

THE UNRAVELING OF MR. DARCY

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE VARIATION

Valerie Lennox



Punk Rawk Books

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CHAPTER ONE

The moment that Miss Elizabeth Bennet laid eyes on Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, nothing especially remarkable happened. She noted to herself that he was a handsome man. He was tall and dark and had broad shoulders. His arms were rather thicker and more powerful than his companion Mr. Bingley's arms. If you liked that sort of thing in a man—powerful arms and broad shoulders, that is. If you liked that sort of thing in a man, then Mr. Darcy was altogether pleasing.

Elizabeth did like that sort of thing in a man, she had to admit. Not that it mattered, of course, because Darcy was part of the party from London that Mr. Bingley had brought to the ball in Meryton. Bingley himself was rather high above the station of Elizabeth and her sisters. Though Elizabeth's mother thought it possible, even likely, that Bingley would choose a bride among the Bennet sisters—of which there were five—Elizabeth did not harbor any such vain hopes.

Her desire for the evening was a bit of fun and diversion. She would like to dance and be merry. She would see her friend Miss Charlotte Lucas, and they

would laugh together over the assembled gentlemen.

Elizabeth was not looking for a husband that night.

But she was struck by Mr. Darcy's gaze meeting hers across the room. Only a few moments after she laid eyes on him, he seemed to notice her. He held her gaze for a long, long moment, and then he coughed and looked away, and he did not catch her eyes again.

No matter to Elizabeth. By this time, she had begun to realize that nearly everyone in the room was taken with the appealing looks of Mr. Darcy. She resolved not to give him another thought.

* * *

When Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy laid eyes on Miss Elizabeth Bennet for the first time, he reacted rather violently, but he did his best not to let it show. Indeed, he was quite mortified by his reaction, which wasn't the least bit appropriate or proper, and he spent the next hour walking around the dreadful public ball, trying desperately to get himself under control.

Mr. Darcy found Miss Bennet attractive. He did not know her name yet. That would come later. For now, she was simply the pretty girl with bright eyes and a lively smile who had been staring openly at him when he looked up to see her. There had been a smile playing on her lips. It bespoke mischief and joy and delight.

And if it had been just that, it would have been bearable. But he found himself noting other things about her. She was quite nicely put together, and she

had long, delicate fingers, and fine features, and there was the matter of her bosom and her hips, which he couldn't see too clearly under her gown, but what he could see was delectable. One look at this girl, and Darcy's mind had immediately tunneled into carnal fantasy. He'd thought of unpinning her hair, of freeing her breasts from her —

He was horrified to be thinking such wanton thoughts.

And, well, aroused. Physically aroused. He was worried that it was obvious, that anyone who looked at him could see how he had reacted.

By all rights, he should not have responded this way. It was horrid. It was most improper and entirely embarrassing, as if he were some adolescent boy who was still unschooled in the ways of the world. He wasn't the sort of man who got excited at the drop of a hat, or at least he hadn't been for some years now. And yet, here he was, at this dreadful public ball in Meryton, with Bingley and his sisters, walking with his hands clasped in front of his crotch, wishing that it would subside. He might as well have been in the ninth circle of hell as far as he was concerned.

Darcy tried to convince himself that no one could tell. No one was going to be staring at his crotch anyway, and if they did, it would be easily as embarrassing for them as it was for him. No person would dare to comment on such a thing. They'd pretend they hadn't noticed. So, in that respect, it was as if it wasn't happening.

When he gave off on reassuring himself, he

immediately turned to any attempt possible to make the blasted thing go down. He thought of all sorts of boring and disgusting things—anything to get his mind off of it, but nothing worked, not even thoughts of his dead mother, which—by all rights—should have fixed everything.

He wondered vaguely if there was something wrong with him. Maybe he'd contracted some kind of awful illness that had affected him there. After all, there were soldiers here at the ball, and they were exposed to all manner of ailments. He supposed, as illnesses went, this one was at least not painful, well, not yet, anyway, although he supposed that things might well get there if he stood around for too long in this manner.

What if it never went away? Darcy tried to imagine going to a doctor and explaining that his clock was striking a perpetual twelve. He was mortified. He couldn't possibly.

But no, he would be spared the indignity, because this wasn't brought about by some sort of malady. This had come upon him after an appropriate stimulus, so it was likely not borne of some sort of illness. Likely, it would go away, eventually.

He was only puzzled at his reaction. It was hardly like him. He wasn't the sort of man who was generally taken away by the sight of a pretty woman. And certainly, he didn't tend to respond in such a base way at a social function like this.

Well, if one could really term this sad excuse for a ball a social function, he supposed. It was dreadful in every way. Crowded, full of dancing bodies, the

music nearly drowned out at times by boisterous conversation.

Darcy was not the sort of man who enjoyed this sort of thing. He liked his activities to be ordered and neat and civilized. Everything in its place. And, for that matter, a ball was no place for vulgar thoughts or base physical reactions.

Darcy felt utterly out of control, and he wasn't happy about that either.

He gathered that the girl who had wrought this unfortunate circumstance upon him was the sister of the girl that Bingley kept dancing with. Oh, yes, Bingley seemed to be having a really good time. Darcy, hiding behind a chair, glowered at his friend.

There was nothing special about the girl. No reason that Darcy should see her and be seized in the throes of lust. She was pretty, even tempting, even entrancing —

He really needed to *stop thinking* about that girl.

Of course, he had spent the whole of the evening seeking her out with his eyes, and every time he caught sight of her, he thickened and stiffened and throbbed. He wanted to put his hands on her. He wanted to put his lips on her. He had never felt so violently attracted to a woman in his entire life.

He didn't even know a thing about her.

Mr. Hurst, the husband of one of Bingley's sisters, lay a hand on Darcy's shoulder.

Darcy jumped. He'd been so lost in thought that he hadn't heard the other man approach.

"You know what would improve this assembly?" said Hurst. "A game of whist."

Darcy smiled tightly at the man. "Indeed," he allowed. Hurst seemed only concerned with his card playing.

"Listen, Darcy," Hurst continued, "Mrs. Hurst is desirous of another dance, but I'm far too exhausted. Be a good man and dance this one with her in my place?"

"No," said Darcy. "I couldn't possibly."

"Why not?" said Hurst.

"Yes, why not indeed?" said Mrs. Hurst, giving him a cross look. "You haven't danced with anyone since arriving."

Darcy's jaw twitched. He looked back and forth between Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, hoping that a proper excuse would swim to the tip of his tongue. Instead, he thought of that girl with her eyes closed and her head thrown back and his mouth on her –

"Fine," said Darcy, moving stiffly around the chair. *Mrs. Hurst can't tell*, he assured himself.

Mrs. Hurst beamed. "Oh, thank you, Darcy."

Perhaps dancing with Mrs. Hurst would help, he thought. After all, he didn't find her attractive in the least. She was the more timid of Bingley's sisters, which was probably why she'd been married off so quickly when the other, Miss Caroline Bingley, was still hoping for an offer. But, truth be told, Darcy found neither of them the least bit attractive. Partly, he supposed, because he thought of them as Bingley's sisters, not as desirable women. Mrs. Hurst, of course, was taken. And Caroline was simpering and stupid. There couldn't be an original thought in her head. She was tiresome.

Dancing with Mrs. Hurst did not help in the least.

But he was consoled by the fact that she didn't seem to notice anything amiss. In fact, she hardly seemed to notice him at all. She chattered on about how she thought they should attempt to prevail upon her brother to quit Netherfield for town, even though the entire party had only lately arrived. Besides which, she was a married woman and could go wherever her husband wished, regardless of her brother's wishes. Darcy didn't say any of this, however.

It was nearly impossible to talk, because moving around the room—his drawers too tight against the straining, throbbing part of his body—was a special kind of agony that only worsened the situation.

At one point, the girl twirled past him in the arms of someone else. Her cheeks were pink and flushed and she was laughing.

Darcy wanted her so badly in that moment, he thought he wouldn't be able to continue standing.

But he managed to keep moving. And eventually, the dance was over. Unfortunately, afterward, Caroline Bingley wanted him to dance with her. Darcy was too addled at that point to know how to refuse her, so he danced with her as well.

But when that dance was over, he was adamant that he couldn't dance another dance, not even when Bingley left off with the sister of the siren and came back to try to convince him.

Darcy said that he wouldn't. He used the strongest language he could. "It would be insupportable."

Bingley was having none of it. "I would not be so fastidious as you are for a kingdom. Upon my honor I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them, you see, uncommonly pretty."

Darcy glared at his friend darkly. *Oh, yes, pretty. Though pretty doesn't go quite far enough. Bewitching. Maddeningly enticing.* But Bingley would leave him alone if he made his friend realize he wasn't interested. "You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room."

"Oh," and Bingley's voice changed, "she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld." He paused, simply staring at the girl he had been dancing with. "But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I daresay very agreeable."

Darcy didn't have to turn his head to know who it was Bingley was talking about. It was the girl who had made him lose his head, who had put him in this embarrassing situation to begin with. Darcy thought about telling Bingley the truth. *I won't dance with her because looking at her has made me rise to the occasion in the most dreadful of fashions, and I want the floor to open and up and swallow me whole.* Instead, he said, "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me, and I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me."

Something in his manner must have convinced Bingley, for he didn't pursue the matter any further,

but left Darcy alone.

There was no more dancing that night for Darcy, and for that, he was pleased. However, he could not help but surreptitiously steal glances at the girl for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER TWO

Elizabeth Bennet lay in the darkness next to her sister Jane and laughed. "Tolerable? Can you believe he said such a thing? Isn't it the funniest thing you ever heard?" It was late, but she and Jane never slept after a night out and about. They were both too excited and tended to lie awake together in their room chattering over it until exhaustion claimed them.

Their younger sisters did the same thing, of course, but Elizabeth and Jane would never own that they had a silly streak buried within them. It would be so disappointing to their dear father, who thought they were the sensible ones in the family. The giggling in the dark, then, was their own secret, and they kept it quiet enough that no one knew.

"It's not the least bit funny, Lizzy," said Jane, shocked. "It's appalling. To think that he would say that and with you in earshot!"

"Oh, I don't think he thought I could hear him."

"Even so, it's shocking," said Jane. "One would think that a man of Mr. Darcy's stature and breeding would behave better."

"I think it's quite amusing," said Elizabeth.

“Especially since he said that he wouldn’t dance with me because I was being slighted by other men. That’s utterly nonsensical, isn’t it? Why, every man who asks a partner to dance must ask someone who is not already claimed. The idea that a girl isn’t dancing and is therefore defective is positively backward.”

“You are not defective,” said Jane, sitting up straight in bed and looking down at her sister. “I won’t have you say such things.”

“Of course I don’t think I’m defective.” Elizabeth was still laughing.

Jane lay back down. “You oughtn’t make light of it. Had it been said of me, it would have hurt me deeply. I believe you must feel a bit sore about it. You are making light of it, but he treated you badly.”

“Oh, Jane, he’s a horribly stuffy man who stood behind a chair all night and had a pinched look on his face. I couldn’t care less what he thinks of me. To win his favor would be an insult, don’t you think? A man such as him?”

Jane sighed. “Perhaps you are right, dear Lizzy, but I shan’t laugh at such a thing. Instead, I fear I shall always think less of Mr. Darcy, no matter what good things that Mr. Bingley says about him.”

“Yes, of course,” said Elizabeth, turning on her side to grin at her sister. “When you are *Mrs.* Bingley, you will have Mr. Darcy barred from Netherfield – ”

“Stop it,” said Jane, and her voice was soft. “You shouldn’t say things like that, even in jest. Saying it out loud makes the thought of it far too real.”

Elizabeth laughed again. “Oh, Jane, my dear, you have fallen for Mr. Bingley.”

"Of course I haven't. I barely know him. It is only... well, I have never met a man quite like him before." There was something wistful in Jane's tone.

Elizabeth didn't laugh this time. She had become sensible to the knowledge that her sister had deeper feelings for Mr. Bingley than Elizabeth might have at first thought, and that made things a bit more serious.

"But there is nothing in it," said Jane, clutching the covers to her chin. "He is a great man, and I am only me, and there is no chance on earth that he would feel that I... that I..."

"He danced with you more than once," said Elizabeth quietly. "And when I overheard him and Mr. Darcy, he said you were the most beautiful creature he ever beheld."

"He was exaggerating. I can't allow myself to hope—"

"Why not?" said Elizabeth, her voice too loud.

"Shh, you'll wake the house," said Jane.

"Sorry," said Elizabeth more quietly. "It is only that you *are* beautiful Jane. And what's more, you are the soul of goodness. There is no one that I know who deserves to be happy more than you do. Why not allow yourself a bit of hope? He seemed taken with you, and I mean that."

"If I allow myself to hope for it, I shall be crushed when he is indifferent. No, Lizzy, pray don't say anything further on that subject. What were we talking about?" She paused for a moment. "Oh, yes, the dreadful Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth laughed. "The *dreadful* Mr. Darcy

indeed. Although, it is funny that at first, I did think he was handsome. Until it became obvious he was quite proud."

"And rude," said Jane. "His manners leave much to be desired."

"Everything about him leaves much to be desired," said Elizabeth. "But what would I know. I am only 'tolerable.'" She smothered a fit of giggles with her pillow.

"Lizzy!" admonished Jane, but she was laughing as well.

* * *

Mr. Darcy was certain that he would have been successful at putting the girl from the ball out of his mind entirely if it weren't for the fact that she was now staying at Netherfield.

Well, to be quite frank, the arrival of the girl's sister, Jane, might have brought her to his mind, which would have been unbearable on its own, but then Jane had somehow grown ill, and now she required the assistance of her sister, Elizabeth, who had arrived one morning with muddy skirts and bright eyes and the same long, delicate fingers and rounded bosom as he had admired before. The sight of her sent him tumbling into the same dreadful erotic fantasies.

The only good thing he could say about her presence was that the continued sight of her seemed to have tamed his base reaction to her. When she first arrived, he'd wandered around for nearly a quarter of an hour waiting for his erection to subside, but it had gone away. And then, dining with her, spending

hours in her presence, he finally had himself somewhat under control.

Not that he didn't still find her exceedingly diverting. But he could look at her without tumbling into some horrid imagined tryst between the two of them, and for that, he was glad. He found it abominable to talk to her, however, and everything that came out of his mouth had the sound of coming from a simple-minded fool. He endeavored not to look at her as much as possible, and that, too, made it quite difficult to carry on any kind of conversation.

He had hoped that she would open her mouth and prove herself to be as empty-headed as Caroline, but it turned out that Elizabeth Bennet had a sharp but lively tongue in her head. She seemed to speak her mind without any concern for what might be thought of it. However, she did so with such wit and charm and grace that she could not be offensive.

In fact, he was beginning to think that he could be quite happy spending time in her company, not simply in removing her clothing, which he still wanted to do, only rather more badly than he had before.

The long and short of the matter was that he was still in hell, a worse hell than the ball, a hell that would not be relieved until Elizabeth was removed from his presence once and for all.

Even the arrival of the mother, the positively abominable Mrs. Bennet did nothing to dampen his desire for Elizabeth. In fact, for a moment, he found Elizabeth almost defending him as she endeavored to explain to her dimwitted mother what it was that he

had meant by a comment about the variety of town in contrast to the country.

It didn't last, of course. In moments, she was tartly taking the opposite side against him on some discussion of poetry, but as to what he was even saying, he didn't know.

Had he really said that poetry was the food of love?

It was *music*, damn it, music. That was the Shakespeare quote. No doubt Elizabeth thought him a bumbling idiot who passed off misremembered Shakespeare quotes as his own thought.

He was happy when the mother left, along with the nannies of the younger sisters that Elizabeth had, but he wished that they would have taken both Elizabeth and Jane back with them, and let him get back to life as normal, which would mean he and Bingley conversing about things other than how pretty the eldest Miss Bennet was.

As it was, he was suddenly being pestered mercilessly by Caroline Bingley, for no reason that he could ascertain. He made one comment about the brightness of Elizabeth's eyes, and Caroline couldn't let it go. She was everywhere, hanging on everything.

He was attempting to write a letter. He hoped to be able to do some kind of concentrating and take his mind off the devil that was Elizabeth, but Caroline wouldn't shut up.

"How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!" said Caroline, who was peering over his shoulder to make out the salutation to his sister.

Perhaps, if he were to accidentally turn too fast, he would drive his elbow into Caroline's forehead and knock her out cold. Then she would shut up.

"You write uncommonly fast."

He turned to look at her. She smiled at him, a too-wide smile that seemed practiced. He sighed. He was being uncharitable to the poor girl. She couldn't help that she had very little wits. She thought that this passed as conversation, no doubt. Besides, she was his friend's sister. He turned back to the letter, forcing himself to answer. "You are mistaken. I write rather slowly."

"How many letters you must have occasion to write in the course of a year. Letters of business, too. How odious I should think them." She shuddered as if filled with revulsion.

"It is fortunate, then, that they fall to my lot instead of yours." He was careful to keep the sarcasm out of his tone. He was trying to be polite. She wasn't making it easy.

"Pray tell your sister that I long to see her."

"I have already told her so once, by your desire." At this point, he had completely forgotten what he was even writing. He dipped his pen in the inkwell, and then caught sight of Elizabeth, who was doing some needlework. By the small smile on her face, she was listening to everything that was being said and thought it amusing. He wondered what Elizabeth thought of him. He had taken pains not to let her see that he was... was... Whatever he was towards her, he had tried to hide it. She probably thought he was ridiculous, from the way she spoke to him. He gritted

his teeth. Not that he cared what she thought of him. He removed his pen.

“I am afraid you do not like your pen. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well.” Caroline beamed at him.

“Thank you – but I always mend my own.” There was a growl in his voice, even though he was striving to keep it from coming through.

Seemingly placated, Caroline quieted. He returned to writing, even though he hardly knew what he was saying anymore. *Think of your sister, he urged himself. Not of Elizabeth. By all means, stop thinking of Elizabeth Bennet.*

“How can you contrive to write so even?” chirped Caroline.

That was it. This time, he really was going to drive his elbow into her face. Instead, he schooled himself to be still and silent.

“Tell your sister I am delighted to hear of her improvement on the harp, and pray let her know that I am quite in raptures with her beautiful little design for a table, and I think it infinitely superior to Miss Grantley’s,” Caroline prattled.

At this point, he lost his temper. He set the pen down and told her to leave off. He said he didn’t have any room in his letter. He tried to communicate, without saying it aloud, that he would rather she leave him alone. She was such an insipid sort of woman. If he and Bingley weren’t so close, he shouldn’t tolerate her.

It was a pity, really, that Elizabeth weren’t of a higher birth or more noble circumstances. She was a

worthy conversationalist. She was not idiotic to obvious hints. Elizabeth would never sit next to him and try to goad him into conversation while he was writing a letter. She wouldn't be so needy. She was a different sort of woman altogether. Not only was she maddeningly enticing, she was in full possession of herself. She was smart and funny and self-assured, and he was quite unsure of himself around her.

And then, without quite understanding how it had happened, he was engaged in another verbal sparring session with Elizabeth's sharp tongue, as she took him to task over humility, and over the influence of friendship on behavior. He found himself again tongue-tied as he tried to keep up with her. Her eyes shone as she spoke, and there was a hidden smile behind all she said.

Finally, he was rescued by Bingley. "If you and Miss Bennet would defer your disputes until I am out of the room, I should be most thankful."

Elizabeth shrugged, turning away. "What you ask is no sacrifice on my side."

Indeed not, he thought. She was as careless toward conversing with him as she might be toward the intricacies of hunting. She could not care less about him.

She eyed him, that knowing smile playing at her lips. "And Mr. Darcy had much better finish his letter."

And just like that, he was dismissed. In truth, he was not overly disappointed, and he turned gratefully back to his letter, because — when it came to speaking with Elizabeth — he was out of his depth.

While he wrote, though, he began to think that he was making too much of her birth and station. She was a gentlewoman, was she not? He thought of those delicate fingers of hers and he imagined them deftly undoing the buttons of his jacket.

Inwardly, he groaned. Why did he *do* this to himself? He must school himself not to think any more inappropriate thoughts about Miss Bennet.

After a while, when there was some music, he couldn't stop himself from asking her to dance.

She refused him.

She must think he was ridiculous indeed.

CHAPTER THREE

Caroline Bingley sat on the bed in her sister's room. "It's horrid, Louisa. I think he has feelings for that dreadful Elizabeth Bennet. You heard what he said about her eyes. And then, tonight, I did everything that I could to draw him into a conversation, and he would have none of me. Then, he asks her to dance with him? Did you see that?"

Louisa Hurst sat in an easy chair, opposite her sister. "Mr. Darcy will marry you. He has barely left your side for many months."

"He's barely left our brother's side!" Caroline seized handfuls of her gown. She was despondent. "I think we've been reading it all wrong. He may be quite indifferent to me. Did you see the way he was with me? I complimented his writing, and men love to be complimented. I offered to mend his pen, and he brushed me off."

"He was likely trying to concentrate on writing. How can a man talk and write at the same time?"

"He should have stopped writing and spoken to me. If he truly had any intention of marrying me, he would have."

Louisa sighed. "Well, be that as it may, I don't see

what you expect me to do about it. I can hardly force him to marry you."

Caroline let go of her skirt, and she felt as if the world was going to pieces. She'd had it all quite nice and tidy. She would marry Darcy, and Darcy's sister, Georgiana, could marry her brother. What could have been more perfect than that? Now, these stupid Bennet sisters had shown up and ruined everything. Nothing was going the way that she wanted it to. "Force him," she murmured. "Yes, how can I force him to do it the right way?"

"Caroline?"

Caroline got up from the bed and walked over to the window. It was dark outside, but she could see the outline of the trees against the night sky and the stars dotting the blackness.

"You can't force anyone to do anything."

"What if I could?" Caroline asked the window. "What would compel a man like Mr. Darcy to marry a woman?"

"There's no point in even thinking such things."

Caroline turned around. "He'd avoid scandal, don't you think? And he's an honorable man."

Louisa's eyebrows shot up. "What are you saying?"

Caroline squared her shoulders. "I wouldn't risk my reputation for nothing, but in the case of Mr. Darcy, there can be no risk. He would do the right thing. There is no question of that."

"What right thing?"

"If Mr. Darcy and I were caught together in a scandalous position, for instance," said Caroline.

“Say... if we were locked in a bedroom together. You remember that the catch in the bedroom on the north wing is faulty? We found it when we were looking over the property that first week.”

“Yes,” said Louisa, “we said that if you shut the door, you would be unable to leave. I meant to talk to Charles about having it fixed, but I’d quite forgotten.”

“Well, what if Mr. Darcy and I were trapped together in that room?” said Caroline.

“There’s no reason for the two of you to be alone together,” said Louisa. “As you say, Mr. Darcy is quite honorable. He wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Caroline. “He would have to be summoned to the room, I suppose. But if you were to write him a letter telling him to go there—”

“Any letter I wrote would be even more scandalous. I am a married woman!”

“That is not what I meant. I meant that you could write a letter in Charles’s hand. You can do it as well as your own. You amused all of us in the nursery by copying handwriting.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly!”

“Write the letter, and then discover us together there, in the middle of the night,” said Caroline. “Make sure to bring our brother along. Say you are concerned about me. And then, when Charles sees us compromised, Darcy will have to propose.”

“That’s...” Louisa folded her arms over her chest. “That’s quite devious. And risky.”

“As I said, with Mr. Darcy there can be no risk,”

said Caroline. "Come now, you are my sister. Would you see me a spinster? Mr. Darcy is meant to be my husband. You must help me secure him."

* * *

Elizabeth had not spent the night in her own room the night before. She had sat up with Jane all night, dozing in a chair by the bed only. Now, Jane was much improved, and Elizabeth's back could not bear another night in the chair, and so she was going back to her own room.

The only problem was that she was very confused. It was dark now, and she only had a candle to light her way. She had been sure that her room was just down the hallway from Jane's, but when she'd entered the room that she'd thought was her own, she found that it was wrong, and that the bed hadn't even been made up for her.

So, now she was wandering through the halls, checking rooms, hoping to find one she found familiar.

She should probably find a servant to help her, but it was late, and everyone must already be abed by now. She didn't want to wake anyone. She wasn't properly dressed, anyway. She was only wearing her shift and bed jacket, because she'd gotten ready to sleep in Jane's room. It was only after seeing how much better that Jane was that she'd decided to return to her own room.

However, she wished she wasn't so turned around. She'd been so consumed with Jane's well-being that she hadn't paid nearly enough attention to the location of her own room. And Netherfield was

so much bigger than her own house, which seemed frightfully small by comparison.

Overall, Elizabeth felt flustered. She wasn't at home in this place, not among Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, and most especially not with Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bingley was a very genial man, but the rest of them were horrid. If Jane really did marry this man, Elizabeth wasn't sure she could bear the society of these people. She might go quite mad if she had to listen to Miss Bingley talking about the evenness of Mr. Darcy's writing.

It was pathetic the way Miss Bingley had been throwing herself at the man. And she seemed not to notice that he was utterly indifferent to her.

Perhaps Mr. Darcy was indifferent to every woman. After all, he had made that comment about how most women were not truly accomplished. He had such high standards that mere mortals couldn't possibly measure up to them.

She'd be happy when Jane was feeling better and they could both go home. If Jane was made happy by Mr. Bingley, then Elizabeth would be happy for her. But she'd rather not have to spend anymore mind-numbing time in this place than was absolutely necessary.

There.

This wing. This had to be it, didn't it?

Yes, this was where her room had been. Right along this wall. That door there, the one slightly ajar, that was the door to her room. She pushed it open.

Wait, was there a candle burning inside the room?

Oh.

She put a hand to her chest, letting out a tiny cry. Oh, dear, this wasn't right at all. This wasn't her room, because this room was occupied. It was Mr. Darcy's room. At least, it must be, because there was Mr. Darcy, backing out of the closet, holding a candle and muttering something under his breath. He wasn't dressed, either. He was only in his nightshirt and banyan.

Her breath caught in her throat. She could see more of Darcy's skin that she rather wanted to, and he was powerful and muscled underneath it all. There was a smattering of dark hair peaking out of his nightshirt, and something inside Elizabeth clenched in a pleasant but alarming way.

Darcy had seen her. He nearly dropped his candle. "Miss Bennet," he said in a harsh voice.

Elizabeth didn't say anything at all. Instead, she backed up, back toward the door.

Except the door was closed, she realized as her back collided with its solidness. She fumbled behind herself at the catch. She tried to open it.

It wasn't working.

Panicked, she turned her back on Darcy and looked down at the door handle. She tried to open the door.

It wouldn't budge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Darcy didn't know what was going on. He had come to this room on the urging of a letter from Bingley, which he'd found in his room before retiring to bed. He thought it was odd. He'd left Bingley only moments before, and he wasn't sure how his friend would have had time to write the letter and deliver it. Furthermore, why bother with the letter at all? Why not simply instruct Darcy to come to the room?

It wasn't like Bingley at all.

But the note had a certain urgency to it. It requested his presence "at once" on a matter of "some importance," and Darcy had obeyed its summons. It was only that upon reaching the room, he found it empty. Bingley wasn't there. No one was there at all. He had opened up the closet door, thinking that this might be some ridiculous joke. Bingley did have a horrid sense of humor.

But nothing was there. Upon quitting the closet, he had turned, and there was Miss Elizabeth Bennet. An undressed Elizabeth, only in her nightdress, with nothing more than a bed jacket over top of it. Her hair was down and in a long braid that hung over one shoulder. Her lips parted, and he thought of how

pleasing the shape of her lips were, and he thought about rubbing his thumb against her lower lip, tracing that pleasing shape.

Abruptly, she ran from him, hurrying back out of the room.

But her way was stopped by the door, and she seemed to be having some trouble getting it open.

He watched her for a moment, first as she scabbled behind her with one hand, then as she turned and tried the handle. He liked the look of her body in her nightclothes from the front and the back, he realized.

And just like that, he was aroused again. He cursed inwardly.

This entire situation was highly improper. He was closed in a bedroom with Miss Bennet, and neither of them were dressed. It was insupportable.

He crossed the room in long strides. "Move aside," he said, and was horrified to hear that his voice had become a rasp, as if being in her presence had robbed him of his ability to speak like a gentleman.

She turned to look at him. "It's locked or caught on something. I know not what. But I can't open it."

"Let me try." Dear God, was he going to have to move her out of the way? How would he do that? Seize her by the hips? He shuddered in pleasure and something like terror. No, her shoulders, of course. But even that, his fingers through the thin fabrics both of the bed jacket and shift beneath it... It wouldn't be much of a barrier.

Then, luckily, she moved.

He found he was disappointed at losing the chance to touch her. But he put that aside and went at the door.

It wouldn't open. He put his shoulder into it. It groaned, but it didn't open.

Elizabeth had set down her candle. She was biting her lip and hugging herself.

"Something's wrong with the door," he said.

"That's what I *said* to you," she said. "You are uncommonly arrogant, are you not? You keep no council but your own." So, even in this situation, he wouldn't be safe from her sharp tongue.

His gaze honed in on her bottom lip, the way it plumped up with her teeth biting into it. That made him feel warm all over. He turned back to the door and continued his endeavors to get it open, which were coming to naught, and he knew it. But to truly come to terms with the situation would be too much for him. He needed to focus on something else, some task he could complete. Opening the door was that task.

However, several more moments rattling the door and fiddling with the latch, and he knew it was hopeless. He kept at it for a bit longer, anyway, simply to have something to do. Eventually, he had to give up. He turned, back to the door, squaring his shoulders. "I think we're trapped in here."

"Oh, do you?" She glared at him. "You've just now come to that conclusion, I suppose?"

"Forgive me if I am not as quick a study as you, Miss Bennet," he said. "I am not the sort who gives up easily, I suppose. I will labor until I have quite

exhausted any attempt.”

“And you have done so now and made your conclusion?” Her tone was acerbic. “How marvelous. What would we have done without your attention to detail, sir?” With a huff, she turned away.

God help him, but he liked the way her eyes flashed when she was in a passion. This was some kind of awful torture, stuck with her here in this room, neither of them dressed. Why, the things that he could do to her...

But why *was* he here? His brow furrowed in thought. Was it possible that Bingley had somehow noticed his shamefully inappropriate attraction to Miss Bennet and arranged to have them trapped here as some sort of joke?

No.

That didn't seem like the sort of thing that Bingley would do. He didn't have a cruel sense of humor.

And it wasn't likely that Bingley could have guessed what Darcy was feeling for Elizabeth. Darcy had hidden it well, at least he hoped he had. He would not wish it aired among his social circle.

But now, with this turn of events, trapped in this room, was there a way to avoid it? He and Miss Bennet were going to be linked when they were discovered. And —

“What are you doing?” he said, leaving off his thoughts and crossing the room to Elizabeth, who was opening a window on the other side of the room. “We are two stories above the ground. We can't get out that way.”

“I had thought maybe to find a trellis or some

helpful stonework," she said, sticking her head and torso out the window.

He yanked her back inside.

She recoiled. "Don't touch me!"

He backed away, partly because of her cry, partly because touching her scalded him—a fiery line of desire licked through him, and he was undone.

She poked back out the window. "Lord, there is nothing." She pulled her head back in, clenching her hands into fists. "We really are trapped in here, Mr. Darcy."

He shut the window with a slam. "Yes," he said. "And it's far too cold to have the window open." He did up the catch. And then he winced. He ought not to have made such noise with the window.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Her voice was rising.

"Quiet," he said to her.

"Don't shush me," she said. "I suppose you're going to claim that you need silence to think, but let me tell you, there is nothing to think about. There are two ways into the room—through the door or the window—and the window isn't really even a way in, but both are unassailable, so—"

"It's not for the sake of me that I ask you to be quiet," he said, his voice a harsh whisper. "It is because I do not wish for anyone to hear us."

