom, seeing she was in good hands, went back to his work.

When they were out of earshot, Darcy spoke.

“I no longer think of the difference in our stations. It is of no consequence.”

Elizabeth looked down at him in thought. Then, she became distracted as the horse moved beneath her, the rhythm both soothing and exhilarating. “You know, Mr. Darcy,” she began, “I never imagined I would find myself here – on a horse, learning from you of all people.

Darcy chuckled softly. “And why not me?”

“Because the Mr. Darcy I first knew seemed too aloof, too grand to bother with such a thing.”

Darcy looked almost hurt.

“Well, that is what I had thought, but now...” She glanced at him, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Now, I think you might enjoy it.”

Darcy grinned. “Perhaps I do. I find great satisfaction in sharing something I love with someone who...means a great deal to me.” His voice lowered, the intimacy of his words making Elizabeth’s heart skip.

Then he added as an afterthought. “And even in the autumn, I would have helped you if you had asked.

“All right, I am going to step away now; just continue as you were. I am here, just not touching. The lead is yours, Miss Elizabeth.”

After a while, Elizabeth asked, “Mr. Darcy. The countess, did she...”

Darcy sighed. A soft smile played on his lips. She *was* clever. “Yes, she came because Phillip had written to her.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Do you not wish to know what she said?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

“She was impressed with her. She would have to learn a lot about navigating the ton, but yes, she liked her.”

“Are you saying my sister could become a countess one day?”

“It is possible.” He grinned.

“My mother will faint.”

Darcy’s eyes widened, and Elizabeth burst into laughter. She felt proud of her sister. “I felt I was under scrutiny, too.” She hesitantly added. Their eyes searched for each other.

“She did say you noticed her interest.”

“Did she approve of me, too? How could that be?”

“I have said. You have much to recommend you.”

She blushed naturally.

“If you are worried about your lack of money, understand this. Both Phillip and I are in a very

good position. We both have considerable wealth. If you had five or ten thousand to your name, it would still not add much to ours. I am not saying this to boost. It's not money we seek; it is...your person, your..." he swallowed, "love." He left her and got on his own horse.

It was a good thing that he did not see – Elizabeth's breath caught, and her eyes brimmed with unshed tears as his words settled in her heart. She looked down, her hands trembling slightly on the reins, overwhelmed by the sincerity of his declaration.

He aligned himself with Elizabeth and nudged his horse into a walk. "Now, we shall walk a while longer and then proceed to a gentle trot. Feel your horse, feel its rhythm." Darcy observed her posture. "The countess had approved of you before she came."

Elizabeth looked at him, her eyebrows furrowed.

"When she heard I was under the weather back in London, she summoned me, and I had to tell her all."

Elizabeth was about to speak.

"Do not ask. She has this ability. She has been a mother of sorts to Georgiana and me since my mother's death; she knows me like no other."

“I’m like that with my Aunt Gardiner. It took everything in me not to confide in her when I returned from Hunsford. I could tell she knew something was the matter with me, but for some reason, she decided to leave me be. So, you told her about me.”

“Yes, and to my surprise, she said she would accept you. I had considered that an impossibility for no reason, it seems.”

“But—but why?”

“She wants to see me happy...”

“Happiness,” Elizabeth mused aloud, her tone thoughtful. “It’s a rare thing for parents to prioritise. Many would consider wealth or connections more important.”

Darcy nodded solemnly. “The countess is not without her faults, but she values family above all. She sees what I see in you – a partner who brings balance, not just status. She understands what matters most.”

Tom came out nonchalantly again.

“All right, now we are going into a trot. Nudge your horse.”

“Wha—how?”

“Just feel it.” Darcy waved to Tom to open the paddock. He led them out on the road in front of

Longbourn. Elizabeth hesitated, her grip tightening on the reins, but she mirrored Darcy's motion, urging her horse into a trot.

The rhythmic clop-clop-clop of the horses' hooves echoed against the packed dirt road, a steady cadence that seemed to match the quickened beat of Elizabeth's heart. The breeze brushed past her cheeks, carrying with it the faint scent of wildflowers and the earthy aroma of freshly turned soil. She could feel the strength of Daisy beneath her, each powerful stride transmitting a slight bounce through her frame. At first, it was jarring, but as she adjusted her posture, she began to move in harmony with the horse, her body instinctively finding the rhythm.

"I—I cannot believe I am riding!" she exclaimed, her voice bright with exhilaration.

"You are managing it admirably," he praised, his tone warm with approval.

Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush at the compliment, but more than that, she felt a strange sense of pride. Here was a man she had once thought insufferable, now praising her with such sincerity. The transformation in her opinion of him mirrored his transformation in character, and it left her breathless.

Elizabeth's laughter bubbled forth as the trot continued. The world seemed to blur around her;

the fields to their left glowed with vibrant greens and yellows in the afternoon sunlight, while the canopy of trees to their right offered dappled shade. The steady motion, the fresh air, and the feeling of accomplishment filled her with an unexpected sense of freedom.

They continued a short distance before Darcy slowed his mount, signalling her to do the same. As they returned to a walking pace, Elizabeth beamed at him, her cheeks flushed and her curls slightly dishevelled from the ride.

“That was exhilarating! Thank you,” she said breathlessly.

“You are welcome,” he replied, his voice tinged with pride.

A breeze rustled through the canopy above them, scattering a few early summer leaves across the path. The dappled sunlight flickered over Elizabeth’s skirts and the horses’ backs like playful gold coins. A bird sang somewhere overhead – a high, fluting call that made Darcy glance up. For a moment, neither of them spoke. It was the kind of quiet that only follows shared laughter – content, expectant, unspoken.

“After the assembly the other day, I had to reconsider all our interactions from the autumn. There was one occasion that seemed out of place.

Do you remember, by chance, that one morning we spent some time in the library?”

It was Darcy’s turn to redden. Elizabeth wondered.

“You hardly noticed I was in the room. I remember being quite irritated about your rudeness. You never even looked at me.”

“Yes, I remember. Would it mean anything if I said that it took everything in me to *pretend* I did not care you were in the room?”

Elizabeth tilted her head, studying him intently. “It struck me as odd at the time. You seemed so distant, and yet...” She trailed off, unsure of how to put her thoughts into words.

Darcy leaned forward slightly, his expression earnest. “And yet?”

“And yet, I could feel your presence, even when you were silent. It was...unsettling,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. Then she looked at him, wanting to know. “But why?”

“You will laugh at me if I tell you. Ugh! I thought I had shown too much attention to you the previous night and...”

“You did not want to raise expectations.”

Darcy nodded.

“Well, that thought never even occurred to me then.”

“If I did not deserve you at Hunsford in the spring, I was definitely not ready before. I was too conscious of my status and what was expected of me. Also, I did not recognise my feelings for what they were. That came later. At least I made progress at Rosings, but you remember my disastrous proposal. I was still too arrogant. I had to come to terms with that and realise that you were worth more than any of the things I had considered important. You are worth everything to me.” He looked at her as he spoke the words.

Elizabeth once again marvelled at the power it seemed she had over him. She tried some levity. “Mr. Darcy, once you start speaking, you say the most amazing things. How can I stay annoyed at you when you speak so gallantly?”

“Now you understand my strategy.”

They both laughed, but then Elizabeth grew quiet, her gaze steady.

“So...you will not regret your choice based on—based on my circumstances.”

Darcy dismounted, took off his gloves while looking into Elizabeth’s eyes, and stretched his arms for her.

“No.”

She was suddenly enclosed in his presence – his height, his scent, the heat radiating from him like sunlight drawn too near. She shivered as his hands

settled lightly at her waist, her hands still on his shoulders.

“Do not fear me, Elizabeth... I could never harm you.”

“I—I am not afraid,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Only...overwhelmed.”

His breath deepened. “I am overwhelmed by you constantly.”

Their lips curved into matching, breathless smiles. But neither moved. The moment held. Taut and trembling.

Slowly, reverently, Darcy lifted one hand to the edge of her collar and adjusted it – not for modesty but to feel the slope of her neck beneath the fabric. His fingers lingered for a heartbeat too long, a silent confession.

Elizabeth’s eyes fluttered closed. Her breath caught at the nearness of him, the precision of his touch.

“You are not what I expected,” he said softly. “I thought I understood women, understood what I needed. Then you came – fierce, kind, clever beyond measure. You changed everything.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught, her heart stumbling at the quiet vehemence of his words. For a moment, she could not speak. His words, so unlike the man she once thought him to be, left her

breathless. She looked away, and when she looked back, she straightened.

“I have been called many things, Mr. Darcy, but rarely a source of transformation.” She nodded slightly, thoughtful. “Still... I find I am not as I was either.”

“Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy called as they were going back to the house. “I must raise a delicate issue before we return to the house. Please do not feel pressured by it. It’s just that if I am going to be a regular guest at Longbourn, I—I should speak with your father soon. It is only honourable. What do you think?”

For Elizabeth, seeing Mr. Darcy unsure of himself, even fearing her reaction, was truly amazing. *Well, he is everything but arrogant now.* Her heart skipped a beat as she considered his request. “Thank you for asking me. You are right, especially since they now know of our past. You may talk to my father.”

“So easily?”

“Why, what did you expect?”

“I do not know what I expected. It’s still marvellous to me that I am welcome, that you welcome me.”

“Mr. Darcy, you can be assured that I have changed my ideas about you. It was painful for my

pride, but I am, I should like to think, a reasonable being. I'm just afraid I shall disappoint you.” When Darcy wanted to interrupt, Elizabeth raised her hand. “You seem to have such a strong conviction that I am right for you, but I feel undeserving of your praises. And considering that all I would bring to the marriage union is myself, I can only ask, what if I am not enough?” She looked away.

“I wish you would see yourself with my eyes. Miss Elizabeth, it is I who am undeserving of such a lady; in every quality, you exceed what any man could wish for. You are indeed all I could desire – and far more.”

Elizabeth did not have time to react to this fervent confession, as her father, Mr. Bennet, approached them from the entrance.

“Oh, you are back! I thought I would see your education myself. Well, how did you like it?”

“Today, we did not just walk around; Mr. Darcy showed me how to trot. It was breathtaking, Papa.”

“I am glad to hear it.” He looked at Darcy. “Well, Mr. Darcy, thank you for indulging our Lizzy.”

“It is my pleasure.”

Mr. Bennet observed the couple in front of him. His wife was right, he thought; those two

would marry. And then he soon received his confirmation.

“Papa, why do you not take Mr. Darcy to your room? He has a question to ask.”

“A question?”

“Yes, sir.” Darcy bowed his head.

“And how do you feel about this question, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth hesitated, her heart racing. In that moment, she felt the weight of Darcy’s devotion, his willingness to lay bare his feelings for her. It was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. *I must be honest*, she thought, summoning her courage.

The words trembled on her tongue. She feared how much they might reveal. Yet at last, she met his gaze and spoke:

“I feel...” she looked Darcy straight in the eye, “I feel warmly.”³⁹

When the two gentlemen joined the ladies in the parlour, Mr. Bennet announced that Mr. Darcy had asked to court Elizabeth, and he was given permission. Mrs. Phillips, who had arrived while

³⁹ There is an outtake of the conversation between Darcy and Mr. Bennet on the story website

the couple was out riding, openly gaped at the development before she gushed about the prospect. Elizabeth sighed and looked at Darcy.

“Now there is no escape. Everybody will know about us on the morrow.”

“Strangely, it doesn’t bother me. I’ll proudly court you.”

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, you are everything courageous.”

They chuckled.

After Darcy accepted Mary’s congratulations, he spoke to her.

“Miss Mary, I shall also take you for your second lesson tomorrow if you wish. When I come in the afternoon.”

“You would?”

“Of course. My cousin told me how much you enjoyed it.”

“Thank you. It would be lovely. That is – if I’m not in the way of...your courting.”

Elizabeth could not be more pleased with Mr. Darcy’s offer. It showed her that he wanted to be a part of the family he had scorned at Hunsford.

“Don’t worry, Mary. We will be fine.”

“Mr. Bennet, if you don’t mind, I would leave my horse here. I have heard that you started to have lessons with your youngest daughters. Maybe you could teach them to ride.”

On his way home on Devil, Darcy reflected on his afternoon at the Longbourn household. To say that he enjoyed himself was an understatement.

He marvelled at how naturally she commanded his attention. Elizabeth had a way of grounding him, of reminding him of the things that truly mattered. It was not just her wit or beauty, though those were undeniable. It was her authenticity, her courage to speak her mind, and her refusal to be anything other than herself. How could he not adore her?

He knew himself as a man of few words, maybe a bit better with his family and friends, yet with Elizabeth, since he returned to Netherfield, especially on the occasions when they could talk without interruption and scrutiny, he had been indeed verbose. It was easy, it felt natural, and it was as if they had been friends. He recalled his initial inability to talk to her, like at the church, but it seemed that it took her rejection, again, to loosen his tongue. He had nothing to lose, only to gain. *Is that what it took?* His aunt had told him to share himself with her. It was good; he felt no shame or awkwardness. He needed her to understand him.

Their conversations had been a liberating experience. *It must be the key*, he thought. *She said ‘warmly’ to her father’s question.* It was more than he had dared hope for, a small but significant step toward the future he longed to share with her. At that moment, as she looked into his eyes, it felt like they were one, one purpose. He felt understood.

He appreciated Elizabeth’s courage in speaking about issues close to her heart and asking him real questions. *What a woman! Worrying about whether she would be enough...* He had made her think so little of herself by rejecting her based only on her station and circumstances, yet she would not cower; she took him to task and forced him to confront his prejudices. He felt the hurt he had caused when he proposed by calling her a degradation to her face. She felt the difference in their stations acutely. Possibly one of the reasons she could not contemplate such a match. He would have to work hard to make her forget his arrogant sentiments.

She was his junior by about seven years, yet she was his superior regarding social interactions. She could be his teacher, he mused. He would never seek to be the centre of attention, nor would he ever speak freely in social settings; he had no inclination to change that, but maybe her influence would make his interactions with people easier.

When it was just them, he would take her lead. So far, it had worked. He would continue to reveal himself to her. He wanted her to learn about him, and he wanted to learn more about her. He wanted to know her deepest thoughts, good and bad, so he could care for her and keep her safe...and love her more. He ached to have that camaraderie where they would casually talk about the people in their lives, everything and anything, just like they had about Miss Bennet and Phillip.

He was mortified that before he proposed at Hunsford, he would have married her without all this. He had walked with her, hardly speaking or listening. Did he think they knew each other? He was so engrossed in his own desires that the marriage between them, had she said yes, would have been very different. Without her rejection, that's precisely what would have happened. Two strangers would have tied the knot. He imagined what their life could have been, tiptoeing around each other, polite yet distant. A breakfast table came to his mind with them on both ends, hardly speaking, and in the evening, he would join her, and she would play the piano, and then he would take her to bed. He was horrified at himself. He never thought that he would consider his brutal rejection a blessing. And a blessing it was.

FLOWER LANGUAGE

Chapter 22



Phillip was in a state by the time he saw Darcy arrive home on his horse from his bedroom window. He had abandoned his work in the field not long after his cousin left for Longbourn. Several times, he decided to follow him, but just as often, he decided not to. He did not even make sense to himself. He became increasingly angry and finally admitted to being governed by pure cowardice.

They were not given an opportunity to talk, he and Miss Bennet, as her father was there immediately after Bingley had left. His rescue entrance itself was anything but heroic; he almost found himself face down on the floor. He could not adequately explain why he had followed. His only solace was that, before she left the parlour, it was to him her gaze was directed.

He saw again that moment – the way her eyes lingered on his, the slight parting of her lips as if she wished to speak but thought better of it. It was not indifference. It was hesitation...or perhaps hope?

He paced his room, the carpet beneath his boots worn thin by his indecision. Each glance toward the window mocked him for his cowardice. He had abandoned the field when he should have stayed and fought – for her, for himself.

He also worried about leaving the rose from his lapel on her pillow. It was a decision on the spur of the moment, and for a while, he basked in the idea of her finding it, but after all that happened, he became more and more regretful in case she found his gesture appalling or too forward. Why a maiden would think that of a romantic gesture from a gentleman, he did not contemplate.

“A toast is in order, Phillip, Georgiana. You see before you a man who is officially courting Miss Elizabeth Bennet!” He claimed with the broadest grin possible.

From the hall came the unmistakable clatter of a dropped tray. A maid, startled by the shout, had nearly scattered the tea things meant for the drawing room. Phillip chuckled.

“Well done, cousin – I believe that announcement reached the kitchens.”

“Oh, William, that is wonderful news!” Georgiana exclaimed.

“Indeed? How—how did you manage to secure such a thing? She had just given you permission to call on her.”

“I know. Today, while riding, we had a long conversation about us, and then I brought up the topic of asking for her father’s consent. She agreed. In fact, she asked her father if he could see me.”

“And how did the interview go?” Phillip inquired.

Darcy leaned back in his chair, a soft smile lingering on his lips. “It went as well as I could have hoped,” he replied, his voice carrying a note of relief. “Mr. Bennet did not make it easy, of course. He questioned me thoroughly – my intentions, my feelings for Miss Elizabeth, even my readiness to accept her independence.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a teasing grin. “And you survived? The mighty Mr. Darcy, subjected to an inquisition by Mr. Bennet?”

Darcy chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Barely. He has a sharp wit and a knack for making one squirm without lifting a finger. But in the end, he gave his permission.”

Georgiana clasped her hands together, her face alight with happiness. “I am so proud of you, William.”

Phillip poured another glass of wine and raised it in a toast. “To William Darcy, a man bold

enough to face both the formidable Mr. Bennet and the even more formidable Elizabeth Bennet.”

Darcy raised his own glass, the hint of a smile playing on his lips. “To Miss Elizabeth, for being worth every effort.”

They clinked glasses, the soft chime of crystal filling the room.

“And what now?” Phillip asked, leaning forward with an intrigued expression. “Do you plan to announce the courtship to the whole household, or will you let the news trickle out?”

Darcy’s smile grew wry. “It has been announced already. I doubt there will be anyone in Hertfordshire who will not have heard of it by tomorrow evening.”

Phillip laughed heartily, his booming voice filling the room.

Georgiana tilted her head, her expression turning thoughtful. “William, do you think Elizabeth is...pleased with this turn of events? I mean, truly pleased?”

