

Chapter One

“I certainly will not return to Hertfordshire,” Fitzwilliam Darcy groused. “And most definitely not on Mr. Collins’s behalf.” The idea of seeing Elizabeth Bennet again so soon after her refusal of his hand was not to be fathomed.

He had been with her when Mrs. Collins had come running to bring Miss Elizabeth an express from Longbourn. Only moments earlier, he had met Elizabeth at the gate where the grove edged the park and placed his letter of explanation into her hands. He had wanted more time to study her sweet countenance—time to memorize every feature to cherish when he considered giving his heart to another, but he had no more said, “I have been walking the grove some time in the hope of meeting you. Will you do me the honor of reading that letter?” before another called to her.

In what appeared to be panic, Miss Elizabeth had stuffed his letter into a pocket of her pelisse and turned away from him. “Pardon,” she murmured before moving off in the direction of the lane, which led further from the turnpike road. With nothing else to do, he had presented her retreating form a slight bow before turning again into the plantation without a proper farewell between them. It was only through his cousin that he had learned the express had come from Miss Mary Bennet, delivering the news of their father’s passing. The Collinses had received a similar letter from Sir William Lucas. Darcy had immediately extended an offer of his traveling coach for her journey, and his cousin had personally seen her off to Hertfordshire, while all Darcy could do was to stare out the window in the direction of Hunsford Cottage and say a private prayer for the quick healing of her heart.

He wished he had been in a position to rush to the Collinses’ cottage and offer Miss Elizabeth his comfort—to hold her until she had spent her tears and to whisper words of assurance that he would see to her care and her protection. However, he did not possess the right to act as such, for he was *the last man in the world* whom she could ever be prevailed upon to marry.

“There is no one else,” Lady Catherine’s shrill voice dragged him from his musings. “Even if there was a decent inn in Meryton, and Mr. Collins affirms there is not, I cannot go. It would not be proper. Mr. Collins is my rector, not my relation. Moreover, I must interview those who wish to replace him. I cannot rush off to assure myself the Bennets do not take more from the estate than is their due.”

“Should such not be Mr. Collins’s responsibility? To secure his inheritance? Certainly the Bennets have an executor of the estate in place,” he remarked with disinterest in anything but Elizabeth Bennet’s welfare. “The man has inherited the property. He should be the one counting the silver and examining the household books.” Darcy did not think he could bear viewing Miss Elizabeth brought low. He seriously doubted Mr. Bennet had dutifully provided for his family. In his observations, Darcy had thought Bennet performed in an indolent manner.

“Collins has agreed to stay on until I can locate a replacement; therefore, I have promised to protect his interests in Hertfordshire,” his aunt said in that matter-of-fact tone she often employed.

Darcy shook his head, refusing to give in. “I still do not see how any of this becomes my burden.”

He waited. Counted to ten and ten more. Waited for his aunt to rap her cane upon the floor to express her displeasure. Waited for her outrage. Instead, she responded in what sounded

of calmness, a fact that set Darcy's equilibrium off balance. "You are correct: Collins is not your responsibility, but Anne is."

Darcy's frown deepened. It would be necessary for him to proceed cautiously, guarding his words, until he knew his aunt's intent. When Lady Catherine spoke of Anne and him in the same sentence, he knew something was afoot. "How has Anne become my charge? If something were to happen to you, Matlock would assist his niece. Moreover, Anne is of age. My cousin may name her way if she so chooses."

"Your idealism is your weakness, Darcy," his aunt responded with a challenging lift of her eyebrows. "You believe Anne can find her way without a man to guide her."

"I *will not* entertain this conversation again," he said stubbornly. "I adore Anne, but I will not marry her. We would not suit."

"So says my daughter." His aunt's sudden change of heart had Darcy's every nerve on alert. "Anne has begged for a Season, but I have been reluctant to agree. However, I might be persuaded to alter my opinion if—"

"If what?" Darcy demanded. Lady Catherine's gestures and features were too amiable for Darcy to know ease.

