

The Pemberley Journals



A Jane Austen Variations
Original Story

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The Portrait of Lizzy

It was the painting that made Ellie step inside the red rope. She found herself drawn to it, genuinely interested in something for the first time since she had walked through the front doors of Pemberley.

The grandeur of the place had impressed her and it had been briefly interesting to think what it might have been like to live in such a great big house, in a time before cars, planes, dishwashers and go-pros, but she was not a fan of stately homes and after ten minutes or so, it had all started to look a bit the same; room after room full of antiques and thick rugs. The tour guide did nothing to alleviate her boredom either. His delivery was emotionless, and his jokes were cringingly bad. To be fair, he seemed well informed and most of the tour group still paid polite attention to him, but there was some restless shuffling of feet and a lot of coughing whenever they were asked to stop and pay attention to something in particular. Two elderly ladies, in dripping raincoats and plastic hoods, started their own conversation at the back of the group about where the tea room might be, further distracting Ellie. She had deliberately lingered and let them all go on ahead, but then she had seen the portrait.

The room was roped off, but the door was open. Reasoning it couldn't be that private, she climbed over the barrier, intending only to lean in through the doorway and get a closer look. The subject of the picture, a dark-haired girl in a simple yellow gown made of some sort of floaty material, seemed to invite her further in though, and before she knew it, Ellie was standing in front of the fireplace, gazing up, lost in contemplation. The girl was very pretty, quite young, with petite features and dark hair. But it was her deep brown eyes, framed by beautiful long lashes that fascinated Ellie—the mischievous expression in them made the painting almost come alive and she was rooted to the spot.

A little bronze plaque on the portrait's frame told her the name of the artist and the year it was painted, and the name of the girl in yellow. "Elizabeth," she read out loud, gazing up at the painting again, and at the way her little rosebud mouth was parted, as if she were about to speak. "What's up, Elizabeth? What did you want to say?"

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in here?" answered a deep, male voice.

Ellie gasped and jumped, turning to see a man standing beside a mahogany desk, with a pile of post in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. He looked very pissed off.

She had come in from the hallway, but he had come in a different way. Ellie peered around him to see another door, one that joined the room they were in to what appeared to be a large library.

“Oh, I’m sorry. The door was open,” she said with a slight smile and a nod in the direction of the hallway.

He frowned. “No, it bloody well wasn’t. I was only gone ten minutes and it was definitely shut before.” He was about thirty, square shouldered, tall, slim and dressed in those sort of smart casual clothes favoured by the rich country set. Her gaze wandered from his polished brogues, to her own feet, clad in battered converse—they had gotten wet and muddy during her walk from Lambton. He was glaring at her dirty shoes too. “It’s roped off. The entrance fee does not entitle you to go wherever you like, invading the privacy of those who work here. What are you up to?”

“Hey, I’ve apologised. I wasn’t stealing or anything and the door was bloody well open. I just wanted to see the painting up close.”

“Oh, I get it.” He set his coffee cup on the desk. “Well you can go back and tell the gallery owner, collector, or whoever sent you, that it’s not for sale, or loan. Any of the other works on the tour—which you should be sticking to—can be borrowed for exhibitions, but not this one. I don’t know how many times it has to be explained before people believe it.”

Ellie crossed her arms, annoyed by his arrogance and assumptions. “I just thought it was interesting, that’s all. Nobody sent me. I don’t know anything about art.” She went to leave, but fury overcame her and she turned back. “Did anyone ever tell you that you’re really rude? Just because you work in this great stately pile, it doesn’t give you the right to speak to people like they’re the crap on your shoes, you know?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, cross but also slightly amused. “I don’t think there is any crap on my shoes. There might possibly be some on yours though.”

She glared at him before turning with the intention of stalking back out the way she had come.

“Not so fast,” he said.

“No, I’m going. Don’t worry, I’m not a thief, or some sort of art spy. In fact, as of last Friday, I don’t even have a job.”

“Why?”

“Why what? Why don’t I have a job?”

“No, why so interested in the painting?” He came closer, his tone softening slightly.

“Oh.” Ellie shrugged and put her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “It spoke to me. It’s different to all the others I’ve seen here. In most of them, the women are dripping in jewellery and wearing bright, rich colours, with their hair arranged all in a big pile on top of their heads, but she . . .” Ellie pointed up at the painting, studying it again. “She looks like she has just come back from a walk through the woods, more like a country girl, but I guess she must have been important, rich, or she wouldn’t have had her portrait painted, would she? I suppose it must have cost a lot of money to have something like that done back in those days.”

He smiled but said nothing further.

Feeling like she was being laughed at, Ellie huffed. “And I obviously sound like an uneducated idiot, so I’ll be on my way.”

“No, hang on, you’re right. It is different, unusual; that’s why it garners a lot of attention. It also hasn’t moved from that exact spot in two hundred years. The subject is Elizabeth Darcy, and it was commissioned by her husband Fitzwilliam Darcy just after their marriage. He asked the artist, Mr Rainham, to paint her just as she was, without any adornments, in a natural sort of way. Rainham was very pleased with the result and wanted to display it at the great exhibition in London. Mr Darcy, however, refused. ‘I prize it too much to be exposed to the public eye. I cannot explain myself properly, but a mixture of love, pride and delicacy prevents me from allowing it to leave Pemberley.’ – so said in a letter to his friend, Charles Bingley.” His features had changed while he’d been talking, and he had become enthusiastic. All the annoyance and arrogance from earlier had left him. He was a bit geeky, and wore chunky glasses, and his hair was too curly and a bit too long, but even so, he was quite attractive

“That’s a lovely sentiment,” she replied, “but it seems a shame to shut the portrait in here, where only a few people get to see it.”

“He could afford to be precious about it. The estate is much smaller now, but that particular Mr Darcy owned half of Derbyshire. Elizabeth lived to a ripe old age, and was considered one of the great mistresses of Pemberley. It’s a sort of talisman now, and

every Darcy since has been afraid to move it, in case the walls should tumble down or something. A bit like the ravens at the Tower of London.”

“Well, she looks happy enough up there, like she’s having a laugh, or about to tell a joke.”

“She was a funny lady.” He rushed to the desk, picked up a book and brought it back to her before she could think about leaving. “It’s a collection of her letters, to various people—her parents, other relations and friends. Some to her husband, but it’s believed a lot of those were destroyed by one of their children. Maybe they thought them too intimate to leave hanging around. They were a very prudent lot, the Victorians. According to one reviewer it’s . . .” He turned the book over and read a quote from the back, “a fascinating and often amusing glimpse into the life of an extraordinary Georgian lady.”

As he seemed to have been offering it to her, Ellie went to take the book from his hands, but he pulled it away at the last moment. “A bargain at £9.99, available from the gift shop, on your way out.” She was affronted for a moment, until she saw his wide grin and realised there was a tease in his voice. “Can’t be giving them away, I’m afraid. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to deprive a poor starving writer of a living, would you?”

“Well, if it’s all the same to you, I’ll keep my £9.99, as I’m unemployed and soon to be starving too. Probably not my thing anyway. I can’t see myself caring too much about the life of some over-privileged woman from generations ago. Don’t you think it’s obscene that one family could own so much when there was poverty and sickness everywhere? I don’t know how they lived with themselves, sitting about writing amusing letters, when there were children in workhouses and being sent up chimneys. It was all very well for them, wasn’t it, being spoilt and waited on hand and foot?”

“I’m Tom.”

“What? I mean pardon?” It wasn’t the reply she’d been expecting and threw her off her train of thought. “Oh, my name’s Ellie.”

He nodded. “I suppose you’re right in some ways, Ellie, and yes they were fortunate; but those who worked on the estate and in the house were fortunate, too. The Darcy’s way of life gave them employment, and most had a job for life. The Darcys were kind and generous employers. What would happen to the coachman, butler, cook, or maids, if there were no mistresses or masters to wait upon?”

“Elizabeth Darcy has never struck me as spoilt,” he went on. “She did a lot of good in her time, and established the first charitable school here. She even used to go down herself and read to the children occasionally. She came from humble beginnings, she had no money, no title, and her family was very ordinary. She was just very pretty and charming, and lucky too. She hit the jackpot! In today’s terms, he would have been worth over twenty million.”

Ellie let out a small whistle. “I bet he was ugly.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “What makes you say that?”

“Otherwise he’d be too good to be true.”

“When you re-join the tour, have a look at the long gallery upstairs. There’s a picture of him at the far end, as a young man, before he married Elizabeth, and another one next to it; a picture of the two of them with some of their children. You can judge for yourself how handsome he was. Some people say I look a bit like him.”

“Some of their children?”

“They had eight.”

“Wow!”

“She had the last of them when she was forty. He’d been overseas for a time on business, and was supposed to be returning on a ship that was lost in a storm. Everyone on it was presumed dead. When the news reached Pemberley, Elizabeth wrote him a letter; a letter she thought he would never read, full of all the things she loved about him, telling him how thankful she was for the life they’d had together.”

“But he wasn’t dead?”

“No, he missed the first sailing. He was on an entirely different ship and just walked through the door one day. Elizabeth fainted at the sight of him, and when she came to, she slapped him—for ‘having the temerity to make her so miserable by his supposed demise.’ And then they had one last child. It was a true love story. Even after twenty years of marriage and seven children, he couldn’t keep his hands off her. Fortunately for me, as it turned out,” he said. “Are you sure you can’t be tempted?”

She wondered what he was suggesting before she saw him tap the book again. Then she saw the name of the author, Thomas Darcy.

“Oh, you’re Tom? That’s you? That last baby was your great, great, great, great someone or other?”

“Grandfather, yes. You missed a couple of ‘greats’ though.”

“Poor starving writer, my arse. You own this mansion!”

He smiled again, revealing a little dimple in his left cheek. “No, I don’t. The house is owned by a family trust, and well, eight children, that’s a lot of descendants. I might be a Darcy, but I have to work for a living, I’m afraid. I’m the steward here. The book is a bit of a side-line. It’s a great love story, a happy ever after.” He waved the book in front of her. “Come on, buy one. You’d be responsible for a one hundred percent increase in sales this week.”

“Sorry, but I don’t believe in happy ever afters anymore. They’re about as real as the tooth fairy and Father Christmas.”

“Father Christmas isn’t real?” he asked in mock horror, making her laugh.

“Listen, if I said anything offensive about your great, great, great whose-what’s-its, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you personally. I’m a bit opinionated sometimes. I should learn to keep my mouth shut.”

He shook his head as he leaned against the edge of the huge desk behind him. “Not at all, I was rude. I can be a bit officious. It’s difficult sometimes, living and working in a place that has strangers walking around it almost constantly, and I’m sorry for mistaking you for a spy. It wouldn’t have been the first time an art dealer has sent a beautiful woman in to try and tempt me.”

Had he just called her beautiful? A warmth crept up around Ellie’s neck as he looked at her, and she had to resist the urge to wipe her sweaty palms on her already dirty jeans. She wasn’t used to being referred to as beautiful. Quirky, yes, pretty, yes, but beautiful? She imagined she appeared far from it, standing there in her damp, jacket and jeans, her hair bedraggled from the rain, and with not a scrap of make-up on.

“Did you walk here?”

“Yes, from the village.”

“Lambton? That’s a bit of a trek. I don’t mean to be nosy, but you don’t seem as if you’re on holiday, and you’re not the sort of visitor we normally have here. Some days I’m lucky if I see anyone under the age of fifty,” Tom said.

“I had a bad day yesterday. My boyfriend dumped me, so I quit my job.”

There was surprise and a question in his eyes.

“The boyfriend was also my boss.”

“Oh, messy.”

“Yeah. I’m a great big mess. I was in a state and just got in my car yesterday and drove, for hours, with no idea of where I was going. I got to Lambton and Mildred just stopped.”

“Mildred?” he asked, smiling.

“My car. I rented a room above the pub, tried the car again this morning, but she still won’t start. I called a local mechanic but he said he couldn’t get to me till late afternoon, and then I was at a loose end and thought the woods around here were pretty. Then it started to rain, so I paid for the tour, and . . . Why am I telling you all this?”

He didn’t answer, just watched her steadily. He had lovely eyes, and behind the glasses, a perfectly straight nose, and a strong chin. They were both quiet for a moment, and then she was embarrassed and wanted to run. “I should get out of your way. I’m sorry, for intruding. Bye.”

Tom nodded and she moved towards the doorway, but stopped when something brushed past her. She scanned around for a dog, a cat, another person, but there was nobody in the room except for her and Tom. Then the door slammed shut, very firmly, as if a sudden breeze had caught it. Ellie looked towards the windows. It was windy and rainy outside, definitely, but nothing had been left open. There wasn’t anything that could have caused such a sudden draft. In fact, the air in the room was deadly still.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It was odd, wasn’t it?”

“Are you winding me up? How did you do that? Have you got a secret button or something?”

“I didn’t do anything,” he said “But, you know, there are some that say Elizabeth Darcy adored Pemberley so much her spirit remains here to this day, that she’ll never leave it.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do I, actually, but your car broke down in Lambton. You claimed the door was open when you came in, when I’m certain it was shut. And you said the painting spoke to you.”

“Not like that, I just meant I liked it. I didn’t hear voices or anything. I might be a bit all over the place at the moment, but I’m not crazy.”

“Have a drink with me. At the pub, tonight?”

The unexpected invitation and the earnest way it was delivered unnerved her.
“Thanks, but no, I am . . .”

He interrupted before she could finish turning him down. “Not into men who shout at you, tell you soppy things about their ancestors and then try to freak you out with ghost stories? Yeah, sorry. I just thought, well, misery loves company and all that since I just got dumped too. Never had a lot of luck in that department.” He retreated behind the desk, and waved a hand in the air, as though he regretted asking her.

The sun came out unexpectedly, streaming in through the windows, bathing the room in light and sending a glow across his features. She liked him, Ellie realised. He had an awkwardness that made him abrupt at times, but he seemed kind, intelligent and his deep laugh was adorable. “Actually, I will have a drink with you.”

“Something changed your mind?”

“It seems Elizabeth thinks I should,” she said, smiling at the painting.

He lifted his eyebrows. “But you don’t believe in ghosts?”

“No, or happy endings, but maybe I shouldn’t close my mind off entirely, to either possibility.”

“I’ll see you at seven then?”

Not trusting herself to speak again, she nodded and walked towards the door, suddenly desperate to see the rest of the house and the paintings he had told her about. She took the stairs two at a time, found the gallery and raced along it. Her tour party was at the end and the boring guide frowned at her for having fallen behind, but she paid him no attention. Luckily, she was just in time. He was throwing his hand out, guiding her eyes towards the portrait of Fitzwilliam Darcy. Ellie peered up at it and gasped. If she paid no attention to the Regency clothes, and added a pair of glasses, it looked just like Tom Darcy.

“Quite ‘hot,’ wasn’t he? Is that what you say these days?” said someone, in response to her gasp. It was one of the two elderly ladies from earlier, who had been chatting at the back, previously only interested in finding the tea room.

“Yes, and he is. I mean, he was.” Ellie grinned. “Very hot. I’m going for a drink with him tonight.”

The elderly lady edged away from her, with a dubious look. “If you say so, dear. If you say so.”

The Near Miss

The only way to leave Pemberley was through the gift shop. It was a cramped, peculiar place, full of thimbles, toast racks and all sorts of oddities— nothing anyone could possibly have had a practical use for since nineteen eighty-two. Ellie had been trying to dodge and weave her way out as quickly as possible, when a book was thrust at her by a short, matronly lady in thick glasses and a chunky knit cardigan.

“You must be Ellie?” the lady said, smiling. Her name badge read “Marion.”

“Yes.” Ellie glanced down at the book and saw it was the one Tom Darcy had tried to persuade her to buy, a post-it note was stuck to the cover. His writing was unpretentious, scruffy and scratchy, and she smiled at the sight of it, thinking, ridiculously, that it looked exactly like she would have expected it to. God, she needed to get a grip! She only met him twenty minutes ago. She knew nothing about him. Without reading the note, she tried to pass the book back. “I’m sure it’s great, but I really don’t have a lot of money at the moment. I’m waiting for a mechanic to come and fix my car and that’ll probably cost me loads. So, thanks, but no thanks.”

“No charge, lovey. Mr Darcy told me to keep an eye out for you, said I should give it to you.” Marion was very sweet. She spoke with a lisp, obviously hampered by a pair of badly-fitting false teeth.

Ellie silently pondered for a moment. Would it be wrong to accept it? Had she been too hasty in agreeing to have a drink with him, too easily flattered? What if he was some sort of crazed stalker, or what if he had a girlfriend tucked away somewhere, or even worse, a wife? Maybe he regularly scanned the Pemberley tour parties for girls who might be easily impressed by his connection to the big house and surrounding estate.

“He seems . . . nice. Mr Darcy, that is,” she said. “Have you worked here long?”

“Nearly twenty years. He’s a lovely lad is Tom Darcy. Fair and kind to all the staff here.”

“I’ll bet you’re just saying that because he’s the boss. Does he pay you extra to say good things about him?” Ellie teased.

The jolly little lady giggled. “Heavens, no. He’s as well thought of as the older Mr Darcy was before him. Though his dad was probably a bit too kind, a bit too generous. Luckily for us, this one has a more sensible head on his shoulders. He’s got big

restoration plans for Pemberley. He wants to drag it up to scratch again. Make it as beautiful as it was in its heyday.”

“And what’s Mrs Darcy like?” she asked, fishing for information. She felt a warmth creep into her cheeks as she was met with a distrustful look. She was embarrassed by her own nosiness, but she had to know.

All the jolliness left Marion’s face and her eyes narrowed. “Well, that’s not for me to be talking about. None of my business, I’m sure.”

Ellie’s heart sank into her shoes. She was a complete and utter idiot. There was a Mrs Darcy! Bloody hell, why hadn’t she checked for a ring? She felt like crying. It was official, this weekend couldn’t get any worse. Were all men complete shit-bags, or just the ones that took an interest in her?

“Well, I hope you enjoyed your visit. Are you taking the book, or not?” Marion didn’t sound so welcoming anymore, and had become a little impatient.

“No, I’m not. I may look sad, but I’m not desperate enough to become a bit on the side, or a cheap one night stand.”

The elder lady’s eyebrows rose in surprise and her mouth made a little ‘o’ of shock. Ellie realised she’d raised her voice and caught the attention of everyone in the tiny shop. She heard their mutters and excited whispers, but was too angry to care.

“Actually.” She grabbed the book from Marion. “I will take it.” She hurriedly peeled the post-it note off the front and stuck it down on the nearby cash desk, before heading to the door, where she stopped and turned for a moment. “That way, if Tom Darcy comes anywhere near the inn at Lambton tonight, I’ll have something heavy to hit him with.”

Then, thankfully, she was out in the open air, striding down the gravel drive. She moved at a furious pace, walking with determination towards the large gates at the end of it. The wind rushed at her and whistled in protest as she cut a path through the heavy gusts. The only other sound was the crunch of the tiny stones as her feet moved over them. It was quiet enough for her to hear her mobile ringing at the bottom of her small rucksack. She ignored it at first, letting it ring out, but whoever was trying to reach her was persistent, and after a few moments it began ringing again. Wiping away the angry tears that had begun to pool in her eyes and were threatening to spill over, Ellie pulled off the rucksack and dug out the phone, glancing at the screen before answering.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been so worried, I’ve smoked two packs of cigarettes since last night. I’m trying to quit, you know? Being your friend is shortening my life.”

Despite her dreadful mood, Ellie couldn’t help smiling at the sound of Theresa’s voice. Whatever else might happen, there was someone she could count on; there was at least one person in the world who truly cared about her. “I’m sorry. I did try to call you. The reception here is patchy.”

“Where are you?”

“Derbyshire. And don’t ask me why, I have no idea. I just wanted to get out of London. Greg . . .” Ellie choked on the words, they wouldn’t come out.

At the other end of the line Theresa made a soothing, sympathetic noise. “I know, I went over to see you and he was moving his stuff out. Stuff which you should have made a bonfire of, by the way. We could have danced around it and chanted evil spells, while we watched his Hugo Boss shirts burn. And then we could have made an effigy of Chantel and stuck pins in it.”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t have helped. I wasn’t in the mood for voodoo.”

“I could do the voodoo, while you sat in a corner feeling poopoo.”

Ellie let out a small, bitter laugh.

Theresa’s sigh was loud enough to be heard clearly, even through Ellie’s crappy phone. “I’m sorry, chick.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, get your pert little bottom back to London. There are things you have to do when you break up with someone. There is a procedure that must be followed. First, you have to wallow and watch sad movies for at least two days and eat a lot of ice cream, then you have to get magnificently drunk and throw up, then you have to anonymously order sixty-two pizzas to be delivered to his slutty, man-stealing, no morals, new girlfriend’s address, cash on delivery. I’m keen to get started on the ice cream and alcohol parts.”

“I’ll be back tonight. I just have to wait to get Mildred fixed. She broke down, can you believe it? It’s like every bad thing that can happen to a person decided to happen to me in the space of the last forty-eight hours!” Ellie was trying not to feel too sorry for herself, but it was proving more and more difficult.

“Hey, nobody died. It’ll be okay.”

“No, it won’t. Why do people say stupid stuff like that? It won’t be okay. I had to resign from the estate agency. I had to! I couldn’t go in every day and face Chantel and Greg cooing at each other over the desks. I have no job, Theresa.”

“You hated that job, you only stayed because of Greg. Think of this as an opportunity to do something different.”

“I won’t be able to afford the flat on my own. He’s moving in with Chantel. I’ll have to move.”

“Get a roommate,” Theresa suggested, as though it was just the simplest solution in the world

“It’s a one-bed studio, who am I going to share with?”

“Danny DeVito. He’s small, I’d bet he’d hardly take up any room. He could sleep in the closet.”

“Stop trying to make me laugh, I don’t want to laugh. Do you know what else happened? This is the icing on the cake. I got played by this absolute wanker. This handsome guy, who runs this big stately home. He invited me out for a drink and it turns out he’s married.”

“Handsome?”

“What?”

“You said handsome? After wanker, you said handsome.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to, in fact he’s not handsome, he’s geeky. He’s lanky and has stupid, curly hair, and glasses and arrrggghhh!” Ellie’s scream frightened a magpie who gave a squawk and flew away.

“Oh, you really fancied him, didn’t you?”

“Only for a moment. I went temporarily insane. I just got dumped, after all.” Ellie remembered Tom Darcy’s smile, and the way his dark eyes had brightened when she had agreed to meet him. “Never mind, forget him. Arrrggghhh!” she screamed again, in frustration.

“Wow, you sound more cross about him than you are about Greg.”

Ellie blew her fringe from her eyes as she exhaled. “Honestly, I’ve been expecting the Greg thing for a while. I saw the way he stared at Chantel. She’s so glamorous, you know, legs that go on forever, all that big blonde hair.”

“And not to mention her being the regional manager. He’s after a promotion, you know. That’s a big part of it.”

“Let’s face it, Theresa. She’s everything I am not.”

“You are gorgeous, inside and out, and don’t forget it! Now, come back to London, please?” Theresa begged.

While they had been talking, Ellie had walked through the gates at the entrance to Pemberley. A small road ran along the border of the estate and she would have to cross it to get to Lambton. Just as she was saying goodbye to Theresa and preparing to step out, an odd sight on the other side of the road caught her eye: a figure in old-fashioned clothes, a dark cloak and a bonnet with long floating ribbons, which were being whipped around in the breeze. She looked as if she had wandered off the set of a period drama, or stepped out of a painting. When she turned and smiled, Ellie gasped, “Elizabeth Darcy.”