Darcy’s eyes softened, and he nodded. “She said she felt...warmly about it, which is more than I dared hope for. She even allowed me to believe that she might come to care for me in time.”

Phillip leaned back with a knowing smile. “A good start, cousin. A very good start. But do not let your guard down. Winning Elizabeth Bennet’s

heart fully will require more than a courtship. It will take persistence and...perhaps a little charm, too.”

Darcy arched a brow at Phillip, his tone dry. “I shall take that as advice from an expert.”

Later, when Georgiana retired after she had made her brother promise to tell her all the next day, the two cousins played a game in the billiard room. Phillip opened the game.

“And how was the Bennet family?” Phillip endeavoured to appear as indifferent as possible.

Darcy gave him a dubious look. “I spent most of the time with Miss Elizabeth. We tried to trot today. She enjoyed having another lesson on riding a horse very much.” Darcy played his turn. “I have told you about the interview. Mrs. Bennet’s sister was there when our courtship was announced. She was a bit loud in her congratulations, but Mrs. Bennet surprised me with her grace. She was effusive but just genuinely happy. I survived.”

“And Miss Bennet?”

Darcy glanced at his cousin. “She was happy for her sister.”

Phillip was about to adjust his aim.

“She seemed to be disappointed when she asked about you...”

Phillip’s stick went the wrong way.

“... and I had to say you were not coming.” Darcy gave a subtle nod, thinking it only right that Phillip should learn a lesson.

“She – she asked about me?”

“Yes, Phillip. She looked lovely.” Darcy said nonchalantly.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean? She looked, you know, even more beautiful than usual. She wore a nice dress I haven’t seen, a pink and blue one and had a lovely pink silk rose attached to it...” He widely used his hands to show what he meant. Oh, Darcy enjoyed torturing his cousin.

Phillip’s eyes grew impossibly wide, then his jaw went slack, and his mouth fell open.

Darcy shook his head at him. “You should have been there, Phillip.”

“A pink rose?” His voice rose unexpectedly.

“How could you not show up after a gesture like that?”

Phillip repeatedly blinked in shock. “You know?”

Darcy aimed his stick. “Thank Miss Elizabeth for giving you this message.”

Phillip just stared at his cousin. “I am an idiot! What must she think of me?” He fell into the chair at the window. “Was she really disappointed?”

“Who do you think she dressed for?”

“She dressed for me?” Phillip cursed his cowardice. *She wore it?* His heart leapt, a wild, untamed thing, as if her act had declared her regard without words. The pink silk had been a token of his admiration; her wearing it transformed it into a promise.

Darcy rolled his eyes at his cousin.

Elizabeth finally had a taste of what it was like to be her mother’s favourite daughter. Her mother was jubilant; she laughed and teased her husband. She hugged Elizabeth not once and not twice, and ordered Elizabeth’s favourite cake to be baked. Elizabeth could not help but be happy for her as one of her goals for her daughters just got closer, but mostly, Elizabeth was happy for herself.

A strange energy swirled around Elizabeth; she could not put her finger on it, but she felt an excited sensation. Her body was calm to look at, but inside, she thought she could combust. This strange disharmony between her body and mind caused her to see everything more sharply and vividly. As she looked around the room from her

vantage point in the window alcove, her mother's joyous face was never more radiant. She could see the finer details on Jane's dress, her delicate stitches. She could see her father's eyes behind his spectacles with unusual sharpness, even if the sun reflected on them. When she turned around and looked outside, she almost gasped at how the colours played on her senses.

This restless energy made her useless for any rational talk or reading. Despite rereading the same passage several times, she had no idea what she had read. She put it down with a huff. Her father, amused, left the ladies to their own devices and returned to his haven. Finally, she occupied her hands with the cup of tea her mother served her. The steam rose gently, carrying with it a faint scent of lemon balm and something floral – something like the wild borders of Netherfield. It brought to mind open fields, wind in her hair...and Mr. Darcy's steady gaze.

She thought of Darcy and wished to share whatever this was with him. He wanted *her*. He wanted *her love*, he said. *How does one give oneself to another? And what about love?* How could she offer her affection when she had never known love? She was sure of it. She had a vague idea; after all, she had read about romance. Could she love Mr. Darcy? When he said all that to her earlier in the

day, her heart was in her throat. It was such a profound thing to say. This man, handsome, wealthy beyond imagining, learned, accustomed to high society and acquainted with the Regent himself, wanted to be loved by *her*. That was all he asked of her.

She could care for him; she understood that feeling. It meant putting another's interest ahead of hers. She could do that, and maybe she even wanted to. She realised she wanted to make this man happy. Since she had opened her eyes and started to see him as he was, she had found qualities in him that resonated with her: he was honourable, dutiful, clever and enterprising; he was not afraid of work, even manual labour; he wielded much power, yet he cared about the people who worked for him; although she knew it was somewhat alien to him, he flirted with her, he put himself forward; he spoke his mind...*and* he wanted *her*. She recognised the feeling – the elation of vanity. To be adored like that did something to a person.

“Mama, what does it feel like to love someone? How do you know when you are in love?” Elizabeth asked her mother as she prepared for bed.

“I wish I knew, child. It has been a while... Maybe it's easier to understand when the gentleman is away...when you feel lost without

him, when you feel his absence acutely, when all your thoughts are with him. Then maybe, after that, you can recognise it when you are with him. You do know, do you not, that most people marry without such feelings?”

“Yes, yes, I know. It’s just that there is nothing much else I can give him. I want to give him my love.”

Mrs. Bennet clucked her tongue. “Well, that is all fine and noble, child, but be sure to ask what kind of cakes he prefers. Love is important, yes, but a man’s fondness for plum pudding should not be underestimated.”

“Oh, Mother!”

“I see. I see... If you want to love him, I think you are halfway there. Goodness, to love such a man! Oh, my! It takes a special woman.”

“What do you mean, Mother?”

“Why, just that he is a man of the world; your father says he is very clever, but at the same time, he is somewhat awkward, is he not?”

“That he is. He is trying to overcome it, though. Mama, have you... have you ever felt love?”

“Of course, my dear. Your father was a very handsome man. I liked that he was so clever, even if I didn’t understand what he often talked about. I would sit in the window waiting for him to come. It was sweet agony.” Mrs. Bennet’s voice was

tinged with nostalgia as she spoke. “I thought I was the luckiest woman alive when he chose me. But life, you see, has a way of changing things. We grew older, and the days of sweet agony turned into a different kind of partnership. Still, there are moments when I look at him, and I remember the man I first loved... I hoped to give him a son, but I failed him.” Her demeanour changed. “Life is unpredictable. You have done it, Lizzy. Or at least today was a big step toward it. You will have an exceptional life. What a handsome and tall gentleman! I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

“Aww, must you always try to outdo me?” Phillip exclaimed when Darcy appeared with a small bouquet the next day.

“What do I care about you? I am about the business of my own courtship.” He savoured the delicate fragrance of the small bouquet in his hand.

Before luncheon, he had asked his sister to help him create a bouquet for Miss Elizabeth from the garden patches of Netherfield. At the very end of May, flowers were blooming everywhere. The price was answering all her questions, but he did not mind. Georgiana instructed her brother on

how to make the bouquet of pansies and forget-me-nots. He was very proud of himself for using the language of flowers to express his affection to his beloved. Georgiana chose the blue and yellow ribbons from her stock.

“They are exquisite, just like the lady they are intended for.” Georgiana sent her brother on his way with such words.

The arrival of the whole Netherfield party was anticipated at Longbourn. Darcy had sent a note that his cousin would like to call, and he would bring his sister to wait upon the Bennet ladies; she also hoped to help with Miss Mary’s lesson. Mrs. Bennet thought it gentlemanly of Mr. Darcy to send the note about their visit. “He is everything a gentleman should be.” She said with conviction.

Elizabeth placed herself on the window seat to be in perfect view of the gate from the road. When she saw the guests, her eyes went to Darcy on their own accord. Darcy, of course, noticed her in the window and raised his hat to her. She left the window and went to meet them outside.

“Welcome, my lord. It is nice of you to visit.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I am in your debt.” He looked into her eyes, wishing her to understand him.

“Please, only proceed if your intentions are honourable.” She lowered her voice.

At first, he was taken aback, but he could not begrudge her for warning him. “It will be so.” He bowed to her again.

“Oh, Hussar, you are here? Did you come all the way to see us? What a lovely dog you are!” She greeted Darcy’s dog, who demanded her attention next. She played with his velvety, long ears while his long, smooth tail lashed out in all directions.

“He begged to come,” Georgiana said.

“It’s lovely to have you come, Georgie. Mary is changing. You may join her upstairs; her door is the third on the right.”

Georgiana followed her advice and went into the house.

Elizabeth straightened. “Mr. Darcy.”

“Miss Elizabeth. Your smile...so beautiful.” He looked away for a moment. “Sometimes, I still think I am dreaming when you smile at me like that.”

Her voice caught in her throat, overwhelmed by emotion at his unexpected, endearingly awkward compliment.

Before she could speak, Darcy brought around his hand with the flowers and offered them to her.

Elizabeth gasped. “For me?” No matter how hard she tried, she could not suppress the grin that

spread across her face. “You brought me flowers?” Elizabeth’s heart leapt with joy. Once again, Mr. Darcy had surprised her. *I keep underestimating him*, she thought as she raised the lovely bouquet to her nose. “Pansies and forget-me-nots?”

The soft petals brushed against her fingertips, and she marvelled at how this once stoic man had come to express such tenderness. It was a message in flowers, and she could not ignore its sincerity.

“I thought they would serve my purpose,” Darcy replied, his tone warm yet earnest.

“Do you know the meaning behind these flowers?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“I do.”

“How?” She tilted her head in amusement.

“I purchased a book on the subject.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in delight. “You went into a bookstore to buy...?”

“I sent my valet,” he interrupted, his mouth twitching into the barest hint of a smile.

She giggled, unable to help herself. “May I ask when you did this?”

“After I resolved to try again.”

“Oh.” Like every maiden, Elizabeth was familiar with the meaning of flowers, but she never really thought she would be able to apply that knowledge for herself. “Thank you,” she murmured, a pleased blush overspreading her cheeks.

“It was my pleasure.”

The fragrance of pansies mingled with the crisp scent of the morning air. Elizabeth inhaled deeply, the sweetness a balm to her restless thoughts. “If you do not mind, I want to put them in water.”

They went inside. Darcy pointed to Hussar to stay.

“I’ll visit with your father while I wait. Please let me know when Miss Mary is ready for her lesson.”

“We shall not be long.” Elizabeth nodded, then turned to the stairs.

Elizabeth used a small vase in her room, filled it with water from her jug and put it on her windowsill. Pansies were the symbol of thoughts between lovers. *What message are you sending me, Mr. Darcy?* She caressed the petals of a small forget-me-not. Royalty? No, she chuckled but became serious at the thought of the other meanings, like devotion...and true love. He wanted her to know that she was loved with a true heart and that he would do anything for her. Could one ask for more?

Phillip took a big breath; he wiped off the non-existent dirt from his jacket and let the footman

announce him. Mrs. Bennet and Miss Bennet were the only inhabitants in the parlour. He bowed.

“Ladies, Mrs. Bennet and Miss Bennet. I hope you are both well.”

“Indeed, we are. Although Jane here had no appetite at dinner yesterday, she has recovered, as you can see for yourself, my lord.”

“Mama.” Jane did not know where to look.

“Does she not look to be in good health?” Mrs. Bennet still addressed the lord.

Phillip was grateful for the opportunity to observe Jane openly.

“Indeed, Mrs. Bennet, she looks the picture of health, but if I may, I would gladly escort Miss Bennet for a stroll in the fresh air to ensure she does not suffer a relapse.”

“Oh, no, no! We cannot have you relapse, my dear. His lordship is right. You should be in the sun. Thank you, my lord. You are very kind to suggest this. Go, dear, go.”

ANOTHER HEARTFELT APOLOGY

Chapter 23



The roses seemed to bloom brighter in the sun, their fragrance wafting on a gentle breeze. Birds flitted between branches, their cheerful chirping a perfect accompaniment to the tentative steps of two hearts inching closer.

They walked in the garden, the trimmed hedges casting lacy shadows over the gravel path. Jane watched the playful patterns at their feet. She was steadfastly silent, and Phillip was mortified and tongue-tied. Jane's cheeks bloomed with a quiet, natural blush, perhaps from the warmth, perhaps from the subtle awareness of her companion.

Phillip cleared his throat and offered his arm, and she accepted with the lightest touch. The world seemed to shrink to just the two of them, the gentle arch of a rosebush overhead, the sweet trill of a distant lark, the faint spice of sun-warmed petals filling the hush between their words. Every

step brought an unspoken question, every glance an answer not yet voiced.

Jane's heart fluttered in her chest, uncertain but hopeful, as though the air itself urged her to trust the man walking next to her. He had come.

Phillip, whose confidence so often found expression in quick wit and polite turns of phrase, found himself uncharacteristically mute. He regularly discussed business and negotiated with all kinds of people; now, he was failing in matters of the heart. Each glance Jane stole at him, every gentle brush of her fingers along his sleeve, seemed to rob him of speech. He marvelled at his own awkwardness, at the way sentences jumbled and dissolved before ever reaching his lips. Why was it, he wondered, that his tongue felt thick and his mind so clumsy in the presence of such gentle grace?

He had meant to say something – anything – to bridge the silence and explain himself. But the air was golden, heavy with the scent of roses and the shimmer of possibility, and Phillip felt as though any word spoken too hastily might shatter the spell between them. His thoughts raced ahead, but his voice lagged behind, caught on some invisible snag of emotion. He chastised himself for his lack of composure; after all, he was a man accustomed to negotiation, to the easy give-and-take of society's

parlour games. Yet here, in the hush of the garden, he was as uncertain as a boy.

Jane, for her part, seemed content to let the quiet linger, though Phillip sensed she was waiting – perhaps even hoping – for him to speak. He tried to summon courage, to force some clever remark or earnest confession past the sudden dryness in his throat. The colour in her cheeks encouraged him, yet at the same time deepened his uncertainty.

Phillip cleared his throat again. The simple sound seemed ludicrously loud in the hush. He attempted a smile, faltered, and finally managed, “Miss Bennet,” his voice softer than intended, almost lost in the rustle of leaves. The words he wished for – apologies and explanations, hopes and fears – crowded together, jostling for release but refused to emerge in order. He could not understand it – how could someone so practised in conversation, so adept at charm, find himself so wholly undone by the gentle presence at his side?

“I am very sorry for not visiting yesterday.” He finally blurted.

“Sorry? Why?” She did not look at him.

“I should have been here.”

Jane examined her footsteps. “My lord, we are happy to see you whenever you decide to visit.”

She did not make it easy for him. Phillip had to address this. He stopped. “Miss Bennet. I apologise...”

“My lord, you do not owe me an explanation. If you are worried about the rose, you should not. I shall think of it as a kind gesture from an acquaintance, nothing more. If you prefer, I shall give it back. I can go and get it.” Her voice was even, but her fingers curled at her side, betraying her strain.

“What? No! Miss Bennet, please forgive me. I know I hurt you. The flower was a token of my admiration. When Bingley asked for an interview, I froze. I thought the gentlemanly thing was to let you answer for yourself, but then I became terrified that you might say yes. In the end, I was ready to tear his person from you. I wanted to rescue you from him, but being the wonderful person you are, it turned out to be unnecessary.”

“You feared I might accept him?”

“When the possibility occurred to me, I was more than afraid. You had loved him once; I thought you might realise you still had feelings for him. In my selfishness, I could not endure it.”

He exhaled hard and ran a hand through his hair. “I am not proud of my behaviour. I let doubt master me – and you deserved courage, not absence.”

Jane inwardly cherished every word he said. A little Elizabeth came out in her: “So, how did you want to handle it if I had been of a mind to accept him?”

“I should have told you that you had another option.”

“And what would that have been?”

“To marry *me*.”

“My lord! Well, there is no need for that; I declined.” Her heart was beating fast; she hoped he would not be able to see how much she was affected. She started to walk again.

Phillip did not know what to do; everything was going wrong! He reached out. “Miss Bennet. Yesterday, I was unsure of my reception, and cowardly, I kept myself away. But today, I am here.”

“Well then, it is well for you.”

Phillip chuckled at her petulance.

Jane did not recognise herself. She was being mean to a gentleman who had become important to her. Right after he showed his preference by leaving the rose for her, although he did try to interrupt her interview with Mr. Bingley, he abandoned her the next day. That very much reminded her of her previous abandonment.

“I am aware that you are trying to chastise me for my failure, and I deserve it,” Phillip said, his

voice softening. “But know this: I would never abandon you.”

Jane’s eyes widened in shock. *Abandon*, she thought, as though he had read her mind.

“... Not when I was discreetly informed that you wore my flower yesterday.”

Jane could not hide her surprise.

“I am indebted to Miss Elizabeth,” he continued, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Well, it was too pretty to lie around in my room,” she replied, her voice shaky.

“Is that the only reason you wore it?” Phillip asked, his tone laced with hope.

This was becoming too much for Jane. She felt overwhelmed. Her body trembled slightly, and she found herself unable to respond. She looked away, her emotions too intense to face him.

“Because if that was not your only reason,” Phillip stepped closer, his voice dropping to an intimate murmur. “It would make me ever so happy.” He paused. “Jane.”

Her head snapped back at the sound of her name from his lips, spoken with such familiarity. The syllables curled in her chest like a flame. No one – no gentleman – had said her name that way before.

“Ever since I saw you for the first time in the churchyard, I have been intrigued by you. I was

captivated, and every time we met and talked, you took my breath away.” Phillip took her hand gently, and he went down on one knee, his eyes filled with sincerity. “Is that the only reason?”

Jane, mesmerised, shook her head, her heart pounding in her chest. She felt an inexplicable pull toward this man who spoke of cherishing her with such sincerity.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” Phillip said softly.

“Jane,” she corrected, her voice barely above a whisper. “Please. I like how you said my name.”

Phillip smiled at her. “Jane, I’ve been a bachelor for a long time. *You* needed to enter my life for me to recognise how empty my life has been. If you say yes, I shall cherish you, care for you, and keep you safe. Complete my life, Jane. Marry me.” Phillip’s voice faltered slightly, betraying the depth of his emotions.

