

Chapter One

“I am not made for Mama’s aspirations,” she sniffed. “I’ve no head for strutting about like a peacock.” With the toe of her boot, Elizabeth Bennet nudged the loose pebbles on the well-worn path leading down the slope of Oakham Mount. Her mother would be furious if she knew that Elizabeth had snuck off to claim a few moments of peace.

Longbourn had been in a tizzy since Mr. Bingley, the Bennets’ newest neighbor, had accepted the family’s invitation for supper. The prospects of an eligible young man with a reported five thousand pounds per year as income dining at Longbourn had Mrs. Bennet with visions of marriage proposals dancing in her head, for the lady was certain the gentleman would choose one of her daughters to be “Mrs. Bingley.”

“Mama has always been insistent upon putting us forward,” Elizabeth grumbled. Although she enjoyed socializing with a variety of neighbors, until today, Elizabeth had never really considered the prospects of marriage, especially a marriage with someone she could not respect and admire, or worse, that particular someone not respecting and honoring her.

She paused to study the scenery below her from her favorite vantage point. The land was soft and rolling, nothing like the mountains her Aunt Gardiner described as part of Derbyshire’s landscape. “*Derbyshire offers the most magnificent views in all of England,*” her aunt was often fondly saying of her home shire. According to her aunt, Oakham Mount was not really much of a mountain, but this side of the “rising hillside” was Elizabeth’s sanctuary.

Realizing she could not be from home much longer without encountering her mother’s wrath, Elizabeth set her feet in motion to descend the hillside. It had turned windy than she had expected, and with a sigh of resignation, she tucked a stray strand of auburn colored hair beneath the band circling her “work” bonnet. It was made of straw, and she wore the headwear whenever she assisted Mr. Hill in the garden or called upon her father’s tenants. As she jammed the wisp of hair into her pinned braid, she wished, not for the first time, that she possessed Jane’s golden curls or Lydia’s deep brown locks. “Instead, I am *blessed* with hair too red to considered brown and too brown to claim the term ‘strawberry,’” she grouched.

When she reached the lowest point of the path coming off the mount, she chose to sit upon a downed tree, a place she often claimed as her seat while writing in her diary. Her father called her scribblings a “journal,” but Elizabeth preferred the word *diary* because it sounded more literary in nature, although, in truth, what she wrote in the book each day was anything but literary—just the ramblings of a girl coming into her womanhood. She had been writing each day since she was sixteen, after receiving her first “diary” from her Aunt Gardiner as part of a

celebration of Elizabeth's coming into society. That original book held gold embossed lettering, and she treasured it more than any other gift she had every received, other than the single pearl she wore on a chain about her neck that had once belonged to her great-grandmother. Now, she wrote in the blank books her father kept especially for her use in a drawer of his desk. They were plain, nothing like that first diary, but she had maintained the exercise because she thought it kept her sane in a house full of female twittering and ribbons and constant talk of which gentleman was the most handsome among the eligible young men in the neighborhood. She was certain that before the evening was over that Mr. Bingley would claim that particular title, even if he had a large wart on the end of his nose and crossed eyes. "After all," she murmured in vexation, "he has a fortune of five thousand a year."

Before she sat, Elizabeth removed the hard covered book from the pocket in the smock she wore over her day dress. She should have removed the outer garment before she left Longbourn, but when her mother had taken to her bed for a restorative nap, Elizabeth had claimed the advantage of the reprieve and set out for her favorite walking path.

Plopping down upon the log, she kicked off her half boots, undid her ribbon garters, and removed her stockings. "Wonderful," she sighed as she rubbed the soles of her feet against the cool grass, which was still quite green, even though autumn had made its presence known in the last week. She was well aware that her actions were extremely improper, and if her mother learned of them, Elizabeth would have a high toll to pay for the liberties she had taken, but she rarely denied herself such pleasures. "Moreover, when was the last time I met anyone along this turn of the road?"