"As you well know," she began again in what sounded of reasonable tones, "I am most attentive to my duties." Darcy resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I have made a promise to Mr. Collins to see him well-situated in Hertfordshire." In other words, his Aunt Catherine wished to brag to all those under her tutelage of her assisting Collins. "However, aiding my current rector, while employing his replacement, would consume too much of my time. I could not oversee Anne's entrance into Society. Matlock's countess has offered to introduce Anne at several events, but anyone who knows my sister-in-marriage knows she was never the most attentive mother. How can I expect Lady Matlock to tend to Anne's delicate nature? I am one of the few people who know my daughter's frangible side."

As realization dawned, Darcy's eyes narrowed. "You mean to make me the thief who steals away Anne's opportunity for a Season," he accused.

"Certainly not," she protested, but Darcy noted the shift of her shoulders, as if Lady Catherine assumed an enviable position. "Anne is sensible enough to realize Mr. Collins's future must take priority over a few balls and afternoon teas. After all, my daughter possesses no one depending upon her for his support. She has not known a day of labor."

As much as Darcy despised his aunt's manipulations, a part of him admired how easily she had assaulted his sense of honor. Lady Catherine knew he was incapable of denying those he loved, and he was excessively fond of his sickly cousin. "Yet, I would imagine, if I chose to oversee Collins's interest, *say for a month*, you would feel comfortable in allowing Anne to claim a husband, *who is not me*." He stressed the facts upon which they must still come to an agreement, for they both knew he would relent in such a matter. If Anne was not successful during the Season, he did not want Lady Catherine again to take up her pleas for him to marry his cousin.

"Naturally," she agreed readily, having won her concessions. "Without worrying over Collins's inheritance, I would have more time to devote to Anne's comportment. It is not my wish to have my daughter leave me, but, in the natural order of things, I possess no choice, so I consider it my duty to make certain a man who sees her only as an heiress does not turn her head."

Darcy held his tongue. He understood Lady Catherine completely: His aunt wished Anne to marry a man her ladyship could control, just as she controlled Mr. Collins and all her tenants.

Otherwise, the gentleman could banish her to one of the other properties which were part of the De Bourgh inheritance or to the dower house.

His aunt continued. Their negotiation was not over. "I would assume your cousin will require *more than a month* to claim success in Society."

"Six weeks maximum," Darcy bargained. "I have my own estate to which to attend. Naturally, you and Anne are welcome to spend longer in London, but you must have a replacement for Mr. Collins by that time or else your rector must name another to act in his stead. He has a father-in-marriage who has been knighted by the King. Sir William Lucas can assume the duties, or you might suggest another to Collins. I am certain your man of business could successfully oblige you." The idea of spending more than a few weeks in the neighborhood with Elizabeth Bennet, especially as Wickham was still part of the Meryton militia, shook Darcy to his core. But perhaps his presence in Hertfordshire could convince Elizabeth she had judged him harshly. Although he knew there was no hope for them, he would prefer not to leave her thinking poorly of his character. "*More importantly,*" he emphasized, "*I insist Anne should remain in the Capital long enough to discover a gentleman to her liking.*"

"I suppose I can conduct my interviews while in London," his aunt observed. Darcy instantly knew such was her intent all along. "And although Anne will know disappointment at losing your attention, she will recover. The newness of a Season should resolve any lingering doubts."

Darcy wondered if Anne would be permitted truly to experience life in London, but all he could do would be to provide his cousin the opportunity to discover someone who would cherish her for herself. He would speak to his uncle and ask Lord Matlock to intervene with his sister once Lady Catherine and Anne arrived in London. Perhaps the earl could "encourage" several suitors to seek out Anne.