"But we must be heard. How else will we get clear of the room?"

"Miss Bennet, if we are discovered in this manner, together, it will be shocking," he said.

Her delicate fingers fluttered at her lips, and

understanding flashed across her face, followed by horror. "I should be quite ruined," she breathed.

* * *

Elizabeth went across the room and sat down on the bed, her heart pounding. How could she have been so stupid as not to have thought of the implications of all of this? She was alone in a room with a man, without a chaperone, and neither of them were wearing clothing. Why, if this were discovered, it would be the end of her, and the end of her entire family. This would destroy any chances Jane might have with Mr. Bingley. This would stop cold any chance any of her sisters might have.

It washed through her, like an icy current, and she despaired.

How had this happened? She looked up at Mr. Darcy, who was still by the window, seemingly very interested in the palm of his hand. "Why is the bed made?" she burst out.

"Hmm?" He looked up at her, surfacing his own thoughts. She wondered what he was thinking. This was not so devastating for him, but it wasn't good either. He would survive the scandal. He had the money for it, after all, and he was a man. But it wouldn't be good for his name or his reputation. She was a gentleman's daughter, and this would sully him as well. But he didn't seem the least bit ruffled. She wondered if anything affected Mr. Darcy, or if he was always stiff and formal and proper.

"The bed," she said. "You are obviously dressed for sleeping, and I accidentally wandered into your chamber, but why is the bed still made up? Hadn't

you lain down for the night?"

"This isn't my bedroom, Miss Bennet." Had he always had such a deep, rumbling voice? She rather liked it, she decided, even if he was altogether the most awful man in the world.

"Not your bedroom?"

"No," he said. "I was summoned here to this room by a letter."

"Well, that doesn't make any sense," she said.

"Were you similarly brought hither?"

"No, I am simply lost." She dragged her hands over her face. "I am beside myself, sir. If I had only paid better attention to the path to my own room, I should not have been wandering around in the dark alone, and I should not be in this position at all. But now, I am here, and I have brought about the worst for myself and my family."

"I imagine they're quite capable of doing that themselves," he muttered dryly.

She sat up straight, indignant. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "Pay me no mind, Miss Bennet."

"This is serious," she said. "When we are discovered, it will be the end for me. I shall never recover from something like this."

He came across the room toward her, moving through the darkness. She could barely see him in the light from the candles they had left on the other side of the room, but in shadowy profile, she was suddenly struck by how handsome he was, how straight his nose was, how firm his jaw. It was late,

and he had not shaved since that morning. There was a bit of growth on his chin, and he seemed so... so frightfully *masculine* that there was a churning in the pit of her stomach and goosebumps prickled her skin.

He stopped only a foot away from her. "You mustn't take on like that," he said in a soft, low voice that seemed to reverberate through her. "It will all turn out right in the end. I'll see to it."

"How?" she whispered. "If you think you can pay off the servants to keep them from talking, you underestimate the delight that people take in a scandal like this one. And if you think we can somehow avoid detection by the servants, you are wrong. It will likely be one of them who will discover us, and then it will be all over Hertfordshire by the time a fortnight has passed. There is no hiding from this."

He cleared his throat. "Well..." His hand came up and he passed his thumb over the line of his jaw, rubbing at his stubble. "We could get married." He eyed her then, and there was something in his eyes, some kind of hunger that deepened the stirring in the pit of her stomach, that made her shiver in fear. In anticipation. But of what she was anticipating, she didn't know. Elizabeth had very vague ideas of what passed between husbands and wives after marriage. If she felt any curiosity beyond her knowledge, she pushed it aside for the sake of propriety. The look in Darcy's gaze wakened something inside her, but it also frightened her and confused her. She didn't know how to respond to it.

She shot up from the bed, lifting her chin. "Is this a proposal, sir?" She was pleased that her voice didn't tremble. "It's highly irregular."

"Everything about this situation is irregular," he said and his voice was even deeper now.

Yes, it was. She stared him down, taking great, heaving breaths and trying to calm herself, because she could not marry Mr. Darcy. Not the man who had said that she was tolerable, but not enough to tempt him. No matter how appealing he looked now without his clothes, with his deep voice, and with the stubble on his face. No matter that she had some kind of strange warmth pooling between her thighs when she looked at him—shameful warmth, confusing warmth. None of that mattered. He didn't want her, not truly. He was only suggesting a marriage because he had a shred of decency, but there was no way they could be happy together. He would resent her. She would despise him. It would all be miserable.

She opened her mouth to say something to this effect, but she was interrupted by a sound.

The door latch. It was rattling.

CHAPTER FIVE

At the noise of the latch rattling, Darcy turned to look at it, but he didn't move. He was rooted to the spot, waiting for the door to be thrown open and the two of them to be discovered.

He found he was disappointed. He couldn't say that he was enjoying her company, not truly, but he was enjoying the view. He liked the way she looked, her hair in that braid, only clad in her nightclothes. It was an intimate, secret look, something that he had no rights to look upon, but he was able to see her, feast his eyes on her, and he didn't want to stop.

Elizabeth made a sound, a little yip of fear.

And suddenly, the latch stopped moving.

Darcy didn't understand.

Everything was still and silent for a moment. And then he heard the faint sound of footsteps moving away from the door.

He had an instinct to go to the door and yell after whoever was there to come back and let them free. But the consequences of discovery were unpleasant for both of them. The consequences were unavoidable, but they were not to be rushed. So, he stayed rooted to the spot and listened as the footsteps

faded out.

"Someone knows we are in here," Elizabeth whispered.

"Perhaps not." He was whispering too. "We did nothing to identify ourselves. There is no proof."

"They will come back," she said.

"Perhaps," he said. "But I wonder why this person stopped trying to open the door when you cried out."

"Oh, it doesn't matter." She put a hand to her forehead. "We are trapped here, and we will be found out eventually. There is nothing for it."

"Yes," he said, because she was voicing his own thoughts. "Our fate is sealed."

"I am sorry," she said. "You needn't feel as though you must rescue me by... by doing as you said."

He turned back to her. Dear God, he had suggested marrying her, had he not? And he couldn't marry her. He had been over every reason why she was inappropriate, why she was not the bride for him. And yet, he did want her, and here they were together, and perhaps the barriers between them were not insurmountable. He wanted to touch her again. He wanted to feel the heat of her skin through her nightclothes. Or even—shockingly—to put his hands on her bare skin, to move aside her clothing and—

"It would be awful for you," she said softly. "I know what you think of me."

"On the contrary," he rumbled. "I can imagine it being rather pleasant." He *was* going to touch her.

Damn it, if they were compromised already, what did it matter? He was suddenly brutally aroused, a throbbing going through his entire body, but concentrated between his legs, where he had grown even harder, and he wanted to put his mouth on hers.

She looked up at him, though, and her eyes were wild and frightened.

He gritted his teeth.

She winced. "You don't have to say such things. I can see that you are appalled at the idea. I know I am not the sort of woman who would... would tempt you. After all," and here she gave a funny little laugh, "I am only tolerable."

He was flush with hot embarrassment and shame. She had *heard* him? He tried to say something, but nothing came out except a sputter.

"And you mustn't flatter yourself to think I have any other opinion of you," she said. "You are altogether wrong for me, not the sort of husband I would want in the least." But as she was saying that, she was looking him over, and there was a breathless quality to her voice.

"When I said what I said before, Miss Bennet, you must understand, I didn't mean it."

She laughed again, but this time, there was real mirth in it. "Yes, that is quite the way most people speak, Mr. Darcy. They say what they do not mean. Naturally, that is what I would understand."

"When I saw you, I..." He licked his lips. How to explain to her the effect she had on him? She would find it vulgar, and it wasn't helped by the fact that he

was driven to do all manner of vulgar things to her, with her, and now they were in this room together, and they were standing so close to each other, and why *wasn't* he touching her?

"You are proud, and you are quite convinced yourself above the rest of us mere mortals, and I should never be the sort of wife you truly wanted. You would grow to loathe me if you don't already."

He shook his head. "I don't think that would be the case." There was a lump in his throat. Though, of course, her family and her lack of connections were quite a blow. But what was the alternative? She was right about the servants talking when they knew of the two of them together. If he were to leave her here, if he were not to marry her, the damage done to his reputation would be significant. Perhaps it would be surmountable, but it would cause trouble for Georgiana, and he couldn't bear to harm his sister. Lord knows, she had been through enough already, barely skirting scandal on her own.

"And I," she said, her voice even breathier, "I already loathe you."

"Do you?" He stepped closer to her.

"Yes," she murmured. "I would not marry you if you were the last man alive in all of England." She puffed out her chest, which only made her bosom more prominent.

He raised his hand, thinking about cupping one of those breasts. He would do that, and she would melt into his arms, and then there would be no more questions about whether they were going to be married or not, because he would take her now. He

would lay her back on the bed next to them and lift her skirts and part her thighs and –

He touched her braid instead. He picked it up, and his knuckled brushed the softness of her bosom, but that was all.

Her eyes went shut and then fluttered open. Her breathing was uneven.

So was his. He fingered her hair, stroking its softness. His voice was hoarse. “I think you’re being ridiculous, Miss Bennet. You have to marry me, and there’s no reason to talk about it anymore. And when we are married, whether we loathe each other or not, I am quite sure that I will enjoy, at the very least –”

“Stop that,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Let go of me. You shouldn’t touch me. It’s improper.”

“I’m not touching you.” He fingered her braid. “Not really. I *could* touch you. I could touch your face. Your lips. I could...” He leaned closer. “I could kiss you.”

Her eyes widened. “Mr. Darcy –”

He was going to do it. His lips were going closer and closer, and he was going to put his lips on hers, and once that was done, then he would wrap his arms around her, and brush his fingers over her hips and waist and anywhere else he pleased. His lips were less than an inch from hers.

But then he looked from her lips to her eyes, and he stopped. Because he couldn’t read what was in her eyes. Whether it was welcoming or whether she really did loathe him. So, he hesitated. One moment.

Two. Three.

And then the moment was lost to him and he took a step away from her. This was madness. What was he doing? Thinking about tugging this woman that he barely knew when every word out of her mouth told him that she despised him? He supposed he couldn't blame her. He had done his best to make her think that he was indifferent to her. He wished he was indifferent to her, in fact. He wanted her against his own will. If he could stop his feelings, he would stop them.

He couldn't, though.

However, he could stop his own actions. He moved away from her, to the other side of the room, to that window that she had opened, and he gazed out into the darkness, gulping in long breaths of air, trying to get himself back under control.

* * *

Elizabeth was shaking. She was unsure of herself, and everything that she was feeling was foreign to her.

Mr. Darcy had very nearly kissed her. *Kissed* her. Why had he done such a thing? It didn't make any sense, not when she knew what she did of him. He had very clearly put her down at the ball. He had insulted her appearance, and now, he was behaving as if he found her... well, tempting, the very thing he had said she was not.

She couldn't make heads or tails of that.

Then there were her own feelings, the sensations that had surged up within her body, tempestuous things that she was unprepared for. When his lips

had been inches from her own, she'd felt a breathless excitement at the thought of their closeness. When he had touched her hair, she had felt hot and then cold and then hot again, and there were... tingles in all sorts of places. Her body didn't feel like her own. She was altogether unprepared for any of it.

She struggled to calm her beating heart, but she couldn't.

Proper Mr. Darcy, about to kiss her!

What upside-down, topsy-turvy world had she tumbled into?

She had a vague hope, suddenly, that she was actually asleep, and this was nothing more than a dream, but she didn't dare to hope for something like that. How lovely it would be to wake up in her bed, or even in that dreadfully uncomfortable chair next to Jane's bed, breathing a sigh of relief that none of this had ever happened.

But no. She was awake, and all of this had happened, and she was either to be ruined or married to Mr. Darcy. Of the two of them, she wasn't sure which she dreaded more. Certainly, she must marry him, if he had sincerely offered. If not because it would be preferable for her, then because of what it would do for her family, most especially for Jane, who had fallen for Mr. Bingley. She had to do it for Jane.

But...

Oh, Elizabeth wasn't necessarily a starry-eyed romantic. She knew that marriages were often conducted for practical reasons, so she didn't dare hope that she would fall helplessly in love with her

husband. Life wasn't like one of those lurid novels she often read, after all. But she knew that she could not marry someone that she didn't respect.

And she abhorred Mr. Darcy. Everything about him was despicable. It wasn't only because of the way he had insulted her at the ball, it was everything about his manner and his dreadfully stiff pronouncements. She remembered again how he had declared that he could not boast of knowing half a dozen women who were truly accomplished, and she felt again the growing desire to strangle him for being so assured of everything. She dearly wished for Mr. Darcy to be wrong and to be publicly humiliated. Marrying a man for whom she had such feelings, it was not to be borne.

Oh, but... now, the two of them here, the way he had *looked* at her just then? The look had burned. It had made *her* burn. It was some kind of sinful look, the kind that was denounced from the pulpit, the kind that she should repent from even considering.

How could stuffy Mr. Darcy look at her that way?

And what would happen if he did kiss her? Would that burn too? Would the fire reach all the way inside her, between her legs and into her core? Would it set her soul aflame?

She shuddered.

Mr. Darcy turned back to her from the window, and there was no heat in his eyes anymore. Instead, his expression was dull, like usual. When he spoke, his voice was not so deep as it had been. He barely looked at her. Instead, he seemed to be looking over her head as he addressed her. "We are trapped here,

and there is no way to remedy our situation. I don't suppose there's much point in continuing to talk about what we will do. We are both tired and unsettled, and that does not lead to the most wise decision making. A night's rest will not change the situation. We will simply address the issue on the morrow."

Her jaw dropped. "You propose we sleep here... together?"

"Unless you'd like to stay awake all night?" He strode across the room and unceremoniously tugged a blanket off the bed. "I shall sleep on the settee." He gestured. "You may have the bed." He turned his back on her and went over to the settee. He lay down, pulling the blanket up over his head.

Well. She supposed that was that, then.

She turned to look at the bed.

After a moment's hesitation, she climbed onto it and settled on one of the pillows. She shut her eyes, but she didn't fall asleep for a long time.

* * *

Darcy had erotic dreams about Elizabeth. He woke from one in which he was unbraiding her hair and spreading it out over her bare breasts to hear the latch on the door being undone.

He sat up straight, shaking the images of his dream out of his head, forcing himself to stop wondering if his imaginings of the size and color of her nipples was the least bit accurate, and saw that the door to the room was standing open.

It was still dark outside, but the hint of dawn was not far off. He could see that from the window. They

didn't have much time. Servants would be up and about within a half an hour, undoubtedly. But if they were quick, they could get back to their own chambers undisturbed. They were free.

He hesitated.

Was that what he wanted? If he went back to sleep, they'd be discovered soon, and then he'd be forced to marry her. Soon enough, he'd be able to find out the truth of her bare breasts for himself. He felt a lurch of heat go through him at the thought. He wanted her.

But perhaps it was obscene to go about it this way.

Even if they did get married, under such circumstances, there would be a smear on their good names, and he would avoid that if he possibly could. No, it was better if they weren't discovered. And it didn't mean that he couldn't still marry her. She had said all those things about loathing him last night, but she must see that a match with him was very likely the best offer she would ever get, and she wouldn't refuse him.

She already has, whispered a voice in his head.

He shoved that aside. He would not have it forced between them. If she discovered that he had known the latch was undone and had not woken her, she would definitely despise him, and she might never forgive him. He had to wake her.

So, he did.

He touched her shoulder and her skin was warm and giving under her nightdress, and he was hard again. He groaned softly, but he shook her.

She stirred and woke, and she was beautiful shaking off the dregs of sleep.

He wanted again to kiss her, and if it hadn't been for the nature of the news he bore her, he might have, because in the wee hours before dawn, kissing her seemed the most natural thing in the world. But instead, he only whispered, "The door is open."

She sat up straight. "How did you do it?"

"I didn't," he said. "I woke up to find it thus."

She put a hand to her chest.

Her braid was mussed from sleeping, rather looser than it had been, and it only made him want to untangle it more, to see all of her hair down around her shoulders. He bit the inside of his cheek and didn't dare touch her.

"How did it get open?" she said.

"I don't know," he said.

"Someone opened it," she said, looking up at him. "Someone knows. The same someone who tried the latch last night?"

"Perhaps," he said. "But whoever it is, they have taken pity on us. We have a way to avoid damage to our reputations. We must take it."

She stood up from the bed. "You are right, of course, but it still makes me uneasy. How did we get locked in? How did we get free? Who summoned you to this room?"

He had to admit that he wasn't pleased with the situation either. However, they had no answers to those questions, and they couldn't waste time worrying over them now. "We don't have much time, Miss Bennet. The servants will be rising soon."

We must get back to our rooms before that is known."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, of course, you're right. We must go. And perhaps it will be as if this never happened."

"Indeed."

"Thank heaven," she said.

"Quite." He nodded too.

CHAPTER SIX

Together, Elizabeth and Darcy put the covers back on the bed and smoothed them out. They were neither of them experts in bed making, but together, they managed to make it look presentable. And then they left the room, parting ways. Elizabeth was concerned that she would still be lost, unable to find her room, but she found it straight away, without any problem. She climbed into her bed and tugged the blankets up to her chin and waited until she heard the sound of the servants moving around. Then she sank back into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning, she waited through breakfast for some announcement by whoever had opened the door of what had passed between herself and Mr. Darcy. But it never happened. Luncheon came and passed as well. Nothing.

She noticed that Caroline Bingley shot her some of the most venomous glances that she had ever seen, but she was not unaccustomed to veiled hostility from that woman. She didn't know what it was all about, but she imagined that Caroline did not want Jane as a sister-in-law, and that she sought to drive both her and Elizabeth away.

There was also the matter of Caroline's obvious preference for Mr. Darcy. She practically fawned over him. In fact, after luncheon, Caroline spirited Darcy off by herself so that the two of them could walk together, leaving Elizabeth alone with her sister, Mrs. Hurst.

With Mr. Darcy himself, Elizabeth didn't know how to interact, so she didn't. Several times, she looked at him and found him gazing at her with bottomless, unreadable eyes. Once or twice, she was even sure there was a hint of that fire from last night in his gaze. But they didn't speak to each other. At all.

Which was no matter, as they had not been speaking overmuch as it was.

However, it was all quite disconcerting. It was truly as if the previous night had never happened, and Elizabeth was unsure how to feel about that. On the one hand, she was quite grateful, because everything was back to the way it had been before, and she was no longer ruined or in a position to be forced to be married to Mr. Darcy. On the other hand, she felt somewhat disappointed, though she couldn't be sure why. It had something to do with those fiery looks he'd given her, something to do with the kiss they'd almost shared, and she didn't understand exactly what any of it meant.

Furthermore, she was still on guard, because someone did know they had been in the room, and she wasn't sure who that person was or what the person might do with such knowledge.

She was so consumed with these thoughts that

she didn't speak much to Mrs. Hurst as they walked together.

And for Mrs. Hurst's part, she didn't seem pleased to be saddled with Elizabeth as a companion. She walked very quickly, and Elizabeth had to stretch her legs to keep up.

Eventually, they spotted Caroline and Darcy, and presently, they came close to them, within earshot.

"As for your Elizabeth's picture," Caroline was saying in a jeering voice, "you must not have it taken, for what painter could do justice to those beautiful eyes?"

What? Why was she calling Elizabeth Mr. Darcy's? He wouldn't have told Caroline what had happened the night before, would he?

The rumble of Mr. Darcy's voice. "It would not be easy, indeed, to catch their expression, but their color and shape, and the eyelashes, so remarkably fine, might be copied."

At that point, Darcy and Caroline rounded a bend and came face to face with Elizabeth and Mrs. Hurst.

Caroline's eyes widened in horror.

Darcy also looked surprised, but he looked her over and his expression kindled the same fiery desire from the night before.

Elizabeth stood still, shaking a bit. *What* had they been talking about?

"I did not know that you intended to walk," said Miss Bingley, narrowing her eyes.

"You used us abominably ill," answered Mrs. Hurst, "running away without telling us that you were coming out."

Elizabeth licked her lips, gazing at Mr. Darcy, her eyes full of questions.

He broke away from Caroline and started for her.

Mrs. Hurst intercepted him, linking her arm with his, endeavoring to have him walk along with her and her sister.

But Darcy shook her off, saying, "This walk is not wide enough for our party. We had better go into the avenue." He wound Elizabeth's hand around his arm and took off with her into the avenue, which was just outside the path they walked on.

Elizabeth glared at him. "You told her!" she whispered accusingly.

"Certainly not," he whispered back. "I know not, though. She is frightfully close to home with her teasing. I fear she is the one who opened the door."

Then Elizabeth understood. Caroline knew, had not told because she wanted Darcy for herself. Her longing for the man was nakedly obvious. Elizabeth took her hand from Mr. Darcy's arm. Well, that was better, then, wasn't it? Allow Caroline to have him. Elizabeth didn't want him. Hadn't she said to herself how she abhorred him? And if Caroline got the man she wanted, well, that would ensure her silence. She gave Darcy a little shove back toward Caroline.

"The two of you make such a picturesque spectacle. You mustn't allow my presence to spoil it." She gave Caroline a knowing look.

Caroline's return look was one of confusion. But she seized Mr. Darcy's arm at once and went off with him.

Elizabeth watched them go, and she wasn't sure

why there was a pang in her chest.

* * *

The evening was abominable for Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth seemed resolved not to speak to him, and no matter what he did, Caroline would not leave him alone. He had a book, which he was very pointedly reading, although the truth of it was that his mind was in far too much turmoil to possibly concentrate on the book.

He couldn't make all the pieces of what had happened fit. Earlier, on his walk with Caroline, she had gone on and on, teasing him about his attraction to Elizabeth and saying all manner of positively insulting things about both Elizabeth and her family. He couldn't understand why she would do such a thing. It seemed obvious that she had discovered him and Elizabeth in the room together the night before. But, for some reason, she had kept it all to herself, and he wasn't sure why that was.

Perhaps Caroline was trying to be good to him, keep a secret that she knew might cause damage to him. But if she truly thought that he had risked his reputation for a tryst with Miss Bennet, then why would she be attempting to talk him out of his attraction to her? Wouldn't she think that things had gone too far for an attempt such as that to succeed?

Of course, Caroline was a particularly stupid woman. It was possible she had not thought it through.

Whatever the case, she had not said anything, and he was grateful, but that didn't mean that he wanted to engage in any ridiculous conversation with her

about whatever stupid things she was saying. For heaven's sake, she kept parroting back things he himself had said to her as if they were her own observations. Did she not think he would remember saying it himself?

He really wanted to strangle her, and he knew he was going to have to be nice to her to get her to keep his secret.

Then he wondered again if he really cared if it was known. In the early morning, before the dawn, he had been convinced that he would marry Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

He would, wouldn't he? He would rather it be proper, that he court her and go through the right motions, and that they have a respectably long engagement...

Well, that wasn't true. He wanted to rip all her clothes off her and unpin her hair and kiss her lips and her jaw and her neck and her...

At any rate, a very short engagement would suit him fine. If Caroline decided to tell all, he didn't care.

But why wouldn't Elizabeth even look at him anymore? She had pulled away from him on the walk before, as if she couldn't wait to be rid of him.

She loathes you, said a voice at the back of his head. *Has she not said it enough times, you idiot?*

But what could he have possibly done to make her hate him that much? He had been short with her. He had ignored her. He had said an insulting thing, which she had heard, yes, but which he did not even mean. Surely, if he had the chance to explain it all to her, she would change her mind.

Of course, he'd been alone with her for the entirety of last night and not been able to explain it then.

Yes, but it had been distracting, then. She wasn't wearing clothes. She'd had her hair in that braid. And he'd been thinking about kissing her the entire time, which had made it hard to speak. More than once, he'd removed himself from her close proximity so that he could gather himself.

All of that had happened because he was unprepared for being alone with her. But now that he knew what it was like, he would be quite adept at navigating the path that was talking to Elizabeth. So, he'd go to her again. Tonight.

It was improper to do so, but there was no other way that they could talk without being overheard, and so there was nothing for it.

* * *

There was a soft knocking at Elizabeth's door. "Jane?" she called out hopefully, for her sister was doing much better, and might conceivably be up and about and looking for her.

"It's not Jane," said a deep voice at the door.

Mr. Darcy! The sound of his voice made a shiver go through her. What was he doing here? She crossed the room and opened the door, but only enough to peer outside. "What are you doing here? This is most improper."

"I realize that," he said, "but we need to converse, you and I. Let me in."

"No," she said. "It was bad enough to be trapped in a room with you last night. I can't do it again. I

should be putting myself in much the same danger as I was last night, and I like to think that I have escaped it."

"If someone were to happen upon us arguing through the door, it would be just as bad," he said, arching an eyebrow. "You might as well let me in."

Her nostrils flared. This man! He was dreadfulness personified. But she relented and opened the door.

He came inside.

She shut the door behind him. "We shall talk briefly, and then you'll leave straightaway."

"Listen, Miss Bennet, I fear that I've made a bad impression on you, and I must rectify it. Perhaps if I could explain why it was that I said the things that you overheard me saying at the Meryton Assembly."

"Well, that's plain enough, I must admit," she said. "You said those things because you thought them."

"Indeed, I did not. I was only in a rather embarrassing situation, and I was eager to say anything to get out of dancing. I could not bear dancing."

"You danced." She lifted her chin. "With both Mrs. Hurst and with Miss Bingley."

"Yes, but that was why I knew that I couldn't possibly do any more dancing."

"Why not?"

"It was, er, a physical... condition, which was exceedingly uncomfortable."

"You seem able-bodied to me, Mr. Darcy."

"It was not an ailment, necessarily. Rather, a

reaction to... to you. The sight of you."

"What?" She could not believe he had said such a thing. "I assure you, I have no ability to render men physically incapable of dancing simply by appearing in a room."

"In my case, yes, you did. But I'm afraid it's all rather impossible to explain to you. You see, I was struck by your... your beauty, and I, um..." Mr. Darcy blushed then. Perhaps he had been blushing all along, but now the flush was obvious, stealing over his face and even his neck. "Listen, I can't explain this to a woman such as yourself. It would be utterly indecorous. You must, however, trust me that I think entirely the opposite of what I said, and that you are, in point of fact, one of the most winsome creatures I have ever laid eyes on. I think you very beautiful."

Now, it was her turn to flush. She found she couldn't keep her gaze on his. She looked down at her fingers and she twisted them together. "You don't need to make excuses for yourself, sir. I assure you, I am not bothered in the slightest about the things you said. This ridiculous physical condition you have invented —"

"It's not an invention."

"I would not have your compliments, when they are only being said now because you feel guilty of having said the opposite in the past."

"That is not the case. I am endeavoring to tell you that you have been mistaken about me. I feel as though you are not much inclined to believe me, however."

"And why should I be?" She looked up at him now.

"Well, when we are married, if you are always willfully disbelieving me, I fear it will be quite disagreeable for us both."

"When we are...?" She gaped at him. "Your arrogance knows no bounds."

He flinched. "That is... I did not mean for it to come out in that way."

"I have accepted no offer of marriage from you," she said, and her voice was rising, even though she knew that it wasn't wise to talk so loudly, lest they were discovered.

"I realize that, and I meant to say that I had come to renew my —"

"Furthermore, there is no need for any offer of marriage at all," said Elizabeth. "We escaped from that room last night, so we are free from any obligation. And even considering the particulars, I was by no means convinced that I would take your hand at any rate, as I think I made abundantly clear."

Darcy's blush deepened. His jaw twitched. "Your opinion of me, Miss Bennet, is flawed, and I am only attempting to get you to see —"

"I don't think it *is* flawed," she said. "You are far too presumptuous. You take me for granted, and I can't abide that. I think you should go."

"There is always the possibility that Miss Bingley will decide to tell what she saw," he said. "Will your answer still be thus in that eventuality?"

"I don't think she will," said Elizabeth. "At least not if you flatter her a bit. Flirt with her. She is

obviously quite taken with you, and she only keeps it to herself because if she forced us together, she should lose you."

"Lose me?" Mr. Darcy's face twisted in horror. "You can't possibly think that Miss Bingley would want me?"

"You are blind, Mr. Darcy. I don't know what goes on in that thick head of yours," she said, and it was easier to be angry with him, because it tended to drive down the other things that she felt when she looked at him—the bothersome and confusing sensations that ran all through her body. "Now, please, leave my room."

* * *

When Darcy left Elizabeth's room, he felt as if he'd been held under a strong current and nearly drowned.

What had he been thinking? That woman's tongue would cut him to ribbons. He couldn't possibly marry her. No, he was actually glad that she was refusing him. He had an irrational attraction to her, but that was as far as it went. He would have to deny himself the pleasure of the things he wanted to do to her, he supposed, but that was worth it, because she was stubborn and prejudiced. She had made up her mind about him based on one interaction, and nothing to the contrary seemed to be able to shake her conviction. If they did get married, after the heat of passion left them, he imagined they would have been miserable, anyway.

Yes, he was very glad that she'd said no, and even more glad to find that she and her sister were leaving

Netherfield, as he discovered the next day. They were to remain one more night, and then they would be gone.

He made himself scarce, and didn't speak to her again. She, of course, would not speak to him either. At one point, they were even left alone together for almost half an hour, but he studied his book the entire time and reminded himself over and over that he was glad to be rid of her.

Once she was gone, he was certain it would be the case that he no longer thought of her, and he eagerly awaited her departure.

He did consider also what she had said about Caroline, which was so odious that he willed it to be false. He despised Caroline, and he was only polite to her for Bingley's sake. He certainly had no desire to be matched with her, and he hoped against hope that she had no desire either.

However, as he observed Caroline in the ensuing days, he was forced to concur with Elizabeth's analysis. Caroline did seem to spend more time than made any sense talking to him, especially about nonsensical things. He noticed that she didn't do this with anyone else, not even her brother, who tolerated her idiocy more than anyone else. And she and her sister were close friends, but Caroline paid more attention to him than her also.

He also began to think of other things that Caroline had done in a new light. For instance, she had pronounced a strong dislike for a book that Darcy was about to begin reading. After he took it up and sang its praises, Caroline decided to read it too,

and upon doing so, she changed her mind, and then wanted to spend time talking to him about his opinions on various passages. Of course, she had no opinions of her own. She simply agreed with whatever he said. *"You're quite intelligent, Mr. Darcy. I'm sure I could never think of anything like that myself,"* she would say or some other such nonsense.

With a sinking sensation of dread, he realized it was true.

Upon doing so, he immediately began completely ignoring Caroline. He only spoke to her in short phrases, and he never engaged her. He did not consent to any more walks in the lane with her and her sister, but instead withdrew entirely. He didn't want to give her any encouragement whatsoever. He even began considering that he might go back home to Pemberley. There was nothing good coming of being here with Bingley, and he could certainly stand to see Georgiana again.

Bingley himself was mooning over Elizabeth's sister, and nearly every conversation he had with Darcy had something to do with her. *"Doesn't this remind you of the color of Miss Bennet's hair?"* Bingley would say, or, *"It's a pity that Miss Bennet had to go home so soon."*

If it weren't for the fact that Darcy had succumbed to the madness that was falling for a Bennet girl himself, he would do his best to dissuade Bingley from his obvious infatuation. But, as it was, Darcy barely had the space in his mind for it, so often was he chasing away thoughts of Elizabeth.

The worst was at night, when he dreamed of

her—exactly the kind of carnal dreams that made him feel as though he was burning up from the inside, the kinds of things that were surely a sin against nature to feel. He would wake sweating and aching and throbbing, and nothing seemed to drive the dreams away.

