

Chapter One

As days went, Elizabeth Bennet could not name this particular day as anything but pleasant. After all, this was her elder sister's wedding day. Jane Bennet had accepted Mr. Charles Bingley's late-coming proposal, and all was right in the world of the Bennets. "At least, Mama is happy. Two daughters married within the span of a few months." Even so, Elizabeth was eaten up with guilt, for she knew, without the assistance of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, none of her mother's manipulations would have known the same outcome.

Elizabeth also could not shake the idea one of the reasons the gentleman had acted was because of the accusations she had thrown in his face when Mr. Darcy proposed to her at Rosings Park. She would give anything if she could go back in time to that day when she had righteously accused, "I have every reason in the world to think ill of you. No motive can excuse the unjust and ungenerous part you acted there. You dare not, you cannot deny that you have been the principal, if not the only, means of dividing Mr. Bingley and my sister from each other; of exposing one to the censure of the world for caprice and instability, and the other to its derision for disappointed hopes, and involving them both in misery of the acutest kind."

She peeked around the corner of the passage where the library was located. Elizabeth had searched all the common rooms in the house and had concluded Mr. Darcy was again holed up in the library, likely avoiding Miss Bingley's company, as well as her own.

There was a time back in August when they were both at Pemberley that Elizabeth had thought they could be more than passing acquaintances. However, Lydia's marriage to Mr. Wickham destroyed those hopes. Through her mother's relations, Elizabeth had learned something of Mr. Darcy's involvement in bringing her youngest sister and Mr. Darcy's long-time enemy together. The gentleman had spent a small fortune to bring Mr. Wickham to solvency and to provide the scoundrel an occupation, but, his actions essentially prohibited Mr. Darcy from aligning his family with hers. Darcy had protected her and her sisters from censure, and she was thankful for his honorable actions. Yet, an idea to which she had never given voice still haunted her: she had lost more than her reputation was worth. She had lost the possibility of a great love. There was no way Mr. Darcy would propose to her a second time, for how could he when Mr. Wickham could still harm Miss Darcy with a careless slip of the lip? And she would not permit that to happen, no matter how much she yearned for a different outcome. The gentleman had protected her, and, now, she would protect him.

Setting her shoulders in determination, she made her way along the hall. She prayed not to encounter either of Mr. Bingley's sisters, for, once she found him,

Elizabeth was to deliver a message to Mr. Darcy, a message that was none of the Miss Bingley's concern. Jane—dear, sweet Jane—had forgiven, at least she had made the effort to offer absolution to the ladies for their purposeful separation of their brother from Jane, and, even though Elizabeth had issued her cautions, Jane had said, “God would expect me to offer my forgiveness. Moreover, how can I think to separate Charles from his sisters?”

Mr. Bingley had been less forgiving: He had permitted his sisters' arrival to occur specifically on yesterday's date and had insisted on their leave-taking on the morrow. Elizabeth agreed with her new brother-in-marriage's ire. She was not one who readily forgave those who harmed the people she held in her heart.

The library door was closed when she reached it. Elizabeth tapped lightly and turned the handle, but the lock did not release. She tapped again. “Mr. Darcy? Are you within?” She prayed she was not interrupting a private encounter between Jane and Mr. Bingley. Over the last month, she had walked in on more than one of their intimate moments. However, when she considered the possibility of Mr. Bingley, a man who rarely read for pleasure, choosing the library for a moment with Jane, or of Mrs. Bennet permitting Jane from her sister's room, where she prepared for the wedding, Elizabeth knew both an impossibility.

Her father, Mary, and Kitty had remained at Longbourn last evening. Mr. Bennet had entrusted the letter to Elizabeth before she left to join her mother and Jane, who had dined with the Bingleys. “I do not wish your mother to see this,” he had explained.

“What type of business do you have with Mr. Darcy?” she had asked suspiciously.