"Then instruct Mr. Collins to draft a letter naming me as his agent. Also ask him to provide me copies of any correspondence he has received from Mr. Bennet's man of business or his solicitor since it became known that Collins was the heir to Longbourn. Meanwhile, I will contact Mr. Bingley regarding the use of Netherfield Park. You are correct: The inn in Meryton could only be termed as mediocre at best." *In addition, I am less likely to encounter Wickham if I am not in the village*, he thought. "I must see to Colonel Fitzwilliam's return to Town. I assume you do not intend to travel to London in the next few days."

"Certainly not," his aunt declared. "It shall take a sennight, at least, before we can depart. There is so much to do. Appointments for fittings. Making arrangements to stay at Matlock House or to let a house. Making inquiries of a suitable replacement for Mr. Collins."

"In that case, perhaps Collins could forward me the necessary papers to Darcy House. Bingley should still be in Town, and I can speak both to him about the availability of Netherfield Park and to Matlock upon your behalf when I return Fitzwilliam to his duties."

"You mean to depart so soon?" she questioned.

"Mr. Farrin should return with my coach later this evening," he explained. "I will set a course for London tomorrow. Now, if you will pardon me, I have much to accomplish." Darcy did not wait for his aunt's acknowledgement. His decision made, he anticipated the opportunity to look again upon Elizabeth Bennet. He had presented her his letter. Surely sometime between yesterday morning's encounter and next week, when he would arrive in Hertfordshire, Miss Elizabeth would recognize something of his worth.

* * *

Elizabeth reread the note addressed to her in her father's handwriting. It was typical of Mr. Thomas Bennet to have the last laugh. Even in death, her dearest "Papa" meant to vex his wife and family. Despite her continued tears, the idea made her smile.

She and her family lived, as Sir Thomas Browne ascribed in his *Pseudodoxia epidemica*, on "borrowed days." With the unanticipated death of her father, their treasured Longbourn now belonged to Mr. Bennet's cousin, Mr. William Collins. It would be a few weeks before all the paperwork would be completed, but soon all of Longbourn would be "entailed away from her own children," as her mother was so fond of saying during each bout of Mrs. Bennet's nerves. So, in between their own fits of tears, she and her sister Jane had attempted to make out all the papers her Uncle Philips had placed before them.

From what she could tell, there was not much they could consider their own. There had always been the promise of a son to secure the entail, but her mother had produced only healthy daughters. The one son the Bennets had sired had died two days after his birth. She, her sisters, and mother would be separated, becoming charity cases of loving, but far from wealthy relatives. As it was now, she and Jane would be placed with the Gardiners in London, in hopes they could each better find gainful employment in the Capital. Mrs. Bennet and Lydia would join Uncle Philips's household, while Kitty's and Mary's placement was still questionable. Uncle Gardiner knew of several teaching positions in schools in Bath and Liverpool and Winchester. If she and Jane could each claim one of those or a placement as a governess or lady's companion, then Mary and Kitty could reside with the Gardiners. The uncertainty had worn on Elizabeth's frail composure as easily as the knowledge she would never again share an afternoon of quiet conversation with her father.

A light tap on the door to Mr. Bennet's study brought Jane to their father's private hideaway. "You wished to see me?" her sister asked. Jane's lovely countenance displayed dark circles under her cornflower blue eyes. Too much crying. Too many worries. Too little time.

"Yes, I desire your opinion."

Jane glanced about the room. "I see you have made progress."

Elizabeth had been delegated the task of inventorying her father's library and study.

"*I cannot believe that awful Mr. Collins will have his greasy hands all over Mr. Bennet's books. Your papa loved his books,*" Mrs. Bennet had lamented more than once of late.

"*Sometimes more than he did any of us, with perhaps the exception of Lizzy.*"

"*How soon Mama forgets she once thought Mr. Collins would make you a fair husband,*" Jane had sympathized when Mrs. Bennet's words had found a target in the shape of Elizabeth.

