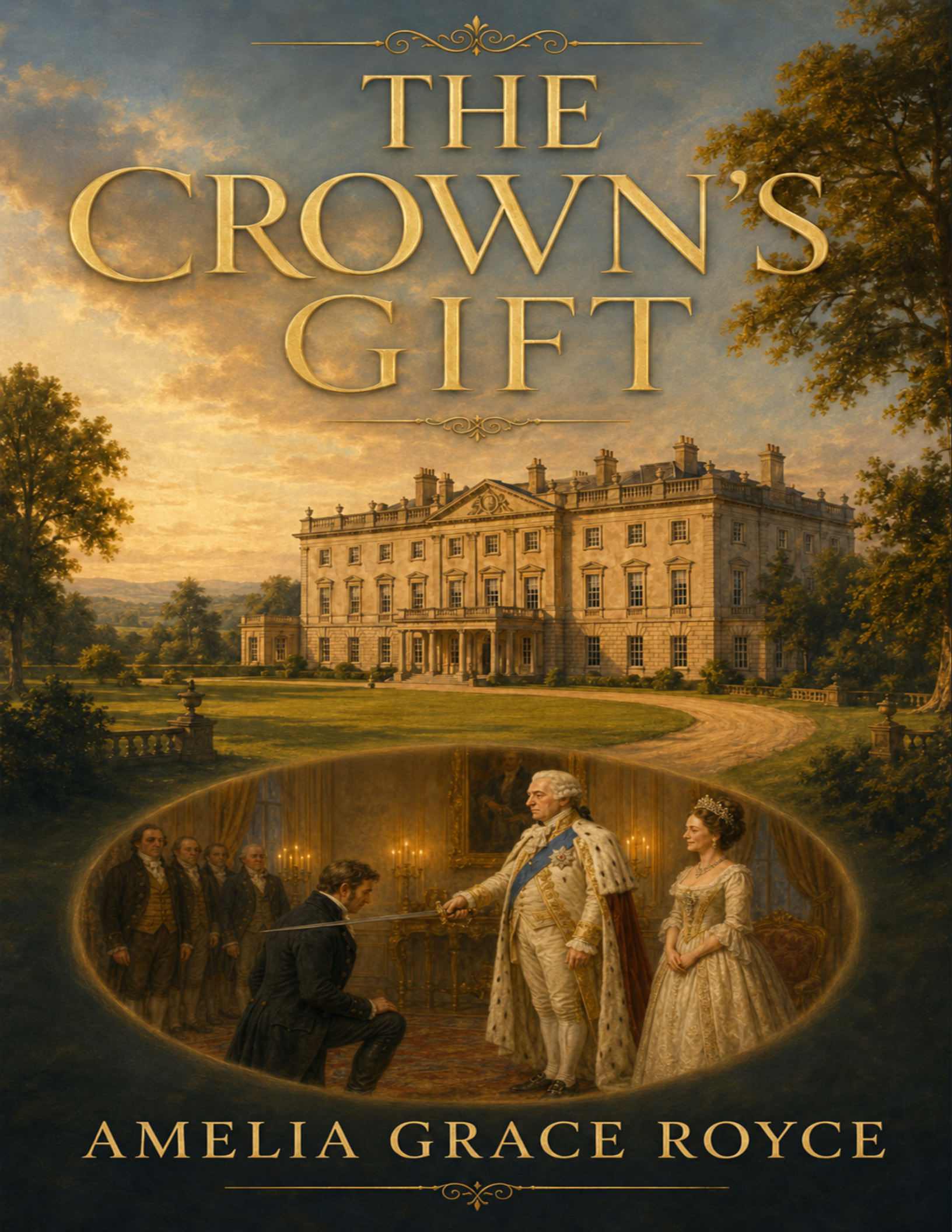
THE CROWN'S GIFT



AMELIA GRACE ROYCE

THE CROWN'S GIFT

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

by

Amelia Grace Royce

For Eleanor

"The greatest Gift and Honor,
is having you for a Daughter."

— *Fa Zhou, Disney's Mulan*

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First edition

CHAPTER ONE

The King's Gift

The day Thomas Bennet saved the life of a king began with his wife objecting to a ribbon.

"It is not merely blue," Mrs Bennet declared, holding the offending length before the morning-room window. "It is peacock. Peacock is a color which announces itself. Sky blue only waits to be noticed, and no one has time to wait when half the county will be in Meryton."

Thomas kept his place in the book balanced upon his knee. The argument had begun with Jane's bonnet, travelled through Elizabeth's sash, and now threatened the dignity of the monarchy itself.

"His Majesty has endured wars, ministries, and the Prince of Wales," he said. "I hope he may survive a sky-blue ribbon."

Across the room, ten-year-old Elizabeth pressed her lips together. Twelve-year-old Jane lowered her head over her sewing, though the needle remained still. Mary, only eight and earnest in everything, looked from one parent to the other in concern.

"You laugh, Mr Bennet, but Mr Lucas says the King notices every mark of respect."

"Mr Lucas says a great many things when he hopes they will be repeated."

He turned a page. It was the smallest possible movement and, he knew, the most effective means of provoking his wife.

"Well! If you will not advise me, I must decide everything. Hill! Hill, where has that woman gone? Lydia has put jam upon her sleeve, Kitty is crying because she cannot wear Jane's beads, and we are expected in Meryton before noon."

The door closed behind her in a rush of muslin and indignation. Silence settled, fragile and welcome.

Elizabeth left her chair and came to stand beside him. "Will the King truly notice our ribbons, Papa?"

"I should think he has better employment for his eyes."

"Then why must we go?"

Thomas looked at the top of her dark head. She had asked the question without complaint. Elizabeth rarely complained when inquiry would serve her better.

"Because your mother desires it, because the whole neighborhood will go, and because a king passing within three miles of Longbourn is an event your grandchildren may wish you to describe."

"What shall I tell them?"

"That his coat was red, his carriage gilded, and his expression one of fortitude while Mr Lucas addressed him."

Elizabeth laughed. Jane whispered, "Lizzy," though she smiled too.

Thomas returned to his book. It did not occur to him that by nightfall his own grandchildren would hear the tale from every servant, tenant, shopkeeper, and gentleman within fifty miles—and that none of them would care what color the King had worn.

The royal progress had not been intended to pass through Meryton. A broken axle on one of the baggage coaches and a flooded road near Hatfield had altered the route, and local enthusiasm had done the rest. By half past eleven, the principal street was hung with greenery. Flags drooped from upper windows in the damp September air. The assembly rooms had been opened for a cold collation, and every family with the slightest claim to gentility had contrived to receive a card.

Mrs Bennet's agitation increased with every yard of the carriage journey.

"Jane, do not hunch. Lizzy, you must not stare. Mary, if anyone speaks to you, answer clearly. Kitty, leave your gloves on. Lydia—where is Lydia's other glove?"

"Under her," Elizabeth said.

Five-year-old Lydia bounced in Nurse's lap and produced a crushed white glove with triumph.

"Mr Bennet, say something to them."

Thomas glanced over the top of his book. He had brought it into the carriage as a shield, though the road was too uneven for reading.

"You have heard your mother. Do not hunch, stare, mumble, disrobe, or conceal articles of dress beneath your person."

Mrs Bennet gave him a look of injury. Jane's mouth trembled. Elizabeth looked out of the window so that her laughter might be mistaken for a

cough.

At the assembly rooms, they were separated almost at once. Mrs Bennet drew Jane toward Mrs Lucas and the best light. Nurse took Kitty and Lydia to a quieter corner. Mary remained near her father, one small hand closed around two of his fingers. Elizabeth stood on his other side and watched everything.

Mr Lucas moved among the company with a flushed, important countenance. He had arranged the greenery, advised the innkeeper, lent silver from his own house, and rehearsed an address which grew longer each time he repeated it.

"He means to speak all afternoon," Elizabeth murmured.

"Then we must hope the King has eaten well."

The royal party arrived to the crash of a small local band and a roar from the street. Thomas saw scarlet uniforms first, then ladies in pale gowns, gentlemen burdened with stars and ribbons, and at their center a stocky man whose plain, open countenance seemed almost familiar from engravings. Queen Charlotte walked beside him, small and erect, her attention moving quickly over the room.

Everyone bowed or curtsied. Mary pulled Thomas's hand down with such determination that he nearly lost his balance.

The first quarter-hour passed as ceremony required. Mr Lucas delivered his address. His Majesty listened with patience, asked two questions about local trade, and complimented the decorations. Mrs Bennet managed to be presented with several other ladies and returned breathing as though she had run from Longbourn.

"The Queen looked directly at Jane," she whispered. "Directly, Mr Bennet. I thought she would speak, but Lady Somebody moved between them. Most provoking."

"Perhaps Her Majesty was overcome by the ribbon."

"It is peacock," Mrs Bennet said, but quietly, because a royal equerry had turned his head.

The company was permitted to approach the collation by degrees. Thomas would have preferred to remain near the wall, but Mary had begun to look pale and Elizabeth confessed to hunger. He found them lemonade and a

plate on which rested seed cake, thin slices of ham, and a small dish of glazed sugar plums.

"Not so quickly," he warned when Mary took a large bite.

She obeyed at once.

Some twenty feet away, the King laughed at something Mr Lucas said. He held a glazed sugar plum in one hand. Thomas saw him bite into it—and saw the instant he discovered it had not been pitted. The King's laugh stopped.

At first there was nothing remarkable in it. A man coughed. His hand rose to his throat. The gentleman beside him took one uncertain step away.

The King coughed again, but no sound came.

The room changed.

Thomas would remember that change more clearly than the shouting which followed. Conversation died in pieces. Smiles remained fixed upon faces that had not yet understood. The King's eyes widened. His mouth opened, but his chest made only a terrible, useless movement.

Queen Charlotte said, "George?"

Someone called for a physician.

Everyone looked toward the doors, although the King stood in the middle of them choking.

Thomas put the plate into Elizabeth's hands.

He had seen this once before. A stable boy at Longbourn, purple-faced over a piece of apple, had been saved when the head groom caught him from behind and gave three violent heaves beneath the ribs. Mr Jones later supposed that the force had driven trapped air upward. Thomas had listened with the detached interest he gave to all knowledge that did not require him to leave his library.

Now there was no head groom. No Mr Jones. Only a ring of jeweled and uniformed people frozen by the enormity of touching an anointed king.

Thomas moved.

The first guard blocked him with an arm across his chest.

"Stand back."

"He cannot breathe."

"The physician is coming."

The King staggered. Queen Charlotte caught his sleeve. His face had darkened from red toward a dreadful violet.

Thomas ducked beneath the guard's arm.

He had never in his life struck a soldier, but he drove his shoulder into the second man's side, slipped on a fallen napkin, recovered, and reached the King as hands seized the back of his coat.

"Forgive me, sir," he gasped.

He locked both arms around the royal body, braced his clasped hands beneath the King's ribs, and heaved with all his strength.

Nothing.

The King's body convulsed. Thomas heaved again.

A sword left its scabbard with a hiss.

On the third desperate heave, the plum stone flew from the King's mouth, struck Mr Lucas upon the lapel, and dropped to the floor.

The King dragged in a breath. It was a ragged, whistling sound, but it was breath.

Thomas released him.

Steel touched the hollow beneath Thomas's jaw.

Another blade pressed between his shoulder blades. The guard whose arm he had evaded twisted his wrist behind him until pain flashed to his elbow. Somewhere behind the wall of uniforms, Mrs Bennet screamed his name.

Thomas had time for one absurd thought: he had not marked his place in his book.

Then the King coughed, spat a streak of sugared plum juice upon the polished floor, and raised one shaking hand.

"Stop."

No one moved.

"Put up your swords." His voice rasped. He coughed again and looked at Thomas through watering eyes. "That gentleman saved my life."

The blade beneath Thomas's chin disappeared.

His knees nearly followed it.

Queen Charlotte reached the King and took his face between her hands without the smallest concern for ceremony. "You can breathe? George, answer me."

"I can breathe, Charlotte." He touched her wrist, then looked again at Thomas. "Thanks to him."

The room exhaled.

Noise rushed in: weeping, questions, orders, the physician at last forcing his way through. Thomas was moved backward and then forward, examined as if he too might be injured, and asked his name by three people in rapid succession.

"Bennet," he said. "Thomas Bennet, of Longbourn."

Mr Lucas stood nearby with a streak of sugar glaze upon his lapel. He dabbed at it very slowly.

Mrs Bennet broke through the company with Jane and Elizabeth behind her. "Mr Bennet! Oh, Mr Bennet, they had swords. I saw the swords. I knew we should not come. I said from the first that the roads were damp."

She seized his arm with both hands. Her face was colorless beneath her bonnet.

"I am quite well."

"You are not. You have torn your coat."

Elizabeth said nothing. She stood with the abandoned plate still in her hands, staring at him as though he had become a stranger.

The King would not continue until Thomas was brought before him. His Majesty had recovered his color, though the physician hovered at his elbow and Queen Charlotte had not released his arm.

"Mr Bennet," the King said. "Who taught you to do that?"

"A choking stable boy, Your Majesty. Or rather, the man who saved him."

The King's mouth twitched. "Then England is indebted to two stable yards."

A nervous laugh passed through the room.

Thomas bowed. "I am only glad I was near enough to be of service."

"Near enough, and willing enough. There were many nearer."

The words fell heavily. Several noble gentlemen discovered an interest in the floor.

The King studied Thomas's torn coat, his bent spectacles, and perhaps the wife still gripping his sleeve. "We shall speak again before I leave Hertfordshire. A service to the Crown is not forgotten."

Thomas bowed once more. He wanted only to take his family home.

That desire was not granted until evening. Depositions were taken. The guards apologized with military misery. Mr Lucas repeated the event so often that in his final account Thomas had crossed the room in a single bound. The King rested in private chambers and sent two separate messages assuring the company of his recovery.

In the carriage, Mrs Bennet held Thomas's hand.

She did it without speaking, which frightened him more than anything that had occurred.

Jane sat very straight, tears drying upon her cheeks. Mary had fallen asleep against Nurse. Kitty and Lydia, too young to comprehend the danger, whispered about the swords. Elizabeth sat opposite her father.

"You might have died," she said at last.

Mrs Bennet's fingers tightened around his.

Thomas attempted a smile. "The guards were persuaded otherwise."

"Before the King spoke, they might have killed you."

"Yes."

The single word silenced the carriage.

He had made jokes all his adult life because a joke put unpleasant truths at a manageable distance. He could not find one now. He looked at his daughters: Jane's gentle fear, Elizabeth's angry one, Mary's sleeping trust, Kitty's untidy curls, Lydia's jam-stained sleeve. He knew almost nothing of the two youngest beyond their noise. He knew Mary's solemnity better than her pleasures. He relied upon Jane's goodness and Elizabeth's wit as if those qualities had grown without tending.

He had run toward a dying stranger and spent years withdrawing from his own family one quiet hour at a time.

The realization humiliated him.

Three days later, a royal messenger came to Longbourn.

Within a fortnight, Thomas knelt before the King and rose Sir Thomas Bennet. The knighthood astonished Hertfordshire. The greater astonishment followed: by letters patent, His Majesty granted Sir Thomas the house, park, farms, and revenues of Netherfield, a Crown property without a private heir and lately returned to royal possession after years of disputed management.

"Five thousand a year," Lady Bennet whispered when the solicitor finished. "Netherfield is five thousand a year."

Sir Thomas looked across the library at the five daughters who would not inherit Longbourn.

"Perhaps more," the solicitor said. "With attention."

Attention. The word seemed directed at him.

That evening, Thomas closed his book before Elizabeth entered the library.

She stopped just inside the door, surprised.

"Come here, Lizzy."

She approached. He drew a second chair near his own rather than making her stand.

"You asked why we had to see the King," he said. "Do you remember?"

"Yes, Papa."

"I told you it was a story for your grandchildren. I believe we must improve the ending before you tell it."

Her brows gathered. "How?"

Thomas looked at the shelves surrounding him, at the safe and orderly retreat he had mistaken for a life.

"I shall have to begin by leaving this room more often."

Before winter, the Bennets left Longbourn for Netherfield. Jane was twelve, Elizabeth ten, Mary eight, Kitty six, and Lydia five; the move altered their address before it altered any of their habits.

* * *

Ten years later, in September 1809, Sir Thomas Bennet stood in the library at Netherfield with a lease in one hand and his youngest daughter's muddy boot in the other.

"It was not muddy when I put it on," Lydia said.

"An admirable defense. Was the mud lying in wait?"

At fifteen, Lydia had grown tall enough to look him nearly level in the chin and remained young enough to believe that dignity was principally a matter of volume.

"Dancer shied at a pheasant. I stepped into the ditch only because Kitty pushed me."

"I did not push you," Kitty protested from the window. "I caught your sleeve. That is the opposite of pushing."

Miss Harwood sat beside the fire with her hands folded over a closed book. She had been governess to the Bennet girls for eight years and could express entire moral treatises through the position of one eyebrow.

Sir Thomas set the boot upon a folded newspaper. "You left the path after being told the lower meadow was wet. You took Dancer without asking Mr Glover. And you have interrupted my meeting with Mr Morris because you hoped to reach me before Miss Harwood did."

Lydia's confidence diminished by degrees.

"Yes, Papa."

"You will clean the boot yourself, apologize to Mr Glover, and remain out of the saddle for three days."

"Three!"

Miss Harwood's eyebrow moved.

"Four," Lydia amended hurriedly. "I mean—yes, Papa. Three."

She took the boot. Kitty followed, pausing to kiss her father's cheek and murmur, "I truly caught her," before the door closed behind them.

Mr Morris, the Netherfield steward, concealed a smile by examining the lease again.

"You were saying that Mr Bingley's references are excellent," Sir Thomas said.

"Very. His London man of business answered every inquiry. The income is sound, and he has authorized his solicitor to pay a year in advance if you prefer it."

Sir Thomas moved behind his desk. The room was larger than the library at Longbourn and possessed a handsome prospect over the east lawn, but he had resisted filling it with unnecessary furniture. The old desk from Longbourn stood beneath the windows. His familiar books lined the nearest shelves. The remainder contained estate ledgers, agricultural reports, maps, and the records of ten years' determined attention.

The first two years at Netherfield had exposed how little he knew. Roofs had leaked. Tenants had been charged fees never authorized by the Crown. Fields had been exhausted by the same crops. Sir Thomas, who had once congratulated himself on understanding mankind because he could detect

foolishness at twenty paces, discovered that understanding a drainage account required humility of another sort.

He had learned.

Longbourn had changed with him. Its cottages were repaired, hedges laid, tenant agreements made fair, and the house renovated without destroying its character. When the Bingley inquiry arrived, Sir Thomas had felt the peculiar pain of offering another man the home in which all his daughters had been born.

Lady Bennet had felt no such pain.

"A single gentleman of four or five thousand a year may sleep in my old dressing room as often as he likes," she had announced. "Especially if he dances."

Sir Thomas read the final page. "Give Mr Bingley the lease. Three years, with the option to renew. The west tenant farms are excluded as agreed, and he is to consult us before cutting mature timber."

"Yes, sir."

"And Morris—do not tell Lady Bennet he dances."

The steward's composure broke. "No, sir."

News travelled more quickly than leases. Before the ink had dried, Meryton knew that a wealthy young gentleman from the north had taken Longbourn, that he owned a carriage, that he intended to bring a large party, and that he might possess anything from three to twelve thousand pounds a year depending upon the listener's distance from the original source.

Lady Bennet received the certainty of his arrival over breakfast.

"There, Mr Bennet. You see? We must call at once."

"He is my tenant. I have already exchanged six letters with his solicitor."

"A solicitor cannot introduce Jane."

Jane's cup paused halfway to her lips. At twenty-two she had the same delicate beauty that had caused Queen Charlotte to remark upon her during her presentation four years earlier, but serenity no longer meant she could not be embarrassed.

"Mama, Mr Bingley has not yet spent one night at Longbourn."

"Which is why we must not descend upon him today. Tomorrow will do."

Elizabeth looked at Mary across the table. Mary lowered her eyes, but a smile appeared.

"Sir Thomas will call first," Lady Bennet continued. "Then he may invite Mr Bingley to dine. Jane shall wear the ivory silk. Lizzy, you may wear the green, though as you are not yet presented—"

"I shall be invisible?"

"Do not tease. Of course you may dine with us at home. It is only in London that people make everything difficult. Mary, sit straight, my love. You need not look alarmed. No one will present you to Mr Bingley."

This assurance made Mary look more alarmed.

Elizabeth reached beneath the table and pressed her sister's hand. Mary returned the pressure quickly.

Mary had changed most visibly from the solemn child who once read sermons she did not understand. Miss Harwood had discovered that she possessed a fine ear, then obtained a master who praised effort before display. Freed from the belief that she must be wise because she was not beautiful, Mary became quiet rather than severe. Her brown hair was dressed simply. Her eyes, behind light spectacles used only for reading music, were soft and observant.

She dreaded her coming presentation.

Elizabeth had been eligible two seasons earlier. She had delayed first because their grandmother Gardiner had fallen ill and died, then again because Mary confessed—one midnight, in broken whispers—that she could not walk into the Queen's drawing room alone after watching Jane do it so perfectly.

"Then you shall not," Elizabeth had said.

Their father had objected. Their mother had lamented. Elizabeth did not yield, and in the end Sir Thomas admitted that a presentation undertaken freely was worth more than one hurried for convenience.

Now the sisters would enter Court together in the spring.

"We shall dine quietly," Sir Thomas said. "Mr Bingley may bring those staying with him. I understand his sisters accompany him, with one sister's husband and a friend."

"What friend?" Lady Bennet asked at once.

"His name is Darcy."

Jane looked up. "Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy?"

"You know him?" Elizabeth asked.

"Only by sight. He attended the same concert at Carlton House last year. Miss Grant said he owns a large estate in Derbyshire."

"Ten thousand a year," Lady Bennet said reverently.

Sir Thomas buttered his toast. "Then he may be trusted to feed himself."

Charles Bingley arrived at Netherfield two days later in a blue coat, a high good humor, and precisely seven minutes of nervousness. The nervousness vanished when Sir Thomas asked whether the chimneys at Longbourn drew properly.

"Perfectly, sir. Better than the house we had in Scarborough, and my sister says the morning room has the finest light she has seen outside London. I hope you do not mind that we shifted the pianoforte. We have not scratched the floor—I made Hurst help lift it."

"Then I am already indebted to Mr Hurst."

Bingley laughed easily. He was handsome without appearing conscious of it, with fair hair, an open face, and the habit of leaning toward whoever spoke as if no other person deserved his attention.

Sir Thomas liked him and therefore became cautious.

"A house is meant to be lived in, Mr Bingley. Within the terms of the lease, you may arrange it to suit yourself. But Longbourn is connected to my family in ways not stated in a solicitor's inventory."

Bingley's expression sobered. "I understand. Or I hope to. My father built his fortune in trade, and we never had an old family house to leave. I would not willingly treat yours carelessly."

It was a better answer than Sir Thomas expected.

"Come to dinner on Thursday. Bring your party. Lady Bennet will wish to welcome her former curtains and may consent to welcome the present inhabitants as well."

Bingley's grin returned. "We shall be delighted."

Darcy did not accompany him on the call, a fact Lady Bennet considered suspicious until the Longbourn carriage arrived for dinner and he descended from it.

Elizabeth watched from the drawing-room window. Bingley came first. Behind him was a fashionable woman in orange silk, another lady with an indolent expression, a broad gentleman already glancing toward the dining-room doors, and last a tall man in black evening dress.

He paused upon the gravel and looked up at Netherfield.

There was nothing offensive in the action. Any visitor might admire the balanced stone front, the lit windows, and the portico added under Sir Thomas's direction. Yet something in the stranger's stillness suggested appraisal rather than admiration.

"That must be Mr Darcy," Mary whispered.

"Because he looks so wealthy?"

"Because he looks as if he would rather be elsewhere."

Elizabeth smiled. "Mary, I begin to fear you have acquired discernment."

The introductions were civil. Miss Bingley took in Lady Bennet's rose-colored satin, Jane's beauty, Mary's quiet dress, Elizabeth's steady gaze, and the room's elegant furnishings in one comprehensive sweep.

"How extraordinary it must be," she said, "to live so near one's former home."

Lady Bennet's smile remained fixed. Ten years earlier she would have explained the entail, the rent, the income, and the number of bedchambers in both houses before drawing breath.

"It is very convenient," she said. "I may remember my happiest years without being responsible for the attics."

Sir Thomas's eyes warmed. Elizabeth wanted to applaud.

At dinner Bingley sat beside Jane and forgot three times to eat what was placed before him. Mr Hurst compensated on behalf of the company. Mary answered Mrs Hurst's questions softly but sensibly. Miss Bingley attempted to determine whether the Bennets' Court connections were significant and received nothing more useful than Lady Bennet's opinion of the Queen's taste in lace.

Darcy spoke little.

When Elizabeth asked whether he preferred town or country, he said, "Each has advantages which the other cannot imitate."

"A diplomatic answer."

"A true one."

"Truth and diplomacy are not enemies, then?"

His eyes turned fully toward her. They were darker than she had expected and more attentive.

"Not necessarily. Though they are not always introduced."

"Perhaps they require a mutual acquaintance."

For an instant, his mouth nearly softened. "And who would you appoint?"

"Good sense, if it can be persuaded to attend."

Across the table, her father lowered his wineglass to hide a smile.

Later, while the ladies waited for the gentlemen, Miss Bingley asked Jane about her presentation. Jane answered without vanity. Mrs Hurst recalled seeing her at a ball. Mary grew quiet when the coming spring was mentioned.

Elizabeth shifted closer until their sleeves touched.

Darcy entered in time to observe the movement. His gaze rested first upon Mary, then upon Elizabeth's hand lying near hers. Something in his expression changed—not warmth precisely, but reconsideration.

Elizabeth noticed because she had already decided he was a man who reconsidered very little.

When the party departed, Bingley pressed Sir Thomas's invitation to the Meryton assembly upon his sisters as though he had invented dancing.

"He is agreeable," Lady Bennet declared before the door had fully closed. "Very agreeable. And Jane, he scarcely looked away from you."

Jane's cheeks colored. "He was attentive to everyone."

"Not in that manner," Mary said.

All eyes turned toward her.

Mary looked up from behind her spectacles. "Was I mistaken?"

Jane laughed and kissed her cheek.

Sir Thomas remained near the window, watching the carriage lamps descend the drive toward Longbourn. His tenant was charming. His tenant's friend was proud, observant, and perhaps not quite as indifferent as he wished to appear.

The old Thomas Bennet would have retreated to his library and waited to be entertained by whatever followed.

Sir Thomas rang for Hill and asked whether Jane's mare had been exercised.

CHAPTER TWO

An Assembly Reversed

The Meryton assembly had changed less in ten years than the Bennets had. The chandeliers still smoked. The musicians still argued between sets. Mrs Long still placed her nieces where every entering gentleman must pass them, and Aunt Phillips still knew precisely who had arrived before the door opened.

Yet the room responded differently when Lady Bennet entered.

People made space.

It was not the easy familiarity offered to Mrs Lucas, for Mr Lucas remained a prosperous merchant and magistrate without a royal title. It was a subtler acknowledgment that the mistress of Netherfield possessed consequence beyond Meryton, that her eldest daughter had been presented, and that the King himself had once asked after the health of the Bennet children in a Christmas letter.

Lady Bennet enjoyed every degree of it.

"Do not look so resigned, Mr Bennet," she murmured as they crossed the room. "You may stand near the card tables all evening if you choose. I shall not require you to dance."

"Your mercy does you credit."

Only Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary accompanied them. Kitty had developed a cough after her wet walk, and Lydia's attempt to imitate it had been so unconvincing that Miss Harwood assigned her French verbs for dishonesty.

Mary wore pale blue. Elizabeth had helped choose it because it did not demand attention but rewarded a second glance. She looked nervous until Miss Charlotte Lucas approached.

Charlotte was seven-and-twenty, sensible, composed, and one of the few people who never spoke to Mary as though quietness were an illness.

"I saved you a place near the musicians," she said. "We may criticize the tempo with authority."

Mary smiled. "Lizzy says criticism is more enjoyable when one has no authority at all."

"Lizzy is an expert."

Elizabeth joined them. "I am wounded by this conspiracy."

The arrival of the Longbourn party interrupted her. Bingley entered with such visible pleasure that half the room followed his gaze directly to Jane.

He bowed to Lady Bennet, greeted Sir Thomas, and asked Jane for the first two dances within four minutes.

"Your tenant wastes no time," Charlotte observed.

"A useful quality in a leaseholder," Elizabeth said.

Darcy came behind his friend. He was even taller among the local gentlemen than he had appeared at Netherfield. His evening coat fit without ornament. He bowed correctly to the Bennets, spoke to Sir Thomas, and allowed Bingley to draw him toward several introductions.

Within half an hour, everyone knew that Mr Darcy possessed ten thousand a year and everyone disliked him for behaving as though the knowledge were insufficient recommendation.

Elizabeth watched him refuse Mrs Long's niece. His manner was not cruel, but neither did it invite forgiveness. He stood apart after the first set, his attention moving over the dancers with an expression of private endurance.

"He looks like a man waiting for bad weather to pass," Charlotte said.

"Perhaps Derbyshire assemblies occur in silence."

Mary glanced toward Darcy. "He may be shy."

Elizabeth turned. "You defend him?"

"No. I only know that looking displeased and feeling displeased are not always the same."

It was an observation Elizabeth might have considered longer if Bingley had not approached Darcy at that moment. The music had ended. Jane was speaking with Lady Bennet, and several young women remained without partners.

"Come, Darcy," Bingley said. His cheerful voice carried farther than he intended. "I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about in this stupid manner."

"You are dancing with the only handsome woman in the room."

Bingley glanced at Jane and smiled helplessly. "She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld. But one of her sisters is sitting down just behind you.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet is very pretty, and agreeable besides. Let me ask her to introduce you properly."

Darcy turned.

Elizabeth had no time to look away. Their eyes met. His gaze rested on her face with disconcerting deliberation.

Then he said, "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me."

He turned back to Bingley.

Darcy's quiet words carried across the space between them.

Heat touched Elizabeth's cheeks. It was not heartbreak; she had no wish to dance with an unwilling man. It was the casual certainty of his judgment that stung, the sense that he imagined a woman placed before him existed chiefly to be measured against his appetite.

Charlotte heard. Her mouth tightened.

Mary heard too.

Before either could speak, Elizabeth lifted her fan. "A narrow escape. I had feared Mr Bingley might persuade him."

Charlotte searched her face. "Lizzy—"

"Truly. What conversation could we have sustained? I know nothing of silent Derbyshire dances."

She smiled until Charlotte's concern eased. The hurt did not disappear. Elizabeth folded it into humor and placed it where no one might touch it without permission.

Mary touched her sleeve. "You are handsome enough to tempt people with sense."

Elizabeth's smile became real. "My dearest Mary, that is almost a compliment."

Mr Denny asked Elizabeth for the next dance. She accepted and enjoyed herself with determination. When the figure brought her near Darcy, she laughed at something her partner said and did not look toward him.

Darcy looked toward her.

He had known almost as soon as the words left him that Bingley was right. Miss Elizabeth was more than pretty. Animation transformed features he had first judged irregular. Her dark eyes held intelligence and mischief in equal measure; her figure was light; her movements unstudied.

But he had been tired, crowded, and irritated by the room's scrutiny. Refusal had become habit before he understood the offer.

Then Bingley told him which Bennet sister she was.

"The Bennets of Netherfield?" Darcy asked.

"Of course. Sir Thomas owns this half of the neighborhood, or near enough."

Darcy frowned. "I thought the Bennets lived at Longbourn."

"They did. Longbourn is entailed. Netherfield was granted to Sir Thomas by the King after he saved His Majesty's life. Did Caroline not tell you?"

Caroline had said only that Bingley's landlord was a country knight with too many daughters and a royal story repeated beyond endurance.

Darcy looked again at Sir Thomas. The man stood near the wall speaking with the local apothecary, not soliciting notice and not appearing impressed by the wealth Darcy carried into every introduction. Lady Bennet was animated, but her attention remained upon her daughters rather than the room. Miss Mary Bennet sat beside Charlotte Lucas, discussing the music. Miss Bennet danced with Bingley and smiled at him with gentle warmth.

And Miss Elizabeth had heard him insult her.

"You might ask her for the next," Bingley suggested.

"She is engaged."

"The one after."

Darcy watched Elizabeth turn beneath Mr Denny's raised hand. "I do not believe she would accept."

Bingley laughed. "You have known her only one evening and already fear her?"

"I fear no such thing."

"Then ask."

Darcy did not.

His reluctance had changed its nature. Before, he had not wished to dance. Now he did not wish to discover that his first careless sentence had placed a refusal beyond remedy.

During supper, Lady Bennet spoke across him to Mrs Phillips with an enthusiasm impossible to ignore.

"Jane has always loved to dance. When she was presented, the Duke of Clarence himself remarked upon her grace. Not that she heard him, for she was too busy remembering which foot to move."

"Mama," Jane said softly.

"I say nothing improper. He did remark upon it."

Sir Thomas caught Darcy's eye. "My wife has retained every royal compliment. I have forgotten half of them, which is why our marriage remains useful."

Lady Bennet tapped his sleeve with her fan. "You remember perfectly well."

Affection lay beneath the exchange. Darcy had expected vanity from people raised suddenly in consequence. What he saw was a family accustomed to consequence and therefore no longer dazzled by it.

Elizabeth stood on the far side of the table with Charlotte. When she laughed, Darcy found himself listening for the sound.

Miss Bingley noticed.

"You cannot admire her," she said when they were briefly apart. "Her eyes are tolerable, perhaps, but her manner is very decided. And Lady Bennet—though improved, everyone assures me—still speaks enough for three women."

"I said nothing of admiration."

"You looked it."

Darcy's gaze returned to Elizabeth before he could prevent it. "Then I must learn greater command of my face."

The final set began. Elizabeth danced with an officer. Mary declined a partner but remained without distress beside Charlotte. Jane and Bingley stood together once more.

Sir Thomas approached Darcy.

"You do not dance, Mr Darcy?"

The question was mild. Darcy heard no rebuke in it, which made his own words return with greater clarity.

"Not often with ladies I do not know."

"A difficulty assemblies are designed to remedy."

Darcy found humor, but no mockery, in Sir Thomas's expression.

"I have not acquitted myself well tonight," Darcy said.

It was as close to confession as pride permitted.

Sir Thomas followed his glance to Elizabeth. Something paternal and alert entered his face.

"My daughter values honesty," he said. "Though she prefers it without collateral damage."

Darcy stiffened. "She told you?"

"She did not need to."

Sir Thomas bowed and moved away.

For the first time in years, Darcy wished he had remained silent not because speech had exposed him, but because it had injured someone who did not deserve it.

At Netherfield after midnight, Elizabeth sat before her dressing-room fire while Jane removed the pearl pins from her hair.

"Mr Bingley asked whether he might call tomorrow," Jane said, attempting lightness and failing.

"Then I hope Papa gave him directions. He has only lived at Longbourn four days; he may lose his way down the hill."

Jane smiled at her reflection. "He is very agreeable."

"He is."

"And his friend?"

Elizabeth met Jane's eyes in the mirror. "Mr Darcy has ten thousand a year, a handsome face, and no temptation to dance with me. We understand one another perfectly."

Jane set the last pin upon the table. "You are laughing, but you were hurt."

Elizabeth looked down.

With anyone else, she might have denied it. Jane's gentleness did not make falsehood easier; it made falsehood feel mean.

"For a moment," she admitted. "Not because he disliked my face. Because he thought his dislike important enough to announce."

Jane rested both hands upon her shoulders. "Perhaps he regretted it. He watched you afterward."

"To see whether tolerable features improve with exercise?"

"Lizzy."

Elizabeth covered one of Jane's hands with her own. "Do not worry. I shall survive Mr Darcy's indifference."

She meant it.

What she did not know was how soon his indifference would become far more troublesome than his contempt.

* * *

Mr Bingley did not lose his way down the hill.

He called at Netherfield before noon, stayed an hour and twenty minutes, and spent at least fifty of those minutes attempting not to look exclusively at Jane. By the time he departed, Lady Bennet had invited his whole party to dine the following week, Kitty and Lydia had learned that Longbourn's north attic still creaked in cold weather, and Sir Thomas had obtained a promise that the eastern copse would not be used for shooting until the tenant cottages beyond it were warned.

Two days later, an invitation arrived from Miss Bingley.

"For Jane alone," Lady Bennet said, examining the note. "That is marked attention."

"From Miss Bingley?" Elizabeth asked.

"From the sisters, which is nearly the same as from the brother when one lives in the same house."

Sir Thomas folded his newspaper. "The logic escapes me."

"Everything escapes a man who wishes not to understand it. Jane, you must go. The weather is clearing."

Beyond the breakfast-room windows, rain had diminished to a fine silver haze. The distance between Netherfield and Longbourn was less than three miles by road and considerably less across the fields. Jane could have taken the carriage. Lady Bennet, who had not lost her ability to hope for romantic inconvenience, suggested a horse.

"If it rains again, they cannot send you home."

Jane colored. "Mama."

"I do not mean that you should become ill. Only damp enough to require tea."

"She will take the carriage," Sir Thomas said.

Lady Bennet looked at him. Ten years of a more attentive husband had not taught her meekness, but it had taught her that he did not issue commands merely to amuse himself.

"Very well. Though the lanes are perfectly passable."

The carriage was required unexpectedly before Jane could depart. A tenant's little boy had fallen from a hayloft, and Sir Thomas would not wait for Mr Jones to find another conveyance. Jane watched the horses disappear down the drive.

"I can remain at home," she said.

"Or ride," Lady Bennet replied, too quickly.

Sir Thomas was gone. Miss Harwood judged the weather improving. Jane wished to go and did not wish to confess how much. Within half an hour she rode from Netherfield in a dark blue habit, accompanied by a groom.

The weather betrayed every opinion offered of it. The fine mist thickened before they reached the lower lane. Then the clouds opened.

Jane arrived at Longbourn soaked through.

Bingley met her in the hall with alarm so sincere that Caroline could not hide her displeasure. Fires were lit, dry clothes found, and hot wine prescribed. By evening Jane's throat ached. By morning she had a fever.

The note sent to Netherfield was written in Bingley's hurried hand.

Elizabeth read it twice.

"I am going to her."

"The carriage has not returned from Mr Robinson's farm," Lady Bennet said. "The axle was damaged in that dreadful lane. We shall send as soon as it is repaired."

"I shall walk."

Mary looked toward the windows. The rain had stopped, but the lawns shone and low clouds crowded the horizon.

"Lizzy, the lower path will be mud."

"Then I shall wear boots."

Lady Bennet protested. Miss Harwood offered to accompany her, but Kitty's cough had worsened and Lydia was one unguarded hour away from climbing the roof in search of excitement. Elizabeth kissed Mary's cheek, promised to send word, and set out with a maid.

The short route between the estates crossed two meadows, a narrow footbridge, and a rise from which Longbourn's chimneys appeared among old elms. Elizabeth had walked it since childhood. The landscape carried a double memory now: the freedom of the fields and the shape of the home they had left.

Mud caught at her boots. Wet grass darkened the hem of her brown walking dress. At the footbridge she lifted her skirts and laughed when the maid nearly surrendered a shoe to the bank.

By the time they reached Longbourn, Elizabeth's cheeks were bright from exertion and several curls had escaped beneath her bonnet.

Darcy saw her from the breakfast-room window.

He had been listening to Caroline describe the inconvenience of an invalid when motion beyond the lawn drew his eye. A woman crossed the last field with quick, certain steps. Her dress was muddied, her bonnet damp, and her attention fixed upon the house.

He knew her before he saw her face.

"Who can that be?" Mrs Hurst asked.

Bingley reached the window. "Miss Elizabeth."

He left the room before Caroline could answer.

Elizabeth entered the hall as a servant moved to take her cloak. Bingley came toward her with both hands extended, checked himself before touching her, and said, "Your sister is better this morning. Jones is with her now. I am very sorry. We ought to have sent her home before the rain worsened."

"Jane possesses a mind of her own, Mr Bingley. I do not hold you responsible for the clouds."

His relief was visible. "You must come to the fire."

"I must see Jane."

Mr Jones emerged from the staircase before she could ascend. He had attended the Bennets for years and spoke to Elizabeth without ceremony.

"A cold and fever. No danger if she rests. She will remain abed today and likely tomorrow."

Elizabeth let out the breath she had held since reading the note. "May I sit with her?"

"If you do not exhaust her."

Jane slept much of the morning. When awake, she apologized for creating trouble.

"You have done nothing except become wet," Elizabeth said, wringing cool water from a cloth. "Mama has done that in company more often than I can count."

Jane smiled weakly. "Is she very anxious?"

"Very. Papa will bring her when the carriage is safe. Mary wished to come. Kitty coughed. Lydia offered to ride Dancer and was removed from the discussion."

"Poor Lydia."

"You are ill indeed if you pity her restraint."

Near noon, Bingley appeared with broth and an expression suggesting that he had personally negotiated its ingredients. Jane brightened when he entered. Elizabeth saw it. Bingley saw it too, and nearly dropped the tray.

He remained only a few minutes, speaking gently and asking no question that required effort. When he left, Jane watched the door.

"He is kind," she said.

"He is."

"His sisters have also been attentive."

Elizabeth did not mention that the broth had been carried upstairs by Bingley while Miss Bingley sent her compliments from the drawing room.

