

JULIE COOPER

All That Glitters



A Pride & Prejudice Variation

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE

December 16th, 1811

Fitzwilliam Darcy glowered at his aunt.

He did not wish to be here. It would not have been necessary, had she possessed the sense of a goose—and could cease interfering in every single action her steward attempted for the good of Rosings. This was the third steward he had hired for her since Sir Lewis had escaped her for Heaven's reprieve.

Alas, sense was in short supply, and the man had sent a letter to Darcy saying that he could not endure it any longer, and had decided to seek new work elsewhere, even if he had to travel to America to find it.

"He is an idiot, Darcy! He wishes to chop off the branches of every tree in my orchard, and expects *me* to pay for it! He is a wastrel, who would denude my beautiful trees simply for the prestige of throwing my money at menials, and so I told him!"

He closed his eyes and willed his tone to remain even. "It is called 'pruning' my lady. If it is not undertaken in the winter whilst the tree sleeps, each tree will expend all its vigour in the spring growing unnecessary wood and foliage instead of fruit. It is essential."

"I daresay. Winter is such a *dull* time of year, I assumed it was a story of his own invention. But if you insist, I shall naturally comply. If you were to marry Anne, I would, of course, happily allow *you* to make all of these decisions, and I would not have to waste my time with such tedium."

And there it was—the extortionate demand: 'Marry Anne and these problems shall disappear'. But firstly, he had made clear his lack of intentions towards Anne years ago; secondly, she was lying. Lady Catherine liked nothing better than meddling in the lives of anyone and everyone in her purview—she would only have more access to his, if he were foolish enough to marry her only daughter.

"As I have repeatedly said, you are more than welcome to write to me if you have questions regarding the actions of your steward—but unless I say otherwise, you are to follow his quite sensible and reasonable instructions." His voice rose as the frustration over her clumsy manipulations, resulting in this unnecessary trip to Rosings, rose in force enough to—nearly—mitigate the speech of the gentleman he always strove to be. The look upon her face informed him that she was treating his every word with complete indifference.

"I will *not* hire you another steward. If you think yourself wiser, feel free to act yourself. Before you do, might I remind you of the nearly criminal destruction you caused your estate by doing just that after your husband's death? I also promise, as God is my witness, I will *not* be salvaging Rosings Park again. If you persist in your aggravating and obnoxious interference, you will soon be attending to these issues by yourself, with whatever resources you can muster. I will give you no more of mine."

"I do not know why you work yourself into such a state," she sniffed, offended. "I have the situation well in hand. There is no need to be disagreeable."

She has no idea why I am upset? Never mind that he had been required to cancel several important meetings at the last minute after receiving word from her steward. Never mind that it was bitterly cold and muddy, making travel miserable. Never mind that he had a dejected Bingley on the one hand and a heartbroken sister on the other. Never mind that he had not slept well since departing Netherfield two weeks prior, because as soon as he closed his eyes, he could only see Elizabeth. He knew he ought to refer to her, even in his thoughts, as 'Miss'...but he had found he could not; not when, in the privacy of his own mind she was no missish, unexceptional, anonymous female. Somehow, she had managed to insinuate herself into his mind, lying in wait to capture his every train of thought. No, formality simply would not do.

Even now, while his aunt blathered on, it was too easy to slip away into his last memory of Elizabeth: dancing with her at the Netherfield ball, her eyes fiery as she defended his worst enemy, her grace and beauty as she twirled around him in the figures of the dance, the sound of her laughter, her wit, her sparkle as she challenged him, the stuff of his waking dreams.

He wanted her with a dangerous sort of wanting he had never before encountered. Sensibly, he had fled her, practically forcing Bingley to abandon Netherfield Park. He had hastened to London, where he expected to shed himself of any foolish

romantic notions, submerging them beneath visits to his club, to Gentleman Jackson's, to the entertainments to be found with friends and family.

Unfortunately, distance had done nothing to quell a passion he could not permit himself to accept.

Meanwhile his aunt bleated on and on about her usefulness, her intuition, her discrimination, her perspicacity, until he thought he might curse.

"See here, Darcy," she complained, holding up a letter written in a flowery hand. "This is proof received just this morning from my vicar—I have mentioned him before, I think I recall."

"Collins," he grimaced, remembering the toady, ingratiating dullard who had dared push himself forward at Netherfield's ball.

"Yes, Mr Collins," she said. "He has followed my advice in every particular, and because of it, he has won the prize. Hear this: 'It remains only to thank your ladyship for your excellent guidance and the wise counsel which led me, a humble man of the cloth, to win the hand of a young lady most modest, gracious, and pleasing to both eye and heart.'"

Someone had agreed to marry that fool? He made a sound of disinterest. It did not stop her.

"I understood when I granted him the benefice that he required a wife, as no congregation with an unwed vicar can properly function. Neither could he marry within the parish—it would create strife and envy."

Darcy rolled his eyes at the thought of *anyone* fighting over Collins. His aunt continued to ignore his impatience with the subject, blathering on.

"I knew of course that he is heir to a fine estate in Hertfordshire, possessing five unmarried, female cousins currently living upon it. What could make more sense, I ask you, than that he should take one of them to wife? I despatched him for a visit as soon as he was appropriately settled at Hunsford. He has relied upon me completely to direct his courtship, of course. Recently he wrote to me that he did not think it quite proper that he attend a ball being held by one of the neighbours. I told him very directly that an entertainment of this kind—given by a respectable neighbour, for respectable people—could not have any evil tendency, and that he not only should participate, but that he should ask the cousin of his choice for the first set. I do not believe in squandering opportunities!"

Darcy's exasperation with the subject had impaired the speed with which he made the proper deductions. Slowly, however, his aunt's meaning dawned upon him.

He was aware that Collins was Elizabeth's cousin. The man himself had made *sure* he knew it. He also knew with whom Collins had danced the first set at Bingley's ball. He had watched Elizabeth carefully during the whole of it. Her look and manners were open, cheerful, and engaging as ever, but without any symptom of peculiar regard. Indeed, he had watched the buffoon squash her toes twice! Darcy could, in fact, name every single one of Elizabeth's partners; he had followed her with his eyes all that evening, as she laughed and danced and charmed the world. He remained convinced, from his careful scrutiny, that she had not received Collins's attentions with pleasure, and *certainly* did not invite them by any participation of sentiment.

What his aunt implied now was that the vicar had asked Elizabeth—dearest, loveliest Elizabeth—to be his bride!

A flash of fury charged through his body like lightning. "The clumsy oaf spent most of his time stomping upon his partners' feet," he spat. "No one would want to *dance* twice with him, much less marry the fellow."

Lady Catherine looked genuinely confused at his response. "Darcy, do not be an idiot. Females—especially those without means—do not select husbands for their skill at the Scotch reel, but for their ability to provide for a home and children. I daresay any woman would be eager to receive his proposal." She glanced down at her letter again before continuing.

"He was somewhat put off by her lack of fortune—but I advised him to make no demand of that nature upon her father. 'All that glitters is not gold,' I told him. If she has been properly brought up and can keep a good house, those are the talents which will serve you best. In return, you might generously overlook her poverty."

Unbidden, a vision of Elizabeth clothed in her pale golden gown, smiling, swept over his vision, replacing his view of Lady Catherine's strong features, momentarily stealing his breath. *The Bennet poverty!* How he despised it! Elizabeth was wealthy in ample portions of beauty and wit, desirable in every other way. How was it possible that her parents should have permitted her to yoke herself to a fool?

"I admit, his decision to purchase a licence and marry her quickly does not show his frugality in the best light," she said, still scanning the page. "But her mother insisted the wedding take place swiftly, and he thought it wise not to appear reluctant. Her father—although he had quite a bit to say about it—yielded to her wishes."