She dug a pencil from her pocket and opened her diary. "Perchance, I should write what Mama's lecture would be if she caught me in such a state." The idea brought a smile of amusement to her lips as she mimicked Mrs. Bennet's overly stern tone: *Running about the countryside like some sort of hoyden! Not a servant or a sister to keep you company! Sitting upon a fallen tree as if it were a throne! Your ankles and feet exposed to any who pass by!*

Subconsciously feeling the scorn her mother would rain down upon her if she knew of Elizabeth's state of undress, Elizabeth tucked her bare feet under the hem of her dress, but that was the only concession she made to her mother's sense of propriety. "I am a hopeless case, Mama," she whispered before she took up the pencil to write. Some days she wrote only a paragraph. On other days, she filled several pages.

Today, she began by recording the Shakespearean lines that her father had assigned her for the day's reading. They had spent a good hour or more digging into the truth of the lines. She thought it odd though that he had been insistent on

her dwelling on the advantages and the disadvantages of being persuaded to marry. “Perhaps, Mama’s silliness is wearing off on him after all these years,” she murmured aloud.

Her dear Papa had always favored her over her sisters, and the two of them had spent countless hours over Elizabeth’s lifetime, beginning as early as when she was a small child sitting on his lap, discussing Mr. Bennet’s life-long obsession with William Shakespeare. He read Shakespeare to her daily, and she could recite many of the Bard’s plays from heart. Over the last seven years, their discussions specifically dealt with her father’s attempt to discredit the papers of James Cowell, whose work was supposedly the basis of the research of one James Wilmot, who professed that it was Francis Bacon who wrote the plays and the poetry attributed to William Shakespeare. It always amazed Elizabeth that her father, a simple country squire, was considered one of the most renowned Shakespearean scholars in England. Moreover, with Bacon’s home of Gorhambury House in Hertfordshire being nearby, her father’s fellow scholars often called upon Longbourn to participate in a never-ending debate.

As her mind wandered over all these things, her pencil flew across the page. She attempted to compose her own poem, patterned after Shakespeare’s lines, but she termed herself sorely lacking. “The above poem proves I am not gifted with the ability to express myself in such a succinct form,” she wrote beneath her feeble efforts at greatness. In deep concentration, she took no notice of the crunch of newly fallen leaves until a shadow fell over her shoulder to steal away the sunlight.

* * *

Periodically sipping from a flask of brandy, Fitzwilliam Darcy walked briskly along the country lane while humming a sea shantie. The tune made him smile. Darcy had learned the air from two of his father’s cottagers when he was but a boy. They were his cottagers now, and he still enjoyed spending time at the tables of Ned Little and Henry Boardman. Unsurprisingly, his mother Lady Anne Darcy’s reaction was all for which a young boy could ask when he had proudly performed the tune for her. Darcy missed his mother more than an adult man should admit, for she had always been his champion. His father had roared his “disapproval” of the song, but Lady Anne had gleefully claimed the tune *delightful*, but warned him it was not a song for mixed company. His father had privately warned him the Irish air was too *bawdy* for the son of George Darcy to sing.

That did not prevent Darcy from doing so, but only in private. He often hummed “What shall we do with a drunken sailor?” as he marched along the paths surrounding the fields of Pemberley. He considered the tune a *walking* song, for a man could not have it in his head and not walk briskly.

He should be frustrated that one of his team of horses had taken on a stone, which had bruised the pad of the horse’s hoof, but he was not. What did irritate

him was the necessity for him to arrive at Netherfield Park on foot, but it was so freeing to be removed from his Aunt Catherine's manipulations that he took little note of the dust forming on his boots or any note whatsoever of the road marker for Netherfield, which was well hidden behind an overgrown holly bush.

He "marched" harder and sipped deeper when he considered how Lady Catherine had taken it upon herself to retrieve Georgiana from London without his knowledge of his sister's whereabouts. Therefore, instead of traveling with his friend Charles Bingley to Hertfordshire to examine Netherfield Park as a possible estate for Bingley to let, Darcy had tracked his sister to Kent and fended off Lady Catherine's manipulations for him to marry his Cousin Anne.

"I am most displeased that you would use Georgiana to assure my attendance at Rosings Park," he had fumed.

His aunt huffed her annoyance. "And I am most displeased that you have yet to speak a proposal to Anne."