“Just an offer he made me,” her father responded with less than a full disclosure. “At first, I refused an association with him, for we all found him a proud, ill-mannered sort of fellow.” Her father's words caused Elizabeth to blush. Mr. Bennet's perspective had been based on her earliest opinions of Mr. Darcy, and, although she now knew them to be inaccurate, she could not speak to the gentleman's amiability without betraying all she knew of him. “However, after the gentleman convinced me of his honorability, I have had a change of heart. There is no reason not to hitch my wagon to a thoroughbred is there?”

“Mr. Darcy has proven himself,” she said, wishing to defend the man against the general dislike presented him by her family and the neighborhood as a result of Mr. Wickham's lies. “I am persuaded it was with his influence that Mr. Bingley returned to Netherfield and Jane.”

Her father's eyebrows rose in question. “Then you think more kindly of the man than you did previously?”

“Aunt and Uncle Gardiner assisted me in seeing Mr. Darcy in a new light,” she had explained. “He was everything cordial when we visited Pemberley.”

Therefore, she knocked a third time and spoke against the wood. “Mr. Darcy, it is I, Elizabeth Bennet. My father asked me to bring you a letter.”

Suddenly the door opened, and she was pulled roughly into the room. The lock was shot behind her.

“Mr. Darcy!” she protested.

“Shush,” he warned, before catching her elbow and guiding her—or rather pushing her toward the far corner of the room.

“What is—” she began, but when his finger touched her lips, Elizabeth forgot her protests. She could feel her cheeks catch fire, as the idea of her kissing that finger took hold. “Why are you hiding in Mr. Bingley’s library?” she demanded, in hushed tones.

“Miss Bingley,” he confessed.

“Surely it cannot be so bad that you must isolate yourself away?” she questioned. Elizabeth’s breath came out in a rough exhalation when she looked into his handsome face. “Is it not possible to explain to the lady you mean a different course for your life?”

He smiled at her. “As you well know, Miss Bingley is not easily diverted. Such is the reason I asked my valet, Mr. Sheffield, to sleep in my quarters last evening. I cannot take the chance. Desperation makes one act from character.”

Elizabeth could only manage an “Oh” before blushing again.

He gestured to a gathering of chairs. “Make yourself comfortable.”

She shook off the idea. “I cannot remain alone in a room with you, especially behind a locked door. My reputation would be ruined, and all your efforts to save it would be for nought.”

“You know about my interference in your youngest sister’s life? I did not think the Gardiners would be so willing to share what I hoped to keep secret.”

Elizabeth hesitated, not knowing quite how to respond. “You must not blame my aunt: Lydia’s thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter; and, of course, I could not rest till I knew the particulars. Let me thank you again and again, in the name of all my family, for that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications, for the sake of discovering Lydia and Mr. Wickham.”

“If you will thank me,” he replied, “let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your family owes me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of you.”

Elizabeth felt herself blush again. It was her greatest wish that he still desired her, but the reality was simple: Mr. Darcy could not present his family fortune and his name to a woman with a silly mother, a sometimes indolent father, one daughter married to a man constantly in debt, and the husband of the eldest

daughter, although a dear friend, still steeped in the “filth” of the world of business. Elizabeth’s recent encounter with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Darcy’s aunt, had easily spoken to Elizabeth’s doubts of her worth to a man of Mr. Darcy’s means.

Awkwardly, Mr. Darcy turned away. “Evidently, I have left you in a position where words have escaped you. I must beg your pardon. I never meant to discompose you. I thought perhaps, after you refused to agree with my aunt’s demand for you to deny me, that hope still lived.”

“I told Lady Catherine I would permit no one to dictate to me to whom I presented my hand.” She studied his stance. Countless memories stood between them. Elizabeth loved him, but she loved him too much to bring harm to his door. Regret squeezed her heart hard. “The wedding begins in an hour. I sought you out because my father asked me to deliver a message to you. It was late when I arrived at Netherfield last evening. I was told you had retired.”

His eyes narrowed. “A letter from Mr. Bennet?”

She reached into her reticule and extracted the folded over letter. Handing it to him, she asked, “What business do you have with my father?”