The thought of Elizabeth suffering the meaty paws of Collins upon her person caused a sudden wave of nausea to roll through him. Her mother! *Certainly* her mother had insisted upon the match; the woman thought of nothing except marrying off her daughters and preserving her standing in the community. Her father would want his Longbourn estate to remain in the family. Elizabeth was simply a victim of her parents' greed.

"Foolish man!" Lady Catherine smiled benignly. "He is impatient to fill his nursery, but who could blame him! Especially if she is as lovely as he claims, his haste is understandable. Ah, whatever you think of my age, I, too, remember what it was like to be young and impetuous! On my wedding day, Sir Lewis—although several inches shorter than I, was *such* an eager groom, with *such* a creative mind, and *such* flexibility—"

Darcy abruptly stood, sending his chair screeching back at least a foot. “If you will excuse me madam,” he said, interrupting any possibility of hearing more. “I have urgent business in town and must take my leave. You will allow Mr Twitchard to prune, to pluck, to chop the blasted orchard down if he sees fit, and henceforth stay out of his way.”

“But Darcy, you cannot have come all this way only to turn around and leave within the hour! It is impossible! Ridiculous! You have not yet seen Anne! She will be so disappointed to have missed you!”

Since Anne had about as much interest in him as he did in hearing of Sir Lewis’s elasticity, he gave leave to doubt. “You will convey her my apologies,” he replied, and strode from the room.

CHAPTER TWO

Darcy could not, in fact, justify an immediate return to town—subjecting his cattle, coachman, valet, and footman to a lengthy return journey on a frigid, nearly moonless night—but he managed to get them nearly two hours away before stopping. The Golden Fleece was a bustling coaching inn, respectable in appearance, obviously conducting a brisk trade. The innkeeper hastened to ready rooms—but once Darcy was safely ensconced in one, he found himself with too much time to think.

His thoughts were not comforting.

Elizabeth *Collins*!

It is awful. The toady vicar has overreached himself. He should not be able to claim a bride whom I am unable to touch!

Darcy wanted her, oh yes. He was a man of the world, and hardly a green one. He had wanted before—but not like this. It was necessary, for a man in his position, to bridle his lusts in most cases. He knew how, and had always considered himself a proven master of the art.

The worst part about wanting Elizabeth was the mastery *she* had over him.

Whenever she had walked into the room, he was unable to do aught but give her his attention, all of it, to wonder what next she would say, to see her hold her own and then surpass everyone in wit and cleverness. Whether it was the insipid Miss Caroline Bingley or the foolish Sir William Lucas, she managed every conversation with keen intelligence and appealing charisma. No matter how dull the entertainment, once he was certain she would attend, nothing else signified. He had graced more parlours in the final two weeks of his visit to Netherfield than he had in the year previous.

He had known he should not ask her to dance at Bingley's ball; it had been foolish. It might have given her ideas—he never danced with anyone with whom doing so might create expectation of anything more. Had it been London, the whispers of his interest in Elizabeth might even now be causing gossip in the papers or caricatures in the broadsheets. That he had defied sense and reason, that he had gone and done the thing regardless, was likely a good part of the reason Miss Bingley had pressed him so hard, to take her brother and depart Netherfield; Bingley's infatuation with Elizabeth's elder sister was the least of it. Miss Bingley knew *her* birth was not high enough to suit him, but she felt her fortune made her Elizabeth's equal, or even superior. To see his obvious interest in someone she thought of as a lesser rival had exacerbated her usual jealousy. She had done all she could to encourage both men to bolt.

Proper matrimonial conduct had been drilled into his mind and upbringing since boyhood, and had only intensified from the time of his sister's birth—Georgiana *must* be amply provided for, and he *must* replace her settlement with his wife's. Especially with the current state of his finances, it was more important than ever that the family's fortunes be sheltered. Three years in a row of unseasonably frigid temperatures had affected the yields of his tenants. Returns were low; he had been required to forgive some debts he had not wished to forgive.

Pemberley had not, as yet, suffered. The spar mines were still very profitable. But his fortunes ultimately depended upon the prosperity of his tenants, and *their* fortunes depended upon fickle weather. Marriage to Elizabeth would cost him a minimum of thirty thousand in an absent settlement to replace Georgiana's, and untold losses in connexions and consequence. The legacy of fortune—Pemberley itself—he had always been taught, must come first. Never mind his uncle's lectures; the earl had been throwing introductions at him for a few years now, trying to pair him with one young lady or another of his cronies, in the hopes of shoring up his own consequence. The last, he recalled, had been the granddaughter of a marquess—*her* settlement had been fifty thousand.

Of course, she had been a chinless, spineless ninny, and thirty minutes in her company had convinced him that they ought to double her portion if they wanted any takers. Nevertheless, he could not imagine telling the Earl of Matlock that his bride was an impoverished country lass who added precisely nothing to his own consequence, never mind the earl's.

He did not sleep well that night.

It was not because of Elizabeth, he told himself. Her life was no business of his, and while he regretted her lack of choices, those were not his problem. His sleeplessness was the inn's fault—although they pretended their accommodations were superior, the mattresses were not quite plump enough, the linens not soft enough, the walls not thick enough.

Before dawn, he gave up, and woke his man. Within the hour they were on the road. Well before noon, he was in his comfortable home on Curzon Street, in his comfortable study, eating a more-than-comfortable meal prepared by expert hands.

It tasted like dust in his mouth. *What is the matter with me?*

A tap on his door happily interrupted his bleak thoughts. His butler, Childers, reported unexpected news—Bingley was waiting for him in the library. Bingley's affable, cheerful manner was just what he needed to restore his spirits. Surely he was no longer moping about, mourning the absence of Miss Bennet? Languishing was not in Bingley's nature, not even at the worst of times. Eagerly, Darcy abandoned his half-hearted attempt at breakfasting and went to welcome his friend.

CHAPTER THREE

Bingley sat—or rather sprawled—across Darcy’s leather sofa, the picture of discontent.

“I say, Darcy,” he said, by way of greeting. “I think I ought to go back.”

“We have talked of this,” Darcy replied, sighing, and wishing he had not been quite so quick to return to town. “You are young, and have many years before you need acquire a leg-shackle. You have already raised expectations by your attentions to Miss Bennet. It was the country, not town; one cannot pay such obvious attentions to a lady without creating talk. I saw no evidence that she shared your sentiments, but that will not matter. You remove all her choices if you hover around her endlessly—she will be accused of flirtation if she does not agree to a match. Do you not want a wife who wishes to *be* your wife?”

“Of course I do!” He made a broad, sweeping gesture with his arm, encompassing the whole of his surroundings. “But nothing means anything without her. She may not have returned my feelings yet, but I was making progress, I know it! I was not alone in my sentiment!”

Darcy looked pityingly at his friend. A grasping, clutching shrew like Mrs Bennet would have instructed her daughter on how to manipulate young Bingley.

Not fair, Darcy, his conscience reminded him. Neither Elizabeth nor her elder sister ever showed any sign of flirtation or untoward behaviour. Still, he felt his original point was a valid one.

“Nevertheless, had she displayed anything remotely akin to affection, one ought to be able to see it, oughtn’t one? I have been on the receivers’ end of marriage mart pursuit for years, and believe me, it is *not* difficult to tell when a young lady has an interest beyond acquaintanceship. I studied Miss Bennet, searching for that interest, Bingley, I vow it—and I saw nothing!”

Bingley slumped, leant his head back, closed his eyes, and sighed gustily. “Have you ever been in love, Darcy?”

Darcy opened his mouth to reply, ‘No, and neither have you’ but a strange paralysis held his tongue. A couple of days ago, he might have said it, but the hours spent reflecting on Elizabeth’s best qualities made it seem almost...insulting to his feelings for her. Instead of his well-rehearsed lecture on the subject, he heard himself asking a strange question rather than answering Bingley’s.

“How is it different this time, Bingley? You have claimed to be in love before—I have heard you. Is it only that she does not love you in return? The challenge of it?”

