



JULIANA ABBOTT

DARCY'S  
*Guarded  
Heart*

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE  
VARIATION



# *Darcy's Guarded Heart*

*A Pride and Prejudice Variation*

Juliana Abbott

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## *About the Book*

**One proud gentleman. One spirited lady. And a love tested by loyalty, mistrust, and the race to stop a scandal.**

When Fitzwilliam Darcy accompanies Charles Bingley to Netherfield, he hopes for peace and quiet in country society. Instead, a chance encounter with the Bennets' beloved ward, Thomas, raises his guard. Thomas reminds him far too much of the scoundrel who once betrayed his family.

Everything changes when Thomas introduces them to the Bennet sisters—especially Elizabeth, whose wit, warmth, and fine eyes unsettle everything Darcy thought he wanted. She challenges him, infuriates him, and yet draws him closer with every encounter. But when Georgiana arrives and quickly falls under Thomas's spell, Darcy resolves to protect her—even if it means losing Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's first impression of Darcy is nothing short of dreadful. Proud, aloof, and far too quick to judge dear Thomas, he is the last man she could admire. Yet the more she sees of him, the harder it is to ignore the man of honor and tenderness beneath the reserve.

When Georgiana and Thomas vanish, Darcy and Elizabeth must race to prevent scandal... and to embrace a love neither can deny.

# *Chapter One*

## *Elizabeth*

“Carriages! Four of them, I saw them coming up the London Road,” an excitable young voice called, and Elizabeth raised her eyes, drawn from her reverie at the sound. She had not realised there was anyone else about. It was early afternoon, usually an ideal time to walk as it tended to be quiet. Not that it ever got too busy in their corner of the world. Still, having just returned from a visit to London, she’d longed for a little peace—something not easily found at Longbourn.

Alas, her quiet walk was not to be as three young boys ran towards her. She recognised them at once. Peter Lucas, her friend Charlotte’s youngest brother, and Harold and Charlie Parks, his cousins. She glanced in the direction they were pointing, and sure enough, there was something akin to a caravan travelling down the road from London towards Netherfield.

She spotted three stately carriages, followed by another plainer vehicle—one that perhaps carried servants or luggage. All four carriages were loaded down with trunks and portmanteaus, so many that she could only assume a family of ten was moving into the place that had stood empty for so long, or a few people with rather extravagant tastes.

“Miss Bennet,” Peter called. “Do you see them?”

“I assure you, Master Lucas, my eyes function perfectly.” She raised a hand to her forehead to shield against the low, autumn sun and squinted, hoping to catch a glimpse of the passengers, but the carriages were too far away.

“I did not know Netherfield was let again,” she murmured, more to herself than to the boys. However, evidently Harold Parks felt as though she had addressed him, for he immediately replied.

“Mama said that a gentleman from the north has taken it. A Mr Bingler,” the boy explained. “The servants arrived on Monday. I did not see those carriages arrive, but Mama said there were at least five that brought servants and trunks and provisions. She was quite upset, saying they ought to have hired from Meryton, not brought their own servants,” he added.

“I imagine they desired those they were already acquainted with,” Elizabeth remarked, though it was a shame when grand houses like Netherfield were opened again only to be staffed by strangers, when so many in Meryton were in want of employment.

She sighed. It could not be helped. People, especially those who could afford to rent a place like Netherfield Park, tended to be less concerned with such matters. Still, she could not deny her curiosity about the new inhabitants. Their carriages certainly were rather impressive, with their shimmering black exteriors and door handles that had glimmered in the sunshine. The horses, too, appeared to be of the sort only those of substantial means could afford.

“Peter!” Charlotte Lucas called then, and Elizabeth turned to face her friend.

“Charlotte,” she smiled at her dearest companion, who came rushing down the road, cheeks flushed and hair bobbing beneath her bonnet.

“Eliza, how good it is to see you. I feel as though it has been weeks,” she said, pausing for breath.

“A fortnight at least. I was in London visiting Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. I meant to call on you when I returned but I have not yet found the time.” She nodded at the young boy. “Your brother was just telling me about the new tenants.”

“Ah yes, Peter delights in disseminating all manner of news. He is like a sponge for gossip. I daresay Mama will yet despair of him.” She turned to her brother and cousins then. “What are you doing here? Mama and Aunt Beth are awaiting you at the house. Off you go,” she urged the boys who swiftly fell into step and hurried towards Lucas Lodge.

“I wish Kitty, Lydia, and Mary were as obedient as those three,” Elizabeth said with a laugh.

“They are somewhat older, my dear. I daresay the older they are, the less they listen,” Charlotte sighed, slipping her arm under Elizabeth’s as they walked away from Netherfield and the carriages.

“You possess all the wisdom, do you not?” Elizabeth chuckled. “You will make a very good mother one day, bringing them all to heel with the snap of a finger.”

“I wish. Oh Eliza, I do wish that so. But I must admit, I am seven-and-twenty—chances of my finding a husband are growing slimmer with each passing day. I shall end up an ape leader yet,” she said. Even though she knew this to be a

possibility, Elizabeth shook her head, unwilling to let her friend admit such defeat just yet.

“Charlotte do not speak thus. You are still lovely and young, you shall find someone. Perhaps even among the Netherfield party,” she said, nudging her friend playfully.

“I believe if there is a gentleman to be had amongst them, your mother will claim him for you or your sisters at once,” Charlotte replied wryly, and Elizabeth could not deny that this might indeed be the case.

“Well, Mama does not control the hearts and minds of every person in her vicinity, even if she wishes it so. In any event, what do you know of the party? Anything of note?”

Charlotte shook her head. “Nothing of particular interest, save that they are from the north and staying from now through to Christmas and into the summer.”

“That is certainly a long time to become acquainted, especially with any eligible gentleman.”

“I daresay, given my fortunes, they will turn out to be an old married man with four sons, all of them wed to beautiful highborn ladies. The best I can hope for then is a posting as a governess,” she said, but chuckled, letting Elizabeth know that despite her tone, she was jesting somewhat.

“Perhaps they will be young and dashing, however, and entirely unwed. In which case, I am sure they will come to the assembly. What do you say, Charlotte? Shall we set our caps for them if they are indeed handsome and unwed?”

Charlotte turned to her and took her hands. “You are a dear friend, Eliza. Yes, we shall. Perhaps the two of us will be engaged come Christmastide!”

“Perhaps we shall,” Elizabeth replied, and the two giggled as they made their way down the road towards Lucas Lodge.

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After parting with Charlotte, Elizabeth made her way down the lane at a brisk pace, arriving at the house a little out of breath. The sun was beginning to set, and a sharp breeze reminded her that it was already late October. Before she knew it, the long dark days of winter would be upon her. Not that she minded. She had always been fond of the cold season, especially when it snowed. There was something singularly enchanting about Christmastide in the snow. And after that, her other favourite season would follow spring. She loved how the world awakened anew after the cold of winter.

There was something peaceful about it.

She narrowed her eyes when a decidedly unpeaceful sound spilled from the open windows of the drawing room. Her mother’s shrill voice.

Elizabeth could not yet distinguish her words, but she did not need to. Those high, urgent notes could belong to no other. No doubt she had just received news of the new occupant at Netherfield Park. It would be a long evening indeed if her mother had made such a discovery.

And if the new arrivals proved to be bachelors? There would be no end to her mother’s raptures. Not that Elizabeth could wholly blame her. Any woman with five daughters must, inevitably, concern herself with securing them respectable husbands. As much as she had hesitated to say so to Charlotte, there came a point when a woman without a prospect might indeed find herself looking at the dreaded shelf.

Not that she or her sisters were yet in danger of such a fate—none of them had yet passed one-and-twenty.

She took a steadying breath as she neared the door, bracing herself for whatever storm brewed within—only for the door to spring open and Thomas, the family’s ward, to run out. Without preamble, he seized her wrist and pulled her away.

“And pray, where do you think we are going?” she protested, though she did not resist as he hurried her across the courtyard.

“Trust that I am doing you a kindness, Lizzy. You do not wish to go inside just now. Your mother is in fine form.”

“I heard her voice as I approached, so I already suspected as much. Is it about the new neighbours?”

“Indeed, it is.”

They made their way across the yard to the stables, passing the groom and a stable hand, both of whom cast them

curious glances but said nothing. It was hardly unusual for Thomas to be found here, after all. He pulled open the door, and the familiar scent of hay and horse met Elizabeth's senses. Only then did Thomas finally release her wrist, waving her inside before shutting the door firmly behind them.

"You will thank me later," he said. "Your mother has already repeated the same speech twice—once for Jane, once for Kitty. She is now on her third repetition, as Mary and Lydia have just returned from Meryton. I daresay she will not wish to repeat herself a fourth time for you."

"And what, pray, is all this excitement about? I saw a procession of carriages arrive earlier. I trust they are all young gentlemen in desperate need of wives?" she teased, dropping onto a bale of hay. The horses nickered nearby.

Thomas sat beside her and leaned back, letting his legs dangle from the haystack as he had done since childhood.

Elizabeth smiled, suddenly reminded of a day almost fifteen years past, when six-year-old Thomas had first come to live with them. She had just celebrated her fifth birthday when he arrived, and though she had been too young to fully comprehend his circumstances, she had been delighted, nonetheless. It had been her fondest wish to have a brother.

Her mother, newly delivered of Lydia, had been most put out by her continued failure to produce a son, and Elizabeth had taken it upon herself to remedy the matter, praying earnestly every Sunday in church and each night before bed that a brother might miraculously appear. And in a way, one had.

Of course, Thomas Bennet—though he bore the family name—was no true brother. They shared the last name due to his mother, Bessy Bennet, her father's unfortunate cousin.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked, perplexed.

"Nothing—nothing to do with our present predicament. Only that I recall the first time I saw you sitting on a bale of hay just like this."

"The day I arrived." He nodded. "I remember it well. I was terrified. I had no notion who these Bennets were, nor why I was to live among them. I felt as though I had been in that carriage for days and days, though upon further reflection, Brighton is but a day and a half away. At the time, it seemed an eternity."

"I know it. And I remember how quiet you were at dinner—so unlike the Thomas I know and cherish now," she said, giggling.

"Yes, well, your mother had prepared some dreadful dish—the memory of which I have done my best to suppress."

"It was haggis."

"Did you not hear me? I do my best to suppress such a memory. But if you insist on torturing me with this memory, I shall indulge you. Haggis. Dreadful. She made it because she had been informed that my branch of the family had settled in Scotland and thus presumed, I would appreciate it. I did not."

"No, and nor had you ever even been to Scotland," Elizabeth remembered. The aunt and uncle who had taken him in after his mother's death had moved to Scotland and deposited Thomas with another relative in Brighton from where he'd joined them. Though Mrs Bennet had never been one for paying attention to detail.

"Quite right. I thought she was exceedingly displeased with me for not eating it. That is why I came out here to hide—I thought she would be cross with me."

"She was not. Only disappointed. But you could not have known. You had yet to become acquainted with the delight that is my mother."

"Indeed, not yet." He smiled wryly. "I did, however, become acquainted with you that evening. I remember looking up to find you lurking in the shadows, watching me as though you expected me to steal a horse."

She laughed aloud. "I did not! I merely wished to marvel at you, for I was convinced that my prayers had summoned you."

"Yes—the infamous brother prayers," he said with a chuckle. "It is a shame I am not truly your brother. Perhaps your mother would not be in such perpetual agitation over the matter of finding husbands for you girls."

"Indeed. Which brings me once more to our current predicament, what on earth has Mother discovered that sent her into such raptures?"



Thomas chuckled. “She has discovered not one, but two eligible bachelors, of course. The gentleman who is to occupy Netherfield Park is Mr Charles Bingley of Sheffield—a man of trade, with considerable means.”

“And how, pray, did she gather this information so quickly when they have only just arrived?”

“They have just arrived by Mr Bingley’s staff arrived days ago. You know how she is. She has her ways,” he said. Then he pulled back his shoulder and heightened his voice with a smirk before speaking in the high tone they all used when imitating their mother. “Oh, Jane, can you imagine? You must set your cap on him posthaste. It will be a delight to have a daughter married so well.”

Elizabeth shook her head but couldn’t help but smile. “Oh, dearest Mama. Of course, it would be Jane she sets to this particular task.”

“She is the oldest and most refined. And by far the most kind-hearted.”

“And prettiest,” Elizabeth added, but Thomas shrugged.

“That is in the eye of the beholder. In any case, you are all to attend the Meryton assembly. None is to be left behind.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Very well. We shall see what this Mr Bingley is all about. But pray, you said there were two eligible gentlemen? Who is the other?”

“I am unsure. A friend of Bingley’s, but Mrs Bennet was not able to find out more just yet. But fear not, she shall not rest until she does.”

Elizabeth shook her head in bemusement, for she knew this was true. She glanced at Thomas. A part of her wanted to ask why he still referred to her mother as Mrs Bennet after all these years, but another part did not want to pry. She knew it must be difficult for him to be a part of this family while also being somewhat on the outside. They shared blood and a name, but he was still not really one of them—not in the eyes of outsiders, anyhow. To her and her sisters, Thomas was like a brother. Indeed, at times she forgot he was not. But to others, he was always the Bennet’s ward.

It was a difficult position to be in; she recognised this and did not want to draw attention to it by asking him questions such as why he preferred a formal address for her parents.

For the time being, she pushed these thoughts aside. It was time to head inside—and hope that for once, her mother had quite exhausted herself with her excitement.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Darcy*

**T**he country air was fresh with notes of lavender from a nearby field and the distinct scent of cow manure. Darcy knew it was strange, but he had always liked the scent. The earthiness invoked something in him—memories of a time when he'd been unburdened by responsibility and had been able to be free. Childish days spent outdoors with his mother and father.

It was rare that he could indulge in such memories these days; his time seemed occupied every moment of every day.

“Darcy?” Bingley called, drawing him out of his thoughts. “You did not answer my question.”

“I beg your pardon, I was lost in thought,” he replied.

“I can tell. Admiring my soon-to-be estate, I hope?”

“I was, actually. It is a fine piece of land you have found, Bingley. Close to London, with tenant farms already established, and lands that will surely serve you well in the future. The only trouble is that it is near that little town.”

“Meryton? It appears utterly charming; I do not know what you mean,” Bingley replied. Darcy sighed.

“It's far less refined than Lambton. It struck me as rather provincial,” he said.

“Of course, it is rural, Darcy. It is the countryside,” Bingley said incredulously. “You do strike me as peculiar at times.”

Darcy knew it was not an insult on Bingley's part. His friend was merely stating whatever came into his mind—a habit he had tried to break him of for some years but without success. Bingley was affable, which made him popular with all who met him, but also gullible, leaving him vulnerable to those who might exploit such a trusting nature. Darcy aimed to protect his friend ever since they'd met some ten years prior and had no intention of letting him run afoul of anyone who might do him ill.

“Meryton may be rural, but there do seem to be rather a lot of... well, let me say the people do not appear to be of consequence to me.”

“You've hardly met anyone, Darcy,” he observed, the sound of their horses trotting on the dirt road accompanying his words. “But fortunately, that shall change in due course. In fact, Caroline informs me there is an assembly dance this very evening, and she and Louisa will be attending. I trust you will come with us?”

“Must I?” Darcy asked, for he did not like to partake in such events. He preferred private balls and gatherings where he already knew everyone and could be assured everyone was of his station—or at least not far below. In a place like Meryton, one could never know what sort of riffraff one might encounter.

“Yes, you must. Caroline and Louisa will need someone to dance with, after all. You are wary of these strangers, and so are they. But they will be much assured by your presence and mine. And Mr Hurst's, of course,” he said brightly as they rounded a corner.

Darcy could think of no reason to decline. After all, he had agreed to spend time here at Netherfield and the surrounding area to ensure Bingley made a wise investment. And if time at the assembly meant that he could assure himself that Meryton was indeed better than he currently imagined, then he ought to take that chance. Perhaps he had been hasty, and the town would prove to be on par with Lambton.

“Upon my word, Darcy, look!” Bingley called, and Darcy looked up to see the cause for his friend's excitement. There, at the side of the road, stood a cart. It had half come off the road and now stood akimbo with one wheel evidently broken. A tall, dark-haired young man stood beside it, hands on his hips, shaking his head, evidently vexed by whatever it was he saw before him.

“Excuse me,” Bingley called and drove the horse forward, ready to help as always. “May we assist?”

The young man looked up, a small smile on his lips. “Good morning, gentlemen, I do not think that you can. It appears the wheel has broken. I shall have to take the horse back and fetch some men to come and aid me.”

“Do you hail from Meryton?” Bingley asked.

“Yes, well, Longbourn, which is just one mile outside of Meryton.”

“Ah, yes, I recall it. A charming little village. Do you not recall, Darcy? I pointed it out to you as we passed. Very quaint. Is it your home?” he asked, directing his attention back to the man.

“I live there, yes,” he said. “Thomas Bennet. You must be Mr Bingley?”

“Oh, I see news of my arrival has spread,” Bingley said and extended his hand. “Indeed, I am he. This is my good friend Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

“How do you do?” Darcy asked, shaking the man’s hand. It was large, and his grip firm, but he noted the calluses on his hands that spoke of a farmhand more so than the son of a gentleman.

“Aside from this debacle, quite well, Mr Darcy. Well, I shall not keep you,” he said and set out to detach the horse from the vehicle when Bingley spoke up again.

“Nonsense. You need not ride all the way to Longbourn. Come with us. We are just returning to Netherfield. My men can aid you and make a repair, I am sure. Bring your horse and ride it to Netherfield, and we will see that it is fed and watered while we wait,” Bingley said. For a moment, Darcy hoped the young man would decline the aid, though he wasn’t sure why he felt that way. However, instead he nodded and gave a grateful smile.

“I appreciate it, Mr Bingley, very much.”

“One must be neighbourly, mustn’t one?” Bingley said and helped him detach the horse while Darcy looked on without dismounting.

As the three rode towards Netherfield, the two young men fell into easy conversation, one Darcy found difficult to take part in. He had never made friends with great ease, always taking his time to get to know people—unlike Bingley, who never knew a stranger. The same appeared to be true for Mr Bennet, who was as affable as Bingley, at least on first inspection.

“And you, Mr Darcy? Will you come to the assembly?” Mr Bennet asked after the topic of the dance came up.

“Darcy despises socialising. Indeed, he does not enjoy sudden locomotion,” Bingley said and laughed. The friends frequently teased one another, but he was not used to Bingley making such jests around others.

Especially strangers.

“I simply prefer to know the company I will be keeping,” Darcy replied tersely.

“I can assure you, the company you will keep will be most excellent, Mr Darcy,” Bennet assured him. “There are a great many fine ladies in Meryton and the surrounding area. Longbourn alone has five charming young ladies.”

“Indeed?” Bingley said. “Five sisters in the home? You must be exhausted all the time. I have but two, and one is already married, but I often feel rather perplexed by the fancies of young ladies.”

“The Bennet girls are very well-behaved for the most part,” he replied. “Jane is especially refined and kind, as is Elizabeth. Indeed, they all have lovely qualities.”

He was trying to find husbands for his sisters, Darcy realised. If he didn’t know better, he’d have assumed the meeting was by design rather than accident, but that would be silly to believe—not with the cart in the state it was in. Still, Mr Bennet lost no time in advertising his sisters’ virtues and accomplishments. “...and Mary plays the pianoforte rather well. Of course, there are a great number of lovely ladies, as I said. You will have no shortage of dance partners. And your sisters? They will attend?”

“Mine will be present,” Bingley said, though the question appeared to have been addressed to them both. “Darcy’s sister is not joining us for another fortnight, isn’t that correct?”

“Indeed, my sister is in London for the time being, but she will join us shortly. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst will attend the assembly with us,” Darcy said, and the young man nodded.

“We shall have to introduce the ladies to one another. I am certain your sisters will enjoy having local friends, Mr Bingley.”

“I know they will. I certainly had hoped to make connections,” Bingley said with enthusiasm. “Pray, what does one do for leisure here, other than ride and hunt?”

“Ah well, there is fishing. There is a lake about four miles out with splendid fish. I have a boat, I will be glad to take you. Then there’s shooting, of course, and one can always have inspiring conversations down at the inn,” Bennet said.

While Darcy did not dislike shooting, fishing, or hunting—in fact, he was fond of them all—he could not see himself or Bingley at an inn, rubbing shoulders with the locals. To his dismay, however, Bingley apparently could.

“Well, that is grand, do you not think so? I’ve always fancied the idea of visiting a country inn. And fishing on a charming little lake sounds like a wonderful time,” he said.

“We shall arrange it then,” Mr Bennet said while Darcy ground his teeth. He did not like how quickly this man was working his way into Bingley’s good graces. He had to have ulterior motives.

They arrived at Netherfield in due course, and Bingley promptly summoned two of his grooms to explain the situation. “Please, take Mr Bennet around to the back quarter, attend to his horse, and ensure his carriage is retrieved,” he instructed.

Turning to the young man, he added, “I look forward to seeing you at the assembly, along with your entire family.”

“And I anticipate the pleasure of meeting yours,” Mr Bennet replied, nodding before turning to Darcy, who offered a slight acknowledgement as well. “And yours, of course. It has been a delight.”

“Likewise,” Bingley responded, and Darcy forced a smile, though he found it somewhat lacking.

“It has indeed. Good day to you, Mr Bennet.” With that, the young man followed the two grooms around to the stables.

Once Mr Bennet was out of earshot, Bingley cleared his throat.

“What good fortune that we should make an acquaintance so soon after our arrival. And what a nice young fellow he was. I had hoped to cultivate a rapport with the local populace, especially if I am to make Netherfield my home. Yet you led me to believe that the people of Meryton were beneath notice.”

“I do not believe one positive encounter defines the disposition of an entire town,” Darcy replied. “Besides, I fail to see what you find appealing in this young man. He appears hardly refined, more suited to the role of a farmhand than that of a gentleman’s son.”

“Simply because he is tanned and his hands bear the marks of labour, you ought not to be so judgemental,” Bingley countered. “I found him rather entertaining.”

Darcy suppressed a sigh and followed Bingley inside, glancing over his shoulder in the direction where Mr Bennet had departed, though he could no longer see him.

He could not quite articulate why, but something about the young man unsettled him. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say he understood precisely what troubled him. Bingley’s evident fondness for Mr Bennet. Darcy did not possess a great many close friends—among those he did, Bingley had always stood as his best friend. The only other gentleman to whom he was as closely bonded was his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, though familial ties afforded a certain predisposed affinity.

Yes, perhaps he felt a twinge of jealousy regarding Bingley’s instant camaraderie with the young man. However, it was not solely that.

The mention of five sisters had instantly raised his suspicions; Darcy was well aware that Mr Bennet might very well be seeking a suitor for at least one of them. The idea of being taken advantage of was far from agreeable to him. Nevertheless, he resolved to keep his thoughts to himself for the time being, recognising that voicing them would only lead to discord, which he wished to avoid.

# *Chapter Three*

## *Elizabeth*

“**W**hat a lovely gown,” Arabella Smythe cooed.

“I had my maid lay out the very best, it is not every day that an eligible bachelor comes into town,” Anne Underwood replied and Elizabeth shook her head. The Meryton Assembly was far busier than she’d anticipated. So much so that there was hardly room for moving about. There hadn’t been a dance for some months now and of course, the arrival of two young unattached gentlemen in need of wives had bolstered attendance further.

“I beg your pardon,” Lady Lucas said as she bumped into Elizabeth, jostled by someone else pushing past.

“There is no need to apologise,” Elizabeth replied. “It is quite crowded.”

“Indeed it is,” Lady Lucas responded. “Everyone is eager to see Mr Bingley and his friend. I hear that young Thomas has already had a chance to speak with them.”

Elizabeth nodded, but before she could convey anything to Lady Lucas, her mother called to her, waving her white handkerchief erratically.

“Please excuse me,” she said, making her way past Lady Lucas to her mother.

Her mother had been most enthused ever since Thomas told her of his encounter with their new neighbour. Presently, Thomas stood beside Mrs Bennet, slightly bent at the waist to bring his ear closer to her mouth, no doubt in an effort to keep her from shouting loudly enough for all to hear. Still, Elizabeth caught most of what her mother was saying, even from a fair distance away. Subtlety of conversation had never been one of Mrs Bennet’s accomplishments.

“Now tell me again. You are quite certain that Mr Darcy is a bachelor? My sister told me he has ten thousand pounds per year!”

At that, several attendees turned to observe the Bennet family, while Elizabeth closed her eyes in mortification, feeling her cheeks grow hot.

“Mother,” she managed to say, “must you entertain all of Meryton with such proclamations?”

“Oh pish, let them hear!” Mrs Bennet declared, waving her hand dramatically, while Lydia and Kitty giggled to her left. Jane, positioned beside Lydia, smirked and shook her head, as if to advise Elizabeth to let it go, but there was little point in debating with her mother.

“Thomas? Well? Are you sure?” Mrs Bennet urged him.

“Yes, ma’am,” Thomas replied. “That is indeed what I was told. I cannot confirm his income, of course, but I am certain Mrs Philips would be quite accurate. She rarely is wrong on any account.”

“Ten thousand a year! That would be a splendid match. And Mr Bingley, worth half that, is still a wonderful match. Oh, girls, you must be sure to be on your best behaviour! Smile, pull back your shoulders, raise your bosoms.”

“Mother,” Lydia interjected with a giggle, “how can you say such things?”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and glanced at her sister. If even Lydia was calling attention to their mother’s indiscretion, it was undeniable that Mrs Bennet was deep in her raptures, likely already planning at least one of their weddings without the gentlemen having made any advance.

“There they are,” Thomas said, pointing his chin towards the door.

The entire Bennet family, along with most of the ballroom, turned their attention to the entrance as two tall gentlemen entered. One was tall and blond, his hair fashionably cut and styled. The other was slightly taller with dark hair, a lock falling onto his forehead. Both gentlemen were impeccably dressed, their heavily starched cravats and tails pressed. Accompanying them was a shorter, stout gentleman with beady eyes and a countenance that spoke of boredom.

Beside him stood a woman who mirrored his expression. Elizabeth assumed she was his wife, as their close proximity, albeit without touching, indicated an intimate connection.



Another woman stood beside them, her shoulders drawn back and her head held high, a posture that would have made Mrs Bennet proud, were she not distracted by her own family.

“The blond-haired gentleman is Mr Bingley,” Thomas said in a hushed tone, so that only the sisters and Mr Bennet could hear. “The other tall gentleman is Mr Darcy. The women must be their sisters. I know one of them is married; I assume the shorter gentleman is her husband.”

“Well, you girls,” Mrs Bennet exclaimed, “ignore the short fellow and focus on Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley! Smile and make certain they know you are available for a dance! Thomas, you shall make a formal introduction. We must approach them before those other women try to. Thomas, how clever of you to introduce yourself to them! I had spoken to Mr Bennet about visiting Netherfield to introduce himself, but you know how he can be.”

Elizabeth caught Thomas’s eye, and they shared a quick smile. She had witnessed her mother beseeching her father to pay a visit to Netherfield; she knew he would have obliged, but fortunately, Thomas had managed to do so before Mr Bennet had to. Mr Bennet preferred not to make social calls when it could be avoided, thus she knew he was grateful. But of course, her mother was making it sound as though Thomas had taken it upon himself to make the connection, rather than having come upon it by happenstance.

Her mother had insisted he repeat every detail of their conversation multiple times, praising him profusely for his offer to take them fishing and then chiding him for not presenting her daughters in a more favourable light.

However, all that was forgotten now as her sole focus lay on the two gentlemen who had just entered.

Ever-obliging, Thomas waved at Mr Bingley, whose face immediately lit up, and he escorted his party across.

What followed was a rather chaotic medley of introductions, accompanied by assorted bows and curtsies from the group. When at last every member of the family and every member of the visiting party had been introduced, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst quickly excused themselves, accompanied by Mr Hurst who had been persuaded to dance the first dance with Miss Caroline.

“Well, my dear Mr Bingley, how very fortunate for you to have been able to snap up Netherfield Park. It is one of the finest establishments in the area.”

“That is what I was told,” Mr Bingley said cheerfully. He looked around the group, and Elizabeth noted that his eyes seemed to linger a moment longer on Jane than on anyone else.

Jane likewise coloured under his gaze, and Elizabeth wondered if perhaps her mother’s machinations would not be necessary—because a natural alliance was about to form.

“And you, Mr Darcy,” her mother said, turning to the other gentleman, “from where do you hail?”

“Up north,” Mr Darcy said.

Elizabeth felt his gaze linger on her—not in the same way that Mr Bingley had looked at her sister earlier. There was no admiration in his gaze, merely curiosity, and perhaps judgement.

“Ah, and where exactly, Northamptonshire?” Mrs Bennet pushed.

“Derbyshire. My estate is Pemberley, a small village near the town of Lambton,” he said and instantly her mother whooped as though she had won a prize.

“Indeed? How serendipitous! My sister-in-law hails from Lambton. You must know her. Mrs Margaret Gardiner, formerly Lester. Her father was the rector.”

Mr Darcy rubbed his chin and shook his head. “I am not familiar with the name,” he replied.

“Surely you must be. She is always speaking of the place. She is...”

“Mother, not everyone knows everyone,” Elizabeth chimed in.

“In London perhaps, but in a small town? I think it speaks of good manners to know the people one lives near. We dine with four-and-twenty families, I will have you know,” she said.

Mr Darcy blinked and Elizabeth felt the tension coming off him as he stood and nodded.

“Well, I am a rather busy man. Running a large estate does not leave much time for socialising. I am sure Mr Bennet

here can attest to that,” he said and nodded at Thomas who puckered his lips and looked about the room as though for a way to escape.

“Thomas?” Mrs Bennet repeated. “He would not know anything about running an estate. My husband would but he is otherwise occupied.”

“Surely the heir to an estate, even a modest one like Longbourn, would know a thing or two about how busy it is. I know my father drilled the intricacies of managing an estate into me when I was but a boy,” Mr Darcy said, and Elizabeth realised that somehow information had not been passed along properly. Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley obviously thought that Thomas was their brother and heir. Although the way Mr Darcy spoke, she assumed he had an idea this was not so. Did he intend to humiliate Thomas?

“Ah, Mr Darcy, you misunderstand. Thomas is not our son, he is our ward. We share a family name and are related, but he is not the heir to Longbourn,” Mrs Bennet said and waved a hand. “It is confusing, given the name, do not feel bad about having assumed.”

Mr Darcy’s shoulders pulled back and he blinked once as he turned to Thomas.

“I do not believe I made an assumption. For you did not mention your relation to the family once when you spoke of your sisters yesterday,” he said and Elizabeth frowned. Thomas did not usually refer to them as his sisters outside of the family home.

“I do not believe I...” he started but then Mr Bingley stepped in.

“Enough of these technicalities. This night is for dancing not debating. Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour?” He looked at Jane, proffering his hand and Elizabeth heard her mother suppress a small sound of delight. Then, the two left for the dancefloor, leaving an obviously uncomfortable Mr Darcy behind.

“Well, Mr Darcy, surely you do not intend to sit out this dance, do you? Not when there are such lovely dance partners to be had. My Elizabeth is as graceful a dancer as any at Court,” her mother said and gently pushed Elizabeth forward. Mortified, she took a step back because it was clear from Mr Darcy’s countenance that he had no desire to dance, least of all with her.

“I do not wish to dance, Mrs Bennet. Please excuse me,” he said and walked past Elizabeth before disappearing into the crowd.

“How rude! My word, I have never met a gentleman as ill-mannered as Mr Darcy,” Mrs Bennet grumbled while Elizabeth looked after him, herself mortified by his obvious slight.

What a horrid, high-in-the-instep man this Mr Darcy was. She could only hope for her sake and the sake of all of Meryton that his visit would be mercifully short.

# *Chapter Four*

## *Darcy*

Darcy did his best to tolerate his situation and consented to dance once with Mrs Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, but when he found himself confronted with an assortment of Meryton's inhabitants seeking to make introductions, he thought it best to remove himself from the situation as much as possible.

Thus, he retreated to the far corner of the assembly hall, dodging further attempts to engage him in conversation, none of which he had any interest in entertaining. These people, he had already decided, were beneath his notice—just as he had thought.

“Are you seeking refuge, my dear Mr Darcy?” A familiar voice reached him, and he looked up to see Caroline Bingley approaching. He was not generally fond of either of Bingley's sisters, but in the present circumstances, he was almost glad for the familiar company.

“I am most certainly not hiding, but I am rather fatigued by...” He waved his hand, indicating the general vicinity.

“Ah yes, it is all rather common, is it not?”

The irony of her comment did not escape him, for it had to be said that Caroline—like the rest of her family—was a commoner. Their father had made wise investments in mining and horse trading, and Bingley had expanded into a lucrative import and export business, which had catapulted them far beyond their humble beginnings. Indeed, once Bingley purchased Netherfield—or any other property—they would be part of the landed gentry. But as of now, they were not above the people populating this ball.

However, Darcy knew Miss Bingley already considered herself elevated in station, even if reality somewhat lagged behind her imagination.

“The company is rather lacking,” he said. “Excluding present company, of course.”

She placed a hand in front of her mouth and giggled rather childishly. “You are charming, Mr Darcy. Pray, are we not to expect you on the dancefloor again this evening?”

“I think not. I detest it at the best of times unless I am well acquainted with my partner. And I have already danced with the only two ladies I am familiar enough with.”

“I would not oppose another dance,” she said, but Darcy ignored the comment. He knew well that Caroline had set her cap at him long ago, and he did not wish to encourage her by dancing more than once with her at any given occasion. Even a second dance would be interpreted by her as meaning far more than he intended.

“Your brother evidently enjoys his dance partner. They are on their second set already,” he remarked, glancing at the dancefloor, where Charles was beaming at Miss Jane Bennet.

“Indeed,” Caroline replied, her tone betraying her feelings on the matter. “He declared her the most beautiful lady he had ever danced with. He is utterly besotted with her, and he hardly knows her at all.”

“That is Charles,” Darcy said with a sigh.

“Indeed. But I am afraid he is becoming rather too infatuated with her too quickly.”

“I agree, especially as we have just discovered her so-called brother misrepresented himself.”

Caroline nodded. “Indeed he did. I have made some enquiries since, and I can confirm he is indeed only the Bennets' ward—nothing more.”

“You have already made enquiries?” Darcy asked, a little impressed.

“Of course. One thing a lady must be accomplished in is the art of gathering information that will aid her and those dear to her, Mr Darcy. And I am rather an expert. You see, these townsfolk want nothing more than to impress those above them in station, and they will gladly share information to accomplish that feat.”

Darcy wetted his lips while watching Caroline carefully. He did not wish to be indebted to her, but at the same time, he

wanted to know as much as he could about this imposter and his family.

“Well, do not keep me in suspense. What have you found out?”

Caroline smiled at him rather like the cat who had got the cream and stepped a little closer, as though they were involved in a confederacy of two. “Well, I spoke to a young woman named Maria Lucas, daughter of Sir William. The only person of any real consequence in Meryton, I should say—and she told me that Mr Thomas Bennet shares a name with the family because he is a distant relation of Mr Bennet. It seems a cousin of his got herself into trouble and had him out of wedlock. Mr Bennet saw fit to take the poor lad in and raise him as a ward.”

“How unsavoury,” Darcy said, glancing out over the dancefloor, where Bingley was still engaged in the English Country Dance with Jane Bennet. The family had already not struck him as terribly suitable, what with the mother lacking any decorum, but they had now slipped further in his estimation.

“I daresay it is. He has, by all accounts, been raised as a member of the family, but he is not the heir to Longbourn by any means. In fact, the family has no local heir, as there are only daughters.” She dropped her voice. “And the estate is entailed away from them.”

“Perdition,” Darcy gasped. So that was probably why the young Mr Bennet had attempted to advertise his so-called sisters to him and Bingley. They needed rich husbands to secure the daughters’ futures.

“And who stands to inherit the estate? Was Miss Lucas able to tell you that?”

“She could not, but Mrs Morton, who happens to be the sister-in-law of Mrs Bennet, told me that it is entailed to a fellow in Kent by the name of Mr Collins—you may be familiar with him; he is the vicar at Rosings Park.”

“Collins?” Darcy exclaimed, for he knew the name well. He had met his aunt’s insufferable vicar more than once. “My word. Collins. I recall hearing about an attempt that was made to break an entailment of which he was the beneficiary some years ago, but it failed because—” He narrowed his eyes, as this sometimes helped him think, but he could not recall it.

“Because the party looking to break the entailment did not have enough funds to offer,” Caroline said triumphantly. “Mrs Morton was rather forthcoming with the information.”

“Can we be certain the information is accurate? It seems rather unkind to be sharing such damaging details with a third party.”

“It seems there is bad blood between Mrs Morton and Mrs Bennet. You see, Mrs Morton’s brother, Mr Phillips, is married to Mrs Bennet’s sister, and according to Mrs Morton, both Mrs Bennet and Mrs Phillips are insufferable, having caused a rift.”

Darcy shook his head. It spoke of ill-breeding to share family secrets in such a way, although he ought not to have been surprised. “So, Mr Bennet has a wanton cousin, and Mrs Bennet’s relation is a prattler. It does not speak highly of them in the least.”

“Not at all. And their financial standing, as well as their breeding, is to be called into question also. Mrs Bennet is from a family of solicitors, but none of them rose higher than your average village practitioner, if that. Mr Darcy, I do not wish to speak ill of anyone, but I also am not one to keep my opinion to myself when I feel it necessary to share it. I worry for my brother.”

Darcy looked at Bingley, who had just stopped dancing with Miss Bennet and was now engaged in deep conversation with her and Thomas Bennet.

“You fear he will allow Miss Bennet’s pretty countenance and charm to ensnare him?” he asked, and Caroline nodded, eyes narrowing.

“You know him as well as I do. We must warn your brother. All the world is good in his eyes. He is blind to the nonsense of others. Especially when that nonsense is uttered by a pretty face.”

“We must keep an eye on him, certainly. If he seems to act foolishly, we shall have a word.”

Darcy pressed his lips together as the music filled the room. He knew Caroline was correct. It seemed all too obvious now. Their chance encounter with Thomas Bennet and his subsequent praise of his sisters, the way they had been tangled in conversation with them almost at once upon arrival, and now the way Miss Bennet looked at Bingley as though he were by far the most interesting person in the entire world.

He wanted to believe the young woman's interest in him was genuine, but he could not deny that he suspected otherwise. Given the revelations now—the entailment, the family's poor standing—it stood to reason that she was after more than just a few dances.

And if they did not intercede soon, Bingley might lose both his head and his heart entirely. As a friend, Darcy could not—would not—allow this to happen.

No, Bingley had to be stopped before he made an utter fool of himself. And he was the man to do it. The question was, how?

As he considered this, he rubbed his chin. Suddenly his eyes caught sight of a rather concerning development. Standing there in the corner, her gaze fixed on him in a rather penetrating stare was none other than Elizabeth Bennet—and it was clear she had heard every word they'd said.