Jane pressed a hand to her chest, hardly daring to believe it. She stared down at him, overwhelmed not by doubt, but by the astonishing reality of being chosen – truly chosen – not for fortune or name but for herself.

“I am not dreaming, am I?” she asked, her voice trembling with emotion.

“No, darling, no,” he assured her, his eyes never leaving hers. “What say you?”

“Is this what you truly want? Are you sure you’re not just asking because of...you know...?”

“I would much rather we did not mention his name while I am proposing,” Phillip said with a playful glint in his eyes.

Jane laughed softly, her heart light.

“Well, do you mind answering? My knee is starting to protest.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, her hand flying to her mouth. “I am so sorry! Yes, yes, I shall marry you!” She eagerly helped him to his feet, her heart brimming with joy at the prospect of their future together.

“Jane,” Phillip murmured as he removed her glove and reverently kissed the back of her hand, his lips lingering for a moment.

“My lord...” she whispered, awed by his tenderness.

“Phillip,” he corrected with a soft smile. “Please call me Phillip when we are alone.”

“Your parents, Phillip,” Jane said hesitantly, her brow furrowing in concern. “Should you not speak to them first? I fear they might think me...”

“Do not finish the thought,” he interrupted gently. “My parents have been praying for me to start my own family. My father will adore you. You are beautiful and kind. But my father will accept you because my mother has already accepted you.”

“She has?”

“Yes,” Phillip confirmed, a twinkle in his eye. “That is why she came to see us here.”

Jane gasped. “All that time, she—she was...”

“Indeed, she observed you keenly and was most pleased.”

“Oh, if only I had known.”

“You would not have been yourself,” Phillip said, his tone smoothing. “Please understand that I owed it to my family. I needed her to see you for herself. She has committed to guiding you through everything you need to become a countess.”

“A countess!” Jane exclaimed, her breath catching.

“Had that not occurred to you?”

“When I started to hope for us, I dreamt only of you,” Jane confessed, her eyes wide. “Oh, Phillip, you offer me so much; what could I possibly give in return?”

A jolt of warmth surged through Phillip as he gazed at her, his heart swelling with affection. *She is an angel*, he thought. *She asks what she can give in return.* He raised her hand to his lips once more, pressing a kiss upon it.

“You will be granting me the greatest gift, yourself,” he said tenderly, his words filled with the depth of his feelings. “You will live with me; hopefully, we shall make each other happy; we’ll build a

life. You'll be by my side and organise our social life, manage our household and later our tenants. God willing, bear me children. We shall grow old together, Jane. You are all I want in return."

Jane's eyes were full of tears – tears of happiness.

Phillip, ever the gentleman, took out his handkerchief and dried her tears. "Thank you for accepting me."

"You might have simply requested a courtship, you must know," Jane said, laughing through her tears.

Phillips shook his head. "No, you were deserving of a firm commitment. Also, I do not want to spend another month before I can call you mine. Would you like to speak to your mother? I need to talk to your father."

Jane nodded repeatedly, unable to speak just then. Phillip led his beloved into the house.

In the meantime, Darcy and his lovely ladies went to the stables. The siblings conducted Mary's lesson. Elizabeth declined, saying that she would rather just watch. Soon, Mary was trotting around the paddock on Daisy. She clapped. Her attention

went to Darcy's figure, his deep voice. He was gentle yet firm in his teaching. He taught Mary like a big brother.

"Mary, relax your posture!" She added her meagre knowledge to the lesson.

Darcy turned back and grinned at her.

When Georgiana was satisfied with Mary's progress, she led Mary out of the paddock.

Darcy turned to Elizabeth. She was watching him as he approached her. She did not look away. Her gaze held his, quiet but expectant, as though she had waited for him to speak. Darcy inclined his head.

"What are you thinking?"

"The way you were with Mary, I don't think she has had the sole attention of anyone for some time."

"How was I with her?"

"Like, like a brother." She looked him in the eye. "She blossomed under it," Elizabeth added softly. "I daresay...we all do."

"Hmm. There's a thought." He looked at her with meaning.

Elizabeth, on cue, crimsoned.

"Mr. Darcy, there's something I should like to discuss with you, however impolitic it is."

"Impolitic?"

“Well, it will paint me in a bad light, but I would rather address it sooner so I can finally leave it behind me.”

“I am intrigued, Miss Elizabeth. Shall we walk or sit down?”

“Walking would be best. We could just follow the girls.”

“You may have wondered from where my animosity originated.”

“Indeed. So, it is more than what you accused me of at Hunsford?”

“I’m afraid yes.” She took a big breath. “Do you recall the assembly you attended when you arrived here in the autumn?”

He nodded, a look of confusion on his face.

“Well, you were not in the best of moods, am I right?”

Darcy looked away, trying to recall the evening in question. They were late because of Miss Bingley. When was he in a good mood in a ballroom? He remembered the whispered conversations about him and Bingley, as well as several families introducing their daughters. Bingley was annoyingly exuberant, and the Bingley sisters could not display their disgust any better. Out of courtesy, he had to dance with them.

“No, I was not.”

“It showed. Because of that, I thought you were arrogant and was appalled by your attitude toward our neighbourhood. It felt like you dismissed all of us before you took the time to get to know us.”

Darcy felt righteous indignation for a moment, but then he tried to really hear Elizabeth’s criticism.

“I have since come to understand you better. Your aunt spoke about you and how making you attend balls during the season is a struggle for her. I wonder if your dislike is because you are pursued relentlessly.”

“That and the several attempted compromises.”

Elizabeth blinked; the shock momentarily silenced her.

“The ballroom is an often-chosen place for trying to achieve a compromise. A wrong move can mean the end.”

“How—how awful!” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose in distaste. Trapping a man against their will was appalling to her. “I had no idea such tricks were practised.” She shook her head. “How utterly mortifying for all involved.”

“They like to play on a man’s instinct. They pretend to fall, and the poor fellow reaches out to catch them; however, they manage to have the

gown indecently ripped. Last year, it happened to me. I was about to catch a debutante but thankfully had the state of mind and stepped back. She fell with her face on the floor. Several of us helped her up, and yes, her bodice was loose; it was pre-cut.” He looked ahead. “So, you did not like my condescending behaviour.”

Elizabeth was still trying to digest what the ladies of the ton dared do to achieve their goals. She had to shake her head before returning to Darcy’s question.

“No, I did not.

“At one point, I contemplated dropping my handkerchief at your feet just to make you engage in an interaction with one of us.”

Darcy blinked. “Would it have been embroidered?”

She laughed. “With my meagre stitching? But seriously, when my mother tried to converse with you, you simply excused yourself. No matter. I may understand that you are not like me in social situations... Unfortunately, there was more. Mr. Bingley tried to persuade you to enjoy yourself and dance, offering a lady to ask. Do you remember?”

Darcy remembered vaguely. He remembered noticing Elizabeth as she walked past him with an impertinent look; he remembered watching her

dance with a strange interest that he could not deny.

“You told your friend that you thought her only tolerable looking and that you didn’t want to give consequence to ladies other men already neglected.”

“I said that?” He was mortified. “Was – was that you?”

She nodded, looking at her shoes.

“I sat out a dance so that other ladies could have their turn as gentlemen were scarce, and as you know, some chose not to dance.”

Darcy shut his eyes. He recalled being pestered by Bingley and that he sent him back to his new angel. He did not remember saying what he said.

“I—I beg your pardon, Miss Elizabeth. I must not have been in the right mind. If I had really looked at you, I’m sure I would not have said that.” Darcy’s jaw tightened as he replayed his careless words in his mind. “No, that is not true. It sounds very much like what I would say just to avoid dancing.” He shook his head in self-reproach. He had been blind not only to her beauty but to her presence – a failing that now seemed inexcusable.

“To be honest, I did not want to enjoy myself. In my way of thinking, I abandoned my sister, who was suffering, because I had thought to protect her from learning what Wickham had become and

then hired a woman who helped him in seducing her. I thought I didn't deserve to have a good time, not that I usually achieve that in a ballroom." He smiled wryly.

Now, Elizabeth felt even worse for her sentiments at the time.

"And is that why you hated me so much?"

"Being called tolerable hit me harder than I was ready to admit. I laughed about it, but I was... Imagine growing up next to Jane."

"But you are beautiful!"

She was stunned for a moment. "You—you are very kind. Of course, I know better now. Then, however, I hated you. In reflection, my feelings were hurt, and I lashed out; I wanted to hear Mr. Wickham's condemning words about you because then I could dismiss your words and you as *you* dismissed me."

Darcy made Elizabeth stop. He took her hand.

"If I could go back in time, I would take those stupid words back. I am truly sorry for causing you pain. I had no idea."

Elizabeth's resentment began to crumble under the weight of Darcy's sincerity. She saw for the first time how her own pride had mirrored his, how her wounded vanity had kept her from seeing the man behind the words.

“I think I was angry at you that you dismissed me, and with that, you dismissed the possibility of us. Maybe that is why I did not want to see or understand your admiration or devotion. It was difficult to reconcile that and then being proposed to.”

“I could kick myself. I caused my own downfall... Well, let us start anew. I want you to know that I find you enchanting. Your sparkling eyes haunted me even when I left you. If it is any consolation, I did notice you at the assembly. I remember you walking past me with a look of challenge, which I now understand. I watched you dance, and for some reason, my eyes always found you. I was already fascinated, though I did not realise it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I wish I had known. Do you know I was so silly that when I found you looking at me, I thought you were looking to find fault? I needed Jane to laugh at the idea.”

“That is indeed silly. I looked at you because I could not look away.”

AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT AND A SUNDAY PICNIC

Chapter 24



Jane found her mother in the still room⁴⁰ checking the stock. She and her sisters often joined her mother, the cook, or Mrs. Hill there, making jam or preserves for winter. Now, she closed the door behind her and asked her mother to sit on a chair.

“What is it, my dear?”

“Just sit first, please.”

“All right, I’m sitting. What is it?” She put her notebook down.

“Mama, I am grateful for your counsel about Mr. Bingley.”

Her mother sighed as she listened, her expression thoughtful.

“I know it was a good offer, more than I could have ever hoped for,” Jane began softly. “But one of the reasons I declined his offer was that another had captured my heart. I didn’t know if it would

⁴⁰ A room in a large house used by the housekeeper for the storage of preserves, cakes, and liqueurs and the preparation of tea and coffee.

amount to anything, but I couldn't help myself. I hoped."

"The viscount?" Mrs. Bennet asked, her eyes narrowing with curiosity...and hope.

Jane nodded. "Yes, Mama, him."

Mrs. Bennet's brow furrowed in thought. "I suspected, but...he is a peer."

"Indeed, he is," Jane replied, her face lighting up with a charming smile. "And this very peer has just asked me to marry him."

Mrs. Bennet grew unnaturally still.

Jane was a good daughter. She knew how important such news would be to her mother. She only hoped that, upon realising she was to become a countess one day, her mother might manage to keep her composure. Well, one could always dream.

"I am to be married, Mama," Jane said, her voice trembling slightly with joy. As the words left her lips, Jane felt the weight of their truth. The dream she dared not voice had come true, and with it came a tide of emotions – happiness, relief, and a touch of apprehension about the new life ahead.

"You are to be married...to a viscount," Mrs. Bennet repeated, scarcely able to believe her ears. "You are not teasing me, are you?"

Jane shook her head with energy.

“Oh, I’m quite overcome. Really? Jane, oh, I knew you were so beautiful for a reason! I have seen the way he looks at you.” She clapped her hands together. “His lordship as a son-in-law! My daughter married, married... Good gracious, you will be a countess...elegant, rich, a peer.” Mrs. Bennet dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, her heart swelling with pride. “Oh, my sweet Jane, you’ve fulfilled every mother’s dream. A daughter of mine – a countess!” She laughed through her tears, pulling Jane into a tight embrace. “Oh! Does your father know?” She jumped from her chair.

“Phillip is with him now, seeking his permission.”

She sat back. “Phillip? What a handsome name! Most fitting for a gentleman of his rank. Oh, my sweet Jane, you will be so happy.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“Is it naïve of me that I did not think of that when I wanted him to propose to me?”

“Oh, no. Young love!” She gasped. “Jane, what about the countess?” She was worried all of a sudden.

“Phillip said she came to Netherfield to meet us. She bestowed her blessing upon him.”

“Even then, when he invited her to meet us? Oh, she wanted to meet me, too! I hope I did not let you down, child. She approved? The Lord has

been good to us! Now, your father will be smug. He will vex me by reminding me that, although he didn't save for your dowry, it was not an obstacle to you finding a husband."

"Well, it could've been. Easily." Jane sighed.

The household was full of joy when Darcy and his ladies returned. When they entered the parlour, they found Mr. and Mrs. Bennet sitting in two arm-chairs and Phillip and Jane sitting on a couch together.

"Oh, it's time you returned! Come, come, all of you. Your father has an announcement to make." She waved her handkerchief.

A palpable sense of excitement filled the room. The door opened again, and Kitty and Lydia joined them, filled with quiet joy that they were called down from their lessons.

"What is it, Mama?"

"Come and sit, girls. Your father is about to announce wonderful news."

"Yes, well." Mr. Bennet stood. "Indeed, it is an important announcement. Aunt Gardiner was kind enough to interview several ladies and chose a good candidate. The governess for Kitty and Lydia will arrive next week..."

The girls gasped with horror.

“Oh, Mr. Bennet! You are cruel to play such a joke on us. Not that announcement,” interrupted his wife.

“Certainly, my dear. How could I forget?”

“Papa! Must we have one? The Morlands have one, and she is not nice.” Kitty protested.

“Kitty, hush.” Her mother dismissed her.

“Well, everybody, I should like to announce that our Jane is getting married. His lordship asked her to marry him, and she accepted. I have given my blessing.”

The people in the room were struck speechless for a moment, after which gasps and squeals were heard.

“What?”

“How?”

Elizabeth’s joy at her sister’s engagement was palpable, radiating from her in waves of warmth and happiness. Even though she knew about the likelihood of this, she could barely contain her scream of joy. Her sister had denied the possibility, but Elizabeth knew she must have secretly hoped for it. The viscount was a good match for her. He was steady, competent, and already his own man. He would be a good guide for her sweet sister. Jane would have the opportunity to step out into the world and learn so much! Her lovely nature would

provide a place of refuge and respite from the demands of her husband's public life.

She looked on as the cousins hugged each other. Mr. Darcy's face was overtaken with genuine happiness for his cousin. These new expressions she had recently witnessed on his face elated her. It felt like he had transformed. But Elizabeth knew now that these were always beneath the surface; he just needed familiarity and purpose to let them show themselves. How she liked it when his face softened into a warm look! It suited the gentleman. On the other hand, she did not begrudge him the expressions he used to keep people away, the neutral one, the master one...those were necessary for life, but she adored the one he only put on when he looked at her. Now that she understood, she realised it made her feel special.

The Netherfield party was invited to dinner without ceremony, which the gentlemen accepted merrily. The guests were offered the guest rooms to freshen up. Kitty and Lydia invited Georgiana to join them in their rooms. Mrs. Bennet assured that there was no need to send for their evening attires as they would only be among themselves. A note was sent to Netherfield that they would not

dine there. Mrs. Bennet sent a note to the Phillip-
ses to join them for dinner as they were
celebrating.

An express was dispatched to the Matlocks’
residence in London with the viscount’s handwrit-
ing:

*Mother,
I am engaged to the most wonderful woman in the world.
Your son,
Phillip*

*P.S.: Please, have Father place the announcement.
Here are Miss Bennet’s details.*

Sunday came again, signalling the end of May. The
weather was beautiful for the enjoyment of the
neighbourhood. At the end of the service, the par-
son announced the first commonly held picnic⁴¹
behind the church. Once everybody had their Sun-
day breakfast, the congregation was invited back.
The Netherfield gentlemen decided to attend, ea-
ger to spend more time in the company of their
ladies.

⁴¹ See images of Regency picnics on the story website

Mrs. Bennet sent her three younger daughters to help set up the picnic, putting tablecloths on the long tables and arranging the flowers. Pitchers of drinks were prepared. Many families took blankets and pillows.

As everyone arrived in the afternoon, the tables were quickly covered with all kinds of offerings: cold roast beef, ribs of lamb, roast fowls, roast ducks, ham, tongue, veal-and-ham pie, pigeon pie; somebody had brought six lobsters; baskets of salad, cucumbers. The stewed fruit was well sweetened and sat with pastry biscuits, cheesecakes, jam puffs, a sizeable cold plum pudding, a few baskets of fresh fruit, plain biscuits, cheese, butter, rolls, tin bread, plain plum cakes, pound cakes, sponge cakes, a tin of mixed biscuits, and tea; the offerings covered the cloth. No guest would go hungry at the picnic.

The younger generation played games, and the older and distinguished ones indulgently looked on. Darcy and Phillip were reclining comfortably on the blanket and surrounding pillows. Elizabeth became flustered at seeing him so informal. Darcy looked at her questioningly.

“I should know better by now, as I have seen you attired for heavy work, but it’s still new to see you so...relaxed in public...you are laughing at me.”

And indeed, he burst out laughing. “Miss Elizabeth, you are a treasure! You surprise me endlessly.” Darcy’s eyes sparkled with mirth as he leaned closer. “Did you think I retired for the night with my cravat still in a proper knot?” He laughed anew as Elizabeth crimsoned, warm and inviting like a freshly ripened strawberry. Phillip was trying hard to refrain from laughing, too.

“My lord, you might as well laugh, too. As I said it out loud, even *I* find it silly.” She shook her head.

“Miss Elizabeth, I should be honoured if you called me Phillip among ourselves.” He bowed his head to her.

Elizabeth was pleasantly surprised. “Phillip? I should like that. Please call me Elizabeth or Lizzy.”

Darcy cleared his throat and murmured, “I believe Elizabeth should suffice.”

It was Jane’s turn to laugh; her sister looked at her, confused.

“Oh, Lizzy. He wants your nickname for himself.” Jane gestured to Darcy.

Poor Elizabeth crimsoned further, and her wit abandoned her, so she tried to change the subject.

“I—I saw Hussar arrive with you. Where is he?”