Worse still, he very much wanted to hear his friend’s answer.

Bingley leant forward, suddenly eager. “It is precisely the difference between what I have felt in the past and my current feelings that reveal my love to me. My former sentiments were but a pale imitation of what I feel now. Before, it was interest and curiosity and—” He paused, blushing a little. “And desire, I shall admit it. A beautiful female is a fascinating prospect, don’t you think? I hope I always find it so—not for lovemaking, you understand. Beauty for beauty’s sake.”

Darcy had been pursued by beauties for so long, he almost could not remember when the first had coyly dropped her handkerchief at his feet; he could admit that before meeting Elizabeth, he had expected their deference, their attention, as his due. Because Elizabeth was not beautiful in the classic, portrait-perfect sense of many *ton* diamonds, he had overlooked her. Even insulted her.

Remembering, it was his turn to blush. Had he ever apologised to her for that? With effort, he turned his attention back to his friend.

“Bingley, there is a certain hardness to most great beauties. I do not say it is all their fault—practically from birth, their looks have drawn uncommon attention, until they cannot appear anywhere without being assaulted by it. Early on, they learn to push back against it—usually with dismissive conceit. Their beauty obscures character, fortune, address, and a host of other desirable traits, for it is what their admirers want most. They are viewed more than anyone, yet seldom seen. Can you understand me?” He ran his hand through his hair, searching for the right words. “One cannot trust the practised words they use, the practised charm they exert, because an essential part of them is not really participating. There is no real connexion.”

Bingley’s expression grew thoughtful. “Do you think I learnt nothing from my previous experiences? Why do you believe naught came of any of them? I am not the most perceptive man, certainly, but neither am I stupid. Even I can sense when I am

alone in my feelings. I tell you, Miss Bennet is the genuine article.” Abruptly, he stood. “Do you know, Darcy, I do not think we are speaking about beauties. We are talking of *you*.”

“Me?” Darcy sat back, frowning up at his friend.

“*You*. Uncommon attention since you were a lad. Distrustful of everyone. Dismissive conceit, and a refusal to truly participate—in love, certainly, but neither much in life itself, because true enjoyment of life requires you to put yourself forward, to take risks in knowing others. The world has disappointed you too often, I suppose.”

Darcy gaped at him.

“Others have disappointed me—there is no question. Miss Bennet, however, has not. It seems wrong of me to treat her as though she has. You say she feels nothing for me, and you may well be correct. I have been mistaken before. Forgive me, however, if I find it difficult to put my sole trust in the word of a man who feels nothing for anyone.”

For a moment they stared at each other incredulously. Then Bingley bowed, mumbled “Forgive me” once again, turned on his heel, and hastily made his exit.

The door shut behind him before Darcy could respond. He rose and paced, furious. How dare Bingley accuse him of conceit, of refusing to ‘participate’ in life! The mediocre society presented to him in Meryton had made of Sir William Lucas its leading citizen. “Should I converse easily with such a person, one who relinquished whatever trade brought him his wealth in the first place so he might pretend he is my equal?” he asked aloud to the empty room.

Did I refuse to ‘participate’ in the work of finding a suitable estate to lease in the first place? Who was the one Bingley turned to for nearly every important decision he’d had to make since his father’s untimely death a few years past? Had he ever been turned away? Or did I make great sacrifices of time and effort in order to see my friend settled and prospering? Participate indeed!

As was the case in most surprising confrontation, these suitable, cutting ripostes only occurred to him long after Bingley’s departure, adding yet another layer to his resentment.

A second tap on the door interrupted his bitter thoughts.

“Enter,” he commanded.

His cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, strode into the room.

Surprised, Darcy rose to greet him, somewhat alarmed at his presence; he had thought him established at Matlock for a few weeks—where Georgiana currently resided. Had something occurred?

“What brings you back to London so soon? Is Georgiana well?” Darcy asked, once tea had been ordered.

But the colonel smiled easily, seating himself before the fire. “Georgiana is fine and happy. She and my mother are planning Christmas celebrations and village fetes and the like. Fair warning, your presence *shall* be required. Childers said you have just returned from a visit to our lady aunt and in none too happy a mood.”

“That is *not* what he said,” Darcy remarked repressively, taking the chair across from him. Childers was the soul of discretion.

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “It was implied. Something in his posture. Anyway, to answer your question, I decided to return to town after receiving your latest letter, that I might remove myself from all planning committees. I say, if you have gone to Kent and back since you wrote it, it was an extremely brief visit. I am fortunate to find you at home.”

Quickly, Darcy explained their aunt’s ludicrous actions regarding her refusal to release monies for the pruning of her orchards. “She does it apurpose, in order to force me to visit. I will not be subjected to her ham-handed manipulations. I will not reward her for such behaviour by doing exactly what she desires. I told her I would *not* hire her another steward if she loses this one, nor will I rescue her financially again.”

He had expected Fitzwilliam to express sympathy or outrage—or even recollect past humorous absurdities, as he did so well, turning his own indignation into reluctant laughter. Instead, his cousin steepled his fingers. “This brings me to my other reason for returning to town.”

Darcy raised his brows.

“I have been thinking of offering for Anne. At least, I thought I might gain your advice on the subject. Possibly, had you stayed at Rosings for a time, I might have joined you there, that I might gain your influence in convincing Lady Catherine that the idea is in her best interests, as well as her daughter’s.”

This idea was nearly shocking to Darcy. Of course, Anne was a wealthy heiress, or would be, so long as her mother did not run the estate into the ground. It was well known that the colonel would get very little from his parents.

“There is no question but that it would be the very best Anne could hope for,” he said carefully.

Anne’s spinsterhood was not entirely her fault, but she was less than desirable for so many reasons. Not only did she

possess little wit, charm nor address, she had no interest in acquiring any. One might suppose that she was overwhelmed by the intensity of her mother's influence, but that was not entirely the case either. She was, in fact, her father's daughter—quiet, disinterested, and fonder of horses than people. Like Sir Lewis, she suffered from complaints of belly and heart, and when she did speak, it was of her medical issues she addressed. "However, forgive me for saying it, but...*you* could certainly expect someone..."—Darcy struggled to find words not entirely damning to Anne—"...healthier. What of Lord Roden's daughter—I thought you might hold some interest in her?"

"I considered her," he said, and then he laughed humourlessly. "Or, to be perfectly honest, she considered me. But I think she has decided she could do better. She is paying attention to Montclair these days."

"If not her, then someone else."

Fitzwilliam smoothed his short beard. "I hate the blasted marriage mart, Darcy. If I never again attend a ball with the express purpose of analysing who is out, whose settlement is ample and whose hopes are few, wondering how *I* appear to *them*—cap in hand, a suppliant for fortune, a kept man—it will be none too soon for me."

Roden's daughter had, obviously, deeply hurt his cousin's pride. "You would be a fine husband, and she is a fool for looking elsewhere. Any lady lucky enough to earn your regard is a privileged woman indeed. Montclair is an idiot, a mere child, and not half the man you are."

The colonel made a show of propping his feet up on the footstool, rather than responding to this remark. Darcy poked at the coals with the fireiron, struggling to furnish further points of argument.

"The thing is," Fitzwilliam said at last, "with Anne, I know what I am getting. She knows what she has in me. I would take her to Matlock until Lady Catherine dies—I could *not* reside with that woman—and who knows but what living away from her mother might do to improve her character. When we do have to be at Rosings—"

"Which shall be far more often than you suppose," Darcy interrupted, latching onto this salient point. "Lady Catherine requires a heavy hand in order to keep her from driving away her best people and spending money unwisely."

"Yes, I have seen how you struggle with her. I am not afraid of her, Darcy. With the authority of marriage, I could ease the burden she has become to you. It only makes sense. I owe you that."

"Do not marry Anne in repayment of a non-existent debt!"