Mr. Darcy accepted the letter, staring at his name upon the foolscap. “I am uncertain beyond his providing me and Mr. Gardiner with a list of Mr. Wickham’s debts in Lambton. Perhaps it is an accounting of what Mr. Bennet paid out to the various merchants.”

She did not believe him, for her father had mentioned that Mr. Darcy had contacted him, but she was not in a position to accuse him of something nefarious. “Then Mr. Bennet knew of your involvement in the matter?” she questioned. Elizabeth prayed he would not lie to her again.

He shook off the idea. “Not initially, but it is possible Mr. Gardiner took your father into his confidence.”

“Are you going to read it?” she asked.

“I will when there is time for me to study the contents. I heard the carriages coming up from the stable. Bingley will be searching for us, and, as you said, we cannot be found together.”

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God, he wished someone would shake some sense into Elizabeth Bennet. Why could she not see they were perfect for each other? When he first opened the library door to pull her inside, Darcy had come within an inch of abandoning his customary good sense and, instead, gathering her into his arms to kiss her into submission. She would have regretted his actions, but he would not. From that first night after the Meryton Assembly, and every night since, he had dreamed of kissing her as she had never been kissed previously.

“Did Miss Elizabeth do something to anger you?” Bingley asked as they stood near the altar waiting for the ceremony to begin.

“Why would you think so?” Darcy asked in tones he prayed sounded of nonchalance.

“You were scowling when the two of you exited the house,” Bingley explained. “I pray you are not arguing again. You appeared on much better terms when we were all in Derbyshire together.”

“Nothing of the sort. Just a letter of business I received,” Darcy assured.

“I did not hear a rider,” Bingley observed.

Darcy slapped his friend on the back in a gesture of companionship. “And why should you? You are marrying the delectable Miss Bennet in less than a half hour.”

“She is an angel.” Bingley’s smile widened, but it quickly disappeared when his friend noted the entrance of his sisters. “Duty calls,” he said and moved off to deal with the ladies’ need for attention.

Left alone for a few minutes, Darcy replayed Mr. Bennet’s letter in his head. After Lady Catherine had issued her orders and departed in a huff, without knowing satisfaction, Darcy had secretly sent Mr. Bennet a message and requested a private meeting with the man, where he had laid his heart on the line. Elizabeth’s father had remained skeptical, but he had agreed to consider what Darcy had shared and to inform him of his intention to extend or deny Darcy’s request to pursue Elizabeth as his wife.

He glanced up from his musings to view the woman whose image haunted his dreams coming toward him, and his heart sang its song of love and devotion. “Is it time?” he asked when she took her place beside him, for they were to stand up with Bingley and Miss Bennet during the ceremony.

“Mama agrees, so here I am,” she said with a grin. “In truth, I think she means to provide Jane *the talk* regarding what to expect on my sister’s wedding night. Mrs. Bennet does not know Mrs. Gardiner has already spoken to each of us.”

Darcy grinned. Whether the lady realized it or not, Elizabeth Bennet considered him one of her closest confidants, for she spoke to him on a level not afforded “indifferent” acquaintances. “May I say you look lovely?” he whispered.

Her brows drew together in disapproval. “Your tone says you would place an addendum to the compliment.”

He hesitated before answering. “I think you would be more lovely, if such were possible, if you were wearing jewels in your hair, rather than the flowers.”

Everyone’s attention turned to the back of the church—everyone’s but his. From the corner of his eye, Darcy noted Mrs. Bennet scampered up the aisle to assume a place on the front pew. Miss Bennet, her hand resting on her father’s

arm, paused at the head of the aisle, the lady's attention on Bingley as she approached them.

"Is she not beautiful?" Elizabeth murmured.

Darcy's eyes, however, remained on Elizabeth. "Not so exquisite as you," he said in hushed tones.

She glanced up at him, displeasure crossing her expression.

Yet, before she could react, Darcy took the ultimate leap of faith. "When we marry, would you prefer a large wedding or a more private affair?"

