

The background of the entire cover is a painting of a woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a long white dress, standing in a forest with vibrant autumn foliage. She is looking towards a brown horse that is standing in the distance on a path covered in fallen leaves. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light.

The IMPOVERISHED ORPHAN

A
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
VARIATION

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
KELLY MILLER

The Impoverished Orphan

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

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To my dad. Although you will never read my books, I know you are proud
of me.

A Note on the Spelling and Language in The Impoverished Orphan

In order to bring authenticity to the time frame and setting of this story, the Regency era in England, an effort was made to avoid including any phrases, words, or word usages that would not have existed in 1811/1812 England. Also, British English spellings and word usages were utilized even though the author's own familiarity is with American English. For instance, "turn round" is used rather than "turn around." In addition, the author followed traditional British usage for should/would and shall/will.

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Chapter 1: Life with the Bartons

May 1796
Knight's Manor, Wiltshire
Elizabeth

My kind, grey-haired nurse, Mrs. Oakley, led me to the doorway of my aunt's morning-room, a bright space decorated in green and gold. "Here she is, madam." She patted my back, urging me onwards, then retreated to the hall.

With a bright smile, my aunt stood from her chair and beckoned. "Come here, Lizzy."

"Aunt Barton!" I rushed across the soft, floral carpet towards her but made a sudden stop. Moments earlier, my nurse had admonished me to give my aunt a proper greeting. She had reminded me, *You are five years old now and no longer a baby*. I dropped into a hurried curtsy. "Good day, Aunt Barton."

A pink glow lit my aunt's fair skin, making her even more pretty than usual. "Very nice, my sweet girl, and good day to you, too. Now, may I have a hug?" She opened her arms, and I ran into her embrace. She lifted me, rocking us back and forth. No one else gave hugs like she did! Aunt

Barton resumed her seat, placing me sideways upon her lap. Her bulging belly pressed against my hip.

I stared at her swollen stomach. "When will the baby come?"

"In a few more weeks, I think. Are you eager to meet him or her?"

"Yes, I want another cousin to play with."

Her arm encircled my shoulder. "You are such a comfort to me, Lizzy. Although you are three months younger than Cassie, you are much more mature. You are kind and protective of her, like an ideal sister. And you are a fine playmate for Noah."

I could not help but grin. How I loved my aunt's praise!

"Ah!" Aunt Barton held still. "The baby is kicking. Here, give me your hand." She pressed my palm to her swollen skin, and a tiny bubble of pressure pushed against me.

"I felt the baby move!" I giggled.

"He or she has been very active today." Aunt Barton released my hand. "I have received a letter from your uncle Gardiner. When he stayed here at Christmastide, he spent a great deal of time with you. I believe you liked him very much."

I nodded and pictured my uncle Gardiner, a brown-haired young man with an agreeable face. He had joked with me, read to me, and even given me a fine doll.

"Well, Mr. Gardiner shared happy news. Next month, he will move into the home of his employer, a Mr. Pembroke. He has spoken of you to Mr. Pembroke and his wife, and they have extended an invitation for you to stay at their house this September. This will be a fine opportunity for you to spend time with your uncle."

What? Why should I do that? I chewed upon the inside of my cheek. "Will you, Noah, and Cassie stay there too?" I did not include my uncle Barton because he did not like me; it would not matter whether he came or not. On his infrequent visits to the nursery, he saved his attention and smiles for Noah and Cassie.

"No, my sweet, the invitation is for you in particular. Your uncle Gardiner is your late mother's brother, and he wants to spend more time with you. I think you are mature enough for this trip. I plan to travel to the Pembroke home with you and ensure you are comfortable there before I depart."

"Oh." My parents and my sister, Jane, lived in Heaven, and I had no memories of them or of my previous home. But I loved Aunt Barton and

my two cousins very much and would not want to be in a strange house without them. "I should much rather stay here with you."

My aunt moved a dark curl out of my eyes. "You need not fret. Your uncle Gardiner is an amiable man, and the Pembrokes have been most gracious to him, so I am certain you will be content. We shall plan your first visit to be a brief stay of no more than a se'nnight."

Seven days? That sounded like a very long time! Yet my aunt's cheerful manner soothed me, and I did not speak the words. After all, she liked my uncle Gardiner, and he had been kind to me. He must be a nice person.

"Now you had better run along with Mrs. Oakley and resume your studies." She lowered me to the floor. With a parting curtsy, I removed to the hall, and my nurse urged me towards the stairs.

At the second-floor landing, I tugged upon Mrs. Oakley's hand. "May we stop in the sitting-room to see the portrait?"

She nodded. "Yes, we may stay there for a short time."

The painting adorned the wall opposite the fireplace. Light from the adjacent window allowed for a clear view of my parents' faces. Mother sat in a green chair looking happy and regal. I admired her golden hair and blue eyes. She must have been no less beautiful than Aunt Barton. My aunt has said that my mother loved to entertain, and she laughed often.

Standing behind her, my father made for a more sedate figure. Although I should not call him handsome, he looked very learned. He held a book against his waistcoat. My aunt has described him as 'wise and scholarly'. Once I grew older, I should read each one of his books that had been left to me.

On a few occasions, my parents appeared in my dreams; they would come to stay at Knight's Manor. Sometimes Jane accompanied them. I had no portrait of my sister, but Aunt Barton remembered her as a sweet, shy blonde-haired child.

Mrs. Oakley placed a hand on my shoulder. "Let us return to the nursery now, Miss Bennet."

"Very well." I allowed her to lead me away but took a backwards glance. *Good day, Mama and Papa.*

June 1801
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

I knocked upon the door to my uncle's study and entered at his invitation. Uncle Barton stood from behind his desk. He had never been an especially attractive man, but ever since my dear aunt and her baby had died in childbirth five years ago, he had aged quite a bit. The grey hairs in his thick mane threatened to overtake the brown ones. Excess pounds had settled around his middle, and the lines beneath his eyes often lent him a haggard look, as they did today. He appeared far different from the painting of him and Aunt Barton that held a prominent position in the portrait gallery.

Since my aunt's demise, the entire household had undergone a profound alteration from a sunny, happy home to a far more subdued one. As the years passed, Cassie and I struggled to preserve our fuzzy remembrances of her. Noah, now thirteen years of age, retained many more memories of his mother, and we often called upon him to recount these anecdotes for us. No one, though, had suffered more for Aunt Barton's death than my uncle. He had *cherished* her.

Within the last few years, my association with Uncle Barton had greatly improved to the point that he now took an interest in me and my activities. His opinion of me had altered for the better, and I held him in affection. In fact, he had become akin to a paternal figure.

I approached his desk. "You wished to see me, Uncle?"

"Yes, Lizzy, sit down."

I lowered myself upon the chair and crossed my ankles.

"Miss Green tells me that you are advanced in your studies for your age, and your reading comprehension is impressive." My uncle pursed his lips. "I only wish Cassie would follow your example."

Devoid of a defence for my cousin, I made no comment. Cassie did not share my love of learning and took little interest in Miss Green's lessons. She often tried our governess's patience.

"You are ten years old now, and you ought to be made aware of a few facts, though you may find them difficult to hear."

My back stiffened. What could he mean?

"Upon your parents' marriage, your mother received a settlement of five thousand pounds. So, when your parents and sister succumbed to ague seven years ago, I assumed those funds had gone to you, though your aunt Barton and I never discussed the matter. However, after my wife's death, I

went through her desk and discovered documents that indicated your father had invested in a Northumberland silver mine.”

My uncle stroked his chin. “Unfortunately, the mine proved to be barren, and your father lost every penny of his investment.” He shuffled a bundle of papers on his desk. “Do you understand what that means?”

A memory niggled at me. Aunt Barton had once made a passing mention of my ‘inheritance’, but the details of her comment had faded beyond my grasp; she must have referred to the books in my room that once belonged to my father. “I suppose you are saying that I do not have a dowry.”

“That is correct. Cassie has one, but you do not.”

Just yesterday, Cassie had broached the subject of her fortune, worth over fifteen thousand pounds, and had wanted to know the value of mine. I had replied that I did not know; no doubt she had asked her father that question, precipitating this meeting. “Yes, I see.”

“In light of this disparity, once you enter society, you will need to be mindful that your experience will differ from Cassie’s. While I expect her to make a fine match one day, your situation is more complicated. Most eligible gentlemen of substance expect the lady they wed to bring their own portion to the union.”

I sucked upon my lower lip. Uncle seemed to believe that no gentleman would ever offer for me. I swallowed. “What will become of me if I never marry?”

“Rest assured, you will always have a home here. Neither I nor Noah should ever turn you out. Still, I wanted to prepare you so when the time comes, you will not have unrealistic expectations.”

“Very well.” It seemed my future would be dissimilar from Cassie’s. However, maybe this would not matter so much—after all, she and I had few preferences in common.

“What I have to say next may come as a shock.” He leaned forwards and beheld me with a benevolent expression. “Despite what we have led you to believe, you are not, in truth, my niece.” His voice had a soft, measured tone. “You are neither related to me nor to my late wife.”

I gasped. *Could this be true?* “But you must be my uncle. Aunt Barton always called me her niece.”

He shook his head. “Rebecca and I agreed that we should use that term for you. We thought that, if others believed you to be a family member, they

would be more apt to accept you and treat you with the respect you deserve.”

A wave of dizziness descended upon me, and I pressed my palm to my forehead. “I do not understand. How...um...did I come to be here?”

“Rebecca’s father was a fellow at Cambridge. Each summer, he took a few of his most promising students home to tutor them, including your father, Mr. Bennet. Because of the close bond he had formed with Rebecca, her brother, and her parents, Mr. Bennet named her as your godmother and indicated in his will that she and I act as your guardians.”

“So...” For a moment, my words remained trapped in my throat. “I am no relation to Noah or Cassie either.”

He released a heavy breath. “That is correct.”

My heart raced, and I blinked at the beginnings of tears. This explained why my parents’ portrait did not hang in the family gallery. Aunt Barton once professed to have placed the painting near the nursery for my convenience. “Who else knows the truth?”

“I have confided in my friend Mr. Hayward, and Noah has known for the past two years. I have not yet told Cassie, but I shall do so soon.”

Noah already knows. Yet he had always treated me the same way—as a sister. “What am I to call you?”

“You must continue to call me ‘Uncle’ and call Noah and Cassie ‘Cousin’ as before. Nothing has changed. We may not share your blood, but we shall always consider you to be family. This is your home, and you belong with us.”

His words of assurance settled over me, and my respiration calmed.

For a time, neither of us spoke. Then a rhythmic sound broke through the silence in the room: my uncle’s boot tapped on the wooden floor. He coughed. “There is one final matter that pertains to your uncle Gardiner. When you have asked whether you might see him, I have made excuses to put you off. But you ought to know the truth. Your uncle is a dishonest and disreputable man. He appears to have no interest in seeing you, and for that I am grateful.”

“Oh dear, I had no idea.” Faint memories came to the forefront of my mind: Uncle Gardiner spending time with me in the nursery, and my aunt Barton encouraging me to visit him. Did those things actually happen? “But I...I remember my uncle Gardiner as a kind man, and Aunt Barton spoke well of him.”

His lips rose momentarily in a faint smile. "That is true. My dearest wife tended to see the best in others. However, in this instance she had been deceived. Your uncle Gardiner is a clever man. He can be cordial and charming when he wishes, such as when he engaged you in the nursery, yet he is neither honourable nor trustworthy."

"That is a shame." Besides him, I had no other living relation on my late mother's side of the family. Mrs. Phillips, my mother's sister, had succumbed to the same virulent outbreak of ague that took the lives of my parents and sister. My late father's estate, Longbourn, had been entailed and passed to a distant cousin whom I had never met, a Mr. Collins.

"Yes, it is a lamentable circumstance. But you need not be concerned, my dear. I shall never allow Mr. Gardiner anywhere near you."

August 1806
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

I jerked awake in my pitch-dark room to incessant banging; someone knocked upon my door.

"Lizzy, wake up." Noah's familiar voice could not be mistaken, despite his lowered tone.

I sat up. "Has the foal come?"

"Yes, she arrived fifteen minutes ago. She is healthy and so is Thea."

"Thank goodness! I shall be ready in a few minutes." I threw off the bed-clothes and dressed in haste. Last night, Uncle had insisted I retire rather than sit up with Noah and our head groom, Joe, in anticipation of the foaling. The ten-year-old dam, Thea, a grey Arabian, had been my favourite mount since I outgrew my sweet Shetland pony. I had learnt to ride eight years earlier, at the age of seven, with instruction from my uncle, Joe, and Noah. Both Joe and my cousin had a masterful way with horses, and I strived to emulate them.

When I burst from my room, Noah, who had been pacing, whipped towards me and grinned. "Let us go." We ran down the stairs whilst trying not to make noise lest we wake anyone. At almost six feet tall, my cousin towered over me. Like Cassie, he favoured his late mother in looks, with fair skin, blond hair, a dusting of freckles across his cheeks, and deep blue

eyes. I had harboured a childish infatuation with Noah from the age of five until I grew to be nine or so and began to view him in a fraternal way.

“What does she look like?” I glanced at Noah as we darted down the front steps.

“She is a beauty, a sorrel with a blaze and four white socks. When I left, she had not yet stood.”

Joe had said that a sound foal ought to stand within two hours of birth; she still had plenty of time. We entered the stable, with its comforting scents of horses, hay, and leather. Uncle Barton looked back at us, grinning.

“Ah, there you are, Lizzy.” He stepped away from the door to Thea’s stall and swept his hand, urging me closer. “Come and see our newest horse.”

I ran the rest of the way. Thea licked the newborn’s forehead. The sorrel filly *stood* on trembling legs beside her dam. I beamed at Uncle and Noah in turn. “She is already on her feet!”

My uncle nodded. “Yes, she rose up moments before your arrival as though to impress you.”

The foal moved to face me, and I stared into her shiny obsidian eyes. What a fascinating creature—so glorious and yet so...vulnerable. At the sight of her, an idea took shape in my mind: Would Uncle allow me to train her? Noah had already trained several colts on his own. My chest muscles clenched. Surely my uncle intended to keep this foal!

I tipped my head to view Uncle Barton. “I hope you are not thinking of selling this one.”

“Oh no. We shall keep her.”

“Do you promise?”

A soft chuckle stirred his chest. “Yes, I promise. We can always use another fine Arabian mare.”

“Would you allow me to train her? I know I can manage it—I have observed Noah, Joe, and the other grooms with the horses. And if I need assistance, Joe or Noah will advise me.” I met my cousin’s gaze.

Noah gave me a nod before confronting his father. “Lizzy has shown good instincts with Thea, and she has been helping me with the yearlings. She would do well with the responsibility.”

My uncle rubbed his chin. “I see no reason to object.”

“Thank you, Uncle!” I bounced upon my toes.

“You are welcome. You may begin when we separate her from Thea in five months.”

I moved before the stall door and stretched up on my toes. I itched to go near the fascinating creature. “Actually, I should like to introduce myself to the filly now.”

“Now?” My uncle’s eyes widened. “What is the hurry?”

“I want her to be comfortable with me from the outset.”

“Hmm.” Uncle Barton shifted back on his heels.

Noah cleared his throat. “Although this is not our usual practice, I see no harm in her approaching them. I expect Thea may allow Lizzy, of all people, near her foal.”

“Very well.” My uncle held his palm out to me. “Now, I caution you to be careful and make slow movements. One never knows when a mare might act out to defend her young from a perceived threat.”

“I understand.” I unlatched the door and passed into the stall. The foal had wandered five feet or so from Thea, but as I neared them, she rushed back to her mother. “All is well, little one.” I went to Thea and stroked her neck. “You did an admirable job, my girl. I hope you do not mind if I meet your pretty filly.” Thea’s dark eyes held me, and her ears remained slightly drooped—so far, so good.

My glimpses in the foal’s direction revealed her to be watching me with apparent curiosity. I inched closer to her position against Thea’s flank. “You need not fear me. We shall be great friends.” I reached out, and she sniffed the back of my hand. My fingers brushed against her velvety nose, and my breath slowly escaped. She allowed me to touch her! In time, I progressed to caressing her forehead and neck.

“Well done, Lizzy!”

I shot a glance at Noah. “She does not seem to fear me.”

The foal shifted towards Thea’s belly, so I stepped back to allow her more room. She stretched for Thea’s teat, latched on, and suckled. I looked back at my uncle and cousin. “She is feeding!”

“That is wonderful,” said Noah.

“Indeed, I think this is enough for the first day, Lizzy.” My uncle gestured for me to return. “Let us leave them in peace.”

“Very well.” I gave Thea a final pat before I left the stall.

Uncle Barton sent me a sideways glance. “Our newest horse needs a name. Do you have a suggestion?”

Would he allow *me* to choose? Despite having had no expectation of being given this honour, I had nevertheless written down various possible

names in my journal over the past few weeks; one of them seemed well suited to this foal. “What do you think of Lily?”

Noah met my gaze. “Lily is a fitting name.”

“I agree.” My uncle rested a hand on my shoulder. “Lily, it is.”

June 1808

Knight's Manor

Elizabeth

When I withdrew from the kitchen, the pockets of my pelisse bulged with pieces of carrot for Lily. Now a two-year-old, she had grown into a beautiful and singular filly. Her evident intelligence and trust in me allowed us to forge a powerful bond.

As I neared the door to my uncle’s study, the sound of raised, peevish voices prompted me to halt. Noah argued with Uncle Barton. What could have made my cousin so angry? Despite the temptation to remain and eavesdrop, I pushed myself forwards and settled upon a chair in the hall with a view of the study entrance.

Noah left the study and raced towards the vestibule. I jerked to a stand, but he gave no sign of having noticed me and continued out of the front door. I followed him into the grove of beech trees. “Noah, wait for me!”

My cousin stopped and paused a moment before spinning towards me. “Yes, Lizzy?” He attempted to act unruffled, but his complexion bore a crimson tint, and perspiration glistened at his temples.

“A few minutes ago, I passed the study and could not help but overhear your argument with Uncle. What is amiss?”

He shook his head. “Nothing at all. We had a minor disagreement.”

“I know you too well to believe that. Pray tell me what is wrong.”

His nostrils flared, and with an audible exhalation, he paced before me. “I cannot abide the disparity in my father’s treatment of Cassie and you—it is unpardonable. This could never have happened if Mother still lived. She would not have stood for it.”

Dear, sweet Noah, he had long been my fiercest advocate. An ache plagued my chest; I could not bear to be the unwitting cause of his distress. “There is no reason for you to be upset.”

“How can you say so? This inequity has existed for years, and to my shame I never disputed my father’s rationale before. But now you are seventeen and out in society. You ought to have the same opportunities as Cassie. She goes to parties and balls in town whilst you remain here.” His arms flailed to mark his speech. “Furthermore, Father *spoils* Cassie. He buys her nothing but the best gowns, hats, trinkets, jewellery, and whatever else she desires whilst he is stingy with you.” He pointed at my gown. “You receive the clothes Cassie discards, never anything new.”

“Pray do not be vexed with Uncle Barton. He has the best of intentions. You must be aware of his reasoning.”

“Oh yes, I have heard his explanation.” Noah sputtered the words, adopting a mocking tone. “He does not want any potential suitor of yours to mistakenly assume you have a fortune. What a ridiculous and paltry excuse! We may count on Cassie to ensure every new acquaintance learns she has a dowry and you do not.” His mouth wrenched into a sneer.

“You are severe on her.”

“I speak the truth as you well know.”

“Believe me, the situation does not trouble me in the least. Cassie’s dresses ought to be finer than mine. First of all, she loves clothes far more than I do. Second, she is Uncle’s daughter, while I am merely his ward.”

“To my mind, you are no less my family than Cassie.”

“And I feel the same way towards you.” I touched his shoulder. “Allow me to remind you that Uncle is generous in the ways that are most dear to me. He allows me to pursue the pastimes I love. I may ride Lily whenever I wish, and he grants me free access to his library.” Cassie disliked reading aside from the occasional popular novel. And although she had learnt to ride as a child, she shunned the activity and had no affection for horses. Cassie could not abide ‘smelling like a horse’ and deemed riding habits to be ‘unbecoming’.

Noah raked a hand through his sandy hair. “What about our trips to London? It must bother you that Father always leaves you here at the estate.”

“He does that for my protection.” Although Uncle Barton made more frequent trips to town alone, my cousins sojourned with him there for a month or so each Season. Uncle Barton had explained that he would take no chances of my crossing paths with my uncle Gardiner.

“There is no reason to think we could not keep you safe in London or anywhere else.”

I bit my tongue. In actuality, I should love to visit the public gardens and museums in town and see a play or opera; rather than admit this, though, I should ease Noah’s mind. “Although I miss the three of you whenever you are away, I am content to remain on the estate.”

He ceased his movement and confronted me. “Is this your true opinion?”

Despite my discomfort for deceiving my cousin, I strove to appear sanguine. “Yes, it is.”

“Even if that is the case, I think my father is wrong.” Noah picked up a handful of loose stones from the path and threw each one towards the meadow in rapid succession. After a moment, he turned back to me. “Well, I suppose it would make little sense for me to carry on being resentful if you are not.”

Thank goodness. I moved into an easy posture. “Quite so.”

The hint of a smile lightened his expression. “Well, since there is no point in my sulking any longer, shall we take the horses out for a ride?”

I grinned. “Yes, by all means.”

Wednesday, 17 April 1811
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

Cassie twirled before me, her golden locks flying off her shoulders. She stopped and adopted a showy attitude with her hands on her hips, her chin high. “What do you think, Lizzy? Is this dress not beautiful?” She moved to preen in front of the looking glass, smoothing the satin fabric of her new gown. The afternoon sun illuminated her lavish chamber, decorated in tasteful pigments of pinks and greens.

“Yes. The design is stylish, and the citron hue complements your blonde hair.”

“I had the same thought, and I am eager for Stephen to see me wearing this.”

My cousin intended to marry Mr. Stephen Ware, the heir to a nearby estate, Hawthorn Ridge. This past winter, their friendship had taken a romantic turn. He had proposed to Cassie a week ago, and she had

accepted. But Uncle Barton had withheld his consent; while he approved of the younger Mr. Ware, he would not allow Cassie to marry before the age of one-and-twenty due to a promise he had made to Aunt Barton in the days before she died. Cassie would not reach her majority until February of next year.

Despite my cousin's impassioned pleas, Uncle Barton did not relent; he would honour his word. He maintained that, if the pair's destinies united, their love would endure the wait. Thus, no official engagement existed.

Cassie had pouted for a few days. Mr. Stephen Ware, though, had accepted Mr. Barton's dictate. He had pointed out to Cassie that, this way, he would complete his studies at university before they wed. In time, my cousin became resigned to the situation.

"You may have this lemon muslin dress." She indicated a garment draped over a nearby chair. "I have already worn that one several times here and once in town."

"Thank you." I glanced at the gown. With shortened sleeves, new trim, and the necessary alterations, the garment would suit me well.

"You are welcome." She sat on the bed beside me. "Once I am Mrs. Stephen Ware, my first priority will be to find you a suitable husband."

"What?" I chuckled. "You need not be concerned for me. If I am meant to marry, then the right man will cross my path. If not, I shall be content to dote on your children."

"We shall see, my dear Lizzy." She patted my hand then returned to the mirror to admire her image once more.



Chapter 2: Crossed in Love

Thursday, 11 July
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

Upon my return from a tenant visit, a flash of blue in the garden caught my attention: Cassie sat upon a secluded bench in a wilted posture.

I veered towards her, and my pace hastened when her soft sobs reached my ears. “Cassie, what is wrong?”

Her head snapped up, and she dabbed her handkerchief beneath her eyes. “Oh, Lizzy, I have never been more miserable. My understanding with Stephen...or rather Mr. Ware, is over.”

I sat beside her. “No, I cannot believe this. Did the two of you have an argument?”

“Yes, we did. I called at Hawthorn Ridge today, and Mrs. Ware told me that Stephen and Miss Mullins had ridden into Salisbury. I was disappointed, of course, and I assumed someone else must have accompanied them. But when I left the house, the two of them came up the avenue on horseback alone.” She sniffed. “You can imagine how I felt. He

should not be riding unattended with *any* unmarried lady when he is promised to me!”

She paused to blow her nose. “I asked to speak to him in private. When I demanded to know why he rode to town with Miss Mullins, he blamed his mother—he declared that she had suggested he take her there.”

The Mullins family—including Miss Mullins, an attractive and amiable red-head—had been guests at Hawthorn Ridge for several weeks. The elder Mr. Ware and Mr. Mullins had been friends since university. Mr. Stephen Ware, having completed his studies early for Cambridge’s Easter Term, had been home for the entirety of the Mullins’s stay. “I can understand the let-down for you to arrive and find your favourite absent, but you have no cause for concern. He would never betray you.”

Her breath expelled in a huff. “That is what *he* said. He maintains Miss Mullins is a friend, nothing more.”

“You ought to believe him.”

“How can I do so when our association blossomed from a platonic one? No doubt that coquette has been taking every opportunity these past few weeks to gain his attention.” She wrinkled her nose. “Miss Mullins is no beauty, but I suppose if he can overlook the pimples on her face, she is not so bad-looking.”

I placed my hand on her forearm. “He *loves* you. You need not be concerned about Miss Mullins or any other lady.”

“No, you are wrong.” She blinked back new tears. “When I asked him to agree that he will never go anywhere alone with her or any other unmarried lady again, he refused. He said I ought to trust him.” Her voice cracked. “A man who loved me would assent to my request, if only to ease my mind. Miss Mullins must be more important to him than I am. So, I ended our understanding.”

A sob burst from her. “Oh, Lizzy, I am so unhappy.” She lay her temple against mine and snuffled.

“I am so sorry.” I stroked Cassie’s back in a circular motion. “The situation does not sound so dismal to me, though. In a few days, the two of you will speak again and reconcile.”

“You are so naive!” She pulled back, her cerulean eyes flashing. “Stephen has made new friends at university and has met some of their families as well—including their *sisters*. He may already have other female acquaintances with whom he spends time alone.”

“That is mere speculation on your part. I see no reason not to take him at his word.”

“Why are you on *his* side?”

“I am not. I want you to be happy, and I believe he is the ideal match for you.”

She folded her arms. “No, a future with him is no longer possible. Although it is inevitable we shall cross paths from time to time, henceforth we shall meet as distant acquaintances, nothing more.”

“You cannot mean that.”

“I am resolute. Mr. Stephen Ware is not the only one who may meet other people. On our next stay in town, I intend to seek a more desirable match.” Cassie held her head higher. “I have no notion of who that will be, but mark my words, he will be wealthier, handsomer, and of superior standing than Mr. Stephen Ware.” She shot to her feet and stamped back towards the house without a backwards glance.

Oh, Cassie! I collapsed against the bench. She would not listen to me, but no doubt Noah or my uncle would convince her to relent.

Tuesday, 30 July
Salisbury
Elizabeth

“Easy, girl.” I shifted my weight back in the saddle. Lily slowed to a trot and then a walk as we neared the home of Mr. Walter Rowe. He resided in a modest stucco dwelling not far from the cathedral. I spotted him at the side of the house, kneeling in his garden. The aged gentleman had lost his wife to consumption five years ago. He had thinning grey hair and a rather plain face, made pleasanter by his frequent smiles. At this moment, his position made the bald patch at the top of his head prominent.

I halted Lily. “Good day, Mr. Rowe.”

He shot me a quick look. “Miss Bennet, how lovely to see you.” He rose, dusted off his trousers, and came towards me with a jovial air. “Have you come from Minster Street?”

“Yes, I went to the circulating library.” My hand moved to my saddle bag. “Today I borrowed a memoir of a Scottish author’s travels through Portugal

and Spain.” My uncle kept a family subscription to the library—he, Noah, and I used it often.

“That sounds interesting. Let me know your opinion once you have read it.”

“Yes, I shall.” Lily stamped a hoof upon the dirt—she wanted to move forwards. I stroked her neck in a rhythmic pattern to soothe her.

“I received a letter from my daughter, Marina. She will not be able to visit me this summer but is planning to come in October.”

“Oh, that is a shame, but I shall be glad to see her then.” The former Miss Marina Rowe had married Mr. Vaughan, a barrister, last year, and the couple lived in Northampton.

His hands clapped together. “I have tidings from your tenant Mr. Hughes. We spoke last week when he called in on his way home from the market. He remarked that his two daughters adore the dolls you and Miss Barton gave them.”

“I am pleased to hear that.” I sat straighter in the saddle. Although Cassie’s sewing skills exceeded mine for intricate work such as embroidery, I had designed the prototype for our dolls; we created them to match the physical traits of the recipients. The Haywards’ three-year-old daughter loved the one she received from us.

It occurred to me that we had not dined with Mr. Rowe in over two weeks. “Would you like to join us for dinner this Saturday? My uncle will be absent as he is leaving tomorrow for a stay in London, but the Haywards will be there.” Despite the difference in their ages, Mr. Rowe and Mr. Hayward shared a close bond.

His mouth flattened. “I am afraid I cannot accept, though I appreciate the invitation. As it happens, I am also for town. Since my daughter has postponed her visit, I have decided to depart on Wednesday morning to stay with my brother for the next month.”

“Oh, I see.” Mr. Rowe, like my uncle, took frequent trips to London.

Not long after I parted from Mr. Rowe, a familiar gentleman rider appeared in the distance: Mr. Stephen Ware. He cantered towards me on a bay horse from a path perpendicular to the road.

He waved to me, and I returned the gesture. The poor man. Cassie continued to avoid him and would not budge from her resolve. My uncle, Noah, and I had all attempted to dissuade her from this course to no avail.

“Good day, Miss Bennet.” Mr. Ware touched the brim of his hat.

“Good day, Mr. Ware. It is nice to see you.”

He directed his steed to the road and drew alongside me. “Are you on your way home?”

“Yes, I have been to the library in Salisbury.”

“Ah. I hope your uncle and cousins are well.”

“Yes, quite well.”

“Pray be certain to give them my regards.” He held me in an earnest gaze.

“Yes, I shall do so.” He had not mentioned her, but without doubt, Cassie drew the bulk of his concern.

Mr. Ware raised his beaver hat to smooth a section of his hair. “I wonder whether there is any possibility...” He broke off, and his chin dipped before he faced me anew. “Do you suppose Miss Barton would be willing to receive me today?”

From my observation, he had always been a reserved, private sort of man. It must be difficult for him to be so direct. I drew my lower lip between my teeth. Would that I could offer him encouragement, yet it would not do to give him false hope. “I am afraid not.”

The line of his jaw tensed, and he nodded. “Thank you.” He spun his horse round and rode away.

I should relate my encounter with him to Cassie. Surely, she would come to her senses and forgive him one day soon.

Saturday, 31 August
Darcy House, London
Fitzwilliam Darcy

I lifted the missive from my friend Charles Bingley and strained to make out the blurred letters; his slapdash penmanship and the random blots of ink tainting the page made the effort akin to solving a cypher. My friend had signed a lease on an estate near Meryton in Hertfordshire. He would take possession of the property on the sixth of September and asked me to join him there, provide my opinion of the house and grounds, and remain for a month or two.

To my regret, I should be forced to decline since I had already accepted my friend Patrick Hayward’s invitation to sojourn at his estate near Salisbury. Hayward, whose parents had retired to a house in Sidmouth

several years earlier, resided there with his wife and young daughter. Although Hayward had stayed at Pemberley more than once, this would be my first visit to his home. I moved my calendar nearer and perused the forthcoming dates.

Perhaps I ought to ride out to Hertfordshire on Friday the sixth of September and return to town the following day, thereby providing Bingley a modicum of first-hand guidance while allowing me time to prepare for my trip to Wiltshire. Thereafter, I could offer Bingley any assistance he may require via correspondence. Yes, I should do that.

At the sound of a knock, I set down the letter. My butler stood in the doorway to the study. "What is it, Slade?"

"A Mr. Notley is here to see you, sir." Slade strode to me and handed over a card, which identified the caller as a Bow Street runner. The man must be investigating Mrs. Cooper's murder.

"Bring him here."

"Yes, sir."

My neighbour Mrs. Cooper, a fifty-year-old widow, had been strangled on Thursday evening. The constable, Mr. Clark, had questioned me yesterday in accordance with his official inquiry.

I stood from my desk as Slade announced the runner, a thin, blond man in his fourth decade. My hand lifted towards a chair. "Have a seat, Mr. Notley." Slade closed the door behind the officer and departed.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy." He sat and removed a notebook and pencil from his coat pocket. When he accepted my offer of brandy, I poured him a glass and took the opportunity to refill my own. He took a sip of the liquor and opened his notebook to a blank page. "As you may have surmised, I am investigating the murder of Mrs. Cooper that occurred two nights ago."

"Yes, Mr. Clark called here yesterday. As I told him, I rarely spoke with Mrs. Cooper and have no idea who may have wanted to harm her."

"Mr. Clark provided me with his notes from your interview. The coroner completed his exam yesterday. Based upon the ligature marks on Mrs. Cooper's neck, he believes the killer strangled her with a length of cloth, possibly a cravat." He held me in an intent gaze. "Mrs. Cooper has been your nearest neighbour for decades. May I ask why you had such a distant association with her?"

I toyed with the silver buttons on my sleeve. It would not do to disparage the dead, yet I should be honest. "I found Mrs. Cooper to be narrow-minded

and spiteful, so I avoided her whenever possible.”