In the afternoon Jane slept again, and Elizabeth was persuaded to change her stockings and eat. She entered the drawing room in a borrowed gown that belonged to Caroline. It was too long, too narrow through the shoulders, and chosen—Elizabeth suspected—to make the difference between their figures as obvious as possible.

Darcy rose when she entered.

His gaze moved from the damp curls at her temples to the hem hidden beneath Caroline's elaborate silk. For one alarming instant, admiration showed without disguise.

Elizabeth remembered the assembly.

"Miss Eliza," Caroline said, "we have been marveling at your walk. Three miles in such mud!"

"Considerably less across the fields."

"But alone."

"My maid is recovering in the kitchen and would be sorry to learn she has vanished."

Mr Hurst laughed into his wine.

Darcy said, "The path near the footbridge floods quickly. You were fortunate not to fall."

"I have crossed it in worse weather."

"That does not make it prudent."

Elizabeth sat opposite him. "No. It makes it practiced."

His eyes held hers. "You believe practice transforms risk into wisdom?"

"Sometimes. Otherwise no one would ever mount a horse twice."

Bingley entered and insisted she take tea. Conversation turned to Jane, then to the country, then—through Caroline's determination—to accomplishments.

"A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages," Caroline said. "She must possess a certain manner in her walk, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions—or the word will be but half deserved."

"And to all this she must yet add something more substantial," Darcy said, "in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading."

Elizabeth lifted her cup. "I am no longer surprised at your knowing only half a dozen accomplished women. I wonder at your knowing any."

Bingley smiled. Caroline did not.

Darcy's expression sharpened with interest. "You consider the standard unreasonable?"

"I consider it assembled by people who require women to perform six arts at once while appearing unconscious of effort. My sister Mary practices three hours each day. If she plays well, it is because she works, not because perfection descended with her gloves."

"Miss Mary plays?"

"Very well," Bingley answered. "She played at Netherfield after dinner."

Darcy had been speaking with Sir Thomas and had heard only the end. "Then I hope to hear her properly. My sister is devoted to music."

Something softened in his voice at the mention of his sister. Elizabeth noticed against her will.

Caroline leaned forward. "Dear Georgiana is accomplished in everything. Her figure, her taste, her execution—"

"She is sixteen," Darcy said, and the quiet correction ended the catalogue.

Elizabeth looked at him anew. A brother capable of protecting a girl from praise too heavy to bear was not entirely the man she had decided him to be.

That evening Sir Thomas and Lady Bennet arrived in the repaired carriage. Lady Bennet's anxiety filled the hall but did not escape it. She went directly to Jane, kissed her brow, whispered over her improvement, and thanked Bingley with genuine warmth.

"You have been very good to her. I shall remember it."

Bingley reddened to the ears.

Sir Thomas remained after his wife departed. The roads had darkened again, and Bingley would not hear of Elizabeth leaving while Jane needed her.

"Two nights," Sir Thomas said privately to Elizabeth. "If Jane is not fit to return, we shall move half of Netherfield down the hill and defeat Mr Bingley's hospitality by force."

"Papa, you are not uneasy?"

"Jones is not. Your mother is, enough for us all. I reserve judgment."

He glanced toward the drawing-room door, where Darcy stood speaking with Bingley.

"And you?"

"I am perfectly easy."

"Then I am uneasy enough for two."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "What have you observed?"

"That Mr Darcy has looked toward this passage four times in six minutes."

"Perhaps he fears I shall track mud upon another carpet."

"Perhaps. Longbourn's carpets are very fine."

Sir Thomas kissed her forehead and departed before she could answer.

Darcy looked toward the passage a fifth time.

CHAPTER THREE

A Gentleman Misjudged

Jane's fever lingered for three days. Elizabeth therefore remained at Longbourn, inhabiting the house of her childhood as both intimate and guest.

She knew which stair complained beneath a hurried foot, which window in the west corridor admitted a winter draught, and where the morning sun first touched the breakfast-room wall. Yet Bingley's books sat upon her father's old shelves. Caroline's shawl lay across the sofa where Lady Bennet once sorted household accounts. Mr Hurst slept after dinner in the chair Sir Thomas had favored before he learned that remaining awake sometimes improved family conversation.

The strangeness made Elizabeth tender toward Longbourn and impatient with anyone who treated it carelessly.

Bingley did not. He asked before opening rooms the lease had reserved for the Bennets' storage. He knew the names of two tenant families already. When a servant cracked a blue basin that had belonged to Lady Bennet's mother, he apologized as though he had wielded the poker himself.

His sisters behaved as if a furnished house had materialized for their convenience.

On the second morning, Elizabeth found Caroline directing a footman to remove a small portrait from the staircase.

"The frame is too dark," Caroline said. "It makes the landing positively gloomy."

The portrait showed Elizabeth's grandfather at twenty-five, unsmiling and square-shouldered in a brown coat.

"That picture is excluded from the household inventory," Elizabeth said.

Caroline turned. "Is it?"

"It belongs to my father. He left it because the wall was built around its hook, and because Grandpapa appears to disapprove of everyone who climbs the stairs. We were fond of the effect."

The footman froze with one hand near the frame.

"Leave it," Caroline said. "I had no notion it mattered."

"Now you have."

Elizabeth continued upstairs before temper could turn accuracy into rudeness. At the upper landing she found Darcy.

He had heard enough. His gaze went from the portrait to Caroline's retreating figure and then to Elizabeth.

"You were restrained."

"Were you expecting bloodshed?"

"I was expecting wit. It sometimes leaves deeper injuries."

"Then Miss Bingley is fortunate I am tired."

He almost smiled. "Your grandfather?"

Elizabeth looked at the portrait. "He died before Lydia was born. He was stern, generous, and incapable of telling a story in fewer than forty minutes. Papa says I inherited his eyebrows and none of his patience."

"Sir Thomas speaks of his family with unusual candor."

"You mean he makes jokes."

"Not only jokes. He listens."

The observation was so precise that Elizabeth forgot to defend her father from it.

"He did not always," she said.

Darcy waited.

"The King's accident changed him. We gained Netherfield in the public account. In ours, we gained Papa."

She had not intended to say so much. The hallway seemed suddenly private despite its open doors.

Darcy's expression lost its reserve. "That is a considerable gift."

"The greater one."

Their eyes met. For once neither reached for argument.

Jane improved enough to sit up that afternoon. Bingley read aloud to her from a newspaper and omitted every paragraph concerned with Parliament. Elizabeth occupied a chair near the window, mending a cuff badly. She had never acquired Jane's patience with a needle.

Darcy entered carrying a book.

"Bingley, your steward wishes to speak with you about the west boundary."

Bingley looked reluctant to abandon his post.

Jane smiled. "I shall not relapse in ten minutes."

"Fifteen at most," Elizabeth said. "After that I can promise nothing."

When Bingley departed, Darcy placed the book on the table beside Jane. "Your father mentioned you enjoy Cowper."

"Thank you."

He did not leave. Elizabeth became conscious of the poor seam beneath her fingers.

"Do you mend often, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Only when I wish to humble the garment."

Jane laughed and then coughed. Darcy poured water before Elizabeth could rise. He handed the glass to Jane without fuss and resumed his place.

"Your sister's devotion is evident," he said.

"Lizzy never does anything by halves," Jane answered.

"Jane means that I am exhausting."

"I mean that you walked through mud because I sneezed twice."

"Three times. I have standards."

Darcy's mouth curved. It transformed him. The severe lines around his eyes eased, and Elizabeth saw the handsome man beneath the guarded one so suddenly that her needle entered her finger.

She inhaled.

Darcy's smile vanished. "You are hurt."

"Mortally."

A bead of blood appeared. He reached for the handkerchief in his pocket at the same time Elizabeth lifted her own. Their hands met above the sewing basket.

The contact lasted no more than a second. His fingers were warm. Elizabeth withdrew first.

"I have survived," she said.

Darcy set his handkerchief beside her anyway. His initials were embroidered in one corner with severe neatness.

Jane looked from one to the other and discovered renewed interest in Cowper.

That evening, Caroline's restraint failed.

Lady Bennet had come to sit with Jane and remained for dinner. She spoke more loudly than Mrs Hurst considered fashionable, praised Bingley's kindness more than once, and expressed the hope that Jane would soon be well enough to return home—though her gaze suggested she would not object if recovery required a fortnight.

Caroline waited until the gentlemen joined them.

"How fortunate for Miss Bennet that her family is so near," she said. "Though I confess I would find it peculiar to be nursed in a house once my own."

Lady Bennet folded her embroidery. "Would you?"

"I suppose attachment to old rooms is stronger in some people than others. For my part, when one improves one's situation, it is best not to look backward too often."

Bingley said, "Caroline."

She ignored him. "Of course, Netherfield was so extraordinary a gift. One can hardly blame a family for preferring it."

The room stilled.

Elizabeth saw her mother understand every implication: that the Bennets had abandoned Longbourn for splendor, that royal favor rather than merit sustained them, that their presence in the old house was sentimental intrusion.

Ten years earlier Mrs Bennet would have answered with income, rank, and outrage. Lady Bennet placed one measured stitch into the linen.

"My husband spent six years improving Longbourn before he offered it to your brother," she said. "The cottages have new roofs, the south fields proper drainage, and the house new plumbing. We look backward sufficiently to care for what is behind us."

Caroline's color rose.

"I meant no criticism."

"Then we are fortunate, for I took none."

Sir Thomas, who had entered unnoticed at the final sentence, crossed the room and bent over his wife's hand.

"My dear, Jane is asking for you."

Lady Bennet rose. As she passed Elizabeth, their eyes met. Pride—not vanity, but earned pride—filled Elizabeth so strongly that it hurt.

Bingley followed his sister into the corridor a few minutes later. The door did not fully close.

"You will not speak so to Lady Bennet again," he said.

Caroline's answer came in a hiss. "I spoke no differently than I should to any country acquaintance."

"She is my landlord's wife and Miss Bennet's mother. More importantly, she has been kind to you."

"Kind? She has inspected every room since arriving."

"Her daughter is ill in the house where she raised five children. If she inspects the roof beams, I shall offer her a ladder."

Elizabeth looked down at her hands. She had not expected such steel in Bingley.

Darcy stood near the mantel. His expression suggested he had not expected it either.

"You admire your friend's courage," Elizabeth said quietly.

"I admire his justice."

"Are they different?"

"Justice knows the right action. Courage performs it when affection makes silence easier."

Elizabeth looked toward the corridor. "You speak as if from experience."

"Perhaps from failure."

Before she could ask, Bingley returned.

Jane was well enough to leave Longbourn the next morning. Bingley stood at the carriage step until the door closed, his concern unhidden. Caroline sent a polite farewell from the window. Darcy helped Elizabeth into the carriage.

His hand closed around hers through their gloves. The contact was proper, brief, and far more unsettling than the accidental touch above the sewing basket.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said, "I hope your opinion of Longbourn's present inhabitants has not suffered beyond repair."

She looked at Bingley, who was speaking earnestly to Jane through the open door. "Of one inhabitant, it has improved."

Darcy's eyes darkened with amusement and challenge. "Only one?"

"I have not completed my inspection."

He released her hand. "Then I must hope for another visit."

The carriage moved before Elizabeth found an answer.

* * *

The militia came to Meryton in scarlet coats, polished boots, and a cloud of expectations.

Lydia learned of their arrival before breakfast and announced it before grace.

"Colonel Forster has taken the house near the mill, and there are to be thirty officers—perhaps forty—and Aunt Phillips says two are very handsome and one has been to France."

Miss Harwood looked across the table. "How did Mrs Phillips convey this intelligence before eight o'clock?"

Lydia reached for bread. "Kitty told me."

Kitty nearly dropped the sugar tongs. "I did not."

"Then I dreamed it. How extraordinary that Aunt Phillips wore the same green cap in my dream as when she leaned from her carriage at the gate."

Sir Thomas laid down his fork. "Your aunt stopped at the gate?"

Lydia's eyes moved toward the window.

"For no more than a minute."

"And you were where?"

"Near the gate."

"Having been given leave to walk in the park with Kitty, not to conduct intelligence at the road."

"Papa, the militia will remain all winter. We cannot be expected not to know them."

"I expect you to know those to whom you are introduced. I expect you not to chase news through hedges. These are modest ambitions."

Lydia pressed her lips together, but the sparkle remained in her eyes. An engaged father had not made her less lively. It had simply ensured that

liveliness met boundaries sturdy enough to survive it.

"Colonel Forster and his senior officers will be invited to dinner in due course," Sir Thomas continued. "Until then, you and Kitty will not walk into Meryton without Miss Harwood or one of your sisters."

"Jane and Lizzy may be more distracted by officers than we are," Lydia said.

Elizabeth lifted one eyebrow. "Certainly. I have already embroidered thirty red coats upon my petticoat."

Mary choked on her tea.

Even Sir Thomas laughed, and Lydia accepted defeat with reasonable grace.

Within a week, introductions were made. Colonel Forster was a sensible man in his late thirties, newly married to a cheerful young woman who found Lydia delightful in the limited quantities permitted by formal calls. Captain Carter spoke intelligently of music. Lieutenant Chamberlayne possessed red hair, good manners, and no history in France whatsoever.

Mr George Wickham arrived last.

Elizabeth first saw him outside her aunt Phillips's house. She and Mary had walked into Meryton with Miss Harwood to return a parcel of music. Jane remained at Netherfield receiving Bingley's call, which had become so regular that Lady Bennet no longer pretended surprise.

Mr Denny crossed the street to greet them. The gentleman beside him wore the militia uniform with uncommon advantage. He was handsome in the open, pleasing manner that made acquaintance feel like recollection. His smile included Mary without overlooking Elizabeth, and his bow carried neither Darcy's stiffness nor Bingley's boyish haste.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet, Miss Mary Bennet, Miss Harwood—may I present my friend Mr Wickham? He has joined us only this morning."

Wickham's expression changed when he heard their names.

"The daughters of Sir Thomas Bennet? Then I have long wished to make your acquaintance. Every county in England must know the service your father rendered the King."

Elizabeth had heard variations of this compliment since childhood. Wickham delivered it as if he admired not the royal gratitude but the man who had acted.

"Papa would say every county has found better subjects by now."

"Great courage is always fresh to those who require an example."

Mary glanced at him with shy approval.

A commotion of wheels interrupted them. Bingley's curricle turned the corner with Darcy beside him. Bingley lifted a hand in greeting.

Darcy's gaze moved from Elizabeth to Wickham.

All ease left his face.

Wickham's color changed too, though he recovered with a faint, ironic bow. Darcy inclined his head no more than civility demanded. Bingley looked between them in surprise, but the curricle had already passed.

Elizabeth felt the encounter like a sudden drop in temperature.

"You are acquainted with Mr Darcy," she said after Denny resumed speaking.

Wickham's smile returned more slowly. "We have known one another all our lives. His father was my godfather."

He said nothing further in the street. The omission was artful enough that Elizabeth recognized it and remained curious despite herself.

At her aunt's card party that evening, Wickham allowed the history to emerge.

The Phillipses' drawing room was crowded and over-warm. Lydia and Kitty sat where they could observe every officer. Mary had been persuaded to play a short piece before supper and now occupied a quieter table with Charlotte. Elizabeth found herself beside Wickham during lottery tickets.

"I fear my meeting with Mr Darcy distressed you this morning," he said.

"It surprised me."

"His reaction was plain."

"So was yours."

Wickham looked down at the card in his hand. "I find deceit difficult, Miss Elizabeth, though truth may be imprudent."

Her father's voice rose in memory: *Whenever a man tells you that honesty pains him, Lizzy, attend first to what the pain purchases.*

Sir Thomas had given that advice after a distant cousin attempted to borrow money while praising his own reluctance.

"Then prudence may serve us both," she said. "We need not discuss Mr Darcy."

Wickham looked at her with new appraisal. "You are loyal to him?"

"I scarcely know him."

"Yet you defend him."

"I defend no one by declining to judge a private history from half its participants."

For the first time, Wickham's smile failed to reach his eyes. It returned almost at once.

"You are right to rebuke me. My circumstances have made me sensitive. The late Mr Darcy intended a valuable church living for me. His son denied it after his death. I was young, perhaps foolish, and without the means to contest a powerful man."

He spoke without melodrama. That made the story more persuasive.

"Was the intention written?" Elizabeth asked.

"It was known throughout the family."

Not an answer.

"And you wished to take orders?"

"At one time. Life altered my understanding of my own character."

"Before or after the living became available?"

Wickham's brows rose. Then he laughed, low and appreciative. "Sir Thomas has educated his daughters to cross-examine the world."

"Only when the world volunteers a case."

He leaned nearer, not enough to violate propriety but enough to create the appearance of confidence. "I accepted compensation in place of the living. It was spent unwisely. Later, when I saw my error and requested the position originally intended, Darcy used my former decision against me. That is the whole of it."

Elizabeth heard injury and self-knowledge in his voice. She also heard a gap wide enough to hold many facts.

"It sounds painful," she said.

"Your sympathy honors me."

"I offered understanding, not judgment."

His gaze sharpened. "There is a difference?"

"A considerable one."

Across the room, Mary played with the corner of a card and watched them uneasily. Elizabeth excused herself soon afterward.

On the walk home, Mary remained quiet until Meryton's last lamps fell behind them.

"I did not like the way Mr Wickham spoke of Mr Darcy."

Miss Harwood walked a few steps ahead with Kitty and Lydia, who were disputing whether Lieutenant Chamberlayne had smiled at one or both of them.

Elizabeth lowered her voice. "Because you like Mr Darcy?"

"I do not know him. But Mr Wickham seemed to enjoy being pitied."

Elizabeth considered. "He may have had little else to enjoy."

"Perhaps."

Mary's uncertainty carried more weight than another person's accusation. She rarely condemned and never for sport.

At Netherfield, Sir Thomas waited in the library. He had permitted the girls to attend the party on condition that he hear how it passed, a habit Lydia called interrogation and secretly enjoyed because it prolonged every outing.

Kitty described the officers. Lydia described them more loudly. Mary praised Charlotte's patience during cards. Elizabeth said little of Wickham until her father asked whether the new lieutenant had been present.

"He told me he was the late Mr Darcy's godson."

Sir Thomas's fingers stilled on the arm of his chair. "Did he?"

"And that Mr Darcy denied him a living intended by his father."

"Did you believe him?"

Elizabeth sat opposite. "I believed that he believes himself injured. I do not know whether the injury is justly described."

"Good."

"You know something of him?"

"Only his name. It appeared in correspondence sent to me two years ago by Lord Melbourne's office concerning army commissions purchased with questionable drafts. Nothing was proven against Wickham then."

Mary had followed Elizabeth into the library and stood near the shelves. "Will you tell Mr Darcy?"

Sir Thomas looked at her. "Would you wish me to?"

"If someone told stories about Lizzy, I would want her warned."

Elizabeth turned, touched by the quiet certainty.

"Then I shall determine whether a warning is needed," Sir Thomas said. "But none of you will repeat Mr Wickham's account. A man's charming face does not make his accusation true, and another man's pride does not make it false."

Lydia, lingering in the doorway, sighed. "Must every handsome officer become a lesson?"

"Only the ones who speak."

The following morning Sir Thomas wrote three letters. One went to his solicitor. One went to an undersecretary who had dined at Netherfield after the King's recovery. The third was addressed to Colonel Fitzwilliam, younger son of the Earl of Matlock, whose acquaintance Sir Thomas had made during a royal shooting party.

He did not write to Darcy.

Darcy came to him first.

They met beside the lower lake two days later. Sir Thomas was inspecting damage to a stone culvert when Darcy approached on horseback. He dismounted rather than speak from the saddle.

"Sir Thomas."

"Mr Darcy. Have you come to admire my drainage?"

Darcy looked toward the muddy opening. "Bingley said I would find you here."

"Then my vanity must endure disappointment."

Darcy held his gloves in one hand. Reserve sat upon him like armor, but his jaw was tense.

"I understand Mr Wickham has joined the militia."

"He has."

"He may attempt to impose upon your family."

"In what manner?"

Darcy's silence lengthened.

Sir Thomas waited. Ten years of managing people had taught him what wit never had: silence used patiently was not withdrawal. It was room for another person to decide.

"He is skilled at creating sympathy," Darcy said at last. "His account of our history will not be accurate."

"Then give me an accurate one."

Darcy looked toward the lake. "Some facts are not mine alone to disclose."

"Does the safety of my daughters depend upon them?"

Darcy's head turned sharply. "Potentially."

"Then disclose what is yours, and tell me where the boundary lies."

For several moments Darcy said nothing. Then, in clipped sentences, he described the bequest, the three thousand pounds Wickham accepted instead of the living, his later demand for the church position, and the refusal that followed. He did not mention Ramsgate. Sir Thomas recognized the boundary and did not press—not yet.

"You have documents?"

"Yes."

"Send copies."

Darcy stiffened. "You doubt me."

"I verify matters that may affect my children. I am doing you the courtesy of verifying Wickham as well."

Pride and reluctant respect struggled across Darcy's face.

"Very well."

Sir Thomas stooped to retrieve his walking stick from the grass. "Mr Darcy."

Darcy waited.

"My daughter told me very little of Wickham's tale. Do not punish her in your mind for listening to what he offered without invitation."

Color rose along Darcy's cheekbones. The accuracy of the rebuke was answer enough.

"I have no claim upon Miss Elizabeth's opinions."

"No. But you appear to value them."

Darcy looked across the water rather than reply.

At Longbourn that evening, Caroline found him standing alone in the library.

"Charles says you rode to Netherfield. Was Miss Eliza at home?"

"I went to see Sir Thomas."

"How disappointing. Though I suppose the father is the better connection. The King's brave little knight and all that."

Darcy closed the book in his hand. "There is nothing little in courage performed while armed men attempt to stop it."

Caroline stared.

"And Sir Thomas is not a connection I am pursuing."

"Of course not."

She smiled, but uncertainty entered it.

Darcy left the room. On the hall table lay a forgotten pair of women's gloves. They were brown, practical, and marked with a faint smear of dried mud.

He knew they were Elizabeth's before the servant confirmed it.

For a moment he touched the stain with his thumb. Then he ordered the gloves wrapped and sent to Netherfield without a note, because every note he imagined revealed more than he intended.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Heir and the Ball

Mr Collins arrived at Longbourn expecting cousins and found Charles Bingley at breakfast.

The error might have been corrected in a sentence. Mr Collins required twelve.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I was given to understand that Mr Bennet's family remains in possession—not legal possession, naturally, for the unfortunate entail must in time place the property within my own stewardship, but present occupation, which is a different species of possession altogether—"

Bingley set down his coffee. "Sir Thomas owns Longbourn. I lease it from him. The family lives at Netherfield."

Mr Collins stared. He was a tall, heavy young man whose solemnity appeared too large for his features.

"Netherfield Park?"

"Yes."

"The royal estate?"

"The Bennet estate now."

Caroline entered in time to hear this and took immediate interest in the stranger's discomfort.

"You must be Mr Collins. Sir Thomas mentioned that his cousin was expected."

"Expected here, madam. At Longbourn."

"How fortunate that you began with an inspection of your future inheritance."

Bingley gave her a warning look. "You will be welcome to breakfast, Mr Collins, and I shall send a servant to Netherfield with word of your arrival."

Mr Collins sat, though his eyes continued to travel over the room with the proprietary grief of a man discovering his inheritance occupied by better furniture than he anticipated.

Sir Thomas came for him before ten.

"Cousin Collins," he said, entering the breakfast room. "Welcome to Hertfordshire. I hope Mr Bingley has not charged you rent for the chair."

Bingley laughed. Mr Collins did not know whether he was permitted.

"Sir Thomas, I must offer my most humble congratulations upon the extraordinary distinction which Providence, acting through His Majesty, has seen fit to bestow upon you. My noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has often observed that gratitude to one's superiors—"

"Has she? Then you may tell me in the carriage."

At Netherfield, Mr Collins met Lady Bennet with an apology prepared for inheriting Longbourn. She heard him without agitation.

"Yes, yes, the entail is tiresome," she said. "But Mr Bennet has provided for us very well, and my daughters will not be turned into the lane. You need not look so miserable over it."

This deprived Mr Collins of his best speech.

He had come, in part, intending to marry one of the Bennet daughters and thereby repair the injustice of the entail. His plan had seemed generous at Hunsford. At Netherfield, surrounded by polished wood, fine paintings, and servants who addressed his cousin as Sir Thomas, generosity became calculation in a mirror.

Jane's beauty first fixed him. Lady Bennet informed him, with unusual economy, that Jane was likely soon to be engaged.

Elizabeth alarmed him within an hour.

Mary appeared possible.

She listened when he spoke of Lady Catherine. She did not laugh when he praised the shelves at Rosings. When asked to play after dinner, she performed a quiet sonata with feeling and no display. Mr Collins watched with approval.

Mary felt his attention and missed two notes.

Later she found Elizabeth in their shared sitting room.

"He means to consider me."

Elizabeth looked up from a letter. "Mr Collins?"

"He asked whether a clergyman's wife ought to understand parish music. Then he said Lady Catherine approves of plain young women because beauty encourages idleness."

Elizabeth placed the letter aside. "I shall kill him."

Mary sat beside her. "Please do not. Papa would be inconvenienced."

The dry answer delighted Elizabeth and made Mary smile, but the smile faded.

"Mama did not discourage him."

"Mama may not have understood."

"She understood when he looked at Jane."

Elizabeth took her hand. "What do you want?"

Mary's fingers were cool. "Not him. I know it is foolish to answer before being asked, but I do not want to spend my life being grateful to Lady Catherine for telling me where to place shelves."

"That is not foolish."

"I am not like you. I could not refuse him without everyone watching."

"Then he will not be permitted to ask where you can be cornered."

Elizabeth went to their father.

Sir Thomas heard her without interruption. His face hardened, not against Mary but against himself.

"I invited Collins because I thought acquaintance might ease the future transfer of Longbourn. I did not consider that he would arrive seeking a wife."

"He believes himself benevolent."

"The most exhausting form of ambition."

"Mary is frightened."

Sir Thomas closed his ledger. "Send her to me."

Mary entered with Elizabeth. Sir Thomas came around the desk rather than speak from behind it.

"Your cousin has not proposed?"

"No, Papa."

"Do you wish him to?"

"No."

"Then he shall not. If he attempts it before I speak with him, you may say, 'My father has not given you permission to address me.' Nothing more is required."

Mary's shoulders lowered. "Will he be angry?"

"Possibly. His anger will survive."

She surprised him by stepping forward and putting her arms around his waist. Sir Thomas held her. Over Mary's head, his eyes met Elizabeth's.

He did not joke.

The next morning he invited Mr Collins to walk.

"You may someday inherit Longbourn," Sir Thomas said as they crossed the east lawn. "That possibility does not grant you a claim upon any daughter of mine."

Mr Collins colored violently. "I assure you, sir, my intentions are honorable."

"I believe they are. Mary does not encourage them."

"Young ladies often reject the man they secretly mean to accept."

"Not in this family."

Mr Collins attempted to invoke Lady Catherine. Sir Thomas stopped beneath an elm and looked at him until the name faded.

"You are welcome here as my cousin. You will be treated fairly in every arrangement concerning Longbourn. Do not confuse fairness with indulgence."

That evening the party dined at Lucas Lodge. Charlotte sat beside Mr Collins and asked intelligent questions about Hunsford parish. She did not flatter. She listened, redirected his longest speeches, and gently corrected his belief that boiled potatoes required twenty minutes of praise.

Mr Collins became calmer in her company.

Elizabeth drew Charlotte aside after dinner. "You need not rescue Mary."

"I am not rescuing her."

"Then what are you doing?"

Charlotte watched Mr Collins explain one of Lady Catherine's chimney arrangements to her father. "Considering a situation with open eyes."

"Charlotte."

"He is foolish, not cruel. Hunsford is comfortable. I am seven-and-twenty, Lizzy, and my brothers will not support me forever with delight. Your father has shown that Mr Collins can be checked. I might prefer a husband who requires management to a future that requires permission from everyone."

Elizabeth's protest rose and stopped. Charlotte's face held neither romance nor despair.

"Could you respect him?"

"Enough not to humiliate him. More, perhaps, if he learns."

Across the room, Mr Collins looked toward Charlotte with genuine gratitude when she rescued him from Mr Lucas's attempt to discuss turnip prices.

Elizabeth did not approve. She could no longer pretend not to understand.

By the end of the week, Mr Collins had transferred his admiration with a speed he considered delicacy. Charlotte accepted him privately and insisted that the engagement remain quiet until Sir Thomas reviewed the settlements.

"Lady Catherine has never been asked to revise a settlement," Mr Collins said, aghast.

"Then she will enjoy a novelty," Charlotte replied.

Sir Thomas liked her very much.

* * *

Bingley announced his ball with all the restraint of a boy announcing summer.

"The twenty-sixth," he said at Netherfield. "If Sir Thomas and Lady Bennet approve. I know it is strange to entertain you in your former house."

"It will be stranger if you ask my permission every time you light the chandeliers," Sir Thomas replied. "Give your ball."

Lady Bennet approved of everything except the date, the supper hour, the number of musicians, and Jane's first choice of gown. Her objections were so energetic that Bingley departed convinced she was delighted.

Elizabeth looked forward to dancing and dreaded meeting Darcy with equal determination. The brown gloves had been returned without a note. She had told herself his silence was proper, then wondered why proper silence could feel so pointed.

He had called twice with Bingley. On the first visit, he spoke mainly to Sir Thomas. On the second, he asked Mary about music and listened to her answer. Elizabeth could not decide whether he sought to improve her opinion or whether her opinion had nothing to do with it.

The evening of the ball, Longbourn blazed with light. Carriages curved through the familiar drive. The front doors stood open beneath garlands, and music travelled from the ballroom added by Sir Thomas during the improvements.

Lady Bennet paused in the hall.

One night it's fated mates. The next, it's a slow burn with her worst enemy.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google when you feel like switching things up.

For one unguarded moment, her face changed. She looked up the staircase where she had carried five infants, toward the parlor where she had waited through fevers, proposals never made, bills she had feared, and years in which her husband's laughter had too often arrived from behind a closed library door.

Sir Thomas offered his arm.

"Do you regret it?" he asked quietly.

"Leaving? No." Her fingers settled upon his sleeve. "But I remember."

"So do I."

They entered together.

Bingley met Jane before she had crossed half the hall. Darcy bowed to Elizabeth.

"Miss Elizabeth."

"Mr Darcy."

"May I request the next two dances?"

Directness surprised her. She had prepared for reserve, avoidance, or another silence to interpret.

"You may."

His eyes changed. Relief, quickly hidden.

Their first dance passed under the scrutiny of half the room. Elizabeth felt it in the turn of heads and Caroline's fixed smile.

"We must speak," she said as the figure brought them together. "A silent dance will confirm every rumor about Derbyshire."

"What rumors?"

"That your assemblies are conducted without conversation."

"I was not aware Derbyshire possessed so formidable a reputation."

"You created it in Meryton."

He absorbed the reference without retreating. "I behaved badly that evening."

Elizabeth nearly missed the next step.

"That is almost an apology."

"It was intended as one."

"Then it lacks only the useful portion."

They separated. When they came together again, Darcy said, "I am sorry I spoke of you with discourtesy. My ill humor was mine and did not justify making you its object."

The words were formal, but nothing in his face was easy.

Elizabeth's anger, carefully polished through repetition, lost its clean edge.

"Thank you. I accept."

His shoulders changed by a fraction. "Your father advised honesty without collateral damage."

"Papa heard?"

"He observed."

Elizabeth wished both to laugh and to speak sharply to her father. "He has become inconveniently attentive."

"You do not regret it."

It was not a question.

"Never."

They moved through the figure. Darcy danced with precision but not stiffness. His hand at hers was steady. When another couple crowded Elizabeth's path, his palm hovered near her waist without touching, ready to

protect and restrained from presumption. She felt the absent contact more acutely than a real one.

At supper Caroline attempted a different attack.

"Charles has preserved the house almost exactly as the Bennets left it," she told Mrs Lucas. "One feels they might return at any moment and ask for the keys."

Mrs Phillips bristled. Lady Bennet drew breath.

Jane spoke first.

"Mr Bingley has been an excellent steward of everything entrusted to him. We are grateful Longbourn is full of music and guests again."

Bingley looked at her with such feeling that Elizabeth turned away out of kindness.

Caroline smiled tightly. "Steward is an unusual word for a tenant."

Sir Thomas joined them. "Every owner is a tenant with a longer lease, Miss Bingley. The land remains after us all."

"How philosophical."

"How agricultural."

Darcy's cough concealed a laugh.

Later, Bingley found Caroline in the small morning room. Darcy entered before either noticed him.

"You will cease making the Bennets' ownership a subject of ridicule," Bingley said. "You insult them in their former home while enjoying their furniture."

"I am trying to protect you."

"From what? Jane Bennet's beauty? Sir Thomas's fairness? A family welcomed at Court more warmly than we are?"

Caroline's face hardened. "From imagining that because they are kind, they do not see what you are. Their estate is ancient. Their royal favor is secure. You are the son of a tradesman leasing their entailed house."

Bingley went still.

Darcy stepped into the room. "If that is your fear, Miss Bingley, you have expressed it by behaving as though their consequence were false. It is not."

She turned toward him. "You take their side?"

"I take the side of civility."

"And Miss Eliza's fine eyes have nothing to do with it?"

Bingley's anger gave way to astonishment. Darcy's did not.

"You will not speak of her so."

Caroline stared at him, understanding too much.

Darcy left before Bingley could question him.

In the ballroom, Mr Collins danced with Charlotte and counted every movement aloud. Mary played one set at Bingley's request. Her hands trembled when she began. Georgiana was not there to hear her, but Darcy stood near the instrument with quiet attention. When Mary finished, he thanked her without extravagant praise and asked the name of the piece.

Mary answered with growing ease.

Elizabeth watched him. He glanced toward her and found himself observed. Neither looked away at once.

Wickham had not attended. He claimed business in town, though Elizabeth suspected Darcy's presence explained his absence. The evening was more comfortable without the tension between them.

It was not without consequence.

Near midnight, Bingley and Jane stood in the shadow of the conservatory doors. He said something Elizabeth could not hear. Jane's face softened, then became serious. She answered. Bingley bowed his head as though receiving a precious instruction.

"What do you suppose they discuss?" Charlotte asked.

"If Jane tells me, I shall know."

"You have learned restraint."

"No. Papa has made eavesdropping more difficult."

Charlotte shifted her weight and pressed one gloved hand briefly to her ankle. Mr Collins, approaching to claim the final dance, noticed before she disguised the movement. He fetched a chair and a glass of negus, then offered to surrender the set without mentioning Lady Catherine's opinion of perseverance. Charlotte accepted the drink, rested through one figure, and chose to dance the next. Elizabeth saw surprise soften into gratitude on her friend's face.

Darcy came to Elizabeth instead.

"You have not danced the last with anyone."

"Have you inspected my card?"

"Bingley asked on my behalf."

"Cowardice through friendship."

"Efficiency."

She placed her hand in his.

During the final figure, they spoke less than before. Silence had changed between them. It was no longer dismissal. It held awareness: his fingers closing around hers, the sweep of her skirt near his shoe, the instant before they separated and the pull when the dance returned them to one another.

At the end, Darcy bowed over her hand.

"Thank you."

Elizabeth could think of no teasing answer. "Good night, Mr Darcy."

In the carriage home, Jane confessed that Bingley had asked whether she could be happy living permanently at Longbourn.

Lady Bennet made a sound so sharp the horses seemed to quicken.

"He did not propose," Jane said quickly. "I told him happiness depends more upon the people within a house than its name."

"And what did he say?" Elizabeth asked.

Jane looked down at her gloved hands. "He said he hoped to become one of those people."

Sir Thomas turned toward the dark window. Elizabeth saw his reflection smile.

CHAPTER FIVE

Departures and Promises

Three mornings after the ball, Bingley rode to Netherfield with a question he did not manage to ask.

He found Jane walking beneath the covered terrace with Mary. Lady Bennet received him warmly. Sir Thomas invited him into the library after half an hour and waited.

Bingley sat, stood, examined a painting, and sat again.

"I admire Miss Bennet very much."

"That has not escaped us."

"I would never behave dishonorably toward her."

"I did not imagine you would."

Bingley's fingers tightened around his gloves. "I had thought—after the ball—that I might speak. But Darcy believes I should settle certain business first. My purchase of an estate has been delayed, and my father's investments require review. He says a proposal made while my future is unsettled may be selfish."

Sir Thomas studied him. "Do you believe your future unsettled?"

"Not financially. Only—Darcy knows these matters better."

"I did not ask what Darcy knows."

Bingley looked away. "I am to go to London tomorrow for a fortnight. I wanted Miss Bennet to understand that I shall return."

"Then tell her."

"Directly?"

"You appear to have mastered direct conversation with me."

Bingley left the library chastened and hopeful. On the terrace, however, Jane was no longer alone. Caroline and Mrs Hurst had arrived unexpectedly to collect their brother. Caroline remained beside Jane through the entire farewell.

"We shall be only a fortnight," Bingley said. "Perhaps less."

Jane's smile was gentle. "I hope your business prospers."

"I shall write to Sir Thomas about the estate."

"Of course."

Mr Hurst waited in the carriage while his wife and Caroline collected Bingley. Darcy returned to Longbourn before dinner, and the entire party departed for London the following morning. Bingley's servants covered the furniture and left only the housekeeper and two maids in residence until his promised return.

There were too many listeners and too little courage. Bingley bowed over her hand and left with what mattered still unsaid.

Darcy told himself the separation was prudent.

He had watched Bingley fall in love often enough to distrust speed. Jane Bennet was affectionate, but her composure concealed the degree of it. The Bennets' increased position removed most objections he might once have named, yet Darcy found new ones because caution had become the language in which he disguised control.

Sir Thomas had been knighted yesterday in the reckoning of old families. Lady Bennet remained too loud. Kitty and Lydia were not yet formed. The King's favor could elevate; it could also attract resentment. Bingley, born to trade and aspiring to land, might enter a family whose consequence made him feel less rather than more secure.

Darcy presented these concerns as friendship.

He did not examine why separating Bingley from Hertfordshire also removed Darcy from Elizabeth.

In London, Caroline ensured that every plan extended. A solicitor was unavailable. Mrs Hurst required fittings. An invitation from a duchess could not be declined. Bingley's proposed week became two.

Caroline assured Bingley that Jane remained perfectly serene in Hertfordshire and had made no inquiry after him. She offered the lie lightly, as though reporting the weather.

The letter arrived at Netherfield on a cold December morning.

We are settled for the winter, Caroline wrote. *Charles is much engaged with Mr Darcy and his delightful sister. I hope, in time, to call Georgiana a sister myself. She and Charles are so well suited in temper and fortune that one cannot help imagining what might be.*

Jane read the page in the morning room. Her face did not crumple. She simply became very still.

Elizabeth took the letter. "This is deliberate."

"Perhaps it is true."

"Bingley looked at you as though the rest of us were furniture."

Jane folded her hands. "He left."

The quiet words checked every easy reassurance.

Lady Bennet entered while Elizabeth was reading the final lines. She saw Jane's face and did not begin with outrage. She crossed the room, sat beside her eldest daughter, and held her.

Jane resisted for one breath. Then her forehead lowered to her mother's shoulder.

"I believed him," she whispered.

"So did I," Lady Bennet said. "If he has been false, the shame is his. If he has been foolish, he may yet discover it. But you will not be ashamed for loving honestly."

Elizabeth looked away, tears burning unexpectedly.

Sir Thomas read the letter that evening. Anger moved through him without noise.

"Miss Bingley writes what she hopes, not what she knows."

"It makes no difference if her brother permits it," Elizabeth said.

"It makes some. Not enough."

"Will you write to him?"

Jane lifted her head. "No, Papa. Please."

Sir Thomas turned toward her. "I would not ask him to marry you."

"I know. But I do not want him summoned like a tenant who has broken a gate."

He accepted the rebuke. "What do you want?"

Jane considered for a long moment. "To go to London with you in January. To see Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. To discover whether Miss Bingley will receive me as a friend when I am before her rather than safely in Hertfordshire."

"And Bingley?"

Pain crossed her face. "If he wishes to see me, he knows where I shall be."

Sir Thomas nodded.

Elizabeth's anger fixed upon Darcy. Bingley could be weak, but someone had strengthened his doubt. Darcy had left Hertfordshire after the ball without one farewell call. The memory of their final dance, once warm, became evidence of another kind of arrogance: he had allowed intimacy while deciding his friend's happiness from above.

Two days later, a packet arrived from Darcy containing copies of Wickham's settlement documents and a short note to Sir Thomas. Nothing was addressed to Elizabeth.

She told herself she was relieved.

In London, Bingley's unfinished note to Jane remained folded inside the writing desk in his room at the Hursts' house. He had begun it on his first night there.

Dear Miss Bennet,

I fear I left Hertfordshire without saying what I most wished—

Caroline had entered before he completed it. She did not see the words, but her report that Jane appeared perfectly serene after his departure made the confession seem foolish. Bingley folded the page away.

At Netherfield, Jane folded Caroline's letter into the same small square three times, then placed it in the fire.

She watched until every word was ash.

* * *

Sir Thomas found Elizabeth in the old nursery after midnight.

The room had become a schoolroom years ago, though traces of its first purpose remained: faint scratches on the window seat, a wooden horse missing one wheel, the marks where five small heights had been dated in pencil upon the doorframe. Elizabeth stood before those marks with a candle in her hand.

"You were shorter yesterday," Sir Thomas said from the doorway.

She did not turn. "Jane cried herself to sleep."

He entered and closed the door.