The colonel waved this off. "It is not like that between us, I know. But I would be a better friend to you, were I not also a drain on your pocketbook every time I need a new mount."

"You have never been a drain, nor asked much of me. Your companionship is all that a friend's should be, and I beg you to make your decision without any concern for encumbrance between us."

Fitzwilliam nodded, seeming to wish the subject closed, and Darcy wondered what else he could say. It was beyond odd—that in a single morning, one friend should accuse him of not caring enough, whilst the other was willing to sacrifice his future for him.

"I would see you happy, Fitzwilliam—above any and all other considerations."

The colonel smiled, a little hollowly. "I wish the same for you. I will decide nothing today, I promise. Now, talk to me of something else. Anything else. In your letter, you mentioned that you were recently returned from Hertfordshire."

Of course, Elizabeth—never far from his thoughts—immediately came to mind. It seemed that she accompanied him during every waking moment, an obsession that he knew he needed to crush and yet seemed helpless to prevent. It went against the grain to speak of her, but he could hardly help himself, given such an opening.

"I have wrestled with the idea of happiness myself," he admitted. "Whilst visiting Bingley, I met a young lady. Unique, witty, spirited, beautiful, engaging, charming—I could apply any number of favourable descriptors to her."

Colonel Fitzwilliam straightened at this, obviously distracted from his own troubles. Encouraged, the dam was released, and for the first time, Darcy gave vent to his feelings for Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a country gentleman. His sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—and of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with great warmth. Such was the strength of feeling which speaking of her engendered, he could not remain seated, finding it necessary to pace the length of his library throughout his animated disclosures.

"I can only imagine the conversation, were I to introduce her to the earl as my bride. 'See here, Matlock. I have brought you a girl whose mother is the daughter of a solicitor, and who possesses a dowry of a thousand pounds—once the mother dies, of course.' He would laugh in my face. No, worse—he would express his severest disappointment."

The sound of an oath startled him from his frantic pacing. His cousin stood, white-faced.

"This is it, is it not? What you truly think of me. I thank you for explaining it so fully—I do appreciate your honesty."

Darcy frowned, taken aback. "I am speaking of Elizabeth, not you."

"Are you really? If this Elizabeth possessed Bingley's fortune, might not her ill-mannered family be overlooked, as you so frequently overlook Hurst's drunkenness and his sisters' ceaseless gossiping?"

A shaft of annoyance struck Darcy, but he did not wish to argue the point. He tried to explain.

"You have not met the Bennets. The situation of her mother's family, though objectionable, is nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly, betrayed by Mrs Bennet, by Elizabeth's three younger sisters, and

occasionally even by her father.”

The colonel’s lip curled. “Oh-ho, then. I suppose you have never seen a relation to any of your titled friends participating in activities unbecoming a gentleman? Since when has the bad behaviour of a family member disbarred your friendship to another? Be honest with yourself Darcy, and be honest with me. It is the money, and only the money, which prevents your admiration for this woman from strengthening into love.”

“You are speaking absurdities! It is one thing when a friend’s parent shows some awful habit, and quite another when it is your own wife’s family.”

“And you have never perceived Lady Catherine’s insufferable behaviour? Never watched the earl playing too deep? What of the deeds of your own sister? But perhaps you were protecting the young lady from exposure to a pack of contemptible characters? This Miss Elizabeth certainly ought to avoid nearly every member of our family and shun us as beneath her notice, if proper conduct is now to be the basis of every friendship!”

This callous mention of his sister’s past sins was uncalled for. “Georgiana was but fifteen years old when she was subjected to Wickham’s scheming! She was too young to understand what truly he wanted of her,” he hissed, furious.

“How old are these deplorably behaved Bennet sisters?”

Darcy took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “Georgiana would never flirt with a regiment of officers, never overindulge at the punchbowl and never make a fool of herself before two hundred people.”

“No. Only before one.”

He almost struck his cousin in his abject fury, and it took all of his control to stop angry retorts, escalating an argument into a battle. His voice, when he spoke, was cold. “You are naturally entitled to your opinion, although I most vehemently disagree with your every point. My feelings for and about Miss Elizabeth are not subject to reinterpretation by anyone in general, and have nothing to do with you in particular.”

The colonel seemed to deflate. They said nothing for some moments, the sound of the pendulum clock the only noise in the room. Neither seemed to know what next to say. But at last, Fitzwilliam sighed.

“I will go now. I did not mean to offend you, Darcy.”

Darcy nodded curtly.

At the door however, the colonel paused. “I think you are wise not to marry her, my friend. It is my worst fear—that I be thought unworthy of my bride. I would not wish that upon anyone, least of all the girl you love. If I were to marry Anne, most everyone—myself included—would say her bargain was a good one. Was not it Shakespeare who said, ‘All that glisters is not gold’?” He tried for a smile, although he failed miserably.

Before Darcy could think how to reply, he shut the door quietly behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

For some time, Darcy did his best not to think of the morning's encounters. In the afternoon, he met with his solicitor, one of the appointments his aunt's foolishness had forced him to cancel. Afterwards, he went to his club—*non-participation in life, indeed!*—and spent three or four hours at a game of chess, which he lost.

Returning home, he wrote to his sister, all the while remembering the time he had written to Georgiana from Netherfield, whilst Miss Bingley complimented his pen, his writing, the length of his letters, and anything else she could think of to try and ingratiate herself. Whereas Elizabeth had been wholly the opposite—teasing him for his suggested faults. He had known it was George Wickham who filled her mind with the worst possible view of himself, had even wondered if she was trying to gently suggest he ought to make amends with the wastrel. He had quickly disabused her of *that* notion.

“Implacable resentment *is* a shade in a character,” she had said. “But you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me.”

He had thought, in that moment, she had seemed rather sad about it. Sad that he could not be teased? Sad that he was hopelessly resentful? Why had he not taken any opportunity to explain at least some of that resentment? Who knew what sort of lies Wickham had shared with her?

And the burning question, that, when he tried to close his eyes that night and sleep, prevented any semblance of rest:

Do I want to be 'safe' from her?

It is too late, he reminded himself. She is betrothed to another.

Sleep was a long time coming, however. When it did at last...it was to unrelenting, horrible dreams.

—•••—

Darcy approached his chambers with keen expectation. His man would be within, and could remove this blasted neckcloth—knotted within an inch of his life in the most elaborate of folds, a true palatial fortress of a cravat, practically choking him. But what had he expected? It was his wedding day, and he must present himself in state for his bride.

Unfortunately, Pennywithers was not to be found—not in his sitting room, dressing room, or bed chamber. He searched everywhere in the vast space, but it was empty. He was alone.

Not for long, however. On the other side of a connecting door that was hidden within the panelling was the mistress's chambers. Would Elizabeth, even now, be dressing in some translucent, revealing gown, purchased especially for this extraordinary night? Or might she be already awaiting him in her bed?

His excitement, hardly containable, reached new proportions at the very idea. He had imagined, had dreamt, had anticipated this moment, it seemed, for years. It was odd that he could not remember what his prior objections had been—stupid ones, certainly.

In the absence of his man, he impatiently decided he must undress himself. Divesting himself of his coat was difficult; he heard a stitch or two rip. Well, Pennywithers must repair it, mustn't he? Blast him for his abandonment! Peeling off his boots took even more doing, and he was in a sweat by the time he got them off. Why had he decided to wear boots instead of slippers to his wedding? What had he been thinking? Why had Pennywithers allowed it? Again, he cursed the missing valet.

Breeches and smallclothes were thrown aside, as was his vest. He stood before the looking glass, clad in only his long fine linen shirt and the dratted cravat. Tugging at it only seemed to knot it more tightly; he clawed at it, pulling at the thing, yet, unable to loosen it. Frantically, he rummaged in his dressing table and bureau for his penknife, thinking he would simply cut it off. The knife was inexplicably absent from its usual spot, and creeping feelings of panic assailed him.