"Neither," she hissed. Embarrassment, or perhaps it was anger, colored her cheeks.

"You would prefer one comparable to the future Mrs. Bingley?" he asked in what he hoped sounded of innocence. Convincing Elizabeth to agree with him would take all his skills of negotiations.

"We are not marrying, large, small, or—" Her voice increased in volume. "Or—"

"Or would you prefer to leave for Gretna Green? Is a marriage over the anvil more to your liking?"

"Enough, Mr. Darcy!" she exclaimed in a voice and tone rarely used in a church.

"Elizabeth Bennet!" her mother warned from her position on the pew. "This is not your day."

Elizabeth nodded her apologies, but Darcy ignored everyone but the woman he loved. "Autumn has already made itself known. If you hold no objections, I would prefer we pronounced our vows before Christmastide. You have not lived until you celebrate Christmas at Pemberley."

She spun around to face him. Pointing her finger at him, as if he was a misbehaving child, she enunciated each of her words slowly. "I once told you I would not marry you even if you were the last man in the world."

"But we both know you did not mean those words. You have had a change of heart. No absolutes!"

"I am not marrying you, sir," she growled.

Darcy thought her adorable when she was so angry that she had lost her ability to reason. "Never? Let us ask your mother," he said with a smile.

"You would not dare." Elizabeth no longer spoke in soft tones.

"Before I do, answer me this: Are you set against me? Completely set against me?"

"Not if we were the last two people on earth," she said with a stomp of her foot to emphasize her irritation.

"We would require at least one more person," he continued logically. "To witness the joining." He thought it exhilarating to watch the passion flowing

through *his* Elizabeth when she was angry. *Just imagine how it will be when we are alone together*, he cautioned his heart. “Simply explain what obstacles remain to prevent us from marrying.”

She shot a glance to the congregation, who was watching their interactions with great interest. Darcy refused to look, knowing his daring would die if he encountered a scowl upon her father’s face, or those of her neighbors. “You know my reasons without my pronouncing them aloud.”

Off to the side, he heard Miss Bingley announce, “I knew the chit did not have the brains of a sluggard.”

“Mr. Bennet,” Darcy called out, but his eyes remained on Elizabeth. “Do I have your permission to marry Miss Elizabeth?”

Her father’s voice held his amusement. “As I said, son, you must convince Lizzy on your own.”

“Understood, sir. But you hold no objections?”

“Not if Elizabeth is happy.”

Mrs. Bennet shot to her feet, finally comprehending what was happening. “Elizabeth Bennet, you present Mr. Darcy your assent this very moment.”

Bingley stepped up beside him. “In case neither of you have noticed, this is my and Miss Bennet’s wedding day, not a battlefield.”

“All this is Mr. Darcy’s fault,” Elizabeth accused, refusing to abandon her anger.

Bingley growled, “I do not care for faults. All I care about is my Jane and our pronouncing our vows. I swear one more interruption, and I will personally escort you both outside.”

“I apologize, Bingley,” Darcy said in contrition.

“I will be silent,” Elizabeth said obediently.

Darcy listened in when Bingley leaned closer to speak to Elizabeth without an audience. “You know something of Darcy’s dogged determination when he sets his mind to a task. It might be best if you offered your consent now. It would please both Jane and me to see the two of you happy.”

Darcy noted how Elizabeth stiffened in denial. “I am determined I will not marry him. Some find ‘my’ stubbornness endearing.”

“My money is on Mr. Darcy,” Colonel Forster called out.

“Then you will lose, Colonel,” Elizabeth said adamantly. “I remain unmoved.”

Sir William announced, “Those who wish to place a bet, see me outside after the ceremony. For now, Mr. Bingley wishes to claim his bride.”

Before the focus shifted away from him and Elizabeth, Darcy called to the man, “Put me down for fifty pounds. I mean to prove I possess more resolve than does Miss Elizabeth. The lady ‘will accept’ my proposal.”