But he was also assailed by less carnal thoughts, as well. He imagined what she might say in conversation or how she might enjoy a meal or simply her smile. Quite often, as he listened to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst prattle at what passed as conversation, he wished that Elizabeth were there to add her bright wit.

The truth was that he missed her. It had barely been a matter of two days since she left, and he was already wishing to see her again. He told himself that he simply needed more time, and that she would soon be nothing more than a distant memory.

But then he went to sleep that night, and she surfaced in his dreams again, delicate fingers and creamy skin and her hair undone...

Abruptly, he was pulled back into wakefulness. He had felt a weight at the foot of his bed, as if someone was sitting there.

He sat up, and there was Caroline Bingley, holding a candle, perching on the edge of the bed.

“What the devil are you doing here?” he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"You shouldn't use such language," said Caroline, shocked.

"You must leave now." Darcy glowered at her. He could not believe that she was the one shocked, when it was her who had come into his bedroom in the middle of the night. That was a bit of irony.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's only that you don't even look at me anymore, and I know it's that awful Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and if I don't do something, I fear that you'll slip away, and I can't allow that to happen."

"What are you going on about?" He thrust aside the covers to the bed and got out. On his feet, he seized her by the arm and hauled her up.

"Oh! Mr. Darcy, you're hurting me." Her voice was a squeak.

He dragged her across the room towards the door. His mind was churning. Slip away, she'd said? So, she had orchestrated this in an attempt to secure him in some way. What did she want from him? Whatever it was, she wasn't going to get it. He flung open the door and came face to face with Mrs. Hurst.

Who screamed at the top of her lungs. "Villain!"

She pointed at Darcy. "Wretched, wretched man."

Darcy was stunned. He looked at Caroline.

Caroline winced. "I really am sorry."

"Wait a moment," said Darcy. "The other night, being locked in that room. That was you! It was your first attempt. But you accidentally caught Miss Elizabeth instead of yourself. What is the meaning of all of this, Miss Bingley? This is highly irregular, as you must see."

"Oh, Brother, help!" Mrs. Hurst was yelling as loud as she could. "You won't believe this calamity."

Darcy let go of Caroline long enough to grab at Mrs. Hurst. "Stop that."

She shrank from him as if she was afraid he was going to strike her. "Please, Mr. Darcy."

And at that moment, all of the servants in the house appeared around the bend in the hallway, wide eyed.

Darcy let go of Mrs. Hurst, sighing heavily.

A moment later, Bingley burst through the servants and strode down the hall. No one was dressed. Everyone was clad only in their nightclothes. Bingley was wearing a ridiculous nightcap and the top of it flopped down in his face. Annoyed, he brushed it away. "What is the meaning of this?"

Darcy began to speak. "Your sister is the most dreadful—"

"He's ruined Caroline," said Mrs. Hurst breathlessly.

Mr. Hurst appeared at the end of the hallway. "Now, what is all this?" he said sleepily.

Bingley looked from Darcy to Caroline to Mrs. Hurst and then back to the servants. "Go back to bed," he bellowed at them.

Dutifully, they all disappeared around the corner, but Darcy would have laid money down that they were simply hiding round the bend, listening to everything that was being said. His heart sank into the pit of his stomach. He was starting to realize what was happening, and he didn't like it at all. He lowered his voice. "Bingley, I assure you, I have not *touched* Caroline—Miss Bingley." Dash it all, saying her first name as if they were intimates was not helping anything.

"I should say not," said Bingley. "You are my friend. My dearest, closest friend. You would never do such a thing."

"Indeed not," said Darcy.

"But he has," said Mrs. Hurst. "I discovered that my sister wasn't in her bed, and I knew where I would find her. She had confided in me such alarming things as of late, and I was sick with worry. I went in search of her at once. And wouldn't you know it, I found her here. In Mr. Darcy's bedchamber."

"This is most assuredly all a lie," said Darcy.

"Have a care," called out Mr. Hurst. "That's my wife you're calling a liar."

Bingley's night cap flopped over his eye again. Frustrated, he pushed it aside. "Look here, Darcy. She wasn't in your room, was she?"

"Well..." Darcy cleared his throat. "That is, she was, but I didn't ask her to come in. I simply awoke

and she was there, and it's likely all a trap she's laid, and it's not the first time she's attempted something of that nature —"

"How dare you?" said Caroline, and her face was crumpling. "You would... would not protect me, sir? When it was from your summons I came to you in the first place?"

Darcy swallowed.

Bingley's eyes widened. His cap flopped down again. He tore the thing from his head and dashed it against the floor. "Darcy, I would have thought it impossible you would treat my own sister with such disrespect. What are you about? And then, to be such a blackguard as to deny it, it is not even to be thought of, let alone —"

"Of course I deny it. Nothing happened." Darcy clenched his hands into fists.

Bingley's face was getting red. "Now, listen to me, you are saying that both of my sisters are lying."

"They have obviously conspired with each other," said Darcy. "They've put this together themselves to ensnare me and make me look like the worst sort of snake, but I assure you that there is nothing in it."

Bingley sputtered. "Why would they invent something so abominable?"

"We would not!" said Mrs. Hurst, indignant. She looked over her shoulder. "Husband, will you bear his accusations in this way?"

"Indeed, I will not," said Mr. Hurst. "In point of fact, Darcy, I have not the least objection to dueling one such as you. I have done it before, and —"

"Oh, stop!" said Caroline, horrified. "There is no

need for that. Darcy is sorry, are you not, darling? You will admit what you did with me?"

Darcy turned to her, disgusted. "And what is that exactly, madam? What do you claim has passed between us?"

"We were... alone together in your room," she said. "And that is quite scandalous enough. Everyone knows now, and you are an honorable man, so you must do the honorable thing."

Bingley was shaking. "Darcy, will you insist on denying this thing?"

"I must deny what is not true," he said. "We were alone in the room for moments only, and I was taking her back to her room, that is all. Nothing passed between us, nothing at all. I do not have any designs on your sister. Indeed, I can hardly stand to be in her presence. There is no chance on earth that I—"

"That's enough," said Bingley. He drew himself up, and his eyes were wild. "I want you out." Bingley pointed down the hallway. "I would not host such a man as you under my roof anymore. You...." He gave Darcy a disgusted look. "I don't think I've ever even *known* you."

Darcy shut his eyes for a moment and then opened them. He was reeling now, unsure of what to do, but this naked dislike from Bingley shook him to his core. He and Bingley were quite close, and the destruction of their friendship was not something that could be taken lightly. But perhaps things could be mended with time. If Bingley were to calm down, then perhaps Darcy could get him to see that this was

all a misunderstanding. So, he simply nodded. "Yes, of course. I will go." He started to close the door.

"Wait, you can't send him away," said Caroline, looking very worried.

"A moment to get dressed and I will be gone," said Darcy. "If you could be so good as to send someone to the stables to saddle my horse." He slammed the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Outside the door, Darcy could hear the screech of Caroline's voice, but he couldn't make out what she was saying. He struggled to dress without the help of his valet, which he hadn't thought would be quite so difficult. It was the emotion of it all that made it hard for him to stay steady. His hands were shaking.

He hardly knew how to feel.

This was not to be borne. He did not deserve any of this. And Bingley should know that Darcy was not the sort of man who would do something such as what he had been accused of. How could Bingley believe his sisters?

But Darcy realized that if the situation had been reversed, he would have turned against Bingley himself. He simply couldn't abide the thought of his own sister as anything other than innocent. And Georgiana was, of course. Innocent. She had been taken in by that horrible Wickham. It wasn't Georgiana's fault. Couldn't be.

He sucked in a breath. No reason to think of any of that, he supposed.

No, no reason at all.

He understood why Bingley had sided against

him, but he couldn't help but be wounded. And he was frankly furious at the injustice of it. Did he have no recourse? It was his word against hers, and she would never relent. He could see that now. Caroline Bingley was a conniving woman who would stoop so low as to endanger her own reputation for what she wanted.

He had underestimated her, he realized. He had thought of her as stupid and silly, but she had a wicked intelligence that he had never suspected.

His door burst open.

Darcy looked up from trying to tie his cravat.

It was Bingley. "Now, look, you must marry her."

Darcy ripped off the cravat and tossed it on his bed. "Bingley, nothing happened."

"You don't have to leave," said Bingley. "In fact, you can't. If you leave, the talk that will spread will be damaging to you both. You stay, and you announce your engagement to my sister. And we'll... attempt to forget this ever happened."

Darcy's nostrils flared. "You're being hasty. Give it some time, and we can talk, and I can make you see what's happened here."

"I know what's happened," said Bingley. He looked down at the carpet. "I have questioned Caroline, and I find her answers sufficient enough to know that there is no covering this up and presenting her to some other man. You have trespassed against her virtue—"

"No, I swear it," said Darcy. "For God's sake, man, you know me. I would never do that." And then he thought of Elizabeth only a few nights before,

and the way he had nearly ravaged her.

Bingley squared his shoulders. "Perhaps she encouraged you." This was hard for him to admit, but he was doing it to be charitable. "It is inexcusable even so, but I do see how it might be possible to lose your head with a woman you find quite enticing."

"But I don't find your sister enticing."

"Then *why* would you do this to her?" And now Bingley was trembling all over in barely-repressed rage.

Darcy started protest again that he hadn't, but he stopped his voice. It was pointless. They were going round in circles. He could protest his evidence until the end of the age and it wouldn't do anything but make him into a repetitive parrot. The truth was, he had no options here. When he'd been trapped in the room with Elizabeth, he'd thought it all through, and he had seen that there was nothing to be done.

He had Georgiana to think about, after all, and he could not do anything to smear the name of Darcy. Besides, from the point of view of connections, it was a good match. It was only that, when he thought of a woman of Caroline's character as the mother of his children, he felt ill.

Darcy went and picked up the cravat again. "Yes, fine. You're right, of course. I must marry her. It doesn't matter what did or didn't come to pass. The appearance of it is all that matters." He wrapped the thing around his neck.

Bingley sucked in a shaking breath, but this time the shaking came from relief. "Thank God, you are being somewhat reasonable."

Darcy tied his cravat. "I'm leaving anyway."

"What? You can't leave. The talk—"

"I am going to town to prepare things for my bride," said Darcy.

"You must marry her at once," said Bingley. "If she is with child—"

"She is not." Darcy glared at him. "I told you nothing happened." He strode past his friend and past everyone in the hallway, who had been listening to every last word.

When he rounded the bend in the hallway, there were all the servants. He had been right about their listening in as well.

He walked out of Netherfield without a backward glance, as if for all the world, he had no cares. But inside, he was a well of despair.

CHAPTER NINE

Elizabeth had scarcely had much time to consider what had occurred at Netherfield. She had been quite occupied. Upon arriving at home, they were immediately visited by Mr. William Collins, upon whom their father's estate was entailed. For what purpose the man had come, none of them knew, but Elizabeth found him unbearable and was counting the days until he left.

She wasn't sure what was worst about the man. His obsequiousness when it came to his patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh? His superciliousness about everything, turning each and every conversation into one of his sermons? Or simply the fact that he talked overmuch and never seemed to shut up?

Altogether, he was most disagreeable.

However, when she wasn't contemplating the odiousness of Mr. Collins, she had a few moments here and there to think of the fact that she had denied the marriage proposal of Mr. Darcy twice. And that Mr. Darcy was a man with ten thousand a year. She would have been mistress of all of his estates. True, Darcy made her blood boil, but he also....

Well, it was hard not to picture the way he had

looked that night in his nightshirt—the hair on his chest, on his chin, the muscles of his arms moving beneath his banyan. How close his lips had been to hers.

When she thought of such things, she felt the urge to fan herself, even though it wasn't the least bit warm. It was November, for heaven's sake.

"Oh," said Jane. "Oh, dear."

Elizabeth looked up. She was at breakfast at the moment, and a letter had arrived from Miss Bingley to Jane, but Elizabeth had been giving it no mind. Now, she sat up straight. Had Miss Bingley changed her mind? Had she decided to share what she knew of Elizabeth and Darcy? Would she have put something so scandalous in a letter?

Elizabeth's heart began to pound. "What is it, Jane?"

"It is only that that I did not think he seemed to care for her," said Jane. "He seemed to pay her no mind much of the time. However, perhaps that is simply his way. He must be quite taken up with his own thoughts and think everything else is of little importance."

"Of whom are you speaking?" said Elizabeth. "What is in the letter?"

"Oh, yes, Jane, do tell us," spoke up their sister Lydia from across the table. "We are all quite in suspense over here."

"It is Mr. Darcy," said Jane. "Miss Bingley writes to say that she is engaged to him."

Elizabeth felt as if she had been struck across the face. She gasped, falling back into her chair.

“Lizzy?” said Jane, giving her a concerned look.

Elizabeth put her hand to her chest, endeavoring to breathe. She couldn’t speak. She found that she was not in the least pleased with this news. But she had probably orchestrated it herself, had she not? Mr. Darcy had been unaware of Miss Bingley’s designs on him, and she had spelled it out for him. So, naturally, he had proposed. Miss Bingley was the proper sort of woman for Mr. Darcy. She had a fortune and the right connections, and he would want someone such as her. It all was quite tidy and neat, wasn’t it?

And she... well, she had no interest in Darcy at all. She despised him.

In her mind’s eye, she saw Darcy passing his thumb against the stubble on his jaw, and she felt hot and then cold and then hot again. She managed to suppress a whimper that wanted to come out of her throat.

She *hated* Mr. Darcy.

“Oh, la,” said Lydia. “I think they’re both quite well suited. They both think they’re too good for the rest of us.”

“Now, Lydia, that is not charitable,” said Jane. She was still looking at Elizabeth. “Are you all right, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth forced herself to smile. “Perfectly. Yes, I think it will be a lovely match. She will bore him to death, and Lord knows, he deserves it.”

Lydia found that pronouncement abundantly funny, and Kitty followed her sister’s lead and also dissolved into giggles.

"Indulging in gossip about others is not a virtuous use of time," Mary said solemnly.

"Oh, how can it be gossip when she wrote us to tell us of her news?" said their mother. "She wanted us to know. What else does the letter say, Jane?"

"Even so," said Mary. "I think we should keep our minds on what is pure and lovely."

"Well said," agreed Mr. Collins, who had been silent up to this point. He opened his mouth to wax philosophical on some subject or other, so Elizabeth interrupted him before he had a chance.

"Yes, what else does she say, Jane?" said Elizabeth.

"Only that Darcy has gone to town to make preparations for their wedding," said Jane.

"He has left her immediately upon their engagement?" said their mother. "Well, he is uncommonly unthoughtful, is he not? At any rate, I say good riddance to that man. I'll be glad if we don't have to see him again. Of course, when Bingley and Jane are married, with him married to Bingley's sister —"

"Mother, please do not say such things," said Jane. "I am not pledged to marry anyone." But she had gone a deep shade of red.

Elizabeth swallowed. If Jane did marry Bingley, was there a chance she would be running into Darcy for the rest of her life? That would be quite disagreeable.

* * *

"Hill has heard it from one of the servants at Netherfield," Lydia was saying. She and all her

sisters (excepting Mary, who had chosen to stay home and play the piano, albeit badly) had walked to Meryton for a bit of diversion. Lydia and Kitty were quite impossible when it came to the officers. It would have all been pleasant, Elizabeth thought, if it weren't for the inclusion of Mr. Collins, who had taken the opportunity to speak at length on the subject of virtue, quoting several verses to prove whatever points he made. Of course, Elizabeth was fairly certain that he had misquoted one of them, but she hadn't dared to point it out, as she was sure Collins wouldn't have borne that well.

So, it was only now, after they had arrived, that Lydia was able to begin giving this news she had procured.

"You oughtn't pay any attention to the housekeeper's gossip," Jane said. She had seemed quiet and lost in thought the entire walk. Elizabeth envied her. It seemed as if Jane had completely blocked out whatever it was that Collins had been prattling on about.

"As if Lydia could stop paying attention to any gossip," said Elizabeth under her breath. But the truth was that she was interested in news from Netherfield, so she didn't join Jane in chiding Lydia, but only listened.

"Well, it's not as if I could help but hear," said Lydia. "I have ears, don't I?" She laughed. "Heavens, Jane, would you have me stopping them and humming to myself so as not to be tainted by the talk?"

"As the apostle Paul says—" Mr. Collins began.

“For heaven’s sake, Lydia, what did Hill hear?” Elizabeth interrupted.

Mr. Collins gave Elizabeth an appraising look.

She ought not have interrupted him. She bit down on her bottom lip, inwardly scolding herself.

“Well, it’s all very vague. But something shocking. The engagement between Darcy and Miss Bingley was very sudden, and Mr. Darcy left the house in the middle of the night on horseback. And without a properly tied cravat, at that!” said Lydia. “What do you think it means?”

“I think it means that Mr. Darcy is positively the worst man we know,” said Kitty. “To leave in the middle of the night.”

“And without tying his cravat,” said Lydia. “It’s all dreadful. The worst kind of dreadfulness. Why would he do such a thing?”

“Why would he come to a ball and refuse to dance?” said Kitty. “He is a nonsensical man with no care for anyone but himself.”

Lydia nodded. “Indeed he is.”

Elizabeth didn’t know what to make of the news. Was it true? She could not understand it at all. She did not know what to make of Mr. Darcy, anyway. She wondered at the fact that he had renewed his proposal of marriage to her after they were out of danger of discovery. Why had he done such a thing? And all of that business about his physical condition and his actually finding her beautiful? She didn’t know what to make of that either.

Now, apparently, he was marrying Miss Bingley.

No, she couldn’t understand it, no matter how she

tried.

It was probably better not to think any more on the matter of Mr. Darcy, especially not of Mr. Darcy's shoulders or of how much of his skin she'd been able to see when he'd been in a nightshirt.

Her clothes felt tight.

"Oh!" said Lydia in excitement. "There's Denny." She thrust her hand into the air and waved it wildly. "Denny!" she called. "Over here!"

Across the street, Elizabeth noticed Mr. Denny, who she had been acquainted with briefly before. Lydia knew all of the officers by name, but Elizabeth hadn't paid nearly as much attention.

Mr. Denny, who was not alone but with another man, saw Lydia and a grin split his face. He started across the street, bringing his companion with him.

As the man grew closer, Elizabeth could see that Denny's companion was rather shockingly good looking. She shifted on her feet and looked away from him, and wondered at her reaction to the man's countenance and form. If he were to be clad only in a nightshirt, would he also have bits of hair on his chest?

It wouldn't be dark like Darcy's. This man had golden hair. Golden hair and blue eyes and broad shoulders.

"May I present to the Bennet sisters Mr. Wickham?" said Denny with his perpetual smile.

Mr. Wickham bowed low and smiled at them all. "Charmed, I'm sure."

"You must keep them straight," said Denny, smiling at Wickham and proceeding to introduce all

of the girls to Wickham, who kissed all their hands and winked at each.

When he took Elizabeth's hand, his gaze lingered on her, and she felt flushed.

Perhaps a fine looking man like Wickham was all that Elizabeth needed to forget thinking about Mr. Darcy. She winked back at Wickham, and his smile widened appreciatively.

"Lovely day for a walk, isn't it?" said Wickham, ostensibly to all of them, but he was looking at Elizabeth.

"Well, there's no rain, and it's not too cold, so I suppose so," said Elizabeth.

"If I were to walk amongst such pretty girls every day, I should never want to stop walking," said Wickham, still holding her gaze.

"Then, sir, your legs would get quite tired," said Elizabeth.

"Indeed," he agreed. "I should probably exhaust myself and collapse, and then I should have need of someone to nurse me back to health." He winked at her again.

Elizabeth flushed again. She touched her chest. "You couldn't mean to speak of me, certainly? That is rather forward of you, to assume that I would be your nursemaid?"

"I wouldn't dare to assume such a thing," he said. "If you were near me, after I had collapsed, I'm certain that I would need nothing more than the sight of your smile to revive me entirely."

They continued to banter in a light fashion for a few moments more, every other word out of

Wickham's mouth a compliment. The man was too charming by half.

Yes, she thought. Wickham was just the thing to drive away the specter of Mr. Darcy entirely.

The sound of a horse interrupted them, and they looked up to see that Mr. Bingley was approaching. He looked tired, his mouth drawn and his eyes shadowed. Elizabeth did not think that she had ever seen him thus, and she was struck by the sight of him.

Upon seeing their party, he paused. And at the sight of Jane, a change came over his countenance, as if simply regarding her could chase away whatever it was that had ailed him.

"Oh, Lord, Mr. Bingley!" said Lydia cheerily. "How lovely to see you. Are you come to invite us to the ball you have promised?"

Elizabeth cringed. Was her sister blind? It was obvious that there were no thoughts of merriment in Mr. Bingley's mind, or at least there had not been until he had caught sight of Jane.

Mr. Bingley only smiled at Lydia, however. "I'm afraid that the ball has quite slipped my mind as of late."

"What with the news of your sister's engagement, I suppose," said Lydia. "Our sincerest congratulations, by the by."

"Yes," said Bingley, but the shadow passed over his face again. Eagerly, he sought out Jane again. "I was on my way to Longbourn in search of you. But I see you are engaged, and I have other business to take care of. Perhaps I will call soon, though, and I

will bring news of this ball I have committed myself to."

Jane gave him a small smile in return. "I should like that."

"Is it true that Mr. Darcy left in the middle of the night?" said Lydia.

"Lydia!" said Elizabeth, going to take her sister by the arm. "We're quite sorry, Mr. Bingley."

"He did leave with haste," said Bingley. "But if you'll excuse me, I must be on my way." And he galloped off.

"Oh, you scared him off," said Kitty with a giggle. "What must it all mean? Something quite irregular, I think."

"Indeed," agreed Lydia, who looked positively overjoyed at the prospect.

"This Mr. Darcy he speaks of?" said Mr. Wickham.

Elizabeth turned to him. "Yes?"

"Only that I am acquainted with a Mr. Darcy," said Mr. Wickham. "But the one I know is an arrogant sod."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I think we are speaking of the same man." She hated Mr. Darcy. It was fate that Mr. Wickham felt the same way. A sign from the heavens that she should put aside any more thoughts of the awful man.

* * *

Elizabeth woke with the bedsheets tangled around her neck. She was overly warm, even though the fire was dying down to embers. She pushed aside the covers and stared up into the darkness.

She had been dreaming of Mr. Darcy, of being in that room with him again. Only this time, she had been quite sure he was—in fact—going to kiss her. She found that she wanted that kiss, welcomed it. In the dream, she had shut her eyes and waited for the feeling of his lips on hers.

But when she had opened her eyes, she was here, alone in her own bedchamber, and it had all been a dream.

A pointless, useless dream, because Darcy was going to marry Miss Bingley, and she was never going to know what it was like to kiss him.

She attempted to change her thoughts. To insert Mr. Wickham into the scene instead of Mr. Darcy. Wickham was blond and fair and fine to look at, and he had a silver tongue. Wickham was not the sort of man who would say that she was “tolerable,” nor would he make up stories about physical conditions that kept him from dancing.

She wondered what Wickham would have done if she had found herself trapped in a bedchamber with him instead.

Would Wickham have tried to kiss her? Would he have stopped?

No, she thought. She didn’t think that Wickham was the sort of man who showed a lot of restraint. He seemed to hurtle headlong into whatever course had been set ahead of him. If he was going to flatter a young lady, he really flattered her. If he was trapped in a bedchamber with a woman, then he would kiss her.

Possibly, he would do more than kissing.

Elizabeth tugged the covers back up over her body. Not because she was cold, but because she felt as though she needed some protection when she thought things like this. These sorts of thoughts were best done under the covers in the darkness.

She knew very little about what could happen between men and women alone in a bedchamber together, but she understood that whatever passed between them was the same thing that happened on the wedding night. On a wedding night, it was acceptable, but between two people not joined by matrimony, it was a sin. She also had a vague notion that it involved removing clothing, only she couldn't be sure where she had gotten that idea. It was only that it seemed right.

She had never seen a real, live naked man before, unless you counted babies or art. Either way, she knew that the things between men's legs were different than the things between women's legs. And she also knew that she had such sensations between her own thighs when she thought about all these sorts of things.

It was a heavy feeling, as if everything down there were swelling and growing more tender.

Overall, she simply didn't have enough information to be sure of more than that. But whatever it was that men wanted from women, she thought it might be likely that Wickham would take it.

Which made something inside her twitch and clench. She thought of kissing Wickham, of his hurtling headlong down the course set ahead of him,

and it made her feel a bit breathless.

But then she thought of Mr. Darcy in that room with her, and the way he had looked at her with a fire that lit her up inside. And yet, he had kept himself in check. He hadn't kissed her. He had done nothing except to touch her hair.

She put her own fingers on her braid, then, and she had a brief memory of Darcy's knuckles brushing the soft skin of her breast.

Just like that, she was on fire again.

She gasped, rolling over and burying her face in her pillow.

She shouldn't be thinking thoughts like this. For one thing, she had resolved to forget about Mr. Darcy, and to stop thinking of him. For another, these must be wicked, sinful thoughts, and a woman like her shouldn't even be considering them. That she did so might mean that *she* was wicked. She knew that Darcy had not ruined her when they were trapped together, but the fact that she could think these thoughts... well, maybe it meant she was as good as ruined.

She must stop thinking of it, at once.

But she couldn't help but think of Darcy keeping his desires at bay as opposed to Wickham's lack of restraint, and she felt as if she might prefer the former, even though she was supposed to banish Darcy completely from her mind.

CHAPTER TEN

The following day, they were to dine with the Philipses in Meryton, and upon arrival, Elizabeth was pleasantly surprised to see that Wickham was there as well. When she entered the room, his gaze sought hers out and she found herself flushing already.

It was all well and good to say that restraint was more affecting in the dead of night with the covers pulled tight against her body. But Mr. Darcy was gone and engaged to boot. Mr. Wickham was here, and she told herself that she didn't give a fig for restraint. She wanted laughter and warmth and Mr. Wickham's dancing blue eyes.

So, she was gratified when he ended up at a table with her and Lydia. At first, Lydia talked so much that Elizabeth could not get a word in edgewise, and Wickham, all politeness, was happy to speak with her in a light and agreeable tone. But eventually, Lydia became too engrossed in the game of cards they were playing, and she was quiet enough to allow some conversation between Elizabeth and Wickham.

Wickham was paying very little attention to his

cards, all the while making rather large bets, which Elizabeth didn't think wise, especially considering he was apparently new to the game of whist. But soon she forgot all that, for Wickham brought up Darcy. "I understand Mr. Darcy was staying at Netherfield."

"Yes, for about a month," said Elizabeth. "But he is gone now. He has gone to town, or that is the rumor, anyway. I suppose he could have gone home. He is a man of very large property in Derbyshire, I understand."

"Yes," replied Mr. Wickham, "his estate there is a noble one. A clear ten thousand per annum. You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you certain information on that head than myself, for I have been connected with his family in a particular manner from my infancy."

Elizabeth could not but look surprised. So, Wickham knew Darcy well. Knew him better than she herself did, and might know all manner of things about him. She felt her heart begin to pick up speed. She wanted to ask all manner of questions about Darcy, but she didn't dare, for fear of giving away any particular interest in him. *And I do not have any particular interest in him*, she reminded herself. *He is engaged. And very disagreeable at that, no matter how his bare skin looks in candlelight.*

"Are you much acquainted with Mr. Darcy?"

"Me?" Elizabeth didn't know what to say. *He asked me to marry him. He nearly kissed me. I have dreams about the hair on his chest.* "I have spent four days in the same house with him." And then she forced herself to add, "I think him very

disagreeable.”

Wickham let out a soft snort. “I have no right to give *my* opinion as to his being agreeable or otherwise. But I believe your opinion of him would in general astonish—and perhaps you would not express it quite so strongly anywhere else. Here you are in your own family.”

“Upon my word, I say no more here than I might say in any house in the neighborhood, except Netherfield. He is not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Everybody is disgusted with his pride. You will not find him more favorably spoken of by anyone.” It was true. No one thought well of Darcy. “And after this business with his recent engagement, after which he disappeared, people are even more likely to say unfavorable things.”

Wickham was quiet for a long moment. “I cannot pretend to be sorry. As you know, I was quite open with my own thoughts of him before. I suppose it is not a charitable attitude, but I don’t mind his being taken a bit low. But what is this you speak of with his engagement? I was given to understand that he is promised to his cousin Miss de Bourgh, the daughter of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up. “Of that, I know nothing.” But it was strange that Lady Catherine had come up again, when Mr. Collins was in such raptures with her.

“Well, it is of no matter,” said Wickham. “Perhaps I was mistaken in my understanding of the arrangement. At any rate, I am gratified that he has quit this part of the country. It is not for me to be

driven away by Mr. Darcy in any case, but it is simpler this way. We are not on friendly terms, and it always gives me pain to meet him. His father, the late Mr. Darcy, was one of the best men that ever breathed, and the truest friend I ever had, and I can never be in company with this Mr. Darcy without being grieved to the soul by a thousand tender recollections. His behavior to myself has been scandalous, but I verily believe I could forgive him anything and everything, rather than his disappointing the hopes and disgracing the memory of his father."

At this, Elizabeth was quite intrigued, but she felt a stab of some other emotion, one she couldn't even quite name. Though she was resolved that she had no love for Mr. Darcy, she felt a bit of guilt at saying insulting things behind his back, especially when her feelings toward him were in such tumult. Still, she must know all. "You cannot leave me with such a vague explanation," she said. "You must tell me what it is that Mr. Darcy has done that requires forgiveness."

Wickham picked back up his cards at this, and he was silent for some time. "The church ought to have been my profession—I was brought up for the church, and I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living, had it pleased the gentleman we were speaking of just now."

"Indeed." She was not sure what to make of this.

"Yes—the late Mr. Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. He was my godfather, and excessively attached to me. I cannot

do justice to his kindness. He meant to provide for me amply, and thought he had done it, but when the living fell, it was given elsewhere.”

“Good heavens!” cried Elizabeth.

Wickham nodded. “Yes, the living became vacant two years ago, exactly as I was of an age to hold it, and it was given to another man. I cannot accuse myself of having really done anything to deserve to lose it. I have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may have spoken my opinion too freely. I can recall nothing worse. But the fact is, that we are very different sort of men, and that Darcy hates me.”

Elizabeth was struggling to find words. Would Darcy have truly done such a thing? He had seemed so honorable with her, offering to marry her when he did not need to do so. Of course, he was such a closed-down man, who thought so highly of himself. “This is quite shocking! He deserves to be publicly disgraced.”

“Some time or other he will be — but it shall not be by me. Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose him.”

“That is quite an honorable sentiment,” said Elizabeth, but her mind was in turmoil. This didn’t fit with what she knew of Mr. Darcy. She couldn’t quite explain why it didn’t fit, but it was wrong in some way. And yet, she could not see any reason why Mr. Wickham might be mistaken. Surely, he would not be telling her a falsehood. The story made him look pitiful, and Elizabeth was quite sure that Wickham wouldn’t abide such an impression of himself unless his feelings of indignation towards Mr. Darcy were a

good deal stronger. It must be true. "But what," she said, almost to herself, "can have been his motive? What can have induced him to behave so cruelly?"

"Jealousy," said Wickham with a shrug. "Had the late Mr. Darcy liked me less, his son might have borne with me better, but his father's uncommon attachment to me irritated him, I believe, very early in life. He had not a temper to bear the sort of competition in which we stood—the sort of preference which was often given me."

Elizabeth nodded, but this assessment rankled even more. No, the very reason she could not abide Mr. Darcy was that he had such a high, unwavering opinion of himself. That he would feel threatened by Wickham, it didn't seem to fit with what she knew of the man. And yet, again, she had to accept this as truth. It was quite likely that she simply did not know Mr. Darcy very well, and even more likely that the turmoil of her feelings toward him were tainted by that wicked heat he had awakened in her.

