

Beyond WORDS

A
Pride & Prejudice
Novella
variation

LYDIA FAIRFAX

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organisations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, as inspired by Jane Austen or otherwise.

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some of us are still here.*

Beyond Words

PROLOGUE

*July 1810
Ramsgate.
Darcy*

"How could you consent to such a thing?" Fitzwilliam Darcy paced the small drawing room, his hand raking through his hair. "How could you trust him?"

He had ridden eight hours from London with his fury carefully assembled, certain at least of one satisfaction — that he would face Wickham directly and settle the matter as it deserved. He had been denied even that. Wickham was gone. How he had known to leave, Darcy could not determine. What he found instead was Mrs. Younge, Georgiana's governess, standing in the hallway entirely unrepentant. When pressed, she had not dissembled. She confirmed every suspicion Darcy possessed and informed him, without apparent regret, that Mr. Wickham had quitted Ramsgate that very morning. Darcy had dismissed her on the spot. She had left without a word of protest, which told him everything he needed to know about her complicity in the affair.

So there was only this: a small drawing room by the sea, his sister standing in the middle of it, and eight hours of anger with nowhere left to go.

She was looking at him as though she did not know whether he had come to save her or condemn her.

"Sit down," he said.

She sat. He did not.

He crossed to the window and stood with his back to her. It was a bright afternoon, indecently so. Gulls moved in slow arcs above the shore. The sea went on in every direction, pale and glittering — unbothered and boundless and of no use to him whatsoever. He could not look at it for long.

Wickham.

Darcy had known for years precisely what George Wickham was. He had grown up beside the man. Had watched his character take shape by slow degrees. Had understood, by the time they were both old enough to know better, exactly what he was capable of. And still he had not placed Georgiana beyond his reach. He had believed distance sufficient. He had believed a respectable companion sufficient. He had been wrong on both counts.

"Fitzwilliam."

Darcy turned.

Georgiana sat with her hands folded in her lap, her eyes red, her posture effortfully composed. She was fifteen years old. She looked, at this moment, considerably younger. She looked, in fact, very much as she had at their mother's funeral, standing beside him in the Pemberley chapel, not quite understanding she was permitted to cry.

The sight of her did not lessen his anger. It merely reminded him that some portion of the blame was his.

"Tell me what happened," Darcy said. "All of it."

She told him. Her voice was low and careful. She did not look away from him as she spoke. She told him how Wickham had sought her out, how his attentions had seemed at first no different from ordinary civility. How gradually it had become something else. How she had been flattered, and then persuaded, and by the time she understood what she had been persuaded of, it was already too late to see clearly.

"He spoke about Mama," she said at the tail end of her confession.

A coldness settled along Darcy's spine that owed nothing to the sea breeze drifting through the window. It rooted him where he stood.

"He told me I would go deaf." She did not soften it. He understood she was reporting his exact words. "He said to look at my family. That Mama had lost her hearing entirely. That our cousin Anne de Bourgh had never known a day of full health." She paused. "He said Lady Catherine had simply been the lucky one. The one who escaped it. And that luck of that kind did not pass down twice."

"He called it a curse," Darcy said quietly.

"Yes." Her hands tightened in her lap. "He said it was coming for me next. That I was nearly sixteen. That I had better make my peace with it sooner rather than later." A tear slipped down her cheek. "And then he said

he had already made his peace with it. That if I accepted him, whatever happened to me, he would remain."

Darcy turned back to the window. He did not trust what his face was doing.

Of course Wickham had known. He had spent most of his boyhood at Pemberley. Had eaten at their table, ridden their horses, moved through their house as though it were his own. He had watched Lady Anne's hearing fail by degrees. Had seen what the household quietly adapted to. Had filed every detail away with those patient eyes that missed very little and forgot even less.

Darcy remembered a hot afternoon in the stable yard. He had been eleven, perhaps twelve. They were waiting for their horses. His mother came across the yard and he called out to her. She did not turn. She did not hear him. She walked on with her usual unhurried grace and nearly reached the gate before she glanced back and saw them.

Wickham had said nothing at the time. He had waited until they were riding, out beyond the park where no one could hear them. Then he said, lightly, as though remarking on the weather, that it must be rather embarrassing. Having a mother who could not hear herself being called. That people would talk. That they probably already did.

Darcy had told him to be quiet. Wickham had smiled and never raised it again directly. But the knowledge had stayed in his eyes from that day forward. Present and patient. Waiting for a use. Fifteen years he had carried it, and saved it for a fifteen-year-old girl alone by the sea.

"He said it kindly," Georgiana said. "That was the worst of it. He said only that most gentlemen would not willingly take on a lady with such a prospect. That society would not be forgiving. That I ought to understand my situation plainly." She paused. "I thought he was only telling me the truth."

"It was not kindness," Darcy said. "He wished you to feel afraid."

"I know that now."

"He saw your fear and made use of it."

Georgiana did not respond. Her tears flowed freely now.

"Georgiana." Darcy sat down beside her, close, on the same small settee. "Why did you not write to me?"

She was quiet for a moment. "I did not want you to think me foolish."

She had not written because she had been ashamed. She had been alone with Wickham's words, alone with their mother's history, and alone with a fear she had carried for years without anyone ever thinking to prepare her for it.

She had been only four when Lady Anne died. What she knew of the deafness she knew from household whispers and half-heard conversations. By the time she was old enough to ask questions, Darcy had never known how to begin. And so the knowledge had sat half-formed in her mind until Wickham took it and finished it for her. In the worst possible way.

"You are not foolish," he said, reaching out to lift her chin gently. "And you are not alone in this. You never were. That is my failure. Not yours."

Georgiana lowered her gaze to their joined hands and said nothing. He felt the slight trembling of her fingers beneath his.

"Whatever comes," Darcy continued, "you will not face it as though it were something to be ashamed of. It is not."

"Do you believe that?"

He did not answer immediately. The history of his mother's family was not easily dismissed. His grandmother had lost her hearing. His mother had done the same. Anne de Bourgh's fragile health offered little comfort to anyone inclined to draw conclusions. Not for the first time, he questioned whether Wickham had simply spoken aloud what others preferred to leave unspoken.

Yet it was not that thought which lingered.

His mother's face rose before him, calm and steadfast. He remembered the February of his seventeenth year, when very little time remained to her. She had taken his hand and spoken slowly and carefully, knowing he had taught himself to understand her even when her hearing had failed.

Promise me, she had said. Promise me you will look after her. Whatever she faces. Whatever she becomes. You will not let her face it alone.

He had promised. He had been seventeen and frightened and entirely certain he meant it. He had not, until this afternoon, understood how completely he had failed to keep it. But his mother had not asked him to spare Georgiana from difficulty. She had asked him not to let her face it alone. That, at least, was still within his power.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

Georgiana held his gaze. Then she nodded, very slightly, and leaned her head against his shoulder as she had not done since she was small. He

did not move. The afternoon light shifted slowly across the floor. The sea continued its indifferent work beyond the glass.

He would keep the promise. He had made it twice now. Once to his mother. Once today.

He did not yet know how. He knew only that somewhere beyond this room, beyond Ramsgate and its bright uncaring sky, the answer existed.

He simply had not found it yet.

ONE

15th October 1811
Meryton Assembly.
Darcy

It was shaping up to be a thoroughly disagreeable evening.

Darcy had arrived in Hertfordshire that very afternoon, somewhat earlier than he had originally intended. Georgiana was with him. She sat nearby, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

She appeared composed. Most observers would have attributed her reserve to shyness.

Darcy knew better.

A year had passed since Ramsgate. Outwardly, she had recovered. She laughed again. She played the pianoforte. She walked with her new governess, Mrs. Annesley, in the parks and accepted invitations she would once have declined.

Yet some injuries were not so easily overcome.

Her introduction into society was less than a year away. A prospect she had once anticipated with innocent eagerness now seemed only to alarm her. Wickham's words had taken deeper root than Darcy liked to admit. No argument of his had yet entirely succeeded in dislodging them.

This evening alone, she had declined every invitation to dance.

Darcy had hoped the quiet of the country might restore some measure of her spirits before that particular trial arrived. What he had not anticipated was being swept into a public assembly within hours of his arrival, with scarcely an opportunity to settle his sister comfortably before being obliged to escort her out again.

Bingley, naturally, was delighted with the arrangement.

Darcy was less so.

He stood near the edge of the room and surveyed the assembly. The evening appeared likely to proceed exactly as assemblies always did. The

hall was warm and crowded, the musicians tolerable at best, and the company precisely what one would expect of a small market town upon an assembly night. Mothers with daughters. Daughters with expectations. And every eye in the room that was not already fixed upon the dancers had, at some point during the last half-hour, found its way to him.

He had no intention of encouraging any of them.

Miss Caroline Bingley had already made two attempts to secure him for a dance, approaching with an attention so studied as to be almost theatrical. He had declined both times with the civility the occasion required and no more. She had retreated without visible mortification, which suggested she had not entirely abandoned hope.

Miss Bingley fancied herself in love with him. Her elder sister, Mrs. Louisa Hurst, seemed equally convinced that her sister's success was only a matter of time. Darcy entertained neither belief.

He intended to disappoint her.

Darcy sipped from a glass of port he had no particular intention of finishing. The position he had chosen afforded him a measure of privacy, though not nearly so much as he would have preferred.

He was, he reflected, having a very bad evening.

His gaze returned to Georgiana at frequent intervals. She sat watching the dancers with an expression of polite interest that did not quite reach her eyes. He had withdrawn from her side in the hope that she might be induced to converse with some of the ladies present.

Seeing her so detached troubled him more than he cared to admit.

He did not press her. Society had become a trial she no longer met with enthusiasm.

A sweep of the room offered a welcome distraction. Two gentlemen of mature years stood in conversation together to his far left. Darcy could not immediately recall which was Mr. King and which Mr. Ashford. Bingley was dancing with the beautiful young lady, Miss Bennet, whose appearance had captivated him from the moment the Netherfield party had been introduced. Several matrons observed the proceedings with evident satisfaction, while a handful of younger ladies sat along the wall awaiting partners.

Few minutes later, Darcy had just taken another sip of his port when Bingley appeared at his elbow. He was flushed with exertion and good

humour, evidently well pleased with both his partner and the set recently concluded.

"You really must dance, Darcy." Bingley procured a glass of port from a nearby table before moving closer. "It is most ungentlemanlike to stand about in this manner."

"I am perfectly content." The smile Darcy offered in return required more effort than it ought.

"You look as though you are attending a funeral."

"I am attending an assembly after a day in a carriage and scarcely an hour's rest. The distinction is slight."

Bingley laughed.

"Come. There are several agreeable ladies who have not yet been asked. Miss Bennet's sisters, for instance."

He nodded towards a small group of young women seated along the wall. "I am persuaded any one of them would be glad of a partner."

"I thank you, no."

"Darcy." Bingley lowered his voice, though his expression remained cheerful. "You have not danced a single set. The neighbourhood will think you insufferably proud."

"The neighbourhood is welcome to think as it pleases."

Bingley sighed, though not in the least discouraged. "Will you not at least consider it? Miss Bennet has a sister, the one in the champagne-coloured gown. She sat out this set. She is very pretty and, from all accounts, remarkably good-humoured. I dare say she would not bite."

Darcy glanced in the indicated direction.

The young woman in question was seated beside Miss Lucas, Sir William Lucas's daughter, who had been kind enough to facilitate several introductions earlier in the evening.

She was not the beauty her elder sister was.

Yet there was something in her manner that arrested his attention.

She sat with an easy, unaffected composure, her dark eyes moving about the room with an attention that struck him as unusually exact. She was not merely observing the dancers. She appeared to be observing everything. Every countenance, every gesture, every exchange. She took it all in with a quiet thoroughness that stirred a faint sense of recognition, though he could not immediately have said why.

"She is tolerable, I suppose," he said, still looking at her, "but not handsome enough to tempt me. And I am in no humour this evening to give consequence to young ladies neglected by other men."

Bingley shook his head.

"You are impossible."

"I am tired. There is a distinction."

Bingley appeared inclined to argue further, then wisely abandoned the effort and returned to his partner.

Darcy turned back to the room.

And found Miss Elizabeth Bennet looking directly at him.

There was a curious amusement about her expression.

Then, as he watched, her lips moved.

Not in conversation. There was no one beside her now. Miss Lucas had been claimed for the next set. She sat alone. She was repeating something.

Silently.

Carefully.

Not handsome enough to tempt me.

The words shaped themselves on her lips with a precision that left no room for mistake. She had heard him. Or rather — she had not heard him. She had watched him. She had read his lips from across a crowded assembly room, in candlelight, above the noise of an orchestra and fifty conversations, and she had caught every word.

A chill froze Darcy in place. The glass paused halfway to his mouth.

The only person he had ever known capable of such a thing was his mother.

Miss Elizabeth held his gaze for one moment longer.

Then the corner of her mouth lifted, ever so slightly, and she looked away, back to the dancers, back to her quiet observations, as though nothing of consequence had occurred.

Darcy stood very still.

Across the room, Bingley was laughing at something Miss Bennet had said, while Miss Bingley watched them both with poorly concealed dissatisfaction. The musicians had embarked upon another reel. The evening proceeded exactly as it had a moment before.

Darcy was no longer attending to any of it.

He looked again at Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

She did not return the glance.

She sat with her hands lightly clasped before her and watched the room with that same composed attention, giving little away, asking nothing of anyone, entirely self-possessed amidst the noise and scrutiny surrounding her.

His mother had sat exactly so.

In rooms very much like this one, during those years when the world had begun to grow quiet around her, Lady Anne had learned to watch rather than listen. She had cultivated that same stillness, that same economy of attention, and borne it without embarrassment or explanation. Most people had never noticed.

Darcy had.

He had watched her do it through countless evenings without fully understanding what he was seeing until it was far too late to tell her so.

He turned towards Georgiana.

She was watching the dancers, her expression unchanged. She had no notion of what he had just observed.

Or perhaps he had imagined it entirely.

He was getting considerably ahead of himself. He knew that.

Yet when he looked toward Miss Elizabeth Bennet once more, she was speaking to her mother. Mrs. Bennet, he remembered well enough — Sir William had introduced her on arrival, and she had since made herself one of the louder presences in the room.

Darcy turned back to his glass.

He did not, for the remainder of the evening, entirely cease watching miss Elizabeth Bennet.

TWO

15th October 1811
Meryton Assembly.
Elizabeth

The secret, Elizabeth had long since determined, lay in arriving sufficiently early to choose one's position before the room grew crowded and conversation dissolved into a general murmur.

She had accomplished it that evening. Barely.

She had secured a place along the eastern wall, near enough the floor to observe the dancing, yet far enough from the musicians that they served chiefly as ornament. Charlotte sat beside her, which was a blessing in itself. Charlotte possessed the useful habit of always turning toward the person to whom she spoke, a quality Elizabeth had never ceased to value, though she had never said so aloud.

"Well," Charlotte said, touching her arm with some eagerness as she looked toward Jane and Mr. Bingley. "He is precisely as described."

"Thus far, he seems exactly as reported," Elizabeth replied. "Open, cheerful, and perfectly at ease with himself and everyone around him. Jane already thinks well of him, which can surprise no one."

"I was not speaking of Mr. Bingley."

Charlotte directed her attention, with some deliberation, toward the opposite side of the room. Elizabeth followed her gaze.

Mr. Darcy stood somewhat apart from the company, a glass in his hand and an expression which suggested the evening had already disappointed him. He was tall, well-formed, and might have been called handsome had his countenance not seemed so determined to remain severe. He had arrived with the Netherfield party and had, so far as Elizabeth could tell, occupied nearly the same position ever since.

Yet it was not Mr. Darcy who first claimed her notice.

Beside him, seated a little apart from Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley, was Miss Darcy. She was fair, slight, and elegantly dressed, observing all around her with a quiet attentiveness that conveyed no particular wish to join in the festivities.

"She has not danced all evening." Elizabeth inclined her head slightly. "Miss Darcy, I mean."

"She is very young," Charlotte replied. "And newly come amongst strangers. Perhaps she is merely overawed."

"Perhaps." Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy glance toward his sister. There was concern in the look, and something almost protective. "Or perhaps she is as uneasy here as her brother. Neither appears to derive much pleasure from the evening."

Charlotte grimaced. "You have concluded all that from across a crowded assembly room?"

"I have concluded it from observing two people who are exerting themselves admirably to appear occupied by nothing at all," Elizabeth said. "It is not difficult if one pays attention."

Charlotte shook her head and pursed her lips as she always did when Elizabeth's observations struck nearer the mark than she found comfortable. Elizabeth accepted the reaction without remark and turned her attention once more to the dancers.

Jane was still radiant. Mr. Bingley was still captivated. The evening proceeded exactly as such evenings always proceeded, and Elizabeth was content, for the present, merely to observe it.

"Ten thousand a year," Charlotte said, returning, as she invariably did, to practical matters. "That is what Mrs. Long says of Mr. Darcy."

"For a gentleman who arrived in Hertfordshire only this day, how does Mrs. Long know the amount of his fortune?"

Charlotte lifted her eyes in mock reflection. "Mrs. Long is seldom mistaken where incomes are concerned."

"She does possess a singular talent for discovering particulars which do not concern her," Elizabeth agreed.

"The difficulty is that he has not spoken to anyone beyond his own party," Charlotte continued. "He has not danced, and yet every mother in the room is aware of him."

"Every mother in the room was aware of him within a quarter of an hour of his arrival," Elizabeth replied. "My own included, I dare say, though

she has not yet informed me of it."

She turned just in time to see Mr. Darcy survey the room with detached attention, as though finding it deficient. "My objection to him is that he is proud."

"He is wealthy."

"Charlotte." Elizabeth scolded.

"I merely observe that the two qualities frequently travel together." Charlotte tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "What else?"

"He does not look as though he wishes to be here," Elizabeth said. "Though judging by the frequency with which he looks toward his sister, I am no longer entirely convinced that is the whole of it."

Charlotte regarded her curiously. "What do you mean?"

Elizabeth did not answer at once.

Mr. Darcy had glanced toward Miss Darcy again. The look was brief and unguarded, there and gone before anyone not watching closely would have marked it. Whatever had brought him into Hertfordshire, she thought, it was not solely regard for his friend.

"Nothing," she said at last. "Only that proud men are rarely so simple as they first appear."

The set concluded. Mr. Bingley returned Jane to their mother's side with evident reluctance. Jane's countenance glowed with a happiness Elizabeth had not witnessed in many months, and the sight filled her with warmth entirely independent of the crowded room.

"She is happy," Charlotte observed, her eyes settling on Jane.

"She is," Elizabeth agreed. "Let us hope he deserves it."

Mr. Bingley made his way back to Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth watched him speak with animation, gesturing broadly toward the room, the dancers, and the assembled company. Mr. Darcy's expression remained unmoved. Then Mr. Bingley turned and gestured, quite distinctly, in her direction.

Elizabeth did not look away. She had discovered long ago that looking away was seldom worth the effort. Her attention settled on their mouths as she followed what fragments of the conversation she could.

"Lizzy, Mr. Marcus has engaged me for the next set. I had better make myself available lest he suppose me indifferent and bestow his attentions elsewhere." Charlotte said before rising to leave.

Elizabeth uttered some reply she scarcely heard herself, though she made no attempt to look toward Charlotte as she departed.

Mr. Darcy's gaze travelled slowly across the room.

It reached her, rested upon her for a moment without particular warmth, and passed on. His lips moved in response to something Mr. Bingley had said.

Elizabeth read them with ease.

She had been reading lips across crowded rooms for a couple of years, and Mr. Darcy, whatever his faults, spoke with admirable precision.

She is tolerable, I suppose. But not ... me. And I am in no humour tonight to give consequence to young ladies slighted by other men.

Elizabeth's heart gave a violent start.

What had he said?

She had not perfectly caught the middle portion. As was her habit when uncertain, she silently repeated the movement of his mouth.

Not handsome enough to tempt me.

Her eyes widened.

There was no other arrangement of words that suited the movement she had observed, and the phrase fit the remainder of his speech perfectly.

While Elizabeth reflected upon the rudeness of such a declaration, and upon the degree of pride required to speak so publicly of an entire stranger, she observed an unexpected stillness come over him.

Recognition lingered upon his features.

As though he had witnessed something remarkable.

A tap upon her shoulder startled her so thoroughly that she nearly jumped.

Turning, she found her mother at her elbow.

"Lizzy," Mrs. Bennet said at a volume sufficient to overpower the musicians, "you appear far more interested in Mr. Darcy than in securing a partner for the next set."

Recovering herself, Elizabeth shook her head. "My observing Mr. Darcy has nothing to do with my not dancing."

"He is very stiff," Mrs. Bennet declared, to Elizabeth's no great surprise. She suspected her mother's sudden interest in her had far more to do with gossip than with securing her a partner for the next set. "Ten thousand a year is no excuse for incivility. I do not like his look at all."

"Is that your own opinion, Mama, or are you speaking on behalf of every mama in the room?"

"He has not asked a single young lady to dance."

"No, Mama."

"Which is exceedingly rude. Everyone thinks so. A gentleman of consequence ought at least to be civil. I shall never like him, Lizzy. I have entirely made up my mind."

Snapping her fan shut, Mrs. Bennet swept away in the direction of Mrs. Kings before Elizabeth could reply.

With her mother gone, Elizabeth allowed her gaze to wander in search of her sisters.

Lydia and Kitty had attached themselves to the Goulding brothers with considerable enthusiasm. Mary sat in a corner with a glass of lemonade, observing the room with an expression of mild disapprobation which suited her admirably at social gatherings. Jane was being led back to the floor by Mr. Bingley, who had apparently determined another set with her was worth whatever notice the neighbourhood might take of it.

Across the room, Elizabeth's attention returned briefly to Miss Darcy.

She had not moved.

She remained in almost precisely the same posture she had occupied for the better part of an hour, observing the dancers with quiet care.

I wonder, Elizabeth thought, whether she wishes to dance and does not know how to begin. Or whether someone has persuaded her that she ought not.

She glanced once more toward Mr. Darcy.

He was looking at his sister again with that same unguarded concern he seemed entirely unaware of displaying.

Having satisfied her curiosity, Elizabeth returned to a pastime she had long since perfected.

She watched mouths moving across the room, silently shaping the words she could discern, smiling at those she deciphered and frowning at those which defeated her. It was an old habit, a private one, and it served her exceedingly well in assemblies such as this.

She did not once look again toward the corner where Mr. Darcy stood.

She had no need.

From the moment he had declared her not handsome enough to tempt him, he had not ceased watching her, and she saw no reason to grant him the satisfaction of knowing she had noticed.

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That evening, the Bennet ladies provided their father, a gentleman who possessed little fondness for assemblies but never objected to hearing of them afterward, with a thorough account of the evening's events.

"Mr. Bingley is something quite extraordinary." Mrs. Bennet settled comfortably into her chair, satisfaction evident in every line of her countenance. "He danced three sets with Jane. Three! I am quite persuaded he would not have stood up with another young lady all evening had common civility not required it."

"Indeed?" Mr. Bennet's lips twitched. "Then Jane must have been the toast of the room."

"The envy of it," Mrs. Bennet declared, fluttering her fan. "Five thousand a year, perfectly agreeable, and not a disagreeable feature to be found. She could not have done better had I selected him myself."

"And what of the remainder of the party?" Mr. Bennet asked, turning his attention to Elizabeth. "Did Mr. Bingley arrive with the large company rumour promised?"

"Not particularly large," Elizabeth replied. "Only his sisters, his brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst, and a friend, Mr. Darcy."

"Darcy." Mr. Bennet considered the name. "And what sort of gentleman is this Mr. Darcy?"

"Proud," Lydia answered at once. "He stood in one corner the entire evening and did not ask a single girl to dance. Not one."

"He is handsome, though," Kitty supplied. "And has ten thousand a year."

"Ten thousand a year and not a particle of manners," Mrs. Bennet said decisively. "He is nothing at all to Mr. Bingley. Extremely stiff. Extremely disagreeable. I do not like him in the least."

"You did not speak to him, Mama," Jane observed gently.