Calm yourself, he ordered his reflection. Do not be stupid. Leave it. Your shirt is long, not as long as a nightshirt, but long enough. Perhaps it is a bit irregular to appear before Elizabeth in it; still, you need merely don your dressing gown

and you will look perfectly acceptable, especially to your new bride—who likely would prefer the candles doused shortly after your arrival, regardless.

Unfortunately, a dressing gown was nowhere to be found. He owned at least three of them, and worked up another sweat tearing wardrobes apart in his search. He would be having a stern word with Pennywithers, that was certain, and he yanked the bell-pull, furious. If Pennywithers did not appear, his housekeeper, or one of the many, many servants he paid to wait upon him and see to his every need would find his man or his penknife or his dressing gown, or he would know why!

No one arrived. What was the matter with his entire household? Why, on the most important night of his life, had they all deserted him? It made no sense.

He had only two choices. He could wait here alone, growing ever more enraged, or he could go to his bride.

Darcy leant against the bureau, taking deep breaths, forcibly quieting his wrath.

It is my wedding night. Nothing shall ruin it for me; nothing shall ever be wrong again, once I am with Elizabeth.

When he had regained good regulation over his temper, he stood straight and walked to the connecting door. *Elizabeth is the only one who matters*, he told himself.

At the door he paused in the act of reaching for the door handle; his hand was actually trembling, as he imagined her awaiting him in her bed, surrounded by pale linens, her hair—her long, silken tresses revealed to him, spread across her pillow. He might look ridiculous at the moment, but he would make her forget everything.

Eagerly, he drew the door open.

He blinked in the brightness of dozens of candles, golden light blazing from every available surface and momentarily blinding him, disconcerting him. It was unexpected, but unwilling to wait another moment, he turned to the enormous bed.

Reclining upon it was a large, naked, extremely hairy—and extremely male—back.

“What is this?” he shouted.

The reverend Mr William Collins turned a startled face towards him, the glutinous mass of his large, hairy belly sluggishly following as he twisted around.

“Mr Darcy! What are you doing in my wife’s bedroom?” the vicar shrieked. “Get out! At once! If you require my ministering, it will simply have to wait until the morning!”

Shocked and alarmed, Darcy staggered backwards; suddenly he found himself once again in his own room, facing the closed connecting door.

“I did not see what I just thought I saw!”

“What did you expect?” Bingley’s voice startled him into whirling. His friend was dressed for riding. “You cannot believe that every man would be as slow to act as you are. I am returning to Netherfield. I hope it is not too late for me, as it is for you.”

“Too late?” he repeated stupidly.

“Far too late,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, suddenly appearing beside Bingley, his medals gleaming against his regimentals. “’Tis for the best, Darcy. She shall be much happier this way.”

Darcy thought of the hairy blob of a man who lounged naked in a bed awaiting Elizabeth. *His* Elizabeth. “Impossible!” he cried. “How can she be happy with that...that...”

“Husband,” Bingley finished for him. “He is her husband. For as long as they both shall live.”

“No!”

“Yes,” the colonel said mournfully. “She had not gold enough to earn your good opinion. She has ample ability to earn his.”

Words failed him, but it was not the time for them. Giving the other men his back, he wrenched at the door. It would not open, not for all his strength.

“Too late, Darcy,” his comrades chorused. “Give it up. Too late. Much too late.”

“Noo!”

Darcy sat bolt upright in bed, the sound of his own horrified shout of protest waking him.

“A dream!” he gasped aloud. “Not real. Only a dream.”

But with a sickening feeling, he knew it was no dream. It could easily be truth. Elizabeth might already be married to the Reverend William Collins.

Gone, lost forever to him. The phantom neckcloth still choked him.

Flinging the bed curtains aside, he scrambled out of bed. Thin grey light streamed through the chamber’s window. It was already morning.

“Pennywithers!” he shouted.

Darcy checked his watch again. It had taken far longer to escape London than he had hoped, even mounted, as several streets were clogged in early morning traffic. He had given his stallion, Plunder, his head once they were on country roads. Still, it was nearly ten o'clock before Longbourn was in sight, and it took him another ten minutes to reach the manor house door.

At its entry, he faced a neat older woman, obviously an upper servant.

"I'm sorry sir. The family has gone to the church for the wedding."

His heart moved to his throat, so that he almost could not speak. "Miss Elizabeth?" he choked out.

"Yes, sir."

"How long ago?"

"Not long. Perhaps half an hour."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and raced back to Plunder.

Before he was even half the way to Meryton's churchyard, it began to rain. Darcy could not care.

Perhaps he was mad. Of course he was mad. It did not matter; he only was sure of one thing: he must try. For the rest of his life, he would hate himself if he did not. He might anyway, for delaying—he ought to have made for Longbourn the moment his aunt had read him the news of a betrothal. Instead, he had done as Bingley accused, as had become his habit: arrogant dismissal, putting off life, refusing to risk his heart.

The words spoken from the dance floor at Netherfield filtered through his mind. At the time, he had only fixed on his annoyance with Elizabeth's interest in Wickham, instead of the obvious solution. Why had he never made Wickham's character known to these people? He need not have said much—he had a vast selection of stories displaying the churl's dishonesty, none of them betraying his sister.

Neither had he any high moral ground for despising her family; just as Colonel Fitzwilliam pointed out, his own was as flawed as anyone's. Why in heaven's name had he worried what the earl would think? It was his own father whose good opinion he wished to honour—and his excellent father would have adored Elizabeth. He also knew that his father would have trusted him—and he could trust himself—to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to see Georgiana taken care of and his tenants as well. As he had been reminded too many times lately, fortune was not everything.

As he thundered down the road, a particularly virulent gust of wind sent his hat sailing, but he had not a moment to spare to retrieve it. With a sinking feeling, he realised that when it came to Elizabeth Bennet, he had *always* fixed his attention on the wrong things, chasing distractions, ambitions, and fears.

Now it might be—probably *was*—too late.

CHAPTER FIVE

Darcy leapt off Plunder, tossing the reins over the churchyard gate. In a few quick strides he was up the steps and flinging open the church doors.

He spared no attention for those filling the first pews; his gaze was entirely fixed upon the small gathering of people before the nave, facing the vicar—including a dark-haired woman in blue silk, and a hulking man—Collins, he was certain—in black clothing. His sudden arrival did not at all prevent the ancient clergyman from the ceremonial speech already in progress.

“...wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou—”

“She will not! Elizabeth, no, please!” he gasped, forgetting, in his panic, even proper forms of address. “Marry me, instead, I beg you!”

Time froze, as bride and groom simultaneously spun towards the interruption.

To his utter, complete, and total mortification, the bride was *not* Elizabeth Bennet. Rather, Miss Charlotte Lucas stared back at him in buck-toothed amazement. Elizabeth, he noticed at last and far too late, was seated on a pew at the front with nearly every member of her family, equivalent looks of incredulity and wonder on their faces. Meryton’s vicar frowned his disapproval. Miss Lydia giggled, and time restarted.

He abruptly became aware of his position in the middle of a church, hatless, his neckcloth soaking and ruined, his greatcoat dripping on the aisle floor, disrupting a wedding. He flushed.

“I—I apologise,” he managed, straightening, adopting the pose of offended dignity he had used so many times when falsely accused of Wickham’s misbehaviours. “There was a misunderstanding. Please forgive me the interruption.” He followed his apology with a brief bow, and made the swiftest exit he could without breaking into a run.

He let himself into the adjacent graveyard via a rusted iron gate. The rain had stopped, at least—not that it mattered in the slightest; he could hardly appear any stupider. A conveniently placed bench, out of sight of anything except a large monument erected to some long dead, much beloved rector, served as a good enough place to bask in humiliation. He leant forward, resting his forearms on his knees, staring at the ground while trying to absorb what had just occurred.