Mr. Darcy was quite likely the devil, she determined.

"Well," said Elizabeth, tossing her head, "he is altogether horrid, then, is he not? I propose we cease to speak of Mr. Darcy entirely."

Wickham chuckled, picking up his cards. "Yes, indeed. I agree. I can't see a reason to speak of such a man when I am in the presence of such wit and beauty. I believe we should at once begin discussing whatever subject pleases you." He winked at her.

Elizabeth flushed again.

And just like that, the subject of Mr. Darcy was

banished. Would that it could be so easy to banish him from her thoughts.

* * *

The following day, Mr. Bingley arrived with his sisters to invite them to the ball at Netherfield in person. Elizabeth had been certain that Caroline was not desirous of the ball earlier, when it had been discussed during Jane's illness and sojourn at Netherfield. But something seemed to have changed her mind, for she made several comments about a ball being just the thing to get everyone's minds off of unpleasant matters.

What these unpleasant matters were, Elizabeth was sure that she didn't know. She would have thought that Caroline would be triumphant in her engagement to Darcy, but the latter's absence did seem to cast a pall on the former's joy. Why had Mr. Darcy left, and had he really gone off in the middle of the night?

More rumors had surfaced in this time, each more outlandish than the last.

The most salacious was that Mr. Darcy had cuckolded Mr. Hurst, who was too busy playing cards to notice that his wife was otherwise occupied, and that Darcy had fled in the midst of the night to avoid the threat of a duel with Mr. Hurst. He had only become engaged to Miss Bingley as an attempt to hide his affair with Mrs. Hurst, and now he might not live to see the marriage through, as Mr. Hurst was intent on having it out with the man.

This was the version that Lydia claimed was the most likely to be true, having gotten it very directly,

from one of their own servants, who had spoken directly to a servant at Netherfield.

But Elizabeth knew it was ridiculous. There could have been nothing between Darcy and Mrs. Hurst.

At night, though, when she turned it over in her head, she had to admit that she didn't understand anything about Mr. Darcy. If he was the sort of man to deny Wickham the living owed him out of jealousy, perhaps he was the sort of man to have an affair with a married woman right under her own brother's nose. She did remember the way he had looked at her, fires burning in the depths of his eyes, and she knew there was passion and power inside the man. He kept himself closed off and in check, but if he were to unleash it...

She shivered.

Wickham, she reminded herself. *Think of Wickham.* Wickham was charming and agreeable. And she was going to see him at the Netherfield ball and would dance with him all night. And who knew what might come of all of it? She did not allow herself to think of being a military wife. After all, she was not in possession of any fortune, and with Wickham's situation as it was, well, he might aim higher. Certainly, he could.

There wasn't a woman in the area who had met him and didn't think him a charming man and quite fine to look upon. Wickham would have his pick of any number of women. So, she could not expect anything from him, certainly not a proposal. But a pleasant diversion? Why not? And the future was unwritten. Perhaps, if she and Wickham did fall in

love, he might favor her higher than the others.

She knew that even Jane would encourage her to think on Wickham and not Mr. Darcy's wickedness. She had shared with her sister what Wickham had told her of Mr. Darcy's behavior toward the other man, and Jane had said that there was nothing good to be heard of Mr. Darcy.

The week to the ball passed in such a way, with her struggling to work through her feelings and to convince herself that Mr. Darcy was, indeed, a wretched man to whom she should give no more thought.

She was taken quite by surprise when Mr. Collins, of whom she had endeavored to pay as little mind as possible, asked her for two dances at the ball. In her mind, these dances were already given to Wickham, and she was reluctant to turn them over to Collins, as insufferable a man as he was. But there was nothing for it, and she had to consent.

Upon arriving at the ball, Elizabeth sought out Wickham among the red coats in assembly, and she found him quite readily. He looked eyes with her and winked, and she flushed. Mr. Wickham was quite capable of making her flush, that was obvious.

She longed to go to speak to him at once, but Collins was there, and she was forced to dance two dances in a row with him. During the dances, Collins made long remarks about dancing in the bible, and how he found it an innocent diversion, and—indeed—that King David himself had danced, and that the scriptures said he had done unto the Lord, so perhaps there was a place for dancing in proper

worship to the Almighty. He said other things as well, but Elizabeth tuned them out, making appropriate agreeing noises when Collins paused.

As Collins rarely paused, she didn't even have to do that very often.

Eventually, the dances were over, and she was free.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Wickham was engaged, having found some other woman to dance with. She was obliged to wait two more dances until he joined her, and during this time, she complained of Mr. Collins' idiocy to her friend Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte was seven and twenty, and she and Elizabeth were quite close.

Wickham appeared at long last, though, and he planted himself in front of her with flourish. "My dear Miss Bennet, you are too pretty to be here in the corner. Allow me to gallantly spirit you off so that I might occupy your attention for the rest of the evening."

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, do you promise, sir?"

"I shall look at no one but you," he said. "In point of fact, I have been pretending it was you that I was speaking to all along during the course of the evening. But I must say that my imagination is capable of but a pale imitation of the genuine article. You quite take my breath away."

"Is that so? You have enough breath to enumerate my virtues, it seems."

He chuckled. "Let us dance instead of talking, then, if it pleases you?"

"Yes, let's." And she allowed him to spirit her off,

as he had said.

Wickham's company was most diverting. As they danced, she couldn't understand why she would have any interest in the brooding, smoldering air of Mr. Darcy at all. Indeed, she wasn't at all sure why she was always and forever thinking of Mr. Darcy and comparing everyone to him. It was altogether infuriating. Would he never leave her thoughts?

* * *

Caroline Bingley was sulking in the corner at the ball. She had hoped the occasion would be one of merriment, for Lord knew that she needed some in her life these days. No one in the house was happy with her. Though her brother gave Darcy the lion's share of the blame, he did not consider her innocent in the matter of her loss of virtue. It was ridiculous, of course. She was as virtuous now as she had been before, but she couldn't tell her brother that or risk losing even more of his good opinion for her. At any rate, Bingley looked at her with shock and disapproval, and he spent his time brooding. He missed Darcy, she could see. They had long been companions, and to be without him, parted on such bad terms, it had hurt her brother.

Her sister was not pleased with her either, saying that Caroline had drawn her into this scheme, and that now she regretted it, seeing what had been wrought in its wake. It was altogether a displeasing business, she said, and she hated that she had been part of it. She spent more time with her husband, who had never paid any mind to Caroline before and now continued to ignore her.

So, yes, Caroline longed for some small bit of merriment or happiness. She was engaged, and to the man she had long pined for, so she should be happy.

Instead, she was disgraced and disliked.

She found, however, that she could not go so far as to say that she regretted what she had done to snare Darcy. If she did so, she thought, she would have to take it all back, and then everything would be ruined. So, instead, she made excuses when she felt pangs of guilt. She told herself that she had done a favor to Darcy, in all actuality. She had saved him from a union with that dreadful Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and so it had really been an errand of good will. She had sacrificed her brother's opinion of her to rescue Darcy, but it was all to be worth it in the end.

And that, of course, was why she *deserved* merriment.

But there was no merriment to be had at the ball. She had no one to dance with, not that she would stoop so low as to dance with the sort of people in attendance, because she would not. Well, if she were asked, she might be willing to make an exception for the sake of politeness. But no one was asking, and she couldn't see why that was.

From time to time, though, she did see Elizabeth twirling about the dance floor with a devastatingly good looking red coat. She wasn't the least bit interested in officers herself, but that man was very handsome. Caroline's insides twisted up.

It wasn't fair, she thought.

Mr. Darcy had wanted Elizabeth, and then she

had somehow wormed her way into that room that Caroline had set up for *her* and Darcy and ruined everything, making it all so much worse. If Caroline had simply made it to the first trap with Darcy, she was sure it would have gone more smoothly. Caroline still wasn't sure what had passed between them in that room.

For all she knew, Elizabeth had surrendered her virtue to Mr. Darcy like some kind of common doxy. And now, here she was, using her charms on that officer.

Well, why should Elizabeth be allowed to have the attention of every attractive man in the world? Why should she get to dance when Caroline had to stand on the sidelines?

Her brother and the eldest Miss Bennet came off the dance floor after the last dance they had danced together, both staring into each other's eyes as if their brains were addled. Oh, dear, that wasn't good. But what could Caroline do about it? She did like Jane, but she knew that the woman was no match for her brother. Caroline, however, had squandered whatever influence she had over Bingley, and there was nothing to be done for it now.

She approached the two of them, smiling. "Miss Bennet, your sister seems to be having a lovely time."

Jane looked up at Caroline, still beaming from gazing at Bingley. "I think so, yes."

"Who is that man she is dancing with?" said Caroline.

"Oh," said Jane, "that is Mr. Wickham. Actually, I meant to ask Mr. Bingley about that." She turned to

Bingley. "I have heard a dreadful story about Mr. Darcy, involving Mr. Wickham. I cannot help but think there is some confusion over what it really means. It paints Mr. Darcy in a most unfavorable light."

Bingley grimaced. "I'm afraid that we have all been deceived when it comes to the character of Mr. Darcy. He is not nearly the man he appears to be."

Caroline furrowed her brow. Why must her brother insist on insulting her fiancé? Lord knew, they'd had a devil of a time doing what they could to ensure the servants' silence on the matter. They didn't need anything else to throw a pall over her marriage.

"But surely, he is your friend," said Jane. "I cannot but think that there must be some confusion in the story."

"I would not be surprised by anything Mr. Darcy did," said Bingley, his expression sour. "Not anymore."

* * *

Elizabeth sipped at the drink and laughed. She was in high spirits. The evening was going very well, and she was enjoying dancing with Wickham, even if he did tend to clutch her tighter than was strictly proper. Maybe *because* he clutched her too tight, even. She must truly be wicked, after all. One near kiss with Mr. Darcy and she wanted to kiss everyone.

Well, no, not everyone. But she found herself contemplating a kiss with Mr. Wickham.

"Miss Bennet," said a voice.

Elizabeth turned, surprised to see Caroline there.

“Miss Bingley,” she said, nodding. “I trust you are well.”

“Quite,” said Caroline, with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “And you?”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth. “I must congratulate you on your engagement.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Caroline. “Very kind of you.”

“It must be such a hardship to have your fiancé gone from you,” said Elizabeth, unable to resist.

“Not at all.” Caroline narrowed her eyes. “We will be spending the rest of our lives together, after all.” She turned then, making full eye contact with Wickham. “And won’t you introduce me to your companion?”

Dutifully, Elizabeth did so, unsure why Caroline much cared about a lowly red coat. Elizabeth would have assumed the other woman was above his social sphere.

But Caroline kept her eyes on Wickham. “You are quite a fine dancer, sir. I could not help but observe you from across the room.”

Wickham smiled at her, and Elizabeth found that his smile was quite as open and charming as ever, which annoyed her. She wished that Wickham would be rude to Caroline. But, of course, Wickham was charming to everyone. “Quite nice of you to say,” he said. “Is it true then, that you are Mr. Darcy’s promised?”

“I am,” said Caroline.

Wickham’s mouth curved into a wider smile. “And do you dance?”

“When I am in the mood,” she said.

Wickham arched an eyebrow. “How is your mood now?”

“Quite agreeable,” she said.

“In that case, would you do me the honor of this next dance?” said Wickham.

Elizabeth was shocked. Why was Wickham be asking Caroline to dance? He had promised not to take his eyes off Elizabeth all night. But he was only being polite. And Caroline would find some excuse to turn him down. She wouldn’t be caught dead dancing with the likes of Mr. Wickham.

“But of course,” said Caroline instead.

And the two walked off from Elizabeth without even taking their leave.

Elizabeth gaped after them, astonished. That wasn’t at all what she had expected to have happened.

She consoled herself that Wickham would only dance one dance with Caroline and then he would be back to her, but he didn’t come back. He didn’t even speak to her for the rest of the evening. He disappeared at some point, probably when she was being talked at by Mr. Collins, who could not keep his mouth shut.

And then it was a long night, because her mother had contrived that they be the last people to leave the ball, so as to give Jane and Bingley as much time as possible together.

When it came to that, Elizabeth supposed that her sister was quite happy, and she should be focusing on Jane instead of her own slights, but she could not

help but feel as if Wickham had treated her ill.

Wickham had appeared to be so smitten with her. Why would he abandon her in that manner? Why wouldn't he even come to say goodbye? Elizabeth felt sure that Mr. Darcy would never do such a thing.

Of course, Mr. Darcy had become engaged to Caroline less than two days after asking Elizabeth herself to marry him.

And you turned him down, she reminded herself. Twice.

If she had but said yes, everything would be different now.

Oh, what did it matter? Perhaps they were both despicable men, when it came down to it. Perhaps all men were despicable.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning had brought no indication to Elizabeth that her notion on the nature of all men in general was at all faulty. For Mr. Collins had ambushed her before she was yet finished with breakfast to propose marriage.

Elizabeth had refused him.

Of course she had refused him. She could not bear the idea of being joined to Mr. Collins, who was quite possibly the most hateful man in existence. He was embarrassing. She could not stand to listen to him talk for five minutes, let alone to spend her life with him.

But the whole of it had upset her greatly, and she had run out of the house and spent the rest of the morning avoiding everyone, looking out over a small lake that was part of her family's property.

She was beginning to wonder if she was too particular when it came to marriage.

Not because she was having any second thoughts about Mr. Collins. She was not. But because she had denied Mr. Darcy, who – in comparison to Collins – was like light to shadow. He was infinitely superior, and she had deemed him not good enough. Was she

being unrealistic in her estimation of what kind of marriage she could have?

And she felt a heaviness descend on her, because she knew that if she married Collins, she would be mistress of this house and would be able to take care of her mother. There was a responsibility she was running from in her denial.

She didn't know how she felt about any of it.

Eventually, her father came for her. In his characteristic way, he managed to let her know she was under no obligation to marry Mr. Collins, much to the chagrin of her mother, who would likely work herself into a fervor over all of it.

Suddenly, Elizabeth couldn't bear any of it anymore. She had to get away from all of this.

She didn't want to see Wickham or Caroline or Collins or anyone.

She went back inside and composed a letter to her aunt and uncle in town, asking if they might allow her to come and stay with them. She would obviously have to get permission to go away, but she didn't suppose that would be a problem, as she and Jane were often guests with her aunt and uncle. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were quite pleasant people and they would counter any time spent with her younger sisters and mother. They were probably the most sensible of Elizabeth's relations.

Now that she had set upon the idea, she longed for it rather acutely. She supposed that she could stay until Christmas, even, perhaps longer, though she didn't quite dare hope for that.

As she predicted, no barrier was given to her for

her absence, although her mother was quite cross with her for refusing Mr. Collins and said that she would rather that Elizabeth have nothing that gave her pleasure than that she might feel the pain her mother felt. However, her mother also allowed that she was in fact so cross with Elizabeth that having her out of sight might do well for the both of them, and so she was pleased with the prospect of Elizabeth's leaving.

Only Jane was not so pleased, saying that she would miss her sister.

More than once, Elizabeth considered confiding in Jane what had occurred in Netherfield, when she had been locked in the room with Darcy. But she kept it to herself because she was not sure she knew how to speak of it. She had no worry that Jane would spread rumors or think badly of her. Jane was quite adept at thinking the best of everyone, in point of fact, and she would make excuses for everything that Elizabeth told her.

But Elizabeth didn't know how to explain to Jane the strange heat and fire that stole over her when she thought of the incident, and she was ashamed of it. No matter what her sister might say, Elizabeth was frightened that she was indeed wicked. She did not wish to be excused for her inclinations. She would rather do her best not to think of them.

That was why she did not share the incident with Jane. She wished to put it from her mind as if it had never happened.

Her letter went off to her aunt and uncle, and Elizabeth waited for a reply.

Before it could come, however, Mr. Bingley

arrived to call one afternoon. He had gone to town after the ball, and Elizabeth had wondered if he'd been with Mr. Darcy at that time. And then scolded herself for always and forever thinking of Mr. Darcy. It seemed impossible to put him from her mind, no matter how much she wished to do so.

Bingley was all nervousness and wished to speak to Jane, and it was quite clear what he was about, even though afterward, Jane expressed surprise at the intent of his visit, claiming never to have guessed such happiness was to be conferred on her.

Bingley and Jane were engaged.

Of course there were no objections to the union, and blessings were given from Elizabeth's parents. Her mother was beside herself with joy, though she couldn't seem to help herself to throw several pointed comments toward Elizabeth for the grief she had caused her over her refusal of Mr. Collins. Elizabeth was used to her mother's way, however, and she was quite happy to ignore it all in happiness for Jane.

She did love her sister, and there was no one who deserved such good news more.

At any rate, there was no going to town, not until after the wedding, which was set for sometime in January. And now her father was somewhat bitterly set against her going, saying that if she left, what with Jane being married and gone, he would not hear a syllable of sense for all the time she was gone, and he asked her, for his sake, to stay.

She told him it was a matter of some weeks until then, and that she would give it thought.

However, there was no time for thinking at all, because there was Christmas, and then there were the wedding preparations, and the younger girls were quite caught up in Jane's good fortune. For her part, Elizabeth was too.

But when Lydia or Kitty talked to Jane of her wedding or of being mistress of Netherfield, Elizabeth could see that the girls were thinking of their own future and spinning a dream that it would someday be their turn to experience such a romance. Elizabeth, however, knew that such things were not for her, and probably likely not for her sisters either. That Jane had been so fortunate was a rarity, not something to be counted upon.

She did see Wickham a time or two again, for her sisters were fond of making the trip to Meryton, and it was not yet too cold to forbid such a journey. She had expected an apology from Wickham for his abandonment of her at the Netherfield ball, but none was forthcoming. He was the same as always, charming and winking and blond.

She found that she didn't find him as diverting as before.

It wasn't simply because he had slighted her. She was hurt, but she wasn't so vain as to think that she deserved the special attention of any man, including Wickham. No, it was more that she realized that she had been fooling herself, telling herself that Wickham's pretty phrases and winks were enough to hang something on, and she realized that Wickham was insubstantial. He was pleasant enough, but there was nothing else to him.

She needed more than a man like that.

At night, she still dreamed of Mr. Darcy. Not every night, but nearly once a week, sometimes more. She dreamed of kissing him, and his lips branded her and left her gasping and yearning... but she wasn't even quite sure what would satisfy her.

When Charlotte Lucas came to her to tell her that she was marrying Mr. Collins, that seemed to drive Elizabeth to a precipice. Not because she was the least bit slighted by what Charlotte had done, though her friend seemed concerned that she might feel supplanted. Elizabeth didn't. She was confident that, as she had said, Mr. Collins couldn't make her happy, and she was the last woman on earth who could make him so. She wished never to revisit that possibility.

But it was the ugliness of it all.

Yes, ugliness.

That Charlotte had to trade her dignity for her comfort. She had to secure her future, and this was the only path open to her. If she and Charlotte had been men, perhaps they could have done as her uncle Mr. Gardiner had done and become merchants, taken up a trade that would support them. But they had no such options.

Elizabeth was far too unbending to make the kind of sacrifice that Charlotte had made, and because of that, she could not be assured of her own future.

She imagined it was likely she would be imposing upon Jane in the future. She would live out her life as a burden on their household, a spinster who never had a household of her own or a husband. It wasn't a

pleasant future, but it was much more pleasant now that she knew that Jane would be in a position to be burdened, she thought wryly.

Now, if there was to be a trip to town at all, it was even further postponed, because she would stay also to see Charlotte's wedding.

But her aunt wrote to Elizabeth to say that the invitation was open, and that Elizabeth should feel free to give them notice and come at any time that pleased her.

So time passed, and Elizabeth attended two weddings. Jane's was a lovely, light affair, happy and free and good. Charlotte's was stiff and formal, though there was joy in it as well, as everyone involved was quite pleased with the outcome.

Her sister Jane went off to live at Netherfield with Mr. Bingley, beginning her life as a married woman. Elizabeth watched her sister, happy for her. Jane seemed rather blissfully happy, and no one deserved it more than Jane.

* * *

"Now, Lizzy, you mustn't repeat this, I hardly need to make that clear," said Jane in a very quiet voice. The two were in a drawing room in Netherfield, quite alone for it was only Bingley and Caroline here in Netherfield these days, since Mr. and Mrs. Hurst had left after the wedding. Bingley was busy and Caroline had retired to her room.

"Of course I would not," said Elizabeth. She had come to say goodbye to her sister before she left for London, and she hadn't expected to be taken into this serious confidence. Jane apparently had some story

or other to tell Elizabeth, and she was dreadfully serious about it. "What is this about? Has something befallen you? Are you quite whole?"

"It is not about me," said Jane. "It concerns Mr. Darcy and his engagement to Miss Bingley. Now that I am his wife, my husband confided all to me. I am only telling you of it because I must confess I have seen the way your countenance changes when the man is brought up in conversation, and I fear for you. Is there something about Mr. Darcy you have not told me?"

Elizabeth's heart stopped. Why would Jane ask that? "Oh, Jane, I hardly know how to speak of it."

Jane swallowed. "Oh, dear. Is it quite so awful that you cannot give it words?"

"It is..." Elizabeth was sitting on a chair next to her sister, who was perched at the edge of a couch next to her. Elizabeth felt the urge to get up and walk away, run from all of this. Instead, she gathered up her skirts and began to pass the fabric through her fingers. "One night when I was staying here with you, when you were ill, I became lost on my way to my own bedchamber and I ended up..." She drew in a breath to steady herself. "I ended up in a room with Mr. Darcy. There was a fault in the latch, and we were unable to get out. We were trapped there together until nearly dawn."

All the color drained from Jane's face. "Oh, Lizzy!"

Elizabeth reached out and took Jane's hand. "Nothing happened. We slept separately, and he did not so much as touch me." Unless fingering her braid

was to be taken into account, which was shocking to be sure, but not disastrous.

Jane squeezed her hand. "You were lucky, then, in a way that Miss Bingley was not."

"What are you saying?" said Elizabeth.

"Darcy is a rake of the worst sort, I'm afraid," said Jane. "He was discovered alone with Miss Bingley at night in much the same manner as you are describing. But, I know not, perhaps her character was not as strong as yours. She was not able to resist his advances, and she did not escape with her virtue intact."

Elizabeth licked her lips, trying to process this information. She almost protested that Mr. Darcy had not made advances toward her, but she realized that wasn't true. He had nearly kissed her, and there was the way he had *looked* at her. She shivered. And there was the fact that she *had* resisted him. She'd denied his proposal and she'd made it clear that she did not like him. She had even said that she would not marry him if he were the last man in England or something, hadn't she?

"When Bingley discovered them, Darcy resisted marrying his sister," said Jane. "He was not repentant in the least, and then he galloped off and has barely had any contact with them since. Bingley is beside himself. He had managed to cover it up, but he does not know what is to become of his sister. He thought Darcy a friend, but Darcy was despicable."

Elizabeth put her hand to her chest. "If he did it to both Caroline and me, then it's likely it's a habitual practice for him. You say that he resisted marrying

Caroline? Because he told me he would marry me, and then he tried to kiss me.”

“You said he didn’t touch you!”

“Well, he didn’t. He wasn’t successful.”

“Perhaps that is the way he convinces his conquests,” said Jane. “He promises marriage and then reneges on what he has said once he has taken advantage of the girl. Lord knows how many times he has done such things. If he had not been caught with Caroline, he might have gone on doing it. He is a snake.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth whispered softly. “Yes, he must be.” She did get out of the chair then. She could barely make it across the room though. When she reached the window, she had to brace herself against the wall to steady herself.

Jane was next to her, hand on her shoulder. “Oh, Lizzy, are you all right? You are telling me the truth, aren’t you? You were not compromised?”

Elizabeth turned to her. “As I said, he didn’t touch me. No, it is not that. It is only that I... I still think of him sometimes. And my feelings toward him, they are, well, some are favorable, and I must stop all that. I must see him as he really was, a villain who manipulated me.”

“Who failed to manipulate you,” said Jane. “You are strong, Lizzy, and he was no match for you.” She drew Elizabeth into a hug.

Elizabeth clung to her sister and felt herself pushed even further over the precipice. The world was a bleak place indeed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At first, London was nothing but peace. Her aunt and uncle did not get out often, and so Elizabeth was often just in the company of her aunt or able to do nothing but read for hours on end. It was good, because she didn't think of any of it.

That is, she didn't think of it during the day. At night, she still dreamed of Mr. Darcy, and when she woke from those dreams, it all came flooding back, and it was nothing but pain. She hadn't realized it at the time, but she had fallen for Mr. Darcy, just a bit, and against her own sense and will. She wasn't sure when it had happened. Certainly not when she was denying his second marriage proposal, she didn't think. Because if she had fallen then, she might have accepted him.

But what a disaster that would have been. A man like Darcy would not have meant it. He was only saying it to attempt what he had been unable to accomplish the night before. And when he had failed with her, he had moved onto Caroline Bingley.

(Only it was strange, wasn't it, that he'd been in her company for so long and done nothing to compromise her before.)

No, it hadn't been then that she had fallen for Mr. Darcy, but maybe later, when she had tried so desperately to be diverted by Mr. Wickham. Or maybe when she began to dream of Mr. Darcy's kisses. Maybe then.

Maybe it hadn't happened all at once, but slowly, over time.

Whatever the case, knowing the truth about Darcy was a blow. She thought it might have broken her heart. Somewhere inside, even though she had denied him, she had carried an idea that she could have been the wife of a man like Darcy, but now she knew his proposal was never serious, and that he had only desired to use her. All the wicked heat he had made her feel, it was doubly shameful now. She had been tempted by sin, and she only barely managed to resist. Not only was Darcy wretched, but she was too for wanting him.

But dawn would come, and she would banish these thoughts and rise to a quiet house, devoid of Lydia's giggles or her mother's complaints or Mary's pronouncements, and she found peace again.

Then, however, one evening, they were invited to a ball, and Elizabeth was suddenly thrown into a panic. The last she had heard, Mr. Darcy was in town, and she was frightened that she would see him. But she assured herself that it was unlikely. Her aunt and uncle certainly wouldn't have the kind of connections that Darcy did, and so it would be strange for him to be there. She wouldn't see him.

And if she did, she could ignore him. She could avoid meeting his eye, even avoid being in the same

room as him.

Besides, she wouldn't see him. He wouldn't be there.

She wished that she had asked Jane for more information about Mr. Darcy before leaving. Jane had said that Bingley did not know where he was —

Or had she?

She had said that Bingley did not know when Darcy was going to marry Caroline and that Bingley had barely heard from him. But that did not mean that no one knew where Darcy was. He might, in fact, be in London, and then —

Oh heavens.

In the pit of her stomach, she had terrible feeling that she had been so insistent on coming to town precisely for this reason. Because Darcy was here, and she wanted to see him.

No, I don't, she told herself.

But she did, and this was, of course, precisely why she had concealed the thought from herself, because she didn't want to admit that she had not quite scrubbed all feeling for Mr. Darcy from her soul. She still pined for him, down in those hidden depths, and she was ashamed of herself.

She considered feigning a headache or some other ailment and skipping out on the ball entirely. But she knew she couldn't do that, as there had been several times in her aunt's discussion of the event that she had hinted that they were attending primarily to amuse Elizabeth, and it would be frightfully rude to decline.

Furthermore, surely she would not see Mr. Darcy.

* * *

When Elizabeth finally arrived at the ball, she was pleased because she was certain that she was right. She would not see anyone. The ball was altogether too crowded to see anybody at all. It was quite a large affair. After all, it was the beginning of the Season and that meant that quite a lot of people were out and about in London. This ball seemed to be attended by each and every one of them. It was practically a crush of bodies.

Mr. Gardiner, her uncle, excused himself to play cards, and then it was just her aunt and herself. They found a place to sit so that they could watch people dancing. Mrs. Gardiner made comments on the various fashions, and Elizabeth—who usually only had a passing interest in such things—found herself quite diverted by her aunt’s attention to detail.

There was little chance of Elizabeth having to dance. She didn’t know anyone there, and she couldn’t dance with someone with whom she had not been introduced. Rather than finding this disappointing, however, Elizabeth was relieved. She was quite done with all the trappings of romance, she had decided. Jane had been the miracle of the family, securing such a wonderful marriage with a man such as Bingley. Perhaps her sisters might manage a marriage too. Lydia and Kitty were the kind of silly women that some men seemed to prefer. Elizabeth had to admit that Mary was probably just as hopeless as she herself was. But no matter. She didn’t suppose Mary would mind. And Elizabeth herself resolved to be in good humor about it all.

There was nothing worse than a person bitter about her station in life, after all. That person drove away what company they might have to distract themselves from their plight and to give them hope. No, it was much better to have a sense of humor about it all, and Elizabeth was, by nature, a bright and positive sort of person.

She ought to count herself lucky anyway. She had narrowly escaped being a victim of Mr. Darcy. If she and Mr. Darcy had been discovered, she would have had no brother like Mr. Bingley to insist upon Mr. Darcy's doing the honorable thing. By all rights, things should be much worse than they were. As it was, things were quite good on the whole. So, she smiled at her aunt, and she watched the women in their dazzling dresses, and she felt happy.

Then, they were approached by the master of the ceremonies, who had a younger girl and another woman trailing along behind him. "Excuse me," said the master of the ceremonies. "You are Miss Bennet, are you not?"

Elizabeth was taken aback. "Why, yes, sir."

The master of the ceremonies gestured. "May I present Miss Darcy and her companion Miss Tilney."

Miss Darcy? Elizabeth was quite surprised. Was this, then, Mr. Darcy's sister, Georgiana, the one who was so accomplished, and of whom Miss Bingley had so wished for Mr. Darcy to convey her greetings in that letter so long ago? Why was she being introduced to her?

Georgiana curtsied and so did her companion.

The master of the ceremonies continued his

introductions, introducing both Elizabeth and her aunt. They both curtsied as well. When the master of the ceremonies had left, Elizabeth was tongue tied.

Georgiana looked to her companion, who obligingly began to speak. "We apologize for the intrusion, but Georgiana was most desirous of being introduced to you."

"Yes," said Georgiana, then, in a very soft voice. She was young and small and seemingly shy. "My brother has told me a great deal about you, you see, and I was most desirous to make your acquaintance."

Elizabeth responded with politeness. "Of course, yes, I have heard much of you too," she said. "And have been quite eager to know you too." But inside, her mind was reeling. Darcy spoke of her? To his sister? Did that make any sense? She was a conquest and a failed one at that. Why would Darcy be spinning stories of the women that he attempted to take advantage of to his sister?

"You must call on me," said Georgiana. "I so rarely get any visitors these days, and my brother says that you are a lively conversationalist and that you read quite a lot. Perhaps if we have read some of the same books, we could talk of them. I do try to talk to Miss Tilney, but she is never that interested, I'm afraid."

"I do my best," said Miss Tilney. "But I haven't the same taste as Miss Darcy. If you will come and entertain her, I would be quite pleased myself."

Georgiana smiled. "There, you see, you must come. Do say you will."

"Well, of course," said Elizabeth, who was still

thoroughly confused.

“Excellent,” said Georgiana. “Now, I think I have a dance with that abominable Mr. Fletcher. He is always speaking of hunting. He seems to take too much pleasure in killing things.” She shuddered in disgust. Saying their goodbyes, both Miss Darcy and her companion took their leave of Elizabeth and her aunt.

Her aunt was all astonishment. “This is the sister of Mr. Darcy, the most hated man in all of Hertfordshire? I did not think you were on good terms with him, Elizabeth.”