Then there was the loud, long beep of a car horn and Ellie heard herself cry out in fear, certain she was about to get hit by a large chunk of moving metal. Instead there was nothing, no impact, no collision, and when she opened her eyes she found herself sitting safely on the kerb. Had she fallen, or jumped back? A car was swerving sharply in front of her. Its brakes screeched before the driver seemed to regain control, then sped up, continuing on down the road. Ellie watched the car’s taillights disappear and tried to process what had happened. With a shaking hand, she picked up her phone, which was lying a couple of feet away.

Theresa was yelling down the line at her. “What was all the noise?”

“I almost got hit by a car, but I’m okay, I think.”

“Oh. My. God. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I got distracted and stepped out, but I think I jumped back just in time. I’m not really sure, there was something.” Ellie squinted at the other kerb across from her but whoever, or whatever, had been there, was now gone.

“Ellie, I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine. I just got a shock. Not even a bruise, I promise. I’ll speak to you in a while.” She ended the call before Theresa could protest, and then hurried over the road, being careful to look properly this time, but there were no cars, and no lady in period dress either. “Elizabeth,” she called out loudly. She then glanced around to see if anyone appeared. “Well, it’s official. You have beaten me world, and sent me insane. I’m now seeing things!” She threw her hands in the air. It was all too much!

But was she seeing things? The figure had looked so real. She thought back to her time in the study at Pemberley, when something had brushed past her. Had she just seen Elizabeth Darcy's ghost? Shaking her head, she chuckled to herself. There were no such things as ghosts. She was overtired and overemotional. She needed to be put down for a nap, like a small child, to have someone smooth her hair back from her face and bring her soup.

The mechanic had promised to get in touch as soon as he arrived in Lambton. She should go to her room at the inn and lay down until he called. Taking the shortcut she had discovered that morning when she had walked to Pemberley in the opposite direction—through the lanes and fields—Ellie made her way, but every now and then she would have to stop and look about her, puzzled. Though the flowers and trees and hedgerows were as pretty as they had been when she had first seen them, their colours seemed oddly muted; and then there was the weirdness of the sky, which was giving off a strange light. It was dark, but not like it would be if it was about to rain. It was almost purple in places, broken up by sparks of bright silver. Were they shooting stars? In the middle of the day! Had she banged her head when she had fallen in the road? Should she go and see a doctor? Things felt different, but she was unharmed, just confused and full of questions. Nothing hurt, and her legs were apparently very determined to get her to Lambton. She was there in what seemed like just a few minutes.

The inn was a quaint little place, nothing special, but clean and cosy, and welcoming, with its low ceilings and antique furniture. Ellie went up the tiny staircase and found her room. She searched the pocket of her jeans for the key card she had been given the previous evening and instead pulled out a large iron key. She stared at it for a minute before giving a shrug. Maybe she hadn't been given a key card. She had been really upset the night before.

Shutting the door behind her, Ellie put her phone on the bedside table and fell wearily onto the bed, hoping that when she woke up everything would have returned to normal. She tried shutting her eyes and willing herself to sleep, but it was no good. She tossed and turned, unable to forget about how something had pushed past her when she had been standing with Tom Darcy beneath the portrait. And how the strange figure by the roadside had smiled at her and looked just like Elizabeth Darcy. Her descendant might be an unfaithful pig, but Ellie was still drawn to the book about Elizabeth. She could almost feel it on the bed beside her, could almost hear it begging to be opened.

What the hell, she thought, reaching for it. She had nothing else to read, and hopefully it would be dull enough to send her out cold. She turned to the first page, and was soon, unexpectedly, deeply engrossed in the life and letters of a lady who had lived almost two hundred years before Ellie had even been born.

How long had she read before passing out? Ellie didn't know, but it must have been hours and hours, because when she next woke up, the sun was streaming in brightly through the tiny windows of her room at the inn. There was no way it could still be the same day; the light was too good. Which meant she must have slept right through and missed the mechanic's call, which also meant her car still wouldn't be fixed. She might be stuck in Lambton for another whole day, maybe even two. She swore out loud.

"Why, Lizzy. Wherever did you learn such an expression? Such language would make a sailor blush."

Ellie sat up straight and looked in the direction of the strange voice. In her room, at the end of the bed, stood a thin, pretty, middle-aged woman, who was staring at her with a mixture of amusement and horror.

"What are you doing in my room?" she demanded, her heart beating quickly.

The woman frowned. "Oh, excuse me, my dear, I did not think you would object. It is not, after all, the first time I have come into your room to wake you. You have slept very late. So, now you must make haste, or I fear we will not get to enjoy all the delights Pemberley has to offer. If you do not rise soon, the morning will have quite run away with us. I shall have someone bring water and warm cloths, and my maid will come and help you dress."

"No offence, but I think you might have wandered into the wrong room. Do you normally wear glasses? Or do you maybe take tablets for something? Is someone supposed to be looking after you?" Ellie asked gently, now more concerned than fearful. Clearly the woman had issues.

When she came closer, Ellie edged away, but the strange woman managed to reach a hand out and place it on her forehead. "Lizzy, I have woken you too suddenly, from a strange dream perhaps? I hope you are not unwell," she mused. "You have no fever."

"I'm fine, but you've got the wrong room, I'm not Lizzy." It was then that Ellie began to realise the woman spoke strangely. Not badly. No, in fact, she had a very cultured, intelligent sounding voice, but her words were odd, out of order, and her phrases were weird. "Make haste?" It was like something out of one of Elizabeth Darcy's

letters. Ellie searched around for the book of letters, but it was nowhere to be seen, neither was her phone, or the bedside table! In fact, the room was a lot sparser than she remembered, less chintzy. “Who are you?”

“Lizzy, are you perhaps making me a victim of your famous wit? Must you tease me? Of course you know who I am. Have I not known you since you were five, when I married your uncle Gardiner?”

“You are Mrs Gardiner?” Ellie said, her voice flat and emotionless, but on the inside her mind was reeling, her emotions whirling, her stomach flipping over.

“Of course I am. Now stop this, ’tis a silly parlour game.” She patted Ellie’s hand and walked out of the room. Ellie watched in amazement, bewildered by the floating, empire line gown the woman wore. Then she saw that she was wearing a prim long-sleeved nightgown, with ruffles and lace down the front. She jumped from the bed. Where was that damn book? Reading it had conjured up a horribly realistic dream.

While she ripped apart the room, pacing, talking and pinching herself, she caught sight of her reflection in a mirror on the wall and swore for the second time that morning.

Last night, she had been wishing herself out of her own sad, miserable existence and into the life of Elizabeth Darcy—a woman with no work or money worries, with dozens of servants on hand to cater for her every need, an enormous house surrounded by beautiful lawns and woodland, and an adoring husband to boot. Well, her wish had somehow come true. The face in the mirror, staring back at her, was Elizabeth Darcy’s!

The Stranger in the Mirror

Ellie stepped closer to the mirror and leaned in until she was nearly touching the surface. Her dreams sometimes took on a strange bent, but what the hell was this? She turned her face to the side, keeping her wide eyes on her reflection as she examined every small detail of Elizabeth Darcy's features. She brushed a curl away from her cheek, touched her temple, then her eyebrow, and lastly her rosebud lips. With her thumb and first finger, she shoved her nose down and then pulled it painfully to one side and then the other.

"Bizarre!" Her chin gave a jolt back in shock. Her voice was different, Elizabeth Darcy's tone was higher than hers. She took in a breath to speak again, but before she could say another word, the door opened. She straightened and dropped her hands to her sides as a young woman with a jug entered and curtsied.

"Beggin' your pardon, miss, but Mrs Gardiner asked me ta help ya dress."

The maid—probably Mrs Gardiner's maid—moved to a basin in one corner, poured the contents of the jug inside, and held a cloth out to Ellie. "Might as well wash while tha water's nice and warm."

Ellie automatically took the cloth as she stepped forward. Did people bathe in dreams? She'd once dated a bloke who loved dream analysis, but she couldn't remember him ever mentioning bathing. Did a bath have a specific meaning and was a shower different? And was the lack of a tub significant?

"Miss?"

The maid was watching her. Dream or not, the girl would think she was mad if she tossed away the cloth and traipsed out of the room in the relic of a nightgown she was wearing, even though the idea was tempting.

There was a screen located conveniently beside the basin, so she'd be hidden while she removed her clothes and washed. Standing before a stranger, whether she was in another person's body or not, would be embarrassing—even in a dream, nudity was awkward.

Ellie dashed around it and began to clean herself up. The warm water was comforting as she wiped down her arms and chest, but when she reached her legs, she paused. Good grief! When was the last time Elizabeth Darcy had waxed, or shaved? She rubbed her hand all the way down her calf till she reached her foot. By the looks of it,

she never had! Okay, so they probably didn't have wax in the nineteenth century, but surely they had razors? Ellie lifted her arms to find a small tuft of hair. Eww! Disgusting. Apparently, ladies did not see the need for proper hygiene yet. At least she would wake from this; she wouldn't survive for long if it were reality.

"Miss, are ya ready for your chemise?"

Ellie gave a tiny jump and peered around the edge of the screen where the maid held a simple white cotton slip. "Sure, why not." Once she had pulled the slip over her head, the girl came at her holding what appeared to be something like a corset, except it wasn't much more than a big bra with ties at the front.

"Puttin' ya stays by tha fire dried them out well indeed after tha misty day yesterday."

"It wasn't so bad. I doubt I'll ever get all the muck off my Converse, though."

The maid paused and stared at her for a moment, so Ellie grabbed the "stays" and slipped them around her. "When in Rome and all that!" she thought, as the laces were tightened around her chest. The maid kept tugging and made them tighter still, pushing her breasts together until they bulged a bit from the top and she could barely breathe.

Looking down at her now pretty impressive cleavage, she let out a small whistle. She needed to get some of these when she woke up! Much more effective than a push-up bra—who needed to be able to breathe anyway?

Once her stays were tied, the maid helped her put on "a petticoat," ignoring Ellie's eyebrow roll. "Really, another layer?" she asked, when a gown similar to Mrs Gardiner's was put over the top of the petticoat.

A giggle erupted when she saw herself in the mirror—or technically, the sight of Elizabeth Darcy in the mirror. What a riot! This was like playing dress-up, though she could have never afforded the costume. She'd seen dresses and bonnets for Regency balls and re-enactments on Etsy. People shelled out quite a few quid on get ups like this, and she didn't even have her phone—so no selfie of the results. Not that it would be her own face anyway.

The maid pulled her before a dressing table, and Ellie again found herself gaping at Elizabeth Darcy's reflection, resisting the urge to lean in and examine the face from the portrait further. When the maid reappeared beside her and pulled the seat back, Ellie started and sat.

With the quick untie of a ribbon, the plait hanging down her back was loosened and a tumble of dark, mahogany curls fell around her shoulders, reaching her mid-back. Such a contrast to Ellie's usual hair, which was fine, straight, and what some claimed to be a shade of ginger, but she preferred to call bronze shimmer; an argument she and Theresa had regularly.

"Do ya have a preference this morning?"

She thought about Elizabeth Darcy's portrait in the library at Pemberley, but beyond describing the appearance, she really had no knowledge of the hairstyles of the time. "No, whatever you like will be fine."

The girl gave her another confused look before shrugging and setting to work. Normally, Ellie enjoyed having her hair done, but this was an entirely different story! The maid brushed, tugged, pulled, and pinned until the bulk was neatly arranged on top of her head. Then she placed a metal thing that resembled a small pair of garden shears in the fire.

The metal heated until it was flaming red and the maid took it off, allowing it to cool for a few seconds before she returned. Ellie pulled away when the maid grasped a lock of hair to bring it closer to the heated instrument of torture. Was this about to turn into a nightmare? "What are you doing?"

The maid glanced to the tool and back to her. "Your aunt said ya were in a peculiar mood this mornin'. Now, shift back over so I can curl yer fringe."

With wide eyes, Ellie remained where she was.

"Really, Miss Bennet! Your aunt will have my hide if I don't have ya prepared for breakfast in tha next quarter hour. Please!"

Taking pity on the girl, Ellie straightened and closed her eyes, waiting for the smell of burnt hair to reach her nose. The maid huffed with a smile.

"I've yet to singe ya, and ya behave today as though I do it every time."

After a few tugs on one side, she heard the maid passing behind her. "There's one part done."

Ellie peeked through a single eye while keeping the other firmly shut. There was now a set of perfect ringlets on one side of her fringe. A slight odour lingered, but it wasn't any stranger than the smell of a modern curling iron.

“There, all done.” The maid placed the warm object on the stone hearth, opened a small box, and removed a chain and pendant. She put it around Ellie’s neck and Ellie pressed her fingers to the five stone amethyst cross while the maid fastened the clasp.

In one of Elizabeth Darcy’s letters, she had written about her family. They weren’t exactly the Beckhams, and she wondered how they could have afforded such pretty jewellery with five daughters to support. She had a memory of her father, the history buff, once telling her about paste jewellery when she’d been small, and he’d been trying to interest her in his work. Wait? Why was she worried about how accurate her dream was?

“Your uncle has a private dining parlour—second door on tha left when ya go down. He and your aunt will be waitin’ for ya.”

“Thank you,” replied Ellie.

Awkwardly, she left the room, pausing in a small sitting room and looking back and forth between the two doors opposite. On a whim, she took the one to the left and found a long corridor, with a window to one end and what appeared to be a staircase in the opposite direction. She headed towards the stairs, studying the artwork on the walls and giving a giggle when a man passed her, his tight breeches leaving little to the imagination—apparently life in the nineteenth century did have some compensations.

At the next floor, she paused at the sound of voices coming from where the maid told her Mr and Mrs Gardiner would be.

“I have never seen her behave as such, Edward. I cannot make heads or tails of it. She genuinely appeared terrified, as though I were a stranger, and where did she learn such a vulgar expression?”

“You are overreacting, my dear.” The lower voice sounded as though he wanted to laugh—particularly when compared to the almost frantic tones of Mrs Gardiner. “I am certain she was disoriented from a sound sleep, or perhaps a particularly intense dream.”

Ha! If he only knew the truth!

“I hope you are correct. Her father would never forgive us if she came to harm.”

“I am certain some tea and a good breakfast will set her to rights. Please do not ruin our day by fretting.” The lady gave a sigh. Her husband’s attempts to soothe her didn’t seem to have helped.

“Good mornin’, miss.”

Ellie jumped and attempted a smile at the girl who approached from the opposite direction with a tray. The servant stopped before the door and stared at Ellie, who glanced around herself.

“Oh, you’re waiting for me to go in first.” She stepped inside the room, ignoring the girl’s raised eyebrows.

“Ah! Here she is!” exclaimed the gentleman, cheerfully. “Your aunt just told me of the silly prank you played on her earlier. You must not try her nerves lest she become like your mother.”

Mrs Gardiner rolled her eyes as she spread what appeared to be strawberry jam on her toast. “Really, Edward. Lizzy knows she has little worry of that.”

The man motioned to the chair across from him. “You have never been timid about a meal. Sit down, Lizzy, and make yourself a plate. Your aunt is quite eager to be off.”

Ellie looked over the food on the table. The smells coming from the dishes made her mouth water and her stomach gave a rumbling growl. She placed a hand on her belly as the man, who must be Mr Gardiner, smiled.

“You have never lacked for a hearty appetite.” The girl set the last plate not far from her. “Look at that. Hannah has brought bacon.”

Without a word, Ellie took a piece of toast. Her clothes had been a bit tight since all her problems with Greg had started. She had been comfort eating – stuffing herself with chocolate and glugging white wine, and she needed to keep a closer eye on her figure.

She opened her mouth to take a bite of her dry toast when a sudden thought struck her, and the toast remained where it was, paused before her open mouth. This was a dream! And by some crazy quirk of fate, if it wasn’t, she was in Elizabeth Darcy’s body! She could eat all the bacon she wanted!

Mr Gardiner chuckled when she dropped the toast on her plate like it was a rock and began to help herself some of everything on the table. “I knew you could not ignore the bacon. You have adored it since you were a little girl.”

Elizabeth Darcy was a smart woman. After all, who could dislike bacon! She took her first bite, her eyes fluttered closed, and she sighed as the salty goodness all but melted on her tongue.

Mrs Gardiner straightened and clasped her hands. “I know you are uneasy about visiting Pemberley, Lizzy, but I appreciate your willingness to go, despite your misgivings.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, I’d rather not if it’s all the same to you,” responded Ellie, without thought. “I mean the house is lovely, but the owner is a real wanker! I’d be happy never to lay eyes on him again.”

“Elizabeth Bennet!” gasped Mrs Gardiner. “Where have you learned such language? I insist you tell me at once!”

Mr Gardiner’s bushy eyebrows were almost raised to his missing hairline. “Regardless of where you learned such words, you should know better than to use them, young lady. I will not tell your father of this, but should you speak in this vulgar manner again, I will not hesitate to inform him upon our return. Do you understand?”

Ellie nodded and turned her attention back to her bacon. Who cared whether she swore, or called Tom Darcy names? Oh wait! If she was Elizabeth Darcy, the owner of Pemberley wasn’t Tom Darcy. It was . . . Oh, what was his name? Fitzwilliam! That was it. The owner was Fitzwilliam Darcy!

Mrs Gardiner placed a hand on her husband’s wrist. “We are well aware of your distaste for Mr Darcy, but when would you have toured Pemberley?”

“I toured the house and grounds yesterday while I waited.” What difference did the truth make if she was dreaming? After all, she would wake and leave all this behind and nothing that happened here would matter.

“Not more of this,” complained Mrs Gardiner. “I hope you cease these infernal games before we depart. I do not find your present manner the slightest bit amusing.”

Ellie was so tired of going along with this! She would say what she wanted and when she wanted. “My father would enjoy Pemberley’s library. If they allowed him inside, he’d never leave—especially once he noticed that big desk in the study—all he’d need is his research and takeaways and he’d be set for weeks.” After all, what history professor wouldn’t be in love with Pemberley’s library?

“But he would never be allowed inside, would he? I mean, they don’t allow visitors into Pemberley’s study, do they?” She rambled as she ate, without noticing the others at the table. “Not only do they keep the door shut, but it’s roped off as well. Not to mention Mr Arsey Darcy and his temper issues. Oh, and he hasn’t just got problems with his anger, he’s a two-timer to boot! I still can’t believe I fell for his act only to find out he’s married!”

Ellie set her knife and fork on the plate and reached for another piece of bacon, noticing the horrified expressions on the faces of the Gardiners as she grabbed it with her fingers and began to eat.

Mrs Gardiner set her utensils on her plate, dabbed her mouth, and rose from her chair, which scraped harshly against the floorboards. "I do not understand what has occurred to alter you so overnight, but until you can behave as you ought—as the Elizabeth Bennet I know and not some lunatic fit for Bedlam—I ask you to refrain from speaking that which is so disturbing to me." The lady's eyes were glossy with unshed tears. "I can only pray what ailment has overtaken you can be cured with a good night's sleep." Her voice was not loud, but had a slight raspy quality.

Mrs Gardiner stared at Ellie for a time as though she expected her to speak, before she shook her head in disappointment and left the room. Mr Gardiner wore a similar frown. His eyes told her off without words. She grimaced and hoped she wouldn't get a lecture from him, too.

"Really, Lizzy!" he scolded. "You spoke no better than a common scullery maid and your manners at this table are no better than one of the hogs on the farm. Your father might find such antics amusing, but as improper as your mother can be, she would be as shocked as we are by your present behaviour. We would not be surprised by such a display from Lydia, yet we expect better from you."

"But this isn't real!" Ellie's raised voice echoed around the room.

"I beg your pardon?"

"None of this exists." She waved her hands. Mr Gardiner stared at her bacon flapping wildly as she motioned to her surroundings. "I fell asleep this evening, reading a book of Elizabeth Darcy's letters, and now I am having this insane dream."

Ellie stood and pressed a hand to her forehead, which was beginning to ache. "I am not Lizzy, or Elizabeth Bennet, or even Elizabeth Darcy! Any moment now, I will wake from this madness, and let me tell you, when I do, I'll chuck that book of Elizabeth Darcy's letters in the nearest bin!"

The dream had been a bit of a lark, initially, but this wasn't fun anymore. The boning in her stays was stabbing her in the armpit, a pin in her hair jabbed painfully at her scalp, and she swore she could feel the hair on her legs rubbing against her stockings! She wanted this nightmare to end, and end now!

She sometimes woke from her dreams by taking a fright or falling, but nothing in the dining parlour would help her. She rushed to the window, placing her hands on the sill and watched the road before the inn.

The scene outside was similar to her vision of Elizabeth Darcy—like something from a period drama. The buildings were the same as in twenty-seventeen, but newer; the Tudor and Georgian buildings looked as if they'd just been built! The road was not paved, and no cars sat parallel parked along the pavements. Men on horseback rode in both directions. Three boys ran to the horse chestnut tree on the green across from a blacksmith's and began to climb its branches. Carriages passed, hurrying to wherever it was they had to go.

“Lizzy?”

Ellie didn't look or speak to Mr Gardiner, but instead, hitched her skirts up to her ankles and rushed from the room. She ran down the nearest set of steps to the entrance of the inn, where a man opened the door for her as she came closer.

“Lizzy!” called Mr Gardiner's voice from behind her.

Stepping outside, she peered in one direction, but, other than another man on horseback, there was nothing. She turned the opposite way and saw a huge coach with more horses pulling it than she had time to count. It was hurrying down the road, making the people sitting on top if it sway from side to side.

This was it! She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and lunged, throwing herself in front of its huge wheels.



With a tremendous gasp, Ellie sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding against her ribs. She pressed her hand to her chest, reached over to click on the bedside lamp, and glanced down to the bedraggled camisole top she wore when she slept! Yes! She was back! Ellie fist-pumped the air in celebration.

The book! She felt around the duvet, shifted the pillows, and peeked under the bed, but no luck. Where could it have gone? After a few more minutes of searching, she let her shoulders drop, bewildered, as she scanned the room.

Everything was in its place, just as she left it the night before, except the book, but then, she was just going to throw the bloody thing in the bin. Why was she so concerned about what had happened to it?

Big red numbers on the bedside clock told her it was two in the morning. She checked her phone; the mechanic hadn't called. It was too late for her to call him. She would just have to wait until tomorrow.

She glanced at the time once more. "Too early," she whispered to no one but herself. With a heavy exhale, she turned off the lamp and snuggled back into the pillow, and drifted, this time, into dreamless oblivion.

Elizabeth Bennet's Untimely Demise

It was good to be home, or at least it would be when she eventually found a parking space. Though she had a resident's permit, it wasn't always easy, and Ellie had to drive around the side streets near her flat for almost twenty minutes before she was eventually able to reverse her little sports car into a tight bay, switch the ignition off, and pull the handbrake up.

Although she was still jobless, boyfriend-less and possibly soon to be homeless, at least her car was okay. The mechanic had woken her a few minutes after nine that morning by calling her mobile repeatedly. When she'd groggily answered, he'd met her downstairs and cheerfully taken her keys from her to have a look. How embarrassed she'd been when he'd turned the ignition and the car had roared cheerfully to life! The battered old MG, which had struck her as so great in the second-hand car showroom, but had given her nothing but constant trouble and huge repair bills ever since she'd owned it, now seemed to be running smoothly. The engine purred away happily, sounding better than it ever had; the mechanic had shrugged and told her there was nothing wrong with it.