Mr. Notley nodded. “You are not the first to describe her in such terms. There is also the matter of the past accusation of theft levelled against her. Are you familiar with the incident?”

“Yes, the newspapers chronicled the events, including her trial.” Mrs. Cooper had been reported for the theft of a ruby brooch by a jeweller in Piccadilly. Despite her eventual acquittal, I had found the jeweller’s version of the episode to be more credible than Mrs. Cooper’s testimony, wherein she maintained that she had forgotten to set the brooch down before leaving the shop.

Some years ago, Mrs. Cooper and several other ladies had taken tea at the home of my aunt Lady Matlock. After the guests had departed, the butler noticed a miniature porcelain figure of a horse had disappeared from the drawing-room. This preceded the jewellery shop incident, but one of my aunt’s friends had experienced a similar loss after Mrs. Cooper had attended a gathering at her house. Thereafter, my aunt never again sent an invitation to Mrs. Cooper and suffered no further thefts.

Mr. Notley glanced at his notebook. “According to Mrs. Cooper’s cousin who resides in Chelsea, Mrs. Cooper made a new acquaintance in the month before her death, a gentleman by the name of Mr. James King who owns an estate in Norwich. Mr. King approached Mrs. Cooper in a shop on Bond Street. He declared himself to be a friend of her late husband and maintained they had met long ago.”

He shifted his feet forwards. “Do you have any knowledge of this man?”

“No, I do not, and the name is not familiar.” I drank from my glass.

“That is a pity. Mrs. Cooper’s butler confirmed that Mr. King dined at the house the night of her murder. She had dismissed most of the servants for the evening, so no one saw him leave before a passing maid discovered her body. It is imperative that I speak to him, but thus far, he has proved to be difficult to find.”

It sounded like Mr. King might be the killer. “I hope you are able to question him.”

“That is our intention.”

“Do you know who benefits from Mrs. Cooper’s death?”

“Yes, she has three nephews who will share her estate. The two eldest were out of town on Thursday. The youngest has been described as a ne’er do well. However, a lady friend has provided him with an alibi.”

“Have you any other suspects?”

“Not as yet. We cannot discount the possibility that she encountered a burglar who became violent.”

“Is any property missing from her house?”

“Yes, two items. A valuable porcelain vase in a blue floral pattern from the front sitting-room and the necklace Mrs. Cooper had worn that evening—a jade pendant in the shape of a rose on a gold chain.”

“I see.”

Mr. Notley gulped down the remainder of the brandy and set the glass upon the rosewood table. “Well, I appreciate your cooperation. Depending on what information comes to light between now and the inquest, I may wish to speak with you again.”

“I have no objection, but I shall be in Hertfordshire on the sixth and seventh of September, and afterwards, I shall be staying with a friend near Salisbury in Wiltshire.”

He scribbled in his notebook. “Very well. I shall bear that in mind.”

After Mr. Notley departed, I quit the study and followed the sounds of a sombre sonata to the music-room. Since our return from Ramsgate in mid-July, my sister, Georgiana, had suffered from depressed spirits. Despite my best efforts, I had been unable to coax her into a more positive outlook; rather, she tended to avoid me.

I stayed near the doorway and took in the scene before me: Mrs. Annesley, the companion I had hired two weeks before, stood to Georgiana’s right as my sister played. When the lady interrupted my sister to make a correction, I approached them. “Pardon me.”

Whereas Georgiana acknowledged my presence with a nod before lowering her head, Mrs. Annesley started and spun towards me with a smile. “Oh, good day, Mr. Darcy.”

“Good day, Mrs. Annesley. I should like to speak with my sister. Would you mind waiting for her in the library?”

“No, not at all.” The prim, middle-aged lady used a soft tone. She left the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Georgiana, let us sit together.” I gestured to the seating area behind us. Without a glance towards me, she rose and ambled to the sofa. I sat beside her.

How could I ease her pain? She had believed herself to be in love with Wickham. The wretched reprobate had been my childhood friend until his

dishonest nature became clear to me, and after I had covered hundreds of pounds of his debts. My sister would have eloped with the rogue had I not made a surprise visit to our house in Ramsgate. Once his plan had been foiled, Wickham had admitted his ruse and spouted a deluge of vitriol, crushing Georgiana's tender sensibilities and breaking her heart.

My sister had been further betrayed by Mrs. Younge, the conniving companion I had hired. The woman and Wickham had conspired in this scheme with the object of obtaining Georgiana's fortune. Mrs. Younge had been dismissed without reference. I had threatened to have Wickham thrown in debtors' prison if he ever crossed my or my sister's path again. According to the servant I directed to follow Wickham's activities, he had found employment assisting a surgeon at a seaside town in Wales.

I adjusted my seat towards her. "What do you think of Mrs. Annesley?"

Her sight remained upon her lap, where she brushed her skirt in a zig-zag motion. "She is kind. I like her."

"That is good to hear." I suppressed a sigh. My sister would not so much as look at me. "If you ever have a concern with regard to her, I want you to tell me at once."

"Yes, I shall."

"It pains me to see you so down, dearest. What may I do to help you?"

Her chin dipped lower. "There is nothing you could do or say to change what happened."

"Nevertheless, I hope you will rally soon. You have not left the house since we arrived in town. Shall we take the horses to Hyde Park tomorrow morning?"

"No, I...I do not wish to go."

"Why not?"

"I cannot help but feel that anyone who sees me will know my shame."

A twinge pierced my chest. "What do you mean? You assured me that Wickham never harmed you."

"He did nothing beyond kisses, yet I had become devoted to him. I should have agreed to anything he asked of me. Mrs. Younge left us alone for hours at a time. If he had wanted to take my virginity...if he had asked me to agree, I should have done so. He could have ruined me." Sobs interrupted her speech. "I am tainted. I am no better than a harlot!"

"That is not true." I gathered her in my arms. She stiffened at first, then melted against me.

“No honourable gentleman will ever want me now.”

“Hush, my dear. You are human, that is all, and you never should have been left in Mrs. Younge’s care. That woman fooled me, and to my regret, you paid the price for my mistake.”

“I knew better than to agree to an elopement. But Mrs. Younge and Mr. Wickham made the plan sound so romantic. I did not want to disappoint them.”

“They are both despicable. In any case, I have no doubt you will make a fine match one day, but I hope that will not happen for many years. It will be a difficult day for me when you leave.”

Her head lifted from my shoulder. “But...I must have made you ashamed. Are you not eager to be rid of me?”

“No! How could you think that? You are the most important person in my life.”

My sister snuffled. “I am sorry for causing you so much trouble.”

“You have no need to apologise.” With a final pat on her back, I released her.

“I suppose Mrs. Younge fooled us both.”

“Yes, she did. Wickham, too, deceived me many times before I broke ties with him. He would apologise and tell me he had changed, and I wanted to believe him. He is a gifted liar. I understand why you accepted his words as truth.”

“You need not be concerned about Mrs. Annesley. She is the opposite of Mrs. Younge in every way.”

“That is what I hoped she would be.” I settled back in my seat. “Next month, I shall stay in Wiltshire at the estate of my friend Mr. Patrick Hayward.” My sister had met Hayward enough times in the past to have grown comfortable in his company. “I met his wife, Mrs. Hayward, in town last year, and she is quite amiable. And they have a daughter who is now three years old. Would you like to go?”

A knot arose between her brows. “But...I do not know Mrs. Hayward. And if I went, I should be expected to spend most of my time with her.”

“I am certain you will like her, and Mrs. Annesley would come as well.”

Her nose crinkled. “How long will you stay?”

“My plans are not yet set. Perhaps six weeks.”

“I should rather not face any new acquaintances just yet. As it is, I am still growing accustomed to Mrs. Annesley.”

My jaw tightened as I resisted the impulse to frown. Should I try harder to convince her? The concept of leaving her alone, even with a companion, rankled me. Yet, what if I cajoled her to go and caused her to be anxious and unhappy? “A shorter stay may suit you better. You and Mrs. Annesley could join me there later in the month.”

“Perhaps.” Georgiana rubbed the crook of her neck. “I shall give the idea thought.”

“Very well.” Her tense demeanour did not bode well for her agreement, but I should abide by her wishes.

Wednesday, 4 September

Darcy House

Darcy

To my surprise, Mr. Notley called again this afternoon. Despite his having suggested he might return, I had no notion of what help I could provide him. I poured brandy for myself and the investigator, and we settled in a pair of chairs by the fireplace.

He drummed a pencil upon his thigh. “Since we last spoke, I have determined that ‘Mr. King’ is an alias, and I have attempted to discover the man’s true identity.”

“How do you know Mr. King is not his real name?”

“We could not find any lodgings for Mr. King in town, and we made inquiries in Norwich to find his estate to no avail. I expect his true home is elsewhere.” Mr. Notley leafed to a page in his notebook. “Mrs. Cooper’s servants have described him as a man of average looks, a medium build, and a pleasant smile. He is in his fifth or sixth decade, has a cleft in his chin, and wears a white wig.”

“I see. Have you any clues that might lead you to the man?”

“Yes, and that brings me to why I am here today. The victim’s butler recounted an incident he found to be peculiar. Mr. King removed a handkerchief from his pocket, and a piece of paper fluttered to the floor outside Mr. King’s notice. The butler retrieved it and glanced at the writing—a purchase receipt from a cobbler in Salisbury. He offered the receipt to Mr. King, who snatched it back as though retrieving an item of high value.”

Mr. Notley raised the brandy to his lips for a small sip. "When I questioned Mrs. Cooper's coachmen, one of them recalled that Mr. King's driver had grumbled of his distaste for London and his desire to return to Wiltshire."

I brushed my knuckles over my mouth. "Do you suppose the man calling himself Mr. King might reside near Salisbury?"

"That is my suspicion."

"Have you any theories as to why he may have killed Mrs. Cooper?"

"No, but the fact that he used an assumed name leads me to suppose he had an ulterior motive from the beginning. By all accounts, Mrs. Cooper thought well of Mr. King. If they had a disagreement that final night, the servants, most of whom had retired below stairs, did not hear them."

"Will you go to Salisbury and attempt to find your suspect?"

"No, our office has taken this investigation as far as is practical. Mrs. Cooper was not an especially well-liked person, and her heirs are not inclined to provide the funds for our further investigation of the crime. Unless someone comes forward with new information, we shall direct our energies elsewhere."

"That seems a bit harsh. Popular or not, she is dead, and a killer is walking around free."

"Yes, but our time must be devoted to more pressing crimes. For instance, yesterday, a sixteen-year-old shop girl was bludgeoned and killed in the course of a robbery. My focus now is upon finding *that* perpetrator."

"I understand, but whoever killed Mrs. Cooper may pose a threat to others."

"Yes, that is true." He leaned closer, giving me a wry smile. "And it is understandable that you may take a particular interest in finding this murderer, since the crime occurred so near to your home. Therefore, in the interest of furthering justice, I suggest that while you are in Wiltshire, you attempt to find the man who presented himself as Mr. King. Any assistance on your part would be most welcome."

So, he had come to solicit my help. "What would you have me do?"

Mr. Notley took a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket and handed it to me. "I took the liberty of jotting down the relevant facts in the case for you."

I glanced at the writing, which included descriptions of 'Mr. King' as well as the missing vase and necklace.

“All I ask is that you pay close attention to the local denizens, in particular members of the gentry, and make a few discreet inquiries. If you happen upon any men between the ages of forty and sixty with cleft chins who fit the description of the suspect and spent most of August in town, send me their names.”

“Am I to seek a man who wears a white wig?”

“Not necessarily. The suspect may have worn the peruke to disguise his usual appearance.”

“Very well, if I encounter any men who meet that profile, I shall inform you.”

“Thank you, I appreciate any information you may provide.” With a final quaff of the brandy, he stood and took his leave.

I stared at the notes Mr. Notley had provided, my chest muscles cramping. *Blast it*, I had agreed to spy on Hayward’s friends and neighbours. No doubt I should be wasting my time; I had scant probability of identifying Mrs. Cooper’s murderer.



Chapter 3: A Sojourn at Springvale Estate

Thursday, 12 September
Springvale, Wiltshire
Darcy

I had chosen to ride my stallion, Regal, ahead of the coach carrying my valet, Winston, and my luggage. We cantered past fields of wheat and several outbuildings before reaching the avenue. My friend's stone and stucco residence sat nestled between a forest of elms and a meadow tinted with ragwort and mallow flowers. I dismounted and handed the groom my reins.

When I entered the vestibule, Patrick Hayward rushed towards me from the hall.

"Darcy, it is good to see you!" He shook my hand and clasped my shoulder.

"Thank you, Hayward. I am glad to be here." Married life appeared to agree with my friend; he looked hale and happy. Hayward wore his dark-brown hair longer and carried a few more pounds on his lean frame than before. The angular contours of his countenance, though, had not altered. I

glanced at the interior structure and elegant furnishings around us. “You have a fine home.”

“Thank you, it is not as grand as Pemberley, but it is ideal for us.”

We moved deeper into the house, and Mrs. Hayward, a pretty, plump lady with an aquiline nose, came towards us and gave me a warm welcome. She directed a maid to take me to my chamber. An hour later, refreshed and changed, I joined my hosts for tea in the drawing-room.

My friend described his latest shooting venture with a neighbour, Mr. Walter Rowe. Hayward’s eyes gleamed as he recounted having brought home seven brace of partridges, thanks in part to the superior performance of his new fowling piece, purchased last spring from Manton’s gun shop in London.

He paused to sip his tea. “Mr. Noah Barton of Knight’s Manor, the estate bordering mine to the east, has invited me to shoot with him and his father this Saturday. When I mentioned your expected arrival, he included you in the invitation. Shall I tell him that we accept?”

“By all means.”

Mrs. Hayward beheld me. “I should like to have a dinner party and invite our neighbours so you may become acquainted with them.”

I clinched my facial muscles to forestall a frown. “That is most considerate of you, but pray do not go to any bother on my account.”

“Nonsense, it is my pleasure.”

With a chuckle, Hayward shook his head. “If I know Darcy, my dear, a dinner party with him as guest of honour is the last thing he would want. I fancy he would prefer to meet our neighbours one at a time, or at least one family at a time.” When he met my gaze, I nodded my thanks.

“Indeed?” She quirked an eyebrow at me. “In that case, we shall thrust no more than one household of friends upon you at once.”

“That sounds ideal, thank you.”



The following day, Hayward and I took his carriage into Salisbury, where he acquainted me with the local blacksmith, surgeon, and postmaster. The shoemaker’s shop displayed a sign indicating they would be closed until

Monday. I made a mental note to return and query the cobbler; maybe he could assist in identifying the suspect who used the name King.

We spent an amusing hour sipping ale at The Haunch of Venison, a quaint tavern on Minster Street. With no little pride, the affable proprietor exhibited his prized possession, a mummified hand. He spun an unlikely yarn of the hand's origin and further bent our ears with tales of ghosts who haunted the grounds.

Later, when my friend lingered in the tannery to inspect the saddles, I parted from him to enter the nearby haberdashery. I often purchased small gifts for Georgiana when I travelled, and I strolled the aisles with her in mind. A display of colourful scarves drew my notice. Georgiana might like one of them, but which one?

"Good day, sir. I am Mr. Crew. May I be of assistance?"

I shifted towards the short, smartly dressed man whose hair receded high above his forehead. "Perhaps. I hope to find an item my fifteen-year-old sister would find desirable. Which of these do you think would be the most suitable?" I indicated two striking silk scarves, one in a green-and-yellow floral pattern, the other in blue-and-white stripes.

"Ah, both of those are pretty. Is your sister dark-haired like you?"

"No, her hair is blonde."

He spread both scarves out on the table. "I think either one would make a delightful gift. It is a shame my female clerk is not in today, for she has exquisite taste in these matters." His gaze locked upon a sight behind me. "Ah, pray allow me a moment, and I shall have an answer for you."

Before I could articulate a response, he snatched the two scarves and strode towards a female who browsed an aisle with gloves and handkerchiefs. Did he mean to intrude upon another customer for such a trifling matter? If he had voiced that intention, I should have forestalled him.

Out of curiosity, I took a meandering course to acquire a clear view of the lady and the haberdasher from a sheltered position behind a group of cloaks.

"Good day, Miss Bennet. Are you in need of assistance?"

The lady beamed at the manager. "Good day, Mr. Crew. No, thank you. I am passing the time whilst I await my cousin, who stopped at the post office."

The radiant smile Miss Bennet directed at Mr. Crew illuminated far more than herself; indeed, her presence brightened the area like the warming rays of the sun emerging through dark clouds on a bleak day. I found myself in the inexplicable state of envying the man for being the recipient of her attention. Her dulcet voice—confident, yet distinctly feminine—in combination with the captivating picture she made, summoned me closer as might a siren’s call.

Miss Bennet’s charms defied her unremarkable features. Her small nose lacked character, she stood at an unfashionably short height, and with her average-sized bosom and narrow hips, she lacked the symmetry and curves of the ideal female form. And her attire, of a commonplace cut and mediocre fabric, did nothing to embellish her looks. Yet her sparkling brown, or maybe hazel, irises had a fascinating allure, even from six yards or so away. I had to lock my feet in place to resist the inclination to shorten the distance; if I ventured any nearer, I should be caught staring.

“Ah, in that case I should appreciate your opinion of these two scarves.” Mr. Crew held them up for her perusal. “Which would you choose for a fifteen-year-old blonde lady?”

“Both of these are lovely and elegant, so I imagine she would be pleased to receive either.” Her expressive brows shifted to emphasise her speech in a most charming manner. “If the young lady has blue eyes, I should choose the striped scarf, and if she has brown or green eyes, the green-and-yellow one.”

I had become so engrossed in the melodious tone of her speech, it took a moment for the gist of her words to strike me. Why had that point not occurred to me? The blue one would enhance the colour of Georgiana’s eyes. Moreover, what explained my peculiar attraction to this lady, a stranger? Never before had I experienced anything similar to this phenomenon.

“Thank you very much.” Mr. Crew bowed to her. “I appreciate your help.”

“The pleasure is mine.” She glanced towards the window. “Ah, I see my cousin has finished his business, so I must go.” With a nod, she quit the shop in a light, graceful gait.

In her absence, the room faded to a dull lustre. Rather than indulge my disposition to follow Miss Bennet’s progress until she moved out of sight, I lowered my head to feign interest in the display of snuff boxes before me as

Mr. Crew approached. I ought to be thankful she left before I drew attention to myself.

“Well, sir, I have an answer for you.” Mr. Crew wore a triumphant grin.

“Yes, I heard the lady’s response. But I wish you had not disturbed her on my account.”

Mr. Crew’s hand fluttered at me. “Pray, sir, think nothing of it. I should not have approached just any customer. I have known Miss Bennet for many years, and I knew she would not mind my question. She is one of the most amiable ladies of my acquaintance.”

“I see. Well, I shall take the striped scarf.”

“Very good, sir. May I assist you with anything else?”

“No, thank you.” We moved to the counter to settle the payment. Although a myriad of questions absorbed me with regard to Miss Bennet, I refrained from querying the man lest I betray a peculiar interest in her. She must live in the area, so in all likelihood I should make her acquaintance soon. Unless... My next thought caused a leaden mass to develop in my gut: although she had *spoken* like a gentlewoman, based upon her dress, she *might* be the daughter of a tradesman. Any female who attracted me in such a forceful way yet could not make me a suitable spouse must be avoided at all costs.

When I reached the tannery, Hayward met me at the doorway, and we returned to his coach. I did not ask about Miss Bennet; nevertheless, I should remain alert for any mention of her by my friend or his wife.

Later that day, I met Mr. Allan Barton, a widower of an age with Hayward’s father, and his son, Mr. Noah Barton, a tall gentleman with blond hair and attractive features, when they called at the house. Although Mr. Noah Barton proved to be the most garrulous of the pair, his father appeared to be amiable enough.

I noted the elder Mr. Barton had a prominent cleft in his chin. In the course of our conversation, I managed to confirm he had recently returned from a month-long stay in town; thus, I already had one name to provide Mr. Notley.

By the time the Bartons departed, I had formed a favourable opinion of both men. The possibility that the elder Mr. Barton, a respected estate owner, might have killed Mrs. Cooper seemed far-fetched, to say the least.

Whilst Hayward and I played a game of billiards, it occurred to me that I ought to confide in my friend; he would be apt to know which men in the

area may fit the suspect's criteria. Thus, I related the known facts of Mrs. Cooper's murder and the description of the unknown man who used the alias Mr. King and may reside near Salisbury.

Hayward took his shot and sank the red ball in the corner pocket. He straightened and met my gaze. "What a strange turn of events. It must have been a shock to learn that a murder occurred so close to your own house."

"Yes, without a doubt."

"I hate to think the killer could be a local resident."

"The elder Mr. Barton meets the profile, but he is an improbable suspect."

My friend snapped his fingers. "By Jove, yes. He is the right age, has a cleft in his chin, and his most recent trip to town puts him there at the right time." He shook his head. "But the very notion is ludicrous. Barton cannot be the murderer."

"Have you ever known him to wear a white wig?"

"No, never."

"Can you think of any other local gentlemen who fit the suspect's profile?"

Hayward's forehead crimped. "No, there are none that come to mind."

I replaced the red ball and took my turn, hitting Hayward's white ball into a side pocket. "How did Mrs. Barton die?"

"She suffered complications from a difficult childbirth, and her infant son perished as well."

"Oh, that is...terrible."

"The loss hit Barton very hard, and it took him well over a year to rally again. I recall my parents voicing their concern for him back then." Hayward cocked his head, twisting the cue in his hands. "In contrast, his first marriage was one of convenience."

I turned sharply towards him. "Mr. Barton was married before?"

"Yes, my understanding is that his late father had mortgaged the estate, and the first Mrs. Barton brought the needed funds to discharge the loan."

"What was the first Mrs. Barton like?"

"Well, I never met her, but my mother described her as a rather plain, reserved, and soft-spoken lady. I do not believe she made any close friends in the neighbourhood. Of course, she died less than a year after she married Barton."

"What happened to her?"

My friend leaned upon the pool table. “She and Barton had been riding on the estate when her horse shied and jumped from a deer leaping across their path. Mrs. Barton fell, hit her head upon a stone, and died later that day.”

“Did anyone find her death to be in any way suspicious?”

“I recall my father saying that the lady’s father came for the funeral and publicly accused Barton of causing the incident, but he had no basis for the allegation. The coroner had deemed her death an accident.” Hayward scratched the side of his head. “And lest you speculate that Barton may have already fallen in love with his future second wife by then, he did not meet her until two years after the first Mrs. Barton’s death.”

The fact remained, though, that Mr. Barton had married the first Mrs. Barton for her money, and her death freed him so he could make a later love match. Had Mr. Barton acted to *influence* his first wife’s fate?

Saturday, 14 September
Knight's Manor
Darcy

Hayward and I followed the butler into the dining-parlour, where we exchanged greetings with Mr. Barton and Mr. Noah Barton.

The elder Mr. Barton urged me towards a pretty blonde lady with classic features and a well-proportioned frame. He introduced me to the lady, his daughter, Miss Cassandra Barton. She wore a fashionable gown of fine checked muslin and a pearl necklace.

Miss Barton beamed at me throughout our salutations, sparing Hayward a brief juncture of regard. Whilst she did not breach propriety, she came close enough to provoke me to stretch my upper body backwards. I guessed her age to be near twenty. She swept her arm towards a chair. “Will you sit and have refreshments before you leave?”

I might have been more inclined to stay for a cup of coffee if she tempered her eagerness. “Thank you, but we ate before we left the house.” Her mouth squeezed shut for a moment.

Hayward glanced around the room. “I do not see your cousin. No doubt she is on one of her rambles.”

Miss Barton gave my friend a quick look. "Yes, Lizzy has not yet returned from her walk." Her azure irises returned to me. "My cousin resides with us, so you are certain to meet her soon."

I nodded.

She took a basket from the table and held it out to me. "You may not be hungry now, but you could take a muffin or a roll with you for later."

"Thank you, no."

Her smile wavered again for a few seconds, and she neglected to extend her offer to Hayward before she set the basket down. "Well, we must have you to dinner one night soon." She directed her sight to my friend. "I shall send an invitation to Mrs. Hayward."

"Thank you." Hayward inclined his head.

My friend and I left the house with Mr. Barton and his son. Several of Mr. Barton's servants led the way into the woods with a yelping pack of boisterous hounds close at their heels.

Elizabeth

"Lizzy, you have returned at last." Cassie strode into the breakfast-parlour and slipped into the seat beside me.

"Good morning, Cassie." I ingested a mouthful of eggs.

"You are tardy today."

"Yes, I meant to return sooner, but the Hughes children called out to me as I passed their house. They wanted to show me their kitten, an adorable tabby. I ended up staying with them for half an hour."

She shifted to face me, wearing a broad grin. "You missed the opportunity to meet Mr. Hayward's guest, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. He is the handsomest man of my acquaintance, his figure is faultless, and he is one of the most sought-after bachelors in town. His name has appeared in the Fashionable Intelligence section of the London papers many times. He owns a magnificent estate in Derbyshire with an estimated income of over ten thousand a year."

"That is all quite impressive. What do you know of his character?"

Cassie shrugged. "I have no doubt he is honourable. He is Mr. Hayward's friend and a guest in his home, so that speaks in his favour."

“That is true. I do not believe Mr. Hayward would expose his household to a man of poor character.” I bit into my roll.

“Of course he would not.” Cassie twisted a lock of golden hair around her finger. “I believe Mr. Darcy is the man I have been waiting for—my future husband.”

I almost choked on a morsel of bread. “But you cannot know this already. You just met him.”

“Nevertheless, I have a powerful feeling about him, right here.” She raised a hand to her heart. “I do not believe any other man could suit me better.”

“Well, I am eager to meet this paragon.” I infused exaggerated reverence into my statement, but Cassie did not appear to notice the gibe.

“And so you will. I shall invite the Haywards and Mr. Darcy to dine with us.” She leaned back in the chair with a fanciful gleam in her eyes, and her sight drifted upwards. “I shall take every opportunity to secure Mr. Darcy’s affection. He will choose me—I shall ensure he does.” Her lips curved up. “I cannot wait to see Stephen...um...rather *Mr. Ware’s* expression when he sees us together.”

Oh, Cassie. My cousin still cared deeply for Mr. Ware, but she refused to admit it. Why else would she be so eager to exhibit a new suitor before him? “I still believe Mr. Ware is your ideal match, and I wish you would forgive him.”

She glared at me. “I have grown weary of you, Papa, and Noah advocating for him.”

“Your happiness is our primary concern.”

“Mr. Ware had his opportunity to be my husband, and he tossed that aside. I loved him very much, but he has ruined any chance for us. I shall never forgive him.”

“Never is a long time.”

“My mind is made up.” Cassie pushed away from the table, creating a discordant clamour as the chair legs scraped the wooden floor. She stood and marched from the room.

Darcy

Although we all returned with a respectable number of grouse and partridges, Mr. Noah Barton caught the most birds and distinguished himself as an exceptional shooter. Hayward and I begged off Mr. Barton's offer of a drink at the house as Hayward had the headache. So, we parted from the Bartons near the stables, and a groom brought out our horses.

My friend and I set off alongside a large paddock where a striking sorrel horse pranced within. The animal bore the distinctive profile of an Arabian. Based upon her build, refined and not excessively muscular, she must be a female. Her markings—a full blaze and four socks—made her an exact likeness of Majesty, my late mother's mare. Last spring, Majesty had succumbed to a severe case of colic. The loss had brought my sister low; the mare had been a favourite mount of Georgiana's and a beloved living symbol of our mother. I glanced at Hayward. "Just a moment, I want to take a look at this horse."

"Ah, that is Lily. She is a fine mare."

"Indeed, she is." I directed Regal nearer to the paddock. The reddish-brown steed, Lily, caught sight of us, and her ears shot up. With a snort, she cantered away, kicking up her heels, before slowing to a trot and following the perimeter of the enclosure. "Her gaits are impressive, and her conformation is faultless."

"Aye, and she is well-trained too."

As I followed the animal's movements, an idea sent my blood pulsing: I must buy this mare! She would be the perfect gift for Georgiana, and there could be no better way to nudge my sister from her state of melancholy. I turned back towards my friend. "You go on back to the estate. I intend to purchase this mare from Mr. Barton."

Hayward let out a short laugh. "I am afraid that is not possible. He would never sell Lily. But no doubt he has other fine animals he could show you."

"No, I am not interested in any other horse." I dismounted from Regal.

"Well, if you are determined to waste your time, I shall see you back at the house." With a shake of his head, my friend rode away.

I tied Regal to a post and went to the front door. After a short wait, the butler led me to Mr. Barton's wood-panelled study and announced me.

"Ah, Mr. Darcy, I am glad you changed your mind." With a broad smile, Mr. Barton rose from his seat behind the sizeable mahogany desk. "Where is Hayward?"

"He has gone home."

“Well, no matter.” He indicated a set of chairs near the fireplace. “Have a seat if you will. What would you like to drink?”

“Thank you, I should welcome a brandy.” I sat in one of the chairs.

“Yes, of course.” Mr. Barton poured two glasses of the liquor and passed one to me before taking his seat.

I took a sip and cradled the glass in my palm. “I happened to notice one of your horses in the paddock, the sorrel Arabian with a blaze and four socks.”

“Yes, that is Lily. She is a singular steed.”

“I agree. In fact, I have seldom seen a mare that impressed me so much, both in appearance and in the spirited way she moves. I want to buy Lily from you. You may name your price.”

His mouth tightened. “I am sorry, but she is not for sale. However, I have several other fine Arabian horses that may suit your needs.”

“No, thank you. My interest is solely in Lily.”

He raised his palms. “Well, then I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Will you accept five hundred pounds for her?”

Mr. Barton’s brows shot up. “You must know she is not worth that much. But it matters not, for I have no intention of selling her.”

I brushed my knuckles over my mouth. I should never find another horse so ideal for Georgiana. I must buy this mare—no matter the cost.

“I shall pay you one thousand pounds for Lily.”

A choking sound escaped Mr. Barton. He leaned forwards. “Is this some sort of jest? That is a ridiculous price for any steed, except perhaps a champion race-horse.”

“My offer is serious. Will you part with her for one thousand pounds?”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I cannot refuse this opportunity. I accept your offer.”

I heaved a deep breath. Perhaps Lily would be the key to lifting Georgiana from her depressed state.



Chapter 4: Distressing News

Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

I had reached the most difficult section of Herr Beethoven's 'Andante Favori' when our butler, Oliver, entered the music-room. I halted with my fingers aloft and met his gaze.

"Pardon me, Miss Bennet, but the master wishes to see you in his study."

"Thank you, Oliver." I went to the study door and knocked, entering at my uncle's invitation.

Noah rose from one of the chairs opposite Uncle's desk; he gave me a quick glance without meeting my eyes. Uncle Barton wore a grave expression.

I took cautious steps inside as Oliver closed the door behind me. "What has happened?"

My uncle indicated the open chair. "Pray have a seat, Lizzy."

I obeyed and tried in vain to catch Noah's gaze. How odd; why did he refuse to look at me?

Uncle Barton presented a weak smile. "Today, I made a business agreement. Like many decisions in life, I did not arrive at this one easily.

Nevertheless, I believe I took the most prudent course. As a result, I intend to settle a jointure upon you of one thousand pounds.”

One thousand pounds? “I do not understand. How is this possible?” In the past, both my uncle and Noah had remarked on the estate’s financial setbacks in the last several years. How, then, could my uncle afford to bestow so much money upon me?

“An unexpected opportunity arose today, one which I could not overlook. I am delighted to be able to do this for you.”

“I do not know what to say. This is incredibly generous of you. And yet...” I swallowed. “I do not know whether I can accept this gift.”

A crimson hue tinted Uncle Barton’s complexion. “But you must!”

The force of his response made me shrink back in my seat.

“Pardon me.” My uncle’s voice resumed a moderate volume. “The money will make a significant difference in your life. The principal funds will accrue interest, providing you at least forty pounds each year, and you will have a better chance of making a match with an eligible gentleman.”

I took a quick look at my cousin, who kept his head down. Why did he appear out of sorts? Did he object to Uncle Barton giving me this money? No, Noah would never begrudge me anything. “If you insist, then yes, thank you very much.”

“You are quite welcome.”

“Is there anything else?”

“Yes.” He brushed his hand over his chin. “I once made you a promise, and I should never have broken my word without a powerful incentive. I hope you will not allow your emotion to overrule your reason.”

My teeth closed upon my lower lip. What promise did he mean?

Uncle’s gaze drifted lower. “I have sold Lily for the sum of one thousand pounds, an amount which far exceeds her actual value.”

No, not Lily. He could not mean this! I shook my head, and hints of nausea caused my stomach to spasm.

“You must be reasonable and accept that I could not, in good conscience, refuse such a remarkable offer. In any case, my decision has been made, and the matter is settled.”

I expelled a heavy breath and found my voice. “No, I do not believe this. You would never sell Lily! She is worth far more than any amount of money.” My hands curled into fists. *You promised me!*

“I know this is difficult for you, my dear. You may ride Thea for now and have your pick of the three-year-olds to train for yourself.”

Noah cleared his throat. “I am so sorry, Lizzy, and I hate to see Lily go. Nevertheless, I am relieved to know you will have your own funds. I only wish it could be more.”