Darcy looked around, now red himself.

“I am afraid we’ll not see him until we leave. He’ll approach everybody eating, and with his

puppy eyes, he will be fed. Ugh, he is there, with the children.” He gestured toward them.

Elizabeth noticed they received much attention and many amused glances.

“Mr. Darcy, would you like to join me in greeting our neighbours?” Elizabeth asked him sweetly.

“You should not believe me if I answered, ‘It would be my pleasure,’ but I shall join you because that is what *you* would like.”

That made Elizabeth laugh. “Indeed, I should like you to join me. Do not fret; I’ll protect you,” she bantered.

They walked around and stopped to talk to several people. As she expected, most people had heard the gossip that they might be courting. They were not subtle about it; they openly asked if it was true. At first, Darcy did not know how to handle such open inquiries, but he became braver after Elizabeth acknowledged the courtship with a happy smile. “We are indeed courting. Miss Elizabeth was gracious enough to accept my request for a courtship.

“We all love our dear Miss Elizabeth. She is the loveliest of ladies.” Mrs. Long enthused.

“Exactly so, madam. I had no choice but to try to convince her to accept me.”

“Now, Miss Lizzy, don’t make this excellent gentleman wait too long,” she admonished affectionately.

Darcy enjoyed Elizabeth’s crimson cheeks. “I wish to rescind my answer to you.” He said in a low voice as they stepped away. “It *was* my pleasure to talk to the neighbours.”

They returned to the family, who were already eating. They went to the table and looked at what was on offer.

“This is a rich offering. Why do we not use this to learn what food we like and what we do not? I shall hold our plates, and you choose the food.”

Elizabeth thought it a great idea and started asking about every item available. There was not much Darcy did not like; in fact, practically nothing was skipped. They laughed and teased. They had a lovely time filling the plates. By the end, Darcy’s plate was about twice as high as Elizabeth’s.

“Come on, Miss Elizabeth, you must eat more. A little more ham, perhaps?”

“Do not forget, Mr. Darcy, that we have not looked at the desserts. I need to save myself for them.”

They ate in the circle of their family. Kitty and Lydia were surprisingly quiet but ate with energy. As soon as they finished, they were off again. Mr.

Bennet already looked like he would fall asleep any minute while Mrs. Bennet chatted with her sister. Mr. Phillips looked around in a leisurely manner; he was already eating his dessert.

After some time, Phillip suggested a walk. The two couples left together. Hussar happily joined them when he saw his master walk away.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I have a letter from my aunt and uncle. They were going to take me with them to the Lake District in the summer, but as things stand, I think I shall decline.”

“When would this be?”

“July–August?”

“If you want to go, by all means, do not decline on my account. I shall have to return to Pemberley in August... Maybe you could stay at my home for a while on the trip.”

Elizabeth did not expect Darcy to suggest that she should still go ahead if she wanted. *Stay at Pemberley? With relations from trade?*

“This is my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, who live in London.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And you would have them visit Pemberley?”

Darcy stopped, just having understood her hesitation. He was mortified that she had to ask. “Miss Elizabeth, they are your family, and after what I

have heard, I know they are quite important to you. Therefore, I shall welcome them.”

“Tha—thank you, but there is still the question of Jane’s wedding.”

“You are right. Hey, Phillip, any thoughts on when you want to marry?” Darcy called out to his cousin, who was walking with Jane in front of them.

“The sooner, the better if you ask me.” He chuckled. “We have not discussed it. We must consult with my mother. Jane, what are your thoughts?”

“If our names are read in our parishes, we can marry any time after that.”

“That’s a good idea. Let us talk to your parson, and I shall send a letter to mine...”

Elizabeth continued, “Well, I mentioned my uncle’s letter because I wrote to them about your enterprise. I tried to explain it as best I could. I thought maybe he would be interested.” She smiled broadly. “My uncle wrote that he would like to become a customer. Moreover, his associate is interested as well. Their neighbour is also a well-to-do merchant, and he would not mind deliveries either. He included my aunt’s list of items they would be very interested in.” She gave Darcy the note.

Darcy, after the shock of it, called Phillip again. Both Darcy and Phillip were unable to speak for a few seconds when Elizabeth repeated what her uncle had written.

“Now, that is some development. I did not even consider soliciting customers among those in trade.” Darcy said at last.

“They have money and like everything related to the gentry. We should have thought of that. What is on the list?” Phillip was intrigued.

“Hmm...honey. We had not considered that possibility. That would be easy enough to establish.”

“Mr. Harris and I think even the Lucases make honey.” Jane offered.

“What do you think, Phillip?”

“Yes, excellent idea.”

“He also mentions baked goods, bread and such.”

“Oh, bread? That is... This enterprise is just getting better and better. Why not? We could have more ovens built. We are already building one for the staff.”

“All right, let us discuss this with our people.” Darcy nodded. “Miss Elizabeth, please tell your uncle that we greatly thank him for his business. If these other two families become our customers,

too, we will give him a discount on all his purchases while they shop with us.” He looked at Phillip, who nodded. “We will send word when the provisions may begin to be supplied. In a few weeks, hopefully. Do explain that our prices will be slightly higher than the market price. We are grateful. If you could give me your uncle’s address.” He turned to Phillip. “He also mentioned different pies on the list. Indeed, the possibilities are endless. We will need to hire more women.”

“Did I really help? You do not mind my interference?” She asked Darcy as they resumed walking.

“You have opened new possibilities. Without this, we would have concentrated on the ton. Why would I begrudge that? If you have any ideas, please share them. We can only benefit from other perspectives.”

“You would welcome my thoughts on the subject?” Elizabeth felt a strange warmth spread through her chest. Here was a man of immense power and privilege, yet he valued her opinions. The thought humbled her, and for the first time, she saw a glimpse of what a partnership with him might truly mean.

“Indeed, I would. Why? Do you have more?”

“I might. I shall have to think about it.”

After some silence, Darcy reflected out loud. “As you know, I have been my own man for about five years now. Also, in the last year of my father, as soon as I returned from my Grand Tour, I had to make my own decisions about the estate and everything. I have surrounded myself with capable people to help me, but ultimately, I have borne the responsibilities alone. Having someone with whom to share my thoughts would be a great comfort. A partner.” He looked at her. “You could be that person. You are clever; you have your opinions on things, and you are interested. You have just shown initiative by contacting your relatives. We could discuss things...”

She imagined long evenings spent in the library, discussing estate matters over tea, her opinions not just heard but sought.

“... It would also be beneficial if you could share some of my decision-making process. It is getting to be too much to handle by myself.”

Elizabeth was flabbergasted. Unlike her father, this man trusted her intellect and wanted her to be his partner. He usually dismissed her suggestions; she could count on one hand when her father acted on her advice. This man wanted to involve her in his business and all his decisions. How could she have dismissed him before? Never again.

For the rest of their time together, she made him talk about his home. Pemberley seemed like the perfect topic as Mr. Darcy relaxed and freely shared his thoughts on the subject, and there were many.

As he spoke of his estate, his passion for its management shone through. Elizabeth found herself hanging on his every word, imagining the grand beauty of Pemberley and the man who brought it to life. She felt her admiration for him deepen, an emotion that was both unbidden and undeniable.

As one of the organisers, Lady Lucas looked around with satisfaction. The event was successful, with many families in attendance, including some from the trade sector, which they hoped to encourage, as their community was small. She had a lot to report to her daughter at Hunsford. As she made her rounds, Mr. Wickham's lies, subsequent crime, and his debts to the merchants were a much-discussed topic. She was angry at herself for extending invitations to her events and letting him dine at her house more than once.

She would also mention the new Netherfield party and that Maria was on her way to becoming

friends with Miss Darcy. At the picnic, they spent most of their time in each other's company with some of the other young ladies.

The most significant news she wanted to share with her daughter was that Jane had captured the heart of a peer. The viscount, a handsome gentleman himself, had already asked for her hand and, of course, was accepted. Fanny did not fail to mention that in all her conversations. Oddly, the other worthwhile news she learnt from Agnes Phillips was that Mr. Darcy was now courting their Lizzy. Lady Lucas could hardly wait to relay the news of Jane's betrothal and Elizabeth's courtship. She imagined Charlotte's astonishment as she read the letter, her daughter forever intrigued by the unfolding dramas of Longbourn and Netherfield. She would ask her daughter if Lizzy had written to her about it. She observed the couple herself at the picnic, and there could be no mistake about the news. Mr. Darcy was very attentive to her, which she accepted with pleasure. The two groups were picnicking together.

Lady Lucas sat down that evening and penned the following to Charlotte:

“My dearest Charlotte,

You will never guess what unfolded at the Sunday picnic...”

And so, as soon as the following day, Lady Lucas sealed the letter with an air of triumph, certain it would spark endless speculation in Hunsford.

UNDER THE WALNUT TREE AND FLYING

Chapter 25



The two gentlemen started the following week with renewed energy. They worked hard from early morning, planning, calculating, overseeing, and giving instructions all the way to lunch. After a morning filled with plans and calculations on the estate, the gentlemen took a well-deserved reprieve in the afternoon to visit their respective ladies.

“Phillip,” Jane greeted her fiancé on Thursday. “It remains a marvel that you are now ‘Phillip’ to me.”

“It is marvellous to hear you call me by my name.” Phillip had asked her to start with a walk. “How are you, Jane?”

“I am very well, thank you,” she said with a big smile. I sometimes wonder if I am still dreaming. How can someone survive feeling this happiness? And I have made my whole family so delighted,” she babbled on, her gaze sweeping over the sun-dappled path ahead. “It feels as though every joy I

dared to imagine is unfolding before me, yet there's a part of me that wonders if I truly deserve it."

Phillip gazed at her with endless admiration. His beloved was happy. How well it suited her angelic face! "Are you happy?" He stopped walking.

"Yes, I am."

He could not look away; she was entrancing. How had he ever believed himself complete before her? How fortunate he was to call this radiant creature his own. He needed to get her alone.

They resumed walking.

"And you? How are you? You have been busy."

"I like to be busy. The buildings are coming along nicely. One team is building farming facilities so that the animals can be housed sometime next week. Some have already arrived, and we are using the buildings of one of the tenants; we will need a lot of poultry to sell, to feed the staff, and we need many eggs." He smiled. "The first leg of the greenhouse is also ready, so the plants are going under glass, and the next phase has started. The accommodations are nearly finished, well, the first ten rooms. Carpentry is producing some furniture; some we bought from the neighbourhood."

"What about accessories, like curtains?"

"Oh, I guess... Jane, would you like to be involved? I mean, only if you want. You could take

the lead on ensuring the rooms have all the necessary items, such as bowls, jugs, sheets, and chairs. Darcy wants to make them welcoming. I'm sure Mrs. Nicholls would welcome relinquishing that responsibility."

"You would trust me with all that?"

"This needs a woman's touch. You'll be my wife. It does not mean you have to do everything personally. You may use the steward or his assistant to negotiate prices or arrange storage...whatever you need."

"My goodness, yes, yes, I wish to be involved. I shall ask Georgiana if she wants to help me. Lizzy might be interested as well." Her eyes sparkled with excitement. Already, she imagined the rooms filled with carefully chosen linens and the warm touch of thoughtful details. Jane felt a deep sense of purpose rising within her.

Phillip could see the wheels already turning in her mind. How he adored this woman!

"You do it as you wish, my dear. It will help us greatly, whatever you do. I would like to introduce you to our new secretary and treasurer. If you want to help, you could get the ladies to organise attire for the workers, shoes, boots – there's so much to think of. We need to hire some women to sew..."

“I think we can arrange that among ourselves...we can ask tenant wives if they would be interested in earning more money.”

“You’re truly remarkable. Yes, please, your help would be appreciated. I shall talk to Darcy.” He marvelled at her ability to embrace challenges with such poise.

He took a letter from his breast pocket and offered it to Jane.

“Mother sent a letter to you. You may read it when you are alone. In mine, she says they will visit next week as there’ll be a few days’ break at parliament, and my father, the earl, can join her.”

Jane nodded.

“Also, she wrote that she would like to take you with her for about a week when they return.”

“Why?” She asked, confused.

“To purchase things. You’ll need a new wardrobe.”

“Heavens!” She breathed in sharply. “I—I have about five and twenty pounds saved.”

“Oh, darling, truly? That is so charming. That’s a lot of money.”

“Are you teasing me, *my lord?*” she asked, her smile betraying her playfulness.

“My lord? No, no, no,” he replied, feigning offence, “I would never mock you...”

“My lord? No, no, no. I would not dare mock you. You’ll need much more than that, however. Hopefully, your father will provide you with some funds, but please do not protest; I also plan to give you enough money so you won’t have to worry about your spending.

Jane crimsoned.

“Your blush delights me, but there’s no need for it. I want the best for you. Let me spoil you, Jane. We will be under scrutiny; better to say, *you* will be under scrutiny. I want folks to be brought to their knees when they look at you, and the women to become green with envy.”

Jane searched his eyes to see if he was joking. He was not.

“I shall have to get used to this, will I not? Oh, what hardship?” She laughed and pretended to swoon with her hand on her forehead.

“Indeed.” Phillip smiled at her silliness. “Please listen to Mother for what you will need, however overwhelming it seems. Regarding fashion and what is appropriate and flattering, you can listen to her; she is quite one of the best-dressed ladies of the ton, but I want you to enjoy yourself and choose what *you* want. Unfortunately, she doesn’t want me to join you. She argues that purchasing our trousseaus will occupy most of your days, and she also wants to use your time together to impart

some vital knowledge for navigating the ton. I apologise in advance; that will be a necessary evil. You will be better prepared for it, however. All right, enough of this talk.” Phillip looked behind them at the maid who played the role of a chaperone.

“Excuse me for a moment.” He stepped up to the maid and discreetly put a few coins in her hand. “Mary, is it?”

The girl nodded.

“Well, Mary, if you might tarry behind a bit, we would appreciate a moment of solitude. “You understand our need for a moment’s privacy, I trust?”

She curtsied shyly. “But...”

“We just need a couple of minutes of privacy.”

She nodded.

Phillip went back to his beloved. As he looked around, they were quite by themselves. Drawing Jane along a quiet, shaded path, Phillip led her to an ancient walnut tree with its thick, sprawling branches, offering them a rare moment of privacy.

“Jane.” He said softly.

She anticipated this.

“Sir, you are a man of great planning,” Jane said, her voice barely above a whisper. Her heart hammered, and her mouth felt suddenly dry, betraying the nervous energy she was trying to contain. She had imagined this moment, yet now

that it was here, she felt suspended in a dream-like haze, unsure if she would awaken.

Phillip smiled, clearly enjoying her attempt at banter at such a moment. She valiantly tried not to show her nervousness, though the flush on her cheeks revealed it.

“Yes,” he replied with a teasing glint in his eyes, “I do flatter myself that I can think two steps ahead. I have long envisaged you in my arms, and for that, I had to act accordingly.”

“In your arms?” she echoed, her voice faltering slightly.

“Yes, my darling. Jane.” He murmured, his voice soft and full of affection. His hand slipped to her waist, pulling her toward him while stepping forward. He looked into her eyes and searched them for any trace of reluctance. But in her eyes, he only found trust – trust mingled with the sweet, timid fear of the unknown. She was untouched by any man’s affections; he rejoiced in the knowledge that he would be her first kiss. Although they had not said anything, her eyes sparkled with her love for him.

“Have you ever been kissed?” He whispered, his breath warm against her skin.

Jane just stared at him; she hardly remembered to shake her head. Warmth took over Jane’s body as she concentrated on her breathing. She might

have stopped breathing altogether when Phillip leaned in and touched her lips with his. She felt his hand gently cup her face, his thumb grazing her cheek, while his other hand seemed to become one with her on her waist. The kiss was more of a series of soft, tentative kisses, like whispers between souls still learning the language of intimacy, as if testing the waters of a delicate, precious moment, but for Jane, each one was more intoxicating than the last. When he finally drew back, he rested his forehead against hers, his chest rising and falling with the emotion.

His breathing laboured; Phillip had to stop because the feeling in his chest as he kissed Jane overwhelmed him. The reaction of her virgin, trembling lips made him lightheaded. For a man so accustomed to control, the torrent of emotion she evoked in him was disarming. He had never felt so vulnerable, yet he would not trade this moment for anything.

“Jane, sweet Jane,” he sighed, the words barely audible, as if speaking too loudly might shatter the fragile magic of the moment. But then he went back to kissing his beloved properly. He slowly taught her the ancient dance of lips, making her unconsciously mould into his embrace. He answered her silent request and hugged her to

himself, tightening his arms around her and pulling her fully against him.

Her knees began to weaken beneath her, overwhelmed by the emotions flooding her senses. Phillip held her securely, his strength grounding her as they lost themselves in the intimacy of the moment. He kissed her with a slow, deliberate tenderness as if each kiss were a promise – a promise to cherish her, to protect her, and to love her.

When they finally parted, Jane was breathless, her face flushed with the warmth of her first kiss. She leaned against Phillip, her head resting on his chest as she tried to catch her breath, her heart still fluttering from the intensity of the experience. She had dreamt of what it might feel like to be kissed, but no dream could have prepared her for the trembling truth of it. Phillip pressed a kiss to the top of her head, his hand still gently caressing her waist.

“You are everything I imagined and more, my darling Jane,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “You are mine, as I am yours.”

Darcy and his merry ladies were just returning from their now regular riding lessons when Phillip and Jane appeared at the corner.

“I think after one more lesson with Miss Elizabeth on the morrow and Saturday, we could have that ride you have been talking about.”

“That sounds very good, Darce!”

Darcy observed the two, with Jane looking everywhere except at them, and her hair slightly out of place. He saw their chaperone at a generously discreet distance. He asked slowly, “And how was your walk this lovely afternoon?”

Immediately, Jane’s eyes showed alarm, and her face crimsoned like a ripened apple.

Phillip came to the rescue. “We viewed many of the blooms. Shall we go in?” He said, and then he led Jane inside.

Darcy rooted, exclaimed under his breath once they were gone, “Lucky ba...lucky man!” He corrected himself when he saw Elizabeth’s eyes widen. The irony was not lost on him. Here he was, longing for Elizabeth, yet constrained by propriety and her uncertain affections. How maddening it was to watch his cousin so easily claim what he desired. She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

“Did you not see your sister?”