“Indeed, I did not either,” said Elizabeth. She was very bewildered by the entire exchange, not least because it had renewed within her the fear that she might see Mr. Darcy, who was quite likely in attendance at the ball that night.

“You must tell me everything,” said her aunt.

“There is nothing to tell,” said Elizabeth. “When Jane was ill and spent that week at Netherfield, I went to be with her. I was in Mr. Darcy’s presence somewhat during that time, but I did not form anything like a friendship with the man. In fact, I would have suspected that he thought of me as... well, not as someone to speak of to his sister. It’s all very odd, in fact.”

Her aunt smiled. “Odd, indeed. Perhaps Jane is not the only of the Bennet sisters who will be making herself a very good match.”

“No, no, it’s not like that,” said Elizabeth. “Mr. Darcy is... well, abominable.”

“Disagreeable, yes,” said her aunt. “So, you’ve

said. But I might think that he has other attributes that provide a bit of balance to his disposition." She gave Elizabeth a knowing smile.

Elizabeth laughed a little. "Indeed, you think me quite shallow, I suppose."

"I do not. I am only teasing." Mrs. Gardiner regarded her, her smile fading. "He is as bad as that, then?"

"He is indeed," said Elizabeth. She did not want to speak further on the subject. With Jane now connected to Mr. Bingley, nothing could be said to besmirch his sister's name, or it would badly affect Jane as well. And certainly, Elizabeth had no desire to reveal what had passed between Darcy and herself. She left it at that, and if her aunt was curious for more details, she did not press for them, perhaps sensing that Elizabeth was not disposed to talk of the matter.

* * *

Elizabeth was nervous at the idea of calling on Georgiana, but she had been asked to do so specifically, so she knew that she must. Her aunt, who was to accompany her, was eager to know more of the situation, and suggested it every day for the next three days, but Elizabeth kept making excuses.

She didn't want to go, because she was horrified at the idea of seeing Mr. Darcy. She thought it was only divine providence that she had not seen him at the ball, and she did not think it was likely she could tempt fate again. If she went to his home, she would see him, and it would be calamity. She did not know what she would do at the sight of him, but she didn't

trust herself. She imagined screaming at him, because he deserved it. But even if she managed to keep herself in check, she was certain that she would begin to shake or cough or in some way betray herself, and what would everyone think when they saw that?

The worst fear, though, was not that she would let anything slip, but that it would simply be painful to see him. She might see that fire in his eyes, and it might rekindle it within her body, and that would wound her desperately. She did not wish to feel anything for Mr. Darcy, and she was quite frightened that she still did.

Finally, on the fourth day, her aunt said that if she did not call soon, it would be taken as a slight, and Elizabeth was too good a person to do such a thing. So, they got themselves together and traveled to the other side of town, to the grand town house where Miss Darcy was staying.

When they were greeted at the door, Elizabeth half-hoped that no one would be there, and that they could just leave their cards and be done with the whole business. It would be much easier if Georgiana came to see them. There would be less chance of Mr. Darcy coming, and she would not be faced with seeing him.

But instead, they were conveyed into the drawing room, and only moments later, Georgiana and Miss Tilney met them.

Georgiana greeted them warmly. "I am so very pleased that you would come. It is delightful, and I will send for some light refreshments right away. I must say that I haven't had as many visitors as of late

as would please me.”

“That is unfortunate,” said Elizabeth. She found she didn’t know what to say. She knew very little of Georgiana. “I am given to understand that you are very accomplished.” And then she cringed inside, for she found the accomplishment of ladies to be vaguely ridiculous. She thought of her conversation of it with Mr. Darcy. Thinking of him, of his voice, was a like a dart penetrating her flesh.

“Oh, who says so? My brother?” Georgiana laughed. “He is terribly proud of me, but I do not know if it is warranted. I believe he does have a familial bias.”

Elizabeth swallowed. She couldn’t help from asking. “Is your brother... at home?”

“Oh, no, indeed.” Georgiana shook her head. “He is in the country. He was here for Christmas, but then he left, and good riddance to him, I say, because he was in a foul temper the entire time he was in town. I could hardly get him to speak. He brooded everywhere. He brooded over tea. He brooded over soup. Just sat at the table, staring at his spoon while the broth dripped back into the bowl, as if he was trying to solve all the world’s problems by wrinkling his brow. Nor would he tell me what was wrong. I gather he and Bingley had a falling out. Do you know what it was about?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I suppose I had not known. It seems strange, what with his engagement to Miss Bingley.”

“What? To Caroline?” Georgiana raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Excuse me for using such

informality. Is this true? He did not tell me." She sat back in her chair, thoughtfully. "Often, Caroline – that is, Miss Bingley – would make hints to me that she hoped for such an outcome, but truly, I have always thought my brother indifferent to her. I can't believe he would do such a thing."

Elizabeth wasn't sure what to say to this either.

"And of course, our aunt, Lady Catherine, is still convinced that my brother will marry her daughter, Miss de Bourgh, but I have always thought that unlikely as well." Georgiana shrugged. "You must forgive me. I don't mean to prattle on. It is only shocking to hear that my own brother has spent weeks with me and told me nothing, especially when it concerns something so desperately important. And certainly, when Miss Bingley arrived last night, she might have said something to me. But then she was frightfully ill and didn't even come down to dinner, so..."

"Oh, excuse me," said Elizabeth. "Did you just say that Miss Bingley is here? In this very house?"

"Why, yes," said Georgiana. "She arrived last night, as I said, but why she would travel when she was so ill, I haven't any understanding. When she found out my brother wasn't here, she was quite upset. She had heard word from him around Christmas and, I suppose, had not heard that he had departed. I'm sure she would have joined us now if she had not been feeling so poorly."

Elizabeth, for her part, was just as glad not to have to endure the society of Miss Bingley again.

* * *

In point of fact, when Elizabeth returned back to her aunt's house, there was a letter waiting from Jane, who had written to tell her just this bit of news.

You may in the course of things meet with Miss Bingley, for she has just traveled to town. She has been acting rather strangely as of late. Bingley feels it is his fault, for he has not been keeping as watchful an eye on her as he might have. He says that he considered it pointless after what had already befallen her. But we have scarce seen her these past few weeks, it must be noted. She has been behaving with some secrecy, and we have no knowledge what she may have been amusing herself by engaging in. Then, most recently, she has had the notion to leave Netherfield, and she apparently had arranged all with Miss Darcy. Bingley is hopeful that she will find her fiancé and that all will soon be righted in their situation, but I remain skeptical. Out of respect to you, dearest sister, I have kept to myself that which you confided in me before you left. I also don't think my husband need know the depths of depravity to which his future brother-in-law has sunk. He is in such despair about it already, I think that would only serve to make him more wretched, and I cherish my husband's happiness more than I can say.

Why would Miss Bingley have come to town? Elizabeth wondered. She supposed that Caroline was trying to find Mr. Darcy. Perhaps she thought that her presence might hasten their nuptials. Indeed, it was true that Mr. Darcy was behaving rather badly. To have never told his own sister of his engagement was quite irregular. She didn't understand it. She wondered if Darcy had some scheme to get out of the marriage to Caroline.

But why should it be such an impediment to him,

after all? Elizabeth had done enough reading to know that a married man could stray as much as he desired against his wife without consequence. It wasn't as if a marriage to Caroline would force him to curb his own wicked behavior. However, perhaps it would be harder to convince unmarried women if he could not give them an empty promise of marriage.

Elizabeth was relieved that Darcy wasn't in town, and that she wouldn't have to see him, but there was a sharp sting of disappointment as well. She didn't know what to make of that, but she had to realize that it was there. Mr. Darcy truly was the devil, she decided. Because even though she knew the depths of his wickedness, she could not make herself stop feeling the things she felt when she thought of him.

There was another letter there as well, this one from Charlotte Lucas—now Mrs. Collins—who wrote to ask Elizabeth to come and visit her. Elizabeth had to laugh a little at that. Apparently, the society of Mr. Collins was already growing tiresome. Elizabeth was not overly desirous of seeing the man again, but she could not deny her friend, and she did miss Charlotte, so she agreed that she would visit after the conclusion of her time in London with her aunt.

That proved to be in mid-February.

Before then, Georgiana Darcy came to call on Elizabeth, and she informed her that Miss Bingley was now staying with her sister and husband instead of at her home. Georgiana had written to her brother to inquire about the engagement but gotten no reply.

Georgiana was now worried over all of it, because things were proceeding in a most irregular fashion. She couldn't imagine what must be going through her brother's mind.

But when that subject was exhausted, their conversation turned to books, as Georgiana was an avid reader. Elizabeth found that they had much the same taste, and she quite enjoyed Georgiana's company.

She called on her once more before she left town, and this time, they only talked of books, and not of Mr. Darcy at all, and the occasion was quite agreeable.

The days approached until she would leave to visit Charlotte, and Elizabeth steeled herself for the company of Mr. Collins.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Upon Elizabeth's first arriving at Hunsford, Mr. Collins was indeed his loquacious self, showing off this and that bit of the parsonage, and explaining at some point or other what Lady Catherine had told him about this room or that. But once Lady Catherine had been brought up, a pall seemed to settle over Mr. Collins features, and he actually fell silent for some time.

It was not until later, at dinner, that he admitted that he was quite concerned for Lady Catherine, who was not herself as of late. Apparently, the Collins family was used to being invited to dine at Rosings on a somewhat regular basis.

"It is not, you must understand," said Mr. Collins, "as if it is a schedule, or something that we depend upon, for we could not expect that of Lady Catherine, who is such a great woman, after all."

However, according to both Collins and Charlotte, two weeks had passed without an invitation, and Lady Catherine was also in poor spirits when she attended services.

"Others may not notice it," said Mr. Collins. "She is a lady of the utmost politeness and stature, and she

is not one to wear her heart on her sleeve, so to speak. But I have paid quite close attention to Lady Catherine over the years in which I have known her, and I can see it. I have spoken to Mrs. Collins about it on many occasions, have I not, dear?"

"Oh, indeed, Mr. Collins," agreed Charlotte, who looked up from cutting her meat with an angelic smile to answer, and then returned to what she was doing. Elizabeth had noted it was much the way with them. Charlotte often added only short proclamations of agreement to any conversation with her husband. But then, he was rather given to filling any silence with the sound of his own voice, so it was likely the path of least resistance for Charlotte, and there was peace in the household. Elizabeth marveled at the strength of her friend. She would not have been able to do it herself. She was too headstrong. That was why Elizabeth was convinced that she would never marry.

Mr. Collins was speaking again. "However, I have seen that she is much quieter than usual, not offering her opinion on matters as she usually does. Why on many occasions, she has given Mrs. Collins advice on her dress or hair style, which Mrs. Collins was quite happy to receive, but there has been none of that as of late, which vexes us both greatly."

"Yes, I have been despondent over the lack of direction," said Charlotte, who looked up and smiled again, but Elizabeth could see some amusement in the smile.

Ah, so that was the way of it. Elizabeth began to get a notion of the character of Lady Catherine, and

she thought it was no wonder that she and Collins got on so well with her. They were made for each other, weren't they? Both people who believed to know better than everyone else what others should be doing. Elizabeth was rather glad that they wouldn't be dining with Lady Catherine. She was not sure she would be able to keep herself from saying something she would regret. Lady Catherine sounded horrid.

"At any rate, I have inquired as much as I dared after her," said Mr. Collins, "but my interest has infuriated her, which only leads me to believe that she is indeed going through some manner of ailment or disaster. I wish I knew what the problem could be, for I would be ready and willing to offer all my assistance in any matter. That is, after all, my occupation as clergy."

Charlotte put down her fork and smiled at her husband. "Yes, dear. I'm quite sure Lady Catherine knows of your devotion and would appeal to you if there was some assistance you could provide."

"Quite right," said Mr. Collins, nodding. "Yes, Lady Catherine knows that I am her servant in all things."

* * *

Mr. Darcy had arrived at Rosings to meet with his aunt two weeks ago. Upon arriving, he had spent one evening with his cousin Anne. The day had been reasonably fair for February, and he had intended for the two of them to walk in the gardens, but once he set eyes on her, he knew that she would be unable to handle the exertion. Instead, they had spoken for

about a quarter of an hour, after which Anne had professed to be too tired to talk anymore and had been spirited off to her room.

Darcy was disappointed.

He had always kept the idea of marrying Anne in the back of his head. It wasn't an official engagement. No agreements had been drawn up by the family, and he was not obligated to marry her, not legally, but he knew that it had been something his mother often spoke of, and he also knew that his aunt depended upon it as if it were a foregone conclusion.

However, Darcy had never been convinced that he was going to marry Anne, primarily because she was young, younger than Georgiana by over a year, and because she was always so sickly. But in the wake of everything that had happened with Caroline Bingley, he had thought it might be convenient to him to claim that he had a prior engagement that he could not break, and to marry Anne at once.

But there was no marrying Anne, not for some time. She was far too young, and Darcy had no interest in wedding one barely out of girlhood. It was obscene.

Upon realizing this, he had gone directly to his aunt and told her that he was engaged to another and would not be marrying Anne.

Whereupon his aunt had refused to hear of such things and insisted he stay with her for some time, and that they would bring up the matter at a later date.

But time was passing, and his aunt was doing nothing to bring up the matter. Nor was she

addressing it in any way. She wasn't even attempting to put Darcy and Anne together much. It was as if his aunt thought that if enough time passed, he would forget about the matter entirely.

One evening, however, after Anne had gone to bed, and it was only he and his aunt together near the fire, both reading their separate books, he decided he must speak to her about the particulars. He had not put up much of an argument to her proposal, but that was only because he had no real desire to marry Caroline, and he wanted to run from the specter of the event. But he was beginning to realize that the further he ran from the marriage, the larger and more awful it became in his mind.

He wasn't a cowardly man, so he was simply going to have to face what had been done to him, and he would have to go and get it all settled. Once he was married, he told himself that he and Caroline wouldn't have to spend much time in each other's society if he didn't desire it. He told himself that nothing would really change.

Of course, everything had already changed. Losing Bingley's friendship, making an enemy of his aunt, running from the whispers of society... nothing was the same.

"Listen, I must tell you that I really cannot remain at Rosings much longer," said Darcy.

Lady Catherine was still looking at her book. She addressed him without facing him. "My dear nephew, I don't see why you should leave. I would be quite happy to have you as a guest for another six weeks."

“As I have told you, I am engaged, and I must go and see to that.”

Lady Catherine slammed the book closed. “This again? I thought this idea of yours had been left behind.”

“How could it be? We have only discussed it once, and then you told me not to speak of it again.”

“Because it is ridiculous. You and I both know that you are going to marry my daughter.”

“I cannot,” said Darcy. “Miss de Bourgh is too young and too frail. It wouldn’t be right to marry her now.”

“No, not now, but in a few years,” said Lady Catherine. “It has been decided long ago, while you were yet a child, and—”

“Respectfully, Aunt, it has only been a suggestion. And I cannot wait to marry a few years. I am in a position in which I must marry this woman to whom I’m engaged with some haste.”

Lady Catherine’s eyebrows shot up. “And why is that?”

Darcy turned to look into the fire and said nothing.

“See here, Darcy, this is all very irregular,” she said. “In my mind, there are only a few reasons why a couple would need to marry in haste, and they are all rather scandalous.”

He turned back to her. “I have done nothing dishonorable. I promise you that. But there are appearances...” He shook his head. “At any rate, I have little choice now. I cannot remain here, and I will not be marrying Miss de Bourgh.”

Lady Catherine got out of her chair, drawing herself up. She stretched out a finger, pointing it at Darcy. "I don't know what mess you've gotten yourself into, but I suggest you clean it up as best you can. You have the means to do so, after all. And then, you return here in several years and marry Miss de Bourgh, as you have always been meant to do. I will hear of nothing else, and you will not leave Rosings until I have your agreement." With that, she swept out of the room.

Darcy stared into the fire again. That familiar feeling of despair overtook him.

* * *

Elizabeth was surprised that she was finding her time in Hunsford to be quite pleasant, Mr. Collins notwithstanding. The truth was that the man had a daily routine that kept him busy and out of the way most of the time. When he was there, he seemed often mollified by Charlotte herself who seemed to have a knack for soothing him and getting him to cease speaking overmuch. Charlotte truly was a wonder, and she seemed quite happy in her new life.

Elizabeth almost envied her. Not for being yoked to Mr. Collins, for that was nothing to be desired, but because of Charlotte's ability to accept her lot in life and to be satisfied with what she had. Elizabeth herself wasn't good at lowering her expectations, she supposed.

She wasn't sure what it was within her that held out for a happy marriage. After all, her own parents' union was nothing to indicate to her that such a thing was to be hoped for. Her father had married in

youth, and had made a match for himself that didn't suit because of his lack of wisdom. Perhaps she thought that she could be wiser, that she could make certain she didn't saddle herself with someone who would make her unhappy.

Whatever the case, it was all unimportant now. In her life, she had received offers of marriage from two men, and in was unlikely any other man would ever ask. She had denied them both, and so she needed to take a page from Charlotte's book and grow accustomed and pleased with the life that would lie ahead of her.

She hoped she would be able to do so. After all, marriage to a man she loathed was far worse than no marriage at all.

There was a week of unseasonably warm temperatures, and Elizabeth took to taking a morning walk and contemplating these things. Sometimes Charlotte walked with her, and sometimes Elizabeth walked alone.

One bright morning, Elizabeth had paused near a pond, surrounded by bare-limbed trees, the ground beneath her feet covered in a layer of dead leaves from the fall before, and she was thinking to herself about how beautiful it would be when it was spring. But then someone appeared on the other side of the pond.

At first, she was sure her eyes must be deceiving her, because she could not understand what Mr. Darcy would be doing there. But then, she remembered that he was Lady Catherine's nephew, and she had assumed he'd left London for his home

in Derbyshire, but that she had no reason for thinking so. He had likely been here all along.

Her heart skipped a beat.

From the stiffness of Darcy's shoulders, he had not expected to see her there either. It was probably more shocking for him, for he would not know of her connection to Mr. Collins.

She stood there too long, and now her heart was beating wildly in her chest, because she had forgotten how it was that Darcy looked, and that virile way that he carried himself, and she could not help but think of him in the light of candlelight, too much of his skin bare, and she began to feel that raging fire start to kindle within her belly. All of that seemed to root her to the spot.

And then Mr. Darcy moved. He was coming around the pond, calling to her.

Still, she was frozen for moments longer, her heart racing so much that she thought she might be in some danger. However, then she found herself, and she gathered up her skirts and hurried back through the woods, trying to get away from him as fast as she could.

He was running after her. "Miss Bennet, please!" he yelled.

She tried to run too, but she was too encumbered by her clothes and her emotions to make much of a good attempt, and he gained on her. She looked over her shoulder to see him dashing after her, dry leaves flying askew in the wake of his progress.

And then he was there, right behind her, and he had taken her arm and stopped her and turned her.

They were face to face.

He was breathing heavily, gazing at her with wonder in his eyes. "It is you," he managed.

"Let go of me," she said, and she wanted her voice to come out scornful and strong, but it wasn't. Instead, it was barely higher than a whisper.

He didn't let go of her. Instead, he moved closer to her. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Darcy, you must remove your hand from my arm at once," she said. She managed to put a bit more strength into that, but she still sounded shrill, rather like her mother when the woman was pouting, and Elizabeth was horrified.

He stepped even closer. His breath was growing more even. "Have I gone mad? Are you some sort of hallucination? Why are you in my aunt's woods?"

"It is highly, highly improper for you to be this close to me." She still sounded shrill.

His gaze flicked from her eyes to her lips and then back to her eyes. "Miss Bennet, you must pardon me, but seeing you is probably the best thing I've seen in months, and I..." He sucked in breath through his nose. "Forgive me, I am about to do something even more highly improper than this."

"Mr. Darcy—" she screeched.

And he was kissing her.

He'd simply done it. Closed the distance between them and pressed his lips into her lips, and now he wasn't holding her arm with his hand. Instead, his hand smoothed over the small of her back, pressing her body against his.

The fire inside Elizabeth's body roared to life,

consuming everything in its wake. It leaped to all of her limbs, burning out to the tips of her fingers and the ends of her hair.

The kiss was quite nice.

She'd never been kissed before, not by a man, not by someone like Mr. Darcy, and she didn't know if kisses with him were always this nice or if she was just the sort of wicked woman who found kisses to be so good that she was tempted by a devil like this man, but she didn't care.

She wound her arms around his neck and held on for dear life, her eyes slammed shut and her body full of sparks and shivers and sweetness.

He slanted his lips against hers, and there was his tongue, and her knees felt weak. She held onto him all the harder, because she hadn't even known such a feeling was possible. The pleasure was overwhelming, all consuming.

Kissing Mr. Darcy was probably the best thing she had ever experienced.

It went on and on, one kiss begetting the next, his mouth claiming hers and her mouth surrendering to him in delight.

But finally, there was a pause. He rested his forehead against hers. "I am very, very sorry," he murmured. "I should not have done that."

"No," she breathed. "You should not." They were still close, still holding onto each other.

He kissed her again, just a quick kiss, lips touching briefly. "How do you come to be here?"

"I am visiting my friend, who has recently become the wife of the clergy here. I am staying in

the parsonage," she whispered. "And you? You are visiting your aunt?"

"Yes," he said, and there was another soft kiss, and then one more. He groaned in the back of his throat.

"You must stop that," she murmured.

"Yes," he said absently.

And then more kissing, and it was again the feverish kind they had done before, and it made Elizabeth feel as though she was falling apart inside, as if she was being consumed by this out-of-control flame that burned in her whenever she was with this man. Part of her wanted to burn, to be lost in fever and ache and goodness. But another part of her mind was crying out to her that Mr. Darcy was dangerous, that he was charming only to use women like herself, and that she had escaped from his villainy before. She must escape again.

She wrenched her lips away. "I don't want you to kiss me anymore."

"Truly?" said Darcy, pulling back. "Because I must confess, I am not getting that impression from you at all."

"Mr. Darcy, you are a villain of the worst sort. My sister has told me what you did to Miss Bingley, and I know that you attempted to do the same to me only two nights before, and I will not fall into your trap."

Darcy furrowed his brow. "What? What trap?"

"Do you think I have not been warned about men like you before? Men who think nothing of ruining a woman's reputation to fulfill their own desires? I know what kind of man you are, and I refuse you.

Let go of me now." There, she was finding her strength again at last.

Darcy did let go of her then, dropping his arms to his side and taking a step back.

She was surprised by his movement, and her knees buckled.

Immediately, he moved forward to support her.

"Stop that!" she said, sounding peevish and hating it. "Let go of me."

Slowly, making sure she was steady in her balance, he did let go of her. "My apologies, Miss Bennet."

"I don't believe you're the least bit sorry. In fact, I believe you have spent years doing this same thing to hapless women. Arranging to trap them in bedchambers with you, proposing marriage, and then having your wicked way with them."

He raised his eyebrows. "That is what you think of me?"

"How could I think any differently, sir? And what is more, I have spoken to Mr. Wickham about the dreadful way that you treated him—"

"What?" Darcy's ears had turned red. "I treated Mr. Wickham dreadfully? Oh, that is quite hilarious." But he wasn't laughing, he was seething. "What, pray tell, did Wickham say about me exactly?"

"That he was owed a living, that it was left to him by your father, and that you denied it to him because you were petty and jealous of the affection your father bore him."

Darcy's face twisted, but he said nothing.

"So, you see, Mr. Darcy, I see you quite clearly,

and despite the fact that I am made weak in your presence, I am not beaten. I will not allow you to use me. I will not."

Darcy's lips curved into something that only vaguely resembled a smile. "Yes, Miss Bennet, if that is what you believe to be true of me, I can imagine you would conduct yourself thusly." He nodded at her. "Good day." Then he turned on his heel and strode back through the leaves, which whipped up in his wake.

Soon, he disappeared among the trees, and Elizabeth was left alone. It was only then that she realized she was trembling.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"No, I don't want to go for a walk today," Elizabeth said. "Or perhaps ever again." She was standing in the drawing room the next morning with Charlotte. She had said nothing about her meeting with Darcy and very little at all, in fact. The encounter had shaken her in many ways, and she was unable to pretend as if it had never happened, so she simply attempted not to draw attention to her emotional turmoil. Now that she and Charlotte were alone, though, she was frightened her friend would notice.

"But it is even nicer weather today than it was yesterday," said Charlotte, surprised. "I had thought you were enjoying the walks."

Elizabeth was flustered. "It is rather colder than it seems. Once one is walking for some time, one's fingers grow numb, which is generally unpleasant, and I simply don't desire to walk again."

"I see," said Charlotte. "Well, then, I am sorry for it, because I am most desirous to walk, but I suppose I must go alone."

"I suppose so," said Elizabeth. Truthfully, she was in little danger with Charlotte along with her. Mr.

Darcy could hardly attempt to kiss her in the woods with the parson's wife looking on. So, that danger would be nullified by having a companion. But if she went walking with Charlotte, her friend would notice that something was wrong, and she would ask questions, and Elizabeth couldn't admit what she had done.

If anyone knew that she had been alone in a bedchamber with this man or that she had kissed him, she would be ruined. Though Charlotte was dear to her, Elizabeth could not bear for her friend to think any less of her. She didn't want to share what had happened. She would stay here, then, alone, since Mr. Collins had left earlier that day to attend to make visits to sick parishioners.

Charlotte was confused, and Elizabeth could see it, but she didn't press her friend. Instead, she left Elizabeth alone and went on a walk.

Elizabeth stayed in the drawing room, attempting to read, but the words on the pages of the book all swam up in front of her and she couldn't follow anything. She was in turmoil.

An hour later, she was startled when the housekeeper came into the room and announced Mr. Darcy, who had come to call.

Elizabeth was horrified. But she only had herself to blame. She had told him where she was staying. But what did he hope to accomplish in this house? He couldn't think she would surrender her virtue under this roof in the middle of the morning while the servants listened at the door.

Darcy was a shocking man, but no one was *that*

shocking.

He came into the room, then, and he reminded her of the Darcy she had first met, the man who was expressionless and closed off, not the man who had kissed her thoroughly the day before, who had kindled fires within her.

“Miss Bennet, I hope you will forgive me the forwardness of coming to call.”

She huffed. “I believe, sir, that I made myself quite clear yesterday. There can be little to be gained by our continued society.”

“I find that I dislike your thinking such things about my character,” he said. “It was so disturbing to me last night that I couldn’t sleep, and I wrote this. I planned to deliver it and then quit your company, but as there is no one else here —”

“You thought you would again prove yourself to be the kind of base man who makes improper advances?”

“Certainly not.” He was horrified. He sucked in breath and glared at her. But then he deflated, and his voice lowered in pitch. “I must apologize again for my behavior yesterday. You make me quite mad, Miss Bennet. All reason seems to fly from my head in your presence.”

Oh, blast him. Why did that make her feel fluttery inside? She grasped the back of a chair to steady herself. She would not give in to this man’s charms. “I would beg you not to be so forward, Mr. Darcy.”

“I am sorry for it. I shall endeavor to...” He sighed. He held out the letter to her. “Please, if you would read this.”

She stared the letter and did nothing.

He continued to proffer it to her, giving it a little shake.

Annoyed, she snatched it from him. "I will read it." She set it down on a table by the window.

He waited.

"You expect me to read it now?"

"Well, if you aren't engaged in anything else pressing?"

Truly, she was rather interested in the letter. She picked it back up and settled down on the couch and began to read.

He paced.

"Are you really going to do that the entire time I read?"

"I'm sorry," he said. He crossed the room to stand at the window.

She perused the sheets, several pages covered in his even handwriting, as she had once heard Caroline Bingley exclaim over it. Caroline, who Darcy had taken advantage of, and who he was obligated to marry. He was a snake. She shouldn't even bother to read the letter, but she did.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Darcy had his back to Elizabeth, and for a long time it was silent, but then there was a noise from behind, something derogatory and scornful. He turned away from the window to look at her. The sight of her was nearly too much. She was the most beautiful woman he thought he had ever seen, and now that he knew the taste of her lips and could not claim her, he felt as if he were losing his mind. This letter, this explanation, it was madness. None of it mattered. But for Elizabeth to hate him, well, he could not bear that. "What is it?"

She looked up from the letter. "This story of Wickham? You expect me to believe that?" Darcy had endeavored to explain to her what really happened between Wickham and himself. That Wickham had taken the worth of the living owed him, gambled it away, and then come back asking for charity. That Darcy had turned him away and told him to make his own way in the world. That Wickham had then attempted to trick Darcy's sister into eloping with him, hoping to get his hands on Georgiana's fortune. That Darcy himself had stopped Wickham from his designs on Georgiana.

“At what point in the story have you read to?” he asked her.

“That he did not wish to take the living,” she said. “Which I know is not true. He told me that his only desire was for the church.”

“And he lied,” Darcy said flatly. “Because that is the sort of man that Wickham is. But keep reading, Miss Bennet. I will not interrupt you again.”

“I do not believe you,” she said.

But he turned back to the window, and he schooled himself not to react at her other exclamations along the way, even if she tried to engage him in them. He simply said to her to keep reading, and he stared out at the morning, which was bathed in the brightest of sunshine. It was cheery outside. The cheeriness mocked him. He was on a fool’s errand that could come to naught. His future was decided. Yesterday, Elizabeth had accused him of setting a trap, but he was the one who had been caught in a snare. And he would never get free.

At long last, her voice from behind him. “Well, there, I have finished reading it. Are you pleased?”

He turned away from the window to look at her.

She stood up, still holding the sheets of paper, and her face was flushed, and he thought of how badly he wanted to kiss her again. He remembered the way that her body had fit in his arms, as if she belonged there, and he was bitterly disappointed that he could never hold her that way again. After all, she had been right when she told him that they must not do such things. “Are you?” she repeated.

“I don’t know,” he said. “What is your response

to my defense?"

"I think it is ridiculous," she said. "I think you are telling tales."

"You don't believe me?"

"This business with Wickham and your sister, it is preposterous," she said. "It is the kind of thing that you would do, not the kind of thing that Wickham would do."

"No," he said. "It is not. And that is why it is all the more painful to me to be accused of such bad behavior. I am nothing like Wickham, and I would never have taken advantage of Caroline."

"But you nearly took advantage of me. Would have, in fact, had I not been so insulting to you."

"I..." He could not meet her eyes. "You are different, Miss Bennet. You drive me to do things that I..."

"I'm sure that is the same thing you say to all of your conquests," she said.

"Listen, you yourself were the one who apprised me of Caroline's interest in me," he said. "She wanted to secure me, and she found a way to do it. Can't you see? The time that you and I were locked up together, it was not my doing, but hers. She was the one who rattled the the door, whose footsteps we heard leaving. She probably opened the door in the night as well, so that we could get free without being discovered. She wouldn't have been pleased if I had been forced to marry you instead."

Elizabeth licked her lips. "No. You are devious. You spin this story in the hopes, even now, of beguiling me. But I won't believe it. I cannot."

"I assure you, Miss Bennet, I am well aware that you and I can never touch again, as much as I think of nothing but touching you when I am in your presence." His mouth was dry. "You have haunted my dreams these past months. I cannot rest for the thought of you in that nightdress with your hair braided." He very nearly lurched across the room to her, some image in his head of taking her hair out of its pins and running his fingers through it. He stopped himself just in time.

She looked stricken. "You have dreams?"

"Yes, as pointless and hopeless as it is for me to do so. You have never found me pleasing in any way, and you are determined to think the worst of me now. But I... I have always thought you quite the most lovely woman in all of England, and you... you unravel me."

Her lips parted. She drew in a breath, and he could see that her hands were shaking. "I think you must leave, sir. You have no call to speak to me in that manner."

He gritted his teeth together. But then he nodded. "Yes, I suppose you're right. I don't know why I came at all."