I stared at him, and his brows converged in a pleading look. Did he agree with my uncle’s decision? Moisture flooded my eyes. I could not bear to lose Lily; no other horse had ever been so dear to me. “Uncle, I pray you will buy her back. The money does not matter to me. I do not want any of it. I only want Lily to stay.”

“No, Lizzy. You must accept she is no longer mine.” My uncle’s mien hardened.

“Who...who has purchased her?”

“Mr. Hayward’s friend Mr. Darcy.”

“But why did he have to buy *her*, of all the horses on your estate?”

“He took notice of her in our paddock, and she impressed him. Perhaps he recognised her special qualities. Lily will be at Springvale for the remainder of his stay. I expect you will be keen to visit her there.” He raised his index finger to me. “However, I admonish you not to go until Tuesday at the earliest.”

“Why must I wait?”

“Lily ought to have an opportunity to grow habituated to living in an unfamiliar place before she sees you again.”

“She is accustomed to being let out into a paddock or pasture each day, whether or not she is ridden. I could at least ensure her groom is aware of this.”

“I have informed Mr. Darcy of that fact. Joe will take her to Springvale tomorrow morning, so you have ample time to make your farewells.”

Moisture stung my eyes, and I sprang from my chair. “Pray excuse me.” I left the room and rushed through the house, tears streaming down my cheeks. Once out of doors, I broke into a run towards the stables. I halted before Lily’s stall and wiped my face with a handkerchief. She caught sight of me, whickered, and came to meet me. I entered the stall and wrapped my arms around her neck. “I am so sorry, Lily. You will leave here tomorrow, and I am powerless to prevent it.” I nestled my head against her mane. Would she believe I had abandoned her?

“Lizzy.”

I turned to find Noah standing at the open door of the stall. He entered, shut the door behind him, and stood before me. "I wish you would try to understand. Papa acted in your best interest. He did this for you."

"Why did he not tell Mr. Darcy that Lily was not for sale?"

"He did so, but Mr. Darcy did not accept that answer."

"What an arrogant and officious man! He must be the sort of person who is accustomed to always getting whatever he desires."

"Your assumptions with regard to Mr. Darcy do not coincide with my impression of him. He has a reputation for being a responsible master, and it is obvious that Mr. Hayward has a high opinion of him. I am certain he will ensure Lily is well cared for. You ought not to judge the man until you have met him and spent time in his company."

"I have no wish to ever meet him."

He rested a hand on my shoulder. "Come now, it is not like you to be uncharitable."

I turned away from him. "He had no business pressing Uncle to sell Lily. I wish he had never come here!"

"Well, I cannot agree." Noah stepped sideways to meet my gaze. "I shall rest easier knowing you have a dowry. This could make a significant difference for your future."

"But I should much prefer..." I stopped myself from completing the statement. My wishes could not change the facts. The cognisance that Noah made rational arguments while my responses resembled that of a spoilt child added to the pressure in my chest. "Never mind."

"Will you return to the house with me? We could talk over tea."

"Thank you, but no. I shall remain with Lily for a while."

"Very well." He patted my arm, stroked Lily's nose, and departed.

I retrieved Lily's halter from the hook outside her stall and walked with her around the grounds. I told her that she would be going to a wonderful new home, one that she would grow to love. I could only hope I spoke the truth; after all, would a wealthy man not have fine stables, large paddocks, lush pastures, and knowledgeable, competent grooms? After an hour or so, we returned.

Joe left the stable building and came towards me. "Shall I take 'er back for you, Miss Bennet?"

"Thank you, Joe, yes." I passed my hand down Lily's neck and transferred the rope to him.

He rubbed his jaw. "I'm very sorry, miss. I 'ate to see 'er go."

I nodded, blinking back new tears. "Thank you."

Back at the house, a glowering Cassie confronted me in the hall. "Lizzy, Papa told me what happened today, and I want to speak to you." She took my hand and led me to the sitting-room, shutting the door behind her. "I am very sorry about Lily. I know you will miss her. But I do not believe you appreciate the significance of my father's largesse."

"That is not true. I—"

"Allow me to finish." Cassie thrust her hand towards me. "Any other person in your place would be elated to receive such a generous gift. Instead, you have made my father question his judgment. He is fretting that he has made you unhappy. This is outrageous! You must go to him and set his mind at ease."

How dare she? Words of denial danced on my tongue, but before I voiced them, the verity of her assertion silenced me. My shoulders sank. How could I have been so ungrateful to my uncle? He had been an admirable guardian to me, notwithstanding my early childhood years when he had paid me little to no attention. As much as I wished he had not sold Lily, I should not be the cause of his discontent. "You are right."

"And I think..." Her head edged to the side. "Wait...did you just agree with me?"

"Yes, I shall talk to Uncle at once. Is he still in his study?"

"I believe so." She grinned, opened the door, and swept her hand to indicate I should go ahead of her. "Is this not an odd circumstance? For once, *I* am the one to give *you* a lecture."

"Indeed."

Upon my return to the study, my uncle stood. "Have a seat, Lizzy."

"No, thank you, I shall not be long." I stood before him with my right hand gripping my left arm. "Pray accept my apology for my earlier behaviour. Despite your warning, I allowed my emotions to overrule my logic and failed to appreciate your kind consideration. You could have chosen to use the money in any number of ways. I am grateful to you."

My uncle stepped closer, and his arms enclosed me. "You are more than welcome, my dear. You must know you are like a daughter to me, and I want only the best for you."

I coughed against a thickness in my throat. "Yes, I know." Any iota of resentment I may have harboured for him dissipated. I directed the sole

remaining animosity in my breast to Mr. Darcy, a presumptuous man who used his wealth to take whatever he wanted—without regard for how his actions affected anyone else.

Darcy

On the ride back to Springvale, I whistled an old Scottish folk song my mother used to sing to me. At the house, I bathed, then reviewed my correspondence. While Winston dressed me for dinner, I shared the news of my new purchase. My valet expressed his agreement that I had chosen a fine gift for my sister.

In the drawing-room, I took a seat near the Haywards and enquired after my friend's wellbeing. Once Hayward assured me that his headache had receded, I related my successful transaction with Mr. Barton. Yet neither of them offered congratulations. Rather, my friend grimaced, and the colour drained from his wife's countenance. "What is the matter?" My sight darted between them.

Hayward gritted his teeth. "Lily, though she legally belongs to Mr. Barton, is *Miss Bennet's* horse. She trained the mare from the time Lily was a foal, so they have developed an extraordinary bond. She will not take the news well."

Miss Bennet: the customer in the haberdashery. Her fair image thrust to the forepart of my mind. Lily had been *her* horse? I swallowed. "Who is Miss Bennet, and what is her connexion to the Bartons?"

"She is Mr. Barton's niece and has been his ward since her parents died sixteen or seventeen years ago of a virulent ague."

"I do not understand how you could have purchased Lily." Mrs. Hayward studied me, wearing a marked frown. "I should have averred that Mr. Barton would never agree to sell that horse under any circumstances. How did you convince him to part with her?"

"I...um...offered him one thousand pounds."

"*One thousand* pounds?" She shared a quick look with Hayward. "If I may ask, why would you offer so much money for one horse?"

Once I had explained my rationale for purchasing Lily, understanding lightened the expressions of my friend and his wife. Nevertheless, a twinge

radiated from deep within my core. “I wish I had known of Miss Bennet’s attachment to Lily. Why do you suppose Mr. Barton agreed to the sale?”

Hayward slanted his head. “Barton has suffered financial difficulties over the years and has been trying to rebuild his coffers. I suspect he could not forgo your offer.”

“Oh, fie!” Mrs. Hayward expelled her breath in a huff. “This was badly done on Mr. Barton’s part—that horse means the world to Miss Bennet. And he could have saved a pretty penny by now if he had not indulged Miss Barton’s every wish over the years. That young lady has an extravagant wardrobe and receives everything else her heart desires while Miss Bennet wears her castoffs!”

My friend reached out to touch his wife’s arm. “Now, now, Susan. It is not so difficult to understand that after his wife’s death, Mr. Barton sought to make up for the loss of his daughter’s mother with material goods. Besides, unlike Miss Barton, Miss Bennet does not covet such finery. Rather, she is content to have plenty of books to read.” Mrs. Hayward opened her mouth to respond, but he silenced her with a raised palm. “Do not misunderstand me. I do not agree with Barton’s treatment of the two ladies. Furthermore, I hate to see Miss Bennet lose Lily, but what is done is done. She may take a modicum of comfort from the fact that her horse will have a loving home and will be well cared for.” His sight drifted to me. “I shall reassure her of this fact when the opportunity arises.”

That might be a small consolation to her at least. Mrs. Hayward changed the subject with a mention of a new tea shop on Minster Street, but Miss Bennet’s image would not budge from my cognisance. Would she hold my purchase of Lily against me? And why should I be troubled if she did? I roused from my rumination with the realisation that Mrs. Hayward had uttered Miss Bennet’s name again.

What had she said? She had already shifted to another topic: tomorrow’s dinner guests, the Ware family. I took advantage of the first pause in her speech. “Excuse me, but I missed what you said a moment ago with regard to Miss Bennet.”

“Oh yes. I thought it best to inform you of the disparity between the two ladies at Knight’s Manor. Whilst Patrick and I esteem Miss Bennet and deem her to be superior company to her cousin, Miss Barton benefits from a superior situation. Her father has apportioned fifteen thousand pounds to her. In contrast, Miss Bennet lacks a dowry.”

My friend caught my gaze. “The two ladies received a fine education at home from a governess, and a music master taught them to play the pianoforte. They are both skilled musicians.”

“Indeed, their duet performances are delightful.” Mrs. Hayward’s forefinger traced her pursed lips. “Another consideration is Miss Bennet’s uncle, Mr. Gardiner. He is the younger brother of the late Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Gardiner is a tradesman in London, and according to Mr. Barton, he is not an honourable man. In fact, Mr. Barton has taken pains to ensure Miss Bennet is kept far away from him.”

“That is a shame.” To have such a relation, estranged or not, would hinder her chances of marrying a man of any importance.

She gestured to Hayward. “Patrick met Mr. Gardiner once.”

“Did you?” I regarded my friend.

“Yes, I made his acquaintance when he last stayed with the Bartons. I must have been twelve back then. He seemed amiable at the time.” His mouth twitched to the side. “There is one more consideration with respect to Miss Bennet that I learnt from my father and shall tell you in confidence. Although Miss Bennet is a gentleman’s daughter, she is not, in actuality, a relation to the Bartons. Rather, the late Mrs. Rebecca Barton served as her godmother, and Mr. Bennet named her and Mr. Barton as Miss Bennet’s guardians.”

“I see.” That made Miss Bennet’s situation all the more peculiar.

Mrs. Hayward shifted to a new position and recovered her former sanguine air. “We are invited to Knight’s Manor for dinner on Monday, so you will meet Miss Bennet then.”

“Very well.” In order to alleviate any possible awkwardness between us, I should apologise to the lady for having inadvertently purchased her favourite horse.

Monday, 16 September
Darcy

Hayward and I rode our horses upon a picturesque path along the River Avon that morning. Upon our return to the stables, we parted company: Hayward returned to the house, while I approached the russet-haired groom, Tim, and asked him to saddle Lily.

When he brought the mare to me, I almost admonished him for having made a mistake. This horse bore little resemblance to the spirited steed I had admired and purchased on Saturday. She walked at a sluggish gait, more like a hackney nag than a fine riding horse.

Could Mr. Barton have sold me a sick animal? I stepped around Lily and searched for any signs of disease. "What is wrong with her? She must be ill."

"No, sir." Tim brushed his hand along Lily's nose. "She's well enough. She ate every scrap of 'er grain and most of 'er 'ay this morning. She's just a bit down in the mouth."

"You believe the mare is depressed? Why would that be?"

"She's pining for 'er mistress."

Could that be the sole reason for this alteration? "You refer to Miss Bennet."

"Aye, sir."

"I suppose she has ridden Lily here in the past."

"Yes, many times." A smile lightened Tim's look. "The lady is a friend to the mistress."

"You seem to approve of Miss Bennet."

"Oh yes, sir. She's like a ray of sunshine. Always has a kind word for anyone she meets."

His description matched my impression of her from that day at the haberdasher's shop. "Well, I expect exercise will improve the mare's temper."

"Yes, sir." Tim's tone, though, did not convey confidence in my statement.

I took the reins from him. When I mounted Lily, her ears moved back, and she stamped a front hoof. Could she be unaccustomed to carrying the weight of a man? "Easy, girl. All is well." I directed her towards the forest path, and she maintained the same tired walk as before. I urged her into a trot and then a canter. She obeyed my cues but without a whit of enthusiasm.

When we came adjacent to a tree, I stopped Lily, grabbed a bare, dry twig, and broke it off. We continued at a walk, and I hit the twig against my boot loud enough to create a cracking sound. Lily's ears shot up, but her pace did not improve. After repeating the effort a few more times without success, I threw the twig away. We came upon a perpendicular path, and I

turned her to the left. In an instant, she transformed: her head shot higher, her nostrils flared, and her sullen walk became a prance. “Yes, that is right. Good girl.” I ran my hand along her neck.

She seemed to have acquired the energy of ten horses. In fact, I had to restrain her from changing to a higher gait on her own. Soon, I cued her to move into a trot, then a canter and a gallop. In time, flecks of foam appeared on her neck and upper chest, and I slowed her. So, my conjecture had been correct: she had needed nothing more than to leave the stables and have a good run.

Then the realisation hit me: Lily had a particular destination in mind. *Blast*, I ought to have guessed this at once. I sat back in the saddle and brought her to a halt. She thrust against the reins in an obvious bid to continue onwards. “No, we are *not* going to Knight’s Manor.” I spun her round. With the release of a doleful sigh, she adopted a lethargic walk once again.

Knight’s Manor **Darcy**

I followed Hayward and his wife into the drawing-room. A beaming Miss Barton came forth to meet us, resplendent in a yellow satin gown. We exchanged salutations with Mr. Barton and his son when Miss Bennet glided into the room with a bright smile and a pleasing flush to her cheeks. She seized my attention with an iron grip, and I forgot to breathe.

“Forgive me for being late. My hair must take the blame—a few of my most errant locks caused my abigail more trouble than usual tonight.”

Miss Bennet’s remark drew my sight to the dark silken tresses framing her heart-shaped face. Unruly they may have been, but the result justified the wait. Miss Bennet far outshone her cousin; she presented a tempting appearance despite her unremarkable muslin gown. I perused her expressive hazel irises, animated eyebrows, and plump lips in an attempt to divine the reason for my attraction to her. I had met many beautiful ladies in my life without any of them moving me. What made her so special? At any rate, I must keep a certain distance from her—she would not make me a suitable wife.

Thus far, I had escaped her notice; the Haywards occupied her with an exchange of warm greetings and pleasantries. At last, Miss Barton took Miss Bennet by the arm and drew her towards me.

“Lizzy, allow me to introduce Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley estate in Derbyshire. Mr. Darcy, this is my cousin Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Miss Bennet’s mouth compressed, and she froze in a taut position, staring at me.

I bowed and managed a smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bennet.”

Several long seconds elapsed before she stirred with a rushed exhalation and curtsy. “Mr. Darcy.” She uttered my name in a whisper and stepped back from me, her sight roaming to the others present. “Forgive me, but I have a sudden headache. I beg you will excuse me.” She turned and fled the room.

On the verge of my vision, Mr. Noah Barton took a step as though to follow her but stopped himself. His response, which may have revealed an affection for Miss Bennet that went beyond a platonic bond, added to my inner turmoil.

Irrational as it may have been, my first impulse reflected that of Mr. Noah Barton, for I anchored my knees to fend the inclination to go after her and demand she hear my explanation. Her rejection of me—for her actions could be viewed in no other way—pierced me like a lance through the breast. But I soon came to my senses: she had no wish to hear from me. I had injured her, and my apology would be poor compensation.

“I am terribly sorry, Mr. Darcy.” Miss Barton’s hand raised to her chest. “I cannot explain or excuse my cousin’s rudeness. This is not like her.”

“You need not apologise on her behalf. I hope your cousin’s discomfort is of short duration.”

I shifted towards Mr. Barton. “Hayward informed me of Miss Bennet’s fondness for Lily.” I used an even tone to avoid sounding accusatory. “I well understand the close bond one can share with a horse.”

He moved closer, wincing. “I take full responsibility for my niece’s discomposure just now.” He touched Miss Barton’s arm. “And I echo my daughter’s apology. I should not want you to be ill at ease.”

“I am sorry to have occasioned pain to Miss Bennet, however unconscious my part may have been.”

Mr. Barton waved his hand. "You have no cause for regret. I agreed to sell Lily in order to establish an account for Lizzy. She has made it clear she would rather I had refused your offer. Nevertheless, I expect one day she will find the money useful."

So, he had given the funds to Miss Bennet. "That was generous of you."

"Indeed." Miss Barton glanced at her father. "Papa gave Lizzy a remarkable gift, and she ought to be grateful to both of you. Without this thousand-pound allotment, she would have nothing to her name."

Mr. Noah Barton shook his head at Miss Barton. "Cassie, you must allow Lizzy time to accept the loss of Lily. Since you are not fond of horses, you cannot comprehend how she feels."

Miss Barton gave her brother a sharp look but did not reply. Soon thereafter, she announced dinner, and I escorted her to the dining-parlour. Throughout the rest of the evening, whilst she directed the majority of her attention to me, I took pains to give polite, if succinct, responses. Meanwhile, my primary focus never strayed from Miss Bennet. How did she fare? Had she recovered any part of her earlier good spirits? The knowledge that I had caused her anguish engrossed me. Would she ever forgive me?



Chapter 5: Lily's New Owner

Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

I darted upstairs, entered my chamber, and collapsed upon the bed. What must they all think of me?

My earlier belief that I could endure this evening without incident had been proved wrong. Despite the welcome presence of Mr. Hayward and my dear friend Dame Hayward, I could not remain in that room. When I came face to face with Mr. Darcy, I had peered at him, my insides turning to ice. Once I regained enough presence of mind to make my excuses, I fled.

I could not deny that the hateful Mr. Darcy made an impressive presentation; for once, Cassie had not exaggerated when she had described his physical attractiveness. But handsome or not, I could not abide the prospect of spending an entire evening in his company. Even though I ached to know how Lily had spent her first days at Springvale, it would have been a waste of time to ask Mr. Darcy; he probably took no notice of her and considered her to be nothing more than one of his many possessions.

Tomorrow, I should ride Thea to the estate and see her for myself. The head groom there, Tim, could be relied upon to relate how Lily had adjusted

to her temporary home thus far. For the remainder of Mr. Darcy's stay in the neighbourhood, I should avoid him as much as possible.

A maid brought me a tray of food. Someone—Noah?—must have given the order. But I lacked an appetite and ate no more than a few bites. For a couple of hours, I played the small pianoforte in the family wing's sitting-room.

Later that night, after I had changed into my nightgown, Cassie came to my chamber. We took seats on my bed, and she directed her steely eyes at me. "How could you embarrass me like that, Lizzy? Mr. Darcy was not just any guest. You knew how much I admired him and wanted to make a good impression. You had no further obligation than to be polite to him."

I recoiled at her low, venomous intonation. She had seldom been so furious with me.

"After the introduction, you could have moved away and allowed me to engage him in conversation. And if you could not manage that, you ought to have remained upstairs!"

"I am sorry. I did not mean to subvert your plans." My arms encircled my bent legs, and I lowered my chin to my knees. "I had every intention of enduring the evening with grace. Before I entered the drawing-room, I had affected a cheerful demeanour. But once I stood before Mr. Darcy, thoughts of Lily consumed me. I pictured her in a stall at Springvale, dejected and wondering why she had not seen me, and my pretence shattered."

"I have no doubt that Lily is well. My goodness, she is a horse, not a child!" Cassie clenched her teeth, scowling at me. "Your outrageous scene ruined everything!"

My sight averted, and a stinging sensation afflicted my eyes. That could not be true, could it? "I think you are exaggerating—the evening did not come to an end because I left the room. Besides, there is no reason to suppose my departure damaged Mr. Darcy's opinion of you."

"Nevertheless, your ill treatment insulted him. Up until that moment, he had been in a sanguine humour."

I peeked at Cassie to find her still glaring at me.

"But once you left, he became grave and reserved. Despite my best efforts, I received naught but terse sentences from him for the remainder of the evening."

At this, my gaze rose to meet hers. "Good Heavens, why do you persist in esteeming a man who is so easily affronted? Do you not think a defect in

his character such as this will often result in unpleasantness?”

“Not at all.” Cassie stretched taller. “I do not expect you to understand this since you have never been to town and have not been exposed to the highest levels of society. A man of importance in the world such as he has every right to expect to be treated with respect at all times, but most especially as a guest in a gentleman’s home.”

With effort, I refrained from making an unladylike noise to deride her explanation. One did not need to set foot in London to know that the *ton* comprised plenty of conceited people.

“I apologised to him on your behalf, but that is not sufficient.” She leaned closer, her expression pointed. “Promise me that at your first opportunity you will extend an apology to him for your conduct tonight.”

“Very well.” With any luck, I should not meet the man again for a long while.

Tuesday, 17 September
Springvale
Elizabeth

I handed Thea’s reins to a young, skinny stable boy. “I should like you to give her water and keep her tied nearby, for I shall not stay here long.”

“Aye, miss.”

“Is Tim in the stable building this morning?”

“Yes, ’e is.”

“Thank you.” I entered the large wooden structure and encountered the red-haired groom brushing a grey horse. “Good morning, Tim.”

He turned and lowered the currycomb. A smile raised his freckled cheeks. “Good morning, Miss Bennet.” Tim came towards me, and his comportment grew staid. “Are you ’ere to see Lily?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’ll take you to ’er.” He led the way and stopped before one of the stalls. “Ah, she’s asleep.” Lily stood with her haunches towards the door, her head sagged, and one hind leg bent and relaxed.

“How has she been?” I used a softened tone.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “She is well, just a bit...droopy.” His brows inched up. “But she’ll be ’appy to see you.”

“*Lily*, it is me.”

Her ears perked up. She raised her head and spun round. With a soft nicker, she hied to me and pressed her nose into my shoulder.

My fingers traced down her forehead. “I missed you too, girl.” I removed the apple and carrot slices from my pocket and fed them to her one at a time. I glanced at Tim, who looked on. “As long as she is here, I shall try to come each morning at this time. But you need not be concerned that I shall remain too long. I should not want the...um...new owner to find me here.”

“Oh, I don’t think ’e’d mind.” Tim shifted his weight, resting a hand on the stall door. “From what I’ve seen, Mr. Darcy’s a skilled ’orseman. I’m sure she’ll be well tended.”

I smiled at him. “Thank you. I hope so.”

“Well, I’ve work to do.” With a nod, he left me.

When Lily had gobbled the last of her treats, I resumed stroking her head and neck. After a while, she leaned against the stall door, and her muzzle nudged my upper arm. She wanted me to take her out—take her *home*. A sudden well of tears filled my eyes, and I blinked to contain them.

“I am sorry, girl. I cannot take you with me. I wish I could.” My fingers caressed the downy skin of her nose. “You must be a good girl, Lily. I know you can do this. Do not give Mr. Darcy a reason to be displeased with you.” I shuddered through a deep breath. Despite my inclination to remain longer, I resolved to stay no more than half an hour to avoid being seen by Mr. Darcy. With a sigh, I gave Lily a final pat and left her.

Darcy

Hayward and I called upon Mr. Walter Rowe, who lived on the outskirts of Salisbury. Based upon the amiable widower’s grey, thinning hair and the lines present upon his visage, he must be near the end of his sixth decade. The cleft in his chin drew my notice when we exchanged greetings.

We took seats in the parlour, and Mr. Rowe served us a citrus ratafia he had purchased last month from a London shop on Bond Street. Hayward’s *rappport* with the elder gentleman became obvious in the affectionate way they teased one another. Mr. Rowe asked after Hayward’s parents, and my friend shared tidings from their most recent missive. We spent a pleasant

couple of hours at Mr. Rowe's home, and in the course of our conversation, I verified that he had spent most of August in town.

When we entered Hayward's carriage, I lightly chided him for not naming Mr. Rowe as a possible suspect.

He stared at me for a long moment before his lower jaw dropped. "Of course, you are correct. I suppose my friendship with him blinded me to any possibility that he could be the man in question. Rowe would never harm anyone."

"I understand." Yesterday, I had endured a frustrating conversation with the local cobbler, a curt, impatient man who made no effort to be helpful. He averred to not know of any customers who fitted the suspect's description. In any case, I had met two men of the right age with cleft chins who had spent August in town: Mr. Rowe and Mr. Barton. The suggestion that either of them could be a murderer seemed ludicrous. Nevertheless, I should write to Mr. Notley tonight and provide the two names.

When the coach turned off the avenue, movement in one of the paddocks caught my notice: a sorrel horse cantered around the perimeter of the enclosure. *Could it be...?* I moved closer to the window, narrowing my eyes to make out the distinctive white markings. Yes, it was Lily.

"What do you see, Darcy?"

I glanced at Hayward. "Lily is in the paddock. She has been depressed since her arrival, but her spirits seem to have improved today."

"Hmm, I may know the reason for the alteration in her."

I shifted towards him. "What do you mean?"

"Earlier today, Tim remarked that Miss Bennet paid Lily a visit this morning. As you may expect, the mare took delight in seeing her, and her presence appears to have had a lasting effect."

"So you believe Miss Bennet is the sole reason for Lily's elevated mood?"

Hayward shrugged. "That is Tim's conclusion, and I trust his instincts above anyone else's in matters related to horses."

"Would that I had never set eyes upon the deuced horse! There is no possible way for me to remedy the situation now." I pressed my knuckles to my mouth.

With a slow, sedate nod, my friend rested his folded hands upon his lap. "That is true. Nevertheless, if Miss Bennet knew you better and could be

assured you would treat Lily well, at least she would be free from that particular worry.”

“Perhaps so, but as you witnessed, she is inclined to avoid me.” I ground my teeth.

“According to Tim, Miss Bennet arrived at just past eight this morning, and she intends to return tomorrow.” Hayward displayed a crooked smile.

“I see.” Unless she failed to come, I should meet Miss Bennet at the stables tomorrow. But what should I say to her? I silently rehearsed several possible dialogues.

By the time we entered the house, I had formed a plan of how I might address her, and the prospect of a conversation with her no longer seemed daunting. In fact, the morning could not come soon enough to suit me. I continued to my chambers with a fresh burst of energy fuelling my steps.

Wednesday, 18 September
Springvale
Darcy

As I neared the stable building, Tim walked out towards the large paddock. He whistled a merry tune and led a grey horse. He caught sight of me, halted, and tipped his hat. “Good morning, Mr. Darcy. Shall I saddle Regal for you?”

“Yes, thank you.” I leaned closer to utilise a lower tone. “Have you seen Miss Bennet this morning?”

His eyes widened. “Oh...um...yes, sir. She’s with Lily now. I ’ope you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all.”

His smile resumed. “I thought not.” He went on towards the paddock.

I entered the stables and spied Miss Bennet. She stood at Lily’s stall in a light-green riding dress. Up to now, I had deemed such apparel to be practical and not the least bit flattering, yet even this garment appeared comely on Miss Bennet’s frame. My steps slowed as the distance between us lessened. Despite having selected several possible statements for this moment, I strained and failed to produce any of them. Nevertheless, I pressed forwards until I came within five feet of her. “Good morning, Miss Bennet.”

Her head jerked towards me, and a flush overspread her complexion. “Mr. Darcy.” Miss Bennet’s hand, which had been stroking Lily’s neck, dropped to her side. “I...um...had been riding in the area and thought to stop here and see her.”

I spared Lily a brief glance. The mare stood in an august attitude. “It is clear she is happy you came.”

Miss Bennet turned to fully face me and maintained a stiff bearing. “I apologise for my rudeness on Monday night.”

I raised my palm. “That is not necessary. I regret having caused you pain. If I had known of your attachment to Lily, I should not have offered to buy her.” At least I hoped this to be true.

For a moment, she scrutinised me, as though to gauge my veracity. “May I ask what made you so intent upon purchasing her? I understand you have a large estate, so you must have many other fine horses.”

“Yes, I do. But Lily bears a notable likeness to Majesty, my late mother’s horse. We lost the mare to colic last year. And my sister...” I moved nearer, and a delectable floral scent—jasmine and roses—tantalised me. She blinked, waiting for me to continue. What had I been saying? *Oh yes...* “My sister is eleven years my junior, so I am a father figure for her as well as a brother. Georgiana learnt to ride on Majesty and grew quite fond of her.”

Miss Bennet’s fascinating hazel eyes, now shiny with compassion, caused my focus to stray again. I took a moment to gather my thoughts. To ensure she understood my motive to buy Lily, I should be frank. “This past summer, Georgiana suffered a...disappointment. She chose to remain in London because she does not yet feel equal to engaging with anyone other than family or her companion. I bought Lily for my sister with the hope of raising her spirits.”

“Oh, I see.”

Her enthralling countenance, with her brows knitted in a show of compassion, held me captive, making it difficult to form words, much less coherent sentences. Everything in me ached to stay in her proximity; yet I could not remain mute and awkward like a dolt. “Ah, do you plan to call at the house?”

“No, it is far too early for that. I just wanted to see Lily.” She brushed her hand along the mare’s blaze.

Then a whim came to me, an excuse to extend my time with Miss Bennet; for I needed to reassure her that I should provide her horse the best of care.

“I had planned to take my stallion out for a ride. Perhaps you would like to join me on Lily.”

With a sharp inhalation, she tilted her head. “You would allow me to ride her?”

“Yes, I should be pleased if you did so.”

The edges of her lips rose in an enticing manner. “Thank you, I should like that.”

I wallowed in the glow of her radiant mien, the sight of which lent me a sensation of lightness. Somehow, I had stumbled upon an ideal suggestion. I stopped a passing stable boy and instructed him to ready the mare.

When we set out together, I drew Regal alongside Lily. “Since you are more familiar with the area, you ought to choose our route.”

“Very well.” She pointed ahead to the avenue. “There is a path on the right that leads to the eastern edge of the estate, and the hills provide lovely views. Shall we go that way?”

“By all means.” Regal’s exaggerated gait drew my gaze. He had adopted a vigorous walk that resembled a strut. There could be only one explanation for his unusual conduct: my horse fancied Lily. I patted his neck and leaned forwards to speak near his left ear. “Stop showing off.” His ears shot backwards, and his excessive movements relented a bit.

For a moment, it seemed I had caught Miss Bennet taking glances at me, and my spirits soared; but it soon became evident that Regal diverted her, not me. My throat constricted, compelling me to cough.

Minutes later, her sight lifted, this time with a focus upon me. “What is your stallion’s name?”

“Regal.”

“Ah, the name fits him. He is very handsome, and it is obvious you and he have a close bond.”

“Yes, we do. But how did you know?”

“It is apparent that Regal is distracted by Lily, yet he is so well attuned to you that he still listens to your every utterance.”

At this indication of her esteem for me, I sat taller. “Although my grooms are skilled horsemen, I conducted Regal’s training myself. My father taught me from the time I was four years of age to cultivate trust and friendship with my horses. Their value goes far beyond the transportation they provide.”

“Indeed, I feel the same way.” Her intonation suggested incredulity.

“Why are you surprised?”

Miss Bennet moved her gaze from me. “You have me at a loss. If you continue in this fashion, I shall be forced to abandon the uncharitable assumptions I have made about you and own that I have been unjust.” She peeked in my direction, and the delicate arch of her brow took my focus.

Her playful air had a seductive effect, urging me to respond in kind. “You would do well to make a thorough study before you draw a final conclusion. My faults of manners have caused offence often enough in the past. With any luck, you may find sufficient cause for disapprobation to preserve your initial hypothesis.”

A soft, musical giggle escaped her. “Your concern for my sensibilities is appreciated, but you need not exert yourself to be rude on my account.”

I had inspired her mirth, and in the moment, nothing could have satisfied me more. “It is generous of you to grant me leave to be polite—at least for a while longer.” I touched my hat in a theatrical style. We continued in a comfortable silence for a short time. For my part, I marvelled at Miss Bennet’s influence upon me. I might be persuaded to do any number of uncharacteristic acts to please her.

Yet I did not lose track of reality, and Mrs. Hayward’s account of Miss Bennet’s circumstances weighed on me. By and by, a desire gained strength within me to seek Miss Bennet’s affirmation of her situation; my friend’s wife could have been misinformed with one or more of the facts.

I kept Miss Bennet in my frame of vision. “Mrs. Hayward has mentioned the tragic deaths of your parents and elder sister. Georgiana and I have suffered similar losses. Our mother died the summer I turned twelve, soon after my sister’s birth. Georgiana’s familiarity with her is based upon anecdotes from me and others in our family. We lost my father to apoplexy five years ago.”

Her full lips pressed together. “I am sorry to hear that both of your parents are gone. It must have been especially difficult for your sister to grow up without a mother.”

“Yes, I should say so, though your childhood must have been doubly onerous.”

“Not as much as you might imagine. My aunt Barton acted as a maternal figure to me for a couple of years until she died when I was five. I have fond memories of her, though the details have grown indistinct. At times, I

am uncertain whether my remembrances are accurate or based upon stories told to me by Noah or my uncle.”

I fought to remain *nonchalant* at the mention of Noah Barton. What did he mean to her? Might she be in love with him? I shook my head as though to disperse him from my thoughts.