# *Chapter Five*

## *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth was fuming inside. How dare this haughty man speak of her sister as though she were a calculating wench looking to snare a husband? Jane was good and kind, and while it was true she needed a husband, the same could be said of any young lady.

That didn't make her calculating or wrong. It was Mr Darcy and that horrid Miss Bingley who evidently thought the worst of everyone. How dare her second cousin, Mrs Melinda Morton speak of family business to strangers? It was true, the Bennets and Mortons were not close and avoided one another whenever possible, but to speak so ill of her mother, it was unconscionable.

She threw open the door and stepped outside, shaking her head as the warm air hit her face.

"You look positively enraged, Lizzy," Thomas said from the darkness and stepped out as he finished a glass of what likely contained brandy—his preferred beverage.

"I am. Have you been out here a while?"

Thomas shrugged, his dark brown hair looking almost black in the dark of night.

"A few minutes. I felt rather uncomfortable inside after Mr Darcy drew attention to our misunderstanding regarding my standing. One might think he had exposed some great fraud upon the nation, the way he carried on," he shook his head but didn't appear terribly upset.

"He sets himself at such a height that it is a wonder he does not faint from the want of air," she said and crossed her arms. "I overheard him speaking to his sister. He thinks our entire family beneath his notice and suspected that Jane only wished to dance with Mr Bingley for his money."

"Jane? Calculating?" Thomas chuckled and stepped beside her. The two leaned against the railing, the moon high above them in the sky. "Our Jane could never wish to trap a man into marriage if she tried. Not that it would occur to her. Now your mother—"

She raised a hand. "You need not remind me. I know she wants us all to catch a husband. Before tonight I would have thought she'd have liked us to bring both Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy home before long as future husbands."

"Ah yes, but no more. Now her focus is solely on Mr Bingley as she finds Mr Darcy as impolite and rude as you do. He has rather wounded her pride when he refused to dance with you," he said and raised an eyebrow as he waited for her reply.

"He has quite wounded my pride as well, but that is not my concern. He will attempt to get between Jane and Mr Bingley, if there is to be something between them," she said.

"Of course there will be. It is evident how much they care for one another already. Even while he was dancing with Miss King he had eyes only for Jane," Thomas reported.

"I am pleased to hear it for her, but what shall we do about his insufferable friend?"

"I do not think he is quite as bad as you make him out to be, Lizzy," Thomas said, taking Elizabeth entirely by surprise.

"You would speak up for him when he acted so rudely towards you?"

"Do not mistake me, Lizzy, I do not claim Mr Darcy was in the right. But I have seen how men will defend their pride when they fear they have erred. I suspect he is not half so sure of himself as he would like us to believe," Thomas said and easily pushed himself onto the railing while Elizabeth stood and leaned against it.

"Besides, Mr Bingley appears very fond of him and we can agree that he is an affable sort of fellow, much similar in character to our Jane, at least from what I have experienced of him on the two occasions I've now met him."

"He does appear that way, yes," Elizabeth conceded.

"Would Jane ever be friends with someone insufferably rude, without any redeeming qualities? Would she become so close to them as to invite them on a month's long stay in the country where she'd have to be around that person night and day?"

Reluctantly, Elizabeth shook her head. "I believe not."

"Well then, we must give Mr Bingley the benefit of the doubt, and in turn, Mr Darcy. I am certain we can charm him still and show him how mistaken he is about Meryton and all of us," Thomas said with a smile.

Elizabeth took a deep breath as music continued to spill from the ballroom. "I only wish Cousin Morton had not worsened matters."

"Mr Phillips's sister, you say? Why, what has she done?"

Elizabeth drew in a deep breath and recounted all she had overheard from Mr Darcy and Miss Bennet's conversation. Thomas rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to speak but closed it again when the door opened, and two young ladies walked out. He lifted his hat and nodded once.

"She dislikes me and by extension, the entire family."

"That is not the reason why she and Mother fell out; you know it."

"It did not aid the situation," he said, and Elizabeth could not deny it. While her aunt and uncle Gardiner, as well as her aunt Phillips and her husband, Clark, had been supportive when Thomas first arrived in the family, Mr Phillips's family had been less enthusiastic. The idea of having a child born out of wedlock, brought up by a gentleman's family, struck them as wrong, as it did not uphold the family in the eyes of society.

If Thomas had been an orphan, entirely unrelated to the family, it might have been one thing, but for him to be a true Bennet, and one born under such shameful circumstances, was deemed unacceptable. A child out of wedlock with the same name? The Phillips family had been most upset. But that had not caused the rift. No, it was a progression quite natural, as both Mrs Morton and Mrs Bennet were headstrong characters who found it difficult to accept no for an answer.

That the dislike ran so deep as to cause Mrs Morton to speak so out of turn still shocked Elizabeth.

"I do worry at times that my presence in your family causes more harm than good," Thomas said then, drawing her from her reverie.

"Do not say such things. You are adored by the entire family. Father sees you as the son he never had, and Mother does the same."

"And yet, I remind them that they never truly had a son. I am a burden, I feel. I..."

Elizabeth stepped forward and looked at Thomas with concern. Was it Mr Darcy's comment that had made him so suddenly sullen, despite his vows that it had not bothered him?

"Thomas, you are a blessing upon this family, and you know it. Lydia and Kitty will listen to nobody as well as you. Even Mary is more amiable with you than she is with most others."

"I know it, but I do worry at times. Nights like tonight make me acutely aware that I am not a desirable husband for any of the ladies who are here fretting over the Bingleys and Darcys of this world. I am almost one and twenty now; I must soon settle upon a course for my life. Mr Bennet and I just spoke of it the other day."

"Oh?" she replied, for she had been unaware of such a conversation. She knew that Thomas had to find a profession that would provide him with a stable income and a respectable position, but so far, he had not settled on anything. The law had been considered, as had trade. In fact, he had gone into London in the summer and worked with Mr Gardiner for several months, but that arrangement had come to an end when Mr Gardiner's partner had chosen his own nephew for the position intended for Thomas. It had not been said aloud, but the implication had been clear—Thomas hadn't been suitable, given his upbringing.

"Are you still considering the law?"

Thomas nodded. "I am. It is what I feel I would be most suited for. I enjoy reading and studying, and I know a great deal about estate law thanks to your father, but I am a bastard. Will anyone take me seriously? I suppose I could join the military. Or the militia. They seem to take anyone if Mr Wickham is any indication."

Mr George Wickham, a member of the militia, had come into town some weeks ago and had caused much upheaval.

"I wish you would not measure yourself against Mr Wickham. He is a scoundrel; we know this. You saw through him before anyone else. You would do well as a barrister or solicitor, I am sure. And Mr Phillips would gladly take you on."

He shrugged. “Perhaps. I must make a decision soon, for if I do not, I shall forever be a burden on your father’s purse, and once he is no more, I shall not be able to assist any of you, as we know what Mr Collins thinks of me.”

Elizabeth wanted to roll her eyes but had, of late, attempted to train herself out of such unladylike habits. Their cousin and heir to Longbourn had always been an insufferable man for as long as Elizabeth could remember, and his visits—which were mercifully rare—always managed to strain her mother’s already fragile nerves further. Her father, likewise, would disappear into his study for hours on end both during and after Mr Collins’s visits, and lamentations about Thomas’s status as ward rather than rightful son could be heard coming from both her parents’ mouths for days after.

Recently, Thomas had taken to calling on friends in Meryton or town when Mr Collins announced a visit, as it was easier for all involved.

“You are no burden, you know it. It is Mr Collins who prevails upon our hospitality time and again, and who stretches our goodwill. Not you. Do not think of what will happen. One day soon, you will find your calling, and you will have a wife and a family, and your beginnings will be behind you.”

Thomas sighed. “I wish it were as simple, Lizzy. Sometimes I wish I knew who my father was. It may make a difference if he were a foreign diplomat of some sort, or an Italian Count, or a Scottish Laird. I may still be a bastard, but one with an interesting twist. As it stands, I shall never know who my father was and shall forever be burdened by that lack of knowledge.”

“Well, you could always move to town and reinvent yourself as such. Thomas Bennet, son of the Viceroy of—”

“If I am to make up a tale, then I might as well claim to be the son of a duke. Let us make it worth the lie. Indeed, as a duke’s bastard son, I would have ladies lining up from here to Netherfield Park wishing to dance with me.”

Elizabeth held out her arm until he offered hers.

“Do not be so dramatic. There are a number of ladies who made eyes at you; I saw it. And I shall show them to you. Come, let us brush aside these dark thoughts of the future, and ill-mannered northern gentlemen and enjoy ourselves while we can.”

Thomas nodded, and together, they re-entered the assembly. Yet, despite her brave words, Elizabeth could not deny that when they entered, her eyes immediately searched for Mr Darcy, for something about that man had vexed her like no other ever had.

# *Chapter Six*

## *Darcy*

“**W**hat a lovely night,” Bingley said as their carriage rumbled away from the assembly and back towards Netherfield. “The air is so much fresher in the country than in town. And look, you can see all the stars. There is not a cloud in the sky; the moon is guiding our way.”

Darcy sighed in exasperation, for he knew well what Bingley’s reverie meant. He had seen it before. Bingley had a tendency to become enamoured of a charming young lady, though never so swiftly as now.

“Charles, will you cease?” Caroline said. “I am not inclined to indulge in poetry this evening.”

“Caroline, you seem to have little regard for nature’s beauty,” Bingley said.

“Leave him be,” Mr Hurst said as he crossed his arms and nuzzled into the side of the carriage. “Young Mr Bingley has fallen in love,” he said, eliciting disapproving murmurs from Louisa and Caroline.

“And so what if I have?” Bingley said. “Miss Jane Bennet is beautiful—she is kindness itself, with a tender heart, keen wit, and the grace of true refinement.”

“And you know all this after two dances?” Caroline asked sharply.

“Two dances and an hour-long conversation. Can you not share in my happiness?”

“I think we are concerned. It is never good to give your heart away to someone you barely know,” Darcy warned.

“You are only dubious because you do not care for her brother.”

“He is not her brother,” Darcy said sharply. “The fact that he conceals this from us...”

“Did he? I recall him telling us that he is Mr Bennet and lives at Longbourn, and that there are five lovely young ladies there. All of that seems accurate,” Bingley said.

Darcy wasn’t sure why, but it bothered him that Bingley was defending the young man. He wasn’t wrong. Mr Thomas Bennet had never declared himself master of Longbourn, or indeed referred to the young ladies as his sisters. Still, there had been a deception there; he had allowed them to assume...

“All we are saying,” Louisa said now, putting on her most sensible voice, “is that you should tread carefully. You do not know her. You do not want to lose your heart and your head just yet. We are to be here for months upon months; there is plenty of time to get to know her.”

“Indeed,” Darcy said. “And many other young ladies wish to dance with you,” he reminded.

“You are one to talk. You danced only with Louisa and Caroline. It was rather uncharitable of you to deny other ladies the opportunity to dance,” Bingley said.

Darcy looked out of the window. “I was not in the proper frame of mind.”

“I must say, it was rather ungracious of you to refuse to dance with Miss Bennet, Darcy,” Bingley continued.

Darcy curled his hands into fists and tightened his shoulders. He did not take kindly to such insinuations, and it was rare for Bingley to rebuke him. Although he wasn’t necessarily wrong in saying what he did.

“Did she truly not meet with your approval?”

“She was tolerable,” Darcy said. “Not handsome enough to tempt me. But tolerable. But you know I do not like strangers.”

“Acquaintance must begin somewhere if one hopes for friendship,” Bingley said.

“Good heavens, he is at it again,” Louisa remarked, “our brother the philosopher.”

“Love will do that to a man,” Mr Hurst mumbled, causing the ladies to look at each other in amusement.

“Well, I shall take your advice and get to know the lady better. Starting this very Friday. We have all been invited to a

tea at the home of Sir William and Lady Lucas. Anyone who is anyone in Meryton will be there.”

“So, just it will be just us and the Lucases?” Caroline asked, and her sister and Mr Hurst chuckled. Darcy said nothing on the matter and simply looked outside. It still bothered him that Miss Bennet had overheard their conversation earlier. He regretted nothing of what he had said, but still, he knew he should have been more discreet.

“I do expect all of you to be in attendance,” Bingley said. “You too, Darcy.”

He turned and nodded. “Very well, I shall. But do be aware that next weekend I am going into London to fetch Georgiana and Mrs Annesley. I will not be available for whatever social excursions you have planned.”

“Dear Georgiana,” Caroline said, “It will be such a delight to have her here. I always think of her as a younger sister,” she said, and looked at Darcy, who regarded her without blinking. He knew what the comment meant but also understood that it would be best not to respond.

“How old is she now? Sixteen?” Louisa asked.

Darcy shook his head. “She is seventeen. She will be eighteen in May.”

“Time certainly flies,” Caroline mused. “I remember when she was just a tiny little girl. And now it’s almost time for her coming-out ball. Have arrangements been made, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy shook his head. “Not yet. My aunt will take charge of it, I’m sure.”

“It will be grand,” Caroline said. “A coming-out ball for Miss Darcy. It will be a society event. You should hold it in London. A shame Darcy House does not have a ballroom. But perhaps you can find a suitable venue.”

“Oh, I am certain of it,” Louisa agreed, and the two ladies went off on a planning expedition of their own, leaving Darcy to his peace and quiet. For the rest of the journey, the men were left to their own devices, Bingley lost in thoughts of his enchanting Miss Jane Bennet, and Darcy fretting about what such a connection would mean for Bingley. Mr Hurst, meanwhile, had taken a journey of his own to the land of nod.

By the time they arrived, the two ladies were still talking about Georgiana’s upcoming debut when Darcy spotted a carriage pulling away.

“Were you expecting a visitor, Bingley?” he asked, and Charles shook his head.

“No, I was not.” He looked at his sisters, then the carriage, and as they alighted, the party of five made their way to the front door.

Immediately upon arrival, the butler cleared his throat. “Mr Bingley, sir, a caller is here. It’s Miss Darcy and her attendant.”

“Georgiana?” Darcy said, utterly confused. What was his sister doing here? “Where are they?”

“The footman has seen to the attendant. The young lady is in the drawing-room,” the butler replied.

“Oh, we must say hello,” Caroline said, clapping her hands, and immediately set off into the drawing-room. Darcy followed and overtook her by a nose length to find his sister sitting by the fire, her eyes closed. She was still in her travelling outfit, her bonnet sitting on the chair beside her, but upon hearing the commotion, she opened her eyes and smiled, flying into his arms.

“William, there you are!” She embraced her brother, inhaling the sweet tones of rose that came from the perfume she always wore. She had inherited several bottles from their mother and taken to wearing them over the last couple of years.

“What are you doing here?” he asked before she could answer. Caroline and Louisa embraced her, and soon the gentlemen greeted her with practiced bows.

“Oh, I could not bear to stay at Darcy House any longer. I was so very bored, and Caroline’s letters sounded so delightful. I could not wait to come. Besides, Aunt Catherine is in London. She has monopolised all of my time, and I must say I found it rather tiresome. All she talks about is you and Anne.”

Darcy closed his eyes. Would his aunt ever give up her pursuit of making a match between him and Anne?

“You should have sent a message ahead, Georgiana. I would have stayed here and awaited you.” And avoided the unfortunate run-in with the family, he thought to himself but didn’t say it.



“I did,” she replied, a little perturbed.

Bingley nodded and held up a piece of paper. “Here it is. It seems it arrived while we were out. Well, I, for one, am very grateful for it,” he said. “The more, the better.”

“I agree,” Caroline said. “A young lady of excellent breeding at last,” she added, taking Georgiana’s arm with a pleased smile.

“Were there no ladies of distinction at the assembly tonight?” Georgiana asked. “The housekeeper told us about it when we arrived.”

“There are certainly ladies of distinction,” Darcy said. “But we do not know them well yet, so it is much preferable that we stick to our own company for now.”

“There is certainly one lady of quality,” Bingley said, and Darcy noted that his tone indicated he was upset by what had been said.

“Oh, and pray what is her name?” she asked.

“Bennet. Jane Bennet. And you will meet her, because we have been invited to a gathering at one of the local knight’s homes,” Bingley said, and Georgiana’s eyes grew wide.

“I can come? Even though I have not yet had my coming out ball?” she asked, glancing at Darcy, who felt the weight of the accusation in her gaze. He had postponed her debutante ball, not quite ready to let his little sister enter the world of courtship that would lead to him losing her. Besides, he did not trust the men in their society to treat her with as much care as she deserved.

He had already had one bad experience in that regard, after all. A year and a half ago, his father’s ward, an insufferable gentleman by the name of George Wickham, had prevailed upon Darcy to give him a loan so he could study the law. He had already spent all the money Mr Darcy had given him as part of his inheritance. Darcy, hoping to be rid of the man, had obliged, only to find out later that Mr Wickham had rather darker plans.

During his visit—much to Georgiana’s delight, as she had always been fond of Wickham for reasons Darcy could not decipher—he had planned to charm Georgiana, then barely sixteen.

If it hadn’t been for the honesty of Wickham’s would-be accomplice, Mrs Young, who once served the family as a lady’s maid, Wickham might have succeeded. As it stood, Darcy had been able to dispatch him under threat of violence if he ever came near his sister again, all without Georgiana being any the wiser.

His sister still lamented the loss of her friendship with Mr Wickham and sometimes blamed Darcy for it, but he would rather have her remain blissfully unaware of the calamity she had managed to evade, even if it meant her being a little angry at him.

“Oh, I look forward to it. I am so glad I brought some of my best gowns with me. Miss Bingley, Miss Hurst, you will help me look my best, yes?”

“But of course,” Caroline said. “And please, if I have told you once, I have told you a hundred times—call me Caroline—and this is Louisa.”

Georgiana beamed as she sat with the ladies to discuss their looks for the gathering at Lucas Lodge.

Though Darcy had to admit, he had no wish for Georgiana to be so publicly displayed. She had already proven herself to be lovely and beautiful, but the public adored her too much, and it was difficult to know where to go next.

# *Chapter Seven*

## *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth stepped down from the staircase and made her way down the hall to the dining room from where Lydia's voice spilled to her ears.

"Georgiana is her name," Lydia said. "Mr Wickham says she just arrived in town a few days ago and she will be at Lucas Lodge tomorrow, so we shall meet her."

Elizabeth only caught the end of the conversation and was thus confused at the mention of George Wickham. A member of the Derbyshire militia, he had caused quite a stir in their small town since his arrival a few weeks ago. He had a way about him that was utterly charming but after initially falling for his easy conversation and handsome smile, Elizabeth had discovered he was a ladies' man and had thus kept her distance. Her younger sisters, likewise, had been warned away from him—although evidently not as effectively as she'd hoped, if Lydia had spoken to him.

"Mr Wickham?" Thomas said as Elizabeth sat down. "And where exactly did you meet this scoundrel?"

"I chanced upon him in town," Lydia replied. "I was talking to Mr Denny, and you know he and Mr Wickham are friends. So we spoke for a time. He mentioned that Mr Darcy's sister is in town now—Georgiana."

"I had heard of a sister," Jane said. "Mr Bingley mentioned she was coming but I did not think it was for some weeks."

"How does Mr Wickham know the Darcys?" Elizabeth asked. Her father looked up at Lydia who shrugged.

"I am not certain but he knows them well. He said Mr Darcy has always been rather puffed up on his own confidence, and we know that is true."

"At any rate, she has arrived now and is to attend the gathering at Lucas Lodge," Lydia added. "We shall all be able to make her acquaintance then."

"We can hope that she is more amiable for Mr Darcy is certainly no friend to this family. We must place our hopes upon Mr Bingley; he will surely prove the better acquaintance," Mrs Bennet declared. "I am surprised he has not invited you for tea yet," she said to Jane.

"He cannot invite me, it would be improper. It would have to be his sister," Jane said. "But he assured me Mrs Hurst would issue an invitation shortly for tea."

"My goodness!" Mrs Bennet exclaimed. "Why did you not mention that before? When did you see him? When did this conversation take place?"

"This afternoon in Meryton," Jane explained. "He was in the bookshop when I came upon him. We spoke but briefly, and he said that he would have his sister extend an invitation for tea—perhaps even this weekend."

"Well, you must simply go! It will be splendid. An invitation from Mr Bingley himself is a most precious opportunity," Mrs Bennet exclaimed.

For the remainder of the meal, little conversation took place, save for Mrs Bennet's ceaseless commentary regarding the many virtues of Mr Bingley, whom she had met a grand total of once thus far.

She paused only to take brief bites of food before resuming her meticulous planning of Jane's visit to Netherfield—from the gown she would wear to the arrangement of her hair.

Elizabeth cast Jane the occasional look of sympathy, silently grateful that, for once, she was not the subject of her mother's scheming. By the time dinner concluded, Elizabeth was utterly spent from her mother's reveries and soon retired, though not without thinking once more of Mr Darcy and this mysterious sister who had arrived. And how did Mr Wickham know him? It seemed off that he had shared his knowledge of the Darcys with Lydia but never mentioned how he knew them.

With her thoughts in utter disarray, she found herself drifting away to sleep, though it was not an easy one for somehow, thoughts of Mr Darcy had made her so uneasy, her rest was a fitful one—and she awoke the next day as though she had not rested at all.

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The following evening, the Bennet family descended upon Lucas Lodge, and almost as soon as they had entered, Elizabeth spotted Charles Bingley and his sisters. Joining them this time was a younger woman—undoubtedly Mr Darcy's sister. Unlike the haughty gentleman, the young woman looked amiable. She carried a sweet smile on her lips as she listened intently to Miss Bingley.

"Is that Miss Darcy?" Thomas asked as he entered and saw the direction Elizabeth was looking.

"I am almost certain," she said before spotting Mr Bingley wave at them. "We shall find out momentarily."

As the rest of the Bennets crowded into the Lucases' comfortable home, Mr Bingley made his way towards them with his sister and the young lady. Slinking somewhat behind was Mr Darcy, though from whence he'd come, Elizabeth could not say.

"Jane, go to the front, be the first Mr Bingley sees," their mother murmured, and Elizabeth and Thomas stepped aside so Jane could stand between them, in a prime position for Mr Bingley's attention. Not that this was necessary, for the young man came directly to them and bowed deeply before kissing Jane's hand.

"Miss Bennet, what a delight it is to see you this night," he beamed at her, as did Jane, and for a moment, Elizabeth felt as though she were an intruder in someone else's most private moment. Then, however, Miss Bingley joined them, and her arrival appeared to extract her brother from his momentary trance.

"Ah, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth," she said, then looked at Thomas. "And young Mr Bennet. How good of you to join the family," she said, and at once, Elizabeth's bristles were set up. Why did she speak as if Thomas's presence here was somehow unusual? He was a member of the family, as were all of them.

"Thomas always accompanies the family to social calls," she said.

"Of course he does," Miss Bingley replied, then glanced at Mrs Bennet. "It is very good of you to be so benevolent to your charge."

Elizabeth's mother stepped forward. "It is one's Christian duty to treat others with kindness, Miss Bingley," she said, and it was rather clear that she was speaking of Miss Bingley's snide remark rather than her own actions.

"But of course. Allow me to present our guest," she said and stepped aside. "Miss Georgiana Darcy."

The young woman stepped forward and looked around the group, clearly overwhelmed by the onslaught of Bennets. Her brother joined her side then and took it upon himself to introduce them all to her, as though they were old friends.

"It is lovely to meet you all," Georgiana said in a quiet tone that betrayed her shyness.

"As it is lovely to meet you," Thomas said. "Have you been at Netherfield long?"

"Only a few days," she said. "I came down from town a little earlier than expected, but I am glad I did now, as the Lucases have been so very kind to me this evening."

"Have you had the seed cake yet?" Lydia asked then and stepped forward. "Lady Lucas always serves the very best seed cake and almond biscuits."

"I have not had the chance," Georgiana said, and at once Lydia stepped forward. "We shall rectify this at once. Come," she said, pulling Georgiana away, with Kitty and Mary right behind.

"Georgiana," Darcy called, but Mrs Bennet cleared her throat.

"I assure you, your sister is in wonderful hands with my daughters, Mr Darcy. They are entirely genteel and respectable."

Elizabeth watched Darcy carefully. Knowing his temperament, she assumed he would not reply, as he did not want to appear impolite—and she was right. He nodded his head once.

"Of course," he said.

"I shall keep an eye on them," Thomas offered, to which Bingley clapped his hands.

"Capital, Thomas. In fact, I am rather famished myself, and seed cake sounds just what I can use right now. Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour of accompanying me?" he asked, and Jane instantly beamed with delight while taking his proffered arm.

Once they were out of earshot, Mrs Bennet cleared her throat. “You see, Mr Bennet, Mr Bingley is utterly delightful. So considerate of our Jane’s wants and needs, and politeness itself.”

It was another veiled barb in Mr Darcy’s direction, for Mrs Bennet remained sourly upset with him for his refusal to dance with Elizabeth. Fortunately for the gentleman—and Elizabeth—her mother was soon distracted by Sir William and Lady Lucas, who had come to greet their newly arrived guests, having been held up somewhere until then.

Suddenly quite alone with Mr Darcy, Elizabeth took a deep breath.

“Well, I wish you a pleasant evening, sir,” she said and hurried away, though not before noticing Mr Darcy’s lips part as if he wanted to say something but did not. Leaving him to stand on his own, she found Thomas, Lydia, and Kitty, who were standing with Miss Darcy at the refreshment table, where they indulged in seed cake and Negus.

“Lizzy,” Thomas said with a smile. “Miss Darcy was just telling us about the Negus at Pemberley which is served during Christmastide. It appears to be the most divine.”

“Oh, I would not say the most divine—certainly, any region will have its particular taste—but I will say it is the highlight of Christmastide when my brother tells me it is the season for Negus,” she said and beamed.

“Ah, I should love to attend a ball at Pemberley, it sounds so grand, do you not think so? Perhaps Mr Darcy has reason to be as arro—prideful as he is regarding his estate,” Lydia said.

“Faith! Do not mistake my brother’s pride for arrogance,” Miss Darcy said quickly, as if alarmed. “He is proud, but he has reason to be. Pemberley is rather lovely.”

Her defence of her brother disarmed Elizabeth somewhat, and it appeared the same was true for her family, as Lydia and Kitty spent the next twenty minutes conversing with their new friend, under the close attention of Thomas, who likewise found Miss Darcy a delight. Indeed, Elizabeth herself could scarcely believe the young woman was any relation to Mr Darcy. She was the opposite in every way. She was kind, charming, and unpretentious.

“When will the dancing start? I can hardly wait,” Lydia complained after a while.

The strains of a lively country dance filled the room, and Lydia clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, how splendid! I have been simply dying to dance all evening,” she declared, already scanning the room for a suitable partner. But in the next instant, her excitement dimmed. “Oh! But where is Mr Denny? He promised he would come!”

“I am sure he shall arrive soon,” Thomas offered. “Perhaps he has been delayed.”

Lydia sighed dramatically. “Well, I shall not dance until he does. Kitty, you go on ahead.”

Kitty, less inclined to let the absence of one gentleman ruin her evening, accepted the arm of one of the Lucas sons and made her way to the floor with an eager step.

Georgiana, who had been watching the exchange in quiet amusement, smiled softly. “I think I shall just watch for now,” she said. “I have always enjoyed observing the dancing. It is quite as diverting as joining in.”

“Indeed?” Elizabeth asked, surprised. “I would have thought you had danced at many a grand occasion.”

“Oh, I have,” Georgiana admitted. “But I always feel more at ease watching. Besides, I am rather wondering where my brother has gone.”

Elizabeth glanced about the room but did not immediately spot Mr Darcy. “I am about to look in on my mother,” she said. “If I see him, I shall be sure to let you know where he is.”

Georgiana nodded gratefully. “Thank you, Miss Bennet.”

With that, Elizabeth excused herself and made her way through the throng of guests. She found her mother quite happily engaged in conversation with Lady Lucas, both ladies deep in animated discussion—likely about the latest news of Jane and Mr Bingley. Satisfied that no intervention was needed, Elizabeth turned to return to her sisters.

That was when she spotted him.

Mr Darcy stood a little apart from the main gathering, keeping his own company. His expression was carefully composed, polite but unreadable.

For a moment, she hesitated. Ought she approach him? She had no real reason to approach, but something about his

manner intrigued her. He did not seem wholly at ease, yet there was nothing in his bearing that suggested he wished to leave. Was he, perhaps, merely biding his time?

As if sensing her gaze, Mr Darcy suddenly glanced up, his eyes meeting hers across the room.

Elizabeth's breath caught.

For a fraction of a second, something flickered in his expression—something unreadable, something that made her pulse quicken against her will. Then, just as swiftly, his composed mask returned, and he gave her the smallest of nods.

Elizabeth inclined her head in return before turning away, her heart unaccountably unsettled.



# *Chapter Eight*

## *Darcy*

Darcy stood in the corner and watched the proceedings. As at the Meryton Assembly, he felt utterly uncomfortable. The Lucas family's home was small but well-appointed, and Sir William and Lady Lucas seemed to be people of consequence—individuals he would not mind spending an evening with at a London gathering or some such event. However, the rest of the gathering consisted of individuals he would generally not acknowledge in passing and would not give any further thought to. Some were landed gentry, but they appeared to be of the same ilk as the Bennets—people seeking to rise in the world by any means necessary.

To his dismay, he appeared to be the only one who felt this way. His sister had taken to the younger Bennet sisters and was standing in the corner, sipping on Negus, and chatting with them. He found this alarming, they were not the kind of company he wished for her to keep. While he was not particularly fond of Caroline due to her sometimes arrogant attitude—which he considered beneath the station she attempted to occupy—he would have preferred his sister to spend time with her or Mrs Hurst instead. Even the Lucas daughters would have been preferable, for at least they were connected to a knighted gentleman.

Bingley, of course, was preoccupied with Jane Bennet. The two sat together near the dance floor, seemingly waiting for the music to start, utterly engrossed in one another. Bingley was besotted, it was evident by the way his body was turned towards the lady, giving her his full attention. He looked at her, smiling with both his lips and his eyes. Jane Bennet, meanwhile, sat poised upon her chair, hands folded in her lap and shoulders back as if presenting herself in the most favourable light. She smiled and giggled occasionally when he did, but Darcy could not determine if this was genuine affection or some ulterior motive.

On more than one occasion, he spotted her glancing across the room at her mother, who was watching the exchange with keen eyes.

“Mr Darcy,” Sir William said, pulling him out of his thoughts. “The music is about to start. I dare say it will be a delight for all the young people, do you not think so?”

“Indeed, I do,” Darcy replied. “You have gathered quite an assortment.”

Sir William chuckled. “That was all my wife, Lady Lucas. She knows everyone in Meryton and the surrounding areas. We also invited a few gentlemen from the militia, they're not here yet. That would delight the ladies, eh wot?”

Darcy had to control his expression to avoid grimacing, for while he held every respect for the armed forces, he did not like the idea of his sister being in the company of officers. He already suspected that the Bennet sisters were the types who would eagerly throw themselves at any officers if there was a chance for a match.

“It is fortunate that every savage can dance,” Darcy said, though he had one particular savage in mind.

“Indeed, indeed. Ah well, the minuet is starting now. See? They are about to begin. Oh, but you are as yet without a partner,” Sir William said. Darcy's eyes widened.

“I assure you, it is quite...”

Sir William appeared undeterred as he craned his neck to search for a partner. To Darcy's dismay, he found one posthaste.

“Ah, Miss Eliza! Surely you could be compelled to dance this night?” he asked.

The young woman smiled, and from this angle, Darcy had to admit she was rather appealing, with her high cheekbones and round lips. He shook his head to rid himself of such thoughts, for it was only then he understood she had not yet seen him.

“Certainly, Sir William. Just as soon as I find a suitable partner who is adept at it.”

“Ah well, I have just the fellow for you,” Sir William replied with a broad smile, placing his hand on the small of her back and turning her lightly towards him. At once, her smile froze as she saw him.

“Mr Darcy.” She spoke his name without intonation, and thus he did not know if she was dismayed to see him—as he was—or if she was somewhat gratified to have caught him like this. For surely she remembered how he had dismissed her at

the assembly days ago. Now, thanks to their host, he was trapped. He'd have to dance with her.

"Surely you must feel inclined to dance with a partner as pretty as Miss Eliza," Sir William said, and Darcy sucked in air, filling his lungs so that he would be occupied for a moment to think of how best to extricate himself from this situation.

"Indeed, Sir William, I am inclined to dance, but not the minuet. I do not care for it. And I did not come in this direction in search of a partner."

Sir William shook his head, a grey lock falling into his ruddy face.

"But the minuet is a delightful dance," he insisted. "And Mr Darcy is a keen dancer. Please, you must," he said, and it was clear that "No" was not an acceptable answer. At this, Darcy exhaled and bowed, proffering his arm, which Miss Elizabeth took after a moment's hesitation.

"There, what a delight," Sir William enthused, stepping aside so they could make their way to the dance floor. She glanced up at him in such a way as to make it quite clear she did not enjoy being paired with him either, but she was too polite to say anything. In fact, she said nothing at all as they made their way onto the dance floor.

It was Bingley who broke the silence as he and Miss Bennet danced past them. "Darcy, what a riot to see you on the dance floor. A rare treat," he said before disappearing into the crowd of dancers while Darcy and his partner fell into step.

"Do you not dance as a rule?" she asked. Again, her tone was flat, giving nothing away.

"I do not know what gave you that impression."

"You did not dance at the Meryton Assembly," she replied, and Darcy felt his cheeks burn because he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"You are mistaken; I most certainly dance. We are dancing right now, are we not?"

"Under some duress," she pointed out.

"I regret if you feel as though you were forced into dancing; I certainly did not feel compelled. I make it a habit not to do things that give me no pleasure," he said, though this wasn't true. He regularly did things he did not enjoy. Yet, he didn't want her to think that he was unhappy dancing with her. He was, of course, but he thought it clear that she disliked him as much as he thought he disliked her at first. However, he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself for having turned her down in front of her mother.

"I see," she said, and then silence fell once more. They moved, and he couldn't deny that she was a skilled dancer. In fact, if they had been fond of one another, it might have been delightful to dance with her, but as it was, it was mostly awkward. After a while, she cleared her throat again.

"I believe it is your turn to speak," she said as he looked down at her.

"My turn?"

"It is customary to converse while dancing. If we do not, there might be idle gossip," she explained. "You could make a comment, for example, on the food or your journey."

He was aware, of course, of the customs and what was expected of him, but he simply hadn't been able to think of anything to say, such was his mortification.

"Mr Denny!" a delighted shout came then, rescuing him from the awkwardness. He looked up and saw Lydia Bennet dashing across the room towards the door, where a number of red coats had just entered.

"Quite exuberant, is she not?" he commented, aware it sounded condescending. "And very fond of the officers."

"That is my sister. She is fond of everybody. She has the sort of sunny disposition that means she does not look down upon anybody, least of all men who have sworn to defend our country," she said.

"I did not imply that I did not appreciate their service—"

"I said no such thing!" he defended himself. "I was merely going to comment on her enthusiasm. I am very fond of and grateful to our armed forces. My very own cousin is a colonel in His Majesty's military," he stated.

"I see," she replied. "Well, you ought to be grateful to these men in arms. In fact, you may know some of them—there are the Derbyshire militia."

His eyebrows shot up then, and he once again looked over his shoulder, and at once, his jaw slowly dropped.

“Perdition,” he exhaled. Indeed, standing just a few steps away from Lydia Bennet, and the officer she was evidently familiar with was none other than George Wickham.

“Do you know Mr Denny?” his partner asked, but he shook his head.

“No. I am familiar with Mr Wickham. Unfortunately. You know of him?”

“Yes,” she said, “He was a later arrival. He has availed himself to our acquaintance.”

His head snapped around, and he felt heat rising up his neck as he had moved his head too quickly. “You know him well? He’s a friend?”

Her expression changed then; a smile faded, and weariness took its place. “He is well known to my family. I would not call him a friend as such. His friend Mr Denny is a great friend of ours.”

As they turned again, Darcy moved slightly to the edge of the dance floor so he could keep a better eye on the situation. His eyes searched for Georgiana, and when he spotted her, he saw that things were coming to a head. For she too had seen Wickham and was now closing the distance between them, a bright smile on her lips.

He had to get off this dance floor, but he couldn’t simply leave Miss Bennet standing there. It would be quite improper for him to do so. Yet he also could not leave his sister alone with Wickham. She had no idea what evil he had rescued her from not two years ago.

“Mr Darcy?” Miss Bennet’s voice drifted to his ear.

“Are you unwell? You have paled.”

“Wickham is an old acquaintance of my family,” he said, “and I would much rather not have him near my sister.” The words came out like a low growl. To her credit, she did not question him but instead observed the scene. Wickham and his sister were now in conversation as though they were two old friends, reunited.

“She does not appear dismayed by his presence,” she said.

“She wouldn’t. She does not know him as I do,” Darcy said, unable to take his eyes off the pair. Then, Wickham caught his eye and dipped his head in his direction as though they were old friends. He wanted to dash across the dance floor and grab him by the collar, dragging him out and sending him away forever, but none of those options were available. He could not make a spectacle of himself and Georgiana would never understand. She was naive and gullible when it came to Wickham, just as Darcy’s father had been.

Without warning, he found himself suddenly bereaved of a partner as Miss Elizabeth let go of him. He paused, confused by the sudden development.

Bingley and Jane were dancing right behind him, and if it weren’t for Bingley’s swift movement, they would have crashed directly into him. He stepped aside just in time to see Miss Elizabeth bending down. He hadn’t been aware that she had dropped anything, and when she rose again, he saw her pull a handkerchief out of her pocket.

What was she doing?

Then he saw it. They were standing just a few steps away from Thomas Bennet, and she quickly fiddled with her handkerchief so everyone could see but as she bent forward, he saw she was whispering something to the young Mr Bennet. Then she turned around and got back into position. “Excuse me, Mr Darcy, I was rather clumsy and dropped my handkerchief.”

“You did not—” he said, but she gently moved him back onto the dance floor, and they fell back into step. From the corner of his eye, he saw Thomas Bennet walking in the direction of Georgiana. He smiled charmingly while Wickham looked decidedly unamused.

With a smooth movement, Thomas Bennet inserted himself into Wickham and Georgiana’s conversation before bowing to Wickham and then escorting Georgiana away.

“Thomas shares your feelings regarding Mr Wickham,” she said quietly. “Rest assured, your sister will be perfectly well looked after.”

The rest of the dance passed without any interruption, though conversation between him and Miss Bennet ceased. He was too busy watching as Thomas Bennet led Georgiana, Lydia Bennet, and the officer whose name appeared to be Mr Denny

towards the other side of the room.

Wickham, meanwhile, disappeared into the crowd on the other end of the room, and an unease filled Darcy's stomach to the point where he did not know how to rid himself of it. Once the dance concluded, he bowed before Miss Elizabeth.

"Thank you for your interference," he said quickly, and before she could reply, he dashed off in search of Georgiana.

However, to his dismay, he could not find her at once. The spot where the group had been now occupied by Mr and Mrs Hurst.