"I saw quite enough. Any gentleman who refuses to dance at an assembly thinks vastly too well of himself. We have no need of such people in Meryton."

"There was also his sister," Jane continued. "Miss Darcy. She remained with the party throughout the evening. Very young and very pretty."

"She did not dance either," Lydia said. "Nor did she speak to anybody. She seemed very much like her brother."

"Perhaps," Elizabeth said, finding herself unexpectedly inclined to offer a defence, "she merely required time to grow accustomed to the company."

Lydia made a noise which clearly indicated her dissatisfaction with such an explanation.

Mrs. Bennet had already returned to the infinitely more important subject of whether Mr. Bingley might call for Jane before the week was out and how many weeks could reasonably be expected to pass before an offer of marriage followed.

Elizabeth offered no further remarks. Settling back upon the settee, she allowed the conversation to flow around her unnoticed.

To her surprise, she found herself thinking instead of Miss Darcy, seated so quietly in her corner, and of Mr. Darcy's repeated glances toward his sister, each marked by particular concern.

Then, against her inclination, she found herself thinking of him watching her for the remainder of the evening with an expression she could not quite decipher.

Whatever it signified, she did not like it.

And she was tolerably certain she had not heard the last of Mr. Darcy.

THREE

29th October 1811

Lucas Lodge.

Darcy

A fortnight had elapsed without any meaningful encounter between Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. He had seen her twice in company, briefly and at a distance, and upon both occasions she had appeared perfectly sensible of his presence and perfectly disinclined to acknowledge it. She did not seek his eye. She placed herself apart from him with a natural ease that might have appeared accidental to anyone not observing her particularly closely.

Darcy was observing her particularly closely.

He could not determine whether she was merely indifferent to him or whether she had perceived him watching her at the assembly and had resolved, with some deliberation, that she had no wish to be observed. In either case, the result was the same. He had learned nothing further, and the question which had occupied far more of his thoughts than he considered entirely reasonable remained unresolved.

He was tolerably certain of what he had seen. Lip-reading was not a common accomplishment. In his experience, it was possessed almost exclusively by those whose hearing could not always be depended upon. He had reflected upon the matter many times in the fortnight since the assembly, the accuracy of it, the ease with which she had done it, the manner in which she had repeated his words without a moment's hesitation, and he could not make it signify anything other than what it appeared to signify.

He required certainty.

When Sir William's invitation to an evening at Lucas Lodge arrived, Darcy resolved to make use of the occasion.

The carriage that evening conveyed himself, Georgiana, Bingley, and Miss Bingley. The Hursts followed in their own. Darcy sat beside his sister and occupied himself with what he had been attempting, with very little success, for the past fortnight: drawing her out of herself. Georgiana had spent the greater part of the previous two weeks indoors. Her days were divided between the pianoforte, walks about the grounds of Netherfield, and various needlework projects undertaken with Mrs. Annesley, occupations which, though respectable, could scarcely be called an engagement with the wider world. Anxiety on her account had rendered him thoughtful all evening, and Miss Bingley's constant complaints regarding country society did nothing to improve his humour.

"It has not been nearly so bad as all that," Bingley said, dismissing his sister's argument that the assemblies they had attended bore no comparison to those of London. "Meryton knows very well how to conduct a ball. I have found them exceedingly pleasant."

"Have you indeed, Charles?" Miss Bingley's smile was thin. "Or does your eagerness to dance with Miss Bennet upon every possible occasion somewhat influence your judgement?"

"What I enjoy, and how often I dance with any particular lady, are entirely my own concerns, Caroline." Bingley did not look at her. "You might concern yourself with securing partners of your own."

Miss Bingley drew a sharp breath, recovered herself with visible effort, and turned to Darcy.

"Perhaps you might speak some sense to your friend, Mr. Darcy. I fear he is becoming the victim of ambitious mothers and their designs."

"I see no reason to interfere in Bingley's affairs," Darcy replied. "Nor do I perceive any design worth remarking upon."

Bingley turned toward the window with a look of satisfaction. Miss Bingley subsided into a silence that conveyed her displeasure more effectively than words.

Georgiana said nothing. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, watching the dark road ahead, present and absent in equal measure.

After a pause, Darcy seized the opportunity to make further enquiries concerning Miss Elizabeth.

"The Bennet family are well regarded in the neighbourhood, I collect," he said to no one in particular.

"Universally," Bingley replied. "Mr. Bennet is one of the most entertaining gentlemen I have ever met. Though I do not think he much enjoys outdoor pursuits. I am persuaded you will like him. Mrs. Bennet is... spirited. All the daughters are generally liked, but the elder girls are especially agreeable."

"And Miss Elizabeth?" Darcy kept his tone easy enough to disguise his interest. "What is generally said of her?"

Bingley glanced at him with mild curiosity.

"Lively. Very clever. Fond of walking in all weather, I am told. Why do you ask?"

"She struck me as thoughtful," Darcy said carelessly. "I wondered whether she preferred smaller gatherings to larger ones. Whether she found rooms such as the assembly, the noise, the crowd, fatiguing."

Bingley considered the question.

"I could not say. Miss Bennet has never mentioned anything of the sort. Miss Elizabeth always appears perfectly at her ease."

"She does," Darcy agreed.

"Why do you ask?" Miss Bingley's eyes sharpened with immediate interest. "Has she said or done anything to suggest otherwise?"

"Not at all," Darcy replied. "I merely find those who observe more interesting than those who strive to attract notice. I wondered whether it was disposition or habit."

Miss Bingley appeared dissatisfied with the answer, but her interest soon faded. Bingley returned his attention to the window. Georgiana glanced briefly at her brother, said nothing, and looked away once more.

Darcy allowed his thoughts to return to the subject which had occupied them so frequently of late. No one appeared to have noticed anything unusual about Miss Elizabeth Bennet. That fact alone was instructive. Unless he had entirely mistaken the matter, Miss Elizabeth concealed her difficulty exceedingly well.

If there is a difficulty to conceal at all, he thought.

Before the evening was over, he intended to know the truth.

The carriage turned through the gates of Lucas Lodge. Lamps burned along the drive, and the house stood warm and welcoming against the darkness of the October evening. Darcy adjusted his coat and offered Georgiana his arm as they descended.

"You need not remain beside me all evening," she said quietly.

"I do not intend to remain beside you all evening. At present, I am merely escorting you through a doorway."

The corner of her mouth moved.

It was not quite a smile. It was nearer one than he had managed in a fortnight, and he was willing to be satisfied with that.

"There is someone I should like you to meet this evening," Darcy said as they approached the entrance.

"Whom?"

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

Georgiana looked at him with mild surprise. "Why?"

"I shall explain later. For tonight, you must simply trust me."

The house was warm and considerably fuller than he had expected. Sir William Lucas received them at the door with all the hospitality for which he was known.

Much to his surprise, Miss Bingley detached herself from her brother and crossed immediately to Miss Bennet, taking her hand with every appearance of particular pleasure. The display was so studied that Darcy was instantly suspicious. He made a mental note to caution Bingley against his sister's interference. There was something in Caroline's smile which inspired distrust rather than confidence.

Having promised Georgiana greater freedom, Darcy released her arm and watched her settle into a chair near the window, where she might observe the company without being required to participate in it. He then turned his attention to the room.

He found Elizabeth almost immediately.

She stood beside the refreshment table with Charlotte Lucas, positioned, as he had expected, with a clear view of the entrance and the room beyond. She appeared to be listening to Miss Lucas, though her attention seemed divided amongst the various activities unfolding around her in that same quiet, methodical manner he had observed at the Meryton assembly and considered repeatedly during the preceding fortnight.

She had not yet seen him.

Or so he believed.

He was no longer inclined to doubt himself. Miss Elizabeth Bennet was observing the room with purpose.

He began to cross towards her.

He was perhaps halfway across when Charlotte Lucas noticed something on the far side of the room, her mother, by the look of it. She touched Elizabeth lightly upon the arm in farewell and moved away.

Elizabeth watched her depart, turned back to the room, and found Darcy standing before her.

She did not start. She did not retreat. She merely regarded him with that composed, attentive expression and waited.

"Miss Bennet," he said. "Good evening."

"Mr. Darcy." She inclined her head.

He took a position beside her to the left. "I trust the evening finds you well."

"Very well, I thank you."

She did not turn fully towards him, nor did she encourage further conversation with a question of her own.

"It is a pleasant gathering."

"Sir William is a most obliging host," she agreed.

A brief silence followed.

Around them, the room continued in its usual course. Conversation, laughter, and the first tentative sounds of the musicians tuning their instruments drifted through the air.

Elizabeth paid no apparent attention to any of it.

"You are acquainted with most of the neighbourhood, I believe," Darcy said at last.

"Most of it," she said. "Meryton is not large."

"And do you find it agreeable?" he asked. "The society here?"

"Very agreeable indeed. I have known most of these people all my life. There is a comfort in such familiarity."

"I daresay there is." Darcy paused, considering his next words. "Though I sometimes wonder whether familiarity makes it easier to be at ease in company. In a room such as this."

Elizabeth turned towards him.

"I am not certain I understand you, Mr. Darcy."

"Only that a room full of strangers presents different demands than a room full of acquaintances," he said carefully. "The noise, the movement, the number of conversations happening at once." He kept his voice entirely neutral. "Some people find it fatiguing. Others manage it with considerable — skill."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment.

He watched her consider both the question and the motive behind it.

"I find it perfectly manageable," she said at last.

Her voice remained light. Her eyes did not.

"I always have."

"Of course."

"Mr. Darcy." She turned fully towards him for the first time. It ought to have felt encouraging. It did not. "You are a very observant gentleman."

"I have occasionally been accused of it."

"I am sure the talent serves you well," she said pleasantly. "In the proper company."

It was not a question. Nor was it quite a warning.

It occupied a careful space between the two, delivered with a composure that made her wishes perfectly clear.

She did not desire his company.

"If you will excuse me." Her voice remained pleasant and entirely firm. "I believe my mother requires my attention."

He glanced across the room.

Mrs. Bennet was doing no such thing. Indeed, she was deeply engaged in conversation with Mrs. Lucas and not facing their direction at all.

When he looked back, Elizabeth had already half turned away, lifting her glass with unhurried composure.

He had one opportunity remaining before she excused herself entirely.

"Miss Bennet." He called quietly.

She paused.

"Before the evening advances further, might I prevail upon you to spend a little time with my sister? She has been at Netherfield a fortnight and has enjoyed very little society beyond our own party. I believe she would value the acquaintance."

Elizabeth heaved a sigh.

When she turned back, the wariness remained, but something else had entered her expression. Not warmth, certainly, but a willingness to consider the request.

"I should be very pleased to make Miss Darcy's better acquaintance."

He inclined his head.

"You are very kind."

Crossing the room, he offered Georgiana his arm and quietly explained that Miss Bennet had agreed to sit with her.

When they returned, Elizabeth's expression softened in a manner Darcy had not yet seen directed towards himself.

"Miss Bennet," Georgiana said, curtsying.

"Miss Darcy."

Elizabeth returned the courtesy with a smile.

It was an entirely different smile from any she had bestowed upon him. Genuine, immediate, and directed wholly towards a young lady rather than a gentleman she had no particular wish to encourage.

Georgiana smiled in return. It was a small thing, perhaps, but Darcy had not seen a smile reach her eyes in many months.

Darcy stepped back and allowed them the space the moment required.

He watched as Georgiana began speaking, hesitantly at first, to a woman who listened with her whole attention, who turned towards her completely, and who possessed the rare ability of making another person feel entirely seen.

Within only a few moments, Georgiana appeared more at ease than she had since their arrival in Hertfordshire.

He had come that evening hoping to confirm a theory.

He had not yet obtained the answer he sought.

Yet he had found someone in whose company Georgiana seemed immediately comfortable.

For the present, that was enough.

FOUR

30th October 1811

Oakham Mount.

Elizabeth

Nothing composed Elizabeth's mind so effectually as an early morning walk, when the lanes were empty and the chance of encountering anyone was as slight as Hertfordshire permitted. The Bennets had returned home late the previous evening, and the events at Lucas Lodge had left her with very little sleep.

It was not Georgiana Darcy who occupied her thoughts. The young lady had been perfectly agreeable, shy, sincere, and considerably easier company than her brother. Elizabeth had enjoyed their conversation and found herself genuinely pleased to have renewed the acquaintance.

It was the brother who had refused to leave her in peace.

She had lain awake turning over his words with the same methodical attention she devoted to anything that unsettled her, examining them from every perspective until she was satisfied she had overlooked nothing.

...the noise, the movement, the number of conversations happening at once. Some people find it fatiguing. Others manage it with considerable skill.

She had acquitted herself well. She always did. She had answered him lightly, diverted the conversation, and revealed nothing. Yet the words themselves, the particular shape of them, the care with which they had been chosen, lingered in her mind in a manner she could not dismiss. It was not what he had said. It was what he had nearly said. The slight pause before the word *skill*. The manner in which he had watched her receive it.

He had been testing something. Of that she was almost certain.

Which made no sense.

There was no possible way he could know. Her family did not speak of it. Jane would sooner hold her tongue forever than mention such a thing to

Mr. Bingley, and her father and Mary made it a principle never to discuss the matter. Her mother referred to it when it suited her purpose, but she was hardly in a position to confide in Mr. Darcy. As for Kitty and Lydia, though they possessed neither discretion nor good sense in abundance, Elizabeth could not imagine either of them discussing the subject within the hearing of anyone connected to him.

She had concealed it for years with a thoroughness that left little to discover. She moved through crowded rooms, managed conversations, placed herself accordingly, read lips when necessary, adapted, adjusted, and passed unnoticed because she took care that she should.

Yet Mr. Darcy had been in Hertfordshire scarcely a fortnight, and somehow his questions had left her with the uncomfortable impression that he knew.

How could he?

At first light Elizabeth abandoned any pretence of further sleep and set out for Oakham Mount.

The path was familiar enough to require little thought. The morning was cold and clear, the fields still silvered with frost, and she walked briskly. By the time she reached the summit she had managed, if not to resolve the matter, at least to place sufficient distance between herself and Longbourn that her reflections seemed less pressing.

She had been there perhaps ten minutes when she became aware of the approach of a horse upon the path below, more sensation than sound, transmitted through the frozen ground beneath her feet, and turned in time to see a rider emerge from the trees.

She felt a chill entirely unrelated to the morning air. That the rider should prove to be Mr. Darcy seemed precisely the sort of misfortune the day was determined to provide.

He saw her at the same moment. He checked his horse briefly, then continued at a walk and dismounted without any particular haste, as though encountering her here at such an hour were an entirely ordinary occurrence.

It was not an ordinary occurrence. Of that she was quite certain.

"Miss Bennet." He inclined his head. "Good morning."

"Mr. Darcy." She returned the courtesy. "I had not expected to encounter anyone here at this hour."

"Nor I," he replied. "I ride out most mornings. I find I prefer the open country to the grounds at Netherfield."

Elizabeth was not entirely persuaded. She had walked out almost every morning since his arrival in Hertfordshire and had never before met him upon the road.

"As do I," she said, and immediately wished she had chosen another response, for it was precisely the sort of small agreement that invited further conversation, and she had very little desire to encourage it.

He secured his horse to a nearby branch and came to stand a few feet away. Without conscious thought, Elizabeth shifted slightly, making room for him on her left side, the same quiet adjustment she made in every conversation, so habitual by now that she no longer noticed herself doing it.

Darcy noticed.

She saw it in the brief pause before he stepped into the place she had made for him, the fraction of a second during which he merely observed, and then said nothing.

"I am glad to have encountered you, Miss Bennet." He flexed his fingers briefly, as though restoring warmth to them. "I wished to thank you."

She looked at him.

"My sister was in considerably better spirits last evening than she has been for some time," he continued. "I believe your conversation was the cause of it. I am very grateful."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. Whatever she had expected him to say, it had not been that. She had prepared herself for further questions, for studied indifference, for that peculiar attention which felt so remarkably like scrutiny. Gratitude had not occurred to her.

"Miss Darcy is very easy to talk to," she said, recovering herself. "I enjoyed her company."

"She enjoyed yours," he replied. "Very much."

He paused, as though deciding where next to steer the conversation. Elizabeth tensed without quite realising she had done so.

"I hope you may find occasion to spend time with her again, whenever it is convenient to you. I would not impose upon you. Only, she does not form attachments easily, and I believe she would benefit from the acquaintance."

Elizabeth looked out across the valley.

She thought of Georgiana's careful questions, of the manner in which she listened, and of the particular quality of her attention. She thought about

Mr. Darcy standing at the edge of the room watching them with an expression she had been unable to read from a distance.

Miss Darcy had seemed cheerful enough in conversation, yet there had been moments when her smiles appeared hard won. Elizabeth found herself wondering what sorrow or disappointment had taught so young a lady such caution.

And she found herself wondering why he was so anxious that his sister should know her better.

"I should be very happy to," she said.

He inclined his head. "You are very kind."

The silence which followed was less uncomfortable than those they had shared at Lucas Lodge. Elizabeth was not entirely certain what to make of that.

"You come here every morning," he said at last.

"Most mornings."

"And when the weather is unfavourable?"

"I come regardless," she replied. "My mother considers it a defect in my character."

The corner of his mouth moved. "I imagine you consider it a necessity."

She glanced at him.

"I find walking settles my thoughts," she said. "Nothing more extraordinary than that."

"Of course."

She became aware once more of that quality in him, the watchfulness, the patience, the sense of a man waiting rather than merely standing still. She had observed it at the assembly, at the gatherings where they had encountered one another since, at Lucas Lodge, and now here upon a hilltop, and she remained no nearer to understanding what exactly he was waiting for.

What she did know was that she had no intention of providing it.

"I ought to return," she said. "My family will wonder where I have gone."

"Of course." He stepped back. "Good morning, Miss Bennet."

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy."

She began down the path. Her pace remained steady, and she did not look back. She was nearly halfway down the slope before she allowed

herself to dwell once more upon his words from the previous evening.

Others manage it with considerable skill.

He had been in Hertfordshire scarcely three weeks. She had concealed the matter most of her adult life. There was no conceivable way he could know.

And yet there he had been, upon her favourite path, at her preferred hour, on the very morning she had chosen because she wished to think without interruption. The expression that had crossed his face when she shifted to place him on her better-hearing side troubled her more than she cared to admit.

It had looked remarkably like recognition.

Elizabeth reached the gate at Longbourn and pushed it open.

Then she informed herself, very firmly, that she was being foolish.

She did not entirely succeed in believing it.

~ ~ ~

Darcy

He had known where he was likely to find her, or at least hoped he did. Only the previous evening, Bingley had remarked that Miss Elizabeth was fond of walking out regardless of the weather. Georgiana, on the drive home from Lucas Lodge, had quietly observed that Miss Elizabeth had spoken of Oakham Mount as her favourite place for walking in the neighbourhood.

He had stored away both pieces of information without examining too closely why he had done so.

That morning, rising before the rest of the house, he had told himself only that the ride would be beneficial. The air was clear, the ground firm beneath the horse's feet, and there was no particular reason not to take the Oakham road. It had been little more than a conjecture, one he had not been entirely certain would prove correct.

It had.

The ride back to Netherfield passed quickly. Darcy paid very little attention to the road.

His thoughts were occupied instead with the image of Elizabeth Bennet shifting almost imperceptibly to her left as he approached, making room for him on that side with the ease of someone who had performed the action so often that it had ceased to require thought. He had noticed it. He had

marked it without comment and said nothing. Their conversation had proceeded as though nothing of consequence had occurred.

Yet something of consequence had occurred.

For a fortnight he had turned the matter over in his mind, telling himself he might be mistaken, that he had seen only what he expected to see rather than what was truly there. He could no longer persuade himself of it.

The movement had been too natural, too practised, too entirely unconscious to signify anything else.

And now that he considered it, it was not the first time he had observed it.

At Lucas Lodge, when he had approached her near the refreshment table, she had shifted in precisely the same manner, placing him to her left with a movement so subtle he had not thought much of it at the time. Indeed, upon reflection, he could scarcely recall an occasion during the previous fortnight when he had seen Miss Elizabeth in conversation and not found the person to whom she spoke occupying that position. Whether speaking with Charlotte Lucas, her sisters, or any other member of the company, she invariably arranged herself in the same fashion.

She heard better from her left side. That was the only reasonable argument.

His mother had done precisely the same before her better side had yielded to silence as well.

He dismounted at the Netherfield stables and surrendered his horse to a waiting groom without a word. The house remained quiet. Taking the back stairs, he removed his coat and gloves before proceeding to his room.

His valet had prepared a bath.

Darcy lowered himself into the water and stared at the ceiling, considering what he now knew with something approaching certainty.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet was hard of hearing.

She had concealed it so successfully, and for so many years, that no one beyond her immediate circle appeared to possess the slightest awareness of it. At least, he presumed those within that circle must know. It was difficult to imagine otherwise. She moved through the world with a confidence and composure his mother had required years to acquire, and she had done so without guidance, without the assistance of anyone who truly understood the challenge before her, entirely alone and entirely without embarrassment.

His thoughts turned to Georgiana.

To the fears Wickham had planted and left to flourish. To the questions she had asked repeatedly since Ramsgate, whether any gentleman would ever truly value her, whether her future had already been diminished, whether a defect of health, should she ever suffer one, might place happiness beyond her reach.

He thought of the answer he had been seeking and had not known where to find.

He had found it that morning, upon a hilltop shortly after sunrise.

Emerging from the bath, he dressed with his valet aid and took his place at his private breakfast table with quiet satisfaction.

He would speak with Georgiana.

He would find some means of bringing her more frequently into Miss Elizabeth's company, and Miss Elizabeth's example might accomplish what his own reassurances had thus far failed to achieve.

It was a sensible plan.

It was the correct plan.

He reached for his coffee.

Then, entirely without invitation, he found himself thinking of Elizabeth Bennet eyes.

Dark, direct, and entirely unimpressed by him, which was, he was discovering, a quality to which he was wholly unaccustomed and about which he could not seem to stop thinking. She had looked at him upon that hilltop with the same frank and unhurried attention she appeared to bestow upon everything, and he had looked back. For one brief moment, the theory, the plan, Georgiana, and every other consideration had fallen away, leaving only those eyes, the cold morning air, and the valley below wrapped in mist.

He set down his coffee.

Getting closer to Miss Elizabeth Bennet was for Georgiana, he reminded himself.

That was the purpose.

The only purpose.

He would do well to remember it.

He picked up his coffee once more.

Her eyes were remarkably fine.

Darcy set the cup down again, pushed back his chair, and went in search of some occupation sufficiently demanding to fill the remainder of the morning.

FIVE

2nd November 1811

Netherfield.

Darcy

Breakfast at Netherfield was, almost without exception, a quieter affair than dinner. Bingley attended to his correspondence as he ate. Mrs. Hurst devoted herself to her breakfast. Mr. Hurst devoted himself to rather more of everything than was strictly necessary. Miss Bingley presided over the table with all the consequence of a woman who considered herself mistress of the house already.

Darcy drank his tea and said very little.

Georgiana sat beside him, making respectable progress through her breakfast and answering Miss Bingley's enquiries regarding her musical studies with polite brevity. It required only a glance for Darcy to recognise that she was making a considerable effort. Caroline's questions betrayed a degree of self-importance which far exceeded her actual accomplishments, and Georgiana, though too well bred to show it, appeared perfectly aware of the fact.

"You play beautifully, dear Miss Darcy." Miss Bingley reached to refill her cup with such studied elegance that it appeared intended for the benefit of any observer. "I have rarely heard the pianoforte touched with such feeling. Your brother must be exceedingly proud."

"He is very kind about it," Georgiana replied.

"Not kind at all." Darcy glanced towards his sister and was pleased to see that the compliment had brightened her countenance. "Merely accurate."

Miss Bingley smiled at him as though the remark represented a significant advance in their intimacy.

Darcy returned his attention to his breakfast.

"Darcy." Bingley laid aside a letter, his face brightening as if he had just conceived an excellent idea. "I intend to call at Longbourn this morning. You ought to accompany me. If for no other reason than to make Mr. Bennet's acquaintance. He reminds me of you in certain respects. I am quite persuaded you would like him."

