

*A Man
of
Few Words*

Being an

ADDENDUM

to

Pride and Prejudice

as told by

FITZWILLIAM DARCY

to

JANE AUSTEN

&

KATHERINE WOODBURY

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personality, or actions of any person, living or dead, should
be considered the consequence of watching too many Jane
Austen movies (not that there's anything wrong with that).

Foreword

I have requested that Miss Katherine Woodbury record the following in hopes of clarifying certain *aspects* of the courtship between Mrs. Darcy, née Bennet, and myself found in the account penned by Miss Jane Austen, widely circulated under the title, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Let me hasten to observe that I find no fault with any part of Miss Austen's account which records, with commendable accuracy, my behavior towards and conversations with my future bride. However, through no fault of Miss Austen's, there have arisen many fanciful inventions in connection with her work. These inventions are, I must stress, wholly without foundation.

I speak specifically to descriptions of my person and character that persist in providing me with the gregariousness of Tom Jones, the masterfulness of one "Mr. B" in *Pamela*, and even, I am sorry to say, the licentiousness of a Restoration rake. I am portrayed as a type of contemporary knight-errant: emotional, hotheaded, and distressingly unorganized.

To be sure, my wife and sister find such depictions amusing in the extreme, and Charles Bingley has taken to regaling dinner guests with each and every new derivation that chances across his eyes or ears.

However desirable such a picture of the English gentleman might appear to many, it is precisely my honor as a English gentleman that compels me to attempt to convince the reading public that, in my case, these portraits have no basis in the truth.

It is thus my earnest hope that the following should put to rest the presumptions contained in any and all such conflicting narratives. Miss Woodbury assures me that she has taken my full character into account. If I detect, occasionally, a hint of amusement in her writing, I lay such amusement at my wife's feet.

One must, in marriage, make some concessions to the impressions of one's spouse.

Fitzwilliam Darcy
Pemberley
Lambton, Derbyshire
28 January 1814

Chapter 1

Darcy Rejects a Lady Without Realizing It

Fitzwilliam Darcy came to Hertfordshire during a damp fall.

Hertfordshire was not part of his usual routine. He usually spent the fall and winter at Pemberley, the family estate in Derbyshire, departing Pemberley in the spring to visit his aunt's place in Kent.

However, Darcy's friend, Charles Bingley, had purchased a house, Netherfield, in Hertfordshire. Darcy, Charles insisted, must see it and give Charles suggestions for its improvement.

So Darcy had come, although he was beginning to suspect that what Charles meant by "suggestions" was "admire the view."

Not that the estate didn't have potential. Darcy took a tour with the estate agent (Charles did not yet have a steward), and they agreed that the west side of the estate could possibly be quarried for chalk, but rents to farmers would make up the bulk of the estate's income.

Darcy re-entered the house, shaking rain from his coat, and found that the neighbors had descended on Netherfield.

He knew they would. Bingley's arrival in the area—with his sisters, who would turn up that afternoon—increased the population of the neighborhood's gentry by ten percent. At least. And Darcy had to admit that Bingley was a pleasant addition to any community.

If only he did not insist on including Darcy.

"This is Mr. Bennet," Charles said when Darcy entered the sitting room. He indicated a lanky gentleman with a sardonic look. "Mr. Bennet, this is my good friend, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy and Mr. Bennet shook hands.

"I mustn't stay long," Mr. Bennet murmured. "Meryton would welcome your presence at the assembly ball, Mr. Bingley—and your entire party. You will be able to dance with my, ah, reasonably pleasing daughters."

Ah. The man had daughters to marry off. Darcy shook his head as Mr. Bennet got ready to depart. For all his gregariousness, Charles would never marry a girl from a country family. Darcy assumed Charles would marry one of the many ladies who flocked around him in London.

"We will make every effort to attend," Charles told Mr. Bennet at the sitting room door.

Darcy's heart sank. He wished people would restrain their communal instincts. He understood the need to gather but why did it need to happen so repeatedly? And in such uncomfortable settings? With strangers?

"We *are* going," Charles told him when Mr. Bennet left on his horse. Darcy didn't bother grumbling.

Not much, that is.

Bingley's sisters, Carolyn and Louisa, arrived the next day. Louisa was married and brought her husband, Mr. Hurst, along. He was a self-indulgent man who spent much of his time staring at cards and ignoring his wife.

"Oh, Charles, you shouldn't have," the sisters both cried when he told them about the assembly ball, but Darcy didn't bother feeling hopeful they would force Charles to change his mind. He'd heard these protestations before. The sisters wouldn't pass up an opportunity to show off their finery.

The sisters did carp at the "small town" nature of visiting an assembly house rather than a well-furnished family dwelling. Darcy considered simplicity one of the (few) redeeming qualities of the affair. A town like Meryton had an obligation to contrive entertainments for its populace.

Civic accountability proved the evening's only redeeming quality. The assembly room was too hot and too crowded. People thronged

around the Bingley party, wanting to be introduced to Bingley, to his sisters, to Mr. Hurst, and to Darcy.

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– *ad nauseam*. Darcy disciplined himself sufficiently not to groan aloud. But he had to wonder why they bothered; he would never remember their names. He was unlikely to spend much time at Netherfield anyway. Bingley would get bored soon and move on. Darcy gave the Netherfield experiment six months.

More faces—more introductions. People welcomed Darcy to the district and extolled the town. Women exclaimed at him. An over-scented woman cried, “Doesn’t the quartet sound lovely?”

There was nothing to say to that. It wasn’t as if Darcy could hear the music with all the chattering and thumping and *unending* introductions.

“What beautiful gowns,” another woman shrieked. Darcy managed to detach himself from the gossiping women who whispered as he edged away. He shook his head. Some of these women carried on as if lace and ribbons were state secrets.

He circled the room, nodding to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley. “What an odd company,” Miss Bingley mentioned as he passed her. “Don’t you think?”

Darcy shrugged but didn’t pause. He’d already danced with her and didn’t need to again—she had plenty of partners. Worthy women could always obtain partners. He started another circuit, looking for Bingley. They’d been here nearly two hours, which was long enough. Bingley would make the customary excuses, they’d go back to Netherfield, and Darcy could read and go to bed.

Bingley was ending a dance with a tall, serenely smiling woman. Darcy waited near the edge of the woman’s party. Bingley bounded over to him like a Pemberley pup. *Wasn’t this ball splendid? Weren’t all the girls pretty? He was having a wonderful time –*

Darcy felt the beginnings of a headache. Bingley appeared puzzled. Darcy knew that look—*Why isn’t Darcy having fun?*—and predicted his friend’s deductive leap—*Darcy would have fun if he danced.*

Bingley lived up to Darcy's expectations. Bingley was going to get him a partner – another Bennet sister, there, behind Darcy.

Darcy turned his head and caught the eye of a sitting young woman. "She's very pretty," Charles said as if a young lady's looks should instantly sweep Darcy into a maudlin, uncritical state of mind. "Stop standing here so stupidly and ask her to dance," Bingley continued.

Darcy snapped refusal. Even if they weren't going to leave early, that didn't mean he was going to dance with somebody he didn't know in an overheated room amongst a crowd of people exchanging pointless remarks.

Bingley understood at least that much. He laughed, slapped Darcy on the back, and strode back to the serenely smiling woman.

Darcy's headache was getting worse.

Chapter 2

A Bennet Sister Turns Down Darcy, and Darcy Doesn't Mind

After the assembly ball, Charles insisted that he, his sisters, and Darcy attend dinner parties around Meryton. So long as Charles could promise cards, Mr. Hurst tagged along; otherwise, he stayed at Netherfield. Darcy wished he could also stay behind, but Charles would be hurt, not to mention Darcy didn't accept Mr. Hurst as an example of proper behavior.

The Bennet family attended most of the gatherings. Charles tended to gravitate to the side of the oldest daughter – Darcy remembered her vaguely from the assembly ball – where he talked enough for both of them.

The next oldest daughter was Elizabeth Bennet. On more than one occasion, Darcy observed that she had autumn-colored eyes. She was a trifle short, her smile a trifle crooked, and she was far from elegant. She wasn't shrill, though, and was easy to listen to. She had a whimsical way of delivering little quips, then waiting with contained amusement for others' reactions. Darcy began to place himself near her at events. He also listened to her sing. She wasn't as polished or as adept as his sister Georgiana, but the songs were well-rendered.

All in all, Elizabeth Bennet was a pleasing and intelligent young woman.

Sir William Lucas – the owner of Lucas Lodge, a moderately well-

managed property—held a party. Charles insisted they all go. Darcy objected less than usual. Miss Elizabeth was sure to be present, and Darcy could watch her talk with others.

Alas, the event deteriorated into a dance. Why in the world did people prefer to hop around rather than converse on interesting subjects? Darcy sighed and looked for Mr. Long, hoping they could continue their conversation about tax law from the last social undertaking.

Instead, he found himself next to the prattling Sir William: “There is nothing like dancing. I consider it one of the first refinements of polished society.”

“Every savage can dance,” Darcy pointed out, but Sir William was making pleasantries, not actual conversation, and Darcy subsided. Sir William began to ask Darcy pointless questions about his dance habits. Darcy glowered; if he stopped answering, maybe Sir William would go away.

The questions finally ceased. Darcy had started to move off when he realized Sir William was presenting Miss Elizabeth Bennet to him as a potential dance partner. It was an unanticipated opportunity to converse with her one-on-one. Darcy extended his hand.

Miss Elizabeth refused. Correctly, Darcy allowed: this wasn’t an appropriate venue for a dance. Still, he bowed and repeated Sir William’s proposal. She was after all, preferable—*much* preferable—to another five minutes of questions about where and when Darcy liked to dance.

She raised her brows, and her eyes—dark brown with flecks of gold—met Darcy’s momentarily. She was, he was disconcerted to see, amused: by Sir William, he guessed. Amusement was probably a better tactic with someone like Sir William than monosyllabic responses. Darcy wondered if he should smile back.

But Miss Elizabeth had moved away. He gazed after her, marking the straight line of her back and her dark curls. She turned to pass a remark to Miss Lucas, and he noted the liveliness of her countenance when Miss Lucas made her laugh.

A pleasant-looking young lady was always a positive addition to

a party. One didn't have to be a besotted follower to appreciate a pair of fine eyes.

Miss Bingley approached. She was talking in her rapid, caustic way. Darcy caught the last sentence: "What would I give to hear your strictures on them!"

On Miss Lucas and Miss Elizabeth, Darcy assumed. He had no strictures. He said so, adding his thoughts about Miss Elizabeth's eyes.

Miss Bingley waylaid his stroll around the room, her mouth working into a scornful smile. "What praise! When will you two announce your engagement?"

Typical female reaction. Miss Bingley pounced on erroneous conclusions even more than Charles, but her lack of perception was not Darcy's problem. He shrugged and occupied himself with watching Miss Elizabeth until the evening ended. He noted that she had easy, pleasant manners, that she discussed a range of topics, and that she liked to sit back and observe people closely, though never rudely.

It was a good thing he wasn't the type of man to form instant attachments.

Chapter 3

Elizabeth Bennet Comes to Stay at Netherfield, and Darcy Gets All Flustered

Several days after Sir William's party, Darcy and Charles spent the evening with Colonel Forster, who commanded the militia quartered in Meryton. Colonel Forster was a affable man who spoke more about horses than troop movements. Darcy didn't put this down to a frivolous mind. Colonel Forster was simply the kind of man who thought he should entertain people with innocuous topics.

They returned to Netherfield near ten. Miss Bingley greeted them with the news that the elder Miss Bennet, who had come for dinner, was ill.

Charles peppered his sister with questions. "I hope she feels better," Darcy said and went to bed.

The next morning, he was told that the local apothecary, Mr. Jones, had been sent for. Charles insisted on giving Darcy a detailed account of what he said to Mr. Jones and what Mr. Jones said to Charles and what Miss Bingley said to Mr. Jones and what Mr. Jones said Miss Bennet said to him and so on and so on. Darcy ate his toast and coffee and waited for Mr. Hurst to finish with the newspaper.

Towards the end of breakfast, the door opened and Miss Elizabeth Bennet entered. Darcy scrambled to his feet and looked beyond her, expecting Mr. or Mrs. Bennet. But Miss Elizabeth was alone.

He frowned. He hadn't heard a carriage. "No," Miss Elizabeth was saying to Miss Bingley, "I walked from Longbourn," which was

quite a distance even if she cut across the fields which she obviously had. She looked exceptionally well, Darcy acknowledged, her eyes bright and cheeks glowing. He folded his arms so he wouldn't smile at her like, well, Charles.

Charles was beaming as he shook Miss Elizabeth's hand and told her all about what Mr. Jones said. Miss Bingley took Miss Elizabeth upstairs to her sister, and Darcy went to the library to figure out exactly how many miles were between Longbourn and Netherfield. Miss Elizabeth was a hearty walker.

Darcy spent the rest of the day with the stable master. Charles came out towards mid-afternoon, agreed with every recommendation Darcy and the master made, and returned to the house. Darcy sighed. Maybe the Netherfield experiment would only last five months. He realized Miss Jane Bennet was a concern, but Miss Elizabeth was more than capable of coping with any contingency. Charles needed to accept that being a landowner meant more than the occasional comment on the condition of the roof. It was a life-role.

Darcy's trust in Miss Elizabeth's commonsense was confirmed at dinner. Miss Elizabeth answered all Charles's questions thoroughly and equably, allaying his concerns. Now, maybe, Darcy could convince Charles to focus on his new property's easements. After Miss Elizabeth returned upstairs, Darcy retrieved Netherfield's plans from the library. When he re-entered the dining room, Miss Bingley was babbling about some subject or other. Darcy unfolded the plans, forcing Mr. Hurst to move his dessert plate.

"You observed it, Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley said, and he raised his head. "I'm sure you would not wish to see your sister make such an exhibition."

"Certainly not," Darcy said. Like her brother, Georgiana shrank from exhibitions.

"To walk three miles, or four miles —"

"Three point four," Darcy muttered.

"— shows a conceited independence, a most country-bred indifference to decorum."

“It shows an affection for her sister that is very pleasing,” said Charles.

Miss Bingley leaned towards Darcy over the table, disarranging Netherfield’s plans. “Likely, this adventure has affected your admiration of her fine eyes.”

“Not at all. They were brightened by the exercise,” he said and moved himself and the plans further down the table.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst fell to discussing the Bennet relations. One of the uncles was an attorney; one was in trade. Charles contended that this did not affect the Bennet sisters’ agreeableness, a comment—however true—that rather missed the point: relations directly influenced a woman’s ability to marry well. Miss Bingley, for example, would marry well because of Charles. Darcy pointed this out, more or less, but no one seemed to understand what he was saying, so he went back to the plans.

Charles, however, wasn’t in the mood for a discussion of easements. He, his sisters, and Mr. Hurst were going to play cards. “Come along, Darcy,” he cajoled. “Don’t punish us with your absence,” and Darcy reluctantly agreed, replacing the plans in the library on his way to the drawing room.

They were playing when Miss Elizabeth came downstairs. This meant her sister was feeling better, a good sign, and Darcy nodded to her. She didn’t see him, though, as she was selecting a book from the shelves. Netherfield had come with a library which Charles had supplemented with his father’s minor collection. The end result was a haphazard assortment, including Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, and some agricultural tomes. Charles was unlikely to fill the library’s gaps.

“I would buy the Pemberley library in an instant,” Charles said when the topic was broached. Likely he would, assiduously showing off the collection even if he never took a book off the shelves. Charles preferred people and conversation to reading and quiet contemplation.

Darcy smiled to himself. Looking up, he found Miss Elizabeth beside him. She looked quite nice in some blue-greeny gown. She’d

closed her book on one finger and was half-smiling at Charles's exuberance.

Miss Bingley leaned between Darcy and Miss Elizabeth to say chattily to Darcy, "Is Miss Darcy much grown since the spring? Is she as tall as I am?"

Darcy's sister Georgiana was five feet four. "She is now about Miss Elizabeth Bennet's height," Darcy said, "or rather taller."

Miss Bingley wanted to discuss Georgiana's accomplishments and then female accomplishments in general, a non-self-serving topic to Darcy's mind. Miss Bingley was cordial but hardly accomplished.

"It amazes me how women can paint and embroider and make decorations," Charles said.

Darcy thought the ability to create nick-knacks to be foisted on loving relatives rather useless. Being accomplished didn't mean producing crafts like a provincial at a village fête; it meant being graceful and talented and having the ability to converse on a range of subjects. Off the top of his head, he could think of six accomplished women: Georgiana, obviously. His own mother, now deceased. Mrs. Reynolds, his housekeeper. Mrs. Annesley, Georgiana's companion (he would never have hired her if she weren't). His aunt by marriage, Lady Beatrice Fitzwilliam. And Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

He said so, more or less, but he must not have mentioned the part about Miss Elizabeth because she laughed: "I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any."

She had a point, but Darcy had restricted his claim to six because he didn't know many more women than six – not well, at least.

As soon as Miss Elizabeth went upstairs again to see her sister, Miss Bingley started rambling about her again. Darcy was getting rather tired of Miss Bingley discussing Miss Elizabeth when Miss Elizabeth wasn't in the room since Miss Bingley said the same things over and over. Now she was saying that Miss Elizabeth was the kind of woman who put down her own sex in order to make herself look better, which missed the point of Miss Elizabeth's remark.

Anyway, as far as Darcy could tell, Miss Bingley did that sort of

thing more often than Miss Elizabeth. And he said so, which seemed to shut everybody up. Thank goodness.