With a shrug of indifference, Elizabeth returned to the task at hand. There would be more than enough time to worry over every cutting remark her mother had rained down upon her head once they were all settled elsewhere. "Yes, but I require your assistance with something I have discovered among Mr. Bennet's books." She retrieved her father's note from a copy of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. "This is a letter to me from our father."

"Oh, Lizzy. How wonderful. You will have something personal of Papa's to call your own."

Elizabeth swallowed a deep steadying breath. "I am not certain Papa meant this," she held up the pages, "to bring me comfort. It is more of a puzzle he has provided me."

"A puzzle? Whatever can you mean?"

"Just read it and tell me what you think," Elizabeth insisted.

Once her sister was settled in a chair, Elizabeth looked on as her sister's countenance turned to one of confusion. Jane returned to the second page and then again back to the first.

“What house?” Jane whispered. “I know of no house associated with great-great-grandmother Eugenia other than Pence Hall. But we could not expect any relief from that quarter. The connection is too weak for that particular branch of the family to acknowledge us. There was that whole scandal when Eugenia’s daughter left her husband and moved to Scotland, so she might achieve a divorce in order to marry another, only to lose her life within a week after the deed was done. Pence Hall is not associated with the Gardiners, but rather with the Sommers family—Eugenia’s maiden name.”

Elizabeth pointed to the paper still in her sister’s hands. “But Eugenia Rose Sommers Gardiner is Mrs. Bennet’s great-grandmother and our great-great-grandmother, is she not?” Elizabeth persisted.

Jane reasoned, “To the best of my knowledge, but we should examine Mama’s Bible to look at her family tree. Mama keeps excellent records of her family within the pages.” Her sister’s eyes returned to their father’s letter. “It would be remarkable if this house—if this estate could be our answered prayer.”

“Such was my thought also. Obviously, we must locate the papers from Eugenia’s estate. The ones of which Papa speaks in his letter. Our father says he placed them in a safe location. We must discover them before Mr. Collins takes residency at Longbourn. Otherwise, we will never be in a position to claim this blessing.”

“I assume you have looked in the more obvious places.”

“His desk. The safe. Papa’s quarters,” Elizabeth confirmed. “This letter was inside Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*.”

“I would say it is much ado about everything,” Jane corrected. “So like our father to make light of our situation.”

“Agreed.” Elizabeth’s mind raced with the possibilities. “Therefore, I would ask you to examine the books I have already returned to the shelves, as well as to go through Mr. Bennet’s papers again to determine if I simply overlooked a copy of his will.”

“A letter with promise? Could this be legal? Would this assist us if we cannot find the latest copy of Mr. Bennet’s will?” Jane held up the letter.

“I doubt Papa’s words would stand in court, but I have no way of knowing what is legal and what would be ignored. Women have so few rights in these matters. Moreover, I do not want to ask too many questions, for fear someone will intervene, and we will lose this opportunity. Mr. Bennet references his copy of Eugenia’s papers. Our best hope—likely our only hope—is to locate both our father’s will and the information he gathered on Eugenia’s.”

“At least now we understand why Papa never appeared to be concerned about what would happen to us when Mr. Collins inherited Longbourn.”

Elizabeth accepted the letter’s return from her sister. “I believe Mr. Bennet was more cognizant of his failures than we once thought. The letter is dated about the time we received notice of Mr. Collins’s first visit to Longbourn.” She glanced again to the letter. “I wonder what Mr. Bennet means by ‘There is more.’ And where is the house that can only be inherited by a family with no male heirs?”

“We could ask Mama,” Jane suggested.

Elizabeth shook off the idea. “I think it best, for the moment, if we keep this information to ourselves. We must learn more of the facts before we expose this idea to our mother. Perhaps we should include Mary, for she can be very tight-lipped when required, and our sister is very sensible, but, definitely not Kitty or Lydia or our mother. I would not wish to send Mrs. Bennet

into another fit of her nerves until we can no longer hide this from her. For now, you and I are simply separating Papa's personal belongings from those left to the estate."