"Mr. Bennet," Miss Bingley said, with a precision that conveyed her opinion far more effectively than any increase in volume could have done, "has not thought proper to call upon you once since your arrival, Charles. Nor has he attended a single gathering to which we have been invited. I cannot imagine what you find so remarkable in a gentleman who cannot be troubled to quit his own house for society."

"Neither have we called upon them," Bingley replied cheerfully. "I have visited Longbourn several times. You and Louisa declined every invitation to accompany me."

Miss Bingley opened her mouth as if to reply but, apparently finding no satisfactory answer, closed it again.

"I should be very glad to come," Darcy said.

It occurred to him that this was the second occasion upon which Bingley had extended the invitation, and he found himself more inclined to accept than before. In addition, a part of him wished to see Miss Elizabeth again, for Georgiana's sake, or so he told himself.

Bingley's smile almost reached his ears. "Excellent. Miss Darcy, will you—"

"Miss Darcy is to accompany us into Meryton this morning." Miss Bingley spoke so quickly in her haste that her teacup very nearly struck the saucer.

"I should have liked that very much." Georgiana looked towards Miss Bingley and then back to Bingley. "But I promised Miss Bingley I would accompany her to the modiste to look at a gown. I cannot honourably withdraw now." She hesitated. "Though I confess I am sorry to miss the visit. I would like very much to see Miss Elizabeth again."

Miss Bingley's smile did not falter.

"There is really nothing to regret on that account, dear Miss Darcy. I am quite certain Miss Eliza will remain in the neighbourhood for a considerable time yet."

"I enjoy speaking to her," Georgiana said. "I consider her a friend."

She spoke simply, without emphasis, in the tone of someone stating a fact which ought not to require explanation or defence.

A brief silence settled over the table.

Mrs. Hurst laid down her fork.

"She is an agreeable enough young woman, I shall allow. And Miss Bennet is certainly handsome, I have no dispute with that. But the family as a whole..." She shook her head, as if unwilling to grant even that much. "The mother is insufferable. The younger girls are scarcely out and seem to possess no notion of propriety. And their connections are hardly distinguished. A solicitor uncle and another, I believe, engaged in trade somewhere in Cheapside."

"Gracechurch Street," Miss Bingley supplied, with a satisfaction that suggested she had taken pains to discover the fact. "Which tells one a great deal about the society to which they are accustomed." She turned towards Darcy with an air of confidence. "And Miss Eliza in particular. I have always found something rather affected in her manner. The way she is forever observing, forever surveying a room and placing herself to advantage. It is hardly becoming. There is a degree of presumption in it, as though she imagines herself superior to the company around her, though I cannot conceive what has given her such an opinion of herself."

Darcy set down his cup with deliberate care.

He had not intended to speak. He had endured the conversation with patience, expecting it to pass as so many similar discussions had done before. Yet there was something in the ease with which Miss Bingley dismissed Elizabeth, something in the confidence with which she disguised hostility as reasonable observation, that exhausted his patience before he had consciously resolved to answer.

"Miss Elizabeth observes a room," he said carefully, "because she pays genuine attention to it, which is more than may be said of most people within it."

His voice remained perfectly even.

"I consider it one of the more admirable qualities a person may possess."

Miss Bingley stared at him as though he had spoken in a foreign language.

Mrs. Hurst cleared her throat. Twice.

"As for her family's connections," Darcy continued, "I fail to see what bearing they have upon her character. Indeed, I have never understood why any person should be judged by the occupations of their relations. Bingley himself derives his fortune from trade. Would you wish either yourself or Mrs. Hurst to be judged on that account?"

Had a breeze crossed the room at that moment, it would have been plainly audible.

The silence was absolute.

Darcy resisted the urge to close his eyes.

Ordinarily he would not have spoken so directly. Yet he had done so because Miss Bingley's remarks had called to mind too many similar observations made years ago regarding his mother. He remembered the careful glances, the thoughtless comments disguised as wit, the assumptions made by those who understood nothing of what they observed. At the time he had been too young to answer them. He was no longer young.

Bingley appeared suddenly fascinated by his plate.

Mrs. Hurst reached for her coffee.

Mr. Hurst reached for another piece of toast, seemingly indifferent to the entire exchange.

Miss Bingley recovered herself with visible effort and redirected the conversation towards the modiste with a brightness that suggested the previous five minutes had never occurred.

Across the table, Georgiana briefly caught her brother's eye.

She said nothing.

Yet there was unmistakable approval in her look, accompanied by a degree of surprise.

Darcy finished the remainder of his breakfast with greater haste than usual, pushed back his chair, and rose in search of his coat.

He suspected the morning ahead would prove unusually interesting.

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Longbourn

Elizabeth

It was not unusual for Longbourn to receive Mr. Bingley, with notice or without. The gentleman was paying his addresses to the eldest Bennet

daughter and had long since ceased to occasion surprise. What was surprising, however, was his arriving in company with the very man Meryton had unanimously declared the proudest gentleman in the neighbourhood.

Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth was walking in the garden, a book in hand, when two horses came through the gate. A stable lad appeared to take them. She closed her book the instant she recognised the riders.

What was Mr. Darcy doing here?

It had been three days since their meeting at Oakham Mount, and she had scarcely thought of him since. Or so she had assured herself.

The sight of him now suggested otherwise.

Mr. Bingley saw her first. He raised his hat with a smile that demanded nothing of anyone. Mr. Darcy noticed her a moment later. He touched the brim of his hat and offered something that bore a distant resemblance to a smile.

Elizabeth composed herself, curtsied, and went to meet them.

"Miss Elizabeth." Bingley bowed. "I hope we do not intrude. I had looked forward to another visit so much that I could not persuade myself to wait for a formal invitation."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Bingley," she replied with a smile before turning to his companion. "Mr. Darcy."

"Miss Elizabeth." He inclined his head. "Good morning."

The housekeeper, Mrs. Hill, had already departed to inform the family of their arrival. Elizabeth led the gentlemen into the house, and by the time they reached the drawing room, most of the family had assembled.

Mrs. Bennet received Mr. Bingley with the warmth and flattery that had become customary during his visits.

She received Mr. Darcy with a degree of civility that did not quite approach the enthusiasm she reserved for his friend, but neither did it amount to a snub.

Elizabeth considered it a marked improvement. Following the assemblies, her mother's opinion of Mr. Darcy had seldom been expressed with such restraint. His presence in her drawing room appeared, at the very least, to have encouraged greater courtesy.

Tea was ordered, and the company settled itself. Bingley and Jane soon found themselves upon the same side of the room, as though by long-

established habit. Mrs. Bennet devoted her attention to them immediately.

Mr. Darcy took the chair beside Elizabeth.

On her left.

She noticed it and said nothing.

"Your garden is very pleasant," said Mr. Darcy.

"It is more deserving of the compliment in spring." Elizabeth cast a warning glance towards Lydia and Kitty, who were amusing themselves at her expense with expressions they believed subtle. "At present it consists chiefly of stubbornness."

He appeared on the verge of replying when the drawing-room door opened.

The gentlemen rose as Mr. Bennet entered, spectacles in hand and curiosity evident upon his countenance.

"Mr. Bingley." He nodded towards him. "And you must be Mr. Darcy."

His gaze settled upon Darcy with frank interest before extending a hand to him. "I have heard a great deal about you, sir."

"I hope it has been favourable." Darcy accepted the offered hand.

Mr. Bennet considered the matter.

"Whatever I may have heard," he replied, "Mr. Bingley's description of you persuades me that I shall find you worth knowing. Come, sir. Sit with me a while."

He led Darcy towards the chairs by the window.

The conversation that followed concerned Hertfordshire at first, then Derbyshire, books and then some subject Elizabeth entirely lost when Lydia and Kitty began disputing the relative merits of various militia officers and Mary undertook to correct them both for their want of decorum before guests.

Elizabeth continued to direct her attention towards the window, careful not to make her interest too obvious, and watched Darcy converse with her father.

She could make out only portions of what was said, for both gentlemen spoke too quickly for easy reading, but she was quite certain he was enjoying himself.

She had never seen him quite like this before.

Removed from assemblies and crowded gatherings, there was something different about him.

Not less observant.

The quality of the observation had merely altered.

It seemed less guarded. More settled.

Elizabeth was so absorbed in watching him that she did not notice her mother sit beside her upon the sofa.

"Is there something I ought to know, Lizzy?" Mrs. Bennet leaned closer and lowered her voice.

"Mama?"

Elizabeth followed the direction of her mother's gaze and immediately understood the implication.

"He is looking at you again," Mrs. Bennet continued. "In much the same manner he did at the Meryton assembly. And do not imagine I failed to notice you speaking together at Sir William's gathering."

Elizabeth shook her head.

The absurdity of her mother's conclusions was almost impressive.

"Mr. Darcy merely wished me to make his sister's better acquaintance. Nothing more."

Mrs. Bennet's mouth curved with playful scepticism.

"I am merely observing."

"You are always merely observing," Elizabeth replied. "It is your greatest talent."

Mrs. Bennet pursed her lips and withdrew.

Elizabeth looked back towards the window.

Mr. Darcy was not looking at her.

He was listening to something her father had said, his expression open and genuinely interested, entirely lacking the reserve she had come to associate with him in company.

She picked up her book.

She did not read a single word for the remainder of the visit.

SIX

2nd November 1811

Longbourn.

Darcy

The gentlemen from Netherfield had been gone perhaps an hour when Jane came in search of Elizabeth.

She had retired to her bedchamber in hopes of taking a short nap, but was instead lying upon her bed with a book and making genuine progress through it for once. Elizabeth lifted her head from the page at the sound of the door opening.

One look at Jane's face was enough. There was mischief there. This was not a mere sisterly visit.

Jane sat upon the edge of the bed without preamble and folded her hands in her lap with an expression of such innocence that Elizabeth distrusted it immediately.

"Well," Elizabeth said. "Out with it."

Jane smiled. "I have said nothing."

"You have said nothing very loudly. I can tell you are planning some mischief."

Jane laughed so suddenly that she bent forward and pressed a hand to her stomach. Elizabeth could not help joining her.

When their amusement had subsided, Jane composed herself and regarded her younger sister with suspicious solemnity.

"Mr. Darcy came today," she said at last.

Elizabeth frowned.

She was almost certain she knew where this conversation was leading.

"What are you trying to say?"

"He has never come before."

"There is always a first occasion for everything."

"He sat beside you."

"The space beside me happened to be vacant, and he scarcely occupied it before Papa carried him away to the window."

"Lizzy." Jane widened her eyes in exaggerated disbelief. "He watched you the entire visit. Every time you spoke, he attended to it. When Mama said something that embarrassed you, he noticed before you had entirely concealed your expression."

Elizabeth said nothing.

"He came to Longbourn," Jane continued, "which he has never done. He chose to sit beside you. And after Papa carried him away, he answered every question put to him whilst continuing to look across the room at you between them." She paused. "I am not imagining it."

"I did not say you were."

"You may as well have."

Elizabeth closed her book.

Her gaze drifted to the window, to the pale grass silvered by frost, the bare hedgerows, and the grey afternoon sky beyond. Her thoughts wandered unwillingly through every interaction she had had with Mr. Darcy since his arrival in Hertfordshire.

"I truly do not know why Mr. Darcy accompanied Mr. Bingley today," she said at last. "He is a very observant man."

"Yes," Jane replied. "He is. And so are you. Which may be why his attention makes you uncomfortable."

"I am uncomfortable because that attention appears to be directed entirely towards me."

Jane merely looked at her with the calm patience of someone waiting for the remainder of the truth.

"I do not know what he wants," Elizabeth admitted. The words emerged more quietly than she intended. "But Mr. Darcy seems remarkably interested in me."

"And why is that such a dreadful thing?" Jane asked. "He is handsome, possesses a very respectable fortune, and behaves exceedingly well in your presence. You have said as much yourself."

Elizabeth shook her head. Jane had misunderstood her entirely.

"I do not believe Mr. Darcy's interest has anything to do with romantic inclinations."

Jane frowned. "What else could it be?"

"I do not know." Elizabeth sat up a little straighter. "But unless I am very much mistaken, I believe he knows that I do not hear well."

Jane stared at her.

For a moment she appeared genuinely shocked.

"That is impossible." Jane said.

"But I think he does."

Elizabeth then recounted each of her encounters with Mr. Darcy. The assembly. Lucas Lodge. Oakham Mount. The peculiar questions regarding crowded rooms and conversation. The deliberate manner in which he always placed himself upon her left.

"I believe he saw me repeat his words at the assembly," Elizabeth said. "I suspect that was when he first guessed." She sighed. "In truth, I do not know what to think anymore. Perhaps I am merely surprised that he has noticed me at all. Or perhaps I am surprised that I may be right."

Jane was silent for some time.

"He said you were not handsome enough to tempt him, and now he pays you particular attention?" she said at last. "I admit the circumstance invites suspicion."

"Exactly." Elizabeth pointed at her sister. "More suspicious still is the manner in which he contrived my acquaintance with his sister."

At this Jane shook her head. "Whatever may be said of Mr. Darcy, I do not believe his desire for you to know Miss Darcy has anything to do with this."

"No?"

"No. Charles speaks of him often. Mr. Darcy is exceedingly protective of his sister. Indeed, the very fact that he sought your acquaintance for his sister suggests that he trusts your judgement and values your character." Jane tilted her head slightly. "What do you think?"

Elizabeth was quiet for a long moment.

Her thoughts returned to Georgiana.

Then to Darcy standing at the edge of the room at Lucas Lodge, watching them converse with that expression she had been unable to name at the time.

She was beginning to name it now.

"I think," she said slowly, "that whatever his reason for wishing me acquainted with Miss Darcy, it is not a simple one. The fact that he sought it only after he began observing me suggests as much."

She paused, considering the matter further.

"And I think there is something about Miss Darcy that I do not yet understand."

Jane only nodded. She did not press further.

That was one of Jane's greatest virtues. She always knew when enough had been said.

"Lizzy." She reached out and briefly squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "You have never allowed your hearing to govern your life. I do not know another person who accomplishes half of what you do whilst managing such a difficulty."

Elizabeth smiled faintly.

"Whatever Mr. Darcy knows or does not know," Jane continued, "he has treated you with nothing but consideration. That must count for something."

"It counts for a great deal," Elizabeth admitted. "A great many ladies would be pleased to receive such attention."

"Exactly."

"Which is precisely why it unsettles me."

Jane laughed softly.

She rose, smoothed her skirts, and moved towards the door.

"Perhaps," she said, pausing with her hand upon the latch, "being unsettled is not the worst thing that could happen to you."

She departed before Elizabeth could think of a suitable reply.

Elizabeth sank back against her pillow and stared up at the ceiling.

For all his unwelcome interest in her hearing and the slight he had delivered at the assembly, Elizabeth found herself reluctantly admiring Mr. Darcy.

Which was deeply inconvenient.

What was there not to like?

He was undeniably handsome. Handsome enough that she had noticed him immediately at the Meryton assembly. It was that very circumstance which had led her to observe him closely enough to discover what he had said about her. Afterwards it had been easy to accept the neighbourhood's judgement that he was proud.

Handsome gentlemen with enormous fortunes were frequently accused of pride.

Often with good reason.

Yet his attention to her hearing remained troubling.

Why could she not rid herself of the suspicion that he wished to know the truth?

Worse still, why did she increasingly suspect that he already did?

She possessed no answers to the many questions occupying her thoughts.

At length she picked up her book once more.

The desire to read it, however, had entirely vanished.

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Netherfield

Darcy

Georgiana returned from the modiste scarcely half an hour when Darcy came back from Longbourn. He found her in the drawing room still wearing her pelisse, and one glance at her countenance was enough to tell him that she had spent the greater part of the day in company she esteemed rather more than she enjoyed.

"Walk with me," he said.

She took his arm without question, and together they went out by the side entrance and into the grounds. The afternoon was cold but bright, the pale winter sun hanging low above the trees, and the park was quiet at that hour.

"How was your morning?" he asked.

"Very well." She considered. "The modiste possessed some beautiful muslins. Miss Bingley has excellent taste in fabrics."

"And Meryton itself? Did you see much of it?"

"A little. We passed through the market." Something softened in her expression. "There was a woman selling preserves who became so determined to prove the superiority of her gooseberry jam that I nearly purchased a jar merely to end the debate."

"Did you?"

"I did." A small smile touched her lips. "She was entirely justified. It was excellent."

He looked at her, at the faint colour in her cheeks from the cold air and the quiet animation that had been absent for so many months, and felt something ease within him.

"It does me good to see you out again," he said. "Genuinely out. Not merely enduring an occasion."

Georgiana glanced up at him. "I am trying."

"I know." Darcy stared into a distance, then back at her. "And I am very proud of you."

She did not answer, but neither did she look away, and that was enough.

They continued in silence for a short distance. Frost still lingered in the shadows of the hedgerows.

"I saw Miss Elizabeth today," Darcy said.

Georgiana's face brightened at once. "How is she?"

"Very well. She sends her regards."

"I am sorry I could not go. I should have liked to see her."

They turned onto the lower path. Darcy watched the ground for a moment, considering how best to proceed.

"There is something I wish to tell you," he said at last. "Something I would not ordinarily discuss."

Georgiana stopped and turned towards him. "What is it?"

Darcy hesitated.

For the better part of three days he had considered how best to broach the subject with Georgiana. Every approach he devised seemed either too direct or insufficiently honest. Until that afternoon, he had hoped some more suitable course might suggest itself.

None had.

At last he concluded that the truth, spoken with care, was the only path remaining to him.

"I have been uncertain whether the matter was mine to mention. Yet I did not encourage your acquaintance with Miss Elizabeth without reason, and I believe you have shown sufficient judgement to be entrusted with that reason."

Whatever curiosity she felt, it was tempered by trust.

"Whatever it is," she said quietly, "you would not tell me unless you believed it necessary. I know that."

Darcy looked at his sister standing in the pale afternoon light and thought of their mother. He thought of promises made beside a sickbed, of years spent attempting to fulfil them, and of how often he had felt unequal to the task.

"I believe Miss Elizabeth Bennet does not hear well." There was no other way to say it. Anything softer would only weaken the meaning he wished to convey.

Georgiana stared at him in evident disbelief. Then understanding began to dawn. Not merely of what he had said, but of why he had been so determined that she should know Miss Elizabeth. For several moments she remained silent.

"I cannot tell you the extent of it," he continued. "I do not know it myself. But I have observed her over the course of several weeks, and I am persuaded of it. She positions herself carefully in company. She reads lips. She adapts to every conversation with a skill that speaks of long practice."

He paused, as though giving her time to come to terms with the revelation. "And she does it so well that almost no one appears conscious of it." The next words seemed to require greater care. "She reminded me of Mama."

Georgiana looked up sharply.

"Not in appearance. In spirit." His voice remained steady. "Mama never permitted her hearing to alter the quality of her life. She adapted when she must and carried on without apology. You were too young to remember all of it, but I watched her for years. I watched the care with which she arranged herself in company. I watched her observe before she spoke. I watched her continue to live exactly as she pleased despite what others believed she ought to be capable of."

He drew a slow breath. "Miss Elizabeth possesses something of that same quality."

Georgiana was silent.

"She enters a room entirely herself. She does not seek approval. She does not shape her opinions to suit those around her. She simply lives as she chooses and appears perfectly content in doing so."

A thoughtful look settled upon Georgiana's face.

"She does," she said softly.

"What Wickham told you was wrong," Darcy leaned closer. "I cannot promise what the future may hold. No one can. But I can tell you this. A person's happiness is not determined by a single trial, nor is their worth diminished by it."

He watched her closely, waiting until he saw that she truly understood. "Miss Elizabeth is proof enough of that."

Georgiana lowered her eyes. "Wickham made it sound inevitable."

"I know."

"He made it sound as though one difficulty would alter everything."

Darcy's expression softened. "Wickham has always possessed a talent for persuading others of the worst."

She smiled faintly at that.

"Does she know you know of it?" Georgiana said after a moment.

"Miss Elizabeth?"

Georgiana nodded.

"No. But Miss Elizabeth notices a great deal. I rather think very little escapes her observation." Darcy said.

"And I am not supposed to let her know I know either?"

"No." His answer came immediately. "Not directly, not indirectly, and not by accident. Whatever she chooses to share of herself must remain entirely her own choice."

"I shall do my best."

Darcy nodded in approval.

They resumed walking together, neither of them speaking.

"I did not do enough," Darcy broke the silence that felt like forever.

Georgiana turned towards him.

"Fitzwilliam—"

"No. Allow me." He kept his eyes upon the path. "When Mama died, I was too young to understand all that I ought to have learned from her. Afterwards, I did not know how to give you the example she would have provided. Since Ramsgate, I have thought often of how best to help you overcome what you fear most." He heaved a sigh. "I have not always known how. But I believe Miss Elizabeth's example may accomplish more than anything I could say."

Georgiana considered this briefly. "I already like her very much."

"I know." Darcy replied.

"I liked her before you told me any of this."

"I know that too."

Georgiana flicked her brow. "It does not alter my opinion of her."

"No," he said. "I did not think it would."

They shared a brief laugh, the sort that often arose between siblings when a conversation had grown too solemn for comfort.

At length Georgiana spoke again. "I think she is very brave."

"So do I." Darcy smiled slightly.

The house came into view beyond the trees. As they approached it, she tightened her hand briefly upon his arm.

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam."

He covered her hand with his own for a moment. "You need never thank me for that."

They continued towards Netherfield together, and as the quiet afternoon settled around them, Darcy felt, for the first time since Ramsgate, that he had done something which might truly prove of lasting benefit.

SEVEN

5th November 1811

Oakham Mount.

Elizabeth

Aside from a single and entirely unwelcome appearance in her dreams on Sunday night, which she refused to examine too closely, Elizabeth had enjoyed a welcome respite from the gentlemen of Netherfield since their visit to Longbourn.

Three days of ordinary Hertfordshire life. It was precisely what she had needed.

Tuesday morning broke clear and cold. She set out early, before the rest of the household was fully awake, with no greater object than the pleasure of the walk itself. For once, her thoughts were settled. She walked briskly, breathed the sharp morning air, and found herself more at ease than she had been for several weeks.

She was nearly at the summit of Oakham Mount when she saw him.

Even from behind, she knew him at once.

Mr. Darcy was seated upon a fallen log near the edge of the rise, entirely alone and looking out over the valley below.

He had not heard her approach.

Elizabeth stopped.

There was something undeniably absurd about the sight.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, possessed of ten thousand a year, seated upon a log in the Hertfordshire countryside at half-past seven in the morning as though he had nowhere else in the world to be.

As though sensing her attention, he turned his head.

Their eyes met.

For a moment Elizabeth forgot how to speak, and very nearly how to breathe.

Then she continued up the path, for there was nothing else to be done, and came to a halt a few feet away with what she hoped was an expression of complete unconcern.

"Mr. Darcy," she said. "Good morning."

"Miss Bennet." He rose at once. "Good morning."

Elizabeth looked at him, then at the log, before returning her gaze to his face.

"I seem destined to encounter you wherever I go," she observed. "It is beginning to feel almost deliberate."

"As I told you before, I am partial to morning walks."

"You did mention it. Yet I should have thought Hertfordshire possessed more than one suitable path, and somehow we continue to choose the same ones." She tilted her head slightly. "I had understood it was Miss Darcy whose acquaintance I was expected to cultivate. Why is it her brother I keep encountering?"

To his credit, he appeared entirely untroubled by the accusation.

"You make a fair point. As it happens, you may remedy the matter today. Georgiana mentioned yesterday that she intended to write to you. Bingley, Hurst, and I are engaged to dine with Colonel Forster, and Georgiana hoped you might spend the afternoon at Netherfield. I trust you will oblige her."

"Colonel Forster?" Elizabeth raised her brows, choosing to ignore the mention of Georgiana's invitation. "You are acquainted with Colonel Forster?"

"I am."

Elizabeth smiled in surprise. "I should not have thought him a gentleman of your acquaintance. Meryton has largely convinced itself that you do not socialise."