The next morning, Mrs. Bennet and her two youngest daughters invaded Netherfield to check on the eldest daughter's health. The youngest daughters were silly while Mrs. Bennet was irritating, being shrill and garrulous. Darcy wished he could be like Mr. Hurst and wander out of the room. But one didn't. One was taught to stand and be courteous while this woman went on and on and on about her daughter's illness and her daughter's sweet temper and what Mr. Jones thought. They had heard more than enough about Mr. Jones from Charles.

Mrs. Bennet hoped that Charles would occupy Netherfield for a long time. That was unlikely. Charles was a good and loyal friend, but he treated plans like hurdles he might just possibly go around rather than over or through. Charles considered spontaneity a sign of originality.

Darcy couldn't agree. He liked Charles—he knew how loyal Charles was—but in Darcy's view, spontaneity was just a way to get what one wanted without considering others.

Miss Elizabeth was kinder in her pronouncements than Darcy. Looking up at Bingley, she said affably, "You are an uncomplicated man."

He preened although Mr. Darcy thought Miss Elizabeth preferred complications.

"You're a student of character," Bingley said to her.

"It is one of my favorite activities."

She wouldn't get many chances in the country, and Darcy said so. She smiled at him and pointed out that people change over time: one could study a single person over many years rather than many people all at once.

Did character alter so significantly over the years? Did change take a month, a year, a lifetime? The idea interested Darcy, and he might have responded, but Mrs. Bennet interrupted with some declaration about the country being better than London.

Darcy wished people would stay on topic.

The conversation moved on to a discussion of poetry. Miss Elizabeth claimed that her sister wearied of a suitor who sent her poetry. Darcy smiled to himself but offered Shakespeare's opinion: "Poetry, like music, is the food of love."

"Of a fine, stout, healthy love," Elizabeth agreed. "Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it is only a slight inclination, one good sonnet will starve it entirely away."

Darcy had to think about that, and the conversation moved on before he could respond.

He was still thinking about literature and the nourishment of sensibility when he wrote a letter to Georgiana that evening in Netherfield's drawing room. Miss Bingley was talking to him, and he made monosyllabic replies, but he mostly concentrated on asking Georgiana what she thought about poetry and requesting an update on her companion, Mrs. Annesley. He trusted Mrs. Annesley, but he had trusted companions of Georgiana before and been disappointed.

He reread the letter and crossed out a few words, then set the letter aside to review later. At the card table, Charles was bragging to his sisters and Miss Elizabeth that *he* could write quickly without proofing.

Darcy frowned. There was nothing commendable about acting or reacting quickly any more than there was anything commendable about suddenly changing one's plans—unless there was a good reason, of course. Darcy said so.

Charles laughed. Charles always thought it was funny when Darcy wanted people to plan ahead and provide specific information.

But Darcy couldn't see how anyone could decide anything without clear facts. What was the point of talking in generalities? Darcy would never change his plans at the last moment unless someone was ill, like Georgiana, for instance, or unless his steward needed his attention at Pemberley. But he wouldn't know the reasons until they occurred. How could he say ahead of time—now—what he would do at some later date? How could anyone, including Charles?

Charles was a far more reliable person than he sounded sometimes. Darcy and Charles had met at a house party given by Darcy's Aunt Fitzwilliam (Charles had been to school with her youngest son). Darcy's Fitzwilliam cousins were not fond of their de Bourgh cousin, Anne, who was also attending, and they urged Charles to string her along or, should that prospect prove too disturbing, deliberately overlook her.

Charles impressed Darcy when he refused. He treated Anne no differently than he did any of the young ladies at the party, dancing with each one on the night of the ball. If he confessed later to Darcy, "Your cousin Anne is rather cheerless," he never embarrassed her before the company.

It was not Charles's way to earn status at others' expense. Right now, for example, he was saying, "Oh, Darcy must be right since he is so much taller than I am."

Darcy shook his head although he understood Charles's objective. Darcy preferred to finish arguments once they started, but Charles was the ultimate pacifier.

Miss Elizabeth apparently also recognized Charles's objective, for she said, "Mr. Darcy had better finish his letter," her lips deepening into a private smile.

Darcy did so, but Miss Elizabeth's smile bothered him. She was a young woman of decided opinions who was quickly diverted by what she considered eccentricities. Darcy couldn't guess what had diverted her this time. The pointlessness of the argument? (Darcy would have to concur.) Bingley's airy intercession? Darcy's displeasure with spontaneity?

He watched her cross to the pianoforte. She was still smiling slightly as she looked through the music books stacked on the lid. She threw glances at him now and again, and he noted that she looked quite appealing in the reddish-brown thing she was wearing.

She'd been wearing a reddish-brown thing at the Lucases' and for the first time, Darcy wondered if her amusement there had been directed at him, not Sir William.

He got up, crossed the room, and asked if she would dance a reel.

She didn't respond. He really didn't understand this woman. He repeated his request.

She turned to face him. No, she wouldn't dance a reel. "You are testing my good taste. Therefore, I have decided not to dance at all; despise me if you dare." And she grinned up at him.

Darcy's heart turned over.

He was *not* interested in her, he told himself in his room that night. She was intelligent and lovely and quick-witted. She was good company. That was all.

Darcy knew the foolishness of sudden attachments, the messiness. He'd seen friends flounder in marriages built on sudden, animal attraction. In comparison, his parents' arranged marriage had produced a solid base for a peaceful, satisfying life.

Darcy wasn't partial to the idea of arranged marriages, but they proved the superfluity of romance.

He was confident in his self-knowledge and self-control when he went downstairs the next morning – until Miss Bingley began teasing him about Miss Elizabeth again. Darcy started to worry. Did she think he was pursuing Miss Elizabeth? Did everybody think that? Did Miss Elizabeth? Why would she? He hardly spoke to her.

You asked her to dance, he reminded himself and winced. That was fairly forward behavior. Had anyone noticed? He didn't even like to dance.

He worried on his dilemma, missing the rest of Miss Bingley's conversation.

"Are you looking forward to cards this evening?" she said as they parted.

"No," he said and went to drag Charles out to meet possible land stewards for Netherfield. Charles didn't yet have a full complement of servants, but a land steward was necessary, and a number had applied in the last week. Darcy wanted to discuss the various applicants' credentials with Charles after dinner.

Unfortunately, Miss Jane Bennet decided to demonstrate her improved health by descending to the drawing room after dinner.

Charles bounced over to her and started to chat. About Mr. Jones in all likelihood, judging by Miss Bennet's disinterested manner. Darcy was glad she was feeling better, but he wished she could time her appearances better.

Darcy picked up *A General View of Agriculture*, vol. II, and began reading while the others chattered. He heard mention of balls and turned a page, sighing. He heard Miss Elizabeth's name and looked up.

Miss Bingley wanted Miss Elizabeth to take a turn about the room. Darcy smiled to himself. This was an old ploy. The ladies wanted to show off their figures or gossip together although the latter seemed unlikely; for all her pert comments, Miss Elizabeth wasn't much of a gossip.

"Will you join us, Mr. Darcy?" Miss Bingley said archly.

"I can admire you better from my seat," Darcy said honestly, though on consideration the comment seemed flirtatious, even to him, and Miss Bingley laughed, looking pleased.

After which, she claimed to be offended. "How shall we punish him?" she said to Miss Elizabeth.

Darcy tensed. Miss Elizabeth had a sharp tongue and a knowing eye, and Darcy amused her for some reason. If she wished, she could make him look foolish.

"Tease him—laugh at him," Miss Elizabeth said.

Darcy tried not to glower. Teasing could easily become taunting which was just a form of bullying to Darcy's mind, an attempt to promote one's own image at the expense of others. Darcy knew people—knew a man—who used teasing to tear down loyalty and honor and other virtues that Darcy frankly admired.

"I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good," Miss Elizabeth said. "I prefer to laugh at follies and nonsense. Perhaps Mr. Darcy is without folly?"

Darcy considered he was intelligent, consistent, and dependable, with a good head for facts and a strong sense of purpose. He was not lazy, vain, or stupid, which were the sorts of faults that deserved criticism. He had pride, but that was understandable given his posi-

tion and duties in life. He tried to make this clear.

Miss Elizabeth cocked her head. The amusement was there but something else as well; she was studying him, and Darcy felt a stab of panic. He didn't know if he liked being studied, and he didn't want Miss Elizabeth to form the wrong conclusions.

She began to turn away and Darcy heard himself say, "I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, very profound." He wasn't flexible, like Charles. He didn't feel sympathy for people of low character nor did he easily excuse such behavior. "My good opinion once lost is lost forever."

She didn't like that. "You have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me."

That didn't make Darcy feel better. He got the impression that Miss Elizabeth didn't like people who were safe from her. "Every disposition has a tendency to some particular evil," he pointed out rather desperately.

"And your defect is a propensity to hate everybody."

Darcy almost laughed. She was so smug in her playful way, but he had been watching and listening to her since he arrived in Hertfordshire. He knew the way she surreptitiously watched others while making her humorous asides; the way she subtly avoided Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, so they couldn't cut her as often as they might; the way she expected everyone to possess her same excellent values.

He said, "Yours is to feign misunderstanding."

Of me, he meant.

She was surprised but not, Darcy was relieved to see, offended. She opened her mouth, but then Miss Bingley interrupted their conversation with a request for music. Miss Elizabeth turned away. Darcy found he was leaning forward in his chair and carefully sat back.

He was *not* interested in her. He was not foolish like his friend Bertram from college who went and married his landlady's daughter. Darcy had listened to a thousand panegyrics regarding the daughter's affectionate nature and lovely face and kind heart. The couple lived separately now, and Darcy believed the affectionate, lovely,

kind daughter was being kept by another man.

Forming instantaneous affections was imprudent. It resulted in nothing but misery. The woman Darcy married would have experience with large estates. She would come from a reputable family. She would—

He wasn't sure. There was no image in his mind of this exceptional wife, just a blank shadow.

Miss Elizabeth's face sprang to mind. He shook his head crossly. He had been too obvious, too forward in his appreciation of Miss Elizabeth. He must not speak to her again while she remained at Netherfield with her sister.

And he didn't.

Chapter 4

Miss Elizabeth and Darcy Go to the Netherfield Ball, and Neither Has a Good Time

After the Bennet sisters returned home, Charles insisted that there be a ball at Netherfield. He had promised the youngest Bennet girls when they came to see their elder sister. Darcy shook his head at the excuse but couldn't censure the result. Charles was now an important personage in the district—even if he didn't stay long.

Darcy saw Miss Elizabeth before the ball. He was riding through Meryton with Charles, and there was George Wickham standing in the road, looking casual and debonair as he spoke to the Bennet girls.

Darcy gripped the reins, nodded to Miss Elizabeth, and kept going, his brain fogged with shock and contempt.

Darcy had once taken George Wickham's bonhomie at face value. He'd grown up with Wickham since Wickham's father had been Pemberley's steward for many years. Darcy had *liked* Wickham.

Until they got older, and Darcy realized—piecemeal at first—how insubstantial the man was, how amoral and self-serving.

The man was a summer-time mosquito, persistently appearing when Darcy finally thought him gone. *Damn him.* Darcy leaned his elbows on the saddle's trammel and breathed deeply.

Bingley had stopped when he saw the Bennet sisters. Now, he caught up to Darcy. "Isn't that fellow the man your father left a living to?"

"He turned it down," Darcy said shortly. He wanted to ask if Miss

Elizabeth had seemed impressed by Wickham but chided himself. She was far too level-headed. He would warn her discreetly at the ball about Wickham's character. That would be enough.

"You gave him the cut direct," Bingley said.

"He isn't worth knowing."

Bingley accepted Darcy's declaration without question. "I could make sure he doesn't attend the ball."

"Don't bother." Wickham wouldn't show. Darcy knew him that well. The man was sly, not brave – sneaky, not direct.

Darcy steeled himself for the ball nonetheless. Charles was right to hold one. If only Darcy didn't have to attend. He put on balls at Pemberley, of course, but there he had things to do, such as consult with Mr. Talbot, his butler, on where to park any extra carriages. Moreover, he always knew his guests; should things get too noisy, he could retire to his study.

The Netherfield study wasn't available; Charles had gone and opened it up for the ball. Darcy stood in the front hall and tried not to look at his watch. He greeted Colonel Forster and several of the officers; Wickham naturally wasn't among them.

Darcy knew of the Bennets' arrival when he heard Mrs. Bennet's voice. He found himself searching for Miss Elizabeth amongst the family group. He wasn't interested in her, of course. But he might as well see how she looked, what she was wearing.

She was wearing a pale blue dress. Her dark hair formed ringlets about her face which was open and delighted although her eyes searched the company uncertainly. Perhaps she was looking for Darcy, but he wasn't interested in her, so he retreated to the wall.

Not being interested didn't mean he shouldn't ask her to dance. This was Charles's first ball at Netherfield; Darcy should help make it a success. He approached Miss Elizabeth during the fourth dance and solicited her hand for the next. She agreed, and Darcy walked off smiling to himself. Apparently, Miss Elizabeth just needed the right venue to agree to dance.

He collected her for the fifth dance. She seemed unusually serious, but part way through the opening steps she smiled and said, "Mr.

Bingley has had good weather for his ball.”

Darcy nodded.

A few steps later, “It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy,” she told him.

Darcy boggled. Formulating an interesting, conversational topic usually took him longer than one dance.

“I will say whatever you want me to say,” he improvised and then felt foolish.

Still, his remark amused her, which was rather a relief. She said, “Rules for conversation while dancing should dictate couples speak as little as possible.”

“I’ve never been gifted at small talk,” Darcy replied, “but you needn’t copy my example.”

Miss Elizabeth raised her brows. “Oh, we are very alike. We don’t speak unless we can impress others.”

She did like to collect attention with her sallies. Darcy found it rather endearing. As for him—he never aimed to impress others with his words. He didn’t think he could if he tried. Darcy preferred to save his insights for one-on-one exchanges.

Perhaps, Miss Elizabeth believed Darcy gave his insights special weight. He worried over her insinuation through the next few steps. Did he belabor points? Make sonorous pronouncements? He didn’t think he was a pompous man—

Miss Elizabeth’s next remark stopped his train of thought. She said, “When you met us the other day, we had just been forming a new acquaintance.”

Darcy tensed. Instead of him warning her about Wickham, *she* was challenging him. He said slowly, “Mr. Wickham’s happy manners ensure his making friends; whether he can retain them is less certain.”

But Mr. Wickham had lost *his* friendship, Miss Elizabeth pointed out, and Darcy felt his temper rising. He should have guessed that Wickham was already spreading tales about his relationship to the Darcy family. Why did Darcy never see it coming? And Wickham was telling his tales to Miss Elizabeth, who was bright and intelligent

and kind and ready to believe anything that was said to her in a reasonable manner.

Wickham could sound reasonable. Darcy knew exactly how Wickham could speak with calm self-assuredness while looking straight at a listener, how Wickham could lie without blinking or blushing or showing any kind of awkwardness.

“The orchestra sounds skilled,” he said to change the subject.

Her mouth went crooked which meant she was amused. Darcy was too upset to be charmed. He needed to say something about Wickham; he needed to warn her. They were standing across from each other, waiting to join hands. He would take her hands and say – and say –

Sir William interrupted Darcy’s deliberations. As expected, Sir William had stopped to comment on the dancing which he extolled in excessively flowery language.

“There will be a great deal of dancing at a certain desirable event,” he added coyly, glancing towards Miss Bennet and Charles. On and on Sir William went, talking about random nothings. Finally, he bowed and strolled away, leaving Darcy to Miss Elizabeth, and Darcy realized that he couldn’t say anything about Wickham—to Miss Elizabeth or anyone else. They would question him. They would want to know his reasons. Miss Elizabeth especially would never accept a negative judgment without explanation.

It was up to Darcy to change the topic. Weather—weather was always safe.

Before he could discuss clouds and humidity, Miss Elizabeth blurted, “You are very cautious, I suppose, as to your resentment being created?”

“I am.”

“And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?”

“I hope not. Why do you ask?”

She was trying to make out his character, she told him, and there was no amusement in her voice. “I hear such different accounts of you as to puzzle me exceedingly.”

Wickham again. Darcy could imagine—he knew—the sorts of

things Wickham would say about him. She shouldn't take the word of one man about Darcy. He tried to say this, but she cut him off lightly: "If I do not try to understand you now, I may never have another opportunity."

She spoke as if they were barely acquainted. Her eyes sought him out in company. Her face brightened when she spoke to him. She dropped her little quips for his enjoyment, even when others weren't present. Darcy felt like he'd known Miss Elizabeth for years. He'd been forward with her. He'd told her things about himself. They were more than barely acquainted.

The dance ended; they separated. Darcy strode into the dining room, wishing he could go riding or help the gardener move rocks or shoot something. He leaned his head against the doorframe and tried to block out all the noise and chatter. This was the reason he disliked communal events—there were too many opportunities for Darcy to misread people's intentions, to overlook opportunities.

And get cornered by remorseless personalities. A prim-looking man with flaccid hands had approached Darcy in the doorway and was introducing himself. Darcy had no idea why. Darcy wasn't the head of the ball; this wasn't his house.

The man's name was Mr. Collins. He was a clergyman. He had the honor of holding a position at Hunsford under the patronage of Lady Catherine, Darcy's aunt on his mother's side. He humbly begged Darcy's pardon, but he could assure Darcy that Lady Catherine was in good health—on and on and on the man went. Monosyllabic responses didn't stop him. Darcy waited for a pause and moved away.

He remembered, as he sat at one of the supper tables near the Bennets, that his aunt had written him about finding a clergyman for the rectory in her parish. Darcy had never responded; apparently, she had found someone on her own.