Ellie had apologised for wasting his time, but he'd been so nice about it and hadn't even charged her for calling him out. Now, she stroked the car's well-worn steering wheel. "You were definitely broken, Mildred. I didn't imagine it," she told the car. It was just another weird thing to add to all the craziness of the past twenty-four hours. She didn't even want to start thinking about how Lambton seemed to have changed since she'd first driven into it. Hadn't it been a cute little place with tearooms and antique shops, tiny buildings and narrow, winding roads? When she had been putting her bag into the boot of the car to start her journey home, however, it looked different, a bit down-at-heel. There was a charity shop and a café serving all-day breakfasts, but other than that, all the other shops were boarded up and loads of the buildings were in desperate need of repair. Hardly anyone had been around; Lambton was suddenly a bit of a ghost town.

It had to be stress! Who wouldn't be strung out in her situation? Once she was back home, with her own stuff around her, she would feel more like herself again. Getting out of the car, Ellie began to weave her way through the busy London streets. A nice long bubble bath, and a good cup of coffee from her recently purchased, shiny espresso

machine would set her to rights! Then later, she'd call Theresa and see if she wanted to meet up for a glass of wine.

Letting herself into the big communal front door of the Georgian building, she trudged up the old winding staircase to the third floor. If she had to move out and give this flat up, she was definitely picking somewhere more modern, somewhere with a lift. Somewhere where the windows closed properly, the doors didn't stick, and the walls were straight. When she first viewed the place, the little quirks had given the flat character, but now, she wanted more than anything to leave them behind. Once she'd turned the key to the door of her flat, she gave the wood a kick and the handle a wiggle—a well-practised manoeuvre—and it swung open.

She threw her keys onto a table near the door and was shrugging out of her jacket when the sight of someone standing in the middle of her living room with a selfie-stick raised above her head—obviously meaning to use it as a weapon if need be—stopped her cold. Ellie jumped in surprise. Her first terrified thought was that it was a burglar, but then she blinked and gave the intruder a thorough once over. They had not come for her TV. They most probably didn't even know what a TV was.

“Oh, won't you please leave me alone? I am sick of you. I don't want any more dreams, ghostly visions, hallucinations, or whatever the hell they are. Just bugger off,” Ellie cried out, pushing her fringe back from her face and putting her hands over eyes. Hopefully, by the time she looked again, the figure would be gone.

She peeked out of one eye, but no change, it was still there—no, she was still there. “I think I need to see a doctor.”

“As perhaps do I.” Despite the selfie-stick cocked over her shoulder like a baseball bat, her voice was more amused than frightened.

“And you speak! Terrific. I have gone certifiably nuts!” Ellie let out a short burst of hysterical laughter. “I can't cope with this. I need coffee, now. Do you drink coffee? I mean, I know you're not real, and I'm just imagining all this. Even so, it seems rude not to offer.”

“Is it possible, do you suppose, to share in a malady of the mind? You appear to be under the impression I am not real, and yet 'tis no dream. I cannot wake from it,” the intruder said, moving lightly and gracefully, following Ellie into the small kitchen area. “All I see and hear, everything is beyond my comprehension.”

“Yep, mine too. I wish I’d never laid eyes on that bloody portrait of yours.” Ellie closed her eyes and groaned. She likely sounded daft talking to someone who wasn’t there and she’d offered them coffee to boot! What would Greg think if he could see her now? He’d probably be congratulating himself on his lucky escape!

“I trust that, given the strangeness of the situation we find ourselves in, you will forgive my impertinence—I know we have yet to be introduced, but you appear to have me at a distinct disadvantage—you know me, yet I do not know you. What is your name, and how are we acquainted?”

Ellie turned and blinked. “I’m Ellie Forrester, and yes, I know who you are. You’re Elizabeth Darcy.”

The tiny, very slim and petite girl drew herself up to her full height and raised her chin, an indignant frown upon her face. “I most certainly am not!”

“I’m sorry,” Ellie replied. “You’re Elizabeth Bennet.”

Elizabeth Bennet nodded. “Indeed I am, but how do you know me and where exactly am I?”

“Oh, that shithead took the coffee maker!” Ellie choked back her tears. There was an empty space on the kitchen worktop where the state-of-the-art machine had once stood. She glanced over at Elizabeth Bennet, who appeared half-horrified and half-amused. One of her eyebrows was raised and a small smile tugged at her lips. “Sorry about the language, not what you are used to, I know. My ex-boyfriend was moving out his stuff while I was away and, well, the coffee maker wasn’t his.”

Ellie stopped, reached out, put a finger on the end of Elizabeth Bennet’s nose and pushed it to the side, just like she had when she’d examined Elizabeth’s reflection staring back at her in the dream. The nose moved, the skin under her finger was real and the girl let out a short yelp of pain.

“Desist! I shall thank you not to poke at me,” she protested.

“You’re real. You are really here.” Ellie shook her head in wonder, looking properly at Elizabeth for the first time since she’d entered the flat. She was a living, breathing blast from the past. Her hair was neatly arranged on top of her head with a few ringlets at her temples, and she wore a long, thin muslin, empire line dress over a long petticoat. There was an amethyst cross around her neck. In fact, she looked exactly as Ellie had when she’d been Elizabeth. She was wearing the same clothes; her hair was styled in exactly the same way. It was astonishing, but she was real.

“I do not blame you for your incredulity, Miss Forrester, or is it Mrs Forrester?”

“Miss, but Ellie is fine.”

“Thank you, yes, I do believe, given the extraordinary nature of our joint predicament, it might be better for us to assume such an intimacy. And I am quite sure I have found myself in a world and time when such formalities are not always strictly necessary.”

Ellie muddled through this speech, and when she thought she understood it, she nodded.

Elizabeth put down the selfie-stick. “I am Lizzy, to my friends.”

“Yes, I know. How did you get here? How long have you been here?” Ellie asked, forgetting about Greg, the coffee maker and everything else. None of that mattered when someone from the nineteenth century had managed to travel through time and end up in her kitchen.

“I awoke here, in your bed, some five or six hours past. At first, I did not believe the evidence of my own eyes. Everything is so strange. I thought perhaps it a dream, but as I moved about your rooms I became gradually accustomed to the notion that it was no sleep-imposed fantasy brought on by too much cheese at supper. I was hungry, you see, Miss . . . oh, Ellie. I was hungry, and we do not feel hunger in our dreams. And I was very warm, I felt overcome by it, and I feel pain; if I should pinch my wrists and when you poked at my nose, it hurt. I have never hitherto known such discomfort in my dreams. Therefore, I can only conclude that this is all material, and not fantasy.” Elizabeth finished with a small, elegant shrug. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“Hamlet.” Ellie had a hatred of Hamlet. She’d failed her English Lit exam.

“Well, I am glad to see the Bard is not yet forgotten, in the year . . . Pray, tell me, what is the date?”

“Two thousand and seventeen.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard and bit her lip while she tried to digest the fact. “Well, what are we to do?”

Ellie put her hands in the pockets of her jeans and studied her shoes for a moment; they looked so scruffy next to Elizabeth Bennet’s neat little boots. “Well, in the absence of any good coffee, we’ll do what we English always do in times of crisis. We’ll stick the kettle on and have a nice cup of tea.”

“I noticed your paintings, Ellie, while I was here alone. They are quite extraordinary.” Elizabeth pointed up at a collage of photos Theresa had made her for her birthday—mostly pictures of the two of them on girly holidays, drunk in various foreign bars and messing about on sunny beaches. “They are so very accurate. I cannot make out a single brush stroke. I think the artist must be very talented. May I know his name?”

“Nikon.” Ellie pressed her lips together, trying to not to smile. How did she begin to explain photography?

They sat opposite one another at the tiny table next to the window in Ellie’s flat, both of them cradling steaming mugs. Elizabeth Bennet took a careful sip of the liquid in hers and cocked her head to the side.

“Is it horrible? Not what you are used to? I don’t have any proper tea leaves, or cream, or bone china to serve it in.”

Elizabeth shook her head as she stared into her cup. “Oh no, it is different, but very good, very strong. I notice you do not mean to re-use it, the little bag that contained the leaves. Do you mean to discard it?”

Ellie nodded. “That seems wasteful to you?”

“Tea is expensive, in . . . At home, it is kept under lock and key and used many times over before it is given over for the servants use, and then used many times over again. It is oft times very bad, very weak, and sometimes, shamefully, in some of the grander houses, dreadful. I have often thought—”

“The richer the hostess, the poorer the tea—the poorer the lady, the richer the tea,” Ellie interrupted. “I thought that was funny when I read it. You often find that, don’t you, that people who have the least to give are sometimes the most generous? You were spot on.”

“I was spot on?”

“I mean you were right. When I read it in your letters, it struck me as being so true.”

“My letters? You have read my letters?” Elizabeth asked. “My letters from some two hundred years ago. How came you to have read them?”

“Because someone kept them, and they were published. You were a famous lady.”

Elizabeth’s large brown eyes widened and she burst out laughing. “Not at all. I am simply Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn. I am the second daughter of a country gentleman, but I assure you, his estate is nothing of note.”

Ellie realised she knew things about Elizabeth she did not know herself. Elizabeth had no idea she was going to marry the ultra-rich Mr Darcy, with his stately home, bursting with chandeliers and grand pianos. This Elizabeth, sitting in front of her, hadn't experienced any of that yet, and maybe it would be wrong to tell her. "What were you doing, before you woke up here?"

"I was in Derbyshire."

"At Lambton, at the Inn. And you had gone to bed, and the next day you had plans with your Aunt and Uncle to go and tour Pemberley?"

"Yes, though I was not certain as to the wisdom of such a trip." Elizabeth blushed and fussed at the curls that were beginning to escape from her elaborate hairstyle. "How do you know?"

"Because I woke up and had breakfast with your relatives. I was there." Ellie paused, trying to remember it all. Holy crap, what had she said to Elizabeth's aunt and uncle? How badly had she behaved? "When I was in the moment, I thought it was a dream, but it was so real. Do you remember what you were saying to me earlier about being hungry and how that doesn't happen in dreams? I tasted bacon, Lizzy, and it was delicious; maybe the freshest, loveliest bacon I've ever had. I was you, while you were here being me." Her voice trailed off as realisation dawned—she had really been Elizabeth Bennet!

Elizabeth blinked and stared out of the window. On the street below them, cars whizzed by and neon lights adorned the shop-fronts. Ellie could only imagine how frightening and surreal it all seemed to the girl opposite her.

When Elizabeth turned back, a small line creased the space between her eyebrows. "Do you mean to say we swapped positions? Became each other?"

"Unless I am completely crazy, that is exactly what happened. I don't know why or how, but yes."

"But now you have returned to your life. Why do you suppose I have not returned to mine?" Elizabeth had a penetrating gaze. For such a small person, she had a big presence that seemed to fill the little flat.

"I'm really sorry," Ellie confessed, cowed by Elizabeth's intense inspection of her face, "but, well, I do have a bit of an idea of why you haven't, you know, gone back."

"And?"

“I think I might have killed you.” Ellie bowed her head as the horrifying truth rushed out of her in a terrified whisper.

“I beg your pardon?”

She held her fingers up, her thumb and index finger a teensy bit apart. “It’s more than a tiny bit possible that you are, in fact, dead.” Ellie squirmed, but there was nothing else for it. She’d just have to spit it out. “When I was you, this morning, I threw myself in front of a carriage—a massive carriage with about six horses pulling it and people sitting on the top. You see, it was the best way I could think of to wake myself up, and well, yeah, I got back to two thousand and seventeen. I suppose you should have gone back to—”

“Eighteen hundred and thirteen.” Elizabeth put a hand over her mouth in shock. “Yet I am still here! Can I not go back?”

Ellie shook her head, unsure of the answer. “I don’t know.”

Other than the faint sounds of London filtering through the glass, the room was silent for a few moments, until Elizabeth recovered.

“I have another question which relates to something you said when you first entered. As shocking as the news of my demise is, I recall you revealing something that is perhaps even more astonishing to me.”

“Go on.”

“Why did you call me Elizabeth Darcy?”

Lighting the Flameless Candle

What a loaded question! Playing for time, Ellie got up from her seat and rushed to the kitchen, holding her mug of tea in one hand and opening the cupboards with the other. “You said you were hungry. You must be if you woke here this morning and haven’t eaten. Do you like pasta?” asked Ellie as she turned. She jumped back when she found Elizabeth standing directly behind her.

“You have not responded to my question.” Elizabeth’s head was slightly tilted to one side, watching Ellie as though she could see right through her.

What was she supposed to say? Could she tell Elizabeth about her future? Should she?

If Greg hadn’t dragged her to every dull as dirt science fiction film that came into the cinema, she wouldn’t be so worried, but he had. She was no fan of space travel, time travel, multiple dimensions or all those other insane plots writers dreamed up, but weren’t there rules about this sort of thing? Wouldn’t telling Elizabeth upset some balance? A disturbance in the force? No, that wasn’t it – that was Star Wars. The space-time continuum! Yes! She probably wouldn’t have remembered if it wasn’t for that fitty¹ Chris Pine, but that was one of the films she had actually enjoyed. What was it called again?

“Ellie, if we are to deduce what has occurred, we must be honest with one another.”

Ellie closed the cupboard. “I don’t know if I should tell you. What if by telling you, I change the past?”

“You altered my history, rather inconsiderately, when you threw yourself into the path of that coach. While I do not believe you should tell me everything you learned from my correspondence—if I should return, I would not wish to know too much of my future, and conversely, I should not want to know what I have missed if I must remain here—but if we are to discern a way for me to return to eighteen-thirteen, I believe **I** must be party to certain information.”

Elizabeth was right. Ellie didn’t have the first idea of how to fix this mess, but she had to admit the two of them were more likely to work it out together, rather than on their own. Two heads were better than one, after all.

“Okay.” She sighed. “Yesterday, while I waited for a mechanic to fix my car, I toured Pemberley.”

“With my aunt and uncle?”

“No, before I met them, and in my time.” She waved both of her hands in front of her. “The point is, I was drawn to a picture of you in the master’s study.”

“A portrait of me?” Elizabeth shook her head. “I have never had an artist take my likeness before. My family could not afford such an expense.”

“But Fitzwilliam Darcy could, and did, after you married.”

“Married to Mr Darcy. Impossible!”

“Why is it impossible?”

Elizabeth’s hands went to her stomach and she began to breathe like she’d been running. “I did hear you refer to me as Mrs Darcy, yet I do not understand how such a match came about. I treated him so abominably at Hunsford, accusing him of ruining Jane’s hopes with Mr Bingley, and of having a disreputable character. I know him as a man of immense pride. I must have wounded it so severely. I don’t believe he would forgive me—”

“But he did.” Ellie grasped Elizabeth’s arms. She needed to calm her down. What if she passed out? Ellie had a few plasters and a hot water bottle, but those wouldn’t do her any good.

A line formed between Elizabeth’s eyebrows and she glanced down to Ellie’s hands. “Do you fear me being violent?”

“No, you started to pant. I was afraid you’d pass out.”

“Pass out?” Elizabeth stared, puzzled. “Oh! You must mean swoon!” She laughed. “I shall have you know I never swoon. I was momentarily overwhelmed by your revelations. I am well now. I will also have you know that I have never panted. Such methods of breathing are for dogs and dogs alone.”

Ellie promptly let go of Elizabeth, picked up her tea, and held it in her hands. The warmth of the mug calmed her. “Sorry.”

“I fear I should apologise as well. I must remember that we will only solve our dilemma with rational minds.”

“Perhaps we should both sit down,” Ellie offered. Once they were again seated before the window, she looked Elizabeth in the eye. “You must understand, I don’t know everything. I read maybe a third of the book before I fell asleep, and it was gone when I woke up.”

“You refer to the book of my correspondence?”

“Yes, one of your, I don’t know how many greats of a grandson, put all the letters you wrote while you were married in a book. He gave it to me when I toured Pemberley.” Ellie blew her fringe from her face as she leaned back in her seat. “In one letter, you mentioned how grateful you were that Mr and Mrs Gardiner took you to visit Pemberley—Mr Darcy came back early and you met him there.”

“Oh, how embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing? How?” Ellie noticed Elizabeth blush and fiddle with the cross and chain around her neck.

“When my aunt first spoke of touring Pemberley, she claimed that those great men were never at home, but I was still uneasy. Our argument at Easter was intemperate, you see. He proposed, but I had reason to despise him then.” Elizabeth turned to gaze out of the window.

“Do you still hate him?”

“No, I was mistaken. He was innocent of the accusations I made against him.” She reached down and a moment later held a folded and slightly battered piece of paper in her hands. “He wrote me a letter, you see. While it was quite improper for him to have done so, and even more improper for me to have accepted it, I could not resist. Till that moment, I never knew myself.”

They both jumped when Ellie’s mobile rang and began skittering across the table as it vibrated. She looked at the display. Crap! It was Theresa. If she ignored the call, Theresa would keep trying day and night until Ellie answered. There was nothing for it. She pressed the green circle on the touchscreen.

“Well? Are you back? You woke me up this morning, texting me that you’d be back in London by mid-day, and that’s come and gone. I’ve been smoking like a chimney waiting for you.”

Ellie chuckled. “I’m home. As it turns out, nothing was wrong with Mildred, she was just being stubborn.”

“But that’s good! You didn’t have an expensive car repair you couldn’t afford anyhow.”

“I suppose that’s something to be chuffed about,” grumbled Ellie as Elizabeth rose and began to walk around her flat.

“You bet it is! So, what time did you want to head out? We’ll stay well clear of The Bell since that’s Greg’s favourite pub, but we still have all of London. Should be simple to find a place to get you pissed.”

“About that,” Ellie began, her voice a little hesitant. “I can’t.”

“You can’t what, drink? You didn’t get ill out in the rain yesterday, did you?” Before Ellie could reply, Theresa gasped. “Oh, God! Tell me you aren’t pregnant.”

“I’m not pregnant.” That was all she needed! She might be living out of Mildred in a few weeks, but at least she wouldn’t be homeless with a baby. “I just can’t go out tonight.”

“But you have to! You can’t skive off now!”

“Theresa, I just can’t. I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to get pissed another night.” Hearing a click, Ellie looked over at Elizabeth who had turned on the bathroom light and was peering inside. With another click, the light was off and Elizabeth gasped before switching the light back on again.

“You have to come! I found this little occult bookstore near the Tottenham Court Road tube stop that actually has supplies. We could put a curse on Chantel. You know, make her boobs shrivel up or have her grow a big hairy mole on her nose,” Theresa said.

Ellie grinned. “It sounds like fun, but we’ll have to do it another night.”

“But Ellieeeeeee!”

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say a word, a high-pitched male voice and a fast dance beat blared through her tiny flat. Elizabeth came dashing out of the bathroom, covering her ears with her hands.

“I have to go,” Ellie yelled and hung up, before running over to press the power button on the small wireless speaker Elizabeth had turned on. When Ellie’s windows were no longer rattling with the noise, she picked up the old mp3 player Greg kept next to the speaker for music, rather than running down the battery on his phone. “He took my espresso machine and left Bieber. Brilliant—just brilliant!”

“What was that racket?”

Ellie grimaced and chucked the mp3 player in the bathroom bin. She wanted nothing left of Greg’s. He could buy a new one if he wanted. “Some call it music, but I might argue when it comes to Justin Bieber.” Ellie turned down the volume, opened the music app on her phone, and pressed play.

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose when an Adele song filled the air. "You can listen to music when you choose, without attending a performance?"

"We still have concerts, but I'm sure they're very different to what you're used to." She tossed her phone on the sofa. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Elizabeth followed her to the small kitchen where Ellie searched through the refrigerator. "I have left-over Chinese takeaway." She glanced at Elizabeth, who was pressing the lever on the toaster down and watching the insides glow. "You've probably never eaten Chinese, have you?" Elizabeth jumped when the toaster popped.

"I can only assume you mean the Orient. I have never travelled so far, so no."

Ellie shifted the chow mein out of the way. "Ha!" After checking the expiry date to be certain it was still good, she unwrapped two ready meals and popped them in the oven. "We'll have a bit of a wait, but we can start thinking of how to send you back to your own time while it's cooking."

When Ellie turned, Elizabeth was opening the door to the microwave, and then closing it again. "Do you have difficulty with your vision?"

"No," Ellie answered, as Elizabeth again opened the microwave door and closed it, watching it like Ellie watched the TV. "Why?"

Once she straightened, Elizabeth pointed to a lamp, and then the light which hung from the ceiling. "Well, every room has these odd-looking candles, which can be lit instantly. Then, the inside of this box, it lights when you open the door, as well as that larger box you just opened. Good candles, those that do not smoke, are costly, so you must require a great deal of light to have so many. I thought, despite your lack of spectacles, your eyesight might be poor."

It was hard not to laugh. Elizabeth's question wasn't stupid, just funny. "The lights aren't candles, they're light bulbs and they can be expensive, but some last several years."

"Years?" Elizabeth's voice was full of wonder as she gazed at the lamp. "I cannot imagine. May I ask, how does the flame appear and disappear so swiftly?"

"Um, I don't know the particulars of how they work. As long as I am not sitting in the dark, I don't worry about it." She crossed her arms over her chest. "We really have to get you back to your own time."

Elizabeth scanned the tiny flat. She suddenly appeared more interested in exploring rather than discussing their predicament. "You killed me, if you remember," Elizabeth reminded her. "What if I cannot return and must remain here?"

"We still have to try. Wouldn't you rather see your family again? Marry your Mr Darcy and live happily ever after?"

"Of course, I wish to see my family, but as for Mr Darcy, we disagreed more often than not." She began to wander about, studying objects and fingering things as she passed. "I find it difficult to believe we had a harmonious marriage."

"Well, you did, and we need to get you back to that life, back to eighteen-thirteen."

Elizabeth picked up the TV remote and pressed a button, when nothing happened, she pushed another. "How do you suggest I do so? I awoke here, in your home, and in this time. I no more planned my journey here, than you did yours to my time. Would you have me go back to sleep in the hopes I vanish during the night?" With the press of one more button, the TV came to life and Elizabeth's eyes widened. "At the moment, I am not tired in the slightest."

Ellie huffed as she strode over, turned the TV off, wrestled the remote off Elizabeth and almost slammed it back on the end table. "Best not look at that, they say it rots your brain. It might blow yours." Elizabeth moved closer to the TV for an inspection, but Ellie stepped in front of her. "What does make you sleepy? Exercise? Wine? I think, once we've eaten, we should both try and sleep and hope that whatever strange twist of fate brought you here returns you to Lambton straight away."

"You slept at the inn in Lambton?"

"Well, yes."

"Then I wonder if, in order to reverse the process, you must be in Lambton and I must be here?"

Ellie hadn't thought of that but she definitely wasn't driving to Derbyshire now! "Let's try sleeping first. If it doesn't work, we'll have to think of something else."

"I hope you will forgive my scepticism. Your idea has merit, yet it seems too simple. You believe all will be well if we just go to sleep?" Elizabeth was standing beside the bathroom door. She turned on the light again before taking a cautious step inside. The sound of water starting and stopping muffled out the sound of the soft music still playing on Ellie's phone. Her visitor was turning the taps on and off. Ellie put her head in her hands.

“What to do? What to do?” she whispered. “Think, Ellie.” But what would, or could, work? She was no scientist, but then even the world’s cleverest boffin might be stumped—people didn’t shift through time. It couldn’t happen! “I need a drink!” Ellie strode back to the little kitchen and began rummaging through the cupboard where she kept the wine.