Elizabeth tilted her head to the side.

Darcy shifted his gaze to her lips.

Her hand flew to her mouth. “No!”

“Yes.”

“Oh, my!” She looked at Darcy with eyes impossibly wide. As Darcy continued to look at her, his expression shifted to one of longing. Elizabeth lowered her hand and watched as the transformation took place.

“Do you—do you wish...?” Her voice croaked.

Darcy’s eyes flashed. He looked toward the sky and shut his eyes. He mumbled, “Oh, for the love of the All-mighty!” When he turned his eyes back to Elizabeth, he offered his arm to her with a sigh. “Shall we follow?”

Elizabeth took his arm, mortified that she dared ask the question and half amused that Mr. Darcy visibly struggled with his desires.

They went inside; however, she was useless for the rest of the visit. She observed Phillip and Jane, trying to imagine what they had done. Elizabeth felt a level of envy for their intimacy; she wondered what it must have been like – she would ask Jane. Then she kept glancing toward Darcy, who caught her gaze a few times and reciprocated. Did he know what she was thinking? Did he know that she imagined them kissing? Suddenly, she experienced the strangest feeling of yearning in the middle of a crowded room. She recalled what it felt like when he lifted her off Daisy; he almost embraced her then. Her heart was in her throat; she cursed men’s fashion, for she remembered what it was like when

she saw his solid and robust neck. How would he react if she...? She gasped silently at her own treacherous and, what was more, scandalous thoughts. She stood and, with shaking hands, poured herself another cup of tea.

On Friday, the events of the day before lingered vividly, still fresh in her mind, like a melody that refused to fade. They hardly said two words to each other – the awkward silence between her and Mr. Darcy weighed heavily, each hesitant to breach the chasm that had opened between them. Thankfully, the riding lesson offered some neutral interaction.

Despite the innocent nature of their engagement, the air around them pulsed with an undeniable tension. It veritably vibrated. Something had changed, and both felt it. The sweet torture of awareness at least afflicted both, and they could rejoice in this shared predicament.

Darcy, riding beside her, was at a loss for how to navigate this new emotional landscape. Darcy did not know how to react; he feared he had stepped too far by mentioning the other couple's kiss. Had he overstepped? As they rode in silence,

he stole glances at Elizabeth, noting her preoccupied expression. Miss Elizabeth seemed occupied by the thought; did she want him to kiss her? Each heartbeat seemed to echo the question. The notion sent a thrill coursing through him, mingled with a sense of uncertainty. Her blush when they looked at each other suggested she was not unaffected by the thought of them kissing.

Jane and Elizabeth awoke in one bed Saturday morning after an awkward but much-needed pillow talk the previous night. Elizabeth fell asleep with the intriguing thought of Mr. Darcy and her, although the image was a blur, while Jane fell asleep knowing what a kiss between lovers was like.

The Netherfield party promised to arrive just after eleven. They were to go behind the sister mountain of old Oakham Mount, a smaller, gentler slope, where the creek that ran through Longbourn and Netherfield widened into a small lake in a depression. They were to have their own little picnic there. The riding group consisted of the gentlemen, Georgiana, and the three Bennet sisters, Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary.

The gentlemen were punctual as always. They brought two extra horses for Mary and Jane. Elizabeth would travel on Daisy. Darcy's servant brought the barouche, complete with blankets, pillows, and a large umbrella; he would help set up the picnic and serve as a chaperone. Darcy wanted to ensure they had an alternative mode of transportation if the ladies felt too tired to ride. As soon as the girls' basket was put into the vehicle, the gentlemen helped the ladies onto the saddles, and off they went with Mrs. Bennet and Hill waving to them until they disappeared.

The kind Reader can imagine the cheerful mood of the ride and the laughter, as well as the relaxed atmosphere while they shared the carefully prepared food. At the onset of summer, they were surrounded by a profusion of life. June revealed nature at its most lush and vibrant.

The only unusual occurrence on the outing was on the way back, when Elizabeth impatiently turned to Darcy.

"I am quite tired of trotting like a governess," Elizabeth said, half in jest, her eyes glinting with mischief. "When may I fly, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy's head snapped toward her, surprised by the daring in her tone. Without a word, he guided Devil closer, bringing his mount alongside hers in one smooth, practiced motion. The others looked

on with interest, but Darcy's focus was solely on Elizabeth. He reached out and, with an ease that belied the strength it required, placed his hands firmly around her waist. Her breath caught in her throat as he lifted her clean off her saddle.

“Mr. Darcy...!” she began, but no more than a startled squeak escaped before she landed with a soft thud in front of him on Devil's back.

For the briefest of moments, Elizabeth froze in shock, her gloved hands clinging to his sleeves for balance. But then it struck her – what he meant to do – and she let out a delighted shriek that echoed across the field, wild and free.

Behind them, gasps and murmurs rippled through the group.

“Mr. Darcy, be careful!” Jane called out in alarm, her hands half-raised as though she might retrieve her sister by force of will alone.

“Are you ready?” Darcy murmured low into Elizabeth's ear, his voice roughened slightly by adrenaline. She felt his breath ghost across her cheek, and the firmness of his arms anchoring her against him.

Elizabeth turned her head slightly to look back at him, laughter dancing in her eyes. “As much as I shall ever be. Just – do not let me fall.”

“Trust me,” he said. His voice, though quiet, thrummed with certainty. Then, with a nudge of

his heel, he urged Devil forward into a bold canter. He adjusted Elizabeth to ensure she was secure and urged Devil into a heart-stopping gallop⁴². It was a sight to see.

“Lean forward, hug his neck, hold on to his mane.” He said, making both of them lean over to secure greater speed.

She could not tell where the power ended – in the stallion or in the man holding her so securely.

“Oh, we are flying!”

The wind rushed at her face, carrying away every constraint of decorum. For the first time, she felt utterly free, untethered by expectation or fear. It was exhilarating, and she wanted it never to end.

They became one with the horse below them. The horse’s powerful legs propelled them forward in a breathtaking display of strength and grace. Devil, as if he wanted to prove himself to Elizabeth, stretched his muscles to make every stride longer. Elizabeth felt that the horse was suspended in mid-air. Behind her, Darcy hardly touched his horse’s back, holding Elizabeth in an almost standing position. Every movement of the horse pressed her back more fully into Darcy’s chest; the rhythmic power of the gallop mirrored the thrum of her heart...

⁴² The average speed of a gallop is around 40-48 km/h, some could reach around 60.

After a while, he sat back and pulled Elizabeth up to his chest. Devil knew the show was over, and he slowed to a canter, then a trot.

Elizabeth breathed heavily. Mr. Darcy had just given her the gift of becoming one with nature; she felt the freedom it offered. She had thought horses were magnificent animals, but now she appreciated these beautiful creatures even more, and she appreciated even more the power that Darcy exerted during the ride. She shivered at her own thought. “I knew it would be incredible to experience this raw power. Thank you,” she turned back to him. “Thank you,” she said.

She was in Mr. Darcy’s arms. She became conscious of their situation. The proper Mr. Darcy had just done something not entirely appropriate; again, she giggled inwardly. She leaned against him.

Darcy had to use all his restraint not to kiss her neck. Her closeness was intoxicating, the warmth of her body against his like a beacon calling him home. He clenched his jaw, forcing himself to respect the boundary between longing and propriety, though every fibre of his being begged to bridge it. All he had to do was lean forward with his head. He never wanted to let her go again. It felt as though she was meant to be in his arms. His palm flexed against her stomach. As if accepting his

claim, Elizabeth put her hand over his on her stomach.

A powerful feeling rose in her breast. She was about to speak when Darcy's attention was diverted.

A huge carriage stood in the courtyard.

STANDING TOGETHER

Chapter 26



Its polished panels caught the light like a harbinger of news. Darcy jumped from his horse and took Elizabeth from the saddle. “It’s my aunt’s carriage.”

“Aunt?”

“Lady Catherine.”

Elizabeth gasped. She straightened, and her pulse quickened. She instinctively moved closer to Darcy, seeking a grounding presence as curiosity and unease vied for her attention. What new development awaited them? The sight of the imposing carriage sent a shiver down her spine. She glanced at Darcy, whose jaw had tightened visibly, a telltale sign of the storm brewing within him.

Darcy looked inside the carriage as if expecting somebody to be sitting in it.

“What could have brought her here?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” He whispered back.

“I do not know. What do you suppose is her purpose in coming?”

“I am afraid nothing good. Maybe she read the Fitzwilliam announcement in the paper.”

“Undoubtedly, she is displeased by the news.”

“Well, let us find out. Come.” Without thought, Darcy offered his hand, and it took only a moment of thought, and Elizabeth took it. They approached the main entrance when they heard voices in the parlour through the open window.

“... What are you talking about, Mrs. Bennet? Do not be ridiculous; the heir of an earldom does not marry a penniless country girl.”

Elizabeth flinched, her cheeks stinging with humiliation. The words might have been aimed at Jane, but they struck her too, as if none of them had a right to rise above what fortune had granted at birth.

“With all due respect, madam, my eldest daughter *is* engaged to his lordship.” They heard Mr. Bennet’s voice.

“The announcement was in the papers. Have you not seen?” Mrs. Bennet asked.

“It must be your doing! You claimed a falsehood to entrap him, to force his hand in marrying your daughter.”

Elizabeth clamped her hand against her mouth. Darcy wanted to advance, but she kept him back with a look.

“That’s not so. The earl and the countess sent the announcement. Why has your ladyship come all this way if not to congratulate them on this event?” Mrs. Bennet asked.

“If this news is true, the situation is even worse than I imagined. I’m here to refute the rumour that my other nephew, Mr. Darcy, is courting *your* daughter, Miss Elizabeth.”

“But it’s true,” Mrs. Bennet responded.

“That is impossible. Do you know who I am? You ought to know that I am not to be trifled with. But however insincere you may choose to be, you shall not find me so. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it.”⁴³

Elizabeth almost heard her father rolling his eyes. She looked up at Darcy. His eyes were shut. She squeezed his hand, to which he opened his eyes.

The argument inside continued.

“My lady, you must be tired from your trip. Maybe you should rest upstairs till your nephews return,” Mrs. Bennet offered.

⁴³ Verbatim from P&P “You ought to know...”

“I can scarcely believe this is truly occurring,” Darcy whispered. “I retract every disparaging remark I have made about your parents. This is utterly mortifying.”

“I demand to be attended to. Where is your daughter?”

“Your ladyship, my wife has already said. They’re on an outing. Why do you not accept Mrs. Bennet’s offer to rest till they return?” Mr. Bennet had clearly lost his patience with Darcy’s aunt.

“Not so fast, I tell you. This – this courting must stop. Your daughter should not aspire to leave the sphere in which she was born. Mr. Darcy is destined for greater things. He cannot be himself. He cannot think of marrying into this low-standing family. You, sir, should know your place and should have discouraged this match.”

“You have it all wrong, Lady Catherine. Mr. Darcy has great respect for our family. He helped us with a delicate issue...and he loves our Lizzy. He is a very clever man; he knows what he is doing. And besides, my daughter is a gentleman’s daughter, just like Mr. Darcy is a gentleman. Elizabeth has every right to marry your nephew. And if he is rich and wants to share that with her, who are we to deny them?” Mrs. Bennet spoke with conviction.

“You spoke well, Mrs. Bennet.” Her husband added.

“Bless your mother,” Darcy whispered.

“I—I shall not stay here a moment longer. You will see I shall carry my point. I have never been treated in—in such a callous manner. I shall not take my leave of you.”

Darcy stepped off the stairs into the courtyard with Elizabeth and put himself in front of her protectively.

“There you are, nephew. They denied that you were here. Impossibly rude folk. How can you associate yourself with these people?” She did not notice Elizabeth as she came down the stairs.

Elizabeth stepped out from behind Darcy. Though her heart thudded loudly in her chest, Elizabeth met Lady Catherine’s piercing gaze with unyielding determination. She would not let this woman intimidate her. He looked down at her and was about to speak, but Elizabeth looked at him pleadingly, strengthening her hold on his hand.

“Are you sure?” He mouthed.

Elizabeth nodded. Standing tall together, their hands linked, they presented a united front against her ladyship. Elizabeth felt the steady warmth of Darcy’s hand in hers, grounding her amidst the tempest of emotions. Whatever came next, they would face it together.

“Oh, you are here.” Lady Catherine’s eyes immediately focused on their laced hands. “Miss Elizabeth, what do you have to say for yourself?” She stepped closer, threateningly. Her lips pursed with disdain, “Do you deny you’ve bewitched my nephew?”

Darcy exchanged his left hand for his right, placing a hand on her lower back; he pulled her toward him. The gesture, though subtle, was firm and reassuring. It was as if Darcy was silently declaring, ‘She is mine to protect.’

“Aunt, what business have you here? Have you arrived unannounced?” Darcy spoke.

“Tell me, nephew, are you courting the girl?”

Darcy sighed. “Yes, Aunt, I am courting *Miss Elizabeth*.” He emphasised her name.

Elizabeth’s breath caught. Hearing it aloud, simply and without shame, sent a thrill through her that no insult could touch.

From the gate came a big commotion. The rest of the riding party arrived. Phillip took in the situation quickly and went to stand next to Elizabeth and Darcy as soon as he assisted the ladies in alighting. He whispered to Jane to take the girls into the house using the side entrance. She nodded and did so.

“Aunt, what a surprise it is to see you here.”

“Phillip! I will be very disappointed in you if what I have just heard is true. Your being here confirms it. How you found this backwater place, I cannot fathom.”

“What could she mean by this?” He turned to Darcy.

“Your engagement.”

He looked long at his aunt. “I am sorry if my happiness at my engagement caused you pain, though I do not see why that would be. And before you say anything disparaging about the Bennet family, let me remind you that they practically are now my family and, therefore, yours as well.” He stopped her response in its tracks.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet snickered from the window as they watched the happenings from there.

“You cannot go against the wishes of your parents. They will never agree to this.”

“They’ve already agreed. My mother met the Bennets and approved of my choice. I know my duty.”

“What about the earl?”

“He does as my mother wishes.”

Lady Cathrine huffed. “And where is your betrothed? Are you ashamed of her?”

“Lady Catherine, at the moment, I am ashamed of *you* barging in here. If you have not come to congratulate me, you shouldn’t be here.”

“Well, I never! Ugh! You are distracting me from my purpose. I should not have to deal with you.”

“In that case, I take my leave of you. Are you going to be all right, cousin? Miss Elizabeth, may I escort you inside?”

Darcy nodded to him.

“Thank you, milord, but I would rather stay,” Elizabeth responded.

Phillip looked at Darcy for confirmation.

“We will be all right.”

Phillip nodded and left. Darcy and his aunt stared at each other in contempt. It was Lady Catherine who looked away first.

“Darcy, have you lost your senses? Have you forgotten your duty? Your duty to Anne?”

“I have not forgotten my duty, which is to my name and estate. I have no duty toward Anne other than familial.”

“But you are engaged to my daughter!”

“You know very well that it is not true. You must let this go. I’ll never marry Anne. She is my cousin. That is all she’ll ever be.”

“Darcy, have you been taken in? She has used her art and allurements on you to forget your station. She just wants what is yours.”

“How would that be any different from what you want? Your obvious choice, if there is such a

thing, should have been Richard all along, as he has no estate, but it seems you want Pemberley. I never understood why; it's not like it would become yours... unless...unless you want to keep Rosings. Is that it, Aunt? You need to leave. You have disturbed the peace here long enough."

"It is not the same. She has nothing; she would gain everything by marrying you; I tell you, she is mercenary."

Elizabeth's jaw clenched. She had suffered slights before, but none had cut so deep nor so unfairly. Darcy sensed Elizabeth stiffen, so he offered a gentle caress with his hand on her waist, conveying reassurance and warmth.

"If she were a fortune hunter, she could have said yes the first time I asked. Do you know when that was, Aunt?"

Her ladyship's confused face was a novelty.

"I asked her back at Rosings when Miss Elizabeth didn't join us for dinner."

"What do you mean, Darcy?"

"I mean that she refused me because she found me wanting. I had to come here chasing after her and earn a courtship."

"You...are you out of your mind? She is playing with you."

Elizabeth had had enough. She pulled on Darcy's arm, and he looked down at her. She raised

herself on her tiptoe and whispered to him. “I wanted to tell you while you embraced me on your horse, but we were distracted.” Her heart pounded; the words were reckless, unguarded – improper. But true. “I love you, Mr. Darcy.” Her voice, though soft, carried the weight of her emotions. Elizabeth felt as though she had stepped off a precipice, trusting Darcy to catch her before she fell. “I had just realised that I had been falling in love with you.”

Darcy pulled Elizabeth into his embrace with his hand on her back. In that moment, all the doubt and turmoil that had plagued him evaporated. Her words echoed in his heart, filling the empty spaces he had long carried with her love. “Elizabeth.” He closed his eyes. He put both his hands on her upper arms. “You’re not just saying it.”

Elizabeth shook her head vehemently, and Darcy gently stroked her arms without thinking.

“What is happening? You will not ignore me!” Lady Catherine looked at the couple in alarm.

“No, but I must love you because the thought of you being taken from me causes me immeasurable pain. I want you for myself.”

Leaning in, their foreheads touched.

“Oh, Elizabeth!” He took her in his arms and whirled them around. Elizabeth openly laughed at

his reaction and held on to him with her arms around his neck. A small shriek was heard from Mrs. Bennet.

It was not, perhaps, the most proper of reactions – but it was the most sincere, and sincerity had rarely looked so well in broad daylight.

“Fitzwilliam, you will stop this unseemly performance! Put her down before anyone sees it. This is not to be borne!” Lady Catherine’s face turned an alarming shade of crimson as she sputtered indignantly. Her imperious demeanour cracked under the weight of Darcy’s defiance.

Darcy ignored his aunt’s admonition. He slowed, gently put his beloved down, and demonstratively kissed her forehead.

Before his aunt could reprimand him for his scandalous behaviour, he spoke up with authority. “Aunt, cease. Your visit has just served the opposite effect. I am marrying Miss Elizabeth. Go home; there’s nothing here for you.” Darcy’s voice was calm yet unyielding, his words cutting through the air like a blade. He turned away, his focus solely on Elizabeth, as though his aunt no longer existed. With that, he started toward the main door, pulling Elizabeth with him. His strides made her almost run. They heard cheers from the window.