That didn't explain what Lady Catherine's clergyman was doing in Hertfordshire. He saw Mr. Collins speak to Mr. Bennet and remembered some offhand remark by Miss Bingley about a visiting Bennet cousin. If so, why hadn't Mr. Bennet introduced him to Darcy? Surely, the man could take time from his lighthearted lassi-

tude to look after his family.

Not that Darcy encouraged introductions to unending chatterers. At that moment, Mrs. Bennet's unending chatter was grating on Darcy's temper. He should move, but he'd sat near the Bennets hoping to catch Miss Elizabeth's eye. Unfortunately, Miss Elizabeth was occupied in trying to shush her mother.

Good luck, Darcy thought. The mother was nattering about her daughter's upcoming marriage. Darcy froze until he realized Mrs. Bennet was talking about her oldest daughter, Jane, not Miss Elizabeth. He hadn't known the elder sister was engaged; surely, Miss Bingley or Charles would have told him.

With a dragging sense of shock, Darcy realized that Mrs. Bennet was talking about her oldest daughter *and Charles*. Charles? Charles wasn't interested in Miss Jane Bennet; he was friendly towards her, yes, but that was Charles's way.

Except—Sir William had mentioned “a desirable event,” and the lady to whom Mrs. Bennet was speaking seemed to agree that the engagement existed.

Ridiculous. Charles wasn't interested in Miss Bennet or Miss Bennet in Charles. She'd hardly shown Charles the same interest that, well, Miss Elizabeth had shown Darcy.

Darcy's stomach hurt. If these people had decided Miss Bennet was going to marry Charles, what had they decided about Darcy and Miss Elizabeth? Was he going to have to set matters right? Talk to people about his feelings? Since Darcy had no idea what his feelings were regarding Miss Elizabeth, he couldn't think of anything more awful.

No. It was nonsense. Nobody had behaved improperly—except for Mrs. Bennet. Charles was not interested in any Bennet daughter; Darcy and Miss Elizabeth had not crossed the lines of decency. These assumptions were the ravings of a mad woman—not lunatic, maybe, but extremely silly.

Except—her friends and neighbors believed her.

Darcy tried to imagine a scenario where Charles offered for Miss Jane Bennet, and sheer social expectancy forced Darcy to offer for

Miss Elizabeth. A brief moment of pleasurable anticipation was swamped by a numbing sensation of ambush and entrapment.

Charles and his sisters were going to have to leave Netherfield. Soon.

The ball's music hour began. Young ladies exchanged places at the pianoforte. Miss Mary Bennet massacred "The Lass With the Delicate Air" in her weak, reedy voice, but all Darcy could think about was how to convince Charles to leave the area. Charles would tire of Netherfield eventually but not in the next week or so, and engagements could be formed in less time.

Mr. Bennet's voice interrupted Darcy's thoughts: "You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit," and Darcy saw Miss Mary redden and scurry back to her seat. He frowned. No father should humiliate his own child. What kind of parents were these Bennets—publicly exposing their children right and left?

Avoiding Miss Elizabeth, Darcy left the supper room. Charles was going to have to leave—and not come back—before the Bennet parents exposed their oldest daughter, both their oldest daughters, to neighborly ridicule.

Charles was a good friend; his excessive amiability should not force him into marriage with an indifferent lady. Such things did happen. The very last thing Charles needed was either a poorly conceived marriage or a breach of promise suit.

Charles was already planning to visit London to speak to his solicitors about his father's stocks. The morning after the Netherfield ball, Darcy rode with Charles to the Meryton junction. He watched Charles ride on, Charles waving his hand in a casual salute, shouting, "Look for me in a few days!"

Darcy wished suddenly, desperately, that he could talk to Miss Elizabeth about Charles. She knew what Charles was like. She knew her sister wasn't interested in Charles. She could solve this problem. She was good at problems. Darcy was not good at problems—not these sorts of problems, anyway. He could figure out tax problems

and weather problems and dirt problems and horse problems. But everything else he left up to people like Mrs. Reynolds.

Like when the second housemaid got pregnant by Jarrad, one of the stable hands: Mrs. Reynolds talked to the girl and to Jarrad, Darcy approved the marriage, and the couple moved into one of Pemberley's cottages. They were hard workers; Darcy liked them; he was glad not to lose them. He was *very* glad Mrs. Reynolds had done all the talking. Darcy surrounded himself with people who did all the talking. Right now, the only talkers he had on hand were Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, but presumably they loved their brother and wanted the best for him. He rode back to Netherfield and asked their advice about Charles and Miss Bennet.

They were as horrified as Darcy at the idea of an engagement—which was a relief. He hadn't liked to think he was overreacting. But no, the sisters were stunned. What an inappropriate connection! Those parents! Miss Bingley started to say something disparaging about Miss Elizabeth, caught Darcy's eye, and said instead, "The three younger sisters have no discipline," which was true. Miss Mary had no musical discipline and the two youngest flirted with officers. Darcy had noticed the flirtations, although not as much, it appeared, as Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. No matter. They all agreed the connection should be severed.

"Does Miss Bennet care for Charles at all?" Darcy asked.

"Of course not," they assured him. She was their friend, not their brother's.

They would all leave Netherfield immediately. They would go up to London and inform Bingley of the change in plans. Darcy went to his room to pack. Perhaps he should send a note to Miss Elizabeth, but he shook his head at the thought. They were not on such intimate terms.

Darcy, Miss Bingley, and the Hursts arrived in London, loaded down with trunks. Darcy would stay with the Bingleys for the next few weeks. He would then pick up Georgiana from school, preparatory to spending the winter at Pemberley.

Charles looked blank as Darcy explained his itinerary. "I thought you would return with me to Netherfield," he said finally.

"I think you should stay in London."

"Why?"

Darcy was alone with Charles. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were upstairs unpacking. He said, "The families there seem to think you and Miss Bennet are engaged." He tried to laugh, then wished he hadn't. Charles wasn't laughing. He got up and wandered to the sitting room windows.

"Is that so bad?"

"It isn't a suitable match, Charles."

"She is—"

"She and Miss Elizabeth are genteel young ladies. But the family, Charles, is not what you should aim for."

"I'm from trade." Charles said to the curtains. His back was rigid.

"I'm not referring to the Bennets' relations. Though your father did hope better for you."

"Like owning an estate." Charles was as caustic as Charles could be. Darcy winced and was silent. "I'm not good at that sort of thing," Charles said. "You know that."

Darcy took a deep breath. "What do you want for your children, Charles? The Bennet father does not tend to his family or to his estate. You would not be so lax."

"She isn't like that."

"Perhaps not. But you inherit the family when you marry and the family's legacies. Charles, you can do better."

He shook his head.

Darcy said, "If you return, you will encourage the rumors and hurt her chances for a suitable match."

"She expects me to return."

Darcy almost smiled. "I don't think her attachment to you is that strong," he said as gently as he could.

Charles hunched his shoulders.

Darcy said, "Has she teased you? Flirted with you? Commented on your character?"

Charles said stiffly, "We discuss many things."

"Personal things?" Darcy had never heard Miss Bennett ask Charles about *his* faults.

Charles came back from the curtain and collapsed into a chair. "No," he said.

"She has no expectations, Charles. Only her mother and neighbors do. You haven't hurt her."

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst came down then and reiterated everything Darcy had said with many more examples and expostulations until Darcy rather wished they would leave Charles alone.

But at least the matter was settled. In January, shortly before Darcy left for Pemberley, Miss Bennet visited the Bingley sisters at the London house. She was staying with her uncle and aunt in Cheap-side, Miss Bingley told Darcy. "But of course, Charles needn't know."

No. It was better that Charles not know. The issue was over. The Bennet sisters were in the past. They could all move on with their lives.

Darcy believed in "moving on." That's what one did when confronted by loss or betrayal or miscalculation. One faced the issue, fixed the problem, and looked to the future. He had no patience with people who wallowed in the past, claiming unbreakable memories and ties to events disposed of long ago.

It wasn't that Darcy didn't feel deeply. He sometimes thought he and Georgiana walked a difficult path of excessive commitment: important things mattered so much to them. But even important things faded in time, and inappropriate attachments could be conquered.

One just had to have the right attitude. Darcy needed to think constructively. He had met an agreeable young lady; he would meet an agreeable lady again someday. There was no such thing as a single chance. And now, he knew what to look for: Miss Elizabeth was a useful comparison. Darcy didn't need to bring her to mind any more than that.

Chapter 5

Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Meet Again, and Darcy Makes a Huge Miscalculation

Darcy hardly thought of Miss Elizabeth over the next four months. In London and at his Aunt Fitzwilliam's (a brief weekend visit that coincided with a ball), he found himself comparing the young ladies present to Miss Elizabeth. They always fell short. That was to be expected. Miss Elizabeth set a high standard of kindness, sisterly devotion, and genial, unaffected good manners.

He certainly didn't dwell on her *personality*. Perhaps, he remembered one of her merry quips now and again. Perhaps, he retained a clear image of her smoke-colored eyes. Perhaps, he even mentioned her to Georgiana once or twice—without suggesting any kind of attachment, of course. But he was sure when he arrived at Lady Catherine's estate of Rosings with his cousin, Colonel John Fitzwilliam, that, given a few more months, he would mostly have forgotten Miss Elizabeth.

Lady Catherine greeted Darcy and Fitzwilliam in her usual way: condescension mixed with pleasure.

"The Collinses have the oddest visitor," she said at the dinner table. "A friend of Mrs. Collins from before she was married. I can't speak to modern manners, but the friend seems a very forward sort of person. Of course, she claims to know you, Darcy, but I can't believe—"

Mr. Collins had married Charlotte Lucas, a friend of Miss Eliza-

beth's (in Darcy's world, reports of marriages and death seemed to travel faster than special messenger). Darcy set down his knife and fork and concentrated on his aunt.

"—and very self-assured which I'm sure is not entirely proper for a young lady, even a young lady of twenty—"

Would she never state the visitor's name?

"—and all five sisters already out."

It *was* Miss Elizabeth. Darcy's stomach churned.

"Five sisters," John was saying in his mild humorous way. "Good heavens."

"Astonishing, isn't it," Lady Catherine said without hearing John's irony; she never did. Had Miss Elizabeth tried to laugh at her? If so, Darcy couldn't imagine the encounter had been a success.

"Do you remember this Miss Elizabeth?" John asked on their way to the drawing room to play cards.

"Yes," Darcy said.

"A bit more entertaining than our aunt?"

"Yes."

John was all for meeting the two single ladies—Mrs. Collins's unmarried sister was also visiting. The next morning, they headed to Hunsford, encountering Mr. Collins in the lane. Mr. Collins bowed, reminded Darcy of their last meeting, and apologized for forcing Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam to walk *all* the way from Rosings without his companionship. Darcy decided that Miss Elizabeth's current living situation provided her with a surfeit of follies and nonsense.

He entered the parsonage parlor after John. "Hello," John said, striding up to Miss Elizabeth. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Darcy turned to Mrs. Collins. John could bypass such basic courtesies; no one ever noticed. Darcy remembered Mrs. Collins vaguely from Hertfordshire and was surprised all over again that Mr. Collins had snagged such a calm, self-possessed young woman. Presumably, the benefits of having her own household outweighed the drawbacks of her odd, ineffectual husband.

Darcy sat beside the imperturbable Mrs. Collins and watched John discuss the Kentish countryside with Miss Elizabeth. She responded, glancing at Darcy. Their last conversation had been at the Netherfield ball, where they had discussed Wickham. He could hardly raise that subject now. He could ask her about poetry, but no, that was too complex a subject for this brief meeting. John had already asked her about the countryside. Darcy could ask her about her travels to Hunsford, but no, John had covered that topic too.

“How is your family?” Darcy said.

Miss Elizabeth cut short a light remark to John and turned to him. “They are well,” she said. “My eldest sister has been in London for several months. You didn’t see her there?”

He’d known Miss Bennet was in London. He hadn’t seen her. The correct response was “No,” except the question implied knowledge of Miss Bennet’s whereabouts, not just an actual meeting. But if he said, “Yes,” Miss Elizabeth would want to know how her sister appeared, and he couldn’t answer that, so: “No,” he said.

She cocked her head slightly, and Darcy felt a sudden qualm, but he could hardly explain his thought process at that immediate moment.

“Very nice gel,” John said as they left the parsonage. Darcy nodded. She was indeed.

He spent the next few days closeted with the house steward going over Rosings’s household books. Lady Catherine had a tendency to underpay her land servants and lower house staff while vastly overpaying her upper house staff. The house steward made some rather pleading suggestions, and Darcy agreed to effect certain changes. He would simply tell Lady Catherine that the changes had been made. She would respond with long rants on her servants’ habits—which rants Darcy never heeded—but she wouldn’t counteract Darcy’s decisions. Until Darcy left, anyway. He told the steward this, and the steward agreed, looking depressed. But Rosings wasn’t really Darcy’s responsibility.

Every evening, John and he took a walk to view the grounds. Ros-

ings was a lovely estate with long views of mustard-tipped meadows and beyond them, the Kent Downs. During these walks, Darcy learned that John was spending almost every day at the parsonage. John would report on his visits: "Miss Elizabeth is very clever," he would say, or "Miss Elizabeth agrees that *Evelina* lacks sparkle," or "Miss Elizabeth is quite the walker."

She was clever. She had interesting opinions about literature and people and other such things. And she was quite a walker. Darcy could tell John as much—but *no*, he decided. John might not understand about Miss Elizabeth walking over three miles to see her sister; he might misinterpret Darcy remembering the incident. Darcy thought of Miss Elizabeth's dark eyes and glowing cheeks and friendly smile and kept his thoughts to himself.

He saw her at church where the congregation sat through a rambling sermon on the importance of respecting one's betters. He thought about speaking to her; he could ask her about—about—

She was already gone, her arm linked with Mrs. Collins's.

"I've invited the Collinses and their guests for a small party," Lady Catherine announced that evening, and Darcy felt a wash of relief. He would have a whole evening to come up with a conversational gambit.

John got Miss Elizabeth's attention first, of course. Darcy was stuck listening to Lady Catherine's critique of Mr. Collins's sermon while Mr. Collins bobbed his head in abashed agreement. Darcy watched John question Miss Elizabeth about Kent and Hertfordshire and poetry: "What do you think of Scott's latest?" Miss Elizabeth answered his questions with her usual ease, laughing occasionally.

John could be droll.

"—of course, Fordyce is always an excellent resource," Lady Catherine was saying.

John was the fourth of five sons with little in the way of inheritance though he had good prospects, was a good dependable man. Miss Elizabeth wouldn't balk at being a soldier's wife. She had the strength and self-reliance to survive her husband's absence to war.

Darcy frowned at his train of thought. She was just being friendly. There was nothing personal about her conversation with John. Darcy was making untenable assumptions. He was getting as bad as Mrs. Bennett.

Lady Catherine ended her critique of Mr. Collins's sermon and shouted to John: "What are you telling, Miss Bennett? Let me hear what it is."

John turned, brows raised. His eyes met Darcy's, and he winked. Darcy felt a sudden chill. Surely, John and Miss Elizabeth's conversation had been general, impersonal. One couldn't have intimate conversations in drawing rooms –

One could actually, as Darcy knew.

"We were talking of music, ma'am."

Darcy let out a breath.

Lady Catherine prized music. "If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great master. How is Georgiana coming along with her studies?" she asked Darcy.

"She is quite accomplished," Darcy said. After Christmas, Georgiana had returned to school where she would stay until Darcy collected her for the summer months. A year ago, Darcy had begun the process of setting Georgiana up in her own London establishment. Unfortunate events had changed those plans, and Georgiana agreed to return to school where she was happy.

Darcy had recently attended a recital at the school, and he'd been impressed by his sister's progress with both singing and playing. He said so.

"Pray tell her from me," said Lady Catherine, "that she cannot expect to excel if she does not practice a great deal."

Trying not to snap, Darcy explained that Georgiana practiced constantly. Snapping never made any difference with Lady Catherine. She hardly heard him now.

"I have told Miss Bennett several times that she will never play really well unless she practices more."

Darcy glanced at Miss Elizabeth, expecting an acerbic rejoinder, but Miss Elizabeth folded her hands in her lap and looked demure.

Darcy tensed.

Lady Catherine tapped his arm to regain his attention. "I have often told her she is welcome to come to Rosings every day and play on the pianoforte—"

That was a kind offer, and Darcy looked again at Miss Elizabeth, hoping to see a sign of appreciation.

"—in Mrs. Jenkinson's room. She would be in nobody's way, you know, in that part of the house."

Darcy winced and stared at the carpet. He was beginning to wish he'd stayed away from Rosings this year.

"You'll perform for us surely!" John said to Miss Elizabeth.

Darcy wished he'd said it first, but it wasn't the sort of thing he could say without sounding unnatural. Despite his aunt's rudeness, Miss Elizabeth agreed to play and sing. She chose an adagio, and Darcy sat back, relaxing as she began.

"Of course, Anne prefers pieces by Charles Avison," Lady Catherine said, and Darcy stiffened with annoyance. He hated people interrupting performances, musical, theatrical, or otherwise. He got up abruptly and walked across the room so he could hear better.

Miss Elizabeth spoke directly to him: "You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, coming over so seriously. But I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well." So, she had attended to his comments about Georgiana. Miss Elizabeth continued, "My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me."

Darcy grinned. She knew he would never try to discomfort her; she knew him pretty well, in fact. She was teasing, pretending alarm she didn't feel. He said so, and she laughed, and Darcy felt himself relax. This was the kind of camaraderie they'd had in Hertfordshire.

Miss Elizabeth began telling John that she could expose Darcy's character if she wished. Darcy wasn't worried. John knew his character pretty well, and Darcy had learned that Miss Elizabeth was never as critical in her judgments as she threatened.