"She would not wish you to tell me."

"She did not. I heard her."

Elizabeth set the candle on the mantel. "I hate him."

"Bingley?"

"Darcy. Bingley is weak, which may be worse for Jane, but it is Mr Darcy who persuaded him. I am certain of it."

"Certainty has arrived before evidence again."

She faced him. "You saw them. You know Bingley meant to speak. What changed except his friend's counsel?"

"Distance, his sister, his own doubt, perhaps Darcy. A conclusion may be correct and still reached badly."

Elizabeth looked toward the heights on the doorframe. "Jane deserves someone who cannot be redirected by the first grave face."

"Yes."

The agreement took the force from her anger.

Sir Thomas sat on the window seat and picked up the broken horse. "The night I saved the King, you asked whether the guards might have killed me. Do you remember?"

"Everything."

"So do I. Not the swords as much as the carriage afterward. You all looked at me as though I mattered to you, and I realized I had behaved as though none of you required me."

He turned the little horse in his hands.

"I had told myself that your mother's nerves excused my absence, that your good sense would supply my neglect, that laughing at folly was superior to correcting it. The King gave me Netherfield, but fear gave me honesty."

Elizabeth sat beside him.

"You changed."

"Slowly. Badly, at first. I hired Miss Harwood as if employing wisdom discharged my duty. She informed me that governesses cannot be fathers. Your mother informed me more loudly."

Elizabeth smiled despite herself.

"I became involved," he continued. "Then I made the opposite mistake. When Jane was sixteen, I refused a young man's calls without telling her because his debts worried me. She had not cared for him, but she rightly objected that I had decided for her."

"You never told me."

"It was Jane's story. I tell you now because I will not repeat it. I shall investigate Bingley's conduct and speak plainly if he comes before me, but I will not arrange your sister's happiness as if it were a tenancy."

Elizabeth thought of Darcy, whose caution had apparently done exactly that.

"What if Bingley never comes?"

"Then we shall help Jane grieve what she believed possible. We shall not persuade her she imagined it."

He set the horse upon the sill. "And you will not let anger at Darcy become a substitute for attending to Jane."

The rebuke was gentle and deserved.

Elizabeth leaned her head against his shoulder as she had not done since childhood. "I am glad the King ate that sugar plum."

Sir Thomas's chest moved with a laugh. "Do not say so within hearing of the Queen."

Preparations for London occupied the following weeks. The Bennets kept a modest house in Brook Street during the season, purchased after Jane's presentation. Lady Bennet considered it small. Sir Thomas considered any house in London large enough if it possessed doors that closed.

Mary's anxiety increased with each fitting.

"I shall trip," she said while Madame Laurent pinned the hem of her presentation gown.

"Then I shall trip beside you," Elizabeth answered.

"That would make it worse. Everyone would remember both of us."

"Very well. I shall create a more interesting scandal on the opposite side of the room."

Mary's reflection almost smiled.

Jane joined them in London, staying first with the Gardiners in Gracechurch Street. She insisted this had nothing to do with Bingley.

"It has everything to do with Aunt Gardiner," she said.

Elizabeth did not challenge the fiction. Their aunt's warmth and uncle's good sense were reason enough.

The morning after their arrival, Jane sent a note to Caroline. A reply came two days later, affectionate in words and empty in feeling. Miss Bingley

was overwhelmed with engagements. She hoped to call when possible.

She did not mention her brother.

Jane read the letter and placed it on the desk. "Now I know."

"You know Caroline is false."

"I know I need not wait for her friendship. The rest is still Mr Bingley's choice."

Her voice trembled only on his name.

Elizabeth embraced her. Jane permitted it, then straightened.

"You must go to your dancing master. Mary will panic if you are late."

"Mary will panic if I am early."

"Then arrive precisely."

In that, at least, Jane could still direct someone.

CHAPTER SIX

London Lessons

Darcy saw Elizabeth first at the Royal Academy, standing before a landscape and arguing with Colonel Fitzwilliam about sheep.

"They are not too small," she said. "The valley is meant to appear immense."

"They resemble crumbs."

"You have spent too much time at military maps. Every object need not announce its scale."

The colonel laughed. "Darcy, settle this. Are those sheep or the remains of luncheon?"

Elizabeth turned.

Surprise crossed her face, followed by reserve. It struck Darcy more sharply than open dislike.

"Miss Elizabeth."

"Mr Darcy."

Colonel Fitzwilliam looked between them with interest. "You are acquainted."

"Our families are neighbors in Hertfordshire," Elizabeth said.

Not friends. Not even recent dance partners.

Darcy examined the painting because it was safer than examining her. She wore dark green beneath a pelisse trimmed in black. London had not altered her confidence, but the setting altered how others received it. Two ladies nearby had already greeted her. An elderly gentleman bowed as he passed. She was neither dazzled nor disregarded.

"They are sheep," Darcy said.

The colonel groaned. "Family loyalty."

"To whom?" Elizabeth asked.

"The artist is a distant cousin. Darcy has condemned himself."

Her mouth almost curved. "Then truth and diplomacy have finally been introduced."

Darcy remembered their first dinner. The recollection warmed him and then collided with the knowledge that he had helped wound her sister.

"How is Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth's eyes cooled. "She is well."

"And your family?"

"Also well."

Colonel Fitzwilliam, sensing something beneath the civility, said, "Sir Thomas wrote to me concerning Wickham. I have sent what information I possess."

Elizabeth turned to him. "Thank you."

"Your father is a formidable correspondent. I received four questions, each of which made every easy answer impossible."

"That sounds like Papa."

Darcy heard pride in her voice. He had once imagined Sir Thomas's involvement a performance born of recent elevation. Now he knew it had outlasted novelty and praise. Darcy wondered what might force the same honesty from him.

They continued through the gallery together. Colonel Fitzwilliam kept conversation easy. Elizabeth spoke of technique, weather, and one portrait's unfortunate hands. Darcy listened more than he spoke.

At a crowded doorway, a gentleman backed toward Elizabeth without seeing her. Darcy placed his hand lightly at the center of her back and guided her aside.

She stilled.

His palm felt the warmth of her through two layers of cloth. He removed it at once.

"Forgive me."

"There was nowhere else to move."

Her voice was quiet. The air between them changed.

Colonel Fitzwilliam turned from the next painting and looked far too amused.

Elizabeth left with her aunt soon afterward. Darcy watched until the green pelisse disappeared into the crowd.

"You neglected to mention her," the colonel said.

"There was nothing to mention."

"You look at nothing with remarkable concentration."

Darcy walked on.

He encountered the Bennets repeatedly after that. Sir Thomas attended a dinner at the home of a cabinet minister who admired his estate reforms. Lady Bennet occupied a box at the opera and whispered too loudly during an aria, then silenced an impertinent gentleman with a remark so direct that Darcy's aunt laughed for five minutes. Elizabeth and Mary attended a musicale at the Fitzwilliams' London house.

There Darcy observed Elizabeth with Lady Matlock.

She did not flatter. She answered questions fully, asked her own, and allowed the countess to discover her wit rather than displaying it. When Lady Matlock mentioned the King's gratitude, Elizabeth redirected attention to the estate schools Sir Thomas had established.

"His Majesty gave Papa land," she said. "Papa thought the best thanks would be making it useful."

Darcy had known heirs who treated inherited estates as proof of merit. Sir Thomas treated a gifted one as debt.

Mary stood near the pianoforte, pale with nerves. Elizabeth remained within sight without hovering. When asked to perform, Mary declined once. At the second request she looked toward Elizabeth, received a small nod, and sat.

Her playing was exquisite.

Not brilliant in Caroline's sense—no rapid passages chosen to display agility—but controlled, thoughtful, and deeply felt. The room quieted for reasons beyond politeness.

Darcy thought of Georgiana.

Afterward he approached Mary. "My sister would admire your interpretation. She plays the same piece but rushes the second movement when anxious."

Mary's eyes widened. "I used to rush it. My master made me practice the left hand alone for a month."

"Would you tell her that?"

"Tell Miss Darcy?"

"She is in town. If Sir Thomas permits, perhaps you might meet."

Mary looked at Elizabeth, who looked at Darcy. Distrust remained, but surprise softened it.

"Mary would enjoy that," Elizabeth said.

"Would you accompany her?"

The question held more than necessity. They both heard it.

"If Mary wishes."

Mary looked between them. "I believe I do."

Across the room, Caroline Bingley watched the arrangement form.

She had come expecting Georgiana to secure Darcy's distance from the Bennets. Instead, his sister would become another bridge.

Caroline left early and went directly to the Hursts' house.

"You will never guess whom Darcy invited to meet Georgiana."

Bingley looked up from the unfinished letter he had taken from his desk again. "Miss Bennet?"

Hope transformed his face so quickly that Caroline understood how little her work had accomplished.

"Miss Mary Bennet," she said. "And Miss Eliza, naturally. Jane is still hidden in Gracechurch Street."

Bingley stood. "She is in London?"

Caroline wished the sentence back.

"For a visit. She has made no effort to see us."

"Did you call upon her?"

"I have been occupied."

"Did you know she was here?"

The room seemed to contract.

"Louisa mentioned a note."

Bingley looked at his sister as if seeing a familiar portrait cleaned of flattering varnish.

"Where is Darcy?"

"At Matlock House, I suppose. Charles—"

He was gone before she reached the door.

* * *

Georgiana Darcy expected Mary Bennet to be dazzling.

Her brother had praised Miss Mary Bennet's playing three times in four days, which from him amounted to public acclaim. Georgiana imagined a confident young woman who would hear every fault in the first measure and wonder why Darcy had burdened her with an inferior performer.

Mary expected Georgiana to be perfect.

Miss Bingley had described her accomplishments, figure, taste, and fortune so completely that Mary saw no space left for ordinary breath.

They met in Darcy's music room and feared one another for seven minutes.

Elizabeth sat with Mrs Annesley near the fire. Darcy stood by the window pretending to read a letter. Georgiana asked whether Mary preferred Mozart or Haydn. Mary answered too softly. Georgiana repeated the question, then apologized for making her repeat the answer. Silence descended.

Elizabeth caught Darcy's eye. His helplessness was unexpectedly endearing.

Mary noticed a folio open on the pianoforte. "Is that the Dussek sonata?"

Georgiana turned. "Yes. I cannot make the final page sound like anything but an exercise."

"Neither could I."

"But you played it at Lady Matlock's."

"After failing at it for six months."

The confession altered everything.

Within ten minutes they sat side by side at the instrument. Mary demonstrated the left-hand practice her master required. Georgiana admitted she hurried when nervous. Mary admitted she sometimes became so conscious of listeners that notes disappeared from the page.

"I imagine them all leaving," Georgiana said.

Mary looked at her in wonder. "I imagine the room empty before I begin."

They laughed with the astonishment of discovering a private oddity shared.

The alpha wants his mate back. She wants a better apology.

If you like your werewolf romance with some groveling, take a look at Lokepub.

Darcy lowered his unread letter.

Elizabeth watched his face as Georgiana relaxed. Tenderness, relief, and an old fear remained there. He did not look like a proud man granting favor. He looked like a brother who had been unable to give his sister ease and was grateful to the person who could.

"She has not laughed so with a new acquaintance since Ramsgate," he said quietly.

The name meant little to Elizabeth then, though the shadow in his voice did.

"Mary rarely does either."

"You delayed your presentation for her."

Elizabeth turned. "Who told you?"

"My aunt."

"It was not a sacrifice."

"Two seasons?"

"I had no urgent desire to walk backward in feathers."

"You altered your own plans so she would not be alone."

"Would you not do the same for Georgiana?"

"Yes."

"Then do not praise me for loving my sister as you love yours."

His gaze held hers. "I was not praising you. I was correcting an opinion."

Elizabeth felt the words land between them.

"Which opinion?"

"That your confidence made you careless of quieter feelings."

She ought to have resented being judged at all. Instead she remembered how readily she had reduced him to pride.

"And is it corrected?"

"Entirely."

Their voices had lowered. Across the room Mrs Annesley concealed a smile.

The door opened abruptly. Bingley entered, followed by a footman whose attempt to announce him came too late.

"Darcy, I must speak with you."

He stopped when he saw Elizabeth and Mary. Color rose in his face.

"Miss Elizabeth. Miss Mary. Forgive me. I did not know you were here."

Elizabeth rose. "Mr Bingley."

Mary's hands left the keys. Georgiana looked between the adults.

Bingley struggled visibly. "Is your sister well?"

"Jane is at my uncle's house."

"In Gracechurch Street?"

"Yes."

"How long has she been there?"

"Twelve days."

His face changed. "I did not know."

Elizabeth believed him, which made his ignorance no less damning.

"She wrote to Miss Bingley."

"I learned that only this morning."

Darcy stepped forward. "Bingley, not here."

"Why not? Miss Elizabeth has a right to know that I did not ignore her sister knowingly."

"Jane had a right to expect you would discover where she was," Elizabeth said.

Bingley flinched. "Yes."

The simple acceptance checked her anger.

"I thought she did not care for me," he continued. "I was told her manner showed only kindness. That she would be equally serene if I never returned."

Elizabeth met Darcy's gaze.

He did not evade her gaze.

"I advised him so," Darcy said.

Mary drew a quiet breath. Georgiana's hands tightened in her lap.

Elizabeth wanted to speak with the full force of weeks of anger. The presence of the younger women restrained her.

"Then you mistook reserve for indifference," she said.

"I did."

"And believed yourself entitled to decide what your friend should risk."

Darcy's face went pale but remained open. "Yes."

Bingley turned toward him. "You told me her family expected the match."

"They did. That did not prove her feelings."

"You told me Caroline believed Jane relieved by our departure."

"I should not have trusted Miss Bingley's judgment where her wishes were engaged."

"And Georgiana?" Bingley asked. "Did you ever imagine us together?"

Georgiana looked stricken.

Darcy answered at once. "No. I mentioned that you regarded her with brotherly affection. Miss Bingley constructed the rest."

Bingley breathed out. Anger and relief moved through him together.

"I am going to Gracechurch Street."

"Not without notice," Elizabeth said. "Jane is not an appointment you may reclaim because your information improved."

He turned to her. "What should I do?"

"Write to Sir Thomas," Elizabeth said. "Tell him the truth, accept his rebuke, and ask whether Jane wishes to receive you. You forfeited the privilege of approaching her without first accounting to her father."

Bingley nodded, chastened but resolute. "I shall write before I sleep."

He left as abruptly as he had entered.

Silence remained. Mary rose from the pianoforte and went to Elizabeth. Georgiana looked at her brother with sorrow rather than condemnation.

"William," she said, "you thought you were protecting him."

"I thought my judgment superior to his hope."

Elizabeth had never heard a man condemn himself so plainly.

Mrs Annesley suggested that Mary and Georgiana take tea in the adjoining room. Mary hesitated, unwilling to leave Elizabeth, but she understood the

request in her sister's eyes. Georgiana took her hand. They went together, while Mrs Annesley settled with her workbasket beside the open connecting doors.

Elizabeth and Darcy remained near the fire. Mrs Annesley's needle moved steadily in the doorway.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Jane is the person owed that apology."

"I shall give it if she permits me."

"Why did you do it? Truly. Her family is respectable. My father has wealth and consequence. Even Mama's loudness cannot outweigh every good quality."

Darcy looked toward the open doorway through which Georgiana had gone. "Bingley trusted me. Georgiana needed me. I grew too certain that being useful made me right."

"And Jane's composure made your conclusion convenient."

"Yes."

"You hurt her."

"I know."

Elizabeth picked up her gloves. "Knowing is not repair."

"No."

He did not ask her forgiveness. He did not say he had acted for Bingley's good. He stood and allowed her anger to remain hers.

At the door, Elizabeth paused.

"Mary has not laughed so with a new acquaintance in years. Thank you for bringing them together." Darcy bowed his head. "The credit is theirs."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Tenant Answered

Bingley's letter reached Sir Thomas at Brook Street the following morning.

It contained neither ornament nor excuse. Bingley admitted that he had left Hertfordshire intending to return, allowed other people to prolong his absence, accepted Darcy's doubt about Jane's feelings, and remained ignorant of her presence in London because Caroline concealed it. He blamed neither friend nor sister for choices he had made. He asked permission to call upon Sir Thomas and, if Jane wished it, to apologize to her at Gracechurch Street.

Sir Thomas read the letter twice, then sent a reply requiring Bingley's presence at eleven.

Bingley arrived at Brook Street twelve minutes early and spent eleven of them walking beneath the windows. Sir Thomas let him in at the appointed hour.

"You displayed affection toward my daughter before an entire neighborhood," Sir Thomas said once the library door closed. "Then you vanished and left your sister to explain your intentions. Do you understand what that did to Jane?"

Bingley held Sir Thomas's gaze. "It made my regard appear like entertainment and her trust appear foolish. Neither was true, but both were my doing."

"Mr Darcy advised you."

"He did. I chose to obey him because doubt frightened me more than leaving frightened Jane."

"Miss Bingley deceived you."

"She did. I made deception easy by asking everyone except Jane what Jane felt."

The unqualified answer checked some of Sir Thomas's anger, though not enough to spare Bingley the remainder of the interview. He questioned him about Longbourn, the winter absence, Caroline's conduct, and the difference between seeking counsel and surrendering judgment.

At last Bingley said, "I do not ask you to forgive me on Jane's behalf. I ask only that you discover whether she will permit me to call. If she refuses, I shall return to Longbourn and trouble her no further."

"You will return to Longbourn regardless. An estate does not cease requiring its tenant because the tenant has made himself unhappy."

"Yes, sir."

Sir Thomas allowed the silence to stand. Bingley did not fill it with promises.

"I shall ask my daughter what she wants," Sir Thomas said. "You will hear from me afterward."

At Gracechurch Street that afternoon, Sir Thomas gave Jane the letter. He remained beside the fire while she read it; Mrs Gardiner sat near the window, mending one of her son's cuffs.

Jane lowered the page. "He wrote to you first."

"As he ought."

"Did you frighten him?"

"I attempted clarity. Fright may have assisted."

Jane read the letter again. Bingley had confessed persuasion without pretending powerlessness. He had not asked Sir Thomas to command an interview or used love as a reason she must receive him.

"I will see him," she said. "Here, with Aunt Gardiner present. But I do not wish him to propose. Not yet."

Sir Thomas folded his hands over his walking stick. "Then he will be told precisely that."

Bingley's first call took place the next afternoon. Mrs Gardiner poured tea; Sir Thomas remained with Mr Gardiner near the hearth; Elizabeth occupied the window seat with sewing she did not complete.

Bingley entered pale, carefully dressed, and without Caroline. Hope moved across his face when Jane greeted him, but he did not mistake courtesy for pardon.

"I am sorry," he said when Jane invited him to speak beside the window. "I made my affection visible enough to encourage expectation and then treated it as something another man might judge for me. You deserved a question before I accepted an answer."

Jane met his eyes. "Did you believe I felt nothing?"

"Darcy believed it. I feared it. I preferred his certainty to the risk of discovering the truth."

"And what will you do when Mr Darcy doubts me again? Or your sister? Or someone whose opinion appears wiser than mine?"

"Bring the doubt to you," Bingley answered. "Not as an accusation, and not after I have acted upon it. I will ask. Then I will listen."

Jane's composure trembled, but she did not rescue him from discomfort. They spoke for another quarter hour about his departure and Caroline's concealment. When the call ended, Bingley asked only whether he might come again.

"In two days," Jane said. "If Aunt Gardiner agrees."

The second call was less painful and therefore more revealing. Mrs Gardiner escorted them through Russell Square with Elizabeth beside her, close enough for propriety and far enough to allow conversation. Bingley described his return to Longbourn, the frozen pipes, and the work neglected during his absence.

"I thought purchasing another estate would prove I was settled," he said. "Now I think remaining where I gave my word may prove it better."

"Longbourn is not a punishment," Jane replied.

"No. It is a responsibility I nearly abandoned because London made indecision comfortable."

Jane asked what he intended to do about Caroline. Bingley did not boast that he could reform his sister. He said Caroline would apologize before entering Jane's home again and that Jane would decide whether the apology earned anything beyond civility.

On his third call, he brought no flowers and made no speech. He carried a packet of estate accounts Sir Thomas had requested and spent half an hour with Mr Gardiner discussing investments before joining the ladies. Jane noticed the effort because it was useful rather than theatrical.

They spoke of ordinary married life: where they might live, how often family would visit, what obligations came with Longbourn, and whether Bingley's friendliness sometimes became agreement before thought. Jane admitted that her serenity could hide opinions she expected others to discover without being told.

"Then we must both become plainer," she said.

"I shall require practice," Bingley answered. "But I would rather practice with you than appear agreeable without being trustworthy."

Twelve days after the first call, Bingley asked Sir Thomas for permission to address Jane. Sir Thomas questioned him about income, settlements, Longbourn's lease, and the obligations of a husband whose sister had injured his intended wife. Bingley answered without evasion.

"I consent because Jane has chosen to receive you again," Sir Thomas said. "Do not turn her courage into proof that the injury was small."

"I will remember it was large enough to require her courage," Bingley replied.

The proposal took place the following afternoon in the Gardiners' back parlor. Mrs Gardiner developed a determined interest in the shelves while Jane and Bingley stood near the window.

Bingley began too quickly, stopped, and tried again. "Jane, I loved you before I understood that love without steadiness can wound as surely as indifference. I cannot promise never to be foolish. I can promise never again to make another person the judge of what I owe you. Will you marry me?"

Jane laughed through tears. "Yes. I believe you have begun to understand the difference."

He took both her hands and waited until she closed the distance between them.

Sir Thomas sent a note to Brook Street. Lady Bennet arrived before the messenger could reasonably have returned, having already ordered the carriage on the strength of her husband's expression at breakfast. She embraced Bingley, then Jane, then Bingley again.

"I knew it from the first dance," she declared. "Though I did not know it last week, naturally, when I believed him faithless."

Jane smiled against her mother's shoulder. "He came back properly, Mama."

Sir Thomas stood beside Elizabeth. "Your mother has completed the settlement. My solicitor may retire."

Elizabeth smiled, but her attention moved toward the door. Darcy did not come. He sent Bingley a short letter of congratulation and departed London for Pemberley the next morning.

Elizabeth told herself his absence made the celebration easier. The lie no longer convinced her.

* * *

Mr Collins had returned to Hunsford three days after the Longbourn ball. Before departing, he called at Lucas Lodge, took formal leave of Charlotte in the presence of her parents, and promised to write once Lady Catherine had approved the wedding date.

His letters had been long, but they had arrived when promised. In February he travelled back to Hertfordshire with the settlement signed and Lady Catherine's written instructions for Charlotte's poultry yard. He and Charlotte married in Meryton church before family and neighbors, breakfasted at Lucas Lodge, and left for Hunsford the following morning. Mr Collins counted their trunks twice. Charlotte remembered to thank him for placing the warm brick at her feet before the carriage started.

* * *

Mary's presentation gown weighed more than Lydia had at birth.

"That cannot be true," Mary said as Hill settled the train across the bed.

"Your mother has never permitted facts to injure a comparison," Sir Thomas replied from the doorway.

Lady Bennet turned. "You should not be here. The girls are dressing."

"They appear clothed. Extensively."

Elizabeth stood near the mirror in ivory silk, silver embroidery tracing the hem. Three white feathers rose from her hair, anchored by a small diamond ornament the Queen had sent for Jane's presentation and later instructed the family to use again. Mary wore pale blue with seed pearls. Her spectacles had been removed; without them, the room beyond several feet softened into color.

"I cannot see," she whispered to Elizabeth.

"You need see only the person before you. I shall be beside you until the final approach."

"And if I forget the curtsy?"

"Bend before the Queen. Do not sit upon the floor. Everything between is ornament."

Mary made a sound halfway between laughter and panic.

Sir Thomas crossed to her. "Look at me."

She did.

"You are not entering that room to prove yourself worthy of it. You are entering because the Queen invited you. Courtesy is required. Perfection is not."

"What if everyone stares?"

"They will. Half will wonder whether their feathers are taller. The other half will be searching for someone more important."

"Mr Bennet," Lady Bennet protested, though she smiled.

He kissed Mary's forehead without disturbing her carefully arranged hair. "I shall be proud of you if you walk three steps and flee."

"Mama will not."

Lady Bennet's eyes filled. "I shall be proud after I recover."

At St James's, carriages crowded the approach. Trains, feathers, jewels, and uniforms filled the chambers before the Queen's drawing room. Elizabeth felt Mary's hand shake against hers.

"Breathe," she murmured.

"I am trying."

Across the gathering, Georgiana Darcy stood beside Lady Matlock. She wore white and had already been presented the previous year, but she had come at her aunt's request. When she saw Mary, she smiled and touched two fingers lightly to her own wrist—the signal they had invented during practice to mean *slow the measure*.

Mary's breathing eased.

Darcy stood behind his sister.

He had returned from Pemberley the night before. He bowed to Sir Thomas, Lady Bennet, and Jane, who attended in support. His gaze reached Elizabeth and paused.

She saw admiration before he controlled it. Unlike at the assembly, he did not measure and dismiss. He looked as if the sight had struck him somewhere unguarded.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said.

"Mr Darcy."

"Miss Mary. Georgiana has spoken of little else this week."

Mary found a smile. "She promised not to tell you how often I stepped upon my train."

"She told me only that she did so more often."

Georgiana looked betrayed. "William."

Their laughter drew several glances, but it also restored Mary to herself.

Caroline Bingley approached in orange silk bright enough to challenge the chandeliers. Her curtsy to Lady Bennet was correct. Her apology had been offered in private two days earlier at Bingley's insistence and accepted by Jane with cautious grace.

"How lovely you both look," she said. "The family diamonds are especially charming, considering they are so newly bestowed."

Lady Matlock's brows rose.

Elizabeth understood the barb: borrowed royal jewels, borrowed consequence, an estate received rather than inherited.

Lady Bennet opened her fan. "The ornament belongs to the Queen. We return it after each presentation. I find that a borrowed diamond shines exactly like an inherited one, but carries less responsibility when the clasp appears weak."

Lady Matlock laughed aloud.

Caroline colored. "How practical."

"The last ten years with Mr Bennet have taught me something."

The line began to move. Conversation ceased. Mary gripped Elizabeth's fingers once, then released them as etiquette required.

Elizabeth entered first.

The room appeared both grand and strangely human: candlelight warming gilded walls, ladies shifting beneath heavy trains, an attendant discreetly retrieving a fallen feather. Queen Charlotte sat at the far end, small, composed, and observant.

Elizabeth approached, made her curtsy, and moved backward as she had practiced. The Queen looked at the diamond in her hair and smiled.

"Another Bennet daughter."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your father still reads agricultural reports on Sundays?"

Elizabeth's surprise nearly disturbed her balance. "He claims they encourage humility, ma'am."

The Queen's smile deepened. "Tell him the King asks after his drainage."

"I shall, ma'am."

Elizabeth withdrew. At the edge of the room, she turned enough to see Mary enter.

Mary took three steps.

Her train caught beneath one heel.

She stopped.

No one gasped. No disaster occurred. Yet terror emptied her face.

Elizabeth could not move toward her. Protocol held everyone in place.

Mary looked past the Queen, toward the cluster where Georgiana stood. Georgiana touched her wrist.

Slow the measure.

Mary breathed, freed the silk with a minute movement, and continued.

Her curtsy faltered slightly and recovered with grace.

Queen Charlotte leaned forward. "You are the musician."

Mary raised her eyes. "I study music, Your Majesty."

"Miss Darcy tells me you play with feeling. That is rarer than speed."

Georgiana turned scarlet. Mary looked toward her friend and then back to the Queen.

"Miss Darcy is generous."

"So is your sister, I understand. She waited for you."

Mary's eyes filled. "Yes, ma'am."

"Then neither of you shall wait any longer. Welcome to Court, Miss Mary Bennet."

Mary withdrew without stumbling.

In the antechamber, Elizabeth caught her before tears could fall upon the silk.

"You did it."

"I caught my train."

"And recovered. That is the doing."

Georgiana joined them. Mary embraced her before remembering where they stood. Georgiana embraced her back.

Darcy watched Elizabeth hold both young women, her own feathers tilting dangerously. Love rose in him without permission and without the old catalogue of objections. It was no longer admiration he might abandon at a prudent distance. It had become a future imagined in pieces: Elizabeth at Pemberley's piano beside Georgiana, Elizabeth arguing with his steward, Elizabeth laughing in rooms grown too quiet since his father's death.

Then he saw Sir Thomas watching him.

The older man's expression was not hostile. It was attentive.

Darcy understood that if he approached Elizabeth, he would not encounter a negligent father easily persuaded by fortune. He would face a man who had once crossed drawn swords and had spent ten years learning not to retreat again.

Strangely, Darcy respected her more for the obstacle.

That evening, at a private supper, Queen Charlotte spoke with Sir Thomas.

"Your daughters did well."

"They did better than I expected, ma'am, and exactly as I hoped."

"The second one was frightened."

"Very."

"Courage is not the absence of it. You know that."

Sir Thomas glanced across the room. Mary sat with Georgiana. Elizabeth spoke to Darcy, her face animated and guarded in equal parts.

"I am still learning, Your Majesty, how many forms courage takes."

The Queen followed his gaze. "Then continue to pay attention."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hunsford

Charlotte Collins had arranged Hunsford Parsonage so that a husband might occupy it without occupying all of it.

Mr Collins possessed the front study, where he could observe Rosings through one window and the road through another. Charlotte kept the small back parlor overlooking the garden. The distance between them was not large, but it was sufficient for peace.

"He is happier when he believes every improvement his own idea," Charlotte told Elizabeth on the second morning of her visit. "I am happier when the improvement exists. We have therefore developed a useful method of conversation."

They walked between early rows of peas. Maria Lucas followed with a basket, listening solemnly.

"And are you happy?" Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte considered rather than offering reassurance. "I am secure. I am useful. Mr Collins consults me more often than he did when we married, and Lady Catherine has discovered that I can hear advice without obeying every syllable. Happiness visits. I do not demand that it occupy every room."

Elizabeth wished for more and knew the wish belonged to her.

"He treats you well?"

"Yes. Your father's conversation with him before the wedding had lasting effect. Mr Collins remains convinced that Sir Thomas may review his conduct in the same manner as the settlement."

Mr Collins returned from a parish call carrying two account books and a detailed grievance about the sexton. The complaint ended when he noticed Charlotte flexing fingers reddened by the cold garden air.

"My dear, you said yesterday that the chill settled painfully in your hands." He moved her chair away from the draught, laid his own wool gloves beside her workbasket, and rang for hot broth. "The sexton can remain mistaken until tomorrow."

Charlotte thanked him without astonishment, suggesting that such consideration had become familiar. Elizabeth lowered her eyes to her sewing and revised, by a small degree, what she believed possible within her friend's marriage.

Elizabeth laughed. "Papa would be horrified by his influence."

"Your father is a useful terror."

Lady Catherine summoned them to Rosings before noon.

She received Elizabeth with the curiosity due a specimen of known but questionable origin.

"So you are Sir Thomas Bennet's second daughter. I remember your father before his elevation. He spoke very little at a dinner in town."

"Papa often speaks least when he is least impressed."

Charlotte bent over her work. Maria looked terrified.

Lady Catherine's eyes sharpened. "You have courage."

"I have been told so."

"And presented at last. Why were you delayed? Illness? Some deficiency in preparation?"

"I chose to wait for my sister."

"Young women do not ordinarily choose the timing of such matters."

"In my family, we sometimes do."

Lady Catherine questioned her about masters, accomplishments, dowry, and royal invitations. Elizabeth answered what courtesy required and declined the rest with a smile.

"Your father has no son," Lady Catherine said. "Netherfield will pass according to the terms of the grant?"

"To whichever of his daughters he designates by will, or in equal shares if he does not. Longbourn remains entailed upon Mr Collins."

Mr Collins bowed from his chair as if the entail were an accomplishment.

"Five women cannot manage one estate," Lady Catherine declared.

"Then it is fortunate we have been taught arithmetic."

Charlotte coughed into her handkerchief.

The arrival of Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam three days later altered every visit.

The colonel called at the parsonage within an hour of reaching Rosings. Darcy accompanied him, though Lady Catherine had surely not commanded such haste.

Elizabeth sat near the window with Charlotte when the gentlemen entered. Darcy's gaze found her immediately.

"Miss Elizabeth. I did not know you were in Kent."

"We arrived last week."

"How long do you remain?"

"Nearly a month."

Relief flickered in his face. "I hope Hunsford is comfortable."

Mr Collins launched into praise of the chimneys. Darcy endured it while Colonel Fitzwilliam seated himself near Elizabeth.

"My cousin has spoken of nothing but drainage since the drawing room," the colonel said. "Your father has ruined him for ordinary conversation."

Darcy looked offended. "I mentioned it once."

"At breakfast, again during the journey, and when we crossed the stream."

Elizabeth smiled. "Papa will be gratified."

Darcy's eyes warmed at having earned it.

He called again the next morning alone. He sat for twenty minutes, spoke to Charlotte about the parish, asked Elizabeth whether she preferred Kent to Hertfordshire, and left having explained nothing of why he came.

"He is in love with you," Charlotte said when the door closed.

Elizabeth stared. "He spoke six sentences."

"Five were to you."

"Mr Darcy is often silent."

"Not with his eyes."

Elizabeth turned toward the window. Darcy crossed the garden path without looking back.

"He admires me," she admitted. "Or did in London."

"And you?"

"I do not know."

That was the difficulty. She had known when she disliked him. She had known when anger over Jane demanded distance. But he had admitted fault,

aided Bingley's return, welcomed Mary to Georgiana, and looked at Elizabeth as if her wit were not performance but invitation.

She had also not forgotten Wickham, though Sir Thomas's inquiries had raised grave doubts. The documents confirmed the three-thousand-pound settlement. Colonel Fitzwilliam's letter described debts and dishonesty. Yet some part of the story remained hidden, and Darcy's secrecy made room for suspicion.

At Rosings, Darcy's aunt displayed the world that had formed him. Lady Catherine interrupted, judged, instructed, and called it benevolence. Darcy sometimes resisted her; sometimes he fell silent with the habit of long practice.

One evening Lady Catherine insisted Elizabeth play.

"You will find my instrument superior to Mrs Collins's. Darcy, move that screen. Miss Elizabeth, sit straight."

Elizabeth played tolerably and without Mary's feeling. Darcy stood near enough to turn pages.

"You mean to frighten me," she said softly, "by coming in all this state to hear me. But I will not be alarmed, though your sister plays so well."

"I know you find great enjoyment in professing opinions which are not your own."

She looked up. "And you find great enjoyment in discovering them?"

"Only yours."

The page beneath her fingers blurred for one beat.

Lady Catherine called from across the room, "What are you saying to Miss Elizabeth, Darcy?"

"That she plays with expression."

"She would play better if she practiced."

Elizabeth finished the piece. Darcy's hand rested upon the edge of the pianoforte near hers, not touching. When she rose, the distance between their bodies was improper only in sensation. She stepped aside.

The colonel joined her the next day on a walk through the grove. He spoke of younger sons, army expenses, and Darcy's character.

"He takes prodigious care of those he loves," he said. "Sometimes more care than they request."

"Mr Bingley might agree."

The colonel glanced at her. "Ah. You know."

"That Mr Darcy separated my sister and Mr Bingley? Yes."

"He rejoices in their engagement now."

"Repentance is useful after damage. Less useful before it."

"You are severe."

"Jane cried."

Colonel Fitzwilliam's expression sobered. "Then perhaps not."

They returned to find Darcy waiting at the parsonage gate. His gaze rested upon Elizabeth's face, then moved to his cousin with unmistakable unease.

That evening he came again.

Elizabeth was alone. Charlotte and Maria had gone to the village, and Mr Collins dined at Rosings to assist with a list of chimney repairs. Darcy entered, learned the circumstances, and ought to have departed.

He did not.

For several minutes they spoke of Jane's wedding plans. Then silence expanded.

Darcy stood. He walked to the window, turned back, and looked at Elizabeth with an intensity that made her heart strike once against her ribs.

"In vain I have struggled," he said. "It will not do."

Elizabeth's hand tightened on the book in her lap.

He took one step toward her.

"You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

Every uncertainty became still.

* * *

Darcy spoke for several minutes before Elizabeth understood that he expected gratitude.

His love was plain. So was the struggle preceding it. He described the inferiority of her connections without calling them inferior, the recent origin of her family's consequence, Lady Bennet's want of quiet, the entail that left Longbourn to Mr Collins, and the objections of relations who valued ancestry beyond royal favor.

He praised Sir Thomas, then made the praise another obstacle overcome.

"Your father's conduct and stewardship command my respect," he said. "Yet Netherfield has belonged to your family only a decade. My duty to Pemberley, to Georgiana, and to the expectations attached to my name required consideration. I have considered. I can resist no longer."

He stopped before her.

His face held hope, fear, and a confidence so deeply rooted he did not recognize it.

Elizabeth rose because she could not refuse him while seated beneath his gaze.

"In such cases as this, I believe the established mode is to express a sense of obligation," she said. Her voice sounded distant to her own ears. "If I could feel gratitude, I would thank you. But I cannot accept your proposal."

Darcy stared.

He had prepared for emotion, perhaps hesitation. Not refusal.

"You cannot?"

"No."

Color drained from his face and returned in a hard line across his cheekbones. "May I ask why I am rejected with so little effort at civility?"

Elizabeth's hurt ignited.

"I might ask why, with so evident a design of offending me, you chose to say you liked me against your reason, your character, and the judgment of everyone connected to you."

"I spoke honestly of difficulties that would have existed whether named or not."

"You spoke as though your honesty made the insult generous. My family is good enough to educate your sister's friend and welcome your closest companion; Jane is good enough to marry him—but loving me is still an act of condescension."

"I did not say that."

"You described it."

Darcy turned away, then back. "My objections concerned circumstance, not worth."

"You separate them very neatly when it serves you."

The fire snapped behind the grate. Outside, a carriage passed on the road, wheels muffled by damp earth.

"Is this your only objection?" he asked.

"No."

His expression closed.

Elizabeth thought of Jane at the Gardiners' window, holding Bingley's letter. "I have every reason in the world to think ill of you. You separated Mr Bingley from Jane. You concealed her presence in London. You judged her heart without asking her and congratulated yourself upon friendship."

"I have admitted my error."

"To me. Did you sit beside Jane while she tried not to weep? Did you watch her wonder whether she had imagined every look and word? Your admission did not endure that. She did."

Darcy's jaw tightened. "I did not conceal Miss Bennet's presence. Miss Bingley did."

"And you knew Bingley remained ignorant."

"Not until later."

"Yet you were content when he stayed away."

He could not deny it.

"I believed her indifferent," he said. "I was wrong. I assisted their reconciliation once I understood."

"Because the evidence changed, not because you questioned your right to govern him."

The accusation reached deeper than she knew. Darcy took a breath, but she had not finished.

"And Mr Wickham."

His face transformed. "What has he said to you?"

"Enough to claim that you denied him what your father intended. Papa's inquiries support your account of the living and the money, but there is more. Everyone behaves as though some great danger must remain unnamed. You demand trust while withholding the truth."

"The truth concerns another person whose reputation I will not expose."

"Then say so without treating every question as insolence."

"Wickham is not entitled to your sympathy."

"That is precisely the manner I mean. You do not explain. You pronounce."

Darcy went still.

Elizabeth heard her own breathing. Anger had carried her beyond caution, yet nothing she said felt false.

"If you believed me arrogant," he said, very quietly, "why did you dance with me? Why come to my house? Why allow me to hope?"

The question hurt because it was not wholly unjust.

"I did not know the extent of my anger until you asked me to overlook it. And I did not understand your purpose. You were kind to Mary. You love Georgiana. You apologized for the assembly. I thought—"

She stopped.

"What did you think?"

That he might be better than her first judgment. That she had begun to anticipate his calls. That the sight of him at Court made her feel seen rather than measured.

"It does not matter."

Pain entered his face before pride covered it. "It matters to me."

"Then know this: I might have respected the man you were becoming. But tonight you offered me the same judgment dressed as love."

He recoiled as if struck.

For several seconds neither moved.

When Darcy spoke, every word was controlled. "You have said enough. I comprehend your feelings and have only to be ashamed that mine were expressed in a manner which caused offense. Forgive me for taking so much of your time."

He bowed.

At the door he stopped but did not turn. "My care for my sister is not a disguise. Whatever else you believe of me, do not doubt that."

"I do not."

His shoulders lowered by a fraction. Then he left.

Elizabeth remained standing until the outer door closed.

The room seemed too small for the force of what had occurred. She sat, rose again, and crossed to the window. Darcy walked rapidly toward Rosings without hat or greatcoat, though rain had begun.

She expected triumph. She had defended Jane, challenged arrogance, and refused to be purchased by wealth.

Instead her hands shook.

He had loved her.

Not admired. Not intended to flirt. Loved, with enough force to disturb every expectation of his life. The offer had been insulting, but the feeling had not seemed false.

Elizabeth pressed her palm against the cold glass.

Charlotte returned to find her before the dead fire.

"Lizzy?"

Elizabeth looked up. The compassion in Charlotte's face broke the last of her composure.

"Mr Darcy proposed."

Maria gasped. Charlotte sent her upstairs with a look.

"And you refused him."

"How do you know?"

"Because if you had accepted, you would not look bereaved."

Elizabeth laughed once, painfully. "He spoke of overcoming us. Papa's new title. Mama. The entail. He separated Jane and Bingley. He still commands rather than explains."

"Then you were right to refuse."

"Yes."

Charlotte sat beside her. "Being right does not prevent grief."