The leading citizenry of Meryton had just witnessed what had to be the most inane, ridiculous proposal of marriage in the history of inane, ridiculous proposals. *At least Elizabeth is not marrying William Collins today*, he reminded himself. Although neither was there much guarantee she would consider yet another proposal from another great fool. Never had he felt so idiotic.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, he did not look up, hoping whomever it might be would simply continue on their way. However, the steps paused beside him, and then the sound of rustling fabric and the creaking bench told him that the person was now seated beside him. In his peripheral vision, he saw a dark woollen coat—but peeking from its edge was the emerald green he had noticed Elizabeth wearing. He ought to have stood at her approach, he realised—but what was one more blunder in a morning which already included so many?

“Mr Darcy,” she began, when he said nothing.

“I was rather hoping you would believe I had departed for a destination unknown,” he muttered.

“Yes, well, I did not think you would leave your fine horse here to fend for himself.”

“Ah. Of course.” He took a deep breath. “I apologise for the, um, scene in the church. I am certain I embarrassed you, as well as myself.”

“As to that, I was surprised, certainly.”

“Again, I am sorry.” Silence ensued, while a list of all the ways he had offended her, or likely offended her, unrolled like a scroll in his mind.

“I had not the smallest idea you felt anything at all for me.”

He forced himself to meet her eyes, and was heartened to see that, at least, she was not glaring. “Again, I beg forgiveness. Bingley says that I treat others with dismissive conceit in order to disguise my fear of taking risks—especially risks involving beautiful women.”

At this, she smiled up at him. “I think you may tell Mr Bingley that your days of avoiding risk are long past.”

He returned her smile and her cheeks pinkened. It gave him a sliver of hope.

“I know I have not behaved in any way that might produce your admiration. I am certain my contemptible conduct upon the occasion of our first meeting left you no good impression of me, and I afterwards failed, not only to apologise, but—”

Darcy scrubbed his hand through his damp hair, which rain had twisted into hated curls. How to explain? What to explain?

“I have allowed Wickham unfettered access to you and your neighbours, without providing any of the many reasons proving he is an unprincipled scoundrel.”

She gasped a little. He soldiered on; he might as well get this all out of the way—all the things he ought to have said, ought to have done.

“I am sure he has done his best to ruin whatever little approbation I might have retained. I promise, however, that I can provide sufficient proof of his deceitfulness. If you never like or trust me, I would not have you fooled by him.”

It was her turn to stutter. “I—I would prefer to draw my own conclusions, I think.” All her pretty blushes had faded now.

Darcy leant back against the bench, looking at the sky instead of the woman he loved, unable to bear seeing her disappointment.

“He was for many years my good friend, my comrade in arms, so to speak. His father held management of Pemberley, and was equally close to my good father. It took me far too long to realise that the friendship was one-sided. He required my reputation and my father’s, my money, and little else. His uses for those, however, were many; his ability to explain away poor decision and blackhearted motive, legendary. The last thing I wish to do is provide particulars, for the more I do, the greater I find my own culpability. Why did I cover those debts, pay those women’s families, without explaining to my father and his that his behaviour was beyond the pale? I distanced myself from him, but preserved his ability to retain their influence.”

“This is horrible,” she said, shaking her head.

Did she refer to Wickham, or his own negligence? Or both? Did she believe him at all? He had hardly demonstrated trustworthiness. He must provide more details, solid facts, not simply vague allusions.

“Yes. In his will, my father left a thousand pounds to him, but also the promise of a living, should he take orders.”

“Yes—he has spoken of what is owed him.”

“What is owed him?” He gave a humourless chuckle. “Nothing at all. He did not want it. He was paid three thousand for his surrender of the benefice.”

“So much,” she said in almost a whisper.

“Yes. That was well before he tried to elope with my fifteen-year-old sister.”

“He did what?” Her dark eyes were huge with shock and dismay.

He finally looked at her, sadness filling him. She, too, had young, silly sisters. Although they had no enticement of a large settlement, as Georgiana did, perhaps it only made him more dangerous.

“I am sorry, so very sorry, that I did not explain sooner.”

“I can understand why you did not,” she replied. “I am uncertain whether I would ever have been so honest as you have been with me.”

“I have no doubt of your secrecy on this matter.”

They sat together in the quiet. He could think of nothing to add, and wondered if there was any hope left for him. She was the first to break the silence.

“Mr Darcy, a few days ago, my sister received a letter from Miss Bingley. In it, she claims that Mr Bingley will not return to Netherfield this winter, and intimated that he would, instead, be pursuing an alliance with your sister.”

He raised a brow in surprise; he had not known that Miss Bingley had perceived his future hopes for Georgiana. Still, it seemed very unlikely that Bingley would care to wait several years for his sister to mature, and he could admit that Georgiana had never shown the slightest interest in him. Besides, Georgiana was in no condition, at present, to think of marriage to anyone, whilst Bingley appeared to be ready for commitment. With a little regret, he gave up the idea of the match forever. In this he could at least relieve Elizabeth, if relief she required.

“Bingley has no interest in my sister, nor she in him.” He hesitated. “Could it be that Miss Bennet has deeper feelings for him than that of an acquaintance?”

She looked at him in some disbelief. “Could you not tell that she does? I thought it obvious that her heart is engaged.”

“If you say it is so, it must be. I could not see it, but then, Bingley has recently called my powers of perception into dispute. I shall write him, and admit that he was right and I was wrong. It is my guess that he shall return to Netherfield immediately

upon receiving word.”

“Your friend relies upon your judgment.”

“He is most unaffectedly modest, and in nothing is judgment more important than in matters of the heart. It is perhaps unfortunate that he should only have me to turn to.” Another long silence followed.

At last Elizabeth sighed. “My perceptive powers are no better. I have been racking my brain for some evidence of goodness in Mr Wickham, and now that I consider it, I find nothing to lay to his credit. Charlotte advised me some time ago that Jane should make her feelings for Mr Bingley more obvious. Not only did I disagree, but I never told my sister of the conversation, that she might decide for herself how best to act.”

“We are protective of those we care for.”

“Yes.” It was her turn to hesitate. “It is not only that.”

She peered up at him through her lashes and he wished with all his heart that they weren’t speaking of Wickham or Bingley, but of her, of his feelings for her—and of any possibility of her feelings for him. All he could do now, however, was listen, and pray listening was enough. He tried to show her, through his very posture, that every word she spoke was important to him.

“Not only?”

“No. I probably should not admit this but...but as you have shown your willingness to, hm, take risks, I will take one as well. It is my family—undoubtedly you have noticed that we are not the most appropriately behaved. I love them, but I grow very frustrated at times with their conduct, and I believe my sister is so upset by some of it, that she tries—perhaps even harder than she ought, if that is possible—to act, always, in the most decorous manner possible.”

He tried to think how to respond, finding words in remembering the colonel’s. “You have not met all my family members yet. Take my word for it that if you do, we would be able to trade stories.”

She grinned at this, and he felt as if he had presented her a bouquet of roses. He could not help but press for whatever tiny advantage he might have gained.

“I do not wish to offer further embarrassment, and one word from you will silence me on the subject forever but...may I have the opportunity, Miss Elizabeth, of calling upon you? Or have I wrecked any chance of redeeming myself in your eyes?”

She looked at him for a long moment, and in the time it took her to reply, he lived and died a thousand lifetimes, alternating between hope and despair.

“As it happens, you have not embarrassed me at all, sir. Yes. Yes, you may call.”

CHAPTER SIX

Mr Darcy had been a regular caller, every day, for the last ten. He had dined at Longbourn for five of them. Mr Bingley had, as predicted, immediately returned to Netherfield and promptly reopened the house, at which point he had moved from The George and joined his friend in the calls. Mrs Bennet waited daily, with increasing impatience, for an announcement of betrothals.