“And Greg strikes again,” she groaned. Of course, he had taken all the expensive bottles and left her the plonk. Wanker! She was pouring herself a glass of wine when she heard the sound of the toilet flushing and a surprised gasp.

“Ellie, what need have you of this low swirling basin of water?”

“It’s the lav, the little girls’ room, the toilet, you know, the chamber pot.” She took a large gulp of red wine. “The food should be ready any minute. Why don’t you come and eat?” She poured a glass of wine for Elizabeth in the hopes it would help her sleep when the time came. The sun was beginning to set, so it would be dark. That would help, too.

After another gulp of wine, she pulled their food from the oven and set each plastic tray on a tea towel to protect the table. She put a knife and fork next to Elizabeth’s place, and as Elizabeth sat, Ellie placed the wine in front of her.

Elizabeth frowned at the food in front of her, carefully touching the hot and misshapen plastic packaging. “Is this what people utilise as plates in two thousand and seventeen?”

“No, I have plates.” Ellie pulled one from the cupboard and set it on the table, thinking it might make Elizabeth more comfortable. “But the trays don’t have to be washed. I can throw them in the bin.”

One of Elizabeth’s eyebrows lifted into a high arch before she began to dish her food from the ready meal package to the plate, placing each bit just so. When she was finished, she turned back to Ellie. “Well, are you to stand and gape at me or shall we eat?”

Ellie stared as Elizabeth delicately cut her meat, without any ear-piercing, metal meets china, scraping noises, and then lifted it to her mouth gracefully. She chewed two or three times, made a face, and swallowed.

“This is . . . interesting.” She took a sip of her wine. “It appears to be beef, but has not the flavour, nor the texture, to which I am accustomed.”

“At least I didn’t cook it in the microwave, or it would’ve been like chewing rubber.”

“Microwave?” asked Elizabeth, peering at the kitchen curiously.

“The small box with the light.” Ellie tensed, waiting for the long list of questions that were sure to follow. “It cooks food really quickly, but not very well.”

“Ah! I thought it for storage.”

Ellie felt guilty as she watched Elizabeth try to cut into another piece of the horrible beef. “Sorry, it’s not great, is it? Mental note to self-keep cupboards well stocked, because you never know when somebody from two hundred years in the past might show up for dinner.”

“Are you expecting it to be a regular occurrence?” Elizabeth smiled before they were both surprised by a banging on the front door. “It seems a little late for visitors.”

“Yeah,” Ellie replied, going to the front door and peeking through the spy hole. It was Theresa. What should she do? She couldn’t turn her best friend away.

“Ellie, I got through the security door by slipping past a pizza delivery man who was on his way out. If you are eating pizza without me, I may never forgive you.” There was some more banging. “Open up! You’re acting strange, and you sounded odd on the phone. I need to check you’re okay.”

“Hey, you’re odd all the time,” Ellie called out. “I don’t feel the need to get in a cab and come over to check up on you. Listen, thanks for caring. I appreciate it, but I’m fine. I’m going to get an early night.”

“Just let me in for five minutes, one glass of wine. What’s up with you? Oh, do you have a guy in there? The guy you mentioned on the phone, Tom Darcy?”

“No!” Ellie glanced over at Elizabeth who raised a questioning brow at her, before she sighed and released the catch on the door. “Oh, alright, come in.”

Theresa stepped into the flat, out-of-breath and suspicious.

“See, no guy, just . . .” Ellie trailed off as Elizabeth stood up from the table.

“I am Elizabeth Bennet. You are a friend of Ellie’s, I believe. ‘Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Elizabeth curtsied.

Theresa’s lips were pressed together and she appeared to be holding back a laugh when she glanced at Ellie, looking for an explanation.

“Theresa, this is Lizzy Bennet, a friend of mine from school. We haven’t seen each other for years, but I bumped into her and she needed somewhere to stay for a night. So here she is.”

Leaning over, Theresa whispered, “What’s with the clothes?”

Ellie was relieved Theresa could see Elizabeth too. Though she had prodded her, talked to her, and believed her to be real, a small part of Ellie had still worried it was all an insane delusion.

“Lizzy, this is Theresa. Theresa, Lizzy is an . . . actress, who’s in London to audition for a part in a play—a Regency play. Yes, that’s it. And, she’s one of those method actresses, you know, so she’s staying in character until after the audition.”

“Oh, right.” Theresa smiled but was obviously still doubtful. “It’s a great costume, and you’re really convincing. You’re a shoe-in for the part.”

“I thank you.”

“So, has Ellie told you all about Greg? I came over to take her to the pub, to cheer her up. You look like you could use a drink. Why don’t you come too?”

“A tavern? Yes, I think I would like that.” Elizabeth’s face was animated, her eyes were bright with excitement.

Theresa laughed. “A tavern, yeah. Let’s all go.”

Ellie was horrified. Leaving Theresa with a swift, “excuse us,” she took Elizabeth by the arm and marched her into the bathroom, shutting the door behind them. It was the only place where a private conversation was possible in her tiny flat

“You can’t go to the pub,” she insisted in a furious whisper.

“Oh Ellie, I am a traveller through time! I don’t know how it has happened, or why, but you cannot expect me to go meekly to my bed and hope I awake the next morning back where I began—not without allowing me some adventure first. Before I went to Derbyshire with the Gardiners, I had never been more than fifty miles from home, and now I am in the year two thousand and seventeen, a completely different world. If I am to fall asleep and return to eighteen-thirteen, may I not at least seek out some new experiences first?”

“But what about the space time continuum?”

“The what-what?” Elizabeth asked, puzzled. “Ellie, as unhappy a prospect as it might be, you admit you may have killed me, meaning I may be bound to this place and time. In which case, I shall require some instruction in your ways and customs.”

Ellie tried to think of a sound reason, a really good explanation as to why Elizabeth should not leave the flat, but then, she began to see the situation through the eyes of the girl in front her. The impossible had happened. The big, long thread of time had contracted or expanded, or got rolled up into a ball, or something, and how had she, Ellie

Forrester marked this incredible, momentous occasion? By dishing up a ready meal and a cheap bottle of plonk—wine she now remembered winning in a raffle. She hoped she hadn't actually killed Elizabeth, so they could return her to her happy ever after with Mr Darcy but meanwhile, the least she could do was buy her a drink and entertain her for a few hours. "Alright, okay, you win," she conceded. "We'll go to the pub, but first, you'll have to change."

"I understand, yes. I shall try and alter my behaviour so as not to draw attention to myself."

"No, I meant, you'll have to change your clothes."

¹Fitty is British slang for a good-looking guy.

Two Bottles of Wine and a Booty Call

Modernizing Elizabeth Bennet turned out to be bloody good fun. By the time they had come out of the bathroom, Theresa had poured them all another glass of the awful wine and found some dance tracks on Ellie's phone. Elizabeth's eyes widened at the free-flowing alcohol, and she winced briefly at the heavy, fast bass beat of the music, but the girl was nothing if not adaptable.

She allowed herself to be pulled over to the closet, where outfit after outfit was pressed up against her before Ellie found something that might work, and then shoved her back into the bathroom with a pair of skinny jeans and a long glittery top. Once she was dressed, Ellie followed her in with a make-up bag. "Now, I reckon a touch of mascara and a bit of lip gloss. You don't need anything else. You have great skin. What do you use on it?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "Merely soap and water."

"Amazing. Now hold still."

Elizabeth leaned back from the mascara wand as Ellie neared her eyes, eyeing the little black stick warily as if it were poisonous. "Trust me. It doesn't hurt, and you're going to look incredible."

"Pray tell me, 'tis acceptable for ladies to have their hair so short, as your friend's, and the ink paintings on her skin? The tattoos? I have only seen their like once, on a sailor who was passing through Meryton."

"Oh, yeah, acceptable, but Theresa is not exactly, you know, average." Ellie thought of her best friend who was waiting patiently on the sofa, nodding her head furiously in time to the music, making the purple highlights in her hair bob about. Elizabeth, politely, hadn't mentioned Theresa's nose or tongue piercings, or the chunky, knee high Dr Martens boots she wore.

"I know she seems a bit weird on the outside, but trust me, beneath the leather and metal lurks a heart of mush. She's a well-buried pot of gold." Greg had always belittled Theresa, had even called her a freak in one drunken unguarded moment—what a fight that had caused!

"We took a business course together, at university," Ellie explained. "On our first day, when the boys in suits with the latest mobile phones and copies of the Financial Times tucked under their armpits hurried in, I didn't know what to think, but she sat

next to me and we started chatting. We've been close ever since. Now she runs three successful piercing and tattoo parlours."

Ellie didn't know how much Elizabeth understood, but she looked down and then up as Ellie told her to for the mascara, and then pursed her lips for gloss to be applied.

"You went to university?" Elizabeth asked, as Ellie dabbed a bit of blush onto her cheekbones, a little envious of Elizabeth's complexion as she worked.

"Yes. I suppose you never had the chance?"

"No." Elizabeth's eyes became dreamy and her voice wistful. "I have often wished for such an opportunity."

"Well, be careful what you wish for. Eight years on and I've had to walk out from the only crappy job I managed to get." Ellie pulled the pins from Elizabeth's hair and shook it out. It fell in lovely, natural soft waves around her face. "I'm still paying the loan off. Right, there you go. I'm done." She took Elizabeth's hand, lifted her off the stool in front of the mirror, and led her out to the living area.

As they entered, Theresa stood and patted the pockets of her denim jacket, checking she had everything with her and making ready for the pub, but the sight of Elizabeth stopped her in her tracks. "Sod the acting. Why is she not on the cover of Vogue?"

While Elizabeth stared at Ellie, confused, Ellie grinned. She understood Theresa completely. Elizabeth Bennet had an incredible face. Not pretty in the normal way, but striking. High cheekbones, a perfect little ski slope of a nose, rosebud lips and huge cat-like eyes that the addition of a little mascara had brought to life in an incredible way. She was petite, but the curves were in all the right places, and were emphasised beautifully by Ellie's well-fitted clothes. No wonder Fitzwilliam Darcy had been completely head over heels in love with her. The right clobber, the right make-up, and well, the girl had the ability to stop traffic.

And she did stop traffic! They had only been out of the flat for about two minutes when some twat in a junk of heap with a loud engine and ridiculously big wheels ground to a halt, wound down his window, and started hollering at her.

Elizabeth whirled on him. "Are you addressing me? Such impertinence! Why, I have never met you before in my life, yet you think you are entitled to speak so informally to me. Begone, quickly! I shall not afford you the satisfaction of any further response."

The spotty youth opened and closed his mouth rapidly, the lewd or suggestive comment he looked like he wanted to make died on his lips. Instead, he wound his neck back inside his stupid car and sped off.

Theresa mimicked the shocked expression on the guy's face, which made them all smile as they started walking again. Theresa giggled as she watched Elizabeth stop at every shop window and gawp at the displays. She also studied the cars closely, incredulous. "No horses," she whispered breathlessly.

"Seriously," Theresa muttered. "If she doesn't get that part, I'll be amazed."

They tumbled into the Horse and Groom and found it busy with an odd collection of drinkers; city-slickers who'd obviously failed to get past the bouncers at the wine bar up the road, some shop workers who were on their fifth "one-for-the-road," and the odd local resident, like Ellie. It was a proper pub, with flowery stained carpets, tiny wobbly tables with sticky surfaces and a grumpy, red-nosed landlord. She and Theresa sometimes ventured into classier places, where all was sleek and clean, to move among the beautiful people whose wallets were never empty and whose clothes were never rumpled, but sometimes they wanted nothing more than a quick drink for less than six pounds a glass.

Ellie watched Elizabeth as she walked in front of her, moving through the crowds. Though she now looked like a twenty-first century chick, something about her attracted loads of notice. A table came free right as they went past it and Ellie lunged at it. She hid her new friend in a corner seat, while her other friend, of much longer duration, went to the bar.

"Astounding!" Elizabeth shook her head. "To be here without chaperone. Tell me, where are your parents?"

Of all the questions Elizabeth might have asked! Ellie played with a beer mat for a few seconds and then gave an awkward shrug. "My Mum died when I was young. My Dad is kind of in his own little world, always has been."

There was silence for a few moments. "I am sorry. My question was intrusive. I did not mean to cause you pain by it."

"No, you didn't," Ellie lied. "It's no big deal. I left home when I went to University at eighteen. I'm pretty sure my Dad didn't even notice I was gone. You know, girls don't have to live with their parents these days, not unless they're saving for a house, or to go

travelling or something. Most buy or rent a place of their own, even if it's just a house share."

"To think, you have a proper education, and when you are in work, you have a non-servile occupation, and you live on your own, as a man might? Such independence, such freedom!"

"Oh yeah, I'm living the dream." Ellie's reply was sarcastic, but Elizabeth didn't flinch. Instead, her forehead crinkled and her eyes appeared more focused, as though she was studying her.

Ellie began tapping the beer mat against the table, searching for Theresa in the crowd. For a brief time in her life, she'd thought she'd had it all. A fast life in the big city with the handsome boyfriend, the sports car, the flat she could walk home to from the swanky Bayswater estate agent's office. She once even closed a deal on a multi-million-pound house. What a sweet feeling! She'd strolled through the city at its most electrifying — a hot summer Friday night—and everything had been beautiful, *she'd* felt beautiful, sipping champagne with Greg in the bar at the top of the Oxo Tower. Those moments never lasted for long though. Her buzz had been destroyed when she'd got into the office on Monday morning to find Greg took all the credit, and every last pound of commission for her sale. "Hey I was there, too," he had said. "We're a terrific team. Next commission is yours, babe." And, like a fool, she'd let him get away with it.

The harsh reality was her flat was tiny, Mildred was broken more often than not, and the boyfriend, well, how often had she pretended not to be upset with him—plastering a smile on her face and convincing herself that maybe she was the unreasonable, selfish one? He had a talent for twisting her words, making her feel like she was always in the wrong, like she was lucky to have him and should put up with all of his crap.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Theresa's arrival back from the bar. As she did nothing by half measures, she'd returned with two bottles of wine, three empty glasses and various packets of snacks so dangerously high in saturated fats they'd make a heart surgeon rub his hands in glee. Everything was balanced precariously on a tiny tray and Ellie winced and couldn't look until it was set down safely on the table. Theresa poured the wine and she and Ellie took huge gulps, while Elizabeth risked a dainty sip before looking around the room, quite obviously gaping at anything unfamiliar, her gaze finally fixing on the television in one corner. Ellie kicked her shin under the table and

Elizabeth seemed to realise her error and tried to look more nonchalant, though it wasn't easy for her. She had an expressive face, which made it really easy to read her thoughts.

"So, Lizzy, did you know Greg once told Ellie he was taking her out for a birthday dinner, booked a fancy restaurant and everything, and then at the end of the meal, suggested they split the bill as he'd just bought himself a pair of two hundred pound shoes? She's so well rid of him. Don't you think?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened in surprise. "That does seem unchivalrous. And two hundred pounds on shoes! Such a vast sum! A sensible man might live quite comfortably for many years on two hundred pounds."

Ellie gave Elizabeth's shin another swift kick under the table. This time she yelped and Theresa looked suspiciously between the two of them.

"I am sorry." Elizabeth managed an uncomfortable smile at Theresa while one of her hands disappeared under the table and rubbed her shin. "I am in jest. Mr, erm, Greg has also taken Ellie's machine for preparing her coffee, which she has found particularly maddening."

Theresa frowned. "If you get this part, Lizzy, are you planning on staying in character for the entire run of the play?"

Elizabeth was saved from answering by a loud beep from Ellie's mobile, and as if talking of him had conjured him from thin air, the display showed a text from Greg that read, "*Hi, I hope you're okay?*"

Theresa leaned over and read it too. "Don't answer it. It's a booty call. If you reply, the next will be something like, 'Shall I come over so we can talk? Miss you, Babe, hope I haven't made a mistake.' After, you'll find out Chantel is out of town, but once she reappears, he'll drop you like a brick again."

Ellie shook her head. "How do you get all that from '*I hope you're okay.*' Maybe he just does hope I'm okay."

"BOOTY CALL, or, you know, BOOTY TEXT! If you answer that, I will never speak to you again. I swear."

Theresa was frightening when she was passionate about something, and Ellie was cowed enough to switch her phone off completely and put it back in her pocket; just in case she was tempted to sneak off to the toilets and reply in secret. Elizabeth was biting her tongue, desperate, but unable, to ask a ton of questions. Ellie was glad and relieved. How did you explain a booty call to someone from the early nineteenth century?

“Do you have a boyfriend, Lizzy?” Theresa asked.

“I have many friends, yes.”

“Anyone special though?” Theresa leaned in a little.

“Oh, I see. No, I am not courting at present.”

“She has had a proposal though. Rich guy with a big house in the country, but she turned him down.” Ellie took another long gulp of wine and swallowed it quickly.

Clapping her hands together, Theresa whooped in excitement. “Oooh, gossip, tell me everything. What’s his name? What happened? Don’t leave any details out.”

Elizabeth lifted her shoulders carelessly while she picked at a small dent in the table. “Well, there is not so much to tell, except to say that I held him in no particular regard. My affections were not engaged and therefore my heart would not allow me to accept.” Elizabeth blushed, having gone redder with each word she spoke. She turned a brilliant shade of red and fidgeted every time Mr Darcy was mentioned.

At the sound of a throat clearing, they all looked up to find a young guy standing near their table with a pint of beer in one hand and a hopeful smile on his face. His eyes shifted shyly at Elizabeth, and his mouth opened and closed, trying to find the courage to say a line he had likely been rehearsing before his approach. He again opened his mouth to speak, but Theresa cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“Listen, I have experience with hot needles, my friend here just broke up with someone and is an emotional wreck, and this one,” she jerked a thumb in Elizabeth’s direction, “is busy practising for her Oscar. So, you know, move along. You’re all out of luck pal.”

He started to speak, but again Theresa cut him off, this time by twirling a bag of peanuts in the air. “We have our own nuts, please take yours elsewhere and leave us alone.”

Two hours later they emerged from the pub. Theresa had drunk more than Ellie and Elizabeth put together and was unsteady on her feet, but managed to hold it together long enough to hail a passing black cab and give her address to the driver.

They waved her off and began walking back to the flat. It was slow progress. Elizabeth stopped to wonder at and examine each and every little thing they passed, and when a plane flew overhead, its lights blinking and lighting up the sky, she would not move until it was completely out of sight. Ellie was then hit with a whole barrage of

questions about the mechanics, history, and science of aviation, most of which she couldn't answer.

"I can't tell you exactly. They go really fast along the ground, and the power of the engine lifts them up into the air and keeps them there." She looked beside her but Elizabeth wasn't there. Ellie had been talking to herself.

When she turned back, Elizabeth had stopped again, having lost interest in the plane, and was a few feet behind her, staring up at the street sign. "Gracechurch Street? You live on Gracechurch Street?"

"Yep," Ellie confirmed and shrugged, not seeing the significance. A moment later, Elizabeth rushed past her towards her building, and she took off after her. When they both ground to a halt in front of the old Georgian stone structure, Elizabeth pointed up towards Ellie's flat.

"I did not see it earlier, the area is so very different, but now it is obvious. This is the connection between us. This was my uncle and aunt's house. I spent many a happy time here." Elizabeth's eyes flickered over the windows as she counted the storeys. "When I visited, I would have been in the corner room, on the second floor."

"Not in my flat then, at the top?"

"Oh no, your flat would have been the servants' quarters."

"Figures," Ellie grumbled, "story of my life, but I guess you're right. It might explain why you ended up here when we changed places." Ellie didn't even want to think about why Mildred had broken down in Lambton, near Pemberley, and how she started running perfectly the next day. It was all too strange. "Elizabeth, when you first woke up here, in my flat, were you by any chance—"

"You? Yes, I was."

"And then at some point this morning, you became you again?"

"Quite so," Elizabeth confirmed with a nod. "The skies outside your windows were an odd colour, dark with sparks of silver. Your rooms became very dark. I lost all my senses for a moment. I could not hear, see or smell anything, but when I blinked, I was myself again."

"You couldn't have shared this information with me earlier?" Ellie snapped. She was irritated, her heart was beating a mile a minute, her stomach had that strange fluttery feeling, and the hairs on her forearms were standing on end.

“I was hoping I might have imagined it, but you said you were me briefly, so I must have really been you. Whatever has befallen us?”

Ellie let them into the building and they began to climb the stairs wearily. “Like I said, I seemed to go back and forth in time when I was asleep. So, let’s try that for now. I don’t know about you but I’m knackered.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Knackered?”

“Tired out, like an old horse, fit for nothing but the knacker’s yard.”

“A colloquialism,” Elizabeth responded as they went into Ellie’s flat.

“Yeah, come on and I’ll find you something to sleep in.”

It was a choice between a pair of Snoopy pyjamas and a zebra print onesie, both of which Elizabeth looked at dubiously. Ellie couldn’t blame her and thought back to the fancy nightgown she had woken up in that morning. She’d never thought of it before now, but it was strange how women of her era regressed to children when it came to bedtime and chose to sleep in large Babygros or flannel PJ’s with cartoon characters on the front.

Elizabeth came out of the bathroom, having chosen Snoopy, and with another load of questions about the toothpaste and the plumbing. Ellie yawned, her eyes were so heavy she could barely keep them open, but Elizabeth was still wired, jumpy.

Ellie rummaged through her wardrobe for a spare blanket. “You’re the guest, I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

“Very well, I thank you. Though I think I shall have trouble sleeping.” Her eyes flicked over to the television.

“No way! No TV. You’ll be up all night.”

“Then, do you perhaps have a book I might read?”

Ellie glanced over to a shelf in the corner of the room. She had a few books, but didn’t read as much as she probably should. Elizabeth had already followed her gaze and walked over to inspect the slim pickings. She picked up a bodice ripper and examined the cover, her lips curved into an amused smile.

“This gentleman is out of doors, without coat, or shirt, but I suppose he has this lady’s—though I am not sure she should be given such an appellation—passionate embrace to keep him warm.”

“I just picked it up in an airport, you know, to pass the time.” Ellie said, snatching the book out of her hands. She scanned the shelf and realised there was only one that

wouldn't completely shock Elizabeth. "Here you go. I had to read it at school and never got rid of it. *A Tale of Two Cities*. It's one of the classics. Well, classic in my time. Brand new for you."

Elizabeth nodded and took it from her, opened it to the first page and read the first line. "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.*" Her smile changed from amused to rueful. "How very beautiful, and oddly appropriate. It is so incredible to be here, Ellie, and to have witnessed everything I have today, and yet."

"You're homesick?" Ellie guessed.

"Yes. I feel sick with longing for home, for Longbourn. How dull of me! I am somewhat disappointed in my lack of adventure. We have both lost our way, have we not, my new friend? You have lost your way in your life, and I am lost in time."

They were both silent for a moment, their eyes drawn to the window and the bright lights of the city beyond it. The sky looked pretty much the same as it usually did, for the time of night, and the time of year. No torrential rain or thunderstorms, no strange lights. Nevertheless, Ellie gave Elizabeth a hopeful smile. "Let's go to bed. It's been nice meeting you, Elizabeth, but no offence when I say I hope you won't be here when I wake up."

Elizabeth curtsied and squeezed her hand. "A sentiment I readily echo. I shall go attend to my book and leave you with my very best wishes for your future health and happiness."

From Lambton to King's Cross

It was too bright. Ellie groaned and pulled the pillow over her face. Where was that light coming from? She'd shut the blinds before they went to sleep, so it should be blessedly dark, instead of this horrible, blinding glare.