Elizabeth covered her face.

At Rosings, Darcy entered through the side door drenched and found Colonel Fitzwilliam in the billiard room.

"Good God, Darcy. What happened?"

Darcy removed his wet gloves one finger at a time. "I asked Miss Elizabeth to marry me."

The colonel's surprise became delight, then alarm. "She refused."

Darcy looked at him.

"You look as if she shot you."

"She was more accurate."

The colonel poured brandy but did not offer easy consolation. "What did you say?"

Darcy repeated enough.

By the end, Colonel Fitzwilliam closed his eyes.

"You informed a woman you professed to love that her family was beneath you?"

"Not in those words."

"Words seem to have been the principal difficulty."

Darcy took the brandy and did not drink.

"She accused me of offering the same judgment disguised as love."

"Was she wrong?"

The answer came too quickly in Darcy's mind and too slowly to his mouth.

"No."

Rain struck the windows. Somewhere above, Lady Catherine rang for a servant with imperious force.

Darcy thought of Elizabeth at Netherfield saying the King's greatest gift had been a father who learned to leave his library. Sir Thomas had changed after seeing death an inch away. Darcy had believed himself more disciplined, more responsible, less in need of correction.

Now the future he had privately built—Elizabeth at Pemberley, Elizabeth with Georgiana, Elizabeth across his breakfast table—vanished because he had asked her to enter it as a concession.

"There is more she must know about Wickham," he said.

"Georgiana?"

Darcy nodded.

"You cannot tell Miss Bennet another woman's secret merely to win an argument."

"No. But I can trust her with it so that she may judge me truly."

He went upstairs and began a letter.

* * *

Elizabeth left Hunsford early the next morning because remaining indoors felt impossible.

The rain had passed. Water hung from hawthorn branches, and the path through Rosings Park shone in broken patches of sun. She walked quickly, as though distance might arrange the disorder of the previous night.

Darcy waited where the path entered the grove.

He looked as if he had not slept. His coat was perfectly fastened, his cravat exact, and his face stripped of every social defense.

Elizabeth stopped.

"Miss Elizabeth."

He held out a letter.

"Do not be alarmed. It contains no renewal of the sentiments which disgusted you. I ask only that you read it."

She accepted it. Their fingers did not touch.

Darcy bowed and walked away before she found a reply.

The letter was thick, written closely, and sealed only once. Elizabeth carried it to a fallen tree beyond view of the house.

Darcy began with Bingley.

He admitted observing Jane's preference without understanding its strength. He had known Bingley's attachment and believed it temporary because his friend's affections were easily engaged. Lady Bennet's expectations and the younger girls' liveliness concerned him; the recent rise in the Bennets' consequence had made him question whether Bingley understood the social pressures surrounding the match. Yet he acknowledged that these objections had become excuses after Jane's character proved faultless.

I saw the risks and presumed I must prevent them, he wrote. Bingley's trust encouraged my interference, and I mistook Miss Bennet's reserve for absence of feeling. When Miss Bingley concealed her arrival in London, I did not know immediately. Once I learned it, I allowed the concealment to continue. For that there is no defense.

Elizabeth read the paragraph twice.

He did not soften his guilt. He did not say his intentions excused him. Anger remained, but it could no longer feed upon denial.

The account of Wickham followed.

Darcy described childhood companionship, his father's partiality, the promised living, and the three thousand pounds accepted in compensation.

He enclosed dates and names already confirmed by Sir Thomas's investigation.

Then he wrote of Georgiana.

At fifteen she had been placed at Ramsgate with a companion, Mrs Younge. Wickham renewed acquaintance, won the lonely girl's trust, and persuaded her to agree to an elopement. Her fortune of thirty thousand pounds was the object. Darcy arrived unexpectedly days before the plan. Georgiana confessed. Wickham left.

My sister's name must not be exposed, he wrote. I reveal it because my silence allowed a practiced deceiver to appear merely unfortunate. I withheld the truth from fear for her, not contempt for your questions. My manner gave you reason to believe otherwise.

Elizabeth lowered the pages.

The grove blurred.

She saw Wickham at Aunt Phillips's table, leaning close as he offered suffering calibrated to invite sympathy. She heard his artful reluctance. She remembered Mary's discomfort and her father's caution. Elizabeth had not accepted the tale wholly, but she had enjoyed its agreement with her dislike of Darcy. Skepticism had become another ornament of prejudice: she asked clever questions, then retained the answer that pleased her.

Georgiana, shy and tender, had nearly been carried into scandal at fifteen.

Lydia was fifteen.

The thought made Elizabeth cold.

Darcy ended without apology for loving her, only for the manner in which love had been offered.

You accused me of presenting judgment dressed as love. I cannot deny the charge. You owe me no answer. I shall leave Rosings tomorrow and will not intrude upon you again.

Elizabeth folded the letter with unsteady hands.

"Till this moment," she whispered, "I never knew myself."

Darcy had been arrogant. She had been prejudiced. Neither truth excused the other.

She remained in the grove until the bells at Rosings marked noon.

Charlotte found her returning by the lane.

"You have been gone three hours."

Elizabeth handed her the outer page, then drew it back. Georgiana's secret was not hers to share.

"Mr Darcy explained. About Jane and Bingley. About Wickham. He was truthful."

"Does truth alter your answer?"

Elizabeth thought of the proposal's condescension, then of the letter's humility.

"Not the answer I gave last night. It alters the man to whom I gave it."

Charlotte took her arm. "That may be harder."

"It is."

At breakfast the next morning, Lady Catherine announced Darcy's departure with offense.

"He has business at Pemberley which apparently cannot wait. Fitzwilliam remains. Darcy has been restless since arriving. I told him London society unsettles men who ought to remain upon their estates."

Elizabeth kept her eyes upon her plate.

Darcy did not call at the parsonage again.

Colonel Fitzwilliam came to say farewell on his behalf and his own. He spoke generally until Charlotte left them near the garden door.

"He is ashamed," the colonel said.

"He has cause."

"Yes."

Elizabeth appreciated that he did not defend his cousin into innocence.

"He gave me the whole history of Wickham."

"Then he trusts you as he trusts few people."

"Trust offered after insult is a complicated gift."

"Most valuable things arrive poorly wrapped in our family."

She smiled faintly.

The colonel's expression softened. "I do not ask you to reconsider. But I have known Darcy since childhood. He rarely changes quickly. When he does, it is because something reached the foundation."

"Change must be lived, not announced."

"Agreed."

He bowed and left.

Sir Thomas's final report on Wickham arrived two days later. The evidence confirmed debts in Cambridge and London, forged signatures on two drafts, attempted demands upon Darcy, and a pattern of courting women with accessible money. Colonel Forster had been warned discreetly. Wickham would remain under observation until stronger proof permitted action.

Sir Thomas added a private note to Elizabeth.

You were right to question both men and wrong only where feeling supplied the verdict before facts arrived. This is a common human error and therefore no less dangerous. Mr Darcy's evidence is sound. His judgment of Wickham was correct. Whether his judgment of everything else deserves your trust is a question only time and conduct may answer.

Elizabeth pressed the note between the pages of Darcy's letter.

When she returned to Netherfield in May, the estate was brilliant with hawthorn. Jane's wedding plans filled the house. Bingley came daily and had learned to ask Jane's opinion before altering even the breakfast menu at Longbourn, a reform so enthusiastic that Jane finally told him she did not require consultation over eggs.

Mary missed Georgiana. Kitty and Lydia begged for news of officers. Lady Bennet complained that Charlotte's wedding had been too quiet and therefore Jane's must compensate.

Life had continued while Elizabeth's understanding changed.

One evening she entered her father's library and placed the investigation report before him.

"You knew about Georgiana?"

Sir Thomas looked up sharply. "Darcy told you."

"Yes."

"Colonel Fitzwilliam disclosed it to me under confidence."

"I will keep it."

"I know."

She walked to the window. "I accused him of secrecy as though I were entitled to every truth. He was protecting her."

"He might protect without contempt."

"That is what he wrote."

Sir Thomas leaned back. "Then he is capable of learning."

"Is that enough?"

"Enough for what?"

Elizabeth looked out over Netherfield's lawns. "I do not know."

Her father did not force her to name it.

That summer, when the Gardiners proposed a tour of Derbyshire, Elizabeth accepted before fear could teach prudence the wrong lesson.

CHAPTER NINE

The Reckoning

Georgiana came to Netherfield in June without her brother.

Darcy had completed several weeks at Pemberley and returned to his London house to meet his solicitors. The business was expected to occupy him for another fortnight. Georgiana was to remain in London with Mrs Annesley, but Mary, who missed her friend and wrote twice weekly, persuaded Sir Thomas to invite them into Hertfordshire instead.

"Mr Darcy may object," Mary said after the letter was sent.

"Then he may write a letter so formidable the postman refuses to deliver it," Elizabeth replied.

Darcy did not object. His answer to Sir Thomas expressed gratitude, provided detailed instructions concerning Georgiana's mare, and included a separate note for his sister. Nothing was addressed to Elizabeth.

She was relieved and disappointed in precisely equal measure.

Georgiana arrived pale from the journey and smiling before she left the carriage. Mary met her upon the steps, stopped at the last instant from running, and then forgot restraint when Georgiana opened her arms.

The household adjusted around their friendship. Music sounded from the west room each morning. They walked with Kitty and Lydia under Miss Harwood's eye. Jane came down from Longbourn to plan wedding music and remained to hear Georgiana's account of Bingley's disastrous attempt to choose curtain fabric.

Elizabeth saw Georgiana happy and understood another piece of Darcy. His caution had not grown from pride alone. At twenty-eight he had carried responsibility for a grieving child, a great estate, and a name everyone expected him to protect. He had become controlling by degrees no less comprehensible than Sir Thomas had once become detached.

Comprehensible was not excusable. It was harder to hate.

On the fourth morning, Mary and Georgiana practiced a duet. A folded sheet slipped from between the pages of Georgiana's music and fell beneath the bench.

Mary retrieved it.

There was no direction outside. She assumed it was a copied exercise and opened it before Georgiana turned from the keyboard.

The first line stopped her.

You have ignored two warnings. Five thousand pounds will purchase my silence; nothing less will prevent the truth of Ramsgate from reaching every drawing room before your brother can hide it.

Mary's hand went cold.

Georgiana saw the paper. All color left her face.

"Give it to me."

Mary folded it at once. "I am sorry. I thought it was music."

"Please."

Georgiana reached for it, but her fingers shook so violently that the page rattled between them.

Mary did not release it. "Is it from Mr Wickham?"

Georgiana looked toward the open door.

"How do you know?"

"The writing. At Aunt Phillips's party he copied a verse into my commonplace book. He makes the capital W like two crossed swords. And the word *nothing*—the final stroke turns backward."

"You must forget it."

"I cannot."

"If William learns—"

"He will blame himself," Mary said.

Georgiana closed her eyes.

Mary understood that she had guessed correctly.

"How many letters?"

"Three. The first came in London. It said only that old friends might meet. I burned it. The second described what would be printed if I refused. This one was placed in my music case yesterday in Meryton."

"You went to Meryton with us."

"I left the case in the music shop while Mrs Annesley examined strings."

"A gentleman in a dark coat stood across from the shop when we arrived. I thought nothing of him until I found the letter."

Mary's fear sharpened into anger. "He was near you."

Georgiana gripped the edge of the instrument. "He says he has letters proving I intended to elope. Some are mine. Others he can create. If society knows, no one will care which are forged."

"My family will."

"Your family must not know."

"Then we must tell Lizzy and Papa. They are already investigating Mr Wickham. They will believe you."

Georgiana's head lifted.

Mary held the letter more firmly. "They have already acted to protect others from him. They will protect you now, and they will not spread what you tell them."

"William will challenge him."

"Papa will not permit it."

Georgiana made a broken sound. "Sir Thomas cannot command my brother."

Mary thought of the swords in the story every Bennet child knew. "He is very persuasive when someone is in danger."

They took the letter to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth read it standing by the window. The hand was disguised in places, but Mary's commonplace book confirmed enough. Rage rose so quickly that the room narrowed.

"He put this in your music case?"

Georgiana nodded.

"Did he specify where the money is to be delivered?"

"The old toll house beyond Lucas Lodge. Tomorrow at midnight. He says I must come alone."

"You will do no such thing."

Georgiana flinched.

Elizabeth softened her voice. "Forgive me. You have been ordered enough. What do you wish to do?"

The question surprised her.

"I want it to end. I want William not to fight him. I want not to feel fifteen whenever I see his handwriting."

Mary sat beside her. Their hands found each other.

"Then we shall end it," Elizabeth said. "But not alone."

Sir Thomas read the letter in his library. Lady Bennet was present because Elizabeth refused to treat her mother as incapable of discretion.

Lady Bennet's face went white. "That man came into my sister's house. He spoke to my girls."

"And he shall not again," Sir Thomas said.

"You must send for Mr Darcy."

"I shall."

Georgiana rose. "Please tell him not to challenge Wickham."

Sir Thomas looked at her with the same steadiness he offered his daughters. "I will tell him. I cannot promise what another man chooses, but I can promise you will have a voice in every step we take."

"Even if I am frightened?"

"Especially then."

Lady Bennet crossed the room and sat beside Georgiana. "My dear, fear has never prevented me from speaking. I recommend the practice."

A startled laugh escaped Georgiana. Lady Bennet took her free hand.

Sir Thomas wrote to Darcy, Colonel Forster, and the magistrate. A trusted groom rode south to Darcy's London house with the first letter and changed horses once. Another carried a coded message to Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was dining that evening in St James's.

The plan was still forming when Lydia entered without knocking.

"Papa, I know I am not to interrupt, but Mr Wickham is riding Denny's grey horse along the north boundary."

Everyone turned.

"How do you know?" Elizabeth asked.

"Because the grey has one white stocking and bites at the bit. Mr Wickham covered his uniform with a dark coat, but the red showed when the wind lifted it. I saw from the attic."

Miss Harwood appeared behind her, breathless from pursuit. "She was not forbidden the attic window."

Sir Thomas crossed to the estate map. "Where exactly?"

Lydia pointed. "Here, near the old keeper's path. He stopped where he could see the west drive."

Georgiana's fingers tightened.

"He is watching the house," Elizabeth said.

Sir Thomas's expression became very calm. "Then we shall allow him to see what we choose."

He turned to Lydia. "You did well to come directly."

Praise transformed her. "May I help?"

"You may obey Miss Harwood without argument for the next two days. It will be the most difficult service required of anyone."

Lydia opened her mouth, saw his face, and nodded.

At dusk a carriage left Netherfield carrying a veiled young woman beside Mrs Annesley. Wickham, watching from the boundary, could not know the veiled woman was Kitty wearing Georgiana's cloak, or that Georgiana remained inside with the curtains drawn.

At Lucas Lodge, Kitty and Mrs Annesley slipped through the stable court and entered Mr Lucas's closed carriage. Two servants continued toward London in the Netherfield carriage, preserving the silhouettes behind drawn curtains. Mr Lucas's coach returned Kitty and Mrs Annesley by the eastern service road after dark, well before Darcy arrived.

He followed the carriage toward London far enough for Colonel Forster's men to note his movement.

Then he turned back toward Meryton.

He believed Georgiana had been frightened away from protection.

He did not know Darcy was riding north through the night.

* * *

Darcy reached Netherfield shortly before dawn, mud to his knees and fury held together by exhaustion.

Sir Thomas met him in the hall.

"Georgiana?"

"Safe. Asleep, I hope."

Darcy moved toward the stairs.

"Wait."

He turned with a look that might have stopped another man.

Sir Thomas lowered his voice. "She has spent weeks being commanded by Wickham and years fearing your anger at yourself. When she wakes, you will go to her as a brother, not an avenging guardian."

"He threatened her under your roof."

"And will answer for it. But if you make your rage the largest thing in her room, she will comfort you instead of receiving comfort."

Darcy's hands closed at his sides.

The words were intolerable because they were true.

"What has been arranged?"

"Coffee first. Then you will hear it from Georgiana."

In the breakfast room Darcy found Elizabeth, still dressed from the previous evening, writing out a copy of Wickham's final demand. She looked up.

Everything he had felt at Hunsford moved across his face and was buried beneath the emergency.

"Miss Elizabeth."

"Mr Darcy."

"You were with her?"

"Mary found the letter. Georgiana told us together."

He expected her to come back. She came back for her things.

Sometimes the best romance starts with her walking away. Find your next story on Lokepub.

"Thank you."

The words were inadequate. His voice made them otherwise.

Elizabeth set down the pen. "She is afraid you will challenge him."

"I would like to kill him."

"That is not what she asked."

Darcy shut his eyes for one moment. "No."

"Papa has the magistrate's cooperation. Colonel Forster has confined the regiment to quarters on the pretext of inspection. Wickham believes Georgiana left for London, frightened. We shall answer the demand and deliver marked notes at the toll house."

"We?"

"Not Georgiana."

"Nor you."

Elizabeth's brows rose.

Darcy heard his own tone and stopped.

"Forgive me," he said at once. "I meant that Wickham may be dangerous. I ask that you not go."

"I do not intend to. Papa and Colonel Forster will manage the exchange."

"I shall go with them."

"That decision belongs to you and Georgiana together."

For a moment he said nothing. She had neither softened her answer nor sharpened it to wound him.

"You are right."

At seven, Georgiana came downstairs with Mary. Darcy rose but did not cross the room until his sister moved toward him.

Then she ran.

He caught her against his chest. For a long time he said nothing. Georgiana wept into his coat. His hand trembled where it rested on her hair.

"I am sorry," she whispered.

"No." The word broke. He lowered his forehead to hers. "Never apologize for another man's cruelty. I am sorry you believed you must carry it alone."

She drew back enough to see him. "You will not fight him?"

Darcy's jaw worked.

"If the law fails—"

"William."

He looked toward Sir Thomas, then Elizabeth, and finally back to Georgiana.

"I will follow the plan we agree upon. I will not challenge him."

Relief collapsed her against him again.

The response to Wickham was written in Georgiana's hand because she insisted.

I will pay what you demand. I cannot come to the toll house. My companion will leave the packet beneath the loose stone at the east wall at eleven. The letters must be placed there in return.

Wickham's message had demanded midnight, but Sir Thomas moved the hour to make him react rather than prepare. A stable boy carried the response to a hollow oak along the boundary, the place specified for communications. Colonel Forster's men watched Wickham retrieve it.

Darcy's solicitor was already tracing Mrs Younge through the questionable drafts, though no answer had yet reached Hertfordshire.

By afternoon the magistrate, two constables, Colonel Forster, Colonel Fitzwilliam—newly arrived from London—and Darcy had assembled in Sir Thomas's library.

Lady Bennet ordered food for all of them and then refused to leave until the magistrate explained the charges.

"Attempted extortion, possibly forgery, and unlawful threats," he said. "If the notes he promises are forged in Miss Darcy's name, the matter becomes graver. We must catch him taking the money."

"You will," Lady Bennet said. "He is vain enough to believe every woman frightened of him and foolish enough to believe every father inattentive."

Sir Thomas glanced at her. "An error common in this neighborhood."

She understood the reference to his former self and touched his sleeve.

The packet contained paper cut to the size of banknotes, with real marked notes above and below. Sir Thomas would place it beneath the stone. Colonel Forster and the constables would conceal themselves inside the toll house. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam would wait beyond the rear wall, far enough that Wickham would not recognize their horses.

"I should make the delivery," Darcy said.

"He expects a servant or companion," Sir Thomas replied. "He may flee if he sees you."

"And you resemble a companion?"

"I resemble a father old enough to be underestimated."

The colonel smiled grimly. "He has you there."

At half past ten, Sir Thomas left Netherfield in a plain dark coat. Elizabeth watched from the portico beside her mother.

"He once ran toward swords," Lady Bennet said. "I had hoped he had exhausted his taste for it."

"Papa has no taste for danger."

"That is what makes it worse. Brave men in stories enjoy themselves. Real ones leave their wives standing in doorways."

Elizabeth took her hand.

Inside, Mary and Georgiana waited near the library fire. Lydia and Kitty had been sent to bed but could be heard moving overhead. Miss Harwood sat in the corridor with a book open and unread.

At the toll house, Sir Thomas placed the packet beneath the loose stone and walked away without haste. He entered the shadow of a copse and waited.

Eleven struck from the Meryton church.

No one came.

Fifteen minutes passed. Then hoofbeats sounded on the western road. A rider approached without a lantern, dismounted, and led his horse behind the ruin.

Wickham waited five minutes more.

He circled the toll house, searched the road, and finally knelt beside the east wall. He lifted the stone, drew out the packet, and opened it.

The constables emerged.

Wickham moved quickly. He struck the first man with the packet, vaulted the low wall, and ran toward his horse.

Darcy stepped from the darkness.

For one instant the two men faced each other.

Wickham stopped. His charm did not disappear; it rearranged itself.

"Darcy. You misunderstand."

"Put down the packet."

"Your sister invited—"

Darcy crossed the distance and seized the front of his coat. Wickham's smile vanished.

Colonel Fitzwilliam caught Darcy's arm. "Your promise."

Darcy's fist was drawn back. He saw Georgiana at breakfast, asking him not to make violence another burden she carried.

Slowly, he lowered it.

Wickham used the hesitation to twist free. He reached for the horse and found Sir Thomas holding the bridle.

"You," Wickham said.

"An attentive father is very inconvenient."

The constables closed around him.

In Wickham's coat they found Georgiana's genuine letters from Ramsgate, two forged additions in imitation of her hand, a list of payments demanded, and a pistol he had not managed to draw. The marked notes remained in his grasp.

Colonel Forster removed his insignia himself.

"You are under arrest."

Wickham looked toward Darcy. "You will not permit a trial. Her name will be spoken in open court."

Darcy went rigid.

Sir Thomas answered. "The forged drafts already under investigation will support charges without naming Miss Darcy publicly. The magistrate has the evidence. Your belief that shame makes women silent has failed you."

For the first time, Wickham looked afraid.

Darcy returned to Netherfield after one in the morning. Georgiana waited in the hall. When she saw his uninjured hands, relief crossed her face.

"It is done," he said. "He cannot reach you."

"You did not fight him."

"I nearly did. Colonel Fitzwilliam reminded me."

"But you stopped."

Darcy nodded.

Georgiana embraced him. Over her shoulder, he saw Elizabeth near the stairs.

Later, after Georgiana had gone to bed with Mary in the adjoining room, Elizabeth found Darcy on the terrace. Dawn had begun to pale the eastern

edge of the park.

"Papa says the evidence is sufficient."

"Yes. Wickham will be held for the forged drafts and extortion. The Ramsgate letters can remain sealed unless required."

"Georgiana is free of him."

Darcy looked toward the windows above. "I thought money and secrecy had protected her. They only protected the silence in which he returned."

Elizabeth stood beside him. Their sleeves nearly touched.

"Mary found the letter because Georgiana had begun to trust her," she said. "You helped them meet."

"And then left my sister where Wickham could reach her."

"At Netherfield, with Mrs Annesley and all of us. You cannot become responsible for every evil choice another person makes."

"You once accused me of trying," he said.

"I accused you of making other people's choices. That is different from blaming yourself for them."

The first birds began in the trees.

"At Hunsford," Darcy said, "I told myself your accusations were anger. Then I discovered anger can be accurate."

Elizabeth's breath caught. "And I read your letter and discovered accuracy can coexist with prejudice. I was wrong about Wickham. I enjoyed believing him because it confirmed what I already thought of you."

"Your first judgment of my manners required little assistance from him."

"No."

They almost smiled.

Darcy looked away first. "I meant what I wrote. I will not intrude upon you again."

The promise, once desirable, suddenly felt like loss.

"You are not intruding now."

His gaze returned.

Elizabeth could not offer more—not after one dangerous night, not while gratitude and exhaustion confused every feeling. But she allowed her hand to rest upon the stone balustrade between them, palm open.

Darcy looked at it. He did not take it.
The restraint was its own touch.

CHAPTER TEN

Northward

The Gardiners delayed their journey by three weeks after Wickham's arrest. Sir Thomas would not allow Elizabeth to leave while statements were taken, Georgiana remained unsettled, and the newspapers threatened to turn every rumor concerning an officer into scandal.

In the end, Wickham's prosecution proceeded under charges of forged drafts, attempted extortion against an unnamed family, and possession of a weapon during flight. Colonel Forster removed him from the militia rolls. Mrs Younge, traced through one of the accounts, agreed to testify in exchange for leniency. At that stage, Georgiana's name did not appear publicly.

Darcy stayed at Netherfield for six days.

He spent most of them with Georgiana or Sir Thomas. He spoke to Elizabeth when company brought them together but never sought privacy. His restraint was consistent enough to cease feeling like a performance.

On his final morning, Mary and Georgiana played the duet interrupted by the letter. Darcy turned pages. Elizabeth sat with Lady Bennet near the window.

"He means to go," Lady Bennet whispered, loudly enough that the footman at the door could have confirmed it.

"He has an estate to manage."

"So does your father. He does not flee to Derbyshire every time a woman refuses him."

Elizabeth's head turned sharply. "Mama."

Lady Bennet adjusted her work. "I am loud, Lizzy. I am not blind."

"How could you know?"

"Mr Darcy looked at you before Kent as a starving man looks at dinner. After Kent he looked as if someone had removed the plate."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together. Her mother's metaphors lacked delicacy and possessed accuracy.

"I refused him for good reasons."

"Then keep them until they are no longer good. But do not invent new ones because changing your mind embarrasses you."

Lady Bennet rose to praise the music before Elizabeth recovered.

Darcy departed that afternoon. He bowed over Elizabeth's hand in the hall.

"I hope your journey north is pleasant."

"You know of it?"

"Your aunt mentioned the Lakes."

"We may not travel so far. My uncle's business delayed us."

"Derbyshire offers some tolerable views if the Lakes prove impossible."

The word *tolerable* passed between them. This time both smiled.

"So I have heard," Elizabeth said.

He released her hand. "Goodbye, Miss Elizabeth."

That afternoon he left for Pemberley with Georgiana and Mrs Annesley. Their two carriages travelled by measured stages, stopping for two nights on the northward road. Darcy sent word from each inn so Sir Thomas and Mary would know Georgiana remained well.

After a fortnight at Pemberley, Georgiana and Mrs Annesley went to the Matlocks' Derbyshire seat for a short visit. Darcy remained at Pemberley; his sister was expected home the following day.

In late July, Elizabeth travelled to Gracechurch Street to join her aunt and uncle. The Gardiner carriage left London the following morning. Jane was to marry in October, and Elizabeth welcomed weeks in which no lace, breakfast china, or seating plan required judgment. They travelled through Oxford and Warwickshire, visited Blenheim, endured rain near Kenilworth, and reached Lambton beneath a clear evening sky.

Mrs Gardiner had spent part of her youth there. She greeted streets, shops, and distant hills like old acquaintances who had aged well.

"Pemberley lies five miles away," she said over supper at the inn. "We might tour it tomorrow. The housekeeper admits visitors when the family is absent."

Elizabeth's spoon paused.

Mr Gardiner noticed. "We need not."

"Mr Darcy is home," Elizabeth said. "Or was expected to be."

Her aunt's eyes sharpened with affectionate interest. "Then we shall not intrude."

Elizabeth looked toward the window. Darcy had said Derbyshire offered tolerable views. Had it been invitation or ordinary courtesy? He had promised not to intrude, not demanded that she avoid his county.

"I should like to see it," she said. "If visitors are admitted."

Mrs Gardiner did not smile, which was how Elizabeth knew she wished to.

The next morning a servant at the inn confirmed that Pemberley's master was away visiting a tenant near Matlock and not expected until evening.

Elizabeth dressed with unreasonable care and disliked herself for noticing.

The road entered the estate gradually. Woods rose on either side, old and richly varied. Then the carriage climbed, turned, and Pemberley appeared across the valley.

The house stood upon rising ground, neither formal nor ostentatious. A stream widened before it, crossed by a stone bridge. The banks had been shaped without appearing forced. Trees framed rather than concealed the building.

Elizabeth leaned forward.

She had expected magnificence. She had not expected harmony.

"It is beautiful," Mrs Gardiner said.

"Yes."

Elizabeth imagined Darcy growing among these hills, learning that order could coexist with wildness. She thought of Netherfield's improvements under her father and understood how an estate might be both duty and expression.

Mrs Reynolds received them in the hall. She was a respectable woman of sixty whose pride in Pemberley required no embellishment.

When she learned Elizabeth's name, recognition warmed her face.

"Sir Thomas Bennet's daughter? Mr Darcy wrote that your family gave Miss Darcy every kindness during a most distressing circumstance."

Elizabeth had not known he wrote of them.

"Miss Darcy is dear to my sister Mary."

"She has spoken of Miss Mary in every letter."

Mrs Reynolds led them through rooms filled with good art and furniture chosen across generations. She described Darcy's parents without tragedy and Darcy himself without flattery.

"He was always the best landlord and master," she said. "Never an unkind word to a servant. The tenants know he will hear a complaint even when he cannot grant the request."

Elizabeth remembered Hunsford: *You do not explain. You pronounce.* Perhaps he had learned differently at Pemberley long before he learned to apply it in intimacy.

In the portrait gallery, she stopped before a painting of Darcy at twenty-four. The artist had caught the private curve at one corner of his mouth—the expression Elizabeth had seen when Mary teased him or Georgiana laughed.

"A very fine likeness," Mrs Reynolds said.

Elizabeth stepped closer.

Outside, hoofbeats sounded upon the gravel.

Mrs Reynolds turned toward the window. "Why, that must be the master. He was not expected until dinner."

Elizabeth's heart seemed to fall and rise at once.

Darcy entered the gallery still wearing riding clothes.

He stopped.

For several seconds, Pemberley's master and the woman who had refused him could only stare.

* * *

Darcy recovered first, though not completely.

"Miss Elizabeth."

Elizabeth curtsied. "Mr Darcy. We were told you would be away."

"I returned earlier than planned."

"If we are intruding—"

"You are not."

The answer came too quickly. He looked toward the Gardiners and mastered himself.

Elizabeth introduced them. Darcy greeted Mr Gardiner without hesitation, asked after their journey, and offered refreshment. He did not look embarrassed by their connection to trade. He did not perform excessive warmth to prove the absence of embarrassment. He simply treated them as intelligent, welcome guests.

Mrs Gardiner asked about the stream's management. Darcy answered in detail. Mr Gardiner admired the trout. Within minutes they were discussing leases, mills, and whether a proposed weir would damage downstream farms.

Elizabeth watched, ashamed of how surprised she was.

Darcy caught her expression once. Something like understanding passed through his eyes, but he made no claim upon it.

They walked onto the terrace. The valley opened beneath them, green and sunlit after days of rain.

"Your father would find fault with the northern drainage," Darcy said to Elizabeth when the Gardiners moved ahead.

"Papa finds fault as a form of affection."

"Then he would love it deeply."

She laughed. The sound startled both of them.

"How is Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

"Better. She and Mrs Annesley arrive tomorrow. She insisted upon returning to Pemberley rather than allowing Wickham to make any place unsafe."

"That is brave."

"It is. I nearly argued."

"Nearly?"

"I asked what she wanted and then attempted to listen to the answer."

The admission came without any invitation to praise him.

"Papa says listening is harder than running toward danger. Danger ends more quickly."

"Sir Thomas is correct about an alarming number of things."

"Do not tell him."

At the carriage, Darcy invited the Gardiners to dine two days later, after Georgiana's arrival.

"My sister would be disappointed to learn Miss Elizabeth had been near Pemberley and not remained."

Elizabeth knew he meant her as well as Mary. He did not say it.

Mr Gardiner accepted with pleasure. Mrs Gardiner accepted after one glance at Elizabeth.

As the carriage descended the drive, Elizabeth looked back. Darcy remained upon the steps.

"He is very different from the man described in Hertfordshire," Mrs Gardiner said.

"He is at home."

"A man's home often shows the portion of him society conceals."

Mr Gardiner smiled. "Your aunt means that his servants like him and he looked at you as if the house were less surprising than your presence in it."

"Uncle."

"I prefer clarity."

They spent the next day in Lambton. Elizabeth visited shops with her aunt, wrote to Jane, and attempted not to measure time until the Pemberley dinner.

Near noon, Darcy entered the bookshop.

He appeared equally surprised and pleased. Mr Gardiner had gone to meet an old business acquaintance; Mrs Gardiner was speaking with the proprietor's wife in the adjoining room.

"Do you require another agricultural report?" Elizabeth asked.

"I was sent for music Georgiana requested."

"Then we are both acting for sisters. Mary asked me to find a collection of Scottish airs."

They searched the shelves together. The bookshop was narrow, forcing occasional nearness. When Elizabeth reached for a folio above her head, Darcy took it at the same moment. His arm passed beside hers. Neither moved for one suspended second.

He withdrew and handed her the book.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

The proprietor returned with a parcel and mentioned a disturbance outside. A cart had overturned near the market cross. Darcy went at once.

Elizabeth followed to the doorway.

A wheel had broken. Apples rolled across the street. The carter, an elderly man, sat stunned against the curb while a frightened horse kicked at tangled traces.

Darcy approached slowly, speaking to the animal. He removed his coat, covered the horse's eyes, and directed two men to cut the strap rather than pull it. Once the animal was freed, he knelt beside the carter and sent for a surgeon.

No one called him master. No audience of consequence observed him. He simply acted because action was needed.

Elizabeth thought of her father crossing the assembly room ten years earlier. Courage did not always arrive with a sword at one's throat. Sometimes it knelt in mud while apples rolled beneath passing feet.

Darcy looked up and found her watching.

His expression changed—not pride in being observed, but concern that she might have seen too much of what he preferred to do privately.

The carter had broken no bones. Darcy paid for the horse to be stabled and the cart removed, then returned to the bookshop with mud on one knee.

"You are practiced," Elizabeth said.

"At overturned carts?"

"At acting while others decide whether intervention is dignified."

He looked toward the street. "My father taught me that an estate is full of emergencies which do not wait for rank."

"A valuable education."

"Incomplete in other respects."

They stood near the shop window, sheltered from the curious looks outside.

"Mr Darcy," Elizabeth said, "I owe you an apology."

He became still.

"Not for refusing you."

"No."

"But I believed Wickham because his account suited my first opinion. I questioned details and congratulated myself upon caution, yet I wanted him

to be right. I was unjust."

Darcy's face softened with pain. "I gave you reason to think me capable of selfishness."

"Not of what he claimed."

"You did not know the truth."

"I knew I lacked it."

He accepted this in silence.

"I am sorry," she said.

"Thank you."

There was no immediate absolution, no attempt to convert her apology into renewed hope. Elizabeth valued him for letting discomfort remain honest.

Mrs Gardiner returned. Darcy escorted them to the inn and bowed at the door.

That evening, Elizabeth opened Darcy's letter from Hunsford again.

The paper was softened at the folds.

She read the final lines, then took up her pen to answer Jane.

I have seen Pemberley, she wrote. *It is beautiful, but not because it is grand. Everything appears cared for without being forced. I begin to understand its master in the same manner.*

She stared at the sentence, then left it on the page.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Pemberley's Master

Georgiana met Elizabeth in Pemberley's hall with a cry of pleasure and none of her former hesitation.

"You came. William said you might, but he would not allow me to send to the inn twice in one morning."

Darcy stood behind her. "Once seemed sufficient."

"The first note only confirmed dinner. The second would have expressed welcome."

"I expressed welcome in the first."

"In six words."

Elizabeth looked between them. "I felt welcomed with remarkable efficiency."

Georgiana laughed and took her arm.

The dinner party was small: the Gardiners, a neighboring couple named Mr and Mrs Harcourt, Georgiana, Mrs Annesley, Darcy, and Elizabeth. No relation of rank had been assembled to make the invitation respectable. No apology was made for Mr Gardiner's profession.

Darcy placed him near Mr Harcourt, who shared his interest in fishing and knew enough of warehouses to ask intelligent questions. Mrs Gardiner sat beside Georgiana. Elizabeth was seated at Darcy's right.

"Did you arrange the table?" she asked when the first course was served.

"Mrs Reynolds did."

"Then I shall credit her with diplomacy."

"And me with nothing?"

"You approved it, I suppose. That is almost exertion."

His smile appeared fully now. "I was warned your opinion might improve at Pemberley. I did not expect my labor to increase with it."

"A favorable opinion must be maintained."

"Then I shall apply to your father for agricultural instruction."

Their ease startled Elizabeth. At Netherfield they had sparred to test one another. At Pemberley the same wit carried trust beneath it. Darcy no longer

defended every jest. Elizabeth no longer shaped each observation into a challenge.

After dinner Georgiana and Elizabeth walked through the portrait gallery. Georgiana paused before the likeness of her father.

"William resembles him when he is troubled," she said. "Papa became very quiet. I used to think quiet meant disappointment."

"And now?"

"Sometimes it means William is trying very hard not to speak first."

Elizabeth glanced at her.

Georgiana smiled faintly. "He told me you were honest with him at Hunsford. Not everything."

"He should not place responsibility for his change upon me."

"He does not. He says you made it impossible for him to ignore himself."

They continued to Darcy's portrait.

"He was pleased you came," Georgiana said.

"He was surprised."

"He was both."

Elizabeth looked at the painted smile. "And what do you wish?"

Georgiana considered the question seriously. "I wish he would laugh more. I wish you were here when he does. But I do not wish you to marry him because I am lonely."

The maturity of the answer moved Elizabeth.

"You are not the frightened girl Wickham deceived."

"I am sometimes. Then Mary writes something sensible and I remember fear is not my whole character."

They embraced before returning to the drawing room.

Georgiana and Elizabeth played Mary's Scottish airs as a duet. Darcy turned pages. At one passage Elizabeth missed a note and stopped.

"Mary would be appalled," she said.

"Mary would make you practice the left hand for a month," Georgiana replied.

Darcy leaned nearer to find the place. His shoulder brushed Elizabeth's.

Neither spoke.

The music resumed more softly.

The next morning Darcy invited Mr Gardiner to fish. Mrs Gardiner and Elizabeth joined Georgiana for a drive through the park. They passed tenant farms, a small school, and cottages newly roofed after a winter storm.

At one farm a girl of seven ran to the carriage waving a bunch of crushed flowers.

"For Mr Darcy's sister," she said.

Georgiana accepted them with grave thanks and knew the child's name. "Her mother was ill last year. William sent the physician from Lambton every week."

"He never mentions such things," Mrs Gardiner observed.

"He thinks doing one's duty is not a subject for praise."

Elizabeth remembered Darcy's objections at Hunsford. Duty had been the frame through which he saw every relationship. Love required something more flexible: generosity without account, trust without proof in advance, vulnerability that could not be managed like land.

He was learning. So was she.

When the fishermen returned, Mr Gardiner carried two trout and enthusiasm for Pemberley's master.

"He asked my advice about a mill lease," he told Elizabeth privately. "Not politely and then ignored. He listened."

"Mr Darcy is capable of it."

Her uncle smiled. "You sound pleased."

Elizabeth looked across the lawn where Darcy walked beside Georgiana. "I am."

That afternoon a letter arrived from Sir Thomas. Wickham had been committed for trial. The forged drafts carried enough evidence that Georgiana would not be called. Lydia had composed a heroic account of her attic observation and been required by Miss Harwood to remove three invented shots and a rope ladder.

Darcy read the letter twice, then handed it to Georgiana.

She sat in silence.

"It is over," he said.

"Not entirely. But it no longer waits outside every door."

He knelt before her chair. "What do you need?"

Georgiana put both arms around his neck.

Elizabeth left the room with Mrs Annesley, giving them privacy. In the corridor she met Mrs Reynolds.

"He has carried that worry a long while," the housekeeper said.

"So has she."

"They may put it down now."

Elizabeth hoped they could. She wondered whether Darcy had also put down the hope he once held for her—and whether she had arrived at Pemberley too late to ask him to lift it again.

* * *

Rain kept the party indoors on the Gardiners' final day.

Pemberley did not feel confined. The library offered long windows, deep chairs, and shelves whose contents bore evidence of use. The door stood open to the breakfast room, where Mrs Gardiner could be heard speaking with Mrs Reynolds. Elizabeth found Darcy there before breakfast, writing at the great desk.

"Am I intruding?"

He rose. "No. I was answering your father."

"That can occupy an entire morning if he asks about drainage."

"Wickham, the trial, and Georgiana. The drainage is confined to a postscript."

She wandered toward the shelves. "Your library is magnificent."

"It is the work of generations."

"And you add to it?"

"Constantly."

"Miss Bingley once implied you purchase books principally to improve the collection's reputation."

"Miss Bingley purchases books to improve the appearance of her table."

Elizabeth laughed. Darcy looked pleased with himself.

She selected a volume and discovered it was a treatise on estate drainage.

"Papa has corrupted Pemberley already."

"That arrived before I knew him."

"Then you were destined to agree."

Silence settled, comfortable at first. Rain traced the panes.

Darcy came around the desk. "May I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Did my presence make your visit difficult?"

Elizabeth considered evasion and refused it. "At first. I believed you absent. When you entered the gallery, I wished to disappear and remain simultaneously."

His breath changed.

"And now?"

"Now I am glad you returned early."

Hope appeared so openly that Elizabeth had to look down at the book.

Darcy did not advance. "I meant what I said at Netherfield. I will not renew an address that caused you pain."

"You have not caused me pain at Pemberley."

"That is not permission."

She looked up. "No. It is truth."

The distance between them seemed filled with everything unspoken.

Darcy rested one hand on the back of a chair. "At Hunsford I believed love justified asking you to enter a life whose terms I had already written. I spoke of family expectations as though you should be grateful I would endure them. I cannot undo it."