“Fitzwilliam, slow down!”

Lady Catherine shouted after them, but nobody paid her mind.

Once they were inside, he turned to his beloved. “Say it again.”

“I—I love you.” She smiled timidly.

Her smile did not merely light up the hall; it ignited a symphony of fireworks in his soul. The elation Darcy felt at her admission was unlike anything he had ever experienced. To be accepted and loved by her – truly loved – was the most profound joy he had ever known. He marvelled at how this spirited, intelligent woman had unravelled the barriers he had carefully constructed around his heart. With her, he felt whole, worthy, and invincible. It was as if every beat of his heart was singing in celebration.

He had long yearned for a place to call home, a sanctuary where he could lay down his burdens and be himself without pretence. At that moment, standing before her, he felt he had finally found it. She was his home. Her presence, her affection, it all blended together to create a feeling so overwhelming that it felt as if his heart might burst with happiness. The warmth of her gaze and the sincerity of her words wrapped around him like a comforting embrace, and he knew that he had never truly understood what it meant to feel complete until now.

“Does this mean...” Elizabeth quickly touched Darcy’s lips.

“Yes, it means I shall marry you. I just did not want you to ask me again. Could we just say that it took me a bit long to answer?”

“Why is this important to you?”

“What reasonable lady could possibly refuse a gentleman of your excellence?”

“Excellence, you say?” He swallowed.

“Yes, I am sorry I was blind to your good qualities. I have since learnt that you are exactly the man to make me happy, and I think I could do the same for you.”

“That is beyond doubt. But since Hunsford, I have come to consider your rejection a blessing.”

“Pardon? What kind of twisted logic is that?”

“Not twisted at all,” Darcy said with a tender smile. “It humbled me enough to understand that a marriage is not about fulfilling my desires alone but about creating a union of two minds and hearts for the benefit of both. Without your refusal, I would still be that arrogant, blind man you could not abide.”

“Oh, Mr. Darcy!” Elizabeth’s eyes shimmered with emotion.

“Fitzwilliam,” he corrected gently.

“Oh, my Fitzwilliam!” She breathed. “Have we both been blind?”

“I am afraid so,” Darcy admitted, taking her hand in his. “But we have both improved. You have made me the happiest of men, Elizabeth.”

Just then, the parlour door swung open, and Mrs. Bennet’s voice rang out, filled with impatience. “What is taking you two so long? How long must you make us wait?”

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged a look of shared amusement and affection, a silent understanding passing between them. Darcy gently released her hand and turned toward Mrs. Bennet, a warm smile still playing on his lips. “Mrs. Bennet, with your permission, may I call you Mother?”

Mrs. Bennet looked him up and down with her sharp eyes. “Are you marrying our Lizzy?”

Darcy nodded, grinning.

“In that case, you may call me Mother.”

“Thank you, *Mother*. Also, thank you for standing up for us. You were magnificent.”

“Of course.” She blushed.

Elizabeth wanted to fall in love all over again for how Mr. Da... Fitzwilliam was talking to her mother. He had a way of speaking to her mother with genuine respect, even admiration, that Elizabeth found utterly disarming. She had never seen him so at ease, so willing to embrace her world. She joined them just when her mother could not

deny herself. She embraced her daughter, and her fluttering took over:

“Good gracious! Lord, bless me! Mr. Darcy! Oh! My sweetest Lizzy!⁴⁴ Two daughters married! Oh, this is too much!” Mrs. Bennet effused. Tears of joy spilt freely down her cheeks as she clutched Elizabeth’s hands. “I always knew you were destined for greatness, my dearest Lizzy! Mr. Darcy! Oh, what a match! Come in; let us not stand in the doorway. Mr. Bennet! Mr. Bennet! You are needed. Oh, the Lord has been good to us! Mr. Darcy and Lizzy...”

“Fitzwilliam, please call me Fitzwilliam.”

Mrs. Bennet was beside herself. Her handkerchief would not survive the night for sure.

“Young man? I take it that display outside means you are getting married.”

“With your permission, sir.”

“Yes, yes, you have my blessing. My wife would not let me be if I refused.”

“Refuse? Mr. Bennet! Don’t trifle with me!” Mrs. Bennet admonished her husband. “As if you could deny your favourite.”

“Darce, congratulations!” Phillip hugged his cousin for the second time in so many days.

“Georgie, I’m getting married!” He hugged his sister.

⁴⁴ Verbatim from P&P

“I am so happy for you! Lizzy is wonderful.”

“That she is.” He caught Elizabeth’s gaze over his sister’s head.

Elizabeth was simply floating in happiness. Her realisation was late coming, she thought, but the force of it was more potent for it. All her objections had fallen away once she saw Fitzwilliam with unprejudiced eyes. Being the beloved of a man like him was a heady experience. As she watched him in the circle of his family, she rejoiced in his happiness. She could only give him her whole self; it was all she could offer, but it was enough for him. She vowed to herself to always be worthy of his trust in her and silently promised that she would cherish the gift of his love and never take for granted the man who had shown her what it truly meant to be loved.

THANK YOU FOR NOT GIVING UPON ME

Epilogue –
some more things need to be said



Mrs. Bennet

Mrs. Bennet checked on her younger daughters after it was decided that the Netherfield party would dine with them. She found them in Jane's room, looking at the gowns the countess had sent.

"Lydia! What are you doing here? Has Jane allowed you into her room?"

"Mama, we're just looking at the dresses. Don't you think this colour would suit me perfectly? Mama, I want this." Lydia ignored her mother's question.

"Put everything back as you found it. Now, Lydia. Miss Darcy, why don't you find Mary? She may be a better company at the moment." She looked back at her youngest with a sharp look.

Georgiana, mortified that she was found in an inappropriate situation, quickly curtsied and left the room.

Mrs. Bennet was ashamed, not for the first time, that not so long ago, she would have let her Lydia have the dress without a thought for the injured party. Was it because she did not want to listen to her endless lamenting about it for hours, or did she think Lydia was her little girl? Both answers left her dissatisfied with herself. She had favoured her and created this entitled and spoiled child. Perhaps there was still time to set things aright.

“I was going to allow you to have dinner with us even if we have distinguished guests, but every reward is wasted on you. Kitty? Must you follow your sister in everything? If you think something is wrong, stand up for yourself, girl. Oh, I despair!”

“Mama, you’re most unfair! We are bored to death in this house,” Lydia complained.

Kitty did not know where to look. She did know they should not be in Jane’s room.

“Do as you are told. I have no patience with you. These gowns were given to your elder sisters. They need them more than you. Have you finished with your sums your father gave you? I am of a mind now to just send up bread and butter.”

It was time for the governess to arrive, she thought. Her sister-in-law wrote about the person she chose. Her situation was particular. She was the widow of a gentleman, a Mrs. Landlane, from Kent. She was left a modest house in London and some money, so she was not destitute. However, she wished to be part of a family instead of living alone. She would rent out her property in the coming years until she was ready to retire. Mrs. Bennet looked forward to her arriving as much as she dreaded it. She did not like to be found wanting, though she knew she was. Maybe she could learn something from the lady, too.

And learn she did. She regularly attended her daughter's lessons. She listened and reflected. By the time of the wedding, she had learnt to think before speaking. It took all her concentration, but she believed it was worth it. She did not want to let her daughters down with inappropriate behaviour in front of her daughters' new family and connections.

The Bingleys

As soon as possible, Darcy sent a note to the papers in London to print the announcement of his

engagement. Out of respect, he worded it on behalf of the Bennet parents. Mrs. Bennet cut both announcements from the papers and put them between the pages of her bible. The Reader can imagine that these papers were widely read at the height of the season, and many noble households would lament the loss of the highly sought bachelors.

Mr. Hurst almost choked on his drink when he read the announcement the following week. With glee, he showed it to Miss Bingley, who was already in a lousy mood about missing many of the events in town. Without Mr. Darcy's active friendship, their invitations had slowed to a trickle.

"This cannot be! He succumbed to her. Oh, Mr. Darcy!" Seeing her brother-in-law's satisfied face, she controlled her outrage. Oh, that woman would be her better! How was she going to survive this? Moreover, she would be a laughingstock among acquaintances who were aware of their close relationship with Mr. Darcy and her preference for him. *Oh, the humiliation!*

When her brother arrived home from his club, where Darcy had sponsored his membership, he was told the news. After a moment of shock, he laughed without humour and reflected. "I suppose he has changed his mind; I remember when he thought she was only tolerable. I wonder if we shall

receive an invitation to the wedding. I've not sent my card around yet."

"Charles, you must. Take a look at our calendar; it's almost empty. We need the connections his friendship with you provides." Miss Bingley complained.

"It is not so bad, is it? We went to the Carlsons' for dinner just two days ago."

"Oh, brother, they're minor estate owners. They'll hardly advance us." Louisa joined the conversation.

Caroline's diatribe continued with a whine, "What does Eliza have that I don't? She has practically no dowry! Does Mr. Darcy not know this?"

The unspoken truth, that Mr. Darcy had never truly seen her, stung more than she was willing to admit. Her heart hardened, bitterness swelling within her. "He was never worth it," she muttered, even as she clung to the memory of his fleeting kindnesses.

"Do not be ridiculous, Caroline. He has had years to ask for your hand and never did. Clearly, you were missing something that Miss Elizabeth has." Bingley chuckled.

Miss Bingley gasped and shot back. "I read in the paper last week that Mr. Darcy's cousin, the Honourable Viscount of Matlock, and Miss Bennet are engaged." She pursed her lips and

heartlessly looked forward to seeing the hurt wash across her brother's face.

And it came though not how she imagined. First, he stared, then slowly took a drink from his glass. His eyes seemed to look within, and his knuckles whitened where they encircled the glass. While at first he felt loss, that emptiness was swept away by bitterness, then by anger. The image of the viscount standing in his spot next to her at the assembly unmanned him. He then decided to inform Darcy that he no longer needed either his counsel or his friendship.

After Bingley's card never arrived at Darcy's residence, he sadly acknowledged his wish. He never sent his card around either, in consideration of his new sister-in-law. When he next saw Bingley in the club, he approached him and expressed his regret that their friendship had not survived their disagreement. With time, they became indifferent acquaintances.

Darcy, in his reflections, could not, with a good heart, regret what had happened. His new sister-in-law blossomed in her marriage to his cousin – they were both so deeply in love that a blind person would be able to see.

He knew he did not do a good service to his friend, but Jane needed someone strong, someone who would support her. He did not think Bingley

would have been able to offer that kind of love. As he followed his life, he proved Darcy right with more of his angels, whom he did not end up marrying.

Bingley and Caroline did marry eventually, but as their significance suffered from Darcy's neglect, they married outside the ton.

On Wednesday, the Earl and Countess of Matlock arrived at Netherfield. Her ladyship's heart had soared when she received her son's note about the engagement. If anybody listened in heaven, Darcy's marriage would be so blessed that they would only know happiness. Indeed, the grateful countess would pray for them for the rest of her life. She soon rearranged their calendars to free them to rush to Hertfordshire. As soon as they arrived, the earl was eager to meet this paragon his wife had spoken of, and the countess wanted to learn everything that had happened in her son and nephew's courtships.

“Why did she refuse Mr. Bingley?”

“She said that after considering our characters, mine and Darcy's, his person did not compare.” With a smile that lit him from within, he added, “She hoped for me.”

“Oh, my darling, of course, you are everything good,” his mother beamed back, “and much more than your wealth and connections.”

“I spoke to her after I returned and apologised for my interference. Miss Bennet did seem disappointed that Bingley gave her up so easily,” Darcy said.

The countess smiled at the men around her, “A woman worthy of being won appreciates perseverance.”

All three men laughed, the earl most loudly.

“Mama tasked me to discuss our wedding date. Do you have a preference?” Elizabeth asked Darcy as they started walking.

Jane and Elizabeth had both been summoned from Longbourn, but she and Darcy excused themselves for a walk in the garden to allow Jane time alone with Phillip and his parents.

“Unless you object, I wish to be married sooner rather than later. We could start by having our bans read this Sunday. In a month, we could be married.”

“So, I do have to decline the trip with my aunt and uncle.”

“Would you prefer a long engagement, then?”

Elizabeth smiled, a soft warmth spreading through her chest at his earnestness. “I find, Mr.

Darcy, that patience is not a virtue I possess in this matter. Now that we are in harmony, I do not see the point of waiting.”

“We are in harmony – I like the sound of that.” He squeezed her hand on his arm. “I’m glad to hear that you do not need much time. Waiting for months would not be something I would like to endure.”

Elizabeth smiled, lifting an eyebrow. “It took you a month to bring me about; another month should be plenty to prepare me to be your wife.”

A soft smile played on his lips. “Then, a month from now would be perfect. At the beginning of July.”

“The first of July is my birthday.”

“Really? And how old will you be?”

“One and twenty. Did you not know?”

“Just wanted to be sure. I’ll be eight and twenty in November.”

They turned back toward the house.

“Until I have to go to Pemberley...”

“We.” Elizabeth interrupted.

Darcy grinned. “Yes, we. Until *we* have to go to Pemberley in August, we shall have to remain here. There is so much to do. If you like, we could spend a week or so in Darcy House, in London, after the wedding. Hyde Park is close, so you will not be deprived of walking.”

“That sounds excellent.”

The earl and countess expressed their congratulations on Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s engagement, and then her ladyship took over. The countess wanted to make her son’s wedding a big affair. Seeing Jane’s stricken face, Phillip said, “Darcy wants his wedding to be in a month. Mother, I do not see why we should wait until September. I am not waiting for that long.”

“We could have a double wedding,” Jane spoke up.

Silence followed.

“What do you mean, J–Miss Bennet?” Phillip asked.

“Well, we do not wish to wait months, nor does Mr. Darcy. That would mean two weddings very close to each other.”

Phillip and Darcy looked at each other.

“It makes sense.”

“As long as it does not delay ours,” Darcy affirmed.

“I should love to share the date with you, sister.” Elizabeth enthused.

Mrs. Bennet, though she also complained about there being too little time, agreed to the suggestion of a double wedding. She was awed by her ladyship’s invitation to the girls to go to London to

complete their trousseaus; unfortunately, she would be working on preparations at Longbourn during that time. Darcy promised her the help of Mrs. Nicholls from Netherfield and his own housekeeper in London.

The wedding, held a month later, did blossom into a truly grand affair, far exceeding expectations. Guests from all over made the four-hour journey to Netherfield, a testament to the social importance of the event, with many returning to London that same evening. Among the attendees were not only society's elite but also the workers and tenants of Netherfield, who were warmly invited to partake in the celebration. The fine weather proved a blessing, allowing the wedding breakfast to be served both indoors for the immediate party and outside on the sprawling lawn for the many other guests who had gathered.

Under the clear skies, tables were laid with lavish dishes, and the scent of roasted meats and freshly baked bread wafted through the air. Music filled the grounds as a small orchestra played lively tunes, and soon, the dancing began, with couples twirling beneath festoons of flowers. The clinking of glasses and the hum of laughter carried on as the sun dipped below the horizon. For hours, the

celebration showed no sign of waning, and the estate buzzed with life and joy. It was not until the last of the London crowd took their leave around six in the evening that the revelry gradually began to quiet. Yet, even then, the workers and locals lingered, toasting to the future of the newlywed couples long into the evening.

As dusk gave way to the cooler hush of evening, the music faded to a murmur. Most guests had departed, the lawn strewn with petals and the scent of spiced wine. In the quiet afterglow of celebration, Darcy stood beneath a copper-beech tree just beyond the edge of the lawn, a half-forgotten glass of champagne in his hand.

Footsteps approached behind him – light, familiar.

“You disappeared,” Georgiana said gently.

He turned to her with a tired but unmistakably contented smile. “Only to breathe.”

She stood beside him, her gloved fingers tucked neatly before her. The air was still, the twilight soft. For a moment, neither spoke.

Then she said, “I never imagined I would see you so happy.”

He glanced at her. “Nor did I. Not quite like this.”

She smiled. “You used to speak of duty. Now you speak of joy.”

He gave a short, rueful laugh. “Yes. I rather thought they were enemies once.”

“And now?”

Darcy looked back toward the house, where warm candlelight glowed through tall windows. Inside, he knew, Elizabeth was laughing – her voice unmistakable even at a distance.

“Now,” he said softly, “I see they were only ever meant to be partners.”

Georgiana’s gaze followed his. “She changed you,” she said.

“Yes.” He looked down. “But perhaps I needed to be changed.”

They stood in silence, brother and sister, not as guardian and ward, not as protector and charge but as equals, shaped by the same world and now able to greet it with steadier hearts.

At length, Georgiana touched his arm. “Go back to her,” she said with a quiet smile. “She will be looking for you.”

He nodded once and turned toward the house. But as he walked, he glanced back and said, “And you? Are you well?”

She gave him a small, knowing look. “For the first time in a long while...yes.”

Darcy asked for some private time with Elizabeth at Longbourn the next day before the Netherfield party was to dine there. They sat at the table in the back parlour. He brought with him a big folder that held the beautiful drawings of the Darcy jewels. Elizabeth gasped as she opened it; the different sets came to life before her. She touched her most precious property, her golden cross necklace. Its simple beauty faded in comparison to the drawings enhanced by watercolour.

“Dearest Elizabeth, I have two purposes for showing you this. For one, I want you to look at the rings to be inspired. I shall have an engagement ring made for you that we could design together. The other reason is that I would like you to choose the items you can imagine wearing. I sold some old pieces from the collection to secure part of the money for the Netherfield enterprise. I have an idea that has been forming in my head that may require that I sell more.”

“So, you are asking me to choose the jewellery I want to keep? What about Georgiana?”

“She has jewellery. She will also receive a few pieces when she comes out, from our mother. She personally chose them for her. If she marries well, she will have the jewels of that family, too.”

“I see. How about we select them together? We did very well with the food.” She laughed, though inwardly she was overwhelmed by the idea of choosing from a jewellery catalogue.

And so, Darcy sat beside her, and they spent quite some time in this fashion. Darcy stopped breathing when she looked at his mother’s favourite piece, a white pearl necklace with two tiers and a series of moonstones framed as miniature suns. He adored that piece. Elizabeth leaned forward to see it better.