“All of us were bereft when we lost Aunt Barton.” Her dulcet voice had grown softer.

“She must have been a lovely and singular lady.”

“Yes, without a doubt.”

Had Mrs. Hayward exaggerated Mr. Barton’s disparate treatment of Miss Bennet? A remark Miss Barton made at dinner on Monday came to me, prompting my next question. “The other night, your cousin described a notable concert of chamber music she attended at Vauxhall Gardens on her most recent trip to London. What did you think of it?”

“Oh, I did not accompany them. In fact, I have never been to town.”

“I had the impression Mr. Barton went there often.”

“That is correct.” Miss Bennet pointed to an intersecting track ahead. “Here is the path.” She directed Lily into a right turn. The overgrown brush on either side of us made the route narrow, and I fell in behind her. She gave me a backwards glance. “My uncle does not take me to London because he is wary of my encountering my late mother’s brother, who resides there. My uncle Gardiner has an import business in Cheapside, and Uncle Barton has a low opinion of him.”

The walk widened, and I moved alongside Miss Bennet again. “Mr. Barton must believe your uncle Gardiner presents a danger to you.”

“Yes, he does.”

“That is a shame.” A frown overtook my face. She had confirmed the most damaging aspect of her situation. “Have you ever met Mr. Gardiner?”

“Yes, when I was four years old, he spent Christmastide with us. My aunt Barton still lived then, and she had invited him. After all these years, my recollection of him is fuzzy, but from my childish perception, he seemed to be interested in what I had to say. I recall him teasing me in a good-natured way and making me laugh. I still have a charming doll he gave me as a Christmas gift.”

Her chest rose and fell as she sighed. “Later, though, after my aunt’s death, Uncle Barton discovered his true proclivities. He is a cunning and

ruthless man who convinced my guileless aunt Barton of his honourable nature. Uncle Barton has protected me from him ever since.”

“I see.”

Her lips pursed. “In any event, Mr. Gardiner has not attempted to communicate with me over the years. He has been content to forget he ever had a niece. It is a sad circumstance since he is the last living member of my mother’s family. The illness that killed my parents and elder sister also took my mother’s sister, Mrs. Phillips. My uncle Phillips moved to America soon after his wife’s death. Uncle Barton had a distant association with my parents and has only been able to describe them in general terms.”

“Where did you, your parents, and your sister live?”

“My father had an estate in Hertfordshire, Longbourn, but in accordance with the entail, a distant cousin of his inherited the property at the age of eight. He and his widowed mother took possession of the estate.”

Longbourn, why did the name sound familiar? “Where in Hertfordshire is the estate located?”

“The nearest town is Meryton.”

Of course, Longbourn bordered Bingley’s rented estate! “Coincidentally, I visited the area just over a week ago. I stayed with a friend at Netherfield Park estate, which adjoins your family’s property.”

“My goodness, that is remarkable!” She peered at me, stealing my focus yet again.

It took me a few moments to regain a measure of composure. “Furthermore, I met your cousin Mr. Collins and his wife in Meryton.”

“Pray, what did you think of him?”

A likeness came to me of the ungainly, plump, and tedious man. My conversation with him, in which he droned through insufferable expositions of Bible passages, had seemed interminable. “Well, I...um...” How could I describe the tiresome man in a positive light?

She tilted her head, keeping me in her view. “You need not be concerned that I shall be offended if you did not like him. First of all, he and I have never met. Secondly, my aunt Barton once remarked that my late father did not favour his Collins relations.”

“In that case, I shall admit that I found him to be one of the most obtuse and long-winded people of my acquaintance. According to another neighbour, Mr. Goulding, Mr. Collins is ill-suited to run an estate.”

Miss Bennet's upper body stiffened. "Oh dear. I hate to think of my family's property being mismanaged."

"I do not believe that is the case. Your cousin, to his good fortune, married a sensible lady, the former Miss Lucas, the eldest daughter of a local knight. My friend's steward spoke highly of her. He maintained that she is the one who runs the estate while Mr. Collins, who hopes to be a published author one day, spends his days working on religious treatises."

"I see. Did you go to Longbourn?"

"No, I did not."

"Oh." She fixed her gaze ahead. "One day I should like to see the place."

In the silence that followed, my thoughts tarried over our conversation. Her frank and impolitic admissions elevated my already substantial esteem for her even as they delivered an unwelcome reminder: Miss Bennet, though a gentlewoman, would *not* make a suitable mistress of Pemberley, for my parents would never have approved of her as a future Mrs. Darcy. As detestable as that fact may be, I could neither alter nor dismiss it.

Thus, whatever time I spent with her could be nothing more than a sweet but temporary interlude. Still, with that understanding, why should I not extend the refreshing hiatus for as long as possible? Lily provided an obvious avenue for me to achieve this. My stomach fluttered as I strove to contrive the best wording for my request. "Miss Bennet, I should like to ask a favour of you."

Her head swung towards me. "What did you have in mind?" Her hazel eyes flared, eroding my equanimity.

"I want Lily to be as content in her new situation as possible." My hand swept towards the mare. "Since her arrival at Springvale, she has never been happier than she is now, with you. If you are willing, I should like us to ride together on a regular basis during my sojourn here." I paused to regulate my tone; I must not sound too eager. "This way, I hope Lily will form a positive impression of me over time through my association with you."

"How frequent do you anticipate these rides will be?"

"They may be as often as is agreeable to you, subject to any other obligations either of us may have."

"I appreciate your suggestion, and I accept."

She agreed. At her captivating smile, an eddy of warmth streamed through me, and the muscles in my chest relaxed. I suppressed a ridiculous

impulse to hum a merry tune.

Miss Bennet redirected her sight forwards, and her wide-brimmed bonnet obscured the upper portion of her profile. “I have not travelled beyond the towns surrounding Salisbury. How does the terrain in Derbyshire differ from Wiltshire?”

With a temperate amount of enthusiasm, I described the hills, rivers, and moors that made up my estate and the nearby Peak. Throughout my discourse, a succession of images consumed me: Miss Bennet riding along Pemberley’s east meadow, walking in the rose garden, and perusing the shelves in my library. In defiance of the inexplicably powerful allure of *her* at my home, I dispelled the thoughts. For all concerned, my association with Miss Bennet must be limited to this stay in Wiltshire. Once I left here, I should banish every trace of her from my mind.

All too soon, we returned to the stables via a winding path, as directed by Miss Bennet. I dismounted and moved towards her with the intention of helping her down from Lily, but she thwarted me: she slipped to the ground in an agile, graceful movement.

I held my mouth immobile to hide my disappointment as Tim came to take the reins from us both.

Miss Bennet greeted him with a cheery expression. “Thank you, Tim. I should like you to bring Thea out for me.”

“Yes, miss.” Tim took the horses to the stables.

I faced her, scrambling for a way to delay her departure. “Will you come to the house for breakfast? I know the Haywards would be glad to receive you.”

“No, thank you. I must go home.”

“Of course. Perhaps another time. Will you be back to ride tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, that would be convenient.” She held my gaze, and my breath grew shallow. “I appreciate your indulgence with Lily. It means a great deal to me to spend this time with her.”

“This is to my benefit as well. I want...” *You*—I stopped myself from uttering the word. “...Lily to be content.”

With a nod, Miss Bennet favoured me with a dazzling grin, then turned to Tim, who approached with a handsome grey mare. He helped her into the saddle while I stood frozen like a dullard. If I had acted with alacrity, I

could have stepped in to assist her instead. Tim walked off as I silently cursed my lack of initiative.

“Good day, Mr. Darcy.”

I snapped to attention. “Good day, Miss Bennet.”

She rode away, and I kept her in my sight until she disappeared at the bend in the path. *Upon my life*, what explained the extraordinary magnetism Miss Bennet held for me? Her physical charms did not surpass those of Miss Barton or many of the others who had taken pains to gain my attention in the past; yet she alone commanded it with no apparent effort. If I did not employ a substantial degree of self-control, I should be in real danger of falling in love with her.

As I ambled towards the house, I drew an inescapable conclusion: I could not, would not, take Lily away from Miss Bennet. Yet how should I solve this quandary?

By the time I reached my chamber, I formed a possible solution. If Georgiana came to Springvale, *she* could befriend Miss Bennet—and give Lily back to her. Yes, that plan might work. My pace accelerated. Once in my chamber, I sat at the escritoire and penned a letter to Georgiana in which I explained the situation and asked her to join me at Springvale.



Chapter 6: Morning Rides with Mr. Darcy

Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

I entered the breakfast-parlour to find the others seated at the table and took the empty chair beside Cassie.

My cousin Noah, seated across from me, slid the toast rack in my direction. "Where did you go this morning?"

Despite having rushed home, I still returned to the house over an hour later than usual. "I went to Springvale."

Uncle Barton looked up from his newspaper. "Ah, you have been to see Lily. How did you find her?"

"She is well." I selected a piece of toast and spread butter upon it. "Mr. Darcy approached me in the stables."

Cassie perked upright, eyeing me. "Did you apologise to him?"

"Yes, and he was most gracious." Even further, he had been thoughtful and kind. What a shock it had been to find him so...likeable. As much as it still pained me to lose Lily, I found it impossible to retain any resentment for him.

She grinned and pointed her half-eaten muffin at me. "So you admit I was right about him?"

"Indeed, yes." I gave Noah a sheepish look. "And you as well."

"This is a marked change." Noah raised his mug of coffee and took a sip. "I am glad you have abandoned your former prejudice against the man. A few days ago, your eagerness to jump to the worst conclusions about him appeared to be boundless."

A blush warmed my cheeks, though Noah's smile softened the sting of his remark. I ought to provide an explanation for my change of heart. "Mr. Darcy explained that he bought Lily as a gift for his much younger sister. He invited me to ride Lily during the course of his stay at Springvale, so I shall do so as often as I can manage."

"How exceedingly generous of him." Cassie's smile diminished, and her eyes narrowed. "I wonder why he extended such a charitable invitation. After all, he paid a pretty price for Lily and has no obligation to you in any way."

"No, of course not. He explained his reasoning. He wants to provide Lily a more gradual separation from me." Under Cassie's scrutiny, the heat upon my countenance increased. She would not be pleased to know I had ridden with her new favourite gentleman and would do so again, so that detail would be best kept to myself.

Uncle Barton and Noah finished their meals and left to inspect a new section of fencing.

Although she too had consumed the food on her plate, Cassie remained in her seat. She shifted to face me. "Lizzy, since it seems you will often be at Springvale, you may encounter Mr. Darcy again."

In an attempt to appear *nonchalant*, I shrugged and reached for *The London Chronicle*, moving the newspaper closer to me. "Yes, I suppose that is true."

"If you do meet him, I want you to speak well of me."

I feigned interest in the newspaper, thus avoiding her gaze. "You must know I should never do otherwise."

She inclined closer. "Yes, of course I do. But in particular, I should be obliged if you would offer complimentary remarks and make me sound likable and interesting, to ensure his favourable impression of me."

My every inclination rebelled at her suggestion, though I could not have articulated the reason for my aversion. "You *are* a charming and attractive

person—everyone can see that for themselves, including him. You do not need my recommendation.”

“Nevertheless, I want to use every possible advantage at my disposal.” Cassie touched my wrist. “Pray, promise you will do this for me.”

Good gracious, she left me little choice but to assent. I abandoned the newspaper and turned towards her. “Yes, if I see him and the opportunity arises, I shall praise you to the skies.”

“You are a darling!” Cassie rose to her feet, her complexion glowing. “Excuse me, I intend to call upon Dame Hayward. With any luck, I shall see Mr. Darcy then.” She smoothed the skirt of her gown. “Dear me, I must decide what to wear!” She darted from the room.

It seemed every morsel I had ingested had merged to form a leaden weight. Why did the concept of a romance between her and Mr. Darcy unnerve me? It must be due to my firm belief that she belonged with Mr. Stephen Ware.

Monday, 23 September
Springvale
Elizabeth

My pulse raged at a feverish pitch as Lily galloped across a long stretch of even ground, and we flew past the silver birches lining the path. The increasing number of yellow leaves blended with the green ones on the trees in a vivid, varicoloured effect, while the wind acted as an invigorating force against my skin. The thrill of riding at top speed never failed to improve my mood. Birds must experience a similar exhilaration when soaring far above us earth-bound creatures.

At my left, Mr. Darcy restrained his ebony stallion to match our pace, though the steed tried to push ahead a couple of times. I slowed Lily to a walk before we reached the rocky portion of the path, and he ensured that Regal followed suit.

Each successive ride with Mr. Darcy had served to shed a bit more light upon his commendable character, and before we finished our second ride together, I had formed a strong preference for his distinct masculine voice. The time with him had always flown by, ending too soon for my liking.

Today, we spoke of literature. To my surprise, we admired many of the same authors and poets. We had a good-natured argument comparing the strengths and weaknesses of Shakespeare's '*Romeo and Juliet*', then moved on to critique '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*'.

In the past, I had enjoyed many similar discussions with Noah, Uncle Barton, Dame Hayward, and Mr. Rowe, but never with this effect upon me: a puzzling melding of satisfaction and yearning—for what, though, I could have provided no coherent answer.

My physical attraction to him could not fully explain this experience. Last year, I had met Dame Hayward's visiting cousin, a blond male Adonis; I spoke to him on numerous occasions without experiencing the peculiar variety of verve that accompanied my conversations with Mr. Darcy.

Nevertheless, I did not lose sight of the fact that Lily would leave with him when he quit the area. At least now that I had a better grasp of his nature, I could take solace in the knowledge that she would be in the hands of a responsible man, a true horseman.

"Miss Bennet, pray wait a moment." He brought Regal to a halt.

"Very well." I stopped Lily.

Mr. Darcy dismounted and went a couple of yards ahead on the path. He crouched before what appeared to be a small, brownish creature.

"What is it?"

He sent me a quick glance. "A newt. I did not notice him when we passed earlier. The little beast seems to be distressed." With gentle, painstaking care, he lifted the creature and carried it to me. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes." I leaned closer for a better look at the chocolate-coloured newt. Mr. Darcy held the creature at an angle and revealed its underside, orange and mottled with black spots. *Oh dear*. The poor thing appeared to be parched—not yet withered, but lifeless. I ought to say as much, should I not? I gulped. "It is a shame, but the newt appears to be...dead."

"That is possible, but I hope not." Mr. Darcy pointed to a trio of poplars. "I recall having seen a pond beyond those trees."

"Indeed, there is a large horse pond. The newt could have come from there. Shall we proceed in that direction?"

"By all means." He led the way with Regal walking beside him, and I followed on Lily. At the verge of the pond, he set the distressed amphibian down. Using a leaf, he scooped water from the pond and poured it over the newt. After repeating the process several times, he stood and smiled at me.

“I detected movement in one of the hind legs, so I think the little beast will recover.”

“You saved him.” I grinned at Mr. Darcy. “Well done!”

His ears turned a shade darker. “I am pleased to have found the newt in time to be of use.”

“Do you make a habit of rescuing wild beasts?”

“I do not seek them out. However, my late father taught me to respect all creatures, wild or tame, and I should never knowingly allow one to suffer.”

“That is an admirable philosophy.” Would any other gentlemen of Mr. Darcy’s standing have bothered to assist a diminutive amphibian? “I had believed the newt to be beyond aid. Now I know better.”

Mr. Darcy mounted Regal, and we returned to the main path. His act of kindness inspired me to enquire whether he had any unusual pets in his youth.

“When I was nine or ten, I found an abandoned young red squirrel at Pemberley in the woods near the stables. The helpless creature could not have survived on its own. I brought her to our head groom, Sam, and asked for his help.”

He glanced at me, his magnetic irises glinting. “Not only is Sam an expert horseman, but he is also well-versed in the care and behaviour of most other animals. He concocted a formula with goat’s milk and showed me how to care for the squirrel. For the next month or so, I fed her every few hours, day and night, until she grew strong enough to be released.”

“I am impressed that any boy of ten would be so dedicated to the welfare of a squirrel. In your place, I should have been loath to part with her.”

“In fact, that was a melancholy day for me, even though setting her free had always been my goal. Once I let her go, she scampered off without a backwards look and disappeared in a thicket. I returned to the spot where I had released her many times and left a handful of nuts and berries lest she had trouble finding sustenance on her own. The food always disappeared by the following day, but I never saw her again.”

In my mind’s eye, I conjured up a ten-year-old version of Mr. Darcy waiting in vain for a visit from his squirrel friend. My heart-strings constricted.

On the next curve in the track, Springvale House appeared in the distance. *Bother*, I could no longer delay fulfilling my promise to Cassie. Yesterday, she had bemoaned to me that thus far, her attempts to put herself

in Mr. Darcy's company had been fruitless. At her enquiry, I had fibbed and told her that I had not yet had the opportunity to laud her to the gentleman.

With a bit of affected cheerfulness, perhaps I should avoid revealing my reluctance. "I believe Cassie intends to call upon Mrs. Hayward later today." *And she hopes to see you.* "My cousin and I have been like sisters since childhood, and I admire her very much. Not only is she beautiful, but she is jovial as well." There, Cassie could not expect me to say more than that. I let out a deep breath.

"It is fortunate that you and Miss Barton have a close kinship. As a child, I often wished for a brother or sister near my age. Still, I am grateful to have Georgiana. She is considerate and sweet—an ideal younger sister." He twisted at the waist to regard me. "I received a letter from her yesterday. She will be joining me here in a few days."

"Oh, that is welcome news."

"At fifteen, she is not yet out, so she will be restricted to small gatherings. With your agreement, I should like to introduce her to you."

"I should be pleased to make her acquaintance."

His response, a winsome grin, had an entrancing effect. "I appreciate that."

For a long moment, I could not help but take in the handsome picture he made until I wrested my gaze away. Of course, once Miss Darcy arrived, *she* would be riding Lily, so our current arrangement would come to an end. My mouth tightened, and I braced myself to keep from frowning. "I appreciate this time you have given me with Lily. I imagine Miss Darcy will be eager to ride her. If it pleases your sister, I should be happy to accompany her on Thea."

His head whipped towards me. "Oh no, I did not intend...I want you to continue riding Lily. My sister may join us on her mare, Shadow."

I stared at him. What a tempting proposition! Yet it did not make sense. "But you must want Miss Darcy to become accustomed to Lily."

"Yes, but there is no hurry for that. My sister will spend time with Lily and may ride her at other times. For now, though, Lily much prefers to be ridden by you, and I shall indulge her for as long as we remain at Springvale."

"Oh, I see." He could not have made a more generous suggestion. What an extraordinarily kind and patient man he must be to afford such time and care to Lily's comfort. In a handful of days, my affection for Mr. Darcy had

flourished from one or two scattered sparks to a blazing bonfire. For my own sake, I must learn to quell this sentiment, for we could never be anything more than friends.



Back at Knight's Manor House, I spent an hour in the music-room playing the pianoforte. I practised my latest undertaking, another challenging piece by Herr Beethoven: the second movement of *Grande Sonate Pathétique*. I caught Noah's entrance near the edge of my vision and broke off after the next measure. "Good afternoon, Noah."

He halted in a rigid bearing. "Forgive me, I did not mean to interrupt you."

"Not at all. I welcome the respite." I stood and approached him. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, all is well." He gestured to the sofa. "Will you sit there with me?"

"Yes, of course." I sat in the centre of the sofa. He settled at my right and faced me. "I saw you riding with Mr. Darcy this morning."

Caught off guard, I froze for a moment but soon recovered, giving him what I hoped to be an easy smile. "Yes, we took the meadow path that skirts the border of Knight's Manor." Why did Noah deem this worthy of a discussion? I straightened my spine. "I do not suppose there is anything improper in our riding together."

"That may be true, yet I question whether you are being wise."

"Why? What troubles you?"

His fingers brushed over his mouth. "It pains me to broach this subject, but Mr. Darcy is one of the most sought-after bachelors in London. No one doubts that the lady he chooses to marry will be wealthy and well-connected."

"Why should that fact concern me?" I did not bother to moderate my voice, and my chin inched higher. "Cassie is the one who is keen to attract his notice."

"Yes, she has made her preference for him clear."

"Whereas I go to Springvale to see *Lily*." Yet my declaration did not reveal the entire truth. Did not Mr. Darcy comprise another inducement for going there? Flames crept up from my neck.

“That does not explain how you came to ride with Mr. Darcy.”

My hand fluttered in a dismissive signal. “He is keen upon giving Lily time to adjust to him at her own pace. He suggested we ride together as a means of allowing her to grow accustomed to him in a gradual way.”

“Huh.”

When Noah failed to continue, I gave him a pointed look. “You have declared that you are disposed to think well of him. Has your opinion changed?”

“No.” My cousin’s weight shifted as he leaned nearer to me. “Still, I met a few men at university who hid their base natures well enough that most of their acquaintances would have been shocked to discover their predilections.” He grimaced.

The words I had been prepared to utter next died on my tongue. “You seem to be implying that Mr. Darcy is one of those men.”

“Not exactly. I have no reason to accuse him of that.” His index finger tapped my wrist. “But as an unmarried lady, you ought to be vigilant any time you are alone with an unfamiliar man.”

So, he meant to caution me in a general fashion. “That is sound advice.” Oh yes, I could ease his mind by informing him of Miss Darcy’s expected arrival. “At any rate, Mr. Darcy’s fifteen-year-old sister will come to Springvale soon, and she will be riding with us.”

“That is welcome news.” Noah rested his arm upon the back of the sofa. “Have you become...reconciled”—his voice softened—“to losing Lily?”

“No, and my continuing to ride her is a double-edged sword. But whilst she remains in the area, I cannot forgo the opportunity to spend as much time with her as possible.”

“Yes, I can understand that.”

Wednesday, 25 September
Springvale
Darcy

When I knocked at the door to my sister’s guest chamber, she bade me enter. Since her and Mrs. Annesley’s arrival, this would be our first opportunity to speak in private. Georgiana had changed from her travelling attire to a yellow muslin gown, and she occupied a chair at a table near the

window. I gave her the scarf from the haberdashery, and she showed every sign of approving of it, thanking me with apparent enthusiasm.

I sat across from her and studied her appearance. Without doubt, my earlier impression upon greeting her had been correct: in comparison to our last meeting, a healthier glow enhanced her skin, and she sat erect, meeting my gaze. She seemed to have escaped her earlier state of dejection. *Thank Heaven.* “I appreciate that you came despite your earlier disinclination.”

Her blue eyes flickered and widened. “When I read your letter, I decided at once to join you and do whatever is in my power to be of assistance. This is such an unusual predicament, and Lily must be an exceptional horse!”

“Yes, without question.” I could not help but smile; she had not been this animated in many months.

“May we go to the stables before dinner? I am eager to see her.”

“Yes, but...” I adjusted my seat nearer to Georgiana. “Take care not to become attached to her. Even if my initial plan goes awry, I hope to devise another method to reunite Lily with Miss Bennet.”

“Oh, you need not be concerned. I am even more keen to meet Miss Bennet. To my knowledge, you have never lauded a lady this way before.”

A burst of heat invaded my neck and face. I could not deny her assertion.

“It will be a pleasure to help bring her and Lily together again.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

Georgiana tensed, and her hands formed a ball on her lap. “However, you know that I tend to be...awkward and shy with new acquaintances, and Miss Bennet is older than me. Have you considered she may find me tedious and uninteresting? Maybe she will not want to befriend me.” Her mouth hardened to a flat line.

My sister’s disquiet prompted an ache in the back of my throat. How could I dispel her anxiety? I put my hand upon hers. “One of Miss Bennet’s most admirable qualities is the gracious way she engages with those around her. She possesses a genuine curiosity for the interests and concerns of her friends and acquaintances. I am certain she will treat you with the kind consideration she has shown to others.”

The tension in her posture abated. “Thank you, that is reassuring.”

Thursday, 26 September
Springvale
Elizabeth

I spotted Mr. Darcy's familiar figure in front of the stables. He stood with his head inclined near a tall, blonde lady as the two conversed. My teeth clinched together. Why did he stand so close to her? But in the next moment, the answer came to me: she must be his sister, despite the lack of an overt family resemblance, at least from this distance.

He straightened at the sound of Thea's hooves thudding the hard dirt and turned towards me, as did the pretty young lady, who regarded me with undisguised interest. He came closer, and we exchanged greetings. I removed my left leg from the stirrup and freed my right one from the hook in preparation for my dismount.

"Pray allow me to assist you." He held out his hands. Although I did not need the help, I had grown accustomed to accepting his aid and could not bring myself to refuse him.

With my hands in his, I reached the ground with ease. I schooled my expression; by now I ought to have grown inured to this physical contact, yet that familiar pleasant shiver shot through me again. When he released me, a tingling sensation persisted in my fingers. I fussed with my bonnet to obscure my face in case I wore a telltale flush.

Mr. Darcy took his sister by the arm and introduced her to me. She rose from her curtsy with her shoulders bowed inwards, and her sight lowered to her boots, though she gave me intermittent glances. She must be a timid creature.

I offered her my warmest smile. "Did you have a pleasant journey from town?"

"Yes, I travelled with my companion, Mrs. Annesley, and we stayed overnight at a charming inn near Basingstoke."

"Will she not ride with us?"

"No, Mrs. Annesley does not share my love for horses and has no interest in riding."

Tim came to take Thea's reins from me. He eyed Mr. Darcy. "Sir, the horses are saddled."

"Thank you, Tim."

We entered the stables. When Miss Darcy approached a handsome bay horse, I followed her. "Miss Darcy, if you would like to ride Lily, I should

be content to mount my grey mare, Thea.” I allowed the bay to sniff my hand, then stroked the steed’s slightly Roman nose.

“Oh no, thank you. As impressed as I am with Lily, I am in no hurry to ride her. My brother explained the exceptional bond you share with her, and I agreed to allow her this time with you for the remainder of our stay.”

“Very well. That is generous of you.” I made a quick turn and stopped short of colliding with Mr. Darcy. He raised his brows in a way I took to mean, *I told you so*, with an affable connotation.

I greeted Lily with a pat and gave her a piece of carrot. Before long, the three of us set out together with our horses. At Mr. Darcy’s suggestion, I chose our destination. For a time, we all rode abreast, with Mr. and Miss Darcy on either side of me.

“Miss Bennet.”

Miss Darcy’s soft, silvery voice drew my sight.

“My brother mentioned that you trained Lily yourself.”

“Yes, that is true.” I shot him a quick look. “During the first hour after her birth, I introduced myself to her. Over the next week, I spent time with her each day and gained her trust. After that, she grasped every subsequent lesson with a minimum of strife.”

“That is fascinating.” Miss Darcy beamed at me and gestured to Lily. “I notice that she perks up when you speak, as though she is waiting to hear a command from you.”

“Yes, I believe that is the case. She is more responsive than most horses.”

“I wonder if my brother”—Miss Darcy flashed a smile at Mr. Darcy—“would allow me to train one of the foals at Pemberley in a like manner.”

He nodded. “Yes, as long as you agree to follow my guidance or that of our grooms.”

She beamed at him, then redirected her gaze to me. “I should be obliged if you would further describe the methods you employed with Lily.”

“Yes, of course. In those first weeks, I observed her with the goal of determining her nature.” I continued my account of Lily’s training, including the advice I received from Noah and Joe. Soon, the route narrowed, and Mr. Darcy reined Regal in to ride behind Miss Darcy and me.

My observations of Miss Darcy’s horsemanship provided reassurance; she demonstrated skill and confidence as a rider, guiding her mount with a gentle touch on the reins and subtle leg cues. She would treat Lily well.

Throughout our discourse, I peeked at Mr. Darcy now and again. He appeared content to remain a silent observer to our conversation, in which Miss Darcy gradually grew more enthusiastic in her address. She continued in the same vein when I urged her to describe Majesty, the horse whom Lily resembled. She regaled me with her fond memories of the mare, and Mr. Darcy contributed a couple of his remembrances. By and by, Miss Darcy and I moved on to discuss music and our favourite composers.

I parted from the Darcys and rode home with unsettled emotions. For although I took delight in forming a tentative friendship with Miss Darcy, I missed the verbal exchanges with Mr. Darcy I had come to expect on our unaccompanied rides. What a strange effect that man had upon me!



Chapter 7: Cassie Makes Plans

Saturday, 28 September
Springvale
Darcy

“I should like to buy a phaeton for Susan.” Hayward leaned to the left as he reined his horse around a low-hanging branch. “Would you like to accompany me to town within the next se’nnight? I had in mind a short stay of three to five days. Perhaps Tattersall’s will have a steed or hound to tempt you.” He regarded me with a lopsided grin.

In other circumstances, I should not have hesitated to accept my friend’s request. But Georgiana had arrived at Springvale a mere three days ago. Would she mind if I left her here for a week or so? The path widened, and I directed Regal alongside my friend. “Let me talk to my sister before I decide. I want to be certain she will be content in my absence.”

Hayward sobered and straightened his posture. “Yes, of course. I understand your concern. From what I have observed, though, Miss Darcy is comfortable in Susan’s company, and she will have Mrs. Annesley here as well.”

Yes, Georgiana had warmed to Mrs. Hayward swiftly, and the two had already formed a friendship. “I shall let you know tomorrow.” Of course, I had another reason to resist this trip; I had grown accustomed to riding with Miss Bennet each morning, and the notion of relinquishing this time with her eroded my serenity, causing my chest muscles to constrict. To my chagrin, these rides had become the most anticipated aspect of my days, for Miss Bennet’s presence provided me an unfathomable form of gratification. This effect endured after my sister began joining us, even though I had restricted myself to infrequent contributions to the conversation, a sacrifice I made with the aim of encouraging Georgiana’s budding association with Miss Bennet.

Blast, I needed to take this trip—time and distance from her may be necessary to break the peculiar spell I had fallen under.

Back at the house, a melodious tune and two angelic voices resounded in the main hall. Hayward and I stopped in the doorway to the music-room, wherein Georgiana played the pianoforte whilst Miss Bennet and Miss Barton sang. The pair stood facing Mrs. Hayward and Mrs. Annesley, who sat together on a sofa. Miss Bennet looked vivacious and alluring in a gown of cream muslin as she swayed in time with the music. Her gleaming hazel eyes and glowing countenance reflected joy in the aria by Handel, ‘*As steals the morn upon the night*’. Together, the two ladies’ voices blended into a delightful harmony.

Hayward’s hand landed on my shoulder. “Shall we go in?” He spoke in a whisper. “We may sit in the two chairs near the wall without being seen.”

I nodded my assent, and we took the aforementioned seats. My vision set upon Miss Bennet and did not stray from her. She sang the next verse solo, and her heavenly inflexion—mellow, ethereal, and yet robust—held me transfixed. What a beautiful sound! I leaned forwards, immersed in her enchanting modulation.

“... *melts the shades away:*
So Truth does Fancy's charm dissolve
And rising Reason puts to flight
The fumes that did the mind involve
Restoring intellectual day.”

When she finished singing and Miss Barton took over the next lines of the song, I stirred at the unwelcome change. Miss Barton had a satisfactory soprano. Nevertheless, my mind tarried in the remembrance of Miss

Bennet's sweet performance. What should I not give for the privilege of being serenaded by her each night?

Good Lord, the risk in my present course could not be plainer. Contrary to my previous assumption, the more familiar I became with Miss Bennet, the stronger her hold upon me grew. In the past, I had erroneously prided myself on my ability to regulate my temper and behaviour; but until now, I had never encountered such a powerful temptation. I must conquer my fascination with Miss Bennet, for she could be a friend and nothing more. That stark fact left a sour tang in my mouth.

Our applause at the conclusion of the song apprised the ladies of our presence, and they came to greet us.

"That was a charming performance." Hayward's sight veered to include Georgiana, Miss Bennet, and Miss Barton, who voiced their thanks.

Miss Barton sidled nearer to me with a grin on display. "What say you, Mr. Darcy? I hope our song pleased you as well."

"Yes, very much." Though I replied to Miss Barton, Miss Bennet's movements absorbed my notice. She took a position beside her cousin and raised her eyes to me, toppling my calm.

Miss Bennet wrapped her arm around her cousin's. "Our carriage awaits us, so I am afraid we must leave."

My fingers curled and extended a few times as a mixture of disappointment and relief warred within me. She and Miss Barton took their leave of us and departed.

Wednesday, 2 October
Springvale
Darcy

I stood and moved my hand to Georgiana's shoulder as the party from Knight's Manor entered the drawing-room. Miss Barton, dressed in a showy yellow silk gown with a diaphanous outer layer of netting, came forth on her brother's arm with Mr. Barton alongside them. But my sight veered to Miss Bennet, who lagged behind. She wore a simple light-green muslin gown, yet her peculiar elegance enlivened the room.

Mrs. Hayward beckoned Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley closer to introduce Mr. Barton and Mr. Noah Barton. By now, my sister had

abandoned all traces of awkwardness in company with my friend's wife—a clear sign of her increased ease with the lady.

When I had broached the topic of my accompanying Hayward to London, Georgiana had revealed no sign of being discomfited by my planned absence. Rather, she had expressed her delight for having already formed friendships with Miss Bennet and Mrs. Hayward, though the former drew the highest and most frequent of her praise; my sister's admiration and affection for Miss Bennet appeared to be infinite.

My pulse soared when Miss Bennet greeted me, my senses attuned to her. Alas, she stayed but a moment before Hayward called her name, instigating her retreat. He provided her with tidings of their mutual friend Mr. Rowe, who had called that afternoon. I should have joined them, but Miss Barton appeared before me and posed questions about Pemberley.