"I am not afraid of you," he told her.

Chuckling, John asked for particulars. Miss Elizabeth lowered her voice to a scandalized murmur: Did he know, could he compre-

hend—the first time she’d met Darcy he had only danced four times “though gentlemen were scarce and more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner.”

It took Darcy almost a minute to realize she was speaking of that first ball in Hertfordshire—when he had refused to dance with any one but Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. He had refused to dance with a young lady suggested by Bingley.

He had refused to dance with Miss Elizabeth.

He blushed. He hadn’t noticed the imbalance of men and women. He had barely noticed who Bingley recommended, but Miss Elizabeth had noticed and remembered; all this time, she had thought him uncivil, deliberately rude.

He said, “I am ill-qualified to recommend myself to strangers.” She must understand that. She knew him well enough.

But she shook her head, and Darcy added desperately, “I have not the talent of conversing easily with those I haven’t met before.” She must have noticed *that*.

She still shook her head. She took the time to practice the piano, she pointed out. Surely, Darcy could take the time to be sociable.

She didn’t practice *that* much. But she did practice enough to give pleasure to her friends and family. Darcy was the same although he admitted to himself that sometimes even his friends and family were stymied by his behavior.

He would have to try harder. He said so, adding, “Neither of us performs well to strangers.”

She eyed him, her merriment dimming. Darcy couldn’t imagine what she might have said next, for Lady Catherine approached, and Miss Elizabeth resume playing. Darcy sat down near the pianoforte where he could watch her.

He needed to dissect Miss Elizabeth’s comment about the first ball in Hertfordshire—an assembly ball, he remembered now. Usually, he disliked people dwelling on minor social infractions: the time Mr. Jones sneezed on Miss Smith, the time Mrs. Brown wore an ugly gown. These types of remarks were no better than jeers, gossip for cruel people with too much time on their hands.

Refusing to dance with Miss Elizabeth was rather worse than spilling a drink or wearing a dirty shirt.

Why didn't she tell me? She hadn't mentioned the assembly ball when she stayed at Netherfield. But then she'd been occupied with her sister. On the other hand, she and Darcy had conversed there—he could remember all their conversations, nearly verbatim. She had never seemed angry with him.

She never seemed angry with Lady Catherine, either, who was pointedly rude. Miss Elizabeth was a gracious young lady who hid her emotions behind a wry smile.

But she bantered with Darcy, asked him questions, smiled at him.

She smiles and banters with John.

She didn't *study* John. She didn't ask John about his faults. Darcy glowered at the fireplace and hardly noticed when the party broke up.

The next morning, he left Rosings early, without John, and went to the parsonage. He would visit the household. Perhaps Elizabeth would be there, and he could make sure she bore him no ill-will.

She was there and alone. Darcy stiffened on the parlor threshold. He wasn't prepared for a tête-à-tête. He didn't have his thoughts ordered. Mrs. Collins was supposed to be present to carry the conversational ball: that's what married ladies *did*.

He entered, sat slowly. Miss Elizabeth asked after the occupants at Rosings. Darcy replied, getting his bearings. He hadn't expected a tête-à-tête, but he wasn't sorry for it. He sank back deliberately in the parlor armchair and watched Miss Elizabeth at the desk. She was dressed in something soft and bright, her hair informally arranged. Darcy found that he liked it better that way.

She was studying him as well, without censure, and the anxiety in Darcy lessened. Their relationship was back to normal—to the way it had been in Hertfordshire, to the way things should be between them.

The way they should always be. Darcy realized he had forgotten he was not interested in Miss Elizabeth. There was no point denying

it: he *was* interested.

They discussed Netherfield, whether Charles would let or sell. They discussed the parsonage and Mr. Collins's marriage to Mrs. Collins.

"It must be convenient for her to be settled within so easy a distance of her family and friends," Darcy said.

Miss Elizabeth was surprised. "Easy distance" for Miss Elizabeth apparently meant "in the same neighborhood of." Miss Elizabeth blushed when Darcy said so, and Darcy's heart beat a little quicker.

This was marriage talk: how far a woman wished to live from her family. Miss Elizabeth had never seemed like someone who wanted to spend her married life a hop, skip, and a jump from her parents' door. He couldn't think of anything more frustrating than trying to manage a household with Mrs. Bennet's interference. Pemberley, at least, was a long way from Hertfordshire.

"You are not that attached to Longbourn," he said, leaning forward.

Miss Elizabeth looked surprised, and Darcy retreated. He was being too forward; he was making assumptions; he was hardly prepared to—to—

To propose?

He left the parsonage in a state of utter bewilderment. She was too genteel, too intelligent, to assume an offer where none was made. But she must know—she was so good at reading people—how Darcy felt. She wouldn't be *surprised* if he proposed.

Which put the decision back on Darcy. He'd decided four months ago in Hertfordshire that she was wrong for him. Why would he change his mind now?

He'd thought about Elizabeth often over the last four months, more than he'd wanted to admit. He'd saved up things to tell her, the kind of things he could never actually tell her unless they were engaged. He'd spoken of her to Georgiana.

And he'd put off leaving Rosings, much to John's surprise, since Darcy rarely varied from his schedule.

I can't marry her. It was not an appropriate connection. He sat in his room, elbows on knees, head bowed. He meant to marry a woman of his own status with a similar background—someone to be chate-laine of Pemberley, who could handle the work involved and be a role model for Georgiana.

Elizabeth was an excellent role model, but Elizabeth's family came with her. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were not acceptable role models for any young person. Nor did they supply an appropriate environment for a future Mrs. Darcy. He didn't doubt that Elizabeth could manage a household, but she'd had little experience with well-run estates. Longbourn was less than half the size of Pemberley, and Mr. Bennet ran it at less than full potential.

If only she were a member of his set. If only she had a stronger pedigree. Darcy's mother—Lady Anne Fitzwilliam, whose ancestry was connected to William the Conqueror—had brought money, stability, and worth to the Darcy line.

The line didn't need more money, but it could use stability. Georgiana needed positive female examples. She would find one in Elizabeth. But not in Elizabeth's sisters—except Jane, Jane who Bingley had wanted to court. Darcy told him the connection was a bad one which was true. What would Bingley think if Darcy married a Bennet sister?

Elizabeth would understand Darcy's conflict. Darcy had seen her blush at her parents' and younger sisters' behavior. She knew what they were like. She knew what Darcy was like.

But he couldn't discuss the matter with her—not until he made an offer. Once she accepted, she would ease his mind.

If he offered. If. If. If.

He visited the parsonage several times over the next few days; he watched Elizabeth talk and laugh, listened to her good sense, observed her manners with John and Mr. and Mrs. Collins. He took her expressions and witticisms and occasional smiles at him back to his room at Rosings where he replayed them in his mind.

He shouldn't propose.

But he would.

He was going to get married.

What an absolutely astonishing thought.

Chapter 6

Elizabeth and Darcy Have a Fight, and Darcy Tries to Explain Himself

The Collins party, including Elizabeth, was invited to tea at Rosings. Darcy planned to pull her aside. He had prepared a short explanation of his decision to propose after which he would proffer the question.

He wasn't sure he would tell Lady Catherine about his and Elizabeth's engagement. Lady Catherine would either express voluble disapproval at the match or start planning the wedding. Imagining either made Darcy cringe. Besides, he should first speak to Elizabeth's father.

He washed his face and hands, dried them on a towel, straightened his collar and, heart pounding, went downstairs.

Elizabeth wasn't there. She had a headache, Mr. Collins explained with gabbled apologies. Lady Catherine looked temporarily annoyed, then promptly forgot about Miss Elizabeth's health.

Darcy sat and fretted. He was leaving soon, the day after tomorrow. His proposal couldn't wait. The last thing he wanted to do was visit Elizabeth in Hertfordshire. He might change his mind by then.

That might be for the best, he thought as he excused himself to the company. Except that he'd decided to ask her today. He'd *decided*. He had to see her, had to propose, lay out everything for her understanding.

He hardly saw the lane as he walked to the parsonage. He

knocked on the door and was admitted. He entered the parlor, greeted Elizabeth, and sat. He couldn't remember his speech—what he'd intended to say or do. It would be easier if she said something, but she was silent. He got up and walked about the room, his feet scuffing the floor.

He faced her. "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

It was easier then—he remembered everything he'd planned to say. He presented arguments for and against the marriage. He explained his feelings, his anxieties. He praised her attributes, especially in comparison to her family. He finished with a declaration that he could not conquer his attachment to her, and he hoped he would be rewarded with her hand in marriage.

He stopped and let out a careful breath. He wanted to sit down but decided it would probably be best to continue standing. For the first time, he examined Elizabeth's face, hunting for an expression.

She looked rather blank. Darcy frowned slightly. Was she concerned about the social gap between them? Should he be more reassuring?

She began to speak. At first, Darcy wasn't sure what she was saying. He kept waiting for the "but, I will accept." It never came. She was saying, "No." She was rejecting his proposal.

"I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly."

She had *flirted* with him. She had been friendly with him. They had discussed personal matters. She was behaving as if none of that had happened. She was acting as if she didn't know how Darcy felt.

She stopped speaking. Darcy realized he was gritting his teeth. He took a deep breath. "I might, perhaps, learn why, with so little civility, I am thus rejected. But it isn't important."

He heard his petulance and didn't care. He wanted to goad her. She was too composed—as if their relationship was as light and care-less a thing as her discussions with John.

Elizabeth flushed, but not coyly, and her eyes weren't sparkling.

They were, rather, flinty and glaring. Darcy waited, his hands and back clammy, his stomach churning. His body knew how she would sound before she spoke.

When she spoke, her voice was cold and furious without its usual warm lilt. He had offended her. Insulted her. Moreover, he had ruined the happiness of her beloved sister –

Miss Bennet? He had never done anything to Miss Bennet.

Was he denying he'd interfered between her and Mr. Bingley?

Yes, he had interfered, but his actions were justifiable.

What about his treatment of Wickham?

Anger cut through Darcy's sick bewilderment. Did Wickham mean something to her then, more than Darcy imagined? He said, "You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns."

Elizabeth proclaimed a general interest: everyone must feel pity for Mr. Wickham's misfortunes which had been inflicted on him by Mr. Darcy, by Mr. Darcy who ridiculed Mr. Wickham's position in life.

She believed Wickham over him. She believed Wickham's pathetic account over Darcy's behavior. He'd told her to be wary of Wickham, he'd told her at the Netherfield ball, yet she still believed Wickham's tales—as if she and Darcy had never conversed, never shared thoughts, never experienced any camaraderie at all.

She couldn't be this blind to Wickham's faults. This sudden, sharp unfriendliness was due to Darcy's honesty. He'd thought she was better than the ordinary type of female who needed insincere praise. He said so.

She was standing now. There was no amusement in her face; she was almost panting with anger.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy. I am only glad the mode of your declaration spared me the compassion I might feel if you had behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner."

A more gentlemanlike manner. He had—he was—

"You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it." She was disgusted by his arrogance, his conceit, his selfish disdain for the feel-

ings of others.

The room was beginning to close in. Darcy had to leave. He made the appropriate remarks, and then he was out in the lane, his head pounding. It was still dusk, but Darcy felt as if a hundred hours had passed. He found he was standing at the gate to Rosings. He stared across the park, feeling sick and lightheaded.

He was a fool. This was what happened when a person made decisions based on emotion. *Idiot*. He'd proposed to a lovely girl who didn't care about or understand his character, his very appropriate reservations—

If you had behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner. Darcy winced. He pressed his hands against the gate and lowered his head between them. Perhaps he had been too detailed with those reservations. But her reasons for rejecting him—her sister and Wickham—were completely unjustified. How could she be so blind?

She loves her sister.

And Wickham?

Darcy grimaced. He shouldn't have gotten angry. If he hadn't gotten angry, he could have explained himself. He turned back towards the parsonage but halted. He wouldn't stay calm, and she was angry, truly angry. Faced with that much anger, nothing he said would come out right. He wasn't even sure she would listen.

He returned to the house through the kitchen. The servants nodded as he passed. In his room, he sat at the desk and pulled a piece of stationary from the desk's well.

He should write her. He could be more precise, more eloquent in a written document than he could with speech. He could say things in writing that he could never say aloud, especially when the matter was sensitive and emotional.

Putting things in writing was risky, of course. But Elizabeth—however much she disliked him—was not a sneak. And she had almost as great a passion for privacy as Darcy; she would not share the letter with anyone.

Darcy began to write. He wasn't going to propose again—he

made that clear. No, he was going to address her accusations against him. He dealt first with the issue of her sister's heart. He explained that he didn't believe Miss Jane Bennet was attached to Charles. Darcy *had* dissuaded Charles from pursuing the relationship. He'd known Miss Bennet was in London and kept that information from Charles: "Perhaps this concealment, this disguise, was beneath me. It is done, however, and it was done for the best. On this subject I have nothing more to say, no other apology to offer."

He sat back, breathing heavily. The lamp was guttering. He lit a fresh wick and reread the paragraphs he had written.

The tone was not civil. Darcy wasn't sure why. He was being objective, factual, honest. Elizabeth might consider his omission deceitful, but that would be an unfair overreaction. He certainly didn't want her making erroneous assumptions about his character. He should rewrite the page, soften his part in ending Miss Bennet and Charles's relationship.

He reached for a new sheet. He heard himself say, "She doesn't need to know," and stopped, appalled.

He wasn't being objective at all. His behavior with Miss Bennet *had* involved deceit. And now he was justifying himself—he, Darcy, was making excuses, as if he were someone like Wickham, as if he weren't a gentleman at all.

He read the page again, wondering at the assumption of rightness underlying his words, the insistence that his actions be taken at face value.

Is this how she sees me?

He certainly owed Elizabeth a better explanation for his behavior, but he couldn't think what that explanation might be. He added a line: "Though the motives may to you naturally appear insufficient, I have not yet learnt to condemn them."

He moved on to her accusation about Wickham. This involved disclosing private family information, but Elizabeth would be circumspect, and she needed to know Wickham's true character. He didn't know how far Elizabeth's attachment to Wickham had gone. He had heard that Wickham was engaged to a Miss King, but that

wouldn't stop Wickham from ruining Elizabeth's reputation if such a course took his fancy.

And he wanted her to know that he, Darcy, wasn't as Wickham painted him. He was not as good as he should be perhaps, but he wasn't so corrupt.

He told her everything: about growing up with Wickham, about his father's will, about Wickham's decision to go into law rather than the church. Darcy had realized several years before that Wickham was idle, dissipated, and licentious. His charm was a cover for plausible lies. He was a man who looked out only for himself. When Darcy's father died, Darcy had handed over Wickham's legacy and put him out of his mind.

Until, that is, Wickham applied to Darcy, stating that he wanted to become a clergyman after all. Darcy refused to help—Wickham already had his legacy; Darcy would never fund such an inconstant libertine—so Wickham revenged himself on Darcy by trying to elope with Darcy's sister, Georgiana.

Darcy could admit now that Georgiana's companion, Mrs. Younge, had been Wickham's confidant from the beginning. At the time, he had been furious at the woman's stupidity: to let Georgiana meet freely with Wickham, to encourage Wickham's addresses! Luckily, Georgiana told Darcy about the planned elopement. But he hadn't seen Wickham's perfidy coming. He hadn't imagined it as a possibility at all. He'd been blessed with luck when he least deserved it.

He was, it seemed, altogether blind about people. He'd never guessed at Elizabeth's feelings. He had thought she liked him. But he couldn't accuse her of playing games with him. From the viewpoint of social propriety, she had behaved no differently with him than with John.

Except. Except—she had seemed to understand him. She was so quick, so friendly, so exactly the sort of person Darcy would be lucky to marry. Darcy leaned his head on his hands and watched the lamp gutter into oblivion.

He relit it towards dawn and added a few extra lines. She could go to Colonel Fitzwilliam if she wished to verify all Darcy had writ-

ten. "God bless you," he wrote and signed his name.

He slept for half an hour, changed, and went out into the still morning. Everything was pale dew and new spring green. He'd seen Elizabeth strolling occasionally in a grove near the park gate, and he went there now, the letter clenched in his hands. If she didn't come—but she had to come. He didn't know what he would do if she didn't come.

She did though she began to retreat when she saw him. She looked drained and unhappy; she hid her feelings so well most of the time, and Darcy felt an odd ache at how similar they were in this regard: plausible faces presented to the world.

For a terrible moment, he thought she would reject the letter, but she took it; he asked her to read it and retreated. He called at the parsonage, knowing Elizabeth was still in the grove, and returned to Rosings.

He and John were going to London the next morning. Darcy sorted his shirts in his room. He concentrated on mundane things—clothes, cravats, boots—so his mind would not spin around the miserable axis of Elizabeth's refusal.

John strolled in towards mid-afternoon. "Good work. I'm already packed."

Darcy nodded, eyeing him. Had Elizabeth asked him to verify the contents of the letter? *He* couldn't mention it. Surely, John would tell him.

John said, "I understand you already said farewell to our parson's household."

"Yes," Darcy said.

"As did I. I missed the lovely Miss Elizabeth unfortunately. Ah, well. Life is made up of stray encounters, is it not," and he went off good-humoredly.

Had she avoided John? Was she still reading the letter? Would she believe anything Darcy had written? He sat on the edge of the bed, watched the sky darken, and wished he was at Pemberley.

Chapter 7

*Darcy and Elizabeth Meet at Pemberley,
and Darcy Gets All Excited about Showing Off His Property*

Darcy didn't try to forget Elizabeth during the remainder of the spring. He accepted, with wry self-pity, that thoughts of her would linger for months.