"No."

"But I would have you know that I no longer think of marriage as an addition to Pemberley. It would change Pemberley. It should change me."

Elizabeth's throat tightened. "And if the change is difficult?"

"Then difficulty is not evidence of error."

The answer reached the place where his first proposal had wounded her.

"I was not fair in everything I said," she replied. "I was right about Jane and wrong to use Wickham's story after Papa's evidence had already made me doubt it. I accused you because anger wanted every charge available."

"You were under no obligation to make refusal gentle."

"No. But I wish I had been just."

Darcy's fingers tightened on the chair. "If I asked whether your feelings remain what they were in April, would that be a renewed address?"

Elizabeth's heart beat painfully.

"It would be a question."

"Then may I ask?"

Footsteps sounded in the corridor.

Georgiana entered carrying music, saw their faces, and stopped. "I beg your pardon."

The moment broke. Elizabeth nearly laughed at the absurdity and nearly wept for it.

"You need not," Darcy said, though his voice was unsteady.

Georgiana retreated anyway.

Elizabeth closed the drainage book. "My feelings are not what they were in April."

Darcy went very still.

"I cannot say more while my aunt is waiting for breakfast," she continued, and a smile escaped. "But I would not have you believe silence means indifference."

He understood the echo of Jane and Bingley. "I shall not make that error twice."

They joined the family.

The rain continued through afternoon. Darcy read aloud while the ladies worked. Mr Gardiner and Georgiana played chess. Elizabeth felt Darcy's awareness across the room without anxiety.

After dinner the clouds lifted. A band of gold opened above the western hills. Georgiana proposed a walk to the small temple overlooking the stream.

Mrs Gardiner declared herself tired. Mr Gardiner had letters. Mrs Annesley found a reason to remain with Georgiana near the rose garden, leaving Darcy and Elizabeth to continue along the path in sight but beyond hearing.

"Our families have become very poor at accidental arrangements," Elizabeth said.

"Georgiana has never been subtle."

"She is your sister."

"An unanswerable charge."

At the temple, they stood above the water. The wet landscape held the last light.

Darcy did not ask the question again.

Elizabeth realized she trusted him to wait.

"When we return to Hertfordshire," she said, "Jane's wedding will consume the household. Lady Catherine may hear rumors. Papa will ask you difficult questions if you approach him. Mama will ask easier questions more loudly."

"I have faced Sir Thomas's correspondence and Lady Bennet's supper conversation. I know the hazards."

"And still?"

He turned toward her. "Still."

The word carried no list of objections, no triumph over resistance. Only constancy.

Elizabeth placed her hand upon his arm.

It was the first touch she initiated.

Darcy covered her fingers with his hand, gently enough that she could withdraw. She did not.

They stood that way until Georgiana called that the path was growing dark.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Return to Netherfield

Elizabeth left Pemberley without an engagement and with no doubt that one would come.

The certainty was more intimate than announcement. It lived in Darcy's hand over hers at the temple, in the way he asked when the Gardiners expected to reach Hertfordshire, and in his promise to visit Bingley before Jane's wedding.

He did not write to Elizabeth during the first week.

She told herself that an unmarried gentleman could not begin a private correspondence. She told herself he was allowing her freedom. She told herself several correct things and remained annoyed with the post.

Georgiana wrote to Mary. Her letter contained four pages of music, two of Pemberley, and a postscript.

William has asked three times whether Sir Thomas prefers port or claret. I told him he is preparing for the wrong Bennet. Lady Bennet prefers champagne.

Mary read the postscript aloud by accident and turned crimson.

Lady Bennet looked at Elizabeth. "Why does Mr Darcy care what your father drinks?"

"Perhaps he intends to dine here."

"Mr Darcy has dined here often without studying the cellar."

Sir Thomas opened his newspaper. "My dear, allow your daughter the dignity of telling us when she has something to tell."

"She has something now. I can see it in her face."

Elizabeth escaped into the garden with Mary.

"I am sorry," Mary said. "I forgot the postscript."

"Georgiana did not."

Mary smiled. "No."

Jane's wedding occupied every room. Samples of ivory ribbon covered the morning-room table. Bingley came and went between Longbourn and Netherfield with decisions he believed urgent until Jane answered them in

one sentence. Sir Thomas reviewed settlements. Lady Bennet discovered that a breakfast for sixty required invitations to ninety. Kitty sketched designs for place cards. Lydia wished to release doves at the church door and was refused by every member of the family in sequence.

"No one values originality," she complained.

"We value the survival of gowns beneath frightened birds," Miss Harwood said.

Elizabeth found herself imagining another wedding after Jane's. The thought no longer terrified her. It embarrassed her only when she pictured Darcy standing beside her father in the library asking permission and Sir Thomas delaying solely to test him.

Bingley brought news that Darcy would arrive at Longbourn on the following Tuesday.

"He means to stay with me," Bingley said. "Though Caroline may go to the Hursts. We have not settled it."

Jane looked at her betrothed. "You have settled it. You have not told Caroline."

"That is a very different stage of settlement."

"Tell her before dinner."

"Yes, my dear."

Lady Bennet watched them with approval. "Jane will manage him beautifully."

"Mama," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, she may call it consultation if she prefers. Your father has become very particular about words."

Sir Thomas lowered his paper. "I begin to regret my clarity."

Darcy arrived on Tuesday afternoon.

Elizabeth saw him from the west window crossing Netherfield's drive on horseback. He dismounted before the groom reached him and looked up toward the house with an expression she could not read from a distance.

She did not wait in the drawing room to be discovered.

When Darcy entered the hall, Elizabeth stood near the staircase.

His face changed.

"Miss Elizabeth."

"Mr Darcy. Welcome back to Hertfordshire."

The footman took his coat. For a moment they were observed by three servants, Hill, and Lydia leaning over the upper banister.

"I hope your journey was comfortable," Elizabeth said.

"Very. I hope yours ended safely."

"It did."

Lydia whispered, "Ask him about Pemberley," to Kitty, loudly enough to reach the hall.

Darcy looked upward. The girls vanished.

"Your sisters have become discreet," he said.

"It is a recent and fragile development."

Sir Thomas received him in the library after dinner. Elizabeth did not know whether Darcy asked for the interview or her father summoned him. She sat with Jane and pretended to sew while the clock advanced.

Inside the library, Darcy stood before Sir Thomas's desk—the same desk where Sir Thomas had once held Lydia's muddy boot.

"You spoke to Elizabeth in Kent," Sir Thomas said.

Darcy had prepared for indirect questions. "I proposed to her. She refused me."

Sir Thomas's brows rose slightly. "She did not tell me until later."

"Her reasons were just."

"All of them?"

"Enough."

"And now?"

"Her feelings have changed. She has given me reason to hope, but I have not proposed again. I came first to ask whether, should she accept me, you would consent."

Sir Thomas studied him. "Why Elizabeth?"

Darcy had expected questions of settlement, family, and Lady Catherine. This was harder.

"Because she sees people clearly when prejudice does not hurry her—and she has courage to correct herself when it does. Because she loves without making dependence small. She challenges me, but not for sport. She made

Georgiana feel safe. At Pemberley, she understood the estate not as an ornament but a trust. When she enters a room, I know the truth will become more difficult and the room more alive."

Sir Thomas looked down, perhaps hiding emotion.

"And Lady Bennet?"

Darcy did not mistake the test. "She is devoted to her daughters, more perceptive than I first believed, and louder than anyone in my family. I do not require her to become someone else."

"Kitty and Lydia?"

"Will be welcomed at Pemberley under reasonable supervision."

"Mary?"

"Georgiana would object if she were not."

"Longbourn's entail?"

"Irrelevant to Elizabeth's security. Her settlement will be generous and independent."

Sir Thomas leaned back. "You have answered the easy questions."

Darcy almost smiled. "I was warned."

"Here is the difficult one. What will you do when Elizabeth's judgment differs from yours and no evidence proves either of you correct?"

Darcy thought of Bingley, Georgiana, Hunsford, and the toll house.

"I will tell her what troubles me and hear her answer. If the matter concerns us both, we shall settle it together. If it is hers, I shall try not to interfere."

"Can you?"

"I am learning."

Sir Thomas rose. "So am I. You have my consent if she accepts. But you will not propose tonight merely because permission burns in your pocket. She has spent the day wondering whether you came for her. Let anticipation do some useful work."

Darcy stared, then recognized the humor.

"Tomorrow?"

"I do not schedule my daughters' proposals."

When Darcy returned to the drawing room, Elizabeth looked at his face and knew the interview had ended well.

He did not ask her to walk.

Sir Thomas entered behind him, accepted a glass of port, and appeared unbearably innocent.

Elizabeth resolved to speak severely to both men in the morning.

She had no opportunity.

Before breakfast, Lady Catherine de Bourgh arrived at Netherfield.

* * *

Lady Catherine's carriage announced itself with four horses, two outriders, and enough gravel thrown against the windows to suggest artillery.

Lady Bennet looked up from the breakfast table. "Who calls at this hour?"

Sir Thomas glanced outside. "A relation of Mr Darcy's who regards clocks as advice for other people."

Darcy stood. "My aunt."

Elizabeth's pulse quickened. "You did not know she was coming?"

"No."

The knocker sounded.

Lady Catherine entered in traveling silk and indignation. She accepted no refreshment, expressed no pleasure in meeting Lady Bennet again, and looked at Darcy as though he were a disobedient estate servant.

"I require a private conversation with Miss Elizabeth."

Lady Bennet's mouth opened.

Sir Thomas spoke first. "You may request one."

Lady Catherine turned. "Sir Thomas, this is a matter between Miss Elizabeth and myself."

"Then she may decide."

All attention moved to Elizabeth.

She set down her cup. "We may walk in the east garden."

Darcy took one step. Elizabeth met his eyes. He stopped.

The morning was cool and bright. Lady Catherine refused Elizabeth's offer of the terrace and marched down the gravel path until the house stood far enough away to prevent overhearing.

"You can be at no loss to understand why I am here."

"I can think of several possibilities. Mr Collins may have misplaced a shelf."

"This is no occasion for wit. A report of the most alarming nature reached me yesterday. I was told that my nephew intends to marry you."

Elizabeth's heart leapt at the certainty of the rumor. She kept her expression calm.

"Mr Darcy has not informed me of such an intention."

"But you expect it."

"My expectations are my own."

"From his infancy he has been destined for my daughter. Their union was planned by their mothers."

"Then their mothers should perhaps have consulted the two people required to marry."

Lady Catherine's color rose. "Do you imagine royal favor places you upon equal footing with the Darcys? Your father was an obscure country gentleman until accident elevated him."

"Until action distinguished him."

"Netherfield was given, not inherited."

"Pemberley was inherited, not earned. I do not think either fact determines the present owner's worth."

Lady Catherine stopped walking. "Your mother is a woman of noisy manners. Your younger sisters lack connection. Longbourn will pass to a clergyman. Your family's appearance at Court is tolerated because the King indulges gratitude."

Anger steadied Elizabeth.

"My mother is loud and loyal. My sisters are educated, loved, and improving. Mr Collins will inherit Longbourn lawfully, while my father has made it more valuable for him. And the Queen did not look as though she merely tolerated us when she welcomed Mary."

"You are impertinent."

"You came to my father's house before breakfast to insult every member of it. My civility has exceeded yours."

Lady Catherine drew herself up. "Will you promise never to enter into an engagement with my nephew?"

Elizabeth thought of Darcy's hand at Pemberley, of the question interrupted in the library, of his answers to Sir Thomas the night before—whatever they had been.

"I will make no such promise."

"Then you admit it!"

"I admit only that Mr Darcy is free to choose and so am I."

"You will be censured. His family will reject you. Society will say you pursued him because a royal grant taught your family ambition."

"Society has said stranger things and survived."

Lady Catherine's voice lowered. "He will regret you."

The cruelty of it reached an old fear. Elizabeth did not answer immediately.

Then she remembered Darcy at the toll house lowering his fist because Georgiana asked, Darcy in the bookshop mud, Darcy refusing to treat the Gardiners as a test.

"That would be his judgment to make," she said. "Not yours."

They returned toward the house.

Darcy waited on the terrace with Sir Thomas. Lady Bennet stood visibly behind the drawing-room window, a curtain held aside in one hand.

Lady Catherine addressed her nephew. "You will return to Rosings with me."

"No."

"You permit this girl to speak to me with insolence?"

Darcy turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Elizabeth does not require my permission to speak."

The answer warmed her more than defense would have.

"Your mother expected you to marry Anne."

Pain crossed Darcy's face at the invocation, but he did not yield. "My mother hoped we might. She did not command it. Anne does not wish it. Neither do I."

"You would abandon your family for people such as these?"

Sir Thomas stiffened. Lady Bennet came through the terrace doors.

"People such as what?" she demanded. "My husband saved your king. My daughters have behaved with greater manners than you since you arrived,

and breakfast is cold because you insist upon shouting in the garden."

"My dear," Sir Thomas murmured.

"I am not vulgar, Mr Bennet. I have not mentioned her hat."

Elizabeth covered her mouth. Darcy looked abruptly toward the lawn.

Lady Catherine appeared unable to decide which insult had been offered.

Sir Thomas stepped forward. "Lady Catherine, you are welcome at Netherfield when you can treat its inhabitants with courtesy. Today you cannot. Your carriage is ready."

"You dismiss me?"

"I rescue the remainder of our breakfast."

Lady Catherine looked from Sir Thomas to Darcy and finally to Elizabeth.

"This is not ended."

"It may continue wherever you like," Elizabeth said, "provided I am not required to attend."

The carriage departed with even greater violence than it arrived.

For several seconds no one spoke.

Lady Bennet adjusted her cap. "Her hat was dreadful."

Darcy laughed.

Not a polite breath or hidden smile. He laughed until Sir Thomas joined him and Elizabeth's anger dissolved.

Lady Bennet looked pleased. "Now, if everyone has finished allowing titled women to ruin the morning, there are eggs in the warming dish."

Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm.

"Will you return to breakfast?"

She placed her hand upon his sleeve. "I find I have an appetite."

* * *

Lady Catherine's visit postponed Darcy's proposal by one day and Longbourn's roof postponed it by another.

A storm tore tiles from the western slope during the night. Bingley arrived at Netherfield before breakfast ended, wet at the shoulders and carrying a fragment of slate as evidence.

"The bedrooms are dry, but water reached the old schoolroom. Morris says the roof beneath was sound when the lease began. I will pay for the repair,

naturally, but the carpenter believes the entire west side should be replaced."

Sir Thomas examined the slate. "The lease divides structural repairs according to cause, which is an excellent method of employing solicitors and a poor method of keeping out rain. We shall inspect it together."

Darcy rose. "May I come?"

She recognized the intention he had twice gathered courage to express, only to be interrupted first by Lady Bennet's demand concerning breakfast orders and now by weather.

"Of course," Sir Thomas said. "You may prevent Bingley from purchasing gold tiles."

"I suggested copper," Bingley protested.

Jane put a hand over her eyes.

The gentlemen spent the morning at Longbourn. Elizabeth and Jane followed later with Lady Bennet, who refused to trust three men with a house and a hole in the same roof.

Rain had stained one wall of the old schoolroom. The pencil marks recording the girls' heights remained untouched beside the door.

Jane ran her fingers over them. "I had forgotten Kitty was taller than Lydia until Lydia was six."

"Lydia has not," Elizabeth said. "She calls those two years the Great Injustice."

Bingley entered with Darcy. Dust marked his coat, and his hair had lost its fashionable arrangement.

"The beams are sound," he reported. "Sir Thomas says the slate failed because someone used poor nails twenty years ago."

Lady Bennet looked offended. "Mr Hill's cousin repaired that roof. I always said he drank."

"Then history has identified its villain," Darcy said.

While the others inspected the damage, Bingley drew Jane toward the window.

"I have been thinking about Longbourn."

"That is wise in the present room."

"Not the roof. Our future."

Jane's expression softened.

"The lease ends in two years," he continued. "Your father will renew it, but the house must eventually pass to Mr Collins. I could purchase an estate now. Darcy knows of one in Surrey. It is larger, and there would be no uncertainty."

"Do you want it?"

"I want a home that is ours. I thought Longbourn might be that because you love it."

Jane looked around the schoolroom. "I do love it. But it is full of my family's memories. I do not know whether I wish our marriage to feel as though I returned to childhood with a husband added."

Bingley's worry eased into curiosity. "What would you wish?"

"To remain here for a year. Long enough to learn how we live together. Then search slowly. Not for the largest estate or the grandest name. For one where you understand the land and I can know the tenants."

"Together?"

"Every part."

He smiled. "I believe I should like that better than Surrey."

"You have not seen Surrey."

"Then it has already disappointed me."

Jane laughed and rested her head briefly against his shoulder.

Across the room, Elizabeth turned away to grant privacy and found Darcy watching her.

"They have learned quickly," he said.

"Jane has always known how to listen. Mr Bingley has learned to ask."

"A useful distinction."

The carpenter called Sir Thomas downstairs. Lady Bennet followed to ensure no portrait was moved. Jane and Bingley went to inspect the nursery, leaving Elizabeth and Darcy alone among the childhood marks.

Darcy approached the doorframe. "Which is yours?"

Elizabeth pointed. "E.B., age eleven. Papa attempted to measure us after dinner and made every mark too high because our shoes were on. Miss Harwood corrected him the next morning."

"He kept the incorrect marks."

"To preserve the record of his error, he said."

Darcy touched the faint pencil line with one finger. "Your father possesses an unusual willingness to make correction visible."

"He learned late. Perhaps that made him less ashamed of admitting it."

"I learned late."

Elizabeth held his gaze. "Not too late."

The words changed the room.

Darcy turned fully toward her. "Elizabeth—"

The use of her name was soft and unplanned.

Bingley's voice sounded from the corridor. "Darcy, the nursery ceiling is painted with birds. Did you know?"

Darcy closed his eyes.

Elizabeth laughed so suddenly she had to lean against the wall.

Bingley appeared in the doorway. "What happened?"

"You," Darcy said.

"I only asked about the ceiling."

"We shall explain when you are older," Elizabeth said.

Jane understood at once and drew her bewildered betrothed away.

Darcy faced her. "Tomorrow morning."

"Is that a request or a warning?"

"A request. Will you walk with me?"

"If the roof remains attached."

"I shall post guards."

Their smiles faded into something more tender.

The roof was repaired over the next week, but the discussion it began continued. Sir Thomas brought Mr Collins from Hunsford to review the long-term lease. Charlotte accompanied him and prevented three speeches concerning his future rights.

"Longbourn may not be mine for many years," Mr Collins said, glancing at Sir Thomas's healthy figure. "Which is, of course, an occasion for rejoicing."

"Then rejoice quietly," Charlotte murmured.

The renewed lease granted Bingley three additional years with protections for improvements he funded. When he and Jane eventually purchased elsewhere, Longbourn could be leased again until the entail took effect.

Sir Thomas also opened the matter of his daughters' portions. Ten years of income from both estates and careful investment had allowed him to set aside ten thousand pounds for each daughter, with additional income to Jane upon marriage and equal interests in Netherfield after both parents' deaths unless a different family arrangement was agreed.

Mr Collins looked stunned. Lady Bennet looked proud enough to ascend.

"They will not need Longbourn," Sir Thomas said. "But they will always be welcome in it while I hold the estate."

Charlotte studied the settlement. "This is fair."

Mr Collins began, "Lady Catherine might observe—"

"Lady Catherine called upon Netherfield yesterday," Elizabeth said. "Her observations have reached their allowance for the week."

Charlotte's mouth curved.

Mr and Mrs Collins returned to Hunsford the following morning, the renewed lease settled.

That evening Sir Thomas stood alone in Longbourn's empty library. Bingley's books had been moved temporarily from the damp western room, leaving disorder on every surface. He placed one volume upright and remembered how many years he had sat there believing provision meant merely keeping the estate intact.

Elizabeth found him.

"Do you miss it?"

"The room? Sometimes. The man in it? No."

She came beside him.

"Mr Darcy asked to walk with me tomorrow."

"I know."

"Of course you do."

"He asked my consent last night."

Elizabeth turned. "Before asking me?"

"He asked whether I would consent if you did."

"And you consented?"

Sir Thomas looked at her. "I told him your answer was yours."

She slipped her arm through his. "Ten years ago, you might have forgotten that."

He looked around the library one final time before they left.

"At considerable expense."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Different Answer

The roof remained attached.

Elizabeth came down before eight in a pale green walking dress. She found Darcy already in the morning room, standing beside the unopened doors to the terrace.

"You are early," she said.

"I was advised that Bennet family emergencies begin at breakfast."

"Then you are just in time."

Sir Thomas entered carrying a letter marked with the royal seal.

Lady Bennet, behind him, had abandoned cap ribbons in her haste. "It is from the Queen. Hill says the messenger came from Windsor. Open it, Mr Bennet."

"The seal has survived a hundred miles. It may survive another chair."

He sat and broke it.

The letter was in Queen Charlotte's hand. The King's health had deteriorated. He would withdraw from public life, and the Prince of Wales was expected to assume duties as Regent. In a lucid interval, His Majesty had spoken of Hertfordshire and asked whether the gentleman who saved him still made good use of Netherfield.

The Queen wrote that she had assured him Sir Thomas did.

Sir Thomas stopped reading.

Lady Bennet took the page when his hand lowered. Her voice softened as she finished aloud.

His Majesty remembers not only the life preserved that day, but the family whose fear he witnessed afterward. He hopes your daughters prosper. I was pleased to tell him they do.

Silence filled the room.

The King had not died, but the man who had laughed over a sugar plum in Meryton and later placed a sword upon Thomas Bennet's shoulder at his knighting was slipping beyond the reach of gratitude.

Sir Thomas went to the window.

Elizabeth laid a hand on his arm. "Papa."

"I delayed answering his last letter for two months because Morris and I disputed a grain account. I thought there would be time."

"There may still be."

"Yes."

He did not use hope to deny the fear.

Darcy remained near the door, giving the family space. Sir Thomas looked toward him.

"You came to walk with Elizabeth. Do not allow an old man's sentiment to consume the morning."

"The morning is yours, sir."

"No. Help us answer before you go, if you will. Elizabeth has waited long enough for her morning."

Lady Bennet crossed to her husband and took his hand. "We shall answer together. I remember everything the Queen wore."

"That will comfort the King."

"Do not laugh. He liked my peacock ribbon."

Sir Thomas laughed anyway, but he raised her hand to his lips.

Darcy and Elizabeth left through the terrace doors.

For a while they walked without speaking. The park was fresh after rain. Oakham Mount rose beyond the southern fields, its path curving through beech and oak.

"I am sorry for the King," Darcy said.

"Papa has known his illness worsened, but knowledge at a distance is tidy. A letter makes it real."

"My father's final illness was the opposite. I saw every decline and still believed the end impossible."

Elizabeth looked at him. "How old were you?"

"Two-and-twenty. Georgiana was eleven."

"You became master and parent at once."

"I tried. I mistook not failing for knowing how."

They reached the lower slope.

"Papa says improvement consists mostly of discovering the next thing one has done badly," Elizabeth said.

"A hopeful philosophy."

"You prefer perfection?"

"I preferred the appearance of it."

He offered his arm where the path steepened. Elizabeth took it.

At the summit, Hertfordshire opened around them: Longbourn's roof among the trees below, Meryton's church tower, Netherfield broad and pale across its park. The two Bennet houses stood within one view.

Darcy stopped beneath an oak.

Elizabeth's hand remained upon his sleeve.

"The King's gift changed everything," he said.

"Not everything. Mama still objects to ribbons. Lydia still finds mud."

"And you still rescue solemn men from themselves."

"I have rescued no one."

"No. You required me to do it."

He turned toward her.

This time, when he took her hand, there was no interruption.

* * *

"My feelings and wishes are unchanged," Darcy said, "but I am not."

Elizabeth's fingers trembled within his.

He stood before her without the formal grandeur of Hunsford. His coat carried dust from the climb. Wind had loosened one dark curl at his temple. He looked neither like Pemberley's master nor Lady Catherine's nephew, only a man who had chosen honesty without knowing its reward.

"You told me at Pemberley that your feelings were different from April," he continued. "If they have changed again, one word will silence me."

Elizabeth remembered the first proposal: obstacles counted, objections conquered, confidence beneath passion. Now he placed refusal in her hand before hope in his own.

"They have not changed," she said.

Darcy drew a breath.

"Or rather, they continue to change," she added. "For the better."

His eyes closed briefly, as if relief was too strong to receive while looking at her.

When he opened them, he asked, "Elizabeth, will you marry me? Will you share a life with me and help determine what it becomes?"

Tears blurred the familiar landscape.

"Yes."

The word seemed to leave her and enter him. Darcy's whole face changed.

"Yes?"

"You demanded only one word. Must I provide references?"

He laughed unsteadily. "I may require several repetitions."

"Then yes, Fitzwilliam Darcy. I will marry you."

He lifted her hand to his lips. The kiss lingered against her knuckles, warm and reverent. Elizabeth's breath caught.

Darcy lowered their joined hands but did not release her. "I love you. I have attempted to express it better than I did at Hunsford and discover the feeling still exceeds the language."

"Your language has improved."

"Sir Thomas's questions were instructive."

"Papa knew you would ask today?"

"He knew I intended it."

They agreed to fake a relationship. Nobody agreed to get jealous.

If this is your favorite kind of mess, have a browse on Lokepub.

"And said nothing to me."

"He claimed that was the point."

Elizabeth looked toward Netherfield. "He will be insufferably pleased with himself."

"I shall endure it."

She turned back. "Will you? You must endure much worse. Mama will discuss lace before dinner. Lydia will ask whether Pemberley has handsome tenants. Mary may love Georgiana more than either of us. Kitty will sketch your nose from every direction."

"You forgot Lady Catherine."

"I was listing difficulties. She is an occupation."

Darcy smiled, but seriousness returned.

"Elizabeth, my aunt may not relent quickly. Some relations will be cold. I cannot promise you will never feel their disapproval."

"I do not require you to control them."

"No. But I will not leave you to meet it alone."

"That is enough."

He touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers. The gesture was tentative, asking. Elizabeth leaned into his hand.

Darcy bent slowly, leaving Elizabeth every opportunity to refuse. She raised her face.

His lips touched hers with exquisite care.

For one suspended moment, both remained still. Then Elizabeth's hand tightened on his coat, and Darcy kissed her again with warmth restrained by the open hillside and every promise of the future. His free hand rested lightly at her waist.

When they separated, his forehead touched hers.

"I have wanted to do that since Longbourn," he whispered.

"When I wore Miss Bingley's ill-fitting gown?"

"Before."

"At the assembly?"

"After I discovered my stupidity."

"That narrows nothing."

He laughed against her temple.

They began the descent slowly. Halfway down, Elizabeth stopped.

"I must tell you something unflattering."

"Only one thing?"

"When I first saw Pemberley, I wondered whether being mistress of it might alter a woman's feelings."

"Did it?"

"It altered my understanding. Mrs Reynolds and the tenants showed me who you were where you felt responsible rather than judged. But the house did not make me love you. You did."

Darcy's expression became grave with feeling. He lifted her hand to his lips. "Then I am grateful the house introduced us."

"Pemberley will be offended to receive so little credit."

Near the foot of the mount, they met Lydia and Kitty walking with Miss Harwood. Lydia saw their joined hands immediately.

She stopped so abruptly Kitty collided with her.

"You are engaged!"

Miss Harwood closed her eyes.

Elizabeth released Darcy's hand too late. "Lydia—"

"You are. Mr Darcy looks almost happy."

"I am entirely happy," Darcy said.

Lydia stared at him, then shrieked and embraced Elizabeth. Kitty followed with tears. Miss Harwood offered Darcy a composed congratulation while attempting to herd the girls away.

"We shall not tell Mama before Lizzy does," Kitty promised.

"Of course not," Lydia said. "We shall only arrive first."

They ran.

Elizabeth looked at Darcy. "Our private happiness has approximately four minutes."

"Then we should walk slowly."

They did, though Lydia's voice could be heard from the terrace before they crossed half the lawn.

Lady Bennet met them at the doors.

Her face moved from triumph to tears so quickly that even Elizabeth was unprepared. She embraced her daughter, then Darcy, then apologized for embracing him and did it again.

"Ten thousand a year—no, I shall not speak of money. Pemberley! That is not better. Oh, Lizzy, you will be so far away."

The final fear emerged beneath every boast. Elizabeth held her.

"We shall visit. You will come to Pemberley."

"In Derbyshire? The roads are dreadful."

"You have never travelled them."

"Then I am unbiased."

Darcy said solemnly, "I shall order repairs before your first visit."

Lady Bennet looked at him, uncertain whether he joked, and began to laugh.

Sir Thomas waited in the library. Darcy and Elizabeth entered together.

"Papa," Elizabeth said, "Mr Darcy has asked me to marry him."

"Has he? How unexpected."

"You are a terrible man."

Sir Thomas stood. His humor faded as he looked at their joined hands.

"And you are happy?"

"Very."

He opened his arms. Elizabeth went to him.

"Then I am happy too," he said into her hair.

Darcy looked away to grant them privacy, though emotion tightened his own face.

Sir Thomas released Elizabeth and held out his hand to Darcy.

"Welcome to the family."

Darcy took it. "Thank you, sir."

"You may call me Sir Thomas until after the wedding. I must preserve one advantage."

Elizabeth laughed through her tears.

That evening, when the household finally quieted, Sir Thomas answered the Queen's letter.

He wrote of Jane's coming marriage, Mary's successful presentation, Kitty's drawing, Lydia's useful observation, and Elizabeth's engagement. He wrote that Netherfield prospered.

Then he added one final line.

Your Majesty asked whether I made good use of your gift. I have tried. The estate secured my family, but the obligation taught me to know them. Whatever good followed began in the breath you recovered and the life I understood I had neglected.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The News Travels

Meryton learned of the engagement before the ink dried on Sir Thomas's letter to the Queen.

Lydia told Aunt Phillips under a pledge of secrecy. Aunt Phillips told Mrs Long under a stricter pledge. Mrs Long informed her nieces because family could not be counted as society. By noon, Mr Lucas called at Netherfield to express astonishment at news no one had officially announced.

"My dear Sir Thomas, what an alliance! Pemberley, Derbyshire, Lady Catherine's nephew—"

"And Elizabeth," Sir Thomas said.

Mr Lucas stopped. "Naturally. Most importantly, Elizabeth."

Lady Bennet received callers in rose silk and attempted humility with heroic failure.

"We had no expectation of it. None. Mr Darcy admired Lizzy's eyes from the first, but who could have known? Ten thousand a year has nothing to do with happiness, though the house contains a gallery and two libraries. I have not asked how many chimneys."

"Thirty-two," Lydia supplied.

"No one asked you."

Elizabeth escaped with Darcy into the park whenever propriety allowed. Kitty or Mary accompanied them at a tactful distance. Lydia was not selected after she hid behind a hedge to hear whether Darcy used Elizabeth's Christian name.

"I already knew he did," she protested when discovered. "I wished to know how often."

Miss Harwood assigned her an essay on privacy.

The engagement altered Darcy's manner without making him careless. He spoke more. He laughed where he once might have withdrawn. Yet he asked before taking Elizabeth's hand in secluded paths, as if the freedom to touch her remained a gift renewed each time.

On their third walk, she stopped beside the lake.

"You need not look alarmed whenever your sleeve brushes mine."

"I am attempting respect."

"Respect may survive contact."

Darcy looked down at her with a warmth that made teasing difficult. "May it?"

Elizabeth placed his hand at her waist.

He drew her closer, slowly. "Your sister is behind the cedar."

Kitty's bonnet appeared at once. "I cannot hear anything."

"That is the intention," Elizabeth called.

Kitty retreated, laughing.

Darcy bent and kissed Elizabeth beneath the shadow of the trees. The kiss began gently and deepened when she leaned into him. His arm tightened around her; her hand rested against his chest, feeling the rapid beat beneath waistcoat and linen.

When they separated, Darcy kept his forehead near hers.

"Respect survives," Elizabeth whispered.

"Narrowly."

Not every response was joyful. Lady Catherine sent Darcy eight pages in a hand pressed so hard the nib had torn through twice. Anne wrote separately.

I congratulate you, she said. *My mother has long arranged my future without asking whether I desired it. I do not wish to marry you and never did, though I hope we may remain cousins once she recovers from discovering we possess wills. Miss Elizabeth was kind to Charlotte. That recommends her more than sixteen quarters of ancestry.*

Elizabeth liked Anne immediately.

Caroline sent no congratulations.

Bingley brought the silence to Darcy after dinner at Longbourn.

"She says she is unwell."

"Is she?"

"Only in temper."

Darcy looked toward the drawing room where Elizabeth and Jane sat together. "She expected to become mistress of Pemberley. I allowed her expectations to continue by ignoring them."

"You never encouraged her."

"I knew what she hoped and found it easier to say nothing. Her notice flattered me more than I cared to admit."

Bingley sighed. "Must we both become wise in the same year? It is exhausting."

"You may rest after the wedding."

"Jane says marriage is not rest."

"Miss Bennet is already wiser."

Caroline's hurt did not excuse her conduct, but Elizabeth understood its shape. A woman raised with wealth from trade and taught to seek security in rank had spent years arranging herself around a man who never intended to choose her. Now he would marry the country woman Caroline dismissed, while Bingley married that woman's sister.

Elizabeth did not require Caroline's affection. Jane required civility.

"Invite her to Netherfield," Elizabeth told Bingley. "Not for me. For a conversation with Jane before the wedding."

"She may refuse."

"Then the choice will be plain."

Darcy studied Elizabeth. "You would receive her?"

"I shall not hide the teaspoons."

"That is Christian generosity."

"Do not expect more before tea."

The invitation was sent.

Caroline accepted.

* * *

Caroline arrived at Netherfield alone.

She wore dove gray, a color too restrained to be accidental. Lady Bennet received her without effusion. Sir Thomas bowed. Darcy remained standing beside Elizabeth, neither hostile nor available.

Jane asked Caroline to walk in the conservatory.

"You need not come," she told Bingley when he moved to follow.

"I thought—"

"I know. This is between your sister and me."

Bingley sat again. "Of course."

In the conservatory, late roses climbed the glass. Jane stopped beside a stone bench but did not sit.

Caroline opened her fan. "I understand congratulations are expected."

"Honesty is expected. Congratulations may wait until they are true."

Caroline looked at her sharply. Jane's serenity had always tempted people to believe she could not see cruelty unless it shouted.

"You concealed my presence in London," Jane continued. "You wrote that your brother might marry Miss Darcy though you knew he loved me. You insulted my family in our former home. If I marry Charles without speaking of it, resentment will enter with me."

"You have won. Is that not enough?"

"There was no contest until you made one."

Caroline's fan snapped shut. "You cannot understand. You were born to an estate. Then your father gained another. You were presented at Court and praised for beauty before you spoke. My father earned every pound, and society reminded us that earning it was inferior to inheriting less. I learned that connection meant safety. Charles risked attaching himself to people who might always see him as the tradesman's son renting their house."

"Did I ever treat him so?"

Caroline looked away.

"Did Papa?"

"No."

"Then you punished us for what others did to you."

The words landed. Caroline sat.

"Darcy was supposed to choose me," she said, the confession thin with humiliation. "Not by promise. By sense. I knew his household, his sister, his habits. I made myself useful."

Jane sat beside her, leaving space. "And he did not see what you intended."

"He saw and ignored it."

"That was unkind, though perhaps not knowingly."

Caroline gave a bitter laugh. "You defend him too?"

"No. I understand you. That is not the same as agreeing."

Jane folded her hands. "You are Charles's sister. I will never ask him to abandon you. But you cannot enter our home and undermine our marriage.

If you treat me with civility, I will offer the same. If affection grows, I shall welcome it. If it does not, we may still behave with dignity."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then Charles will decide which doors remain open. I do not wish that. Neither does he."

Caroline's eyes filled, anger resisting tears. "You make everything sound simple."

"It is not simple. It is only clear."

They returned after half an hour. Bingley rose so quickly his chair struck the carpet.

Caroline looked at him. "I owe Miss Bennet an apology."

"Jane," Jane said quietly. "If we are to become sisters."

Caroline swallowed. "Jane. I concealed your letter and encouraged Charles to remain away. I was wrong."

Bingley's face reflected relief, grief, and the beginning of forgiveness. "Thank you."

Caroline turned to Elizabeth. "I congratulate you, Miss Eliza. Mr Darcy has chosen a woman capable of answering him."

The words carried little warmth, yet their sincerity was unmistakable.

"Thank you."

Darcy stepped forward. "Miss Bingley, I also owe you an apology. I knew what you hoped and chose silence because it spared me discomfort. I should have told you plainly."

Caroline stared at him. Pride battled humiliation, then yielded to a weary nod.

"I would have hated you for saying it."

"Perhaps."

"I hate you somewhat now."

"That is fair."

Lady Bennet, who had endured more quiet emotion than nature intended, rang for tea.

Caroline stayed through dinner. She did not become transformed. She corrected Lydia's pronunciation once, asked three questions about Pemberley's guest rooms, and flinched when Darcy used Elizabeth's name.

But she praised Mary's music without comparison to Georgiana and asked Kitty to show her sketches.

At the end of the evening, Jane invited her to the wedding.

"I will come," Caroline said.

Bingley escorted his sister to the carriage. Before she entered, she touched his arm.

"I believed I was protecting you."

"I know."

"You would have married her without me."

"Yes."

Caroline looked toward the lit windows where Jane stood with Elizabeth. "That is why I stopped trying."

She kissed his cheek and left.

Inside, Darcy found Elizabeth near the fireplace.

"You offered her a path back," he said.

"Jane did."

"At your urging."

"Do not make me too virtuous. I also wished to see whether she would take it."

"And if she had not?"

"We would have locked the teaspoons."

Darcy smiled and raised her hand to his lips. "Pemberley will be safe under your governance."

"Our governance," she corrected.

His eyes warmed. "Our governance."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Terms of Happiness

Darcy's solicitor arrived with a settlement draft thick enough to stun a pheasant.

Sir Thomas read every page. Elizabeth read most of them. Lady Bennet read the figure assigned for pin money and declared the document excellent.

"Five hundred a year for gloves," Lydia whispered to Kitty.

"It is not only gloves."

"What else does a married woman buy?"

Miss Harwood began another lesson before the question reached Lady Bennet.

Darcy settled ten thousand pounds upon Elizabeth for her sole use, secured a jointure of two thousand a year, and provided for any daughters as generously as sons not inheriting Pemberley. Elizabeth's own ten-thousand-pound portion would remain under trustees she selected.

"I do not require your fortune," Darcy told Sir Thomas in the library.

"Elizabeth requires independence whether you require her fortune or not."

"Agreed."

Sir Thomas looked almost disappointed by the absence of battle.

Elizabeth chose Mr Gardiner and Colonel Fitzwilliam as trustees. She reserved part of the income to assist Mary's music publication, Kitty's drawing instruction, and Lydia's eventual season—not because her sisters lacked provision, but because she wanted the freedom to give without requesting household money.

Darcy read the clause. "You expect them to ask you rather than your father?"

"I expect Lydia to spend her first quarter's allowance in six weeks and approach everyone in order of weakness."

"Where do I rank?"

"Below Bingley and above Papa."

"Sir Thomas is less susceptible?"

"Papa will make her present an account. You may be distracted by a story."

"Then you must protect me."

Elizabeth smiled. "I shall let you learn."

They discussed Pemberley more seriously during walks. Darcy described the tenants, the school, the dower house, household staff, winter responsibilities, and London season. He did not present established arrangements as immutable.

"Mrs Reynolds has managed the household since before my mother died," he said. "She will not resent a new mistress, but she deserves respect."

"I would be a fool not to seek her advice."

"You are not required to preserve every custom."

"Which do you dislike?"

Darcy considered. "My father received every tenant formally in the estate room. It preserved order, but some spoke more freely to the steward afterward. I have continued it because it was his method."

"Could there be both? Formal accounts and an open afternoon each month?"

"There could."

"Then we shall try and discover whether everyone avoids us in two settings instead of one."

He laughed.

Elizabeth also asked what he expected of a wife in London.

"To attend every dinner with my relations?"

"No."

"To entertain people I dislike?"

"Occasionally. I shall do the same."

"To produce an heir immediately?"

Darcy stopped walking. "I expect nothing of that nature as a debt. I hope for children. I do not marry you to obtain them."

The directness made her cheeks warm. "I hope for them too."

His hand closed over hers. "Then we may hope together and bear whatever comes together."

No one had spoken to Elizabeth of marriage with such honesty. Lady Bennet spoke of husbands, houses, and security. Married women whispered of confinement and duty. Darcy offered neither false ease nor demand.

"And Georgiana?" Elizabeth asked.

"She will remain with us until she chooses otherwise. I hope you will advise her, but I will not make you responsible for every happiness she lacks."

"I already love her."

"I know. That is different from obligation."

They had both learned distinctions.

One afternoon Darcy accompanied Sir Thomas across Netherfield's tenant farms. Elizabeth rode with them. At the Miller cottage, a woman brought out a baby with a rash. Sir Thomas listened, sent for Mr Jones, and asked after the older children by name.

On the road afterward, Darcy said, "The King gave you an estate in poor order."

"The Crown's agents collected income. They did not know the people."

"You do."

"Eventually. My first improvement was a new stable roof. Three tenant cottages leaked worse. Morris made me see it."

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth. "A trusted correction."

"An embarrassing one," Sir Thomas said. "Those are usually trusted afterward."

They stopped on a rise where Longbourn appeared beyond the trees.