Before long, we entered the dining-parlour. Mrs. Hayward had shared her plan to defy convention and seat Georgiana between Miss Bennet and Miss Barton, and I appreciated her consideration for my sister's comfort. During the meal, Hayward drew the two Barton gentlemen and me into a discussion of tenant contracts inspired by a farmer who had requested alterations to his current lease. The comments contributed by Mr. Noah Barton revealed his keen knowledge of estate management.

Georgiana had first met Miss Barton this past Saturday, the day Hayward and I came upon the three ladies' musical performance. On this occasion, my sister displayed frequent smiles as she conversed with Miss Barton, who monopolised her attention. Perhaps Georgiana would soon have a third friend in the neighbourhood.

In time, though, my sister appeared to grow uncomfortable: she adopted a taut bearing when addressed by Miss Barton. By the dessert course, Georgiana shifted to one side—closer to Miss Bennet—and provided terse replies to Miss Barton. It seemed my sister had grown weary of the blonde lady's dogged attention.

After a brief separation of sexes, Mrs. Hayward announced an evening of cards. She directed Georgiana, Miss Bennet, Miss Barton, and Mrs. Annesley to a whist table.

But Miss Barton made no move to take the assigned seat. She tapped Mrs. Hayward's arm. "I hope you do not mind if I make a request."

Mrs. Hayward moved towards the younger lady and maintained a sanguine deportment. "No, indeed."

“In truth, I am keen to play cribbage tonight.” Miss Barton turned my way. “Will you partner with me, Mr. Darcy?”

Her audacious manoeuvre rivalled that of other scheming ladies I had encountered in the past. Despite my disinclination to oblige her, I had no polite way to decline. “Yes, of course.” On the bright side, Georgiana may appreciate a break from Miss Barton’s enthusiastic attention. I should have asked Mr. Noah Barton to join us, but his father beckoned him to form a cribbage trio with him and Hayward. Mrs. Hayward joined the other ladies at whist.

I sat across from Miss Barton, masking my annoyance. After shuffling the cards, I cut to reveal a jack of hearts. When I held the deck out for Miss Barton to cut, she placed her hand upon my wrist.

“If you please, I prefer that you deal first.” Her eyelashes fluttered, and she wore a simper.

“Very well.” I distributed the cards.

“You are extraordinarily generous to permit my cousin to ride Lily.”

“On the contrary, that is no sacrifice on my part.”

“Yet you have gone far and above what most people would allow in this situation, and your humility is yet another admirable trait.”

I almost uttered a further protest but deemed it a futile effort. Many others before her had plied flattery to attain my interest—a doomed tactic that reeked of desperation and evidenced a lack of imagination; although the method may have been effective with other men. I glanced at Miss Bennet. *She* would never adulate or inveigle anyone as a means of ingratiating herself. Would that I had been partnered with *her* tonight.

“While I enjoy a walk now and then, I do not roam for hours at a time as Lizzy is apt to do. I much prefer domestic pursuits like music, drawing, and embroidery. Although I learnt to ride as a child, I never developed a fondness for the activity. In my opinion, horses are not as pleasant as dogs or cats.” Miss Barton curled her forefinger around a blonde tress at her nape. “And riding a horse strikes me as intrinsically masculine. I cannot understand why so many ladies choose to sit atop a filthy beast when they could walk or ride in a carriage instead.”

“My sister loves to ride horses, as did my late mother before her.”

“Well, riding on horseback *can* be an elegant pastime for women who proceed in a ladylike manner.” Miss Barton released a short giggle. “My cousin Lizzy, though, is still a bit of a tomboy. She spends many hours with

the horses. She has been known to brush them and clean muck out of their hooves, even though we have plenty of grooms.” Her nose crinkled. “She has gone so far as to *embrace* the creatures. As a result, she has come home covered with horsehair and bearing the horses’ odour.”

My lower jaw jutted forwards. Did she hope to tarnish my opinion of her cousin? Instead, that last statement had inspired a most inappropriate imagining involving myself, Miss Bennet, and a large bathing tub. I tugged at my cravat, willing the reverie to dispel, and met Miss Barton’s steadfast gaze. “What you describe is a natural consequence of riding horses, and there is an easy remedy.”

“Still, my cousin is singular, for most ladies take great care to avoid becoming soiled, no matter their activity or circumstances.”

Rather than dignify the remark with an acknowledgement, I gestured towards her hand. “You need to discard.”

“Oh yes, of course.” She examined her cards and set down two of them. “I should not want you to mistake me, though. Despite our differing interests, Lizzy is dear to me. She is almost like a sister.”

“That is a most opportune circumstance for you both.”

“Indeed, yes.” Miss Barton’s eyebrows drew together, and her upper body inclined nearer to me. “It is a great shame Lizzy’s father left her penniless. Her family estate went to a distant cousin, and the one family member left on her mother’s side is a vile man, a *tradesman*.” She uttered the last word with undisguised disdain.

For some reason, her choice of phrasing rankled at my peace. Many in the gentry shared her sentiment; notwithstanding, did she not consider the man’s character faults to be a greater detriment than his class in society? “I am aware of her situation.” It seemed Miss Barton had wanted to make certain of that.

“In any event, Lizzy is fortunate in that she will always have a home here. Neither my father nor Noah would ever abandon her, so she will never be forced to go into service.”

Miss Bennet go into service? A chill permeated my bones at the mere mention of the possibility. Several seconds elapsed before I collected myself well enough to respond. “Your cousin may not always reside here. She may marry and have a home of her own.” My statement brought to mind a beaming Miss Bennet standing arm in arm with an unknown, faceless man, and I almost winced.

“That is true. She may receive an offer from a gentleman of modest means, a second or third son perhaps.” Miss Barton followed my king of diamonds with a five of clubs and took two points for making fifteen. “Noah, Lizzy, and I shall attend the Salisbury assembly on Friday. We often see the Haywards there. Do you plan to go?”

My friend had mentioned the dance earlier in the week. I could not resist an opportunity to dance with Miss Bennet; for that privilege, I should endure a set with Miss Barton and a handful of other local ladies with whom I had insubstantial acquaintances. “Yes, the Haywards and I shall attend.”

Miss Barton perched higher in her chair, beaming at me. “That is excellent news.”

Once I had played my last card, we counted our points and moved our pegs. I handed the deck to Miss Barton. “It is your turn to deal.”

My sight wandered to Miss Bennet, who uttered a comment that elicited a giggle from my sister. Then Mr. Noah Barton’s triumphant interjection as he set down his cards drew my attention. Once again, the concept niggled at me that he might harbour a romantic *tendre* for Miss Bennet.

I picked up the cards distributed by Miss Barton and arranged them. “Your brother and Miss Bennet seem to have a close association as well. Is there any possibility of a match between them?” My respiration suspended.

“Lizzy and Noah?” Her features constricted. “No, that would never happen. They view each other as sister and brother.”

Thank goodness. Although I did not doubt Mrs. Hayward’s admirable intellect and powers of perception, Miss Barton must have a superior understanding of her brother and Miss Bennet’s connexion.

“Besides, Noah is certain to wed an eminent lady of the *ton*. After all, he must consider what is best for his future children.”

Just as I must do. The food I had consumed earlier churned inside me. She must believe that Miss Bennet fell below the notice of a man of her brother’s standing. A firm desire arose within me to argue the point. Although I had entertained similar thoughts, I could not abide Miss Barton’s austere characterisation of Miss Bennet’s future. Mr. Noah Barton would be privileged to have her as a wife!

The mechanics of the game interrupted my musings. I declared my scores and advanced my peg. For all the disadvantages inherent in Miss Bennet’s situation, she was a gentleman’s daughter. And despite what others may

expect of me, I did not *need* to wed for either money or connexions. Given this, why could I not marry for love?

My eyes sought her radiant person. She beamed at Georgiana and leaned near her to share an aside. Whatever she said inspired a responding grin from my sister. Could I already be in love? That must be so, for nothing else explained the unshakable hold Miss Bennet—*Elizabeth*—had upon me. Since the first day I had encountered her at the stables, not one of my waking hours had passed without her entering my thoughts. And more often than not, she had appeared in my dreams.

If I married her, one or two of my relations would object to my choice, but no one could dictate how I lived my life. A few people of my acquaintance might shun her for her lamentable background, but I should not tolerate any mistreatment of her, and the Darcy name would sway most to accept, if not welcome, her.

I fidgeted in my seat. Perhaps I ought to ask for an audience with Elizabeth tonight. For a moment, I indulged in a day-dream of her displaying surprise and delight upon my declaration. Perhaps she would take my hand or even consent to a kiss.

But my next thought threw a damper upon my suppositions. In my eagerness to make Elizabeth my betrothed, I had overlooked a significant and precarious element: her tradesman uncle. What jeopardy might he pose? The prudent path would be to determine what entanglements this man could cause us *before* I entered into the engagement.

Tonight, I should send an express to Mr. Notley and offer him an assignment for which he could name his fee: a thorough investigation of Mr. Edward Gardiner—in particular any criminal or dangerous activity or hints of scandal—to be completed as soon as may be. If possible, I should obtain the investigator's report during my stay in town.

In addition, I should write to Bingley, who had met many tradesmen through his father, and query my friend as to whether he had any knowledge of Mr. Gardiner. I should ask Winston as well, for my valet had a wide and varied acquaintance.

My gaze fell upon Mr. Barton, and my earlier letter to Mr. Notley came to mind wherein I had provided his and Mr. Rowe's names as possible suspects. Neither man had revealed the merest indication that he could be capable of murder, yet I could not regret having acted in good faith to assist the investigator.

Had Mr. Notley come any closer to identifying Mrs. Cooper's killer? There had been no further reports in the newspapers of any arrests made for the crime, and the investigator had not provided a response to my earlier note. When we next met, I should enquire as to his progress in that investigation.

Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

Upon our return, we retreated upstairs, and Cassie followed me into my chamber. "Lizzy, may I have a word with you?"

"Yes, of course."

She took my hand and led me to the bed, where we sat together. "When Mr. Darcy said good-night to you, I thought I heard him say he would see you tomorrow. Why would that be?"

Gracious Heavens, I ought to have predicted Cassie would find out about our morning rides. "Yes, he has been accompanying me when I ride Lily." I used a matter-of-fact cadence. "Now, though, Miss Darcy comes, and the bulk of my conversation is with her."

Her mouth fell open. "This is extraordinary! Why did you never mention this fact before?"

I shrugged. "It did not occur to me to tell you." The falsehood left a lingering bitterness upon my tongue. "He has ridden with me as a means of introducing Lily to him in a gradual way."

"Has he ever spoken about me?"

"No, not that I can recall."

Cassie pouted, her shoulders rounding.

"But then he is not a gregarious person."

"Well, that is true enough." After a moment, she straightened her posture and grinned. "Oh, but he is such a handsome man! Do you not think so?"

I stiffened. "Yes, he is...attractive." *Cassie, when will you come to your senses and reconcile with Mr. Ware?*

"He confirmed that he will attend the assembly on Friday." She released a sigh. "I am in great anticipation of dancing with him, for he is certain to ask me for at least one set. We shall be the most attractive couple there."

She placed a hand on my arm. "Do you know what the best part of the evening will be?"

"No, I cannot imagine."

"When Mr. Ware sees me dancing with Mr. Darcy."

I bit the inside of my mouth. It would do no good to tell her yet again that she and Mr. Ware belonged together. She refused to listen. "Well, it is late, so we ought to get changed."

Cassie stood. "Yes, quite right. It would not do for me to have dark circles under my eyes tomorrow. Good-night, Lizzy."

"Good-night, Cassie."

When the door closed behind her, I collapsed upon my bed. It had been difficult enough to watch Cassie flirting with Mr. Darcy all evening. I could not bear to witness them dance together at the assembly. I should make an excuse and remain at home on Friday.

Friday, 4 October
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

Soft knocks penetrated my chamber door. "Lizzy, are you still awake?"

"Yes, Cassie. Come in." I sat up and arranged my pillow behind me.

My cousin rushed towards me, looking gorgeous in her azure silk gown. She sat facing me on the bed.

I rested against the pillow. "Well, I presume from your grin that you enjoyed the evening."

"Oh, Lizzy, I had a wonderful time. I wish you had been there." She peered at me. "Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you." Earlier, I had feigned having dyspepsia. Now, though, a knot formed in my belly. Had I erred in remaining at home tonight? If Cassie managed to wed Mr. Darcy, I should need to become inured to seeing them together. Besides, if I had gone to the ball, I might have danced a set with Mr. Darcy myself.

"Mr. Darcy was so dapper and handsome tonight! He wore a striking blue coat, so we looked very well together. He spent more time with me than with any other single lady, and I caught many others in the room staring at us." A glimmer danced in her eyes.

I bit back a smirk. Nothing pleased Cassie more than impressing other people.

“Dame Hayward remarked that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hayward will be away most of next week. They are to spend a few days in town.” Her lips twisted.

This information did not come as a surprise; Mr. Darcy had mentioned his forthcoming trip this morning. At his enquiry, I had assured him that I should continue to ride with Miss Darcy during his absence.

“So, I shall not bother to call at Springvale until they return.”

“In any case, I shall invite Dame Hayward, Miss Darcy, and Mrs. Annesley to tea on Monday.”

“Very well.” She leaned to the side, resting her weight upon her forearm, and expelled a heavy breath. “I only wish Mr. Ware had been there tonight. We spoke to Mrs. Ware, who said he left just yesterday. He will stay with a friend in Luton for a time before returning to Cambridge. The timing is inauspicious. He would have been so jealous to see me with Mr. Darcy, and I should have loved to see the expression on his face.”

Oh dear. “Cassie...” How should I phrase this? I must take care, for she would not be pleased to hear what I had to say and may become angry with me. Nevertheless, I should not sit by in silence and allow her to make such a vital blunder.

“What is it?” Her brows drew together.

“It is obvious that you are still in love with Mr. Ware.”

She bolted upright and scowled at me. “Oh no, not that again! You are wrong.”

“If you truly cared for Mr. Darcy, it would not matter to you whether or not Mr. Ware saw you with him.”

Cassie shook her head. “I do not believe this! You have never been in love.” She thrust her index finger at me. “You have never so much as been courted by a gentleman. Yet you presume to tell me how I feel?”

Heat overspread my face. “I may not be experienced in romance or love, but I know *you* very well. I love you and want you to be happy. I should hate to see you make a terrible error because of stubbornness or a wounded pride.”

She stood and folded her arms. “Well, allow me to reassure you. Your concern for me is misplaced, for I am happier now than I have ever been before. After tonight, I am more certain than ever that I shall receive a marriage proposal soon. Good-night.” She spun and hied from the room.

“Good-night, Cassie.” I flinched as she slammed my door shut, smothering my reply.

Could I be mistaken about her? She ought to know her heart better than I ever could. And while she and Mr. Darcy did not appear to have interests in common, maybe that would not matter. Perhaps Cassie’s beauty and overtly feminine demeanour would eclipse all other considerations in Mr. Darcy’s view, and the two of them *would* make a felicitous match. If so, I should find a way to be happy for them.



Chapter 8: Mr. Notley's Report

Wednesday, 9 October
Darcy House, London
Darcy

Mr. Notley arrived at our agreed-upon time, and I directed the investigator to a chair by the fireplace.

After pouring two glasses of brandy, I handed him a drink and took my seat. "I appreciate you completing this assignment so quickly."

The investigator nodded and placed a bundle of papers on the adjacent table. "We welcome commissions from clients such as yourself. The funds provide a subsidy for our criminal investigations." He sipped from his glass, then set it down.

"Have you identified Mrs. Cooper's killer?"

"No, unfortunately not." His mouth quirked downwards. "That investigation has been set aside due to more pressing crimes, including the recent murder of two children in Greenwich. No doubt you have read about the killings."

I grimaced as the reported details of that atrocity burst to the forepart of my thoughts. "Yes, and I can well understand why that investigation would

be your priority.”

“Rest assured, though, I received your letter and appreciate the information. We shall return our attention to that matter at a later date.” He untied the string binding the papers.

This afternoon, a letter from Bingley had arrived indicating he did not know Mr. Gardiner, and my valet had no knowledge of him either; so, I had awaited Mr. Notley’s arrival with a high degree of anticipation. My hand swept towards the pile of papers. “You have brought an impressive stack of documents. Have you uncovered evidence of criminal activity attributable to Mr. Gardiner?”

He tilted his head. “Not at all. After a thorough search for pertinent information that extended from the local area to Meryton, we found no indication that Mr. Gardiner conducts illegal or unsavoury business practices or associates with known criminals. He is as exemplary a citizen as you may expect to find.”

What? I set my glass on the table with a clang. “But there must have been at least a hint of wrongdoing. Could he be a drunkard or a gambler?”

“We found nothing to support either allegation.” His blue eyes narrowed. “What makes you believe he has a nefarious secret?”

“A gentleman of my acquaintance who has known Mr. Gardiner for many years has attested to his deceitful nature. Perhaps Mr. Gardiner is exceptionally clever and better at hiding his misdeeds than most.”

“What offence has he been accused of perpetrating?”

“I do not have any specifics.”

“Then perhaps you will tell me who has maligned Mr. Gardiner.”

I brushed my knuckles against my mouth. “I suppose I may depend upon your discretion.”

“Yes, of course. That is an essential component of my profession.”

“I refer to Mr. Allan Barton, who is the guardian of Mr. Gardiner’s niece, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Mr. Barton is unshakeable in his belief that Mr. Gardiner is a reprobate.”

The investigator frowned. “Barton? That name sounds familiar.”

I shifted in my seat. “As a matter of fact...um...I named him in my letter to you last month. He and Mr. Walter Rowe have cleft chins, and they both spent most of August in town.”

“Ah yes.”

“Of course, I do not believe either of them could be Mrs. Cooper’s murderer.” I drank from my glass. “At any rate, Mr. Barton is convinced of Mr. Gardiner’s dishonest nature and has taken pains over the years to ensure the man cannot come near Miss Bennet.”

“I see.”

“Did you conduct the investigation of Mr. Gardiner yourself or did others do the work?”

“Three of our men assisted me on this assignment. Each member of our team is efficient and adroit. We elicited intelligence from Mr. Gardiner’s current and former servants, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, and business associates.”

“How can you be certain these people spoke the truth?”

A slight smile softened Mr. Notley’s expression. “In some instances, they did not. I cannot reveal our methods, but we verify the testimony we receive in multiple ways. In rare instances, we have obtained enough conflicting information to prevent our reaching a conclusion, but not in this situation.”

“Based on your findings, what sort of man is Mr. Gardiner?”

“He has built a reputation as an astute and honest man of business. He and his wife have a wide circle of friends and are well regarded. A few people we queried provided adverse opinions of Mr. Gardiner, and we found each of those grumblers to be less than credible.”

Mr. Notley removed a sheet from his stack of papers and read aloud the details of Mr. Edward Gardiner’s early life, including his childhood in Meryton and education at Eton and Cambridge. The investigator went on to mention the tragic deaths of Mr. Gardiner’s two sisters, brother-in-law, and niece from influenza in 1794, his apprenticeship with Mr. Pembroke, a successful importer in London, who retired and left the business to him, and Mr. Gardiner’s marriage to Miss Modesty Fletcher with whom he had four children.

After a pause, he looked up at me. “Mrs. Gardiner is the daughter of a country attorney from Lambton.”

Lambton? “That is interesting—my estate in Derbyshire is but five miles from Lambton.”

“Yes, I am aware of that.” Mr. Notley glanced at his notes. “Are you acquainted with the former Miss Fletcher? She moved with her family to London twelve years ago when her father retired. She is now two-and-thirty.”

“No, I have never met her.” Yet an image of her father, Mr. Fletcher, came to me—a short, soft-spoken, and kind man.

Mr. Notley exchanged the paper in his hand for another. “Over the years, Mr. Gardiner has expanded his business. Five years ago, he moved Pembroke Imports from a small building to a sizeable warehouse. Later that same year, he purchased a house on Gracechurch Street where he resides with his family. If his business continues its current pattern of success, Mr. Gardiner will accumulate enough wealth to acquire a small estate within the next year or two.” He shuffled through the papers, selected three sheets, and gave them to me. “This is your copy of the report.”

I gave each sheet a cursory glance and set them on the table. “I cannot imagine why Mr. Barton would disparage Mr. Gardiner without just cause.”

Mr. Notley raised his glass and imbibed the remainder of the liquor. “Maybe Mr. Barton is the one involved in a criminal undertaking. In my experience, those who are guilty of an offence are prone to accusing others of a similar activity.”

“No, that is a dubious theory. Mr. Barton is a well-known and respected gentleman.” Yet an uncomfortable thickness hampered my throat. The mere suggestion of Elizabeth in the care of a dishonest man disturbed my equilibrium. “Nevertheless, when you resume the investigation of Mrs. Cooper’s murder, I should appreciate being notified if you discover anything of concern with regard to Mr. Barton, or Mr. Rowe for that matter.”

“Very well.”

After Mr. Notley left, I refilled my glass with a generous portion of brandy and settled on the sofa in a semi-reclined position. It seemed I had no other course but to seek out Mr. Gardiner and obtain his explanation for this estrangement from Elizabeth and the Bartons. Due to Hayward’s prior acquaintance with Mr. Gardiner, I should ask my friend to accompany me to the man’s house.

Thursday, 10 October
Gracechurch Street, London
Darcy

Hayward followed me out of the coach and stared at the elegant façade before us. “The neighbourhood may not be fashionable, but this house is comparable to the smaller residences at the north end of Park Lane.”

“Yes, I agree.”

On the way to Tattersall’s that morning, I had confided my intentions for Elizabeth to Hayward, which he declared to have suspected. But the information from Mr. Notley’s report astonished my friend, and he readily agreed to accompany me here.

At the auction, Hayward purchased a shiny new phaeton, and I acquired a handsome pair of four-year-old carriage horses to replace two aged steeds who would live out their retirement in a pasture at Pemberley.

We presented our cards to the solemn butler and requested an audience with Mr. Gardiner to discuss a personal matter. After a short wait in the elegantly appointed sitting-room, we followed the staid servant to a sizeable study. Miss Bennet’s uncle stood at medium height with a stout figure, light-brown hair, and a pleasant round face. He made a dapper presentation with his well-tailored and fashionable attire. One could easily mistake him for a member of the gentry.

Mr. Gardiner approached us with his sight settling upon my friend. “Mr. Hayward, it has been many years since we met.” He offered his hand, which Hayward shook. “Do you bring tidings of my niece?” Creases formed around his eyes. “I hope she is well.”

“She is quite well, and our purpose here relates to her.” With a glance at me, Hayward performed the introductions.

Mr. Gardiner greeted me in a rushed manner, then returned his attention to Hayward. “Pray, I must know...is Elizabeth happy?”

My friend smiled. “Yes, I believe so. She is a lovely, cheerful, and gracious lady.”

With a nod, Mr. Gardiner’s shoulders lowered. He indicated two chairs for us and sat behind his desk.

I provided a concise summary of my association with Elizabeth and the Bartons, my intentions for Elizabeth, and my reasons for having hired an investigator.

Mr. Gardiner held a stiff attitude, and his features hardened into a depiction of enmity. “This is most disturbing—both that Mr. Barton has been denigrating my character and that you deemed it necessary to pry into my affairs.”

“Your pique is understandable, and you have my sincere apology for the intrusion. Under the circumstances, I acted to ensure Miss Bennet’s continued safety and peace of mind.”

With a heave of his chest, Mr. Gardiner groaned. “Based on your account, Elizabeth must hate me or perhaps even fear me. This is insupportable!” His fist pounded upon his desk.

I bided my time for a few moments, allowing him to collect himself. “Mr. Barton has led Miss Bennet to believe you took no interest in her.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth.” Mr. Gardiner covered his fist with the other palm. “I have written to Elizabeth each year on her birthday, but I do not suppose any of my letters reached her.”

“Evidently not.”

Hayward cleared his throat. “I have known Mr. Barton and his family for many years, and it is difficult for me to imagine why he would perpetuate this injustice. Could you explain what happened between the two of you to cause this rift?”

“Yes, I shall tell you everything I know.” Mr. Gardiner stood and obtained a tray holding a decanter of brandy and several glasses from a nearby table and moved it to his desk. “Perhaps you gentlemen would like a drink?” My friend and I voiced our agreement and accepted glasses of the amber liquor from him.

Mr. Gardiner dropped heavily onto his chair. After quaffing the brandy in two draughts, he refilled his glass and set it aside. “Mrs. Rebecca Barton was a charming and generous lady. She made an ideal guardian for my niece. I believe she gave Lizzy, as we called her, no less affection and attention than she did her own two children.”

I sipped from my glass, and a robust, delectable flavour filled my mouth. This refined, smooth brandy rivalled the best liquors I had tasted.

“Mrs. Barton invited me to stay at her home whenever it suited me. My studies at university, and later, my apprenticeship with Mr. Pembroke, kept me occupied for most of the year, but I went to Knight’s Manor at Christmastide and saw Lizzy then. I appreciated the opportunity to spend time with my niece, and Mrs. Barton could not have been more gracious.”

His eyebrows pitched downwards. “Mr. Allan Barton, though, afforded me the bare minimum of civility. He told me in no uncertain terms that he did not appreciate this connexion to a tradesman, and he tolerated my presence for the sake of his beloved wife.”

Mr. Gardiner gritted his teeth. “Following the tragic death of Mrs. Barton and her stillborn child, Mr. Barton wrote to me, indicating that I should no longer be welcome in either of his homes and would not be given any access to my niece. He declared his decision to be in Elizabeth’s best interest, citing the damage to her standing for anyone to witness her in company with a tradesman relation.”

My friend shook his head. “And yet you are Miss Bennet’s true uncle, while Mr. Barton is no relation to her. You could have sued for her custody.”

“Yes, and I considered taking that step. Mr. Pembroke would have supported me in that effort. However, I had witnessed my niece’s close connexion to the Barton children and did not want to remove her from the only home she remembered.”

Tensing my jaw, I averted my gaze. Before my trip to town, I had assumed I should follow Mr. Barton’s lead and shield Elizabeth from Mr. Gardiner. Now, I no longer had any reason to doubt the man’s honourability—yet he was a *tradesman*. Might an association with a man of business harm my family’s standing?

Mr. Gardiner supped his brandy and cradled the glass in his palm. “You may be able to imagine my disappointment and frustration at this turn of events. Elizabeth is the sole surviving member of my family. I attempted to speak with Mr. Barton at his house in town, but he refused to receive me.”

A sensation of pressure in my chest hampered my respiration. *Confound it*, the decent course of action ought to have been obvious to me: I could not deny Elizabeth access to her uncle, the last living member of her mother’s family, irrespective of any possible social consequences.

“A month or so later, after having met with one of my suppliers, I passed a gambling den on Bond Street. A dishevelled man stumbled out of the door and reeled towards the road. To my astonishment, I recognised him as Mr. Barton. I went to him and asked whether he needed assistance. He barked an expletive at me and declared he did not need my help. He mumbled a few other sentences that I could not discern. When I asked whether he would permit me to visit Lizzy on his terms and at a location of his choosing, he sneered and refused to agree. Then he entered a nearby carriage.”

I shifted to regard Hayward. “Do you believe this account? Is Mr. Barton a drunkard and a gambler?”

“No!” My friend expelled a rushed inhalation. “Well, not any longer, at least. But from what my father has told me, Barton became inconsolable after he lost his wife and descended into a deep depression. For almost a year, he spent most of his time in town, neglecting his estate and his children and drowning his sorrows in spirits. Several of his friends, including my father, intervened. They told him that his behaviour dishonoured his wife’s memory, and his children depended upon him. At length, he heeded their admonitions. To my knowledge, he has been a responsible and honourable father and master of Knight’s Manor ever since.”

With a nod, Mr. Gardiner sat back in his chair. “That coincides with the information I have gleaned over the years. Since I have never received any correspondence from Mr. Barton or my niece, I sought to assure myself of Lizzy’s continued welfare. From time to time, I have sent one of my trusted servants to Wiltshire to learn whatever he could from the locals and the servants at Knight’s Manor. My man managed to befriend a garrulous maid, who has confirmed over the years that my niece is content. According to the maid, Lizzy has a close association with her two cousins and a more distant, but cordial, one with her uncle.” His gaze fixed upon Hayward. “Is that your understanding?”

“Yes, I should say so.” Hayward rubbed his nape. “I believe Mr. Barton has grown very fond of Miss Bennet. The two of them share a love of books and horses. However, my wife and I dislike his disparate treatment of Miss Bennet. In particular, his practice of taking his son and daughter to town and leaving Miss Bennet at the estate.”

“Has he provided any explanation for leaving her behind?”

Hayward grimaced. “He has used you as an excuse. He maintains that he keeps her at home for her own safety, to eliminate any possibility that she might encounter you.”

“That is outrageous!” Mr. Gardiner scowled and raised his glass to his lips.

“Yes, I agree.”

“Has Mr. Barton mistreated or deprived my niece in other ways?”

Hayward raised a palm. “I do not believe he would ever mistreat Miss Bennet. However, he tends to spoil and favour Miss Barton over her. Although it may be natural for a parent to want their own daughter to have more advantages over their ward, it has been offensive for my wife and I to

witness. Miss Barton receives the finest gowns and all the frippery she desires while Miss Bennet wears the garments cast off by Miss Barton.”

Dash it all! My hands gripped the arms of my chair with enough force to chafe my fingers. Once Elizabeth became my wife, I should ensure she had nothing but the best of anything and everything she desired.

“How dare he treat my niece this way?” A reddish tint overspread Mr. Gardiner’s countenance. “If he wanted recompense for her expenses, he could have asked me for the funds at any time. I said as much in my letters to him.”

My own complexion must appear no less ruddy. I pulled at my cravat as fire crept up from my neck. There could be no valid excuse for Mr. Barton’s conduct.

Hayward shuffled his feet forwards. “In the past, Barton explained his reasoning for providing Miss Bennet with inferior clothes in comparison to his daughter—he does not want any prospective suitors of Miss Bennet to assume she has a fortune. It is a shame her father left her penniless.”

A vein bulged over Mr. Gardiner’s forehead as he leaned forwards. “Has Mr. Barton led you to believe my niece is *impoverished*?”

“Yes...um...he has made that clear.”

“That is a falsehood. She has over fourteen thousand pounds to her name.”

I gulped. *Fourteen thousand pounds?* How could that be?

My friend’s gaze darted to me for a moment. “I am at a loss. This does not make sense.”

What could be Mr. Barton’s motives for his deceptions? Did he blacken Mr. Gardiner’s name to cover for his own criminal deeds? I swigged the rest of the brandy, and my vision drifted from Hayward to Mr. Gardiner. “Is it possible that Mr. Barton, perhaps after accumulating gambling debts, misappropriated Miss Bennet’s funds?”

“No, thank goodness.” Mr. Gardiner refilled his glass again. “He has no access to her fortune. Mr. Bennet left the management of her five thousand pounds—which comprised my sister’s dowry—to me. I have invested the money over the years in various stocks and bonds. About six years ago, a lucrative business contract with a merchant resulted in a windfall, and I added four thousand pounds to my niece’s funds. As of last month, her portion had grown to fourteen thousand five hundred pounds. The money will remain under my care until she reaches her majority next year.”

I scrambled for a way to reconcile the situation. “Is it possible Mr. Barton is ignorant of Miss Bennet’s inheritance?”

“No, for I have provided an accounting of her funds each year. I sent the statements to Mrs. Barton until her death, for she oversaw all aspects of Elizabeth’s care. Thereafter, I addressed them to Mr. Barton.” Mr. Gardiner shifted to the edge of his seat. “If I write a letter to my niece tonight, could I impose upon one of you to ensure she receives it?”

“Yes.” I blurted the word in my haste to speak before Hayward. “You may send the missive to my care this evening—Darcy House on Park Lane.”

“I appreciate this very much. I shall prepare a document for her with a summary of the current value of her portion to include with my letter. I hope she will find satisfaction in the knowledge she need not depend upon anyone else for her livelihood. Notwithstanding, I shall extend an invitation for her to reside here with my family. My wife would welcome her, and my four children would take delight in meeting their cousin.”

Mr. Barton had a great deal for which to answer. In any event, the sooner Elizabeth left his care and became my wife, the better.

At the sound of a soft pair of knocks upon the door, Mr. Gardiner stood. “Come in.”

Hayward and I rose as an attractive brown-haired lady entered the room.

She gave us a cursory glance and approached Mr. Gardiner. “Forgive my intrusion, Edward. Will your guests be joining us for dinner?”

“They are both welcome to stay.” Mr. Gardiner eyed us in turn. Hayward and I shared a look; I gave my friend a subtle nod, and he accepted for us.

Mr. Gardiner took his wife by the arm and introduced Hayward and me to her.

After she offered pleasantries to us, Mrs. Gardiner’s sight lingered upon me. “I spent my youth in Lambton. Perhaps you knew my father, Mr. Fletcher. He was the local attorney.” A touch of the Derbyshire dialect marked her pronunciation.

“Yes, I have met Mr. Fletcher. My late father respected him as a knowledgeable and competent man.”