Occasionally in London, Darcy glimpsed the straight back and dark curls of a young lady. He would imagine it was Elizabeth: she was there, in the city, on the pavement before him. She would turn and say —

He had no idea. Sometimes, unconscionably, he imagined she turned and smiled, even hurried to greet him.

That was unlikely. Fantastical hopes and aching regrets were both pointless. Life was what it was.

At least, he had commitments to distract him. He collected Georgiana from school to take her to Pemberley. The Bingleys, sans Mr. Hurst, joined them in Oxford. They would be guests at Pemberley for several weeks.

Darcy and Georgiana took breakfast in their private sitting room in an Oxford inn. The Bingleys occupied rooms on the floor above. Miss Bingley had suggested breakfasting together, but Darcy preferred to breakfast with just Georgiana.

Georgiana smeared marmalade on toast and hummed softly to herself. Darcy held a letter in his hand. He said, "Max has a question about the Merrydews' tenancy. I'll have to ride ahead. You'll travel

on with the Bingleys." Max was Pemberley's land steward.

Georgiana put down her toast. Darcy folded up the letter and tucked it into his breast pocket. The Merrydews were good farmers, but Mr. Merrydew had no money sense. Darcy wondered if he should have his house steward, Mr. Jetter, reorganize the Merrydews' books.

Georgiana said, "Can't I go with you?"

Darcy looked at her in surprise. "I'm not taking the carriage," he said. "You'll be able to see Oxford with the Bingleys and come on with them."

Georgiana picked at the tablecloth. Darcy nabbed another piece of toast and pushed back from the table.

"I could follow you in the carriage," Georgiana said.

Darcy looked at her bent head. He was missing something, something Georgiana wanted and wasn't saying. He took a deep breath.

"The Bingleys are good company."

"Oh, yes."

"You enjoy your time with them."

"Yes."

"And Mrs. Annesley is here."

"She's very nice," Georgiana said.

Then what is the problem?

Relationships, Darcy had realized in the last four months, were quagmires filled with implications, suggestions, and underlying messages. Darcy didn't pick up any of it.

"I thought you thought I was getting better," Georgiana had said just three days before after Darcy commented on her singing. He had stared at her, realizing that his comment had been unintentionally critical. He had stammered an explanation, and Georgiana had nodded gravely. But until she pointed it out, Darcy hadn't heard how he sounded at all.

Sometimes he wondered that Elizabeth hadn't laughed him out of the parsonage when he started to propose. What kind of man didn't bother to prove his devotion to the woman he loved? *Especially* the woman he loved?

Georgiana said to the tablecloth, "They compliment me a lot."

"Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst?"

"Yes."

"Compliments are nice."

Georgiana gave him a skeptical look, an echo, Darcy appreciated, of one of his expressions. He grinned. "They are a little overwhelming," he agreed. "I'll tell Charles to take you and Mrs. Annesley in his carriage. The Bingley sisters can have mine."

And that was all—she was happy again. Darcy went out of the room, suspecting that Elizabeth would have figured out Georgiana's problem before Georgiana even mentioned it.

Probably. Yes.

In his breast pocket, next to the letter from Pemberley's steward, was a letter Darcy had begun to Elizabeth. He would never send this one: she had rejected him; their association was over. But there were times when Darcy yearned to explain he hadn't known he was being rude in Hertfordshire, at Rosings. These days, when he looked back on their conversations in those places—replaying his remarks—he could only wince.

If you had behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.

He hadn't. He'd taken everything for granted: Elizabeth's understanding, her compliance. She might as well have been Mrs. Reynolds or Max or any of his other servants. She might as well have been Charles. One didn't ask a woman to marry without giving her *some* reason to agree.

He stayed overnight in Leicester and set off for Pemberley early the next morning. As happened so often these days, he let his mind wander back to Elizabeth.

There were times when he thought he had misunderstood every gesture, expression, and word between him and Elizabeth while other times, he was sure there had been positive, intimate moments between them—easy exchanges where they understood each other better than people usually did.

Only things had gone wrong. At which thought, Darcy would de-

scend again into the depressing conviction that the relationship could never have been what he hoped for since things had gone wrong from the start when Darcy unknowingly offended Elizabeth at the assembly ball in Meryton.

It was too easy to say he hadn't meant it. If he had taken the time to accept Charles's suggestion to meet and, even, dance with Elizabeth, everything would be different now. Perhaps. There were always unknowns, of course. But he hadn't done it, and his folly had not only cost him Elizabeth but made it easy for Elizabeth to believe Wickham's lies – which had become another barrier between them.

Eventually this ache would pass. For now, Darcy let it persist. The pain was something, at least, to hold onto.

He arrived at Pemberley before noon. He didn't go straight to the main house but met Max at the Merrydews. Mr. Merrydew contritely laid down a token payment and a new rent schedule was drawn up. Afterward, Darcy spoke to George Merrydew, Jr. who shook his head over his father's business practices and advised Darcy that he was taking over the financial side of the farm. All in all, a good meeting.

Darcy rode with Max along the northern edge of the estate to examine some drainage problems. He left Max at the Chandlers – Max was married to Mr. Chandler's daughter – and cut across the estate to the Pemberley stables. He would talk to Mr. Talbot and Mrs. Reynolds about the coming guests, then go fishing. The Bingleys, with Georgiana, would not arrive until the next morning, and Darcy whistled as he walked from the stables to the house. Now and then he liked having Pemberley to himself, guest-less.

"When would you say it was built?" said a voice, and Darcy turned his head to see a group of callers standing on the road, looking up at the house: a man and two women, one older, one younger. The younger woman turned, and Darcy looked straight into Elizabeth Bennet's eyes.

His brain stopped working. He said something. She said something. He got the impression that he was asking the same questions over and over. Elizabeth answered without looking at him. He stopped talking, nodded, and walked on.

Loomis, the head gardener, drew alongside him, saying, "We didn't know you'd be back today, sir." Darcy explained about Max and the Merrydews; Loomis praised the summer weather "especially in regard to the rhubarb." Darcy nodded. They reached the house, and Loomis walked off.

Darcy stood in the cool north portico, staring blankly into the foyer. She was here, at Pemberley. She must have—but she couldn't have—*why is she here?* She was with friends obviously or relations—on tour, but *why here?*

"Hello, sir," Mrs. Reynolds said, coming into the foyer. "We expected you tomorrow."

"I had to confer with Max."

"We've had some callers." Mrs. Reynolds took his dust coat. "The young lady is acquainted with you."

"Yes."

"They greatly admired the house. I took them into the gallery." Mrs. Reynolds brushed his coat, looking bland. "The young lady praised your portrait."

"Did she?" Darcy said.

Mrs. Reynolds raised a brow and went away, and Darcy stood in the portico, feeling like several tons of rock had landed on his head and been gently brushed away.

Elizabeth was *here*—at his house—on his land. Elizabeth admired the house. Elizabeth admired his portrait.

Darcy went into the washroom in the servant's wing and scrubbed his hands and face. He tidied himself, then jogged outside to the gardens. He cornered Loomis.

"The callers—where did they go?"

Loomis had seen them head towards the wood. Darcy followed the walk, questioning gardeners as he went. Elizabeth and her party had crossed the bridge to view the trout stream. Darcy went in that direction. He saw the man first, speaking to Josh, who oversaw the stream's maintenance. A tallish woman with an elegant, if tired air stood beside him, smiling faintly. Elizabeth was strolling in Darcy's direction along the bank. She moved lightly, her head bent, eyes fol-

lowing the flow of the water. Her curls shone in the slanting sunlight. Darcy wanted to stop and soak in her appearance—here, on his estate—but reminded himself to be sociable.

He approached; he greeted her. He was less stunned this time though still unbelieving. He watched her face, listened to her tone. She didn't seem angry or cold. In fact, she was praising Pemberley.

"It's delightful," she said. "The coppice-wood we came through is full of delightful windings. I'd love to explore—" She flushed and fell silent.

She meant what she said. She wasn't prone to flattery, even at her friendliest. He should show her the orchard and the duck pond. But she had friends with her, and he requested an introduction.

They were her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. Darcy was surprised. He'd understood Mr. Gardiner was a tradesman. He must have a thriving business indeed if he could take several weeks off during the summer. The Gardiners shook hands with Darcy, extolling Pemberley's grounds and explaining their presence. They were staying at the inn at Lambton; in fact, Mrs. Gardiner grew up in Lambton.

She and Darcy shared reminiscences of the village. Everything the Gardiners said was friendly, reasonable, to the point.

"I've never seen such a well-stocked stream," Mr. Gardiner said. "Your man says you keep it clear of oaks—"

Darcy nodded, and they began to discuss stream maintenance, Josh chiming in occasionally. Mr. Gardiner, Darcy found, was an avid fisherman, so Darcy offered him the use of fishing tackle "if you wish to fish at Pemberley during your stay."

"The best spot is there below the bridge," he added, and Mr. Gardiner began to describe practical fishing techniques. They all stopped to admire some water plants, and then Mrs. Gardiner took her husband's arm. Darcy found himself beside Elizabeth.

She had been unnaturally silent, and he studied her with concern, still amazed that she should be here at his shoulder on his estate.

"We didn't know any of the family would be at Pemberley," she said. "We wouldn't have requested a viewing if we'd known—"

Of course not. Darcy understood that. But whenever the family

was away, Pemberley was open to callers. "I came ahead to speak to my steward," he said. "I'm traveling with my sister as well as Mr. Bingley and his sisters."

He stopped then. Would mentioning Charles evoke a heated response? But Elizabeth only nodded. He said, "Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to you?"

She lifted eyes to his face then, astonished, and agreed in a pleased tone. Darcy sagged with relief.

She liked the grounds. She liked the house. She wanted to meet his sister. Darcy could hardly believe his luck. He stopped himself from demanding confirmation: Did she really like Pemberley's views? Had she truly told Mrs. Reynolds she liked his portrait? Did she honestly want to meet Georgiana? Elizabeth didn't lie or fib. He could trust she meant what she said.

They arrived at the house before her aunt and uncle. "Would you like to step in?" Darcy asked, thinking he could show her the improvements he'd made to the flue in the drawing room fireplace, the latest expansion to the library. But she had already seen the house, and she declined. So Darcy stood beside her under the glowing summer sky and thought how marvelous it was that Elizabeth liked Pemberley.

"Have you visited Matlock?" she said, and they discussed Derbyshire towns until the Gardiners arrived.

"I'll bring my sister to call once she arrives," Darcy said, and Elizabeth assented.

He would never have guessed this was possible—Elizabeth in Derbyshire, in Lambton, at Pemberley. He could never have imagined such an amiable meeting after that terrible interview at Rosings.

She had read the letter; she must have read the letter. Had she believed him? Given him the benefit of the doubt? She must have, enough for her to be here at least, to not be angry with him. He would match her civility; he would show her he knew how to behave like a gentleman.

Chapter 8

Darcy and His Sister Issue Invitations, and Everyone (Except Miss Bingley) is Pleased

Elizabeth and the Gardiners departed for Lambton. Darcy strode into the house and requested a light meal. He hardly noticed eating it, and he went to bed with a less troubled mind than he'd had in the last four months.

The Bingleys and Georgiana arrived the next morning. Mrs. Reynolds showed Charles, Mrs. Hurst, and Miss Bingley to their rooms. Darcy followed Georgiana to her sitting room.

"Do you remember me mentioning the Bennets?" he said, prepared to repeat his previous descriptions, but, "Yes," Georgiana said.

"Miss Elizabeth is staying at Lambton with her aunt and uncle. I'd like you to meet her."

Georgiana looked at him, and for a fleeting moment, Darcy thought she seemed amused. But no, he was reading Elizabeth's expressions into his sister's face.

"I would be pleased to make Miss Elizabeth's acquaintance," Georgiana said.

"This afternoon," Darcy said. "If you're not too tired."

"No," Georgiana said, still studying him.

"How was the drive?"

"I listened to Charles tell me all about the beauties of Hertfordshire," she said.

If he didn't know better, he'd think his sister was becoming coy.

Mrs. Annesley came in then; Darcy requested Georgiana's presence in half an hour – she would be prompt; his sister was not given to tardiness, thank goodness – and went down to the stables. He met Charles there, admiring Darcy's latest purchases (Charles never spent more than ten minutes unpacking).

"Where are you off to?" he said when Darcy ordered the curricle.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet is visiting the area," Darcy said. "I am going to introduce Georgiana to her."

He hadn't considered how Charles would react to mention of the Bennets, if Charles would be upset or shamefaced, but Charles smiled hugely and said, "Oh, let me accompany you," and Darcy agreed.

Georgiana came down, and the three of them squashed into the front of the curricle. It was a fresh day of crisp sunshine and cool breezes. As they rode, Charles told Darcy about the trip from Oxford, nudging Georgiana to confirm his observations. Soon after Darcy and Charles met, Darcy wondered if Charles would try to court Georgiana (once she left school). He couldn't imagine that now. With friendly indulgence, Charles treated Georgiana like the most obliging of younger siblings. Besides, even Darcy's quiet sister would walk all over Charles in a marriage; she was a Fitzwilliam after all.

The ride proceeded with no delays, and they drew up outside the Lambton inn well before the dinner hour.

Darcy went in first with Georgiana. Elizabeth and the Gardiners were resting in the inn's upstairs parlor. They stood as Darcy and Georgiana entered; Elizabeth was flushed, her countenance faintly quizzical. She looked how Darcy felt.

The Gardiners greeted him calmly and Darcy felt himself relax. He brought Georgiana forward for introductions. Georgiana found it hard to meet new people, but he trusted the Gardiners and Elizabeth would put her at ease.

He was correct. Elizabeth asked Georgiana sensible questions, the kinds of questions Georgiana could answer easily, and Georgiana answered softly but directly.

"You spend your summer months at Pemberley?" Elizabeth asked her.

"Yes," Georgiana said.

Perfect.

Darcy fetched Bingley. He came in with hands outstretched. "Hello, Miss Elizabeth. How splendid to see you again!"

Elizabeth returned Bingley's greeting. As Bingley praised the "beauties of Hertfordshire," her eyes met Darcy's, glinting with subdued laughter.

He absorbed that look. She still had the power to turn his heart over, only now instead of gauche uncertainty, he felt a flood of easy warmth.

Steady, he told himself. *You've no reason to hope here.*

Darcy turned to the Gardiners, who posed several queries in their easygoing way. Yes, Darcy had met Miss Elizabeth in Hertfordshire. She was an excellent pianist and singer. She danced well. Did they know Miss Elizabeth had nursed her sister at Netherfield for a week?

The Gardiners exchanged a speaking glance.

Georgiana put her hand on Darcy's sleeve. He bent his head to her. "They could come for dinner some night," she whispered.

"You should ask them yourself," Darcy said gently.

Georgiana made the invitation without too many stumbles; Mrs. Gardiner accepted for the day after tomorrow. On the way out, Darcy asked Mr. Gardiner to come fishing at Pemberley the next day. Mr. Gardiner agreed.

"Isn't it remarkable?!" Charles said in the curricle. "What a small world we live in! I never thought to see any of the Bennet sisters again."

Darcy eyed him. It had been eight months since Charles considered courting Miss Bennet. Darcy had encountered him several times since; based on Charles's good spirits, he had assumed his friend was back to flirting with London beauties.

He squirmed on the curricle seat and frowned at the passing road. Bingley was impulsive but not shallow. Bingley had cared for Miss Bennet. Apparently, he still cared. *Was I wrong to interfere there?* For many months now, Darcy had deplored his deception in the matter, but he had not imagined Charles's thoughts still dwelt on that tall,

serene woman of limitless composure. It occurred to Darcy that Miss Bennet might even be a good balance to Charles. Darcy would need to speak to him.

There was no time for private conversation that night. Charles's sisters were curious about where he, Darcy, and Georgiana had gone. Their curiosity turned to incredulity when they learned about Miss Elizabeth and the Gardiners.

"Staying at Lambton?" Miss Bingley said. "How quaint."

Darcy gathered from Charles's expostulation and Georgiana's frown that this was a criticism. Personally, he considered the Lambton inn clean and well-run. He knew the landlord, a fair tradesman and generous employee, whose relatives lived on a Pemberley farm.

Darcy shrugged and went off to confer with Loomis and Josh about the fishing.

He rose early the next morning to visit the Sheldons – Mr. Sheldon wanted to purchase some trees from the estate proper; Darcy was inclined to agree, but he wanted to check the Sheldon land first. When he returned to Pemberley, Mr. Gardiner had arrived, so Darcy went immediately to the trout stream and had an absorbing conversation about gravel beds with Mr. Gardiner and Max.

Towards the end of the conversation, Mr. Gardiner said, "My wife and niece are visiting your sister this morning."

That was excessively civil. "I should return to the house, so I can thank them for coming," Darcy said, and Mr. Gardiner nodded. Darcy ignored the twinkle in his eyes.

When Darcy entered the Pemberley saloon, Elizabeth and Georgiana were seated with Mrs. Annesley and Mrs. Gardiner near the south-facing windows. He crossed to them.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley called. She sat at the other end of the saloon with Mrs. Hurst. Darcy nodded briskly and put a hand on Georgiana's shoulder.

Mrs. Gardiner glanced up at him. "We understand Miss Darcy is an accomplished musician."

"Miss Elizabeth is also quite accomplished," Darcy said.

"Miss Elizabeth likes Haydn," Georgiana said softly.

"You admire Haydn too, don't you, dear?" said Mrs. Annesley and gave Georgiana an encouraging glance. "Which piece in particular?"

"*Le Matin*," Georgiana said, and Elizabeth said, "Oh, yes, it's so cheerful, don't you think?"

Darcy decided Mrs. Annesley deserved a raise.