"Miss Ellie?" That voice. The one in her dream. It was familiar. She wanted to go back to sleep and find out what it was going to say.

"Ellie," said the voice again, but this time something warm touched her arm. She sat up with a jolt, her heart jumping to her throat, and the pillow falling to the floor.

After two or three hard blinks, Ellie's eyes finally focused on Elizabeth, who stood beside her. "Crap! You're still here."

"Yes, it seems I am."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak again, but Ellie raised a hand as she kicked the blanket to the end of the sofa and stood. "Please don't ask what we're going to do now. I haven't had coffee yet, so I can barely move much less think at this time of the morning."

"'Tis eight o'clock already," exclaimed Elizabeth. "I have been awake since six. Do you typically keep town hours?"

"Huh?" Ellie turned at the entrance to the bathroom. "Just give me a moment." She closed the door, splashed some cold water on her face and looked at herself in the mirror. "Wake up!"

When she stepped out a few minutes later, Elizabeth was staring at her expectantly. Ellie shuffled into the kitchen area, opened the cabinet, and began to rummage through it while mumbling to herself, "He had to take the bloody espresso machine. I should've hidden it! Worthless, no-good, megalomaniac prick. Next time I see him, I'm going to shove a cup of coffee right up his . . ."

A glance at Elizabeth's shocked, wide eyes kept her from finishing her tirade. She shifted a few tins of beans to one side and paused at the small jar tucked at the very back. It had been ages since she'd drank instant coffee, but without her shiny new espresso machine, it was all she had. Needs must and all that. Soon, the kettle was boiling and mugs for both her and Elizabeth were on the counter.

"Do you want tea?"

“Tea would be delightful, though I confess, I am quite hungry as well. I do not mean to be an imposition.” Elizabeth picked up a bag of bread that sat on the counter. “If you could but teach me, I might make toast for myself.”

Ellie took the loaf. “You’re not an imposition.” She looked in the cabinet and the refrigerator. She really had nothing to make a proper breakfast out of.

After a quick scan of the bread to be sure she wasn’t serving her guest mouldy toast, she popped two slices in the toaster and looked at Elizabeth. “You had so much fun with it yesterday. Do you want to press the lever?” Elizabeth smiled and used one finger to turn the toaster on.

Beans! She did have beans. Ellie opened a tin, tipped them into a pan and turned on the hob. “Lizzy? Do you have any idea what we should do now, because I really don’t have a clue?”

Elizabeth sighed. “I am not certain of what course we should follow, but perhaps a greater knowledge of what occurred after you jumped in front of that coach would be helpful. I was not a notable figure; however, so I am not certain my life, or the events surrounding my death, would have been documented anywhere.”

“I suppose it’s better than doing nothing, let’s have a look.” Grabbing her tiny laptop off a shelf, Ellie put it on the table and opened it. Elizabeth stretched out a finger to touch one of the keys, but Ellie swatted her hand away. “I’ll drive.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Just that you’ve never used a computer, and like everything else I own, it’s temperamental. I don’t want it to crash. That would get us nowhere.”

“Crash?”

Ellie blew her fringe from her face. “I mean, it wouldn’t work.” It was the easiest answer, even if it wasn’t the best. Trying to explain things to someone from the nineteenth century was downright tricky. When she’d pulled up Google, she tapped her fingers on the edge of the keyboard. “Perhaps we should try you first.”

“I do not understand. Try me? How?”

She paused. Elizabeth was confused and Ellie again struggled for an answer. “Computers are kind of like a book. You can store pictures, things you’ve written, and music inside, and pull them back up whenever you want. You can also link with other computers by something called the internet. Almost anything is on the internet these

days. You would be gobsmacked if you walked into a room filled with the same amount of information that is on the internet—it would be massive, gargantuan!”

When she had typed “Elizabeth Bennet” into the search bar, Ellie pressed enter. “Watch,” she ordered. After a moment or two, an entire page came up with a half-dozen people search sites, a Wikipedia page, and a few Amazon links, but nothing historical. “Elizabeth Bennet is a pretty common name, it seems.”

Both Elizabeth’s eyebrows lifted. “I never knew another by that name, but I suppose it would be arrogant to presume I was the only Elizabeth Bennet for two hundred years.” Once she’d scanned down the contents of the screen, she looked back at Ellie. “Could this tell us what happened to Mr Darcy? He was of more significance than a country squire’s daughter. His consequence might have caused someone to make a note of him.”

“Good idea.” What was his first name again? Fitzwilliam! Ellie keyed in Fitzwilliam Darcy and pressed enter, but this time the window was topped with a sentence that read, “*Showing no results for Fitzwilliam Darcy. Search instead for William Darcy.*”

“Maybe Pemberley?” thought Ellie out loud. She pressed enter and exhaled in relief as a line of familiar images appeared near the top.

“I never knew Pemberley was so grand.” Elizabeth put a hand to her chest. “With ten-thousand per annum, he was obviously rich, but I never realised . . .” She trailed off as she stared.

Ellie squinted and leaned closer. She clicked on one picture, enlarging it. “That’s not how Pemberley looked when I toured it two days ago.”

Elizabeth scanned the image. “Is part of the building in ruins?”

Ellie returned to her search and clicked on the Wikipedia link. She and Elizabeth’s faces were so close to the screen their noses were practically touching it. The page was pretty standard and there wasn’t much information, just a quick paragraph at the top, telling them which Darcy had built Pemberley in the early eighteenth century by overhauling the original house and adding to it. A gasp from Elizabeth startled her.

“What?”

“Oh, my!” Elizabeth whispered. She had her hand to her mouth and tears were welling in her eyes.

“What!” Ellie looked back at the screen, and then she saw it. “Pemberley flourished until a mysterious fire in eighteen-fifteen destroyed a portion of the house and claimed the life of its owner.” A sniff from beside her made her glance at Elizabeth.

“I never had the opportunity to apologise, to tell him I was wrong in my accusations.” Elizabeth was biting her lip to stop herself from crying. “It is so very sad, I should have liked to . . .” Her words trailed off and then her brow wrinkled. “I think it is burnt.”

Ellie nodded at the picture of Pemberley. “Yeah, that whole wing of it is gone.”

“No, whatever you placed upon the stove, the strangely coloured sauce, with the lumps. I believe you have burnt it.”

“The beans!” Ellie shouted, leapt from her chair and ran back to the pan. Too late. By the time she pulled them off the hob the beans were stuck together and black around the edges. “I can’t do anything right,” she said, tossing the pan into the sink.

When she turned around, Elizabeth was drying her eyes with the sleeves of her jim-jams. “I have no handkerchief.”

“Butterfly effect. That’s what this is. I threw me, or you, under the carriage, which ruined Mr Darcy’s life and his house burnt down and he died. It’s all my fault, and I am clueless. I don’t know how to fix this.” She trudged dejectedly back to the table and scrolled down the web page to skim read the rest of the article. There was a list of those who inherited after Fitzwilliam Darcy’s death. “A combination of debts and death duties had eventually made the last heir, a George Fitzwilliam, turn it over to English Heritage,” Ellie read aloud. “Oh, I have an idea.”

“You know how to send me home?”

“No, but I might know where to learn more.” She gave Elizabeth a shove to make her stand. “We need to get dressed.”

“Where are we to go?”

“You’ll see. Just get dressed!” As Ellie shifted around in her closet, Elizabeth reached for her gown. “No! Not that! Here.” She shoved another pair of jeans and a shirt into Elizabeth’s arms. “Wear this.”

Once they were dressed and standing on the pavement, Elizabeth turned and gaped at the house like she had the night before. “Tis so strange. It is much the same as in my time, yet so different.”

Ellie pulled at her arm. “We have to be there before eleven if we’re going to talk to him. We have to go.”

Traffic was too bad on a weekday to chance taking Mildred, so she walked as quickly as she could to Bank tube station. Elizabeth was surprisingly fit and had no problems keeping up. When they entered the station, Ellie handed her a spare Oyster card.

“What am I to do with this?”

“Just do what everyone else is doing,” said Ellie, pointing to the stiles. “Tap your card on the yellow circle, and the gates will open.” It only took Elizabeth two attempts to make it through, and though she paused for a moment at the escalator, she only looked like a tourist, which in a way, she was—except instead of being from America or France, she was from eighteen-thirteen.

She grabbed Elizabeth’s arm and pulled her to the right as they rode down. “You have to stand to this side.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Am I not allowed to stand beside you?”

“No, you have to leave the left side free for people who are in a rush.” As she spoke, a man in a suit with a briefcase jogged down the steps and when he reached the bottom, turned, and disappeared.

They reached the platform and Elizabeth’s head turned from side to side, her eyes darting about. “What is this place?”

In a whoosh of musty air and noise, the train sped into the station. The doors opened and Ellie pulled Elizabeth aboard, finding a spot where they would have a little privacy. Elizabeth resisted a bit as she was keen to watch the doors close. She gasped and swayed, almost losing her footing when the carriage began to move and clung on desperately to the handle overhead.

“All of these ways to travel without the need of horses,” she whispered. “Do you not have horses in the twenty-first century?”

“Of course, but people ride more for fun or sport. Cars and trains are much faster.” Elizabeth winced as they squealed through the tunnel at high speed towards their destination.

When they arrived at King’s Cross, Elizabeth followed Ellie up until they reached the ticket hall, but before Ellie could lead her to the exit, Elizabeth became interested in another corridor. “What is in that direction?”

“It’s King’s Cross Railway Station.” She checked the time on her phone. “We have a minute if you’d like to look. I could grab us a proper cup of coffee too.”

Elizabeth grinned, so they walked into the main terminus of the station, where she stopped to admire the huge glass ceiling and everything around her. “I have never seen the like.”

After being treated to a case of Ellie’s grumps that morning, and then hearing the news about Mr Darcy, Elizabeth probably deserved a little happiness, so Ellie led her to the ticket barriers for platforms nine to twelve, where a girl held a cart that was half-disappeared into the brick wall. The girl gave a jump while someone whipped her striped scarf into the air. Elizabeth’s head gave a slight jerk back. “What could she possibly be about? No one can walk through walls. She appears ridiculous.”

Ellie opened her mouth, but a small voice said, “What? Have you *never* read Harry Potter?” A young girl with short brown hair and bright pink glasses gawked at Elizabeth as though she’d sprouted an extra eye and horns. Elizabeth looked down and was obviously reading the child’s equally bright pink shirt that said, “*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*” in swishy handwriting.

Before the little girl could continue, Ellie tugged Elizabeth’s sleeve. “We need to go.” Elizabeth nodded, and after a brief stop for coffee, they left King’s Cross and walked until they reached the university. After endless stairs and doors and corridors, they finally reached a wooden door with heavily mottled glass in it; the type that only allowed them to make out movement, of which there was none. Black lettering upon the glass read, “Gareth Forrester.”

Ellie rapped upon the wooden door. When no one answered, she tried the handle and knocked again. “Dad, it’s Ellie! I know you’re in there!”

Elizabeth’s eyebrow lifted again. “We’re visiting your father?”

“Sort of.”

After a crash that sounded like a stack of books falling over, and a few thumps and thuds, the door cracked open and her father’s face peeked through. “Elizabeth?”

“Yes,” Ellie and Elizabeth both answered at the same time.

“Why don’t you let us inside?” Ellie asked.

“You are an Elizabeth too, ‘tis your given name?” Elizabeth said in surprise.

Before Ellie could answer, her father opened the door wider and stood scratching his head, making his already untidy grey hair appear even more unkempt. “What’s the matter? We could go to the café. I could buy you a coffee.”

“We’ve already had coffee. Nothing’s the matter. Does something have to be wrong for me to visit you?” So typical of her Dad—not wanting to let anybody into his private space, no proper hello—he just wanted to buy her a coffee and send her on her way again. His tie was even stained with something that might have been egg. “Actually, I have a history question I need answering.”

His eyes shifted to Elizabeth, who glanced back and forth between them.

“This is my friend . . . Liz. She and I were talking about this old house I toured a few days ago called Pemberley. You still do a lot of freelance research work for English Heritage, don’t you?”

Her dad began smoothing his wrinkled, stained tie as he reluctantly backed away from the door. “Yes, I know some of its history. Mind, it wasn’t one of the homes English Heritage had me research, but I am friends with the historian who did. James had a devil of a time with it, he did.” His hand lifted and waved them inside while he bent over a stack of books and began to sort through them. When he found what he wanted, he flipped to a certain page and set it on the desk.

Ellie closed the door and stepped forward, studying the portrait of Pemberley. The caption claimed it was painted in seventeen-ninety-five.

“The problem with Pemberley was most of its historical records were destroyed in the eighteen-fifteen fire.” He jolted as though he’d just woken up. “Oh! I’m sorry.” He rushed forward and moved books from the two chairs in front of his desk. “Please sit.”

Elizabeth did, and pulled the book into her lap, running her finger across the photo. “Is it known what caused the fire?”

He shook his head and moved to his own rickety seat. “Tales only—nothing that could be substantiated. Between the stories of the fire and the superstitions that followed, James could never give them an accurate record, nothing beyond what they had already gleaned from family documents.”

“What superstitions?” asked Elizabeth, with a tilt of her head.

A heavy breath rustled the mess of papers upon his desk. “I don’t remember much, but it’s well known that the owner died in the fire. I believe his sister inherited the property, but she passed in childbirth. I know each owner following the fire either befell

some tragedy, or left no heir when they died. By the time it was turned over to English Heritage, none of the remaining family wanted it—they considered it cursed.”

Ellie glanced at Elizabeth, who was holding herself together pretty well, considering. “Is that all you know?” she asked her father.

He rocked back in his chair. “As I said, I was told bits and pieces of the research, but I was not a part of that project.”

“What of your friend? James? Could we speak to him?” Something in Ellie’s chest was sinking to her feet. Her father had been their best bet. When she’d seen English Heritage on the computer screen, she was certain he’d know. He’d researched old properties for years to help put money aside for Ellie to go to university.

“James now teaches in America—somewhere in the middle—Nebraska, I think.”

“Mr Forrester, do you know who might have the additional information?” Elizabeth clutched the book to her chest. “I am certain some individual must know the tales and stories surrounding Pemberley. They do not require substantiating. We just need to hear them with our own ears.”

Her father stood, opened a file cabinet, and rummaged around until Ellie heard a slight, “A-ha!” He turned with a small black leather book and thumbed through the pages, licking his finger on occasion before turning to the next sheet.

“When he moved, James left his book of contacts with me in case I needed it. I had my own, of course, but you never know. Many of those old homes are interconnected; families married other families, cousins inherited. Contacts were important.”

He stopped and flattened the book on his desk. “Here it is. I don’t know if she’s even still alive. When James left five years ago, she was living in a retirement home in Lambton.” Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie saw Elizabeth shift forward in her seat

“Who?”

“Ruby Reynolds.”

Elizabeth Bennet: Far too Stubborn to Die

“So, this Ruby Reynolds knew a lot about Pemberley? Is there a phone number?” Ellie asked.

“No.” Ellie’s father shook his head before turning his attention to the notes in front of him, his forehead creased into a frown of concentration. It was as if he had forgotten they were even there. He went on reading and muttering to himself, indifferent to their presence.

“But when your friend spoke to her, she was living in some retirement place in Lambton? Does it say the name of the retirement home?” Ellie asked.

“Hmmm?” her father replied, turning a page.

“Dad,” Ellie snapped. “I’ve never asked for your help with anything before, can you at least focus for two minutes?”

Her father looked up in shock. “There’s no need to shout, Elizabeth.”

“It’s Ellie. I prefer Ellie. You would know that if you ever listened to me. You never listen to me and that’s okay. I gave up any hope of getting your attention a long time ago. Once I walk out of here, you’ll forget I exist again. I know that, and it’s fine, but please, this is important.” Ellie could feel hot tears of anger welling up inside her and willed them not to spill over.

“The name of the retirement home is Pemberley Shades, and it says Pemberley beside it, so I imagine it is in the grounds of the old house,” her father said, tersely.

A tense silence filled the room until Elizabeth intervened and smiled gently at the professor. “Thank you, Mr Forrester. You have been tremendously helpful so far. I wonder if I could prevail upon you to answer another question for me? As a historian, I wonder if you might know where records of death are stored?”

“Certainly, they’re kept at the General Register Office.” Elizabeth’s charm had worked wonders on him and he leaned eagerly across his desk. “You can request copies of death certificates for about ten pounds or so. They normally arrive in about a week.”

“Oh my, that is quite a long time. Ellie and I are very keen to know about a particular death. Is there no other, faster method of finding such information?”

“Online? Are they online?” Ellie asked quickly. “Can you look them up?”

“Yes. If you know the last name, first name, and year of death, there are websites that will find a death record for you.”

“Great. We know the year, eighteen-thirteen,” Ellie said triumphantly.

“Ah.” Her father cocked his head to the side. “Unfortunately for you, records began in eighteen thirty-seven. Before that, deaths were not recorded, though burials were noted in parish registers.”

“So, we would have to know which parish a person was buried in?”

“Exactly. The only other reliable source of information regarding births, deaths and marriages before eighteen thirty-seven comes from—”

“Family Bibles,” interjected Elizabeth. “Kept by the head of the family. All notable events were recorded in the front of them.”

“Yes, but they were kept only by wealthy families, the landed gentry. They’re traded as antiques now, sold on and spread about everywhere—those that remain, that is. No, your best bet is the parish registers. Some online records are taken from parish registers, but they aren’t comprehensive. You may be better off going straight to the horse’s mouth so to speak?”

“By that, I suppose you mean the actual church where a burial took place?” Elizabeth asked.

“Or the local registry office, yes.”

“I see.” Elizabeth was biting her lip.

“What about the census?” Ellie said, proud of having come up with an idea. “That’s all online, isn’t it? Who lived in which house, every ten years.”

“The first census was taken in eighteen-forty-one, I’m afraid.”

Deflated, Ellie shrugged at Elizabeth.

“Now.” Mr Forrester got to his feet. “I am teaching a class at eleven, but use the computer if you’d like to continue your research. Slam the door on the way out and it will lock itself. What’s this all about anyway, Elizabeth?”

“It doesn’t matter, Dad.”

He shuffled around the desk, knocking a pile of books over as he went, but he didn’t stop to stack them up again. He gave Ellie an awkward sort of pat on the head—though he barely touched her—she just felt the tips of his fingers hovering over her hair for a moment. He left, without a goodbye and without making any arrangements to see her again.

“And there he goes, my Dad. As you can tell, I’m the light of his life,” Ellie said sarcastically, as the door closed behind him.

“You said your mother died when you were young?”

“I was four. I don’t remember much about her. It was just me and Dad. He worked a lot, always had his nose in a book, or away on research trips. I had au pairs and aunts who helped out.” Ellie went around the desk and sat in her father’s chair. She pressed a key on his computer to bring the screen to life. “Don’t look so sorry for me, Lizzy. I was fine, and he was great in some ways. He made sure I had money for university. I never wanted for anything. He’s just vague, anti-social, and not good with people.” For the second time since they’d entered her father’s office, Ellie felt tears threatening and had to blink hard and quick to keep them at bay. “Oh, great! It’s password protected.”

Elizabeth looked bemused. “You have a problem with the information storage machine?”

Ellie chuckled, despite her mood. “There’s a special sequence of words or numbers I need to put in to access the computer. It’s to stop other people from looking at personal stuff you might have saved on it.”

Coming around to stand over her, Elizabeth bent down and studied the keyboard. “I think I understand. I suppose one would choose letters and numbers that are easily remembered, that are of particular importance to the user.” Carefully and slowly she typed out “Elizabeth.”

Ellie hit the return key doubtfully and was stunned when the home screen appeared and Google popped up.

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth said softly, next to her ear, “he pays more attention to you than you think. We are not all of us social beings.”

Though she was looking for the census website, Ellie was aware that Elizabeth suddenly seemed sad. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“Not a thing. I am well. I just recalled something Mr Darcy once said to me, and then I remembered what became of him.” Elizabeth shook herself and motioned toward the screen. “But melancholy is for times when we are at leisure, and now, we must work. Can this census tell us more than we knew this morning?”

Ellie shrugged, not knowing the answer herself, but asked for Elizabeth’s address and typed it into the search bar before selecting eighteen forty-one on the next tab.

“Oh, my father,” Elizabeth said, pointing at the screen when the results came back. “Does this mean he was still alive? In eighteen forty-one? He would have been nearly eighty!”

“Yep. Looks like he was still around. Is that your mother, Frances Bennet?”

“Yes, though I cannot imagine how they both lived so long together without one murdering the other! And my mother was always complaining about her health. What a terrible fraud she was.”

“You must have been a hardy family. In fact, you lived to a ripe old age. Well you did, before I killed you.”

Elizabeth laughed unexpectedly, loudly, and contagiously. Ellie began to giggle herself. She tried to sober up, but when Elizabeth hiccupped and laughed again, it started her off again too, until they were both wiping away hysterical tears.

“Oh, it is not funny,” Elizabeth said, looking back at the screen. “The only reason for merriment is that I now know there is a strong possibility my father outlived Mr Collins.”

“Mr Collins? Oh, your friend Charlotte’s husband. I remember her from your letters.”

“Yes, he was to inherit Longbourn upon my father’s death. Do you know what became of him?”

“I didn’t read the whole book, sorry,” Ellie shrugged.

Elizabeth sighed when she looked back at the screen. “Mary is listed here too. I cannot be surprised she remained at home. I suppose my other sisters were all gone by then, to different homes, all married, while I . . .” Elizabeth got to her feet and paced behind the desk chair before exclaiming, “I cannot be dead. I stubbornly refuse to be. I do not feel dead.”

“But everything has changed. Pemberley, Mr Darcy, even Lambton is different now. If you aren’t dead, why is it all screwed up?”

“That is what we must find out. Consider this, Ellie, if I am dead, why have I not vanished, become other-worldly? Why do I still walk the Earth? Are we to conclude that I have not only cheated the laws of time, but wonder of wonders, is it possible I have cheated the jaws of death, too?

“I don’t know, but thinking about it makes my head hurt,” Ellie complained. “And I’m starting to think that computers aren’t going to help us either. Let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?”

“To Lambton and Pemberley, I suppose. Let’s try and find Ruby Reynolds, or someone else who knows the history of the place.”

“Thank you, Ellie,” Elizabeth said, sincerely.

“Hey. We’re tangled up in this together. I have no job to worry about. What else am I going to do? Let’s hit the road.”

Mildred’s tiny, but sporty, little engine roared in delight when Ellie put her into fourth gear. They had packed lightly and quickly. Then it had taken over an hour to negotiate their way out of the busy London streets, but now, they were on the motorway and making good progress north.

Elizabeth had been surprisingly relaxed about her first trip in a car, asking lots of questions and sitting back to take in the sights. She marvelled at the London Eye and the skyscrapers, along with the “new” Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. Now, though, her knuckles were white as her hands desperately gripped the sides of the front passenger seat. Ellie sped up and changed lanes, whizzing past a huge lorry.

Elizabeth flinched. “’Tis very fast. May we not slow down?”

“Relax, I’m well within the speed limit. You’ll get used to it, or you can just shut your eyes till we get there.”

“So, we will be in Lambton before nightfall? So quickly?”

“Without any disasters, yes.”

Elizabeth gasped and held a hand to her chest as a white van swerved suddenly into the lane ahead of the them.

“Let’s take your mind off the traffic and talk. Tell me about Mr Darcy?”