A grin lifted her cheeks. “That is kind of you to say.” She removed a neatly folded piece of fabric from her pocket. “When our butler informed me who had called, I retrieved this.” She opened the cloth, revealing a handkerchief with a pattern of bluebells embroidered on each corner. “As a

child, I had a memorable encounter with Lady Anne Darcy, when she came upon my mother and me on the high street. She greeted my mother and asked me my name. As much as I desired to speak to her, I was tongue-tied. I had never seen a lady so regal and beautiful before. My behaviour mortified my mother, and she answered for me. Lady Anne seemed to understand my plight and did not take offence.”

Her brown eyes shone. “I grew so embarrassed at my faux pas, I began to sob. Lady Anne took out this handkerchief and dabbed at my tears. She declared me to be too pretty to cry. Then she tucked the silk cloth into my hand and told me keep it with her compliments. I could not even utter the words to thank her, but I have treasured this ever since. Now, though, I should be honoured to return it to you. Perhaps you would like to give it to your sister.” She offered the handkerchief to me.

I held my palm up. “No, thank you. My mother gave the handkerchief to you and would want you to keep it. Georgiana and I have plenty of mementos of our mother.”

She lowered her hand. “Well, if you are certain...”

“Yes, without a doubt.”

Hayward and I enjoyed a sumptuous meal with the Gardiners. Our conversations with Mr. Gardiner revealed his thorough knowledge on a myriad of subjects, including agriculture and husbandry. He shared his intention of purchasing an estate within the next year or so. Mrs. Gardiner asked after the postmaster in Lambton, and my response led to us sharing memories of the area and of several prominent citizens.

I left Gracechurch Street with the conviction that I should be pleased to acknowledge the Gardiners as my friends—and eventually my relations.

Friday, 11 October

London

Darcy

Hayward glanced out of the coach window when the distinct clanks of the horses’ hooves upon the cobble-stoned surface changed to a softer, duller sound, marking the vehicle’s transition to the dirt road.

He settled back against the squabs, giving me an intent look. “I am still struggling with my disappointment in Barton. I find his treatment of Mr.

Gardiner to be grievous. Others might defend some of Barton's actions, but I cannot conceive of any way to justify his pretending Miss Bennet is penniless. This does not fit the opinion of my friend that I have formed over the years."

"I can understand how you feel. I have been disappointed in the past by a man I once viewed as a close friend." I frowned at the memories of Wickham that came to mind.

"How do you intend to proceed?"

"At my first opportunity, I shall propose marriage to Miss Bennet. Afterwards, I shall relate what we learnt from Mr. Gardiner and give her his letter. We shall discuss the best time and place to confront Mr. Barton with his lies."

"Ah, I see." After a beat, Hayward inched closer. "Are you certain she will accept your offer?"

My brows shot up. How could he think otherwise? "Yes, of course." No other alternative made sense. Although I could not state with certainty that Elizabeth loved me, I did not doubt that she liked me. And she clearly adored my sister. Regardless of the funds that had been kept hidden from her, she could not expect to receive an offer from a superior suitor. For pity's sake, I owned her beloved horse!

He cocked his head. "If you would like my support when you demand answers from Barton, I am at your service."

"Thank you, that may be helpful."

His fingers rapped upon the seat cushion. "In addition, I shall speak to Susan about the Gardiners. If she has no objection, I shall write to Mr. Gardiner, extending an invitation for him and his wife to stay at Springvale. It is high time Miss Bennet reunited with her mother's relations."

"I appreciate that. No doubt once she learns the truth, she will be keen to meet them."

We fell into an easy silence. Thoughts of Elizabeth fed my spirits. Soon, I should make her mine.



Chapter 9: A Consequential Conversation

Saturday, 12 October
Springvale
Darcy

After a long soak in the bathing tub, I dressed for dinner and met Georgiana in her chambers. With a cheerful aspect and a hint of colour tinting her cheeks, she continued to present a vast improvement from the gloominess she had exhibited weeks earlier when I parted from her in London.

I took a seat beside her on the sofa. “I am pleased to find you in good spirits. What has occupied you these past few days?”

“Miss Bennet and I have ridden each morning. On Wednesday, she and Miss Barton came here for a picnic in the east meadow organised by Mrs. Hayward. Yesterday, Mrs. Hayward, Mrs. Annesley, and I had tea at Knight’s Manor with Miss Bennet and Miss Barton. And Mrs. Annesley has kept me busy with music and Italian lessons.”

She placed a hand on my wrist. “Fitzwilliam, I should like to invite Miss Bennet to stay with us at Pemberley. If you agreed, I thought to propose that

she travel with us when we go north and remain at our home for a month or more. What do you think?"

I could not help but respond with an unguarded smile. Although I needed no further arguments in support of Miss Bennet's suitability as a wife for me, my sister's regard for her made my decision all the sweeter. Despite the temptation to announce my plans to Georgiana now, Elizabeth ought to be the first to know my intentions. "Allow me to give the matter consideration tonight, and we shall speak on the subject again tomorrow."

"Very well."

"In addition, I have a favour to ask of you. During my time in town, I learnt information of a sensitive nature with regard to Miss Bennet's relations. I should like to meet with her in private tomorrow morning, so I may enlighten her."

She sobered and drew to an inflexible position. "Yes, of course. I hope the news is not unpleasant."

"Well, a portion of what I must tell her is troublesome."

"Oh dear."

"Do not fret, for I have favourable tidings as well." I pictured Elizabeth's expression of joy when I made my proposal. "On the whole, she will have no cause to repine."

Georgiana moved into a relaxed deportment. "I am relieved to hear that."

Sunday, 13 October
Springvale
Darcy

I passed a restless night with less than two hours of sleep. My anticipation of pressing my suit to Elizabeth in the morning consumed me. At one point, I almost left my bed to compose my overture to her. But I abandoned the enterprise lest my proposal sound like a rehearsed oration rather than a sincere request.

Winston gave me a perplexed look when I asked him to change the blue coat he had selected for a green one. I had observed Miss Bennet to wear riding habits of green or cream, and as nonsensical as my reasoning may have been, I did not want any part of my person to be out of harmony with her today.

I took a position to await her beneath an old elm—an ideal vantage ground with views of the two main paths from Knight's Manor. I caught sight of her familiar form, dressed in green, upon the grey mare half a mile away. When she came within thirty yards of me, I emerged from the shelter of the tree and waved.

She returned the gesture and slowed the horse from a canter to a walk when she neared me. "Good morning, Mr. Darcy. You are welcome back to the neighbourhood."

"Thank you, Miss Bennet." I indulged in a moment to drink in the sight of her unique beauty, enhanced on this occasion by her rosy cheeks and the wind-blown curls framing her face. Although the many images of her tucked away in my memory had made the days of our separation endurable, none compared to the reality. "My sister will not be riding this morning. I came here to find you because I need to speak with you on a subject of import."

"Oh, I see. I hope Miss Darcy is in good health."

"Yes, she is quite well." I swept my arm towards a track leading to the woods, adorned in rich russets, ambers, and yellows to herald the season. "There is a glade along that path where I thought we might talk. We may leave our horses tied here."

"Very well."

I assisted her to dismount, revelling in the all-too-brief contact. After we secured Lily and Regal, I offered her my forearm. She rested her limb upon mine with an exquisite lightness. I savoured the enticing essence, unique to her, that wafted around me. She did not speak, and I searched my mind for turns of phrase I might employ to request her hand; none of them seemed worthy. Yet my precise wording mattered not, as long as I made the offer.

At my suggestion, she settled upon a fallen log. I dismissed the notion of getting down upon one knee as too melodramatic. Instead, I stood before her. "From our first meeting, I have been drawn to you in an inexplicable and powerful way. Never before have I experienced such a phenomenon."

With a sharp, indrawn breath, her gaze lowered to her lap.

"Despite your initial disinclination towards me because of my purchase of Lily, your many singular qualities drew my admiration and regard. My affection for you has grown with our every meeting. By the time I left for town, I had resolved to make you my wife."

Elizabeth's head shot up, and her hazel eyes locked upon me. It seemed my declaration shocked her. No doubt she had believed a match between us to be impossible.

"Will you consent to assure my future happiness by accepting my hand in marriage?" There, I had done it. I indulged in a deep breath.

The stiffness in my posture receded, but as the seconds passed in silence, my weight shifted from side to side, and I pulled on my coat sleeves. Would she not speak? Faint, vertical furrows arose between her fine eyes; she appeared more troubled than elated.

"Forgive me, but I am taken aback." She gripped the garnet cross around her neck, rolling the crucifix between her fingers. "I had the impression you intended to court my cousin Cassie."

What nonsense is this? "Certainly not. Miss Barton is an acquaintance, nothing more." I winced; my response came out more forcefully than necessary.

"But she seems to be certain..." Elizabeth shifted her head sideways. "In any case, I had no idea you felt anything towards me beyond friendship. Although I am honoured by your offer, I...I cannot accept." Her soft intonation did nothing to lessen the sting of her refusal. My stomach muscles contracted, and a wooden sensation in my legs rendered me immobile. This could not be her final answer!

What would induce her to reject me? This ought to have been a moment of felicity; instead, a dull, heavy sensation afflicted me, almost as though I had drifted into a terrible dream. A cloudy film blurred my vision, provoking me to blink and avert my gaze from her. Did she mean to punish me for not having made my intentions known sooner?

With several measured inhalations, I attempted to soothe my inner tumult and ease the writhing pain in my chest before I fixed upon her again. "I should like to know the reason for your refusal. Unless I am mistaken, you have a favourable opinion of me, and you formed an affinity with my sister as well. I have the means to support you in comfort and provide anything you may wish for." *For Heaven's sake*, I could ensure you never had to part with *Lily*. Of course, to mention that would make me sound desperate...or ridiculous.

Her mouth compressed for a moment, yet a soft glimmer danced within her entrancing irises. "You are not mistaken. I like you and Miss Darcy very

much. Nevertheless, you deserve to marry a lady who returns your love, and I cannot state with certainty that I do.”

She does not love me. Yet she did not discount the possibility she could do so in the future. Unlike dozens of other ladies I could name, she would not accept me for material advantages or to elevate her rank. In her rejection, she managed to increase my longing for her. More than any other lady I had ever met, *she* was worth winning.

My error glared before me like a beacon in a storm: I had never made the slightest effort to *earn* her affections. Instead, my primary focus had been upon my futile inner struggle to overcome my feelings for her. All along, I had assumed her heart to be mine for the taking—an absurd and arrogant premise. I had been a conceited fool.

“I am sorry for any disappointment you may feel.”

Unequal, at the moment, to speech, I took a seat upon the log, landing rather clumsily and preserving a two-foot berth between us. I placed my palms flat upon the trunk to steady myself. “You have no cause to apologise, Miss Bennet. I have done you a disservice. I never behaved towards you as a suitor. Rather, I took pains to conceal my feelings for you with the erroneous expectation that in time, they would dissipate. In light of this, your response is judicious...and most commendable.”

A dense sensation hampered my throat. “I should be grateful for the opportunity to correct my blunder. Will you allow me to court you?”

She gave me a fleeting smile. “Yes, I should.”

At her answer, a burst of hope restored my vitality, and I sat taller.

“To be candid, I find it extraordinary that a man in your position would overlook the disadvantages to my situation”—her chin inched lower—“in particular, my lack of wealth and my connexion to a dissolute tradesman.”

“To my regret, I once gave more weight to those details than they merited.”

She shook her head. “I do not take your meaning.”

“Irrespective of the amount of money to your name or any detriment attributable to your relations, you have always been more than worthy of me by virtue of your superior character. I regret that I did not comprehend this fact from our first meeting.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “You continue to perplex me. I should never have guessed that you might take this outlook.”

“In time, I hope you will feel confident that you know me well. I encourage you to ask me anything you may want to know so you will not have doubts about my nature.”

She nodded. “I appreciate that.”

“First, though, I have a great deal to relate, and you are apt to find the information shocking.”

A short, euphonic laugh escaped her. “Nothing could shock me more than your earlier declaration.”

“In fact, part of what I have to say may distress you.”

The skin on her forehead constricted. “Oh dear. Well, by all means proceed.”

In a tentative style, I explained my decision to hire Mr. Notley and shared the pertinent details of his report. She listened in silence, with the occasional flaring of her eyes the sole hint to her thoughts. Whilst I recounted the evening Hayward and I spent with Mr. Gardiner and his wife, Elizabeth’s left foot tapped upon the grassy ground. At the conclusion of my narrative, I removed Mr. Gardiner’s packet from my coat pocket and handed it to her.

She turned the package reverently in her hands and examined Mr. Gardiner’s neat handwriting. “So, my uncle Gardiner has been writing to me each year?”

“Yes, that is what he told us.”

Elizabeth tore through the seal.

I leaned forwards and braced to rise. “Shall I leave to give you privacy?”

“No, I should prefer that you stay.”

My heart leaped at her sweet statement. “Very well.” When she reached the end of Mr. Gardiner’s correspondence, a single tear escaped the corner of her eye. I took out my handkerchief and pressed the cloth into her hand.

“Thank you.” She snuffled and dabbed at her face. “My uncle is kind and eloquent. He wrote that he and his wife would be pleased to have me stay with them, either on a temporary or permanent basis, and he offered to come to Wiltshire so we may meet.” She peered at me. “You spent an evening with my uncle Gardiner and his wife. What is your opinion of them?”

“I found Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner to be admirable people. I liked them very much.” The corners of her lips edged up.

Elizabeth took up the second page, a shorter letter in a feminine hand, and glanced my way. "This one is from Mrs. Gardiner." She skimmed the missive. "She echoes my uncle's invitation and declares her eagerness to meet me. How generous of her."

Next, she unfolded a crude painting. "Oh, look at this!" She held up a picture depicting four children with a brown dog and read the writing on the back. "My cousin Tabitha painted this for me. She is eight years old. Is it not adorable?"

"Yes, quite so."

She refolded the papers and shifted closer. "Why would Uncle Barton go to such lengths to keep me and Uncle Gardiner apart? He must have taken my uncle Gardiner's letters. He declared that Uncle Gardiner took no interest in me and even made me *fear* him." She searched my countenance. "What could have possessed him to do this?"

"I know not. Mr. Barton's duplicity is deplorable. Hayward, too, is dismayed, as he had considered him to be an honourable man."

"He has been the closest I have had to a father." Her lower lip trembled.

I fought the inclination to take her in my arms. "I am sorry to have been the bearer of this disquieting information."

"You need not apologise. I should rather know the truth, however unpleasant it may be." She folded my handkerchief into a square. "Since I grew up believing myself to be penniless, I have wondered whether I might one day seek employment as a companion or a governess."

The cursed man! Mr. Barton had caused her to needlessly fret for her financial future. "Your uncle has abused his position as your guardian." My voice had a raspy sound.

She shuddered through her exhalation. "I cannot reconcile his actions. He maintained he had sold Lily for my sake, and the one thousand pounds you paid him would be set aside for me. That was the first time I ever argued with my uncle. I told him I did not want the money, but he said the deal could not be undone."

"Lily is another of my regrets. Although I had initially intended her to be a gift for my sister, Georgiana agrees with me that Lily belongs with you. If you will accept her, I shall give her to you now."

"I cannot do that, although I appreciate the generous suggestion." Her fingers kneaded her forehead. "I shall confront my uncle today and demand answers from him."

My chest tightened. "I urge you not to do that—not yet. He is your guardian and could decide to isolate you and prevent me and others from seeing you, at least until you reach your majority."

She chewed upon her lip. "I suppose that is a possibility. I shall turn one-and-twenty in May."

"Ah, I see." My jaw clenched. *May, seven whole months from now.*

"While I cannot conceive of Uncle Barton going to such extremes, I must not know him as well as I had believed."

"If you agree, I shall call upon Mr. Barton this afternoon and inform him of my intentions towards you. I want to avoid any further misunderstandings."

"Yes, I think that would be best." She folded her hands in her lap. "And I shall speak with Cassie lest she imagines you and she may make a match."

Blast. "I have attempted to avoid raising Miss Barton's hopes whilst preserving civility. It seems I may have failed. I should hate to be the cause of tension between you and your cousin."

Elizabeth flashed a smile. "I expect she will see reason, eventually. The most difficult aspect for me will be to keep what I have learnt about my two uncles to myself."

"I understand that will be a burden. Yet I could not in good conscience allow you to go another day not knowing the truth about Mr. Gardiner and the money he has been investing on your behalf." Although, I had hoped to explain all this as her *betrothed*.

"How long must this information be kept secret?"

"That depends on you." I swayed closer to her. "Are you prepared to meet Mr. Gardiner? The Haywards are willing to host him and his wife." Last night, Hayward had assured me that Mrs. Hayward would be pleased to have the Gardiners as guests. "If that comes to pass, the Haywards will make every effort to keep their presence a secret."

"Yes, I should like to see my uncle Gardiner as soon as may be." Her brow furrowed. "My uncle Barton must have directed Oliver, our butler, to intercept my correspondence from Uncle Gardiner. I shall write to Uncle Gardiner today and take my letter directly to the post office."

"You need not go to Salisbury. My messenger will deliver your missive for you. If you have your letter ready this afternoon, you may give it to me then. Otherwise, you may bring it to me at Springvale tomorrow morning."

"Thank you."

“I am glad to be of assistance. Once you have met Mr. Gardiner, we may plan the best way to confront your uncle Barton.”

She touched my arm, and I held still, diverted by the tingling warmth she generated. “I shall never forget what you have done. You have given back my uncle to me, as well as a family I did not know existed.” She removed her hand, leaving my limb bereft.

“Anything I may ever do to help you is my pleasure. No matter what the future brings, that will always be true.”

Her bewitching eyes lingered on me, and my breathing grew shallow. What should I do if she did not fall in love with me? *I need her.*



Back at Springvale House, a footman directed me to find Hayward in the study. My friend greeted me with a grin. “Well, Darcy, shall I be the first to wish you joy?”

“No, there is no call for that. At least not yet.” The admission left an acrid taste in my mouth, and I sat heavily in a chair. While I gave Hayward a succinct summary of my meeting with Elizabeth, he poured two brandies and set one at my elbow.

My friend took a seat across from me. “You must be disappointed that you are not already betrothed, yet there is every reason to hope that you and Miss Bennet will wed in time. I know her well enough to assert that if she had been decidedly against you, she would have denied your request for a courtship.”

“That is what I have been telling myself.” I took a healthy swallow of the liquor.

Hayward leaned back in his chair. “Will you inform Barton of your intentions for Miss Bennet?”

“Yes, I shall do so today.”

He stared into his glass before taking a sip. “I truly detest this situation with Barton. At some point, we shall have to tell him what we know.”

“Yes, but for the time being, I want to eliminate any possibility of incurring his ire. And there is the matter of *Miss Barton*. The sooner she knows there is no possibility of a match between us, the better.”

“Ah, yes. She has tried her best to get your attention.” His eyebrows shot up. “You know, I realise this will be cold comfort to you, but at least we know the problem of Lily has an easy solution.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you and Miss Bennet do not marry, she can well afford to buy Lily from you.”

A humourless laugh escaped me. “Yes, as comforts go, that one is rather frosty.”

Knight’s Manor
Elizabeth

Good Heavens, Mr. Darcy loved me and wanted to marry me! In a morning full of revelations, that one remained foremost in my mind, overshadowing my disappointment and confusion over Uncle Barton’s artifice—at least for now.

Had I erred in not accepting Mr. Darcy’s proposal? I could not state with surety that I did not already love him. How did one distinguish a true, lasting sentiment from a transient one? Before I met Mr. Darcy, I had experienced neither.

And until today, I had believed that a union between us could never happen, so I had not allowed myself to form an attachment to him. Of course, the heart is not so easily confined. And I could not deny that my entire person hummed in his presence with my senses attuned to him. Could this equate to nothing more than a physical attraction?

He could not have been more gracious at my refusal; a lesser man would have responded with anger and perhaps petulance. Furthermore, he would allow me time to become better acquainted with him.

Once I had returned Thea to the stables, I went towards the house. Yet the concept of encountering Uncle Barton twisted my stomach. Thus, I veered to the wooded path that followed the stream for a walk. In time, my thoughts centred upon Mr. Darcy again, and an added esprit marked my steps.

After a solitary breakfast, I removed to my room and sat at my escritoire to compose a letter to my uncle Gardiner. I had almost finished my missive when Cassie knocked and called to me through the door. My fingers jerked,

making a sizeable blot on my paper. “Yes, come in.” I placed a blank sheet over my writing and stood as she strode towards me.

Cassie swept her arm to the green brocade settee. “Shall we sit together?”

“Yes, if you like.”

She led the way and shifted to face me when I joined her. “How did you find Miss and Mr. Darcy this morning?”

I took a slow breath. “Miss Darcy did not join us today, and Mr. Darcy had a topic of import to discuss with me.”

She grinned. “Oh, I see. Did he want to speak about me?”

In actuality, I had made the same assumption and had been braced for him to confide his affection for Cassie. “No, I am sorry.” I locked my upper body in place. The sooner she heard this from me, the better. “This morning, Mr. Darcy asked me to marry him, and I—”

“*What?*” Cassie nearly shouted the word and followed it with a harsh laugh. “That cannot be true. Why would you utter such a flagrant fib?”

“You may be assured of my veracity.”

“No, I do not believe it.” She shrank back from me. “How could you, of all people, betray me like this? You *knew* I favoured him. Yet you must have been playing the coquette with him this entire time.” Her features stretched, then contorted into a grimace. “What have you done? Have you been...intimate with him?”

“No, of course not!” Fire shot up from my neck, overspreading my face. “How could you even ask that question? I have never so much as flirted with him. You know me too well to believe that.”

“I thought I did.” She beheld me with a bitter glare. “But a gentleman of Mr. Darcy’s standing would not propose to a penniless orphan who is connected to a nefarious uncle—unless he felt duty-bound to do so.”

With a slow breath, I attempted to subdue my indignation. “Well, that is not the case.”

“He could have his pick of eligible, wealthy ladies. Why would he choose you?”

“Over time, we have formed a *rapprochement*, and he has grown fond of me. We share several common interests, and he has observed how well I get on with his sister.”

“Miss Darcy is *my* friend too!”

“Yes, although I think she is more at ease in my company.” I used an even tone.

“Besides, she has a companion, so I do not understand why that would be important to him.” Cassie sprang to her feet and hugged herself. “This is too much for me to grasp. I...I cannot bear to even look at you right now.” She ran from the room.

I almost called after her but stopped myself. I should give her time to calm down before approaching her. Instead, I returned to my *escritoire* and finished my correspondence to Uncle Gardiner. I secured the letter in my pocket and moved to the armchair with my uncle’s copy of *Ennui* by Maria Edgeworth.

An hour or more later, a knock drew me from my reading. “Come in.”

The door opened to reveal Oliver. “Miss Lizzy, the master wishes to see you in the study.”

“Thank you, Oliver. I shall be there shortly.” Mr. Darcy must have called and would be waiting for me. I set down the book and perused my reflection in the looking glass. The anticipation of seeing him brought a rush of colour to my cheeks. But first, I must go to my uncle. I steeled my spine and went downstairs to the study.

Once I sat across from Uncle Barton, doubts crept in for Mr. Darcy’s testimony. How could this man, who had been so good to me over the years, have been so deceitful? Could some sort of misunderstanding have taken place?

My uncle greeted me with a broad smile. Judging by the reddish hue that tinged his ears and complexion, he had indulged in a drink or two. “Lizzy, I have had the most astonishing meeting with Mr. Darcy.” His lower jaw tarried in an open position. “He said that you *refused* his marriage proposal.”

“Yes, I did. As you may imagine, his declaration took me by surprise. I need the opportunity to know him better in order to make such an important decision.”

“Your logic is sound, and yet few ladies would hesitate to accept a marriage offer from a man of his wealth and rank.” His fingers rubbed upon his nape. “I feel foolish for having led you to believe your marriage prospects would be limited. After all, I understand very well that a man may go to great lengths to secure the lady he loves.” He blinked, his irises glistening.

He must have Aunt Barton on his mind; emotions often stirred him when he spoke of her.

"I hope you will forgive me for my error in judgment."

"Yes, of course." I bit my tongue. "I know you had my best interest at heart." *Is that the case, Uncle?*

"You are generous and understanding, as always." He shifted, and the tension in his shoulders abated. "Mr. Darcy is more reserved than most men, yet he displayed subtle signs of anxiety throughout our discussion—he fidgeted with his signet ring, and his gaze darted around the room. It seemed as though he imagined I might deny his suit." He chuckled. "It is a wonder I never noticed his preference for you." He angled his head sideways. "I informed him that you are not a blood relation, and the revelation did not discomfit him in the least."

"Oh yes. I ought to have mentioned that fact myself. I suppose it never occurred to me."

"No doubt that is because we *are* family, in every way that matters."

His tone, comportment, and facial expression gave every appearance of earnestness. If only I could take his words as truth. I nodded.

"Is...um...Cassie aware of Mr. Darcy's intentions?"

"We spoke earlier today. I am afraid she did not take the news well."

Uncle wagged his hand in my direction. "Do not be concerned. I shall speak to her and will ask Noah to do the same. She will not lament for long."

"I hope you are correct."

"Be assured that I shall not press you to accept Mr. Darcy. However, if you decide he is the right man for you, I shall be delighted to see you become mistress of a fine estate." Uncle Barton cleared his throat. "Now then, I imagine your suitor is eager to see you. He awaits you in the front sitting-room."

When I entered the cheery yellow room, Mr. Darcy strode to me and took my hand, raising it to bestow a kiss, and a sensory shock from his touch warmed my flesh, sending sparks up my arm.

"Good day, Miss Bennet."

"Good day, Mr. Darcy." Even after he released me, a succession of tingles persisted on the back of my hand. We took seats on the sofa. "I take it that your conversation with Uncle Barton went well."

"To my relief, yes." He used a soft tone and glanced at the open doorway. "I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for you to live here with your

uncle. For my part, I had to fight the impulse to demand an explanation for the deplorable way he has treated you.”

I retrieved my letter to Uncle Gardiner from my pocket and passed it to him. “Thank you for handling this.”

“The pleasure is mine. My messenger will have this in Mr. Gardiner’s hands on Monday evening.”

“I am eager to be reunited with him and meet his family. If you would not mind, I should be pleased to hear more about the evening you spent with Mr. Gardiner and his wife.”

“Of course, I should be glad to oblige you.”

I sat forwards in my seat, riveted by Mr. Darcy’s recital of the time he and Mr. Hayward had spent with my aunt and uncle Gardiner. He described them as educated, discriminating, and charming, increasing my eagerness to meet them. Yet dark possibilities intruded upon my enthusiasm. Should I be forced to choose between my uncle Gardiner and my uncle Barton? And if I maintained an association with Uncle Gardiner, should I become estranged from one or both of my Barton cousins?

Noah would never abandon me; I should swear that to be true. Cassie, though, if ordered by her father to forsake me, might not be strong enough to defy him. The possibility of a permanent estrangement from her inspired my shudder. For Mr. Darcy’s sake, I strove to maintain a collected aspect.



Chapter 10: A Heartfelt Reunion

Wednesday, 16 October
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

Despite the best efforts of Uncle Barton and Noah to cajole Cassie out of her resentment towards me, I endured two full days of avoidance and thinly veiled enmity from her. This morning, though, I entered the breakfast-parlour to find her seated at the table alone, and she did not flee when I settled in the chair next to her.

“Good morning, Cassie.”

“Good morning.” She used a dull monotone, staring into her partially eaten soft-boiled egg.

“You cannot remain incensed with me forever.” I moved the toast rack closer, selected a slice, and added it to my plate.

“Can I not?” With a heavy exhalation, she pushed the egg away from her. “You must be very pleased with yourself. Despite your lack of fortune, you have managed to attract the richest gentleman in the area. That is quite a feat.”

“No one is more surprised at that than I. But I do not care whether or not Mr. Darcy is rich. I admire him for the strength of his character.”

She shifted to face me. “Papa told me that you refused his proposal. How could you be so foolish? He has a respected name, a grand estate, and an earl for an uncle! If you have any sense, you will secure him as soon as may be!”

A twinge vexed me from deep inside my chest. Maybe I *had* acted as a simpleton. By now, I had eliminated all but the tiniest shred of doubt that I loved Mr. Darcy. I treasured every moment spent with him, and the thought of being separated from him filled me with dread. “Suppose I did become Mrs. Darcy. Would you be happy for me?”

Her features constricted, her lip protruding in a pout. “Oh, good gracious! Of course I should be happy for you. But you must give me leave to be disappointed. You know that I wanted to be mistress of Mr. Darcy’s estate.”

“Yes, but you never loved him.”

“You do not know that.” Cassie’s fingers drummed upon the table. By and by, she groaned. “Oh, very well. In truth, Mr. Darcy is not the person who has been on my mind of late.” Her chin lowered. “I think you can guess to whom I refer.”

Thank goodness. “Mr. Stephen Ware.”

She bobbed her head in assent. “For weeks I have refused to admit even to myself how much I miss him. Now I am filled with regret, yet there is nothing to be done. Michaelmas Term has already begun, and he will not return home until December. By then, he may already be engaged to someone else. I have ruined my life!”

I took her hand. “I am certain all will be well. He loves you.”

Cassie sniffed and raised her handkerchief to her nose. “I have been... um...composing a letter to him. But I do not know whether I dare to send it. Do you think I ought to write to him?”

“Well, it is not strictly proper. Yet in light of your former understanding, I think the infraction is lessened. Rather than use the post, it would be more discreet to employ Bill or another trusted groom to act as messenger.”

A familiar sparkle lit her eyes. “Yes, that is what I shall do. Thank you.” She leaned closer and embraced me. “Pray forgive me for the wretched accusations I made on Sunday.”

“You are forgiven.” I patted her back before releasing her. “Shall we call upon a couple of our tenants today?”

“Yes, I should be pleased to go.” She reached for her plate and tucked into her egg with gusto.

Saturday, 19 October
Knight's Manor
Elizabeth

“*Lizzy!*” Cassie knocked once and burst into my chamber before I could utter a response. She ran to me waving a piece of paper. “I can scarcely believe this!”

“My goodness!” I stood from my chair, dropped my book upon the table, and went to her. “What has happened?”

“Stephen still loves me! He received my express and wrote me a beautiful letter.” She pressed the missive against her bosom. “He has forgiven me for the unreasonable demands I made and for refusing to see him. He has apologised as well.”

“I am very happy for you, Cassie.” With a forward step, I took her in my arms. After a few moments, I drew back to view her, arching an eyebrow. “To my knowledge, Mr. Ware’s conduct has been faultless, so I am curious to know why he felt the need to apologise.”

“Well, he stands by his decision, yet he regrets that he did not explain his reasons in a more sympathetic manner.”

“I see.”

She paused for a deep inhalation. “And he will travel home on Monday for a short stay. He is coming to see *me!*”

“That is wonderful. I know Noah and Uncle Barton will be delighted as well.” Despite this pleasing news, a degree of tension remained in my shoulders. One day soon, my uncle would have to answer for his falsehoods; once that occurred, my association with the Bartons could become fractured, perhaps forever.

Wednesday, 23 October
Springvale
Elizabeth

I fidgeted in my seat for most of the ride to the Haywards' estate. At long last, I should see my uncle Gardiner again and meet his wife! To my disappointment, they did not bring their children on this visit; according to the express Uncle Gardiner sent me via Mr. Hayward, he and his wife had not wanted to burden Dame Hayward. Due to his business obligations, their stay would be limited to one se'nnight.

Earlier, I had fibbed to Noah, telling him that I had been bound for the circulating library. So, I breathed a bit easier when the carriage entered the avenue without passing anyone on the road who might remark upon having seen me. When we neared Springvale House, I caught sight of Mr. Darcy striding towards the vehicle.

Since his proposal ten days ago, we had continued our morning rides and dined together each evening, either at Knight's Manor or at Springvale. My love for him could no longer be questioned. I could not contemplate a future that did not include him.

The door opened to reveal Mr. Darcy, every bit as handsome as the image that so often dominated my thoughts. "Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to see you again."

"And you, Mr. Darcy." I clasped his proffered hand, and he assisted me to the ground. I took his arm, an act that had become second nature to me.

He bent his head near mine. "Are you nervous? You appear a little pale."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"You have no reason to be. All will be well."

His soothing baritone lent me a new burst of confidence, and I straightened my posture.

"The Gardiners have made a fine impression upon Mrs. Hayward, my sister, and Mrs. Annesley, and they are eager to see you."

"The feeling is mutual." When we reached an area that afforded a modicum of privacy, I tugged on his arm, halted, and moved to face him. "I have felicitous news. Although for now, you must keep this information to yourself."

"Very well. I shall take part in your intrigue." His playful reply inspired my grin.

"As of yesterday, my cousin Cassie is engaged to Mr. Stephen Ware." Following a great deal of pleading on Cassie's part, Uncle Barton had relented his former resolve that she wait until her next birthday to become

betrothed. He acknowledged that the two of them had endured enough strife, and Aunt Barton would have approved of the match.

“That is splendid. I am happy for them.”

“As am I. They truly belong together.” Tonight, the Haywards, the Wares, the Darcys, and Mrs. Annesley would dine at Knight’s Manor.

In the drawing-room, I exchanged salutations with Mr. and Mrs. Hayward, Miss Darcy, and Mrs. Annesley. All the while, though, my attention strayed to my uncle Gardiner and the attractive lady at his side; with their elegant attire and graceful presence, the pair manifested refinement. The two of them came towards me.