Georgiana was smiling at Elizabeth's analysis of Haydn when Miss Bingley cut in: "Pray, Miss Eliza, Colonel Forster's militia has removed from Meryton, has it not? That must be a great loss to your family."

Darcy caught the underlying insult. Miss Bingley knew about Wickham's friendship with the Bennets. She likely also knew that Wickham had never (thank goodness) made Elizabeth an official offer. Darcy hid a scowl and glanced at Elizabeth. If she'd read the letter, if she'd *believed* the letter, she would have cut off any close relationship she had with Wickham. Darcy trusted her that far. But he had no guarantee that she had read it or believed anything he wrote.

She didn't appear disconcerted, however. "Yes," she said. "The town greatly misses the militia's business," and returned immediately to a discussion of symphonies with Georgiana.

Darcy sat and listened, his eyes straying to the glowing sun against the window panes. How had he ever imagined Elizabeth wouldn't fit with Pemberley? How had he ever imagined Elizabeth wouldn't grace his family with her gentle wit and kind dignity?

People didn't get second changes, but maybe, Darcy could get a new and better chance with Elizabeth.

"My uncle was touched by your invitation," Elizabeth said, turning to him. "He doesn't get many opportunities to fish with his busy schedule."

"I enjoy conversing with him," Darcy said sincerely, and Elizabeth looked pleased.

It occurred to Darcy that he would need to introduce her to some of his relations *other* than Lady Catherine. He didn't have many uncles and aunts who equaled the Gardiners.

At least she liked Georgiana.

The visit ended. Darcy arranged for his carriage to take Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth back to Lambton. Elizabeth stood beside him as they waited for the groom, and he thought how much he had missed her brown curls and amused mouth. She was a warm presence against his shoulder – as natural there as everything at Pemberley.

She said, “Your sister is lovely.”

Darcy said, “Yes, she is.”

Their voices combined with the clop of the horse’s hoofs and far-off gurgle of the stream. Mrs. Gardiner rambled down the drive to study the woody hills to the west of Pemberley.

Darcy said to Elizabeth, “I understand from your uncle you visited Warwick Castle before arriving in Derbyshire.”

“We strolled on the grounds. The battlements are impressive.”

“You know, one of the towers is supposed to be haunted by Sir Fulke Grenville.”

Elizabeth smirked, then nodded sagely. “He was killed by his manservant, wasn’t he? What a frightfully horrid tale!”

Darcy smiled to himself. “Do you indulge in the works of Mrs. Radcliffe, Miss Elizabeth?”

“I can’t say I do. The ladies in her tales are so apt to walk into danger; they seem to search for calamity at the worst possible moments.”

Darcy couldn’t help laughing. “You would never be so foolish.”

“I would wait for daylight. And company. And a very good reason.”

“I’ve always thought ghost stories missed the obvious solution – cotton wool in the ears.”

“I take it Pemberley has no ghosts?”

Darcy turned to study the house; Elizabeth turned with him. He eyed the stones, considering. His childhood had been happy, his parents caring if too indulgent. Once Darcy proved intelligent and reasonably self-disciplined, they left him to devise his own rules: when he would study, when he would ride about Pemberley or visit Lambton.

He had, perhaps, been given too much freedom. He certainly cav-

iled now at letting others determine how he spent his time. Still, he remembered his childhood and youth contentedly as a series of long, blissful summers and cozy, family-centered winters.

His mother died when he was just twenty, Georgiana barely eight. That had been a difficult time, for Georgiana particularly. But they had weathered their losses, including their father's death four years later. Pemberley was a sanctuary for him and his sister. They always wanted to return, to soak in the well-lit rooms, to walk the winding paths.

Beside him, Elizabeth said softly, "This is not a haunted home."

Pleased, touched, and grateful, Darcy clasped her wrist lightly as they turned back to the drive.

The carriage arriving, Mrs. Gardiner ambled towards them. Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner climbed in.

"When Mr. Gardiner catches enough fish, I'll send him back to you," Darcy said, and they thanked him. The carriage drove off, and Darcy returned to the house feeling more content than he had even before he went with Charles to Netherfield.

Entering the saloon, he found Georgiana sitting stiff and unresponsive on the sofa while Miss Bingley held forth on some subject. Astonished, Darcy realized she was criticizing Elizabeth. On and on she went, disparaging Elizabeth's complexion and features and eyes.

Darcy could only wonder at the woman's lack of decorum. This was not Netherfield where Miss Bingley's notions held sway. Elizabeth and Miss Bingley were Georgiana's guests. Georgiana should rebuke Miss Bingley, but Darcy didn't expect it of her. Setting aside Georgiana's shyness, she was hardly prepared to challenge so much rudeness.

Darcy listened to the stream of petty insults and wondered that Charles could have such a sister. For the first time, he considered that Miss Bingley might not have been the best person to consult in November about Charles's feelings.

"I believe you thought Miss Elizabeth rather pretty at one time," Miss Bingley said to him.

Now, he could answer. "Yes, but that was only when I first knew

her. For many months since, I have considered her one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance.”

He couldn’t storm out, but he did recollect an urgent need to confer with Mr. Jetter about some Pemberley business and left the room.

Later that night after dinner (through which Miss Bingley was excessively silent, so they listened to Mrs. Hurst and Charles discuss shooting), Darcy wondered if Georgiana had caught the earlier reference to Wickham. Wickham hadn’t entered the corps when Georgiana agreed to elope with him, but of course, that information was known. On the way to his room later, Darcy saw a light beneath Georgiana’s sitting room door and tapped.

“Come in.”

Georgiana sat in a window seat. Darcy said, “Are you well?” and sighed with relief when she turned a tranquil face towards him. There had been many tears as well as self-reproaches in the months after the aborted elopement. Darcy had felt ineffectual. He had been lucky to find Mrs. Annesley—a sensible woman who didn’t encourage self-recrimination—although he’d submitted her to several long interviews with both himself and Mrs. Reynolds before offering her the position.

Mrs. Annesley had proved a kind and trustworthy guardian. Georgiana was still cautious, even somber, but tonight, she looked reflective and absorbed, rather than sad.

She said, “I like her.”

Darcy settled into an armchair. He knew what “her” Georgiana was referring to.

“She’s genuine,” Georgiana said.

Yes, she was. They were probably the only two siblings in the whole of England who understood the substantial worth of that quality. Brother and sister smiled at each other.

Georgiana turned back to the window. “I’d like a sister,” she said to it.

Without a doubt, his sister was becoming coy.

Chapter 9

*Darcy Learns about Elizabeth's Troubles,
and Goes Hunting for Wickham
(but Doesn't Actually Kill Him)*

The next morning, Darcy rode to Lambton, alone, to see Elizabeth.

He'd spent the night considering all possible pathways to the future. He knew how obsessive he could get, pulling apart every choice, every possibility. He knew it was best not to look too far ahead. But he couldn't shut off his mind.

Suppose she wanted him to offer again? Suppose she just wanted to repair the breach, to forget what happened at Rosings? Suppose she simply hoped to get her sister and Charles together? Suppose—

He'd slept for less than an hour that night.

Arriving at Lambton, he looped the horse's reins through the inn's hitching post and requested a servant to announce him. He followed close on the servant's heels and had to jerk to a halt when the servant suddenly stopped. The door to the parlor opened; Elizabeth darted through.

She was shaking. She saw the servant, then Darcy, and blurted, "I beg your pardon, but I must find Mr. Gardiner this moment. I have not an instant to lose."

Darcy begged her to send the servant to search for her uncle, and she did, retreating into the parlor and collapsing onto a chair. She was white and breathing unsteadily. Darcy offered wine. She refused:

"I've had dreadful news from home," she said and started to cry.

Darcy stood over her, aghast. He forced himself to sit and clenched his hands on his knees.

The news rushed out: Elizabeth's youngest sister, Lydia, had eloped with Mr. Wickham while she was visiting friends in Brighton. It was unlikely Wickham would marry her. "*I might have prevented it!*" Elizabeth cried. "*I who knew what he was.*"

Darcy flinched, but she was not accusing him. She was reproaching herself.

"Is it absolutely certain?" Darcy said.

"Yes!" Wickham and Lydia had left Brighton together. They had been traced to London. Her father had gone to London to search for them. Her mother had collapsed. Her sister, Jane, had written for Mr. Gardiner's assistance. The Gardiners and Elizabeth would hopefully leave immediately for Hertfordshire. "I have not the smallest hope," Elizabeth said, and Darcy's insides twisted at the wretched unhappiness in her face and voice.

He had never felt so powerless. He hated this feeling. With Georgiana, the danger had been immediate and easily dealt with. But this — *this* —

"My eyes were opened to his real character. But I was afraid of doing too much. Wretched, wretched mistake!"

And still she did not reproach him, though her words could have been Darcy's own. He knew Wickham's character better than most, had done nothing, and now Elizabeth's sister was paying for Darcy's inaction.

He realized he was pacing and stopped himself. He was useless here. He could do nothing to ameliorate Elizabeth's pain. In any case, this was a family matter; she would much prefer her uncle and aunt to Darcy's company.

He made his excuses, saw her gather herself to respond with courtesy. She requested secrecy, and he gave it: she didn't need to ask. He looked at her carefully before he left; she was white and shaky, but she had herself in hand. The Gardiners would be back soon. Darcy ran down the inn steps, unhitched the horse.

This is the fruit of reticence. Darcy had let Wickham operate freely amongst reputable folk. What had he thought would happen?

He'd assumed others would be wise enough to avoid the worst—as Darcy had with Georgiana. But he'd only avoided the worst with Georgiana by luck. Perhaps the Bennets, the Lucases, and Colonel Forster should have recognized Wickham's basic insincerity, but no one would make the leap from *insincerity* to *rake*, not when Darcy remained so profoundly silent on the subject.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

It would not have been difficult to warn them. He would not have had to reveal much. A hint in Mrs. Bennet's ear would have exiled Wickham from all good homes. A word in Colonel Forster's ear would have given that military gentleman reliable, even necessary information about one of his officers.

Stupid.

He knew before he reached Pemberley what he needed to do, and *he* needed to do it. His London solicitors would follow instructions, but Darcy needed to move, act, *do* something.

Darcy encountered Charles at the stables. "I'm called to London," he said as much to Hutchins, the stable master, as to Charles. "I'll be leaving tomorrow morning."

"Very good, sir," Hutchins said while Charles said, "What's wrong? Do you want me to accompany you?"

"I can't provide details. Please, stay on, enjoy yourself. I'll return as soon as I can."

Charles looked troubled, and Darcy was tempted to confide; he would like Charles's help in London. But what he told Charles, Charles would tell his sisters, and Darcy had to keep Elizabeth's secret for as long as possible. Wickham's actions tainted her, tainted her whole family, including Miss Jane Bennet. If Charles ever intended to propose to Miss Bennet, he could not know of this calamity.

Darcy alerted Mrs. Reynolds to his journey. She sent his valet to pack a valise, and Darcy went in search of Georgiana. She had escaped the Bingley sisters and was seated in the Yew garden, embroi-

dering with Mrs. Annesley. Mrs. Annesley agreed good-humoredly when Darcy requested a moment alone with his sister.

"I have to go to London," Darcy said when Mrs. Annesley departed.

"Why?"

"The Gardiners have been called back to Longbourn. The Bennet family has suffered a misfortune."

"Did someone die?"

Darcy pondered. They were a family of almost abnormal privacy, but he'd rather Georgiana heard the scandal from him than hear it later from someone like Miss Bingley. And he wanted desperately to tell someone.

"Wickham has run off with Miss Elizabeth's youngest sister, Lydia."

He wasn't sure what he expected: a swoon, perhaps tears, but Georgiana only drew in her breath.

Darcy said, "He promised her marriage, but it's unlikely —"

"He'll want money. That's what he planned to get by eloping with me."

Darcy winced, embarrassed, but Georgiana said, "Looking back, I can recognize how fulsome he was. So much flattery regarding my beauty, my talents, my social graces —"

"You are pretty and talented, Georgiana."

"I've never been particularly convivial," she said with a wry grin. "I suppose that's why I was ready to believe him. I'm sure that's why Lydia ran off with him."

Darcy considered Miss Lydia. He remembered a bouncy, talkative young woman, not very like Georgiana. But he thought Georgiana was probably right about the girl's susceptibility. Perhaps, if Lydia had been with her sisters in Brighton, she would have excitedly confided her plans for elopement to them just as Georgiana had excitedly confided *her* plans to Darcy.

He said, "I should never have set you up in an establishment so early." The world was not as safe for young women of fifteen as it was for young men of fifteen; Darcy, unfortunately, had applied his

own experience to Georgiana's life.

Someday, I'll learn to stand outside my own knowledge, however broad, and see the greater implications.

Georgiana said, "You kept me from a dismal future."

Repaired my own missteps.

Darcy stood. "I have to find Mrs. Younge."

"You should ask Gloria Faintree," Georgiana said. "She and Mrs. Younge were friends."

He re-sat abruptly. Gloria Faintree was a servant in the London house, had been when Mrs. Younge was Georgiana's guardian.

Darcy said, "Was she involved –?"

"No," Georgiana said quickly. "Wickham didn't pursue me until I went to Ramsgate with Mrs. Younge. I doubt Gloria ever met him, but she might still be in contact with Mrs. Younge."

"Yes." Darcy squeezed his sister's shoulders.

Georgiana smiled at him sadly. "I guess I'm not the only silly girl in England."

He'd been right to tell her. If he'd thought more about the situation, he wouldn't have said anything, but Georgiana had faced the news with maturity. She had helped him.

So much for well-meaning reticence.

He was supposed to have meetings with Max and various tenants that afternoon and throughout the week. He discussed with Max which meetings could be postponed until Darcy returned and which Max should carry out on his own. They discussed all the estate business Darcy meant to tackle over the next month and rode over the grounds together. Darcy trusted Max; Max would do all right.

He returned to Pemberley late. His valise was ready. He slept for a few hours, waking at dawn. Mrs. Reynolds had packed breakfast for him. The carriage, driver, and groom were waiting. They departed Pemberley at a muffled trot. Darcy meant to make it to London in one day, which meant several stops to change horses, but speed mattered. The more time passed, the more likely it was that the scandal would break. Darcy would lose any leverage he possessed with Wickham, and Elizabeth's reputation would be ruined.

That wasn't going to happen. Darcy could fix this. He *would* fix this.

They arrived in London near midnight. His groom, Paul, would return to Pemberley tomorrow, retrieving the Pemberley horses on the way. Darcy collapsed into bed and slept until late morning.

He asked the housekeeper to send in Gloria Faintree while he ate breakfast. As he was finishing, a short, plump maid entered the room. She froze at the end of the table like a cornered hare. Only her fingers moved, endlessly pleating her apron.

Darcy said, "Do you know Mrs. Younge's whereabouts?"

The girl opened her mouth and whispered something.

Darcy said, "What's that?"

"I've heard, sir," the girl said in a slightly louder voice, "that she's in Edward Street, sir – she keeps lodgings."

"Thank you," Darcy said.

The girl was shivering now. He didn't think he'd been unduly harsh. Rather than turning her over to the butler, he considered possible reasons for her behavior. She might think Darcy would dismiss her for unsuitable fraternization.

He said gently, "Do you have dealings with her?"

"Oh, no, sir. I did, sir, when she was Miss Georgiana's companion. Before. She wrote me after when she moved to Edward Street—I never responded, sir."

"Good," Darcy said. "Thank you," he added and smiled, and the maid smiled gratefully in return.

He went to Edward Street, a busy thoroughfare near Fleet Street. Lawyers, tradesmen, and booksellers threaded their way down it, standing aside to let carts through, gathering to converse in doorways.

Mrs. Younge lived in a grayish town house with a single step. She was out; Darcy told the maid he would return but didn't leave his name. He loitered in the area, taking refreshment at a tap house that overlooked the length of the street.

A hackney carriage pulled up to Mrs. Younge's door. A trim woman in a velvet-lined gown descended with several boxes: Mrs.

Younge. Darcy paid for his drink and went out. He was at the lodging house door almost as soon as it closed. He knew he was bordering on incivility, but the longer he waited, the greater the chance Wickham would leave London with or without Miss Lydia. Darcy knocked. The maid answered.

“Oh, hullo,” she said. “Mrs. Younge just returned—”

He stepped in, handing over his card. His name meant nothing to the maid. She went into a room at the end of the narrow foyer. Darcy waited, a large immovable object. Voices murmured: the maid’s, cheery, impassive; Mrs. Younge’s, surprised, alarmed. Darcy sighed, crossed the foyer, and opened the parlor door.

“You were not invited in, Mr. Darcy!” Mrs. Younge cried, bounding to her feet.

She was a compact, stylish woman. She exuded an aura of tactful refinement: a veneer, Darcy knew, but no doubt, it impressed her lodgers. It had once impressed Darcy.

“I am looking for Wickham,” Darcy said as the maid, brows raised in deliberate disinterest, sidled past him out the door.

“Why do you think he is here?”

Because Wickham always kept a guarantee, a woman he could fall back on for money and support. Darcy didn’t say so. He needed this woman’s good will, at least for the moment. He took a deep breath and said as civilly as he could, “I want to help him.”

“You?” She snorted, then looked annoyed at her lack of dignity.

“He’s going to need help. I can improve his situation. Tell him that.”

“He will, of course, leap to trust you.” Her sneer was obvious.

“My word is trustworthy.”

She pursed her lips and looked unbelieving.

“More than his,” Darcy said. “He never married you.”

She reddened, and Darcy cursed himself for losing his temper, but he might as well speak the truth now: “He’s taken another bride.”

“He won’t marry her.” The veneer was nearly gone now. Mrs. Younge was almost triumphant.