"Are you in search of your sister?" Mrs Bennet said from somewhere to his right. He spun and saw her standing there with a satisfied smile. "She and my daughters are having a rather grand time and are about to dance the Quadrille."

"Thank you, Mrs Bennet," he replied, loathing that he had to converse with her at all, let alone be grateful.

"I saw you danced with my Elizabeth. She is a gifted dancer, she studies dance as if it were a science, but I did attempt to share her delight with you before," she said, not hiding her snide tone.

"I thank you, Mrs Bennet," he replied and left to find Georgiana. Alas, once more, time was not on his side as by the time he found her, she was already in line to dance the Quadrille with Thomas Bennet.

She stood beside the young man on her left, while Mr Denny, Lydia Bennet, Kitty Bennet, and another officer stood on her other side. Bingley and Jane Bennet then joined them, each with their partners. He recognised the woman on Bingley's arm as Sir William's daughter, but he wasn't sure who was the man with Jane. Whoever he was, he wasn't Wickham.

The merry group chatted and then made their way onto the dance floor, all of them unaware that Darcy had been staring at them the entire time.

Across the room, he spotted Wickham making his way over to Elizabeth, who had left his side and unknowingly had given him no further thought after bidding her goodbye. He realised that this was perhaps rude. He found his eyes darting from one side to the other. On one side, his sister was dancing with a man most unsuitable. In fact, if any of his Fitzwilliam family had seen her dancing with a gentleman's ward, they would have been mortified and accused him of not looking after her properly.

Meanwhile, on his other side, the man he had long regarded as his greatest rival his entire life was making conversation with Elizabeth. Both sides were disturbing. And yet he found that right at this moment, he was not going to be able to do anything about either.

# *Chapter Nine*

## *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth took a weary step back as Mr Wickham approached. She hadn't been surprised when Mr Darcy seemed less than fond of him after realising they knew one another.

Mr Wickham had been utterly charming when she first met him a few months ago, but since then, she had come to find him not the most trustworthy of people.

Still, she thought Mr Darcy's reaction to seeing him speak to his sister was somewhat of an overreaction. After all, what could the man have done? It wasn't as if he had approached her in haste; rather, she had been quite delighted to see him.

Not so for Mr Darcy, of course. But then again, when had he ever appeared delighted to see anyone? Both tonight and at the assembly, he had regarded everyone with disdain. Still, something more than simple antipathy had governed his reaction to Mr Wickham. His tone had made her realise he was genuinely distressed about the prospect of his sister speaking to Mr Wickham, and she had felt compelled to intervene.

Her intervention hadn't been just for Mr Darcy's sake. If there was something amiss, she did not want to expose the young woman to it. She couldn't deny that Thomas's words of warning still echoed in her mind. Thomas was friendly with Jerome King, cousin to Miss Margaret King, whom Mr Wickham had recently attempted to court. The Kings had soon realised that Mr Wickham's intentions were not sincere and his motivation for courting her was more the debt he'd run up at the Carlton Arms Inn where he'd lost more than his fair share of card games. Thus, Miss King had been swiftly moved away from Meryton for an extended stay with an aunt in the Welsh countryside.

Due to this, Thomas had been more than willing to stir immediately when he had whispered to her about Mr Darcy's concern.

Now he was on the dance floor with the young woman and her sisters, along with Mr Bingley, having a grand time. Elizabeth smiled, but a little sorrow tugged at her heart, for she knew that while Thomas appeared perfectly happy now, surrounded by friends whilst dancing, he was very much alone off the dance floor. She had seen the way Mr Darcy had looked at him, with such condescension, knowing now that Thomas was not the Bennet's son. She wished it were only Mr Darcy who looked down upon him, but she knew he was merely a reflection of their entire society.

"Miss Elizabeth," Mr Wickham said, closing the distance between them. "Did I see you dancing with Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy?"

She nodded. "Yes, you did. He is staying at Netherfield with his sister, visiting Mr Bingley."

"Charles Bingley? I am as familiar with him as I am with Darcy. Although I must say, I am more grateful for one connection than the other."

Elizabeth bit her lip, unsure how to respond.

"I am certain he has told you dreadful tales about me," Mr Wickham said.

She blinked. "Are there dreadful tales to tell about you, Mr Wickham?"

He smiled wryly. "Nothing more dreadful than what has been said about me in town, which has been greatly exaggerated. I will say I have a habit of being very friendly to people, but I see that as a strength rather than a weakness."

"I see. Pray, how do you know Mr Darcy?"

Mr Wickham smiled wider. "My father was Darcy's father's steward. Old Mr Darcy was always very fond of me. When my father died I was still very young, he took me under his wing. I always looked up to younger Darcy, hoping he would be an older brother of sorts, but it was not to be. We have quite different characters."

"Indeed you do," Elizabeth stated. Although there was something dubious about Mr Wickham, he had an easy nature, could effortlessly entertain others, and always had a story to tell, whilst Mr Darcy was usually quiet and reserved.

"It is a shame," Mr Wickham continued. "We are quite close in age, and his sister has always been very fond of me, just as I am of her. Indeed, I was delighted to see her, even though it meant seeing her brother."

Elizabeth couldn't help herself; her curiosity was utterly piqued. What had transpired between Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy? They disliked each other, yes. But could it be there was something more sinister afoot than mere jealousy?

"She did seem quite delighted to see you," she observed.

"And she was. It is a shame that your brother—I mean, Mr Bennet—took it upon himself to interrupt, but it cannot be helped. There will be time for Miss Darcy and I to speak."

"Miss Darcy?" she echoed. "So you are still on good terms with Mr Darcy's sister?"

"Indeed. This may be a reason for Darcy's great dislike of me. He looked down on me for merely being a steward's son. Not so his father. He always treated me like a son and remembered me in his will. He left me a living."

This took Elizabeth by surprise, prompting her to ask, "But if you have a living, why are you in the militia?"

Mr Wickham shrugged with a playful smile. "That is where Darcy's dislike of me rears its ugly head. He did not wish for me to be in his vicinity for too long, so he gave the living to someone else."

Elizabeth took a deep breath and glanced across the room where Mr Darcy was lurking. She recalled Thomas's words not to believe everything he said, but given the things she had overheard Mr Darcy say about her family and her beloved sister, she had to give credence where it was due.

"He took the living from you?" she asked.

"Indeed. If you do not believe me, you can ask Georgiana. She was well aware of it and quite upset with him at the time. I did not want to come between brother and sister, so I told her it was my own decision and soon left Derbyshire to join the militia."

"Well, I have taken up quite enough of your time. Perhaps later in the week, I might call upon you, and we could take a turn about the garden."

She opened her mouth but then closed it again, unsure how to tell him that while she was not opposed to cordial conversation, she was not interested in more. Not after he had first shown her attention only to then focus on Miss King.

"I am certain Miss King would not appreciate it if you kept my company quite so much," she said.

His smile froze but then quickly returned. "I'm certain you have heard there is no concern in that regard anymore. But in any case, I do hope to see you again, for your company is always a pleasure." With that, he took his leave, making a courteous gesture before walking towards the front door. He paused for a moment to speak to Lady Lucas before disappearing.

Elizabeth stood back and watched him leave and then let her eyes survey the dancefloor where Georgiana, Thomas, Jane, and Mr Bingley still were engaged in a dance, all looking merry and bright. Looking neither merry nor bright on the other hand was Mr Darcy who stood in the corner, scowling.

Elizabeth shook her head. It was such a shame that a man with good breeding, wealth, influence—and dare she say it—good looks should be so very cantankerous. For if he were just a little more amiable, there might be something to him. As it stood, Elizabeth could not wait for the day Mr Darcy mounted his high horse and rode out of Meryton forever.

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When the dance ended, Thomas approached her, his eyebrows knitted together.

"I saw you conversing with Mr Wickham. Pray, what did he say? Did he complain about my interrupting his conversation?"

Elizabeth shook her head while, up ahead, the next dance began. The remaining group had stayed on the dancefloor for the reel, with Lydia now paired with one of the Lucas boys, Georgiana Darcy with Mr Denny, and Bingley with Charlotte Lucas. Jane was in the arms of Mr Hurst, though she was likely less than enthused about this circumstance, she did not let it show. Her countenance was as pleasant and polite as always.

"Lizzy?" Thomas called.

"Yes, I spoke to him. He would have rather not seen his conversation interrupted but he mostly spoke of the brother, not the sister. He naturally had little good to say about Mr Darcy, although I wonder if perhaps there isn't some truth in what he said."

“You would believe him?” Thomas asked, eyebrows arched.

“It is not that I believe everything he has said, but some of what he said rings true when it comes to Mr Darcy.”

Thomas crossed his arms and watched her carefully. She felt a heat rising under her collar beneath his scrutiny. Thomas had a way of looking right through her, correcting her prejudices without even speaking.

“It is true,” she said, “that I have an antipathy towards Mr Darcy. He was rude to me at the assembly, and as you know, I overheard him speaking ill of Jane, Mother, and all of Meryton. Therefore, is it any wonder that when Mr Wickham tells me that Mr Darcy once stole his living from him and generally acted arrogant and haughty, I would believe him?”

Thomas dropped his arms. “It is not at all difficult to believe. I do not think very highly of him either, but I doubt Mr Darcy is as bad as all that. In fact, Mr Bingley spoke of him as a trusted older brother earlier.”

“Mr Bingley appears gentle-minded,” Elizabeth conceded. “Like Jane, he sees the best in everyone, perhaps to a fault.”

“And a gentle-minded man would not regard a cruel-minded one as his dearest friend. All I am saying is, reserve your judgement. I will be able to tell you more soon about Mr Darcy, for Mr Bingley has invited me to go shooting with the two of them tomorrow.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “With both of them?”

“Well, yes. Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy were going to explore his estate, and I mentioned my familiarity with it, seeing how Mr Morris has allowed Mr Bennet and me to shoot there over the years. So Bingley invited me, and for luncheon afterwards.”

“He is fond of you,” she remarked.

“And I am fond of him. He is genuinely pleasant and does not seem to be at all bothered by my being nothing but a gentleman’s ward.”

“Unlike some other attendees at today’s gathering,” she said, glancing at Mr Darcy, who stood alongside Miss Bingley, deep in conversation. The sight of the two of them talking made her feel a little ill because she knew nothing good could come of it.

“Mr Darcy will yet change his mind. After all, most of Meryton has come to accept me over the years. I am invited tonight, am I not?” Thomas said with a smile.

“You are, but the Lucases are kind people, no matter what Mother likes to say. I am not certain the same can be said for Mr Darcy,” she replied.

Thomas shrugged. “Even if he is unkind, what does it matter? He will be here for a few months, and then both he and his sister will be gone from our lives. If Mr Bingley purchases Netherfield Park, we may see them on occasion, but it will be rare and far between.”

She could not argue with this; still, in the back of her mind, she continued to worry. What if Mr Darcy attempted to interfere with Jane’s blossoming friendship with Mr Bingley? What if Miss Bingley did? Did Thomas give the man too much of the benefit of the doubt?

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“Thomas has always had good judgement,” her father said later that evening as Elizabeth sat in his study. The hour was late, as they had returned near midnight, but her father was still awake in his study.

He could be found here at all hours, night and day, for this was the place he felt happiest, among his books and treasures.

She knew he’d be awake when they returned, for the little light he kept on in the window still flickered. She smiled to herself upon seeing it, knowing it was his signal for her to enter his study and tell him about the evening.

And there had been much to tell. She spared her father no detail, telling him all about the dance, the food—but most of all about the Darcys and Mr Wickham.

She concluded her tale with her conversation with Thomas.

“I know he is a good judge of character, but I cannot help but feel that in this case Mr Wickham might be right,”

Elizabeth said, unable to believe she was even saying such things.

“Mr Wickham has proven himself to be a charming fellow, but not a righteous one. I spoke to Mr King not long ago, and he attempted to lure the poor girl away from her family. When confronted, he claimed to act out of passion, but Mr King doubts it is so. The motivation was financial; we know this.”

“Perhaps. Likely, yes. But then, many act out of such motivations. Mr Darcy would accuse Jane of being interested in Mr Bingley purely for finances.”

Her father raised his hands and placed them flat on the desk.

“I will not argue the point with you, for you are right. Mr Darcy is not entirely wrong to worry either. Your dear Mama is certainly more interested in Mr Bingley’s fortune than in his character. However, I do take exception with anyone thinking our dear Jane capable of deception.”

“She would never deceive anyone. She adores Mr Bingley, and after tonight even more so. She has received her invitation to tea this night from Miss Bingley. Reluctantly, as I was issued.”

Her father smiled. “But issued it was. I am glad for it. As for Thomas, you would do well to remember his good judgement. He has always had a way about him when it comes to people. Remember when he told me Mr Glasgow was not trustworthy?”

Elizabeth did recall. Mr Glasgow had replaced their former steward some years ago, and Thomas, only thirteen at the time, had voiced a dislike for the new man from the start. Nobody had taken it seriously at the time, given Thomas’s young age, but in due course, he had been proven right. Mr Glasgow had been stealing from Longbourn and was exposed and sacked at once.

Thomas’s judgement had been held in much higher esteem since then.

“I had a mind of making Thomas my steward, you know?” her father said then. “He has a good head for estate running. But alas, I think it would do him a disservice.”

Elizabeth understood. Since the estate was entailed away from the family, making Thomas their steward would not have been beneficial to him in the long term. Once Mr Bennet died, the entire family would have to leave Longbourn to make room for Mr Collins, their distant cousin and heir. He had already made it clear more than once that he would take charge of Longbourn when the time came. In addition, Mr Collins and Thomas had never been close.

During Collins’s dreaded annual visits, Thomas often found reason to be away, visiting friends in Hertford or London in order to avoid him. Collins appeared pleased whenever he found Thomas absent, and thus it was clear making Thomas steward would not work.

“I wish he could have better prospects,” Elizabeth said, and her father rubbed his temple.

“As do I. I have done all I could for him thus far. I like to think he has been treated well.”

“Undoubtedly,” Elizabeth said, not wishing for her father to feel badly, for he truly had treated Thomas like a son.

“It is unfortunate that more cannot be done. I do wish he would choose a profession, however. If he decided to read the law, Mr Phillips would take him under his wing, I know he would. Or even the military.”

“I think Thomas struggles with his worth,” Elizabeth argued. “I know he would like to make a life for himself, but he worries being seen as a ward will overshadow him all his life. Perhaps if he knew who his father was it may be different.”

Mr Bennet shook his head as he got up and walked to the window.

“It would make no difference, Elizabeth. My cousin made a mistake and had a child out of wedlock. There is nothing to be done other than what we are doing. In due course, Thomas will find a profession that suits him and hopefully make a life for himself that will allow his unfortunate circumstances to be forgotten.”

“As long as there are people like Mr Darcy in the world, none shall forget,” Elizabeth said bitterly.

“I dare say, Thomas may yet charm even Mr Darcy. Mr Bingley appears fond of him. They do go hunting, you said?”

Elizabeth nodded. “In the morning, yes. All three of them.”

“Well then, let us hope Thomas can sway Mr Darcy’s favour not just for himself but for the entire family. I would hate



for him to have such influence over Mr Bingley as to perhaps cause trouble for Jane. Although I would imagine if he were a true gentleman, he would not interfere.”

Elizabeth rose and bade her father goodnight, though as she walked to her chamber, she could not help but reflect on his words.

It seemed he too wished to give Mr Darcy the benefit of the doubt. Thomas had said much the same. Why were these men so willing to think there was good in Mr Darcy? Could it be she was wrong?

He was, after all, quite revered by his sister; that much was clear from the way she had seen them interact with one another.

Mr Bingley was exceedingly fond of him also. Then there was Mr Wickham—although given Mr Wickham’s past actions, could the fact he spoke against Mr Darcy actually be something that could be seen as in Mr Darcy’s favour?

Whatever it was, she knew she had to stop thinking about the matter. Otherwise, sleep would never find her, and after a long evening of dancing, she needed her rest more than ever.

# *Chapter Ten*

## *Darcy*

“I cannot wait to try the partridge tonight. Have you arranged with the housekeeper to have it prepared, Louisa?” Bingley asked Mrs Hurst.

“Of course, Charles,” his sister replied with a weary smile. “It shall be prepared this evening with stuffing, gravy, roasted potatoes, turnips, and parsnips.”

“Quite the feast,” Caroline marvelled. “And all due to your shooting skills, dear brother.”

“Not at all,” Bingley replied as Darcy observed the exchange from the armchair. He was already bracing himself for what was to come next.

“It was all due to Thomas Bennet,” Bingley declared, at which Darcy closed his eyes, having heard quite enough of that gentleman. Both Bingley and Georgiana had spoken of him at length. Georgiana had praised his dancing skills and his quick wit, which he had evidently demonstrated at the ball at Lucas Lodge. Meanwhile, Bingley had spent the morning hunting with the man. It is true that Darcy and Mr Hurst had accompanied them, along with Mr Bennet and a gamekeeper, but Bingley and Thomas—as he insisted on being called—had engaged in deep conversation throughout the day.

When not shooting, the younger Mr Bennet had regaled the group with amusing tales of his exploits on the lake and in the woods. He had warned them of assorted pitfalls in the forest, such as unexpected dips in the paths, as well as where one might find the very best deer for shooting.

Darcy derived some satisfaction from the knowledge that a spot he had sworn would be prime for deer had proven fruitless; however, they soon discovered partridges, which Bingley declared preferable.

In addition to his talent for finding game, Thomas had proven himself an adept shot. This was no surprise, for he had been raised by Mr Bennet, who turned out to be the most skilled hunter Darcy had encountered in these parts. Which was not saying much, given the hunting in this area was lacking.

“We had quite the day. I daresay Thomas knows every nook and cranny of this estate. I had no idea how bountiful the hunting was around here. Another reason to consider purchasing the estate,” Bingley said. “And this weekend we shall go fishing. What say you, Darcy? Will you join us? You did not commit when we spoke of it earlier today.”

Darcy swallowed, for he had indeed evaded the enquiry. He enjoyed fishing; what English gentleman did not? Yet he was reluctant to spend another afternoon in the company of Thomas Bennet and witness him as the centre of attention. It seemed that whenever the gentleman spoke, all eyes were upon him.

“I shall contemplate it,” he responded noncommittally.

“I thought you adored fishing,” Georgiana remarked, raising her gaze.

“It is rather cool outside, and I must consider my health,” he replied.

“Hear, hear,” Mr Hurst agreed. “It is much too cold for fishing. I shall remain indoors, thank you very much.” Given that he had not been invited, this was a rather peculiar statement, but none chose to comment upon it.

“Ah, you are both such dullards. I do hope you will be more entertaining when Miss Bennet arrives for tea this afternoon, I should hate for her to think my entire family tiresome.”

“She is coming for tea?” Darcy asked, and Bingley beamed.

“Indeed, Caroline has issued her an invitation. She should arrive within the hour. In fact, I ought to prepare myself.” He then rose and exited the room.

“I wish to change before tea as well,” Georgiana announced. “Please excuse me.”

She headed to her chamber, leaving behind Darcy and the three individuals he had come to think of as his confederacy of four. Almost as soon as Georgiana had departed, Caroline rose and closed the door, ensuring it was securely shut, as was the one leading to the adjacent music room.

Then she turned, but before she could say anything, her sister shook her head.

“Why did you issue such an invitation? We must attempt to separate Charles from Anne Bennet, not bring them closer together.”

“I had no choice. He requested that I invite her. What was I to say? No?” Caroline replied, sinking back into her chair.

“You could have dissuaded him; the last thing we need is more of the Bennets here,” Louisa said, and Darcy nodded.

“Indeed, it is bad enough that the ward is a frequent guest.”

“You certainly would think so, Mr Darcy,” Caroline replied with a snide tone.

“And pray, what does that mean to imply?”

“Simply that you are accustomed to having my brother’s full attention, and now you must share it—with a commoner, at that,” Caroline said.

Darcy inhaled sharply through his nose. Caroline was not entirely wrong. He was used to being Bingley’s closest confidant, and it troubled him that someone as simple as Thomas Bennet might have taken his place. Of course, they had met perhaps thrice, but the manner in which Bingley spoke of him made it abundantly clear that he held fondness for the man, and they would be seeing much of him, particularly if Bingley’s courtship with Jane Bennet—for that was what it was developing into—proceeded further.

“I am merely concerned with ensuring Bingley keeps proper company.”

“I believe we can all agree on that,” Louisa stated, while Caroline and Mr Hurst nodded in agreement. “It is a pity that Thomas Bennet is not a true brother to the sisters. It would greatly elevate their standing if he was the heir to Longbourn and their futures were secure.”

“Indeed, I would not object so much to Miss Bennet if we could be certain her interest in Charles was not merely for financial gain. Alas, with the estate entailed away from the family, I fear she is an unfavourable match. We simply must make Charles see it,” Caroline said.

“The question is how,” Darcy spoke. “He is quite fond of her and the family as a whole.”

“Perhaps not the entire family,” Caroline remarked with a smirk. “Mrs Bennet is a dreadful chatterbox, and the younger sisters are brash and loud. Indeed, Darcy, I worry for Georgiana in such company.”

Darcy swallowed hard. It had occurred to him as well that the Bennet sisters were not the most suitable companions for Georgiana. He would need to ensure she did not spend time with them again. As he considered the sisters, he thought of his dance with Elizabeth. She possessed a fire within her, a wit that made it difficult to banish her from his thoughts entirely.

Indeed, it was a great pity that she had no brother who would one day inherit the estate, for it would have greatly improved all of the sisters’ prospects. Not that it should matter. She had no prospects; she possessed no bright future—and neither did Jane.

“Well, it is what it is. They have no brother, and their future is bleak,” Mr Hurst stated. “The question is, what shall we do? Shall we broach the subject with Charles?”

“I think not. Not yet,” Darcy replied. “It may well be that he will tire of Miss Bennet or come to see how inappropriate her family is. For the time being, let us ensure we share our apprehensions in a subtle manner and see if we can lead him to the right conclusion naturally.”

“I thought you would be more proactive on the matter,” Caroline remarked. “Given what you said before.”

Darcy shifted in his seat. He knew precisely what she was referring to—the assembly where Miss Elizabeth had overheard their discourse. He still felt uncomfortable considering it and wondered if she had perhaps confided her views to her sister. Nonetheless, nothing had been said on the subject thus far.

“I believe a more subtle approach is warranted. Otherwise, he may resent us for urging him to break with the young woman. It would be better if he were to come to his senses of his own accord. However, there is no reason we should not gently guide him.”

“I agree,” Louisa said. “Mr Darcy’s approach is wise. Let us see if we cannot nudge our dear brother towards recognising the error of his ways. If this fails, we can speak to him more directly. In the meantime, Mr Hurst shall gather

evidence regarding the entailment, should we need to utilise it.”

“And information on the Bennet family’s connections and financial standing,” Mr Hurst added with an air of self-importance. Darcy disliked it whenever Mr Hurst involved himself in any matter, as he had a habit of making himself sound integral to the plan, while mostly being a hindrance.

Alas, this was the plan to which the group agreed, and Darcy found himself relieved that there was at least some course of action. For he knew he could not allow Bingley to continue down this path—an association with a garrulous Mrs Bennet, a bride with scant prospects, and the errant ward of unknown heritage were not companions his friend needed while striving to elevate himself.

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Darcy spent the remainder of the afternoon engrossed in reading, while outside, the weather took an unpleasant turn. The sky shifted from bright blue to grey and eventually nearly black. Thunderclaps resounded, and lightning flashed as the rain drummed incessantly against the windows. It was an ill day to match his mood.

Yet, when he descended once more for tea, he found that the inclement weather had immensely lifted the spirits of Bingley’s sisters.

“With such weather, I doubt Miss Bennet shall arrive. And who could fault her? She might catch her death coming here in this,” Caroline remarked, peering out towards the dreariness.

“I am certain she has a carriage at her disposal,” Bingley contested, his tone hopeful, yet laced with an undercurrent of doubt.

“Any sensible woman would elect not to venture forth in this weather and would send word,” Caroline asserted confidently. However, Darcy glimpsed movement on the horizon and felt that Miss Bingley might be quite mistaken.

“Someone is approaching,” he announced as he drew nearer to the window beside her. Caroline narrowed her eyes, lifting her hand as if to shield herself against the non-existent sun.

“Goodness,” she muttered under her breath, while Bingley moved from his window—which overlooked the road leading to London—to hers, where a carriage was indeed approaching.

It would be a stretch to describe the vehicle lumbering up the road as stately. It was not in terrible condition, yet it appeared old and worn. The rain pouring upon it did not enhance its grandeur.

Seated at the front was none other than Thomas, while a figure was discernible within.

“The ward is driving the carriage—how extraordinary,” Louisa remarked as she leaned closer to the window.

Darcy would not characterise it as quite that. In truth, he found it almost admirable that he had taken it upon himself to ensure his guardian’s daughter arrived safely and soundly, even if it would have been more appropriate—and welcomed—had the tea been cancelled altogether. He did not care for Thomas but credit had to be given where it was due.

“Surely he does not intend to stay,” Caroline said as the carriage came to a halt.

“Of course he should stay, he is a member of the Bennet family,” Bingley declared, and with a spring in his step, he made his way to the front door.

“Who does not intend to stay?” Georgiana called as she entered the room.

“The Bennet ward. He has brought Miss Bennet for tea, but now he is vacating the premises,” Caroline commented, but then fell silent as a surprised sound escaped her.

“Well, would you look at that? They are not alone. It seems Miss Eliza has invited herself for tea. How... unexpected.”

Darcy, who had turned away from the window to follow Bingley into the hall to greet the guests, stepped hastily back to the window. Indeed, there, sitting in the carriage, was none other than Elizabeth.

# Chapter Eleven

## Elizabeth

Elizabeth followed Thomas and Jane out of the carriage and to the front door when Mr Bingley appeared. He was as affable as ever, greeting them all warmly.

“Miss Bennet, we have looked forward to your visit. And Thomas and Miss Elizabeth, shall you be joining us for tea as well?”

At once, Thomas shook his head. “We would not wish to impose, Mr Bingley. Miss Elizabeth and I merely escorted Jane here so she need not walk in the rain. We are travelling on to Meryton now.”

“Oh, surely not in this weather,” Mr Bingley replied, glancing up at the sky. Elizabeth followed his gaze. A flash of lightning appeared in the distance, and she shuddered. Indeed, when Thomas had suggested that they venture into Meryton to procure the latest volume of a novel for her father, she had been quite enthusiastic—until the rain had commenced. She would have entirely abandoned their plans had it not been for her mother’s ludicrous insistence that Jane ought to go to Netherfield on horseback. In her mother’s mind, the scheme was perfect. Jane would set out in a light drizzle and arrive in the field just before the heavy downpour, thereby being forced to stay overnight due to the dreadful weather and the lack of a carriage.

Jane was too tender-hearted a daughter to censure her mother’s scheme, but fortunately, Thomas was less intimidated. He respected Mrs Bennet, of course. He even regarded her as a mother of sorts, but like Mr Bennet, he was not likely to allow her machinations to harm her daughters.

He had insisted that he and Elizabeth would take Jane to Netherfield on their way to Meryton and collect her afterwards, thereby negating the effect of the rain. Mrs Bennet had fought the suggestion, but fortunately, Mr Bennet sided with Thomas. And thus, here they were. Elizabeth had half a mind to remain in the carriage, as she did not wish to make the situation awkward, but that seemed rather impolite.

Of course, given the weather, Mr Bingley’s invitation was more than enticing.

“We really would not wish to intrude. Mrs Bennet would be quite upset if she heard that we forced our way into your tea party,” Thomas said.

“Thomas, do not be foolish. You know how much I enjoy your company, and that of Miss Elizabeth, of course,” Mr Bingley exclaimed, stepping aside. “Come, you must all come. It will be very merry indeed. And I know Miss Darcy will be happy to see you, Miss Elizabeth. She has spoken very highly of you. And you too, Miss Bennet,” he said, flashing a smile. Jane, as was her habit, glanced down at the floor at the compliment, but Elizabeth saw the way her lips twitched in delight. Jane had always been a reserved person, but Elizabeth could see through her. She adored Mr Bingley. And truly, what was there not to admire? He was charming, wealthy, and handsome to boot.

His family, of course, was another matter. As Elizabeth considered this, she came to the conclusion that it was perhaps best that she and Thomas joined them for tea. After all, it would be comforting for Jane to have a friend in her corner, for neither of Mr Bingley’s sisters could be counted as true allies. And Mr Darcy... Well, it would be prudent to keep an eye on him as well.

Thus, they entered Netherfield. She had been there on occasion, but the last time she had ventured to deliver something to Mr Morris, the agent, the house had been closed up. Now it was as though she were seeing it in a new light. All the white sheets had been removed, and everything was in splendid order. Chatter drifted from the drawing room, which had once been a formal space, but now revealed itself to be transformed into a comfortable parlour.

The entire party rose and cordially greeted them, though Elizabeth could detect the confusion in the eyes of Mr Bingley’s sisters and the palpable discontent emanating from Mr Darcy.

“Miss Elizabeth and Thomas will be joining us for tea, I could not in good conscience let them leave in this weather,” Mr Bingley said.

“Jolly good,” Mr Hurst replied, but Elizabeth discerned from his tone that he found little to celebrate in the situation.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy said as he settled into a chair.

“Mr Darcy,” she replied. Fortunately, the arrival of Miss Darcy prevented her from having to say anything further to

him.

“Miss Elizabeth, what a delight to see you. And Mr Bennet,” she exclaimed.

“Please, do call me Thomas. It does become confusing to have the same name as my guardian,” he replied.

“Confusing indeed,” Mr Darcy said. “Anyone might be allowed to believe you were a legitimate heir.”

Elizabeth looked up at him and glared.

“Indeed,” Miss Darcy interjected, apparently unaware that her brother’s words were not merely simple commentary, but rather an accusation.

“It can indeed be ever so confusing. However, the name Thomas certainly invokes pleasant memories, does it not, Fitzwilliam?” she said.

Mr Darcy frowned. “I do not know of which memories you speak, sister.”

“Our Godfather, Mr Thomas Moore, of course. He is a jolly fellow indeed. He always has a smile upon his lips and a jest at the ready.” The young woman beamed as she thought of her relation and even Mr Darcy allowed himself a small smile.

“Well, I am glad that my name conjures such happy associations,” Thomas said, now seated as well.

Elizabeth raised her eyes at Mr Darcy and noted that he allowed his gaze to linger upon her, but for what reason she could not ascertain. She cocked her head slightly to the side as if to challenge him. His right eye narrowed for a moment, and then he turned to Thomas.

“Pray, Mr Bennet,” he said, insisting upon using the correct title rather than the more informal first name Thomas had offered, despite his sisters’ effusive endorsement of the man’s Christian name. “Where is your coachman? Did you drive the carriage yourself?”

“I certainly did,” Thomas replied. “There are occasions when one need not employ a coachman. It seems rather extravagant to me when I am perfectly capable of driving Miss Bennet myself on an errand of my own choosing.”

“I see. How very economical,” Mr Darcy remarked.

“Economical, indeed. It is always judicious when one knows how to manage one’s resources,” Caroline replied. The implications of their statements were clear, they regarded the Bennet family as being in reduced circumstances, compelled to tighten their finances. It was not proper to voice such sentiments, and any further comments on the matter would have bordered on impropriety, especially for those of their standing.

Thus, Elizabeth chose not to respond, despite feeling perturbed that they acted as though the Bennet family didn’t have a sixpence to rub together. They may not be as affluent as Mr Bingley or Mr Darcy, but they were by no means headed for the poorhouse. In fact, they did quite well financially, given their circumstances and within Meryton society, they were certainly well to do. She had a mind to make this clear but she did not wish to be the one to veer the conversation into utterly unacceptable territory. Mr Darcy and Miss Bingley had done more than enough of that already.

“I see it more as pragmatic than merely economical,” Thomas declared, apparently unperturbed by the insult. “I think it is simply prudent estate management to know when to use one’s resources and where to apply them.”

“You are well-versed in estate management,” Mr Bingley observed. If this enquiry had come from Mr Darcy, Elizabeth would have bristled at once, but she understood that Mr Bingley was genuinely intrigued.

“Indeed, my uncle, Mr Bennet, has trained me. I have been his right-hand man for quite some time.”

“That seems rather a waste of time,” Mr Darcy remarked, “since you cannot inherit.”

“It would surprise me that a gentleman would consider a good knowledge of estate management a waste of time,” Thomas responded.

Mr Darcy and Thomas stared at one another, and Elizabeth could not help but think they were akin to two bulls preparing to charge at one another. Well, perhaps this tea had finally awakened Thomas from his illusion that there was anything in the character of Mr Darcy worth admiring.

“Let us not quarrel,” Miss Darcy interjected. “I think it is very interesting that Thomas has such a great many interests. Pray, will you share with the table the story you told me at Lucas Lodge about the time your pigs got loose from the stable? It

was so very amusing that my sides hurt from laughing.”

Elizabeth smiled at the young woman, grateful for her diversion. But she could not suppress her curiosity. How was such a charming young woman related to a disagreeable man like Mr Darcy?

# *Chapter Twelve*

## *Elizabeth*

“Goodness, gracious, the man is entirely insufferable,” Elizabeth declared as they ascended into the carriage and prepared to depart. The rain had slowed to a drizzle and was now entirely gone, though the roads looked less than agreeable. Still, they had spent enough time at Netherfield for one afternoon, at least for Elizabeth’s liking.

“I cannot disagree with you, Elizabeth. It appears he has taken a particular aversion to me, and by extension, the rest of the family,” Thomas responded, surprising Elizabeth, who had not perceived him capable of being critical of Mr Darcy due to some loyalty he had developed towards Mr Bingley.

“Pray, Thomas, do not speak ill of him,” Jane urged. “He is a dear friend of the family and it is unkind to disregard him. We scarcely even know him.”

“Oh, Jane,” Thomas sighed, “it seems you remain steadfast in your determination to see the good in everyone. It is one of the qualities I admire most about you,” he continued, “but if you will excuse me, I shall take my leave now and take us home, avoiding any further defence of Mr Darcy. Besides, I am certain you two have much to discuss concerning a far more agreeable gentleman.” He winked at them before closing the carriage door. A moment later, the vehicle swayed slightly as he mounted the front, and they drove away.

“He is quite right. Instead of spending our time discussing Mr Darcy, we ought to reflect upon Mr Bingley,” Elizabeth remarked, “who is, indeed, most amiable.”

Jane flushed at once and brightened with a radiant smile. “I must confess, I am quite taken with him. He is charming, he is kind, and I absolutely adore him. He has already invited me for a stroll the day after tomorrow!”

“How wonderful!” Elizabeth replied.

“A promenade with Miss Bingley, of course,” she added. “She will act as chaperone, to make it proper. We would not want the townsfolk talking.”

“Indeed, a man like Mr Bingley is nothing if not proper,” Elizabeth said.

“He has informed me of all details concerning his home in Sheffield. He possesses horses and hounds, and his townhouse is utterly delightful.” Jane continued to make a full report on all she had learned about Mr Bingley, his preferences, his pastimes, and down to his favourite desserts.

“He resides in a townhouse, you say?” Elizabeth enquired. “How pray does he keep horses?”

“He has rented stables. However, he intends to move them here to more suitable lodgings,” Jane explained.

“Has he then resolved to purchase Netherfield Park?” Elizabeth questioned, eager to draw more of her sister’s thoughts regarding the young man’s intentions.

“He is contemplating such a venture, but he wishes first to ascertain Mr Darcy’s assessment of the matter,” Jane replied.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Of course he does. Nothing may transpire without the mighty Mr Darcy’s approval.”

“Pray, do not speak unkindly of him, Elizabeth. Mr Darcy enjoys ownership of the largest estate that has belonged to his family for many generations, and his uncle is an earl. He possesses considerable knowledge regarding the stewardship of such lands, and given his youth, he has executed a commendable job of it since taking control of the estate.”

“Many gentlemen assume their parents’ estates at a tender age,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“Mr Darcy was but one and twenty. It was not solely the estate he undertook. He also assumed the guardianship of his sister,” Jane said with evident sympathy.

“And his mother?” Elizabeth asked, though she understood, if he had taken over the estate, it was likely that his father had died whilst Mr Darcy was still young.

“His mother died even before his father. Mr Darcy was but a boy when she died, and poor Georgiana likely remembers



her not at all,” Jane replied.

“How terrible,” Elizabeth exclaimed, feeling a twinge of sympathy for Mr Darcy. Mr Wickham had left out the fact Mrs Darcy too had died, no doubt because he assumed such information would allow for consideration for Mr Darcy to build.

She recalled he had mentioned his father’s death but had not spoken of being so very young at the time. “How dreadful for both Miss Darcy and Mr Darcy!”

“Indeed,” Jane continued, “he is Miss Darcy’s guardian, aided only by a cousin who is away in the military. Furthermore, they have an overbearing aunt in Kent, who is ever so determined to meddle in their affairs, rendering Mr Darcy’s situation even more arduous. I do believe he merits our sympathies.”

Elizabeth absently traced her tongue over her lips as the carriage swayed, hearing the sounds of the rain splashing against the vehicle. “It is true that perhaps he has endured a hard life—harder than we had assumed—but such trials are hardly singular amongst those of his station. Many in our class have faced difficult upbringings. Look at Thomas; I daresay his life has been more arduous than Mr Darcy’s, yet he is by no means as proud or unkind as Mr Bingley’s friend.”

“We must not judge so harshly,” Jane contended. “Mr Bingley is quite fond of him, and perchance, if you would only grant him a chance, you might discern that he possesses more depth.”

Elizabeth prepared to voice her dissent—that she had little desire to undertake such a task—indeed, all she wished regarding Mr Darcy was to avoid his company for the foreseeable future. However, before she could articulate her thoughts, the carriage came to an abrupt halt, jarring both her and Jane against the bench opposite them.

“Goodness gracious!” Elizabeth exclaimed, while Jane emitted a startled gasp. “What was that?”

Before she could enquire further, the carriage tilted slightly to one side, and they heard Thomas cursing from the front.

“We ought to disembark,” Jane said, grasping the door handle. She pushed at the door, which opened not as it typically did, but tipped downwards towards the ground. “Oh dear!” she uttered, retreating onto the seat again, no doubt frightened. Elizabeth, ever more decisive than her sister, leaned her head out of the slightly ajar door to perceive their plight; the carriage had become mired in mud and was tilted aside.

Thomas leaped from the front, the mud splattering against her skirts, causing her to yelp—not from distress over her soiled attire, but from surprise. With a sigh, she hopped from the carriage, intending to find a dry spot for her feet but stumbling instead, landing directly in the mud. The hem of her gown was sodden, as were her shoes. The chill of the mud enveloped her feet, sending a shiver through her, yet her focus remained on Jane.

“Thomas, put down your coat!” Elizabeth called, and he complied at once. Jane stepped upon the coat and then moved over to where it was drier, so as to spare her dress.

“Here, take my hand,” Thomas said, extending his arm to Jane, who grasped on similarly to the little monkey they had observed at the Royal Menagerie in London two years prior.