Dame Hayward indicated the couple before she addressed me. “Miss Bennet, I believe you may remember Mr. Edward Gardiner.” As I held still and stared, a clear image of him as a younger man superimposed upon his more mature features. Although he had grown stouter and his hair arched higher over his forehead, he wore the same amicable, unaffected visage he had back then.

I took a step closer to him and offered my hand. “It is a great pleasure to see you again, Uncle Gardiner.”

He took my hand and covered it with his other palm. “Elizabeth, if I may use so familiar a term, I have anticipated this moment for many years now. You have grown to be a beautiful lady.”

My gaze lowered, and no doubt my face reddened. “You are too kind, Uncle.”

“I assure you, I am only being honest.”

“You are welcome to call me Elizabeth or Lizzy.”

His smile widened. He released me to touch his wife’s hand. “Mrs. Gardiner, I am delighted to introduce my niece, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Mrs. Gardiner grinned at me, her brown eyes crinkling. “Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Her cordial air and dulcet voice put me at ease.

“I am happy to meet you, Mrs. Gardiner.”

At Dame Hayward’s urging, we all took seats, and she served the tea. Uncle Gardiner asked after my favourite interests, my association with my cousins, and my opinion of the Wiltshire area. Based upon his cheerful demeanour, my replies pleased him.

My uncle cleared his throat and glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Hayward before his attention returned to me. “If you are willing, Elizabeth, I thought you,

Mrs. Gardiner, and I should remove to the garden. The weather is ideal, and I noticed a lovely area with benches where we could sit and talk.”

“Yes, by all means.”

The three of us quit the drawing-room for the garden, and I sat opposite the couple.

Uncle Gardiner shifted closer to the edge of the bench. “Based on what you have told me, I should presume you have had an agreeable upbringing. Is that correct?”

“Yes, I should say so. With the exception of the months that followed my aunt Barton’s death, my life at Knight’s Manor has been content.”

“I doubt that I could ever forgive Mr. Barton for causing our estrangement over these past fifteen years.” He shifted into a taut position. “However, if you have been happy, then he must have been a tolerable guardian to you.”

“Yes, that is the case.”

Mrs. Gardiner rested her hand on Uncle Gardiner’s wrist. “We are very much relieved to hear your assurances.”

“Indeed.” The rigidity in my uncle’s shoulders abated. “I regret that our time here is limited. My hope is that, by the time we leave, you will be comfortable enough in our company to stay at our home in town. Perhaps you will decide to travel back to London with us when we leave. Or if that is too soon for you, we should be happy to have you at any later time.”

Mrs. Gardiner looked from her husband to me. “We should love to show you the delights of London—the gardens, museums, shops, concerts, operas, and plays.”

“That is generous of you. Everything you mentioned sounds wonderful.”

My uncle held me in his view. “Last night, Mr. Darcy told us about your morning rides. If you do not mind, I should like to join the three of you during my stay.”

“Yes, I should like that.” An image of Uncle Barton intruded upon me; he would be dismayed to learn about this meeting. “Do you anticipate encountering my uncle Barton before you leave the area?”

“With your agreement, yes. He has much for which to answer. Mr. Darcy, the Haywards, and I have discussed how this ought to be accomplished. We thought Sunday would be best, two days before we must depart for town. Mrs. Hayward would invite your household to tea.”

How might this confrontation unfold? The conversation would almost certainly become heated. “With Cassie and Noah present, my uncle may be less apt to make a scene.”

“Yes, and I imagine Mr. Hayward, due to his long friendship with your uncle, will help ensure the situation remains as civil as possible.”

“Did you discuss who would query my uncle Barton?”

“No, we did not.”

“I think it might be best if I questioned him.”

Uncle Gardiner gave me a long look. “If you are up to the task, I should not deny you the opportunity. And Mr. Barton is certain to take less offence from you than he would from me or even Mr. Hayward.”

“Yes, I fancy that is correct.” It occurred to me that he and Mrs. Gardiner would be left alone tonight. “I...um...regret that I cannot invite you both to Knight’s Manor this evening.”

Mrs. Gardiner moved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “You need not be concerned.” She shared a tender look with my uncle. “We are very happy for this opportunity to see you.”

My uncle nodded. “Yes, and we are content to have a quiet dinner on our own.”

At my request, Mrs. Gardiner provided a recital of how she and my uncle Gardiner had met. When my queries moved on to the subject of my young cousins, both she and my uncle described their four children, providing their likes, dislikes, and personalities. In turn, Uncle Gardiner, who shared my affinity for horses, queried me for the training methods I had employed with Lily.

When it became time for me to depart, we returned to the house, and I took my leave.

Mr. Darcy walked me towards my carriage. His chocolate-coloured eyes scrutinised me. “I take it you and your aunt and uncle had a pleasant talk in the garden.”

“Indeed, yes.” I recounted a summary of our conversation.

“I shall ensure that Mrs. Annesley keeps Georgiana busy elsewhere when this discussion with Mr. Barton takes place.”

“Yes, there is no reason for her to be involved, especially since the encounter could become hostile.”

“If you decide to stay with the Gardiners, I shall return to town as well and call upon you there.” He paused, taking a hard swallow. “Unless, of

course, you would rather I did not.”

I took a quick glance at the waiting coach. A powerful desire to assure him of my love caused my chest to clench. Yet that conversation merited a better time and place. “Whenever I do go to London, I shall be pleased to see you there.”

Mr. Darcy beamed at me and raised my hand to bestow a kiss, providing an ethereal jolt of sensation. “Thank you, Miss Bennet.”

You need not thank me. My throat closed up, though, so rather than attempt to voice the sentiment, I settled for a nod.

Sunday, 27 October

Springvale

Elizabeth

I moved my hands to my sides, then returned them to my lap and glanced out of the window at the familiar meadow. We should arrive at Springvale within ten minutes, and soon thereafter, everything might change. My uncle may blame me for my part in this contrivance. And what about Noah and Cassie? Would they come away from this full of resentment? How should I bear it if they became lost to me?

“Lizzy, are you well?” Noah sat forwards, espying me. “I asked whether you wanted to accompany me to Salisbury tomorrow. I imagine you are ready to return the book you borrowed last week.” My uncle Barton, seated beside Noah, raised his brows at me.

“Yes, I am quite well. Forgive me for not attending to you.” I bit the inside of my cheek. How I hated lying to my cousin! Yet I had little alternative at the moment; I had already agreed to spend most of Monday at Springvale, which would be Aunt and Uncle Gardiner’s last full day before they departed. “In actuality, I am not ready to return the volume quite yet, so you had better go without me.”

“Why is that?” A knot formed on Noah’s forehead. “It is rare for you to take this long to finish reading a book.”

“Yes, but of late I have not been reading as much as usual.”

“Perhaps the book is not to your liking. What is it?”

Fie! Could we not dispense with this topic? “It is a collection of poetry by an obscure writer. I cannot recall the title or the author’s name at

present.”

Cassie turned towards me. “How odd it is for you to not have the answer upon the tip of your tongue.”

I forced out a laugh. “Anyone may be absent-minded once in a while.” To my relief, my companions allowed that discussion to end. For the remainder of the ride, Noah and Uncle discussed the successes from the previous day, when they had gone shooting with Mr. Ware and Mr. Rowe. Meanwhile, Cassie pondered aloud, listing possible dates in January for her wedding, which she wanted to have in town. Her betrothed preferred to wed after he completed the Michaelmas term, and Cassie had decided to push the nuptials to after Christmas.

The Haywards greeted us near the entrance to the drawing-room. Mr. Darcy strode to me, offering his arm, which I took. A few steps later, I leaned upon his limb as my uncle Gardiner and his wife came into view; they sat with their backs to us.

Mr. Hayward beckoned Uncle Barton to follow him. “I have guests tonight, one who is known to you and one who is not.” Aunt and Uncle Gardiner rose and turned in our direction.

I followed my uncle Barton’s progress and noted the moment he recognised Uncle Gardiner: his facial muscles tensed, and his eyes grew steely.

“Have you lost your senses, Hayward?” Uncle Barton’s words came out as harsh and low as a hound’s growl. “Why is this man in your house?”

Uncle Gardiner came forwards in a controlled gait, his expression impassive. He maintained an erect, commanding posture as he accosted Uncle Barton. “It has been many years, Mr. Barton. I am glad to find you in a more lucid state than when we last met.”

“How dare you!” Uncle Barton bared his teeth in an inimical sneer, warping his face to resemble a dreadful mask.

In a subtle lateral move, Mr. Darcy placed himself as a physical shield between me and my two uncles.

“Easy there, Barton.” Mr. Hayward put a hand on Uncle Barton’s shoulder. “There are ladies present, and I expect this to be a peaceful meeting. The Gardiners are my guests, and they merit your civility.” He regarded Noah and Cassie, both of whom gaped at the scene. “For those of you who may not remember, this is Miss Bennet’s uncle, Mr. Edward Gardiner, and the lovely lady beside him is his wife, Mrs. Gardiner.”

“You must be mad, Hayward!” Uncle Barton glared at his friend. “What do you hope to achieve by this spectacle? You are aware of the pains I have taken to protect Lizzy from him.”

At this last statement, a momentary scowl broke Uncle Gardiner’s outward show of calm.

“I want to uncover the truth.” Mr. Hayward glanced at Mr. Darcy. “On our most recent trip to London, my friend and I met Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, and we discovered that the aspersions you have cast upon Mr. Gardiner’s character are incorrect.”

Uncle Barton shook his head. His breath came in heaves, his mouth gnarling. “So, you have taken his word over mine?”

“There is more at hand than opposing statements. Yet I know you to be an honourable man, so I expect there must be a reason for these... inconsistencies.”

“I shall not endure another minute of this nonsense!” Uncle Barton spun round. “Noah, Cassie, Lizzy, we are leaving.”

“Wait one moment, if you please.” At Mrs. Hayward’s request, my uncle Barton halted, and his frown softened. “I should be obliged if you would stay.” She met my gaze. “Over the past five days, Miss Bennet has become acquainted with her aunt and uncle Gardiner. As you may imagine, she has many questions for you, and I dare say Mr. Gardiner deserves an explanation as well.”

“What does she mean, Father?” Noah looked from me to Uncle Barton.

My uncle Barton opened his mouth as though to respond to Noah but failed to speak. He released a sigh and turned to me. “Very well. I shall tell you whatever you wish to know.”

At this, Mr. Hayward urged us to take seats, and Mr. Darcy led me to a settee where we sat together. Uncle Barton, Noah, and Cassie shared the sofa opposite us, while the Gardiners sat on my left. Dame Hayward distributed tea and glasses of wine. The time had come to learn the truth, yet my throat closed up. I glanced at Mr. Darcy, who gave me a subtle nod.

His silent encouragement conferred strength, and I raised my chin to observe my uncle Barton. “I have a clear memory of a conversation we had ten years ago. You told me that I lacked a dowry because my father had made an unfortunate investment. You went on to characterise Uncle Gardiner as a disreputable man from whom I needed to be shielded. Why did you tell me these falsehoods?”

Uncle Barton rubbed his temple. "Much of my past conduct is regrettable, but at least I may acquit myself with regard to your family's loss of funds. Some months after Rebecca's death, I searched her desk for any documents of import. I found a letter from a London bank stating that the account that had been opened for your late mother had been liquidated of the entire sum of five thousand pounds six months before the illness struck your family. Rebecca had several other papers pertaining to a barren silver mine in which your late father had invested."

"You cannot hide from the facts." My uncle Gardiner ground his teeth. "Yes, my late brother-in-law made a foolish investment or two over the years, but he did so with money he inherited from an elderly uncle. Your late wife possessed documentation of the investments I made in Elizabeth's name. After her death, I sent annual summaries of the funds to you. My niece has more than fourteen thousand pounds to her name."

Cassie gasped and raised a hand to her mouth.

"No, that cannot be true!" Despite the force of Uncle Barton's response, a shade of uncertainty coloured his words.

"I thought you might persist in denying the truth." Uncle Gardiner removed a piece of paper from his coat pocket and unfolded it. He stood and held the document before Uncle Barton. "This account statement shows the current value of Elizabeth's funds."

Uncle Barton paled as he perused the paper. He sank lower in his seat. "Upon my word, I...I had no idea."

"I have provided you a statement of Elizabeth's funds each year."

"Nevertheless, I never opened anything you sent. No doubt my wife kept the records you furnished her with, yet my search of her belongings focused upon notices from banks or solicitors. I never read any of her personal correspondence."

My uncle Gardiner returned to his seat, glowering at Uncle Barton. "Your statement, if true, reveals you to have been preposterous and irresponsible."

"You must believe me, Lizzy." Uncle Barton met my gaze. "I had no knowledge of this money. If I had, you would have been made aware of the funds, and I should never have accepted Mr. Darcy's offer for Lily. I agreed to that sale for you, so you would have a source of income."

"Under the circumstances, I cannot accept that money."

His head lowered. "For all these years I have wronged you. I am heartily sorry."

“Did my aunt Barton never mention the funds I inherited?”

“No, she...um...understood that I did not want to be bothered with such details.”

“Why should that be?”

He shook his head. “To my shame, I did not welcome the news that Mr. Bennet wanted my wife and me to be your guardians. Rather, I tried to convince Rebecca that we should refuse the responsibility. At the time, I thought the added burden would detract from the attention my son and daughter would receive from her.”

A gasp passed my lips as the verity of his statement impressed upon me. Had I not suspected as a child that Uncle Barton had resented my presence?

“But my wife would not hear of anyone else taking you in, and I could never deny her anything she truly wanted. So, you joined our household, and I...” He recoiled and his shoulders hunched. “I avoided you as much as possible. Rebecca knew my perspective, and she almost never mentioned you to me.”

To her credit, Aunt Barton had shielded me well from her husband’s animosity. She would make excuses for his lack of attention to me and often stated how much she loved and appreciated me.

“My concerns proved to be false, and Rebecca was never happier than in those final years of her life—the time she spent as your guardian. Even I could not help but notice how well you got on with Cassie and Noah. Yet my obstinate nature and my pride would not allow me to acknowledge your presence as an advantage. Two years after Rebecca’s death, when you began riding on horseback, I finally paid attention to you and recognised your sweet nature. And then I realised that having you here has been a gift to all of us.” A shimmer of moisture flickered in his eyes.

“Why did you cause this estrangement from my uncle Gardiner? What made you turn so decidedly against him?”

“I cannot excuse my behaviour, but I shall attempt to explain how this came about.” Uncle Barton tugged on his cravat. “Since the early years of my childhood, my parents had instilled in me the importance of preserving the separation of classes. Many in my circle concurred with this principle, including my first wife. Yet Rebecca insisted that the boundaries need not be stringent. When she first broached the subject of inviting your uncle to our home, I refused her. But she would not relent. She argued that we

needed to do this for your sake. Despite my misgivings, I could not continue to deny Rebecca. I should have done anything for her.”

Uncle Barton brushed his hand over his chin. “But everything changed when Rebecca and our baby boy died. I succumbed to grief, anger, and self-pity. I left for town, drank away the nights, and slept during the days. In a rare instance of sobriety, I wrote to Mr. Gardiner, informing him that he would not be welcomed in either of my homes again.

“One night I wandered into a gambling hall on Bond Street, and for a few hours, I found an escape from the relentless pain that plagued my every waking hour. Before long, I became a gamester. Then one evening I entered the street after hours of liquor and cards and stumbled into a man known to me.”

He turned towards Uncle Gardiner. “I was utterly ashamed to have been seen in that state by you, of all people, for I believed you to be beneath me. Although I attempted to explain that I had been to the nearby inn for a meal, I knew I had not fooled you. After that humiliation, my resolve to keep you away from Lizzy became stronger than ever.”

My uncle Barton’s gaze returned to me. “I told myself that I acted in your best interest. I believed you to be penniless, and I thought your connexion to a tradesman would harm your future prospects.”

With a convulsive inhalation, my entire body grew rigid. *This* is why he estranged me from my uncle Gardiner? “How could you have been so arrogant—so selfish?”

“I am disgusted by your deception, Father.” Noah’s harsh inflexion drew my gaze. Fire raged in his brown eyes. “You have dissembled to all of us for years and deprived Lizzy of her uncle, all to preserve your inflated sense of pride!”

My uncle Barton lowered his head. “My conduct is indefensible, so I understand why you all must be disappointed in me. Instead of honouring my dear wife’s wishes, I acted to preserve my own comfort and ensure no one would challenge my decision.” He sent me a brief look. “I withheld Mr. Gardiner’s letters to you for the same reason. I did not want you to press me for permission to see him.”

My hands curled into tight balls. “You had no right to keep those letters from me!”

“No, I did not. I am heartily sorry.” Uncle Barton glanced at Noah and Mr. Hayward. “Over the years, I have felt enormous guilt over these

falsehoods. I wanted to reverse my mistake and yet..." He blinked, his eyes shiny. "The truth is, I lacked the courage. But it is a relief to dispense with this mendacity. My apology extends to you all." His sight shifted to my uncle Gardiner. "And most especially to you, Mr. Gardiner."

Seconds elapsed, and the harsh glint in Uncle Gardiner's irises dissipated.

With his crumpled posture and the slight quiver that affected his hands, Uncle Barton appeared defeated. The stark and wretched nature of his confession eroded my energy—along with the majority of my ire for him. Despite his abhorrent actions, I could not bring myself to view him with contempt. This man had taught me how to ride and shoot, encouraged me to read and learn a variety of subjects, and allowed me to pursue the activities that interested me. Despite everything, I loved him.

With a cough, I found my voice. "As a child, I often wished for someone who could tell me about my mother, father, and sister. This past week, my uncle Gardiner has patiently answered my many questions, providing a description of their natures I never had before." My sight veered briefly to the others present. "I am grateful to Mr. Darcy and to Mr. and Mrs. Hayward for the steps they took to allow me this time with the Gardiners, and I have accepted my aunt Gardiner's invitation to stay at their home in town and meet my young cousins. I have not yet decided whether I shall travel to London with them or go there at a later date."

With my vision fixed upon Uncle Barton, I steadied my attitude. "Now that the truth has been revealed, I hope we may all begin anew and put this unpleasantness behind us."

Uncle Barton raised his eyes to me. "That is most gracious of you, Lizzy." A quaver hindered his words. He beheld my aunt and uncle. "Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, I want to extend an invitation to you both. On this or any future visit to the area, you are welcome to be guests at Knight's Manor."

Aunt Gardiner placed a hand on Uncle Gardiner's arm. "Thank you for the offer, Mr. Barton."

For a long moment, my uncle Gardiner stared at Uncle Barton as though pondering an enigma. Then he drew in a slow breath. "My niece is correct. There would be no benefit in holding on to rancour, and my priority has always been to act in her best interest. I am willing to disregard the past."

"I thank you." Uncle Barton reposed in his chair. "How long do you plan to remain in the area?"

“We must return to town on Tuesday.”

Uncle Barton rested his folded hands upon his chin. “It is a shame you will depart so soon. With your approval, I should like to hold a party at Knight’s Manor tomorrow in your honour. I shall inform my neighbours that my former opinion of you was faulty.”

“Thank you.” Uncle Gardiner spoke in a measured cadence. “My wife and I should be pleased to attend.”

“That is splendid.”

With the tension in the room abated, Mrs. Hayward asked Uncle Gardiner whether he and his wife had seen the latest production at the Covent Garden Theatre. A general conversation ensued on the merits and weaknesses of several popular actors and actresses. I followed the good-natured discussion until Mr. Darcy lowered his head near mine, and a pleasant shiver distracted me.

“I hope today’s discussion has unfolded to your satisfaction.”

“Indeed, I could not have foreseen a better conclusion.” I moved to fully face him. “I cannot thank you enough for all you have done to make my reunion with my uncle Gardiner possible.” When he grimaced, my abdomen tensed. How had I displeased him? “Pray tell me, what is wrong?”

“I should do anything in my power to assist you, for any service I may render you is a rewarding endeavour. Yet the last thing I want is for you to feel an obligation to me. No matter what you may decide with regard to us, you owe me nothing.”

His intent gaze stole my focus, delaying my response. “Very well. I shall keep that in mind.”

“Furthermore, I should not want Lily to influence your decision in any way. Once you reach your majority, you will have the funds to purchase her.”

“Yes, I shall be able to afford the one thousand pounds in May.”

“No, I shall sell her to you for a more reasonable sum—forty guineas will be sufficient.”

Forty guineas? My eyebrow arched. “That would be a most regrettable investment for you. Buying high and selling low is not a sound way to conduct business.” I used a soft tone lest he take offence at my little gibe.

“In general, that is true, but not in this instance, for I have received more than my money’s worth with Lily. She has allowed me to spend many priceless hours in your company.”

Under his ardent gaze, my first instinct—to protest his statement—faded away, and a rush of warmth flooded my person. “That is the finest compliment I have ever received.”

His lips raised at the corners, diminishing the fervour in his expression whilst increasing his allure. “Since I lack the talent and eloquence to impress you with fine speeches or pretty verses, I am well gratified.”



Chapter 11: A Most Memorable Party

Monday, October 28
Knight's Manor
Darcy

Throughout my conversation with Mr. Gardiner, I sent frequent glances to Elizabeth, who served cups of coffee and tea. She wore a gown of lemon-coloured spotted muslin and had never looked lovelier. Her pleasing person, fluid movements, and cheery demeanour had an infectious quality; not only did she raise *my* spirits, but everyone she met appeared more sanguine for having encountered her.

The reconciliation between Mr. Barton and Mr. Gardiner yesterday had lifted a great weight from my shoulders. If their reunion had been disastrous, I should have borne the blame for my part in bringing the two men together.

My sole remaining anxiety rested with Elizabeth. For the first time in my life, my privilege, wealth, and authority meant nothing, for they would not influence her heart. If she decided against me... No, I should not contemplate the possibility—not whilst hope remained for a better outcome.

“Pray, could you remind me of that lady’s name?” Mr. Gardiner’s head tipped towards the older petite woman speaking with Hayward.

It took a moment for the answer to come to me, for although I had been in company with the lady several times, we had not exchanged more than a few words. “That is Mrs. Ware of Hawthorn Ridge.”

“Ah yes, thank you. Usually, I am skilled at associating names with faces, but I have been introduced to three brown-haired ladies today, all of a similar age.”

A flash of movement behind him caught my attention. Miss Barton led a pleasant-looking lady in our direction and proceeded to introduce us to Mrs. Vaughan, the eldest daughter of Mr. Rowe. In response to Mr. Gardiner’s questions, Mrs. Vaughan, who wore a perpetual smile, related that she lived with her barrister husband in Northampton and described the local area. As she spoke, she toyed with a striking circular jade pendant suspended from the gold chain around her neck. The green stone resembled a flower—a rose. A *jade rose*. Could this possibly be Mrs. Cooper’s necklace—the one stolen on the night of her murder?

My pulse throbbed in my ears as I awaited the first break in the conversation. At last, they each paused to sip from their cups, and I gestured to Mrs. Vaughan’s throat. “Your necklace is striking.”

“Oh, thank you.” Mrs. Vaughan adjusted the pendant to a straight position.

Miss Barton leaned closer to inspect the jade stone. “I agree. It is beautiful.”

“This is a family heirloom.” Mrs. Vaughan fingered the pendant and raised it from her sternum. “For years, we believed it had been lost, but my father found it a couple of months ago tucked inside one of my mother’s handkerchiefs.”

So, Mr. Rowe had recovered the necklace around the time of Mrs. Cooper’s murder. I could not discount such a significant coincidence. Could this mild-mannered man, who enjoyed the respect of his neighbours and friends, including Hayward and *Elizabeth*, be capable of homicide? An icy sensation traversed my back. I needed to confront him without delay.

With a mumbled excuse to my companions, I rambled through the room towards Mr. Rowe, who stood conversing with Mr. Noah Barton. Both men turned to me at my approach. “Pardon my interruption, but I should like a word with Mr. Rowe.”

“Yes, of course.” The elder gentleman’s smile widened, even as his eyebrows rose.

Mr. Noah Barton patted Mr. Rowe’s shoulder and regarded me. “Well, in that case, I shall leave you to it.” He inclined his head and walked away.

I glanced at the doorway. “Would you mind if we removed to another room?”

“No, not in the least.” Mr. Rowe swept his arm forwards. “You may lead the way.”

I chose the sitting-room at the front of the house; in the event he raised his voice, we should be a fair distance from the others. The two of us took seats in matching Thomas Hope chairs situated near the fireplace.

“Well, you have piqued my curiosity.” He stretched his legs out, easing into a relaxed position.

“Two months ago in London, my nearest neighbour, Mrs. Cooper, was murdered in her home.”

Mr. Rowe stiffened, and the colour drained from his face.

“I have met with the Bow Street runner investigating the crime, and I am aware the primary suspect is a gentleman who called upon Mrs. Cooper on the night of the killing. Based upon witness statements, this man used the assumed name of King, wore a white wig, and is believed to have come from the Salisbury area. I think the man in question is you.”

A derisive noise spewed from Mr. Rowe’s lips. His hands formed a tight ball, and his knuckles whitened. “There must be many men in the area who fit that description.”

“You had the opportunity since you spent most of August in town, and I imagine Mrs. Cooper’s servants would readily identify you on sight.” I waited a beat for him to grasp the consequence of my words. Mr. Rowe’s show of bravado crumbled, with his shoulders bowing inwards. “Do you deny that you called upon Mrs. Cooper whilst concealing your true identity?”

His chin dropped. “No, I...I do not.”

I swallowed. “Did you kill her?”

His head shot up. “What? No! I never harmed Mrs. Cooper in any way.” He moved to the edge of his chair, searching my countenance. “Is that what you think? I am no murderer! Anyone who knows me would tell you that.”

“A porcelain vase disappeared from Mrs. Cooper’s home on the night of her death. Also missing is a necklace. A gold chain with a jade pendant in

the shape of a rose.”

A choking sound escaped him. “Oh yes, the necklace. I can see how this must look.”

“You had better explain your actions. Why did you misrepresent yourself to Mrs. Cooper? And what happened on that last Thursday night in August?”

“Very well.” He adjusted his position, resting an elbow on the chair. “Ten years ago, my wife spent several weeks in town at the home of her sister. During a dinner party, someone entered my wife’s guest chamber and stole her necklace, a beloved antique that had been passed down in her family.”

“Do you refer to the pendant your daughter is wearing tonight?”

“Yes. My sister-in-law assumed one of her servants had to be the guilty party. She directed her butler and housekeeper to question everyone in their respective charges and to search the rooms below stairs, but they did not recover the necklace. However, one of the footmen reported having seen Mrs. Cooper descending the stairs during the party. When he approached her to enquire whether he could be of service, she became flustered. She asked to be directed to the ladies’ withdrawing-room, and he obliged her. There had been no reason for any guest to have been on the second floor.”

He grimaced. “My wife lamented the loss as she associated the jade pendant with her grandmother. She never doubted that Mrs. Cooper had stolen the necklace, but she could not make an official complaint without proof.”

No doubt the woman had stolen from my aunt Lady Matlock in a similar manner and robbed many of her acquaintances over her lifetime.

“Five or so years ago, my dear wife succumbed to an aggressive form of cancer. Not long thereafter, I read the notice in *The London Chronicle* of the jeweller in Piccadilly who had accused Mrs. Cooper of theft. I did not doubt her guilt and attributed her eventual acquittal to the strength and influence of her wealth, standing, and family name.

“Nevertheless, the episode with the necklace faded from my memory until this past summer when I patronised my favourite bookseller on Bond Street and overheard the shop girl address an elegantly attired lady in her sixth decade as ‘Mrs. Cooper’. Although I had never met the woman, she fitted the description my wife had provided. This circumstance afforded me a rare opportunity, for I had been wearing a white peruke that I had purchased earlier in the day.”

“Why did you buy a wig?”

He shrugged. “I suppose you could call it an impulse. I had never worn one before, but the shop boy declared it would be an improvement over this.” He passed his palm over his pate. “At any rate, the peruke disguised my usual appearance, and it occurred to me that I could employ an assumed name to determine whether Mrs. Cooper possessed my wife’s necklace. I thought that, if I formed a friendship with her, she might wear the pendant in my company. So, I approached her and presented myself as Mr. King, an old friend of her deceased husband. We shared a pleasant conversation, and she granted me permission to call upon her. Thereafter, we met at her home twice a week for most of August. Then, on that final Thursday evening, she wore my wife’s necklace.”

Mr. Rowe raised a handkerchief to a trace of perspiration on his temples. “We had dined and returned to the drawing-room before I summoned the nerve to reveal my identity and accuse Mrs. Cooper of having stolen my wife’s heirloom years before. By then, Mrs. Cooper had dismissed the butler for the evening.

“Although I had expected her to be angry at my revelation, the force of her response took me aback. A tremor afflicted her hands, and her face took on such a startling shade of carmine that I thought she might be suffering the throes of apoplexy. Then she stood, unclasped the pendant’s chain, and threw it at me. She told me to take the lousy necklace and be gone. I obliged her. And as God is my witness, that is the entirety of my involvement with the lady.”

“You maintain that you never touched her?”

“That is correct. When I left the house, Mrs. Cooper was furious but very much alive.” His intent gaze locked upon me. “You believe me, do you not?” He threw his hands up. “I did not harm her!”

With Hayward’s words of praise for the man echoing in my head, the suggestion of him being my neighbour’s murderer seemed implausible. Yet if Mr. Rowe did not kill Mrs. Cooper, then who had committed the crime? I scrambled for any remaining unanswered questions. “What happened to the missing vase?”

“I have no knowledge of the vase. Perhaps the killer stole it.”

“What time did you leave Mrs. Cooper’s house?”

“Well, I arrived at six and remained for no more than two hours.”

I pressed my knuckles to my lower lip. Someone could have entered the house after Mr. Rowe left. And since Mrs. Cooper had dismissed most of the servants for the evening, that person may not have been observed.

Mr. Rowe held me in a steadfast stare. "Pray tell me, what do you intend to do now?"

"You are an esteemed member of the community, and I am inclined to believe you. Nevertheless, I am honour-bound to notify Mr. Notley, the Bow Street runner, of your testimony. He may see fit to question you further."

He rubbed his hands over his trousers. "*By Jove*, he may assume that, because I had been to Mrs. Cooper's house that evening, I must be the one who murdered her."

"I have observed him to be a skilled and thorough investigator, so I expect he will follow all the evidence. I suggest you compose a written account of everything you have told me. I shall forward your statement to Mr. Notley and indicate that you have been cooperative and made no attempt to evade the subject or conceal the truth."

"Very well." In a laborious movement, he stood and trudged to a mahogany desk. "The Bartons keep writing supplies here, so I shall compose my account now." He raised a pen, gesturing towards the door. "You may as well join the others. I shall find you later."

Upon my return to the drawing-room, Elizabeth caught sight of me, parted from Miss Barton and my sister, and strode in my direction. My pace accelerated as I went to meet her.

"There you are." Her glittering irises distracted me, disrupting my respiration. "Noah said you left with Mr. Rowe."

"Yes, we had a matter of business to discuss."

She took a backwards glance. "Cassie will have the card tables brought out soon, but I thought we might take a walk in the garden." Her smile took on a teasing disposition. "Unless, of course, you are keen to play whist."

"Not at all. I shall always choose you over cards."

A becoming blush overspread her complexion. "I am pleased to hear it."

We left the house and strolled upon the winding brick path.

"Our roses and chrysanthemums are thriving." She gestured to the plants on either side of us. "Aunt Barton favoured them, and they are among the few flowers that bloom so late in the year."

At her statement, I spared a look at the colourful bushes to our left and right. “They are lovely.” Although neither their vivid hues nor their floral redolence could compare to Elizabeth’s charms. I stopped short of uttering the thought, for I had already made my feelings for her plain. Or would that be a mistake? Maybe I ought to—

With pressure on my arm, she halted, prompting my own steps to cease. She moved to confront me. “Although my childhood was happy for the most part, I often lamented that, unless I married, I should remain a burden to the Bartons.”

My back stiffened. “I wish Mr. Barton had never given you the misconception of being penniless.”

She touched my upper arm, and a grin lit up her countenance. “But now, everything has changed. The funds that Uncle Gardiner invested for me are a gift far beyond their monetary value. Unlike most others of my sex, I may choose to live the life that best suits me.”

A snarl tangled my gut. Had she chosen to remain unmarried? Or maybe she desired a Season in town. Maddening images filled my head: Elizabeth dancing and laughing with other gentlemen.

“I need not bind myself to a husband for money, position, or property. If I chose to, I could marry a penniless man.”

Good God, I had lost her. She meant to reject me and find someone else, a man with whom she could fall in love. A burning sensation blurred my vision, and I fought to maintain an erect posture.

“But in a fortuitous twist of fate, the man who has stolen my heart happens to be wealthy.” Her hazel orbs glistened in the afternoon sunlight.

Every inch of me stilled. Could I have misunderstood her, or did she refer to *me*?

“It is high time I made my sentiments known to you. I love you utterly and completely and want nothing more than to spend my life with you.”

She loves me. Her declaration combined with her captivating beauty to place me in a dream-like, mute daze. I stepped closer and interlaced her hands with mine. An electric incandescence emanated from her and shot up my arms. My yearning for her defied the nagging voice in my head that cautioned me to heed propriety. Thus, I embraced her, savouring her entrancing form, so pliant and feminine. She lay her head in the crook of my neck. Her breath wafted over the skin below my ear in a most provocative manner.