"You will be far from them," Darcy said quietly to Elizabeth as Sir Thomas rode ahead.

"Three days is not exile."

"No. But your mother feels it."

"So do I."

Darcy drew his horse closer. "We may spend part of each year at Netherfield if your parents wish it. There is also no reason they cannot remain at Pemberley for long visits."

"Mama may rearrange your drawing room."

"Our drawing room."

Elizabeth smiled at the correction.

"Then we shall protect the furniture together."

* * *

The Hursts and Caroline came down from London the previous afternoon and took rooms at Longbourn. Their carriage, luggage, and Mr Hurst's insistence upon a particular port made their arrival impossible to overlook.

Jane married Charles Bingley on a bright October morning beneath a sky so blue Lady Bennet claimed to have ordered it.

Longbourn woke before dawn. Though the ceremony would be at the Meryton church, Jane insisted upon dressing in her childhood bedroom. She wanted to descend the familiar staircase one last time as Miss Bennet.

Elizabeth fastened the row of small pearls at Jane's throat. Mary arranged the veil. Kitty held pins between her lips until Miss Harwood objected. Lydia moved from window to door and back again, reporting every carriage.

"Mr Bingley has arrived. He nearly fell on the church steps."

"He did not," Kitty said.

"He stumbled inwardly."

Jane sat before the mirror, serene only at first glance. Her fingers gripped the edge of the dressing table.

Elizabeth knelt beside her. "Are you frightened?"

"Yes. Not of Charles. Of the size of forever."

"You need not live it this morning. Only the first day."

Jane looked at her reflection. "When did you become wise?"

"I am repeating Papa."

Mary adjusted one fold of the veil. "And tomorrow you live the second day."

"There," Lydia said. "Forever is already nearly finished."

Their laughter eased the room.

Lady Bennet entered in lavender satin and stopped. For all her speeches about rich husbands, fine houses, and daughters well married, she had not prepared for the sight of Jane in white.

"Oh," she said.

Jane rose. "Mama?"

Lady Bennet crossed the room and cupped her eldest daughter's face. "You were such a beautiful baby. Everyone said so, even Mrs Long, whose own niece was born the same week. I thought if I could secure you every happiness, nothing could touch you."

Jane's eyes filled. "You gave me happiness before I knew to ask."

Lady Bennet embraced her carefully to preserve the veil and unsuccessfully to preserve her composure.

Sir Thomas waited at the foot of the stairs.

Jane descended on his arm. At the final step, he looked at her and seemed to see every age at once.

"I was not ready when you were born," he said quietly. "You deserved a father from the beginning."

"I had you when I needed you."

"That is generous."

"It is true."

Outside, Darcy stood beside Bingley at the church. Bingley had indeed nearly stumbled, though not where Lydia observed. His hands shook when Darcy straightened his cravat for the third time.

"What if she changes her mind?"

"She will not."

"How can you know?"

Darcy looked down the aisle where guests settled. "Because Miss Bennet does not confuse calmness with uncertainty. You should have learned that."

Bingley exhaled. "You are a comforting friend."

"I am improving."

When Jane entered, Bingley's fear vanished. He looked at her with open wonder, and she smiled in answer—no reserve, no ambiguity, nothing left for another person to interpret.

They spoke their vows clearly.

Caroline sat beside Mrs Hurst. She was pale but composed. When Bingley placed the ring on Jane's finger, Caroline lowered her eyes. At the church door she kissed her new sister's cheek and called her Jane without effort.

The wedding breakfast filled Longbourn. Lady Bennet's sixty guests became eighty-three. The western roof held. Lydia was prevented from making a speech only because Sir Thomas promised she might offer a toast at home that evening.

Mary played a composition written for the couple. It began softly, developed into a bright interwoven melody, and ended with two themes returning together. No one spoke for several seconds after the final note.

Then Bingley applauded with such enthusiasm everyone followed.

Mary rose, blushing. Georgiana embraced her. A London publisher who attended as Lady Matlock's guest asked whether the piece had been printed.

"No," Mary said.

"It should be."

Elizabeth saw confidence enter her sister not as sudden transformation but a door opening.

Kitty presented Jane with a drawing of Longbourn beneath spring trees. Lydia gave Bingley a list entitled *Rules for Marrying a Bennet*, including: never conceal letters, always invite sisters, and do not permit doves indoors.

"The final rule is for you," Bingley said.

"Experience makes law."

Late in the afternoon, Jane changed into a traveling dress. She and Bingley would spend a fortnight at the seaside before returning to Longbourn.

At the carriage, Lady Bennet cried openly. Sir Thomas held her. The sisters embraced Jane in a cluster of ribbons, gloves, and contradictory advice.

Darcy stood slightly apart until Bingley approached him.

"Next time it is you."

"I am aware."

"Terrified?"

Darcy looked toward Elizabeth. She stood beneath the portico with sunlight on her hair, laughing through tears as Jane waved from the carriage.

"Not of marrying her."

"Of what, then?"

"Of deserving the trust after it is given."

Bingley followed his gaze. "Perhaps none of us deserves it in advance."

Darcy smiled. "You have become wise."

"Jane explained it."

The carriage rolled away. Elizabeth came to Darcy and slipped her hand through his arm.

"She is gone."

"She will return."

"I know."

He covered her hand. Together they followed the family back into Longbourn, where one daughter's new life had begun and another's waited close behind.

Caroline and the Hursts remained at Longbourn for the night after the wedding. They returned to London the following afternoon, so the house would be quiet for Jane and Bingley after the newlyweds' seaside journey.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After the Carriage

Longbourn felt altered after Jane's departure, though every chair remained in place.

Lady Bennet walked through the rooms collecting evidence that her daughter had truly gone: a ribbon left beside the mirror, a book on the bedside table, one glove beneath a chair. She carried each object to Netherfield and placed it in Jane's old room there as if constructing a small shrine.

Sir Thomas watched without teasing.

"The house is too quiet," she said that night.

This was objectively false. Lydia and Kitty argued in the corridor, Mary practiced below, and servants carried wedding remnants from room to room.

"It is missing one voice," he answered.

Lady Bennet sat beside him. "Soon Lizzy will go. Then Mary. Kitty. Even Lydia, though heaven knows who will take her."

"Someone with durable hearing."

She struck his sleeve and then leaned against it. "What shall we do?"

Ten years earlier Thomas might have said he looked forward to peace. Sir Thomas thought of breakfast without daughters, walks without reports, a library no one entered without knocking.

"We shall miss them," he said. "Visit too often. Become troublesome grandparents if they permit us. And perhaps discover whether we like one another without five girls to discuss."

Lady Bennet looked up. "I have always liked you, Mr Bennet. Even when you were impossible."

"Your taste remains your greatest mystery."

She kissed his cheek.

Jane and Bingley returned to Longbourn after their wedding journey. Their first dinner at Netherfield as husband and wife produced no visible transformation, yet Elizabeth noticed small differences. Bingley looked toward Jane before accepting an invitation. Jane touched his wrist when he

spoke too quickly. Their ease had become private without excluding anyone.

"Is marriage very different?" Lydia asked over dessert.

Every adult paused.

Jane answered calmly. "Yes. And not in a manner suitable for dessert conversation."

Lydia looked delighted rather than discouraged.

Bingley learned the household at Longbourn anew. Jane moved the writing desk toward the east window, restored her grandfather's portrait to greater prominence, and opened the schoolroom as a place where tenant children might receive lessons twice a week. Bingley approved all three and was firmly prevented from ordering an expensive new pianoforte for a room that already possessed one.

"He wishes to improve everything by purchase," Jane told Elizabeth. "I ask him first whether improvement requires money. He finds the question unsettling."

"Darcy improves by plan. Papa by investigation. We shall compare husbands after a year."

"You have not yet married yours."

"Then I retain optimism."

Darcy remained at Longbourn through November. His courtship of Elizabeth became part of the neighborhood's daily life. They rode with Sir Thomas, visited the Gardiners in London for three days, attended a concert where Mary heard her composition rehearsed by professionals, and spent evenings arguing over books.

One rainy afternoon, Elizabeth found Darcy in Netherfield's schoolroom helping Lydia with an account.

"If the ribbon costs three shillings a yard and you purchase six yards, how much remains from one pound?" he asked.

"Enough for gloves."

"That is not a number."

"It is a practical answer."

Darcy looked toward Elizabeth with mute appeal.

"You ranked above Papa in weakness," she reminded him.

"I begin to see why."

Lydia completed the sum under protest. When she left, Darcy held up the page.

"She is intelligent."

"Very. Her attention runs faster than instruction."

"Sir Thomas could have ignored it."

"He once would have. Lydia might then have mistaken attention from any man for regard."

They both thought of Wickham.

"She helped save Georgiana," Darcy said.

"Because someone taught her observation could be useful, not merely amusing."

He took Elizabeth's hand. "Your family might have been very different."

"So might yours."

"Will you regret living so far from them?"

"Sometimes."

Darcy accepted the answer rather than asking her to soothe him.

"Will you regret marrying into noise?" she asked.

"Sometimes."

Elizabeth laughed. "An excellent foundation."

He drew her close in the empty schoolroom. "I shall never regret you."

His kiss was warm, familiar now but never ordinary. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around his neck. Somewhere in the corridor, a floorboard creaked.

They separated.

Sir Thomas opened the door, looked at them, and looked at the ceiling.

"The roof is sound here," he said. "I thought perhaps another repair required Mr Darcy's full attention."

Elizabeth covered her face. Darcy, to his credit, did not retreat.

"Your timing is remarkable, sir."

"Ten years of practice."

* * *

Mary's wedding composition was published in December under the name M. Bennet.

The first printed copies arrived at Netherfield tied with blue string. Mary opened the parcel in the morning room while the family gathered around her.

They agreed to fake a relationship. Nobody agreed to get jealous.

If this is your favorite kind of mess, have a browse on Lokepub.

Her name—partial, modest, but hers—appeared above the title: *Two Houses, A Duet for Pianoforte*.

Mary touched the ink as though it might vanish.

"They printed the wrong tempo in measure forty-six," she said.

Elizabeth laughed and embraced her. "Then you are truly an author. Your first response is correction."

The publisher had accepted the piece after hearing it at Jane's wedding. Lady Matlock purchased fifty copies for friends. Queen Charlotte requested one after Georgiana mentioned it to a lady of the household. Within a month, Mary's music was played in drawing rooms by young women who would never know how often its composer had once wished herself invisible.

Success frightened her nearly as much as presentation.

"What if the next piece is poor?" she asked Georgiana during a visit to London.

"Then you will write another."

"What if everyone discovers I am ordinary?"

Georgiana looked surprised. "Mary, ordinary people make music. That is why it matters."

They sat at Darcy's London pianoforte with manuscript pages between them. Georgiana had also changed. She entered shops without clinging to Mrs Annesley's arm. She spoke of Ramsgate to Mary when memory

demanded it and then spoke of other things, refusing to make survival her entire identity.

At a small concert, Mary was asked to perform her duet with Georgiana. She nearly declined.

Elizabeth, seated beside Darcy, watched the old fear enter her sister's face. She did not rise to rescue her.

Mary looked toward Georgiana.

Slow the measure.

They sat together.

The performance was imperfect. Georgiana missed one entrance. Mary recovered without stopping. At the end, applause rose warm and sustained.

Sir Thomas stood at the back of the room, tears in his eyes.

"You must not tell her I cried," he told Darcy.

"I believe she saw."

"Then deny it if asked."

Afterward Mary came to her father.

"Was it dreadful?"

"Yes. I suffered through every measure."

She smiled. "Papa."

"You were brave. More importantly, you were prepared."

"Lizzy waited two years for me."

"She did."

"I think I would have managed without her today."

Sir Thomas understood the gift within the statement. "That is what she hoped."

Mary did not acquire a suitor by the end of the concert, nor did she require one to complete the chapter of her life. A thoughtful young barrister named Mr Avery asked about her composition and spoke to her for ten minutes without praising Lady Catherine, but Mary mentioned him only once and then discussed a modulation she wished to revise.

Two afternoons later, Mr Nathaniel Avery called at Brook Street with his widowed sister, Mrs Bell. Lady Bennet received them in the drawing room

with Sir Thomas, Elizabeth, and Georgiana present. Mary entered carrying corrected pages from the concert and stopped when she saw him.

"I hope the printer did not injure the modulation," Mr Avery said after the first civilities.

Mary sat opposite him. "The printer was innocent. I changed it because the first ending arrived too easily."

"Most people prefer an easy ending."

"Only when it has been earned." Mary glanced toward the score. "Music knows when a resolution is false, even if an audience applauds."

Mr Avery did not answer with praise. He asked what made a resolution honest. Their discussion moved from harmony to his work in Chancery, where elegant arguments sometimes concealed unfair results. Mary asked whether law could hear a quiet person when a louder one controlled the room.

"Not reliably," he admitted. "That is one reason I listen for what has not been said."

Georgiana looked at Mary and smiled. Mr Avery noticed the exchange but did not demand its meaning. Before leaving, he asked Sir Thomas whether he might call again when the family was next in London. He also asked Mary whether she wished him to bring the pamphlet on composers' publishing rights he had mentioned.

"Yes," Mary said. Then, more firmly, "I should like to read it."

Kitty's drawing improved under a London master. Her portrait of Lady Bennet captured both movement and affection so well that Sir Thomas hung it in Netherfield's front hall.

"Everyone will see me with my mouth open," Lady Bennet complained.

"You were speaking," Kitty said.

"I am always speaking. You might choose a kinder moment."

Yet she showed the portrait to every visitor.

Lydia remained under Miss Harwood for another year by agreement rather than punishment. She joined Colonel Forster's wife in organizing winter baskets for soldiers' families and discovered that officers' coats did not make cold rooms warmer or hungry children fed.

"Mrs Forster says I have a talent for persuading shopkeepers to donate," she told Sir Thomas.

"They surrender to end the conversation."

"The baskets are full either way."

"A defensible method."

Darcy watched these changes and understood how easily the Bennet girls might have become objects of ridicule in another life. Their abilities had required expectation, boundaries, and someone willing to see them before they became crises.

One evening he said to Sir Thomas, "You did more than improve an estate."

Sir Thomas looked toward the drawing room where Lydia laughed, Kitty sketched, Mary played, Jane leaned against Bingley, and Elizabeth argued with Lady Bennet over wedding lace.

"I arrived late," he said.

"You arrived."

Sir Thomas accepted the mercy from a man who understood late learning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Winter Letters

Darcy returned to Pemberley before Christmas because snow threatened the northern roads and the estate required him.

For the first time, separation did not mean silence.

Their engagement permitted correspondence. Elizabeth discovered that Darcy wrote differently from how he spoke: less guarded, unexpectedly dry, and precise about feelings once paper removed the danger of interruption.

The north tenant farm has lost part of a barn roof, he wrote. *No one was injured, though six hens have taken residence in the steward's office and refuse legal eviction. Your father's advice on slate arrived before my request. I begin to suspect he receives reports from the weather itself.*

Elizabeth answered:

Papa has informants among the clouds. Treat the hens generously. Their occupation is the most decisive Pemberley has seen since Lady Catherine last visited.

Darcy described estate business, Georgiana's practice, and the view from his library under snow. He also wrote what he missed.

The breakfast room is quiet. I once believed quietness proof that a household was orderly. Netherfield has taught me it may only prove everyone interesting has gone elsewhere.

Elizabeth read that line more than once.

She wrote of Lady Bennet's wedding plans, Lydia's baskets, Mary's publication, and the ache of Jane's empty chair despite seeing her nearly every day.

I fear leaving them more than I confess aloud, she wrote at last. *Not because they cannot manage without me. Perhaps because they can. I chose to wait for Mary and became accustomed to believing I stood between my sisters and difficulty. Now Mary no longer needs the same shelter. Jane has Charles. Kitty and Lydia have Papa. I am happy, and still there is grief in being released from usefulness.*

Darcy's reply came quickly.

You are not loved because you are useful. Come to Pemberley as yourself. If you never improve one room, host one dinner, or solve one tenant's problem, I shall remain grateful you came.

Elizabeth pressed the page to her lips before folding it with the others.

Darcy returned to Hertfordshire in January through deep snow. His carriage reached Longbourn after dark, but he came to Netherfield the next morning on horseback.

Elizabeth met him on the terrace wrapped in a red cloak.

"You might have waited until the road was cleared."

"I did wait. For six weeks."

The answer left no room for teasing.

They walked into the winter garden while Kitty followed at a distance with a sketchbook. Snow softened hedges and branches. Darcy took Elizabeth's gloved hands.

"I missed you."

"Your letters were excellent company."

"That is not the same."

"No."

He kissed her. Cold air, warm mouth, the faint scent of snow and leather—Elizabeth felt every week of absence collapse. Darcy drew her beneath the shelter of a cedar. Her arms went around him, and the kiss deepened until caution gave way to hunger.

His hand moved along her back and stopped at her waist. Elizabeth felt the effort of restraint in his body.

"We should return," he said against her temple.

"Probably."

Neither moved.

From beyond the cedar Kitty called, "I have finished the tree."

Elizabeth laughed against Darcy's coat.

"Your family remains vigilant," he said.

"Papa assigns them in shifts."

They returned rosy from weather and other causes. Lady Bennet looked at Elizabeth, then at Darcy, and announced that the wedding date must not be

later than March because prolonged engagements invited colds.

Sir Thomas observed that marriage did not cure weather.

"No, but it permits them to be snowed in together," Lady Bennet replied.

Darcy nearly choked on his tea.

The date was set for the fifteenth of March.

That night Darcy and Elizabeth sat near the drawing-room fire while Mary played. The room held conversation, pages turning, needles moving, Bingley's laugh, Lady Bennet's instructions, and the crackle of wood.

Darcy leaned close. "Pemberley will never sound like this."

"Do you regret it?"

"No. We shall make our own noise."

Elizabeth slipped her hand into his beneath the edge of her shawl.

The alpha wants his mate back. She wants a better apology.

If you like your werewolf romance with some groveling, take a look at Lokepub.

* * *

The royal reply arrived in February.

This time Sir Thomas opened it without delay. The whole family gathered in Netherfield's drawing room, including Jane and Bingley, Darcy and Georgiana, and the Gardiners newly arrived from London for wedding preparations.

Queen Charlotte wrote that the King had received Sir Thomas's letter during a quiet morning. His understanding came and went, but the names Netherfield and Bennet reached him.

He had asked for the letter to be read twice.

At the end, he dictated six words:

A life well used is thanks enough.

Sir Thomas could not continue.

Elizabeth took the page, but Lady Bennet covered her husband's hand before anyone spoke.

"He remembered."

"For that moment," Sir Thomas said.

"A moment altered our lives before."

The Queen enclosed her blessing for both engagements and a small gift for Elizabeth: a locket containing a miniature painted from an older portrait of the King and Queen together. For Jane there was a silver brooch shaped like an oak leaf. Mary received an invitation to submit a composition for a private royal musicale when the Queen's household permitted.

Lydia leaned toward Kitty. "Perhaps I shall receive something when I marry."

"You may receive advice," Sir Thomas said.

"I have plenty already."

Darcy read the dictated line after the others dispersed.

"A life well used," he said.

Sir Thomas stood beside him at the library window. "I wasted a portion."

"So does everyone."

"That is comfort offered by the young. Wait until you can count the years."

Darcy looked toward Elizabeth in the garden with Georgiana and Mary. "I have counted enough mistakes."

"Then do not count them merely to suffer. Use the sum."

Darcy glanced at him. "Is that what you did?"

"Eventually. Guilt is another library. A man may hide in it and call the hiding reflection."

"She will miss you," he said.

"And I her."

"I meant what I told her. We will return often."

"Do not promise a schedule before marriage. She may prefer Pemberley to all of us."

"She will not."

Sir Thomas smiled. "You have become confident again."

"Only in that."

The royal letter was framed and hung in the Netherfield library, not beside the grant or the knighthood portrait, but above the old desk brought from Longbourn.

Lady Bennet objected that visitors might not see it there.

"It was not written for visitors," Sir Thomas said.

On Sunday the family attended church together. The sermon concerned gratitude and duty, a coincidence Mr Collins—visiting with Charlotte—considered providential and described at length over dinner.

Charlotte whispered to Elizabeth, "He revised it after hearing of the letter. The original subject was chimney fires."

"A narrow theological escape."

Mr Collins raised his glass to Sir Thomas. "To the gentleman whose valor preserved our sovereign and whose beneficence has improved the inheritance that, in the fullness of time—"

Charlotte touched his sleeve.

"To Sir Thomas," Mr Collins finished.

They drank.

Sir Thomas looked around the table. The King's judgment was generous. Lady Bennet found his hand beneath the cloth, and he let that answer suffice.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Darcys and the Bennets

The final month before Elizabeth's wedding proved that five educated daughters could still misplace the same length of lace.

Lady Bennet blamed Lydia. Lydia blamed the dressmaker. Kitty found the lace beneath a portfolio where she had placed it for safety. Miss Harwood closed the morning-room door and stood against it until everyone agreed to search one room at a time.

Elizabeth's gown was ivory silk, simpler than Lady Bennet preferred and finer than Elizabeth intended. The Queen's locket would rest at her throat. Jane embroidered a small spray of oak leaves inside the hem where no guest would see them.

"For the two houses," she said.

Mary composed a processional and refused to perform it herself.

"I wish to watch you enter," she told Elizabeth. "The organist can manage."

Kitty sketched Pemberley from a print and added a tiny figure in the foreground wearing Elizabeth's green walking dress. Lydia abandoned the doves and proposed bells on the carriage horses instead.

"One bell each," Lady Bennet permitted. "No more."

Sir Thomas reviewed travel arrangements, settlements, weather reports, and the quality of every bridge north of London as if Derbyshire had been discovered for the occasion.

Darcy endured fittings and legal papers at Longbourn while Bingley offered the wisdom of four months' marriage.

"Agree about curtains," Bingley advised. "They are not worth principle."

"What is worth principle?"

"Letters. Estate purchases. Whether a guest may remain six weeks. Eggs, apparently, are not."

"Your education advances."

"Jane is an excellent instructor."

Elizabeth and Darcy met almost daily but were seldom alone. Anticipation altered every ordinary exchange. When he handed her a cup, his fingers

lingered. When she adjusted his cravat after Lydia declared it crooked, both forgot the room for one dangerous second.

One evening they walked the terrace while Sir Thomas watched from the library window with exaggerated visibility.

"Are you afraid?" Darcy asked.

"Of marriage?"

"Of leaving, Pemberley, my family, any of it."

Elizabeth considered. "I am afraid of becoming only Mrs Darcy in rooms where no one knew Elizabeth Bennet."

"Then I shall introduce you properly."

"You cannot command what people see."

"No. But I can remember who you are when they do not."

She took his arm. "And you?"

"I fear disappointing you after reform has made me attractive. Daily life may reveal I still leave papers everywhere and become silent when worried."

"I have seen your desk. The papers are a serious defect."

"Can you endure it?"

"If you can endure that I walk before breakfast, invite people you have not approved, and sometimes prefer being angry for an hour before becoming reasonable."

"I shall allow two."

"Generous."

He smiled, then became solemn. "I do not expect either of us to remain as we are on the wedding day."

"Good. It would make every anniversary tedious."

Darcy lifted her hand beneath the cover of twilight and kissed her palm.

A little more than a fortnight before the wedding, Mrs Reynolds arrived from Pemberley with two senior servants to accompany the new couple north. She greeted Elizabeth warmly and spent an hour with Lady Bennet discussing linen inventories.

"You must tell her when she is wrong," Lady Bennet instructed.

Mrs Reynolds looked toward Elizabeth. "I believe Mrs Darcy will ask."

Lady Bennet's eyes filled at the title.

"Not yet," Elizabeth said gently.

"In little more than a fortnight. That is hardly time at all."

Later that afternoon, the five sisters gathered in Jane's old room at Longbourn. No mother, governess, husband, or betrothed was admitted.

They sat on the floor among gowns and boxes as they had in childhood.

Lydia asked questions Jane refused to answer. Kitty cried and denied it. Mary gave Elizabeth the first printed copy of *Two Houses*, inscribed: *For the sister who waited until I could walk beside her.* Jane placed the last stitch in the oak leaves.

Elizabeth looked at them and understood that leaving did not undo belonging.

"You must all come to Pemberley," she said.

"At once?" Lydia asked.

"Not at once."

"For how long?"

"We shall negotiate."

"You sound like Mr Darcy already."

"Our governance," Mary reminded her.

They laughed until Lady Bennet knocked and demanded her daughters back.

* * *

The following evening, Sir Thomas and Lady Bennet hosted the Earl and Countess of Matlock at Netherfield because Lady Bennet refused to let the Darcy relations inspect her family only on church pews.

"They shall dine at our table, eat our cook's food, and see that Lydia knows which fork to use," she said.

Lydia looked offended. "I know all the forks. I only disagree with the order."

The earl arrived with Lady Matlock, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Georgiana, and Anne de Bourgh. Mr and Mrs Collins had come from Hunsford earlier that day and were staying at Lucas Lodge until the wedding. Lady Catherine was not expected.

Anne was thin, pale, and far more observant than her mother's descriptions suggested. She embraced Darcy, greeted Elizabeth without condescension, and asked to meet Mary.

"I have your music," she said. "It is the first piece I have practiced from choice in years."

Mary's shyness eased. Within minutes they discussed tempo.

Lady Matlock admired Kitty's portrait. The earl spoke with Sir Thomas about the King's letter and later with Mr Gardiner about trade. Colonel Fitzwilliam allowed Lydia to question him about the army until she asked whether colonels selected uniforms according to complexion.

"At last," he said, "a matter of national security."

The two families did not blend without edges. Lady Matlock looked startled when Lady Bennet described Darcy's income at dinner. Lydia interrupted the earl. Mr Collins, included as family, praised Rosings until Anne requested he discuss Hunsford instead.

But no one was humiliated. Correction arrived without contempt. The evening became livelier than a Matlock dinner and more formal than a Bennet one, a compromise perhaps suited to the marriage ahead.

Halfway through dessert, wheels sounded outside.

Anne's face changed. "My mother."

Lady Catherine entered without apology.

Lady Bennet stood. "Again? At least this time the eggs are safe."

Darcy concealed a smile. Elizabeth rose beside him.

Lady Catherine looked around the table: her brother, sister-in-law, daughter, nephews, Georgiana, the Gardiners, the Bennets, and Mr Collins halfway out of his chair.

"Sit down, Mr Collins."

He did.

The earl regarded his sister. "Have you come to dine or declare war?"

"I have dined."

"Then the second remains possible."

Anne stood. "Mama, I wrote that I would attend the wedding."

"You wrote many things in a most ungrateful letter."

"They were true. I do not wish to marry Darcy."

Lady Catherine flinched more at her daughter's public voice than its content.

Anne continued, pale but steady. "Miss Elizabeth did not steal my future. She prevented you from continuing to imagine one I never wanted."

Silence held.

Elizabeth saw Darcy prepare to intervene, then settle back in his chair.

Lady Catherine looked at her daughter for a long time. "You should have told me."

"I tried."

The words were quiet and devastating.

Lady Catherine sat in the empty chair a servant brought. Some of her grandeur seemed to remain standing without her.

Lady Bennet, unexpectedly, poured tea.

"Daughters speak softly when they fear disappointing us," she said. "It is inconvenient. One must listen between speeches."

Sir Thomas looked at his wife with affection.

Lady Catherine accepted the cup. "I do not require instruction in motherhood."

"No one who requires it does."

The earl coughed violently into his napkin.

Lady Catherine did not congratulate Elizabeth. She did not apologize. But she asked Anne whether she wished to return to Rosings after the wedding or stay with Lady Matlock for a month.

"Stay in London," Anne said.

"Very well."

It was a small answer and perhaps the first real one between them.

When Lady Catherine left, she paused before Elizabeth.

"Darcy is obstinate."

"I know."

"Pemberley requires attention."

"I know that too."

Lady Catherine's gaze moved to their joined hands. "You will not be easily managed."

"No."

Something almost like approval passed through her face and vanished.

"I shall attend the ceremony," she said. "I will not attend the breakfast."

Darcy bowed. "Thank you, Aunt."

After she departed, Lady Bennet released the breath she had apparently held for an hour.

"Her hat was better."

* * *

Two mornings after Lady Catherine's departure, a magistrate's messenger reached Netherfield before breakfast. Wickham had escaped while being returned to Hertford gaol after a magistrate's examination concerning the additional forged drafts. Floodwater had forced the escort carriage to slow at a ford; Wickham struck a guard with his irons, slipped into the trees, and disappeared. One guard was injured but expected to recover.

The magistrate believed Wickham would make for London or the coast. Sir Thomas believed a man driven by grievance might choose a less sensible road.

Georgiana was staying at Netherfield for the wedding. Darcy's first impulse was to send her to Matlock House under guard. He came to the drawing room prepared to announce the decision and stopped when he saw her waiting beside Mary.

"You wish me to leave," Georgiana said.

Darcy drew a breath. "I wish you safe. What do you wish?"

"To remain. If Wickham threatens to publish the Ramsgate letters, I will give evidence myself. I will not let silence become another room in which he can confine me."

Fear sharpened Darcy's face, but he did not answer for her. He asked what protections would allow her to remain without making the household careless. Georgiana requested that Mrs Annesley stay beside her and that no one conceal news from her.

Sir Thomas doubled the watch at both estates. Colonel Forster placed men on the London and northern roads. Wedding preparations continued because Wickham had already stolen enough days from the family.

Three days passed without sight of him.

On the fourth afternoon, Jane invited the family to Longbourn to inspect the repaired western roof and settle the final wedding breakfast arrangements. Darcy was already staying there with Bingley. Georgiana travelled from Netherfield with Mary, Elizabeth, Lydia, Miss Harwood, and Sir Thomas; Lady Bennet followed in a second carriage after remembering two lists she had left behind.

The house was busy enough to feel secure. Servants crossed the passage with linen and plate. Bingley argued with a florist. Jane and Mary compared music in the drawing room while Georgiana turned pages. Lydia was sent upstairs to fetch a portfolio from the old schoolroom.

She returned by the servants' stair instead of the main passage.

"Papa," she whispered at the library door, "someone moved the ladder beneath the west window. There is mud on the schoolroom floor, and it is not ours."

Sir Thomas did not praise or question her. He told her to find Miss Harwood, remain with the servants, and send a groom to the constables stationed near the south gate.

"Do not come back into this part of the house," he said.

Lydia nodded. She obeyed until she discovered that the groom had taken the second carriage to Netherfield. Then she ran through the kitchen garden herself, keeping below the hedge as Miss Harwood had taught all five girls during childhood games that were no longer games.

In the drawing room, a crash sounded from the passage. Wickham entered with a pistol in one hand and a length of broken chain hanging from the other wrist. His coat was torn, his boots soaked, and the charm that once made confidence appear effortless had narrowed into something feverish.

"No one moves," he said.

Bingley stepped in front of Jane. Darcy moved toward Georgiana and stopped when Wickham cocked the pistol.

"Still giving orders with your shoulders, Darcy? Stand beside the hearth."

Darcy obeyed. Sir Thomas entered behind Wickham and quietly closed the drawing-room door, keeping the servants and Lady Bennet from walking into danger.

Wickham wanted a carriage, ten thousand pounds, and a clear road to the coast. He also wanted Georgiana to swear that the accusations against him

had been invented by a jealous brother.

Georgiana's voice shook, but it carried. "No. I will speak at your trial. I will tell them about Ramsgate, the false letters, and every threat that followed."

"They will ruin you with me."

"Then I will survive the truth instead of serving your lie."

Wickham's attention fixed upon her. Darcy's hands closed at his sides, but he remained beside the hearth.

"Elizabeth," Sir Thomas said quietly, "can you reach the bell pull without crossing his line?"

Elizabeth followed the line from Wickham's pistol to the pier glass behind him. In its reflection she saw movement beyond the terrace: Lydia at the hedge, waving her white handkerchief toward two approaching constables.

Miss Harwood had taught the girls that panic narrowed sight. Count the doors. Notice the hands. Find what the frightened person had forgotten to watch.

"Yes, Papa," Elizabeth said. "But not yet."

She shifted one step toward the bell. Wickham swung the pistol toward her.

"You always believed yourself cleverer than other people," he said. "Sir Thomas may leave Netherfield to whichever daughter he chooses. Once you marry Darcy, what is ten thousand pounds to you?"

"Enough that I prefer not to give it to a man who cannot keep hold of a prison carriage."

The insult worked. Wickham took a step toward her, placing the broad writing table between himself and the terrace doors. Darcy met Elizabeth's gaze in the mirror. She let her attention touch the doors and return to him.

He understood and remained still.

Outside, one constable reached the stone steps. Lydia crouched behind the balustrade. Wickham could no longer see the terrace in the mirror because his own body blocked it.

Elizabeth moved her hand toward the bell pull.

Wickham saw the motion and turned. She seized the heavy estate ledger from the table and flung it at his pistol arm. The shot struck the ceiling. Darcy crossed the room before plaster reached the carpet.

He drove Wickham against the table and caught his wrist in both hands. Bingley pulled Jane and Georgiana behind the sofa. Sir Thomas kicked the pistol beneath a cabinet as the constables burst through the terrace doors.

Wickham fought until the guard he had injured during his escape, who had followed the constables inside, locked a second iron around his free wrist.

"You should have run toward the coast," Sir Thomas said, breathing hard.

Wickham looked at Elizabeth. "You think this family will survive her evidence?"

Georgiana stepped from behind the sofa. "We will survive whatever is true."

That answer ended the power he had expected shame to give him.

Lady Bennet entered as soon as the pistol was removed. She embraced every daughter within reach, scolded Sir Thomas for standing near armed men again, and demanded that the constables wipe their boots before taking Wickham through the front hall.

Lydia returned from the terrace with mud to her knees. Sir Thomas looked at the daughter who had disobeyed him and brought the constables in time.

"You left the servants as I expressly forbade."

"There was no groom, Papa."

"You might have been seen."

"I stayed beneath the hedge. Miss Harwood taught us."

Sir Thomas closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, fear and pride occupied the same expression.

"We shall discuss obedience tomorrow. Tonight, you did a brave and useful thing."

Lydia's chin trembled. She threw her arms around him.

Darcy found Elizabeth near the shattered patch of ceiling. He took her hands and checked them for injury.

"I saw the constables in the glass," she said. "I needed him to turn."

"You trusted me to understand."

"You did."

His grip tightened once, then gentled. Around them the family spoke, wept, argued, and refused to hide.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Last Evening

Nine days after Wickham's recapture, Netherfield quieted for the final night before Elizabeth's wedding. She had slept badly at first and still startled when a door struck hard against its frame, but the household no longer organized itself around fear. Georgiana had given her statement without concealment. Lydia had accepted a week's confinement with unusual grace after Sir Thomas admitted, just as plainly, that her courage helped save them.

Netherfield had quieted after midnight. The guests were settled. Her gown hung behind a screen. The Queen's locket lay in its box. Jane slept in the adjoining room by choice, returning for one night to the sister she had once shared it with.

Elizabeth listened to the wind and thought of every threshold before her.

At last she put on a dressing gown and went downstairs.

Light showed beneath the library door.

Sir Thomas sat at his desk with a book open and unread.

"I thought you had abandoned late-night hiding," Elizabeth said.

"I reserve it for emergencies."

"Is tomorrow an emergency?"

"For your mother, certainly."

She entered and sat opposite him. For a while neither spoke.

"I used to believe this room was where you loved us least," Elizabeth said.

Sir Thomas looked around the library. "You were not entirely wrong."

"No. You loved us. You simply preferred us outside the door."

He closed the book. "I thought affection was a feeling, and therefore sufficient if felt. I did not understand that love unseen is often indistinguishable from indifference."

Elizabeth's eyes filled.

"You made me certain of being loved," she said. "Eventually."

"I am sorry for the years before."

"I know."

He took a small object from the desk drawer: the broken wooden horse from the old nursery, its missing wheel still absent.

"You carried this everywhere when you were four. You named it Socrates because I told you philosophers ask questions."

Elizabeth laughed softly. "I remember Lydia chewing the tail."

"I kept it after we moved."

"Why?"

"To remember that you once asked me every question without wondering whether I wished to answer."

He placed it in her hands.

"Take it to Pemberley."

Elizabeth ran her thumb over the worn wood. "It has one wheel."

"Then it should feel at home in marriage. Progress will not always be smooth."

She came around the desk and embraced him.

"I shall miss you, Papa."

His arms tightened. "And I you."

"You will write?"

"When agricultural reports permit."

"That is not an answer."

"Yes, Lizzy. I shall write. I shall visit. I shall irritate Darcy with advice he did not request."

"He may request it."

"Then I shall irritate him by withholding it."

Lady Bennet stood in the doorway, her cap crooked from sleep.

"I knew I would find you together. You always have important conversations after sensible people are in bed."

Elizabeth held out a hand. Her mother joined them.

"You are not to forget us in Derbyshire," Lady Bennet said. "I know you say you will not, but Pemberley has many rooms and great ladies calling."

"Mama, I could not forget you in a monastery."

"I should hope not."

She stroked Elizabeth's hair. "I spoke too often of husbands when you were girls. I feared Longbourn. Before Netherfield, every birthday meant one year closer to your father dying and Mr Collins turning us out. I thought if I could marry you all, I could stop being afraid."

Sir Thomas took her hand.

"You were never vulgar," Elizabeth said. "Loud, yes."

"Very loud," Sir Thomas added.

Lady Bennet ignored him. "I wanted you secure. I did not always remember you must also be happy."

"I am both."

"Yes."

Her mother cried then, not dramatically but with the exhausted grief of letting a child go well.

Jane came to find them. Then Mary, drawn by the light. Kitty and Lydia appeared last, claiming everyone had walked past their room though they slept at the other end of the corridor.

The family crowded the library in dressing gowns and slippers.

Sir Thomas looked around at the room once used to avoid them and surrendered it completely.

They remained until the fire burned low.

At Longbourn, Darcy also sat awake.

Bingley found him in the breakfast room at two.

"You are not reconsidering?"

Darcy looked horrified. "No."

"Then why are you dressed?"

"Why are you?"

"Jane is at Netherfield. The bed is empty. I dislike it."

Darcy poured him brandy.

"Tomorrow," Bingley said, "you will discover marriage is exactly as everyone says and nothing like it."

"Illuminating."

"You will understand later."

They drank in companionable silence.

Before dawn, snow began—light, scattered flakes that did not settle. By sunrise the sky cleared.

The wedding morning came bright and cold.

* * *

Elizabeth did not trip.

Mary's processional filled the Meryton church as Sir Thomas led her down the aisle. Every pew was occupied. Tenants from Netherfield and Longbourn stood at the back. The Matlocks sat beside Georgiana and Anne. Lady Catherine occupied the end of the front pew with the bearing of a monarch accepting an unfavorable treaty.

Darcy waited at the altar.

He saw Elizabeth and forgot the congregation.

Ivory silk moved softly around her. The Queen's locket rested at her throat. Her dark eyes found his, bright with feeling and laughter held just beneath solemnity.

Sir Thomas felt his daughter's hand tighten on his arm.

"He looks frightened," Elizabeth whispered.

"So did the King. You know what to do."

She almost laughed aloud.

At the chancel, Sir Thomas placed her hand in Darcy's. Darcy bowed to him, then looked at Elizabeth as if receiving not a transfer but a trust.

Their vows were spoken clearly.

When Darcy promised to love, comfort, honor, and keep her, Elizabeth heard the difference between keeping as possession and keeping as care. When she made the same promise, she knew honor did not mean submission and comfort did not mean shielding him from truth.

The ring settled upon her finger.

"I pronounce that they be man and wife."

Darcy's breath left him.

Elizabeth smiled. "You may look happier now."

The clergyman pretended not to hear.

Outside, church bells rang. Lydia's approved carriage bells answered from the road. No doves appeared.

Georgiana embraced Elizabeth and called her sister. Mary stood beside them with tears on her cheeks and no attempt to hide them. Jane kissed Elizabeth, then Darcy.

"Take care of one another," she said.

"She has already begun by correcting my expression," Darcy replied.

Lady Catherine approached last among the family.

She looked at Elizabeth's ring, then at Darcy.

"It is done."

"Yes, Aunt."

"Pemberley's blue drawing room requires new curtains. The present ones are faded."

Elizabeth said, "I shall inspect them."

Lady Catherine's brows rose at the absence of obedience or refusal. "See that you do."

She entered her carriage without attending the breakfast, exactly as promised.

The wedding breakfast was held at Netherfield. Lady Bennet had invited one hundred and twelve people and claimed surprise when one hundred and thirty arrived. Tables filled the ballroom. The King's letter and the Queen's miniature were displayed privately in the library, not as trophies but as part of the family's story.

Sir Thomas offered the first toast.

He stood beside his wife, glass in hand, and waited until the room quieted.

"Ten years ago, this family received a gift none of us expected. People speak of Netherfield, the title, and His Majesty's generosity. Those things changed our circumstances. But the most useful gift was obligation—the knowledge that a life spared should not be spent asleep."

His eyes found Elizabeth and Darcy.

"Marriage is also a life spared from solitude, if two people remain awake to one another. To Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam: may you listen before certainty, laugh before pride, and use your happiness well."

They drank.

Lady Bennet wept. Lydia wept because everyone else did. Mr Collins attempted a second toast and was redirected by Charlotte toward the cold

meats.

Mary and Georgiana played *Two Houses*. This time the final passage included a new third theme, quiet at first, joining the original two without overwhelming either.

Elizabeth understood: Pemberley, Netherfield, and the life between.