Elizabeth then extended her own hand, and once Jane leapt over the puddle, she landed upon Thomas’s coat, compressing it into the mud but ultimately alighting upon dry ground.

“Oh, Lizzy,” she exclaimed, “look at your gown!”

Elizabeth gazed down at the disarray and let out a small groan. The mud had completely stained her gown, not merely the portions submerged but splatters transforming her formerly soft white attire into a pattern reminiscent of a cow grazing in the pasture.

“Well,” Elizabeth remarked, “it is fortunate that Mr Bingley has no interest in me.”

“Mr Bingley!” Jane asked. “What does he have to do with any of this?”

“He has everything to do with it. We shall have to walk back to Netherfield and seek his assistance. I do not believe we are capable of freeing the carriage ourselves, are we, Thomas?”

“Not I,” Thomas retorted, shaking his head. “Even if we could release the carriage, it would only become ensnared again. A most dismal turn of fate this week has offered me at Netherfield. And always involving our carriage. First the wheel, now this. Mr Darcy shall presume it was all a matter of design,” he added.

“Well, let us unhitch the horse and return to Netherfield. I am certain Mr Bingley will loan us a second horse to ride

home upon, and a saddle for Misty,” Elizabeth suggested.

Thus, the trio journeyed back to Netherfield, the two young ladies lifting their gowns high enough to prevent further soiling, though in Elizabeth’s case, any effort was quite futile.

After a fifteen-minute jaunt, during which the drizzle recommenced, they arrived once more at the front door of Netherfield. Thomas tied Misty to a hitching post at the side and then took a deep breath and rapped upon the lion-head shaped knocker. A moment later, the butler appeared, and after hearing their tale, he ushered them in and summoned Mr Bingley, who arrived posthaste, accompanied by Miss Bingley and Miss Darcy.

“Goodness gracious, Miss Bennet!” he exclaimed, rushing promptly to her side. “I was informed you had suffered an accident! Are you injured?”

“I am entirely unscathed,” Jane declared. “However, I fear our carriage is not. We shall be unable to extract it from the mud today.”

“Nor return home safely. The road is impassable,” Thomas added. “We had hoped you might lend us a horse and a saddle, so we might ride home.”

“A horse!” Mr Bingley said, glancing outside at the diminishing daylight. “It will soon be dark. I cannot allow you to journey home under such conditions. You shall remain here with us at Netherfield for the night. I shall dispatch a rider to inform your family of your safety. When the weather improves in the morning, you can return. I will arrange for assistance with the carriage.”

“Pray, we do not wish to impose,” Elizabeth interjected hastily, though she half-expected Mr Bingley to extend the invitation to stay. For Jane, this was indeed a delightful turn of events.

“Another misadventure with the carriage?” Mr Darcy enquired, his tone curt. “I take it this week has not brought you good fortune in that regard?”

“Indeed, it may have been more fortuitous had Jane ridden the horse here on her own,” Thomas conceded.

“Nonsense!” Miss Darcy interjected. “Had she ridden in the rain, she would certainly have caught a cold, and that would have been most dreadful! No, it is far better that things transpired in this manner. It grants us the pleasure of hosting all three of you for dinner. Perhaps we might engage in a game of Whist this evening.”

Elizabeth smiled, the young woman was indeed amiable. Her brother, however, regarded them from his corner with a gaze of suspicion. Though she was unsure of Thomas’s earlier assertion concerning Mr Darcy’s thoughts, it was evident from the scrutinising look on his face that he suspected their unexpected visit might not be entirely fortuitous.

“Well, I must inform the cook to prepare for three additional guests at table at once,” Mr Bingley said.

“I do hope there will be sufficient provisions,” Caroline added, her tone laced with condescension.

Mr Bingley waved his hand dismissively. “Do not be absurd, the cook invariably prepares enough to satisfy double our numbers. She will take pleasure in everything being consumed, but I daresay, even with three more mouths to feed, that will not be the case.” He clapped his hands together. “Now, we must find you something in which to change; your garments are quite damp.”

“I venture to say my gowns shall not fit. I am quite taller and possess a different shape altogether than either of you,” Miss Bingley pronounced, and Elizabeth raised her eyebrows in response, noting her faint implication that her own form was more elegant, hence superior. The assertion was, of course, absurd, as Caroline was but an inch taller, and her posture was by no means superior to that of either Elizabeth or, certainly, Jane.

Miss Darcy once more came to their rescue. “I possess a number of gowns that shall fit you both splendidly. I daresay the three of us are of a similar size. If not, we shall make it work. Shall we gather some attire, whilst my brother procures something suitable for Thomas?”

“I have but one pair of tails,” Mr Darcy interjected immediately, clenching his jaw.

“Fear not,” Mr Bingley replied, “I have a second pair, I shall find something for you to wear. Georgiana, if you would assist the Miss Bennets, Caroline, you shall see to dinner.” He made to ascend the stairs, the three ladies following behind, when he turned back to look at Mr Darcy. “And Darcy, if you could ensure that one of the footmen tends to the Bennet’s horse, I would not wish it to remain outside in the rain, tied to a post in such poor weather.”

Though his tone was commanding, it bore no rudeness; however, Elizabeth could perceive from the narrowing of Mr Darcy's gaze that he was not pleased with his friend's words, nor with their unexpected visit.

Despite this, she could not deny finding his indignation somewhat amusing, and a small part of her felt an odd sense of gratitude for the dismal weather.

# *Chapter Thirteen*

## *Darcy*

“**W**hat very unfortunate turn of events,” Caroline said later that day after the party had finished dinner. “We had hoped that Charles would spend less time with Miss Bennet, not more. And now she shall be here all evening—and who knows how long in the morning?”

“Indeed, it is not ideal,” Darcy conceded. “Alas, it cannot be helped. They are here now. We can only hope it will not lead.”

Bingley was captivated by Miss Bennet throughout dinner, Caroline remarked, and Darcy noted that this had not escaped his attention either. Dinner had been scrumptious as always, yet he found himself unable to eat as much as he might have otherwise because the company left much to be desired.

The more time he spent around the Bennets, the more it became apparent that Bingley took to them, especially to Jane. But it was not just Jane Bennet with whom he had conversed at dinner. There was also Thomas and Miss Elizabeth. Miss Elizabeth, who had vexed him during tea with her seemingly unending challenges, had proven herself to be far wittier and cleverer than he had credited her for. To make matters worse, he found himself rather transfixed by her undeniably handsome face.

What troubled him even more was how quickly Georgiana was taking to the Bennets. She had been utterly delighted to have them back again so soon, and now, as he settled into the drawing room intending to read his book, he saw Georgiana once again huddled with Elizabeth near the pianoforte.

As he observed them, Miss Elizabeth raised her eyes, and for a moment, they were locked in a gaze that felt almost like a battle.

Beside him, Caroline chattered on, but he found it nearly impossible to focus on anything else. Unable to avoid distraction, she averted her eyes and followed his gaze with a small, almost imperceptible click of her tongue.

Then she cleared her throat. “Miss Eliza, are you going to delight us with some music this evening?” she asked.

Elizabeth smiled sweetly at Caroline, although Darcy suspected it was not a genuine smile. Her eyes, which he had noted were usually quite bright when she spoke sincerely, remained dull.

“I should imagine that my playing would not delight anyone in this room,” she said, “for my fingers do not move swiftly over the instrument—not as swiftly as I would like.”

“But we could play a duet! I play rather well,” Georgiana suggested humbly, her tone fitting her station.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy chimed in, “why not play for us alongside Georgiana?”

A part of him wanted her to play so that he would not be drawn into yet another verbal sparring match with her, but another part genuinely wanted to hear what she could play.

“Yes, Miss Bennet, please do play,” Bingley said from the table, looking up. “And Darcy, while the ladies play for us, why don’t you come and sit with us? We need a fourth.”

Darcy cleared his throat. Bingley was sitting at a table with Miss Bennet, and the young Mr Bennet, setting up for a card game. He truly did not wish to keep company with the younger Mr Bennet, but he also could not decline, as that would have been exceedingly rude.

He looked at Caroline. “Will you forgive me?”

“Just this once,” she said with a sweet smile, placing her hand over his for a brief moment. Darcy made his way to Bingley’s table and settled into a chair as the sounds of the pianoforte floated across the room.

“Are you quite musical, then?” Bingley asked his companions at the table as he spread the cards.

“I am afraid I am not. Like Elizabeth, my fingers refuse to bend properly to play. I play the flute a little,” the lady replied.

“The flute?” Bingley exclaimed. “What an underrated instrument! What beautiful melodies it can produce.”

“Indeed, it can,” Thomas Bennet replied, picking up his cards. “And what about you, Mr Darcy? Do you play?”

He glanced over his shoulder at his sister and Miss Elizabeth, who were playing a piece and giggling between them, as the composition was not written as a duet and it was clear Georgiana was more skilled than Elizabeth.

“I do,” he said. As he spoke, Miss Elizabeth’s eyes rose and focused on him. “I play the pianoforte, and I play the cello.”

“Perhaps you should play for us, then,” Miss Elizabeth suggested from the pianoforte, and he glanced back.

“I would trade places if you would prefer,” he offered.

“Is that a judgement upon our playing?” she asked with a laugh, and Georgiana joined in.

“Surely not. But perhaps my brother would rather I trade places with him so you two can play a duet,” she said.

Bingley chuckled, and Miss Bennet smiled, while Thomas Bennet hid his smile behind the hand of cards he had just raised. Darcy felt a flush rise to his cheeks and shook his head. “Georgiana, that’s not humorous.”

“I did not mean it to be. I am merely trying to be courteous,” she said.

Darcy shook his head again, focusing on the card game, although he was acutely aware of Elizabeth Bennet’s gaze fixed intently on him.

They played the first round rather quickly, and Thomas Bennet proved himself as adept at playing cards as he was at shooting, leaving Bingley thoroughly impressed. “Well, is there anything you cannot do, Thomas?” he asked with an appreciative smile.

“There are a great many things I cannot do,” the young man replied, and Darcy bit his lip to avoid saying something untoward, such as inheriting an estate or marrying a lady of value. He knew this would be unkind, and he questioned himself for his aversion to this young man. Was he truly so petty, so filled with envy that he could not help but be unkind to this unfortunate soul? After all, it must be difficult being born out of wedlock and then losing one’s mother immediately thereafter.

He resolved to be more cordial. After all, Bingley was very fond of him, and he did not want to risk his own friendship by clinging to animosity towards Thomas Bennet.

“Indeed, I imagine that not every gentleman can excel at everything,” he said. “I myself am rather dreadful at making conversation with strangers,” he said, though he did not like putting himself down but Darcy truly found it difficult to converse with people.

Behind them, the music stopped and started once more a moment later, but this time the playing was smoother and more skilled, and he knew without looking that Miss Elizabeth had risen, leaving Georgiana to play on her own.

A few moments later, the young lady appeared at the table. “May I observe?” she asked.

Darcy wished she wouldn’t, for he already knew that if she sat down to watch, his nerves would be stretched, leading to mistakes. Her presence made him anxious, and he did not understand why. Still, he felt it the moment she moved a chair closer to their table. The hairs on the back of his neck seemed to stand up and tingle. She positioned herself between him and her sister Jane, curiously peeking at their cards while placing one hand in front of her mouth to stifle a smile.

“Now, now, Elizabeth, do not give it all away,” Thomas Bennet said with a laugh.

“I give nothing away, Thomas. I am simply peeking and smiling,” she replied.

“I wish you would not. You see, Bingley, this is what I must endure all our lives. It has always been like this.”

“Like what?” Elizabeth asked with a bright smile.

“Elizabeth enjoys inserting herself into games and being a thorough distraction,” he retorted. “You must be careful, Mr Darcy; she will distract you, and you shall lose.”

But Darcy was already losing anyway, prompting him to chuckle. “I will have you know, I am rather skilled at this game. Usually.”

“I do not doubt it,” Miss Bennet said as the game progressed. As he lost round after round, Darcy realised that any skill

he possessed in card games was utterly absent that evening.

The more this continued, and the livelier the conversation became between Bingley and the Bennets, the more inadequate he felt. This was not a sensation with which Darcy was familiar. Why could he not be light-hearted? Why could he not converse with them as easily as they did?

He coughed, and after the fourth round placed his cards down. "I am afraid I am rather fatigued. I would prefer to sit and read for a little while before retiring to bed."

"But Darcy, we are just beginning!" Bingley protested. "Although I agree, I am rather tired of cards as well. But why do we not play billiards? That could be rather amusing. We can team up in pairs, Thomas and I shall play against you and Mr Hurst."

Usually, when they played billiards, Darcy and Bingley teamed up against whoever was visiting, who often found themselves partnered with Mr Hurst. Indeed, it was a private joke that the two of them always made the winning team, as Mr Hurst was a dreadful player.

The awful feeling of being replaced grew ever stronger in Darcy's mind, and although he had resolved to be kind to Thomas Bennet, his desire to be unkind only intensified.

For the truth was, he recognised that gut-wrenching sensation of being replaced in the esteem of someone he held in high regard. It was a feeling he had experienced when he was a mere boy. Back in those troubling days following the death of their steward, Mr Wickham, when his father had decided to take George Wickham in as his ward, Darcy had witnessed the gradual shift. Slowly but surely, Wickham had become a more central figure in the Darcy family, and Darcy himself had felt left out.

He began to understand why he felt this way, though he did not like it, for if there was one thing Fitzwilliam Darcy disliked above all else, it was feeling helpless.

He rose then and shook his head. "No, I really am rather fatigued. If you do not mind, I shall take my book into the library and read there."

"Very well," Bingley said. "It is perhaps best if we do not linger much longer. I have a grand idea you must hear before you retire, Darcy." Darcy braced himself but nodded for him to continue.

"Tomorrow, we shall all go riding. The gentlemen, as well as all the ladies."

"Oh, what fun!" Georgiana exclaimed from the instrument while his sister grimaced, not fond of riding. "Thomas, perhaps you could show us the riding path you were telling us about at dinner—the one that goes by the lake and ends in that large clearing overlooking the lavender."

"I would love to," Thomas said. "It is truly quite splendid."

"There! Then," Bingley said, clapping his hands in joyful excitement. "It is settled. We shall all go riding together in the morning."

Darcy gulped, for he had hoped that by morning the Bennets would wish to see their carriage pulled out of the mud and be on their way. It appeared, however, that they were in no haste whatsoever. And as he left, under the watchful gaze of Elizabeth, Darcy found himself wondering once again if these repeated incidents involving the Bennet carriage were, perhaps, by design after all.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Elizabeth

Elizabeth found herself quite unable to sleep that evening. She was uncertain whether it was the discomfort of an unfamiliar bed or the peculiar sensation of Mr Darcy's gaze upon her throughout the evening, but slumber eluded her. She tossed back and forth until, at last, she could no longer bear to remain in bed. Rising, she donned the gown Georgiana Darcy had lent her before making her way down the hall.

She wondered if perhaps the library's fireplace still burned, so she might find a book to read or perhaps take one back with her should the fire be extinguished.

In any case, she required a distraction. As she approached the library, she felt relief wash over her upon seeing a familiar yellow light flickering beneath the door. Perhaps she was fortunate and the fireplace remained lit. Carefully, she opened the door, not wishing to wake anyone in the vicinity with unnecessary noise.

Upon entering, her anticipation of discovering a good novel heightened when she suddenly heard, "Good evening, Miss Bennet."

How typically unfortunate, she thought to herself. Of all the individuals she did not wish to encounter, Mr Darcy was seated before her in a wing chair, his legs propped up upon a stool as he read.

"Good evening, Mr Darcy. I did not mean to disturb you. I believed everyone had retired for the night."

"And you thought right. Everyone has. But I found I could not sleep, thus I came to the library. I take it you had the same notion?"

She nodded. "I did, but I shall not disturb you."

"You are not disturbing me. Please, help yourself. Mr Morris maintains quite the selection."

She pursed her lips, pondering whether it would be worth her while to respond, but she could not refrain from retorting, "Mr Morris does not own Netherfield Park. He is merely the agent. Mr Chamberlain is the owner."

Mr Darcy possessed a vexing penchant for needing to know everything better than anyone else and feeling superior. Thus, for once, when she knew something decidedly more than he, she could not resist the opportunity.

"I see," he said. "Well, whoever the owner may be, they have quite an eclectic taste in books. There are volumes written in a multitude of languages, of which I cannot even make out half."

Elizabeth smiled and approached the shelf he had indicated, immediately spotting the books to which he referred. Some she could discern, French, German, even Russian. However, there were others she could not decipher. Picking up a novel—or perhaps it was a prayer book—filled with characters resembling square shapes, she set it aside. Another bore a similar script but more curved, which too she returned to the shelf. "I did not know Mr Chamberlain possessed so many books in so many different tongues," she remarked as she selected another, noting the different alphabet yet again.

"But I do know this one," she said, recognising it to be Japanese. She turned to Mr Darcy and extended it towards him. "This is Japanese."

"And how do you know this?" he enquired, his tone genuinely curious rather than supercilious.

"The shape on the front depicts the Japanese islands," she replied, tracing the outline with her finger.

"Well, it seems you possess a keen eye for geography. It was never my strong suit."

"Is that so? I must admit, Mr Darcy, I am surprised that you would so readily acknowledge your shortcomings as you have this evening."

Indeed, it astonished her that he had even confessed to not being particularly skilled in certain areas, particularly after a series of card games. It had been apparent how uncomfortable he became after losing hand after hand.

"I do not perceive it as shortcomings per se, but rather as areas in which I have yet to acquire proficiency," he replied, placing the book aside. She craned her neck to ascertain the title and chuckled when she noticed it was a book on card tricks. "I

see,” she said with a grin, “you are ever keen on self-improvement.”

He glanced at the book and then smiled, and Elizabeth had to concede he appeared entirely different when smiling.

“I must confess, I do not relish losing as much as I did, and I am unaccustomed to it,” he said.

“I see. So, you have not sneaked away to avoid playing billiards with Thomas, but rather to perfect your card skills, that you might triumph over them next time.”

His expression grew serious again. “It is true I was fatigued. However, I found that when I attempted to sleep, I could not. Much has been weighing upon my mind.”

“Beyond card games and unforeseen company?”

“Indeed, beyond that. And the company was not unwelcome. My sister is very fond of you and yours,” he said, omitting to mention that Georgiana was also quite taken with Thomas. But perhaps he did not notice.

“Miss Darcy is a complete delight. After you departed, she joined our game along with Miss Bingley. Mr Bingley and my sister vacated their seats as well, leaving me quite alone with Thomas. Were it not for your sister and Miss Bingley, I would not have had a chance to win against Thomas thrice in a row.”

Mr Darcy shifted slightly, and she wondered if he felt uncomfortable with the notion of Thomas participating in the game.

“I see. Well, I am certain my sister will recount all particulars in the morning when we take breakfast.”

“She is a joy to be around,” Elizabeth admitted, stepping closer and resting a hand on the back of the armchair before Mr Darcy. He nodded once, indicating for her to sit, and she obliged. Just why she had chosen to remain in the library to converse with him was a mystery; something about him compelled her to stay. He seemed so serene, so unlike the Darcy she had come to know, that she wished to discover if there indeed lay more to him than met the eye.

“Georgiana has always been a delightful child and is now blossoming into a charming young woman. A trifle too quickly for my liking.”

“That is what my father always says regarding my sisters. Although I daresay my younger sister is far less sophisticated than yours.”

“It must be a difficult situation for him, a father with five daughters.”

“I believe it was more arduous for him when we were all young. When Thomas joined us, at least he had one other gentleman in the house to provide him comfort.”

“Not as much comfort as a son would have, I am sure.”

“Neither my father nor Thomas can help it that a lad is not regarded as a natural born son. Even though he ought to be. My father undoubtedly considers Thomas his son, and so do I consider him my brother, as do my sisters. As for Thomas, he feels the same way about us.”

He paused for a moment, looking down at his hands before raising his gaze to meet hers. “I should thank you for your intervention with Wickham at Lucas Lodge.”

“I did nothing,” she replied. “It was Thomas who was keen to assist.”

He nodded once. “And I shall thank him. He does regard you as family, does he not?” Mr Darcy asked, and Elizabeth pursed her lips, pondering her response.

“He does. He is family. He is my cousin. But more than that, he is like a brother to us, and he would never let any harm befall us. He’d do anything for us.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “Indeed. He is the sort of man who would always look out for you, doing whatever necessary to ensure you are all well-protected. Both now and in the future.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed as he said these words for she knew their meaning. He implied that Thomas somehow arranged for their carriage to break down to throw Mr Bingley and Jane together.

“Mr Darcy, I do not know what it is you wish to imply,” she said, though she knew perfectly well. He raised a hand.



“I imply nothing. I merely feel it is fortunate that you have someone who wishes to look after you. That is all, Miss Bennet. Now. I shall bid you a good night,” he said but Elizabeth could not allow herself to let him depart first. Not after his unsolicited comment.

She took the first book she could off the shelf and turned. “No, Mr Darcy. I ought to leave you to your card studies. You shall need it, if tonight is any indication.” With that, she turned, anger burning in her stomach along with some disappointment over the turn their conversation had taken. At last she thought she’d found common ground with Mr Darcy, only for his ill-manners to flare up and dash it all once more.

And what bothered her more than anything was the fact that while they had conversed, she’d enjoyed herself. Indeed, she found that, for the first time, she genuinely looked forward to continuing her conversation with Mr Darcy. But that thought was now gone, along with the old family feeling of contempt for the man who thought himself above all others.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Elizabeth

Morning came swiftly as the entire party rose early to partake of breakfast before riding out. To Elizabeth's relief, Mr Darcy appeared an especially early riser and had dressed, eaten, and set out for the stable before Elizabeth's party even arrived. Miss Darcy, or Georgiana as she preferred to be called, looked utterly elated to be riding out, though Elizabeth suspected this was linked to Thomas, with whom she had already conversed whilst buttering her morning roll.

The way she gazed at him, with her eyes wide and a smile upon her lips, made Elizabeth feel both pleased and alarmed; for nothing could come of such an infatuation. Fortunately, Thomas was well aware of this and did his utmost to dissuade the young lady by engaging instead in rather stilted conversation with Mrs Hurst and her husband.

Jane, meanwhile, sat by the window with Mr Bingley, who ensured a steady supply of tea was available for her. As the group readied to make their way to the stables, Elizabeth, satiated by her porridge and tea, stepped out into the morning sunlight attired in her riding habit. A brisk breeze rustled through the leaves as she made her way out of the house and around the back. Behind her, Thomas exited beside Miss Bingley and Georgiana, their chatter mingling with the crunching of the gravel beneath their steps. The rest of the party followed in due course.

At the stable, she spotted Mr Darcy, who brushed his horse with such a serious expression that one might have suspected he was rehearsing a speech at the House of Commons. He glanced up and cordially nodded when he spotted her. She smiled at him, but in light of the way their conversation had ended, she felt a little perturbed still. She had lain awake for some while reflecting upon their conversation and the abrupt conclusion it had reached. He was indeed a strange man, but perhaps not a bad one; at least, she felt compelled to consider this possibility. Still, he'd allowed an otherwise pleasant exchange to end on a bad note, thanks to his dislike of Thomas—or whatever else the reason was for the way he chose to speak.

"Well, let us ride," Mr Bingley's exuberant voice rang out from behind them as he walked with Jane at his side. Jane beamed, looking as though she were already Mrs Bingley.

"They appear well-suited, do they not?" Thomas remarked as he joined her. "I believe Mr Bingley may yet make an offer."

"Do you not think it too soon?" Elizabeth asked, but Thomas shook his head.

"When one knows, one knows. There are obstacles but they can be overcome if the heart wants it enough," he replied with a wink. "Speaking of obstacles. I observed you emerge from the library last night, by the way, with Mr Darcy still within. Did the two of you bury the hatchet at last?"

Elizabeth drew a sharp breath. "I was unaware you were awake."

"I was descending to help myself to some biscuits left in the drawing room when I saw you exit. Do you still consider him horrid?" Thomas prodded.

"You thought him not much better yesterday," she retorted.

"I did not, but Georgiana assures me her brother is kindness itself. And who am I to argue with a young lady?" he said, nodding his chin towards Georgiana, who smiled brightly back at him.

"She is fond of you," she observed.

"She is. But she is young, of good breeding, and entirely under her brother's thumb, so I maintain my distance. Her uncle is an earl, after all. And I know my place. Mind you, I feel that perhaps Miss Bingley may have a fondness for me also—in a decidedly less proper way," he added with a chuckle. Elizabeth gasped and playfully slapped his arm before giggling, which drew Mr Bingley's attention.

"Always so jovial, Thomas. I love to see it. Now, are we all ready?" he clapped his hands together.

"Mr Darcy has been ready since dawn," Caroline chimed in with a grin.

"Morning is the best time for riding," Mr Darcy asserted. "One can see the sunrise if one rises early enough, although it is too late now," he said, waving towards the sun that had already ascended.

“Ah well, I do beg your pardon for depriving you of the sight, but I had to ensure my guests had a hearty breakfast. But never mind that, we are all ready now, so let us ride out,” Mr Bingley declared, and the group made their way to their horses.

As they rode, small groups naturally formed, with Elizabeth riding alongside Miss Darcy, Mr Bingley with Mr Darcy and Thomas, whilst Jane found herself riding alongside Miss Bingley. The Hursts remained together, a little further to the right as they were engaged in conversation.

Elizabeth observed with keen attention. Miss Bingley appeared a little more inclined to listen to Jane, now they were riding together and Elizabeth hoped that this would give Miss Bingley a chance to change her opinion about Jane.

Up ahead, she beheld Mr Bingley and Thomas conversing with ease, whilst Mr Darcy seemed to interject only when prompted by Mr Bingley. Thomas, meanwhile, had no trouble at all entertaining Mr Bingley with whatever it was he spoke of. The two enjoyed an easy camaraderie that Mr Darcy seemed unable to join.

Why was that? Was he simply too stiff to allow himself some entertainment? Whatever it was, she was glad for Thomas, for Mr Bingley, while aware of his background, chose not to heed what was proper and had formed a genuine friendship.

Her gaze drifted to Mr Darcy again. There was a subtle tension in his posture, a flicker of something akin to jealousy as he watched the easy camaraderie between his friends.

“Might envy truly be the cause of his behaviour? How very ungentlemanly,” she muttered beneath her breath.

“What was that?” Georgiana enquired, turning to her.

“Oh, nothing. I sometimes mumble to myself without knowing what I say,” Elizabeth replied.

“I do as well,” Georgiana responded with an easy smile. “Elizabeth, if I may say so, I am glad you stayed at Netherfield for the night. I had a delightful evening, even if my brother appears perpetually in high dudgeon.”

“He is not as bad as all that,” Elizabeth found herself saying, surprising herself. “We conversed rather pleasantly last night.”

“You did? I am delighted. I do wish Fitzwilliam would be a trifle more open to new acquaintances. He finds it dreadfully hard to converse with those he does not know. But you know this.”

“I do indeed,” she replied, looking at the young woman.

“Your brother informed me he became your guardian at a young age. That must have been quite difficult—to lose your parents so young,” she said, and the young woman looked at her.

“Indeed, it was. But Fitzwilliam has always looked after me as best he can. Though it can be lonely at times, for my brother is always occupied with one thing or another and I am left with none but my attendant as there are no other people my own age at Pemberley,” she admitted. “When George lived with us, I always had a companion, but he and Fitzwilliam did not get along.”

She wanted to ask her more questions about this topic but found their time cut short when Georgiana turned to her.

“Say, do you mind if I gallop ahead? I adore jumping, and there is a fallen tree yonder that is ideal.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth replied. “Go ahead, although your brother will likely suffer apoplexy when he sees you.”

“Perhaps,” Georgiana replied, “but I shall hope that he will not see,” she called as she galloped ahead, her hair whipping behind her despite having pinned most of it up. Elizabeth smiled as she looked ahead at the group riders and breathed deeply.

It was a beautiful morning, and the sky was as clear as the ocean, with not a single cloud to be seen. She enjoyed being personable and conversing but it had been a long day with much conversation already, as well as a long day the day before, and thus some solitude was welcome.

However, as they rode deeper into the woods, she found herself falling behind the group, taken in by her surroundings. She was familiar with these woods, of course, and thus did not worry.

Alas, as she directed the horse along the brook, a sudden movement from within the bushes spooked Elizabeth’s horse who suddenly reared in fright. Time slowed, and she felt herself losing control; in a dreadful moment, she was thrown from the saddle, landing hard upon the ground.

Pain engulfed her, sharp and immediate, in her ankle as she attempted to rise. Struggling, Elizabeth winced and realised that her horse had run further away.

“Come, Bellevue,” she called for the mare but the horse only trotted further away. The rest of the group was some distance away, and she could no longer see them. She would have to walk, albeit carefully.

She hobbled along, forcing herself forward despite her discomfort. Each moment felt like an eternity, and as she reeled from the pain. Using trees to support herself as she clambered from one to the next, she felt both foolish and frightened. What if she hurt her foot further doing this?

“Miss Elizabeth?” A voice called and then a familiar figure emerged from the trees.

Mr Darcy.

“Miss Elizabeth!” he called, his brow furrowed with concern as he dismounted swiftly. He approached, scrutinising her with an intensity that made her heart race for reasons she could not easily define. “I saw your horse wander away riderless a little ahead,” he continued, his voice low yet urgent. “Are you hurt?”

She nodded slightly, her resolve wavering as she glanced down at her injured ankle. “It is nothing serious, truly,” she assured him, though the tremor in her voice betrayed her.

Mr Darcy knelt beside her, his demeanour shifting from worry to focus. “You need to rest,” he commanded gently, his tone wrapped in a tenderness that made her pulse quicken. Captivated by the sincerity in his gaze, Elizabeth found herself increasingly aware of the weight of his concern.

“Let me assist you upon my horse,” he offered, his strong hands reaching out. Hesitant, yet compelled by an unspoken force, she accepted his support as he offered his arm.

He clicked his tongue and his horse approached at once, making it clear he knew this stead better than she’d known her mare—naturally, given it was one of the estate horses.

She raised her right foot up into the stirrup, wincing as her weight was placed more upon her injured foot though Mr Darcy’s assistance kept some of it off. Then, he boosted her up and she found herself in upward motion until she was safely in the saddle.

“There we are,” he said. “Now, let us see if we cannot catch up to the others and find your horse. You are certain you are not hurt other than the foot?”

“I am. And thank you. I would have hobbled all the way back to Netherfield if not for you.”

“A very unadvisable activity on a twisted ankle, I am sure,” he said with a small smile. “Pray, how is it you were riding on your own? I thought I saw you with my sister.”

“I was with her but she wished to gallop ahead to…” she bit her tongue, remembering her conversation with Georgiana. However, he smiled and shook his head.

“She wished to leap over assorted objects,” he said. “I wish she would not but I cannot stop her from everything that might pose danger.”

“We wish we could, but we cannot always,” she conceded. Her thoughts drifted back to the Lucas Lodge and the conversation they’d had there. She wanted to find out more about what had happened between the Darcys and Mr Wickham—and now was her chance. After all, she was upon his horse and if he did not like the question he could not very well walk away. Gathering her courage, she cleared her throat.

“Sir, will you tell me why it is you did not wish Mr Wickham to speak to your sister? She appeared quite fond of him. She mentioned him when we rode together as a dear companion in her youth.”

Mr Darcy bit his lip and stared up ahead, his hand tightening around the horse’s lead. It took him a moment before he returned his gaze to her.

“I suppose I ought to tell you, since the matter continues to come up. Very well. Wickham was my father’s ward. He was always the sort of man who could not be trusted. He also possessed an ease of charm, that allowed him to endear himself to all. My father adored him, almost as a second son, and Georgiana looked up to him. However, I knew him, I knew what he was—if we were to label it, I would say he is not to be trusted.” He narrowed his eyes. “I do not say this because he is beneath me in station; I say this because I have known him since boyhood. He is quite adept at taking advantage. And he sought to take

advantage of Georgiana.”

Elizabeth was perplexed. “But how?”

Mr Darcy shrugged. “Two years ago, he returned from wherever he had been... I do not recall the particulars. He requested funds, having squandered all the money I had previously provided him after my father’s demise.”

Elizabeth raised a hand. “He received an inheritance.” Something in her tone must have conveyed she had learned something else.

Mr Darcy scoffed. “Did he tell you that he had a living assigned to him which I rescinded? That is what he recounted to Georgiana. That is what he told several others. It is not the truth. He rejected my father’s generosity. I must confess that when he stated he did not desire the living and would prefer financial remuneration instead, I was grateful. I did not wish him near Pemberley for the rest of my life, nor for Georgiana’s. I gladly granted him the funds, but I was always aware he may return—and he did, asking for more.”

“I declined, yet I knew that would not be the end of it. I understood he would certainly have ulterior motives, and he did. He took residence in Lambton, the town near Pemberley, and sought visits with Georgiana. I could not very well forbid it, as she had always viewed him as a sort of cousin.”

He paused before continuing, “In due course, I grew concerned regarding the amount of time he spent with Georgiana. I took her away for a while to stay with my aunt at Rosings Park. While there, I received a letter from his godmother, Mrs Younge, a former employee of ours who had left earlier in the year. She informed me that Wickham’s plan was to lure Georgiana into believing herself moon eyed over him and then whisk her away to Gretna Green to forever tie himself to my fortune.”

“I see,” she admitted. “Some time ago, when he first arrived in Meryton, he spent substantial time with my younger sisters, particularly Lydia who has a fondness for officers. Thomas advised our father against it, having heard certain disquieting things regarding Mr Wickham, which prompted my father to prevent my sisters from associating with him too frequently. I was foolish and continued my friendship with him, believing him to be genuine. Then he diverted his attention to a young lady in town who had come into her fortune and I saw less of him.”

Mr Darcy raised his eyebrows, then lowered them with a shrug. “That is George Wickham. He easily charms others. And not solely young ladies.”

She was unsure of his meaning but did not wish to press further.

“I have grown wise to him now,” Elizabeth said, “but Georgiana still appears fond of him if her words are anything to go by.”

“She is, as I never confided the truth. In her letter, Mrs Younge detailed several incidents in which Wickham had been involved—illegal schemes, debts accrued, matters of that nature. Things I could have used to warn Georgiana away from him, and then he vanished. I dread that had he lingered any longer, he may have wormed his way into Georgiana’s affections, but she was merely young then. She is still only seventeen now.”

Elizabeth gasped. “I do not wish to think of what might have happened had we not been warned. And I am even more thankful that Thomas had his doubts about Mr Wickham before he could harm my family.”

“I must say, as am I. I would not have liked to have seen harm come to you and yours, Miss Elizabeth,” he said. She glanced down at him and recalled all the unsavoury tales Mr Wickham had recounted regarding Mr Darcy and realised they were nothing but fabrications.

At least if what Mr Darcy had said was true, and frankly, she had no reason to doubt him; much of his account aligned with what she had already gleaned about Mr Wickham. She had continued to engage Mr Wickham, wanting to believe that somewhere within, he was a decent man. But he was not. She could not explain why she believed Mr Darcy, but she did.

As they walked on, her thoughts turned to the things Thomas had said about him. That Mr Darcy, had been raised a certain way to believe certain things. Perhaps some of his haughtiness could be excused by his upbringing. And perhaps he was capable of change, of seeing the error of his ways. Could it be that in due course he might find he was wrong about his assessments of the Bennets and Meryton in general?

For, weren’t Jane and Thomas correct in their assertion that a man who was of noble character like Mr Bingley would not be friends with a man who was inherently contrary and unpleasant?

No, for the man she was with now was wholly pleasant yet troubled. Having become a guardian to a small child while having lost his parents at a young age had to have been hard, especially with a man like Mr Wickham thrown into it all.

“Mr Darcy,” she started. “Perhaps it would be beneficial to tell your sister the truth about Mr Wickham. She might not be so quick to seek his company if she knew.”

He looked up, a softness in his eyes. “I have pondered this many a time before, Miss Elizabeth. But the truth is I do not want to tarnish what little memories she has left of her childhood that were good. She was so young when our mother died she hardly remembers her, and our father—many of the memories she has contain Wickham. I do not want to rob her of those.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached for him then and she found herself full of empathy for the first time because she understood then the burden he carried for the sake of his sister. It did not mean his prior actions or his haughty opinions were to be excused, but she realised now there was another side to him—a side she had refused to truly see before.

She wished to continue their conversation but alas, she saw then that was not to be for up ahead, was their group—and it had grown exponentially in numbers.

She spotted her younger sisters along with Charlotte Lucas and her mother, as well as some of the younger Lucas children.

“There they are,” she said and nodded ahead. And when she looked down at Mr Darcy, she saw his visage had once again hardened and whatever progress they had made in bringing down his walls had been halted in light of another social gathering he was clearly not ready to participate in.

# *Chapter Sixteen*

## *Darcy*

“Who are those children?” he enquired upon seeing the crowd ahead. He had not been prepared to socialise to such a degree and the sight of the gathering made him feel rather uncomfortable. It was one thing to go out riding with people he knew. Indeed, he had even enjoyed the conversation with Miss Elizabeth for the last half hour or so since finding her in distress.

He’d looked forward to continuing the conversation, in fact, but that was now cut short.

“The little boy with the blond hair is Peter Lucas, and the other is Harold their cousin. And there is my dear friend Charlotte,” she said, pointing ahead. “Oh, and it seems they have laid out a picnic. I now lament the large breakfast I ate this morning,” she remarked.

Darcy returned her smile, not due to any anticipation of the assembly they were about to join, but rather because Elizabeth appeared to be in better spirits. He had found himself concerned for her more than he had expected, yet he felt grateful that she displayed signs of recovery.

“Do you wish to join them?” he asked, “or would you prefer to venture into town for your ankle to be attended to?”

She glanced down at her foot, then at the gathering, and Darcy discerned immediately what her decision would be. She longed to be amongst the others. She was a social being, unlike him. Tentatively, she moved her foot back and forth, grimacing slightly, yet not as painfully as before.

“I believe I shall be quite all right, provided I might sit. If you would be so kind as to assist me down when we get there?”

“Of course I will,” he replied, conscious not to let any apprehension colour his tone. “And then I will look for your horse.”

“Ah, a reason to escape,” she teased. “Pray, tell the truth, Mr Darcy, was it not rather convenient for you that I fell and you discovered me, thus allowing you to escort me back to be seen to and evade the entire spectacle?”

He smiled. “It is not so easy for me to be sociable,” he conceded. “Among those I know well enough, it is practicable, yet I find it difficult when surrounded by strangers. I truly admire how easily you connect with others.”

“Oh, I am certain a gentleman of your standing finds it easy, too,” she replied, her tone more earnest.

He regarded her thoughtfully; it was true that his status influenced his comportment, yet it was far more complex than that. He had always been somewhat reserved, as Bingley would suggest, in public settings. His mother had remarked that he took considerable time to warm to others before forming friendships. And his father often lamented his lack of easy unreservedness something the late Mr Darcy admired in Wickham.