“Elizabeth.” I swallowed, my voice husky. “I love you so very much.” I should have been content to remain in that beatific position indefinitely, but she stirred, inching back to peer at me.

“Forgive me for having made you wait. At the time of your proposal, I did not understand my own heart, though I do not doubt now that I already loved you then. I have wanted to reveal my sentiment since last week, but with all that has taken place, the time never seemed right.”

“You have no need to apologise.” My sight froze upon her rosy lips; did I suffer under a delusion, or did they beckon me? It would not do to rush her into an intimacy beyond her comfort, yet neither should I squander this opportunity. “My love, if you are agreeable, I am...I should like to—”

With a slight nod, she raised upon her toes and pressed her lips to mine. Never before had I been so effectively silenced and elated at once. Her grip tightened around my waist, her fingers pressing into me. I allowed my hands to slip under the fabric of her spencer and explore her back.

It occurred to me that I ought to keep this first kiss chaste lest I overwhelm her, yet she pressed further against me, leading me to dismiss the concern. Her touch, her fragrance, and her nearness had an exhilarating effect, whilst delivering a narcotic more effective than the finest and most potent of liquors.

Then my Elizabeth, the darling minx, drew my lower lip into her mouth in a gentle sucking motion. A faint groan escaped me as I waged an internal battle to maintain my self-control.

She started and drew back from me, tucking her chin. “Forgive me. I...I do not know why I did that.”

I raised my palm to cradle her cheek. “My love, you have done nothing except bring me enormous pleasure.”

Her gaze inched higher to meet mine. “Truly?”

“Yes. Moreover, I should never want you to be restrained with me, as long as we are alone.”

A sparkle illuminated her hazel eyes. “I had no notion that a kiss could affect one’s entire person, almost like tiny fireworks dashing through my veins. Even now, my senses are heightened, and my legs are weak and trembling.”

Her words had a bewitching effect upon me, so it took several moments for the gist of her last statement to spur my action. I took her hand and

supported her lower back with my other arm. "Let us move to the bench." I led her forwards, and we sat together.

"I have decided to travel to town with the Gardiners tomorrow and stay with them for the next few weeks."

"Then Georgiana and I shall return to London on the morrow as well."

"You need not depart so soon, especially on such short notice."

"I have informed Hayward and his wife, as well as Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley, of the possibility, so no one will be taken unawares."

Her smile brightened at my reply.

Dear Lord, she would not want a long engagement, would she? "Have you considered where and when you would like us to marry?" *As soon as possible?*

"Ah, well... Where do you attend church in town?"

"St. James's in Piccadilly."

She nodded. "The Bartons belong to St. George's, but Cassie has been to St. James's and has declared it to be lovely. Should you like to marry there in a month's time?"

"If that suits you, I should like nothing better."

"Then it is settled."

Thank goodness. "Shall we go there on Friday so you may meet the rector, Mr. Andrewes, and we may make the arrangements?"

"Yes, by all means."

The breeze picked up, sending a surge of coolness through the air and rippling the thin fabric of her shawl.

"Are you cold?"

"No." Her lips curled up in a coy style. "But perhaps you should take me in your arms again to ensure I do not take a chill."

"I am at your service." Elizabeth's delectable figure melted against me as I held her, her slender arms snug around my middle and her head resting upon my shoulder. Warmth emanated from my chest and spread through my limbs with a tingling sensation. Before I met Elizabeth, I could never have fathomed such felicity. Back then, I had merely existed. With her at my side, my life would be vigorous, vivid, and complete.

Monday, 7 September 1812

Pemberley

Elizabeth

A soft chuckle escaped me, and I shook my head, setting Cassie's letter upon the desk. Marriage had not altered my cousin's tendencies in the least, and she took delight in managing the household at Hawthorne Ridge. In this missive, she lauded Mr. Stephen Ware's efforts to increase the estate's yield of grain and expand their herds of cattle and sheep. Cassie declared that her husband's income had surpassed that of her father.

In addition to her usual effusions of idle gossip, accounts of recent parties, dinners, and dances, and detailed descriptions of her latest acquisitions from the milliner or mantua maker, Cassie shared a notable bit of news: Noah had fallen in love!

Cassie related that, ever since he made the acquaintance of Miss Rowe, the niece and guest of Mr. Rowe, Noah had found an excuse to call upon the Rowe residence each day. To my knowledge, he had never been so charmed by a lady before. Might we have another wedding to attend soon?

Fitzwilliam and I had married in the beautiful sanctuary at St. James's Church and spent our wedding night at Darcy House. My aunt Gardiner had counselled me on what to expect in the marital bed and answered my questions with unflinching frankness. Still, that first night had proved to be a bit awkward, with Fitzwilliam wary of causing me pain and my apprehension of disappointing him rendering me hesitant and shy. But after a few days and several candid conversations, we dispensed with such trifling concerns. Now, we spent our intimate moments generating a wondrous degree of mutual pleasure.

As for Pemberley, I could not be more delighted with my new home and the many entrancing aspects of nature around us, including the green rolling hills, River Derwent, moors, sandstone formations, and the limestone plateau.

My husband had never caused me to doubt his profound affection for me. I could almost compare his love to a living entity—one that fortified and shielded me like an impenetrable suit of armour from all who would attack me. And I had been subjected to no more than two or three hostile encounters. The vigour of his aunt Lady Catherine's animosity, though, gave me pause. A week before our wedding, she had appeared at my uncle Gardiner's house and made a deplorable attempt to persuade me to jilt Fitzwilliam. Needless to say, she left dissatisfied.

Fitzwilliam had apologised on her behalf and informed Lady Catherine that she would not be welcome at either of our homes until she had repented to my satisfaction; yet no attempt at her atonement had been forthcoming, and Fitzwilliam disclosed he found the estrangement from her to be closer to a blessing than a punishment.

Thus, I had no room for complaints. Despite my nervousness at meeting my husband's uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Matlock, they treated me with perfect civility, if not cordiality. As for the other Fitzwilliams, Lord and Lady Berkeley and Colonel Fitzwilliam, I found them to be charming.

Dearest Georgiana had become a true sister to me. She had confided her disinclination to make her debut, although it would not occur until two years hence. Like her brother, she disliked having public attention upon her. Before her eighteenth birthday, I should make every effort to allay her fears and increase her self-confidence.

A familiar set of footfalls disrupted my rumination, and my husband appeared in the doorway. "Elizabeth, is this an agreeable time to talk?"

"Indeed, it is." He appeared sedate, but not dour, so I maintained a sanguine air as we took seats upon the sofa.

He threaded his fingers through mine and rested our entwined hands upon his thigh. "Bingley has written to me with unfortunate tidings. Your cousin Mr. Collins has expired from a severe illness. He had obtained a minor laceration on his wrist that developed a lethal infection."

For a moment, I weighed the appropriate amount of bleakness for a distant relation not of my acquaintance. "Oh, that is sad news."

"My friend has renewed his invitation for us to stay at Netherfield Park."

"Are you of a mind to accept?" During our sojourn in town, I had made the acquaintance of the amiable Mr. Bingley, his two arrogant sisters, and his rather boorish brother-in-law. At our wedding feast, Mr. Bingley had asked whether we might spend a few weeks at his leased estate before we travelled north. He had not quite concealed his disappointment when Fitzwilliam recounted our plan to go directly to Pemberley.

"If you agreed, I thought we might leave for Hertfordshire tomorrow and stay at Netherfield for a time. We could take the opportunity to pay our respects to Mrs. Collins."

The lady's mother-in-law had died from apoplexy this past January. My cousin and his wife had not been blessed with children, so Mrs. Collins had been left alone in the house. "Yes, we ought to go. I should be glad to see

Longbourn. Besides, Mr. Bingley is eager to have us as his guests, and for his sake, we can tolerate his sisters.”

A smile lightened his aspect. “I agree. And we need only sustain Miss Bingley, for Mr. and Mrs. Hurst are staying with a friend in Norwich.”

“Ah, that does sound better. Shall we take Lily and Regal?”

“No, it is a long distance for a relatively short stay. Lily will be content with Robert giving her daily attention.”

“Yes, I dare say you are correct.” I bit my lower lip. During our first week at the estate, Lily had formed an attachment to her new groom, Robert. I could almost be jealous of their bond. Of course, thanks to him, I could leave Lily at home without concern for her wellbeing. “Will Georgiana come with us?”

“I shall ask her, but I believe she will prefer to remain here. She is almost as uneasy in Miss Bingley’s company as she is with Lady Catherine. She cannot abide the lady’s insincerity and peculiar attention.”

My eyebrow inched upwards. “Whereas *you* are inured to such adulation.” I had witnessed that treatment of him, and myself by association, by people of all classes on enough occasions in town.

He wrinkled his nose. “Yes, I suppose that is true.”



Chapter 12: The Mistress of Longbourn

Friday, 11 September
Netherfield Park, Hertfordshire
Elizabeth

The avenue curved along green pastures and continued past a rustic gardener's shed and a charming pond. Then Netherfield House came into view, with adjacent oak trees casting long shadows across the handsome stucco façade. I removed my sight from the window to peruse my husband. "Are you prepared to endure Miss Bingley's officious consideration?"

He leaned in to kiss the bare skin on the side of my neck, inciting my contented sigh. "Not long after we met, I made a wondrous discovery—everything I once found difficult or tedious is easier with you present."

What a beautiful compliment. I licked my lips, and my mouth tarried near his ear. "A powerful inclination induces me to reward your gallant speech. Alas, that must wait until we reach the privacy of our rooms."

His dark eyes burned into me as he moved his face opposite mine. "You are a singularly maddening woman, Mrs. Darcy. Will you ever cease teasing me?"

“Hmm.” I tapped my lower lip in a show of contemplation. “No, I do not believe so.”

“Thank the stars for that.” He kissed the tip of my nose then settled back against the squabs.

Both Mr. and Miss Bingley met us in the vestibule, the former with an energetic and warm welcome, the latter with the same—for my husband. She engaged *me* in a more placid style with a smile that never stirred her eyes.

Fitzwilliam and I removed to our guest rooms. Once we had refreshed ourselves, made superlative use of our time alone, and rendered ourselves presentable, we joined our hosts in the drawing-room.

The furnishings reflected the latest proclivities in home decorating, much as Miss Bingley’s silk gown and matching feathered turban brought to mind the fashions so often on display in town.

With a jaunty air, a beaming Miss Bingley ambled to my husband and handed him a glass of white wine. “Mr. Darcy, this is your favourite hock. We had it sent for you from London.”

“Thank you, that is most kind.”

“If there is ever anything you desire, you need only ask.” She shifted to me, and her posture stiffened. “What would you like to drink, Mrs. Darcy?”

“A claret would suit me. Thank you.”

Mr. Bingley adjusted his seat forwards. “Darcy, shall we ride out on the morrow, before breakfast, and take a tour of the estate?”

“Indeed, yes.” Fitzwilliam glanced my way. “And since Mrs. Darcy is an accomplished horsewoman, she may want to accompany us.”

Mr. Bingley’s sight settled upon me. “You are most welcome to come.” Seated to the right of him, Miss Bingley’s features puckered.

Although my husband’s genial friend revealed not a trace of displeasure for the suggestion, he may have anticipated the opportunity to speak with Fitzwilliam in private. “I should like to go, but not for the whole of the morning.” I beheld Mr. Bingley. “Perhaps we might circle back to the stables after an hour or so, and you two could continue on without me.”

“By all means, we shall do that.” With a grin, Mr. Bingley reclined against his chair.

Miss Bingley’s mouth wrested downwards, as though from a bitter taste. “Yesterday, I received a most peculiar and impudent note from our neighbour Mrs. Collins.” Her expression softened when she fixed upon

Fitzwilliam. "She has learnt of your impending visit and entreated me to impart a request. She asked that you and Mrs. Darcy call upon her at your earliest convenience."

How very odd. Why would Mrs. Collins request an audience with us? "Is that the entirety of the message?"

Miss Bingley shot me a quick look. "Yes. I found it shocking that she would impose on the two of you this way." She gestured to my husband. "After all, Mrs. Collins's acquaintance with you is flimsy, and she has never even met Mrs. Darcy. I had half a mind to destroy the note without any mention, but I thought you both ought to be forewarned that she may have some sort of contrivance in mind."

Tensing my facial muscles, I resisted the impulse to gape at her. I should much sooner suspect *her* of a nefarious plan before I should that poor widow.

"Contrivance?" Mr. Bingley directed a rare frown at his sister. "I cannot imagine why you would suspect Mrs. Collins of any sort of misdeed. She is a kind and honourable lady."

She raised a forefinger to Mr. Bingley. "I know you have a favourable opinion of her, but you are far too indiscriminate with your approval. And you must allow that she breached decorum by begging the Master and Mistress of Pemberley to honour her with their company—especially now, when the woman is in full mourning."

"As it happens"—my husband gave Miss Bingley a severe look—"Mrs. Darcy and I had already intended to pay our respects to Mrs. Collins." He met my gaze. "Shall we go to Longbourn tomorrow at three?"

"Yes, that would be convenient."

"That is exceedingly magnanimous of you." Miss Bingley adjusted her ruby necklace, ensuring her fichu did not obscure the stone. "For you to show Mrs. Collins such condescension is beyond what anyone would expect. I ought to accompany you to ensure she does not overstep her bounds."

Heavens above. I pressed my lips flat lest I blurt out an immoderate protest. If Mrs. Collins had personal business to discuss, she would not want to disclose the information before Miss Bingley.

"I appreciate the offer." My husband displayed a wan smile. "But since this is such a distressing time for Mrs. Collins, my wife and I shall call

alone. I should not want to tax her with the need to entertain more than two guests at once.”

“As you wish. Be prepared, though, for a rather paltry manor. They lack a drawing-room and entertain guests in a smallish parlour with shabby furnishings.”

I gnashed my teeth. How dare she denigrate my late father’s estate?

It seemed Miss Bingley realised her faux pas, for she blanched, and her head swung towards me. “Rest assured, I mean no insult whatsoever to *you*. Your parents have not presided over the property for many, many years. I do not doubt the residence appeared more elegant in those days. And it is no wonder the place looks so plebeian now, for Mrs. Collins’s father used to be a *tradesman*.”

What audacity! Based upon Miss Bingley’s affectation of superiority, an uninformed observer would be surprised to learn her fortune had come from her deceased father’s business.

Mr. Bingley, perhaps sensing my husband’s displeasure in the conversation, changed the subject. He regaled us with an enthusiastic description of his latest litter of seven springer spaniels, sired by his best hunting dog. At my request, he agreed with alacrity to show us the puppies before our ride in the morning.

Saturday, 12 September
Longbourn
Elizabeth

I leaned near the coach window to savour the view of the stone Tudor-style home. Although it paled in size to Pemberley House, and yes, Netherfield House as well, I should not have called the residence ‘paltry’.

“What do you think of the place?”

With a glance at my husband, I set back in my seat. “It is charming. No matter what Miss Bingley may say, I fancy many people prefer a home that is cosy rather than grand.”

“I agree.” He angled his head towards me. “Although I hope you are not displeased with the magnitude of Pemberley House.”

“Not at all. I love every room and passage of our home—in particular on days with inclement weather, since I can obtain the exercise I crave by

walking through them in comfort.”

The butler led us to the parlour, and I gave the area a quick survey. Although modest in size, the room boasted two large windows overlooking a lovely garden. And while the fabric on the sofa and chairs revealed subtle signs of wear, these pieces appeared to be of fine quality.

Mrs. Collins stood upon our entry. She made for a dowdy figure: a lady nearing thirty years of age with unremarkable features and deep folds darkening her forehead. Her black gown did not flatter her pale skin; instead, the bleak tint lent an added emphasis to her weary appearance. But most of her facial lines dissipated when she gave my husband a weak smile. “It is good to see you again, Mr. Darcy.” She moved to include me in her gaze. “And I am honoured to welcome you here.”

“The pleasure is ours.” Fitzwilliam patted my arm. “Mrs. Darcy, I should like you to meet Mrs. Collins.”

Upon rising from my curtsy, I stepped nearer to her. “I am glad to make your acquaintance, though I am very sorry for the circumstances. My husband and I offer our deepest condolences for your loss.”

“That is kind of you.” Her mouth flattened for a moment. “I...um...did not know whether you would come.”

“Even without your note, we should have paid our respects.” My sight wandered around the room. “Since I have no memories from the time I lived here, I have long wanted to see this house.”

Her brown eyes widened, and her palms drew together. “Oh, of course! That is understandable. Shall we take a tour of the house and grounds now and return here for tea afterwards?”

“That is kind of you to offer, but we should not want to burden you. A servant could take us at a later time.”

“Not at all. It would be my pleasure to show the place to you.” Mrs. Collins raised her hand to her chest.

“Well...that would be lovely.”

A new burst of energy fuelled Mrs. Collins’ steps as she led us throughout the manor. Fitzwilliam and I followed, arm in arm, and I attempted to picture a very young version of myself running through the corridors or playing in the nursery. Of course, nothing seemed the least bit familiar. Yet, the dwelling had a cheery ambience and must have made a fitting abode for my family. The park offered cobblestone walks through the gardens, which bordered upon a lush section of wilderness. Narrow paths

led to a wooded area to the west of the house, to the out-buildings, and to the surrounding meadows.

Back in the parlour, Mrs. Collins poured the tea. From the assorted refreshments offered, I added a biscuit and a slice of pound cake to my plate. Fitzwilliam, seated beside me on the settee, chose a rhubarb tart.

When she settled back in the chair, her earlier vivacity vanished. Her sight riveted upon me. "Four days ago, whilst poring through my husband's desk to sort his documents, I made a disturbing discovery. A grave injustice has been perpetrated against you." A faltering exhalation passed her lips.

I perked to an erect bearing. What sort of injustice could she mean?

"Among Mr. Collins's writings, I discovered a journal in my late mother-in-law's distinctive hand. She had written about her life over the past thirty years. I read the diary out of curiosity, for my husband had never spoken of his life before he and his mother moved to Longbourn. He had been a child of eight at that time." She bowed her head. "The late Mrs. Collins had known that if she bore a son, he might inherit Longbourn one day. Yet she suffered many miscarriages and feared she would never have a successful pregnancy. She finally gave birth to a son, William, but the surgeon told her she would never have another child. Unfortunately, William died from ague at the age of two."

"*What?*" The word squeaked from me. I glanced at Fitzwilliam, and his hand settled atop mine. I took a beat to summon a more measured tone. "Did you say that my cousin Mr. William Collins died before he could have inherited Longbourn?"

"Yes, that is what happened. Based upon my mother-in-law's journal, the child, William, had appeared to improve during the day, but his condition took a fatal turn late that evening. Mr. and Mrs. Collins discovered their son's lifeless body in the morning. For two days, the couple remained shut up in their home with their dead child, grieving the loss of their son's future inheritance as much as the son himself.

"Mrs. Collins pressed her husband to make burial arrangements for William, but Mr. Collins devised a plan to conceal their son's death. They took his body to Oxford, where they believed they would not be recognised, and buried him there under a false name. Next, they repaired to town. Mr. Collins went to the St. Giles neighbourhood and purchased a two-year-old male who bore a vague resemblance to their child from a destitute woman for forty pounds. He had this boy christened as William Collins and

thereafter passed him off as their own. The elder Mr. Collins perished from consumption a few years before his wife and adoptive son took possession of Longbourn.”

Mrs. Collins paused, her chest heaving. “Four years ago, I married a fraud, an impostor. This scheme cheated you out of your rightful legacy.”

My legacy? “But as a female, I could not have inherited in any case.”

“In actuality, that is not true.” My husband’s remark drew my gaze. “If no eligible living male relation existed upon Mr. Bennet’s death, Longbourn should have gone to you, his sole living child.”

“Oh my!” I sank lower in my seat, my emotions in flux.

“There is no doubt of that.” Mrs. Collins reached out to the nearby table and grasped a vellum book. “I have perused the entail documents and set them aside for you.” She placed the volume in her lap, leafed to a place marked by a ribbon, and studied the page.

Fitzwilliam squeezed my hand and held me in a steady gaze. I took strength from his calm, assured presence. When I gave him a fleeting smile to indicate my wellbeing, he faced Mrs. Collins. “This is a shocking allegation. Does this diary provide pertinent dates and locations?”

“Yes, the death of the true William Collins is recorded at St. Michael’s Church at Oxford under the name Robert Smith. And my mother-in-law’s former abigail, who has remained in my employ, has admitted her knowledge of the Collinses’ contrivance. Before you depart, I shall summon her here to answer any questions you may have.”

“May I see the journal?”

“Rest assured, I shall ensure you take it with you. First, though, there is another matter I must relate.” She turned to a page near the end of the journal. “My husband and mother-in-law took a trip to town in June 1811. They attended a party where my mother-in-law encountered an old friend, Mrs. Cooper, a widow who resided on Park Lane.”

Fitzwilliam stirred beside me, moving to the edge of his seat. It took a moment for the significance of the name to hit me: Mrs. Cooper, the neighbour who had been murdered last year. My husband had related the entire disturbing saga, which had led to his questioning my friend Mr. Rowe, of all people, as a possible suspect. Despite a renewed effort by the Bow Street office to find new clues, the crime remained unsolved.

“After forming a friendship at a school for girls, the late Mrs. Collins and Mrs. Cooper sustained the association, and they corresponded for much of

their adult lives. On the day following young William's death, my mother-in-law had written to notify her friend of the loss. Once she and her husband agreed upon the plan to replace William, Mrs. Collins dissociated from Mrs. Cooper. So, you may imagine the lady's surprise upon encountering her estranged friend accompanied by her son, Mr. William Collins."

A grimace distorted Mrs. Collins's countenance. "My late husband could always be relied upon to boast of his inheritance at every opportunity, and he found an eager listener in Mrs. Cooper. She soon deduced the fraudulent scheme that had been perpetrated. Thus, she accosted my mother-in-law and demanded two thousand pounds in compensation to maintain her silence.

"My mother-in-law agreed to pay the requested sum. But upon consideration, she realised that to grant the requested amount would provide no assurances whatsoever that the lady would not make further demands.

"Rather than acquiesce to the extortion, my mother-in-law resolved to silence her former friend forever. With knowledge of the lady's habit of staying awake past midnight, my mother-in-law went to Mrs. Cooper's house late at night, when most of the servants had retired. She sneaked inside and managed to creep behind Mrs. Cooper whilst the lady sat upon a chair. My mother-in-law had taken a knife with her but at the last moment rejected the weapon as being too untidy. Instead, she threw her silk scarf over Mrs. Cooper's head and strangled her."

Good God! Could this be true? My gaze shifted to my husband. A knot had formed on his forehead.

He ran his hand down his lapel. "Mrs. Cooper was my neighbour, so I am familiar with the circumstances of her death. How could your mother-in-law have committed this crime without being seen?"

"Her past visits to the home, both as a young lady and as an adult, made her familiar with the house's configuration. And she disguised her appearance by wearing an old cloak that belonged to one of her maids and the scarf covering her head. If challenged by one of the servants, she would have made an excuse and fled, but no one noticed her. She entered through the kitchen and departed by the front door." Mrs. Collins's eyes grew wide. "Oh yes, and my mother-in-law took a small porcelain vase before she departed the house. According to her diary, the vase belonged to her and had been stolen by her erstwhile friend."

"Where is the vase now?" asked my husband.

Mrs. Collins pointed behind us. "It is there, on the mantel."

He rose and walked to the fireplace for a better view of the sapphire vessel. "This fits the description of the vase taken on the night of the murder." He returned to his seat.

With a shudder, I edged closer to him. "It is difficult to imagine any woman committing such a dreadful act."

"Yes, I know." Mrs. Collins wrung her hands. "However, I do not doubt the veracity of my mother-in-law's written account. She returned from London at the end of August a different person from the composed, confident one I had known. She had become nervous, timid, and laconic. She suffered from insomnia, drank to excess, and shunned her friends and neighbours. Less than three months later, she succumbed to apoplexy. It seems the guilt weighed upon her and hastened her death."

Mrs. Collins closed the journal and relinquished it to Fitzwilliam, betraying a slight tremble in her hand. "I have asked my father to find a modest room to let in another shire. With your indulgence, I shall remain here until I have arranged for suitable lodging."

My husband looked up from the diary. "Will you not move back to your family's estate?"

"No, I cannot." She averted her gaze. "Once my mother-in-law's crimes become common knowledge, the scandal could damage my family. I hope to shield them by distancing myself."

But that is not fair! My stomach writhed at the notion of Mrs. Collins relegated to a dreary boarding house, forsaken and forgotten by her friends. "I think you ought to stay at Longbourn House." I glanced at Fitzwilliam, who gave me a slight nod. "Assuming there is no legal impediment, and the estate will become mine, you may remain for the foreseeable future. I hope to have children, but it may be five-and-twenty years before I have an heir old enough to manage Longbourn."

She rubbed her temple. "Are you offering to hire me as a housekeeper or perhaps a caretaker?"

I pressed my mouth flat. "No, for I should not want to lower your standing." I turned to Fitzwilliam. "What do you think? There must be a better way to handle the situation."

He held his knuckles to his lips, as he often did in contemplation of a problem. "My understanding is that Mrs. Collins has long been making the decisions with regard to the estate." His sight shifted to her. "Is that the case?"

“Yes, upon my marriage to Mr. Collins, I took the responsibility over from my mother-in-law. My husband never took an interest in estate matters.”

“Let us assume all goes as expected, and Mrs. Darcy takes ownership of the property. I propose we sign a lease agreement stipulating that you will run the estate in lieu of paying rent, and you will receive fifty percent of the net income. Over time, you will accumulate a modest fortune.”

I beamed at him. “That is a splendid idea!”

Mrs. Collins, though, shook her head, her brown eyes shiny. “That is exceedingly generous of you, and I wish I could accept. But I cannot remain in the neighbourhood. If I did so, I should be...shunned.”

That poor woman! “This fate cannot be inevitable, for that would be an outrage! You are innocent of any offence. Furthermore, many in your place would have burnt the diary and ensured no one ever learnt the revelations within. Instead, you proved yourself to be honest and noble.” I touched Fitzwilliam’s arm. “You and I may be able to prevent the damage to Mrs. Collins’s reputation, may we not?”

“Indeed, I believe we can.” He gave me a winsome smile, and it took all my powers of restraint to keep from kissing him. I settled for a subtle caress of his upper arm.

“Pray do not suppose that I am ungrateful.” Mrs. Collins’s voice cracked. “But I do not think there is any hope of keeping the sordid details of this scandal from being known.”

“No doubt that is true.” Due to the illicit nature of the late Mrs. Collins’s actions, the story would spread like a wildfire through the community. “Whilst we remain in the area, my husband and I shall reveal the late Mrs. Collins’s crimes whilst we praise your integrity and declare you to be our friend. I fancy others will follow our example. Your state of mourning limits our ability to appear with you in public for now, but we shall invite you to our home in town when you are able to accept.”

“Yes, that sounds like an effective plan.” Fitzwilliam closed the journal and placed it on his lap. He gestured to Mrs. Collins. “If anyone casts aspersions against you within our hearing, we shall contradict them.”

“My goodness, I am speechless.” Her words came out in a whisper. “I should be honoured to accept your offer, and you both have my heartfelt thanks.”

“You are welcome.” I beheld Fitzwilliam in an admiring gaze. “And you ought to know that when he wishes to be, my husband can be a formidable object. I doubt any of your friends and neighbours will have the temerity to oppose him.”



Once ensconced within the privacy of the coach, I did not hesitate to reveal my thoughts to Fitzwilliam. “*Bless me*, what an astonishing visit! Mrs. Cooper’s murderer has been revealed, and my childhood home may be restored to me.”

“Indeed. Upon our return to Netherfield House, I have letters to write. I must notify Mr. Notley, the Bow Street runner, of the late Mrs. Collins’s confession. Based on the journal and the written statement I received from the abigail, I shall direct my solicitor to initiate a lawsuit in your name claiming the rightful ownership of Longbourn.”

I took in the staid state of his profile as he stared out of the window. “You appear a bit sombre. Do you doubt that we shall prevail in court?”

“No. I am indignant on your behalf. You have suffered the past mistreatment from Mr. Barton, and this business with Longbourn is yet another malfeasance perpetrated against you. You ought to have grown up secure in the knowledge that you had an estate to your name.”

“Pray do not be offended on my behalf. Even if granted the power to change the past, I should decline rather than risk altering the circumstances that brought you into my path. I could not be happier with my lot in life.”

He turned to scrutinise me. “Is that the truth?”

“Without a doubt. Have I ever given you any cause to think otherwise?”

“No. Still I...” He swallowed. “I love you so very much that I sometimes wonder whether I am seeing what I *wish* to see.”

“Nothing is clouding your vision, my dearest love.” I snuggled against Fitzwilliam. His arm enclosed my shoulders, and I rested my head against him. His familiar, enticing scent fed my senses, further elevating my joyous state. “We may count upon your amiable friend Mr. Bingley to aid us in our contrivance for Mrs. Collins, for he is always eager to please. *Miss* Bingley, on the other hand, is disposed against her and may present an obstacle.”

“Leave Miss Bingley to me.”

“Oh?” I arched back to view him, raising an eyebrow. “Do you have a peculiar bond with her?”

“Not at all. Nevertheless, her fondness for my wealth, property, and position in society is excessive, and she covets the connexions I might provide her. Thus, my continued good opinion is essential to her, and she will not hesitate to do me this favour.”

With a giggle, I settled against him again. “Well, it will be diverting to witness Miss Bingley’s alteration from Mrs. Collins’s detractor to her fervent defender.”

“As you must know, I live to provide you amusement.” He lowered his head, leaving soft kisses on the side of my neck. The whole of me warmed, and a familiar longing stirred my pulse—one only he could satisfy.

In that moment, it occurred to me that Cassie’s advice with regard to Fitzwilliam, to ‘secure him as soon as may be’ had been sound; not for the reasons she cited but for the advantage of experiencing this particular form of pleasure weeks sooner. Of course, back then I lacked the advantage of retrospect. After all, how could anyone have predicted that the purchase of my beloved horse by an arrogant stranger would precipitate such a wondrous improvement to my life and lead to my current state of bliss?

The End

Acknowledgements

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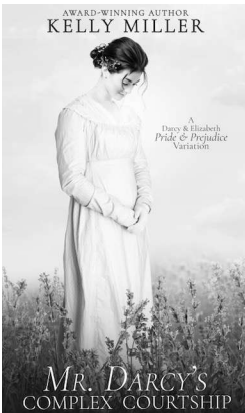
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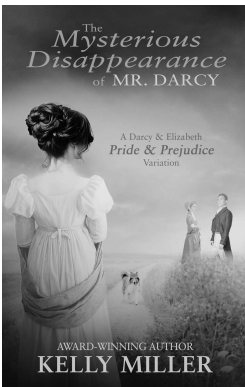
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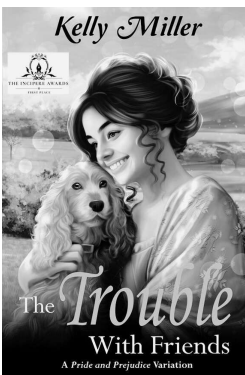
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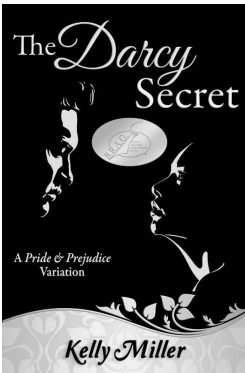
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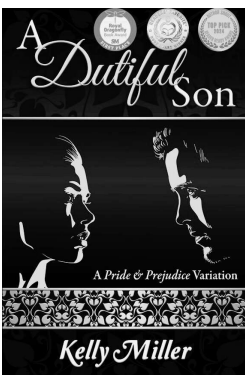
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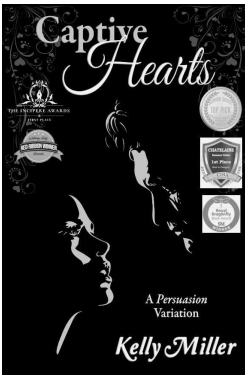
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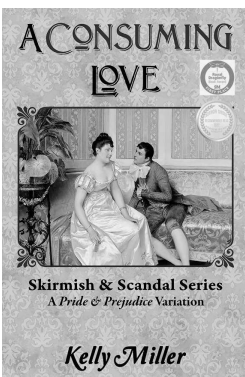
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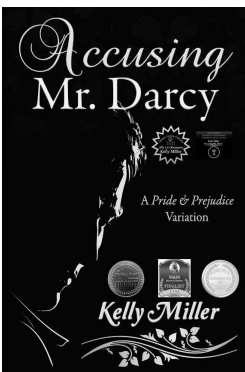
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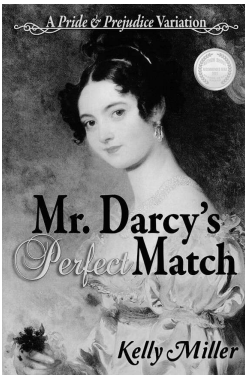
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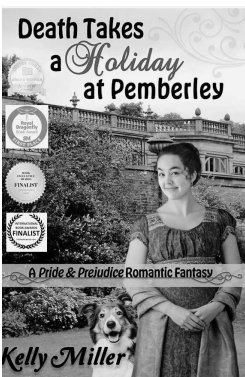
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