There were times that Darcy considered asking for his cousin's hand in marriage so as to be done with his aunt's continual debate, but he knew he could not bear a lifetime with Anne as his wife. He cared for his cousin as a dear relations, but he wished for something more than a half-hearted marriage. He desired the playful, abiding love displayed by his parents.

So, he had again avoided his aunt's plans, made his private apologies to Anne, gathered his sister to return her to the care of Mrs. Annesley in London, and then set out for Hertfordshire. In the scheme of his last few days, a stone cut of his horse's hoof held little significance. It was simply "another inconvenience, but not the world's end," as his father would have said.

"You could foil our aunt's plans if you chose another," Georgiana had offered into the silence that filled his coach upon its return to Darcy House. Against his better judgment, he had moved Georgiana and her companion into his residence to curtail his aunt's future plans to make Georgiana a pawn in the struggle between them.

"A man of my fortune only attracts a certain type of woman," he countered. "I want someone who would choose me even if I were a tenant upon Pemberley estate, rather than its master."

"You cannot change your inheritance or your responsibilities to the Darcy name," she ventured, "but you could be more open to the world around you. I love you, William; yet, you keep so many people at arm's length, that it is a wonder you possess any friends." She shook her head in dismay, as if gathering her thoughts. "I was...I was too impulsive in my interactions with Mr. Wickham." He noted how tears misted Georgiana's eyes and how she swallowed hard against the emotions swelling in her chest. Darcy reached across the bench to capture her hand. "I...I have little experience, but you are a man who can see beyond those who flaunt

their so-called charms before you. Look for the hidden gem. The wallflowers no one notices. The women who lean toward being a bluestocking. Do not recite the characteristics of a well-approved society woman. Our father used to tell me stories of our mother—provided me memories I would never have possessed otherwise. One of my favorites was how he first took note of Lady Anne Fitzwilliam.”

“At a garden party,” Darcy said in sweet sadness.

“To celebrate Aunt Catherine’s betrothal to Sir Lewis De Bourgh,” Georgiana added.

“Lady Catherine was being her proud self—ordering about her father’s servants and many of the house guests. Papa had snuck off with some of the other gentlemen. They had mocked our aunt in private, for Aunt Catherine had ignored them during the Season for they were only *misters*, rather than titled gentlemen.”

Darcy continued, “The previous Lord Matlock had settled a hefty dowry upon Sir Lewis to take Aunt Catherine off his hands. Her ladyship’s fortune would fortify the wall of Sir Lewis’s estate and assist the baronet in bringing back his fields after several years of poor harvest. Lady Catherine’s dowry made Rosings Park into the showcase it is today.”

“The other men, including Papa,” his sister’s eyes brightened as they shared the retelling, “could not be persuaded to take on Lady Catherine, despite our aunt’s large dowry. Only Sir Lewis was brave, or desperate, enough to claim her ladyship to wife. While the other gentlemen at the party chose to ride out to be rid of Aunt’s Catherine’s shrewish ways, our Papa took the wilderness trail behind the estate. And there upon the banks of a grotto, George Darcy spotted the lovelier and younger Fitzwilliam sister.” Georgiana giggled, a sound Darcy had thought lost after her episode with Mr. Wickham. “Papa thought to avoid Lady Anne, for he feared she was of the same nature as her sister.”

“His approach had taken Lady Anne unawares.” Like his sister, Darcy was caught up in the familiar tale. “She rushed to stand...”

“And promptly fell into the pond,” Georgiana finished.

“Our father fished her out,” Darcy said with a smile, “and they knew great happiness together from that day forward.”

Georgiana clasped his hand tightly. “The point is, William, while avoiding those you find intolerable, you should look beyond the obvious. Surely there is a gem such as our mother lurking in the background of Society’s paintings.”

* * *

Elizabeth should have known fear at having someone step up behind her, but instead she knew annoyance at being disturbed. She expected to look up into the familiar face of one of her sisters sent to fetch her home or of Charlotte Lucas, her closest acquaintance, shaking her head in friendly disapproval of Elizabeth’s distraction.