“What about Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth blushed.

“You say you argued with him a lot, but then he proposed and you said no. After that he sent you a letter and now you don’t hate him anymore. What have I missed? Because it doesn’t make sense.”

“So many vehicles! Of all shapes and sizes.” Elizabeth pointed to a tiny city car they were passing. “Where do they all go to, in such haste? I cannot imagine.”

“Nice try but stop changing the subject.”

“We met at an assembly.” Ellie must have looked confused because Elizabeth quickly continued, “A dance. A dance at which Mr Darcy displayed very poor manners. He spoke to no one, danced with no one, though many a young lady was in want of a partner, and, well, he slighted me.”

“Slighted?”

“I overheard him describe me as ‘tolerable,’ and he refused to ask me to dance when his friend attempted to persuade him.” Elizabeth was playing with the cross that hung around her neck. She wasn’t someone who fiddled with things. She was calm and still most of the time, very together and poised, someone who wasn’t fazed easily—except when it came to the subject of Mr Darcy.

“Why did you care?”

“I did not. I found him and his manners pitiable. I laughed at him.”

“Oh, no. You really liked him, didn’t you? But he swaggered into the party, being all ‘I’m too cool for school’ and dissed you, big time. Later, he develops a serious case of the hots for you, but by then you’re all ‘I’m so over you, take a walk.’”

“I have no idea what you just said.” Elizabeth frowned. “Whatever has happened to the English language?”

“It got MTV’d. Back to Mr Darcy. You said you accused him of things he didn’t do?”

“I am afraid another gentleman told me falsehoods. He made spurious allegations against Mr Darcy which unfortunately, and perhaps due to my general disinclination towards him, I believed without question.”

“So, when he asked you to marry him, you said no. The two of you had an argument, and then he sent you a letter explaining things?”

“Yes, I confess I felt something of a fool after I received it.”

“Did you write back to him?” Ellie asked, as they passed a sign that read “Welcome to Hertfordshire.”

“Heavens no! An unmarried woman may not correspond with an unmarried man. Are we now in Hertfordshire?”

“Yep. Have you talked to Mr Darcy since?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “We move in different social circles and live so far apart. If we did happen to meet, well, ‘tis difficult to explain, but a woman of my time is bound by certain rules of behaviour. Unless we chance upon one another by accident and gain some time alone, it would be impossible. Even then, it would be bold of me to raise the subject. Yet, I confess I should like the opportunity to apologise for misjudging him.”

“And you would’ve had it, if it hadn’t been for me. I’m guessing you were about to bump into him by accident the day I threw myself in front of the carriage. If I’d have kept you alive a few hours more, you would’ve had your happy ending.”

“Ellie, though you say I went on to marry him, I must tell you that even if I returned to my time tomorrow, and Mr Darcy offered for me again, I do not know if I would be fully prepared to accept him. His manners are still deficient. There is, I believe, within him, a tendency to think meanly of others. He is a man who has little consideration for those outside of his immediate circle of family and friends. I refuse to marry at all unless I can be assured of deep and true affection. My husband must be a man I can respect, and he must also be prepared to show respect to my family, which is not always an easy task. I often fail at the obligation myself, but he must be willing to try.”

“Have you seen his house? It’s huge and really pretty.”

Elizabeth laughed. “No, I have not seen his house. You think it might change my opinion; that a beautiful house can make the owner of it less reprehensible? Am I to rate his furniture above and beyond his character?”

Mildred made a spluttering noise. Ellie paused and slowed down before pulling over to the nearside lane, frowning at the dials on the old-fashioned dashboard. The red needles were whizzing back and forth like crazy. “What now? You were fine, Mildred. What’s going on? Stop it.”

The car refused to listen to her questions and orders, so Ellie was forced to nurse her along to the next junction where she pulled the wheel gingerly to the left and took the exit ramp, hoping that if her car did choose to break down, she would wait until they were off the motorway. They spluttered, lurched, and backfired their way along, eventually coming to a stop beside an old wooden sign. It was white with black lettering and various old village names were written on it, pointing in different directions.

“You must go right.” Elizabeth’s voice was certain, like she knew it for a fact.

Ellie looked dubiously at the road. “It looks kind of narrow, like it goes nowhere.”

“It goes to Meryton. You must turn right.” Elizabeth pointed to the sign with a shaking hand. “Meryton is home. ‘Tis the closest village to Longbourn.”

They looked at each other, both acknowledging the strangeness of what had just happened. “I don’t know if Mildred will make it. Maybe I should call a recovery truck?” Ellie said at last.

“Let us try. I believe Mildred will make it.”

Ellie turned the sharp corner and Mildred roared into action again, like nothing had ever been the matter, proving her wrong and Elizabeth right. The little red car sent them whizzing down a small, winding country lane that was dark with overhanging trees.

They bumped along, being thrown about, and thankfully, didn't come across another car until they met a wider road at the bottom, and all was light again. It seemed to be the main village road and Elizabeth sat up very straight at the sight of it.

-“Well, this is nice.” Meryton was one of those very well-off, commuter-belt villages with lots of delicatessens, coffee shops, and boutique clothing stores.

“Is it?” Elizabeth replied. “It looks nothing like it did before. Go forward, and then, you must turn left.”

Ellie did as she was directed until they left the village when suddenly their surroundings weren't so pretty anymore. They passed a recycling plant that was busy churning away at plastic bottles and paper; saving what it could, discarding what it couldn't, then a McDonalds, a supermarket, and a factory. It was ugly. There was no other word for it.

“This was all once fields and trees and that was once the path towards Oakham Mount.” Elizabeth pointed to a small winding lane on their left.

Ellie slowed to stop beneath a brown sign, with symbols below it, telling them that Oakham Mount was a viewing point and picnic area. On the ground underneath was another handmade sign, roughly written and all misspelled in capital letters “BURGUR VAN-BACUN, CHIPS, SARSAGES. THIS WAY.”

“Maybe all progress isn't for the best, but well, they do bacon, if you're hungry. Bacon roll with ketchup?” she asked, hopefully.

Elizabeth smiled sadly, but shook her head. “Go on please. Do you see the church steeple to the left? Longbourn was nearby.”

Ellie drove on, but instead of finding Longbourn they drove into a housing estate called Oakham Heights where rows and rows of uniformity greeted them. Tiny little houses, brick built with wooden slats nailed to the front of them to make them appear older than they actually were; all cramped together and all allotted a tiny parking space and a tiny fenced garden.

“It is gone,” Elizabeth said, with a hand to her chest. She sagged against the seat for a moment, before recovering. Then, she got quickly out of the car and strode towards the church next to the estate. Ellie raced after her, running to catch up. In the churchyard, Elizabeth went quickly from tombstone to tombstone, reading the inscriptions and shaking her head, working her way to the back, till they were nearly at the church wall. There it was, in amongst a few other Bennets, her own epitaph. “Elizabeth Bennet.”

Ellie braced herself for tears from Elizabeth, wailing, despair. Instead, there was a shout of delight.

“Oh, there is nothing more delicious than being correct. Look, Ellie, I am alive!”

After reading the inscription on the stone, Ellie didn't quite know what to feel. It was all that was good, and all that was bad. “Elizabeth Bennet. Much loved, etcetera. Oh, you are still alive! But only just.”

“Yes, I saw today's date this morning, on your walkable communication machine and on your father's information.” She waved a hand in the air. “Today is the seventeenth day of July. I do not die until the twentieth day of July. We have three days, Ellie. I am lost at present, but there are three days, a window of time perhaps, in which we might work to return me.”

“Return you to die?” Ellie hated herself for her pessimism, but then, it had been a hell of a day.

“In this moment, I die, but can it be changed? If I travelled here, to your time, surely anything is possible. I wonder how I came to be buried here. I can only presume I lay dying in Lambton after being struck down. To transport my body here to be buried near Longbourn would be most unusual and would have come at great expense.”

“Mr Darcy,” they both said, at the same time. Elizabeth reached for Ellie's hand and gripped it tightly as the sky grew silvery above them. Lights swirled and they raised their faces to it, watching.

“It's happening, Lizzy,” Ellie gasped, breathing quickly. “It's starting. See that sky? That's our chance. We need to get to Lambton, quickly.”

The Sky, the Story, and a Token

Mildred behaved for the rest of their drive to Lambton, but the weather did not. The sky was still a weird silvery colour and sparks of light continued to shoot across it, and then the rain and the wind came. Ellie had to concentrate to keep the little car on the road while strong gusts and a torrential downpour lashed at it from all angles. She was grateful the motorway was now far behind them and they were travelling down small country roads, getting ever closer to the inn. Having spent the previous night tossing and turning on her lumpy sofa, Ellie was tired. Her eyes hurt and her head was beginning to ache.

“You are weary, Ellie. Should you like me to drive Mildred for a time?”

Shocked, Ellie glanced at Elizabeth quickly, before turning her eyes back to the road. “Are you crazy? No! You don’t know how to drive a car. It takes lessons, and lots of practice. You have to pass a test and get a licence before you’re allowed to drive.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I admit to experiencing a certain level of perturbation when we first began along the fast road, but on these smaller lanes, I believe I could manage it well enough. There are pedals for stopping and going faster, and one must turn the wheel to steer. The small stick beside the wheel is either pushed up or down, which makes a light flash, to let other road users know which way you intend to turn. You must stay to the left and stop when there are broken lines—”

“Okay.” Ellie held up a hand. “You don’t miss a trick, I’ll give you that, but you still can’t drive the car. If I remember rightly, we’re nearly there anyway.”

A sign caught Elizabeth’s eye as they passed it. “Pemberley Shades. Is that not where Ruby Reynolds lived? Should we turn here and seek her out?”

“I don’t know, look at the skies. That meant something before. We could find the inn, rent the same room, and take a nap.”

“Ah, we have returned to your ‘let us fall asleep and hope I wake up back in eighteen-thirteen’ strategy. Yet, I still believe we should not be so passive. We must call upon Mrs Reynolds.”

Despite her exhaustion, Ellie nodded and followed the sign’s arrow. There was a break in the trees after two hundred yards or so and Pemberley itself came into view. Elizabeth leant forward and Ellie slowed down, and then stopped altogether. They both stared at the house opened mouthed.

“When I was here before, when I met Tom, it wasn’t like this, Lizzy. It was beautiful, at least the outside was. There were rolling fields, a big lake, and a huge gravel drive. It was also the only house for miles.”

Ellie ran out of words—what was the point of talking about something that didn’t exist anymore? Pemberley was a mess. One wing, the side that had burned down in eighteen-fifteen, was just ruins. The rest of the building was covered in scaffolding, like it was being restored, but there were no workmen about, no vans or cranes. A tarpaulin covered parts of the roof but had come loose, and flapped about uselessly in the high winds.

There were hardly any grounds now, they had probably been sold off, piece by piece and built on.

“Tom? You mentioned him before, Tom Darcy,” Elizabeth said. “Am I to assume there were children from my supposedly happy marriage to Mr Darcy?”

“Oh yeah. Eight.”

“Eight!”

“Guess there wasn’t much to do of an evening back then, other than . . .” Ellie smiled and waved a hand in the air.

Elizabeth’s face went as red as beetroot. “Eight! Suddenly I am more than a little inclined to remain in twenty-seventeen.”

“But you loved your children. You were devoted to them, always writing about them in your letters.”

“Was Tom Darcy one of my direct descendants?”

“Yeah, he was,” Ellie gazed at the derelict mansion and realised Tom wasn’t the steward there anymore. By the looks of it, Pemberley didn’t need one, because there was nothing left to manage. Elizabeth and Mr Darcy had never married, so Tom had never been born.

Ellie thought back to when she had met him in the library and the excitement she’d felt when he’d asked her out; that little flutter she’d felt in her belly when their eyes had met. She’d only talked to Tom for a few minutes, but there had been something special about it. Why did he have to be married, and a cheat? Now, of course, he was non-existent so it shouldn’t matter, but somehow, it did. “He wasn’t a gentleman though, Lizzy. He was married, and he lied about it.”

“Perhaps we ought to go on,” Elizabeth suggested.

They found Pemberley Shades easily. While its name conjured up images of a pretty retirement home with roses around the door, it was actually a long, white square box of a building about a half-mile from Pemberley. It needed a lick of paint and the buzzer on the security system was cracked. Ellie pressed it but half-expected it not to work. She jumped when a gruff middle-aged woman answered quickly.

"It's not visiting hours," she bellowed down the crackling line.

"Sorry," called Ellie into the box, "but we've come all the way from London to speak to Ruby Reynolds. Does she live here?"

"Yes, but we have set visiting hours. It's in the brochure. You'll have to come back later. No visits out of visiting hours, unless you've called ahead."

"Please, it's raining pretty hard out here. Can't you just let us in to speak to her for a minute? It's a long story, but we really need to see Ruby. She's our aunt." It was a lie but what else was she supposed to do? They might never get in otherwise. "And actually, I did call ahead. I spoke to . . ." A name! She needed a name, and a common one or it would never work. Crossing her fingers, she prayed she'd get lucky. "I spoke to John."

"Oh, right. If John said it's okay, I suppose it is."

The gate swung open.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at Ellie as they went through. "And I thought I was meant to be the actress. You show far more talent for theatricals than I do. What is this place, exactly?"

"A retirement home. You know, for when people grow old, and they can't look out for themselves anymore."

"Why do they not live with their families?"

"That's a very good question." Ellie sighed as they walked into Pemberley Shades. It was dark and depressing and smelt like a hospital, like everything had been dipped in antiseptic. It was eerily quiet except for the occasional loud cough or moan from one of the residents.

The owner of the gruff voice met them at the reception desk, told them her name was Dawn, and showed Ellie and Elizabeth down a long corridor to a conservatory at the end of the building. It would have been the only sunny room in the whole place, if not for the storm still raging outside, which made it as dim as all the other rooms.

"These two girls say they are your nieces, Ruby, is that right?" Dawn asked a tiny lady who was tucked up under a blanket in a big chair by the window.

Ruby's face was time-weathered, but her eyes were young and curious as she peered up at Elizabeth and Ellie.

"She's a bit senile," Dawn said.

"I am not senile," the old lady snapped. "They are certainly my nieces and you can get off now. Terrorise someone else and leave me to chat to them."

Dawn huffed but went away.

Ellie pulled up a chair and sat opposite Ruby. Feeling as if she had lied enough for one day, she decided to be honest. "We're not actually relatives of yours, Ruby. Elizabeth and I are doing some research on Pemberley. There was a historian called James who came to see you before. Do you remember him?"

"Like I said before, I'm not senile. I remember James. He used to sneak me in a little flask of gin. Got any gin?"

"No," Ellie replied, surprised. "I might have some chocolate though." She rummaged in her bag and came up with a Snickers bar she kept there—for emergencies. It was a bit squashed but Ruby snatched it gleefully and tucked it under the blanket.

Ellie and Elizabeth smiled at each other before remembering why they were there. "We were wondering if you could tell us anything further about the fire that destroyed a part of the building in eighteen-fifteen, the fire that took its master's life," Elizabeth asked, pulling up a chair of her own.

"My family lived and worked at Pemberley for generations, right up until the family let all the staff go in the nineteen-seventies. It was sad to see it sold, but it was the curse, you see." She glanced between them. "I can see you don't believe me, but anyone around here will tell you the same. The great house is cursed. There's not been a single person that's been happy there, not since the fire."

"Does anyone know what caused the fire?" Ellie asked.

"Well, the master, Fitzwilliam Darcy, caused it! That night, he'd been crying and drinking brandy—a lot of it—he was well and truly pickled. They believed he knocked over a candle in his study. Of course, the whole place was full of paper and next to the library with all those wooden shelves of books. It took hold quickly, a terrible blaze. Mr Darcy sobered up enough to get everyone out, but while the flames were still high, he ran back in for something, and never came back out."

Elizabeth shivered. Outside, thunder rumbled and a crack of lightning split the silvery sky.

“Do you know what he went back in for?” Ellie asked.

Ruby laughed. “Well, how’s anyone supposed to know that when he never came out again? But there is a story people like to tell.”

“Pray, go on.” Elizabeth’s voice was a hoarse whisper.

“Well, it’s said Fitzwilliam Darcy was madly in love with a girl who’d been in a horrible accident a couple of years before. He was coming home from London on his horse when it happened right in front of him. No one knows why, but she ran before a post coach. Everyone who saw it thought she was dead, but she survived and was rushed inside the inn. If you go to Lambton, the building where they took her is still there on High Street. Her relatives sent for a doctor but didn’t know he was considered a quack by the locals. Mr Darcy didn’t trust him, something to do with the bad care the man had given his mother. He ranted and shouted and tried to get the lady seen by his own doctor, but her uncle had already let the man treat her. She died.”

Elizabeth leaned closer. “So, it was not the accident that took her life, but—”

“The doctor bled her with dirty instruments. She got a terrible fever,” Ruby told them. “And he gave her a medicine, some concoction he’d made himself. P’haps that made things worse?”

Elizabeth turned white as a sheet, and Ellie saw her hands tremble as she reached for the cross around her neck. “But are there any theories about what Mr Darcy went back into the house for?”

“It’s all rumours and guesses. No one ever knew for certain, but it’s said he took something from the body of the girl, a token. Her relatives were devastated. They were in no fit state to do anything. It was Mr Darcy who returned her lifeless body to her poor parents, and paid for her burial, too. But he took something before he sent her off.”

It was all too much for Elizabeth who got up suddenly and rushed to the other side of the room. Ellie watched her as she continued to play with the cross about her neck while biting roughly at her lip.

What had Mr Darcy stolen? Elizabeth didn’t have much he could’ve taken without her aunt and uncle noticing, maybe Elizabeth’s cross or a lock of her hair? When the Pemberley fire had been raging, Mr Darcy had risked his life to go back inside for that one tiny part of Elizabeth he still possessed. Ellie was as sure of it as if she had been there and seen it happen. She didn’t need proof.

“Nothing was the same after that,” Ruby went on. “There was never enough money to rebuild the house, crops failed, tenants left to work at the mills in Derby. He was the last great master, and all that inherited Pemberley after him, one after another, had the most terrible luck. I’m telling you—that girl’s death was a curse. She was the curse of Pemberley, and I think she still haunts it to this day.”

Elizabeth bolted from the room. Ellie hurriedly thanked Ruby and took off after her, leaving the old lady reaching under her blanket for the chocolate. Elizabeth was rattling the handle of the big glass front door when Ellie caught her up.

“Why won’t it open?” she cried out in frustration. “I do not understand. I do not understand anything in this world. Why would you lock elderly people up?”

Ellie found the large green button to release the doors and pressed it. “It’s to lock other people out, Lizzy.”

But Elizabeth wasn’t listening. Once she was through the doors she began running again, not to the car, but anywhere, just away. Ellie struggled to keep up and was amazed at the girl’s speed. Wasn’t she supposed to be from the generation of ladies who sat and sewed all day? Thankfully Elizabeth had to stop when she was blown back by the storm, her small frame was no match for the fierce winds howling around them.

“How can my death have changed so many things? I am inconsequential.” Her eyes were wet with tears, her cheeks flushed with confusion and anger.

“Not to him you weren’t.” Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak again, but Ellie held up her hands. “Just wait. Mr Darcy told you he loved you. You may not have believed him when he said it, but he must have been crazy about you. You were supposed to meet at Pemberley the day I ran in front of the carriage, and he was so broken-hearted over your death that he was never the same. He must have been really important to everything to Pemberley and Lambton.”

There was loud, rumbling thunder again, right above them, so Ellie pulled Elizabeth by the hand back to Mildred. They were both wet through and Elizabeth trembled as they sat back in the front seats.

“I need a drink, a really big glass of wine,” Ellie said, staring out through the windscreen.

“Alcohol is rarely the answer, Ellie.”

“No, sometimes chocolate is the answer.”

“It seems you have much in common with Ruby Reynolds,” Elizabeth smiled wryly.

“Let’s go to the inn and get dried off.”

When Elizabeth didn’t protest, Ellie started the engine and pulled onto the road. Despite all the excitement of the last half hour, or maybe because of it, she was more tired than ever and emotionally drained to boot. She had to shake herself repeatedly to stay awake, but her eyes were so, so heavy, and maybe they closed, despite her willing them not to, but only for what seemed like a second. Then Elizabeth shouted her name and she opened them, and panicked.

She was on the wrong side of the road as a carriage being pulled by four large horses was hurtling through the misty rain towards them. A driver in a big fancy coat with a whip in his hand, was urging the beasts along faster and faster and the carriage bore down on them so quickly there was no time to really study it, or for Ellie to wonder if she was hallucinating. Strangely, she could see the carriage, but the driver didn’t seem to see Mildred. Ellie had to wrench the wheel sharply to the left to avoid crashing into it and Elizabeth screamed as Mildred left the road and mounted the grassy bank beside it. The momentum sent them sailing straight through a wooden fence. The cracking and crunching noise of metal colliding with wood at thirty miles per hour was horrendous, and though the car came to a stop a few feet into the field, Ellie started to feel sick and faint, and then passed out.



Pain. Pain unlike anything she’d experienced before, and a crushing weight on her chest made breathing almost impossible. Her ribs stung when they stretched and expanded for her to get a full breath. Ellie tried to open her eyes, but they refused to cooperate. They felt like they’d been glued shut.

She was also cold—freezing in fact—and the blankets weren’t doing a thing to help. She shivered constantly, which only made her hurt more, if that was possible.

“Lizzy?”

Whose voice was that? It wasn’t Elizabeth’s, but she sounded sort of like her.

“Lizzy, dearest, open your eyes.”

Wait! It was Elizabeth’s aunt! If Mrs Gardiner was speaking to her, then she must’ve returned to Elizabeth’s body. Lord, no wonder she hurt!

“Mrs Gardiner, I understand your reluctance to accept matters as they are, but your niece was gravely injured. Should she survive her injuries and the fever that has taken

hold during the night, she will likely never be the same. We should make her as comfortable as possible. Laudanum would help with the pain.”

Something warm wrapped around Ellie’s hand. Mrs Gardiner must have been holding it. “Sir, my niece is a strong young lady and will fight for her life. Of that I am quite certain. If you are not willing to aid us in her recovery, then we shall search for a physician who will. I will not, however, hear talk of letting her die.”

The sound of a latch being lifted and a door creaking open echoed through the room. “Mrs Gardiner, I brought tha water and towelin’ ya asked fer.”

And then there was another voice, more distant, as if it were coming from the hallway. “You must see reason! I can provide a comfortable room, servants to see to Miss Bennet’s every need, and my personal physician—even a surgeon from London should she require it. Please, Mr Gardiner! I implore you! You must allow me to be of assistance.”

The man’s tone was impatient, distressed. She hadn’t heard it before but it was deep and rich, not unlike Tom Darcy’s.

“Sir, I appreciate your offer, but we simply cannot accept. ‘Tis too generous from someone we have never met and who has such a slight acquaintance with our niece.”

“I cannot insist, but I beg of you to allow me to summon a physician.” The man paused before his voice dropped until it was almost too soft to hear. “Mr Grantley is not well thought of in Lambton and few use his services, which is why he was able to respond with such haste to your summons. He was competent in his youth, but his treatments are not of the most recent developments. Please, sir.”

Her heart suddenly began to beat faster. An icy rag was placed on her forehead and she stiffened, everything throbbed.

“There, there,” soothed Mrs Gardiner. “I know you must be in a great deal of pain and the cloth must be cold, but we have to do what we can.”