"For the life of me, neither do I." And her voice was a desperate whisper, and he could see longing in her eyes.

His heart leaped, for some part of him had wanted to believe that she felt as he did, especially when he thought of the eager way she responded to his kisses. But he told himself that he deceived himself. She loathed him. She always had. Except, no,

he could see that she didn't. So, he didn't go to the door, but instead crossed the room to her, and he took her hand in his.

"Mr. Darcy –"

"Miss Bennet, I cannot bear it if you believe these lies of me. Please say that you do not think that I would stoop to the accusations laid at my feet."

She pulled her hand away, but slowly. "Mr. Wickham said that he was not even acquainted with the rules of whist at the dinner we had with him at the Philipses, and you say he is a wretched gambler."

"Oh, you watched him play, did you? Did he truly seem as if he was unschooled in the game?"

"Well... I don't know if I paid attention, but..." She bit down on her lip.

His entire body grew taut.

"I suppose he did have a great deal of winnings," she muttered. "But if he cared so much about money, then why did he pay any mind to me?"

"I think you underestimate your charms, Miss Bennet. You are..." He let out a slow breath. "There is no woman like you that I have ever met."

"I suppose he did abandon me at the Netherfield ball," she said softly. "And he never even apologized."

Darcy didn't know what she was walking about.

"But if it really is all true," she said. "If Caroline trapped you into a marriage, then..."

"Then what?" His voice was hoarse.

"Then you truly meant it when you asked me to marry you," she said.

"I did," he said.

“But now...”

He swallowed. “Now, that can never be.”

Elizabeth folded up the letter clumsily. “Either way, it is all abominable, and I don’t see there is any reason for us to speak of any of it. I have asked you to leave, sir, and I wish that you would do as you claimed you would and go. I do not mean to be impolite, but your presence unsettles me in such a way...” She shoved the pages of the letter into her reticule, a small handbag that only contained her handkerchief else. Then she marched across the room and flung open the door. “I will escort you out.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then he began to walk across the room.

When she saw him moving, she went through the doorway, hurrying toward the door to the house, as if she meant to open that one too and throw him out. She disappeared from his view.

And then he heard a cry of agony.

He rushed forward to find Elizabeth just outside the door, prostrate on the floor. One of her legs appeared trapped unnaturally underneath her, caught up in her skirts.

She pushed herself up, freeing her leg. She let out a moan and attempted to get up but could not.

He went down on his knees next to her, but hesitated to touch her out of propriety.

She scrambled into a sitting position and leaned back against the wall.

“Miss Bennet?”

“It’s my ankle,” she said, tears tinging the edge of her voice. “I don’t think I’ve ever hurt it so badly. I

was going too fast. I got tangled in my own skirts. I am such a ninny." She tried again to get to her feet.

He stopped her. "You have probably sprained it. It is not your fault. As you said, my presence is what upset you."

"You must not touch me," she said, and she pushed herself up again, only to cry out in pain when she did so.

He reached out to steady her.

Her breath caught when touched her. "Mr. Darcy, you mustn't—"

"Shh," he said. "You need to lie down." Hang propriety! She was in pain. Nothing else mattered. He fitted his arms beneath her legs and tipped her up, and he was holding her. All of Elizabeth Bennet's soft warmth was cradled in his arms. He struggled for breath. But he got himself under control and carried her back into the drawing room where he set her on the couch.

By this time, the housekeeper had come back, having heard Elizabeth's cries, and he sent her to fetch some things to make Elizabeth comfortable. Then, assured that Elizabeth was as comfortable as could be managed, he set off at once to bring a doctor back to tend to her.

* * *

Mr. Collins returned before Mr. Darcy and the doctor did, and—to Elizabeth's chagrin—he determined the best thing he could do for her was to read aloud some scripture, which he claimed would "soothe her soul."

Elizabeth did not need soothing. What she needed

was for the throbbing pain in her ankle to stop, and that seemed unlikely to happen. Mr. Collins's grating voice only seemed to make it worse.

But thankfully, Darcy and the doctor arrived at the same time as Charlotte returned from her walk, and then Charlotte was able to stop Mr. Collins from reading anymore, and the doctor was able to look at her ankle. He pronounced it a sprain, just as Darcy had thought.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth and tried to breathe through the pain. She only heard about half of what the doctor said, but she got the basic gist.

The doctor prescribed ice for the affected area and a dollop of laudanum and said that she would need some time to rest her injury.

Elizabeth resisted the laudanum. She had been given it a few years before and found that it upset her stomach.

Through it all, Darcy stayed with her, and he would be happy to be of any assistance that was needed, asking her often if anything more could be done to make her comfortable. He stayed for quite some time, until she was tired and nodding off, and even then, he promised that he would return on the morrow and would bring with him books and games and amusements, for she was not to be able to get up and about on her own for some time.

Before Elizabeth could be helped off to bed, however, she was subjected to a long discourse from Mr. Collins, who wished to relate to her that he had known a parishioner whose ankle had been thus hurt, and that it was six weeks before she was able to

walk on her own. He desperately hoped the same was not true for her.

Elizabeth did too. She supposed if that was the case, she would be confined here in Hunsford for the duration, and she did not know if she could bear the society of Mr. Collins for so great a time.

But she tried not to think of that as she lay and waited for sleep to come. She tried to think of something pleasant, because—though she was quite tired—the pain was keeping her awake. She slept fitfully, dozing in and out, and when she woke she thought of Darcy's letter and the things that he had claimed. She wondered if they could be true.

Of Mr. Wickham's story, she found that she could make no certainty of it. She did think that it was likely that a man with a bad character would pin that character on someone else and declare himself blameless, so that counted against Mr. Darcy. However, she was unsure why Mr. Darcy would tell her something that put Georgiana in such a bad light. When she had met her, it had been obvious that she was a well-loved sister, and Darcy would not make up untrue things which would besmirch her character, Elizabeth didn't think. He was not so bad as all that.

Also, there was the fact that she did know that Caroline Bingley's designs on Mr. Darcy had been quite plain. She had clearly desired him. But had she really been so desperate to make the match as to go so far, to put her own reputation on the line? Elizabeth did not know the woman well enough to say, but she had to admit that her general opinion of

Caroline had not been favorable.

There was a chance that all he had related to her was true, and that her opinion of him was entirely inaccurate. Maybe Mr. Darcy was not a bad man at all, but one who had been manipulated.

When she finally could not sleep, she gave in and consented to have a bit of laudanum after all. This time, mercifully, it did not affect her badly and she went to sleep almost immediately.

When morning came, it brought with it the pain, but as she had nothing to do that day except lie on the couch in the drawing room, it was all right.

Mr. Darcy was as good as his word, and came with a great assortment of books and cards and other amusements. He spent the entire day with her, and her comfort was his only concern. When she protested, he wouldn't hear of it. "It is my fault you fell, you see," he said. "I must do what I can for you."

And because she was beginning to find his company rather agreeable, she did not protest again, but simply enjoyed his presence. It was easier to be with him when he was thus—neither proud and standoffish nor igniting fiery passion within her. He was simply a companion, and she was an invalid in need of cheering up. He proved to be quite up to the task.

Days passed in this same manner. A week had gone by, and not one day had passed that Mr. Darcy didn't come to see Elizabeth. She looked forward to his visits, and when he was gone, she felt a strange emptiness, as if he had filled some missing hole in her life.

They spoke of everything, even of his supposed engagement to Miss de Bourgh, of which Elizabeth had heard of from several sources. Darcy told her it was not a true engagement, but only something that been desired by his family. At any rate, he could not marry her now, not with the fact he was promised to Miss Bingley.

But on that topic, neither found themselves much disposed to speak.

One evening, after the evening meal, Charlotte commented on it as she was sitting with her. "Mr. Darcy is different than we thought, is he not?"

"He is," said Elizabeth, smiling.

"Back in Hertfordshire, he said that you were not handsome, but when he looks at you now, I think he is quite pleased with your appearance."

Elizabeth felt herself blushing. "Stop it, now, Charlotte. I know what you are about to say, and that can never be. Mr. Darcy is engaged."

"Is that true, then?" said Charlotte. "It all seemed like a rumor passed around amongst the servants."

"It is true," said Elizabeth.

"But... he cares for you," said Charlotte.

Elizabeth didn't answer.

"And you care for him?"

"He is a very good friend," said Elizabeth, but she wasn't looking at Charlotte.

Charlotte put her hand over Elizabeth's. "Oh, my dear, I am so sorry."

Elizabeth raised her gaze to meet hers. "It is hopeless. All hopeless. And to think that I lost my chance, that he asked me once to marry him, and I

refused him, because I thought he was different than what he is. But you see him. He is the soul of goodness."

"Yes," said Charlotte, squeezing her friend's hand. "He is a very good man, and I think he is in love with you."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"But Lizzy," said Charlotte, lowering her voice, "you and I both know that if he is truly engaged to another, then nothing good can come of your continued closeness. You must send him away. It is for your own good."

Elizabeth shut her eyes. Oh, Charlotte, ever the practical one, the righteous one. What would Charlotte think if she knew that Elizabeth had kissed this man in the woods, had allowed his tongue into her mouth, and—what was more—Elizabeth had liked it? Charlotte would likely think she was a fallen woman. She opened her eyes again. "You are right, of course, but I simply can't bear to do that."

Elizabeth no longer questioned Mr. Darcy's character. She had seen his true nature in the way he had been so selflessly committed to her recovery. She knew that he had told her the truth of what had happened. She believed him. He was no villain. He was a good man caught in a web of deceit. It only made her care more for him.

"I could do it for you," said Charlotte. "I can speak to him. He must see the reason in it."

"No, not... not yet," said Elizabeth. "Once my ankle is healed, there will be no more reason for him to come. And it is improving. I think I shall be right

as rain in another week or so." It wasn't as bad an an injury as Mr. Collins's parishioner's. "When that happens, I shall tell him myself."

Charlotte hesitated, but then she nodded. "As you wish, then. But I would not see you any more hurt than you already are."

Elizabeth gave her a watery smile. "You are good to worry over me, but don't. This is not too much for me to bear."

* * *

Within only four more days, Elizabeth was able to put weight on her foot, and most of the pain was gone. Everyone urged her to take things slow, not least Darcy, and she wanted to wallow in the injury, for it meant that he would be able to continue to come and see her.

But she did see the sense in what Charlotte had said to her. She could not continue to allow intimacy to grow between her and Darcy. They had no future together, and the more connected they became, the more painful it would be when they were torn apart from the other. And she knew that was inevitable.

She did not wish to confront Darcy and sever their connection, but she knew that she must. She was steeling herself to do it that next day. Charlotte kept putting pressure on her. Charlotte said that the sooner done the better, and she was right. The longer Elizabeth let her closeness with Darcy go on, the harder it would be to break it off. So, that morning, she was going to tell Darcy that he should not come to visit her anymore. Indeed, he should probably seek out his fiancée and arrange for his marriage to

take place. That was the way this was going to end, after all. What was the use in prolonging it?

Elizabeth had come to Hunsford with the knowledge that she would die a spinster. Now, she was assured of it, for she could never see another man the way she saw Darcy, and she could not have him. It was a heartbreak, but nothing had changed, not truly. She would find her way through this, but it would be easier if she did not have to see him all the time, to be reminded of what she could not have.

But a letter arrived before Darcy did that morning, and when she had read the contents, all thoughts of dismissing him flew from her head. She was only consumed with what the letter said, and she sat on the couch in the drawing room, clutching it to her chest, too stunned to know if she should scream or cry and or tremble in fear.

It was to this scene that Darcy entered. When he was announced, she scarce glanced at him, just held the letter closer.

Darcy knew at once something was wrong, and he was next to her in an instant. "Elizabeth? What is it?"

She shook her head. She couldn't speak or move or think.

"What are you holding?" He tried to take the letter from her, but the paper began to rip, so he stopped. "Elizabeth? Are you all right?"

She bit down hard on her bottom lip. "It's Jane," she said, and then she burst into tears.

Darcy got up and called for the housekeeper to bring some strong tea, and then he took her by the

shoulders and forced her to look at him. "Talk to me. What about your sister?"

"It's in the letter," she said, sniffing. She wiped at her eyes. The tears were fading. They had come on like a brief summer storm and left the same way, and now she wished for them back for what scant comfort they offered. "It's not stated outright, but there's dread all through it. My sister is dying."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Elizabeth got up from the couch, tears drying on her face. She limped toward the window, letting the letter flutter to the floor.

“Elizabeth, you should not be on your feet,” he said, getting up to brace her with one arm.

She collapsed into him. “She is very ill. My father writes, not my mother, and I believe my father. My mother might exaggerate. She is—well, you know what she is like. But my father, he would not worry me needlessly. He says it came on suddenly, and that she cannot eat. Everything she tries to keep down she vomits, and she is growing weak and wan and—and he doesn’t say, but I know he is telling me that I must make haste and go home if I want to see her alive again.”

“You can’t travel. Your ankle,” said Darcy. “Surely, your father knows of that. You wrote him to say.”

“Yes,” she said. “And don’t you see, that is why I know it is dire. For he would not tell me to risk it with my affliction if he did not think that time was growing thin. I must go to her. I must go at once.”

“How?” said Darcy. “How can you travel?”

“I had always planned to go back by post, and –”
“Absolutely not.” He pressed his lips into a firm line.

“It is not your decision,” she said, pushing out of his grasp. “It is my sister, and I shall not let anything get in my way –”

“I’ll take you,” he said.

“Oh,” she said.

“It is but half a day’s journey,” he said. “You will be much more comfortable in my coach than some wretched post coach, and I can make sure it is not too taxing on you with your injury.”

“My injury is mostly healed,” she said. “And you are most kind, but... well, we cannot go alone.”

“Of course not,” he said. “Mrs. Smith has been staying with my aunt and talking of how much she wants to travel back to Bedfordshire, which is only a bit further than Hertfordshire. She will doubtless want to accompany us.”

“But I want to leave now,” said Elizabeth. “As soon as possible.”

“Yes,” said Darcy. “Well, if we are quick about it, we can be on our way first thing tomorrow morning. Will that suit you? It is unlikely you could be gone any earlier by post.”

“Tomorrow will do,” she said.

He nodded. “I will go to make arrangements.” And with that, he was out of the room, leaving to do what he could.

Elizabeth was still too stunned by the news to think of much of anything else. But she managed to limp to her room and began the process of sorting

through her belongings and packing.

Charlotte knocked on the door. "Did you do it, then?"

"What?" said Elizabeth, who was at her closet, removing her dresses.

"Elizabeth, what are you doing? You shouldn't be on your feet. Sit down." Charlotte crossed the room and took her by the arm. She led her to her bed and helped her to sit down.

"I need to pack. I have to go home at once," said Elizabeth.

"What?" Charlotte was perplexed. "I saw Mr. Darcy leave with all swiftness, and I assumed you had spoken to him."

"No, I'm afraid not yet. But it is no matter. I will be home soon, after all."

"I don't understand. Was there something in the letter you received?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "It's Jane. My sister is quite ill, and may not survive. I must go to her at once. Mr. Darcy has agreed to take me back to Hertfordshire tomorrow morning. So, you see, I must pack." She gestured to the closet.

"No, don't trouble yourself. I will have Stone do that. What are you thinking?" Charlotte put her hand to her forehead. Stone was a servant in the household. "You will be riding with Mr. Darcy in a coach?"

"There will be a chaperone, of course," said Elizabeth. "Mrs. Smith will accompany us."

"Oh, the guest of Lady Catherine's. She is a widow, is she not?"

"I believe so."

Charlotte shook her head. "He will go to the ends of the earth for you, won't he? You are both in dreadful danger, Elizabeth."

"When I am home, I will not see him."

"For both your sakes, I hope you are right." And then Charlotte abruptly embraced her. "Oh, I am sorry to hear the news about Jane. That is dreadful. And I will miss you. I have so enjoyed your company since you have arrived."

Elizabeth hugged her back. "I shall come and visit again, whenever you call for me. I fear I shall be underfoot wherever I go for the rest of my life, and anyone who welcomes me will provide relief for my put-upon relatives."

Charlotte pulled back and held her at arms' length. "Don't speak so, Elizabeth. You will marry and have your own household, and I shall be a guest there. It is only that you must... be realistic about such things."

Elizabeth smiled wanly. "I appear to be far more susceptible to flights of fancy than I had ever considered."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next morning dawned gray and cloudy, the sky covered in angry thunderclouds. As the coach was being loaded, the first drops of rain began to spit out of the sky.

Mrs. Smith was uncertain as they took off. It was the start of a downpour. "Perhaps we should wait until the storm clears?"

Water was coming in through the windows. Elizabeth and Mrs. Smith shared one side of the coach, and they had to huddle close to keep from getting wet.

"We must get there today," said Elizabeth. "I have to see my sister."

"We will get you there today," said Darcy. "Don't worry."

And off they went into the pouring rain. The longer they drove, the worse the rain grew. Thunder rolled across the sky, and lightning forked its way down over the trees. The rain was coming down like buckets of water were being poured out. The road had turned into a river of mud.

At one point, the driver yelled for Darcy, and Darcy climbed out. He spoke with him for some

time. He came back, sopping wet, and told Elizabeth not to worry. Nothing was stopping them.

Elizabeth was chilled to the bone. The rain was nearly frozen. It was likely just a bit too warm for snow, but only just, so the air was full of a freezing dampness that seemed to penetrate everything, seeping into her skirts and the blankets they had thrown over themselves for the journey.

Across from them in the coach, Darcy shivered.

Elizabeth could not help but stare at him, his hair wet and plastered to his forehead, droplets of water on his cheeks and nose. His lips were turning blue. She said that he must have one of their blankets, but he waved that off, saying he should only get it wet, and then it would be good for no one. Her heart swelled, because she knew he was doing all this for her. And, well, she couldn't help but think that he looked rather nice wet. She only wished he wasn't so cold.

She had a horridly wicked thought, of wrapping her arms around him, pressing her body close, warming him that way.

She forced it down. She would never do such a thing. This man was engaged to another. She could not forget that. It was only that it was agony, knowing what it was to kiss him and also knowing she could never kiss him again.

They drove on for some time, the rain worsening. Neither Elizabeth nor Darcy spoke, but Mrs. Smith was most displeased. She said that she thought they were mad to continue, and that they must stop somewhere, at least long enough until the rain

passed, because this was all very unpleasant, and she didn't know how much longer she could bear it. Her fingers were turning to icicles, she said.

But even against this, Darcy insisted that they had to keep going. He told Mrs. Smith that it was a matter of urgency for Elizabeth.

Eventually, Mrs. Smith quieted. She sat in the coach as they rattled along, and she glowered at them silently.

Until, abruptly, the coach came to a stop and wavered back and forth, as if it were about to topple on its side.

Mrs. Smith screamed.

In spite of herself, Elizabeth cried out.

The coach righted itself, but it didn't start moving again.

Faintly, they could hear the driver urging the horses, and there was a forward jostling, but no movement.

Darcy opened the coach and got out. "We've got a stuck wheel," he called in to Elizabeth. "We'll get it out of the mud and be going again in no time."

But that was not to be. No matter how they tried, the wheel would not come unstuck.

Eventually, Elizabeth and Mrs. Smith were obliged to get out, though Mrs. Smith was not the least bit pleased by the idea, because it was thought that the lack of weight in the coach might help. It did not. Trunks were unloaded. That didn't help either.

Now, Elizabeth and Mrs. Smith were both drenched, and the bottoms of their skirts were muddy. Elizabeth did not mind so much. She had

run through mud before. In fact, her first trip to Netherfield had been marked by her muddy skirts. But she couldn't say that the icy rain pounding down on them was the least bit enjoyable. It was quite abominable, in fact.

When everything had been tried, and there was nothing they could do, the driver suggested they walk on to an inn he knew of nearby, where they might find some assistance to get the coach out of the mud. With no other options, they set off.

* * *

Elizabeth walked as long as she could on her ankle, but eventually, it began to pain her. She concealed this as best she could, but Darcy noticed. He said he would carry her, but she was indignant at such a thing and would only accept his assistance. She leaned on him and used his strength to make her own way.

However, upon much annoyance from Mrs. Smith at the slowness of their pace, she was prevailed upon to accept his former offer.

And that was how she ended up being carried across the threshold of an inn by Mr. Darcy, both of them sopping wet, muddy, and freezing. It might have been nice, being that close to him, if she hadn't been so cold and tired and wet.

When they finally arrived, Elizabeth could think of nothing but rest. Darcy deposited her in front of the fire, so that she might dry off, and he called for food and ale for both her and Mrs. Smith. But he did not sit down to eat with them.

"Where is yours?" said Elizabeth, noting that he

had not brought a cup or a portion for himself.

"I have already drunk and eaten in haste," he said. "I am going back to get the wheel out of the mud. I will return with the coach. Hopefully, we will be on our way again within an hour or two."

"You *are* mad," said Mrs. Smith. "Walking all the way back through that rain? I don't know what has addled your brain."

But Elizabeth only squeezed both of his hands as hard as she could. "Thank you. You don't have to —"

"Of course I do," he said. And he was gone.

Mrs. Smith arched an eyebrow at the way their hands touched as he took his leave of them.

Elizabeth found she didn't care what Mrs. Smith thought.

"If you think that I'm getting back in that coach, you're sorely mistaken," said Mrs. Smith. "I shall be procuring a room for the night here. I cannot go out in that storm again."

Elizabeth drank her ale and didn't argue. Mrs. Smith couldn't be blamed for not wanting to leave. Perhaps it was a moot point, anyway. Perhaps the coach would not be unstuck. She drank and ate, and the fire dried her clothes, and she gazed into its warmth, feeling drowsy. It would have even been pleasant if it hadn't been for her persistent thoughts of Jane.

How long had her father waited before sending the letter? How bad was her sister?

She was terrified that she would get home to find that Jane had died the night before, that she would never get a chance to say goodbye. She could not let

that happen. She must get there. She must.

She and Jane had always been so close. Even now, she thought of their talks at night in the darkness, their laughter and secrets. She had known there would be no more of that when Jane married, but she had not thought there would be no more Jane at all.

She should have realized something had gone wrong. Letters from Jane had been few and far between lately, but Elizabeth had thought her sister was simply too happy and busy with her new life as Mrs. Bingley to write.

While Elizabeth stared at the fire and worried, Mrs. Smith was writing a letter, sending for someone to come and fetch her in the morning. She remained resolute that she would not step foot out into the rain.

Some time later, Darcy returned, looking even more bedraggled than before. He was thoroughly wet, covered in spattered mud, and his lips were turning blue.

Elizabeth got up from her chair. "You tried," she said, "and that is all that anyone could ask. You mustn't—"

"We're moving again," said Darcy. "The coach is free of the mud."

Elizabeth's eyes widened.

"It doesn't matter," said Mrs. Smith. "Because I refuse to stir from this place. I am staying here. And if the two of you go off together, that would be scandalous."

Darcy gave her a pained look. "Under the circumstances, Mrs. Smith, I hardly think that any

impropriety will be likely. Not in such weather."

She shrugged elegantly. "Do as you like. Now that you are back, I am going to retire to my room. I suggest that you procure lodgings for yourselves as well." She got up and quit the two of them.

Darcy sank into her chair, shutting his eyes. He looked exhausted.

"Would you like to rest?" said Elizabeth. "Because after everything you've been through today, you could hardly be expected to keep traveling." Another day's delay would not make a difference, she tried to tell herself. She would be in time for Jane. Her sister must hold on a bit longer. She *must*.

"Miss Bennet, I have spent the better part of three hours making my coach travel ready. What I should like to do is travel." He dragged a hand over his face. "But I will not risk your reputation. We have no chaperone, and if we leave, Mrs. Smith may spread rumors."

"What are rumors compared to seeing my sister?" said Elizabeth. "If you are willing to travel, then I am ready too."

He eyed her. "Well, I suppose we are no strangers to shocking circumstances."

She smiled a small smile. "No, indeed. We are not."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It seemed that some bit of providence was with them, for the rain cleared almost immediately once they were back on the road. The sun came out, and it shone down with a late afternoon brightness and warmth.

Under its brilliance, Darcy rested his head against the back of the seat and fell asleep.

Elizabeth didn't have the heart to wake him. He had done too much today.

He woke as they drew close to home. He stretched and yawned and looked powerful and beautiful and sweet, like an overgrown boy. Watching him made her heart swell in painful ways. But then he was embarrassed. "You should have woken me."

"I could not, truly," she said. "If anyone deserved the sleep, it is you."

"We are drawing near, are we?" he said, looking out the window.

"Yes, I believe so," she said.

"Do you want to be taken home to Longbourn or do you wish to go directly to Netherfield?"

"To Jane directly, if you don't mind," she said. "I

fear that any time I waste might be time I cannot afford."

"I understand," he said.

So, they went to Netherfield, and they were received by a bewildered staff who had not been expecting them. Both of them were in utter disarray, the journey having soiled them. But when Bingley saw Elizabeth's face, he could not but say that she should go to Jane at once.

"She has been asking for you," said Bingley. "I hope it will raise her spirits to see you. Please, go up to her with all haste."

So, without even changing her muddy skirts, Elizabeth was taken to her sister right away. She could not help but think of an earlier time when she had rushed to her sister's bedside here in this very household. Only then, the circumstances had been much less dire. Even so, she hated to think of Jane alone and ill.

When she arrived in the room, she saw that Jane was awake, sitting up in the bed, propped up by pillows. But, oh how different did her sister appear. She looked quite small and pale, nestled in that large bed. She had lost a great deal of weight, and the color was gone from her lips and cheeks.

But when she saw Elizabeth, her mouth stretched into a wide smile. Unfortunately, it only showed how thin her face was, how prominent the bones beneath.

It took all of Elizabeth's power not to burst into tears.

"Lizzy!" cried Jane. "I am so glad to see you."

Elizabeth ran to her and took both her sister's

hands in her own. Though she had been traveling in the cold all day, she registered that Jane's hands were even colder than hers.

"You look a fright," said Jane. "Whatever happened?"

"Oh, Jane, I did not know," said Elizabeth. "I would have come right away if anyone had told me—"

"You hurt your ankle!" scolded Jane. "Should you be up and about?"

"It is fine," said Elizabeth. "Don't worry about me. I am only worried for you."

"Oh, I am fine," said Jane, waving it away. "You should not have troubled yourself. It is some stomach ailment. I am sure it will pass soon."

"You are not fine," said Elizabeth. "Oh, Jane, you are..." But she checked herself. It would not do to tell her sister just how dreadful her appearance was. No, she must instead keep her sister's spirits up. Perhaps if she believed that she would get well, it would help. "It is only that I had a letter from Father, and he worried me a bit."

"Oh, you mustn't listen to Father," said Jane, laughing. "He has exaggerated things in order to bring you back home. He is out of his mind, no doubt, with Mother and Kitty and Lydia."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes, I suppose that must be it. Too much silliness for him."

"But however you come to be here, I am glad to see you," said Jane.

"And I to see you," said Elizabeth. "You have no idea how glad."

* * *

Darcy stood in the foyer of Netherfield, looking Bingley over. He hadn't seen his friend in quite some time now, and he found he wished that things were different between them.

"You and Miss Bennet are arriving alone?" said Bingley.

"Well, yes," said Darcy. "We had another companion, a woman named Mrs. Smith. She is a widow that you may have met in London, perhaps?"

"I can't say that I have, no." Bingley folded his arms over his chest.

"Well, no matter," said Darcy. "Earlier today, there was a storm, and she was determined not to go back out in it when we were at the inn."

"What inn?"

"Oh, the inn where we stopped while the coach was stuck in the mud." Darcy drew in a breath. "But once we got moving again, it all cleared up. Even so, Mrs. Smith couldn't have known that. It was only a matter of a few hours that Miss Bennet and I were alone. And I daresay it isn't anything you'll wish to mention, as you won't want to cast aspersions on your sister-in-law."

"Yes, well, all the secrets I am obliged to keep about your improprieties, Darcy," said Bingley, shaking his head. "All I can say about you is that I am disappointed. I had thought you a different man than you are."

Darcy's nostrils flared. "Now, listen, Bingley, it's been quite some time since I quit this place—"

"Yes, it has, and you've left my sister with no

word of where you were or how to find you. She has been chasing you all over the country, and you seem to be running from her. You've already treated her despicably, and you continue to add insult to injury."

"It is your sister who's treated me badly," said Darcy. "Perhaps, if you'd simply listen —"

"This again? You insist on accusing my sister of lying?"

"I do, because she has. I don't see how you could think it of me. I would not dishonor a woman in such a way."

"Well, who knows what you would do," said Bingley. "You and Miss Bennet arrive in wet and dirty clothing, alone, as if you've been off rolling in the mud together —"

"She is beside herself in fear for her sister's life. There was nothing going to get in the way of my getting her back here," said Darcy.

"How is that you come to be with Miss Bennet anyway?"

"By coincidence," said Darcy. "But now that I have delivered her here, I assume that there is no reason for me to stay any longer. I shall be off, then." He turned to leave. He strode across the foyer and then stopped. He looked back at Bingley. "Is it really quite so bad as we have been led to believe?"

Bingley's face twitched. He looked down at the floor. "I suppose you mean Mrs. Bingley."

"Yes, of course. I am quite sorry for not inquiring earlier. I don't know what I was thinking, going into all that sordid business from last November. Thoughtless of me, really. How is your wife?"

Bingley spread his hands. "I know not. She is... quite weak and losing weight. She cannot keep anything down, not even broth. She is wasting away before my eyes, and yet she smiles and tells me that she is all right and that she is sure it will pass. I haven't the heart to tell her that she is dying. I..." Abruptly, he lifted his chin. "But I don't know why I confide in you. You may have the countenance of a dear friend I once thought I knew, but you were a wolf in sheep's clothing. You have caused me nothing but grief, Darcy."

"I am sorry," said Darcy. "Sorry to hear of your wife and sorry to have been a source of sadness for you. I will go. If you could convey me to Miss Bennet so that she does not think I have abandoned her." He turned again and went for the door.

"Wait," said Bingley.

Darcy stopped.

"Where are you going to go?"

"I am sure there is somewhere nearby to procure lodging," said Darcy.

"And how will that look?" said Bingley. "You are engaged to my sister, but not residing under my roof? Have you lost your mind? You will stay here."

"I would think that my presence would only cause you more pain," said Darcy.

"Indeed, but I suppose I must grow accustomed to it. You and my sister will be joined for all eternity soon enough. And now that I have you back, I daren't let you go again, do I? You've run away long enough, Darcy. You must marry my sister as soon as possible."

Darcy heaved a heavy sigh. "I suppose if you truly feel that it is better for me to stay here, then I will remain. And we will discuss the situation with myself and your sister at a later time."

"If you think there is anything you could say that would change my mind —"

"Lord!" interrupted a loud voice, and Mrs. Bennet burst into the foyer. "I had thought there was an arrival. I said to both Lydia and Kitty that I had heard horses, but they were so busy talking they had not heard anything and told me to hold my tongue. Mr. Darcy, you look as if you have been run over by a coach."

Bingley made a face. "My mother-in-law has been here with my wife daily for weeks now."

"Yes," said Mr. Darcy, bowing to Mrs. Bennet. "Greetings, madam, and I am sorry for the occasion that marks our meeting."

"It is absolutely dreadful, isn't it?" said Mrs. Bennet. "Why, I have been unable to eat or sleep for weeks. All I can think about is my sweet Jane. What a darling she has always been. But now, I have been in an awful state. The way that I suffer, it is most horrendous. And there is no one who can comfort me, not that anyone tries. Why no one is tending to me at all."

Bingley cleared his throat. "Mrs. Bennet, I was given to understand that you had come to tend my wife. She is the one who is sick, after all."