“This must be beautiful! I like this one, Fitz...” She stopped speaking as she took Darcy’s expression in. “Is—is this one important?”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, I like it very much.”

Darcy released his breath. “It was my mother’s favourite.”

“Oh, then I shall wear this with pride.”⁴⁵

“What is this idea you mentioned?” She asked as she continued to look at the drawings.

“Erm. Please do not speak of this to anyone for the time being. I have been playing around with this idea.”

Elizabeth put down the drawing she was perusing. “Now I am intrigued. Tell me, Fitzwilliam.”

⁴⁵ See necklace on the story website.

“How I like it when you say my name.”

“Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy glanced at her, his eyes softening with fondness. “Well, I was thinking of your father’s estate.”

“What about it?”

“I think it could be a great investment. All right, so this is what I have been thinking.” He leaned forward, and his excitement showed on his face. “As I understand, Mr. Collins inherits it.”

Elizabeth nodded. She was all the while fascinated by the man sitting next to her. Was he like this when he planned his Netherfield enterprise? Lady Matlock had said she was there when the idea occurred to him. She could just imagine how the different thoughts must have swirled in his head. Her heart swelled with pride as she watched the animation in his face, the way his mind worked through the details with precision and care. He was a man of vision, and she felt privileged to witness it.

“Well, your father seems to be in good health; he could live many years. What if I approached your cousin, Mr. Collins, and offered him something in return for him to relinquish his inheritance? I am sure he would not be a good landlord. I can actually see him being robbed blind or running the place to its ruin.”

Elizabeth looked at him with widened eyes.

“Your estate is presently worth about sixty thousand, but I can explain that it is worth fifty to me. I intend to offer him twenty-five thousand, but I am willing to go as high as thirty thousand. He would have half the value of the estate now. Invested in the four per cent, that would provide three times the income he currently has without requiring any effort and allowing him to remain at Hunsford with the patronage of ‘his esteemed’ Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Elizabeth chuckled at Darcy’s dry humour.

“I see. We would have Longbourn after my father dies?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone softening. “It would be a way to preserve the memory of your family’s connection to it and ensure its legacy endures. We can decide later what to do with it. We can use it as a holiday estate or give it to a daughter or second son.”

“Oh, Fitzwilliam!”

This idea bore fruit with time. In the first year of their marriage, Darcy approached Mr. Collins when they visited Charlotte’s parents. Soon, an agreement was reached. Mr. Collins could not resist the bargain. Although he was not the cleverest man, he did silently agree with Mr. Darcy that, as

he did not know much about managing an estate, especially after Mr. Darcy had enumerated all the things a landlord had to deal with, including how an estate could be lost with one bad season. Further, it was evident that Mr. Bennet was still relatively healthy. Therefore, the jewellery that Elizabeth did not choose was sold, and the money was used to buy Longbourn.

When Mrs. Bennet was told of this and that she never had to leave Longbourn, she lost all her composure and cried in her son's arms.

Darcy then approached his father-in-law and made an offer to him that he would take over managing his estate and its benefits, and in return, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet could continue to live at Longbourn. They would be supplied with farm produce at a cost price and have a home farm for their use. Further, they would receive an allowance of one thousand five hundred pounds a year until Mr. Bennet's death. Mrs. Bennet would receive an allowance of seven hundred a year if she still lived, and she could retire with them if she wished. Darcy firmly suggested that Mrs. Bennet's dowry funds could now be allocated to enhance the dowries of the remaining daughters, assuring her that she would be well provided for.

Mr. Bennet, acknowledging his own indolent nature, could not refuse an offer that would allow

him to have the benefits of being Longbourn's master with none of the responsibilities. Darcy used the library at Darcy House as an additional incentive, agreeing that he could spend a month there every year when the Darcy family was not in residence and bury himself in the tomes of his library.

Over the course of the following year, Darcy introduced a series of innovative methods at Longbourn (having learnt many things at Netherfield), meticulously reorganising both the estate's operations and his relationship with the tenants. He implemented improved agricultural practices, optimised crop rotation, and cultivated the land to yield a greater abundance, using the same new methods of watering plants, thus ensuring higher-quality produce for the growing Netherfield business. In due time, Longbourn became the primary supplier, with its reputation for quality surpassing that of the neighbouring estates. These enhancements and Darcy's steadfast commitment to efficiency and fair dealings soon increased the estate's annual income to a remarkable four thousand pounds. The transformation stood as a testament to his industriousness, benefiting not only the estate itself but also all those in its employ.

Eventually, when Darcy and Elizabeth's second son married at seven and twenty as his father

had, they gave the estate to him. It was then worth about a hundred and twenty thousand – a good investment, indeed, having paid only five and twenty for it – and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had never had to move from their beloved home.

“Elizabeth, I wanted to give you this, too, before you leave to shop with my aunt in London.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow in curiosity as she took the small bundle of papers from his hand. “What is this?”

“Please send it to Darcy House as soon as you arrive. It is a note to my man and a letter to my bank. My butler will deliver you a hundred pounds.”

“Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth exclaimed, clearly taken aback.

“Please, Elizabeth,” he said gently, his eyes soft as they searched hers.

“Father has already promised us fifty pounds each, and Mother gave me fifteen from her secret fund this morning. I have ten saved. Is seventy-five not enough?”

Darcy smiled, his admiration for her practicality evident. “I like your mother more and more. And you have some money saved as well? That’s

admirable. Elizabeth, I want you to purchase whatever you'd like. I do not want you to think about money next week. Enjoy yourself fully, without concern."

Her heart swelled with gratitude, not for the money itself, but for the thoughtfulness behind it. He wanted her to feel secure, cherished, and unencumbered.

"I am pretty sure that Phillip will give some funds to your sister, too."

"You think so?"

"We have not discussed it," Darcy admitted with a smile, "but I'm quite certain he will."

Elizabeth sighed. "You're not my husband yet, and you are already spending money on me," she said, her voice trembling.

"Lizzy," Darcy said, stepping closer, his expression earnest and full of love. "My Lizzy, I have spent *thirty thousand pounds* just to be near you."

She gasped. "You," – she began, but her voice faltered as her eyes filled with unshed tears – "you make me feel unworthy of your kindness," she finally managed to say, her voice barely audible.

"That's not why I said it," Darcy murmured, his tone tender. "I merely want you to understand how much you mean to me – that you are *everything* to me. I would face any trial for you if it were required."

Elizabeth, ever the wit, could not resist teasing him despite the emotions coursing through her. “Are you any good with the sword?” she asked, a playful glint returning to her eyes.

Darcy straightened, a hint of amusement flickering across his face. “I can defend myself, yes,” he replied, his voice full of quiet confidence.

“But can you win?” she pressed, her smile widening.

“I do not often lose,” he answered with a wink. “Is that enough to satisfy you, my lady?”

She laughed, the sound warm and filled with affection.

“Very well, you clever creature,” he said, shaking his head in mock exasperation. “If, by any chance, you should run out of funds, simply have the bill sent to Darcy House.”

Elizabeth’s laughter softened as she gazed up at him, her heart full. “You’re impossible, Fitzwilliam.”

“Only for you, my love,” he replied, leaning in to kiss her forehead. He was ever grateful for being able to call his Elizabeth his love.

With a gentle smile, Elizabeth tucked the papers away, her heart warmed by the gesture, knowing that this man – her Fitzwilliam – would always be there to protect and provide for her in ways that went far beyond mere money.

As it turned out, there was no need to send any bill to Darcy House. Her ladyship had a secret about how to beat the fierce competition among the ton. She did buy some gowns from the most prestigious and expensive modistes, over whom those in the haute ton fought for the privilege of patronising, but she also experimented with new women of the craft. When she found a unique talent, she would also have dresses made by one of these secret sources at a lower cost and at the same time, this way, she could stand out. She also had a contact in the fabric trade who alerted her to new shipments, and she paid for a first perusal ahead of other customers. She was happy to share her secret, which made her the envy of many, with Jane and Elizabeth. They shared a look about her ladyship's cunning.

Elizabeth had one particular story to share with Darcy, which still amused her whenever she thought of it. She and Jane had crossed paths with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst at a fashionable shop on Oxford Street. The encounter, as Elizabeth recounted with a mischievous gleam, was rather revealing of their old acquaintances' dispositions. Neither Miss Bingley nor Mrs. Hurst offered so much as a polite nod of congratulation on Jane's engagement, and Caroline, ever slighting, chose to

address Elizabeth as ‘Eliza’ with a thinly veiled disdain.

Elizabeth, however, was not easily ruffled. In response, she turned to the shopkeeper with an air of unbothered grace and requested a pair of exquisite gloves and a fan, ensuring her voice carried as she instructed that the bill be sent to Darcy House. She then strolled out of the shop on her sister’s arm, leaving Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst to simmer in their unspoken envy. She confessed to Darcy that she had never felt even a kernel of regret at the momentary indulgence; on the contrary, she relished the small triumph. She was no longer the poor, insignificant country girl they had once dismissed.

Darcy, for his part, was delighted by her spirited retelling and loved that she had claimed him so openly in their presence. He laughed heartily at her wit and ingenuity, feeling once again how fortunate he was in having won the heart of so singular a woman, one who could meet his former detractors with such grace and humour.

The men retired to Mr. Bennet’s book room to share some port after dinner at Longbourn. The

earl was perusing Mr. Bennet's impressive collection. He turned to the host. "Mr. Bennet, there is a question preying on my mind. I cannot help but ask. How is it possible that your daughters have practically no dowry?"

Mr. Bennet's jaw dropped. He did not know what to say.

"I ask you how it can be that you did not think to save for their future. How did you expect they would be married well without anything to their names?"

"Well, is that not what happened? My two eldest daughters have made excellent matches." He quipped.

"Not because of you, Bennet. If not for these two excellent men, your daughters would have withered in this place. Explain yourself."

Phillip and Darcy paid attention.

"Erm, we hoped for an heir, but when it was not to be, we gave up; it was too late."

"That's it? That is all you can say? Too late for what? You should have begun to put money aside as soon as they were born."

"We just never had any surplus."

"And why is that? You are the master of this estate; you are the master of this house. You simply readjust your budget."

Mr. Bennet cringed, relieved the earl was not aware he had never bothered to make one in the first place.

“It’s easier said than done. My wife...”

“Do not blame it on your wife. As her husband, it is up to you how much she can spend.”

“Then you don’t know my wife.” Mr. Bennet spoke wryly.

“I do not have to. The dinner she put on the table was delicious but not extravagant. Additionally, she and her daughters are dressed well but, again, not extravagantly. I didn’t see anything outrageously costly in the décor or the furniture. No, sir, this explanation will not do. It is not your wife’s spending habits that have kept you from doing your duty to your five daughters.”

Mr. Bennet looked in front of him. He knew the earl was right but still could not enjoy being admonished like a child.

“Your wife has four thousand to her name, am I right? What have you done with the interest on it? Should that not be... Phillip, how much should it be after twenty years?”

“About...at four per cent, almost nine thousand.” He turned to Mr. Bennet. “You have invested it, have you not?”

“We used the interest to supplement the estate’s income.”

“But, sir, your land should yield about three thousand, if not more. So, it does not even produce two?” Darcy asked.

“It depends on the year. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not.”

Darcy shook his head. He was dismayed at the measure of neglect Mr. Bennet had shown toward his estate, his family.

“It is this collection of yours. This is where you have spent the money that it was your duty to invest for your five daughters.” The earl gestured with the book in his hand. “This volume alone would inspire envy in the most discerning collector.”

Mr. Bennet looked up at that.

“Sir, I expect you to do well by your remaining daughters. I shall send an expert to evaluate your collection and determine which books to sell. This is where you cheated your daughters out of what you, as a parent, should’ve saved for them. With luck, you invested in books that grew in value. I see a lot of first editions here.” He put the book he had in his hand back on the shelf. “You will do this for your daughters.”

The viscount and Darcy shared a knowing glance. Darcy wholeheartedly agreed with his uncle. Although he admired him for his intelligence and insight into politics, history, and literature, and

he felt duty-bound to feel affection towards Elizabeth's father, he could not approve of his indolent nature, which had cost his family better circumstances and even better dowries. He had estimated the present yearly income to be around two to three thousand, but he was dismayed at the lowest estimate to be the case, so much potential lost!

Mr. Bennet was sufficiently taken aback and did not dare protest. About a month after the wedding, the earl arrived with a man who knew and loved books like no other. While the earl distracted Mr. Bennet, his expert selected the books that would yield the best profit for his elite clientele. Within a few months, the books were sold, providing three thousand seven hundred pounds to each of his remaining daughters, and an additional two thousand pounds was added to Mrs. Bennet's dowry. At the earl's insistence and the viscount's suggestions, Mr. Bennet invested that money and the entire amount of Mrs. Bennet's portion in three different profitable enterprises, including Mr. Gardiner's. The returns would be added to the capital.

Phillip and Darcy were grateful for the earl's insistence, who felt strongly about the issue. He did not have a daughter and lamented the fact with his wife. He would have cared for a daughter and planned for her willingly. In addition to declining

Jane and Elizabeth's portion, which would not have made any difference for them anyway in favour of the younger sisters, Phillip and Darcy vowed to follow the earl's example to prepare for all their children's futures with diligence.

Jane and Phillip, the unexpected fruit of Darcy's mission to win Elizabeth, enjoyed their short engagement. Phillip fell in love with Jane more and more every day, and Jane blossomed in his love for her. While she had smiled before, she now openly laughed. It was a blessed time.

Seven years into their marriage, the earl gave his son all the responsibility of the estate at Matlock, and he, in turn, took an allowance from the estate's income. Phillip gave a smaller estate and its income to his brother, Richard, unofficially (it was part of the earldom, therefore, could not be separated on paper) so he could marry. The earl and the countess lived comfortably on their allowance and the interest of his personal investments for many more happy years, even living to see their two beautiful granddaughters marry. Jane and Phillip's third child was a much-beloved son and heir to the earldom.

With Phillip's support and the backing of the elder generation, Jane overcame her early struggles with her station's new responsibilities, and she served as an exemplary countess when the time came.

Jane and Elizabeth, filled with joy, settled in Derbyshire in estates that allowed for frequent visits to their families. The bond between the families was so strong that it was a rare occasion when they weren't gathered together at either Matlock or Pemberley in the north, or London or Hertfordshire in the south.

Mrs. Bennet was pleased that business drew her eldest daughters and their families back to Longbourn several times a year, when they often stayed there. Of course, the extended family was invited to Matlock or Pemberley at least once a year. It was at such times, and during the blissful month of isolation at the library of the Darcy House in London, that Mr. Bennet would bury himself in the libraries of the two estates. He dared not confront the earl about his books, but these visits provided comfort. Even after Darcy took over the responsibilities of Longbourn and Bennet was assured that all his children and grandchildren were well, he still lamented the loss of his books, never seeming to

understand that they had been liquidated to compensate for his indolence in failing to provide for his daughters.

Phillip and Darcy's joint enterprise created a friendship as steadfast as Darcy's with Richard. As men, they did not speak of it, but their bond meant a great deal to both.

By the end of that first summer, Netherfield was running well. They had filled all the essential posts, and their people were fully trained. Their workers had the opportunity to undertake various tasks, take on more responsibility, and expand their general knowledge. The strong sense of community, the clean and comfortable accommodations, and the attractive wages made their people feel that they were not just employees but integral parts of something great.

Their Netherfield business grew in the next five years and surpassed every expectation. As had been promised, the labourers also profited from the sales. The surrounding land was transformed and became a bustling central hub, sending shipments to London three or four times a week. The whole neighbourhood thrived with renewed energy. Through Mr. Gardiner's efforts with his contacts, the innovative shop they opened in the

affluent trading district of London served as a distribution point to organise their deliveries of farm produce and prepared goods directly to their customers. By the fourth year, they ventured into several directions. For instance, they had started to produce and sell soaps and creams, creating quite a brand over time.

Ever attuned to the importance of their family responsibilities, Darcy and Phillip found an investor in the sixth year to take over the business. The new owner was impressed by what they had achieved. Darcy advised him to leave everything as it was unless he could improve on things and cautioned him that he would take him to task if the labourers suffered financially or otherwise. The new owner was happy to leave most of the decision-making to the by-then-experienced stewards and their teams. Darcy, Phillip and the original owner pocketed a handsome profit on their investment.

Additionally, Darcy and Phillip used their new knowledge to improve their own estates. Their innovative changes made working for their estates a good alternative in the coming years, even decades, as the country competed with cities for workers. Darcy, for instance, gradually transformed half of his primary estate at Pemberley into a profitable commercial enterprise by creating farm shops in

the neighbouring towns which served the whole county. This created more opportunities for his tenants and their families to thrive.

“No, Mary, sit down.” Mrs. Bennet told her daughter when she wanted to follow Mr. Darcy and her sister to the piano.

The sisters had returned from their shopping trip with trunks full of fashionable triumphs and the scent of lavender still clinging to their new ribbons, and the day had offered a rare break in visits and wedding preparations.

“But Mama...”

“Oh, hush, child. Leave them alone. They cannot do any harm in the next room. Just leave the door open.”

When Darcy realised they were left to themselves as Elizabeth was playing, he gently placed his hand over hers, halting her graceful movement across the keys. The music faded, leaving only the sound of their breathing in the quiet room.

“Do you know?” Darcy began, his voice warm with affection, “Your mother has become my favourite person in this house.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, amusement flickering in her eyes. “Is that so? More favourite than me?”

A low chuckle rumbled from Darcy’s chest, the sound rich and full of warmth. “Jealous?” he teased, his expression softening as his gaze lingered on her.

“Should I be jealous of my mother?” Elizabeth replied, her lips curving into a playful smile, though her heart quickened in anticipation.

He shook his head, his smile fading into something more serious, more intimate. “You are all that I dream of, Elizabeth. I have missed you.”

“I have missed you, too, although your aunt hardly left us alone... You dream of me?” she asked softly, the weight of his gaze making her pulse quicken.

“I have been dreaming of you since the very beginning, Elizabeth,” he confessed, his voice low, full of sincerity. With a gentle touch, he brushed her hair away from her face; his touch lingered, tender and warm.