"I have known Colonel Forster for several years," Darcy replied, a faint smile appearing in return. "He is a close friend of my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. They entered the militia together and served in London for some years before Colonel Forster obtained his present commission."

"I see." Elizabeth considered this. "Though I confess your calling at Longbourn still occasions me greater astonishment than your acquaintance with Colonel Forster. I had not imagined you a gentleman who visited people."

Darcy looked at her.

"I visit people."

"Mr. Darcy," she said pleasantly, "your first introduction to Meryton was that of a gentleman who stood in a corner and appeared unwilling to acknowledge the existence of anyone beyond his own party. You must forgive us for drawing conclusions."

"My first impression," he replied, with a gravity she strongly suspected was entirely sincere, "was formed under particularly unfortunate circumstances. I had spent the greater part of the day travelling. My sister was not in the best of spirits. We were attending an assembly which Bingley had accepted on our behalf before consulting either of us, and I had not enjoyed so much as an hour to compose myself before being obliged to enter a crowded room full of strangers."

He spread his gloved hands.

"It was, in short, a very bad day. Meryton must simply forgive me."

Elizabeth stared at him for a moment, then laughed.

Not the polite laugh she employed in company, but the genuine one, the sort that escaped before she had decided whether to permit it.

"That," she said, "is the greatest number of sincere words I have ever heard you speak at one time."

"You drew them out of me."

"Did I?" She was still smiling. "And are you truly sociable, Mr. Darcy?"

"In the right company."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed."

Elizabeth glanced sideways at him.

He met the look with an expression that was, she felt certain, the nearest approach to unguardedness she had yet seen from him.

The morning lay quiet around them. Below, the valley was slowly awakening beneath the rising sun, the frost retreating from the fields as the light strengthened.

It occurred to her, not for the first time, that Mr. Darcy was considerably less disagreeable than Meryton had first led her to believe.

"I shall look forward to Georgiana's letter, then." She stepped back and began descending the path. "Good morning, Mr. Darcy."

"Good morning, Miss Bennet."

She had gone perhaps twenty yards down the slope before she permitted herself to smile properly.

Far enough away, she hoped, that he could not see it.

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Longbourn

Elizabeth had been looking forward to a letter from Netherfield at breakfast and was therefore quite unprepared when Mr. Bennet announced, with a degree of amusement that immediately invited suspicion, that he had received a letter from his cousin, Mr. Collins, who proposed visiting Longbourn on Friday.

"Friday!" Mrs. Bennet set down her cup. "That is only three days away."

"So it is." Mr. Bennet seemed entirely pleased by the circumstance. "Lizzy, read the letter aloud, if you please." Drawing it from his coat, he handed it across the table. "It is, I believe, the most entertaining letter I have received in several years."

Elizabeth took the letter whilst her sisters abandoned all pretence of interest in their breakfasts and waited for her to begin.

Dear Sir,

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father always gave me much concern, and, since I have now reached an age at which I may judge for myself, I have frequently wished that some means of reconciliation might be effected between our respective branches of the family.

For some time, however, I was restrained from writing by doubts respecting the propriety of such a step, lest it should appear that I was wanting in due regard for the memory of my late father. Having now the happiness of enjoying the distinguished patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose benevolence and condescension have been such as few men are fortunate enough to experience, I have been encouraged to believe that every Christian clergyman ought to promote harmony whenever it lies within his power to do so. Under the guidance of so excellent a patroness, whose judgement I esteem most highly, I have therefore resolved to make the attempt.

Perhaps you may not be aware that I have lately been so fortunate as to receive the valuable living of Hunsford, in Kent, through the generosity of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The duties of my office are considerable, yet I trust I discharge them with diligence and humility, and it is my constant endeavour to conduct myself in a manner worthy of the distinguished favour I have received.

The circumstance of my being the future possessor of Longbourn has not escaped my consideration. Indeed, I have often reflected upon the hardship which the entail must occasion your amiable daughters, and I am by no means insensible to the inconvenience of an arrangement which deprives them of an estate to which they might otherwise look forward with confidence.

As the future inheritor of Longbourn, I have therefore long felt it incumbent upon me to make every suitable reparation within my power. After much consideration, and with the approbation of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, whose advice upon matters of consequence I always seek with gratitude and respect, I have determined that the most eligible means of accomplishing this object would be by forming a matrimonial connexion with one of your daughters, should such an arrangement prove agreeable to all parties concerned.

You may perhaps think me hasty in expressing myself so plainly, but I have always considered openness and sincerity among the greatest ornaments of the clerical character.

In order that I may have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of yourself, Mrs. Bennet, and your daughters, and of judging whether my hopes may be reasonably entertained, I propose waiting upon you at Longbourn on Friday the eighth of November at two o'clock in the afternoon. I trust this arrangement will not prove inconvenient.

I remain, dear sir,

With respectful compliments to Mrs. Bennet and your accomplished daughters,

*Your well-wisher and cousin,
William Collins*

Silence followed the conclusion of the reading.

Then Lydia burst into laughter. "He writes like a sermon," she said, when she had gathered herself sufficiently to speak.

"He writes considerably worse than most sermons," Mr. Bennet replied. "Sermons, in my experience, generally possess the good sense to end."

"He means to marry one of us," Kitty said, with the air of someone identifying a threat.

"He means to offer," Mrs. Bennet corrected, sitting a little straighter. "Which is quite a different thing." She was already calculating. "Jane is as good as engaged, so it cannot be Jane. Lizzy is next."

"Mama—"

"It is only sensible, Lizzy," Mrs. Bennet said. "You are one-and-twenty and have yet to show the slightest interest in any gentleman who has shown an interest in you. Mr. Collins will inherit this estate, which is considerably more than most of your admirers have ever been able to offer."

"He does not sound particularly intelligent," Elizabeth replied. "He appears to have determined upon reconciliation only because Lady Catherine approves of it. A gentleman who requires another person to tell him what to think can hardly be said to possess much judgement of his own. I cannot think that a desirable quality."

"A clergyman," Mary observed before Mrs. Bennet could answer, "occupies a very respectable station in life. There is much to be said for a man of steady principles and an established parish."

Every eye at the table turned towards her.

"You see," Kitty said, "I believe Mary has just volunteered."

Mary looked up from her plate. "I said no such thing."

"No," Mr. Bennet agreed. "But you said enough to suggest you would not object to the man."

Mary returned her attention to her toast without offering either a defence or a quotation.

Mrs. Bennet looked from Elizabeth to Mary and then to her husband.

"Well," said Mr. Bennet, "this visit may prove even more entertaining than I anticipated."

Had Hill not entered the breakfast room carrying a note upon a small tray, Elizabeth suspected her mother would have pursued the subject with renewed determination. The housekeeper's appearance, however, drew everyone's attention at once.

Elizabeth's own settled immediately upon the note.

This must be Georgiana's letter.

The prospect was a welcome distraction from her mother's efforts to dispose of her in favour of Mr. Collins.

Her anticipation vanished the moment Hill crossed the room and stopped beside Jane.

"A note from Netherfield, Miss Bennet."

Jane accepted it and broke the seal.

Whilst Elizabeth attempted to understand what had become of Mr. Darcy's prediction, Jane read in silence, her expression passing through surprise, pleasure, and something she made only a partial effort to conceal.

"It is from Miss Bingley," she said at last. "The gentlemen have been invited to dine with Colonel Forster, and she asks me to spend the day at Netherfield." She paused, smiling slightly. "She adds that Elizabeth will be very welcome if she is at liberty. Miss Darcy requested particularly that she be invited."

Elizabeth felt a curious disappointment ease almost as soon as it arose.

After all, it was perfectly sensible. One invitation addressed to Longbourn was far more practical than two separate notes saying much the same thing.

Yet she could not help wondering whether Georgiana had mentioned her intention of writing her to Miss Bingley, as she had apparently done to Mr. Darcy, and had then been forestalled by the lady herself. The circumstance was not difficult to imagine. Miss Darcy was only a guest at Netherfield, whilst Miss Bingley seemed inclined to regard herself as its mistress and might therefore consider the issuing of invitations her particular province.

Whatever the truth of it, the invitation made one thing abundantly clear.

It was Georgiana who wished for her company. Certainly not Miss Bingley.

From their few encounters, Elizabeth had seen little to persuade her that Miss Bingley liked her at all. Indeed, she was not entirely convinced the lady liked Jane either, beyond the civility required by her brother's attachment.

Elizabeth had scarcely reached that conclusion when Mrs. Bennet sprang to her feet.

"Jane, you must go. You must both go. Hill, the carriage—"

"Mama," Elizabeth interrupted, "we have not yet decided."

"What is there to decide?" Mrs. Bennet threw out her hands. "Mr. Bingley is at Netherfield. His sisters have invited Jane. You are invited. What possible objection can there be?"

Elizabeth had no objection whatsoever.

She looked across the table at Jane.

Jane looked back with an expression of quiet satisfaction, as though the arrival of Miss Bingley's note had entirely displaced Mr. Collins and his alarming intentions from consideration.

"We shall go," Elizabeth said.

"Of course you shall." Mrs. Bennet was already halfway to the door. "Hill! Tell Sarah to bring up the good dresses!"

Elizabeth picked up her tea.

Across the table, Mr. Bennet had returned to Mr. Collins's letter and appeared to be deriving fresh amusement from every line.

"Friday," he remarked to no one in particular. "I find I am almost looking forward to it."

EIGHT

5th November 1811

Netherfield.

Elizabeth

Miss Darcy, *Georgiana* as she had insisted upon almost immediately, was the most accomplished young lady of sixteen Elizabeth had ever known.

That was the conclusion to which she had arrived.

Their first substantial conversation at Lucas Lodge had been largely one-sided, *Georgiana* asking questions and Elizabeth answering them, whilst the girl listened with an attention so earnest and intent that Elizabeth had found it both charming and faintly disconcerting.

Today had been entirely different.

Georgiana spoke.

She possessed opinions on music, on books, and on the relative merits of watercolour and pencil sketching, and defended those opinions with a quiet certainty that suggested she had reflected upon them long before finding anyone with whom she felt comfortable sharing them.

Elizabeth could not help thinking that her father might find himself considerably humbled if *Georgiana* Darcy were ever to become a member of the Bennet household.

Only Mary approached her in appetite for knowledge, and Mary's learning possessed a degree of display that *Georgiana's* entirely lacked. *Georgiana* simply knew things and spoke of them, without preface and without affectation.

Lydia, who was almost *Georgiana's* equal in age, had never willingly completed a book that contained fewer officers than chapters. The contrast was not lost upon Elizabeth.

The morning had been spent in the music room, where *Georgiana* played and Elizabeth listened. She had little to offer by way of criticism. *Georgiana's* performance was far beyond anything she could creditably

evaluate, and so she had listened instead, which proved precisely the correct course. When Georgiana prevailed upon her to play in return, Elizabeth complied without false modesty and without pretending to possess greater skill than she did. Georgiana praised her warmly and with perfect sincerity, which Elizabeth accepted with a laugh and the acknowledgement that she had been very thoroughly surpassed.

After luncheon they walked together about the grounds of Netherfield.

It was there that the conversation truly opened.

They were speaking of London when Georgiana said, "I am to come out next year."

"I know. Do you look forward to it?"

Georgiana considered the question.

"I believe I am afraid of it."

Elizabeth turned to face her fully. The slight droop of her shoulders and the hesitation in her expression told their own story.

"There will be so many people," Georgiana continued. "And so many opinions. I sometimes wonder what they will make of me."

Elizabeth was silent a moment.

She had known for some time, from something Georgiana had mentioned in an earlier conversation, that she had lost her mother very young. Four years old, she had said once, almost casually, as though it were merely a circumstance, she had learned to bear rather than a grief that had shaped her life.

Elizabeth had not pressed her then. She did not do so now, though she could not help thinking that this was precisely the sort of conversation a mother, an aunt, or a sensible elder sister ought long ago to have had with her.

"Most people will make of you whatever you first persuade them to believe," Elizabeth said, taking her hand. "If you enter a room as though you belong there, the greater part of the company will accept it without question. People are seldom paying as much attention as we imagine."

Georgiana looked at her curiously. "You make it sound very easy."

"It is not easy," Elizabeth said. "But it may be learned."

She paused, allowing Georgiana a moment to consider it.

"Confidence is not the absence of fear. It is merely the determination that fear shall not be permitted to speak first."

Georgiana was quiet for a moment, then she smiled. "Did someone tell you that?"

"No." Elizabeth smiled. "I arrived at it myself, after a great many years and a great many assemblies."

That earned one of Georgiana's better smiles. "I think you are a very remarkable person, Miss Elizabeth."

"I think," Elizabeth replied, "that by the time you are grown, Georgiana, you will prove considerably more remarkable than I."

They walked on, the grounds of Netherfield stretching around them as the conversation wandered to lighter subjects. They spoke of friends, of places they had visited, of favourite books and music, and a dozen other matters that required neither seriousness nor reflection.

By the time they returned to the house, the afternoon light was already beginning to fade.

Jane rejoined them from wherever Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst had occupied her for the greater part of the day, and the five ladies settled together in the drawing room.

It had been a pleasant day. Most of them appeared in no particular haste to see it end.

Elizabeth could not say the same of the Bingley sisters.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst seemed to regard every additional quarter hour as an unnecessary trial. Neither was particularly successful in concealing it. There were glances exchanged whenever Elizabeth and Georgiana became absorbed in conversation, and on the few occasions either sister joined the discussion, it was generally to offer a question that felt suspiciously like a challenge or an observation that bordered upon a criticism.

Elizabeth found it easiest to ignore them.

It was perhaps half past four when the gentlemen returned from their engagement with Colonel Forster.

Mr. Bingley entered first and he made directly for Jane.

Mr. Darcy followed, with Mr. Hurst a short distance behind.

Elizabeth noticed the difference immediately. Though he greeted the company with perfect civility, there was a gravity about him that had not been there that morning at Oakham mount. He was polite, composed, and entirely attentive to those around him, yet some part of him seemed elsewhere.

She had seen it before.

At the Meryton assembly, before she had known anything of him, he had stood in his corner with precisely that same quality. Like a man physically present whilst his thoughts occupied another place entirely.

Elizabeth found herself wondering what could have occasioned the change.

She had scarcely begun considering the question when Mr. Hurst inquired of his wife when dinner would be served.

Elizabeth nearly laughed.

The gentlemen had only just returned from a lengthy luncheon, and yet Mr. Hurst already appeared concerned with the next meal.

A short time later Jane rose and smoothed her skirts.

"We ought to think of returning home," she said. "It will be dark before long."

"Nonsense." Bingley stood immediately. "You must stay for dinner. Both of you." He smiled with all the openness that made refusal nearly impossible. "The evening is still young, and I am certain the cook has prepared more than enough for a larger party. Pray remain."

Jane looked towards Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's eyes moved first to Mr. Darcy.

He offered a polite smile, though it did little to dispel the seriousness she had observed since his arrival. Georgiana nodded encouragingly too.

"We should be very happy to stay," Elizabeth said.

Dinner was laid at a quarter past five.

Bingley took his place at the head of the table, Darcy at the other end. Georgiana sat to Elizabeth's left, Miss Bingley to her right, with Jane beside Bingley and Mr. and Mrs. Hurst occupying the remaining seats.

The first course passed pleasantly enough. Georgiana drew Elizabeth into a conversation about Oakham Mount which occupied most of it. Bingley contributed warmly whenever his attention could be spared from Jane. Darcy was quieter than usual, present but not entirely so.

The second course was brought in and served. It was soup.

After a few minutes, Miss Bingley, who had accepted only a token portion when the soup was first offered, caught the eye of a maid and indicated that she wished to be served again.

Elizabeth was in the midst of answering a question from Georgiana. She saw the maid approach in her peripheral vision and thought nothing of

it.

Gradually, however, she became aware of a curious stillness at her end of the table.

Several pairs of eyes appeared to have settled upon her. Namely, Mrs. Hurst's and her husband's.

Elizabeth turned from Georgiana towards her right.

The maid stood waiting beside her chair, the soup ladle poised.

Had she spoken?

The question flashed through Elizabeth's mind with uncomfortable speed.

Judging by the expressions directed her way, everyone else seemed to believe she had.

Elizabeth caught sight of Darcy drawing breath to speak.

Miss Bingley was quicker.

"Dear Miss Eliza." Caroline's voice was laced with false concern. "I do wonder whether you are entirely with us this evening. You seem to be somewhere else altogether." She smiled around the table. "I suppose it is the mark of a very deep thinker. Or perhaps merely a very selective listener. For why else would you keep the maid waiting?"

The words landed precisely where they were intended to land.

Elizabeth turned to her with complete composure.

"I have always thought it a courtesy to give my full attention to the person with whom I am speaking," she said. "One hears a great deal more that way. I had no intention of neglecting the maid, and I trust she will forgive the oversight."

Darcy lifted his glass but did not drink. Instead, he set it down again. "I cannot think Miss Elizabeth guilty of intentional neglect," he said.

For a moment, the only sound was the clink of cutlery from Mr. Hurst who had resumed eating. No one appeared eager to challenge Darcy.

"I have observed her conduct often enough to know she extends the same courtesy to a servant as she does to any other acquaintance." Darcy continued, his gaze settling briefly upon the maid before returning to Miss Bingley. "I believe she was merely engaged in conversation with my sister."

For the briefest moment, Elizabeth forgot about the maid altogether.

The words had been directed at Miss Bingley.

The meaning behind them had not.

Miss Bingley's smile remained exactly where it was.

Nothing else did.

Bingley cleared his throat and asked Darcy something about his opinion of the weather. Darcy answered. The dinner continued.

Elizabeth did not look at Darcy. Yet she found it impossible to dismiss what had just occurred.

Miss Bingley's remark had been pointed enough, but it was Darcy's response that lingered.

He had not merely contradicted her. He had defended her. Without hesitation. As though he understood there could be no malice in it. He had spoken as though he knew the omission was unintentional.

The thought settled heavily in her chest.

For weeks now she had suspected that Mr. Darcy knew her secret. Every encounter seemed only to strengthen that suspicion.

Yet if he knew, why had he sought the knowledge? And if he knew, why did it appear to make no difference at all?

He had not looked at her with pity. He had not treated her with condescension. He had not withdrawn his attention.

If anything, he seemed more determined in it.

And now, when given the opportunity to remain silent, he had chosen instead to defend her.

Elizabeth could not decide which was more unsettling, that he might know, or that knowing did not appear to trouble him in the slightest.

She turned to the maid with an easy smile.

"I am sorry, but I do not need more soup."

The girl curtsied and moved away.

Across the table, Georgiana caught her eye briefly and said nothing.

Her expression suggested she was very pleased indeed.

When at last the evening drew to a close, Jane took leave of Bingley with the composed warmth she brought to everything, and Bingley received her farewell with poorly concealed reluctance. Georgiana embraced Elizabeth briefly and said she hoped to call at Longbourn on Friday. Elizabeth told her she would be delighted to see her.

Darcy accompanied them to the door.

He was civil, attentive, entirely correct. Yet the distraction Elizabeth had noticed at dinner had not left him.

"Good evening, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth curtsied just before she and Jane stepped into the carriage.

"I am glad you came." A smile touched his features, one she suspected cost him some effort. "Thank you for spending the day with Georgiana."

"It was entirely my pleasure."

The sincerity in his voice admitted no doubt.

Elizabeth believed him.

The sisters took their leave and started for Longbourn.

NINE

5th November 1811

Netherfield.

Darcy

Darcy brooded for hours over what was troubling him. It had taken everything he possessed to maintain a civil countenance through dinner, for Georgiana, for Elizabeth, and for the general obligations of an evening that deserved better than a distracted him. He had managed it. Barely.

The moment the Bennet carriage disappeared down the drive and the house settled into its evening quiet, the pretence ceased to serve any purpose.

The last name he had expected to hear in Hertfordshire was George Wickham.

Colonel Forster had mentioned it in passing between one unremarkable observation and another. Several new officers had recently joined the militia, he had said, all of them doing their part to keep spirits high. This Wickham in particular had distinguished himself. Charming. Agreeable. The sort of man who could win a room without appearing to try.

It sounded exactly like the Wickham Darcy knew.

He told himself it might not be the same man.

England was large enough to contain more than one George Wickham. A name alone proved nothing.

Yet he could not put the matter from his mind.

During the luncheon he had been sorely tempted to ask Forster to produce the man at once. To single out one name from several, however, would have invited questions Darcy had no desire to answer. He had therefore held his tongue, finished the meal, and carried the knowledge home with him like a stone lodged beneath his ribs.

Darcy rose and crossed to the window.

The grounds of Netherfield lay dark and silent beneath the night sky and offered him no answers.

His thoughts turned inevitably to Georgiana.

She was somewhere in this house, sleeping peacefully.

Only a month ago she was still trapped within the prison Wickham had built for her. Her confidence had been systematically undermined. Her sense of her own worth made dependent upon fears that had not yet come to pass and might never do so. Now she was improving. Truly improving.

Even that evening she had spoken with a lightness he had not heard in more than a year. She had repeated portions of her conversation with Elizabeth, reflections upon confidence and self-possession and entering society without surrendering oneself to it. She had been animated.

Happy.

And now a George Wickham had appeared in Meryton.

A George Wickham whom Darcy had sought for nearly a year without success, finding only the traces of debts left in his wake. Debts Darcy had quietly acquired and now held himself. Debts sufficient to send Wickham to a debtor's prison the moment Darcy chose to act upon them.

Could it truly be the same man?

And if it was, what then?

What would become of the progress Georgiana had fought so hard to make?

What would happen when she learned he was nearby?

Darcy's jaw tightened.

No.

He would not permit Wickham near her again.

The decision settled something within him.

He turned from the window, crossed to the writing desk, and sat down.

This time he did not hesitate.

Taking up a quill, he began a letter to Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Richard,

I write to you tonight on a matter I would not commit to paper were it less urgent. I trust you will read this with the discretion it requires.

You will be glad to know that Georgiana is considerably better than when I last wrote. I will not say she is fully herself — I do not think either of us expected that so soon — but there has been a marked improvement these

past weeks, in no small part due to a friendship I took some care to encourage. A lady I met here in Hertfordshire, a Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, has proven herself to be everything I could have hoped for in a companion for Georgiana. She is intelligent, warm, entirely without affectation, and possessed of a quality of confidence that I believed, when I first observed it, might do Georgiana more good than anything I could say myself. I was not wrong. You must therefore understand why what I am about to tell you concerns me as much as it does.

This afternoon I spent some time in company with your friend, Colonel Forster. In the course of conversation he spoke casually of several new members recently joined to the regiment, remarking on their good conduct and general impression. Among the names he mentioned was George Wickham.

I need not tell you what that name means to me, nor what it would mean to Georgiana were she to hear it. I have said nothing to her and I do not intend to until I know more. I am aware that the name George or Wickham is not exclusive to that particular scoundrel — I myself once met a Fitzwilliam Darcy on a journey to Hull, which gave me a moment's pause I can assure you. It may well be nothing.

However, I cannot in good conscience dismiss it. I intend to keep a close eye on wherever the militia men are gathered and to make further visits to Colonel Forster on the pretence of renewing the acquaintance. I do not wish to raise suspicion by asking him to produce the man directly.

I ask only that you make enquiries through whatever channels are available to you. I need to know whether this is the same man. If it is, I will require your assistance in managing the matter quietly and without public exposure. Georgiana's name must not enter into it under any circumstances.

Come to Hertfordshire if you are able. I would rather have this conversation in person than on paper.

*Your cousin,
F. Darcy*

He folded the letter, sanded it, sealed it, and set it upon the corner of the desk.

The candle had burned low. Darcy sat for a moment in the quiet of the room and thought of Wickham. Unwilling to surrender the remainder of the evening to thoughts of the scoundrel, he forced his mind elsewhere. It

turned naturally to Georgiana, to the happiness in her voice that evening, to the ease with which she had spoken, and to the girl he remembered slowly returning by degrees. Two encounters with Elizabeth Bennet had accomplished what a year of his own efforts had not. He did not know whether to feel grateful or humbled. In the end, he settled on both.