“Mrs Gardiner, if you are determined I should continue treating her, we should bleed her to bring the fever down. She is due another dose of laudanum and I should apply plasters to her wounds. I should also like to try a remedy of my own making. Her heart is not beating as quickly or as strongly as it should, and it will strengthen the blood.”

“What sorts of plasters?” asked Mrs Gardiner. While Ellie was listening to Mrs Gardiner and the doctor, she could still hear Mr Gardiner and Mr Darcy arguing in the background, they were obviously just outside the door.

“My wife can prepare them for you, simply a mixture of oils and litharge—lead.”

Lead? Ellie fought to pry open Elizabeth’s eyes.

“What of the other remedy?”

“Oh, merely a solution of oil, herbs, and strychnia.”

Strychnia? She’d heard that before, but where? It was hard to sort through her thoughts when her head hurt so much, but . . . Wait a minute! Wasn’t it in one of her Mills and Boon bodice rippers? It was! The one where Lord Montague attempts to poison Lady Genevieve. It wasn’t called strychnia anymore, though. It was . . . Oh, crap! Strychnine!

Ellie gasped and forced Elizabeth’s eyes open, but everything was a blur. A shadow loomed over her face and something cold touched her lip. A bottle? “No!” she forced out. Somehow, she managed to throw an arm upwards, catching the person leaning over her. There was a crashing noise that could only have been something falling to the floor.

“She knocked over the bottle,” complained the doctor.

“Lizzy!” Mrs Gardiner’s palm was cool against her burning forehead. Ellie tried to concentrate on her eyes, desperate to make them focus, but she couldn’t. She licked her lips and swallowed. “Mr Darcy,” she whispered. Then, summoning every bit of strength she could gain from Elizabeth’s battered and bruised body, she shouted, “Please, Mr Darcy. Help me!”

In Elizabeth Bennet's House Slippers

Ellie finally managed to pry her eyes open again, but everything around her was fuzzy and not quite in focus. She blinked and shifted, gasping at the pain she felt in too many places to count. At least it wasn't as terrible as before. One more closing and opening of her eyes cleared things a little, but the light was too bright. The glare made it difficult to keep her eyes open and her head throbbed.

"Miss Bennet?" The voice was a man's, but not one she recognised. "There are many people who will be pleased to find you awake, young lady."

"I am Elizabeth Bennet. I am still her and I am still here."

The man chuckled as he straightened to stand. "Indeed."

"The light," she whispered in a raspy voice.

"Does it pain you?" He made a motion with his hand, and a sound like the shifting of fabric came from nearby as the room became a little dimmer. "Is that better?"

She gasped when she tried to nod. Movement definitely didn't help! Her head already felt as though someone was playing the drums in a constant beat against her skull. She needed to stay still as much as possible.

"Drink this." A cup was placed to her lips but Ellie kept them firmly shut, remembering the previous doctor and his little bottle of strychnine. "Come now, it is only willow bark. The taste is not pleasant, but the extract will help with the pain. I would like to give you less laudanum. I have seen my fair share of patients who cannot stop when they have taken it for too long, and Mr Darcy has given me specific instructions for your care. I do not plan to disappoint him."

In the darkened room, Ellie's vision began to clear while he patiently waited for her to follow his order. When she could finally focus properly, she took a long look at the man. He had long sideburns peppered with grey, a moustache, and a friendly smile with eyes that crinkled at the edges. He looked kindly and claimed to be acting upon Mr Darcy's orders, so he could be trusted, couldn't he? She ignored the stinging in her ribs as she inhaled deeply, then opened her lips and allowed the liquid to be tipped into her mouth. A bitter taste hit her tongue and she swallowed the vile liquid quickly, trying not to gag or choke on it.

"Now, since we have that unpleasantness behind us, please allow me to be completely uncouth and introduce myself. After all, no one else is about to do so." He

smiled widely and gave a slight bow. "I am Mr Newnham, Mr Darcy's physician. He sent for me not long after your accident, and I have been in charge of your treatment since. I pray you will forgive me, but I do hope you are a better behaved patient than Mr Darcy. When he is ill, he is too eager to return to his duties and never rests as he ought."

A door latch clicked and footsteps rushed closer. "Lizzy! Oh, Lizzy, I am so pleased to see you awake. You do not know what a fright you gave me and your uncle." Elizabeth's aunt, Mrs Gardiner, wiped tears from her cheeks and took Ellie's hand.

"I'm sorry," rasped Ellie. Her chest wasn't as heavy as before, though it still smarted whenever she took a breath. "I shouldn't have—"

Mrs Gardiner shook her head. "We shall not think of that now. You are awake and will be well."

"Perhaps Miss Bennet would like to sit up?" suggested Mr Newnham.

Elizabeth's aunt spluttered and adamantly shook her head. "I do not believe she is ready for such a step."

"Yes. I want to." Ellie pushed her voice so it was a little stronger this time and not as rough. Anything had to be better than lying there staring at the ornate canopy above her. Hang on, ornate canopy, where was she? The last she remembered was calling for Mr Darcy. She assumed she was at the inn at Lambton when that happened, but from what little she could see, everything now appeared a lot grander.

"Very well," said the doctor. "We shall need to be careful of her ribs and the bruising."

A maid came over and placed a hand behind Ellie's back while Mrs Gardiner did the same. Ellie flinched at the pain when they lifted her and placed pillows behind her to prop her up, then gasped at her first proper sight of the room. It was larger than her flat! She pressed her lips together to prevent an exclamation of "holy crap." Fortunately, she stopped herself in time.

"Where am I?"

"I wondered if you would remember." Mrs Gardiner tucked and straightened the linens, took Ellie's hand, and sat on the edge of the bed. "Do you remember how you were injured?"

"Yes, a post coach."

The maid set a tray on the table, and this time, Mrs Gardiner raised a cup of something to Ellie's lips, pausing before she administered it. "Mr Darcy, who happened

to be riding by at that very moment, witnessed the accident and immediately offered his assistance. Your uncle refused his requests to be of aid more than once, but Mr Darcy was insistent—especially after you called for him.” Mrs Gardiner’s lip curved into a mischievous smile. “You have been very sly, Lizzy. You never once told us your feelings for the man had changed.”

Ellie braced herself when Mrs Gardiner encouraged her to drink. She expected something as nasty as the willow bark, but was relieved when what was in the cup tasted like thick beef broth.

“He persuaded us to dismiss the first physician who attended you and had you moved here to Pemberley. You were feverish and asleep. I don’t suppose you remember much of the journey?”

Ellie shook her head. “No, nothing.”

“He has stood vigil outside your door since we arrived,” Mrs Gardiner went on. “He sent for Mr Newnham and ensured you had any treatment you required.” She bent closer. “I know I said I wished to see Pemberley, but I had not meant in this fashion.” A girlish giggle came from the older lady and Ellie started to laugh, but instantly regretted it.

When she hissed at the sharp twinge in her ribs, Mrs Gardiner squeezed her hand. “Forgive me. I promise I shall not make you laugh, not until you are well again. I am simply relieved to see you on the mend, and resembling your usual self.”

Mrs Gardiner fed Ellie the remainder of the broth, placed the cup back on the tray, and looked at her with pleading, hopeful eyes. “I know it is not entirely proper, but would you allow Mr Darcy to attend you for a time? He has been beside himself with worry, and I believe it would do him good to see you so improved. I declare the man would not have slept a wink last night if Mr Newnham had not ordered him to his own bedchamber.” She smiled and brushed a few stray curls from Ellie’s face. “I must say I like him very much. He is quite reserved, but I believe your liveliness will suit him well.”

Her teeth latched on to the inside of her cheek to stop herself from saying a word. Elizabeth would be horribly embarrassed by Mrs Gardiner’s assumptions, but she wasn’t here, Ellie was. And while she was in her shoes—well, she wasn’t wearing shoes—but even so, she needed to do whatever she could to make things right again. She started to wonder where Elizabeth was. The last time she had seen her they had been in

Mildred, crashing through a fence. Was she okay or deserted by the roadside, injured, hurt, or stranded out of time? Oh, this was all so wrong, but the best Ellie could do for her now was not to make any more horrible mistakes.

“Of course,” she replied in a cool voice, hoping she sounded like Elizabeth. She couldn’t make anyone suspicious. “I should be pleased to see Mr Darcy.”

Okay, that worked, didn’t it? She felt quite impressed with herself.

Mrs Gardiner patted her hand. “We shall put your dressing gown on you for a little modesty.” The robe was slid down Ellie’s back and wrapped around her with hardly any effort on her part. She barely had to move.

When Mrs Gardiner opened the door, Mr Darcy stood outside, just as she said he would be. He was leaning on the wall opposite but straightened abruptly when he noticed Elizabeth’s aunt. Then, he looked behind her, at the doctor, and finally at Ellie. His intent gaze seemed to drink her in, like a thirsty man who’d been deprived of water for days. “She is awake?” he asked, astonished.

“Yes, sir, and sitting up as you can see. We cannot begin to thank you for all you have done,” exclaimed Mrs Gardiner. “Would you like to speak with my niece for a time? She has said she would welcome your company.”

His eyes widened and he took a hesitant step forward, pausing to look at Mrs Gardiner. “You have no objections?”

“No, sir,” replied Mrs Gardiner. “After all you have done and your obvious worry, I could not allow you to continue on as you have without some reassurance of her well-being.”

Mr Darcy clasped his hands together behind his back, drew in a deep breath, and stepped into the room. Ellie tried to not to gawk at him. His portrait didn’t do the man justice! It was as though Tom Darcy—without the black plastic framed glasses and slightly geeky manner—had strode into the room, except this Mr Darcy wore a stuffy cravat, too tight breeches, and tall black boots. It was easy to see, however, why Elizabeth might have thought him proud when she first met him. He stood before her with one boot slightly in front of the other, his hands clasped behind his back, and his nose slightly in the air, but Ellie could tell he was nervous. His hands shook as he unclasped them from behind his back to bow deeply. The poor man was a nervous wreck. Elizabeth said she had argued with Mr Darcy when they had last met, after his proposal. He obviously wasn’t sure what to expect from her now.

“Miss Bennet, ‘tis a great relief to see you awake,” he said, awkwardly.

What would Elizabeth say or do? How many times had Ellie seen the girl try not to curtsy when she met someone in twenty-seventeen? Ellie chuckled and then clutched her side as a fresh, new pain hit her. “Sorry I can’t, you know, return. I can’t curtsy.”

Mrs Gardiner passed behind him with a sly grin and seated herself on a sofa by the fireplace, reading a small book she picked up along the way. Ellie supposed she wasn’t allowed to leave them alone. She must be acting as a chaperone.

“I would not expect you to even attempt such a thing. I am merely happy to see you awake, here, at Pemberley—recovering at Pemberley, and awake.”

The poor man was babbling and blushing. He put a hand to his mouth and had to look away for a few moments to compose himself. “Is there anything I can bring you for your present relief? Or to help you pass the time? A book perhaps? We have a large library at Pemberley, which I hope you will take advantage of while you recover. We have many books at Pemberley.”

“Am I at Pemberley, by any chance?” she asked.

He looked confused for a moment before his face split into a wide smile. “If you are teasing me already, Miss Bennet. I have high hopes of you making a full and rapid recovery.”

Oh, he was sweet. He might look a bit pompous, but he was so eager to please and he stared at her with such intensity. No, Ellie reminded herself—he was staring at Elizabeth with such intensity. It gave her a heady, fluffy feeling though. Greg barely even noticed her most of the time. Why the hell had she put up with him for so long?

“Thank you for your kind offer,” she said slowly and carefully. Her voice wasn’t strong and her speech was slow, but she wasn’t used to speaking so formally. “Indeedy, perchance my aunt might require a tome or two to read to me thither. Pray, I don’t know if I will be up for any novel perusing on my own anytime soon.”

Mr Darcy frowned, his head tilted to the side, and he watched her for a moment. He turned and motioned to the doctor, who stepped forward at his request. “A little less laudanum, I think,” he said quietly. The doctor nodded while Ellie berated herself. It was probably best if she spoke as little as possible.

“I would be pleased to read to you while you rest if you like—and if your aunt and uncle do not object.” He was so shy and his voice broke when he asked. If only Elizabeth was here to see this side of him.

“That would be kindly of you, good sir. I don’t know how long I can loll about reposing here without something to do. I’ll run mad after a few days.”

He stared at her again. “Yes, well, you seem in need of more rest at the present time. I hope when you are a little better, I hope I do not ask too much, but I hope you will do me the honour of allowing me to introduce you to my sister. She has joined me here at Pemberley and is desirous of making your acquaintance. I am certain she would enjoy keeping you occupied.”

“She sounds sweet. I would like to meet her.”

Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment.

“Miss Bennet?” His warm hand covered hers, and she jolted awake at the sound of his worried voice.

“I’m sorry. I must have dozed off for a sec.” No! More formal! She needed to sound like Elizabeth! “I am having great difficulty remaining awake.” Was that better?

“I certainly understand. You have endured quite an ordeal. Your aunt, your uncle, my sister, the Bingleys, and myself—we have all been exceedingly worried.”

“The Bingleys?” She knew that name. She’d read it in Elizabeth’s letters. Wasn’t Elizabeth’s sister Jane Bingley? Oh, no! If Jane was here, she’d ruin everything. Ellie couldn’t pretend well enough to fool the sister Elizabeth was closest to.

“Yes,” he responded, his brows drawn down in the middle. “Do you not recall Mr Bingley who leased Netherfield Park last autumn? He, his sister Miss Bingley, and his eldest sister Mrs Hurst, along with Mr Hurst, are here. They travelled with my sister, Georgiana.”

“Oh,” she mumbled. “No Jane then.”

“Should you like your sister here? I could send for her if it would put you at ease. Anything that will make your stay more comfortable shall be done.” Without waiting for her reply, he continued, “Yes, ‘tis only right. She ought to be the one to nurse you, and I ought to have thought of it sooner. I shall send a note by express tonight.” His manner was determined and wonderfully masterful. He was a real man of action, but perhaps a little too used to being in charge and having his own way. Elizabeth was going to have her hands full with him when she finally got back to eighteen-thirteen!

There was another cry of “Lizzy,” and Mr Gardiner walked through the open door. “I came as soon as the maid told me you were awake. How are you, my dear girl?” Before she could answer, he clapped Mr Darcy on the shoulder. “I can see you are better, and I

am certain this gentleman is pleased beyond measure. I must say that nothing was done that he did not do himself. He had you moved to his home, he sent for Mr Newnham, and anything the physician said would bring you relief, he has made available to us.”

Mr Darcy turned really red again and walked over to the window. He was so uncomfortable and awkward, but his love for Elizabeth was obvious.

Ellie thought hard, trying to find something to say that might give him a bit of hope, because there was hope. They were destined for each other weren't they, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy? “I am appreciative of Mr Darcy's efforts on my behalf. He's very kind. I didn't realise just how kind he was—until now.” Mr Darcy turned and smiled softly at her and Ellie smiled back.

Mr Gardiner coughed. “I need to speak to my wife.” Without any explanation, he then urged a confused Mrs Gardiner quickly from the room. The doctor left them, too, muttering something about an ointment.

“You might believe my interference was officious, but I could not stand idly by and watch you die,” confessed Mr Darcy, when they were alone.

Why *had* they been left alone? Wasn't that some sort of taboo? Did Mr Gardiner think they were already engaged? Or was he expecting Mr Darcy to propose? Ellie sincerely hoped he wouldn't, not when Elizabeth wasn't actually able to hear it and answer for herself. “No, not interfering at all. I'm very grateful.”

“I do not want or require your gratitude—I do not want you to feel obliged to me.” He spat the words out, as though they tasted like something disgusting.

“Eliz . . .” She stopped and took a deep breath. “I don't think I am someone who would pretend to feel something I didn't.” Ellie hadn't known Elizabeth long, but was certain her new friend was nothing if not honest and straightforward. He looked miserable as he moved closer to the bed, and Ellie, out of sympathy, instinctively held out her hand to him.

Mr Darcy's mouth went slack in disbelief. She had probably broken some stupid, ridiculous rule they had in Regency times. Nevertheless, he grasped at her hand, squeezed her fingers tightly, and looked as if he wanted to raise them to his mouth and kiss them. Before he did, however, he seemed to change his mind and put her hand carefully back on top of the covers instead.

“You must be very tired. Sleep will be your best medicine, though I look forward to the time when you are well enough to join us downstairs. Perhaps one evening we could arrange for you to be brought down, so you do not over-exert yourself.

“Brought down?” Ellie asked. She was starting to feel hot and very uncomfortable again. “How?”

“On a chair,” Mr Darcy replied.

She grinned as her mind conjured up an image of herself being held aloft on a chaise lounge by several half-naked and incredibly fit men. “Like an Egyptian queen? Will someone feed me grapes?”

Mr Darcy smiled but shook his head. “You are looking flushed and are obviously light-headed. ‘Tis an effect of the laudanum, and I suspect I have taxed your strength. In my joy at finding you well enough to receive me, I have tarried longer than I ought. You must have long been desiring my absence. I thank you for your tolerance.”

“Oh, no problem. You’re very, you know, tolerable.” His head shot up, and he inhaled sharply.

What had she said? She was certain it was something terrible, but it was becoming harder to concentrate. Ellie blinked, struggling to keep her eyes open.

There was a knock on the door, which had been left slightly open, and a small woman in a dark black gown bobbed a curtsy at Mr Darcy. She kept her eyes politely averted from Ellie. “Sir, Mr Randall is here to see you.”

Mr Darcy let out a big sigh. “Mrs Reynolds, I am in no mood for business today, send him away.”

“I did instruct the butler to say as much to him, sir, but Mr Randall says it is a matter of urgency. A matter concerning Mr Wickham.” Mrs Reynolds finished in a whisper, as if “Wickham” was a dirty word.

“Send him away. I have more important matters to attend. At the moment, I am concerned only with Miss Bennet’s recovery.”

Wickham! So many familiar names. Reynolds and “Wickham,” why did those ring a bell? Remembering suddenly, Ellie shot up straight and cried out when her ribs painfully protested against the swift movement. “No, don’t send him away. You must go and see him. ‘Tis, indeedy, too important.” Ellie sank back against the pillow, feeling very woozy. It was getting difficult to keep things straight in her head. -“I remember now,” she mumbled. “Her biggest regret was something Mr Wickham did. That’s how

she described it in one of her letters, anyway. You must meet him, Mr Darcy. Do not send him away!"

"Elizabeth," soothed Mr Darcy, who reddened again. "Forgive my impertinence—I mean Miss Bennet. You are feverish. This will not do. Please lie down and do not distress yourself. Fetch Mr Newnham immediately, Mrs Reynolds."

The servant left to do as he asked while Ellie had no choice but to lie down. The room spun wildly, and she found it difficult to draw breath. "You must go and find out what's happening with Mr Wickham, Mr Darcy. I think it's important," she managed to whisper, before shutting her eyes. As soon as they closed, Morpheus instantly carried her away into the land of dreams with her shaking and shivering as she went.

Convincing Mr Darcy

Ellie came around slowly to find herself sitting in Mildred's driver's seat, her hands still clutching the wheel and her head bent down. She was still braced for impact, like nothing had ever happened, only it had happened. Mildred had swerved off the road, gone crashing through a fence, and Ellie had travelled back to eighteen-thirteen again. A disgruntled cow stared at her through the windscreen, obviously miffed about having her grazing space invaded. "Sorry," she told it. The cow mooed and ambled slowly away.

Ellie got out of the car and rubbed her head—maybe it had collided with the steering wheel or the side window since her fingers now traced a small lump growing at her hairline. Her hair, thank God! She combed her fingers through the fine, straight strands. Now, this was definitely her own hair. She was herself once again, which was cause for mild celebration, but then, panic gripped her. Where was Elizabeth? She circled the car, searching both inside and out, but the girl had vanished.

Maybe they had swapped places and Elizabeth was now in her own body, recovering in her sick bed at Pemberley in eighteen-thirteen? Could everything be fixed? Ellie smiled and felt hopeful for a few moments before she sighed at the sight of her smashed up car.

What to do now? Mildred was wrecked. Ellie reached inside the car and grabbed her mobile phone to call a tow truck, but cried out in frustration when she read the display. No signal! She walked back and forth, jumped up and down, but the display still refused to show any tiny black bars. She was well and truly in the middle of nowhere. She looked back down the road to where Pemberley Shades stood earlier, but the retirement home was no longer there. In its place stood a pretty and quaint, little cottage. In the other direction, at the base of a lush, rolling green hill, sat Pemberley. Though Ellie had seen some shocking sights in the last few days, the changes since she and Elizabeth had last gone past the great house—not more than an hour ago—were truly incredible. No longer surrounded by other buildings, it stood alone, nestled beautifully into a little valley. The metal poles that supported it were gone and the roof was no longer in need of repair. It was perfect. Just like it had been on the very first occasion Ellie laid eyes upon it.

A smart, new Range Rover came down the road and stopped along the verge. Its driver got out and inspected the damage to the fence before he walked in her direction. Ellie smiled, ridiculously pleased to see him. There was something comforting about his lanky frame, his presence, not to mention the fact that he now existed. When Tom Darcy noticed her, however, he jumped back in surprise and appeared horrified.

“How did you do that?”

“Oh yeah, sorry about the fence. It all happened so quickly. You see there was, well, something coming the other way. I had to turn sharply or—”

“No. I mean how did you get here? I just left you up at the house.” Tom rubbed a hand over his eyes. “How did you get here so quickly?”

“You said you left me up at the house?”

“You must have sprinted up that hill.” He frowned and folded his arms over his chest. “If you can move that fast there’s obviously nothing wrong with you. Get in your car. You steer, I’ll push.” He tipped his head towards Mildred.

He was angry with her, that much was obvious, but Ellie wasn’t quite sure why. She shrugged and tried a small, apologetic smile. “I’m not sure it’s driveable.”

Tom made a gruff sound and unfolded his arms before he walked around the car. “Well, apart from your wing mirror coming off and a couple of scratches on the bumper, it seems fine—and driveable. Let’s get your heap of junk off my land, so I can get someone down here to fix the fence. Otherwise, I’m going to have an expensive herd of cattle wandering into Lambton and blocking the roads.”

“Tom, I—”

“Oh, you remember me now, do you?” he snapped. “Why were you pretending you didn’t before? I’ve met some crazy women in my time, but let me tell you, you surpass them all. Get in your car, get out of my field, and please don’t come back again.”

“Hey, I was just in an accident. You could be a little sympathetic,” Ellie protested. “Why are so cross with me?”

“Cross with you? What makes you think I’m cross with you?” he asked, his voice laden with sarcasm. “As it happens, I love sitting in bars on my own, nursing a pint for over an hour, wasting my time waiting for someone who doesn’t show up. Don’t worry about it, I’ve been stood up by better looking women than you.”

“Right, we were supposed to meet for a drink. But you can’t blame me for not turning up,” Ellie replied, her own anger rising. “You must know why I didn’t. I don’t like liars.”

“You’re calling me a liar! I’m not the kooky, untrustworthy one here. And, I *was* sympathetic. I picked you up from this wreck, remember, when you were acting all weird and pretending not to know me. I even let you sit in one of the private rooms and had our first aider check on you. Only it seems there’s nothing wrong with you at all, apart from being a complete fruit loop. When I took you to Pemberley, you behaved like you hadn’t seen it before, but you were there just couple of days ago. What is going on with you?” He crossed his arms over his chest with attitude. He definitely expected answers.