“At times, I wish I could emulate Wickham in that regard—not in any other, mind you. Yet the truth remains, he finds it effortlessly simple to charm,” she acknowledged. “He could walk into any inn or tavern and walk out with five new friends.”

“Five friends? He could cheat at a card game or take advantage of the naïve, if all you have related of him and what Thomas has indicated is accurate, Mr Darcy.”

“Indeed, that is true. Yet in that instant, he would have had five new companions. I wager that is how he has managed these past years—roaming from place to place, winning people over, until he could no longer contain himself and spoiled everything.” Darcy had not spent much time thinking of Wickham and his exploits over the last few years but with his sudden appearance here, he had to. “I believe being taken in as our ward gave him a sense of being superior to others and allowed him to build such confidence that he might not have had if he’d remained a mere steward’s son.”

“There are such individuals in life. Yet not all wards are of that ilk. Some are simply driven by the desire to be good, to live as joyously as they can under the circumstances,” Elizabeth said as the horse neared the clearing.

He cast a glance at her, remembering their conversation from the previous evening, which had remained amiable until he felt compelled to speak poorly of Thomas once more.

Looking up, he spotted the young man seated with Bingley, Miss Bennet, and Georgiana. The sight struck him like a

dagger in his side. Feelings and memories he'd long suppressed had resurfaced of late and he did not like it. In fact, he was in such discomfort he had contemplated departing early, taking Georgiana with him, yet she seemed to be relishing her time.

Nevertheless, the thought lingered in his mind. If only he did not find Elizabeth's company so enticing, even if vexing at times. This was another reason he had not been able to bring himself to leave yet. If only her smile did not draw forth emotions he wished to avoid. Life would be so much less complicated.

At length, however, he could not dwell on such thoughts, for they had arrived at the gathering. Upon noticing Elizabeth perched awkwardly on the horse, both Jane and Lydia Bennet hastened over to her, soon followed by Thomas.

"Pray, what has transpired?" Lydia enquired. "We came here for a picnic and found you not here. I thought you had ridden into the woods as you are prone to do but here you are, looking dishevelled!"

"I tumbled from the foolish horse," Elizabeth explained. "The horse ran away, leaving me stranded. Mr Darcy gallantly came to my aid."

"Fitzwilliam!" Georgiana exclaimed as she joined him. "What has happened? Oh dear, are you injured, Elizabeth? Shall we fetch help?"

"I can summon help at once," Bingley offered as he approached the throng. Darcy felt a wave of warmth rise beneath his collar, not due to the sun, but from the sudden attention surrounding them.

Fortuitously, the larger part of the group lingered behind as he turned to aid Elizabeth in dismounting the horse. As he steadied her, he felt her delicate waist beneath his fingers, and for a moment, struggled against the desire to inhale her scent.

The woman was driving him to distraction. He carefully set her down, and Thomas swiftly wrapped his arm about her to assist her in walking.

"I do not require aid, Mr Bingley, but I thank you for your concern. I only wish to sit and if someone could look for the horse," she said.

"Lizzy, come sit! Let me take a look," Jane Bennet urged before addressing Darcy. "Thank you, Mr Darcy, for your assistance."

"Of course," Darcy replied, following the group as they made their way beneath the tree once more.

Immediately, her foot was examined with care by her sister, aided by Lady Lucas, who had also joined the gathering. Darcy blinked and turned to Bingley.

"Bingley, where have all these people appeared from? I was unaware there was to be a picnic."

"There was not," Bingley informed him, "but when I sent word to the Bennet family that their charges would be staying with me and that we were to ride out in the morning, Mr Bennet responded, stating that his younger daughters, accompanied by some of their friends, wished to orchestrate a picnic in our honour. I thought it a splendid surprise, do you not agree?"

"A splendid surprise indeed," Darcy replied, though in truth, it was anything but.

"Come, sit," Bingley beckoned. "Thomas was just telling us about a rather hidden fishing spot he discovered."

Darcy sighed and settled down, vowing to conduct himself with civility.

Indeed, as he leaned against the tree with his hat at his side, he found, in due course, that the gathering was not quite as dreadful as he had anticipated.

He conversed primarily with Elizabeth, Charlotte Lucas, and her mother, Lady Lucas, who were keeping them company.

Meanwhile, Bingley and Thomas had excused themselves to look for the horse, a venture that bore fruit rather quickly and the errant horse was returned to the others.

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As the afternoon wore on, Miss Elizabeth's foot improved, the slight swelling going down soon enough. The group made merry and ate while Georgiana was participating in a game of shuttlecock with Mary, Kitty, and Lydia Bennet.

This sight did little to comfort him, as he recalled Lydia Bennet's boisterous behaviour at Lucas Lodge and doubted it would serve as suitable companionship for his sister. Yet, for the time being, he refrained from expressing any concern.



“She is quite skilled,” Charlotte remarked, indicating Georgiana.

“Indeed, she is. We play often,” he replied.

“You do?” Elizabeth responded. “Pray, you must join us in a game! Perhaps when my ankle has recovered, you and I shall engage in a match.”

He could not help but smile. “That is a challenge I shall gladly accept,” he said.

“Mr Darcy,” Caroline interjected, drawing his attention as she wandered over from her sister’s side. The frown creasing her brow suggested she took little pleasure in the gathering.

“Shall we take a turn? It is such a lovely day and my sister Louisa is such a bore and does not wish to.” Knowing it would be discourteous to refuse, he rose, took his leave from Elizabeth and her companions, and approached Caroline. He linked arms with her and strolled towards the path that led past the shuttlecock game.

He observed his sister swing the bat, sending the shuttlecock soaring across the field towards a giggling Lydia Bennet.

“I must say, I have never attended such a lively gathering,” Caroline remarked.

“I was alarmed at first, but it is not quite as boisterous as I had expected,” he replied. “It is, indeed...”

Caroline raised an eyebrow. “Enjoyable? I never thought I would hear you utter such sentiments, Mr Darcy. Have you merely grown accustomed to the proceedings now, or is it due to some particular young lady who has captured your attention?”

He met her gaze, shaking his head. “Certainly not.”

Caroline pursed her lips. “Well, that makes one of you. I perceive that young Mr Bennet has taken quite a fancy to Miss Georgiana,” she said. “I observed him looking at her earlier with that gaze gentlemen employ when they are...”

Darcy stiffened. “He is no gentleman,” he muttered under his breath, though loud enough for Caroline to hear.

“Indeed not. And I have cautioned your sister accordingly. There is no need to thank me. I regard her almost as my own younger sister, and it is my duty to ensure she comprehends the nature of the company she keeps.”

“I am grateful,” he said, “but what do you make of the younger sisters?” He was unsure why he enquired, as he already knew her answer.

“Rowdy, uncouth, not accomplished enough to secure advantageous matches. Is that your assessment as well?” she enquired, to which he nodded.

“I shall concede that it appears the eldest Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth are the only ones possessing any refinement,” he remarked.

“Miss Bennet, certainly. Her only flaw appears to be her relations,” Caroline echoed. “And yes, there is something about Miss Eliza, is there not? Although I would not necessarily brand her as accomplished.”

Darcy was on the verge of defending Miss Bennet when Georgiana called his name.

“Fitzwilliam!”

He released Caroline’s arm and turned towards her.

“Yes, Georgiana?” he replied.

“Pray, there shall be a dance in Meryton this coming weekend. May I go?”

He frowned. “A dance?” He looked at Caroline, assuming she would have knowledge of such an event.

She shook her head. “I heard of no such event.”

“Lydia just informed me. It is at the residence of one of her friends. It shall undoubtedly be a lovely affair, and Lydia is to go along with her sisters and their mother, thus providing me with a chaperone,” she continued, her eyes wide with excitement.

“No,” Darcy declared. “Absolutely not.”

“But why not, brother? I shall not be alone, and I am almost eighteen.”

“But you are not yet. You are my charge, and I do not know any of the individuals who will be present at this ball.”

“Yes, naturally you do. You know all of the Bennets and Charlotte and Maria Lucas. Pray, if Thomas comes along, then I would have a male companion to look out for me, as well,” she added, unaware this weakened her argument considerably.

Darcy felt a wave of vertigo wash over him as he struggled to suppress his dismay. This was becoming increasingly dire. He should have understood better than to permit his sister to associate with the younger Bennets. He had already harboured concerns, yet the younger ones seemed to lack any semblance of decorum. Even now they bellowed and whopped as they played in a manner unbecoming of young ladies.

“No,” he stated firmly. “It is settled. She shall spend the weekend with me and the Bingleys, and that is final.”

“But brother,” she protested.

“No,” he reiterated, wagging his finger to emphasise his point.

Georgiana dropped her shoulders, shaking her head as she headed back to the shuttlecock field, where she raised her arms and dropped them dramatically.

“Good on you, Darcy! Quite right, indeed. You must not allow her to walk all over you. You may be her brother, yet you remain her guardian. She must respect you.”

“Quite right, Caroline, quite right,” he affirmed.

“I daresay, Mr Darcy,” Caroline continued, “it may be prudent to limit the amount of time your sister spends in the company of the Bennets. Any Bennet, in fact. We would not want her to form too significant an attachment. My father always maintained that a lady’s worth is not solely in her accomplishments, but also in the company she keeps. I was rather disturbed to witness her think nothing of Thomas’s standing.”

Darcy nodded in agreement. His sister was youthful and naïve; he understood this. In order to protect her, he would have to adhere to Caroline’s counsel and keep her away from the Bennets as much as possible.

# *Chapter Seventeen*

## *Elizabeth*

“**W**hat a delightful day! What a lovely evening! Indeed, what a grand time we had!” Jane exclaimed as they returned to Longbourn. Mr Bingley’s servants had repaired their carriage, after extricating it from the mire, and it appeared none of its vital components had sustained damage.

“Oh, Jane,” Thomas replied, “I am pleased to hear you feel that way. It certainly appears you had quite the pleasurable experience. And might I add, Mr Bingley seems to have enjoyed himself as well.”

“Indeed,” Jane responded, “even Mr Darcy managed to appear not entirely miserable for a time.”

“Yes, until he took himself off for a promenade with Miss Caroline,” Elizabeth observed. “She seemed rather glum after that. Mr Darcy as well, for he appeared rather downcast.” She had hoped their conversation might continue, but upon his return, he rejoined them and spoke not a word to her, save for a brief farewell as he and Georgiana departed for Netherfield ahead of the others.

“I daresay it is due to Georgiana’s request to attend the ball,” Jane surmised. “Mr Darcy would not allow it.”

“Indeed! I suspect the affair does not suit his tastes,” Thomas remarked. “I doubt he wishes for his sister to associate with common folk.”

“We are equal in standing to the Darcys,” Elizabeth protested. “Our father is a gentleman, just as Mr Darcy is. In fact, we outrank the Bingleys,” she added, and Thomas nodded in agreement.

“Indeed, your father is a gentleman. But as for mine, I am uncertain. He may very well be a stable boy, a tradesman, or a sailor,” he remarked with a shrug.

“None who value you would concern themselves with your father’s station,” Jane countered.

“Mr Darcy does,” Thomas pointed out. “Lizzy appears to have risen in his estimation but not I.”

“Yet his sister does,” Jane said with a smile, but Thomas scowled.

“That matters not at all. I believe it is Mr Darcy’s sudden change in mood that stems from this incident, and not to mention that Miss Caroline is not one to elevate the spirits of her company.”

Elizabeth could not restrain a snicker, whilst Jane emitted a disgruntled huff, evidently protective of the woman who might soon become her sister-in-law.

“If her remarks to Mr Darcy at the Meryton assembly serve as any indication,” Elizabeth remarked, “I must concur with Thomas.

“Well, whatever the situation may entail, Mr Darcy may have succeeded in preventing his sister from attending our ball, but there will soon be a dance at Netherfield.”

“There will?” Jane exclaimed, curious.

“Indeed! Shortly after Mr Darcy and his sister departed, Lydia and Kitty, aided by your friend Charlotte Lucas, managed to persuade Mr Bingley to hold a ball at Netherfield.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said, not surprised at her sisters’ attempts to convince Mr Bingley of such a venture but quite taken aback by Charlotte’s involvement. Yet, recalling Charlotte’s lamentations regarding the scarcity of dances in their vicinity, it was not altogether unexpected.

“And when, pray tell, shall this cherished ball take place?” Thomas enquired.

“On Saturday,” Jane replied, “and I fear...” she halted, wide-eyed as a horse halted suddenly on its way home. “Goodness gracious, it cannot be...”

Elizabeth looked up, and indeed, a groan escaped her lips, for standing in the yard of Longbourn was her cousin, Mr Collins.

“Did we know of his impending arrival?” she said with dismay.

“We did not,” Thomas growled. He and Mr Collins regarded each other with an animosity that was almost tangible, and Thomas made it a point to vacate the estate whenever he was aware of Mr Collins’s visit. “I would not be present if I had known.”

“Perhaps he is merely passing through?” Jane suggested. “One can only hope,” Elizabeth replied as the carriage came to a halt by the house. She and Jane exited effortlessly, while Thomas manoeuvred the vehicle around back to the stable yard. They waited for him at the front, and the prolonged absence told Elizabeth that he had contemplated retreating as on previous occasions, perhaps to seek refuge at the Phillips home until Mr Collins had departed. Finally, he appeared around the corner, a countenance decidedly glum.

“Come, let us go greet our cousin,” he said with all the enthusiasm of a man marching towards his doom.

The three made their way through the front door, shrugged off their outer garments, and made their entrance into the drawing room, where Mr Collins had taken up residence with their parents. Their mother wore an expression suggesting displeasure with the visit, whilst their father bore his customary amiable smile, ever present when their cousin was upon the scene.

“There you are!” he exclaimed, rising immediately. “Dear cousins Elizabeth and Jane, what a pleasure it is to see you!” He cast his eyes upwards towards Thomas, who loomed over him by nearly a head. “And the young ward. It has been some time since we met!”

“Not all that long,” Thomas began, but Mr Bennet quickly intervened.

“It has been, indeed. The two of you have been like ships passing in the night. Thomas is a very busy fellow, constantly performing errands for me, travelling to town and to Hertford. How fortunate it is that you should encounter one another!” he continued, turning to the three of them. “Apparently, Mr Collins wrote ahead to inform us of his visit, but his letter has yet to arrive.”

“The Royal Postal Service cannot be relied upon,” Mr Collins interjected. “I should have followed my esteemed mistress’s advice and sent it via messenger, but I was inclined to save a few shillings,” he said, shrugging dismissively. “Nevertheless, all is well. We are family after all, and I was merely informing Mrs Bennet, that if it is a bother, then I could find alternate lodgings. However, your dear mother would not hear of it.”

“Certainly not!” Mrs Bennet chirped. “We are, as you say, family. Now, Elizabeth, Jane, would you be so kind as to find Hill and request she prepare the guest room in the attic?”

“In the attic?” Mr Collins echoed. “I fear it shall be quite challenging for me to ascend to the attic multiple times a day. I have just recovered from a cold. Might it not be possible for me to occupy the chamber in the back, near the kitchen?”

“You mean my chamber?” Thomas said incredulously.

“Do you still reside in that room?” Collins asked. “It has been some time since I last laid eyes upon you. I assumed, perhaps, you had procured accommodations of your own. However, I would not wish to impose upon you during my stay here.”

Elizabeth felt the heat of indignation rising within her, so much so that she believed smoke might soon issue from her ears. The very manner of Mr Collins’s speech, the phrases he chose ‘this home’ instead of ‘your home’, ‘while you are staying here’ and ‘accommodations of your own’ all intended to undermine Thomas, hinting that he was not truly considered part of the family. She longed to unleash her fury upon Mr Collins, yet she recognised that it would only serve to exacerbate the matter. Already, her mother wore an expression that suggested she might soon seek the comfort of smelling salts.

“Thomas,” she said urgently.

He raised his hands in surrender. “Very well. I shall move to the attic for the fortnight. Mr Collins is welcome to stay in my chamber and sleep in my bed—only permit me to remove a few of my belongings first.” He turned and departed towards the kitchen, while Elizabeth followed closely behind.

“Thomas,” she said tentatively.

“It is entirely right, Lizzy. We are all aware of his character. He shall not allow us to forget that this will be his home upon your father’s demise. And indeed it will be, for this is but our dwelling until he permits us to remain. The moment he becomes master of Longbourn, I shall be compelled to find shelter elsewhere.”

“It is quite strange that he harbours such aversion towards you, given that we are cousins,” she mused. “Indeed, I think he perceives you as a threat.”

“A threat to what?” Thomas replied, incredulous. “I cannot legitimately inherit Longbourn. All I can claim is the love and affection of this family.”

“I believe that is what he wants—the love and respect we share. He knows he shall never possess it, and so he directs his ire towards you.”

“I fear you are correct, Elizabeth. In any event, I must gather my belongings. You ought to rest, for just because you can walk on your ankle again does not imply you should not elevate it. Indeed, you should consult a surgeon for an examination.”

“Ah, the dutiful guardian,” Elizabeth said, placing a hand on Thomas’s arm.

She then departed, returning to her chamber. Her ankle throbbed with pain if she placed excess weight upon it; thus she walked cautiously, leaning on the front of her foot rather than the back.

Once upstairs, she reclined on her bed and elevated her foot on a pillow, her heart and mind wild with conflicting feelings. Mr Collins’s pretentious airs, Mr Darcy’s ever-changing temper—all of it agitated her. Just as she felt herself on the cusp of slumber, another thought surged forth.

Mr Bingley had invited them all to the ball that Saturday. The entire family. And that included not only them, but also Mr Collins.

# *Chapter Eighteen*

## *Darcy*

That evening, Darcy found himself back in the familiar walls of Netherfield Park. Seated in an armchair by the window, his gaze fixed absently on the view. He had not intended to attend this particular gathering, but an urgent summons from Caroline and Louisa Hurst, and the ever-indulgent Mr Hurst, made it inevitable.

Caroline Bingley's eyes flicked towards him. "Mr Darcy," she began, her eyes lighting up with a mixture of amusement and malice, "Mr Hurst has made enquiries into the background of the Bennet family."

Darcy's jaw tightened imperceptibly. "He has indeed? And what, pray, has he discovered?"

"Tell him, Victor," Mrs Hurst prodded her husband.

Mr Hurst, who had been half-listening to the exchange while flicking through a newspaper, looked up. "The Bennets?" he said lazily. "Ah, yes, my man in London has informed me of their true circumstances. It is as we thought, the estate is entailed away from them but even without this circumstance, things are dire. Mr Bennet, as it happens, has an income of just two thousand pounds a year."

Mrs Hurst let out a small grunt of surprise, clearly unimpressed. "Two thousand pounds a year? Good heavens! Hardly the kind of fortune one would hope for in a family with five daughters, don't you think? No wonder they are so desperate to marry them off."

Hurst nodded. "Indeed. And the family's estate is entailed to Mr Bennet's second cousin once removed, I believe. Such a situation renders the Bennets prospects quite precarious. One could not, of course, consider them as proper in-laws based on this alone."

"They are not entirely unrespectable," Darcy heard himself say, despite what he truly believed. "Their financial circumstances are unfortunate, yes. But we must give credit where it is due."

Caroline's smile widened, though it did little to mask the pointedness of her words. "Oh, I am sure Miss Elizabeth possesses all the character one could wish for. As does Miss Bennet herself, who is a delight to be around." Her eyes glittered as she glanced at Darcy, her voice dipping into something almost conspiratorial. "But surely, despite your admiration for Miss Elizabeth, it is clear Miss Bennet is no match for my brother."

"It is not ideal," Darcy conceded, not wishing to give any attention to Caroline's comments regarding Elizabeth. He knew she meant to set his bristles up and he would not let her succeed. Or rather, he would not let her know she already had. "But it cannot be denied your brother is very fond of her."

Louisa, intrigued by the direction the conversation was heading, chose to add her voice to the matter. "Well, if Miss Bennet is to be considered for Charles's affections, then surely the entire family must be taken into account. A woman's social standing is often defined by her family, after all."

Caroline seized the opportunity to deliver her final blow. "Indeed, and Miss Bennet's family is hardly the sort of company we would want to keep. Her mother's vulgarity—of which I have heard much talk in town—and her father's indifference. It would all reflect terribly on Charles, would it not, Mr Darcy? To say nothing of the sisters, who appear mad for officers."

Darcy wanted to defend Elizabeth and her family but at the same time, he could not deny that they were correct. After all, he'd forbidden Georgiana from attending a ball with the Bennets because he worried for their influence. Surely, such a family could not be tied to his dearest friend.

The fire crackled in the corner, filling the room with its soft, rhythmic warmth, but the silence that followed was heavy, laden with unspoken thoughts and the tension of half-buried emotions. Darcy sat back in his chair, his thoughts racing, but he was not yet ready to confront the full depth of his feelings for Elizabeth.

"You must know," Caroline said, her voice smooth and deliberately sweet, when she spoke again, "that Mr Collins has arrived in Meryton."

"Collins?" Louisa asked and Darcy raised his head.

“The cousin upon whom the estate is entailed,” Mr Hurst explained as he consulted a paper by his side. “A vicar, from Kent. You might know him, Darcy. He lives at the Hunsford Parsonage.”

“Hunsford you say?” Darcy said at once alarmed. “I am familiar with him.”

Indeed, Rosings Park was a place that Darcy avoided whenever possible. He had known Lady Catherine all his life, and though he respected her in many ways, her condescending attitude and belief in her superiority were tiresome. As for Mr Collins, Darcy had never had the misfortune of having much interaction with him, but from what he had observed, the man was a walking embarrassment. The mere thought of him—his fawning, his inability to take the slightest hint of sarcasm, and his overestimation of his own worth—was enough to make Darcy’s stomach churn.

“I have met Collins. He is the vicar at my aunt’s estate. She holds him in high regard but the same cannot be said for others who have met him,” Darcy said, his voice cool. “I do not imagine he would be much of an asset to anyone in this company.”

“Oh, indeed! I recall you telling us tales of the man now. He sounds rather... interesting. My maid tells me that the ward and this Mr Collins dislike one another greatly, and that the family is rather embarrassed by him also,” Caroline replied, her face a perfect mask of amusement.

“I cannot blame them,” Darcy conceded. “He is somewhat of a bumbling fool, if memory serves me right.”

“Then perhaps he is not without merit in one regard—he is, after all, the heir to Longbourn. It is so... fascinating, don’t you think?” Caroline smiled broadly, looking rather like a cat about to indulge in a mouse.

Darcy raised an eyebrow at the comment. “Heir to Longbourn?” he repeated, his tone even more clipped than before. He could scarcely believe it. As if this entire sordid affair could not get any more complicated.

Caroline nodded. “It seems a most unfortunate turn of events for the Bennet family. Longbourn will be inherited by Mr Collins upon Mr Bennet’s death, as the estate is entailed to him. Mr Bennet’s daughters, as you know, cannot inherit the property themselves, and so it passes to this... parson.”

Darcy’s thoughts raced. He could not help but feel an additional layer of contempt for a man who had so readily accepted an inheritance that had come at the expense of the Bennet family, and particularly for someone as self-important and disagreeable as Collins.

Caroline’s voice interrupted his musing. “Mr Collins, I daresay, will be most useful in reminding Charles of the Bennet family’s unsuitability. He is willing to ignore their lack of a son, their lack of refinement—but he will not be able to ignore the heir’s unsuitability, I am sure.”

Louisa, who had been sitting idly, now spoke up with an air of quiet contemplation. “We must admit, the upcoming ball at Netherfield is the perfect opportunity to show our dear brother just how... inappropriate the Bennet family truly is. It’s clear that Miss Bennet has made an impression on him, and perhaps it is best that he sees just what kind of connections she has.”

Caroline’s smile grew more satisfied as she continued. “Indeed, Louisa. I doubt the Bennets can conduct themselves in an appropriate manner at a prestigious ball and Charles will surely be able to see the family for what it truly is. And we shall invite Mr Collins, of course. It will be a wonderful opportunity for him to showcase his character and perhaps draw further attention to the disparities between Miss Bennet’s family and our own.”

Darcy, though he had no great liking for Collins, found himself agreeing with Caroline’s logic, albeit with a slight sense of distaste. The man’s presence would certainly make the Bennets’ shortcomings even more glaring, especially in the refined circles to which Bingley belonged. Still, he did not wish to humiliate Elizabeth or Jane Bennet. They did not deserve it. But then again, what was more important? Sparing their feelings? Or ensuring his best friend—and his own sister—were spared from the unfortunate connection?

# *Chapter Nineteen*

## *Elizabeth*

**T**he evening of the grand ball had arrived, and the house at Longbourn was filled with a bustle of activity that could scarcely be contained within its modest rooms.

“Oh, Jane, hurry up with that hair! We mustn’t be late for Mr Bingley,” Mrs Bennet exclaimed, her voice strained with the urgency of the moment. “You are the picture of elegance already, but a little more time spent on your hair and complexion, and he’ll never be able to resist!”

Jane, her face alight with excitement, was seated at the vanity, carefully arranging her hair with the assistance of her sisters. “I hope Mr Bingley takes notice of me,” she said softly, her eyes shining with hope.

“Of course, he’ll take notice of you,” Elizabeth replied with a teasing smile. “You are the only one who ever looks so perfect without trying. Besides, this ball is not because Lydia wanted it, it is because Mr Bingley wanted to see you again, to dance with you. He’d never have agreed so readily if not for you. I dare say, you could appear covered head to toe in mud and hay and he would have eyes only for you.”

“Oh, nonsense, Lizzy,” Mrs Bennet interjected, bustling over with a hand on Jane’s shoulder. “Do not waste time with such remarks. Jane must appear perfect. If she is perfect, then Mr Bingley will propose without hesitation. Now, we must go down. Please, now,” she rushed them. “I want to see Jane in a better light.”

She rushed Elizabeth, Kitty, and Lydia downstairs while Jane followed. Once the family was settled in the drawing room, she examined Jane and when she deemed her perfectly coiffed, her attention turned to the other sisters.

“Now, Lizzy, you mustn’t be too forward, control your tongue. And you,” she turned towards Mary, “you must simply play the pianoforte, show your skill. Show them how accomplished and sensible you are!”

“Indeed, Mother,” Mary said primly, not even glancing up from her sheet music.

“Oh, Mr Bennet, I do hope Mr Bingley proposes tonight. I’m sure he will. Jane is such a sweet, sensible girl,” Mrs Bennet said, turning towards her husband, who was seated by the fire with a newspaper in hand, completely unconcerned with the frenzy around him.

“Hmm?” Mr Bennet grunted, barely glancing up. “Yes, my dear. I’m certain it will happen.” He sounded, as always, more interested in the quiet of his chair than in his wife’s fervent hopes.

“Well, if you say so, then it must be true,” Mrs Bennet said with a self-satisfied nod before turning to her daughters again. “Now, don’t you dawdle, girls! We must be perfectly on time and perfectly behaved. We must catch them, as you know, and they have to fall in love at first sight.”

“And pray, who is them?” Elizabeth asked.

“Lizzy, do not test my nerves tonight. You know perfectly well. The Bingleys have many connections and I am certain a great number of their London friends will be here, and perhaps some gentlemen from up North. Whomever, we must impress them. Five daughters, and none wed. I will not have it, I declare!”

In the midst of the chaos, Mr Collins arrived. He strode into the drawing room, looking every bit the picture of self-importance in his voluminous coat and pale stockings. His hair, though carefully styled, looked as if it had been shaped to resemble a head of overgrown cabbage, perfectly absurd in its attempt at formality.

“Good evening, good evening, my dear Mrs Bennet!” he boomed, addressing her in a manner that almost bordered on reverent. “How delightful it is to join you and your esteemed daughters in such a pleasant occasion! How well I am already prepared to appear in the most agreeable company tonight—though I must admit, I am rather nervous! But of course, a man of my standing must not shy away from opportunities to improve his social connections.”

Mrs Bennet, who had been hurriedly tying Jane’s sash, now turned with a wide smile, that was as false as her sweet tone. “Ah, Mr Collins, so kind of you to join us. I trust you will enjoy the ball immensely. But Jane, my dear, please do stop fidgeting with your dress! You simply must wear the ribbon I chose—it will show off your beauty so. Mr Collins, do you not think so? It shall impress Mr Bingley and push him to propose at last.”



Mr Collins puffed out his chest, clearly pleased by the opportunity to offer his opinion. “Ah, yes! Miss Bennet, of course! I can see how her beauty will captivate Mr Bingley!” He beamed at Jane, though his gaze lacked true appreciation and was rather more mechanical than genuine.

He took a step forward, and suddenly aware of the lateness of the hour, added with an air of self-importance, “It is rather late, we must leave. As my esteemed patroness always says, lateness is never acceptable under any circumstances.”

As he spoke, he turned towards Elizabeth, who had been quietly observing her mother and the absurd Mr Collins with some amusement. “Cousin Elizabeth,” he said, bowing with an exaggerated flourish, “what a charming lady you are. Your modesty, your grace! You will, of course, allow me to offer you a dance tonight?”

Elizabeth, who had long been used to Mr Collins’s over-the-top manner, could not help but smile wryly. “I shall be most happy to join you for a dance, Mr Collins, though I must warn you, I am not a very accomplished dancer.”

“Ah, a modesty that is the mark of a true lady!” he exclaimed. “Do not be concerned! I shall guide you through every step with utmost care and precision. The clumsy feet of some others at this ball shall be no obstacle for us, I assure you.”

Just then, Thomas entered the room and raised his eyebrows at Mr Collins, though said nothing.

“The carriages are ready,” he simply stated. As the entire family and Mr Collins were going, they were forced to make use of Mr Collins’s vehicle, which left them in even more debt to him than before.

“Well, we can’t be late!” Mrs Bennet cried, pulling Jane to her feet. “Do hurry, girls! Let us be on our way—Mr Bingley is waiting!”

As the family hurried to the door, Mr Collins’s loud voice continued to fill the room, though he was left behind, still muttering to himself about his duties and the significance of his arrival. The younger girls, who had seemingly been forgotten by their mother, rushed out the door, the anticipation of the evening hanging in the air.

And so, with all the excitement and chaos of the evening unfolding around them, the Bennet sisters—Jane, with her quiet hopes of Mr Bingley’s affection, and Elizabeth, ever more aware of the absurdities around her—set off for the ball at Netherfield, the stage set for what promised to be an unforgettable night.

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The carriages came to a halt outside Netherfield, and Elizabeth looked up. The house was magnificently illuminated, all the windows on the ground floor shimmering with candlelight. Music spilled forth, accompanied by laughter and the occasional clinging of glass that emitted from some of the open windows.

Her sisters tumbled out of the carriage, making her way to the door alongside Mr Collins and her parents. Thomas, dressed in his tails, looked splendid, though there was something rather stoic about him.

“Are you quite well?” she asked. “Is Mr Collins vexing you?”

“You know how he is. He is a dreadful man, and if I never see him again, it shall be too soon,” he replied. “I wish I had known he was coming. I would have managed to avoid it. I’d have gone to London.”

“Avoid it? Leave? But then you would have missed this ball, and the chance to dance with Miss Darcy—excuse me, Georgiana. I forget she wishes to be called by her Christian name.”

“Something her brother detests, no doubt,” Thomas remarked, and Elizabeth could not disagree. “I do not know that I ought to dance with her. She is charming, but I fear it may perhaps send Mr Darcy over the edge.”

Elizabeth waved her hand dismissively. “It is a ball, dancing is expected, regardless of Mr Darcy’s opinions. I am beginning to think that perhaps he may not be as arrogant and prideful as I first imagined. Indeed, he spoke of some rather alarming things concerning Mr Wickham.”

“Mr Wickham? I am not surprised there are more horrid tales about that man. But pray, what was it?” Thomas asked.

Elizabeth hesitated, then shook her head. “Perhaps I should not divulge. Mr Darcy conveyed it to me in confidence, and it seems wrong to share,” she said, “even with you.”

“I understand. Whatever was told to you in confidence ought to remain as such.”

She nodded, though felt a little unsure. Thomas ought to know at least some of what she’d learned so he would know how to conduct himself. “Suffice it to say it explains in part why Mr Darcy is so protective of his sister.”

Thomas nodded to this, understanding. “I see. Well, I cannot deny that he has been stretching my nerves as of late, but I must remind myself of my own words and give him the benefit of the doubt.”

They climbed the steps to the front door, and Elizabeth reached for her reticule, wishing to apply a bit more perfume on her wrist from the small container she had brought from home, when she realised with a start that she did not have it.

“My reticule!” she exclaimed. “Have you seen it, Thomas? I cannot find it. Did I have it with me in the carriage?”

“You most certainly did,” he assured her. “Shall I fetch it for you?”

“No, I shall get it myself.” She glanced over her shoulder at the carriage they had arrived in, which was just now pulling around to the side, likely to join the other guests.

“I shall be there in a moment. Do not deprive yourself of a moment’s joy on my account,” she said.

They parted ways then, and Thomas went inside while she hurried after the carriage. She lifted the hem of her gown just enough to keep it from dragging on the ground and made her way around to the side of the house. In the distance, she saw the stable yard where all the carriages were being lined up. She was surprised by how quickly their carriage had been taken away.

By the time she reached the stable yard, she regretted not having accepted Thomas’s offer to fetch her reticule, for she was quite out of breath.

“Miss Bennet!” called Mr Martin, one of the stable hands who sometimes served as a coachman, when he saw her. “Do you wish to return to Longbourn?”

“Oh no,” she replied with a laugh. “I’ve merely left my reticule behind—most foolish of me. Would you mind if I...”

“Of course not,” he said, opening the door for her. There, lying on the seat near the window, was her green reticule. She took it and thanked Mr Martin before making her way back.

“Escaping the festivities already, Miss Bennet?” a familiar voice came, and she stopped. Stepping out from the shadows of the stable yard was Mr Darcy. Like Thomas and her father, he was dressed in the most splendid attire. His tails looked freshly pressed, and the white shirt and waistcoat beneath brought out the dark colouring of his hair, which she could see even in the dim light. Perched atop his head was a top hat that made him appear more regal than usual, and the moonlight shimmered in the sheen of his leather shoes.

He was—she could not deny it—exceedingly handsome. Not that she hadn’t noticed it before; one would have to be blind not to see that Mr Darcy was an exceptionally handsome gentleman.

“Mr Darcy,” she said, “I had not expected to see you here! And no, I am not escaping the festivities. I merely came to fetch my reticule. But what excuse do you have for seeking refuge? I would have thought there would be enough accomplished ladies of your acquaintance at the ball to inspire you to dance.”

He offered a small smile, revealing his perfectly white teeth. “Indeed, Bingley has gathered quite a number of acquaintances. I would not be averse to dancing tonight—perhaps even with you, if your ankle permits.”

She was taken aback; she had not expected Mr Darcy to ask her to dance.

“My ankle is much improved this very evening, though my mother takes credit for it as she insisted on wrapping it to excess in an assortment of poultices,” she replied.

He wrinkled his nose. “My governess was particularly fond of them. It seemed there was a poultice for everything—a sprained ankle, colds, a cut on one’s finger, a bee sting.”

Elizabeth laughed. “A poultice for an upset stomach indeed, there was a remedy for everything. And it seems that the more severe the malady, the more unpleasant the treatment.”

“Indeed,” he said, laughing. “I recall suffering an ailment in my youth—though I cannot even remember what it was, as the cure seemed far worse. I was forced to endure a poultice made of vinegar and other unmentionable ingredients. The scent made me quite ill, which, of course, inspired my governess to concoct another remedy.”

Elizabeth chuckled heartily, one hand covering her mouth and the other resting upon her stomach. “Goodness, Mr Darcy! And there I was thinking that a gentleman of your standing was immune to such troubles.”

His smile faded, and she immediately realised how thoughtless her remark had been.

"I did not mean it, Mr Darcy. I do understand that the wealthy and powerful are not immune to tragedy. Really, I was—"

He raised his hand. "Please do not trouble yourself. I appreciate your quick wit and sharp replies, although perhaps this night is less than amusing."

"This night?" she asked, tilting her head. "Pray, why is this night different?"

She mused whether he was in a high dungeon due to the ball and the proximity it afforded to her family, but that did not seem to be the case.

"This night is troublesome for me, regardless of my company. It is the anniversary of my father's death."

"Oh," she said, placing her hand over her mouth. "How tragic! I did not know."

"Of course not. Hardly anyone knows. This morning, Georgiana and I took a walk and shared stories about him. Then we fed a few ducks and geese—an activity my father always enjoyed. We followed that with a luncheon of cucumber sandwiches, one of his favourites." He smiled briefly but then shook his head. "I am uncertain why I confided this to you; it does not concern you."

"I see nothing wrong with it. In fact, it is not unlike how my family and I mark the passing of our grandfather. He passed away five years ago, and every year on his birthday, we embark on a fishing expedition and cook whatever we catch on a campfire, for that was one of his favourite pastimes."

His smile returned. "Well, it seems we have more in common than I initially thought."

"That is quite so, Mr Darcy. I do hope you can see that we are not that different—my family and yours."

She wanted to broach the subject of what she had overheard at the Meryton assembly—his and Miss Bingley's poor opinion of herself and her family—but somehow it did not seem the right moment. There was an ease between them, a comfort she had first felt in the library and then again when he aided her after her ankle injury. She did not wish to ruin that. In fact, she yearned to continue conversing with him. There was something about him that seemed changed this evening; perhaps it was the softening influence of his father's memory.

Whatever it was, she did not wish to spoil it.

"Were you close to him, then, your grandfather?" he asked suddenly, drawing her from her reverie. It seemed he wished to continue the conversation.

"I was. We all were. He was a kind-hearted, loving man, though he struggled somewhat after my grandmother's death. He lived with us for a time, but I think a house filled with six children was too much for him to manage, and so he took up residence in a cottage nearby."

"It must have been a very lively household," Mr Darcy remarked.

"Quite different from a household of two children, I assure you."

He smiled. "I wish mine had been a household of only two for longer stretches."

"Oh," she said, recalling Mr Wickham. "Did Mr Wickham live with you at Pemberley?"

He shook his head. "When his father was alive, they lived in a cottage on the estate, and I did not see much of him. After his father died, my father appointed a guardian for him—a distant cousin called Miss Younge, who had served as my mother's lady's maid when she was living. I have mentioned her before. She lived with him in the cottage then, and after that, he frequently visited Pemberley. My father arranged for a private tutor for him, although we did not take lessons together. I saw far too much of him."

Elizabeth detected the apprehension—and even disdain—in his voice as he spoke. It was clear that there was no love lost between him and Mr Wickham.

"It must have been difficult to spend so much time with someone you once held dear," she said.

"I did not loathe him to begin with," Mr Darcy clarified. "I learned to loathe him over time, it is true. I sometimes wonder if, had we spent less time together, I might have been more cordial towards him, but that was not our fate. Forced proximity can sometimes breed acrimony."

"Yes, and at other times, it can bring about something quite different," she replied. "Are we not often thrown together,

and yet I find our conversations now much more pleasant than they were at the outset?" They regarded one another for a moment, and she wondered if she had overstepped, but he nodded.