He would find more opportunities to bring them together. Whatever else remained uncertain, that much was within his power.

He reached towards the candle snuffer and stopped.

Elizabeth Bennet's eyes came to him unbidden, as they had been doing with increasing frequency these past weeks. Dark and direct and entirely unimpressed by him, which he had long since ceased pretending he did not find remarkable. He thought of the way she had looked at him across the dinner table that evening, steady, composed, entirely herself, and of the fact that he had noticed despite everything else occupying his thoughts.

Darcy exhaled slowly.

This was about Georgiana. That had always been the purpose.

He snuffed the candle and retired for the night, firmly resolved to think no more about Elizabeth Bennet.

An hour later, still awake in the darkness, he was forced to admit that the resolution had met with very little success.

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Longbourn

Elizabeth

Elizabeth sat at her dressing table long after Jane had come and gone from her bedchamber and the house had settled into its nighttime quiet.

She had been turning the dinner at Netherfield over in her mind since the carriage ride home, which Jane had spent in happy silence and Elizabeth in considerably less peaceful contemplation. Miss Bingley's remark had been a slight. Elizabeth knew a jab when she felt one. The woman had not known, could not have known, what she was truly saying, and yet the words had landed regardless, with the precision of something thrown without aim that found its mark anyway.

A very selective listener.

Elizabeth had answered it well enough. She always answered such things well enough. That was rather the point.

What she could not account for quite so easily was Darcy.

She thought of how he had defended her. There was something about it she could not shake. It had been too deliberate, too precisely aimed at the right thing, for a man who did not know what he was defending. She was certain of it now. He knew. And from everything she had observed of him, he appeared entirely untroubled by it. For a gentleman of his station, and one whom society insisted upon calling proud, she would have expected some alteration in his manner. Surprise, perhaps. Pity. At the very least, curiosity. Instead he behaved as though the knowledge changed nothing at all.

Elizabeth pressed her fingers lightly against the edge of the dressing table.

She did not know what to make of it.

What she did know was that whatever remnant of ill opinion she had once harboured against Mr. Darcy had vanished entirely that evening. He was a good gentleman. There could be no denying it now. He was considerate, spoke with intelligence, cared deeply for his sister, and possessed a steadiness of character she found herself admiring more with every encounter.

And he is exceedingly handsome.

Elizabeth sat up straighter.

That line of thought was considerably less useful than the others.

She rose from the dressing table at once, as though physical movement might prevent her mind from wandering any further in that direction.

Then there was the other matter. The worry she had seen in him all evening beneath the civility and the conversation. The same quality she remembered from the Meryton assembly, when she had mistaken it for pride and indifference. She did not make that mistake now. Whatever occupied his thoughts, it was not indifference. She wondered briefly whether it would be too forward to ask him about it, then nearly laughed at herself, for she could not imagine the conversation at all.

Mr. Darcy, you appeared distracted this evening. Is something troubling you?

No. She would have to do what she always did. Wait. Observe. Draw her conclusions when the evidence presented itself. In time it would. She was fairly certain of that. She would see him at Oakham Mount soon enough, or perhaps on Friday—

Friday.

Elizabeth's mouth rounded into a silent O. She had agreed to Georgiana calling at Longbourn not three hours ago, entirely forgetting that Mr Collins was due to arrive the very same afternoon.

Then she blew out the candle, climbed into bed, and decided that a gentleman whose letter had announced his own foolishness so thoroughly was unlikely to improve upon acquaintance. At least Georgiana would be there on Friday. That, she thought, would make meeting her cousin considerably more tolerable.

And Mr. Darcy, of course.

For reasons she chose not to examine too closely, that thought was unexpectedly reassuring.

TEN

6th November 1811

Oakham Mount

Elizabeth

Elizabeth had not expected solitude during her walk that morning. She had hoped, in fact, for the opposite, though she would not have admitted it to anyone, including herself. When she reached the crest of the mount and found Darcy already there, seated upon the same fallen log on which she had found him before, looking out across the valley.

He turned at the sound of her approach and rose.

"Miss Elizabeth."

"Mr. Darcy." She nodded towards the log. "Pray, do not rise on my account."

He did so nevertheless, and only resumed his seat when she took her place beside him, to his right, though Elizabeth ensured there was sufficient distance between them for propriety's sake.

His countenance appeared improved from the previous day, though there remained a shadow beneath it.

"You appear more yourself this morning," Elizabeth said before she could stop herself.

He turned and grimaced slightly. "Do I?"

"You do." Elizabeth nodded. "Yesterday evening, you appeared troubled. Distracted, somehow."

His expression shifted into something faintly resembling a smile. "I received some news yesterday that was not entirely welcome." Elizabeth noticed he chose the words carefully. "The matter is already in hand."

Elizabeth nodded. She did not press him. He appeared to notice this, and something in him eased.

They looked out across the valley together.

"You enjoy the view," Elizabeth said at length.

"I did not know I should come to like Hertfordshire as much as I do," Darcy replied. He said it simply, without self-consciousness, as though it were merely a fact he had recently discovered.

Elizabeth regarded him with interest. "What do you find agreeable about it?"

He considered the question seriously. "It is unpretentious," he said. "The country does not announce itself. It simply is what it is, and one finds oneself pleasantly surprised by it."

"That is rather a fine description," Elizabeth said. "Though I confess I have never thought to describe it at all. It is simply home."

"That may be precisely why you have never needed to."

She glanced at him. "And Derbyshire? How does it compare?"

"Favourably," he said, with a gravity she was now fairly certain concealed amusement. "Though I admit I am not entirely impartial."

"No," she agreed. "I have observed that people rarely are where their home counties are concerned." She paused. "Georgiana speaks of Pemberley as though it were the finest place in England."

"It is the finest place in England."

Elizabeth laughed. "There it is."

"I stand by it."

"I am sure you do." She folded her hands in her lap. "She described it to me at some length yesterday. The grounds, the river, the library." She chuckled, remembering the smile on Georgiana's face as she described it. "She spoke of the library at considerable length."

"Georgiana has good taste."

"She said the same of yours. That you read everything and remember most of it, and are insufferably well informed as a result."

Darcy looked at her. "She said that?"

"In rather more affectionate terms," Elizabeth admitted. "But that was the substance of it."

Something crossed his expression that was unmistakably fond. He turned his gaze back towards the valley.

"And you?" he asked after a moment. "What are your own interests, Miss Elizabeth? Beyond walking and being, as I have observed, exceptionally quick-witted."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Is that what you have observed?"

"Among other things."

She considered the question. "Books," she said. "I read a great deal. Not with Georgiana's thoroughness, I think, but widely. My father instilled the habit early and has been largely unable to reverse it since. He also taught me chess, which I enjoy a great deal more than I am perhaps supposed to."

"Why more than you are supposed to?"

"Because my younger sisters consider it incomprehensible and my mother considers it unbecoming. I have also been scolded by her on more than one occasion that gentlemen do not care to be beaten at chess by a lady they are attempting to court." She smiled. "I have found this largely irrelevant, as I have yet to meet a gentleman I wished to lose to on purpose."

Darcy regarded her with an expression she could not entirely interpret. "Your father did mention that we should have a game," he said.

Elizabeth's brows drew together. "Did he?"

"He suggested, when we spoke at Longbourn, that I might care to test my strategy upon some future occasion."

Elizabeth stared at him for a moment. Then she laughed. "He did not."

"He was quite specific about it."

"That," Elizabeth said, "is entirely characteristic of him, and I apologise on his behalf."

"I found it refreshing," Darcy smiled. "I have rarely been challenged to a game of chess within the first quarter hour of an acquaintance."

"He likes you," Elizabeth said, then found herself faintly surprised to have spoken so directly.

Darcy appeared equally surprised to hear it.

"I am glad of it," he said after a moment. "He is not a man whose good opinion one would willingly forgo."

They sat quietly for a moment. A farm cart trundled along the lane below them, unhurried in the morning distance. Somewhere behind them, a bird made its opinion of the cold known with remarkable persistence.

"What else did Georgiana tell you?" Darcy asked. "About Pemberley."

"A great deal," Elizabeth did not turn to face him. "The grounds particularly. She described the river and the walks beside it, and the kitchen garden, and a particular rose bed which apparently blooms in June and is, in her estimation, the finest sight in Derbyshire."

"She is not wrong about the rose bed."

"She also mentioned Lambton," Elizabeth said. "She was describing how you and she would sometimes visit the town, and I told her then that my aunt Gardiner was raised there. Mrs. Gardiner speaks of Lambton so often that I sometimes think I know the place myself."

Darcy turned towards her. She met his eyes. "Your aunt is from Lambton?"

"She is. She left when she was perhaps seventeen and has not returned since, though she speaks of doing so whenever the opportunity presents itself." Elizabeth smiled. "Georgiana was delighted. She said your housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, would remember the family."

"It is entirely possible," Darcy agreed. "Mrs. Reynolds has been at Pemberley longer than I have been alive and remembers everyone."

"Then I shall tell my aunt. She will be very pleased." Elizabeth paused. "Georgiana also mentioned that you have only one aunt."

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh," Darcy said. "Yes. She is... particular."

Elizabeth frowned briefly, then smiled.

Darcy looked at her. "What is it?"

"Nothing, only..." She pressed her lips together against a smile that was already forming without her permission. "Georgiana mentioned an Aunt Catherine in Kent entirely in passing. I gave it no thought at the time. I did not make the connection."

"Connection to what?" Darcy asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

"Well." Elizabeth was obliged to steady her features before replying. "My cousin, Mr. Collins, is to visit Longbourn on Friday. His letter informed us, at considerable length, that he is the rector of a parish at Hunsford in Kent, under the patronage of a Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park." She paused and smiled again. "I had not, until this precise moment, understood that to be the same Aunt Catherine Georgiana mentioned yesterday."

Darcy's eyes widened.

Then he laughed.

The sound surprised Elizabeth enough that she nearly laughed herself.

"You are amused."

"I confess I am." He shook his head slightly. "Mr. Collins is your cousin?"

"He is."

Darcy laughed again and inclined his head in apology. "I beg your pardon. I have never met the gentleman myself, but my cousin Anne has mentioned him in her letters. She describes him as exceedingly devoted to my aunt. I believe he dines at Rosings with considerable frequency."

"'Exceedingly devoted' is a very charitable summary of his letter," Elizabeth said, laughing outright. "Mr. Collins appears to hold your aunt's opinions in the highest possible esteem."

Darcy's smile widened. "I confess I should very much like to meet the man."

"You are aware," Elizabeth said, composing herself, "that Georgiana is to call at Longbourn on Friday."

Darcy's eyes widened with sudden understanding. "Then we shall meet him?"

"If Mr. Collins proves as punctual as his letter suggests, you certainly shall."

Darcy regarded her with unmistakable amusement. "I find I am looking forward to it."

The morning lay quiet around them, and the valley stretched away in every direction, entirely unconcerned with Mr. Collins and his approaching visit.

"Friday," Darcy said at last, "promises to be a very interesting afternoon."

Elizabeth rose from the log not long afterwards.

"I ought to return. My family will soon be at breakfast, and my father may begin to suspect I have abandoned Hertfordshire altogether."

Darcy rose as well. "May I walk you to the bottom of the mount?"

Elizabeth considered him for a moment.

"You may, sir."

They set off down the path together, the conversation drifting naturally to other subjects, among them whether Hertfordshire lanes were best enjoyed in autumn or spring, a question upon which they found themselves capable of conversing pleasantly and at considerable length.

At the foot of the path they parted.

Elizabeth turned towards Longbourn. Darcy towards Netherfield.

She did not look back.

By the time she reached the lane leading home, however, she found herself smiling.

She saw no particular reason to stop. Mr. Darcy was a gentleman whose company she thoroughly enjoyed.

ELEVEN

8th November 1811

Longbourn

Elizabeth

Mr. Collins arrived at precisely five minutes before two o'clock. The punctuality surprised no one. Indeed, Kitty and Lydia had made a wager that he would arrive at least a minute later than his letter had promised, and both were disappointed.

His satisfaction in his own punctuality was evident from the moment he stepped down from the hired carriage. He straightened his coat and turned towards Longbourn with a smile so carefully arranged that it appeared to have been prepared in advance.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and somewhere in his middle twenties. Elizabeth noted these facts and moved on immediately to the more pressing observation that he had not ceased speaking since his feet touched the ground.

Mr. Bennet performed the introductions. Mr. Collins bowed to each lady in turn. When he reached Jane, he paused a fraction longer than propriety strictly required and spoke of the pleasure of the acquaintance with particular emphasis. He lingered again when introduced to Elizabeth, displaying much the same degree of attention. Elizabeth returned his greeting with composure and resolved to think nothing of it.

They went inside.

An hour later she had entirely revised that resolution.

In the space of sixty minutes, Mr. Collins had expressed opinions upon the entrance hall, the drawing room, the prospect from the east window, the arrangement of the furniture, the selection of books upon the side table, the proper conduct of a parish, the relative merits of a country living compared to a town one, and the importance of humility in a clergyman, a subject

upon which he discoursed at considerable length and with no apparent sense of irony.

What struck Elizabeth most was that scarcely an opinion seemed entirely his own. Every observation eventually circled back to Lady Catherine de Bourgh. What Lady Catherine preferred. What Lady Catherine recommended. What Lady Catherine had once remarked upon a similar subject. It was as though the lady's judgement informed every conclusion he reached.

Elizabeth could not recall disliking a man's opinions so thoroughly or so quickly.

Lydia and Kitty spent much of the time exchanging faces whenever Mr. Collins launched into another speech, though he appeared entirely unaware of their efforts. Even Mary, upon whom the family occasionally cast speculative glances, remembering her unfortunate defence of clergymen at breakfast several days before, did not seem especially impressed by him.

Elizabeth was still arriving at this conclusion when the sound of horses upon the drive reached her.

Relief, she hoped.

She was at the window before she had quite decided to move and was immensely gratified to discover that Mr. Darcy and Georgiana had kept their promise to call at Longbourn.

The new visitors were shortly shown in by Hill. Mrs. Bennet rose at once to receive them. Georgiana was welcomed warmly and with genuine pleasure. Mr. Darcy received a degree of civility that Elizabeth thought had improved considerably since his first appearance at Longbourn.

Mr. Bennet welcomed Georgiana with equal warmth. Elizabeth was delighted by it, for she had spoken of their friendship to him since returning from Netherfield.

After the usual greetings had been exchanged, and with Mr. Collins visibly disconcerted that the attention of the room had shifted from him scarcely an hour after his arrival, Mr. Bennet turned towards his guest.

"Mr. Collins, allow me to present Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Miss Darcy."

For a moment Mr. Collins merely stared.

Then understanding dawned.

"Darcy?" he repeated. "Mr. Darcy of Pemberley?"

"Yes," Darcy replied.

Mr. Collins's eyes widened visibly.

"Good heavens." He bowed at once. "Then you are Lady Catherine de Bourgh's nephew."

"I am."

The effect upon Mr. Collins was immediate and profound.

Elizabeth watched it happen.

It was rather like observing a man discover that he had accidentally seated himself beside a prince.

"How often I have heard your names, sir, and yours, ma'am." Elizabeth had never expected anyone to address Georgiana as *ma'am*, but apparently Mr. Collins did. "Your honoured aunt is pleased to speak of you both whenever I am privileged enough to enjoy her confidence."

Darcy smiled politely while Georgiana merely blinked and took the seat beside Elizabeth.

"I confess I am surprised to meet you in Hertfordshire at all, sir," Mr. Collins continued, his pleasure still very evident. "Those of us within Lady Catherine's circle who have not yet enjoyed the honour of your acquaintance had rather expected that your marriage to Miss de Bourgh would provide our first opportunity of meeting you. Indeed, her ladyship has frequently spoken of the union—"

Elizabeth felt her heart do something she had not given it permission to do.

Across the room, Darcy's eyes flickered towards her before returning immediately to Mr. Collins.

"My marriage to my cousin?" Darcy grimaced. "You must be mistaken, sir."

Mr. Collins blinked.

"No, sir. Her ladyship has often spoken of the future union of the two great families."

"Miss de Bourgh and I have no understanding whatsoever," Darcy interrupted, more firmly this time. "Nor have we ever had one. Whatever Lady Catherine may have communicated to her acquaintances upon the subject, she did so without either my knowledge or my consent. I should be obliged if you would make that distinction clear upon your return to Hunsford."

Mr. Collins looked as though the foundations of his world had shifted beneath his feet.

He opened his mouth to reply, but Mr. Bennet raised a finger.

"In my considerable experience of men, Mr. Collins," he said, with every appearance of genuine fascination, "a gentleman is generally the first person to know when he is engaged. I would not rely too heavily upon Lady Catherine's certainty in the matter. She and Mr. Darcy appear to be operating from rather different information."

Lydia giggled aloud, earning a pointed look from Mrs. Bennet. It did not, however, prevent the smiles that appeared upon the faces of Jane, Kitty, or even Mr. Darcy himself.

At this, Mr. Collins closed his mouth.

He looked, for the first time since his arrival, as though he had genuinely run out of things to say.

Elizabeth felt a curious sense of relief settle over her at the clarification. For reasons she preferred not to consider, she found herself glad that Mr. Darcy was not engaged to Miss de Bourgh.

Chastising herself for feeling anything at all on the subject, Elizabeth resumed her conversation with Georgiana and soon offered to show her the house. She left Mr. Darcy in company with her father and Mr. Collins in company with the remainder of the household, though her cousin seemed considerably less inclined to speak than he had been an hour before.

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Elizabeth returned from showing Georgiana around the house to hear her father insisting that Mr. Darcy and his sister remain for dinner. The cook had made sufficient preparation for Mr. Collins's arrival that two additional mouths presented no inconvenience, and Mr. Bennet, who was making very little effort to conceal his preference for Darcy's company than Mr. Collins's, appeared disinclined to let him depart before extracting further entertainment from the afternoon.

Darcy, after observing that he and Georgiana had not intended to stay so long, accepted out of respect for Mr. Bennet's invitation.

While the cook prepared the table, Darcy leaned towards Elizabeth, who had resumed her seat.

"I wondered," he said, "whether you might show me Longbourn's gardens as well. I confess myself curious to see whether they compare favourably with Netherfield's. Bingley speaks so highly of your father's gardens that I find myself eager to judge them for myself."

Elizabeth looked at him. Georgiana had entered into conversation with Lydia and Kitty, so she agreed.

The gardens at Longbourn were modest and November-bare, but they possessed the considerable advantage of being outdoors and therefore free of Mr. Collins.

Darcy fell into step beside Elizabeth on her left as they emerged through the side door, and she led him along the path between the kitchen garden and the hedgerow without any particular destination in mind.

"I must apologise," Elizabeth said after a time, "for Mr. Collins."

Darcy smiled. "There is no need. I know men like him."

"There is every need," Elizabeth insisted. "I do not believe he considers his words before speaking them."

"Mr. Collins," Darcy said, his expression hardening slightly, "is not mistaken in what he said. My aunt has long entertained the notion of my marrying Anne. She has spoken of it as settled for as long as I can remember." He paused, as though recollecting something. "She claims it was an arrangement approved by my mother. That they discussed it together and came to an understanding before my mother's death."

Elizabeth glanced at him.

"I was very close to my mother," Darcy continued. "I know every conversation of consequence she had during her last years. She never said any such thing to me, and I do not believe she said it to Lady Catherine either." His voice remained even, though something lay beneath it. "The fact that my aunt invokes my mother's memory in support of a claim that was never made is one of the reasons I am so firmly opposed to the idea. Aside from that, Anne herself harbours no such wishes. We correspond often, and she is as disinclined to the match as I am."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment.

Then, carefully, she asked, "Do you generally find family expectations difficult to bear? Or only those that have been invented?"

He looked at her. "Only those that have been invented. A genuine expectation, sincerely held, is another matter entirely."

"I ask," Elizabeth said, "because I know something of family expectation myself." She paused. "I do not know whether you are acquainted with the circumstances of my father's estate."

"I am not," Darcy replied, his tone immediately attentive.

"It is entailed. My father has five daughters and no son, which means that upon his death Longbourn must pass to the nearest male heir." She glanced back towards the house. "Which is Mr. Collins, now that his father is deceased."

Darcy was quiet for a moment.

"I was not aware of that."

"Most people in Meryton are, though they may not yet know Mr. Collins, as we ourselves only met him today." Elizabeth smiled faintly. "Mr. Collins has come to Longbourn with what he considers a very generous solution. He intends to offer for one of us. In his mind, it is a means of making amends for the injustice the entail may occasion."

Darcy stopped walking altogether.

Elizabeth looked at him. There was something in his expression she had not seen before, not quite displeasure and not quite alarm, but somewhere between the two, and directed, she thought, rather specifically at the situation she had just described.

"Forgive me," he said after a moment. "I do not mean to be forward. But I hope very much that you are not the lady upon whom he settles."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Why do you say so, sir?"

"From what my cousin Anne has written of him, and from what little I have observed this afternoon," he said, "your cousin is not a man who would appreciate your wit or intelligence. He would not know what to do with either."

Elizabeth considered this.

"I have no intention of marrying a man I do not love," she said. "Or one I do not respect. Or one who does not love and respect me in return." She gazed ahead for a moment. "Mr. Collins is none of those things."

"No." Darcy said bluntly "He is not."

They resumed walking and continued in silence for a time, passing what remained of the flower beds and the last stubborn vines of the kitchen garden.

"For what it is worth," Darcy said suddenly, "I respect you a great deal, Miss Elizabeth. And I admire you." He said it simply, without ceremony, looking straight ahead. "More than I have found adequate opportunity to say."

Elizabeth felt warmth rise to her cheeks.

She did not answer immediately. She did not know what answer to give.

For several moments she watched the path before them.

"Thank you, sir." She said softly. "And if I have earned your respect, then I am very glad of it. For there are few opinions I value more than yours. And I confess that your devotion to your sister has done much to increase that esteem."

Darcy looked at her with an expression of such warmth that Elizabeth found herself obliged to turn her attention to the path before them. Neither spoke for several moments, but the silence was not uncomfortable.

They were already making their way back towards the house when the door opened and Jane appeared, smiling, to inform them that dinner was served.

TWELVE

9-10th November 1811

Longbourn

Elizabeth

Heavy rain arrived shortly after midnight on Friday and continued for the next two days.

By midday the following morning, the lanes were impassable, and the Bennet household had been reduced to its own company.

Elizabeth had formed her initial opinion of Mr. Collins within the first hour of his arrival. Two days of enforced proximity had done nothing to revise it and a great deal to confirm it. He had opinions on everything and knowledge of very little, a combination she found particularly exhausting. He spoke of Lady Catherine with the devotion of a man who had found religion and chosen an unusual deity. He complimented everything in the house, including the card games.

Knowing her mother would steer him away from Jane and might still encourage his attentions towards her, Elizabeth had braced herself for Mr. Collins's advances, particularly after the way he had lingered during their introduction. Yet by the end of the second day, it became apparent that Mr. Collins had either thought better of Elizabeth altogether or had been redirected by some external force. He had attached himself to Mary, praising her reading of Fordyce and extolling her skill upon the pianoforte, which he declared superior to that of the organist at his parish. Mary received these attentions with such indifference that Elizabeth began to suspect she had no wish to receive them at all.

Elizabeth made several attempts to observe conversations between Mr. Collins and her mother, hoping to overhear some mention of his intentions. All had proved futile. It was Kitty who eventually brought the intelligence she sought.

She appeared in Elizabeth's bedchamber on the afternoon of Mr. Collins's second day at Longbourn, while Elizabeth and Jane were passing the time together, with the breathless energy of someone carrying news she considered of the utmost importance.

"I heard Mr. Collins talking to Mama," she announced, dropping onto the bed beside them. "In the small parlour. He did not know I was in the hall."

"Kitty." Jane raised her brows in gentle warning, suggesting that accuracy and Kitty were not always intimate companions.

"He said," Kitty continued, entirely undeterred, "that Elizabeth is afforded too much liberty. That she speaks too freely and has opinions she expresses without invitation."