Elizabeth could admit that she waited too.

“It is amazing, is it not? A couple of weeks ago, I hated Mr Darcy, and now I stand at our drawing room window like an eager puppy, looking for any sign of his appearance,” she said drily to her sister.

Jane smiled; she was smiling more often and more widely these days, and it only added to her great beauty.

“I do not think you hated him, Lizzy,” she chided gently, not willing to ascribe any faults to a most beloved sister. “You did not know him well enough to hate him, and had been misinformed of his character.”

“You mean, I listened to ill-natured gossip from a stranger, a relative stranger, and provided him with more of it.” Really, it was amazing how easily Darcy had forgiven her for her culpability. Thankfully, Mr Wickham had utterly disappeared from these parts, and good riddance.

“I think that whatever your feelings of the past, they are vastly different now.”

Elizabeth found her own smile, the one thoughts of her former belief in Mr Wickham’s lies had chased away.

“They are indeed.”

“Do not you find him...somewhat...intimidating?” Jane asked.

“Not at all. I have found that his usual sober expressions seldom reveal anything he is really thinking. Besides, how can anyone be intimidated by a man who would rush into a church, hatless and sopping wet, to try to stop the wedding of the wrong bride? That loss of dignity is not easily forgotten.”

“Oh, Lizzy, surely you do not tease him over that?”

Elizabeth laughed. “You are wrong, dear sister, if you believe that Mr Darcy does not enjoy a bit of teasing.”

Jane’s brows rose, but then she smiled. “What I think is that there is nothing you could say that he does not like.”

It was probably true.

Astonishing, that such a man as he had decided, somehow, to love an impertinent country miss; at first, however, she had only agreed that he could call due to his obvious embarrassment. It was undeniably flattering, to have attracted such attention from him.

Of course, there were those who thought she ought to be embarrassed as well, people like Pamela Harrington, who had snidely remarked, “Really, Eliza, I do not know how I would be able to hold my head up, should a man make such a spectacle of himself before God and the entire neighbourhood, over *me*.”

“I should not worry too much about the necessity of planning for the occasion,” Elizabeth had replied cheerfully, to the sound of much laughter from the other young ladies. No, she felt no embarrassment whatsoever—ought she to, when a man of great wealth and property—a man whom nearly everyone had believed so far beyond the reach of any local lass that no one had ever seriously considered the possibility—deigned not only to offer for her, but to do it so publicly? Was it an insult, that he had decided nothing else mattered except reaching her in time to make that interest known before it was, as he had believed, everlastingly too late?

But love? That was another thing entirely. Still, with every intelligent, fascinating conversation, she had felt more deeply entranced—he was not conceited, but self-assured. His sense of humour was dry and droll. Long walks together had resulted long talks in favourite paths and places—the hermitage at Longbourn, and the rose garden at Netherfield, amongst others. They were, ostensibly, always supposed to be under the watchful eyes of Bingley and Jane—most conveniently, the worst chaperons in the history of chaperonage.

Mr Bingley’s carriage pulled up the drive, and she felt her heart beat harder as his footman pulled down the step and opened the door.

To her thorough disappointment, only Bingley emerged.

“But where is Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth asked him, once he had been shown in.

To her surprise, Jane’s smile was distinctly conspiratorial.

“Ah, as to that,” Mr Bingley said, bowing most dramatically. “I have been tasked with delivering you this.” With a flourish, he removed an envelope from an inner coat pocket and handed it over to her.

Her name was written in forthright handwriting across the front of it—Mr Darcy’s writing. Curiously, she unfolded the missive.

A walk ended, a fresh beginning commenced...here.

She was certainly confused. Slowly, an incredible idea began to form. She looked up from the letter-paper. “Is this...is this a Treasure Hunt?” she asked, referring to the popular party game of searching out clues.

Jane smiled. “Perhaps something like!”

Mr Bingley bowed. “My carriage is at your disposal, should your searches lead you any great distance.” He and Jane exchanged sly grins.

A walk ended, a fresh beginning commenced...here. After the scene at the church, she had agreed that Mr Darcy might call; to her surprise, the very next day he had arrived at Longbourn. The first visit was somewhat awkward, but it had not remained so. The next day he arrived with Mr Bingley in tow. They had gone for a walk together, the four of them, which had quickly diverged paths. She and Darcy had stayed in Longbourn’s gardens and then she had shown him the hermitage. The hermitage! Where they had talked for an hour that passed in mere seconds.

Hurriedly she abandoned Jane and Mr Bingley, to race for her coat and an umbrella.

CHAPTER SEVEN

An hour later—after a short drive in Mr Bingley’s carriage—Elizabeth found herself at the foot of Oakham Mount, looking about for the next clue. None of them had been too difficult to find thus far. In her coat pocket, three others resided, all of which she would save forever. And then, just as she was out of sight of the waiting carriage, a man emerged from a stand of trees.

For a moment, just a moment, she marvelled—how was it that this tall, broad-shouldered, handsome man in exquisitely cut coat and gleaming Hessians, should be *here*, smiling at *her*? He had devised this whole exercise for her intrigue and amusement; how had she ever thought him dull?

He bowed; she curtsied, smiling back at him.

“Miss Elizabeth, what a surprise,” he said, his low voice causing a little thrill to chase up her spine. “What brings you out in nature on a wintry December afternoon?”

“As it happens, I *have* misplaced something. A small note card, about so big.” She brought her fingers up in an approximation of the clue paper size.

“Ah. I might have noticed something of the sort. I may have picked it up. One ought not to be so careless as to leave papers lying about.”

“One certainly ought not,” she said, twinkling up at him.

Mr Darcy made a show of patting his coat pockets. “Hm. Now what did I do with it? I could swear it was...” He reached up, feeling along the back of his shoulder, as if it could possibly be there, then twisted around as if feeling for it.

There was the note card, pinned to his coat in the very centre of his back, ‘Elizabeth’ written in his bold, firm hand and she giggled. Stretching for it, she laughed again when he turned in a circle as if trying to see for himself—keeping the clue just out of reach. In trying to grasp it, somehow she found her arms around him, and his went about her, and his lips descended to meet her laughing mouth and she discovered a whole new realm of feeling, of passion, of wonder in the pressure of it, the intensity of the exchange. He was the first to pull away, while she could only remain standing, looking at him, dazed and trembling and astonished.

It was a kiss such as she had never even dreamt nor imagined. Abruptly, she wished he had not ended it—worlds opening up before her eyes.

Slowly he turned, presenting her with his back. With unsteady hands, she unpinned the note card and read the words within.

Oh to be Shakespeare, to possess any idea how one might expertly express the wishes of my heart. Alas, I am only a man, inspired but not inspiring, one who is truly, deeply in love for the first time in his life. If it is too soon for you to return my feelings, I understand. Advise me to wait. Say that I ought to withdraw, and I will. Only...do not tell me that I must give up hope. Anything but that.

FD

Slowly, he turned back around, looking into her eyes as if he could read her tremulous thoughts. Then, he dropped to one knee.

“Elizabeth...my dearest, my loveliest...my heart’s home. Will you have me?”

She went to her knees, heedless of her gown, to wrap her arms around him, to be even with him, to hold his face within her hands. “Perhaps a couple of weeks ago our hearts were not aligned. But I seem to have caught up to you,” she said.

“Is that a yes?” he asked, as if he were hardly daring to hope.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she said, and he smiled warmly upon her—even his eyes were smiling, in tenderness and yearning.

“When?”

“Shall we wait for Mr Bingley to come to the point?”

“While I do not think it will be long before he does, I admit to impatience. Would you object to a licence? Or am I pushing my good fortune?”