"You are quite right. Now, it is becoming rather chilly, and I am sure your family will miss you. Shall I escort you back to the ballroom, and perhaps we might decide upon a dance we'd like to share on the way?"

She dipped her head, took his proffered arm, and together they made their way back to the ballroom. Elizabeth could not help but feel that perhaps this evening would turn out to be quite splendid indeed.

# *Chapter Twenty*

## *Darcy*

Darcy re-entered Netherfield with a significantly altered disposition. He had maintained a solid exterior throughout the day, his thoughts distracted by the anniversary of his father's death. What had troubled him even more was his initial belief that Georgiana had forgotten the significance of this day, as she had not mentioned it at all.

To his relief, when he finally broached the subject, she revealed that she had not forgotten; rather, she assumed he had let it slip his mind. Once they both realised their actions stemmed from a place of thoughtfulness towards each other, they spent the morning reminiscing about their father. This proved a comfort to him, but as evening approached and his sister departed to prepare for the ball alongside Caroline and Louisa, a sense of melancholy returned.

Even all these years later, Darcy could not shake the deep, aching sense of loss. The merriment within the halls of Netherfield did not aid his poor mood in the least. Thus, he resolved to take a walk, as such contemplations sometimes assisted him; however, on this occasion, it did not.

As he made his way to the stables—a refuge he often found comforting due to the presence of horses—he suddenly spotted Elizabeth. Hurrying down the path from Netherfield towards the Bennet carriage, she looked both graceful and striking.

He debated with himself whether to approach her, torn between the desire to continue their acquaintance and the resolve to maintain his distance for Georgiana's sake. Ultimately, his longing for her companionship triumphed, and he stepped from the shadows to greet her.

As they conversed, he searched for something amiss in her countenance—a flaw to justify maintaining his distance. Yet, he found nothing wanting. Elizabeth was kind and compassionate, and he was pleased to discover yet more common interests between them.

As he climbed the steps to Netherfield, reminiscing about their conversation, he shook his head in despair. It was hopeless whenever he was near Elizabeth. All he wished was for their interaction to be prolonged, to engage with her further. But he was acutely aware that such a path would lead to no good.

As he entered the house, the scent of beeswax candles filled the air, mingling with the sounds of music, chatter, and the rhythm of feet dancing across the floor. Upon entering the ballroom, he spotted Bingley dancing the quadrille with Jane Bennet, while Mrs Hurst twirled with a gentleman Darcy did not recognise, and Mr Collins amusingly danced with Mrs Bennet, who did not look the least bit pleased.

Elizabeth, who had departed the stables before him in order to ensure there was no impropriety should they be seen together, was standing with her father now.

Darcy was walking to the refreshment room for a glass of wine when Caroline hastened towards him, adorned in a striking canary yellow gown with ruffled sleeves and a sparkling silver sash designed to attract attention to her figure. A similar sash was placed in her hair, catching the candlelight as she moved beneath the chandelier.

“Mr Darcy, there you are! I have been looking for you,” she said.

With a sigh, he turned to her, assuming she was in want of a dance partner. “I was merely taking the air, Miss Bingley. At present, I do not feel inclined to dance.”

“Oh! I sought you not for a dance partner—I have plenty. I wished to alert you to your sister's predicament.”

His heart sank at her words. “My sister's predicament? Pray, what do you mean?”

“Your sister has been a source of excitement. She has just come downstairs, and at once she and her companions—the youngest Bennets—have made quite the spectacle, throwing themselves at officers and giggling. Well, you must see for yourself!” She gestured towards the adjoining room, where parlour games had been set up.

Darcy frowned. “Surely there is nothing wrong with a parlour game or two; we play them at all balls.”

“Indeed, there is nothing wrong with parlour games,” Caroline said with a dismissive air, “but the manner in which they have been carrying on is truly beyond the pale. Mr Darcy, you must accompany me and witness it for yourself.”

He took a deep breath, glancing over towards Elizabeth once more. She smiled at him, and he reluctantly returned the expression, yet the anticipation of what he would witness in the next room clouded any joy he felt in seeing her.

Following Caroline into what was usually the music room, he discovered it had been transformed into a space for various parlour games. In one corner, a table lay abandoned, remnants of a game of *Bullet Pudding* still visible. A dusting of flour covered the floor, though it appeared a maid was just entering to sweep it up.

A crowd had gathered around another table, and to Darcy's surprise, he saw Georgiana standing with Lydia and Kitty Bennet alongside several officers. Gratefully, Wickham was not among them, yet unease washed over him as he pressed forward to glimpse the game.

To his shock and discomfort, he found a game of 'Snapdragon' in progress. Georgiana was engaged in snatching raisins from a burning spirit, her laughter ringing out louder than etiquette would permit. Lydia's boisterous encouragement filled his ears, urging Georgiana to attempt again. "Get another! You can do it!" Lydia cheered, and Georgiana's gleeful shout of, "Oh no, I've burnt myself!" did little to quell Darcy's growing disquiet.

"Do not be so silly, it is but a small burn," Catherine Bennet urged, as Darcy moved closer, ready to intervene.

"Mr Danny, will you take a look at Georgiana's hand? Let us ensure she does not have a burn that requires medical attention."

"Let me see, Miss Darcy," the officer named Danny said and took her hand. He looked at her hand, dipped his head from left to right. "It does not look serious at all, Miss Darcy. I shall heal it at once," he declared and raised it to his mouth as though he were about to kiss the perceived burn.

"Georgiana Darcy," he called, and at once the officer dropped her hand, a red hue creeping over his face while his sister turned towards him.

"Fitzwilliam, there you are. You must come and join us for this game. It is such fun," she said, apparently entirely unaware of how inappropriate her actions had been.

"I think not, Georgiana. And I think you've had quite enough entertainment for one evening," he said with a stern tone. "Come with me please."

"But—"

"I said come," he repeated, speaking the word slowly and in a low tone so that she would understand just how displeased he was.

"Very well," she said, and dropped her shoulders. As she walked towards him, Lydia grabbed her by the arm, whispering something that made Georgiana giggle.

No doubt the young Miss Bennet had said something inappropriate about Darcy. Something disrespectful. He wasn't going to have such disrespect.

"Georgiana," he said, as she came closer. He took her by the elbow and steered her outside. He turned his head to Caroline. "I do thank you for drawing my attention to this. It will be handled," he said, and then walked a few steps before increasing his pace to bring Georgiana down into the hall and towards an alcove. There he turned to her.

"Georgiana, what are you doing?"

"I am enjoying myself at a private ball, just like everybody else. Everyone was playing games."

"Not everyone. You must not draw such attention to yourself. You must not raise your voice in such a manner or laugh as though you were a commoner. You are not. You are a high-born lady, granddaughter to an earl. Conduct yourself with the proper decorum, Georgiana."

"Lydia and Kitty are gentlemen's daughters, and they are allowed to enjoy themselves."

"No one is telling you that you cannot enjoy yourself, but the way you acted attracted attention, and the way you spoke to the officer and he to you was below your station. And where are your gloves?"

She slipped her hand into her reticule and pulled out her bunched-up gloves, putting them back on swiftly. As she did, her chin wobbled, and he saw her eyes fill with tears. "I did not mean to upset you, William," she said. "I simply wish to enjoy myself for a little bit at least. I saw nothing wrong with how I acted."

“Which is precisely the problem,” he said, but her tears, which threatened to spill over, softened his heart. “Georgiana, I only want what is best for you. I want you to make a good match with a respectable gentleman who will take care of you if ever I am not able to. But you must understand that keeping company with officers, as you just did, and behaving in such a manner will not attract such a gentleman. And your choice of friends likewise will play a role.”

“Perhaps I like the Bennet sisters to be my friends. And perhaps do not wish to attract a gentleman right now. Perhaps I do not wish to attract anyone, or perhaps I am not interested in attracting the sort of man you think suitable. What if I choose someone you do not like?”

He frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing! Only that you cannot control everything, William, you certainly cannot control me.” She turned and walked away, and Darcy remained alone in the hall. He had to admit that perhaps she was right. Perhaps he truly didn’t know how to control her, and that frightened him more than anything. They had not had these issues back home. At Pemberley, she’d been an obedient, well-mannered young girl. It was only since they arrived here that her temper got the best of her and her sense of propriety appeared to have diminished.

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Two glasses of wine and a shot of whiskey later, Darcy found himself dancing with Caroline. Despite her earlier excitations, she had accepted his first offer of a dance without any sort of protest. The long line of suitors she’d earlier eluded to, appeared to have disappeared in the crowd—if they ever existed at all.

“You were right to do what you did, Mr Darcy. Someone must show the young lady her limitations. Heaven forwent if somebody had seen her carrying on like that. Oh, you should have seen them earlier, when they were diving in the flour for the bullet... Fortunately, I could intercede before Georgiana found herself face-first in the flour.”

“I thank you. Truly, I do,” he replied. “I do not know what I am to...”

“Exactly as you did tonight, Mr Darcy,” she reassured him. “Let your sister know that she cannot act this way. I do truly believe it would be best to tell my brother that we must return to town for the time being. The company there is much more refined. Do you not think?”

“Indeed,” he said, looking around the room. Mary Bennet was now sitting at the pianoforte, accompanying the orchestra rather badly. Her father, Mr Bennet, stood beside her, whispering in her ear with a look that suggested to Darcy—and everyone else—that likely, he was attempting to persuade her to stop.

Their cousin, the bumbling Mr Collins, was now on the dance floor, dancing with Charlotte Lucas. The young woman appeared to have the patience of a saint. Darcy had looked over at them twice now, and both times Collins had stepped on her feet.

He could not spot Elizabeth anywhere, nor her sister Jane, and had to assume that they were somewhere engaged in their confederacy of two, no doubt analysing the events of the evening.

The music came to a stop, and he escorted Caroline from the dance floor.

“Now, now,” Mr Bennet’s voice came, loud enough for most people in the vicinity to hear. “You have played long enough for us, dear Mary. It is time to let somebody else have their turn,” he said in a firm voice. Mary Bennet looked up at him and then down at the instrument, rather crestfallen, as she snatched up her notes and walked away.

“That girl plays rather dreadfully, but I do feel badly for her being humiliated in such a manner in front of all these people by her very own father,” Caroline said, shaking her head.

“Indeed,” Darcy agreed. He had not enjoyed Mary Bennet’s playing either, and the orchestra looked rather relieved to see her leave, but he didn’t think it was quite necessary for her to have been dismissed in such a fashion. He thought quite highly of Mr Bennet, but it seemed that even he, the family patriarch, did not possess the sort of manners one would expect of a gentleman.

“Goodness, it seems Georgiana recovered rather quickly,” Caroline said, and Darcy looked at her, following her gaze. To his dismay, he found the source of Caroline’s comment. Couples were lining up for the English country dance, and standing in line with them was Georgiana, alongside Thomas Bennet. The two were deep in conversation, with the young man chattering away and Georgiana placing one hand in front of her mouth as she giggled.

Darcy’s blood boiled. Was she dancing with him because of their conversation? Georgiana’s words came back to him.

Had she implied that she had her eye on someone Darcy wouldn't approve of already? Or was he interpreting things wrongly?

"I think another conversation is in order, Mr Darcy," Caroline said beside him, and he nodded.

"Indeed. It seems it will be."

"It would be most unfortunate if our dear Georgiana got herself mixed up in something unsavoury. People might talk if she continues to keep such company. Imagine the talk. Goodness, I should not think Lord Matlock would like such distraction," she said.

Darcy could already imagine what his uncle—and worse, his Aunt Catherine would say. His eyes flittered from Georgiana to Mr Collins, who was now conversing with Sir William. He would most certainly make a full report on everything he observed. And he had observed rather a lot thus far.

"I shall speak to her after the dance," he said.

And then, without another word, he turned on his heel and walked towards the table, where he snatched another glass of wine. He'd taken only one sip when the familiar figure of Miss Elizabeth appeared beside him.

"Mr Darcy. I saw you overcame your aversion to dancing. You and Miss Bingley made rather a smashing pair," Elizabeth said, her amused tone drifting to his ear.

He looked at her, and she smiled at him, her seafoam green gown complementing her pale complexion.

"Yes, well," he said, "sometimes a man must do what a man must do, even if it means dancing," he replied. She opened her mouth and was about to reply when he cleared his throat. "Good evening, Miss Bennet," he said, and walked past her.

He had to get away from her. Talking to her would only ease his mood and right now, he needed to hold on to his anger, for there were things he had to do. He had to rebuke Georgiana. He had to talk to Bingley. This entire affair had to come to an end. Caroline and her sister had been right. They needed to ensure Bingley broke off his connection with the Bennets, and the sooner the better. For parting Bingley from Jane Bennet meant they could leave here—and put distance between himself, Georgiana, and the Bennets as well.

That was what was needed. Distance. And plenty of it. Even if his heart continued to long to prolong his conversation with the one Bennet he had come to truly care for. Elizabeth.



# *Chapter Twenty-One*

## *Elizabeth*

**T**he moon was already making its descent the following morning when Elizabeth and the rest of her party finally stumbled out of Netherfield and boarded their carriages again.

Jane, Elizabeth, and Lydia sat with their backs to the horses, while Mrs Bennet, Kitty, and Mary sat across. All three had fallen asleep before the vehicle left Netherfield,

Lydia prattled on about the highlights of the evening, her flow of words only interrupted by the occasional yawn.

“It was such a grand ball. Jane, when you are Mrs Bingley, you must host a ball such as this every single week.”

Jane chuckled. “I should think not. Even if I were fortunate enough to become Mr Bingley’s wife, I do not think he would appreciate my spending all of his money on such nonsense.”

“Nonsense? It is hardly nonsense, Jane” Lydia interjected. “Five thousand pounds per annum. He surely can afford it. Starting with your wedding. I shall dance and dance and dance and eat wedding cake and dance some more. It will be splendid!” She looked at her sleeping sisters. “Look at Mary and Kitty. What bores they both are. I daresay, they act as though they worked in a mine all—” Alas, her rebuke was interrupted by a yawn of her own.

“I daresay you shall join them soon in the land of Nod,” Elizabeth said.

“I think not,” Lydia replied. “I am far too excited! If only that dreadful Mr Darcy hadn’t spoiled Georgiana’s fun. She was doing so well, snatching raisins!”

“Raisins?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes! We were playing a game of ‘Snapdragon’. I thought it quite surprising that Mr Bingley would set up such a game when it is usually only played at Christmas. But I was glad for it for it was such fun. And Georgiana was doing so well when suddenly Mr Darcy appeared and was rather cross. Poor Georgiana was ever so upset.”

“Do not say ‘ever so’, it is common,” Mrs Bennet chided from beside Jane. Elizabeth thought her mother was asleep, but it seemed she had only been eavesdropping this entire time.

“Yes, Mother,” Lydia said, “but it was ever... It was so very upsetting. It was fortunate that she recovered herself so quickly. Thomas attended to her immediately afterwards because she was crying.”

“Thomas tended to her?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes,” Lydia nodded. “Mr Darcy was so gruff with her. He censured her rather sternly.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard. The idea that Mr Darcy had been so upset with his sister that he had brought her to tears troubled her. Then, she thought back to their conversation earlier.

“Mr Darcy had a difficult evening,” she said. “It was the anniversary of his father’s death. Perhaps he was easily—”

“I daresay Mr Darcy must have a year’s worth of deceased fathers, for he is in a dreadful mood every day,” Lydia said.

“Lydia,” Jane tried to hide her laughter. “That is not—”

“Indeed, it is. Lydia, you should not say such things,” Elizabeth added.

“I’m surprised at you, Elizabeth,” Lydia continued. “Why are you defending him? You were the one most vocal about what a dreadful man he is.”

“I am not defending him. I am merely giving a reason for his behaviour. Though, I do not think it proper that he spoke to his sister in the manner in which you described.”

“It must be terribly lonely for her to be in that big house with no one her own age to keep her company,” Jane said. “Mr Bingley told me there are no girls her age near them, and all her cousins but one, are men. And the one who is a woman is older than her and very sickly.”

“It sounds as though she is in want of female company,” Elizabeth said.

“That is why I have invited her for tea,” Lydia said.

“Well, you should let your mother, the hostess, know you are to have a grand tea with a fancy young lady,” Mrs Bennet interjected.

“I would hardly call her fancy, Mother,” Elizabeth said, but her mother waved her hand dismissively.

“I am too tired to trifle with semantics now, Elizabeth. Well, what time is she supposed to come?”

“I am uncertain,” Lydia replied. “She said she had to ask her brother, so she may not come today, but perhaps tomorrow.”

“A grand tea with a fancy young lady on day yet to be decided, and yet I am expected to be ready for company at a drop of the hat?” Mrs Bennet tutted.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow in Lydia’s direction, and her sister chuckled.

“Mother, you are ever so...”

“Lydia,” Mrs Bennet said with a warning tone.

“Dramatic,” Lydia finished.

Elizabeth chuckled as Jane shook her head and looked out of the window.

Soon they arrived at Longbourn, and Elizabeth followed her family inside. It took several minutes before the gentlemen joined them and when they did, Mrs Bennet rounded on her husband.

“There you are at last. You left before us but arrived later. What kept you?” she demanded. “We might have been greeted by intruders and then be left to our own devices with no man to defend us.”

“I should say you would have managed,” he relied dryly. “I will remind you that I left several minutes before you because Sir William’s cousin required transportation as he had rather overindulged. I am happy to report that the entire Lucas party is settled at Lucas Lodge, with the young gentleman now resting upon the chaise longue downstairs with a bucket conveniently located.”

“I do not need to know so much detail, Mr Bennet. Let us go upstairs now. I am dreadfully tired, and I know that that unfortunate rooster is going to be crowing at any moment.”

“I dare remind you to suspend your criticisms; it was not my idea to stay at the Netherfield ball until sunrise,” Mr Bennet said, putting his hand on his wife’s. She took it and then let out a deep sigh before resting her head against her husband’s shoulder.

As the family dispersed to their various chambers, Mr Collins grumbled and groaned about an upset stomach of his own and how nobody had enquired about his need for a bucket. He went into Thomas’s chamber and shut the door.

“Poor Mr Collins,” Thomas said. “He had a rather mortifying evening.”

“How so?” Elizabeth asked. “I have scarcely seen him.”

“That is because you are very good at hiding from him. He attempted to make conversation with Mr Darcy and ran afoul of him. Indeed, the man was in a dreadful mood.”

“Not when I first spoke to him,” Elizabeth said. “He was civil enough, we had a rather enjoyable conversation.”

“Did you?” Thomas said, dipping his head to one side.

“Yes, but I hear that he and his sister had a rather unpleasant encounter.”

“Indeed. The poor girl was crying. She did not deserve that. She worships the ground her brother walks on. For him to talk to her in such a manner in public is unconscionable. She truly does not deserve it. She is so lovely a girl.”

Elizabeth paused and dropped her voice. “You are fond of her, are you not, Thomas? Tell me the truth. I can see the way you look at her.”

“And so what if I am fond of her? What is there not to be fond of? She is kind and sweet and well-spoken. And she has a great interest in many things—things one would not think a young lady interested in such as fishing, riding, and hunting. Yet

she likes to read, she enjoys studying the newspaper and foreign lands and their customs..." Thomas shook his head. "I am silly, I know it. I have had too much to drink and too little rest. Forgive me."

"You are forgiven, but for what, I do not know. You like her. She likes you. There is nothing wrong with that."

Thomas groaned. "There is everything wrong with that. I know that you adore me, but it makes you sometimes forget who I am. I am nobody... I have nothing. I could never offer someone like Georgiana Darcy the life that she deserves!"

"Maybe the life she deserves is one of happiness at the side of somebody who admires her," Elizabeth proposed. "And if that is you, then that is you."

"You know, as well as I do, that it would never be accepted. Her grandfather was an earl. Her uncle is an earl now."

"And so? There have been grand stories such as this. Rules that have been broken many times. Look at King Henry VIII, he married his brother's widow! It was a scandal at the time, and yet..."

Thomas laughed. "And yet she found herself divorced in rather rapid fashion, living a miserable life thereafter and producing a miserable daughter who slaughtered countless innocents on account of religion."

"Very well, Elizabeth Woodville, then. Her family was middle rank when she wed Edward IV."

"The fact that you must look to the medieval era to find examples, should prove my point. Besides, the examples you gave show powerful men marrying woman of less than ideal standing. In our case, the roles are reversed."

She sighed dramatically. "Goodness gracious, Thomas! Are you so determined to be unhappy?"

He lowered his voice. "I am not determined to be unhappy. I am determined to not get myself and your family into any trouble. In any case, Mr Darcy would never allow it. He would never allow Georgiana and me to be alone in a room together, let alone anything else."

Elizabeth crossed her arms. "Mr Darcy is quite a miserable man. I had wished to see more in him, to see good in him, but the way he has acted tonight makes me think that perhaps I was wrong. And yet—" she waved her arm. She wasn't even certain anymore what she felt or thought. Exhaustion and wine were clouding her judgement.

"Now of all times," he said, rolling his eyes. "I wish it were not so complicated. I wish Georgiana were of common birth then perhaps I would be considered suitable, but that cannot be helped. I shall put her out of my mind."

"Not so fast. Do you not think the lady deserves a say? Let me issue another invitation to Miss Darcy to come visit us for tea. Lydia already invited her once. If she comes, if she visits us, we will see what becomes of it."

Thomas sighed and nodded. "Very well. I already know better than to argue with you, Elizabeth. Whenever you are determined that something should come to pass, you always find a way to make it so."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said with a grin as she bade him goodnight and made her way back to her room. But sleep eluded her for some time as she was occupied with replaying a conversation with Mr Darcy in her mind over and over. If only he could understand her. If only he would allow her to understand him.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

### *Elizabeth*

“Oh, you must take another scone, Miss Darcy,” Mrs Bennet said two days later, as they were all gathered around the table in the dining room. “Hill made them special. And they go so well with the tea. Ah, we must have more tea as well!”

“Oh, I couldn’t, Mrs Bennet. I’ve had two already. If I have another, I shall simply burst!” Georgiana said and placed one hand on her stomach. Indeed, Elizabeth did not blame her. From the moment she had arrived an hour and a half ago until now, Mrs Bennet had refilled her tea and her plate multiple times, for in addition to scones there were assorted sweetmeats, rolls, and many other items loaded upon the table.

“Very well,” Mrs Bennet replied. “We wouldn’t want that! But surely you will take some back with you to Netherfield. Mr Bingley will certainly enjoy them. You can tell him Jane’s help has been invaluable.”

“Did you bake these, Jane?” she said, and looked at Jane, who shook her head.

“These hands did not touch any flour,” Jane said. “My mother likes to make me sound more industrious than I am.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs Bennet interrupted. “You picked the raspberries last summer. That is essential for raspberry jam.”

“Your mother is quite right,” Georgiana said, and Mrs Bennet beamed.

“You see? Miss Darcy agrees with me.”

Elizabeth shook her head and went over to Georgiana while Mrs Bennet bustled out of the room in search of more tea. “You mustn’t mind my mother,” she said.

“She is lovely,” Georgiana replied. “Your house is charming, and the tea was delightful. And the company as well,” she added, but this time she had raised her eyes to Thomas, who was sitting diagonally across from her. He smiled at her.

“We are grateful to have your company, Miss Darcy,” he said because Mrs Bennet had chided the assembled group when Georgiana first arrived and they’d called her by her first name. No amount of assurances had convinced Mrs Bennet to switch to the informal form of address and thus, Miss Darcy she was—unless Mrs Bennet was not near enough to hear.

“Faith! I should look in on Mrs Annesley,” Georgiana said. “I think your mother mentioned that she was with the other servants in the kitchen.” She then looked once again at Thomas. “Would you mind showing me how to get there? She wasn’t feeling well this morning, and I felt terrible making her come with me.”

“Of course,” Thomas replied and offered his arm. Together, they went out.

A surprising whooping sound followed, accompanied by their mother’s voice. “Goodness! I did not expect to see you here. Is something the matter? I went to see about the tea and I found it!” she said, and a rattling sound indicated that her mother had taken it upon herself to pick up another teapot for Mrs Hill rather than waiting for it to be delivered, as was proper.

“We are checking on Mrs Annesley,” Thomas said. “Miss Darcy was worried.”

“I see. How very kind of you,” Mrs Bennet replied. “And Thomas, when you have checked on Mrs Annesley, why don’t you show Miss Darcy the gardens?”

“But there is nothing in bloom,” Thomas said.

“Nonsense. Of course, there is! In the back garden, by the bench. There are flowers in bloom,” she insisted.

Elizabeth looked at Jane, who shook her head. “There is nothing blooming anywhere. We are lucky that there isn’t snow yet.” Mrs Bennet re-entered the room and shot them both a glare.

“Leave them be,” Mrs Bennet said. “We are fortunate that the young lady is even allowed to visit. After everything I’ve heard about Mr Darcy and how he treated her at the ball I was positively shocked she was allowed to come. That Mr Darcy—acting as though our Lydia and Kitty are beneath his notice.”

“Indeed, he acts as though we are commoners, not gentlemen’s daughters,” Kitty complained, while Lydia stuffed a chunk of scone into her mouth and nodded in agreement.

“Dreadful he is!” Lydia exclaimed once she swallowed. Elizabeth shook her head.

“I think Mr Darcy is rather a refined gentleman,” Mr Collins said. “We are very fortunate to have his acquaintance. The fact that he allows his sister to come for tea is only due to his regard for the family. Not to sound as though I think rather too highly of myself but there is no doubt he realises who I am, which has influenced his changing of mind.”

“It is only a pity that he did not recognise you at the ball,” Elizabeth said, unable to keep her thoughts to herself any longer. By now she had heard from a multitude of people that Mr Collins had, indeed, approached Mr Darcy in the exact manner Thomas had described, and that Mr Darcy had rebuffed him in no uncertain terms.

“We cannot blame the gentleman for not knowing me. He knows a great many people and cannot be expected to remember every single one. I am certain that the next time I see him, we shall have a splendid conversation.”

“Georgiana did mention that they are due to visit Rosings Park soon. Perhaps we will see them there when you rejoin Lady Catherine,” Lydia said. “I am certain that must be very soon, so I am surprised that she has been able to stay for as long as she has without you.”

Mrs Bennet’s eyebrows rose, but she said nothing, for the truth was the entire family had wondered just when Mr Collins’s visit—the purpose of which they still hadn’t deciphered—was going to come to an end. For the sake of their sanity, Elizabeth hoped that it would end sooner rather than later.

“Mr Collins, indeed! I am certain my patroness misses me greatly, as I am far more than a simple curate. She always tells me that she could not do without me. However, I cannot return in good conscience without having fulfilled my quest.”

“That sounds rather adventurous,” Lydia remarked.

“Not so much adventurous as romantic, Mr Collins.”

“You see, my patroness has sent me here to find a bride.”

A sudden stunned silence settled upon the table. It was quite clear to everyone what he meant to imply. He didn’t mean here as in Meryton; he had meant here as in Longbourn.

He sought to make one of them his bride. Elizabeth picked up her cup and stared into it as though something in the brew indeed captivated her attention. Mrs Bennet’s tone alarmed her, as it was the sort of tone she always had when an eligible bachelor presented himself. Five minutes ago, Mrs Bennet would have taken any young woman who had fallen into such a role as a privilege concerning Mr Collins, but now Elizabeth could see her mother’s mind calculating. If she could make one of her daughters Mrs Collins, that would mean that Longbourn was safe. This was an opportunity her mother was not going to let slip by.

As expected, she immediately cleared her throat. “And what of my mind, Mr Collins?” she asked, smiling brightly.

Mr Collins smiled, looking at Jane. “Well, I had come with the intention of proposing to my dear cousin Jane, but I see that I was too late. However, I have such a large number of lovely cousins to choose from,” he said with a smile, winking at Elizabeth, who quickly looked away, alarmed that it might be her he had his eye on. He had shown no such interest since his arrival, but then one could never know.

Fortunately, she was rescued from any further discomfort by a stern knock on the door.

A moment later, Hill appeared in the hallway doorway. “Excuse me, ma’am,” she said, addressing Mrs Bennet. “A gentleman is at the door. Mr Darcy. He’s looking for his sister.”

Mrs Bennet rose at once. “Oh, Mr Darcy! I had not expected to see him here,” she said, rushing out with a flourish.

“Mr Darcy?” Jane said.

“Perhaps to apologise for the way he acted in front of Lydia and Kitty,” Elizabeth suggested, although she already knew that this was not the reason.

They were not left wondering for very long, for Mr Darcy stepped into the room, and his visit was not one of companionability. In fact, his brows were furrowed, and he looked about the room in a searching manner.

“I shall ring for another cup of tea for you, sir,” Mrs Bennet began. “I was about to do so when he—”

“I am not here on a social visit, and I do not require tea. I do need to know where my sister is,” he interrupted.

“Your sister? She wanted to take a turn about the garden with Thomas.”

“I would appreciate it if somebody could take me to my sister immediately,” he said, his tone sharp, almost like a cat whose tail had just been stepped upon.

Elizabeth got up, sensing that Mr Darcy was close to an explosion. “I shall take you,” she said.

He nodded at her, and she noted that he hadn’t removed his hat yet, so clearly he had no intention of staying. Why was he so upset, she wondered?

They walked together out of the drawing room, just as Mr Collins had risen to his feet and bowed, his mouth half open, it was clear he had attempted to engage Mr Darcy in conversation.

“I had not expected to see you,” she began.

“Do you think I am the sort of gentleman who would allow my sister to sneak away from home when she was explicitly told not to, and I would simply do nothing?”

Elizabeth paused, biting her lips as she realised why he was here and why he was in such a dreadful mood. “Sir, do you mean to say that your sister did not have permission to come?”

Mr Darcy softened somewhat. “No, she did not. She asked me but I denied her request. I suspected that your sisters encouraged her to come anyway.”

“They did not, Mr Darcy,” she said at once. “But perhaps if your sister felt the need to sneak away, that should make you reconsider how you approach this situation.”

“Reconsider what? She made a request, I denied it. It is as simple as that,” he said but did not meet her eyes.

“You still do not think our family is proper? May I remind you that my father is a gentleman, same as you? Your sister is a gentleman’s daughter, same as I, and my sisters...”

“But your ward is not,” he retorted.

Elizabeth understood at once. The affection Thomas held for Georgiana had been obvious to her. Therefore, it was reasonable that Mr Darcy, as her brother and thus intimately familiar with her, would have noticed as well.

“Thomas is an upstanding gentleman,” she said defensively.

“That is the trouble; he is no gentleman at all. But no matter. All will be put to right.”

What did he mean by that, she wondered.

“Georgiana!” he called, and she looked up just in time to see Georgiana and Thomas leapt up from a bench, both looking guilty. She closed her eyes. Of all the things she didn’t want Mr Darcy to see, it was this. She had hoped to find the two of them conversing about flowers or some other matter, but instead, they were engaged in rather more intimate activities. She was almost certain she had seen them holding hands. She could only pray that Mr Darcy hadn’t.

“William,” she said, but got no further.

“We are leaving,” he stated firmly. “Right now. Where is Mrs Annesley? I shall have to have a word...”

“She thought we were entirely permitted to be here,” Georgiana protested at once. “Do not be cross with her; she has done nothing wrong.”

Mr Darcy sighed. “Very well. It is good of you to stand up for her. But in any case, we are leaving. Now.”

“Mr Darcy,” Thomas said but Mr Darcy only glared at him before ushering his sister back to the house.

“Thomas,” Elizabeth said but he shook his head.

“I told you this was a terrible idea. I wish I had not listened to you and put her out of my head when I had the chance,” he said and Elizabeth’s heart broke for he’d never spoken to her like this before. She glared at Mr Darcy, wishing that she too had put the man out of her mind when she had a chance to do so.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

### *Darcy*

As the carriage rolled smoothly over the cobblestones, Darcy observed the delicate features of his sister, Georgiana, seated beside him. She looked upset, there was no denying it. Of course, he'd known she would be. He had separated her from the man she appeared to be infatuated with. He'd had his suspicions, but seeing them together on the bench had confirmed it. It hadn't been an intimate situation by any means—and his sister's behaviour was beyond reproach—but it had been clear enough.

He'd been correct to come. Goodness, he did not want to imagine what might have happened had Caroline not been eavesdropping on Georgiana's conversation with poor Mrs Annesley, who she'd roped into this venture. To think his own sister would manipulate the poor woman. It was unconscionable.

Across from them, Mrs Annesley sat, her usual composure marred by lines of concern etched on her face. "Mr Darcy, I must apologise," she began, her voice nervous. "I was unaware you did not wish for this call to take place."

Darcy turned his hazel eyes towards her, maintaining an aura of calm in the carriage's tight confines. "Mrs Annesley, it is not your fault. My sister has already informed me of the situation. I understand that you were misled." He watched as relief swept across her face, though the worry remained.

"I wish I had anticipated it. I should have been more vigilant."

"Please do not blame yourself," he replied, his voice steady and reassuring. "Georgiana is perfectly capable of handling herself, and I appreciate your concern."

Georgiana offered a soft smile, her gratitude evident. "Thank you, Mrs Annesley. And I do beg your pardon for the deception. I only did it because I so badly wanted to visit Longbourn and..." She grew silent and for that, Darcy was grateful.

"We will address this matter later," he said in a stern tone, unable to hide his disappointment in his younger sister.

The remainder of the journey passed in silence. As they approached Netherfield, Darcy gazed out the window, his heart heavy with mixed emotions.

Upon their arrival, Darcy turned to Mrs Annesley. "Please pack Georgiana's things. We shall leave for Town in the morning."

Georgiana's eyes grew wide as his words sank in. "William, please don't—" she began.

"I've had enough of the Bennets and of Meryton," he interrupted, his tone firm. "And I have certainly seen enough of your behaviour here to warrant our departure."

She looked at him, tears welling in her eyes, a mixture of disbelief and sadness. "But I enjoyed my time here! I want to stay longer."

Darcy's expression remained resolute. "This is not a debate, Georgiana. We are leaving."

"But they are my friends, the Bennet sisters and Thomas is lovely and considerate and if only you'd give them a chance and look past your prejudices then you'd see it also."

"I will not be lectured by my sister. Now, go with Mrs Annesley and pack, that is final," he said though he hated how authoritarian he sounded.

With a pained expression, she turned away, her shoulders trembling but she did not cry. He had expected her to fight him on this, to plead passionately for a chance to return to the company of her newfound friends. But instead, she pulled herself together with surprising composure, almost as if she were shedding her childhood.

As she walked away, Darcy felt a brief flicker of doubt. Had he misjudged her? He watched her retreating figure, wondering if she had truly come to terms with his decision, or if she was simply burying her feelings.

Just then, Caroline appeared in the hallway, her expression sharp and alert. "Darcy, we need to speak with Charles. There are matters to discuss regarding our plans."

He nodded, momentarily distracted from the strain of the situation with Georgiana. “Of course,” he replied, though his mind lingered on his sister’s demeanour, the weight of their conversation still hanging in the air.

Darcy entered the parlour to find Bingley seated in a chair, looking distinctly uncomfortable and pale. Caroline, Louisa, and Mr Hurst sat around him, their expressions varying from concern to impatience. Caroline, ever poised, resumed her seat across from Bingley and gestured for Darcy to join them.

As Darcy settled himself, Bingley let out a breath, visibly relieved by his friend’s presence. “Darcy,” he began earnestly, “my family is trying to convince me that I ought to abandon my courtship of Jane Bennet. They claim she does not truly care for me, that she only seeks my fortune, and that the Bennets are not a respectable influence. They insist that the match is an unwise investment.” He hesitated before adding, “I wish to know your thoughts.”

Darcy steeled himself. He knew full well that the simplest course of action would be to support the assertions of Bingley’s family, thus allowing him to remove Georgiana from this detestable town and never return. Yet he could not dismiss the sincerity of Bingley’s affections for Jane Bennet, nor was he entirely convinced that her feelings were feigned. She was reserved, true, but so were many women.

Caroline spoke then, her voice deceptively sweet. “I do think Jane Bennet a pretty young woman, but she is the eldest of five daughters with little means. It is her duty to secure a husband, and she has quite evidently set her sights on you, Charles.”

Louisa nodded in agreement. “And then there is the insufferable Mr Collins. Is that truly the sort of connection you desire? The man is a mere clergyman with nothing to recommend him beyond the patronage of Lady Catherine.”

Caroline turned her gaze pointedly to Darcy, expecting his support. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could form a response, Bingley interjected. “I care little for a man like Mr Collins, but he lives far away from here and God willing Mr Bennet will be alive a long time. Perhaps I can even help undo the entailment. Therefore, I care little about this matter.”

“But Miss Bennet is so cold towards you, she does not display any sign of affection at all,” Louisa continued. Caroline looked at Darcy, as if willing him to speak up.

Bingley shook his head. “Thomas himself has assured me that Jane’s affections are sincere.”

Something within Darcy recoiled at those words. Was Bingley truly placing Thomas’s opinion above that of his own family? Was it merely because Thomas had told him what he longed to hear? Whatever the reason, Darcy heard himself speaking before he had fully decided what to say.

“Miss Bennet is indeed a kind and amiable woman,” he said carefully, “but I cannot dispute that she has a duty to her family, one that will always take precedence. And Bingley, you must ask yourself—do you truly wish to align yourself with a family of such modest standing?”

Bingley’s face drained of colour as he turned to Darcy, as if the very foundations of his happiness were crumbling before him. A heavy weight settled in Darcy’s chest, but he pressed on, knowing what was expected of him.

Mr Hurst, who had thus far remained silent, now spoke up. “Their financial situation is precarious, Charles. If you marry Miss Bennet, you shan’t merely be supporting a wife, but her sisters, her parents, and even their ward. Are you prepared for such a burden?”

One by one, they listed reason after reason against the match, until at last, Darcy delivered the final blow. Looking directly at Bingley, he asked, “Do you truly believe that Jane values you above her obligation to her family?”

“I do. At least I feel that she does. The way she looks at me, I see tenderness in her eyes,” Bingley said, though he sounded miserable.

“None of us dispute that she feels tenderness for you, but is it love? Or is it tenderness because you can help her family prosper?” Darcy asked.

“Indeed, Mr Darcy is quite wise on the matter, Charles,” Caroline said with emphasis, smiling at Darcy as though she wished to thank him for finally speaking up.

“You believe that I ought to let her go? Let Netherfield go? All of it?” Bingley asked. His tone was pleading. He wanted someone, anyone, to side with him and tell him Jane Bennet was right for him.

And she may well be. But Darcy also knew there were better matches, and those matches were unencumbered by meddling relatives, unfortunate wards, and obligations. No, would he do his friend a favour by advising him against her. It



might hurt him now, but in due course, he'd see sense.

Darcy was certain.

The room fell silent. Darcy took a deep breath, and after a pause, added, "I do not think that your future lies here in Hertfordshire or with this young woman. I believe it would be in your best interest to relocate to London, where you will have the opportunity to find a more suitable match—someone of equal fortune, who does not require your support."

"And the Christmas season is about to begin," Louisa added. "There will be masquerade balls and dinners, and so much merriment. You will find someone in due course, for there will be no shortages of eligible ladies."