Elizabeth stared in shock at her. Then she laughed, a genuine, unguarded laugh that surprised even herself. "He said that?"

"Yes." Kitty paused, watching their faces for effect. "I think when Mama told him that Jane was as good as spoken for by Mr. Bingley, he insisted upon you instead."

Jane tapped Kitty's arm impatiently. "Then how did he come to speak of Lizzy in the manner you first described?"

"Mama told him that Mary was considerably more biddable and that Elizabeth was..." Kitty frowned, trying to recall the exact wording. "Difficult. I believe that was the word."

"Difficult," Elizabeth repeated with considerable satisfaction.

"I thought you should know," Kitty said, rising. "Mary, however, says she could not marry him either."

"Mary said that?" Elizabeth grimaced.

"This morning. To me." Kitty nodded. "She said..." Again, she paused to remember. "She said that a man who speaks so frequently of another woman's virtue has very little of his own to recommend him."

Jane seemed to have considered this thoughtfully. "I think that means she does not like him."

"I think it does," Elizabeth agreed.

Kitty soon departed when she realised that, having delivered her news, she was no longer of particular interest to either of her sisters.

Once she had gone, Jane looked at Elizabeth with a small smile. "You look relieved."

"Enormously," Elizabeth said, making no attempt to conceal it.

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9-10th November 1811

Netherfield

Darcy

The rain that had arrived shortly after midnight on Friday continued through Saturday, giving Darcy far more time indoors than he found useful.

He had been thinking about his visit to Longbourn ever since returning to Netherfield. He was still thinking about it now, standing at the window of his sitting room and watching the rain sweep across the grounds, with a book lying open upon the desk behind him that he had not touched in over two hours.

He thought about the walk in the gardens. About the ease with which Elizabeth had walked beside him, free from the careful management she employed in company, as though the afternoon had lowered her guard without her realising it. He thought about what she had said, that she would not marry a man she did not love or respect, spoken with a certainty that was neither performance nor bravado but merely the conviction of a woman who knew her own mind and expected to be taken seriously. He thought, too, of what he had said in return, words that had escaped more plainly than he had intended and which she had received without embarrassment and without pretending she had not heard them.

He admired her greatly.

The admission no longer seemed worth avoiding.

Indeed, he had admired her for some time. If he was honest with himself, it had begun the night of the Meryton assembly, moments after he realised she had read his lips. Since then he had disguised the feeling beneath concern for Georgiana and convinced himself that every effort to spend time in Elizabeth's company was motivated by his sister's welfare. That explanation had served its purpose. He was now finished with it.

The previous day had brought a letter from Fitzwilliam. His cousin intended to come to Hertfordshire as soon as his obligations allowed and investigate the matter of Wickham personally. Darcy was grateful that Georgiana remained ignorant of it all. If she suspected that something troubled him, she had not said so. He attributed that chiefly to the happiness she had found in her friendship with Elizabeth, a friendship which seemed to occupy much of her thoughts these days.

The following morning the rain eased somewhat, though not enough to tempt anyone outdoors. Darcy was spending an hour in the library when Georgiana sought him out.

"You have been distracted for some days," she observed, taking the chair opposite him.

Whatever gratitude Darcy had felt for her apparent reluctance to question him vanished immediately.

"I have had matters to attend to."

"You have been keeping to yourself and staring out of windows," Georgiana replied. "That is not attending to matters. That is worrying about them."

Darcy closed the book before him and offered a smile he hoped might discourage further enquiry.

"And how long have you been this observant?"

"I have always been this observant." She shook her head, making it plain that she recognised the deflection. "You simply do not always notice." She folded her hands in her lap. "Is it Miss Elizabeth?"

Darcy blinked.

Of all the conclusions she might have reached, that had not been one he was expecting.

Elizabeth was not troubling him in the least. Wickham was.

Yet Wickham was not a subject he intended to discuss with Georgiana, and so he found himself answering a different question entirely.

"Partly," he admitted.

Georgiana waited.

"I find that I..." He stopped and looked towards the window before beginning again. "This may sound rather sudden, given that we have been in Hertfordshire barely a month. But I am considering courting her."

The smile that crossed Georgiana's face was warm and not entirely guileless.

"Does it sound sudden to you?" she asked.

Darcy considered the question with care.

"No," he said at last. "It does not."

"Nor to me," she said. "She is remarkable, Fitzwilliam. I think you know that."

"I do."

Silence settled between them for a moment. The fire shifted in the grate. Rain tapped steadily against the windows.

Then Georgiana spoke again.

"Have you told her?"

"That I intend to court her? Not yet. I had thought—"

"Not that."

Darcy looked at her.

Georgiana met his gaze with a directness that had become increasingly familiar over the past week. "Have you told her that you know? About her hearing?"

The humour vanished instantly from Darcy's expression.

"Because if you have not," Georgiana continued carefully, "and you begin courting her in earnest without telling her, she will eventually discover it. When she does, she will wonder how long you have known and why you said nothing." She tilted her head slightly. "That is not a small thing, Fitzwilliam. To her, it may feel like deception."

Darcy said nothing. The difficulty in speech was that she was right.

She was entirely right, and he had known it long before she voiced it.

"You are wiser than I sometimes give you credit for," he said at last.

Georgiana laughed softly. "You give me a great deal of credit."

"And not always enough."

"Perhaps not." Her smile softened. "I learnt from the best brother."

Darcy's own smile returned despite himself.

"I intend to tell her," he said.

"Soon?"

"When the opportunity presents itself. When it can be done properly." He glanced towards the rain-streaked windows. "I wish to do it correctly."

Georgiana nodded.

She did not press him further. She understood, as she always had, when enough had been said.

They sat together quietly while the rain continued outside, and Darcy found his thoughts returning once more to Elizabeth Bennet, to what he needed to tell her, and to how he might do it.

He told himself the opportunity would present itself soon enough.

He did not yet know that something else would present itself first.

THIRTEEN

12th November 1811

Meryton

Elizabeth

It finally stopped raining on Monday, though the grounds remained too sodden to venture anywhere of consequence. By Tuesday the sun had done sufficient work to make the lanes passable, and Mr. Collins, who had spent the better part of four days indoors making his presence felt in every room of Longbourn, announced at breakfast that he considered it high time to see something of the village.

Mrs. Bennet, entirely committed to the project of satisfying the heir of Longbourn, encouraged her daughters to accompany him. Jane was indisposed and remained at home. Elizabeth would have stayed behind as well, she had endured three days of Mr. Collins's company and felt she had acquitted herself admirably, but the prospect of fresh air after so long indoors proved stronger than her reluctance. Mr. Collins had shown no particular inclination to seek her out since the second afternoon of his visit, and she reasoned he would spend the walk in Mary's company in any case, which left her free to enjoy the morning in relative peace.

She was not wrong. Kitty and Lydia had darted ahead before they reached the gate, while Mr. Collins had secured Mary's company and was already discoursing at length on the proper conduct of ladies during parish disputes. Mary listened with admirable seriousness, though whether from interest or perseverance was difficult to determine.

Elizabeth walked some yards behind them, enjoying the rare luxury of fresh air and freedom from conversation. After several days confined indoors with Mr. Collins, she found both equally restorative.

They were perhaps halfway to their Aunt Philips's house when Lydia's voice reached her from some distance ahead.

"Mr. Denny! Mr. Denny, here!"

Elizabeth looked in her direction. Lydia was calling at the top of her voice and waving with characteristic abandon at two officers crossing the street towards them. Kitty had already hurried forward to join her.

Elizabeth quickened her pace slightly to see what had occasioned the excitement.

One of the officers she recognised as Mr. Denny, a young man of pleasant enough manners who she had seen at balls once or twice with the usual militia party. The other she did not know. He was tall, fair-haired, and possessed of the kind of easy, open countenance that presented itself well at a first glance.

"Who is that with Mr. Denny?" Elizabeth asked as she reached Kitty's side.

"That," Kitty said, with evident satisfaction on her face, "is Mr. Wickham. He is one of the newest officers in Meryton and quite one of the most handsome in the regiment. Everyone says so."

The two men soon crossed the road to meet the group. Mr. Denny made the introductions. Mr. Wickham bowed with a grace that suggested he had done it many times and found it no effort at all. He smiled at the party generally and settled into easy conversation with the group. Lydia and Kitty immediately claimed Mr. Denny, informing him that they were on their way to their Aunt Philips's after visiting the market. The two officers offered to accompany the ladies and their cousin.

The two youngest sisters walked ahead with Mr. Denny. Mr. Collins, who contributed little beyond observations on Lady Catherine de Bourgh's opinions regarding the militia and the ongoing war, remained beside Mary. Elizabeth soon found herself walking beside Mr. Wickham more by circumstance than design. He walked to her left.

Curious as to how she had never encountered him before, particularly when Kitty and Lydia appeared already well acquainted with him—in fairness, they contrived to become acquainted with every militia officer, whether in life or in print—Elizabeth initiated a conversation.

"You have not been in Hertfordshire long?" she asked.

"Less than a month," he said pleasantly. "We came the day after the Meryton assembly. Denny told me I missed a great deal."

"He was not wrong," Elizabeth smiled. "The neighbourhood considers a good assembly a considerable event."

"And do you?" Wickham asked.

"I find them useful," she replied. "One learns a great deal about people in a crowded room."

Wickham smiled and shook his head in agreement.

"That has been my experience also. Though I confess I had heard something of Hertfordshire before I came. I spent a summer at Luton not far from here as a boy and have always thought well of Hertfordshire."

"Then you are already half acquainted with us," Elizabeth said. "That puts you at a considerable advantage over most new arrivals."

"I am not sure about that," he confessed. "Meryton appears to have formed very decided opinions about its new arrivals already."

Hearing this, Elizabeth's thoughts drifted to the Meryton assembly. The crowded room, the musicians, and the various new arrivals. Then came the memory of Darcy himself, particularly the moment she had repeated his words to Mr. Bingley and watched his expression shift from indifference to shock across a candlelit room.

The recollection brought with it a warmth she had not quite expected. Elizabeth did not realise she was smiling until she heard Wickham gasp softly.

At once she composed her features, hoping he would not suppose she was laughing at something he had said, and turned towards him.

He was not looking at her.

She followed his gaze.

In the distance, Darcy was riding through the high street at a steady pace. Forgetting entirely why she had turned in the first place, Elizabeth stepped forward instinctively and raised a hand to catch his attention.

He saw her. She was certain of it. His eyes found her face.

His expression was harder than anything Elizabeth had ever seen upon it. Not displeasure. Not reserve. Something colder. Something sharper.

Anger.

His gaze moved from her to Wickham and lingered there.

He did not stop. He did not slow. His eyes remained fixed upon Wickham for a moment longer before he looked away entirely and rode on. He neither bowed nor acknowledged her greeting.

Elizabeth lowered her hand slowly.

What on earth had just happened?

What had she done to Mr. Darcy to earn such rudeness?

She turned back to Wickham. His colour had gone. He was watching Darcy's retreating figure with undisguised alarm, as though the encounter had overturned some expectation of his own.

"Mr. Wickham?" she called gently.

He turned back, recovering himself.

"Forgive me." He managed a weak smile before turning to Denny. "I have just remembered something of great importance. I cannot escort the ladies any further, I need to attend to a matter rather urgently."

He smiled at Elizabeth with every appearance of ease.

"Miss Bennet, it has been a pleasure. Denny, I shall find you later."

He turned in the direction from which they had met the gentlemen and hurried away before Denny had time to reply.

Elizabeth watched him go. Then she looked back down the high street in the direction Darcy had ridden.

She stood with it for a moment.

Then it struck her.

Whatever had just happened had nothing to do with her.

The two men knew one another. That much was plain. Whatever else it was, it was not a friendly acquaintance.

She filed the observation away and hurried to rejoin her sisters, who were already demanding to know why Mr. Darcy had not stopped to speak to them.

Elizabeth had no answer to offer.

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Netherfield

Darcy

He had ridden out that morning for no particular reason beyond the need for open air after days of confinement indoors. The grounds of Netherfield had sufficed for a time, but he had wanted distance and had taken the Meryton road without giving the matter much thought.

He was thinking a great deal now.

The sight Darcy had just witnessed would not leave him.

Elizabeth, smiling. That particular smile, the genuine one, the one she did not bestow upon general company. Standing beside George Wickham in the middle of Meryton High Street as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

He urged his horse into a faster pace.

So Colonel Forster's George Wickham was indeed the same George Wickham he knew.

How long had he been in Meryton? How long had he and Elizabeth been acquainted? Had Wickham sought her out deliberately, or had the meeting been accidental?

Darcy did not know.

The questions arrived more quickly than he could answer them, and each was more unwelcome than the last.

He thought of Mrs. Younge. Of how thoroughly she had deceived him. Of how completely he had trusted her with Georgiana, how carefully he had selected her, how certain he had been of her respectability. He had been mistaken in every particular, and by the time he understood the truth, Wickham had vanished and the damage had already been done.

And now here was Elizabeth Bennet, smiling at George Wickham in a Hertfordshire Street.

He had trusted her.

He had trusted her easy confidence, her warmth, and that particular quality of attention which seemed to make every person she spoke to feel heard. He had placed Georgiana in her company and assured himself it was solely for his sister's benefit. He had walked with her just four days earlier and told her he admired her, and had meant every word.

He had been on the verge of courting her.

He had admitted as much to Georgiana.

Had Wickham engineered it?

The thought arrived cold and clear and settled in his chest like a stone.

Wickham knew about Lady Anne. He knew the effect a hard-of-hearing woman's example would have upon a man carrying Darcy's particular history. He knew Darcy would be drawn to a woman who navigated the world with such composure, such intelligence, and such confidence.

Had Wickham placed Elizabeth deliberately in his path?

Had he selected someone he knew Darcy would admire, someone with a hearing impairment, knowing precisely what it would mean to a man whose mother had been deaf and whose sister feared the same fate?

It was exactly the sort of calculation Wickham was capable of.

It was exactly the sort of thing Darcy ought to have anticipated and had not.

The argument seemed increasingly plausible the longer he considered it. Despite attending social functions throughout the neighbourhood, Darcy had never once encountered Wickham at any of them. What if Wickham had known he was in Hertfordshire with Georgiana and had orchestrated the entire thing? What if coincidence had merely favoured him, and Darcy had walked willingly into a trap laid long before he recognised it?

He reached Netherfield at a pace that brought two grooms hurrying from the stables. Handing over the reins without a word, he entered the house and took the stairs without slowing.

Once inside his bedchambers, he crossed directly to the writing desk.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was expected that day. If he had made good time, he might already be on the road. Until that morning, Darcy had intended for his cousin to make discreet enquiries of Colonel Forster regarding the George Wickham he had mentioned. Fitzwilliam was better placed to do so without drawing attention to the matter.

That was no longer necessary.

George Wickham was no longer a name or a suspicion.

Darcy had seen him with his own eyes.

Wickham had spent years slipping through every attempt to bring him to account. Now he knew Darcy was in Hertfordshire. Worse, he knew Darcy had recognised him. If there was one thing Wickham excelled at, it was disappearing when circumstances became inconvenient.

Darcy was not prepared to allow it.

He reached for a sheet of paper and began a letter to Colonel Forster.

The colonel needed to know what sort of man he had accepted into his regiment. He needed to know that Colonel Fitzwilliam was due to arrive that day to address a matter of long-standing concerning Mr. Wickham. Most importantly, he needed to ensure that Wickham was not permitted to vanish before that meeting could take place.

Darcy wrote quickly.

Wickham had debts. Darcy owned every one of them.

For the better part of a year, he had held them in reserve, waiting for the proper moment to act. That moment appeared to have arrived.

As for Elizabeth—

Darcy set down the pen for a moment and stared at the wall, allowing himself a single breath of something that was not anger.

He would withdraw.

There was no other course.

He would withdraw from her entirely and ensure that Georgiana did the same. He would offer no explanation until Wickham had been dealt with and the truth could be laid before them plainly.

It would hurt Georgiana.

He knew that.

She had come to care for Elizabeth sincerely and would not understand the sudden distance.

Yet it had been a close thing.

Providence had intervened at the last possible moment, and he had no intention of ignoring the warning.

Darcy picked up the pen once more and continued writing.

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Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived at Netherfield that evening, mud-splattered and entirely himself, which was to say composed, direct, and asking questions before he had removed his coat.

Darcy told him everything he had witnessed that day. He described his meeting with Wickham, the note dispatched to Colonel Forster, and the reply assuring him that the matter would be acted upon at once.

Fitzwilliam listened without interruption, which was how Darcy knew he considered the matter serious.

They rode to Colonel Forster's quarters within the hour.

What they found there surprised Darcy considerably.

Wickham was already under arrest.

Forster received them with a satisfaction tempered by regret. Darcy's warning, it appeared, had been only too well founded.

Though he admitted he had never suspected anything wrong in Wickham's character, Darcy's letter had persuaded him to keep a careful watch upon the lieutenant. The caution was rewarded sooner than expected.

Wickham was apprehended at the coaching inn that evening, luggage already loaded and one foot upon the step of a northbound coach.

"It was not the conduct of a man intending to remain and answer questions," Forster observed dryly.

The debts Darcy documented were substantial. The apparent attempt to abscond only strengthened the case against Wickham.

"He was very nearly gone when my men intercepted him," Forster said. "Another few hours, and we might have had difficulty finding him."

Darcy felt an unpleasant mixture of satisfaction and irritation. It was exactly what he had expected of Wickham, and yet some part of him had hoped to be wrong.

"Would you like to see him?" Forster asked.

"No." Darcy said instantly.

Forster raised an eyebrow in evident surprise.

Darcy understood the reaction. Most men would have wanted a confrontation, an explanation, or at least the satisfaction of seeing their adversary brought low.

"There is nothing he could say that I have not heard before," he said. "He has been lying with remarkable consistency since he was sixteen. I see no reason to provide him a fresh audience."

A brief smile touched Fitzwilliam's mouth.

Forster inclined his head. "As you wish."

Forster asked that the practical arrangements for Wickham's trial be left in his and Fitzwilliam's hands. Darcy readily agreed. He had no wish to involve himself further in the matter.

Only one thing concerned him.

"Wickham must not escape."

"He will not," Forster assured. "You have my word on it."

They rode back to Netherfield in darkness. Darcy said little. Fitzwilliam, who possessed the valuable skill of recognizing when conversation was unwelcome, said even less.

It was done.

That was what mattered.

Wickham was contained. Georgiana was safe. Providence had moved with a speed Darcy had no right to expect.

He ought to have felt relieved.

And he did.

Only not entirely.

There was still the matter of Elizabeth Bennet.

FOURTEEN

14th November 1811

Netherfield

Darcy

Fitzwilliam found Darcy in the small parlour Bingley had set aside for his use — a quiet room at the back of the house that looked out onto the kitchen garden and was unlikely to be disturbed. Darcy was standing at the window with a glass he had not touched and an expression that apparently communicated enough on its own.

"For a man who has just ensured his greatest enemy was delivered to a debtor's prison," Fitzwilliam said, closing the door behind him, "you do not appear particularly satisfied."

Darcy looked at him with questioning eyes but said nothing.

Fitzwilliam helped himself to a chair and stretched his legs out before him with ease.

He watched Darcy take a gulp of his whisky before he spoke. "Georgiana thinks you are wrong," he said at last.

Darcy did not need to ask him what his sister thought he was wrong about. He knew what—or whom—he was referring to. He had told Georgiana everything the morning after Wickham's arrest. While she was happy that the man who had broken her confidence and tried to take advantage of her was gone, the one thing she did not agree with was any complicity on Elizabeth's part in the affair, as Darcy suggested. Still, Darcy had insisted she stay away from Elizabeth until he could ascertain that she had nothing to do with Wickham. He was not doing anything to ascertain anything. Just seeing the two of them together had riled him up so badly that he did not even want to see Elizabeth.

"I know what Georgiana thinks." Darcy pushed the bottle of whisky on the table closer towards Fitzwilliam's side and signalled to a small cabinet with glasses.

"She is quite insistent about it." The colonel stood to retrieve a glass and poured himself a drink. "She says Miss Elizabeth could not have known Wickham, or at least not known the kind of person he is. She came to find me this morning, which tells me she has tried and failed to move you herself."

Darcy took another sip of the drink. "She is sixteen years old, and she is attached to the woman. Her judgement is not impartial."

"Neither is yours," Fitzwilliam said pleasantly, returning to his seat.

Darcy thought to take another sip, but checked himself. It was either that or continue at his present pace and end the evening thoroughly foxed. He could not permit that.

"In your letter," Fitzwilliam continued, "you described Miss Elizabeth Bennet as someone you trusted. Someone remarkable. You said she was doing more for Georgiana than a year of your own efforts had managed." He swirled the alcohol in his glass. "And now you believe she conspired with Wickham."

"I saw them together."

"You saw them together, so what?"

"She was smiling."

"Darcy." Fitzwilliam looked at him with all seriousness. "People smile at people. Neighbours, friends, acquaintances, even strangers. It is a common enough occurrence."

Darcy swallowed and remained quiet.

"Tell me about her," Fitzwilliam said after a while. "Properly. Not what you wrote in the letter or the hurried summary you gave me when I arrived. Tell me how it began."

Darcy looked at his glass. Then he set it down, walked to a chair, took a seat and leaned back.

He began with the Meryton assembly. Then the lip-reading, the recognition that had stopped him cold. He described the moment he understood that Elizabeth Bennet was doing the same thing that his mother had done at some point in her life.

He told him about Lucas Lodge. About how he had discovered that she heard from the left, then about their conversations at Oakham Mount. Finally, he told him how Georgiana had finally opened up to Elizabeth and how he had even left Georgiana in her company when she came to visit Netherfield.

"I had intended to court her," Darcy said at the end of his elaborate explanation. "I told Georgiana as much. I was going to tell Miss Elizabeth what I knew, what I had observed, and let her decide what to do with it." He paused and took a sip of his drink. "And then I rode into Meryton and saw her talking to Wickham and smiling, and everything I had built in the past month came apart in about thirty seconds."

"And now?" Fitzwilliam asked.

"Now I do not know." Darcy looked at the window. "Two days of thinking about it have reduced the certainty I had on Tuesday morning. But I cannot dismiss what I saw."

"Or," Fitzwilliam said, "it is a coincidence. And you are so accustomed to Wickham's machinations that you are seeing them where they do not exist."

Darcy shook his head in disagreement, though he realised there was sense in what his cousin had said. He had thought so himself that morning too, but dismissed it.

"You have spent fifteen years watching that man destroy things," Fitzwilliam said. "And with what he did last summer, it would be entirely understandable if you could no longer tell the difference between a genuine threat and your own fear." He leaned forward slightly. "But I will say this. I have never once heard you speak of a woman the way you just spoke of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. And I have known you a very long time."

The room was quiet. Outside, the kitchen garden was bare.

"What would you have me do?" Darcy said at last.

"I would have you think very carefully," Fitzwilliam said, "before you throw away something real because of a man who is now sitting in a debtor's prison and can do no further damage to anyone."

He rose, straightened his coat, and moved toward the door.

"Wickham is gone, Darcy," he said. "The question is whether you are going to let him take something else from you on his way out."

Without waiting for a response, he left.

Darcy sat alone in the quiet parlour for a long time after that.

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Caroline had not been looking for anything in particular when she passed the small parlour at the end of the east corridor.

She had merely been walking, as one did in a house that had become exceedingly dull, when the sound of Darcy's voice reached her ears, followed by that of his cousin. Someone had closed the parlour door without fastening it properly, leaving it slightly ajar and allowing their conversation to carry into the corridor.

Caroline stopped at once and moved quietly towards the opening.

For the better part of two days, the two gentlemen had been behaving mysteriously, Darcy in particular. Georgiana had not been in the best of spirits either. Something was clearly amiss, and if a little eavesdropping provided the answer, Caroline saw no reason to object.

"Tell me how you met her." Colonel Fitzwilliam's voice carried clearly through the gap.

Her?

Caroline frowned.

So, it was about a woman. What woman had Mr. Darcy met that had occupied his thoughts so thoroughly?

Then Darcy began to speak.

His voice was low and measured. He started with the Meryton assembly.