However, when she glanced over her shoulder, she discovered a pair of muscular legs enclosed in dark breeches and polished boots, which were peppered with dust. She had not expected a gentleman to be so close; however, she did not know fear. Something more along the lines of familiarity than anxiousness held her in place. Although the man was obviously an opposing figure, it was difficult to know fear when one stared up at the openings of his nostrils, for that appendage and the gold buttons upon his jacket and the slight stirring of his open great coat was all she could see.

She leaned to the side to tilt her head upward to view the man's countenance. He was far from being the most handsome man she had ever countered, but he was certainly in the top tier. Then his lips parted in a smile, and Elizabeth's breathing hitched higher. His was a compelling smile. Above his lips, she discovered said nose—quite aristocratic in its cut—and two heavy eyebrows—one arched as if in amusement—and dark lashed eyes full of bold admiration. Elizabeth, to her irritation, discovered herself blushing under his steady gaze.

He extended his hand to her, and without her considering her actions, she placed her hand in his gloved one. Instead of fleeing from a perfect stranger—and *perfection* was an accurate term to use in describing him—she found herself rising to her feet to stand before him. Slowly, he carried the back of her hand to his lips to place a lingering kiss upon her knuckles. It was the most magical moment of her life, and for a brief second she thought perhaps she had conjured his image in her writings; that is, until he spoke, or rather sang:

“Weigh heigh and up she rises, early in the morning.”

Elizabeth snatched her hand away. “You would greet a lady with the words of seafaring men?”

The gentleman's eyebrow hitched higher, but the interest of a moment prior had transformed into bewilderment. “And how would a *lady* recognize such a tune?”

Ignoring his accusation, Elizabeth pursed her lips together in a tight line. She bent down to snatch up her diary and her half boots. “I am unaccustomed to being accosted by drunken louts!” she charged. “And do not importune me with your denials. I can smell the heavy drink upon your breath!” Again, she should know fear, but nothing about the man frightened her. She knew embarrassment. Aggravation. But not fear. She should question this odd reaction to the man, but there was no time for circumspection.

“Then tell me, dear lady,” he clipped. “With whom are you *accustomed* to meeting upon a lonely country road?”

She glared haughtily at him. “You are not numbered among my acquaintances, sir. We lack a proper introduction. Do not speak to me further.”

“Upon my word!” he exclaimed. “You did not appear adverse to the taking of my hand moments prior.” He frowned before firmly returning his beaver to his head.

“That was before...” Elizabeth faltered. His accusation was all too accurate. Why had she so readily accepted a stranger’s hand? Why had she not fled when she first encountered him? What had she been thinking? She had performed as if she were a teasing opera singer in Covent Gardens of whom she had seen made the fool in one of the caricatures found in her father’s newsprints. “You have erred, sir, in your evaluation of my willingness to know you better.”

She jammed her diary into one of the boots before catching her skirt in her other hand. She turned to flounce down the grassy part of the road, hopefully leaving him behind. She did not think she could run home barefooted, but she would make the attempt if he had the audacity to follow her. She dared not glance back at the scoundrel for fear of encouraging him to do more than he had. Unfortunately, she reached no further than the stile crossing between one field and the next before she heard him behind her.

Rounding upon him, instead of retreating, Elizabeth charged toward him. “Why do you continue to torment me? I do not welcome your attentions. Get thee from this place. Yours is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing!”

“I am pleased that you can quote Shakespeare to your benefit,” he mocked, “although I cannot imagine any man who loved one of your nature could be so oddly muted by the news of your death, as was Macbeth for his lady. Personally, I would cry against the Heavens.” And to make certain she understood his disdain for her, he held out her abandoned stockings and garters. “I thought it might be awkward if you entered your home without these.” He winked at her. “I would not wish an irate father to be at my door tomorrow, accusing me of undressing his daughter.”

Elizabeth wished to tell the fool that her father only became irate when he was forced to leave his study for more than meals, but she kept the complaint to herself, for it would appear to the stranger as if Mr. Bennet did not care for her, and she knew, without qualms, that he did. She dropped her boots with the book inside to snatch her intimate wear from his hands. She could feel the heat rushing once more to her cheeks. “You, sir, are certainly no gentleman!”