"Your sister is right, Bingley. This is your chance to find someone who fits you better, an estate which suits you better. Do not squander your future on the first pretty woman you find," Darcy said.

"I suppose," Bingley muttered and lowered his gaze to his hands. As he did, doubt rose in Darcy. He saw his friend withdraw into himself, the light in his eyes dimming. The sight pained Darcy more than he cared to admit. He had wounded Bingley deeply, and yet, at the same time, a strange relief settled over him. Once they left Netherfield, there would be no reason to return. The Bennets, including Elizabeth, would be left behind—forever.

# *Chapter Twenty-Four*

## *Elizabeth*

Night had already fallen, and Elizabeth sat outside, her shawl drawn tightly around her shoulders to shield against the creeping chill. Dinner had been an awkward affair. Her mother, whose fiery disdain for Mr Darcy had only deepened with his conduct that very day, had been in a state of great agitation. Lydia and Kitty, ever exuberant, were now inconsolable at the sudden removal of their friend from their midst. The events had transpired with such alarming rapidity.

The dining room had been quiet in a way that was far from peaceful. It had been the kind of silence that filled every corner and sat heavily upon one's chest. Mrs Bennet had made several sharp comments about 'arrogant men with no regard for proper civility', while Kitty had blinked back tears with each mouthful. Lydia, who typically laughed everything off, had been uncharacteristically silent, stabbing her potatoes with the fury of a general betrayed.

Thomas had not joined them for their meal at all, preferring instead to remain in his temporary quarters beneath their roof. No one had questioned it; his absence only compounded the weight pressing down on the evening.

The family had taken their meal swiftly, in silence, seeking to avoid unnecessary discourse. Elizabeth had then excused herself.

But the quiet had not calmed her mind. Between her vexation at Mr Darcy, concern for Thomas, and a growing unease over Georgiana, Elizabeth had yet another anxiety to contend with, Mr Collins. Ever since he had declared his intention to find a wife upon this very visit, she had steeled herself against his awkward attempts at conversation. It was, regrettably, clear to her that she was the object of his matrimonial designs.

Kitty and Lydia were far too youthful and flighty for the tastes of a man such as Mr Collins, and while Mary might have made a most suitable choice—pious, quiet, and unassuming as she was—Mr Collins had scarcely exchanged two words with her since his arrival.

No, Elizabeth was almost certain she was the target of his affections, much to her dismay.

And just as she settled into the welcome quiet of the evening, Mr Collins appeared to disturb it.

"Cousin Elizabeth! Here you are," he announced, emerging from around the corner with the self-satisfied air of one who believed himself charming. "I was just on a brisk evening walk. Do you not simply adore the evening air? You must, since you're sitting here."

"I was enjoying the quiet," she replied, hoping the subtle hint would not be lost on him. Alas, it was.

"There is nothing more refreshing than a bit of peace and quiet," he continued. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Before she could object, he seated himself beside her.

"Well, this is splendid, is it not? What do you do out here on your own? I see no book, no embroidery," he said, looking about with a perplexed expression.

"It is too dark to read or embroider," Elizabeth said, striving for civility. "So I simply enjoy the stars."

"Yes, yes, the stars. I do that as well. Sometimes I count them until I grow sleepy."

Elizabeth wet her lips, barely concealing a sigh. "I don't count them. I look for constellations—the Big Dipper, Orion's Belt, and so on."

"Oh, that is hardly a suitable pastime for a young lady. Leave the sciences to the scholars, I say."

"I have always had an interest in science," she replied evenly. "Medicine too. The advancements are fascinating."

"Ah, but that is where you are mistaken, Cousin Elizabeth," he said, turning to her with a self-important nod. "A young lady should not burden her mind with such matters. A woman's place is by her husband's side."

Her temper flared. "So a wife of yours ought not be too intelligent, nor too curious about the world?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You misunderstand me. A wife of mine should possess a keen mind, indeed—but

directed towards the domestic arts. I should like her to be well-read, of course. There are many fine texts—cookery books, for instance, and naturally the Holy Scripture. She need not preach, but she should be able to advise me appropriately after hearing my sermons.”

“Then I hope you find such a woman, for I fear I am not she,” Elizabeth said coolly. “I have no passion for cookery, and it has been many years since I even opened a cookbook.”

“Surely you are familiar with the Bible? You attend church.”

“Of course. But more for the social engagement. I enjoy seeing my friends after service. And Sunday is always agreeable for tea and conversation.”

“Coffee, you mean?” he said, aghast.

She nearly smiled. She had tried coffee once—at her aunt and uncle’s home in London—and found it dreadful. But she suspected Mr Collins would find it scandalous, and she was not disappointed.

“One must indulge in such things now and again, Mr Collins. I daresay any husband of mine would do the same. Life ought to contain a little adventure—culinary or otherwise.”

He tugged at his cravat as if her words made his skin crawl.

“Well, I suppose you have not yet been properly exposed to the beauty of scripture or the blessed simplicity of a vicar’s wife’s life,” he said with some condescension. “You are young. Mouldable. I am sure that any husband would teach you these virtues.”

She opened her mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but before she could speak, the sound of hooves on gravel drew her attention. A rider approached, turning into the drive and dismounting with haste. A cloak concealed their figure, but as they landed on the ground, the hood slipped.

“Georgiana!” Elizabeth exclaimed, rushing towards her. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, this is most irregular,” Mr Collins huffed. “Most irregular indeed. What would your aunt say, seeing you riding like a gentleman at this hour? And where is your companion?”

“At Netherfield,” Georgiana said shortly. “And I haven’t time to argue with you, Mr Collins. Report what you will to my aunt. I must see Thomas immediately. It is urgent. My brother is making us leave Netherfield in the morning.”

Elizabeth took her by the hand, ignoring Mr Collins’s sputtering, and ushered her inside.

“Wait here,” she said, then hastened up the stairs to Thomas’s room. When he answered, his eyes were heavy with sleep.

“What is it?”

“Georgiana is downstairs. She’s come alone.”

He blinked. “Georgiana? What is she doing here?”

“She’s come to say goodbye. Mr Darcy is taking her away tomorrow.”

“No,” he muttered. “He can’t. Not now... Not when she and I—”

“Thomas, go to her. She’s upset.”

He nodded and squeezed her shoulder before hurrying down the stairs.

“This is most irregular!” Mr Collins cried.

Elizabeth followed quickly and found Collins attempting to block Thomas’s path to Georgiana.

“Please,” Georgiana said, her voice tight, “I wish to speak to Thomas. I do not need a chaperone.”

“You most certainly do. Your aunt would be outraged. I cannot allow this.”

“Collins,” Thomas said, his tone low, “step aside. Or we shall both regret it.”

“Such a threat!” Mr Collins cried.

“A man of the cloth should know a warning when he hears one,” Thomas replied.

Elizabeth pushed herself between them.

“Mr Collins, I shall be their chaperone. This conversation does not require your supervision or interference. Kindly leave us.”

“I cannot.”

“You must. Now.”

He finally relented, muttering about impropriety.

“He is correct about one thing,” Elizabeth said, turning to Thomas and Georgiana. “If you’re alone, it could damage Georgiana’s reputation.”

“I do not mind if you hear what I have to say,” Georgiana whispered.

“Nor I,” Thomas added.

Elizabeth sat in a corner near the fire, letting the darkness envelop them. Their words became a soft murmur—sweet, private, aching. She gazed into the flames, the firelight flickering over her features, as her thoughts wandered to her own place in this tangled web of affections and departures. Every warm glow from the hearth was a stark contrast to the cold edges of change encroaching from all sides.

She heard quiet sobs, then Thomas’s gentle voice soothing them. A faint creak of the chair, a rustle of fabric. The intimacy of heartbreak. She could not bear to look.

Their silhouettes shifted. He held her. Perhaps more. Elizabeth did not wish to know. It was heartbreaking—and somehow, she felt responsible. She had encouraged Thomas to speak with Georgiana. But no—this was Mr Darcy’s doing. He was taking Georgiana away, just when she had begun to blossom.

After a while, the two approached. Georgiana’s cheeks were wet with tears.

“I must say goodbye. If my brother discovers this, he’ll be livid.”

“So you are truly leaving?”

“For London. For how long, I do not know. If my brother hears of this, I fear he would lock me away until I am one and twenty.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened.

“Perhaps, I exaggerate. But my brother would be most displeased,” Georgiana added.

“We shall deal with Mr Collins,” Elizabeth promised.

Georgiana embraced her. “You have been a true friend. Tell your sisters goodbye for me. I shall miss you all. One more thing, I’ve heard rumours. The Bingleys may be leaving too. I know not why. If it is so, I am sorry for your sister.”

Elizabeth gasped. Darcy’s departure she had expected. But Bingley?

“Surely he would call to say farewell?”

“I imagine he will,” Georgiana said gently.

Elizabeth was briefly comforted. Mr Bingley must care for Jane—he would not leave without a word. Perhaps he would even propose. And yet she worried.

Her thoughts drifted back to the assembly weeks ago. The whispers between Caroline and Mr Darcy. Had they conspired at last to separate them?

If Mr Bingley left Jane behind, there would be two broken hearts at Longbourn.

# *Chapter Twenty-Five*

## *Darcy*

### *Darcy House, London*

“Georgiana, I am about to call on Bingley. Would you care to join me?” Darcy asked his sister.

Georgiana glanced up from her book, a frown creasing her brow as she caught his gaze before turning back to the pages. The drawing-room of his London townhouse where she had retreated, appeared to offer her far more solace than his company.

“Shall I take this as a no?” he ventured, patiently awaiting her response. Yet, instead of words, she chose silence, facing the back of the chaise longue, thus presenting him with naught but the expanse of her back.

It had been a month of this cold treatment. Ever since he had compelled her to leave, Georgiana had not smiled upon him, choosing to speak only with restraint to Bingley’s sisters, and with noticeably more warmth to Bingley himself. Mr Darcy had become the recipient of nothing but frost.

He had anticipated her displeasure. Endeavouring to protect her from the Bennets and their influence was a decision rooted in his concern for her reputation. Affection for young Mr Bennet, he believed, threatened her very virtue.

He steeled himself, convinced he had made the right choice. In time, she would understand.

Leaving his sister to her melancholic musings, he stepped into the brisk London afternoon. How vastly different it was to return to the city, compared to life in the countryside. He had always preferred the tranquillity and beauty of rural retreats. Of all the places he had travelled, none could rival the serenity he found in Pemberley and the rolling hills of Derbyshire.

The thought of returning there tugged at his heart. How he wished to whisk Georgiana away. But alas, Bingley remained consumed by the shadows of his recent sorrow over Jane Bennet’s absence, his usual affable demeanour supplanted by gloom. Darcy felt an obligation to support him, having played a role in altering Bingley’s once-jovial disposition.

As he strolled down the cobbled streets, unbidden memories of Elizabeth Bennet danced in his mind. Their conversation at the stables had stirred something profound within him. Might different circumstances have led them down another path? If not for Georgiana’s entanglement with the Bennets, he wondered, could he have pursued a tenderness for Elizabeth beyond mere admiration?

Yet he chastised himself. Those days of possibility had slipped away. Hertfordshire seemed a faraway dream—a distant echo along with all its associated heartaches.

Arriving at Grosvenor House, he knocked and was swiftly admitted by the butler. After relinquishing his hat and jacket, he made his way to the parlour, where Bingley sat slumped beside a glass of wine, a newspaper cast aside at his feet.

“I have come to urge you to join me at the club for a light luncheon,” Darcy announced in the most buoyant tone he could muster.

Bingley looked up at him, and Darcy’s heart sank at the sight. His friend appeared drained, with weary eyes that hinted at sleepless nights and sunken cheeks.

“I’m not hungry,” he replied, “but you are welcome to partake of a drink—whiskey, sherry, even wine.” He gestured weakly towards the sideboard, where numerous bottles stood half-empty.

Concern rippled through Darcy. Bingley, usually so temperate, had taken to drink after his separation from Jane. “Are you quite well? You ought to steer clear of too much liquor, it will worsen your spirits,” he admonished gently.

“Can you lift me from this guilt?” Bingley asked forlornly. “Guilt for abandoning Jane and entrusting Caroline with my letter, which I fear conveyed none of my remorse.”

Darcy opened his mouth, closed it again, and found no words to soothe his friend’s torment. “I cannot, my friend.”

“Well then. It appears you cannot aid me at all. I have made an unfortunate mistake, one that was foolish to heed your counsel or that of my sisters. Have any of you known love?” Bingley’s voice was laced with bitterness.

This pointed critique stung. Normally, Bingley refrained from such barbs.

“Have I been wrong?” Darcy pondered for the hundredth time that month. Both Bingley and Georgiana were wretched, while Caroline and the Hursts revelled in their perceived triumph of saving Bingley from an ill-fated match. Perhaps, Darcy mused, they erred in their judgement.

“Shall I take my leave?” he offered tentatively.

“I cannot provide entertainment at this time, Darcy. Unless you wish to sit in silence and sip your drink, I suggest it is best you proceed to the club alone.”

“Actually, I had hoped to avoid lunch with my aunt today,” he confessed. “She is in town, residing at Hartley House. I would have preferred to send her a note stating I had other engagements.”

“Then you need not lie,” Bingley murmured, despondently.

Darcy’s heart ached at the realization that Bingley harboured resentment towards him. To be blamed cut deeper than self-reproach. He had not intended to inflict such pain.

“Well, I shall take my leave then.” With that, he departed, making his way to Hartley House, his aunt’s residence in London.

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Upon arrival, he found Lady Catherine de Bourgh seated at the dinner table, an eager smile dancing on her lips.

“Fitzwilliam! How delightful to see you! Do sit. How are you?”

“Well enough, thank you,” he replied quietly.

“And your sister?”

Lady Catherine’s enquiry about Georgiana prompted a flicker of concern. He feared she would broach the delicate subject of Georgiana’s unfortunate friendship with the Bennet sisters or that boy, but thus far she remained silent.

“Georgiana is, as well as can be expected. I daresay a return to Pemberley will restore her spirits.”

“Excellent! I must invite you to Rosings Park first. My vicar is to be wed, and I believe you know the bride.”

Darcy’s heart clenched. Who could it be? His thoughts immediately turned to Elizabeth. He had observed the way Collins favoured her company, both at the ball and in conversations around town. Jane had shared whispers of the odious little man’s attentiveness to Elizabeth with Bingley.

This troubled him greatly, and he silently prayed the bride was not Elizabeth.

“A young lady named Charlotte Lucas,” his aunt pronounced. “She’s the daughter of a knight.”

“Oh,” Darcy exhaled, relief pouring over him. “I am familiar with Miss Lucas—a commendable young woman.”

“Indeed, though perhaps not quite so young. She is seven-and-twenty, considered somewhat past the marrying age. I did caution Mr Collins to ensure she is fit for motherhood.”

Darcy frowned. “How is he to gauge that?”

“He can enquire as to her mother’s age when she bore each of her children; it serves as an indicator. You ought to understand such matters, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy nodded without further comment, placing his napkin on his lap.

“And how fares your unfortunate friend, Mr Bingley?”

“He remains as he was,” he replied thoughtfully. He had not confided in his aunt regarding Georgiana’s involvement with the Bennets, nor had he shared the deeper reasons for Bingley’s disquiet. To Lady Catherine, he credited their parting as a righteous measure. She had lauded him as a hero for rescuing Bingley from a dreadful match.

“He is quite miserable. I am beginning to doubt the wisdom of my actions.”

“My dear nephew, what trouble could possibly arise from separating from a family of such lower station?” she asked,

exuding confidence in her opinions. “If anything, Bingley is beneath the Bennets. He is not yet a true gentleman, lacking an estate.”

“But he shall, in due course,” Darcy interjected. “Do not let his present woes stain your conscience, you did the right thing. He shall soon express his gratitude.”

Darcy had little faith in this forecast but his aunt offered no time for reflection.

“We must always safeguard our status, Fitzwilliam. One cannot lower themselves by marrying beneath their station; we must always marry upwards or at least on par.”

“But what if such decisions lead to unhappiness?”

“Happiness blossoms from respect and financial stability, not from the fleeting allure of a handsome visage or a clever retort. You ought to have grasped this by now.”

While he conceded that physical beauty may fade, he maintained that a partner’s intellect was of considerable importance.

His aunt snorted. “I hardly presume Bingley seeks much intellectual challenge. He strikes me as one unconcerned with matters of profundity.”

Darcy pursed his lips, acutely aware that, while Lady Catherine might favour Bingley, she also harboured a certain disdain for him. She misinterpreted Bingley’s warm disposition as folly, a perspective Darcy found inequitable.

“Mr Bingley is my closest friend, Aunt Catherine. I wish you would refrain from such disparagement.”

“Disparage? I recall the night he almost allowed himself to be ensnared in that wretched match. You performed valiantly, Fitzwilliam, and I will assert it a thousand times over. You must learn not to emulate your father,” she cautioned. “He mistakenly elevated that detestable Wickham to your equal standing, and we all know how that concluded.”

With that, she resumed her meal, forcing Darcy back into the depths of his thoughts. He should have drawn strength from her words, yet they only deepened his uncertainty. Throughout his life, he had often found himself at odds with Lady Catherine’s perspective, particularly concerning the nature of love.

Had he truly erred in separating Bingley from Jane Bennet? And what of Thomas? Lady Catherine’s remarks regarding social status, the importance of remaining within one’s sphere, made him uneasy. He was haunted by the scrutiny with which she viewed Bingley, who had yet to rise in society, despite being one of the finest friends he had ever known.

He reflected on Lady Catherine’s final sentiments, remembering his father’s failure to see beyond social standing when he took George Wickham into their home and treated him as a son. Those memories bore a weight of anguish, for Darcy had never felt more cast aside than when his father embraced Wickham so warmly. Had he allowed those harrowing experiences to darken his perception of the Bennets and their ilk?

How often he allowed the spectres of his past to taint his judgements. Yet now, only upon witnessing the consequences of his actions did he fully comprehend what he must do.

# *Chapter Twenty-Six*

## *Elizabeth*

**T**he back door creaked open, and footsteps echoed through the kitchen. The figure in the shadows halted, removed one boot, and dropped it silently in the corner. He then glided across the kitchen to the chamber on the right. As he opened the door, it let out a soft creak, and just as he was about to step inside—

“How is Georgiana?” Elizabeth enquired, clutching her chair.

“Why are you hiding in the dark?” Thomas asked, ignoring Elizabeth’s question.

“Because I wished to speak to you before the entire household becomes aware of your return,” Elizabeth replied.

“Will you at least light a candle so we need not converse in the dark?” he asked. She rose and struck a match, igniting two candleholders in the centre of the room. With the kitchen now sufficiently illuminated, she looked up. Thomas’s hair was tousled, and as he shrugged off his jacket to hang over the back of the chair, Elizabeth noticed the snowflakes that clung to his dark locks.

“Is it snowing?” she asked.

“Yes, it began just outside of London,” he answered.

“You did not ride there, did you?” she pressed.

He shook his head. “Of course not. I rode to the county in the company of my friend and then took the coach. But the snow followed me all the way here.”

“I see. And how is she?” Elizabeth asked, her concern evident.

“When I am with her, she is well enough. She still refuses to speak to her brother. He has warned her that if she does not improve, they will travel to visit her aunt in Rosings,” he replied.

Elizabeth frowned. “I worry that if she is in proximity to Mr Collins, Charlotte will not be able to hold him to his promise.”

“That is precisely why we cannot let that happen,” he said. “I must devise some solution.”

Elizabeth smiled at the realisation that Thomas was no longer denying his clandestine visits to Georgiana Darcy. This marked his fifth visit in seven weeks, and she had thought time would soon run out. She was surprised that Mr Darcy had even chosen to stay in London for so long. With the snowfall in the north, she assumed he was reluctant to travel under such conditions. It was mid-February now, and in a few weeks, they would be able to journey north without complication. Yet, she surmised that Darcy did not wish to expose his sister to any risk, which was why he had chosen to keep her secluded, viewing her well-being as paramount.

“And Mr Darcy, how does he fare?” she asked.

“I am surprised you enquire; you have not uttered his name in quite some time,” he observed.

Elizabeth merely shrugged; it was indeed true she had refrained from mentioning Mr Darcy lately, yet thoughts of him lingered. She often reminisced about their conversations in the library at Netherfield, or the afternoon when she injured her ankle, or that evening at the Netherfield ball. Each encounter left her with a sense of genuine fondness, but now, uncertainty clouded her feelings.

“Georgiana informs me that he is quite miserable. She overheard him confiding in Bingley, who is in quite a dudgeon. He drinks too much, eats too little, and seldom ventures out. Darcy seems genuinely concerned for him.”

“Why is that?” Elizabeth queried, intrigued.

“Georgiana thinks he genuinely regrets separating from Jane, yet he is too proud to admit it.”

“I am surprised she holds any affection for her brother,” Elizabeth remarked.

“She loves him dearly. But...” Thomas trailed off, his expression thoughtful.



Elizabeth smiled and placed her hand over his. “But she loves you more?”

“I just—” he paused, “she wishes me to know that her brother is not a bad man, that he harbours many demons. After hearing what she has shared, I cannot entirely fault him for his actions. Yet, I find it difficult to extend any favourable thoughts towards him due to the misery he has wrought upon us all. Not all of it rests upon his shoulders, for he is a product of his circumstances.”

Elizabeth frowned and leaned back in her chair. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean to say, Darcy faced a difficult upbringing.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Elizabeth replied, surprised. “Living at Pemberley, with a London townhouse, and a wealthy grandfather?”

Thomas smiled knowingly. “I dare say wealth does not guarantee happiness. From what I gather, he was happy—but the roots of his grievances seem to stem from jealousy.”

Elizabeth listened quietly, absorbing his words.

“He was his father’s only son and quite close to him, but according to Georgiana, once Wickham entered their lives, he became the late Mr Darcy’s favoured child. Darcy was often cast aside, as all his father’s attention gravitated towards Wickham, which fostered resentment. Even Georgiana appeared bewitched by him, for Wickham was mischievous and charming, while Darcy was seen as quite the opposite—responsible yet rigid.”

“It’s no wonder he cultivated such a sense of responsibility; he was raised to be that way,” Elizabeth said, surprising herself with her defence of Mr Darcy.

Thomas nodded. “Indeed, the same dynamics persisted during their time at Cambridge. Many of Darcy’s former friends abandoned him for Wickham, drawn to the latter’s inclination to indulge and enjoy life rather than commit to his studies. He was also quite generous with his finances.”

“That does sound like Mr Wickham,” Elizabeth mused. “Generous with money that belongs to another.”

“Precisely. Georgiana confided that her brother often felt inadequate, as though he was never enough.”

“I suppose when he arrived here, he sensed a familiar pattern developing,” Elizabeth concluded.

“How does Georgiana understand all of this? Surely, as a child, she could not have grasped the entirety of it?” Thomas asked.

“Some of it she witnessed herself; other pieces were recounted by her cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” he explained. “In any case, she believes that her brother was jealous of me. That is not something I ever thought I would experience. A gentleman envious. Of me.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth said, her understanding dawning. “Because you and Mr Bingley have become rather close, haven’t you?”

“Indeed, though it was not my intention to come between them. In truth, I do not think Bingley regards me as a better friend than Darcy. I hope that, over time, we will become closer, yet we have not exchanged words since he departed Netherfield. He never mentioned leaving, which I would have thought a true friend should do. Nevertheless, when Georgiana and I started to grow closer, he must have interpreted it as a repeat of what transpired when Wickham entered their lives. Everyone favoured him.”

“Do you know what transpired between Mr Wickham and Georgiana?” she asked.

Thomas frowned, his brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Elizabeth replied, “Two years ago, Mr Wickham cunningly attempted to charm Georgiana into believing herself in love with him, persuading her to elope, so they could wed and he could seize the Darcy fortune for himself.”

“Good heavens!” Thomas exclaimed, clenching his fists. “That weasel! Poor Georgiana...”

“She was blissfully unaware. Mr Darcy uncovered Mr Wickham’s intentions and intervened before he could execute his plan, ensuring that Mr Wickham was never allowed near her again.”

“Well, that is a relief,” Thomas said, nodding. “I would not have wished her to suffer such a fate.”

“Yet Darcy must see me as some sort of monster now,” Thomas continued, a pained expression crossing his face. “I never would have intended for any of this...” he paused. “If only he could see that I wish to be with Georgiana...”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean, you never would have?”

“Nothing, Elizabeth,” he said quickly, cutting off the conversation. “It is late. I must retire. It has been a long day, and you should rest as well. Do not fret, all shall be well eventually. I hope these revelations regarding Darcy may soften your sentiments, at least a fraction.”

“I hold no feelings for him, save for disdain,” she retorted, rising from her chair and meeting Thomas’s gaze.

“Indeed,” he replied, his tone laced with scepticism. “Of course, you do not. I must have been imagining things.”

“I assure you, you were mistaken. There was never anything between Mr Darcy and myself, nor shall there ever be.”

“Very well,” Thomas said, a note of resignation in his voice. “I shall bid you good night then. Until the morning.”

As he made his way back to his chamber, Elizabeth remained seated, grappling with thoughts that spun through her mind. The truths concerning Mr Darcy’s past stirred an unexpected sympathy within her. It provided context for his actions. If jealousy had been the driving force behind his behaviour, it would explain his choices and how he had perceived Thomas as a threat. Yet he had chosen to gamble with the well-being of those he had left behind—Georgiana, Jane, and Mr Bingley—leaving them all deeply affected by his decisions.

She glanced again at Thomas’s door. His words lingered in her mind. What had he meant by never would have? Confusion swept over her, and as she extinguished the candles, she made her way up to her chamber in darkness, emotions swirling within her more tumultuous than ever.

# *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

## *Darcy*

It was a dull, grey morning in London. The house was quiet, except for the faint clink of the fire grate in the drawing room. Georgiana Darcy sat by the window, not looking up as her brother entered. Her embroidery lay untouched in her lap.

Darcy stood nearby, uncertain how to begin. After a moment, he said quietly, “You must speak to me eventually, Georgiana. This silence cannot go on.”

She did not respond.

“I know you are angry,” he said, moving closer. “Is this because I brought you away from Longbourn? From the Bennets’ ward?”

Still, she said nothing.

“Please,” he added, “just speak to me.”

Georgiana’s eyes stayed fixed on the street outside, but her voice came at last, low and tight. “His name is Thomas. And he is more than a ward. You would know that, if you’d ever given him a chance.”

Darcy looked away, caught off guard by the sharpness in her tone.

“I didn’t want to believe what Mr Wickham said about you,” she continued. “That you were proud. Unkind. Cold. But now I wonder. You seem to care only for people who meet your high standards. Everyone else—Thomas, Miss Bennet—you push aside.”

Darcy tried to reply, but Georgiana went on. “You speak of doing what’s right. But you helped Caroline and her sister separate Mr Bingley from Jane. Don’t deny it. I heard them. They talked about it openly, as if it were clever.”

He turned away, his jaw clenched. “That wasn’t the full story.”

“I’m not a child,” she said. “I know what I heard. And I know how unhappy Jane looked when we left. You always criticise Aunt Catherine for meddling, for judging everyone by their rank, but how are you any different?”

Her words struck him like a slap. He stood still, unable to speak.

“I will fix it,” he said at last. “What I did to Jane. To Bingley. To you. I’ll make it right.”

Georgiana looked at him. “Then will you let me see Thomas again?”

Darcy hesitated. “That is... a separate matter.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why is it separate?”

He couldn’t answer. He didn’t trust himself to speak the truth—that jealousy and pride had guided his hand more than care ever had.

“I should have talked to you,” he said quietly. “Really talked. I thought I was protecting you.”

She stood now, her face pale but calm. “Taking me from Netherfield wasn’t protection. It was control. You ruined my happiness—and Jane’s, too. And you didn’t even tell Bingley the truth. You let him believe she didn’t care.”

Darcy stepped forward, but she pulled back.

“You say you’ll fix it,” she said. “But you can’t undo everything. Not easily. You should ask yourself whether it was all worth it.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and left the room.

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Darcy remained where he stood, alone. Her words echoed in his mind, and for the first time, he truly saw how far he had fallen from the man he believed himself to be. Darcy sat with his hands clenched tight in his lap, the pressure of his fingers

digging into his gloves. The study in Bingley's London townhouse was quiet, save for the soft ticking of the clock on the mantel. He had been speaking for some time now—everything laid bare. His interference. His doubts. His intentions, however misplaced. He had told Bingley all.

Now he waited.

Across from him, Bingley leaned back in his chair, a pained look on his usually cheerful face. He had not spoken for several moments, and Darcy dared not break the silence. He had braced himself for anger, perhaps even a demand that their friendship come to an end.

At last, Bingley looked at him and said quietly, "So, you did not truly share the opinion of my sisters and Mr Hurst?"

"No," he said quickly. "I did not. I should not have allowed myself to be drawn into their confederacy. I was a bad friend and I can only ask your forgiveness now."

Bingley's reply surprised him. "Did it have something to do with Wickham?"

Darcy blinked, startled. "I—what do you mean?"

"Do not feign surprise, Darcy. I know you better than that. I've always suspected it ran deeper than just your opinion of Jane. I know how much you disliked Thomas and I assume the idea of my marrying Jane would mean being near Thomas which would not be favourable to you."

Darcy looked away. "I had no wish to bring that up. It sounds like an excuse."

"But is it part of the truth?"

Darcy nodded slowly. "Yes... it is. When I saw how easily you took to Thomas Bennet—how well-liked he became—it reminded me of... then. When we were boys. My father used to praise Wickham, more than he praised me. And again at Cambridge. Everyone was drawn to him. I've always been the serious one, the dull one. And I was afraid I'd be... cast aside. Again. I thought if you and Jane become closer, he too would remain in your realm and I would no longer matter. I do not have many friends, as you know, and I should not have liked to lose one of my closest."

Bingley looked at him for a long moment. "Do you really think so little of me?"

Darcy's throat tightened. "No. But I often think very little of myself."

"You believe I'd drop my best friend the moment someone more charming came along?"

Darcy shook his head, his voice low. "I didn't mean to think it. I only... felt it."

"Well," Bingley said, sitting forward, "you may be serious, and you may not smile often, but that's why I trust you. I never have to wonder where I stand with you. I can talk to you properly. That matters more than all the charm in the world."

Darcy looked down, shame twisting in his chest. "I have betrayed your trust. I wronged Miss Bennet and I wronged you. There's no excuse for it."

Bingley sighed, but his voice was gentler. "It was out of character. But I see now why you did it. You weren't just trying to protect me, were you? You were afraid."

Darcy nodded. "Of losing my sister."

He hesitated, then went on. "She became very close to Thomas. I saw it happening, and I feared... feared the same thing that happened before. That someone I loved would be drawn away, without me even realising it. I thought if I acted quickly, I could stop it before it went too far."

Bingley shook his head. "But Thomas isn't Wickham."

"I know that now. He's nothing like him. He's not titled, no fortune of his own, his parentage uncertain—yes. But he is decent. He is steady. And he truly cares for Georgiana. I can see that now."

"Then what is the trouble?"

Darcy gave a weak smile. "If she were to be with him, her future would be tarnished. The family would not take it well."

"Come now," Bingley said. "Colonel Fitzwilliam adores her. You do as well, of course. That's most of the family she

cares about.”

“I would not turn my back on her.”

“Exactly,” Bingley said. “And nor would I. And if things were to progress, she’d have the Bennets as her family too. There is nothing wrong with that.”

There was a silence between them again. But this time, it was not cold. It was thoughtful.

“We could all have been family,” Bingley said, softer now. “If not for what you and my sisters did.”

Darcy lowered his eyes. “I know. And I regret it more than I can say.”

He looked up, voice steady now. “I mean to go to Miss Bennet. I will tell her everything. I will confess what I did.”

Bingley sat up straighter, his eyes brightening. “She’s in London?”

“Yes, Mrs Annesley saw her and her aunt in Covent Garden market on Monday. She is staying at Gracechurch Street. I plan to see her after this, if you would care to come.”

“Care to?” Bingley exclaimed. “I insist on it. I must beg her forgiveness myself.”

Darcy allowed himself the faintest of smiles. But then Bingley added, with a smirk, “And perhaps, if you’re very noble in your confession, it might win you a little favour from Miss Elizabeth?”

Darcy straightened slightly, though his expression remained unreadable. “That is not the reason I—”

“Don’t lie to me, Darcy.”

Darcy met his gaze, then slowly nodded. “Very well. I care for her more than I can explain.”

“Then there is hope yet,” Bingley said, standing. “Here is our plan. I will beg Jane’s forgiveness this very hour. You will speak to Georgiana and make peace. And then—we shall go to Longbourn. And you will tell Miss Elizabeth how you feel.”

Darcy’s chest tightened with nerves, but he nodded. “Yes. I will.”

“Good,” Bingley said. “Let’s not waste another day.”

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The streets of London were quiet as Darcy helped Bingley from the carriage, steadying him as they reached the steps of his townhouse. The night air was sharp, the scent of frost beginning to rise from the road.

“Come now, I can walk on my own,” Bingley said with a grin, though he leaned rather heavily on Darcy’s arm.

“You’ve had three glasses more than was wise,” Darcy replied, not without affection.

“And two toasts fewer than I would have liked,” Bingley returned cheerfully. “But no matter. Jane forgave me. She forgave me, Darcy. She is everything I hoped she was. Everything and more.”

Darcy gave a small nod. “I am pleased for you.”

“She cried, you know. Not in anger, but with joy. And I cried too—not a word to anyone,” he added, wagging a finger. “You are the only person I can trust with such shameful confessions.”

Darcy smiled faintly. “You are not the first man to cry from happiness.”

“No, but I must be the first to cry and then drink an entire bottle of claret in honour of it,” Bingley laughed, swaying slightly on his feet. “I must go to Longbourn. At once. Tonight!”

“You most certainly must not,” Darcy said firmly.

Bingley blinked at him. “Why ever not?”

“You are half-drunk, Bingley.”

“A quarter,” Bingley corrected.

“A generous half.”

Bingley laughed again, louder this time. “There it is! That’s why I love you, Darcy. You are the only man alive who could call me drunk to my face and still sound like a gentleman doing it.”

Darcy sighed, ushering him to the door. “Sleep tonight. Travel in the morning.”

“Yes, yes. Sensible as ever.” Bingley paused at the threshold, his face still flushed from drink and delight. “I’m going to be happy, Darcy. Genuinely happy. And you—well, you’ll see. It will be your turn soon enough.”

Darcy raised a brow. “Go inside, Bingley.”

With one final laugh and a clumsy bow, Bingley disappeared through the doorway, and Darcy turned back towards his own home.

The streets were colder now, emptier. His breath hung in the air. And with each step, thoughts of Elizabeth crept in uninvited.

Jane and Bingley would be married. There would be visits. Family dinners. Shared holidays. He and Elizabeth would see one another more frequently—not by design, but by circumstance. And perhaps, in time, he might repair the impression he had left upon her.

But no. He must not think so far ahead. He must not let his heart wander. Not yet.

Georgiana came first.

It had been weeks since their last true conversation, and though she had kept to her room and to short, polite exchanges, he had promised himself that he would try again. Tonight. Now.

Darcy entered his house, nodding briefly to the footman, and made his way upstairs. The lamp in Georgiana’s room had not yet been extinguished. He knocked gently, then opened the door.

The room was still. Her writing desk stood open, and a single candle flickered low by the window. There was no sign of her.

His eyes fell on the envelope resting neatly against the inkwell.

His name was written in her hand.

With a sinking heart, he crossed the room and broke the seal.

*Dearest Brother,*

*I know you love me. I believe it. But I also know you cannot give me what I need—not here, not like this. You wish to protect me, but I do not need protection. I need freedom. I need truth. I need the chance to be happy in my own way.*

*You do not understand what I felt at Longbourn, or what Thomas meant to me. Perhaps you never will. But I can no longer sit still, waiting for you to approve of the life I wish to live.*

*Do not send anyone after me. I am not in danger, and I am not foolish. But I will not find my happiness under this roof. I have left in search of it.*

*Forgive me if you can. I do love you. But I must be free.*

*Georgiana*

Darcy sat down slowly in the chair by the desk, the letter in his lap. The candle sputtered, casting long shadows on the wall.

He did not move for a long time.

# *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

## *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth had only just dressed when she descended the staircase, expecting a quiet breakfast. But as she reached the bottom step, the sound of her mother's exclamations drew her attention at once.

"Oh! Oh, I do not know what to think!" Mrs Bennet cried, fluttering about the parlour like a hen disturbed. "He has done it! He truly has!"

"Done what, Mama?" Elizabeth asked, startled, moving quickly into the room.

Mrs Bennet turned, eyes wide, hair somewhat loosened from its pins in her agitation. In her hand was a folded note, held aloft like a banner. "Gone! Thomas has gone! He has run off to Gretna Green!"

Elizabeth blinked. "Gretna Green?"

"To marry Miss Darcy!" Mrs Bennet wailed, though whether from joy or horror was unclear. "He has taken a carriage in the night and left this letter behind. I never thought our family would be embroiled in such a scandal."

Elizabeth's breath caught. "Miss Darcy? He has taken Georgiana Darcy?"

Mrs Bennet nodded furiously. "And not a word to anyone! I am quite beside myself."

At that moment, Mr Bennet appeared in the doorway, his dressing gown hastily tied, and a grim expression darkening his features. "He has emptied half his wardrobe," he said simply. "Gone with nearly all his coats, save the summer ones."

Mrs Bennet turned to him. "He did not speak to you first!"

Mr Bennet gave a small, weary shake of the head. "No. And I can't say I know what wounds me more—the fact of his leaving, or that he could not come to me."

"Papa," Elizabeth said gently, "how could he have? You would have tried to stop him." Her thoughts swirled as she thought back to her last conversation with Thomas. There had been a hint. Of course there had been. But she'd ignored it. And now this...

"Naturally!" Mr Bennet cried. "Because this—this is folly. It's a disaster. Thomas has no fortune, no standing, and he is taking a girl not only vastly above him in birth but barely eighteen."

Mrs Bennet huffed. "Yes, yes, but she must be very fond of him, else she wouldn't go. And think of it, Mr Bennet—Miss Darcy! He will have married well in the end. Perhaps it is not as bad as we think."

Elizabeth frowned. "Thomas would never accept Mr Darcy's money, Mama. Surely, you know that?"

"I quite agree," Mr Bennet said, his tone dry. "Thomas would rather work in a warehouse than live off Mr Darcy's goodwill. And yet I cannot help but wonder—does Miss Darcy truly understand what life with him would entail? She has lived in every comfort, dined with nobility, been raised with the highest expectations. And now she is to live with... us? Or worse, in lodgings?"

Mrs Bennet sniffed. "Well, perhaps Mr Darcy will not be so hard-hearted. She is his sister, after all. He must help them somehow. And Thomas must accept it if he wishes to ensure a good life for his bride. He will set aside his pride, I know it."

Elizabeth said nothing. Her mind was racing, her heart troubled. She knew Thomas had been brought to point nonplus, and she admired Georgiana's courage. Yet, she feared what might await them both on the other side of all of this.