"Oh, of course," said Mrs. Bennet. "But you cannot think but to say that it doesn't affect me, can you? She is my oldest girl, my very first child. For her

to be thus, it is calamity. Oh, I cannot but think of it, and my heart begins to pound so. I can hardly stand." She threw herself at Mr. Bingley, who caught her, making a sour face.

Elizabeth appeared in the foyer at that moment. "Mama? What are you doing here?"

Bingley managed to extricate himself from Mrs. Bennet. "She has been here every day for some time," he said.

"I'm here to help tend Jane, of course," said Mrs. Bennet. "And when did you get here, Lizzy? I am happy to see you, I must say. My anger toward you over refusing Mr. Collins has abated somewhat, but I am not entirely ready to forgive you."

Elizabeth pursed her lips. "Yes, Mama, well, I suppose that I could not expect much else. Come, Jane is sleeping. Let us head for home now, so that Mr. Bingley might have a chance to rest as well."

"Leave?" said Mrs. Bennet. "We almost always stay for the evening meal."

"Not tonight," said Elizabeth. "We mustn't impose any longer."

Mrs. Bennet sighed. "Oh, well, I suppose that I shall go and collect Lydia and Kitty, then."

"Lydia and Kitty are here as well?" Elizabeth was incredulous.

"But of course they are," said Mrs. Bennet. "You would hardly think they would allow me to go to Netherfield without them, would you? No, if I had but suggested it, they would have been beside themselves, and I should never have heard the end of it."

Elizabeth turned to Bingley. "Thank you so much, sir, for your great hospitality to my family during this difficult time. I cannot express how much it says about your deep love for my sister that you have borne such circumstances."

"What does that mean?" said Mrs. Bennet.

Elizabeth rounded on her mother. "Go and collect my younger sisters, and let us be gone at once."

Mrs. Bennet sighed again, but she left the foyer.

"Thank you, Miss Bennet," said Bingley in a low voice. "I do appreciate the, er, peace."

Elizabeth smiled. "You don't have to be polite about it anymore, Mr. Bingley. We are family. My mother and younger sisters are dreadful. I should know. I live with them. I shall get them out from underfoot for tonight at least and do what I can to keep them from invading you again. I am sure they have been no help to Jane whatsoever, but only caused discomfort for everyone."

Bingley cracked a bit of a smile. "Well... well... yes." He chuckled softly. "When I married your sister, I'm afraid I was so besotted that I paid little attention to her family. Jane is worth all of it, of course, but with her in such decline lately..." He swallowed, casting his face downward.

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes, it is all quite awful. I was surprised to see how changed she is."

"So, it is as bad as you had feared?" Darcy spoke up quietly.

"It is... very bad," Elizabeth allowed.

But at that moment, her mother and sisters appeared, and there was no more talk for any of

them, because they couldn't get a word in edgewise between the chattering of the other three.

* * *

Elizabeth had to listen to her mother's complaining the entire way back home and then also once they arrived.

"Oh, we are going to lose our sweet Jane," her mother wailed as she settled into the couch in their own drawing room. "And if one of the other of you had but married in the meantime, or if Jane had at least been able to have a child, it would be better, but we shall be back in exactly the same situation we had been in before. Mr. Bingley will marry again, and we shall be kicked out of this house when your father dies to make way for Charlotte Lucas."

"Collins, Mama," said Elizabeth. "Charlotte Collins." Trust her mother to make every disaster into her *own* disaster. She was quite self-centered.

"And if it weren't for Jane's illness, then the girls might be walking to Meryton to see the regiment, but that is dashed, and none of them will find husbands that way, so we are ruined. Ruined. Just when we had been saved. And – oh, my darling Jane. She is the sweetest and the prettiest of all my girls. My first baby girl. I cannot bear the thought of losing her. It cannot happen. I must do something to save her. I will go back to Netherfield and spend the night at her bedside –"

"No, no, Mama," said Elizabeth. "You're in no condition to undertake something of that magnitude. In fact, I think you are so upset that you should probably take to bed early tonight."

“Oh,” said Mrs. Bennet, turning to her daughter, “oh, Lizzy, I have missed you. You are here to look after your poor mama. Yes, you are right. I am overwrought. I must to bed immediately.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth. “And I shall speak to Hill about mixing the drink for you that calms you so.”

“Oh, indeed, I should like that,” said Mrs. Bennet. She got to her feet and staggered across the room. “I shall lie down at once.”

“Yes, Mama, do,” Elizabeth called after her. She had spent a long time under the roof of her mother, long enough to know that her mother must be mollified or she would demand to be the center of attention, whipping herself into a frenzy of tears and moaning that couldn’t be ignored. But a fit of that magnitude would have worse effects on her mother’s mood, and might literally make her ill. Then they’d have to tend to her and wait on her hand and foot for a week, maybe more. It was easier to nip things in the bud.

As for the drink that Hill made, it was little more than a mixture of honey and strong drink, and it had the immediate effect of making Elizabeth’s mother fall asleep, which was welcome.

Elizabeth’s own worry was for Jane, not for her own future. But as she made her way through her house to find Hill, she couldn’t help but admit that she had been counting on the idea of staying with Jane during at least some point of her spinsterhood. With Jane gone, her future would not only be bleak, but heartbreaking as well. She loved her sister more than life.

There had to be something that could be done for her. Some way to restore her to strength. Elizabeth would stay here tonight, and she would make certain that her mother and sisters stayed away, but she would go back to Netherfield in the morning, and she would not rest until she had nursed Jane back to health or died trying.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Once Mrs. Bennet and her daughters had gone, it was only Darcy and Bingley again, and it was frightfully awkward. Darcy attempted to start some conversation between the two of them but was rebuffed. He offered again to sleep elsewhere, but Bingley was insistent that it was better that he stay here, so he asked to be shown to his room and resolved not to come back until dinner.

He was settling in with a book when he heard the arrival of a coach. He got up and went to the window to see that Caroline had arrived, along with Mr. and Mrs. Hurst. *Wonderful*, thought Darcy sarcastically. *Just like old times.*

He didn't want to eat with them at all, and he thought of begging off the entire business. But the truth was that he was famished. It had been an exhausting day, and he'd had little to eat or drink, and he was in need of sustenance. Perhaps if he paid enough attention to his food and ignored everything else, he would be able to avoid much interaction with them at all.

He dressed for dinner with trepidation, however. The thought of seeing Caroline again made his

insides feel hollowed out, mixed up, and scooped back in out of order. He was angry for what she'd done to him. He was angry because he was helpless against it. He wanted anything but to be forced to marry her. And yet, that was to happen, and probably sooner rather than later.

If he hadn't insisted on getting Elizabeth back here, maybe he could have put all this off. But he couldn't regret anything he did for Elizabeth.

When he had first clapped eyes on the woman, she had affected him physically, drove him to distraction with the way he wanted her. But his feelings for her now were far more than mere lust. He admired her—her wit and her spirit and her loyalty and her goodness. She was lovely both inside and out. He would gladly do anything he could for her, no matter what it cost him.

The meal was tense.

No one much spoke.

Mr. Hurst attempted to engage Mr. Bingley in a conversation about cards, but Bingley's one-or-two-word answers didn't seem to satisfy Hurst, so eventually, he fell silent.

Mrs. Hurst delicately picked at her food with her utensils, but seemed to put little of it in her mouth.

Caroline, on the other hand, was attacking and devouring every course with much the same gusto as Darcy was doing. The only good thing he could say about being back at Netherfield was that the food was good. However, he strongly suspected anything remotely nourishing would have been delicious to him at the time.

Caroline paused to smile at him across the table. "It is very good to finally see you again, Mr. Darcy, I must say. I had not expected you to be in attendance here."

"He brought Miss Bennet back from Hunsford to see her sister," said Bingley.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet?" said Caroline sharply, her face going still.

"Yes," said Darcy.

Caroline's nostrils flared and she went back to her meat, sawing at it with great enthusiasm. "Well, that is no surprise, is it? You are always at her beck and call, are you not, Darcy?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Darcy in a flat voice. "She is quite an honorable woman. She would not dare to attempt things that some *others* might to get what she desires."

Caroline narrowed her eyes at him. "Yes, and you are honorable too. To a fault. Which is why you must honor your promises to me."

"Honorable, sister?" said Bingley. "He is anything but honorable. He deceived us, you most of all."

"Let's not speak of that," said Caroline. She turned to Bingley, eyes wide. "Do tell us instead about dearest Jane. How is she?"

Darcy could almost believe she was sincere, even though he doubted she cared a jot for Jane.

Bingley set down his fork and stared into his plate. "Not good at all, I'm afraid. It has been many weeks since she was well enough to get out of bed."

"But what has been done for her?" said Darcy. "What doctors have seen her, and what treatments

have they prescribed?"

"With an illness like this, there is naught to be done," said Bingley. "She must fight or not. If she is strong enough, she will get through to the other side."

"But it has been some time, has it not?" said Darcy. "How many weeks has she been ill? Most stomach ailments of this sort have cleared by now."

"Indeed," said Bingley. "And that is why I am having trouble holding out hope."

"Perhaps we should get a second opinion," said Darcy. "Bring in some other doctors. Someone from town, or —"

"I don't need your advice, Darcy," said Bingley, picking his fork back up. "And it is most certainly not a group effort. She is my wife. I'll thank you to keep your own counsel."

Darcy went back to his meal and resolved to keep his mouth shut. It wounded him that things between himself and Bingley had been so destroyed, but he saw nothing for it. He was still hungry, anyway.

Bingley turned to Caroline. "You will be renewing your friendship with Mr. Wickham now that you have returned? Or will your fiancé keep you busy with some attention for once?"

Darcy's head snapped up, thoughts of eating forgotten. "Friendship with Mr. Wickham, what is this?"

Bingley smirked at Darcy. "That's right. You had some quarrel with him, did you not? You were always so vague about it. But knowing your character as we now do, undoubtedly you were in

the wrong. At any rate, you cannot be too bothered by my sister's association with him, not when you have ignored her for months."

Darcy had to admit that he had never told Bingley the story of what had occurred between Georgiana and Wickham because Georgiana had begged him not to. His sister had a girlish affection for Bingley. When she was only ten years old, she had gone about pronouncing that she and Bingley would be married, and Georgiana was now mortified to think that Bingley might hear of her poor judgment. She might still even carry a bit of a torch for him, though he was married to someone else now, and it could only be a girlish fancy.

Caroline had gone white as a sheet. "Stop it," she said to Bingley.

"What?" said Bingley. "I didn't think it was such a secret, not when you danced with him at every ball we attended in the winter."

Darcy did not know what to make of any of this.

Caroline's lower lip trembled. "Pray, excuse me. I find a headache is coming on quite suddenly." She stood up, scooting out her chair with an echoing screech. Then she turned and fairly fled from the room.

Bingley turned on Darcy. "There, now look what you've done."

"I?" said Darcy, quite confused. "It was your words that chased her from the room."

"And your lack of attentiveness that broke her heart," said Bingley. "I am losing my wife, and I have already lost my dearest friend, and my sister has

become little better than a doxy. I sometimes wonder why I bother to get up in the morning." He stood up from the table as well. "You know, I find I am afflicted with a sudden headache as well. Please excuse me." He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

It was silent.

Mr. Hurst spoke up. "So, Darcy, have you played any good games of chance as of late?"

* * *

Elizabeth was stopped on her way to find Hill by her father, who she had yet to greet. He was pleased to see her, and said that he had feared it was too soon to write her, but after visiting Jane that weekend had seen how ill she had become and knew she must come home.

"My dear," he said, eyeing her. "We had a letter you had injured your ankle. Ought you be up and walking in this manner?"

"It is nearly healed," she said. "And after I have seen to my mother, I promise I shall retire and rest it."

"See that you do," he said. "I need both of my girls whole." He gave her a small, sad smile. "I know Jane will recover. I refuse to say anything otherwise. But she needs your strength, Lizzy. We all do." He inclined his head. "Furthermore, I've not heard a word of sense out of any mouth in this household since you left. You have been gone for far too long. You must promise me not to leave for that long again."

She laughed a little. "I promise. I think you will

have my company for quite some time now."

"Good, I am glad to hear it." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Now, see that you rest that ankle, my dear." And he moved on down the hallway toward his study.

After that, Elizabeth was unencumbered on the rest of her journey, and eventually arrived in the kitchen of her household. But Hill was not there. Only the cook was, and she was in a bit of a tizzy, wandering around murmuring to herself that she had not thought the family would be back for dinner, indeed they had dined at Netherfield for nigh on a fortnight, and now how was she to get together something for everyone to eat on such short notice?

Elizabeth did not want to distress her further. Indeed, the woman did not even seem sensible of Elizabeth's presence. However, she was desirous to know of where Hill was, so she cleared her throat. "Pardon me?"

The cook looked up and was startled. She bobbed in a tiny curtsy and her face colored. "Oh, begging your pardon, Miss, I didn't know you was standing there. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I am seeking Hill," said Elizabeth. "My mother is in one of her fits, and she is desirous of that drink that Hill prepares for her."

"Oh, Miss, it's me that prepares that drink," said the cook. "I'll have it ready in a jiffy and send it up with one of the housemaids, if you please."

"Thank you, that would be most helpful," said Elizabeth.

"Well, of course, Miss."

"Listen, I know that you are concerned about preparing something for all of us to eat, but I'm sure it needn't be anything too involved. You were doubtless going to make something for both my father and Mary. Whatever that was to be would certainly be adequate if there would be enough."

"Oh, you mustn't mind my mutterings, Miss," said the cook, growing pink again. "I can have something ready that you'll be most pleased with, I'm sure. Leave it to me."

Elizabeth smiled. "Of course."

And that moment, Hill burst into the kitchen. "Mrs. Barker, what are you about?" she addressed the cook. "The mistress is in a fit, and we must have—" She broke off. "Oh, Miss Elizabeth, I didn't realize you were here."

"I am just leaving," said Elizabeth. "Barker has been most helpful." She nodded at them and prepared to take her leave.

"If you please, Miss Elizabeth," said Hill, "have you seen our Jane?"

Elizabeth sighed. "I have. It's not good."

"Oh, dear," said Hill. "That is as I feared. I have inquired from the other girls and your mother, but I haven't gotten much from them. I am not even sure what the nature of her malady is."

"It is something with the stomach," said Elizabeth. "She is afflicted with strong vomiting, and she can keep nothing down. She is wasting away before our eyes."

Barker spoke up. She was busy mixing honey and brandy together in a mug. "Begging your pardon,

Miss, but is it the smell that is causing her troubles?"

"The smell?" said Elizabeth. "Well, I don't know, I did not inquire."

Hill's eyebrows shot up. "And if don't you mind my asking, Miss, is she still having her courses?"

Elizabeth drew back, hand to her chest. "Hill, I am quite taken aback by—"

"She could be with child," said Barker. "I can't believe no one's thought of that."

Elizabeth let the words wash over her. Suddenly, her ankle pained her. She stepped backward to clutch the doorway for balance. "It seems no one has. But even when a woman is with child, she is not so deeply afflicted that she cannot take nourishment, surely?"

Barker shrugged. "It can happen. Why, my own son's wife, she were in a bad way at the beginning. We all feared she would die and take the babe with her. But there was a midwife that came to see her, and she brewed up a tea, taught us how to make it too, and that helped her quite a lot. Also, she said that in the morning, first thing, she should have either cheese or meat, not anything like beans or bread. Said the other stuff had more substance and would keep the sick away."

"Yes," said Hill, nodding. "I have heard quite the same thing."

Elizabeth put a hand to her lips.

Hill turned to Elizabeth. "If it is the case, then all our Jane needs is to calm the sickness enough to take some nourishment. Then both she and the babe will grow strong. But it may not be. You must ask her

about her courses.”

Elizabeth felt dizzy with all the new information and possibility. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Before bed, Darcy went out to the stables to look in on the horses he'd brought. They'd been through quite the ordeal that day, riding hard through the rain and the mud, and he wanted to make sure they were being well looked after and given all the best to retain their strength. But the stables in Netherfield were quite of the best quality, and he needn't have worried.

He returned shortly afterward and went straight to bed.

But when he had turned down the light and was about to climb into bed, something there stirred amongst the pillows. He drew back in surprise, and then realized that there was someone hiding on his bed. A woman.

She sat up, and it was Caroline.

He drew back. "What are you doing here?"

She was wearing only her shift, and her hair was in two braids on either side of her face. She looked young and a bit tired. She reached out for him. "Just lie down with me. Everyone thinks it has already happened between us. What is the use of more waiting?"

He furrowed his brow. "I hope that I mistake your meaning. You said at dinner that I was an honorable man. Perhaps if you attempted a bit of honor for yourself, you would be the better for it, madam."

She gave him a pleading look. "Don't make it difficult, Darcy. Why must you make everything so difficult? If only you would have proposed to me on your own, without any prompting, none of this would have been necessary."

"'Prompting,' you call it?" He shook his head at her. "I wonder at you, Miss Bingley. I cannot think what has made you into the creature you are."

She crawled out of the bed and started toward him. "The creature that I am is to be your wife, and this will have to happen eventually between the two of us, so it might as well happen now."

"That is nonsensical," he said, backing up.

She kept coming. "Is it? I don't think it is. Besides, it is my understanding that men will go to great lengths for this experience, so don't pretend as if you don't desire it."

He collided with the wall. It was at his back. "I don't desire anything from you."

She pressed close, her hands smoothing over his chest. "You are frustratingly proper, sir. But perhaps with a bit of encouragement..." Her hand traveled lower, darting suddenly between his legs.

He cried out, and then grasped her wrist and tugged it away from his body. "Miss Bingley!"

"Please, Mr. Darcy," she said. "Grant me this. It is my only wish from you. Or, if you will not, at the

very least promise me we will marry with haste, within a fortnight, sooner if possible, and then that you will grant me my wedding night."

He gaped at her, his mind racing. He had not thought a lady would be so forward. He had not thought a lady would know such things. Why had she touched him as she had done? What was the meaning of this?

"Please," she said again.

"I cannot do as you wish."

"Why not?" she said. "Because it is not proper? Then set the date for our wedding."

"I cannot do that either."

"We must marry," she said. "You will not destroy us both and your sister besides. I know you. You will not do such a thing."

"This is most irregular, madam. You and I cannot converse together in such a manner —"

"And why not? As far as everyone thinks, we have already done this deed that you refuse me. I am painted with a brush as a certain kind of woman, but I have not tasted the forbidden fruit for which I am reviled."

"You have only yourself to blame for all of that," he said. "I want you to leave my room."

"Perhaps," she whispered, "if you saw me..." She pulled her night dress aside, over her shoulder, down to expose her breast.

He flinched, turning away so that he couldn't see. "Stop it, Miss Bingley."

She pressed close again. "You could pretend it was her," she whispered. "I won't mind."

He tugged up her dress, covering her bare skin.
“Stop this *now*.”

“Mr. Darcy –”

“And go,” he said.

“I cannot,” she said. “Not until you have me. You must. Please.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. Why was she so desperate, as if her life depended on his acquiescence? He didn’t like this. He didn’t like it at all. “I will drag you back to your own bedchamber if you do not go on your own. Now, leave.”

She opened her mouth to protest again. But then, she hung her head and tears began to stream down her face.

If she expected her tears to move him, she was wrong. He glared at her instead.

Downcast and defeated, sobbing softly, she did leave his room.

Once she was gone, he locked the door behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"I thought it was because of my illness," said Jane, looking up at Elizabeth. "I have heard that sometimes the courses stop when you have lost weight, and I do seem to have done so."

The sisters were in Jane's room at Netherfield and they were speaking privately. Elizabeth had left Longbourn early, on her own that day. She had instructed Mary to tell her mother that she was far too affected by Jane's illness to travel today, and that she must stay at home and be looked after by the other girls.

Mary had been dour. "But there is nothing wrong with her," she had said.

"She cannot be in the way at Netherfield," Elizabeth had said. "It is for Jane, who needs peace for recovery."

"So, you are asking me to lie?" Mary had said. "Do you know what the bible says about lying?"

"Mary, for your sister, please," Elizabeth had said. "And it is not a lie. It is the truth. Mother has gotten herself quite worked up." Elizabeth knew that if her mother's vanity was played upon, she would be unable to resist the idea of being coddled and

pampered. She would never agree to take the younger girls to Netherfield if there was a chance that she could be fussed over instead.

When Elizabeth left, she hadn't been sure that Mary would do as she asked, but she hoped that she would. And thus far, there had been no sign of anyone else from Longbourn, so Elizabeth hoped for the best.

She had been at Jane's side when her sister woke and then waited until they might have some time alone before asking Jane about her courses. Now Jane furrowed her brow and her face seemed so very, very thin. "Why do you ask me this, Elizabeth? What does it matter?"

"It's only that Hill and Barker think that you may well be with child, and that your illness is because of that, not anything else," said Elizabeth.

"Of course," said Jane, brightening. "Why, it all makes sense. I do remember how Mother was with Kitty. She was quite out of sorts and could eat nothing but crumpets and tea cakes."

Elizabeth thought privately that her mother may have played up her affliction when she remembered that last pregnancy. But she and Jane had both been so young at the time, it was hard to remember anything about it very clearly.

Jane beamed at Elizabeth. "Oh, Lizzy, this is the best news. I am going to have a baby! My own sweet baby. I have to admit, at first, when my courses did not come, I thought of it, but then I began to blame the illness, and everyone has been so worried about me, I did not want to say anything, for I thought it

would make everyone even more worried about me. But if you think the illness is caused by that, then... then..."

"It really changes nothing," said Elizabeth, sighing. "But stay here. I will go down to the kitchens and tell the staff there of a tea that Barker told me about. Perhaps it will help you."

Jane's smile grew even bigger. "Oh, please do. I'm so glad you are here. I missed you so much. And you know just the way to fix everything. I put myself entirely in your hands." Then she made a face and groped on the side of the bed for the pot she kept there. Up came all the water she had drunk at Elizabeth's urging earlier.

Elizabeth cringed.

"Oh, don't watch!" cried Jane.

"Jane, I have seen you vomit before," said Elizabeth. "I will go as quickly as I can." And she ran from the room to head downstairs to speak to the staff at Netherfield.

At first, there was some concern over all the ingredients. They had ginger and honey in plentiful amounts, but peppermint was not growing yet. Then someone remembered that there was a store of dried peppermint in the larder, and that was brought immediately. The tea was brewed right away and then delivered up to Jane's room.

Elizabeth, frightened to give anyone else hope on the possibility that she was wrong, watched in trepidation as Jane took that first sip.

Jane wrinkled up her nose. "The ginger is quite... biting."

"It will soothe your stomach. Keep drinking."

"The mint is lovely though," said Jane. "Yes, that's rather..." She took another drink. And then another. "You are a miracle worker, Lizzy. It is the first time in some weeks that I don't feel as though I am on the edge of vomiting."

"Truly?" said Elizabeth.

Jane laughed. "Truly." And she drank the entire cup of tea.

* * *

Elizabeth stepped into the drawing room, where Bingley was sitting at the window, staring out the window at the bright sun outside. His face looked drawn and tired, and Elizabeth was struck by how different a man he seemed than when she had first laid eyes on him at the Meryton assembly. Then, he had been a jolly sort of fellow, full of smiles and easy laughter. But in that time, he seemed to have aged years.

"Here you are, then," she said brightly.

He turned to look at her. "Ah, Miss Bennet. Good morning." His voice had a cheerful lilt, but the undercurrent was broken.

"Yes, I was looking for you, but I only found your sisters, who said that they had not seen you." Not that either of the women had been much interested in talking to Elizabeth, after all. Caroline, in particular, had glared at Elizabeth as if she were the devil himself. "They did say that sometimes you liked to spend time here in this room, so I thought I would seek you here. I have news. I think you will find it good, although it is not an end to all of our worries."

He sat up straight. "About my wife?"

She nodded. "Yes. I believe that she is in need, not of a doctor, but of an accoucher."

"Accouch..." His eyes widened. "You don't mean that...?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "I believe that I do. It seems that sometimes women who are expecting a child are quite badly afflicted with vomiting, and Jane seems to be responding well to a tea that my cook and housekeeper told me about for women in that condition. There are other signs that point to that conclusion, so—"

Bingley was across the room in two moments, seizing both of her hands, a smile on his face. "Then, she is not fighting an illness at all?"

"No," said Elizabeth, and she smiled too. But then the smile slid from her face. "It does not mean that we can stop worrying, however. She is quite weak, and she has not been eating, and that is not good news, for she should be eating more than usual to keep up her strength and feed the babe as well."

Bingley's smile faded too. "What you say is true. She is still quite in grave danger. And it is not a random illness, but my own fault."

"Now, there is nothing to be gained from looking at it that way," said Elizabeth. "There is yet hope, however. She was able to eat something after the tea we gave her, and she has kept it down. I was told she should eat things like cheese or meat straightaway upon waking, and that seems to have sustained her a bit, so I think we must hope for the best. And the midwife, the one who is knowledgeable about

women badly afflicted. I think she must be sent for at once."

"Indeed," said Bingley. He took a deep breath. "Can you... do you know how to get in touch with the midwife? I think I must go to my wife immediately. I must see her, talk to her."

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "You must. And I shall be able to manage the business of sending for the midwife."

Later that day, after the midwife had confirmed with reasonable certainty that Jane was in fact with child and that her sickness was a consequence of that, Jane was feeling so much better that she was able to dress and come down for dinner, though she didn't stay long, because the smells were too much for her. Once back in her room, though, she had more of her tea, and she was able to eat some chicken and potatoes, because she said they were bland enough not to upset her. She was already in better spirits.

The midwife had explained that the sickness affected women differently, and that Jane was simply unlucky to be one who was so badly plagued. She had various ideas for things that could help, and said that they must do what they can to settle Jane's stomach enough that she could take down sustenance and keep it down. If the tea was helpful, she must have as much tea as she liked.

Jane herself was overjoyed with excitement, exclaiming to Elizabeth that she had gone from knocking on death's door to having a whole future in front of her including a baby, and she spent every last moment talking about names to whoever would

listen, saying that, of course, she would have to be sure that Mr. Bingley was in agreement before anything was settled on. She was also most desirous of looking at the nursery in the house, for they would need to get started as soon as they could on it.

For his part, Mr. Bingley was in much improved spirits, and the air of the entire household was better than it had been.

Only when Elizabeth saw Mr. Darcy at dinner and their gazes met for one moment, did anything dampen her mood acutely. Seeing Mr. Darcy reminded Elizabeth of what she wanted and what she could never have.

He looked away at once, appearing as stricken as she felt. For the rest of the meal, he was silent, and after dinner, she did not see him.

* * *

A week passed, and Jane grew stronger.

Through trial and error, they were able to determine what smells were most bothersome to her, and she took care to avoid them all. If she was given tea and a bland hard cheese upon waking, it calmed the very worst of her illness, and she was able to be up and about for the day, not confined to bed. She took meals with everyone, and all was well.

Instead of feeling as though Jane would not make it, she began to gain weight and grow rosy cheeked and bright eyed. She was in high spirits. Elizabeth was cautious at first. She wanted to believe the danger was over, but she did not want to be over hasty. As the days passed, though, she grew more and more confident that Jane would recover entirely,

and that her baby would be healthy as well.

One afternoon, the windows were thrown open to let in the warm spring breezes. Jane was in the drawing room with all of them – Bingley, Caroline, Darcy, and Elizabeth. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst had left a few days earlier, wanting to be back in town.

The wind changed direction, and suddenly Jane was on her feet, retching.

A flurry of action burst forth, calling for a pot for her to vomit in and for her tea to be brewed at once, and in all of it, only Elizabeth seemed to notice that Caroline was affected too.

She was clutching her chest as her cheeks bulged, and Elizabeth could only think that Caroline smelled something that only Jane could smell. Why would that be?

She had an awful thought. That perhaps all the stories she'd heard about Caroline and Darcy were, in fact, true, and that Darcy had been lying to her. Perhaps he had robbed Caroline of her virtue, and perhaps she was already gone with his child.

But no, that couldn't be, for it had been November when all that happened, and now it was mid-March. If she had begun increasing so long ago, there would be a sign of it by now. And from what Elizabeth had heard from the midwife, the stage at which smells produced vomiting was early in the course of childbearing.

Of course, Elizabeth had to admit that she knew very little about carrying children.

As for Mr. Darcy, he'd had very little contact with Elizabeth, though she had been residing under the

same roof as he. She spent all her time tending to Jane, and Darcy stayed out of the way for the most part. The fact that he had even joined them today in the drawing room was out of the ordinary. She wanted to believe that he was the man that he had claimed to be. Indeed, every observance of his character in Hunsford had told her that story. But she could not be sure of it.

She sought out his gaze across the room.

He was wrangling a pot from a maid and handing it over to Jane, passing along the word that tea was being brewed and would be there as soon as possible. But then he saw Elizabeth looking at him.

She nodded at Caroline.

He turned to look at her.

Caroline gagged one more time, and then seemed to get herself under control. She straightened her shoulders and tossed her hair.

Darcy looked at Elizabeth, brow furrowed.

She raised her own eyebrows, a question.

He shook his head firmly.

Did she trust him? If she did not, she would call attention to Caroline now, demand to know what was the meaning of all of this. And then Darcy would be forced to take responsibility, if he indeed was responsible.

Instead, she was silent.

She waited until later, when she and Jane were alone, and she brought it up to her sister. It was late, and she was in her sister's bedchamber, bidding her goodnight. She told Jane what she had seen.

"Oh," said Jane, "well, the smell was putrid. I'm

sure Miss Bingley was naturally affected by it.”

“I didn’t smell anything,” said Elizabeth. “No one else did except the two of you.”

“So, what are you saying?” said Jane. “You think she is with child as well?” She bit down on her lip. “I suppose she was made a victim by Mr. Darcy.”

“That’s just it, Jane. I know we haven’t had a chance to speak of such things, but when I was in Hunsford, I saw a different side of Mr. Darcy. He told me that he never touched Caroline, and that she only made it look as if he had in order to trap him into marrying her. You may not remember, as you were ill during your first sojourn in Netherfield, but she has always had designs on Darcy. Apparently, she was quite desperate to make them a reality.”

Jane put her hand to her chest. “Oh, Lizzy, that is quite a lot to take in. You really think we were mistaken in our assessment of Mr. Darcy’s character?”

“I do.”

Jane, who always wanted to think the best of everyone, smiled. “I think my husband will be happy to hear it.”

“But how could he be?” said Elizabeth, “when it paints his own sister with such a black brush?”

“True,” said Jane. “That would wound him. And I fear that I am not understanding why you are telling me this, anyway. If her virtue is intact, how can she be with child?”

“I don’t know,” said Elizabeth. “But I think you must speak to Bingley, and he must speak to her and get the truth from her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Well, she has admitted it,” Jane told Elizabeth the next day as they took a walk in the gardens. Jane had brought with her a sprig of dried peppermint to chew if any smell was too much for her. That should help keep her illness in check. “You were right. She is with child.”

“Oh,” said Elizabeth. “Oh, dear. That is most troubling.”

“Yes, and my husband is beside himself,” said Jane, sighing. “He is, this very day, going to Darcy to demand that he marry his sister now, though he is not sure a scandal can be avoided, not this late.”

“But I don’t think it is Darcy,” said Elizabeth. “Or... at least, I don’t want to think so. When it comes to Mr. Darcy, I must admit, however, I don’t always think clearly.”

“What is this?” Jane turned to look at her, bemused. “You have always despised the man, do I not have that right?”

“Oh, Jane, I cannot say how I feel about him.” Elizabeth twisted her hands together. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, anyway. I have no chance of ever being connected to him except through your

connection to Miss Bingley, who is going to be his wife, regardless. Darcy has already agreed to marry her. He must, no matter how she has gotten with child."