During the dancing, Darcy claimed his wife's hand.

"Mrs Darcy."

The name sent warmth through her.

"Mr Darcy."

"Are you happy?"

"Entirely. You?"

"I have been attempting not to ask whether this is real."

"Your aunt attended. No dream would be so thorough."

They danced while family and neighbors watched. At the assembly he had refused her because she was not handsome enough to tempt him. Now every turn away felt too long, every return a private relief.

Near the end of the set, he said, "I was blind."

"Only at first."

"I shall spend the remainder of my life correcting the error."

"That sounds exhausting."

"I am equal to it."

As the breakfast thinned, the Matlocks prepared to return to London the following morning, Anne with them. Colonel Fitzwilliam would rejoin his regiment; the Collinses would leave for Hunsford on Monday; and the Gardiners would remain for several days before taking their children home to Gracechurch Street. Georgiana and Mrs Annesley were to travel north with the newlyweds after the London stop.

They left Netherfield before dusk. The journey north would begin the next day from the Darcys' London house, but their first night as husband and wife would be spent at a small estate Darcy owned twenty miles away, free from relatives and wedding guests.

At the carriage, Lady Bennet held Elizabeth too long. Sir Thomas embraced her without speech. Jane, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia crowded close.

Darcy waited.

When Elizabeth finally entered the carriage, he sat beside her and took her hand.

Netherfield receded beyond the glass.

Tears slipped down Elizabeth's cheeks. Darcy did not tell her not to cry or promise the separation was small. He placed his arm around her and let grief travel beside joy.

"I love you," he said.

Elizabeth leaned against him. "Take me home."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mrs Darcy of Pemberley

The small house at Ashbourne belonged to Darcy through his mother's family. It held twelve rooms instead of Pemberley's hundreds and no guest beyond a discreet married couple who kept it ready for occasional use.

Elizabeth entered as Mrs Darcy beneath a stone portico dusted with late snow.

The housekeeper curtsied. Darcy removed Elizabeth's cloak with hands that were steady until his fingers brushed the nape of her neck.

They dined alone.

For the first time in months, no parent, sister, aunt, servant carrying a message, or curious chaperone occupied the edge of their awareness. The privacy was liberating and suddenly formidable.

Darcy poured wine. Elizabeth noticed he nearly filled his own glass twice.

"You are nervous," she said.

"Terrified."

"Of me?"

"Of causing you pain. Of expecting too much. Of appearing to expect nothing and thereby insulting you differently."

Elizabeth reached across the table. "We need not perform perfection tonight."

He took her hand. "What do you wish?"

The question had become central to their love.

"To stop feeling as though fifty relations wait beyond the door. To be kissed by my husband. To learn the rest without pretending I am not nervous too."

Darcy raised her fingers to his lips. "That is exactly what I wish."

After dinner they entered a sitting room warmed by firelight. Elizabeth stood before the mantel, suddenly conscious of the ivory traveling gown, the pins in her hair, the ring on her hand.

Darcy came behind her. Their reflections met in the mirror.

"May I?" he asked, touching one pin.

She nodded.

He removed them slowly. Each small piece of metal clicked upon the table. Her hair loosened, then fell over his hands. Darcy's expression in the glass was so tender that fear eased.

Elizabeth turned.

"You have seen my hair loose before."

"At Longbourn, when you walked through rain. I thought you beautiful and resented the conclusion."

"A severe burden."

"You have no idea."

She placed both hands upon his face and kissed him.

Their practiced restraint gave way slowly to care. Darcy held her as if desire and reverence were not opposites. Elizabeth discovered the pleasure of making him lose a sentence, of seeing composure return and fail again when she touched his hair or whispered his name.

When he lifted her, she laughed softly against his mouth.

"You might warn me."

"May I carry you upstairs?"

"You are already doing so."

He stopped on the first step.

"Fitzwilliam."

"Yes?"

"Carry me upstairs."

His smile was the last clear thing she saw before he kissed her again.

Later, beneath heavy blankets while snow touched the dark windows, Elizabeth lay with her head over Darcy's heart. The first awkwardness had given way to tenderness, laughter, and trust. No poetry could have made it perfect. Its humanity made it theirs.

Darcy traced one finger along her shoulder. "Are you well?"

"Very."

"Certain?"

"If you ask a fourth time, I shall become less so from irritation."

He kissed her hair. "I was advised to bring doubts to you."

"Not every three minutes."

"The terms were unclear."

Elizabeth lifted herself enough to see him. Without cravat, coat, or reserve, he looked younger.

"I love you," she said.

Emotion moved openly through his face. "I love you."

Morning came pale over snow. Elizabeth woke alone for one startled instant before hearing movement in the dressing room. Darcy returned carrying a tray with tea he had plainly removed from a servant at the door.

"I did not know whether you preferred chocolate."

"Tea. Strong."

"I shall remember."

He sat beside her, hair uncombed. Elizabeth smiled into the cup.

"What?"

"Pemberley's master steals breakfast trays."

"Ashbourne's servants are discreet."

"And at Pemberley?"

"Mrs Reynolds will know what we require before we do."

They remained at Ashbourne two days while weather cleared. They walked only far enough to return gladly, read by the fire, wrote one joint letter to Netherfield, and learned the small rhythms of waking, eating, and silence together.

On the third morning they began the journey north.

Elizabeth watched the landscape change beyond the carriage. Darcy pointed out towns, ridges, and the inn where he always ordered mutton and was always disappointed.

At the final rise before Pemberley, he took her hand.

"Ready?"

She saw the house appear across the valley, no longer merely his home and not yet fully hers.

"Yes."

* * *

Pemberley's doors opened before the carriage stopped.

Mrs Reynolds stood at the head of the servants. Georgiana waited beside her, smiling so brightly that formality lasted only until Elizabeth reached the top step.

"Welcome home," Georgiana said and embraced her.

Home.

The word entered slowly.

Darcy presented Elizabeth to the assembled household not as the new mistress alone but by name.

"Mrs Elizabeth Darcy."

She greeted each senior servant, repeated names, and forgot two immediately. No one appeared shocked. Mrs Reynolds guided her through the morning with kindness free of indulgence.

The blue drawing-room curtains were indeed faded.

"Lady Catherine was right," Elizabeth said.

Darcy looked alarmed by the precedent. "We need not tell her."

"Marriage has made you secretive."

"Prudent."

Elizabeth did not change the curtains that week. She did not rearrange the furniture, replace menus, or summon tenants merely to prove activity. She walked through the house with Mrs Reynolds, learned the household accounts, visited the stillroom, and asked which customs mattered to the servants who carried them.

At the first formal dinner, she forgot the name of a neighboring baronet's eldest son and recovered by asking about his horses. At the first tenant reception, a farmer addressed every answer to Darcy despite Elizabeth's question. Darcy redirected him without humiliation.

"Mrs Darcy asked about the south field," he said. "She knows more of drainage than I did at our marriage."

"Only because Papa considers it courtship conversation," Elizabeth replied.

The farmer laughed and answered her.

The monthly open afternoon began in April. The first visitor was a tenant widow who wished to move to a smaller cottage but feared losing her garden. The second was a schoolgirl requesting more books. The third came

only to see whether the new Mrs Darcy truly had dark eyes and a royal locket.

"Do I meet the report?" Elizabeth asked the child.

"Your eyes are darker."

"Then truth has improved upon rumor."

Darcy watched from the doorway, pride warming him without possession.

Elizabeth did not perform every duty easily. A dinner for thirty exhausted her. She offended an elderly neighbor by seating a naval captain above him. She cried once after receiving three cold letters from Darcy relations and then became angry with herself for crying.

Darcy found her in the gallery.

"Lady Selwyn says I lack understanding of Derbyshire precedence."

"Lady Selwyn says everyone lacks what she alone supplies."

"Your cousin writes that I encourage Georgiana to be forward."

"Georgiana spoke three sentences at dinner. The family is unprepared."

Elizabeth smiled weakly. "I thought I would not care."

"Why must indifference prove strength?"

He sat beside her. She leaned against him.

"I miss Netherfield."

"Then we shall go."

"Not because I am unhappy here."

"You may love one home and miss another."

Letters came almost daily. Lady Bennet reported weather, neighbors, and rumors. Sir Thomas reported Longbourn yields and asked Darcy's opinion of a drainage design before rejecting the answer in a postscript. Jane described married life at Longbourn and Bingley's search for an estate. Mary sent music. Kitty enclosed sketches. Lydia requested permission to invite Georgiana to an officers' charity concert and included an account proving the funds would be supervised.

Elizabeth kept every letter.

In May, she and Darcy walked to the small temple at sunset.

The valley was green again. Pemberley's windows held the light.

"Does it feel like home?" he asked.

Elizabeth considered. "More each day. Not because I have learned every name. Because I am allowed not to know them yet."

Darcy kissed her temple. "I still discover Pemberley."

"You were born here."

"One may spend a lifetime learning a place."

She rested a hand over his. They stood above the water as they had before their engagement, but nothing between them waited to be asked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

London and Homecoming

London received Mrs Darcy with curiosity sharpened by rumor.

She was the daughter of the King's rescuer, mistress of Pemberley, sister to Bingley's wife, friend of Georgiana Darcy, and the woman who had supposedly defeated Lady Catherine de Bourgh in a garden before breakfast. Depending upon the drawing room, Elizabeth had pursued Darcy for his fortune, refused him twice, enchanted the Queen, trapped Wickham, or all four.

"I am disappointed no one has given me a secret child," she told Darcy after their first ball.

"The season is young."

He sat beside her in their carriage, one hand around hers beneath the lap robe. Society had been exhausting. Three women praised her gown while criticizing Hertfordshire. A duke asked whether Sir Thomas truly struck the King. Caroline, unexpectedly, redirected him by explaining the difference between rescue and assault.

"Miss Bingley defended my family," Elizabeth said.

"She enjoys correcting dukes more than she dislikes you."

"A firm basis for friendship."

Darcy had not hovered. He introduced her, remained near when needed, and allowed her to answer insult herself. When Lady Selwyn remarked that newly elevated families often mistook royal gratitude for hereditary rank, Elizabeth replied that old families sometimes mistook heredity for achievement. Darcy concealed his pleasure badly.

At home, however, he asked whether she wished to decline the next dinner.

"Do you?"

"Desperately."

"Then let us decline because we are both tired, not because you think me fragile."

"Agreed."

They spent the evening alone with supper trays in the library. Elizabeth removed her shoes beneath her gown. Darcy read estate letters aloud until

one from Sir Thomas became an argument about crop rotation.

"He has annotated my advice in three colors," Darcy said.

"Red means error. Blue means consideration. Black means he agrees but refuses to admit it."

"There is no black."

"Then you have failed entirely."

Georgiana's first large ball since Ramsgate became the season's greater test. She wore pale gold and asked Mary to stand with her before the first dance. Mary had come to London with Sir Thomas and Lady Bennet for a private royal musicale.

When a young man requested Georgiana's hand, she looked toward Darcy from habit. Darcy waited.

Georgiana turned back and decided herself.

"Yes, thank you."

Darcy released a breath.

Elizabeth touched his arm. "You survived."

"Barely. Who is he?"

"The son of people your aunt approves."

"That is not reassuring."

"He asked Georgiana, not your aunt."

Across the room, Mary spoke with Mr Avery, the barrister from the concert. He admired her second composition, then asked whether she believed music should imitate conversation or improve upon it. When she answered that most conversation would not survive being set to music, he laughed with her rather than at the unexpected sharpness.

They spoke for fifteen minutes. Mr Avery asked about Georgiana's part in the new piece, Mary's work with Lydia's charity concert, and the books she read when no one required accomplishment. By the time Lady Bennet noticed them, Mary had spoken more about loyalty, annoyance, and ambition than about scales.

Lady Bennet saw and began to rise. Sir Thomas placed one hand upon her sleeve.

"Let her speak without our hopes standing beside her."

"I only wished to hear."

"From six inches away."

She remained seated with visible suffering.

Queen Charlotte's private musicale took place at Windsor. Mary performed her new piece, *A Measure of Courage*, with Georgiana. Elizabeth and Darcy attended beside Sir Thomas and Lady Bennet.

Afterward the Queen spoke to the family.

"His Majesty has few clear days now," she said to Sir Thomas. "But your letter remains in his room."

Sir Thomas bowed, unable to answer.

The Queen turned to Elizabeth. "And Pemberley?"

"It is becoming home, ma'am."

"Becoming is honest. Too many brides claim perfection before learning the servants' names."

"I confused two footmen for a week."

"Only two? You are accomplished."

Darcy smiled.

The Queen looked at him. "You appear less solemn, Mr Darcy."

"Marriage has corrected me, Your Majesty."

"No wife should receive so impossible an assignment."

Even Darcy laughed.

On the carriage ride back to London, Sir Thomas sat opposite his daughter and son-in-law. Lady Bennet slept against his shoulder.

"The King saved you too," Elizabeth said softly.

"By nearly dying. An inefficient method."

"Effective."

He looked at her and Darcy together. "Yes."

* * *

The Netherfield servants lined the steps when the Darcys returned in August.

Lady Bennet did not line anything. She came down the drive before the carriage stopped and called Elizabeth's name through the open window.

Darcy had time to say, "Prepare yourself," before the door opened.

Elizabeth descended into her mother's arms.

Sir Thomas waited behind, smiling. Mary, Kitty, and Lydia crowded near. Jane came from Longbourn in a light carriage with Bingley driving too fast because she had told him not to miss the arrival.

For the first hour everyone spoke at once.

Lady Bennet wished to know whether Pemberley's chimneys smoked, whether the London house needed curtains, whether Lady Catherine had behaved, and why Elizabeth looked thinner. Lydia asked about balls. Kitty asked about the gallery. Mary asked after Georgiana, who would arrive the following week.

Sir Thomas shook Darcy's hand. "You brought her back."

"I promised."

"Promises are easily made before Derbyshire roads."

Elizabeth looked at her father. New silver showed at his temples. She had been gone only months, yet absence made change visible.

At dinner she sat in her old place. Darcy sat beside her as husband, which made every familiar object slightly new. The room sounded exactly as he remembered.

"You were right," he whispered.

"About what?"

"Pemberley does not sound like this."

"You said we would make our own noise."

"We have begun."

They remained at Netherfield six weeks. Darcy rode with Sir Thomas, reviewed Longbourn improvements, and learned that advice requested could still be ignored. Elizabeth spent mornings with her sisters and afternoons at Longbourn with Jane.

A letter from the family solicitor awaited them. At the Hertford Assizes, Wickham was convicted of forgery, extortion, escape, and armed assault. The capital sentence attached to the forgery conviction was commuted, upon the Crown's recommendation, to transportation for life. He was taken under guard to a prison hulk at Portsmouth and later placed aboard a ship bound for New South Wales. Georgiana's evidence was entered in her own

name because she refused to let his threats govern the record. He could not return to trouble either family.

Jane had news she had kept from letters.

She took Elizabeth into the old nursery and closed the door.

"I am expecting a child."

Elizabeth stared, then embraced her so quickly Jane laughed.

"When?"

"February, if all goes well."

Joy arrived with fear close behind. Childbirth was not an abstract danger. They had known women lost to it; Lady Bennet had survived five confinements and never allowed them to forget the achievement.

"Are you well?"

"Tired. Hungry at impossible hours. Charles has read three medical books and is now more anxious than Mama."

As if summoned, Bingley entered carrying a tray.

"Jane, you did not eat the biscuits. Oh—Elizabeth. She told you?"

"She did."

"Mr Jones says walking is good but not too much, rest is good but not too much, food is important unless it disagrees with her, and worry is harmful. His instructions are designed to destroy me."

Jane accepted a biscuit. "You see?"

Elizabeth kissed Bingley's cheek. "You will be a devoted father."

"I hope to be a less foolish one than I was a suitor."

"The child will offer immediate correction."

When Lady Bennet learned the news, she cried, issued twelve instructions, and began knitting something of uncertain shape. Sir Thomas went very quiet.

Jane found him later in Longbourn's garden.

"Papa, you are worried."

"It is a father's occupation."

"You taught us fear need not become command."

He looked at her. "I dislike having my lessons returned."

"I know."

"You will have the best physician available. You will remain where you are comfortable. Your mother may instruct everyone except you."

"And you?"

"I shall wait where I am told and terrify Bingley by appearing calm."

Jane rested her head against his shoulder as she had when young.

Darcy and Elizabeth walked to Oakham Mount before leaving. The view held both houses beneath late summer green.

"Jane will have a child here," Elizabeth said.

"We may one day bring ours."

She looked at him. They had not yet conceived, so far as she knew. The hope carried no accusation.

"I should like that."

Darcy touched the Queen's locket at her throat. "Two houses."

"One family."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Courage in Company

Kitty was presented the following spring.

She had spent the winter studying drawing in London and no longer copied Lydia's laughter before deciding whether a remark amused her. When Lady Bennet suggested that Lydia be presented at the same time for convenience, Lydia herself refused.

"I am not ready."

The breakfast table fell silent.

Lydia looked around defensively. "I know how to curtsy. But everyone still expects me to do something foolish. Sometimes I do it because they are waiting. I should like one year in which they stop waiting."

Sir Thomas set down his cup. "That is a wise decision."

"Do not look so surprised."

"I am impressed, not surprised."

"You are both," Lydia said, but she smiled.

Kitty entered Court in white silk with a small sketchbook hidden in the carriage for courage. Elizabeth attended with Darcy. Georgiana waited near the antechamber, and Mary stood beside their mother.

Kitty's curtsy was graceful. When Queen Charlotte asked whether she was the artist, Kitty answered clearly and presented a small drawing of the oak in Meryton beneath which the King had rested after his recovery.

"You drew this from memory?" the Queen asked.

"From the tree, ma'am. Papa says memory improves composition and ruins accuracy."

The Queen laughed. "Your father is inconvenient."

"Yes, ma'am."

Afterward Kitty cried with relief and then sketched the Queen's spaniel from memory.

Mary's life advanced more quietly, though not without difficulty.

A week after Kitty's presentation, Mr Avery called at Brook Street while Georgiana was visiting. Mary had received a proposed contract for her third

collection. The publisher offered respectable terms, but a clause transferred ownership of every future arrangement made from the music.

Mr Avery read the clause and reached at once for pen and paper. He dictated three changes, named a solicitor who should handle the negotiation, and began explaining why Mary must refuse the agreement.

Mary's fingers closed around the edge of the score. His advice was sound, but he had taken the page from her without asking.

"Mr Avery," she said, interrupting him for the first time, "I asked what the clause meant. I did not ask you to answer for me."

He stopped with the pen above the page. Embarrassment rose beneath his composure.

"You did not. I beg your pardon."

"Papa and Lizzy have spent years teaching me to use my judgment. I can understand the law without surrendering the decision."

"Nor should you." Mr Avery set down the pen and moved the contract back across the table. "May I explain the risks and leave the decision—and every instruction to the solicitor—to you?"

Mary looked toward Georgiana. Her friend touched two fingers to her wrist, their old signal to slow the measure, and waited.

"Yes," Mary said. "Explain. Do not direct."

Mr Avery went through the contract clause by clause. He marked questions in the margin and distinguished what he knew from what required specialist advice. When they finished, Mary chose which provisions to reject and drafted her own letter to the publisher. Mr Avery read it only after she offered the page.

Two days later he returned with a shorter memorandum headed Questions for Miss Bennet. It contained no instructions. Mary kept that page long after the contract was replaced.

Their next meeting occurred during an escorted walk in Kensington Gardens. Georgiana and Elizabeth walked ahead with Mrs Bell; Sir Thomas remained close enough to satisfy propriety while pretending interest in winter pruning.

Mary said, "Sometimes I think you admire the music and have mistaken its maker for part of the composition."

Mr Avery was silent long enough that she feared she had offended him.

"Your music first made me curious," he said. "It is not why I look for you when I enter a room. I admire the way you gave Miss Darcy courage without making her indebted to you. I admire that you hide a wicked sense of humor until someone has earned it. I admire your loyalty to your sisters, including when they exhaust you. The compositions matter because they are yours. You are not valuable because you compose them."

Mary's eyes burned. She looked toward Georgiana, who had slowed without turning around.

"That was a very long answer," Mary said.

"I am a barrister. We are trained to fear brevity."

She laughed, and the last of the fear loosened.

Before the Bennets returned to Netherfield, Mr Avery asked Sir Thomas for permission to correspond with Mary. Sir Thomas first confirmed that Mary wished to receive his letters, then questioned him about income, family, law, and the moral implications of publishing music under initials. Mr Avery emerged pale but returned the next day.

Mary and Mr Avery wrote for the remainder of the winter. Their letters discussed music and law, but also irritating relatives, favorite walks, household economies, and the books each had abandoned halfway through. Georgiana encouraged Mary to answer honestly whenever old habit tempted her to write only what sounded accomplished.

"He must court you," Georgiana said, "not the version of you who never disagrees."

Mary folded Mr Avery's latest letter. "He has already met the version who interrupts legal advice."

"And returned."

Mary smiled. "Yes. He returned."

Darcy enjoyed the evolving Bennet household from a safer distance. At Pemberley, Elizabeth received letters and read portions aloud. Lydia's were the most entertaining.

I have completed Miss Harwood's course in household accounts and discovered that candles cost enough to justify darkness. Mrs Forster says I may assist with the regimental charity again, though Papa has forbidden me from addressing unmarried officers without another lady present. This is unreasonable because married officers may be just as silly.

Darcy folded the page. "She has a point."

"Do not encourage her."

"I am expected to answer honestly."

"Marriage has made you troublesome."

"Your family deserves credit."

Elizabeth sat beside him on the library sofa, one hand resting unconsciously low upon her abdomen. She had been tired for weeks. Certain foods turned her stomach. The date she expected each month had passed unnoticed during travel and Kitty's presentation.

Darcy followed the movement of her hand.

Their eyes met.

"Elizabeth?"

"I do not know."

Hope and fear entered his face together.

"Shall we send for the physician?"

"Tomorrow. I wish to hold the possibility one night before everyone begins telling me what to eat."

Darcy covered her hand with his. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Hold it with me."

He drew her against him.

They sat in the library as evening gathered, saying nothing, the possible future no larger than the space beneath their joined hands.

* * *

The physician confirmed that Elizabeth was with child.

Darcy thanked him, asked six questions, forgot every answer, and followed him into the hall to ask them again.

Elizabeth remained seated near the fire, half laughing and half crying.

When Darcy returned, he knelt before her.

"You are well?"

"So he says."

"He recommends rest."

"He recommends ordinary activity without strain."

"That includes rest."

"It also includes walking."

"Short distances."

Elizabeth placed both hands upon his face. "Fitzwilliam, if you become impossible now, we shall not survive seven months."

He closed his eyes. "I am frightened."

Honesty dissolved irritation.

"So am I."

"My mother died years after Georgiana's birth, but I remember the fear during her confinement. I remember my father waiting."

"Mama delivered five daughters safely and tells every confinement as a military campaign. Jane is well. I am healthy. Fear may come without directing us."

Darcy opened his eyes. "You are returning my lessons."

"It is a family habit."

They told Georgiana first. She cried and embraced them both. Mrs Reynolds knew before the formal announcement because the physician's carriage had been seen and Darcy ordered three books on childbirth from the library shelves.

Letters went south.

Lady Bennet's reply contained eight pages of instructions and a final sentence in Sir Thomas's hand: *Your mother has forgotten that women in Derbyshire give birth without Hertfordshire supervision. I have not told her.*

Jane wrote from Longbourn, now heavy with her own child.

I am glad our babies will be near in age, though not in miles. Charles speaks to mine every night and believes it kicks in answer. I have not told him digestion is equally likely.

Elizabeth wished to be with Jane for her confinement in February. Darcy wished the same and feared winter travel. They compromised by going to London in January and waiting for safe roads before continuing to Netherfield.

The compromise was tested when snow closed the northern road for four days. Darcy watched weather reports. Elizabeth paced the London drawing room. Neither said *I told you so*, which they considered a marital triumph.

They reached Netherfield two weeks before Jane's expected time.

Lady Bennet transferred half her attention from one pregnant daughter to the other and exhausted both.

"Lizzy, do not sit in a draught. Jane, you have walked enough. Mr Darcy, she must not climb stairs quickly. Mr Bingley, why is Jane's shawl over there?"

Sir Thomas created a rule: no maternal instruction could be repeated within the same hour.

"You cannot regulate concern," Lady Bennet said.

"I regulate volume. Concern may continue silently."

The sisters found comfort in one another's fears. Jane admitted she dreaded pain. Elizabeth admitted she worried something in her would be lost to motherhood.

"Everyone speaks as if the child becomes your whole heart," she said. "What happens to the rest of me?"

Jane considered. "Perhaps the heart grows. Mama remained herself after five of us."

From the corridor came Lady Bennet's voice demanding to know who moved the foot warmer.

Elizabeth smiled. "Indisputably."

Bingley and Darcy coped differently. Bingley hovered visibly, carrying trays and pillows. Darcy became efficient: ensuring physicians, warming rooms, reviewing routes, and checking fires. Sir Thomas called both forms noise.

One night, Darcy stood with Elizabeth in the old nursery at Longbourn. A cradle waited near the hearth for Jane's child. The pencil marks remained beside the door.

"Our child will know this room," Elizabeth said.

"Yes."

"And Pemberley."

"Both."

"If it is a girl, will you be disappointed?"

Darcy's answer came at once. "No. Pemberley requires an heir eventually, but I require no particular child to satisfy an estate. A daughter would be

loved. A son would be loved."

"And if we have neither after this?"

"Then this child will be loved and the entail will follow where law directs. I will not make our family a servant to fear."

Elizabeth leaned against him, comforted beyond words.

From the bedroom below came sudden movement, then a servant's hurried steps.

Jane's labor had begun.

* * *

Longbourn changed from home to waiting place.

Mrs Jones, experienced in confinements, arrived within the hour. Mr Jones followed to examine Jane and was expelled by his wife after offering three instructions she had already given. Lady Bennet removed her bracelets, tied on an apron, and became calm.

"Heat more water," she told the servants. "Not all at once. Keep the passage clear. Mary, take Kitty and Lydia to Netherfield. Lizzy may remain if Jane asks for her."

Sir Thomas watched his excitable wife become the most capable person in the house.

"You have done this five times," he said quietly.

They agreed to fake a relationship. Nobody agreed to get jealous.

If this is your favorite kind of mess, have a browse on Lokepub.

"And you read through three of them."

The old wound carried no poison now, only truth.

"I am sorry."

"Then make yourself useful to Charles. He looks ready to faint before Jane has begun properly."

Bingley paced the library. Darcy sat near the fire, appearing composed enough to enrage him.

"How can you sit?"

"Standing will not assist Mrs Bingley."

"Nor will sitting. Nothing assists. That is the horror."

Sir Thomas entered. "You may assist by remaining where Jane can find you if she asks, eating something before morning, and not requiring every servant to report upon matters they cannot discuss."

"How long will it be?"

"No one knows."

"That cannot be the answer."

"It is the only one."

From above came the muffled sound of Jane's pain.

Bingley went white.

Darcy stood then and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Breathe. If she asks for you, do not carry your terror into the room."

"How?"

"I do not know. But Sir Thomas did it for Georgiana, and I did it badly until he corrected me. We shall practice."

The unlikely lesson occupied minutes, not hours. Hours refused occupation.

Elizabeth sat beside Jane when permitted. She cooled her face, supported her during pains, and offered no cheerful lies.

"I cannot," Jane gasped once.

"You are."

"Knowing it does not make this easier."

"No. But this pain will move. You need survive only the one that is here."

Lady Bennet stood on Jane's other side. "Crush Lizzy's hand, not mine. She is younger."

Jane laughed and cried at once.

Near dawn, Mrs Jones sent Elizabeth out. Lady Bennet remained. Bingley was summoned briefly because Jane asked for him.

He entered trembling and came out twenty minutes later transformed by helpless love.

"She told me to stop apologizing," he said.

"Then stop," Sir Thomas replied.

"I apologized for apologizing."

Darcy put a cup into his hand.

The sun rose. Breakfast cooled untouched. Footsteps crossed overhead. A door opened and closed. Sir Thomas stood at the library window watching light reach the trees where Jane had played as a child.

He could not run toward this danger or read it away. He could only remain.

At half past nine, a cry sounded from above.

Not Jane.

A thin, furious infant voice entered Longbourn.

Bingley's cup fell to the carpet.

The library door opened. Lady Bennet stood there exhausted, tear-streaked, and smiling.

"A girl," she said. "A beautiful little girl. Jane is well."

Bingley made a sound none of them had heard from a grown man and ran past her.

Sir Thomas caught the back of a chair. Darcy looked away, giving him the dignity of tears.

Elizabeth came downstairs later carrying the child wrapped in white.

"Papa."

Sir Thomas took his first grandchild with more fear than he had taken any royal document. The infant's face was red, her dark hair damp, one fist pressed beside her cheek.

"She is very small."

"She was considerably larger to Jane," Lady Bennet said.

Sir Thomas laughed through tears.

The baby opened her eyes briefly.

"Emma Jane Bingley," Elizabeth said. "They chose Emma because they liked it and Jane because Charles insisted."

"He could not insist upon his own name?"

"He proposed Charles if it was a boy and admitted defeat."

Sir Thomas looked at Emma. "You will know your father from the beginning. See that you appreciate the advantage."

Jane received visitors that afternoon in carefully limited numbers. Bingley sat beside the bed holding the baby and looking as if he had discovered both terror and divinity.

"She has Jane's nose," he told everyone.

"She is six hours old," Mrs Jones said. "She has a baby's nose."

Darcy stood with Elizabeth near the door. His gaze moved from Emma to Elizabeth's still-flat figure.

She knew what he felt because it moved through her too: relief for Jane, wonder at the child, fear of the autumn waiting for them.

He did not speak of it until they were alone that night.

"I thought I understood courage," he said. "I did not understand waiting while someone you love enters danger you cannot share."

Elizabeth lay beside him at Netherfield, his hand spread protectively over their unborn child.

"Papa learned that today too."

"And you?"

"I learned that Mama is magnificent in a crisis and intolerable afterward. She has already advised me to bring Mrs Jones to Pemberley."

"Should we?"

"Fitzwilliam."

"I am only asking."

She covered his hand with hers. "We have time."

This time, waiting did not feel empty. It held a heartbeat too small to hear and a family ready to receive it.

* * *

Emma Bingley was christened beneath the same church roof where her parents and the Darcys had married.

She slept through the sacrament, woke during Mr Collins's congratulation, and expressed her opinion with sufficient force to end it early.

"A Bennet," Lady Bennet declared.

"A Bingley," Charles said proudly.

"A baby," Jane corrected, taking her daughter back.

Jane recovered steadily. Motherhood tired her, surprised her, and occasionally reduced her to tears over matters as small as a dropped spoon. She did not become less serene; her serenity became more honest.

"I love her," she told Elizabeth during a quiet morning at Longbourn. "And sometimes I wish someone would carry her out of the room for one entire hour."

"Both may be true."

"Mama says she never wished to be away from us."

From downstairs came Lady Bennet asking Hill whether Emma had been taken to the nursery yet.

Elizabeth smiled. "Mama edits memory."

Bingley learned to walk the nursery at night. Sir Thomas held Emma during estate meetings, claiming she improved everyone's brevity. Darcy, who had rarely held an infant, accepted her as if receiving a parcel of unstable glass.

Emma grasped his finger and refused to release it.

"She likes you," Elizabeth said.

"She has no judgment."

"A serious flaw."

He looked at the child with wonder. "Will ours be this small?"

"I sincerely hope so."

Spring altered more than the family tree. Mr Avery requested Sir Thomas's permission to address Mary. He came to Netherfield with sensible income, honorable references, and an admission that he knew little of estate life but was willing to learn.

Sir Thomas asked what he loved about Mary.

"The way she listens," Mr Avery said. "She hears structure beneath noise—in music, in argument, in people. She does not speak quickly, but when she does, I discover the conversation has been waiting for her."

Sir Thomas gave consent.

Mr Avery proposed in the music room after listening to Mary play a new piece. He did not kneel until she had set aside the final page.

"Mary, I do not ask you to make my house musical or my life respectable. I ask because I love the mind that makes the music and the woman who has

learned to trust it. Will you marry me?"

Mary said yes so softly he asked again. Then she laughed and repeated it.

Elizabeth embraced her, remembering the frightened girl who had once feared Mr Collins might corner her into a proposal. Mary held Mr Avery's hand without hesitation.

Lady Bennet produced the tablecloth count within ten minutes.

Kitty was invited to spend part of the summer at Pemberley, where she would sketch the Peaks and study with an artist in Derby. Lydia prepared for presentation the following year on her own terms. Miss Harwood announced she would retire afterward.

"You cannot," Lydia said.

"I can. You are nearly eighteen."

"Who will tell me when I am foolish?"

"Apparently I have permanent employment," he said.

Elizabeth and Darcy returned north in May. Lady Bennet packed enough baby linen for triplets. Mrs Jones supplied instructions for the Pemberley midwife. Sir Thomas gave Darcy a private letter containing practical advice and one underlined sentence: *Do not make Elizabeth bear your fear as well as her own.*

At the carriage, Emma slept in Jane's arms. Mary wore her new ring. Kitty discussed summer sketches. Lydia promised to write every scandal and remove only the names.

Elizabeth looked at them and felt the old grief of leaving, changed now by certainty of return.

"Christmas at Netherfield," Sir Thomas said.

"If the baby and roads permit."

"I shall improve the roads. You manage the baby."

Darcy shook his hand. "A fair division."

The carriage moved north beneath spring leaves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Two Houses

Anne Elizabeth Darcy was born in October after twelve hours of labor, one shattered water glass, and a storm Darcy believed personally malicious.

The Pemberley midwife was calm. Mrs Reynolds was calmer. Georgiana remained with Elizabeth until the final hours, when the midwife sent everyone except her assistant away.

Darcy waited in the library with Sir Thomas, who had arrived a week earlier after declaring his daughter should not face confinement with only sensible people nearby.

Rain struck the windows. Darcy walked from hearth to desk and back.

"Bingley paced faster," Sir Thomas said.

"Is this intended to comfort me?"

"No. It entertains me."

Another cry sounded from above. Darcy stopped breathing.

Sir Thomas rose. "Elizabeth chose you. Trust her now."

"I am failing."

"You are still in the library. That will do."

"A low standard."

"Most useful standards are."

Darcy sat at last. Sir Thomas poured brandy neither drank.

Near midnight, Mrs Reynolds entered. Her face gave the answer before words.

"A daughter, sir. Mrs Darcy is tired and well. The baby is strong."

Darcy gripped the chair. "May I see her?"

"In a moment."

Sir Thomas's eyes filled. "A girl."

Darcy looked at him. "You sound surprised."

"I should know better. My family specializes."

When Darcy entered the bedchamber, firelight softened everything. Elizabeth lay pale against pillows, hair damp at her temples. A small bundle

rested in her arms.

He approached as though the floor might move.

"Come here," Elizabeth whispered.

Darcy sat beside her. The baby's face was round and red, her dark hair flattened beneath a cap.

"She is beautiful," he said.

"She resembles an offended apple."

"A beautiful apple."

Elizabeth laughed weakly and winced. Darcy's joy turned to concern.

"Do not ask whether I am well. Mrs Green says I am. I am tired, sore, and happier than I know how to hold."

"Then I shall hold part."

She placed the child in his arms.

Darcy looked down at his daughter. Pemberley had an heir presumptive elsewhere now if no son followed. The fact seemed distant and unimportant beside the weight of Anne breathing against him.

"We named her Anne," Elizabeth said, "if you still agree."

His eyes filled. "For my mother."

"And Elizabeth because I did some work."

He laughed through tears. "A fair claim."

Sir Thomas entered when invited. He stood near the bed, seeing Elizabeth alive and the baby safe, and had to remove his spectacles.

"Papa," Elizabeth said.

"There is dust. Pemberley's housekeeping is overrated."

She held out her hand. He took it.

"You came."

"I said I would."

Anne opened her eyes. Sir Thomas bent close.

"Your grandfather once saved a king who neglected to inspect a sugar plum for its stone," he told her. "You owe your existence to the error."

Darcy glanced toward Elizabeth. "Is this the family account?"

"The official history is worse."

Georgiana came next, crying before she reached the bed. Mrs Reynolds permitted Lady Matlock in the morning and refused Lady Catherine until afternoon. When Lady Catherine finally saw the child, she examined her with grave attention.

"She has Darcy eyes."

"She has a baby's eyes," Mrs Reynolds said from the hearth.

Lady Catherine looked offended. Elizabeth concealed a smile.

"Anne is a proper name," Lady Catherine continued.

"We thought so."

She touched one finger to the baby's hand. Anne gripped it.

Lady Catherine's expression softened before she could prevent it.

"A daughter may be useful," she said.

Elizabeth thought of Anne de Bourgh finding her voice. "More than useful."

Lady Catherine met her eyes and, after a moment, inclined her head.

Letters flew south. Lady Bennet's reply began with relief, continued through advice, and ended with plans to reach Pemberley before Anne's first month despite every road she had condemned.

Sir Thomas remained for three weeks. He held Anne each morning while Darcy attended estate business and Elizabeth slept. He wrote to the King though no answer was expected.

The second life arising from your gift has begun another, he wrote. *Her name is Anne Elizabeth Darcy. She is loud, determined, and very small. You would approve.*

* * *

Lady Bennet reached Pemberley before Anne was six weeks old and rearranged the nursery within two hours.

Mrs Reynolds moved the chair back after dinner. The two women thereafter respected one another as worthy opponents.

Jane and Bingley arrived with Emma for the christening. Mary came with Mr Avery and an engagement ring. Kitty brought drawings. Lydia brought three trunks, though invited for a fortnight.

Pemberley had never held so much Bennet noise.

Darcy loved it for four days, endured it for three, and took Sir Thomas fishing on the eighth though the stream had nearly frozen.

"You require quiet," Sir Thomas observed.

"I require perspective."

"The distinction escapes me."

"Elizabeth claims I should admit when overwhelmed."

"She is right. Do not tell her I agreed without qualification."

They returned to find Lady Bennet directing Christmas greenery in the hall and Lydia standing on a ladder.

"Perspective restored," Darcy said.

The family spent Christmas at Pemberley, then planned the following one at Netherfield. Elizabeth insisted upon alternating.

"Pemberley is larger," Lady Bennet objected.

"Which is why Netherfield will feel warmer."

"Netherfield is perfectly warm. Your father replaced every grate."

"Then there can be no objection."

Anne was christened in Pemberley's chapel. Georgiana became godmother, Colonel Fitzwilliam godfather, and Sir Thomas held the baby afterward beneath a painted window while Emma slept against Bingley's shoulder.

Darcy watched the two grandfathers: Sir Thomas speaking nonsense to Anne, Bingley solemnly promising Emma she might pull the earl's ribbon if she wished. Pemberley's future no longer felt like a line of male names in an estate book. It was people, noisy and unmanageable, entering rooms he had once kept perfect.

Elizabeth joined him.

"You look alarmed."

"I was thinking Pemberley may never recover."

"From Christmas?"

"From belonging to more than one person."

She leaned against his arm. "Is that regret?"

"No. Relief."

After the other guests retired on Christmas night, the Bennet sisters gathered in Elizabeth's sitting room. Jane held Emma. Anne slept in a cradle

near the fire. Mary spoke of a June wedding. Kitty showed a letter from the Derbyshire artist who offered to display two of her landscapes. Lydia announced she wished to be presented in the spring.

"Because you are ready?" Elizabeth asked.

"Because I no longer wish to be noticed by everyone. Only by people worth knowing. That seems safer."

Jane smiled. "And are there no officers worth knowing?"

"Colonel Fitzwilliam is handsome, but too old and far too observant."

"He is thirty-one," Elizabeth said.

"Ancient."

They laughed until Anne stirred.

Mary lifted the baby with growing confidence. "Do you remember the nursery floor before Lizzy's wedding?"

"I remember being denied an immediate visit to Pemberley," Lydia said.

"And now you are here," Kitty replied.

"Eventually."

Elizabeth looked around the circle. Jane shifted Emma into Mary's waiting arms; Kitty moved the cradle away from Lydia's trailing hem; Lydia tucked the blanket around Anne without being asked. The sisters had not become alike. They had learned to make room for one another.

Downstairs, Sir Thomas stood before Darcy's library fire holding the King's six-word message copied in his daughter's hand.

A life well used is thanks enough.

"Do you believe him?" Darcy asked.

Sir Thomas listened to laughter overhead. "Tonight, perhaps."

* * *

Bingley found his estate two years after leasing Longbourn.

Hazelwood lay twelve miles west of Netherfield, close enough for Lady Bennet to visit without luggage and far enough for Jane to establish a household not arranged around childhood memories. The house was smaller than Longbourn, the land well watered, and the tenant farms neglected in ways Bingley now knew how to recognize.

"The roof is sound," he told Sir Thomas after the inspection.

"A low standard learned wisely."

Jane walked through the empty rooms carrying Emma, now a lively toddler who attempted to open every cupboard.

"Can you imagine us here?" Bingley asked.

Jane looked through the drawing-room windows toward an orchard. "Yes. Not because it is perfect. Because we may decide what it becomes."

He purchased Hazelwood in the spring.

Leaving Longbourn was harder than Jane expected. She stood in the nursery while servants packed and remembered fear before her wedding, Emma's first cry, and Bingley walking the floor at night.

"We can remain," he said. "The lease continues."

"No. Loving a house is not the same as belonging in it forever."

They left Sir Thomas's grandfather on the stairs and Mary's height marks beside the schoolroom door. They took the desk Jane had moved to the east window and the cradle Sir Thomas gave Emma.