Darcy quelled his disgust. “He prefers someone wealthier?”

She shrugged and rose, recovering some of her poise. "The maid will show you out."

He didn't move. He was struggling to understand why any woman would associate with Wickham once his character was exposed. Did Mrs. Younge think Wickham would repay her devotion?

"He'll gamble away any money he extorts before you see a farthing," he said.

That gave her pause.

Darcy said, "I am willing to compensate you for useful information."

She considered, eyes half-closed. Darcy watched her, at a loss. He could not comprehend a woman such as this—without decency or self-respect or basic kindness.

"Any information I hold is dear," she said, and that Darcy understood. He took coins out of his purse and set them on a table near the door.

"This is a partial payment," he told her.

"I'll see what I can learn."

He could do nothing more except go. Wickham and Miss Lydia could be anywhere. They would surface eventually, but Darcy must find them before the world heard of their whereabouts, which meant he had to rely on Mrs. Younge's greed.

Darcy returned to his house, paced in his study. There was no guarantee that Mrs. Younge would contact Wickham, no guarantee that Wickham would contact him. It was possible that Wickham had married Lydia, but if he had, he would have applied to Mr. Bennet for funds. Darcy should visit the Gardiners to find out if Wickham had made such a request.

He couldn't. He had nothing to offer them. He would be acting out of self-indulgence: a desire to share his burdens, to check on Elizabeth's health, her state of mind. He couldn't go to the Gardiners until he knew for certain that everything was fixed.

He went over his conversation with Mrs. Younge—should he have been more threatening? Should he have left more money? Per-

haps, he should have taken a lawyer. What did he know about negotiating with rapacious females?

A message came from Mrs. Younge the next evening: "I have located your missing friend. I will supply more information if you call tomorrow at eleven o'clock."

Darcy went. He handed over additional coins, and Mrs. Younge gave him an address. He hoped it was valid, that he wouldn't have to return for another address for which he would have to pay yet more money. He didn't like being this vulnerable to gluttons and coveters.

He was scowling when he finally came face to face with Wickham.

Chapter 10

*Darcy Finds Wickham,
and Wickham Behaves More or Less as Anyone Might Expect*

Wickham said, "Hello, Darcy. I didn't know you were in London."

Darcy said, "Do you have the youngest Bennet girl with you?"

"The youngest Bennet girl? Do you mean Lydia?"

Darcy waited.

"I didn't expect anyone to know yet. Well, well, well. Rumors spread quickly. Did Miss Bingley burn your ears with scandal?"

"Why Miss Lydia?" Darcy said. "The family is not wealthy—"

"I'm not going to marry the girl." Wickham laughed. "I thought you knew me better than that."

"Why take her at all?" Darcy barked. "You had a good commission."

Wickham looked rueful. "And debts," he said. "Rather a lot of them. Let me tell you, Darcy, soldiers play for high stakes."

"So—" Darcy boggled. "You're hoping the militia will just forget you owe people money?"

"I'm resigning my commission." Wickham shrugged. "Not a lawyer, not a soldier, not a vicar—"

"You gave up that occupation," Darcy snapped, wishing he wouldn't react to Wickham's sneers. He said as calmly as he could, "I want to see Miss Lydia."

"She's not your type." Darcy waited. Wickham shrugged. "Up-

stairs.”

Wickham was lodged near the Strand. The house had several apartments grouped together around a dim stairwell. The only maid—there was also a live-in cook—showed Darcy to the upper room of Wickham’s suite.

“Stay,” Darcy told the maid. She gave him a baffled look but shrugged and followed him through the door.

A young, buxom woman sat by the uneven windows, playing with a kitten. She rose as Darcy entered. He recognized her from Hertfordshire, and he was abruptly conscious that despite her youth, she, like Georgiana, had a full figure. He battled a sudden aching desire to go down and kill the blithe man sitting in the room below. But gratifying his natural man would not help anyone.

“Oh, la,” Miss Lydia said. “It’s Mr. Darcy.”

“Hello, Miss Lydia. I’ve come to return you to your family.”

“Why?”

“They are worried about you. Your sister, Miss Elizabeth, was very upset when she learned you had eloped.”

“Jealous, no doubt,” Miss Lydia said. “I managed to capture Wickham’s affections, not her.”

“Are you sure he cares for you?”

Miss Lydia was astonished rather than offended. “Of course. He gave me Bert—” she held out the kitten. It looked like some species of alley cat.

Darcy found himself exchanging a glance with the maid, who answered with a shrug.

He tried again: “He hasn’t married you.”

“He’s just waiting to get some money that was promised him.”

Darcy stared at her. She was possibly the most non-thinking creature he had ever met. And yet, there was something ingenuous about her; she was amiable if exasperating.

He went down to Wickham’s sitting room, towing the interested maid behind him. It was a wise precaution. Wickham was ready with his smutty accusations: “If you insist on seeing Lydia alone—” stopping when he saw the maid.

“How much are your debts?” Darcy said.

Wickham told him: a considerable amount, but it could have been worse.

“I’m assuming some are debts of honor.”

Wickham made a face.

Darcy was suddenly fed up—with him, this place, the foolish girl upstairs—except Elizabeth’s reputation was at risk, and Elizabeth loved her little sister, and neither she nor her sister would be in this situation had Darcy acted more responsibly.

He said steadily, “You will draw up a list of your debts. You will remain in this house. I don’t have to remind you that duels, despite the pamphleteers, are still fought in England—over debts of honor.”

Wickham blanched. Darcy exited after the maid and gave his feelings some vent by slamming the sitting room door.

At the outside door, the maid said, “Where can I reach you, sir, if he tries to decamp?”

Darcy looked down. The maid, a worn woman of anywhere between sixteen and thirty, looked back at him. Her clothes were grimy, her hair untidy. She had clearly been underfed for most of her life, but her eyes were lively, her mouth formed for laughter, and Darcy’s heart suddenly felt a little lighter. Not everyone was taken in by Wickham.

“What’s your name?”

“Kat, sir. Kat Giles.”

He gave Miss Giles his card and several coins and went down the street, his course clear: he was going to fix this!

Darcy paid a visit to his solicitors the next morning. Now that he knew the amount of Wickham’s debts, he knew what he could offer to gain Wickham’s compliance. He knew, also, what Wickham would try for, but debts of honor were not like ordinary bills, not even for Wickham. If certain soldiers learned of Wickham’s whereabouts, they would show far less restraint than Darcy. It was tempting to tell them. However, soldiers would care little for Lydia Bennet’s situation.

Darcy would have to handle everything. That meant paying out a great deal of money. He did not intend to raise his rents or let go any of his servants. No one under his protection would suffer for Wickham's behavior.

He would sell Munchen Farm. It was not part of the entailed estate but rather a farm his father had purchased during his lifetime. The servants there would have to be relocated to other parts of the Pemberley estate. Luckily, harvest time was nearing when extra laborers were hired by the Pemberley estate proper and by many of Darcy's tenants. The Munchen Farm servants would make up the extra labor force. Darcy would worry about their further employment come winter.

The solicitors were not pleased. Darcy wasn't pleased, but there was no point in dwelling on the odium of the situation. The farm must be sold, the money made available. Wickham's name was mentioned, and the solicitors became frigid with disapproval.

"I would suggest the money not be given directly to Mr. Wickham," said Mr. Garrison, the head solicitor.

"It won't be," Darcy promised.

He returned to Wickham's apartments. "They've been fighting," Miss Giles told Darcy, skipping up the stairs ahead of him. "She's not so sure of marriage since you came."

"Would she leave?" Darcy said, knowing the conversation was improper and not much caring.

"No, sir. He as good as told her he didn't care if she left, but she won't go. That age, they're sure they can get love just by wanting it."

Indeed.

Wickham had made a list of his largest debts. Darcy looked them over, demanding particulars and receipts (some of which Wickham had).

"Are you really going to save my honor?" Wickham said as the day wore on.

"Once you marry Miss Lydia."

Wickham looked pained. "I could make a better marriage."

"Miss King's uncle didn't think so," Darcy said. The uncle broke

up Miss King and Wickham's engagement in May: that piece of information Darcy had had from Mr. Garrison.

Wickham actually flushed and glared.

"You need immediate relief," Darcy said. "I'm offering it."

"I'm not going to marry the chit just to clear some bills."

"I'm aware of that."

A sly sneer crossed Wickham's face. He smoothed it out with a pleased laugh. As Darcy had expected, he suggested that Darcy grant him an improbable sum which, of course, he wanted placed directly in his hands.

"Your debts will be paid," Darcy said, "through my solicitors. Money will be settled on Miss Lydia—in such a way, Wickham, that you will not be able to touch it. A better commission will be purchased for you, and a nominal amount of money will be settled on you."

Wickham protested. A pittance! How typical of Darcy not to be more generous! But all the time, there was wonder in his eyes; he knew Darcy owed him nothing. He couldn't be sure why Darcy was offering such terms. But questioning Darcy's motives would lose him his ability to bargain. Darcy had learned years earlier how Wickham's mind worked.

He went away with Wickham's list of debts. When he returned the next morning, Wickham agreed to all his terms.

Darcy now had to inform the Gardiners of the arrangement. He took a hackney carriage to Gracechurch Street. He rang the bell; a maid answered. Mr. Gardiner, she told Darcy, was engaged with Mr. Bennet.

He hesitated. Mr. Bennet was a poor landowner but not actually neglectful. He would accept the terms Darcy had drawn up—and the money. In fact, Mr. Bennet would need to settle Wickham's bills in Meryton.

The maid waited. Darcy just needed to say, "Tell Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bennet that Mr. Darcy has called with information about Miss Lydia Bennet," and he would be welcomed into the current con-

ference.

Darcy couldn't do it—he didn't know Mr. Bennet, not really. He didn't dislike him, but the man seemed to exist in a perpetual world of diversion at others' expense. Elizabeth found people humorous, but she cared about them too. Darcy wasn't sure what Mr. Bennet cared about. He was afraid Mr. Bennet would look at Darcy in his sardonic, self-deprecating way and say, "Come now, this is all much more than Lydia is worth."

At which point Darcy would snap, "You should care what happens to all your daughters" because a father *ought* to care.

Mr. Gardiner would care. Mr. Gardiner would see the purpose of Darcy's actions. Darcy could work with Mr. Gardiner.

"I will return at a later date," he said and went to the London house.

He ate a light meal and slept fitfully, woke early. He was washing his face with cold water from the night before when he realized he had another reason for avoiding Mr. Bennet—

No one in Meryton could know what he'd done. The Gardiners could be trusted to keep his part a secret. The Bennet parents could not. Elizabeth's reputation would be no better off if Darcy's part was known than if he had never played a part at all. Lydia must be removed to the Gardiners' home as soon as possible; the world must believe she had been there since she left Brighton.

Elizabeth, perhaps, had a right to the whole truth, but Darcy did not have the right to force it on her. Let her believe her uncle had fixed everything.

He ate a small breakfast and took the carriage to Gracechurch Street. This time, Mr. Gardiner was not engaged. He would be down directly. Darcy was admitted and shown to Mr. Gardiner's study. He sank onto a slightly worn but inviting sofa and felt a sudden onslaught of exhaustion. It was almost over, almost fixed. Elizabeth's reputation was safe. No one, except Lydia, was going to pay for Darcy's mistakes, and Lydia didn't seem to know she was paying. Darcy knew, however, and was sorry for it.

He was half-asleep when Mr. Gardiner entered. He roused him-

self as Mr. Gardiner leapt forward, hand extended.

"Mr. Darcy, what brings you here?" he exclaimed and then, before Darcy could respond, "We had such a pleasant time with you at Pemberley. We were sorry to leave so abruptly – as was my niece."

Darcy nodded. "I hope you will visit again," he said. "I am not here, however, with an invitation. I have found Miss Lydia Bennet."

He laid out Wickham's terms, then his plan for dealing with those terms. His inner tension ebbed when Mr. Gardiner quickly appreciated the important point: the need to secure the marriage through the careful distribution of money, little of which would pass directly through Wickham's hands.

The only argument Darcy had with Mr. Gardiner – and later, Mrs. Gardiner – was over who should pledge the money. Mr. Gardiner wanted to take on the whole expense. Darcy had looked over the Gardiners' home; it was large and harmonious with comfortable, tasteful furnishings. He admired the paintings on the wall and the well-stocked bookcases. Mr. Gardiner was a prosperous man. But he was not prosperous to the tune of 9,653 pounds. He had, moreover, five children. Darcy could not allow this family, this overly generous family, to burden itself financially. Darcy would manage the whole; it was, in any case, his problem. He would fix it.

Lydia would come to Gracechurch Street. Once she and Wickham were married, Wickham would receive his commission plus the money promised him (which he would spend on himself; hence the individual settlement on Lydia).

"Oh, you are obstinate," Mrs. Gardiner told Darcy, half fretful, half laughing.

"That is not the worst of faults," Darcy said.

"I could also accuse you of a lack of liveliness," she said, "but I think marriage would cure that," and she kissed his cheek.

Darcy had estate business at Pemberley, not to mention the still-visiting Bingleys, but he returned to London for Lydia and Wickham's wedding. He dined with the Gardiners the day after the newlyweds' departure. The Gardiners were more than a little relieved;

they had put Lydia up for a full two weeks and Wickham was a constant visitor.

“Now my brother-in-law can deal with him,” Mr. Gardiner said. Lydia and Wickham were visiting Longbourn before they went north to join Wickham’s new regiment.

“She may not have a good husband,” Mrs. Gardiner said, “but she will relish living amongst officers.”

Free of Lydia and Wickham, Darcy enjoyed his time with the Gardiners immensely. They seemed to have no agenda, no insistent, if unspoken, expectations regarding how Darcy should behave.

He needed *some* expectations, of course. He needed someone to poke him when he got too comfortable. But there was a difference between the constant, avid watchfulness of someone like Miss Bingley and the casual, kind insightfulness of Miss Elizabeth. Elizabeth would become more and more like her aunt as she grew older, no matter they were not blood relations.

He wished he could see Elizabeth. She would not, of course, be open now to his suit. His wretched incompetence had plunged her sister into marriage with a profligate. But they could be friends, and friendship with Elizabeth was worth a thousand romantic poems filled with fluffy sentiments.

He had to return to Pemberley first. The reorganization of the servants was currently underway and the early harvest. The sooner he completed his duties there, the sooner he could visit Hertfordshire.

Before he left for Pemberley, he issued an order to his London butler, Mr. Poole. Mr. Poole was to visit a certain house—Darcy gave him the address—and hire the services, should she agree, of a servant woman named Miss Katrina Giles.

Chapter 11

Darcy Decides to Propose to Elizabeth (Again), and Takes Awhile Getting Around to It

Pemberley was thankfully quiet. The Bingley sisters had gone to visit friends in Scarborough. Miss Bingley had angled, more tentatively than usual, for an extended invitation, but Georgiana, Darcy was pleased to learn, had resisted all pressure to agree.

Charles remained. He spent days riding about the Derbyshire countryside and evenings playing fox and geese board games with Darcy and Georgiana in the library.

A few weeks after Darcy returned from London, Charles shuffled into his study. Darcy finished checking a report from Max about Pemberley's orchards and looked up.

"I'm going to Netherfield for the shooting," Charles said, his eyes aimed somewhere over Darcy's head.

Darcy's pulse quickened. He and Max were almost caught up with estate business; Darcy could afford a few weeks away from Pemberley. He opened his mouth—

"You'll come, won't you?" Charles said.

"Of course."

Charles's gaze swerved towards the study's curtains. "The eldest Bennet sister is still unattached," he told the curtains.

"Yes."

Charles nodded to the curtains and went out.

So Charles was still loyal to Miss Jane Bennet's memory. Of

course. Despite Charles's zeal for spontaneity, he was faithful, unswerving, decent to his heart's core. Darcy knew that, had always known that. He should have relied on what he knew about Charles a year ago, the last time they were at Netherfield.

This time, he would encourage Charles—if Charles needed encouragement.

"We're visiting Netherfield," he told Georgiana. He couldn't invite her. Without the Bingley sisters, this was strictly a bachelors' hunting party, though if the sisters had been included, Darcy would still have resisted bringing Georgiana. She would likely not return to school; those days were over, but he wanted to give her more freedom, more relaxed days at Pemberley, before she joined the house-party circuit. The constant cycle of visits was nothing to look forward to. Marriage looked better to Darcy everyday.

Georgiana appeared to think the same. "I like having Pemberley to myself now and again," she told him, adding demurely, "Give my best wishes to Miss Elizabeth."

Darcy wished he could tell her there was hope.

Darcy and Charles arrived at Netherfield. They went shooting. Darcy walked the grounds and spoke to the new land steward. He seemed rather depressed, but Darcy couldn't summon up energy to badger Charles about Netherfield's property.

"We should call on the Bennets," Charles said one morning as if the thought had just occurred to him. Darcy didn't cavil. They rode over after breakfast and found the Bennet women gathered in Longbourn's drawing room.

Mrs. Bennet, of course, was ecstatic to see Charles. Charles bowed self-consciously and sat down near Miss Jane Bennet. Darcy glanced at Elizabeth. She had greeted him but was focused now on her sewing and didn't look up. He asked after the Gardiners. She answered in a stilted manner.

Darcy sat on a hard little chair and felt miserable. What had he expected? She had suffered days of uncertainty when her sister eloped with Wickham. She knew how culpable Darcy was there, how

much to blame for Wickham's behavior in the first place. Any kindness she may have felt for Darcy at Pemberley would have been wiped away by now.