"You think it is another man's child?" said Jane.

Elizabeth bit down on her bottom lip. "Perhaps... perhaps it is not someone she can respectably marry, and she hopes to have Darcy in society and this other man in the shadows. It happens in novels, you know."

"This is not a novel," said Jane. "And Mr. Darcy must be the one responsible. They were discovered together, Elizabeth, by the entire household. I fear that he has simply succeeded in charming you. You must not listen to anything else he says."

"Oh, I do not speak to him," said Elizabeth. "I cannot. It is too painful."

"That is wise," said Jane. "And perhaps you should go back to Longbourn, so that you are away from him. I am doing much better here. I do enjoy your company, and would have you stay longer, but I would protect you from a villain like Darcy, and I would rather you safe than with me."

Elizabeth stopped walking.

Jane stopped too, a pace or too ahead. She turned back to her sister.

"I do not, not in my heart, think he *is* a villain," she said. "You seemed to believe me last night."

"Yes, but now I have spoken to Bingley," said Jane, "and his heart is hardened toward Darcy, and I think he is in the right. He is grieved, of course, by Darcy's awfulness, but he cannot hide from the

truth.”

Elizabeth started to walk again. “I think you are right, and I *should* go. But I will tell you that I cannot believe the worst of Darcy. He was too good to me, and it wasn’t out of some false charm with the intent to ensnare me. He walked back and forth miles through the mud in the pouring rain to get me to you, Jane. He *is* good. I know he is.”

* * *

There was a knock on the door of Darcy’s room. He spent most of his time here, with a book. He often went for long rides, and on those rides, he questioned what he was still doing at Netherfield and why he had not gone. For he was no closer to convincing himself to marry Caroline. He was not sure he could do it.

The exchange in the drawing room with Elizabeth had confused him even more. At first he thought he quite understood her meaning. That if Caroline felt ill, she must be in the same condition as Jane, and therefore, it must be his fault. And he had denied that. But then he wondered if he had indeed understood her, or if it had been something else.

More than once, late at night, he’d considered going through the darkened halls of the house and looking for Elizabeth’s room. Usually, it was with a dishonorable intent. He had nothing to offer her, but he wanted her anyway. He spun ideas in his head about taking Elizabeth as a mistress and finding some way to make their children legitimate. Perhaps if he had no children with Caroline, there would be less of a barrier. And he could be sure of that as long

as he never bedded her.

But he could not ask such a thing of Elizabeth. She deserved better, and he knew that.

He wasn't the sort of man who kept a mistress.

Last night, he'd wanted to go to her, but not just because he wanted her. Also because he wanted to know if he had understood her properly or not. He didn't go, though. He would do nothing else to injure her, he vowed it to himself. He had already made a mess of things. To think that he had kissed her.

He had treated her badly, and he felt such shame. It was best if he stayed away from her. However, if she ever needed anything, he would always be at her service.

Now, Darcy answered the door to find Bingley standing without.

"May I come in?" said Bingley.

"Certainly," said Darcy, making room for the other man to enter. He shut the door after him.

Then the two men stood there in silence, casting their glances everywhere but at each other, for several long moments.

Finally, Darcy cleared his throat. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Actually, yes. You can marry my sister."

Darcy sighed. They were coming to that, were they? "Listen, Bingley, something came up yesterday, something that might change things for me. I am eager to avoid scandal, but I am not eager to wear horns. Nor am I eager to raise a child who is not my own as my heir, and I must ask you to find out from your sister whether or not she is with child."

"You bastard!" Bingley folded his arms over his chest. "How dare you refuse to claim your own child?"

"I have never touched your sister," said Darcy. "I told you when I left that it was impossible that she was with child, didn't I? And if she had been, she would surely show signs by now. This is someone else. This is some other wrinkle of her wickedness." He rubbed his forehead. "You are saying that it is true, then? That she is with child?"

"She has admitted it to me," said Bingley. "At first, she tried to say that it was not so, but then she dissolved into tears and finally allowed that it was true. I told her that I would find you and demand that you make it right. But, as you say, it has been some time, and she will likely give birth by the summer, so you must marry at once. There is no time to waste."

Darcy scratched at his chin. "I suppose it makes sense why she came to me that night and was so desperate that I have her. She wanted to blame it on me."

"What are you speaking of?"

"Your sister, man, is a demoness," said Darcy. "She has spun all this as a web to trap me, but I fear she may have miscalculated, and now she is in true trouble. I do not know what man is the father of her babe, but it is not me, and I will not marry her."

"You *will* marry her," said Bingley. "I shall force you to marry her."

"How will you do that?"

"If you do not agree, I shall challenge you to a

duel.”

“Oh, that’s a capital idea,” said Darcy, smiling grimly. “Then I shall be forced to shoot you. And your sister will have neither a brother nor a husband, because I shall still not marry her.”

“I shall shoot *you*, you cad,” said Bingley. “And then...” He thought that through for several moments.

“And then your sister will still be assured of ruin,” said Darcy. “As I said, brilliant idea.”

Bingley was quiet a moment. “If you will not agree to marry her, then I shall not host you under my roof any longer.”

“Excellent, I shall be gone within the hour,” said Darcy. “Now, if you would kindly take your leave—”

“Darcy, how *can* you be this way?”

Darcy gave him a pleading look. “It is not my child, Bingley. Please believe me. It was one thing to be trapped into a marriage, but to be forced to let another man’s child be heir to Pemberley... I cannot do it. For the sake of my dead parents, I cannot.”

Bingley looked at him for several long moments, his brow furrowed as if he could make neither heads or tails of the matter, and then he threw up his hands, muttered a few oaths under his breath, and quit the room.

* * *

Darcy was in the stables saddling a horse. He would send for everything else later. He didn’t want to spend another moment in this dreadful place. The only good time he could say he had spent was the

time he had spent with Elizabeth here, but then, even that wasn't good, because it was only a source of agony for him currently.

Except, damnation, why was that?

He had just made it plain that he was not going to marry Caroline, not under any circumstances. So, whatever was in his way with Elizabeth...

He let go of the saddle, leaving it unbuckled, and left the stable. He hurried back into the house. He paused downstairs, poking his head in to find Jane reading in the drawing room. When he inquired after Elizabeth, Jane said that she was upstairs packing.

"Packing, hmm?" said Darcy. *Good*, he thought. Then she could come along with him. He'd spirit her off and elope with her, and that would be that. Of course, they couldn't gallop off on one horse together. He'd need his coach. But that could all be sorted out momentarily.

He started up the steps.

When he got to the landing of the second floor, Elizabeth was there, coming down the hallway. She saw him and started. "Mr. Darcy."

"Elizabeth," he said, not caring if he called her an improper name.

Her eyes widened. "Sir—"

"Miss Bennet," he corrected. "I have come looking for you. I wish to speak to you now."

She licked her lips. "Well, I'm not sure if it's such a good idea—"

"I'm not going to marry Miss Bingley," he said.

"You're not?" She looked around the hallway, seeming a bit overwhelmed. "But, sir, I thought that

you were obliged to—”

“She is with child,” said Darcy. “And I am not responsible, and I will not be party to the cover up of her sin. She must find the man who is responsible and...” He shook his head. “No matter. That is not important. What is important is that I am free, and I see no reason why we should waste anymore time.” He held out his hand to her. “Come with me now. Marry me on the road. I want you with me now. I want you with me always. I don’t want to be parted from you again, not for any reason.”

Her lips parted. She looked at his outstretched hand and then into his eyes, and then back at his hand.

He pulled his hand back. “You do not believe me. You think that I have ruined Miss Bingley and now I am running out on her.” His nostrils flared and he cast his gaze down at his shoes. “I can see why you would, I suppose. I have no way to prove my innocence. I had hoped that you would—”

“No, that is not...” She cleared her throat. “I do believe you. I... this is all very sudden. You appear at the top of the steps and demand that I elope with you, and I am trying to catch my breath and gather my thoughts is all.”

“What is there to think about if you believe me?” he said. “And what use is breathing? I have known from the moment I laid eyes on you that you were different than any woman I had ever known, and you are the only woman I will even consider marrying, so...” He took a breath. Then he stepped back. “I suppose it would be a bit scandalous,

wouldn't it? People will say things about me. They will assume the worst about what happened with Miss Bingley. You will be drawn into that." Damn it all, he had sworn never to bring her any pain. He was dragging her down into the mud with him. He took another step backwards. "My apologies, Miss Bennet. I did not think it through before I..." The steps were there. He turned, descending two of them, clutching the railing.

"Mr. Darcy," said Elizabeth. "If you could but wait a moment."

"No, I fear that I have made an ass of myself," he said. "It will be difficult enough salvaging what damage this will do to Georgiana, but I have no choice. I cannot marry Caroline, and I won't. But I will not drag you into this. I should not have asked you for such a thing. Excuse me." He started down the stairs in haste.

"Mr. Darcy!" Elizabeth called after him.
He didn't look back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elizabeth pounded down the steps after Mr. Darcy, calling after him. But he was going too quickly, and she was obliged to go more slowly, due to the length of her skirts. By the time she got outside, she saw that Darcy had already climbed onto his horse and was galloping away.

She yelled after him one last time, but he was too far away. He either didn't hear her or wasn't inclined to respond, as he had not been inclined the last ten times she had yelled for him.

She stood there, watching him go, billows of dust coming up from the back of the hoofs of his horse, her hands on her hips.

Infuriating man.

His proposal had been irregular, to be true, and it would not be an easy road ahead of the two of them. But she was fairly sure that she had been about to accept. Her only concern had been her family, Jane and her child specifically, and the problems that the rumors might cause for them. But she had been about to throw caution to the wind and say yes anyway, because she was bound for misery anyway, and Mr. Darcy had the means to help her family, even if he

had a tarnished reputation.

But now he was gone.

She squared her shoulders. "That is the third time he has proposed to me," she whispered. Was it likely he'd do it a fourth time or was this truly the end of all that had passed between them in the past few months? Would she even see him again?

She would write to him. She would find out where he had gone, and then she would send him a letter, and then —

Was that Caroline Bingley walking down the road there?

Why, yes, it was.

What was she doing on the road?

Elizabeth knew that Caroline often took long walks alone in the gardens, but she had not expected to see her sister-in-law walking on the road, as if she was heading to a destination. That was all very interesting. Elizabeth picked up her skirts and went after her.

She did not follow too closely, but far enough back to stay out of sight.

Caroline walked a long, long way, all the way to Meryton, which Elizabeth found surprising. Though she and her sisters often made the walk themselves from Longbourn, she had not thought of Caroline as the kind of woman who be satisfied with such a means of transportation. But Elizabeth supposed that walking had its advantages, as it involved no one else and could be kept secret.

Wherever Caroline was going, she probably didn't want anyone to know about it.

Indeed, when they arrived at Meryton, Caroline did not go into town, but walked around. She settled under a large tree in a field near a brook. She leaned against the tree trunk, stared out at the horizon, and waited.

Elizabeth waited too.

She was beginning to think that perhaps she had been wrong. Perhaps Caroline was only going on long walks because she needed time to think. After all, she was in a desperate situation, and if something weren't done soon, she would likely be cast out of her brother's society and left to make it on her own some way or the other. Despite herself, Elizabeth felt a tiny shred of pity for Caroline.

The woman had set herself on this path, to be sure, and she didn't deserve anything better, but it was still a harsh future that awaited her.

But then, a man in a red coat galloped up on horseback. In another moment, Elizabeth recognized him.

Mr. Wickham.

Elizabeth's heart went into her throat. Of course. She had seen the way Wickham had latched onto Caroline at that ball, completely ignoring Elizabeth herself. And from what she knew of Wickham, including what Darcy had told her, he was desperate to attach himself to a woman of fortune by one means or the other. He had tried it with Georgiana, and there was little doubt that he would not try it again.

Caroline's child was almost surely Mr. Wickham's.

Elizabeth scurried away, back to Netherfield. She had to tell Bingley. He could seek out Mr. Wickham and force him to marry Caroline. It wouldn't be the life that Caroline had wanted with Mr. Darcy, but it would be quite better than being an unmarried woman with child.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When she arrived back at Netherfield, however, Bingley was closed in his study and would receive no one, not even Jane, who said he was in a black mood, and it was best not to disturb him.

So, Elizabeth told all she had seen to Jane, who admitted that it could be so, that Mr. Wickham might have done as Elizabeth had said. But she was hesitant to lay blame at the man's feet, because she didn't want to think badly of him.

Elizabeth told Jane about the letter Darcy had written her, about what he claimed Wickham had done to his sister.

But Jane said what Elizabeth had said, that Darcy was blaming Wickham for his own sins, that he was the one who sought to ruin ladies of gentle birth.

Eventually, Caroline came back, looking disheveled and tired. She retired to her room without a word.

Not ten minutes later, Wickham galloped up the road and came up the steps of Netherfield.

"What is he doing here?" said Elizabeth.

"I don't know," said Jane.

They crept to the top of the stairs so that they

could listen to him speak to the butler. Wickham asked to see Mr. Bingley.

The butler said that Mr. Bingley had professed to be indisposed that day, but that he would ask Bingley if he would greet a guest anyway. He sent Wickham to the parlor to wait.

Jane pointed across the hallway. "That room there," she whispered. "It shares a chimney with the parlor. The sound comes straight through. We'll listen in."

Elizabeth and Jane scurried into the room and shut the door behind them. They sat down directly in front of the fireplace with their ears facing it.

A few moments later, they heard the butler announcing Mr. Bingley. His voice wafted up through the chimney. Then Mr. Wickham and Mr. Bingley exchanged somewhat stiff greetings.

"I shan't waste time, then," said Wickham, who sounded to be in great spirits. "I am here about your sister Miss Bingley."

"My sister?" said Bingley. "What is it that you have to say about my sister?"

"Well, sir, I am hoping to secure your permission and blessing to make her my wife."

Bingley sputtered. "You! But..." His voice choked off.

"Oh, yes," said Wickham. "Well, shall we be polite about all that or shall we simply speak openly, since all is known? It may be that your sister and I were, shall we say, carried away in our affections toward each other. And yes, certain liberties may have been taken. But I am confident that she couldn't

be farther along than but a few weeks, and it shall never be known by anyone. Besides, who truly cares about such things? Shall we discuss financial considerations now? I am given to understand that your sister's dowry is quite generous."

"You... you..." Bingley seemingly was having trouble forming words. "But I thought that Darcy—"

"Oh, yes, Darcy," said Wickham, laughing softly. "You may know that I have some acquaintance with him. But this is a settling of debts between us, I suppose. He has taken much from me. Now, I have taken his fiancée. You do agree to the match, do you not? You could hardly deny it, not under the circumstances."

"No, I suppose I could not," said Bingley. "I could not indeed."

* * *

Darcy fidgeted in the parlor at Netherfield. He had not gotten far before a rider from Netherfield had overtaken him with a letter from Bingley. He'd read it, and then turned around and ridden back. But now, he was waiting for his friend and feeling nervous.

The door burst open and there was Bingley, no butler in sight to announce. "Darcy!" said Bingley and strode across the room toward him, hand outstretched. "I owe you an ocean of apologies. I have been dreadful to you."

Darcy felt a knot unravel that he hadn't realized had been tangled up in his gut for quite some time. He seized his friend's hand and they shook. "You had to protect your sister. I did understand."

"But I *know* you, and I wouldn't listen to you. All this time, your story has not wavered, and I thought you were lying. I feel wretched, I must tell you."

"No more wretched than I have felt, having lost you."

"But you forgive me? I daresay I don't deserve it, but I ask it anyway."

Darcy moved his hand from his friend's hand to his arm and braced him there. Bingley did likewise. "It is forgotten. We shall let it go."

"Thank you, old friend."

They smiled at each other and held on for a moment.

And then they dropped each other's arms and both made a show of straightening their cravats.

"Well, so she is to be married to Wickham," said Bingley. "And soon. There will be a special license, and the marriage will be performed with all haste. I am not pleased about it, but I can't help but think that she has naught but herself to blame for this match."

"She did make bad choices," said Darcy. "Who knows but that she and Wickham are not made for she other? They appear to be cut from the same cloth."

Bingley sighed. "Yes, you may be right. You will stay here, won't you? At least until the wedding?"

"I will," said Darcy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The wedding was delayed only by two days, and during that time, Darcy did not see Elizabeth, for she was called back home on a matter of joy within her family. Apparently, her youngest sister Lydia was to be married to one of the other officers in Meryton, a Mr. Denny. Darcy did not know who he was, nor was he party to understanding why Lydia's marriage must also be undertaken with such haste. But knowing a bit about the girl, he supposed it was not difficult to imagine why or how such a thing had come to be.

He was not invited to the youngest Miss Bennet's wedding. Indeed, few were, in much the same way no one was invited to the wedding of Caroline and Wickham. Darcy was there, only to be there for Bingley. Even Caroline's sister was not called back from London.

Wickham, though, was detestably happy before and during the ceremony. He went so far as to address Darcy after the ceremony, all smiles. "Aren't you going to congratulate me, Darcy?" he said. "Or would it be too hard for you to acknowledge me at all? You have brought me so low, after all. Does it

make up for the fact that your father loved me more than he loved you?"

Darcy glared at Wickham. He hated the man, but he had never been jealous of him. It was odd that Wickham seemed to spin lies for others that he then grew to believe himself. He was so charming that he was a victim of his own deceptions, Darcy supposed.

"Well, perhaps not so low in the end," said Wickham. He leaned closer. "At first, all I thought to do was deflower your fiancée. I thought it would be a good joke, knowing that I had been there first. But instead, I have taken her from you entirely."

Darcy decided to say nothing. Let Wickham think that he wounded Darcy in some way instead of relieving him of the worst burden of his life.

* * *

The atmosphere in Longbourn had been chaotic, which was nothing that unusual, Elizabeth had to admit, but it had been even more chaotic than normal, what with Lydia's hurried wedding, which she had graciously decided to share with her family at the last minute, instead of eloping.

Why this was, Elizabeth couldn't be sure, but probably because someone had put it into Lydia's head that elopement was not respectable, and Lydia did hate being talked about behind her back. On the other hand, a hurried marriage wasn't much better, so Elizabeth was not sure what the point of it all had been. She did think that her house was far quieter now that Lydia was gone.

Of course, her mother was nearly able to make up for that, because she kept weeping into a

handkerchief about Lydia going off to Brighton at the end of the spring with the Regiment. She already had it in her head that the whole family should go, and she was attempting to convince Mr. Bennet of it, but he would hear nothing of it.

Kitty was in poor spirits as well, having lost her compatriot. She also seemed miffed that she'd had no offers of marriage herself, for she was "as lively as Lydia" if she did say so herself.

Mary continued as ever. In Elizabeth's absence, she had truly applied herself to practicing the piano, and she had grown tolerably better at it. Her singing voice was still not what one might call pleasant to listen to, but she seemed to be improving in that manner as well, and she dolefully told Elizabeth that mastery was gained from dogged practice, and that she would apply herself, for it was good for the soul as well.

Elizabeth longed to go back to Netherfield for she had heard from Jane's letters what was going on there, and knew that Wickham and Caroline had been hurriedly married. But more importantly, she knew that Darcy was still there, and she was most desirous to speak to him.

Several times, she had started to try to compose a letter to him, as she had promised that she would do, but it was hard to know what to say.

Dear Sir: As you have proposed marriage to me thrice, can I reasonably assume the offer is still open? If so, I would like to marry at once.

Absolutely not.

Dear Sir: As you are no longer engaged to another

woman, and you have done exceedingly improper things with me, such as fingering my hair and kissing me on the mouth, using your tongue, I should think it is a foregone conclusion that we be married with much haste.

Decidedly not that either.

Dear Sir: I have been woken these last nights by the same burning dreams that I have been afflicted with since the first time I saw your bare skin beneath your night shirt, and I am most desirous to see you without the shirt entirely, so if you please, could you renew your proposal of marriage, because I think I shall go up in smoke else.

That, of course, was the worst thing of all.

She despaired of finding anything to say. But she couldn't leave to go to Netherfield while her mother was sobbing all over the place, not even under the pretext of going to check on Jane, because that would send her mother into further hysterics, since her mother had grown convinced that Jane was likely to die in childbirth. It was the only thing that could come of such difficulty carrying a child according to her mother.

In all truth, it probably wouldn't be any easier at Netherfield. It would probably be just as difficult to speak to Mr. Darcy as it was to write to him. Perhaps even more difficult, she could not say. But he would still want to marry her now, especially now that there was nothing in their way. Wouldn't he? He couldn't have changed his mind.

She thought of things that he had said to her before, and it made her whole body flush. *I don't want to be parted from you again, he'd said, not for any reason.*

He could not have changed his mind. The universe was not so cruel as that.

But if she could not write to him, and she could not see him, what did any of it matter? Elizabeth felt certain she would go mad if nothing happened.

And then, one morning, there he was, calling on her at Longbourn.

"Oh Lord," said her mother in disgust when she saw who was approaching. "It's that awful Mr. Darcy. What could he want with us?"

"For heaven's sake, he is not awful at all," said Elizabeth. "He is just shy and awkward. And I think he's here to see me." Her lips broke into a smile at that, one that couldn't be suppressed.

Darcy was announced. He stood in the doorway of their drawing room.

Her mother and Kitty were on the couch together. They had been engaged in a conversation, which was really no more than two people airing their grievances at the other with no sense that the other had even heard. Mary was in a chair in the corner, reading the bible.

Elizabeth stood at the mantle, looking across the room at him.

"It's a lovely day today, isn't it?" said her mother. "Quite agreeable weather."

"Yes," said Mr. Darcy. "Quite agreeable."

"Of course," said her mother, "perhaps one such as you, who does not enjoy the country because of the lack of variety, does not enjoy the weather either."

"Mama!" said Elizabeth, shaking her head.

"I assure you, Mrs. Bennet," said Darcy, looking straight at Elizabeth, "I have come to find much to admire about this part of the country after all."

Elizabeth's smile was back. She bit down on her lip.

Darcy strode into the room. "I wonder if I might have a word alone with Miss Bennet?"

Mrs. Bennet's eyes were suddenly round like saucers. She leapt to her feet, her voice shrill. "Out, everyone out. Out, now!" She turned on Elizabeth. "Well, Lizzy, you might have let me know this was even a possibility," she said, and then swept out of the room in a huff, her younger daughters trailing behind her.

Elizabeth smiled at him. "You know that they'll all simply be listening at the door to whatever we say now, don't you?"

Darcy smiled too, and she had never seen him look so easy and relaxed, as if the weight of the world had been removed from his shoulders. "Is that so?"

She lurched forward, pulled by a force she didn't understand. Maybe it was the same force that made her burn for Mr. Darcy. She didn't know. But she was next to him in moments, her hand against his cheek.

He shut his eyes. His voice was a low rumble. "Perhaps we don't speak then."

"Mr. Darcy," she whispered. "That is shocking."

His eyes opened. "I cannot seem to escape being shocking when it comes to you." A pause. "Elizabeth."

She shuddered. He had never spoken her name

aloud thus, not in that tone, and besides, it was frightfully irregular for him to call her by her first name. Her mouth was dry.

He was kissing her.

He was kissing her right in front of the mantle in her family's drawing room, and it *was* shocking, and it was also liquid heat that made her go weak and sway into his arms, that made the air seem to churn around them, as if they were being swept up in their own little world together, and none of the rules mattered anymore. This, the two of them together, this was right, and it was all that mattered.

He pulled back abruptly.

She gasped.

"Sorry," he said, furrowing his brow. "I only, I thought before we got carried away, we should – that is... dash it all." He cast a pained look over her head as he tried to gather his thoughts.

She giggled. That was Mr. Darcy, all right. A bit shy and a bit awkward, but underneath it, all, he was molten. And he was hers.

"I came to ask you to marry me," blurted Darcy. "Again."

"I wasn't refusing you last time, you know," said Elizabeth. "You ran off before I could get the words out."

He raised his eyebrows. "You would have married me under such circumstances? Even if it had reflected badly on your loved ones?"

"Some things are worth the risk," she said. She cocked her head to one side. "I can say without question that I have not been nearly as happy as I am

in your presence these past months. I think I would marry you if it brought a pox down on all of London."

He chuckled. "Really? I seem to remember a certain woman claiming she would not marry me if I were the last man in the country."

"She was foolish and young," said Elizabeth, smiling. "I'm older now. Wiser."

And they were kissing again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"I think I am more nervous than you are," came Mr. Darcy's voice out of the darkness.

Elizabeth started at the sound. She had not even known he was there. She was lying on her back in the great bed in Pemberley, and it was late, and she would have been so tired that she had fallen asleep right away if she were not so nervous and... and excited. Inside her, her body was a storm of turmoil and sparks and anticipation.

She was married.

She was Mrs. Darcy now. No longer would she be Miss Bennet, and no longer would she live at Longbourn. Now, she would be mistress of this great estate, and she was overwhelmed by it all, but in the most pleasant of ways. It was more than she had dreamed of, more than she had dared to even think of. She had been quite convinced that she would die an old maid. But, no, she was married.

The wedding had taken place in Derbyshire only that morning.

Though Elizabeth had arrived at her new home the day before the wedding, she'd had little time to take it all in. She had instead spent a large part of the

day visiting with Georgiana, and the two of them had explored the library together. Georgiana had given her five or six books to read, saying that she could not wait to talk about them with Elizabeth.

Georgiana was excited. She said that she and Elizabeth would be like sisters now, and she had never had a sister. Elizabeth, who had too many sisters, thought to herself that she hoped she and Georgiana could have all the sweet closeness of a sisterly relationship without any of the conflict. Since they had not grown up under the same roof, Elizabeth was certain such a thing could be attained.

Anyway, the fact remained that Elizabeth had not seen even a quarter of Pemberley, and she could still hardly believe that she lived here. That she was mistress of all *this*.

Time could have been given before the nuptials for her to settle in, but neither she nor Darcy wished that. She knew there was something behind those kisses of his, something inexorable and inescapable, and she wanted it unleashed. Every time he kissed her, she wanted more. She craved some further plane of pleasure, and she wanted to find it.

Except now, lying here, waiting for her husband, it all seemed... well, terrifying.

"I frightened you," he said.

She sat up in the bed. "No. You do not scare me." Which was true. She wasn't afraid of Mr. Darcy himself, but she was anxious, and that was only because all of this was so new. "I'm, um, I'm quite fine."

He sat down on the bed next to her. "The first

time I saw you, you took my breath away.”

“I thought I made you afflicted with some awful physical ailment,” she suddenly remembered, drawing her brows together.

He laughed. “No, no. Nothing about what you make me feel is awful. You unmake me, it is true, and I fought it at first, but there is no fighting you, Elizabeth. You are a force, and you have overtaken me.”

“As have you,” she said. “You have overtaken me.” She bit down on her lip and looked him over. He was only in his nightshirt. “You have no idea the sleepless nights that little patch of hair on your chest has caused me.”

He was surprised. “Truly?” He touched his chest, and then more of him was visible, more of his skin, more of the muscles moving beneath his skin. “I had not thought that would be... appealing.”

She looked down at her palms, her voice a whisper. “Perhaps there is something strange about me for finding it so?”

“No,” he said, and then he was touching her, and his fingers scalded her, waking her body in ways she had never known possible, and all he had done was to draw his fingers over her shoulder and neck. “You are quite perfect. You are... so beautiful.” His voice had gone husky.

“So are you,” she whispered. Bravely, she reached up to touch him too. His shoulder. His neck.

He sucked in breath sharply.

They kissed.

She felt it in her toes, in the hairs on the back of

her neck. She felt as if her entire body was on high alert.

He slowly broke the kiss, groaning. "Oh, Elizabeth... what you do to me..."

"What?" she whispered. "What do I do to you?"

"Shall I show you?"

"Yes, all right," she breathed.

He took her hand and guided it from her shoulder, down over his firm chest and stomach, and then lower still, and she flushed and felt hot all all over, and then... Oh. She could feel him through his nightshirt. He was... hot and thick and hard, and yet somehow so silken. She ran her fingers over him, and she loved the way he felt.

He emitted some kind of strangled sound, halfway between a growl and a plea.

It sent shocks through her.

He touched her face, brushing her hair away, letting his fingers slide down the length of her hair. "I have dreamed of you thus, spreading your hair over your creamy skin."

She gasped. She supposed he'd never seen her with her hair down. She usually wore it braided to bed, but Jane had convinced her otherwise. She was glad of it now. She licked her lips again.

His face dipped down.

Her eyes slammed shut.

Then he was kissing her, and it was like the day in the woods, the first kiss, the world going away and everything turning to heat and fire, as if everything around them was burning to the ground.

She clung to him, kissing him back, her body

tense and ready for something that she couldn't yet fathom.

His lips left hers.

She opened her eyes to find him looking at her. She tried to speak. Couldn't. Tried again. "I don't... I don't know what to do." Her voice came out low and scratchy.

He smiled, resting one hand on her cheek. "Are you frightened?"

"No," she murmured. "Not exactly."

He kissed her forehead. "Well," he said in a quiet voice, "we must take off our clothes."

"Yes, I know that," she said. She sighed. "It isn't fair, you know. It isn't fair, your knowing everything and my knowing nothing."

"No," he said. "It isn't fair. But I promise that inequity will be remedied. Most thoroughly if I have anything to say about it." And he reached back behind his head with one hand and pulled his nightshirt over his head.

Oh.

He was naked. Completely and totally...

She felt a pleasant ache, tightness coiling in within her. His body was magnificent. She had never seen something so pleasing. The swells and angles of him glinted in the firelight. His wide shoulders, the ripples of his chest and stomach. And lower...

She tipped her head to one side in interest. This was what she had touched. It was hard and thick and long, a little bit curved so that it pointed toward the ceiling. She reached for it again.

Oh. How could something be so soft and yet so

hard? It was velvet. It was iron. It was alive, pulsing heat into her palm, and when she moved around him—

He groaned.

She gasped, enjoying the thought of affecting him.

His hands were inside her shift, grazing her waist, her hips.

She sighed. That felt... Oh, that was good. So good.

He tugged at her shift, but had trouble. Shyly, she helped him to remove it, and then they were both bared to the other.

His mouth found hers, and she was lost to his mouth and his hands, stroking him as she was bursting everywhere. Now his hands were on her breasts, and she was moaning, and now they were brushing her thighs, and she was whimpering, and now he had found the center of her and she was...

She couldn't breathe.

She couldn't speak.

She couldn't stay upright. She was slipping—

And he caught her, lying her back on the bed, covering her body with his own. His mouth on hers, his hands between her legs, all of his bare skin against her bare skin, nothing between them at all.

She bucked against his caresses, her mouth open in a silent scream to the pleasure, to the sheer perfection of it. And they were lost there, for how long she couldn't say, but it was deepening goodness, deepening and swirling and overwhelming. Her eyes squeezed shut—there was nothing in the world but his touch and his lips. And

she was gasping and whimpering and then...

It washed over her again and again, assailing her body, taking her under as if she was being tugged down by a tidal wave, drowning in exquisite goodness.

She cried out, burying her face in his shoulder.

And then he was sinking into her—his body inside hers.

All the while, shocks trembled down her legs, and her body was clenching and releasing, clutching at him as he entered her.

She was gasping and he was groaning, and she felt even more lost. She had to hold onto him for dear life in case she tumbled out into the ether.

"I didn't know it would be so lovely," she breathed.

"Oh, Elizabeth," he rasped. "We've only just begun."

And now, they were finally joined, nothing between them, skin on skin, breathing together, their hearts beating in unison as their bodies moved together. It was all building again, that brutal sweetness within her, and she thought she might explode from the joy of it.

And then...

She did.