Longbourn was leased next to a retired naval captain and his wife, who had no unmarried sons and therefore disappointed Meryton. Mr Collins inspected the agreement, approved the rent, and returned to Hunsford after Charlotte reminded him that inheritance did not require rehearsal.

At Hazelwood, Bingley applied everything Sir Thomas taught him and made new mistakes of his own. He replaced a tenant barn before ordering new stables. Jane opened a small school. Caroline visited and advised on the drawing room without moving ancestral portraits because there were none.

The move changed the map of family life. Netherfield stood at the center, Hazelwood to the west, Longbourn below the hill, Pemberley three days north, and London connecting them all through letters and seasons.

Darcy and Elizabeth visited in summer with Anne. The two little girls played beneath the orchard trees while their parents dined outdoors.

"I once believed buying an estate would prove my father had succeeded," Bingley told Darcy. "Then I believed marrying Jane made the house irrelevant. Now I discover land matters because people depend upon what I do with it."

Darcy looked toward Sir Thomas, who carried Emma on his shoulders and pretended not to listen.

"An inconvenient lesson," Darcy said.

"They are the lasting sort," Sir Thomas called.

Jane came to Elizabeth under the apple trees. "I thought I would grieve Longbourn more."

"You carried what mattered."

"And left what should remain."

Emma ran toward them with grass on her gown. Anne followed more slowly, holding a fallen apple in both hands.

Elizabeth lifted her daughter.

"Two houses became three," Jane said.

"Mama will require a larger visiting calendar."

Across the lawn, Lady Bennet was already asking Bingley which bedchamber she might use.

* * *

Mary's wedding was everything Jane's and Elizabeth's had not been.

It was small.

Lady Bennet fought this condition through winter and surrendered only when Mary said, with quiet finality, "Mama, I wish to know every person present."

Forty guests attended the Meryton church in June. Mary wore cream rather than white, with no royal jewels and no train beyond one she could manage without practice. Her published music was played by Georgiana, who paused before the processional and gave Mary their old signal.

Slow the measure.

Mary smiled and walked toward Mr Avery.

Sir Thomas escorted her. At the final pew she stopped.

"Papa, I am not frightened."

"I am. One of us should preserve tradition."

"You will like him after I marry him too."

"I like him now. That increases the danger."

Mary laughed softly and continued.

Mr Avery's expression warmed as Mary approached, as though the room had indeed waited for her voice. Their vows were quiet, their happiness

unmistakable.

The breakfast at Netherfield filled only the dining room and terrace. Lady Bennet discovered that forty people could produce sufficient admiration if seated closely. Mr Collins gave a brief blessing revised by Charlotte. Kitty presented Mary with a portrait at the pianoforte, not performing but composing, her expression absorbed and at ease.

Lydia offered a toast.

"To Mary, who taught me that quiet people may be planning more interesting lives than loud people suspect. And to Mr Avery, who reads every page she writes and still intends to marry her."

"Has married," Kitty whispered.

"Even braver."

Mary and her husband settled in London, where Mr Avery practiced law and Mary composed. She kept her own income from publication under the marriage settlement Sir Thomas insisted upon. Mr Avery took pride in it without attempting to manage it.

Kitty's landscapes were displayed at a small Derby exhibition and sold to people outside the family, a fact Lady Bennet repeated more often than the prices justified. Kitty did not marry at once. She divided her time between Netherfield, Pemberley, and London instruction, becoming a favorite of Georgiana's and an observer whose gentle portraits revealed more than fashionable likenesses.

Georgiana remained a frequent visitor at every Bennet household. When she no longer required a formal companion, Mrs Annesley retired to a cottage near Pemberley and remained a cherished friend of the family.

Lydia was presented at nineteen.

She entered Court in pale yellow with Lady Bennet, Jane, Elizabeth, and Kitty watching. She made a correct curtsy, answered the Queen without shouting, and withdrew backward without stepping upon anyone.

Outside the drawing room, she leaned against the wall.

"I did nothing memorable."

"That was your stated ambition," Elizabeth said.

"It is less satisfying than expected."

The Queen had asked about her work for soldiers' families. That notice mattered more than the glances of officers at the following ball, though Lydia enjoyed both. She later danced twice with Lieutenant Samuel Carter, Captain Carter's younger brother, who admired her energy and did not mistake it for permission. Sir Thomas observed him for an entire season before allowing serious courtship.

"Papa is terrifying him," Lydia told Elizabeth.

"Good."

"Lieutenant Carter says he respects it."

"Better."

"I have not decided whether I love him."

"Best of all."

Lady Bennet continued to hope noisily. Sir Thomas continued to guard quietly. Lydia chose at her own pace.

After Mary's carriage departed, Elizabeth found her parents alone on the Netherfield terrace.

"Three married," Lady Bennet said. "Kitty may never settle because artists are unreliable. Lydia keeps a perfectly respectable lieutenant waiting."

"You have two daughters still at home and complain differently than when you had five," Sir Thomas observed.

"A mother adapts."

Elizabeth sat between them.

"Do you remember when only Jane was out?" she asked.

"I remember every season," Lady Bennet said. "Your father remembers weather and rents."

Sir Thomas looked toward the house where the wedding flowers remained. "I remember more than I once did."

* * *

On the fifteenth anniversary of the King's visit to Meryton, Sir Thomas planted an oak near the southern boundary of Netherfield.

The original oak beneath which His Majesty rested still stood in Meryton, protected by an iron rail and surrounded by inaccurate plaques. Sir Thomas refused another monument.

"Trees are useful," he said. "Statues only collect birds."

The family gathered for the planting. Jane and Bingley came from Hazelwood with Emma and their baby son, Thomas Charles. Mary and Mr Avery travelled from London. Kitty arrived from Derby. Lydia brought Lieutenant Carter under Sir Thomas's inspection. Darcy and Elizabeth came from Pemberley with Anne and a second daughter, little Eleanor Charlotte Darcy.

Lady Bennet counted grandchildren before breakfast and declared the number insufficient.

The children played on the lawn while Sir Thomas set the young tree into the prepared earth. Anne carried soil in a silver cup until Darcy replaced it with a wooden pail. Emma attempted to climb the sapling before it was upright.

"Why a new tree?" Anne asked.

Nearly three, she possessed Elizabeth's eyes and Darcy's seriousness, an alarming combination.

Sir Thomas knelt beside her. "Because the old tree marks where something nearly ended. This one marks what began."

"Mama?"

"Partly. Your mother, aunts, cousins, all of you."

Anne considered the sapling. "It is small."

"Everything begins so."

The brass plate at its base bore no title and mentioned no estate. It read:

For lives preserved, duties awakened, and families attended.

After the planting, everyone walked into Meryton. The assembly rooms still hosted the annual account of the King's rescue. Mr Lucas, older and no less enthusiastic, told the story to visitors. In his version, Sir Thomas crossed thirty feet through a wall of guards, caught the King as he fell, and forced the sugar plum across the room with a blow heard in London.

"It improves yearly," Darcy murmured.

"By the twentieth anniversary, Papa will fly," Elizabeth said.

Sir Thomas heard. "I object only to the direction."

Inside the assembly room, Anne and Emma stood where their grandfather had once placed a plate into Elizabeth's hands.

"Was Grandpapa afraid?" Emma asked.

"Yes," Elizabeth said.

"But brave people are not afraid."

"Brave people act while afraid. Your grandpapa did that once for the King and many times afterward for us."

Sir Thomas looked away.

Darcy put a hand on his shoulder. "You cannot object to accuracy."

"I object to public accuracy."

The family returned to Netherfield for dinner. Noise filled the house: children, music, Lydia's laughter, Lady Bennet's instructions, Bingley asking Jane where Thomas's blanket had gone, Mary discussing a new composition with Georgiana, Kitty sketching the oak from memory.

Sir Thomas stood outside the drawing room.

Once, a closed door had protected his solitude. Now the open door framed everything he might have missed.

Lady Bennet saw him and called, "Mr Bennet, do not stand there. Eleanor has your spectacles."

He entered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A Life Well Used

News of King George's death reached Netherfield on a cold February morning in 1820.

Sir Thomas was sixty-eight. His hair had gone silver, his left knee objected to wet weather, and he still rode the estate three mornings each week because Morris's successor required correction.

The newspaper lay beside his breakfast plate.

Lady Bennet saw the black border and stopped speaking.

Sir Thomas read the notice once. The King had died at Windsor after years lost within illness. The nation mourned a sovereign many had not seen in public for nearly a decade. The Prince Regent was now George IV.

"He is gone," Lady Bennet said.

"He has been gone from himself a long while."

"I know. Yet now he is truly gone."

"No."

She came around the table and stood behind his chair, both hands upon his shoulders.

For much of the day, Sir Thomas answered letters. The Queen had died in November 1818, so no familiar hand would write from Windsor. A secretary to the new King sent formal acknowledgment of Sir Thomas's old service. Colonel Fitzwilliam wrote with personal sympathy. Darcy's letter promised the family would come south as soon as winter roads permitted.

By evening Sir Thomas had said little of grief.

Lady Bennet found him in the library beneath the framed message.

A life well used is thanks enough.

"You should eat."

"I shall."

"You said that at noon."

He looked at her. "I remember his face when he breathed again. Not the portraits. The surprise. As if air had become something miraculous because it was briefly absent."

Lady Bennet sat beside him. "I remember your face when the swords touched you."

"I made a joke in the carriage."

"A poor one."

"Most are."

"Not most. Some."

He covered her hand. "I was afraid to admit I had nearly left you."

"Then you spent eighteen years admitting it differently."

The first family members arrived two days later from Hazelwood and London. Pemberley's party reached Netherfield after a week. Elizabeth entered the library without announcement, as she had from childhood, and found her father at the window.

"Papa."

He turned. She crossed the room and embraced him.

Darcy followed with Anne and Eleanor. Anne, now eight, understood death enough to become solemn. Eleanor, five, understood that Grandpapa was sad and offered him a biscuit saved from the carriage.

Sir Thomas accepted it.

"The King saved your life," Anne said.

"Your mother has confused the story."

"She says you saved his, and then he saved yours by making you wake up."

Sir Thomas met Elizabeth's eyes.

"I used simpler language," she said.

"Apparently not."

The whole family attended the memorial service in Meryton. Mr Lucas had died the previous year; his son delivered no public account of the rescue. For once, the assembly rooms and church held the story in silence.

After the service, Sir Thomas walked to the old oak with Darcy and Elizabeth. The iron rail was rusted. One plaque still claimed the dislodged sugar plum travelled twelve feet.

"It fell near Mr Lucas's shoe," Sir Thomas said.

"History prefers distance," Darcy replied.

Elizabeth touched the tree's rough bark. "Do you regret the attention that followed?"

"Often. Never the result."

"Netherfield?"

Sir Thomas looked toward the road leading home. "You. Jane. Mary. Kitty. Lydia. Your mother. The result was time I ceased throwing away."

They stood beneath bare branches while church bells tolled for a king.

That night the family dined without formal mourning speeches. Children moved between chairs. Emma asked Sir Thomas to tell the sugar-plum story and was corrected by Anne whenever embellishment contradicted prior versions.

"Were you afraid of the swords?" Thomas Charles asked.

"Very."

"Did you know the King would give you a house?"

"I hoped he would allow me to keep my head."

"Did you become good that day?"

The adults quieted.

Sir Thomas considered the question.

"No. I decided to try that day. Becoming is slower."

Anne nodded as if this accorded with her experience.

Later, Darcy joined Sir Thomas in the emptying dining room.

"The new King may invite you to Court."

"I shall decline unless duty requires it. I have received enough kings."

"And enough gifts?"

Sir Thomas listened to his grandchildren overhead. "More than enough."

* * *

The King's death did not end the life his gratitude altered.

Netherfield continued beneath Sir Thomas's management, then increasingly under Kitty's supervision when she discovered that drawing landscapes taught her to read land as well as render it. She did not surrender art. She built a studio over the old orangery and travelled to exhibitions with a respectable widow as companion.

"You require an heir in practice if not law," she told her father. "Lizzy has Pemberley, Jane Hazelwood, Mary London, and Lydia expects to follow the army. I am here. Teach me."

Sir Thomas did.

He showed her leases, crop records, drainage maps, and the mistakes hidden in old accounts. Kitty's eye for proportion made her excellent at boundaries. Her patience with people exceeded his. In time, the family agreed Netherfield would pass principally to Kitty, with financial shares equalized among the sisters according to the grant.

Lady Bennet mourned that Kitty might remain unmarried until Kitty received an offer from Mr Edward Alden, the widowed younger son of a neighboring family and an amateur botanist who admired her work before her portion. Kitty accepted after a year's friendship and refused to leave Netherfield. Mr Alden came to her instead.

Mary and Mr Avery had two sons and a daughter. Mary published under her full married name after the success of her fifth collection. Her music was performed at Pemberley, Court, and occasionally by young ladies who ignored the difficult passages. She remained quiet in large rooms and no longer mistook quiet for absence.

Lydia married Samuel, by then Captain Carter, after making him wait long enough to satisfy herself rather than Sir Thomas. Their marriage travelled between ports. Lydia wrote vivid letters, managed charity funds with fierce honesty, and still overspent on ribbon once a year.

Jane and Bingley filled Hazelwood with children, guests, and improvements. Bingley became a respected landowner without losing the warmth that once made him vulnerable. Caroline visited twice yearly, spoiled the children, and criticized the drawing-room curtains as proof of affection.

At Pemberley, Anne and Eleanor grew among music, books, estate rides, and letters from every Bennet relation. A son, George Thomas Darcy, was born four years after Anne—not as replacement or rescue, but as another beloved child.

Darcy did not become easy in every company, nor Elizabeth right in every argument. He still withdrew when worried; she still defended a quick judgment too long. Marriage gave them practice in returning to the conversation.

On their tenth anniversary, they returned to Oakham Mount alone.

"My feelings and wishes are unchanged," Darcy said beneath the oak where he had proposed.

Elizabeth looked at the silver beginning at his temples. "You are not."

"Neither are you."

"Then we have kept one promise."

He took her hand. "Do you regret the changes?"

"Some. I regret every child outgrowing sleep. I regret Pemberley's north roof in winter. I regret allowing your aunt to choose the blue drawing-room curtains."

"She was right about the color."

"Do not ruin the moment."

Darcy smiled and kissed her.

Below them, Netherfield and Longbourn remained visible. Hazelwood lay beyond the western trees. The map had changed, but the family crossed it continually.

When they returned to the house, Sir Thomas sat beneath the new oak with three grandchildren around him and a book closed upon his knee.

He was listening.

* * *

The idea for a school began with a leaking cottage and Lydia's account books.

During one of her visits from Portsmouth, Lydia accompanied Sir Thomas on an estate ride and discovered that three tenant girls walked nearly four miles to the parish school in winter. The boys attended more reliably because farm carts carried them part of the distance. The girls remained home when roads were bad.

"Build a school near the southern farms," Lydia said.

"Buildings require teachers, fuel, books, and continued income."

"You say that whenever an idea is good but expensive."

"I say it whenever an idea is expensive."

Lydia returned the next morning with figures. They were imperfect, blotted, and surprisingly complete. She proposed using proceeds from the annual

militia charity concert, a contribution from Netherfield, and subscriptions from neighboring landowners. Mary offered royalties from one composition. Kitty designed a schoolhouse with high windows and a small room for drawing and music. Jane promised books from the Hazelwood school. Elizabeth and Darcy offered a yearly sum large enough to secure a teacher.

Sir Thomas reviewed the plan.

"You have all conspired."

"We cooperated," Lydia said. "Conspiracy sounds more interesting."

The Royal Oak School opened eighteen months later near the young tree planted for the King's anniversary. It admitted the daughters and sons of tenants without fee. Reading, writing, arithmetic, household accounts, and practical agriculture formed the common lessons. Music and drawing were taught twice each month when Mary or Kitty could attend, and by local instructors otherwise.

Sir Thomas refused to name it for himself.

"You saved the King," Lady Bennet argued. "People will expect the Bennet School."

"Then they may practice disappointment."

The new King permitted use of the word Royal after receiving the school's plan through an old secretary of Queen Charlotte. The letter of approval mentioned Sir Thomas's service but praised his daughters' design.

He framed that letter in the schoolhouse rather than his library.

At the opening, Lydia gave the speech.

No one had intended this except Lydia. Sir Thomas discovered it when she stepped onto the low platform with three pages in her hand.

"Most schools teach children to be quiet," she began. "I hope this one teaches them when to speak."

Lady Bennet whispered, "She should stand straighter."

Sir Thomas touched her sleeve.

Lydia continued. "My sisters and I were fortunate. We had a governess, masters, books, and a father who learned to hear us before we could make every possible mistake. Not every child is given the same. This school

cannot give a family, but it can give knowledge enough to recognize danger and the confidence to speak."

Her voice shook on the final line. Captain Carter stood among the guests, pride open on his face.

"The Royal Oak began with one act of courage," Lydia said. "May the children here learn that courage is not only saving kings. It is asking a question, keeping an account, refusing what is wrong, and trying again after being foolish. I know most about the last."

Laughter and applause rose together.

Sir Thomas looked at his youngest daughter and remembered the muddy boot in his library, the attic window, the girl who once believed officers existed for admiration and rules for evasion.

"You are crying," Lady Bennet said.

"Dust."

"Outdoors?"

"An agricultural variety."

The school flourished. A tenant's daughter became its second teacher. One boy earned a scholarship to Cambridge through a fund Mr Avery established. Several girls trained as governesses, companions, and bookkeepers. Others remained in farming households and used arithmetic to challenge unfair market accounts.

Sir Thomas visited every Thursday.

He read with small children beneath the portrait of King George sent from the royal household. The artist had painted the King in state robes, solemn and distant. Sir Thomas preferred the memory of sugar glaze upon the royal fingers and astonishment in his eyes.

One afternoon Anne Darcy asked to accompany her grandfather.

She sat among the oldest pupils during an estate lesson and corrected a boundary calculation before remembering she was a visitor. Sir Thomas made her explain the correction rather than apologize for knowing it.

On the walk back, Anne asked, "Will Pemberley be George's because he is a boy?"

"Most likely."

"Even if I understand the estate better?"

Sir Thomas heard Elizabeth's spirit in the question and Darcy's seriousness in its delivery.

"The law determines inheritance. It does not determine usefulness. Pemberley will be part of your responsibility because it is your home, whether your name stands first in an estate book or not. Your parents will teach all of you."

"Could the law change?"

"Laws are made by people and therefore capable of everything people are, including improvement."

Anne considered this for the remainder of the walk.

When Sir Thomas told Darcy of the conversation, he expected discomfort. Darcy looked thoughtful.

"I have planned George's instruction more formally," he admitted. "Not because I value the girls less. Because habit wrote the plan before I examined it."

"Habit is a quiet author."

"Anne will attend every estate lesson George does. Eleanor too."

"They may not all wish it."

Darcy smiled. "Then I shall ask."

Sir Thomas looked toward the school where children's voices carried through open windows.

The Crown's land had produced income before it came to him. Now it produced questions.

That seemed a better yield.

* * *

Sir Thomas and Lady Bennet spent an entire summer at Pemberley when Anne was ten, Eleanor seven, and George six.

Lady Bennet had previously declared six weeks the longest any civilized person should remain in Derbyshire. She stayed three months and complained only that the journey home would be exhausting.

Pemberley adapted.

Lady Bennet took breakfast in the family room rather than her chamber because she disliked missing news. She advised Mrs Reynolds, who accepted useful suggestions and misplaced the rest. She told every visitor

that Elizabeth had changed none of the best rooms because good taste recognized quality. She rearranged flowers daily and the nursery twice.

Sir Thomas rode the estate with Darcy and Anne. His knee prevented long days, but his questions had lost no force.

"Your northern tenants pay a different mill rate," he observed over the ledgers.

"The road is maintained from the difference."

"Then the accounts should say so. A charge without explanation resembles injustice even when fair."

Darcy made the change.

Ten years earlier, he might have resented instruction from a newly knighted country gentleman. Now he valued the older man's eye because respect had been earned through disagreement, not preserved by avoiding it.

Elizabeth watched them from the library doorway.

"You agree too easily," she said.

Darcy looked up. "Your father is correct."

"Again? He will become dangerous."

Sir Thomas closed the ledger. "My daughter fears any authority not her own."

"I learned from you."

"Then Darcy has my sympathy."

Their marriage had settled into patterns without becoming fixed. Darcy still rose before Elizabeth on estate mornings and brought tea when he remembered. Elizabeth walked in weather he considered questionable and returned with mud that Pemberley's servants no longer treated as crisis. They argued over guests, discipline, expenses, and how much of Lady Catherine's advice required answer. They apologized more quickly than in early years and sometimes not quickly enough.

Affection showed in ordinary movements: Darcy's hand finding the back of Elizabeth's chair, her straightening a page he left crooked, the look they exchanged when Lady Bennet began a story both had heard.

Sir Thomas observed them with private relief.

He had consented because Darcy was learning. He saw now that learning had continued.

One afternoon George disappeared.

The child had last been seen near the rose garden with his nurse. Within minutes servants spread across the grounds. Darcy's face became white with controlled fear. Elizabeth issued clear instructions, then gripped the edge of a table when no one looked.

Sir Thomas remembered a small door beneath the west staircase which George had examined the day before. He found the boy asleep inside an old linen cupboard with the broken wooden horse clutched to his chest.

George woke to three adults staring at him.

"Socrates wanted a cave," he explained.

Darcy lifted his son and held him too tightly.

"You must never hide without telling Nurse."

George began to cry at his father's voice.

Darcy stopped. He knelt, keeping the child in his arms.

"I frightened you. I am sorry. We were afraid because we could not find you. The rule is not punishment. It helps us keep you safe. Do you understand?"

George nodded against his shoulder.

Elizabeth sat on the floor beside them. Sir Thomas withdrew to the corridor, where Lady Bennet waited.

"Found?"

"In a cupboard."

"I said children should not play near west staircases."

"You said the same of east staircases and gardens. We chose not to raise them in a chair."

Lady Bennet embraced him.

That evening George was permitted to bring Socrates to dinner on condition the horse occupied no plate. Sir Thomas told the story of its missing wheel. Anne insisted the toy should be repaired. George refused.

"Grandpapa says the broken part remembers."

Sir Thomas had never said precisely that, but he approved.

On the final night of the visit, Darcy and Sir Thomas sat on Pemberley's terrace.

"You once asked what I would do when Elizabeth's judgment differed from mine," Darcy said.

"I remember."

"I gave an excellent answer."

"Most proposals contain them."

"The truth is less orderly. Sometimes I speak too soon. Sometimes she does. Sometimes we decide and discover both were wrong."

"And then?"

"We remain. We correct what can be corrected."

Sir Thomas looked across the dark park. "That is marriage. And parenting. And estate management. An alarming lack of final examinations."

Darcy smiled. "You have been a good father to me."

The words startled them both.

Sir Thomas looked down at his hands. "I arrived very late for that as well."

"You arrived."

The same mercy Darcy had once offered was returned after years of proof.

Inside, Elizabeth began playing Mary's *Two Houses*. Lady Bennet called for them to come in before the air became damp.

They obeyed.

* * *

The Royal Oak School held a harvest supper every October.

Long tables filled the main room. Tenant families brought bread, apples, cheeses, pies, and enough preserves to survive a siege. The children displayed copybooks and sums. Kitty arranged drawings along one wall. Mary selected two pupils to perform a duet. Lydia, visiting while Captain Carter's ship was under repair, organized games in the yard and denied making them competitive.

Sir Thomas attended from an armchair near the hearth. Age had shortened his walks, but not his interest. He knew which pupil had struggled with figures, whose father was ill, and which teacher wished to add lessons in geography.

Anne Darcy, fourteen, had come from Pemberley with Elizabeth and Darcy. She spent the morning examining estate maps with Kitty and the afternoon

helping younger pupils read.

George, nine, regarded the school as proof that his grandfather invented education. Eleanor, eleven, knew better and did not correct him unless necessary.

At supper, a boy named Matthew Bell sat at the end of Anne's table. He was eight, freckled, and determined to eat an apple tart before Lydia began announcing winners in the yard.

Anne heard the scrape of his chair.

She looked up.

Matthew stood with both hands at his throat. His mouth opened. No sound came.

For one instant, everyone near him misunderstood. A woman offered water. Another child laughed, thinking he made a face.

Anne saw his eyes.

She had seen that expression only in Sir Thomas's demonstrations. Every Bennet grandchild had been taught what to do if food blocked a throat. Lady Bennet disliked the lessons and attended all of them.

Anne moved behind Matthew, wrapped her arms around him, braced her hands beneath his ribs, and pulled hard upward as Sir Thomas had taught her.

Nothing happened.

The room began to shout.

"Again," Sir Thomas called from across the tables. His voice cut through panic. "Harder, Anne."

She pulled again.

A piece of apple flew onto the table.

Matthew coughed and drew a sobbing breath.

Anne held him until his knees steadied. The boy's mother reached them, crying and kissing both children. Darcy crossed the room but stopped when he saw Anne safe. Elizabeth's hand closed around his.

Sir Thomas remained in his chair, suddenly pale.

For a moment the schoolroom in front of him became the Meryton assembly rooms: the King's darkening face, the guards, steel at his throat, air returning with a ragged sound.

Then Matthew began to cry loudly, beautifully, and the past released him.

Mr Jones's son, who had succeeded his father as local physician, examined the child and declared him unharmed. Lydia cleared the room around Matthew. Kitty removed the stained display cloth. Mary took the frightened younger children to the pianoforte and played until conversation returned.

Anne came to her grandfather.

Her hands shook now that action had ended.

"I hurt him."

"You saved him."

"The first time did not work."

"Nor did mine."

"What if the second had failed?"

"You would have tried a third."

Anne sat on the floor beside his chair, heedless of her gown. "I was afraid."

"That is the lesson. Courage came with you anyway."

Darcy knelt on her other side. He looked as shaken as she felt.

"You did exactly right," he said.

Anne reached for him, and he embraced her. Elizabeth joined them, one hand on her daughter's hair.

Lady Bennet stood over all four.

"That tart should have been cut smaller," she said, voice breaking. "I said the apples were too firm."

Sir Thomas held out a hand to his wife. She took it and cried without attempting disguise.

The harvest supper resumed because Matthew wished it to. He sat beside his mother eating custard without fruit and accepting attention with solemn importance.

Lydia cancelled the running games. Matthew objected.

"Very well," she said. "But no prizes involving food."

At the end of the evening, the head teacher asked Sir Thomas to speak.

He refused the platform and spoke from his chair.

"You have heard the story of King George and the sugar plum more often than good sense requires. Some of you may believe I knew what I was

doing because courage arrived complete. I did not. I remembered a stable boy and a groom. Anne remembered a lesson. One person acts because another person taught, demonstrated, or refused to freeze."

He looked around the schoolhouse.

"Knowledge is a form of inheritance not limited by entail. Pass it. Teach another person what you know. Ask when you do not know. The life saved may belong to a king, a tenant's son, or someone not yet born. Its value does not change."

The room remained quiet after he finished.

Then Matthew raised his hand.

"May I still eat tart next year?"

Laughter broke the solemnity.

"Yes," Sir Thomas said. "Slowly."

On the carriage ride to Netherfield, Anne sat between her parents.

"Grandpapa said knowledge is inheritance," she said. "Could we teach every Pemberley family what to do? Not only the schoolchildren."

Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand. "We can."

"The servants too."

"Everyone," Elizabeth said.

At Pemberley that winter, the estate physician gave practical lessons in the great hall. Farmers, housemaids, footmen, tenant wives, stable boys, and the Darcy children practiced responses to choking, burns, broken limbs, and fever. Hazelwood adopted the lessons. Mary arranged the same through her London parish. Lydia carried written instructions to Portsmouth.

No proclamation required it. No royal grant paid for it. The practice travelled through families because one frightening moment had taught them the cost of waiting.

Months later, Sir Thomas received a note from Matthew written in careful schoolroom hand.

Dear Sir Thomas,

I chew my apples twenty times. I showed my sister what Miss Darcy did, but we used a cushion because Mother said not to choke anyone for practice. I am glad the King ate his sugar plum because then Miss Darcy knew how to save me. I am sorry the King choked.

Sir Thomas read it twice and placed it beneath the framed royal message.

Elizabeth found the letter during a later visit.

"He understands the story," she said.

"Better than Mr Lucas did."

"That is a low standard."

"Useful standards often are."

Outside the library, grandchildren and pupils crossed Netherfield's lawn beneath the growing oak. Sir Thomas closed the drawer but left the door open.

The lesson had travelled farther than the gift.

EPILOGUE

A Crown Well Spent

Sir Thomas Bennet lived to see the oak at Netherfield rise above the nursery windows.

On his seventy-fifth birthday, every daughter returned home.

Jane arrived first from Hazelwood with Bingley and four children. Mary came from London carrying a new score and followed by Mr Avery, who had learned to protect manuscript pages from weather and children. Kitty descended from the estate office with ink on one hand. Lydia's carriage arrived late, loud, and burdened with naval souvenirs. Elizabeth and Darcy travelled from Pemberley with Anne, Eleanor, and George.

Lady Bennet stood on the portico counting everyone as if afraid one might have been lost on the drive.

"Thirty-two for dinner," she said. "No, thirty-three. Colonel Fitzwilliam has brought his wife. Mr Bennet, we need another leaf in the table."

"The table has survived worse."

"Not thirty-three."

"It survived our daughters."

The day unfolded without ceremony. Children raced through the park. Mary and Georgiana played together as confidently as they once feared one another. Kitty showed Anne how to mix the green of oak leaves. Lydia organized a game, changed its rules twice, and accused Darcy of winning through silence.

After dinner, the grandchildren demanded the King's story.

Sir Thomas sat before the drawing-room fire. The broken wooden horse, returned from Pemberley for the occasion, rested on a table near him.

"Your grandmama objected to a ribbon," he began.

Lady Bennet interrupted. "It was sky blue. Peacock was correct."

"History remains divided."

He told them of Meryton, the royal progress, the unpitted sugar plum, the frozen room, the guards, and the King's first ragged breath. He did not make himself fearless. He described the sword beneath his jaw and the certainty that he might never see the carriage ride home.

"But you did," little George said.

"I did."

"And the King gave you Netherfield."

"Yes."

"So that was the gift."

Sir Thomas looked around the room.

Jane sat with Bingley and their youngest asleep against her. Mary turned pages for Georgiana. Kitty leaned beside her husband. Lydia laughed with Captain Carter. Elizabeth stood near Darcy, his hand at the small of her back. Lady Bennet watched all of them with satisfaction too large for restraint.

"Netherfield was part of it," Sir Thomas said. "The greater gift was discovering that having a family is not the same as knowing them."

The children considered this with varying degrees of interest.

Anne understood first. "You stopped hiding in the library."

"Not entirely."

"We still find him there," Emma said.

"But the door is open," Anne replied.

Sir Thomas smiled. "Yes. The door is open."

Later, when the children slept and the house quieted by degrees, Elizabeth found her father beneath the framed royal letter.

"Tired?"

"Happily."

She sat beside him. At forty, she retained the lively eyes Darcy first failed to appreciate. Time had placed fine lines at their corners and confidence within them.

"Do you think of the King often?" she asked.

"Whenever someone serves sugar plums."

"Papa."

"Yes. Not as a king, but as a frightened man unable to breathe. A plum stone, a few seconds, and a stranger's decision separated fear from relief."

"And everything followed."

"Everything follows something small when one looks backward."

Darcy entered carrying two glasses of port. He gave one to Sir Thomas and sat on Elizabeth's other side.

"Lady Bennet has found the birthday cake. Lydia hid it from the children, then tasted the icing herself," he reported.

"Consistency remains too much to hope."

Sir Thomas raised his glass toward the words above the desk.

A life well used is thanks enough.

"I did not use all of it well," he said.

Elizabeth took his hand. "No one does."

Darcy raised his glass. "You used enough to teach the rest of us."

Sir Thomas set down his port.

"There is something in the desk for each of you. I intended to distribute it after dinner, but your mother found the cake and may soon command the remainder of the night."

He opened the bottom drawer and removed five narrow boxes. Each bore a daughter's name in his hand.

Elizabeth took hers. Inside lay a copy of the King's six-word message and a letter sealed with dark green wax.

"Are we to read them now?"

"After I am gone would be more dramatic. I have discovered I prefer hearing whether I made errors while able to correct them. Call your sisters."

Jane, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia returned to the library. Lady Bennet came too, suspicious of any family event organized without her.

"You have a box?" she asked.

Sir Thomas produced a sixth.

"I have been married long enough to anticipate one question."

They opened the letters.

To Jane, Sir Thomas had written of the burden goodness could become when everyone relied upon it.

Your gentleness was never permission for others to decide you did not feel. You taught this family that quiet love must still be believed and that kindness may require a boundary. I am sorry I once praised your goodness more often than I asked whether it cost you anything.

Jane read the final sentence twice. Bingley stood behind her chair and rested his hands upon her shoulders.

To Elizabeth:

You were the first child who knocked upon my library door as if expecting it to open. When it did not, you learned to laugh outside it. I am grateful you tried again. Your questions made me uncomfortable long before the King made comfort impossible. Continue asking them, especially when the answers are your own.

Elizabeth looked at her father through tears. "That final instruction is dangerous."

"Darcy may destroy the copy."

"I would not dare," Darcy said.

Mary's letter honored what no early relation had seen.

I mistook your seriousness for vanity because I did not listen long enough to hear fear beneath it. You did not need sermons. You needed instruction suited to your gift and praise that did not demand performance. The music was always yours. Forgive us for making you believe accomplishment must compensate for being overlooked.

Mary covered her mouth. Mr Avery knelt beside her and read only when she turned the page toward him.

Kitty's letter was the longest.

A middle child may disappear without leaving the room. You became an echo because echoes are noticed. Miss Harwood saw your eye for shape before I did. You have since shown me the boundaries of my own land, the expressions I missed in familiar faces, and the future of Netherfield. I entrust the estate to you not because your sisters left, but because you remained by choice and learned to see it wholly.

Kitty looked up sharply. "Papa."

"The legal arrangements are complete. Your sisters agreed years ago."

"You never told me it was decided."

"You were still deciding whether you wanted it."

Her husband squeezed her hand. Kitty crossed the room and embraced her father without caring that everyone watched.

Lydia opened her letter last.

She attempted to joke after the first line and could not.

You required more of me than laughter, and for too many years I offered you little else. You might have mistaken noise for character and attention from strangers for love if we had left you unguided. Instead, you became the person who noticed a rider at the boundary, built accounts for a school, and taught frightened families to speak. Never apologize for being lively. Only ask where the life in you may be useful without consuming the quiet of others.

Lydia read the final portion aloud because tears made secrecy impossible.

"I still consume quiet," she said.

Captain Carter smiled. "In measured quantities."

"Not always."

"No."

She kissed Sir Thomas's forehead. "I was your most difficult daughter."

"You were my loudest lesson."

Lady Bennet opened her box. There was no copy of the royal message. Instead she found the peacock ribbon, faded now to gray-blue, preserved since the day of the King's visit.

Her letter was brief.

You loved them aloud while I loved them at a distance. They survived my silence because your devotion filled the rooms. I mocked your fear rather than sharing the burden beneath it. Netherfield secured you, but you had carried this family before it. I am sorry I allowed you to carry it alone. I have loved you in every version of our life, including the years when I behaved as if affection excused absence.

Lady Bennet folded the ribbon over her fingers.

"It was peacock," she whispered.

"Unquestionably."

She leaned down and kissed him with five daughters, three sons-in-law, and Darcy present. No one laughed.

Sir Thomas looked around the library. "I should have said these things sooner."

"You told us," Jane said.

"Not each of you. Not exactly."

Mary held her letter to her chest. "Exactness matters."

"To musicians and daughters."

Darcy watched them. His own father had left questions that could never be answered; Sir Thomas had risked hearing his daughters disagree.

Anne appeared at the door in her nightdress. "Why is everyone crying?"

"Grandpapa gave speeches in boxes," Lydia said.

Anne came to Sir Thomas. "Is there one for grandchildren?"

"Fifty-three of them. I have not begun."

"There are not fifty-three grandchildren."

"Then I have time."

She climbed carefully onto the arm of his chair, too old for his lap and not too old to lean against him.

The other grandchildren, alerted by mysterious means unique to children, gathered in the corridor. Emma brought the broken horse. George carried a pillow. Eleanor asked whether the birthday cake had been served.

The adult children folded their letters and made room.

Sir Thomas saw that the library would never recover its former quiet. Books would be displaced, cushions crushed, confidences offered, arguments begun, babies soothed, and doors left open to draughts.

He had never loved a room more.

From the corridor came Lady Bennet's voice.

"Mr Bennet! Lizzy! Mr Darcy! Everyone is waiting."

Sir Thomas looked at the open door.

Once, he would have delayed until impatience carried the noise elsewhere. Now he rose at once.

"We should go," he said. "Your mother has waited long enough."

Before breakfast the next morning, Sir Thomas walked to the oak with Elizabeth. He used a cane now and disliked it enough to leave it behind whenever no one watched. Elizabeth noticed and carried it without comment until the ground became uneven.

The tree's upper branches stirred in a mild wind. Beneath it stood the school, the estate road, and the path toward Longbourn.

"What shall happen to the letters?" Elizabeth asked.

"They belong to you. Burn yours if I became sentimental."

"I shall preserve it to embarrass you."

"An affectionate tradition."

They stopped beside the brass plate.

Sir Thomas touched the words with the tip of his cane. "When I first held Netherfield's grant, I thought of income. Your mother's security. Your portions. All worthy concerns. I did not imagine a school, grandchildren, music printed in Mary's name, Kitty managing leases, or Lydia teaching estate families how to answer emergencies."

"You could not have planned us."

"I once thought planning was the height of fatherhood."

"And now?"

"Leaving enough room for the plan to be wrong."

Elizabeth slipped her arm through his. "Darcy would approve."

"He approves too often in old age."

"He is fifty-two."

"A great age to a father-in-law."

They turned back toward the house. At an upper window, Anne waved. George opened another sash and was pulled away from the cold by someone unseen. Lady Bennet appeared behind them, gesturing instructions no glass could contain.

"Do you ever wish the King had not stopped in Meryton?" Elizabeth asked.

Sir Thomas considered the life that might have continued: Longbourn unmanaged, five daughters raised in noise and neglect, a wife mocked for fears he refused to share, himself clever and asleep until the entail or death made regret useless.

"No," he said. "I wish he had chewed more carefully. But I do not wish away what followed."

At the terrace, Darcy waited with two cups of coffee. He handed one to Elizabeth and offered Sir Thomas the other.

"Lady Bennet says breakfast will be cold."

"Your mother has made the same prediction every morning for forty years," Sir Thomas said. "It has occasionally become true."

They entered through the open doors. Children crowded the table. Jane poured tea. Mary discussed a new melody with Georgiana. Kitty held an estate paper beside her plate. Lydia insisted Captain Carter had stolen her toast. Lady Bennet directed every servant and ate nothing until Sir Thomas placed food before her.

No royal messenger came, and no sword left its scabbard. Breakfast grew cold in the usual way.

Sir Thomas took his place among them.

He looked once toward the library across the hall. The door stood ajar. Morning light reached the old desk, the framed royal message, Matthew's careful note, and the empty chair where a younger Thomas Bennet had once believed observation from a distance superior to participation.

Anne asked him to pass the marmalade. Eleanor wanted a story after breakfast. George had brought Socrates to the table despite the rule concerning toys. Lady Bennet objected, then gave the horse a folded napkin so it would not mark the cloth.

Sir Thomas passed the marmalade, promised the story, and moved the wooden horse beside his plate. He found himself hoping breakfast would last.

The birthday cake arrived listing slightly to one side. Lydia blamed the journey from the kitchen; Hill's daughter, now Netherfield's housekeeper, blamed Lydia's attempt to add another candle. Seventy-five flames would have endangered the icing and possibly the curtains, so five candles stood instead.

Jane lit the first. Elizabeth lit the second, Mary the third, Kitty the fourth, and Lydia the fifth. Their faces shone above the small flames.

"Make a wish," Emma called.

Sir Thomas looked at Lady Bennet. She still wore the faded peacock ribbon pinned inside her cap where only the family knew to find it. He looked at Darcy and Bingley, Mr Avery, Mr Alden, and Captain Carter; at grandchildren squeezing between chairs; at Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam, Charlotte and Mr Collins, the Gardiners, and friends gathered through the years.

"I have no unused wishes," he said.

"That is impossible," Lydia objected. "Everyone wants something."

"Then I wish the cake survives your cutting."

She protested. Lady Bennet gave the knife to Jane. Laughter travelled around the table.

When Sir Thomas extinguished the candles, five thin threads of smoke rose and disappeared into the warmth of the room. Servants relit the lamps, plates were passed, children demanded the largest roses of icing, and conversations resumed where they had stopped.

Sir Thomas accepted a slice he did not want because Anne placed it before him. Across the table, Darcy split a glazed sugar plum carefully, removed its stone, and caught his father-in-law watching.

"A prudent habit," Darcy said.

"History recommends it."

Elizabeth heard and smiled. She reached beneath the table for her husband's hand, the private gesture as familiar now as breathing.

Sir Thomas looked away and accepted another bite of cake from Anne.

Outside, the oak moved against the evening sky, rooted in Crown soil and marked by the feet of generations who had played beneath it.

Inside, his daughters spoke in their own voices. None needed him as she once had. All still made room for him. Sir Thomas listened.