“I believe, miss, that the correct response should be one where you express your gratitude for my forethought,” he said in reprimanding tones.

With a regal dismissal of his personage with her hand, she stuffed the stockings and garters into her pocket before snatching up the boots again. She turned from him to climb the stile, but hesitated when she recalled the narrow stream marching along between the two fields.

“Do you not mean to return your stockings and boots to your feet first?” he called in taunting tones as he stood some five feet removed. “It is September. Do you mean to make yourself ill to abuse me?” He sobered in what appeared to be a more serious countenance. “I swear I will remain where I stand. I will not pursue you. Do not punish yourself for the likes of me.”

Elizabeth first eyed him and then the narrow stream creeping along between the rocks. “I shall not provide you more pleasure at my expense!” she declared.

Bracing herself against the cold mud awaiting her feet upon the other side of the stile, she gingerly lowered her weight to the ground. The brook was no more than six feet wide at this point, and there were several stepping stones to employ for those who crossed between the fields on a regular basis, just as she had done earlier today. Even if one’s foot slipped from the moss covered stones, the worse that could occur would be a wet boot, for the water was only a few inches deep. However, her boots were in her hands. The water would be ice cold against her skin.

“Surely you jest!” he called when he realized what she planned. “This is madness! I mean you no harm!”

“You are a cur!” she countered. “A true gentleman would be gone by now!” She straightened her shoulders before lifting her skirt enough that her stride could reach the first stone. She hesitated, dreading the cold on the soles of her feet. As brief as the hesitation was, her stalling permitting the man to cross the stile to reach her.

He scooped her into his arms and began to deftly cross the stream. “A *gentleman* would not permit a lady to place herself in danger,” he hissed in her ear as he tightened his grip upon her person. “And despite your claims to the differ, I am a *gentleman*.”

“Put me down!” She swung her boots about, striking his arm and the side of his cheek. “I mean it, sir. I shall see the sheriff calls upon you for your sporting of me!”

He emitted a mild curse, but held her tighter to his chest. “Be still!”

“Place me down!” she screeched in his ear.

The man stopped suddenly. His stillness causing her to cease her squirming. “Such is your wish?” he asked solemnly.

“No, I would prefer to be molested by a complete stranger,” she said sarcastically. “I insist you place me down.”

“Pardon my hopes of providing you with a bit of comfort.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Alas, good Kate, I will not burden thee! For knowing thee to be but young and light—” With that, he bent and sat here politely in the middle of the stream. His hat tumbled into her lap.

The cold water permeated every inch of the day dress and cotton pelisse she wore. The water flowed spritely by her hips and legs. She found herself splashing in the water as a means to free herself. “You, sir, are a madcap ruffian and swearing jacks!” She threw his beaver at his back as he climbed the opposing bank. “I will have your head on a platter!” she shrieked as she rolled to her knees to stand. Her dress was now wet from the knee down on the front, as well drenched from the hip in the back. She slopped her way across the space between them. “You are a coxcomb if I have ever seen one.”

He turned to face her, but did not offer his hand to assist her on the muddy bank. She was both thankful and irritated by his lack of action. He regarded her warily while he said in what sounded of a challenge, “Come, come, you wasp; I’faith, you are too angry.”

“If I be waspish, best beware my sting.”

He retorted, “My remedy is then to pluck it out.” He made her a courtly bow and turned to leave. “Nay, come again, Good Kate; I am a gentleman. Until we meet again, my lady.” He walked away from her.

Elizabeth growled her displeasure. “This is not finished, sir! And no more repeating Shakespeare’s lines! I am no shrew!” She threw one of her boots at his backside. This attempt bounced off the back of his boot.

He turned to pick it up and crossed at an angle to set her boot upon the ground so she could retrieve it as she made her exit. While he did so, he sing-songed: “No, not a whit; I find you passing gentle. ‘Twas told me you were rough, and coy, and sullen. And now I find the report a very liar; for thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous, but slow in speech, yet sweet as springtime flowers.” With a salute, he retreated in the opposite direction, pausing only long enough to retrieve his soaked hat.

Elizabeth did not wait to observe where he meant to go. Instead, she raced off toward Longbourn, scooping up her boot as she went.