By the time he mentioned Bingley directing his attention towards a particular lady, Caroline's eyes had widened considerably.

Miss Eliza?

She scarcely needed to hear more before realising that the entire conversation concerned Elizabeth Bennet.

She listened.

About the lip-reading. About the assembly. About Lady Anne. About Georgiana.

Then came Darcy's account of the efforts he had made to learn more about Elizabeth's hearing before introducing her into Georgiana's circle.

At that moment, understanding dawned.

Caroline suddenly recalled Elizabeth's visit to Netherfield. The maid standing beside her with the soup ladle. The delay. The confusion.

Miss Elizabeth was partially deaf.

The discovery sent a thrill through her.

Caroline pressed a hand against her mouth to prevent an audible laugh from escaping.

So that was it.

All this time Elizabeth Bennet had mistaken Darcy's attention for personal interest, when in reality she had merely represented something else entirely. A resemblance to his mother. A connection to Georgiana's fears. A curiosity born of circumstance.

The notion was so satisfying that Caroline smiled.

Yet before she could enjoy it fully, the conversation shifted.

Darcy began speaking of Elizabeth herself.

Not her hearing.

Not Georgiana.

Elizabeth.

Caroline listened as he described his admiration for her. Then came the matter of a Mr. Wickham, a gentleman whose identity meant nothing to her but who had evidently altered Darcy's opinion considerably.

That, at least, was gratifying.

Darcy sounded wounded. Bitter.

She found she preferred him that way when speaking of Elizabeth Bennet.

Once, she wished Colonel Fitzwilliam would cease his absurd attempt to defend the woman. The man seemed determined to insist that Darcy reconsider his conclusions, and Caroline found the advice increasingly tiresome.

At last the conversation drew towards its end.

Caroline remained in the corridor until prudence asserted itself. A servant might pass at any moment, or worse, one of the gentlemen might emerge unexpectedly.

Reluctantly, she stepped away and continued down the corridor.

No one had seen her stop.

No one had seen her listen.

No one had seen her leave.

And no one knew that Caroline Bingley now knew Elizabeth Bennet's secret as well.

FIFTEEN

20th November 1811

Lucas Lodge

Elizabeth

A week had elapsed at Longbourn with several significant events occurring in succession. Chief among them was Mr. Collins's proposal to Mary, which she declined instantly, and his subsequent proposal to Charlotte Lucas, which Charlotte accepted. That Mr. Collins would propose to a woman he had barely known four days was ridiculous enough. That Charlotte would accept was, to most of Longbourn, considerably more surprising.

Mrs. Bennet announced her opinion on the matter loudly and without particular charity. A woman of seven-and-twenty, she declared, accepted such a proposal out of desperation and nothing else. Elizabeth understood her mother's meaning well enough, even if she did not share her manner of expressing it. Charlotte was practical. Charlotte had always been practical. Elizabeth could not fault her for it, even if she wished the circumstances had been different.

Mr. Collins departed Longbourn that same afternoon in high spirits, announcing the necessity of obtaining a licence in order to hasten the marriage with the greatest possible speed. The house was considerably quieter without him, which everyone agreed was an improvement.

None of these events surprised Elizabeth as much as they perhaps ought to have. She had too much else occupying her mind.

Mr. Darcy and Georgiana had not come to Longbourn. They had not written. They had not sent word of any kind. Mr. Bingley had called twice since the last time Elizabeth had seen Darcy, but on both occasions he had come alone. When Elizabeth enquired after the Darcys, he offered only that they were at Netherfield and that he would pass along her regards. He said it pleasantly and without apparent discomfort, which suggested either that

he knew nothing or that he had been asked to say nothing. Elizabeth could not determine which.

Every morning that the weather permitted, she walked to Oakham Mount hoping to see Mr. Darcy. She was thoroughly disappointed each time.

Lydia brought news of Wickham's arrest within the week. He had been removed to a debtor's prison, according to Mr. Denny. Lydia found this enormously diverting. Elizabeth found it interesting for entirely different reasons. She could not prove a connection between Wickham's arrest and the expression she had seen upon Darcy's face that morning in the high street, but she could not dismiss the notion either. The two men had known one another. That much had been plain. And now Wickham was gone and Darcy had withdrawn. Elizabeth had no information, too many questions, and no one she could ask without revealing more than she wished to.

It troubled her more than she cared to admit.

A day after Mr. Collins's departure, an invitation arrived for a ball at Lucas Lodge to celebrate Charlotte's engagement. Elizabeth looked forward to it for reasons rather different from those of the rest of the household. The Netherfield party would be there. They would have to be. It was the sort of occasion that did not permit absence without remark.

On the evening of the ball, she dressed with more care than usual and told herself it was out of respect for Charlotte.

When they arrived, she spent the first half hour watching the door while paying only half attention to Charlotte, who came to speak to her again of her happiness and approaching marriage.

Mr. Bingley arrived with his sisters and Mr. Hurst soon enough. Elizabeth looked past them as they entered, and past the next group after them, before it became apparent that no one else was coming from Netherfield.

Later, when Bingley came to claim Jane for a set and they were standing together at the edge of the floor, Elizabeth approached him and asked the question she had been asking herself all week.

"Mr. Bingley." She kept her voice pleasant. "I had hoped to see Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy this evening."

Bingley's smile did not falter, but something behind it shifted.

"He had business to attend to this evening."

It was all he offered.

"And Miss Darcy?"

After a brief pause, which Elizabeth suspected was spent considering the safest answer, he replied that, "She was not feeling quite herself. I believe she remained at Netherfield for that reason."

Elizabeth looked at him for a moment.

He did not meet her gaze.

She thanked him and moved away.

So that was that.

It was not business. It was not illness. For whatever reason, and she had none, could account for none, could discover no explanation that satisfied her, Mr. Darcy and Georgiana were withdrawing from her.

Deliberately and without explanation.

She was still standing with that thought when Caroline Bingley approached her. The smile upon her face sent an uncomfortable sensation down Elizabeth's spine.

"Miss Eliza." Her voice was warm. "You appear to have been expecting someone this evening."

"I had hoped to see Miss Darcy," Elizabeth replied.

The words were pleasant enough, though they emerged more slowly than usual, her surprise at her own disappointment still lingering.

"Yes." Miss Bingley tilted her head, her expression one of exaggerated sympathy. "I imagine you did. It is always disappointing when one discovers that an acquaintance has served its purpose."

Served its purpose?

Caroline Bingley's sentence made no sense to Elizabeth

As if reading her thought, Caroline rubbed her gloved hands lightly together. "There is one thing I will say for Mr. Darcy. When he sets out to study something, he does not do it by halves."

Elizabeth frowned.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your hearing, Miss Eliza." Miss Bingley spoke quietly. Almost kindly. It was far worse than cruelty. "He noticed it at the Meryton assembly. He has been observing it ever since. You were rather useful to him, for his sister's sake, you understand. Not for your own. Apparently the Darcys have experienced hearing difficulties in the past, and Mr. Darcy considered you a specimen worth studying for Georgiana's benefit. I thought you ought to know, since he has apparently decided the study is complete."

The words hung in the air, clashing violently with the lively strains of the orchestra echoing through the crowded ballroom.

Elizabeth's fingers froze against the silk of her gown.

The room, bright with candlelight, music, and conversation, suddenly felt oppressively close.

A cold dread settled in her stomach.

She did not blink. She could not.

Her eyes remained fixed upon Miss Bingley's face, searching for some indication of a jest.

There was none.

"How," Elizabeth said very quietly, "do you know that?"

Her voice was scarcely above a whisper. She forced herself to remain standing though her legs no longer felt entirely reliable.

Miss Bingley's smile widened fractionally. "Does it matter?"

It mattered enormously. And they both knew there was only one person who could have told her.

Elizabeth held Miss Bingley's gaze for one long moment. Seeing that the woman was plainly enjoying her shock and had no intention of leaving, Elizabeth turned away and walked off.

She did not look back.

But her hands, folded neatly before her as she crossed the room, were not entirely steady.

She did not stop until she reached the narrow corridor leading towards the cloakroom.

There she pressed her back against the wall, closed her eyes, and stood perfectly still while the music continued beyond the ballroom doors, bright and relentless and entirely indifferent to what had just occurred.

He had known from the beginning.

The thought had been waiting for her the moment she stepped away.

Darcy had known at the assembly. He had known at Lucas Lodge. He had known on Oakham Mount every time she positioned herself upon her better side and believed herself undetected.

Every careful question. Every deliberate kindness. Every moment she had allowed herself to believe that his attention meant something.

All of it was observation. She was being catalogued. Studied.

For his sister.

It was not his knowing that hurt her most. It was the discovery that she had entirely mistaken his motives. She had believed his attentions arose from esteem. Instead, she had been nothing more than an object of observation. Why had he not acted with greater openness? Why had he spoken of her hearing to Miss Bingley at all, knowing how carefully she guarded it and how quickly the world attached cruel judgements to any perceived imperfection? Why he had chosen such a course, she could not comprehend. Why he had allowed her confidence to grow under such circumstances, she understood still less.

When she opened her eyes, tears were already running down her cheeks.

The corridor remained empty. The music played on.

Elizabeth spent several minutes crying before she managed to compose herself. She straightened her spine, smoothed her gloves, and returned to the ballroom.

She took part in none of the evening's amusements and was obliged to feign smiles whenever anyone approached her.

Only one thought remained with her throughout the remainder of the evening.

How foolish she had been to trust Mr. Darcy. How foolish she had been to admire him.

SIXTEEN

22nd November 1811

Oakham Mount

Darcy

Time passed in a blur. Despite his conversations with Georgiana and Fitzwilliam, it took Darcy eight days after encountering Elizabeth and Wickham together in Meryton to relinquish the belief that she had somehow been complicit. The conviction weakened by degrees, each crack widened by Fitzwilliam's steady reasoning and Georgiana's quiet certainty, until one morning he awoke and found himself unable to sustain it any longer.

What remained was considerably less comfortable than anger. It was the need for an explanation.

He had not attended the ball at Lucas Lodge. He had no wish to see Elizabeth, and he had insisted that Georgiana remain at Netherfield as well. His sister had agreed, though not without a reluctance she made little effort to conceal.

It was Bingley who finally moved him.

Returning from the engagement ball, he found Darcy in the small parlour that had become his preferred refuge since Wickham's arrest — aside from his bedchamber and, on occasion, the library. There was an unusual firmness in Bingley's expression that immediately drew Darcy's attention.

"I wish you would speak to Miss Elizabeth." He waited until Darcy looked up before continuing. "I am weary of making excuses for you. Whatever has passed between the two of you, it ought to be addressed. From where I stand, the injury appears entirely on one side."

Darcy said nothing.

Bingley had noticed his withdrawal from Longbourn and Miss Elizabeth almost immediately and had questioned him more than once. When Darcy informed him it was a private matter, Bingley had respected

the boundary, as was his nature. He was not a man inclined to force confidences. That he spoke so plainly now told Darcy that the matter had begun to trouble him deeply.

"She enquires after you and Georgiana every time I visit Longbourn." Bingley held his gaze. "Every single time. Tonight I was obliged to invent another explanation, and I found myself ashamed of it. Miss Elizabeth deserves better than that."

Darcy looked away.

"I do not ask for particulars," Bingley continued more quietly. "But if you mean to end the acquaintance, then end it. If you do not, then speak to her. What you are doing now is unfair."

Darcy thanked him and offered nothing further on the subject.

Yet that night the conversation remained with him.

He lay awake for hours turning it over in his mind and arrived, slowly and with little satisfaction, at the conclusion that Elizabeth deserved the benefit of the doubt. If she was innocent of any design, if there existed an explanation he had not considered, then he owed her the opportunity to provide it.

He rode out the following morning before the household was awake, hoping to find her upon her usual route.

Oakham Mount was empty.

He returned to Netherfield no easier in mind than when he had left it. Having finally resolved what he ought to do, he had found himself unable to do it. Calling at Longbourn was out of the question. To present himself there now, after a week of deliberate avoidance, would invite questions he was in no position to answer. Nor was he eager to place himself before Mr. Bennet whose good opinion he had come to value.

Yet doubt alone could not undo what he knew of George Wickham.

He needed an explanation. Until he had one, Georgiana's safety had to come first.

The following morning he rose earlier still and rode out again, hoping fortune might prove more accommodating.

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Elizabeth

Elizabeth had not even intended to go to Oakham Mount that morning until sleep eluded her all night.

Two days of turning Caroline Bingley's words over in her mind had made the walls of Longbourn feel considerably closer than usual. Jane had noticed despite Elizabeth's best efforts to appear normal, but she had managed to convince her that her nerves were merely unsettled and that nothing was amiss. It was the only explanation she could offer. How foolish would it sound to admit that she had been vain enough to believe Mr. Darcy regarded her? That she had imagined his placing Georgiana in her company was because he thought her a suitable friend and guide rather than an object of study because of her hearing?

That morning, with sleep still refusing to come and her thoughts no quieter than they had been the night before, she decided to walk. Walking was what she did when she needed to think, and she needed very badly to think.

Elizabeth had no expectation of seeing Mr. Darcy. For the ten days before Miss Bingley's remarks at Lucas Lodge, she had walked Oakham Mount daily and been disappointed each time not to find him there. It had become obvious that he had abandoned the path entirely.

So her decision to walk that morning had nothing to do with expecting to see him and everything to do with escaping herself.

She continued until she nearly reached the summit. Elizabeth was so occupied with her thoughts that she did not notice him until she saw the horse. It was tied beside the lower path, and he was seated upon the fallen log at the crest of the rise with his back to her, looking out across the valley.

The sight of him, simply sitting there as though he had every right to occupy the one place she had come to think of as entirely her own, did something unpleasant to her chest.

The thought irritated her sufficiently that she abandoned it at once.

Elizabeth's first instinct was to turn back and walk away. Her second was to remain where she was and demand an explanation, for she had rather a great deal she wished to say.

The second prevailed.

She continued up the path and must have stepped upon a twig, for he turned at the sound. Whatever he had been expecting, her expression was apparently not it, because something in his face shifted immediately towards caution.

Good, she thought.

"Miss Elizabeth." He inclined his head. His voice was careful.

She disliked it immediately.

She did not return the courtesy. "Mr. Darcy."

She stopped a few feet from him and looked at him directly. He looked tired. Had she encountered him a few days earlier, she might have found herself concerned by the observation.

Now she merely waited.

"I have been hoping to speak with you." He rose to his feet.

Elizabeth laughed at once. Not because anything amused her.

"I find that rather difficult to believe, sir."

Something crossed his face. Not offence. It was nearer surprise, as though he had not expected resistance from her.

"I wonder, Mr. Darcy, whether this conversation concerns my hearing." She had not intended to say it so directly. Yet it was the wound she had been carrying for two days, and the words escaped before she could stop them.

For the first time since she had known him, Elizabeth saw him look genuinely stricken. Not embarrassed. Not defensive.

Stricken.

For the briefest moment she found herself wondering whether she had misunderstood something after all.

Then she remembered the ballroom at Lucas Lodge.

She remembered Caroline Bingley's smile.

The hurt returned in full.

"No, Mr. Darcy," she said, shaking her head. "You do not get to look surprised."

He looked away as though unable to meet her eyes.

"Miss Bingley mocked me with it at the ball. She told me that you had known about my hearing from the night of the Meryton assembly. That you had been observing it deliberately. That your interest in me, your calls at Longbourn, your acquaintance with me, all of it, was for the sake of your sister." She kept her voice even. It cost her something. "Is that true?"

Darcy opened his mouth to speak, but Elizabeth raised a hand.

"Do not tell me it is complicated, sir. Do not manage this the way you manage everything else. I am asking you a direct question, and I would like a direct answer."

"It began that way," he said slowly.

The words landed exactly as she had known they would.

They still took her breath away.

"It began that way," she repeated. "You saw something in me that reminded you of your mother. You decided I would be useful to Georgiana. And so you sought my acquaintance, asked your sister to befriend me, called at Longbourn, walked with me in the garden, sat with me on this mount..." Her voice remained steady. She was proud of that. "And none of it was what I believed it to be?"

"That is not—"

"You confirmed it just now."

She did not raise her voice.

She did not need to.

"You said it began that way. Which means that for some portion of the time I have known you, I was being studied. Observed. Used." She looked at him. "I have spent my entire life ensuring that no one could see what I did not wish them to see. I have been careful and thorough, and never once careless. Yet you saw it in a single evening and said nothing. You watched me for weeks and said nothing. And I had no idea." Her voice tightened despite herself. "That is not a small thing, Mr. Darcy."

"No," he said quietly. "It is not."

"You knew my secret." She looked out over the valley. "You knew the one thing I have never told anyone. The thing I have spent years concealing. And you used it."

"I did not use—"

"What would you call it, sir?"

Darcy was silent.

"I should very much like to know," Elizabeth continued, turning back to him, "what you would call seeking out a woman's acquaintance because of a condition she has worked her entire life to hide, without telling her that you know, without asking her permission, and without once considering what it might mean to her to discover that the attention she had been..." She stopped.

She was not going to finish that sentence.

"What would you call that?"

Darcy looked at her with an expression she could not read.

"I would call it wrong," he said quietly. "I would call it a failure of honesty which I cannot excuse. I would call it my mistake."

Elizabeth held his gaze.

"That is not enough," she said. "For a man whose mother endured the same thing, I would have expected greater kindness. And for a man I trusted, however foolishly, I would have expected him to keep my confidence rather than repeat it to Miss Bingley. She has never liked me, and now you have handed her a weapon."

The colour drained from Darcy's face.

Elizabeth did not wait for a reply.

She turned and started down the path.

"Miss Elizabeth."

She stopped. She did not turn around.

"It became something else."

The strain in his voice caught her despite herself.

"I need you to know that. Whatever it began as, it became something else entirely. I was going to tell you. I had decided to tell you. Then I saw you with Wickham in Meryton and believed you were befriending the man who had spent years tormenting my family. The man who nearly ruined Georgiana." He paused for a while. "I withdrew because I thought you were connected to him. I came here this morning intending to ask for an explanation. I know now that I was wrong. And I know I have handled this badly from beginning to end."

Elizabeth closed her eyes.

"You thought I was friends with him?" The question escaped before she could stop it.

"I did."

She laughed again.

It sounded nothing like amusement.

"So while I was wondering what I had done to offend you, you were deciding whether I was capable of assisting a villain."

The silence behind her was answer enough.

Something inside her hurt more at that than she cared to admit. "I see."

"It became something else," he repeated quietly. "That much is true, whatever else you choose to believe."

Elizabeth stood for a long moment with her back to him, the valley spread before her and the cold morning air pressing against her cheeks.

Then she continued down the path without looking back.

She walked all the way to Longbourn at a pace that had nothing to do with the cold. She did not cry. She did not stop. She told herself very firmly

that it did not matter what it had become.

She was not entirely certain she believed it.

SEVENTEEN

24th November 1811

Longbourn

Elizabeth

There was only one church in Meryton. A small Church of England parish that served both the village and several of the surrounding communities. The Bennets attended it with their neighbours, as they always had. Since their arrival, the Netherfield party had done the same on occasion.

Elizabeth hoped she would not encounter Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst that morning, for obvious reasons. If Caroline Bingley knew about her hearing problem, she had almost certainly told her sister. Or perhaps Darcy had told them both. Elizabeth doubted it. From the few occasions they had all been together and her single visit to Netherfield, it had been plain enough that Caroline Bingley admired Mr. Darcy. She placed herself beside him whenever possible, attempted to complete his thoughts, and smiled at him with a transparency that would have been almost pitiable had it not been so deliberate. It seemed far more likely that something had passed between them in confidence than Mr. Darcy telling both of them. Or so Elizabeth had been telling herself for the past four days, because the alternative was that Miss Bingley had overheard something she ought not to have heard, and that possibility raised questions Elizabeth was not yet prepared to examine.

Much to her relief, none of the Netherfield party attended church that morning.

On the walk home, Elizabeth found herself dwelling upon an entirely different disappointment.

She missed Georgiana. The realization surprised her.

As angry as she remained with Darcy, she could not persuade herself that Georgiana had been complicit in any of it. Miss Bingley had said Darcy

acted for his sister's sake. Not with her. And Darcy himself had admitted as much upon Oakham Mount.

More than that, Elizabeth found herself returning repeatedly to something he had said during those final moments before she walked away.

...Nearly ruined Georgiana.

The phrase had lingered.

He had spoken of Wickham as a man who had tormented his family. A man who had nearly ruined his sister.

Elizabeth knew too little of Wickham to understand what that meant. Lydia, who had been most acquainted with him before his arrest, could offer nothing beyond assurances that he had been handsome and charming and apparently not the man anyone had believed him to be.

What had he done to the Darcys?

More importantly, what had happened to Georgiana?

Darcy's choice of words suggested something so serious that Elizabeth could not bring herself to imagine what Georgiana might have endured.

Elizabeth went about the remainder of her day, though not without turning those questions over in her mind more times than she cared to admit.

That afternoon she sat in the smaller drawing room at the back of the house, only half observing Lydia and Kitty's game of cards, when Hill entered and announced a visitor.

Elizabeth had not heard the arrival of a carriage.

She looked up in surprise when Hill announced Miss Darcy.

A few moments later Georgiana was shown into the room. Mrs. Annesley accompanied her and exchanged greetings with the ladies before accepting Mrs. Bennet's invitation to join her and Jane in the larger drawing room.

Georgiana remained where she was.

There was something in her expression that immediately caught Elizabeth's attention.

She rose at once.

"Miss Darcy."

"Miss Bennet." She bowed her head briefly.

For a moment they simply looked at one another.

Then Georgiana offered a small smile that failed to conceal her nervousness, and Elizabeth felt something tighten unexpectedly in her

chest.

Whatever had passed between herself and Darcy, Georgiana had played no part in it.

"Please sit down."

Georgiana thanked her and accepted the nearest chair. Elizabeth soon call for tea which she poured for them both. Georgiana accepted hers politely and then appeared to forget it altogether.

The silence that followed was not entirely comfortable.

Lydia looked from Elizabeth to Georgiana. Kitty did the same.

After several moments Lydia gathered the cards together. "Come along, Kitty. We can finish this elsewhere."

To Elizabeth's surprise, Kitty rose without argument. The door closed behind them.

Elizabeth waited, rubbing her thumb against the warm porcelain of her teacup and resolving not to begin the conversation herself. She had no idea where such a conversation ought to start. Nor did she know precisely why Georgiana had come, though the slight tremor in her hands and the uncertainty in her expression suggested she was struggling to find the courage for whatever had brought her to Longbourn.

Georgiana stared into her tea for several moments before finally breaking the silence.

"Are you angry with me?"

The question caught Elizabeth entirely off guard.

"What?"

Georgiana looked up. "Are you angry with me?"

"No." The answer came immediately.

Relief softened Georgiana's features.

"No," Elizabeth repeated more gently. "Never with you."

Georgiana lowered her eyes. "I am glad."

Elizabeth had not realised until that moment how much the girl had feared the answer.

Now she knew.

She waited for Georgiana to continue, but when the silence stretched on, she took pity on her. Whatever had brought her to Longbourn, it was clearly costing her a great deal of courage.

Elizabeth set down her cup. "You have come to speak about your brother?"

A faint flush rose in Georgiana's cheeks. "Yes."

Elizabeth waited.

"He does not know I am here." That admission appeared to cost her something. "If he knew, he would tell me this was not my place."

"And yet you came?"

Georgiana nodded. "Because I do not think you know everything."

Elizabeth's attention sharpened immediately.

Georgiana clasped her hands together.

"He has not been himself for two days now. I pressed him and he told me everything that happened on Oakham Mount." Georgiana fiddled with her hands. "I know Fitzwilliam was wrong not to tell you. He knows it too. But there is a reason he noticed."

Elizabeth looked away.

She was certain she already knew the reason.

His mother had been deaf. Georgiana feared she might one day be the same.

Miss Bingley had said as much. What did that change?

Did it excuse observing her without her knowledge? Did it excuse sharing her secret with Caroline Bingley? Did it excuse allowing her to mistake his interest for admiration?