Before another word could be said, the clatter of hooves and the crunch of wheels on gravel echoed through the morning stillness.

They all turned towards the window.

A carriage was pulling up at the front of the house. Not the post. Not the grocer. And far grander than any vehicle belonging to their neighbours.

Elizabeth said nothing, but stepped quietly towards the door, her breath quickening.

The carriage had scarcely come to a full stop when the door swung open, and a tall figure stepped out onto the gravel. Elizabeth recognised him at once. Mr Darcy.

Behind him followed Mr Bingley, looking rather more sober than he had been when last she saw him, and close behind came Jane, her bonnet slightly askew from the hurried journey. A third figure descended more carefully—a pleasant, composed woman whom Elizabeth recognised from Georgiana’s brief visit as Mrs Annesley, her companion.

The entire Bennet household seemed to hold its breath.

Mr Darcy wasted no time. He approached the house with a look so grave it drew even Mrs Bennet into silence. “Forgive the sudden call,” he said, barely greeting them before continuing, “but I must ask directly—has my sister come here?”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “You do not know where she is?”

“She is gone,” he said simply. “We discovered it only late in the night and set off at first light.” He looked to each of them, though his gaze lingered most on her. “I believe she may have come here. Or else... I fear she may have run off with your ward, Thomas.”

Mrs Bennet gave a dramatic gasp, placing one hand against her chest, while Lydia and Kitty peered down the stairs in undisguised fascination.

But Mr Bennet stepped forward, steady and calm. “She is not here, Mr Darcy. But you are correct. She has gone with Thomas. He left during the night as well.”

Darcy’s jaw tightened. “Then you... knew?”

“I did not,” Mr Bennet replied. “Not until this morning. But he left a letter.” He produced it from his coat pocket. “I do not suppose it will comfort you, but it may clarify things.”

Mr Darcy reached for it without a word. His expression was unreadable, but his hand trembled faintly as he unfolded the paper.

“I think we ought to speak in private,” Mr Bennet said. “Gentlemen, if you’ll follow me to the study.”

The three men disappeared down the corridor, the door to the study clicking shut behind them.

Elizabeth stood still in the centre of the hall, heart pounding.

Mrs Bennet, still quite breathless, turned to her daughters. “Well! A runaway match with a Miss Darcy! Who would have imagined it? I always thought Thomas had a mind of his own, but this is beyond any expectations. Mrs Annesley, did you not suspect that anything was amiss?”

Mrs Annesley shook her head, her eyes sad. “No, I knew she had been sad but this? No, I did not see it coming.”

“Well, I shall see you to the kitchen for a cup of tea,” Mrs Bennet said and escorted the older woman inside, leaving Jane and Elizabeth alone for a moment.

“How are you here, Jane? And with such company?” Elizabeth asked her sister as she escorted her inside.

“I had meant to say something... but now may not be the right moment.”

“Nonsense, child! If it is good tidings, then speak. We could do with something cheerful amidst all this running about and scandal,” Mrs Bennet said.

Elizabeth turned towards her sister, noting for the first time the quiet brightness in Jane’s face. Her cheeks were flushed, and though her hands were clasped tightly in her lap, there was a softness about her that had not been there these many weeks.

“I wondered,” Elizabeth said slowly, “why you arrived with Mr Bingley... and Mr Darcy.”

Jane nodded and smiled shyly. “They came to Gracechurch Street last evening. Both of them. Mr Bingley asked to speak with me—and with Aunt Gardiner present, of course.”

Mrs Bennet leaned forward. “And what did he say?”

“That he had been... misled,” Jane said carefully. “That he allowed himself to be unduly influenced. By his sisters, and by Mr Darcy.”



Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. Jane continued.

“He said he had missed me terribly. That not a day had passed without thinking of me. And he asked—he begged—for my forgiveness.”

Mrs Bennet clutched at her kerchief. “Oh, my dear Jane. You are too good! Of course you forgave him!”

Jane smiled, her eyes full. “I did. But not just him.”

She glanced at Elizabeth. “Mr Darcy also spoke. He admitted his part in it, plainly. He said it was not from malice, but out of... something unresolved in himself. That he acted without thinking.”

Elizabeth looked down at her hands. Her heart had started to stir before she realised it. She thought of Thomas’s words weeks ago, spoken with quiet certainty—that Mr Darcy had acted out of jealousy, that he had been shaped by old wounds and rivalries.

And yet, he had come forward. He had helped make things right.

That sympathy Elizabeth had once fought to suppress—the very feeling she had buried when the hurt had been too fresh—now crept back in. Not fully formed, but there. Steady, undeniable.

But now was not the time.

Thomas was missing. Georgiana too. And while her feelings threatened to rise, she pressed them back with effort. There would be time for such thoughts later.

Just then, the door to the study opened.

Mr Bennet emerged first, his mouth drawn in a tight line. Mr Darcy followed, his face unreadable, and Mr Bingley last, adjusting his coat as though preparing for immediate travel.

“Well,” Mr Bennet said, addressing the room. “There is no help for it. Mr Darcy and I shall go after them at once. It may yet be possible to reach them before the matter is... formalised.”

Elizabeth stood at once. “I am coming.”

Mrs Bennet gasped. “Elizabeth! A journey to Gretna Green? With men?”

“I must go. Thomas and I are closer than anyone there and I can talk sense into him. Besides, Georgiana shall need a female influence near her, not be surrounded by all these men.”

Mr Darcy glanced at Elizabeth. For a brief moment, something passed between them—acknowledgement, perhaps even gratitude—but no words were exchanged.

“She admires you,” he said, his eyes piercing through the last of her barriers.

“She is my friend,” Elizabeth said firmly. “And Thomas and I are as close as brother and sister. If this is to be stopped, I must be there.”

Mr Bennet gave a single nod. “Then we shall leave at once.”

Elizabeth turned without delay, already preparing herself for the long road ahead.

# *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

## *Elizabeth*

**T**he carriage rocked steadily as it made its way north, the early morning light filtering through the narrow windows. Inside, the atmosphere was subdued—not heavy with anger or displeasure, but rather the quiet strain that settles between people who have too much to say and too little courage to say it.

Elizabeth sat opposite her father and Mr Darcy, her gloved hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed on the view beyond the glass. Fields rolled past in streaks of frost and pale green, but she barely registered them. Her thoughts were elsewhere.

Every so often, her gaze drifted to Mr Darcy. He sat straight-backed beside her father, his expression composed, but there was a stiffness about him that betrayed unease. It was not the same guarded pride she had once known. No, there was something else now—something quieter. He looked more worn than she remembered. Not unwell, but troubled. She could not decide whether it was the worry for his sister, or the weight of everything he had confessed to Jane and Mr Bingley.

Whatever it was, it unsettled her.

He had changed.

They had barely spoken since the journey began, save for the initial greeting. Now and then, their eyes met, and each time Elizabeth felt a curious twist in her chest. She could not say what it meant and now was not the time to dwell on it.

Her father cleared his throat. “If they left in the night, they would have had a decent start by now. With luck, they will stop to rest before reaching the border. The question is—where?”

Darcy nodded; his tone measured. “They’ll likely keep to the main coaching roads until Yorkshire. After that, they may take the westward route towards Carlisle. It’s the quieter way.”

Mr Bennet considered this, frowning slightly. “A bold move for two young people without much in the way of protection. Though I expect Thomas took great care in planning this.”

Elizabeth, still gazing out the window, spoke quietly. “He has a friend in Haversham. They’ve written often. He may stop there.”

Both men turned towards her.

“Haversham?” Darcy repeated.

She nodded. “It’s just west of the main road. Not a direct route, but if Thomas was trying to avoid attention, it would make sense. And he would not risk Georgiana’s well-being on a poorly kept road.”

Mr Bennet looked to Darcy. “Do you know it?”

“I do,” Darcy said. “It’s not far off course. We could reach it by early evening if we press on.”

He turned to Elizabeth then. “Thank you, Miss Bennet.”

She inclined her head, a small, silent acknowledgement.

The carriage resumed its steady rhythm. Mr Bennet leaned back and closed his eyes, clearly content to let the conversation rest. Elizabeth kept her gaze on the passing hedgerows, but she could feel Mr Darcy’s glance now and then, just as she knew he could feel hers.

So much had changed. And yet, for now, they said nothing. She was not sure what to make of him. He’d done things she never thought possible—bring back together Jane and Mr Bingley. Her feelings were in an uproar but now was not the time to debate it, not with her father beside her.

They had paused briefly at a roadside inn to change horses, the air sharp with the promise of afternoon rain. While Mr Bennet remained indoors to take a little tea, Elizabeth stepped outside to clear her head. The courtyard was quiet, save for the sound of hooves and harnesses being checked.

She found Mr Darcy standing apart near the carriage, his gaze fixed on the distance. There was a stillness about him that made her hesitate, but then she stepped forward.

“Mr Darcy,” she said softly.

He turned at once, straightening slightly. “Miss Bennet.”

“I wished to thank you,” she began, “for bringing Jane and Mr Bingley back together.”

He looked at her, visibly surprised. “You are very kind to say so. I did not expect... that is, I thought you might be angry

with me.”

“I am,” she said plainly. “I cannot say that I am not. What you did hurt my sister deeply.”

Mr Darcy bowed his head slightly, accepting the rebuke.

“But,” Elizabeth continued, “there are some things I have come to understand. Things I might not have, had we not all been so affected by your actions.”

He looked at her then, curious. “What things?”

She hesitated. “This is not the time for it,” she said gently. “But know that I do not see you exactly as I once did.”

There was a brief silence between them, filled only by the quiet clatter of tack and the distant murmur of travellers. Then she added, “I am worried, of course. For Thomas. And for Miss Darcy. But I want you to know—Thomas is a good man.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “I believe that now. Truly.”

He paused, as though unsure whether to speak further, then said, “It may not excuse anything, but I feel I must say it—I was jealous.”

Elizabeth raised her brows, startled by the admission.

“Of Thomas,” Mr Darcy went on. “It is shameful, I know. But when I saw how easily others liked him—how quickly Georgiana admired him—it brought back old wounds I had not realised still lingered. And when I thought of Bingley, and how dear he is to me, and how I might lose him too...”

Elizabeth, surprised by his openness, did not speak for a moment. His tone held no self-pity, only quiet honesty.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said at last. “Jealousy is not so uncommon as some would have us believe. It is what one does with it that matters.”

Mr Darcy gave a faint smile. “Indeed.”

He turned slightly, watching as the stable boys finished readying the horses. “My greatest fear,” he said more quietly, “is that Thomas may not care for Georgiana as he ought. That he is driven more by what she brings than what she is.”

“He isn’t,” Elizabeth replied, her voice firm. “I know him. He is not a man to chase wealth, and certainly not at the expense of someone he truly loves. He has little to offer her in terms of fortune, but what he gives is honest and constant.”

Mr Darcy was silent again, clearly absorbing her words.

“I spoke with Lady Catherine before we left for London,” he said at last. “She warned me—as she always does—that birth, wealth, and reputation are the only true measures of a match. But seeing Jane and Bingley, and now Georgiana, I begin to doubt whether that has ever been true at all.”

Elizabeth looked at him. “I don’t believe it ever was.”

He met her gaze. “I am afraid for Georgiana, yes. But I will not stand in her way. If her happiness lies with Thomas, then I must do all I can to support it.”

Elizabeth nodded slowly, something warm stirring within her. It was not only his words, but the sincerity behind them. For the first time, she saw in him not just honour and principle, but humility.

A call from the stable signalled that the horses were ready.

They turned back towards the inn.

Much remained uncertain. But in that brief moment, beneath the grey sky and the looming journey ahead, Elizabeth felt something shift between them—just enough to give her hope.

# Chapter Thirty

## Darcy

The road north stretched endlessly before them, hedgerows blurring past in streaks of green and brown. The light had begun to fade as the carriage rattled on, the clouds thickening overhead with the promise of rain.

Inside, the three passengers sat in uneasy quiet. Mr Bennet dozed lightly beside the window, his hat tipped forward, while Elizabeth sat opposite, her gaze turned outward, lost in thought. Darcy, seated beside her, was too restless for sleep.

He had not spoken for some time. Words felt useless now—he had made a great mess of things, and every mile they travelled brought that truth into sharper relief.

He had failed Georgiana. He should have trusted her more, listened to her, given her the dignity of her own judgement. Instead, he had acted out of fear—fear of what Wickham had nearly done, fear of losing her, of being cast aside again. He had interfered in Bingley's happiness, in Thomas's prospects, in Elizabeth's family. And now, he rode in silence, close enough to Elizabeth to see the gentle curve of her brow, the quiet strength in her posture—yet unable to say a word of how he felt for her.

It was wretched.

He shifted slightly and found Mr Bennet watching him with a calm, keen eye.

"I ought to say again," Mr Bennet began, "how grateful I am for your warning about Wickham. I had always found the man rather too charming. Thomas had his suspicions as well, but it was your word that truly opened my eyes."

Darcy nodded faintly. "He has done damage, I fear, that I may never fully repair. But I am glad, at least, that Georgiana was spared."

"You were right to be cautious," Mr Bennet said. "It seems he's not stopped his schemes. I've heard from my brother Gardiner that he recently married Miss King."

Darcy looked up, startled. "Miss King?"

"A young girl who came into her fortune some years ago," Mr Bennet confirmed. "He pursued her rather quickly after leaving Meryton, and from what I hear, she is... not entirely happy."

Darcy pressed his lips together. "That poor girl. He must have charmed her family, as he always does. I only hope she has friends about her."

Mr Bennet nodded. "She does, though none with enough sense to have stopped it. Still, not all fault lies with you. Georgiana's escape was due to your care, and no one can question your loyalty to her."

"I begin to wonder if I've been too protective," Darcy said quietly. "Too fearful. I have thought so long that shielding her was the same as loving her. But perhaps I've been smothering her instead."

Mr Bennet considered this. "You may have been. But if I've erred, it was in the opposite direction. I let my daughters choose freely, but I didn't always think where their freedom might lead. Sometimes, protection is a kindness. Sometimes, it is needed."

Darcy looked towards Elizabeth again. She was still silent, her fingers loosely entwined in her lap.

He sighed. "I keep thinking—if I had simply trusted her. If I had trusted Bingley. If I had trusted myself."

Mr Bennet arched a brow. "That, I think, is the very root of the matter."

Darcy managed a faint smile. "I've spent years trying to uphold honour and reputation, and in doing so, I nearly lost all the people who mattered to me."

"Well," Mr Bennet said, closing his eyes once more, "you have a chance to repair it now. Do not waste it."

Darcy turned back to the window. The clouds were thick now, the wind rising. But through the gloom ahead, he hoped there might be a road back—not just to Georgiana, but to Bingley, to Thomas... and perhaps, to something more with Elizabeth.

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The carriage drew to a halt outside a modest house in Haversham. Though the grounds were quiet and the dwelling small, Darcy felt the weight of it as though it were a grand estate. Georgiana had been here—might still be nearby. That thought alone had his heart in his throat.

Mr Bennet stepped down, and with little fuss went to speak to Thomas's friend. Darcy followed more slowly, stepping

aside to allow Elizabeth to descend. It was cool and damp, with that peculiar tension in the air that comes before a storm.

Elizabeth stood beside him. For a moment, they said nothing.

She was so nearby. He could hear the rustle of her gown, feel the quiet energy she always carried—never ostentatious, but undeniable. He wanted to speak, but the words formed slowly, cautious and uncertain.

“Miss Bennet,” he said at last. “May I speak freely?”

She looked at him, her face open and steady. “You may.”

“I have not told you everything. About Wickham. About my father. And about the reasons I failed to see Thomas for who he is.”

She said nothing, only watched him.

“My father doted on Wickham. He was everything I was not—cheerful, engaging, charming. I... tried to live up to what I thought was expected, but I never had that ease. Wickham saw it, and he used it. When we were boys, I often felt invisible beside him. Later, I watched him manipulate those around him—and nearly ruin Georgiana. And yet, people still preferred him.”

He exhaled. “When I met Thomas, I saw that same effortless charm. That warmth. I let those old shadows colour my view. I was proud, yes. But I was also afraid. And ashamed that I could not see past my own bitterness.”

Elizabeth looked thoughtful. “You were prideful. You judged too quickly. You hurt people I love. That cannot be ignored.”

He nodded. “No. It cannot.”

“But,” she continued, “you have learned. That much is clear. And few would be brave enough to admit it.”

He turned to face her more directly. “Then I must ask—is your good opinion of me lost forever?”

She lifted a brow, a small smile playing at her lips. “Mr Darcy, you speak as if I had a good opinion to begin with.”

Her words struck harder than expected. “Oh.”

She laughed then, gently. “You refused to dance with me at our first meeting, insulted me rather directly, and then conspired with Miss Bingley to keep my sister from the man she loved. What sort of opinion did you *think* I had?”

He let out a short breath, almost a laugh. “That is entirely fair.”

“I can see you have changed,” she added, her voice softer now.

Before he could respond, the front door of the house opened and Mr Bennet stepped out, his expression serious.

“They were here,” he said at once. “The owner confirmed it. They left less than two hours ago.”

Darcy straightened. “Still headed north?”

“Most likely. If we hurry, we may yet overtake them.”

Darcy gave a short nod and turned quickly to the coachman.

As he helped Elizabeth back into the carriage, his thoughts burned with a mix of hope and urgency. There was still much to say—but it would have to wait.

For now, Georgiana came first.

# *Chapter Thirty-One*

## *Darcy*

The road wound on, mile after mile, the air growing cooler as afternoon wore into evening. The carriage rocked steadily over the uneven path, but Elizabeth scarcely noticed the motion. Beside her, Darcy sat deep in thought, his hands clasped, gaze fixed on the distant horizon. It was not until the next change of horses, while Mr Bennet had stepped away to speak with the postmaster, that she turned to him.

“I meant to say,” she began, “I was taken aback by what you said earlier. You were... honest. More honest than I expected.”

Darcy looked at her, his expression unreadable. “I have little left to lose by telling the truth.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Were all your actions—towards Thomas, towards Jane—truly driven by what happened when you were young?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. I saw it all playing out again—my early life repeating itself. Thomas became Wickham in my mind, and I... was once more cast aside. But I see now it was all imagination, coloured by old wounds and a family legacy that overvalued station above sense.”

Elizabeth watched him quietly.

“My father,” he continued, voice softer now, “was a good man, but not without fault. His mistake was not in taking in Wickham, for there is nothing dishonourable in helping those less fortunate. His mistake was preferring him to me—blind to Wickham’s flaws, unwilling to see what lay beneath his charm.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I agree. And yet... I can understand why you made the comparison. Mr Wickham and Thomas were both wards. It would have been difficult not to see shadows of the past. If I had known your story earlier, I might not have judged you so harshly.”

Darcy turned to her. “Thank you. But it is I who owe the apology—for judging Thomas, and your family, by standards shaped by my own pain.”

He drew a breath. “There is something else. I see now that all I have done—interfering with Bingley, sheltering Georgiana, scorning Thomas—was born from fear. Fear of losing those I love. But I should have trusted them. Especially Georgiana. I should have told her everything—about Wickham, about what truly happened. Not just the dry facts, but the truth of it. That he tried to elope with her for her fortune. That he used my father’s trust against us.”

Elizabeth looked down, then said quietly, “I must confess something to you. I told Thomas about Mr Wickham. About what he did to Georgiana. I broke your confidence. I’m sorry.”

To her surprise, he did not react with anger.

“I’m not upset,” he said simply. “You had a right to tell him if you believed it necessary. I understand.”

She hesitated, then added, “I only told him because I believed it would help him see why you acted the way you did. I am disappointed in him... because even knowing that, he still took Georgiana. He knew the risk. And he took it anyway.”

Darcy frowned. “I didn’t know Thomas was aware of any of it.”

Elizabeth glanced at him. “He is. Everything you told me—about Mr Wickham, your father—he already knew. He heard it from Georgiana herself.”

Darcy was silent for a long moment, visibly shaken.

“I thought she was still a child,” he murmured. “I thought she would not understand.”

Elizabeth’s voice was gentler now. “Sometimes we forget our younger siblings are no longer quite so young. And we underestimate them.”

He nodded. “I’m beginning to see that now.”

She looked at him closely. “When we find them—what will you do? Will you force her to return to Pemberley? Forbid her from seeing Thomas again?”

Darcy turned his gaze towards the hills beyond. “No. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that I cannot impose my will on those

I love. I will tell her the truth—my disappointment, my fear—but I will also admit my fault. If we reach them before they marry, I will not stop her. I will ask only that they do it properly. That she marries him at Pemberley, if that is her choice. With whatever family is willing to attend.”

Elizabeth smiled then, the smallest curve of her lips. “You truly have changed.”

Darcy looked at her, and the expression in his eyes shifted—deepened. “There is more.”

She raised an eyebrow. “More?”

“There’s something else I’ve not done. Something my pride—and my prejudice—against Thomas and your family kept me from. Something I wanted desperately to do.”

Elizabeth’s heart skipped. She felt herself grow very still.

“I told myself I disliked you. I told myself you were unsuitable—your family loud, your connections lacking, your opinions far too free.” His voice softened. “But the truth is, I was lying. I have long admired your kindness, your clarity, your devotion to your family and friends. I admired your courage to speak plainly—even to me. And I…” He paused, searching for the words. “I wanted to ask you to be my wife.”

Elizabeth stood very still. He had not asked her, not quite, but the words hung there—weighty, powerful, and impossible to ignore.

She could not say yes. Not now. It was not the moment. And yet she could not dismiss it either. A part of her—deep, quiet, and true—was glad he had spoken.

“Oh, Mr Darcy,” she began, uncertain what to say.

But he gently raised a hand.

“I know,” he said. “Now is not the time. I don’t ask you for an answer. I only ask that you think about it. That you allow the possibility.”

She met his gaze and nodded. “Yes. I will.”

Just then, Mr Bennet reappeared, his stride brisk and his face sombre.

“They were here,” he announced. “Two hours ago, no more. They’ve continued north.”

Darcy felt his breath steady. Time was short, but not yet lost.

“Then let us go,” he said. “We may still reach them before it’s too late.”

And as he climbed into the carriage beside Elizabeth, he did so with a heart fuller than it had been in years—not certain, but no longer closed. He felt a rare lightness settle over him. Having shared the full truth with Elizabeth—the shadows of his past, the mistakes he had made, and the quiet fears that had ruled his heart—he now sat in the carriage with a strange peace. Her response had been gentle, understanding, and above all, compassionate. For the first time in a long while, he allowed himself to hope—not only for his sister’s future, but for his own.

# *Chapter Thirty-Two*

## *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth sat across from Mr Darcy, her gaze turned out the window, but when she looked back at him and smiled, something passed between them—soft, unspoken, but sure.

They continued in companionable silence for a while before a shout rang out.

“Stop the carriage!” Mr Bennet called, suddenly leaning forward.

The driver pulled the reins and brought the carriage to a halt.

“That coach belongs to my nephew,” Mr Bennet explained, pointing down the road. “Young Mr Phillips. He and Thomas are close, there’s every chance—”

He did not finish the thought before dashing from the carriage, waving towards the approaching coach. Elizabeth scrambled to rise. Mr Darcy was already outside, turning quickly to hand her down. Her hand lingered a moment longer than necessary in his, the squeeze unmistakable.

The oncoming carriage slowed, then stopped.

And there they were—Thomas, and beside him, Georgiana.

Mr Darcy took a step forward. “Georgiana!”

Elizabeth’s hand fluttered to her chest. Would he keep his word? Would he let her choose freely, or now that she stood before him, would his protectiveness take hold again?

Before he could say more, Georgiana stepped from the carriage, placing herself before Thomas with a quiet strength.

“Fitzwilliam,” she said, her voice steady despite the flush in her cheeks, “do not blame him. He has not acted to hurt me.”

“I think,” Mr Darcy said slowly, “that we have all made mistakes.”

His tone was level, not accusatory. Elizabeth let out a quiet breath of relief.

“I certainly have,” Thomas said plainly. “I never should have taken Georgiana without your consent. It was rash. But I love her, and I will not see her denied happiness for the sake of position or fortune.”

Elizabeth’s heart stirred at Thomas’s courage. She recognised the signs—his clenched hand, the tension in his posture. He was worried, and yet he stood firm.

Mr Darcy nodded, a hint of weariness in his expression. “I can see that. And I trust you have not yet married?”

Georgiana shook her head. “No. Thomas insisted we return. He said it would not be proper.”

Relief washed visibly across Mr Darcy’s face—and Elizabeth knew hers would mirror his.

“You were right to turn back,” Mr Darcy said quietly. “It would not have been the beginning she deserved.”

Thomas stepped forward. “I may have erred in taking her, but you erred too—in refusing us the chance to be happy.”

“I know,” Mr Darcy said. “I saw only as a man raised in expectation and pride. But I see more clearly now.” He turned to Georgiana. “Do you love him?”

“With all my heart,” she said.

Mr Darcy shifted, clearly uncomfortable, and Elizabeth had to bite back a laugh. She could see it—the protective older brother uncertain how to hear such confessions from his little sister.

“He told me about George,” Georgiana added. “I only wish you had.”

Mr Darcy looked at Elizabeth, then back at Thomas. “I’m not angry with either of you. I am thankful that Elizabeth told the truth. If not for her, none of us would be standing here now.”



Thomas nodded. “As we neared Gretna Green, I realised I was becoming what I never intended to be—a man who would pull her from her family without care. I didn’t mean harm. But she loves you. And she’d never be happy without you.”

Tears sprang to Georgiana’s eyes. “It’s true. I was prepared to marry him—but not without you, Fitzwilliam. I need you there. I want you to walk me down the aisle.”

Mr Darcy reached for her, and the siblings embraced tightly. “You shall have it,” he said, voice thick. “I’ve spent too long trying to shield you when I should have stood beside you.”

Thomas watched them, then said, “What of your family? What will they say?”

“They’ll be displeased,” Mr Darcy said. “Some may cut ties altogether.”

“Not Richard,” Georgiana said at once.

“No,” Mr Darcy agreed. “But the rest... it will be difficult. I only wish Thomas had a name to shelter behind. But no matter—we shall find our way.”

At that moment, Mr Bennet stepped forward.

“There’s something I must say. I’ve held my peace for years, but it’s time Thomas knew the truth about his father. I always said I did not know who he was but...”

Thomas turned, startled. “You know who my father was?”

“I do. Peter Waynesborough. The second son of the Earl of Mortimer.”

Mr Darcy paled. “I knew him. He died recently—of excess, as he lived. A cruel, selfish man.”

“How could you not have told me?” Thomas demanded.

“I wanted to spare you the burden,” Mr Bennet said. “But perhaps I was wrong.”

“Yes, you were,” Thomas said, running a hand through his hair.

“If I might,” Mr Darcy said. “The Earl would never have acknowledged a child born outside of marriage. And he himself is no kinder than his son.”

Thomas looked shaken. “I’m the Earl’s grandson?”

“Technically,” Mr Bennet replied. “But Peter Waynesborough would not have claimed you.”

Thomas’s voice was low. “I still had a right to know.”

“I’m sorry,” Mr Bennet said. “I thought it kinder to let you imagine the possibilities. I did not think it would have helped to know when I knew they would not want you. Your mother told the man she was with child and cast her out. After she died, I went to see the earl to speak to him, tell him he had a grandchild—he did not want to hear anything about it. He is a cold unfeeling man. You have lost nothing not knowing him.”

“But I had a right to be told,” Thomas demanded.

Georgiana took Thomas’s hand. “You had a loving family. You still do. We both do. I have heard of the Earl of Mortimer and he is dreadful. But I must wonder, does it make a difference in our case?” The last part, she addressed to her brother.

Mr Darcy looked between them. “To some, yes. You may be seen differently now. You have no right to the lands or anything of that nature, but the connection alone may be of value. Lord Matlock values such connections. Lord Mortimer is an old foe of his. In time, it may help us all. If you wish it to be known who your father was, I can help make it known.”

Thomas gave a small nod. “I thank you but I think I must consider matters further. For the time being, I’d rather be accepted for who I am.”

“And you shall be,” Mr Darcy said. “You already are.”

Georgiana threw her arms around her brother. “I love you.”

Elizabeth stood aside, watching it all unfold, her chest full. She had known this would be a turning point—for all of them.

As the group prepared to return to Longbourn, Elizabeth leaned towards her father and whispered something. He gave her a knowing look and nodded before stepping into the other carriage with Georgiana and Thomas.

Mr Darcy turned to her. “What’s this?”

“I asked for a moment alone with you,” she said as they settled back into the carriage.

He looked at her, heart quickening.

“I wanted to tell you,” she began, “how much I admired what you did. You spoke with understanding and grace. You kept your word. It meant a great deal.”

“I meant it all,” Mr Darcy said. “I’ve been wrong in many ways, but I hope I may make things right.”

“There is one thing you’ve already done right,” she said softly. “You’ve convinced me.”

He turned sharply. “Convinced you?”

She smiled. “You asked me once—if I could ever see you differently. And the answer is yes.”

He held her gaze, breath held.

“I’ve struggled with my feelings,” she admitted. “I thought we might be friends. Then more. But I wasn’t sure. You seemed so distant... so proud.”

He began to speak, but she raised her hand.

“Let me finish, before I lose courage.”

He nodded again.

“You’ve shown me that you are not the man I once thought you to be. You’ve owned your mistakes. You’ve changed. And I see now that I was not innocent either. I let my own pride cloud my judgement.”

She looked up at him, eyes bright. “You said you admired me. And now I can say the same. I admire you. And I wonder—would you consider staying in Hertfordshire a little longer?”

Mr Darcy’s expression broke into a soft smile. “Bingley still holds Netherfield for some months. Arrangements can be made.”

“There’s a wedding to plan,” she said lightly.

He took her hand. “Then we shall have time. And when that time comes... you shall have your answer.”

She smiled back. And in that carriage, the future began to take shape.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## Darcy

Three months had passed since the dramatic halt at the edge of the border road, and now, all was a flurry of lace, ribbons, and well-polished shoes. The household was alive with activity. In just a few days, Georgiana Darcy would be married—not to some titled gentleman chosen by her family, but to Thomas Bennet, the man she loved and had chosen for herself.

The path had not been without its difficulties.

As expected, Lady Catherine had broken all contact. Her most recent letter had not even addressed Georgiana by name, preferring instead to ‘that girl’, and declaring her niece lost to all sense and reason. Darcy had taken one look at it, folded it in half, and tossed it into the fire.

The Earl of Matlock had not disowned his niece and nephew outright, but his displeasure had been made quite clear. There had been no offer of congratulations, and his silence was as deliberate as any statement. Meanwhile, the scandal sheets had wasted no time in embellishing every detail, from Georgiana’s supposed elopement to Thomas’s humble origins.

That morning, Elizabeth sat at the breakfast table, one such paper open before her, frowning at the bold headline, *Heiress Marries Pauper: The Fall of a Darcy*.

“Pauper,” she muttered, crumpling the edge of the paper. “They make it sound as though he lives under a hedge.”

Darcy entered just in time to hear the remark. He took a cup of tea from the sideboard and crossed the room, sitting beside her.

“You mustn’t let them bother you,” he said lightly. “The scandal sheets see what they wish to see. We know the truth. They called me a recluse the week before last. I consider Thomas in rather good company.”

She laughed then and pushed the paper aside. They sat together, shoulders nearly touching, as the late morning sun filtered through the windows.

In the three months since that day on the road, they had spent more time together than Elizabeth would have believed possible—planning the wedding, arranging the accommodations at Netherfield, walking the grounds of Longbourn and Pemberley. They had watched Jane and Bingley marry and settle in a comfortable house in the north, and they had made plans for Georgiana and Thomas to spend some months at Pemberley, where Thomas would begin his training under Darcy’s steward.

It was a peaceful morning, despite the bustle around them.

“I have been thinking,” Elizabeth said, her tone light. “With all these weddings—first Jane and Mr Bingley, now Georgiana and Thomas—you must be growing quite fond of them.”

Darcy tilted his head. “You may be right. I used to think weddings tiresome and overwrought, but now I find them... rather charming.”

Elizabeth grinned. “You’ve developed a taste for weddings, then?”

“It seems I have,” he said, returning her smile. “Though I imagine they would be more enjoyable if one were not constantly defending one’s household against absurd rumours.”

Elizabeth’s laughter bubbled out. “Yes, well... I suppose all things considered; you’ve borne it quite well.”

He looked at her more closely then, and she met his gaze.

“I’ve also had time to think,” she said, her voice quieter now. “About many things.”

Darcy held his breath.

“And I’ve come to the conclusion,” she continued, “that there is nothing I want more than to become Mrs Darcy.”

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Darcy blinked. “You do?”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes shining. “I’ve had time to watch you—to see who you truly are. Not just a gentleman with an

estate and a name, but a man of honour. A man who admits his faults, protects those he loves, and makes every effort to right his wrongs.”

Darcy exhaled slowly. “I had hoped. But I did not dare to presume.”

She smiled. “We’re doing everything backwards, you know. I’ve just given you my answer before you’ve properly proposed.”

He laughed—an unguarded, joyful sound—and stood.

“Then allow me to correct that.”

He dropped to one knee, right there in the breakfast room.

“Elizabeth Bennet,” he said, taking her hand in his, “will you marry me?”

She laughed through tears and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I will.”

He stood and drew her up gently. They stood close now, and the rest of the world fell away.

“There is something I must say,” she added. “We both know that our marriage will make reconciliation with your family even more difficult.”

“I do not care,” Darcy said without hesitation. “It was said to me once, and it is true—we are all family now. The Bennets, the Darcys, the Bingleys.”

Elizabeth grinned. “I’m not so certain Caroline Bingley includes us in her family circle.”

“Then I shall consider that a blessing,” he said dryly. “I have all the family I want and need.”

Her smile softened. “Fitzwilliam... I do not merely admire you.”

He looked at her with gentle wonder.

“I love you,” she whispered.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her, gently but with every ounce of feeling he had tried to restrain for months. And she kissed him back, her heart full.

# Epilogue

*Pemberley, Derbyshire*

*Two Years Later*

It was spring at Pemberley. The trees had burst into bloom, the garden beds glowed with tulips and daffodils, and the soft breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass. The hills in the distance were lush and green, and the sky was the kind of blue that rarely lasted long in Derbyshire—but when it came, it transformed everything.

Elizabeth Darcy sat on the veranda with a cup of tea in one hand and a letter in the other, sunlight warming her shoulders as she looked out over her estate—*hers* now, for this was her second spring as mistress of Pemberley. She had once thought the place too grand, too intimidating. But she had grown into it, and it into her.

At her side sat her husband, reading a newspaper—though not aloud, as the scandal sheets still occasionally made unfounded remarks about their family, and Elizabeth had no patience for nonsense before her second cup of tea.

The letter she held, however, had nothing scandalous in it—at least, not intentionally. She smiled and set it down.

“You are amused,” Darcy remarked, setting his paper aside.

Elizabeth nodded. “Charlotte writes. She is with child at last, and Mr Collins is overjoyed. Though Lady Catherine continues to interfere with alarming regularity.”

Darcy gave a dry chuckle. “It sounds like an exhausting arrangement.”

“Entirely so,” Elizabeth agreed. She reached for her tea. “She says that Lady Catherine is now offering advice on nursery colours and insists the baby be named after her.”

Darcy raised a brow. “Catherine Collins? I cannot think of a child who would deserve such a fate.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Charlotte is far too clever to allow it, I’m certain.”

They sat for a quiet moment. Birds chirped in the hedge nearby. Somewhere in the distance, a gardener called to his boy. Elizabeth breathed deeply, letting the scent of honeysuckle and lemon balm fill her lungs.

“Do you miss her?” she asked softly. “Your aunt?”

Darcy looked thoughtful. “I was greatly angered at first,” he admitted. “And then... simply disappointed. But I’ve come to believe that time will settle what pride refuses to acknowledge. Change is rarely accepted easily by those who fear it.”

Elizabeth looked at him. “And yet it hasn’t settled. Not with her.”

“No,” he said. “But I did receive a letter from my uncle the Earl last week.”

She turned towards him fully now, brows raised.

“He has invited us both to Matlock,” Darcy said evenly. “No mention of scandal or shame—just an invitation. He wrote that he had heard how ‘charming little Margaret is’ and would like to meet her.”

Elizabeth’s face softened. “Well, he isn’t wrong. Anyone would be charmed by her.”

Darcy took her hand and squeezed it gently. “I thought... if the next child is a boy, we might name him Henry, after my uncle. As a gesture of reconciliation.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Henry is my father’s middle name. It would suit perfectly.”

They sat quietly for a moment more, content.

“I’m very much looking forward to the house party,” Darcy said.

Elizabeth gave a playful groan. “It shall be a very full house. All my sisters are coming, with spouses in tow. At least now that all of us are wed, Mother is less worried all the time.”

“Although the fate of Longbourn still bothers her,” Darcy noted.

“She does,” Elizabeth agreed, “though not quite so loudly as before. After all, she now has two grand estates from which to choose future residences. And between Lydia, Kitty, and Mary, there shall always be room somewhere.”

Darcy leaned back. “I still hope we might break the entail one day.”

“With Mr Phillips’s help, and perhaps once Mr Collins is free of Lady Catherine’s influence...” Elizabeth trailed off,

smiling. “It is possible.”

Darcy tilted his head. “And are you ready to have your mother visit again?”

Elizabeth gave him a teasing look. “Are you?”

He chuckled. “After two years, I am quite used to Mrs Bennet’s... particular ways. In fact, I rather enjoy her enthusiastic declarations.”

“You are a dreadful liar,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “But I appreciate the effort.”

Just then, the door behind them opened, and Mrs Annesley stepped out onto the veranda, her expression fond and composed. In her arms was little Margaret, now a year and a half old, golden-haired, and full of curiosity.

“She’s just finished her breakfast, Mrs Darcy,” Mrs Annesley said. “And insists on being outside.”

Elizabeth stood, her arms already outstretched. “Of course she does.”

Darcy stood as well, thanking the woman as he took his daughter’s tiny hand. Mrs Annesley offered a gentle smile and withdrew into the house.

Margaret babbled something incomprehensible and grinned up at her parents.

“She looks just like you when she smiles,” Elizabeth said, brushing a curl from the child’s forehead.

“Then she must have your spirit,” Darcy replied softly.

He wrapped one arm around Elizabeth’s waist, drawing her close. She leaned into him, Margaret now happily perched on her hip.

Darcy placed a hand gently on Elizabeth’s stomach, where new life was only just beginning to stir.

“I’m the happiest man I know,” he said quietly. “I wake up every day and wonder how it happened that you agreed to marry me.”

Elizabeth looked up at him, eyes warm.

“I often wonder the same.”

He gave a soft laugh, then kissed her brow.

“And to think,” she murmured, “it all began because you refused to dance.”

Darcy smiled. “And thank heaven for that.”

They stood together, looking out over the estate, their daughter in their arms, the scent of spring in the air, and a future full of hope before them.

## THE END

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