The touch sent a shiver down her spine, and without thinking, she leaned into it, relishing the quiet intensity of the moment. Her breath hitched, and in a voice that trembled with nervous excitement, she spoke his name, “Fitzwilliam.”

Hearing his given name on her lips was still new; it stirred something deep within him. His heart raced, the sound of her voice filling him with a warmth that he could no longer contain.

On the bench at the pianoforte, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy laced his hand with his beloved's and kissed her. He kissed her with a slow tenderness that erased the world around them. Darcy's lips moved against hers with a care that spoke of his love, his longing, his devotion. He kissed her as though she were the only thing that had ever mattered.

Elizabeth responded in kind, her heart soaring as their shared warmth enveloped her. She had never known a moment so profound, so all-encompassing. In that moment, nothing else existed – only the two of them, entwined in an embrace that was more than a simple kiss; it was a promise, an unspoken vow.

As Darcy finally pulled away, his breath came in shallow gasps, their first kiss leaving them both breathless and wanting more. Her shy smile and her beautiful eyes stole his breath. They were wide and full of wonder, sparkled in the dim light, and Darcy found himself utterly captivated. His gaze held a warm intensity that whispered of deep affection, which Elizabeth could not resist. A soft sigh escaped her lips as Darcy leaned in and captured her mouth again.

His lips moved with hers with a renewed passion, this time deeper, more insistent. His arms circled around her, pulling her closer as though he could never bear to let her go. She melted into his embrace, her hands slipping to his chest, feeling the strong beat of his heart beneath her palms.

When they parted again, Elizabeth looked into Darcy's eyes, her breath coming in short, uneven bursts. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion, "for not giving up on me. I am so grateful. I accused you of pride and arrogance when it was *I* who tried to cling to mine. If not for you, I would not know *us*. I would not know what love is. It was your persistence, dear man."

Darcy answered this heartfelt communication as only a man deeply in love could; he took her in his arms and kissed her with all the tenderness of his feelings. He kissed her not as a man triumphant, but as a man changed, humbled, grateful, in awe of the woman who had taught him how to love. His hand cradled the back of her head, fingers tangling gently in her hair, while his other arm wrapped securely around her waist, holding her close against him. Elizabeth responded eagerly, her arms sliding up to encircle his neck as she lost herself in his warmth, in the safety and love of his embrace.

When they finally parted for the last time, their foreheads rested together as they tried to steady their racing hearts. Darcy pressed a tender kiss to her forehead, his lips lingering there for a moment before pulling back to look into her eyes.

“Persistence *and* passion,” Darcy corrected.

THE END

Dear Reader,

The author has gone the extra mile to create a unique story website for you, packed with additional content related to the novel.

You'll find detailed **explanations, images, illustrations** and links about *Pride and Prejudice* and the Regency era.

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Published by Pegasus Publishing, UK

This story starts at the famous assembly in Meryton. What would change if some of the characters, the two elder Bennet sisters, especially, were better judges of character?

If they were more discerning?

How would that affect the chain of events,
the other characters?

Would the couples reach a happy conclusion?

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What if Elizabeth were what some of us
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Story website:

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Kinga Brady – Passion and Persistence

More Discerning

A *Pride and Prejudice* variation

KINGA BRADY



MORE DISCERNING

Chapter 1



Tuesday, 15 October, 1811

At the Meryton assembly

Elizabeth's lips quirked as a quiet amusement danced in her eyes. Mr Bingley's company appeared to be relatively small. It consisted of his two sisters, and out of all the other reported gentlemen, only two appeared, one of mature years and married. The matrons of the ball only had themselves to blame, as this was what gossip could do. The families of Meryton were so hungry for new male prospects that they let their desires cloud what they had heard. The local four and twenty families just did not have enough sons to provide possible husbands for their daughters. Therefore, great disappointment was reflected on the faces at the assembly. She looked where her mother stood. Elizabeth could see she was quite indignant; she had such high hopes for her girls and this evening.

Elizabeth surveyed the newcomers with deliberate attention, as was her habit. She valiantly wanted to create her first impressions, but her eyes kept glancing at the tall, single gentleman of the group. The man's presence had a strange effect on the atmosphere in the room. He stood out not only by the nature of his height but also by his almost regal comportment. He stood in the back with his head held high; he appeared somewhat detached from his surroundings. The gentleman peered straight ahead, his gaze glancing coldly over the people. Not curious or reticent, but as if he had already decided that he could find nothing worthwhile there.

Arrogant, Elizabeth thought, but perhaps it was unfair. Perhaps he was just more reserved in nature. Not everyone seeks new company in an unfamiliar place. She could not ignore the prevalent whisperings either that he possessed an income of at least ten thousand a year and a grand estate in the north.

A flicker of discomfort crossed his face; he, too, must have overheard. Perhaps he was used to the effect, perhaps he was bored with the same whispering comments, but Elizabeth seemed also to detect a tinge of annoyance in him.

The gentleman only danced with the ladies of his group, in contrast to Mr Bingley, who seemed

to enjoy himself immensely. Elizabeth followed them with her eyes, and while one of the men conversed with light movements and sincere gaiety, the other seemed to be playing a carefully composed part, his posture taut, his eyes scarcely lingering on anyone.

Does he really look down on us so much? – Elizabeth wondered.

Elizabeth, typically an impartial observer, found herself questioning the severity of judgment upon this man. It was true that he did not seem to enjoy himself, but he was there, probably in support of his friend. Maybe he did not like crowded places like her father. *He* had stopped attending assemblies altogether. She thought it admirable that, possibly against his inclination, he did his duty by his friend and the ladies of his group and danced with them.

If Elizabeth had been faithful to herself, she would have admitted to finding that this man had inexplicably attracted her gaze. He had a noble mien, a very handsome face, and deep brown ringlets of hair framed his perfect face in a dishevelled manner. He could have been made into a statue of the ideal male. Even his garments graced his body in perfect harmony, unlike most men, whose clothes always seemed too small for their figures. The coffee-brown tailcoat, cream waistcoat and

snow-white cravat showed an impeccable elegance that could not tolerate any carelessness.

Elizabeth had always liked discovering people's natures and could not help looking for his gaze. What would his gaze reveal about him? A cold detachment, or perhaps something more, some secret, hidden feeling he had no intention of revealing?

There was something strange about him. Was his coldness more out of aloofness than contempt – or was it just the way she wanted to see it? She did not feel inclined to judge so quickly. Still, it was hard to take her eyes off him. She imagined that he might glance at her and halt in his tracks.

Well, the way it happened was not exactly how she imagined it.

She was obliged to sit out two dances as there was a scarcity of men at the assembly. She was used to it and permitted other ladies their turn, gracefully removing herself from the dance. She sat down. Mr Darcy – that was the gentleman's name – happened to stand close to her. She was about to continue her quiet observation of him when Mr Bingley approached the gentleman and coaxed him into dancing.

“I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this, it would be

insupportable,” said Mr Darcy in a low but firm voice.

This was the first time Elizabeth had heard him speak. She thought he had a pleasant, deep baritone voice that seemed well-suited to his imposing figure. *So, the gentleman is a bit...reserved.* She wondered why a man of the world would have trouble meeting new people. Any crippling disability called at her sympathy, however. He seemed to avoid everybody so that he did not have to converse with them. She wished the people at the assembly would notice that he was uncomfortable. That such a man would feel that dancing with strangers was such a burden made her want to help him. Probably, his handsome face had something to do with it, which she acknowledged with surprise.

She was mortified at how the scene played out eventually. Mr Bingley offered her to him as a dance partner. He was already indignant when he turned, and their eyes met for a moment. He immediately turned back as if burnt and said the harshest thing possible to her ears.

“She is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me...”

This struck a chord with Elizabeth.

“I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and

enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.”

Elizabeth’s lips quivered a little. The pain lingered for a heartbeat, then hid behind a customary smile.

*Tolerable...*she repeated to herself. A simple word, a trivial remark, *as if it were merely a matter of the weather or a lukewarm cup of tea.* She herself seemed to fall into this mediocrity. She raised her chin slightly as if she had not heard it. In fact, she barely heard it – at least, that was what she would have told herself if there had been anyone to ask.

Bingley said something else, and Darcy replied, but Elizabeth stopped listening. She sensed that the cheerful indifference on her face was perhaps too carefully formed. No matter. If she played it well enough, she might believe it herself.

Elizabeth wanted to scream that she was sitting out the dance so that others could enjoy the dance also. She had been considerate! She just wanted to help the other ladies! Elizabeth was indignant to the heavens. She pretended not to mind, but her pride was shaken.

He walked away, and Elizabeth was left there reeling. This handsome gentleman had just rejected the opportunity to know her.

Maybe he said it out of embarrassment. Or perhaps he meant it. Not that it matters.

Still, that cold, superior look...

No, it doesn't matter.

Nevertheless, she had no friendly feelings towards him just then, her sympathy forgotten momentarily.

She endeavoured to laugh it off, though the sting was too near. All her life, she had been listening to her mother proclaiming that her beauty was nothing to Jane's, her elder sister. Mrs Gardiner, her aunt by marriage, tried to balance it by saying that she was just as beautiful and should not forget that Jane took after her mother. Of course, her mother would prefer that. Not to mention that Elizabeth was more like her Bennet grandmother. Her mother's relationship with the demanding, gentle-born matron was not the best.

It is always easier to believe the negative things, though; therefore, she always felt inferior regarding her looks. If a noble gentleman then proclaimed her only 'tolerable,' it would not be taken lightly.

She needed friendly consolation, so she stood and went to her best friend, Charlotte. Elizabeth told her what had just happened. She laughed, but it did not reach her eyes. Charlotte, ever observant, saw that Elizabeth was hurt and became indignant towards the gentleman for injuring her friend. She told her not to make too much of it, as he had not

been in the best of moods after all; he had probably just lashed out at his friend. She acknowledged that he should have been more circumspect in his speech. Elizabeth felt justified hearing Charlotte's estimation of the arrogant comment.

The evening soon ended, and Mrs Bennet fanned herself with satisfaction, after all. She felt validated by the attentions bestowed on her daughters. In her opinion, no one was as well dressed and coiffed as her girls – well, maybe except the ladies from town. She was especially pleased about the attention paid to her eldest daughter by the Netherfield party. *Mr Bingley, bless him, danced with her twice!* She even told Mrs Lucas that they were the best thing that had happened to the neighbourhood. Truth be told, she already imagined wedding bells. She proudly looked at her eldest. She knew she was not beautiful for nothing.

The tenants of Netherfield had turned out to be a promising connection. Jane was flattered by the attention; only she was too modest to give it voice – her dear mother provided that. Loud was the journey back to Longbourn, as their mother reminisced over flowingly about the evening, and the two youngest also felt it their duty to announce

every dance they danced, with whom, and how they enjoyed their conversations.

When they arrived home, Mr Bennet had to listen to all that transpired at the assembly, starting with the detailed description of the Netherfield party. By the end of the recitation, he regretted not going to bed while the house was empty.

The younger girls, Catherine ('Kitty' in the family) at seventeen and Lydia, barely out at the tender age of fifteen, immensely enjoyed events like the assembly. Although these were not frequent enough for their taste, their pleasure came from dancing most of the dances and being dressed in their new gowns. They were also happy for their eldest sister, Jane. She was their big sister, and if anybody deserved a suitor, it was her.

Elizabeth also celebrated Jane's success, as she was devoted to her. She knew very well that the opportunity to meet an eligible man was rare in the neighbourhood. She only hoped that their lack of dowries would not prove a hindrance.

When the two elder sisters finally found themselves alone in Jane's room, they further discussed the evening's events and their impressions. Jane, finally able to be herself, shared her thoughts about

Mr Bingley and his sisters; however, she still expressed herself in ladylike understatements. She said that she found Mr Bingley everything a gentleman should be and that she admired his happy manners. She then talked about Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, how they had a pleasant conversation, and the sisters seemed genuinely interested in her.

Elizabeth did not share Jane's enthusiasm about the sisters. In her opinion, they were hugely overdressed for a country assembly, possibly with the intention of showing off. She found their sentiment inconsiderate and their actions arrogant. It was clear to her that the local female populace would either view them with awe or envy. She felt them petty that they would want to create these feelings in the ladies of the neighbourhood.

“I also have the feeling, Jane, that they asked so many questions from you because they wanted to know about whom they must deal with after their brother paid you considerable attention.”

Jane just blinked at her sister's harsh judgement.

“Towards Mr Bingley, I feel favourably, if for nothing else but that he noticed you, my dear sister. He is a good dancer; he danced with me, too. I found him an exuberant, joyful spirit...but he did not make my heart beat faster.”

Jane listened to Elizabeth because she often had good insights, so she promised herself to guard her heart towards the new acquaintances.

Elizabeth then told her sister about *her* unfortunate episode with Mr Darcy, although she was reluctant to share how much his insensitive comment hurt her. Jane could hardly believe that a friend of Mr Bingley could be so cruel! She was adamant that he could not possibly mean it. They examined his every expression and action in an effort to excuse him, concluding at last that he must have felt discomfort at the assembly, as every mother was whispering about his income. Still, they did not approve of his attitude to give offence just because he felt like it or because it was convenient. They wondered if such conduct was typical of a wealthy gentleman. At the same time, they also agreed that if he had chosen to dance with Elizabeth, their mother would have sung about a second marriage in the making.

“For the preservation of my own peace, I must concur with you. I hope we caught him in a bad mood. I should find it very disagreeable, indeed, that a gentleman like Mr Darcy would reject me out of hand. Let us see how he will behave in the future.”

“I think you have the right of it, Sister, and may I say, it is rather magnanimous of you... I wonder

how two gentlemen with hugely different temperaments could be such good friends. Mr Darcy, although older and a member of the first circle, has joined Mr Bingley to help him with his first attempt at learning about having an estate. I find that quite peculiar.”

“Is that why he is here? Mr Darcy, I mean.”

“Yes, Mr Bingley told me himself. He cannot be that arrogant if he has a friend whose fortune comes from trade, can he?”

“Well, that was a rather rational observation, Jane. I may have thought better of what you said and disregarded it because you never see the bad in anyone. This, however, I cannot dismiss. It is curious, indeed. I shall have to defer my judgement.”

Dear Sir,

In her first novel, Elizabeth decides to share the contents of her letter from Darcy with Jane while they are still in London. Jane does not want Darcy to suffer unnecessarily. Impulsively, she writes him a letter to tell him he is not wrong in estimating her feelings toward his friend.

The letter changes everything...

The author of this reimagined story caused quite a stir in the fanfiction world by presenting a unique twist to the original plot. Those who tried it were pleasantly surprised to find a wonderful low-angst tale. Although the story revolves around Jane and Darcy, Elizabeth also finds her own happy ending.

The story website with illustrations:

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Kinga Brady – Passion and Persistence

A Pride and Prejudice reimagining
Kinga Brady



Dear Sir,

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“While part of me may resist that Darcy can find happiness with anyone else, the author makes a good case for Darcy and Jane. Jane is mature and charming in these two volumes. Elizabeth is not broken-hearted. Instead, her interest goes in a different direction, and she finds her soulmate among Darcy’s friends.”

“...The writing is excellent. I look forward to more from this author.”

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*Planned
books*

Whispers of the Heart

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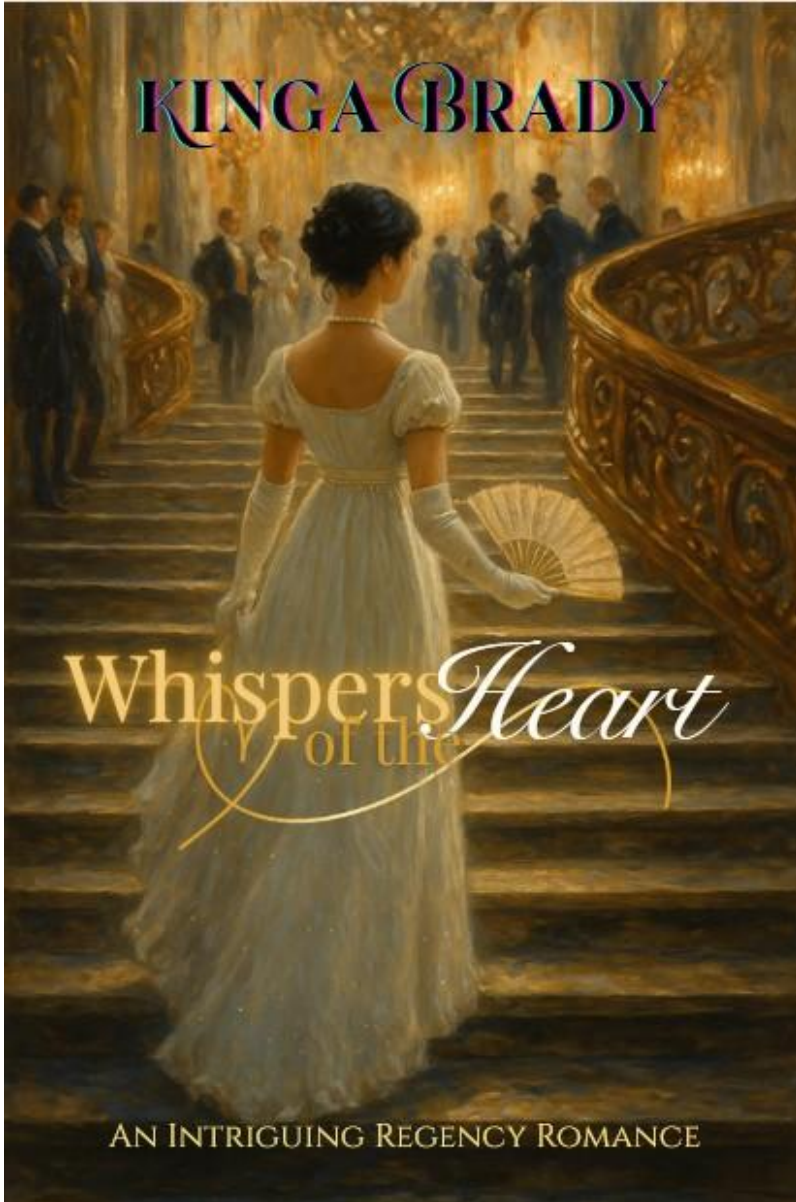
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