Elizabeth did not think so.

For several moments Georgiana stared at her hand, as if to gather courage.

Then she said quietly, "Miss Elizabeth, my brother mentioned that he told you something about Wickham, but I don't think he said everything."

The name immediately brought her last conversation with Darcy on Oakham Mount to mind. Elizabeth shifted in her chair as Georgiana drew breath to continue.

Georgiana lowered her gaze. "Wickham grew up with us in Derbyshire. Growing up, I did not even know he was not my brother. My father treated him exactly as he treated Fitzwilliam." She paused and sighed. "My mother died when I was four, and I cannot remember her hearing very much, although Fitzwilliam told me she was not born that way. Her hearing had deteriorated over the years. So all I had were my father, Fitzwilliam, and Wickham."

Elizabeth moved to the edge of her chair. So Wickham had grown up with the Darcys? How then had the meeting she witnessed between Darcy

and Wickham become so hostile? What could have happened?

"When my father died, he left a living to Wickham in his will. Wickham rejected it, and Fitzwilliam paid him its equivalent in money, which he squandered. He returned two years later demanding the living after all. My brother refused because the living, which was a parsonage, had already been given to another." Her eyes flashed briefly as though she remembered something unpleasant. "It was after this that Wickham swore himself an enemy of Fitzwilliam."

So that was it? Had two men who had once been raised almost as brothers become enemies over money alone?

Elizabeth had not finished the thought before Georgiana resumed speaking.

"I did not know any of this until last summer, when Fitzwilliam told me everything." Georgiana looked away, and Elizabeth thought she heard her voice falter. "Wickham had made certain I understood he was not my brother from the time I was thirteen. I did not know any better. Over the years, he convinced me that Fitzwilliam was controlling, that he did not wish me to have any independence after becoming my guardian upon Papa's death."

Elizabeth froze in her chair.

"It took nearly two years for him to make me believe it entirely, and soon I considered myself in love with him. I was fifteen years old. He was charming and attentive and very skilled at making people believe whatever he wished them to believe." A sad smile touched her lips. "Including me."

She picked up her cup of lukewarm tea, her hand tightening around the handle.

"He persuaded me to agree to an elopement." She said it simply, without embellishment, though saying it clearly cost her a great deal.

Elizabeth stared. She did not even know how to react.

"My brother arrived in Ramsgate before it could happen. Wickham fled," Georgiana continued. "But before he left, he had spent months convincing me of something. He told me I would lose my hearing one day. Like my mother."

Elizabeth felt her breath catch.

"He said it was inevitable. He said it was a curse upon the women of our family. He said no gentleman would willingly choose a wife who might

become deaf and burdensome." Her voice remained steady, though only just. "Then he offered himself as the exception."

The room seemed suddenly quieter.

"He wanted me frightened enough to depend upon him."

"And you believed him."

It was not a question. It was an absent-minded remark that escaped Elizabeth before she realised she had spoken.

"Entirely." Georgiana nodded.

Elizabeth released a heavy sigh.

For the first time, she understood. Not everything. But enough.

She thought of every careful question Darcy had asked. Every observation. Every occasion on which he had positioned himself without drawing attention to it.

"Mr. Darcy was trying to help you from the damage Mr. Wickham caused."

"Yes." Georgiana's answer came without hesitation. "For nearly a year."

Georgiana lowered her eyes again. It was not shame. It was more akin to embarrassment on her brother's behalf.

"He tried everything. Logic. Reassurance. Examples from books. Examples from our mother's life. Nothing worked because fear is not reasonable." A faint smile appeared. "Then he met you."

Elizabeth looked away.

"He saw someone living the future I feared." Georgiana's voice softened. "Someone intelligent and respected and entirely herself. Someone who had built a life without shame or apology."

The words landed with unexpected force.

"You helped me, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth felt something inside her soften.

"You probably do not know that you did. But you did," Georgiana said quietly.

Silence settled between them.

At last Georgiana continued.

"I know he was wrong. I know Fitzwilliam should have told you the truth from the beginning. I know he hurt you." She hesitated briefly. "But I also know he never meant to. He had promised me that he would tell you just days before he saw you with Wickham."

Elizabeth looked at her. The sincerity of it all unsettled her more than she could account for.

For a long time, both ladies sat in silence.

Then Georgiana drew a breath.

"I am not asking you to forgive him. I only hoped..." She stopped and tried again. "I hoped you would hear everything before deciding."

Elizabeth shifted back in her chair. Her heart was doing something she had not given it permission to do.

The afternoon light had begun to fade beyond the windows.

She thought of everything. Of Wickham. Of Darcy's parents. Of a frightened girl convinced she would one day become unlovable. Of a brother who had spent a year trying to undo a wound someone else had inflicted.

And of Darcy, who had stood upon Oakham Mount and admitted he had been wrong.

Against her will, the anger she had been holding onto diminished considerably.

One question still lingered, however.

How did Miss Bingley know?

She thought it unfair to ask Georgiana. Not because she believed she would know, Elizabeth was not certain she did, but because she did not think it was her question to answer.

Georgiana had come against her brother's wishes to apologise on his behalf. To press her further would be stretching that kindness unnecessarily.

"Yes," Elizabeth said at last. "If he wishes to explain himself, I will listen."

The relief that crossed Georgiana's face was immediate. It was not triumph, but relief clear enough to read upon her countenance. As though she too had been carrying a burden these past days that had now eased.

They spoke briefly of other things after that. Elizabeth told her that she had met Wickham for the first time on the very day of the encounter Darcy had described. Georgiana even finished the tea she had forgotten she was holding.

After a while Mrs. Annesley came to check on the ladies and announced it was time to leave. Georgiana rose and hugged Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth?" she said as they drew apart.

"Yes?"

A faint smile touched her lips.

"I have missed you."

The simple honesty of it struck Elizabeth harder than anything else that afternoon.

She squeezed Georgiana's hand. "And I have missed you too."

Georgiana smiled properly then.

Elizabeth walked her guests to the carriage that conveyed them and stood watching until it disappeared beyond the Longbourn lane.

Only then did she turn back towards the house.

She had spent four days convincing herself that she understood exactly what Mr. Darcy had done and exactly how she ought to feel about it.

For the first time since Lucas Lodge, she was no longer certain of either.

EIGHTEEN

27th November 1811

Longbourn

Elizabeth

For the next two days, Elizabeth spent each morning at Oakham Mount.

She had arrived at the decision on the night of Georgiana's visit. Upon reflection, she could not deny that she had left Darcy very little opportunity to speak for himself. Nor was it difficult to suppose that he might find calling at Longbourn awkward after their last exchange. If he did not know how to come to her, she would meet him halfway. It was a small concession, and she made it without ceremony, merely resolving as she put out her candle that the mount would serve the purpose well enough.

He was not there on the first morning.

She was not any better satisfied on the second. She waited far into the morning, longer than was sensible, before finally walking back down the path.

On the Wednesday morning she went again. She waited as long as the cold permitted before starting down and turning toward home.

She came in from her walk later than usual barely paying attention to anything, and therefore did not notice the extra horse tied at the stable.

She pushed open the door to the drawing room, hoping to find some warmth, and stopped.

Mr Darcy was sitting across from her father in the chair beside the fire. He rose the moment she entered, looked at her, inclined his head, and settled back into conversation with her father as though her arrival were the most natural thing in the world.

Mr Bennet looked up at his daughter with a gleam of satisfaction across his countenance.

"Lizzy," he said. "Mr Darcy came very early and has been keeping me excellent company this past hour and a half. I have nearly forgiven him for

not taking me up on the chess."

"I believe the offer remains open," Darcy said, his eyes fixed on Elizabeth.

Elizabeth stood rooted to the spot where she had stopped, not knowing quite what to do or feel. She had gone out hoping to encounter him, and here he was. His gaze did not leave her, as though he feared she might disappear if he looked away for even a moment.

Mr Bennet rose with unhurried ease. "Lizzy, Mr Darcy has sought my permission to speak with you on a matter of some importance. I shall leave you to it." He collected his book from the side table. "I shall leave the door open in the interest of propriety and remain within earshot in the interest of your mother's peace of mind." He paused at the door. "Lizzy, do try not to frighten the man off entirely. He is the finest conversationalist I have encountered in some years and I should like to keep him."

He was gone before Elizabeth could form a reply.

She stood where she was for a moment. Then she resumed walking, took the chair her father had vacated, folded her hands in her lap and looked at Darcy.

He remained seated. He looked, she thought, like a man who had prepared something and was now uncertain whether any of it was adequate.

"Miss Elizabeth." He looked directly at her. "How do you do?"

"Considerably better, I thank you," she said.

"Georgiana told me of her visit to you." His eyes brightened when Elizabeth's expression shifted in alarm at the notion that Georgiana had reported the visit to her brother. "She cannot dissemble when questioned directly. When I enquired of Mrs Annesley in her presence where they had gone so long with the carriage, she confessed the whole of it."

"You will forgive her, sir," Elizabeth said. "She was only caring for her brother and her friend."

He inclined his head in agreement, though his gaze fell briefly to the floor.

"I owe you a great deal more than I said on the mount," he said after a moment.

"You do," she agreed.

He leaned forward slightly, his elbows resting on his knees, and looked at her in the direct manner she had come to understand was simply how he attended to things he considered important.

"I noticed your hearing at the Meryton assembly," he said. "You read my lips from across the room and repeated my words back to me, and I recognised it immediately because my mother managed in precisely the same manner in her last years. Lady Anne lost her hearing gradually, over the course of my childhood. By the time Georgiana was born it was gone entirely." He paused. "I watched my mother manage it for years. The positioning, the attention, the particular care with which she read a room before she entered it. She did it with such composure that most people never knew until in her last years. I knew because I was her son and I had learned to watch her."

Elizabeth followed him but said nothing.

"When I saw you do the same," he continued, "I could not look away. Not from curiosity, but because it was familiar. In a way I had not expected and did not know how to account for." He met her gaze. "And then there was Georgiana."

He told her everything Georgiana had told her, though in considerably greater detail.

Ramsgate. Wickham. Mrs Younge. A letter from a ship's captain of Darcy's acquaintance — a man Wickham had approached about passage to Gretna Green — who, recognising Georgiana's name and suspecting something was amiss, had written to Darcy at once. The letter that had sent him racing from London. His sister's face when he arrived. The words Wickham had planted in her mind that a year of Darcy's best efforts had failed to dislodge.

He told her of the year that followed. The silence. The fear that Georgiana was retreating somewhere he could not reach her. And the gradual, desperate understanding that what she required was not reassurance but proof. Living proof. Proof that the future Wickham had described was not the only future available to her.

He told her of the promise made beside a sickbed to his mother. The words shaped with great care because there had been no other way left between them. And how he had felt he was failing to keep the promise.

"And then I came to Hertfordshire," he said, "and I met you. And you were everything I had been looking for and considerably more than I had any right to expect." He looked at her steadily. "I should have told you from the beginning. I know that. I told myself there would be a right moment, then that I needed to be certain first, then that I would tell you soon, and the

time passed and I never did." He stopped for a while. "Just as I had finally resolved to do so was when I saw you with Wickham. Georgiana has told me she confided in you the full truth of that matter."

"She did," Elizabeth said.

"I will not excuse what followed," he said. "There is no excuse. I was wrong and I was proud and I permitted my prejudice against Wickham to accuse you of something of which you were entirely innocent."

"I did not know the man at all," Elizabeth said. "Beyond that single encounter in the street."

Darcy swallowed. "Georgiana told me as much. And you had every right to say what you said on the mount."

Elizabeth looked at the fire for a moment.

"You said it became something else," she said at last. "On the mount, you said your reason became something else."

"Yes."

"Tell me what you meant."

He did not move, yet the air between them altered at once. When he spoke, his voice was quieter than it had been.

"I meant that somewhere between Lucas Lodge and Oakham Mount and your father's garden, I ceased thinking about Georgiana entirely." His gaze settled directly on her eyes. "I thought about you. What you said and what you did not say, and the way you laughed when you were not managing it, and the particular look you gave me when I was being ridiculous, which was rather more often than I would care to admit."

Something shifted in his expression.

"I meant that I looked forward to seeing you in a way that had nothing to do with my sister and everything to do with the fact that you are the most remarkable person I have ever known, and I could not imagine not knowing you." His eyes fell for a moment before returning to hers. "That is what I meant."

The drawing room was very quiet. The fire shifted in the grate.

Elizabeth looked at him for a long moment. She thought of the occasion on which he had defended her without being asked. Every conversation. Every morning on the mount.

She thought of Georgiana two days ago, steady and honest and entirely herself, asking only that Elizabeth hear him out.

She had heard him out. But one thing remained.

"Why did you tell Miss Bingley of my condition?" she asked.

Darcy shook his head before she had finished the sentence. "I never told Miss Bingley anything of the sort. I have taxed her with it, and she denies having had any such conversation with you."

Elizabeth's mouth fell open slightly.

"I know it to be a falsehood," he continued, "because Miss Bingley will do whatever she considers necessary to injure me with any lady she perceives as a rival. I have been aware for some time that she has fancied herself a candidate for my regard, but I did not take her for one so desperate as this."

He looked away, as if unable to meet her eyes.

"As to how she came to know the particulars — I have given it considerable thought since you told me what she said, and I can arrive at only one conclusion. She must have overheard my conversation with my cousin Fitzwilliam. He was urging me, in my private parlour, to reconsider my ill-founded opinion of you, and I told him everything of how we had met. Miss Bingley has a habit of listening at doors and making use of what she discovers. It is the only way she could have obtained such precise intelligence."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. The explanation was not without merit. She herself read lips, and Kitty had, on more occasions than Elizabeth cared to remember, contrived to overhear conversations she was never meant to hear, including one between their mother and Mr Collins. Though eavesdropping was a habit Elizabeth did not approve of, it was hardly a rare failing. It could indeed account for Miss Bingley's knowledge without Darcy having revealed anything to her.

"You should have told me," She said.

"I know."

"From the beginning. You should have told me."

"Yes. And I am more sorry than I can adequately express for every wrong I have done you."

"It would have changed things considerably." She looked at her hands. "To know that someone saw it and was not — that it did not—" She stopped. She was not accustomed to talking about her hearing difficulty rather than managing it. "I was not born like this, sir. When I was five, after an afternoon spent wading with Jane, I developed a severe infection in my right ear. My father engaged what physicians he could, but the hearing on

my right diminished slowly and never recovered. My parents did not wish me to feel different from my sisters, particularly as only the one side was affected. My father encouraged me to manage with what remained. It served me well enough in most circumstances, but quiet voices and whispers, particularly to my right, became inaudible to me."

Darcy listened without speaking. His expression held no pity that she could object to. Only attention.

"I taught myself to watch mouths and to repeat the words I saw being spoken. I soon realised that I possessed a natural aptitude for it. With sufficient practice over the years, I have very nearly perfected the art." She smiled briefly at the memory of certain early failures. "Mr Darcy, I have spent a very long time ensuring that no one discovered it. People can be remarkably uncharitable towards any perceived deficiency. And you saw it from the very first evening and yet you never once made me feel—" She stopped again.

"I hope I never made you feel less," he said quietly.

"You did not," she said. "That is rather the point."

He looked at her.

"You were very careful about it," she said. "You never enquired directly. You never made it a subject for remark. You simply adjusted. Without drawing attention to it. Without making me feel as though I owed you any explanation." She looked up at him. "Do you know how uncommon that is?"

"I had a very good teacher," he said.

Elizabeth's thoughts turned to Lady Anne Darcy. To a woman who had managed her world with precision and patience and that particular quality of fortitude which has no name for it. She thought of how long Darcy, as a boy, must have watched his mother and learned — without knowing he was learning — everything that had mattered most.

Elizabeth sat straighter and finally allowed herself a smile. "I am still displeased with you," she said.

"I know."

"I may remain so for some time yet."

"I expected nothing less."

The corner of her mouth moved. She did not entirely mean it to.

"Mr Darcy." She looked at him directly, understanding that they had said almost everything there was to say. "If you intend to court me — and I

believe that is what this visit amounts to — then you will conduct yourself with complete honesty. No more watching without speaking. No more managing at a distance. If you observe something, or know something, or think something, you will say it."

"Yes," he said, without hesitation, his countenance brightening as he understood that she had, in her own fashion, swept the matter aside.

"And you will thank Georgiana for saving you in this matter. If she had not come to me, I am not certain you would have found the occasion to do so yourself."

"I have already thanked her," a faint smile touched Darcy's lips. "And I daresay I shall thank her again."

"She ought not to have been obliged to come to me herself," Elizabeth said. "That was your responsibility."

"It was," he agreed. "She is considerably braver than I am."

"She is," Elizabeth said. "You ought to tell her so."

Something shifted in his expression — something warm and unguarded that she had glimpsed only in passing before now, and which suited him, she thought, very well indeed.

"Miss Elizabeth." He looked at her steadily. "I am asking your permission to call at Longbourn. Regularly. With honest intentions and no further concealment of anything whatsoever."

Elizabeth considered this for a moment.

"You may call at Longbourn," she said. "Though I ought to warn you that my mother will draw her own conclusions within the day and communicate them to the neighbourhood before the week is out."

"I find I have no objection to that."

She looked at him. He looked back at her with that same steady, unguarded attention, and for once she did not feel the need to adjust or pretend she had not noticed.

She let him look.

"You may also," she said, "come to Oakham Mount. Should you happen to be riding that way."

"I happen to ride that way most mornings," he said.

"I know," Elizabeth rose. "I had observed that you seemed to have forgotten the path of late."

Darcy rose as well. For a moment neither spoke. The fire burned quietly in the room, whilst beyond the open door came the faint sounds of

the household going about its business.

"Then all is forgiven, Mr Darcy," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth."

Mr Bennet was informed shortly thereafter that the conversation had concluded, and with evident satisfaction invited Mr Darcy to his study for the long-delayed game of chess, an invitation which was accepted without hesitation. Elizabeth left the gentlemen to it and went in search of Jane.

She was smiling before she reached the stairs, and she could not remember when last the world had seemed so much in its proper place.

EPILOGUE

Summer 1812

Pemberly

From the day he apologised and throughout the greater part of December 1811, Mr Darcy called at Longbourn no fewer than three times a week. He sometimes came in company with Bingley, who required very little encouragement to call at Longbourn. More often Darcy brought Georgiana, whose friendship with Elizabeth resumed as though it had never been interrupted, which, in all the ways that mattered, it had not.

Darcy and Elizabeth also met upon Oakham Mount almost every morning until the winter weather made it impracticable. Neither ever remarked upon the regularity of it.

December brought Mr Collins's wedding to Charlotte, a quiet affair in Meryton which the neighbourhood attended with varying degrees of goodwill. Elizabeth attended with her family and wished Charlotte every happiness that could reasonably be found in the situation. Mrs Bennet spoke frequently of the injustice of Longbourn one day passing into the hands of the new couple, but found considerable consolation in the belief that her two eldest daughters were now receiving the attentions of the two most eligible gentlemen in Hertfordshire.

On Christmas Day, in the Longbourn drawing room, Mr Bingley asked Jane to marry him. Jane said yes, and Bingley looked as though he had been given the finest gift he had ever received, which was exactly right.

On New Year's Eve, in the garden at Longbourn, amidst the cold and quiet of the year's last evening, Mr Darcy asked Elizabeth to marry him.

She accepted before he had quite finished asking.

Mr Bennet shook Darcy's hand and informed him that he was the only man of his acquaintance to whom he would willingly entrust Elizabeth, before retreating to his library. Mrs Bennet very nearly swooned with delight. The neighbourhood heard of the engagement almost immediately and continued hearing of it for some time afterwards, particularly Mrs

Lucas, whom Mrs Bennet had considered a rival ever since Charlotte's marriage to Mr Collins.

Georgiana, when she finally received the news, shed a few tears and then declared that she had known since the ball at Lucas Lodge that her brother was in love.

Some weeks before the wedding, a rumour began circulating through Meryton that Miss Elizabeth Bennet did not hear particularly well. Elizabeth suspected Miss Bingley as its source, though it was never confirmed. She did not trouble herself greatly about it. The neighbourhood had always talked and always would, and its opinion of her hearing interested her considerably less than it once might have done. She was soon to be Mrs Darcy. That was of far greater consequence.

On the morning of the double wedding in February 1812, a letter arrived from Rosings Park.

Darcy brought it to Elizabeth before the ceremony. He said nothing as he handed it to her, merely watched her face as she read. Lady Catherine's hand was firm and her opinion entirely unambiguous. The union was beneath the Darcy name. Miss Elizabeth Bennet was nobody, possessed nothing, and would prove a source of lasting regret. Lady Catherine washed her hands of the entire affair.

Elizabeth folded the letter and returned it to him.

"You did not have to show me this," she said.

"I know." He smiled as he took her hand. "But we agreed there should be no further secrets."

She looked at him for a moment.

Then she rose onto her toes and kissed his cheek before reminding him that they had better not keep the vicar waiting.

The Bingleys remained at Netherfield whilst the Darcys returned to Pemberley a week after their wedding. Georgiana stayed with them for a two weeks before returning to London, where the Season was already well underway.

On a particularly beautiful evening during their first spring at Pemberley, Darcy found Elizabeth in the garden, seated upon a bench beside the rose bed with an open book in her lap that she was not reading.

He sat beside her. The roses were in full bloom, exactly as Georgiana had promised, and the evening light stretched across the gardens in long bands of gold.

"Georgiana writes that she enjoyed the recent balls enormously," Elizabeth said, lifting her face to her husband's. "She danced four sets at the last ball and was introduced to a Colonel somebody whose name she cannot properly remember, though she assures me his dancing was above average. She also speaks rather favourably of a Mr Hamilton. It appears he calls with some frequency."

Darcy raised an eyebrow. "A Mr Hamilton?"

"That was very nearly my response," Elizabeth smiled.

"And what does she say of him?"

"Nothing of consequence." Elizabeth laughed softly as Darcy brushed a teasing hand against her neck. "Only that he is sensible, well-spoken, and possesses the good judgement to admire her opinions on music."

"Then the gentleman is clearly exceptional."

"That is a question you will have to put to Georgiana when next she writes."

"Indeed."

"She also writes that she finds she manages the Season rather better than she expected." Elizabeth's expression softened. "She sounds happy."

"She is."

Darcy slipped an arm about her and drew her a little closer.

"I find myself wondering, from time to time, whether Wickham's words might yet prove true. Whether she might one day lose her hearing as he claimed she would." He looked out across the garden. "I do not know what I should have done to restore her confidence if you had not—"

He broke off.

"If I had not become her friend?"

"Yes."

Elizabeth considered this for a moment before turning to kiss him.

"I think you would have found a way," she said when their lips parted. "You are considerably more resourceful than you allow yourself credit for. And for what it is worth, I do not believe it will happen. I know little of your family's history beyond what you have told me, but I think Wickham sought only to inflict the deepest wound he could. Fear was his object, not truth."

"And if it does happen?" Darcy asked after a moment. "One day. Some years from now. What then?"

Elizabeth looked towards the rose bed.

"Then she will manage it," she said quietly. "As your mother managed it. As I have managed it." She paused, watching his face. "And she will find someone who loves her beyond it, just as you love me beyond it." She glanced at him. "There is life beyond what we hear, Fitzwilliam. Georgiana knows that now. Beyond words, there are other ways of understanding those we love. That is all Georgiana ever needed to know."

Darcy was silent for a long moment.

Then he kissed her again in the unhurried, certain manner that had long since become familiar. They sat together in the evening light whilst the garden carried on quietly around them, the roses stirring gently in the breeze.

He had made a promise twice. Once to his mother, in the February of his seventeenth year. Once to his sister, in a drawing room by the sea in Ramsgate.

He had kept both.

He had not, in the end, kept either of them alone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Fairfax spent years selling flowers before deciding that the people buying them were often just as interesting as the blooms themselves. A florist, wife, mother, and enthusiastic cat lover, she now writes romance novels inspired by a simple belief: flowers are part of every love story, and every love story deserves to be told.

When she is not writing, she can usually be found among flowers, with a cat nearby and a new romance taking shape in her imagination.