Elizabeth had never been flirtatious, never overbold. She was, in all the ways that mattered, very much a lady, and it was important to her to be so. Yet, she saw in his dark gaze a worry—that somehow he was alone in this. He had mortified his

pride in order to offer for her the first time; some might say he still was. She was neither wealthy nor important in any of the ways society would recognise. She had misunderstood and under-appreciated him in the past; he, too, had erred. It was a miracle that they were here together, now, in each other's arms, and she could see his fear, the same as hers—that it was all too good to be true.

“Do you mean, do I wish to wait weeks or months before I can go where you go? Before I can lie beside you in the night and wake to see you in the morning light? Before I can be yours and you can be mine? No. No, I do not. If I could choose the date of our wedding, I would choose yesterday. Go and get the licence, my love.”

“Your love,” he said, pride and amazement in his tone. “I am your love.” His mouth bent to hers, and he showed her, with every kiss, every gentle touch, every breath, by the force of his passion and adoration, the strength of the passion he held in return.

EPILOGUE

August 1st, 1812

It was well past dark, but Darcy was close enough now that he shunned the idea of stopping at an inn for the night—had the moon been more than a slim crescent, he would have abandoned the brougham altogether and raced swiftly for home.

He could tell, however, by the speed of his carriage, that Frost—his coachman, who knew this section of road well enough to drive it blindfolded—was anxious for his own quarters as well.

Leaving Elizabeth for the first time since their wedding eight months previous had been difficult. However, the regiment had departed Meryton, and since Mr and Mrs Bingley had recently left on their wedding trip, and would thereafter be giving up the Netherfield lease in favour an estate a mere thirty miles from Pemberley, Longbourn had grown rather dull. To prevent her father from acceding to Lydia's wishes for a holiday in Brighton with the Forsters, Elizabeth had invited Kitty and Lydia to come to Pemberley and enjoy the rest of the summer with her instead.

To his surprise, Georgiana had been an excellent influence upon the two, clearly able to assert her authority as leader of their little trio. "I just try to do and say what I think Elizabeth would do or say," she had confided to him.

Georgiana seemed completely—*more* than completely—over the hurt of George Wickham. No one had heard of that man in a very long while, and Darcy wished to keep it so.

Whilst in London, he had been eager to relay the news of his sister's excellent spirits to Fitzwilliam, and had spent some time visiting with the colonel and his betrothed. Happily, the colonel's betrothed was *not* Anne de Bourgh, and this, too, could be attributed to Elizabeth. He had taken her to town after their wedding, of course, where she had almost immediately acquired a number of good friends—not *ton* leaders, per se, but persons of fine character and wit, in whose company he was pleased to be. One of those was an heiress named Miss Sarah Bentley, whose father was the earl of Hampton's heir presumptive. Elizabeth had immediately fixed upon her as the ideal match for Colonel Fitzwilliam and it had not taken long before they both saw it as well. He and Elizabeth would be travelling to town in the fall for their wedding, but the Matlock and Hampton contingents—as well as the Gardiners—would be coming to Pemberley for the grouse.

For Pemberley had become an active, lively home again, a perception he had not experienced since long before the death of his father. His wife had not left her mark in ways overpowering—she had not immediately commenced redecorating the great house, for instance, although he had told her she should do as she pleased. At times, he still felt a bit guilty for answering her honestly, when she had asked him exactly how her lack of a settlement from her father would affect him in practical terms. The only reason he had done so was to assure her that he was not entering their union blindly or thoughtlessly, and that he had more than enough to provide liberally for her regardless—as well as to ensure she understood that he *knew* how much more valuable she was to him than any worldly goods.

Even in finance, however, her presence in his life had only improved it. His reasons for the trip to town included meeting with Mr Gardiner to finalise the contract sales from his Blue John mines with an exclusive buyer, which would more than double profitability, whilst guaranteeing those working them a greater income. He had never dreamt, when he first learnt of Elizabeth's relations in Cheapside, how those very connexions he had disdained would stabilise and prosper his world. He could not wait to tell her.

Despite her current lack of great expenditure, there were little touches of her everywhere, from the delicately stitched pillows in their favourite parlour, to his mother's sketches she'd had framed and placed in her own chambers and in Georgiana's. He could hardly wait to see her again, to hold her again, to love her again; he could hardly believe his good fortune in winning her hand.

Darcy found it to be the only thing which made his absence from Elizabeth bearable—the exquisite rejuvenation of joy at returning, home, to her. *Home*.

Of course, by the time they drew up Pemberley's drive, it was long past midnight. He had not known quite when his business would be complete, and his Elizabeth was a creature of the morning, usually retiring early when they were in the

country. She would be sound asleep by now. Still, he felt a deep relief to be here where he ought to be.

Once in his dressing room, he shucked his jacket and neckcloth with the help of Pennywithers and sent him off to bed. Quietly he finished disrobing and left his dressing chamber. Elizabeth would be asleep, but he must at least see her—prove for his peace of mind that she was real and whole and yet his.

His room was dark except for the low flame of coals recently freshened in his fireplace, a sign that Elizabeth had had servants watching for his arrival. He crept over to the connecting door in the panelling, and thought of the stupid dream which had heralded his first proposal. The memory was no longer a humiliating one, because Elizabeth had begun to fall in love with him from that very vulnerable moment, she had told him. Still, a silly pang of anxiety snaked over him as he reached for the knob.

In that moment, he heard it—a soft snore, coming from the direction of his own bed. Smiling, he turned away from the door and crept quietly to the bed, pulling the curtains back enough so that he could see her dear face within the golden dimness.

She took his breath away.

His body was on fire for her, naturally, but he would not wake her for the world. Nevertheless, he would tell her how he felt without disturbing her slumber, in case it made her dreams easier.

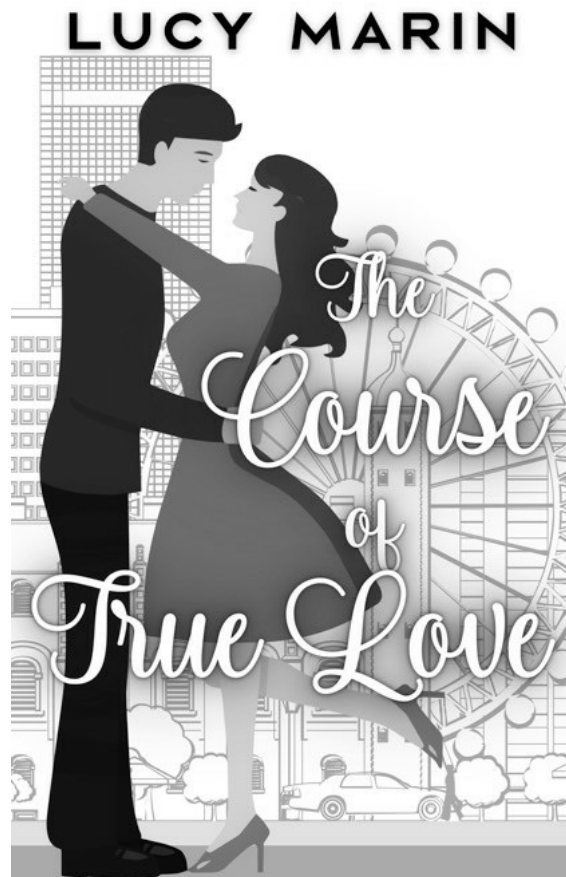
“I love you,” he whispered, so quietly he could barely hear himself. “My treasure, my heart.” Carefully, as gently as he could, he bent to place a soft kiss upon her cheek.

The next moment, her arms were wrapped about him as she pulled him close. “You are home,” she sighed happily. “Welcome home, my darling.”

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Cooper lives with her husband of forty-one years in Central California. She spends her time boasting of her four brilliant and beautiful children, doting on her four brilliant and beautiful grandchildren, and cleaning up after her neurotic Bichon, Pogo. Somewhere in between the truly important stuff, she peddles fruit baskets and chocolate-covered strawberries for a living whilst pressing penitent Mr Darcys on an unsuspecting public.