Mrs. Bennet rattled on about Miss Lydia and the shooting season. Darcy sat there and wished he had stayed away. The friendship he had hoped for—restored when Elizabeth visited Pemberley—seemed to have permanently faded. In a few more years, Darcy would simply be “that gentleman with the big estate who stayed at Netherfield two autumns.”

There was Charles to consider. Miss Bennet seemed pleased to see Charles, if quiet. But then that was her nature. It was not her sister's; Elizabeth would never be so silent unless Darcy's coming embarrassed her.

“Miss Jane is unchanged,” Charles cried as they rode back to Netherfield. “So good-natured and kind and lovely. Don't you agree?”

Darcy uh-huhhed absently.

“They've invited us to dine,” Charles said, and for once, Darcy was grateful for forced communal exchanges. Perhaps, he would get a chance to speak to Elizabeth one-on-one. Their conversations always went better one-on-one. They could clear the air. Darcy could leave Hertfordshire knowing Elizabeth still thought well of him.

Elizabeth did speak more to Darcy at the Longbourn dinner—a brief remark about Georgiana—but it wasn't like before. Nothing would ever be like before. Perhaps, second chances were a possibility but third chances? Darcy knew better.

Charles was certainly getting his second chance. He spent the entire evening at Miss Bennet's side. On their way back to Netherfield, he said to Darcy, “Isn't Miss Bennet remarkable? Even you have to admit she is quite unique.”

Darcy had admitted it, rather incessantly, over the past twenty-four hours. He glanced at Charles, sighing, and found that Charles was watching him earnestly.

“Do you intend to court her?” Darcy said. Surely, Charles had al-

ready decided.

“Yes!” The reply was explosive. “So, you approve? You didn’t approve a year ago.”

Darcy slowed his horse. “I owe you an apology there, Charles. I presumed where I shouldn’t have when I gave you my advice. And I kept from you that Miss Bennet visited your sisters in London.”

“When? They never –”

“In January. I convinced them the connection was a bad one.”

“Oh.” There was silence, then, “You had no right to do that,” Bingley said stiffly.

“I was wrong. I was also wrong about Miss Bennet’s feelings.”

“In what way?”

“She cares for you.”

“Really?”

Darcy gazed at him wonderingly. He had expected more recriminations, but Charles only looked pleased.

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t mention what Elizabeth had told him at Rosings about her sister’s feelings. Instead, “She is pleased to see you when we visit Longbourn. She prefers your company to everyone else’s.”

“Then if I propose,” Charles said, “you won’t be upset?”

“Of course not,” Darcy said, rather startled, and Charles beamed.

Darcy went up to London the next day. There were papers to sign regarding Munchen Farm. It had been purchased by Lord Crambourne, who owned land in Derbyshire. Darcy was pleased: Crambourne was a good landlord and would make a good neighbor; Darcy hoped he would rehire many of the Munchen Farm servants.

The London house was quiet. Darcy and the staff ran across each other sporadically, usually at meal times, though one morning, Darcy encountered a maid washing the stoop. She stepped back, said, “Morning, sir,” in a singing way, and he recognized a primly dressed, well-fed Miss Giles.

He considered calling on the Gardiners, where he could pretend for an hour or two that they were all back in Pemberley in the hal-

cyon summer days before everything Darcy wanted collapsed forever. But Darcy's daydreams didn't justify bothering the family.

He returned from the solicitors one afternoon to find the London house in an uproar. Lady Catherine was in town. She had stopped by that morning to see Darcy. She was most displeased that he was out. Darcy, sighing, told Mr. Poole to ready the kitchen—Lady Catherine would insist on coming to dinner at least once—and prepared to stay at home the next few days. Avoiding Lady Catherine would only prolong the inevitable encounter.

To his surprise, Lady Catherine returned that afternoon. She had many friends and relations in London; Darcy would have thought her wholly occupied in bothering them. Luckily, the cook, used to Lady Catherine's unexpected assaults, had already restocked the larder. Darcy offered a meal; Lady Catherine swept it aside.

"I have alarming news," she announced. Darcy sat in the chilly drawing room—there was no point wasting fuel by lighting a fire—and waited for her to finish: perhaps, Lady Catherine's housekeeper had finally gotten fed up and left.

"Your name, my dear nephew, is being bandied about in the worst way."

Darcy cringed inwardly. Had she heard about Wickham and Miss Lydia (Mrs. Wickham now)? How could she have heard?

"In connection with Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"Miss Elizabeth?"

"You are right to be astonished. I can hardly believe it. The rumors people spread—you know the oldest daughter is marrying your friend—"

Darcy didn't know, but he wasn't surprised: Charles and his spontaneity. *Good for Charles.*

"—an advantageous match for her, I must say. Though he is from trade. But there is no reason for people to suppose that simply because you are friends, you would marry the sister. I can confirm absolutely there was no suggestion of such an idea when you visited Rosings."

Only a rejected proposal.

"I have done what I can to squelch this odious gossip. I even visited the girl."

"What?"

"Can you believe it, Darcy? She knows that such a connection would be improper, but she refused to deny the rumor. Yes, I can see that astonishes you." Darcy had risen and was gaping at his aunt. "An obvious falsehood, yet she refused to admit it. I explained about Anne—"

Darcy blinked, head cocked. *What about Anne?*

Lady Catherine coughed and waved a hand. "And she still refused to acknowledge there is no attachment between you. She knows she would disgrace you."

"No," Darcy said, but Lady Catherine didn't hear him. She continued, her voice rising: "She knows our family would never accept her."

John would. Georgiana would.

"Yet she remained obstinate. She wasn't even worried about her low connections."

What respectable, uncomplicated relations the Gardiners would make! As for Mrs. Bennet, well, Pemberley is a long way from Longbourn.

"She finally admitted there was no engagement, but she would not promise to never enter into one. I realize you would never offer for her, but her willingness to countenance the possibility will only further the rumors. She actually intimated that it was none of my business—"

On and on went Lady Catherine's voice. Darcy slumped beside the unlit fire and replayed Lady Catherine's words in his head: *She would not promise to never enter into one.*

Into an engagement. With Darcy.

She would not promise to never enter into an engagement with me.

If she had decided against Darcy, she would have said so. She may have scrupled at being too blunt, but she would have been frank about her emotions, especially to Lady Catherine.

"You must persuade her to stop these rumors," his aunt was saying.

Darcy nodded absently. Had Elizabeth's feelings changed since April? He'd hoped so at Pemberley, but there hadn't been enough time to judge. If her feelings had changed, why hadn't she spoken to him when he visited Longbourn with Charles?

You didn't speak to her, he reminded himself. But Elizabeth was better at that sort of thing.

He shrugged. It didn't matter. She wasn't opposed to the idea of engagement – that was what mattered.

Darcy finished his business with the solicitors. Two days later he was at Netherfield where Charles was full of his engagement: Miss Bennet had said, "Yes." Wasn't it amazing? Wasn't it marvelous? They would be married before Christmas. Would Darcy be his best man? Charles could not believe his luck.

"It's rather hard to talk to her alone," he admitted. "Mrs. Bennet –" He paused judiciously. "She likes to, ah, discuss the wedding. But I have a walk in mind for tomorrow. Will you come?"

Absolutely. Darcy had never been more in favor of a social undertaking. He dressed carefully the next morning, smoothing his undomesticated curls with scent, then washing his hair to get out the scent (Elizabeth wouldn't care for it), then plastering the curls against his head.

Charles, he noted rather sourly, looked exactly the same as usual.

Mrs. Bennet was delighted to see them, even Darcy; she especially wanted to tell Darcy about Lady Catherine's visit. Darcy cringed, ready to apologize for his aunt's behavior, but Charles cut in with his offer of a walk. Three sisters, plus Charles and Darcy, set off towards the Lucases.

Charles and Miss Bennet fell further and further behind. The younger sister, Kitty, left Elizabeth and Darcy at the Lucases' gate. Darcy was relieved Elizabeth didn't want to go in. He needed time and relative solitude to order his thoughts, to prepare himself to propose.

Suppose she refuses to hear me out?

After all, she might have said what she did to Lady Catherine out

of annoyance. Her association with Darcy was, after all, none of Lady Catherine's business. Or Lady Catherine might have misunderstood or misread Elizabeth's remarks.

Suppose she says "no"?

Darcy could hardly contemplate the possibility, the heartbreak. He wasn't good at heartbreak. Yet—

Suppose she wants to answer "yes," and I don't ask?

Elizabeth interrupted his thoughts. "I must thank you for your intervention with Wickham."

Darcy frowned. He'd trusted the Gardiners not to report his involvement.

It wasn't the Gardiners, Elizabeth reassured him, but Lydia. And Elizabeth was grateful. "Let me thank you again and again on behalf of my family, for that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications, to discover Wickham and Lydia."

Some of Darcy's alarm ebbed away. She wasn't angry because he hadn't acted sooner or faster. She was appreciative; she understood what he'd been though. He'd done it for her, not her family. He said so, which struck him, after the fact, as a little rude, but Elizabeth blushed and looked at the ground.

Darcy loosed a sigh of relief. She wasn't acting unapproachable like she had in the house. He should have remembered that Elizabeth could be as cautious, as reserved, as Darcy upon occasion.

He said, "You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever."

He waited, and the world seemed to shrink like a bubble around him. He didn't hear the birds or wind or carts rumbling down the road. He waited in that narrow, quiet place where all he saw was Elizabeth's face.

"Y-you are so generous," she stammered. (Elizabeth stammering!) "My feelings now in no way resemble my feelings then. I would be honored, happy to receive your addresses."

Darcy almost laughed. She had agreed. It seemed such an unlikely turn of events that he stood for several more seconds in the bubble. And then he was back in the lane with the birds chirping, the wind rustling the trees. He could hear workers in the fields, see the gray of early frost on the grass. He was holding Elizabeth's warm hand, and her cheek was close against his coat.

"I am a lucky man," he told her because she needed to know. Her good sense and humor, her kindness and intelligence, her beautiful eyes—all these things were more than Darcy had ever anticipated in a mate. He described them all to her, and it was the easiest thing he'd ever done.

They walked on, hands clasped. They discussed Lady Catherine, Elizabeth laughing at Darcy's explanation: "I knew enough of your disposition to know had you been irrevocably decided against me, you would have said so."

Elizabeth blushed and nodded. He was right; he knew her very well. On her side, she admitted that Darcy had not been wrong to think she was interested—if not enamored—when he first came to Hertfordshire, but, she said, his behavior confused her. She was sure he was being critical when, Darcy assured her, he was only being cautiously attentive.

Thank goodness she visited Pemberley.

She referred, shyly, to his proposal at Rosings. That same day, she'd learned from John how actively Darcy had opposed Charles's match with Jane (Darcy shook his head over John's breezy confidences). Moreover, it was while she was in Hunsford that Elizabeth learned by letter how much Jane's hopes of meeting Charles in London had failed.

"She went there on purpose?" Darcy exclaimed, trying to match such forthright pursuit with Jane's reserve.

Elizabeth blushed again and admitted she had encouraged Jane to visit the Gardiners and call on the Bingleys.

"I was disappointed for her sake. I should never have treated you so harshly that day. I wished afterwards—but I thought I'd lost my chance," she said and shivered.

Darcy understood her fear of what so easily might not have been and hugged her shoulders.

And, he informed her, she hadn't been harsh at Rosings. Darcy had been an ass. He was better behaved now.

He asked about the letter. Had she even read it? She had; she'd believed everything he wrote about Wickham. "I'm ashamed at how easily I initially accepted his point of view. But then, I was offended by your rejection of me at the assembly ball."

"I didn't know it was you," Darcy said.

She laughed, then nudged Darcy—they shouldn't dwell on the past; they were different people now.

Darcy agreed. She was so wise, his Elizabeth, but he'd waited several months to explain his character to her. He did so now carefully, seriously, and she listened attentively, though occasionally her eyes glinted with familiar amusement. Darcy didn't mind.

They reverted to a happier subject: Charles and Elizabeth's sister. Darcy related how he'd confessed his unjustifiable interference to Charles, and Elizabeth commended his honesty. She seemed to think he had pushed Charles to propose to Jane, but, Darcy assured her, Charles had intended to offer before he returned to Netherfield.

Elizabeth grinned. Darcy eyed her suspiciously, but she only leaned against him, and he grunted with bone-deep relief and satisfaction. Elizabeth was going to marry him. Finally, he could relax.

Relax to a point. Marriage, Darcy knew, involved other people. He told himself sternly that he would bear up under Mrs. Bennet's raptures and the Longbourn neighbors' curiosity.

Speaking to Elizabeth's father was easy in comparison. Darcy brought the full weight of his personality and position to the interview; he didn't want to listen to Mr. Bennet's wry comments on his supposedly-unmarriageable daughters (though the man seemed to have real affection for Elizabeth). He left the interview with Mr. Bennet's surprised, if bemused, approval.

Mrs. Bennet naturally had no objections at all. "Ten thousand a year!" she crowed. Elizabeth blushed, and Darcy refrained from correcting Mrs. Bennet's slightly-incorrect assessment.

The Collinses visited Longbourn, and Mr. Collins fawned on Darcy and Elizabeth. His conversation hinted at Lady Catherine's horror over the engagement; Darcy had no doubt that Mr. Collins deplored the engagement at Rosings as much as he praised it in Meryton.

He was surprised Mr. Collins's comments didn't rouse Elizabeth to her usual sarcasm. Their engagement seemed to have increased, rather than allayed, her nervousness. "You bear his fawning so composedly," she said to Darcy, half-impressed, half-exasperated.

"We're engaged," Darcy said, which he figured explained everything, but Elizabeth only shook her head and sighed. At least, she relaxed around Darcy.

Mr. Collins wasn't the only fawner. Sir William congratulated Darcy on "carrying away the brightest jewel of the country" and asked, naturally, when he would see Darcy dance at St. James with his wife. Darcy just smiled. When Sir William was gone, he shrugged for Elizabeth's benefit, and they shared reminiscences of their dances together.

"Will I still have to do most of the talking?" Elizabeth said, and Darcy said, "Yes."

Georgiana wrote to Elizabeth and to Darcy. Elizabeth showed Georgiana's letter to Darcy—four pages—but wouldn't let him read it.

To Darcy, Georgiana wrote, "Thank you for my new sister. I will see you both soon."

The weddings—his and Elizabeth's, Charles and Jane's—would occur in early December. Darcy and Elizabeth would spend Christmas at Pemberley with Georgiana and the Gardiners. The Gardiners, Elizabeth told Darcy, were pleased to gain such a worthy nephew.

"I am pleased to gain such goodhearted relations," Darcy said.

A year ago, he had left Pemberley alone to visit Netherfield. Now, he would return there with a new bride; his sister, new aunt and uncle would be waiting.

There were times during the courtship when, Elizabeth coming to meet Darcy on the road between Netherfield and Longbourn, Darcy would halt his horse, watch her come, and say aloud, "I am a man of remarkable good fortune."

Chapter 12

Darcy Betrays a Thorough Understanding of Human Biology

Darcy trotted upstairs to find Mrs. Reynolds and his wife removing the curtains in the front guest bedroom. He tucked his hands behind his back. He had been helping Max and the Walston boys unearth a tree trunk in Pemberley's west pasture, and his hands were filthy. Lizzy wouldn't care, but Mrs. Reynolds would scold.

"These curtains can be hung in the back room," Lizzy was saying. "I'm thinking blue curtains in here – what do you think?"

"They won't be too dark?" Mrs. Reynolds said.

"Maybe –" Lizzy frowned. "Green, perhaps?"

"I'll bring up some swatches," Mrs. Reynolds said. She gave Darcy a sharp look, but he smiled – *You can charm anyone when you smile*, Lizzy would tell him – and Mrs. Reynolds only sniffed and went out.

He sat on the divan at the end of the bed and yawned. He hadn't meant to help with the tree trunk, but it was frustrating to stand by and watch people mishandle a task. He studied his hands and wondered if there was any more castile soap in the house.

Lizzy was walking back and forth in front of the windows. His wife had an eye for color and had evinced an interest in decorating that surprised and sometimes alarmed Darcy. She was, however, much more frugal than he had anticipated.

He said, "Charles is looking at estates in Stafford," and grinned as

Lizzy spun towards him.

"That's wonderful. Oh—" She paled and sat abruptly on the divan.

Darcy looked at her in concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Oh, Will, it would be wonderful to have them so close."

"I thought you'd be pleased." He gave Lizzy a hug and started to rise—they probably had some castile soap in the downstairs wash-room—then stopped. Lizzy was short of breath as well as pale.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

She shook her head, frustrated. "Lately—I haven't been feeling so good. I'll be fine by lunch."

"Maybe you're starting a baby," Darcy said and headed towards the door.

He was halfway across the room when Lizzy said, "Will!" and he turned back. She sat on the divan, staring at him, her face pale, eyes large.

"I think you're right," she said, slightly stunned.

Darcy shook his head. Why was she surprised? Her mother was fertile—she had given birth to five healthy daughters and survived.

He went back and kissed the top of his wife's head. He was pleased, though babies at this stage always seemed rather remote to Darcy. He usually visited them in his tenants' cottages after their births, bestowing coins, best wishes, and the occasional sapling.

Of course, this baby—his and Elizabeth's baby—would garner far more attention and resources than Darcy had ever drawn on before. But Darcy rather liked the idea of introducing a new relation to the delights of Pemberley.

"I've never had a baby," Lizzy said to his shirt, which made Darcy laugh. She grimaced up at him. "I've taken care of children, but this—"

"Lizzy," Darcy said, still amused, "you can do anything."

She laughed then and pushed him away: "Get along, you."

Darcy went out to find the castile soap. As clever as his wife was, he thought as he ran down the stairs, there were times when she could be downright obtuse.

About the Author

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