Ellie threw her hands up in the air. “I can’t explain it, but maybe someone else can.” She pointed down the road. “Who lives in the cottage there?”

Tom blinked, thrown by her sudden change of subject. “Ruby Reynolds lives there with her niece. Her family has been in service at Pemberley for generations. My father gave her the lifetime tenancy of it.”

“Okay, so same space, different building, different circumstances, not a retirement home. You’re alive, which is good, but you said you just took me to Pemberley?”

“You know I did,” he replied, exasperated. “Now, though, I’m thinking I should have taken you to a hospital or called the police.”

“I need to see Ruby Reynolds.” Ellie began walking in the direction of the cottage.

“Hey, what about your car? You can’t just leave it here.”

She peered over shoulder. “Yeah, I’ll get to that, but I need to see Ruby first.”

“Hey,” he shouted again, running after her. “Whoa. Hold on.” He grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her around to face him. “I don’t want you bothering Ruby.”

Ellie wrenched her arm away. “I need Ruby to tell me the story of Elizabeth Darcy and the carriage accident.”

“The carriage accident? What about it? I’ll tell you anything you want if you promise to get your ridiculous little car off my land, leave us all alone, and disappear forever.”

Ellie sighed. “If I’m right, there was an accident in Lambton. Elizabeth fell under the wheels of a carriage. She was then almost killed by a doctor who tried to give her

strychnine, but she knocked the bottle out of the doctor's hand, called for Mr Darcy, and he took her to Pemberley where she got the proper care. Am I right?"

Tom's brows rose. "I thought you weren't interested in history or happy ever afters?"

"I am now. I'm very interested."

"Okay. Well, that's pretty much the story. What else do you want to know?"

"What happened afterwards?"

"They got married and lived happily ever after." Tom stubbed a toe-capped boot into the dirt.

"And?" Ellie asked. "Some other issue or problem?"

"Not really. I don't know what else you want to know. The accident made Mr Darcy fiercely protective of Elizabeth. When she became pregnant with her first child, they fought over it. Concerned she was not strong enough to carry the baby to full term, he wanted her to drink a tea that was supposed to make women miscarry. She refused, insisted she couldn't kill "*what was born of their love*." In the end, the baby was healthy, and Elizabeth sailed through the whole experience. She went on to have seven more."

"Right, interesting, but it's not that," Ellie said. "There's something else. She didn't just fall under the carriage, get taken to Pemberley, recover, and marry him. Something else happened, didn't it? Something to do with a man called Wickham?"

"Yes, actually." Tom's eyes widened. "Her youngest sister ran away with a man named George Wickham. It was a huge scandal. Mr Darcy tracked them down and had to pay Wickham to marry the girl. In those days, having a sister living in sin would have ruined the reputations of all the siblings. Fitzwilliam couldn't marry Elizabeth until that was all sorted out."

"Yes, that's what I remembered from your book! 'My biggest regret,' that's what Elizabeth said about her sister's situation. She wished her sister had never been forced to marry George Wickham. He turned out to be cruel and Lydia had some sort of horrible end."

Tom's expression softened and he gave a self-conscious smile. "You read my book?"

"I did, though I'm now wishing I hadn't." Ellie couldn't help thinking that it somehow set all of these strange events into motion.

"Tell me exactly who you are and what the hell's going on?" Tom swiped his glasses from his face and began cleaning them on the hem of his untucked shirt.

Ellie caught a glimpse of a tanned, lean stomach and struggled not to stare, but forced herself to turn away. It was hardly the time to be gawping. She reminded herself he was married, but something about the man drew her to him like a magnet. His movements were unconscious, natural. He hadn't meant to show his torso off, he wasn't at all vain, and was totally unbothered about his appearance. He wasn't one of those groomed, moisturised, buffed-nail, two-hundred-pound shoe-wearing city she-men she was used to. When he replaced his glasses, he gazed at her steadily and her knees buckled slightly. It took all her strength to straighten them again and keep herself upright.

"All that interest in the portrait, sniffing around Ruby Reynolds. If you turn out to be an art dealer after all, I'll wring your pretty little neck," he said with an angry glare.

"My pretty neck?" Ellie couldn't help smiling. "I thought you'd been rejected by better looking women than me?"

"Whatever. You have precisely one hour to get your heap of junk off my land and get your prying nose out of my affairs. Go back to London." He stalked quickly away.

Ellie ran after him. "You're just cross about being stood up. Well, tough cookies! I don't go out with married men, and you're despicable for even asking me. You're also rude. I wouldn't have a drink with you if you were last man on earth."

"What?" Tom stopped and gaped at her. "You think I'm married. That's why you didn't show up?"

Ellie nodded.

"Well, I'm not. I'm divorced."

"Divorced?" Ellie stood stunned and suddenly feeling stupid.

"Yep, divorced for over a year now. It was a pretty messy affair, and I've still got the scars, literally." Tom pointed to his shoulder. "Got a nasty one here where she threw a stiletto at me." He gave her a small conciliatory smile and stepped closer, so they were no more than a few feet apart. "Sorry if I was arsy with you. Truthfully, I was disappointed when you didn't show up the other night. I really enjoyed our chat in the study. You're not like the other girls I've gone out with. You were real, funny, and a bit edgy. I liked it when you told me off for being a pompous twit. Now though . . . What's going on, Ellie? You're not the girl I met that day."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me. I might surprise you."

Ellie looked up at the sky, blew the fringe out of her eyes, and wondered what to say. She desperately needed help, Elizabeth desperately needed help, and who better to help them than a Mr Darcy?

“I need you to take me to Pemberley. The person you picked up from the accident and took there wasn’t me.”

Tom’s brow furrowed. “Who was it then? Do you have an identical twin or something?”

“Let’s just go, in your car. Once we’re at Pemberley, I’ll call someone to come and get mine. I know I sound crazy, but as soon as we get there and you see her, well, you won’t have any choice but to believe me.”

He folded his arms and considered for a while before giving a slow nod. “Okay.”

They walked over to his car and Ellie was unnerved and flustered when he held the door open for her. It was such a simple gesture, but how long had it been since someone had done that? The gesture was a touch of chivalry, something that was fast growing out of fashion.



The expensive Range Rover cruised along quietly while its driver was even more quiet. Ellie sat silent, frightened she might say the wrong thing and break the tentative peace they had negotiated between them. She stared rigidly out of the windscreen, but now and again felt Tom’s gaze on her. As they pulled up in front of a side entrance at Pemberley, she wiped her cheek with her hand. Maybe she had a smudge of dirt there—something certainly made him stare at her.

She jumped out before he could help her, and he showed her through the entrance and down a long hallway. He knocked on a door and waited until a voice told him to enter.

When they went into the room, Elizabeth sat on an ornate, antique sofa, sipping tea from a china cup and saucer, her little finger raised in a show of good breeding. Ellie was delighted to see her and laughed out loud, thinking how she seemed as if she belonged there. Though she was wearing the jeans and jumper Ellie had given her that morning, she still managed to look elegant, like she was starring in a photospread for *Country Life* Magazine captioned, “*Mrs Darcy Entertains in her Stunning Derbyshire Mansion.*”

Ellie crossed the room quickly and bent down to give her a quick hug. Elizabeth gave a small jump in surprise at being wrapped up in her arms but returned the greeting, her tea cup rattling on its saucer while she patted Ellie's back awkwardly with her free hand. "I'm so happy to see you're okay," Ellie said.

"I am perfectly well, quite unharmed, I assure you. This young man was kind enough to transport me here in his equipage and left me in the care of his excellent staff. Though I believe I did not give my proper thanks at the time, shaken as I was, by our collision with the fence. I even forgot to ask his name."

"It's Mr Darcy, Tom Darcy," Ellie informed her.

Elizabeth looked carefully at Tom, and then her head fell to the side while a small smile parted her lips. "Yes, of course it is. I see it now."

Though Elizabeth saw the connection and the resemblance, Ellie could tell Tom hadn't recognised Elizabeth at all. He was too busy staring at Ellie for an explanation.

He pointed at Elizabeth with a crazed glint in his eye. "She's not the person I brought here. I brought you here. It was you. I'm not going crazy."

"No, you're not. The person you brought here might have looked like me, but was actually Lizzy." Ellie gestured at Elizabeth, but Tom only appeared more confused.

Ellie took the teacup out of Elizabeth's hands and set it on a beautifully carved end table next to the sofa. She then pulled her up from the sofa by her hands. "We need to go your study, to the portrait."

He shook his head. "Not the portrait again. Why the fascination?"

"It'll explain everything. Come on, let's go."

"Must we?" Elizabeth protested. "I do hate to be parted from what was an exceptionally good cup of tea."

"We must," Ellie insisted, already tugging her out of the room into the hallway. "He can't see it. It's the clothes. I don't have a bonnet or nineteenth-century gown handy. He needs to see you next to the portrait."

Tom was behind them, following, but seemed reluctant. Ellie couldn't blame him, really, considering all she put him through. She was lucky he hadn't thrown them out the moment he saw Elizabeth. He pointed out the door to them when they reached it, and a moment later, all three of them stood on the rug in front of the fireplace inside the large study.

Ellie held out her hand in the direction of the painting, and Elizabeth's deep brown eyes rose to gaze at her own portrait. She jolted backwards, before her mouth fell open.

"Oh my," was all she could say. "That is terribly flattering. 'Tis really me?"

"I don't think it was done to flatter you. In fact, it's very realistic," Ellie said. "It's exactly like you." She glanced at Tom who was looking between the painting and Elizabeth, scrutinising both with narrowed eyes. "You see it, don't you? You must see it."

"Okay, so your friend here appears identical to Elizabeth Darcy, which is fascinating, but I don't get your point."

"Tom, she looks like Elizabeth Darcy, because she *is* Elizabeth Darcy."

"Bennet," Elizabeth corrected.

"Oh, sorry, Elizabeth Bennet. In her world, they're not married yet, but it is her. If you'd seen her for the first time, as I did, in Regency clothes, you wouldn't even be hesitating. She's from eighteen-thirteen. I swear. We swapped places. I became her and she became me, but now, for some reason, she can't go back."

Tom stood with his arms crossed over his chest while she spoke, but when she was finished, he unfolded them slowly while he moved towards his desk. He picked up a telephone handset and held it out towards them as if it were a weapon. "Now are you two going to leave quietly, or am I going to have to call the police and have you removed?"

Ellie swallowed hard. "Wait! We'll prove it to you. You're an expert on her life. Ask her something, anything, about Elizabeth Darcy."

"Bennet," Elizabeth corrected again, irritably this time.

"Fine." Tom crossed his arms over his chest again and frowned down at Elizabeth. "Where did you go to school?"

"I didn't go to school. I was educated at home."

"Ha," Tom cried in triumph. "You're wrong."

Elizabeth stepped towards him, her face serious with concentration. "Unless you refer to the disastrous se'enight I spent at Miss Hawthorne's school in Hastings. I had a disagreement with a master about the year of Henry VIII's death. When I refused to give into him on the matter, I was punished for my supposed disobedience by being locked in the scullery. I escaped through a window, but was caught on the grounds and sent home in disgrace. My father took charge of my lessons after that. He didn't seek to

return me there or send me elsewhere. I was right, you see, about Henry VIII, and he refused to pay for me to be taught by ‘fools’ who knew no better than a twelve-year-old girl.”

Tom nodded as his arms relaxed to his sides. “That’s exactly right, but it’s not in the book. How did you know?”

“Because I am, or was, that twelve-year-old girl. My temper has improved slightly, though my mother still decries my obstinacy.”

“Tell me something else, then,” Tom said. His eyes landed on the cross around Elizabeth’s neck where they remained. “If you’re Elizabeth Darcy—”

“Bennet,” Elizabeth cried, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“Okay, Bennet, whoever you claim to be. Tell me something I’ve always wondered about then. What was the ‘horrible document’ Mr Darcy gave you at Hunsford?”

Elizabeth smiled. “That is how Mr Darcy describes it? A ‘horrible document?’”

“Yes, I have his journals, and he talks about asking you to burn it. What was the horrible document?”

“He did give me something at Hunsford. That part is true, but he never asked me to burn it.” Elizabeth reached into a back pocket of her jeans, and produced Mr Darcy’s letter, holding it before him. “I believe what you refer to is this?”

Stunned Tom reached for it, but Elizabeth pulled away.

“Tis rather personal.”

“Lizzy, what does it matter? Everything from that letter is two hundred years in the past. Let him read it. It’s proof of who you are, and we do need his help.”

Elizabeth considered for a while before placing it into his hands. “Very well. You may read it, but on one condition.”

“Alright, what?” Tom asked her.

“That while you study it, I might be refreshed with another cup of your excellent tea.”

A Journal, Several Portraits, and a Bedchamber or Two

With a quick call on his mobile, Tom arranged for tea to be delivered to the study, and as soon as he pocketed his phone, his hand reached, palm up, for the neatly folded letter. Elizabeth's earlier cheekiness disappeared, she hesitated, and stared at her name written in a flowing script, running her thumb across the paper in a sort of caress.

"He'll return it when he's done," soothed Ellie, placing her hand on Elizabeth's back. "He just wants to see it." Ellie looked to Tom, who nodded.

"She's right, you know. I've wondered for years what Fitzwilliam meant about that 'horrible document.' I only want to read it and make a copy if you don't mind?" He spoke in a reassuring way, and as he spoke, the tension disappeared between Elizabeth's shoulders.

She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and with a swift motion, set the letter in his hand. "I suppose no harm could come from what you suggest, but I do wish for its return. I am in a fair way of knowing it by heart, though the memory is no substitute for the original."

Tom rolled his eyes. He was obviously still sceptical but at least willing to consider the possibility, and they did need his help. Lord knows they needed his help. The letter had to persuade him they told the truth because they had nothing else. Elizabeth's Regency clothes were packed away in a bag inside Mildred's boot, but how many people made replica clothing from that era these days? Those wouldn't do a thing to convince him. That letter held their best chance.

He unfolded the paper and his eyebrows furrowed while he walked around his desk, not paying attention to where he was going and tripping on the leg before he made it to the other side. When he sat, he placed the letter flat upon the surface then pulled a book from the shelf behind him.

"'Tis so strange." Elizabeth's voice held a tone of wonder while she continued to stare at the painting.

"What is?" asked Ellie.

"I can see the lady in the portrait is me, I am told she is me, but I have no memory of sitting for an artist. I do not remember ever being at Pemberley before today. 'Tis all quite disconcerting, you know. I have lived an entire life I do not remember." She let out a tiny giggle. "I could be considered fit for Bedlam by some."

Ellie peered over to Tom who was bent over the paper, engrossed in its contents. “Tom? Could I show Lizzy some of the house? It’d give us something to do while you study the letter.”

He lifted his head and blinked at her a few times as though he didn’t understand a word she said. “Oh, sure. Yeah, that’d be okay.” Before she could say thanks, his nose was buried again in the current object of his fascination.

They walked out of the room, and Ellie turned and followed the path she took on the tour while Elizabeth followed, peeking into rooms and studying the paintings they passed. They walked through three rooms without speaking a word. In fact, it wasn’t until she stood before a large portrait of a man in a red uniform, the nameplate reading, “Colonel Andrew Fitzwilliam,” that her voice startled Ellie. “Ah, Mr Darcy’s cousin. I met him in Hunsford when he stayed with his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. He was not so handsome as Mr Darcy, but very gentlemanlike.”

She turned to face Ellie with her head at a slight tilt. “After Mildred stopped in the field, you returned to my body in eighteen-thirteen, did you not? I must admit to being shocked at seeing the alteration of Pemberley within moments of your disappearance—one minute it was in shambles and the next not even a charred stone wall remained. I confess to being exceedingly curious as to what occurred.”

“I did return,” answered Ellie. “When I first woke up, I think you were back in your room at the inn. Your aunt was there.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “My Aunt Gardiner? She must have been beside herself with worry.”

“Yes, your Aunt Gardiner and the quack doctor Ruby told us about. I could hear Mr Darcy begging your uncle to bring you here, to Pemberley, and he would send for whatever treatment you needed. I still don’t know how I did it, because it was nearly impossible to move a muscle, but I knocked some medicine from the doctor’s hand and yelled as loud as I possibly could for Mr Darcy.” She didn’t mention the strychnine or the lead. Elizabeth would have to return to that time. What good would it do to freak her out over something she couldn’t avoid in the future?

“Then my uncle must have agreed to Mr Darcy’s request.”

“You’re right,” continued Ellie. “Your uncle did let Mr Darcy have his way, and as you already know, you made it through. You should ask Tom since he knows more of the particulars than I do.”

“I do not believe that is wise. Should I return, it would not be sensible to know too much. I will find it difficult enough to conceal all I have learned as it is. How I travelled in time is not precisely proper drawing room discourse. You cannot simply fit it in with the weather or the state of the roads.” She raised an eyebrow. “Do you not agree?”

They wandered further down the gallery until Elizabeth stopped before the portrait of Fitzwilliam Darcy. Should she tell Elizabeth about meeting him? When Elizabeth returned, she’d learn of her supposedly odd behaviour, so it might as well come from Ellie than be a complete surprise. “I met him, you know.”

“Who?” Elizabeth asked distractedly, her eyes tracing each feature of the image before her.

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Mr Darcy, your Mr Darcy. Who else could I mean?”

Elizabeth turned in Ellie’s direction. “He is not my Mr Darcy,” she insisted with a huff.

“Yes, he is. All you would have to do is say jump, and he would definitely do it. He might even kiss your feet if you were crazy enough to ask.”

She shook her head and turned to again stare at the painting. “I wish to say you exaggerate, but after recent revelations, I am not so certain anymore.”

“Do you at least like him more than when the two of you first met?” Ellie stepped forward to better see Elizabeth’s face. She wanted to know if she became nervous or awkward by the question. Maybe that would give her an idea of whether Elizabeth’s feelings had changed.

“Can a lady not have her secrets?” she asked mischievously. “After all, I do not enquire of your feelings for Greg or Tom Darcy.”

“No, she can’t have her secrets, and leave Greg out of this. He never cared for me the way Fitzwilliam Darcy cares for you. I mean, look at all the man has done. He is head-over-heels in love with you, and you still can’t say whether you like him any better? Come on, Lizzy! Really! He had you moved to Pemberley, he ensured your life was saved, and he would do anything for you.”

Elizabeth looked at Ellie. “My esteem for the gentleman rose merely by reading his letter as he did not require much to rise above my initial impression of him. But, if you must know, I am gratified by his constancy and touched by his depth of feeling. Does that satisfy you?” She turned and began to walk back towards the library, calling over

her shoulder, "Now, I am certain the tea has arrived by now. It will be cold if we do not return. I detest little more than cold tea."

Ellie sighed and followed her back the way they came. When they entered the study, Tom looked up from where he examined a book and the letter that lay beside it. "Amazing! The handwriting is identical to Fitzwilliam Darcy's journals."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes while she prepared the tea that awaited them when they entered. "Of course, it is. Why would I go to the trouble of keeping a letter written by the hand of another?" He appeared confused but instead of arguing, he became more distracted when he turned back to the paper. "Would you like some tea, Ellie?" she asked.

"I don't think so, but thanks. I could really use a glass of wine after the day we've had, but I can't ask when Tom thinks I'm certifiable." Ellie leaned against the table and watched Elizabeth's elegant movements for such a simple task. "I should tell you," she began apprehensively. "When I woke up a second time, your aunt asked if Mr Darcy could visit you."

"She allowed him in my sick room? While I wore my bedclothes?" Her voice was high and shocked. "How mortifying."

"Well, yes, but she did it because she was concerned for him. He'd been so worried that he hadn't slept unless the doctor made him. He stood outside the door for who knows how long . . ."

She shook her head. "Oh, dear. When I first met him, I never imagined he could be so caring. He seemed so proud, so cold."

"Yeah," said Ellie, "about as cold as a bonfire on Guy Fawkes Night."

"Well, he never spoke to me. He always stared and behaved in such a haughty manner. What other conclusion should I have made?"

"I don't know how he acted when you met him, but I can tell you that when he entered the room, he was really nervous. I tried to speak like you but nothing came out right at all. I felt so bad for him that I said he was tolerable."

Elizabeth spluttered and choked on her first sip of tea. "You used the word tolerable?" she squeaked, picking up a napkin from the tray and dabbing her chin.

"I did. He seemed shocked, and I immediately knew I screwed up."

"You could not have known," said Elizabeth. "I hope he was not too put out."

“The two of you still married, so I doubt it. Besides, he thought I spoke oddly from the laudanum and told the doctor to give me less of it.”

Elizabeth giggled. “Forgive me. I can only imagine how you must have sounded.”

“He must have proposed to you? At Hunsford?” asked Tom in a loud voice, startling them. “He mentioned an incident at Hunsford frequently in his journals but never said what happened. Instead, he called it ‘that day.’ Even in this letter, he never says, but it has been the only possibility for his meaning I could think of. Elizabeth never mentioned it directly in her letters either. Instead, she said he needed to think—”

“Of the past as its remembrance gives him pleasure?” finished Elizabeth.

“Yes, that’s it exactly.” His mouth didn’t close at the end of his statement but remained open while he gaped at her. “My God, it can’t be. You being here, in this time, is impossible. Time travel isn’t possible.”

“I would not have believed so either had I not awakened in this strange time and place. I do not understand so much, and while I was fascinated in the beginning, I now long for home. I miss my family—even silly, headstrong Lydia.” Elizabeth glanced up to the portrait of herself; and gave a long exhale, before she looked again at Tom. “Please, can you help us?”

He made an extremely strange sound, almost a cross between an incredulous laugh and a bark. “I haven’t the foggiest idea how to send someone back in time. You need Stephen Hawking or Albert Einstein—of course, you’d have to travel in time to consult *him* on the matter.” He shook his head as he stood and began to pace back and forth in front of his desk. “Even H.G. Wells would be a better choice than me. I’m just a simple historian with a near-obsessive fascination for my family’s history. I don’t know. I can’t solve this!”

Ellie jumped forward and grabbed him by the arms, stopping him in his tracks. “We don’t need a brilliant scientist. I think we need to fix Elizabeth’s biggest regret for her to go back.” She glanced to Elizabeth, hoping she would help convince him, but she just sat there watching them as though they were a show on the television. “Well? Don’t you agree?”

“Forgive me, Ellie,” she replied, placing her teacup upon the saucer. “I have felt such a fish out of water since my arrival. I must confess to enjoying your Mr Darcy’s shock. We do indeed require your assistance and not whoever you mentioned earlier, though I am certain they are quite knowledgeable in their own right. I must confess that

I am at a loss in regards to my biggest regret. 'Tis quite unlike me to have regrets, but if you say I did, then I must have."

Ellie's arms dropped to her side. She hated shocking her, but if they were going to fix this, then Elizabeth had to know. "While you visited Derbyshire with your aunt and uncle, Lydia eloped with George Wickham."

Elizabeth closed her eyes in horror. "Oh! That stupid, stupid girl. I tried to warn my father, but he would not heed my advice. I knew something of this nature would happen one day, though I do not understand why it is my regret? She should be the one to shoulder the grief of such a mistake."

"Because Mr Darcy was so in love with you, he paid Wickham to marry your sister," explained Tom. "I don't have an exact sum, but it's believed to be nearly one year's income."

"Ten thousand pounds!" Elizabeth's hand flew to her chest. "He was rumoured to have ten thousand pounds per annum."

"But your biggest regret wasn't the money," continued Tom. "Wickham had a cruel streak no one realised and three years later, he . . ." He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "Well, he beat her to death."

A loud swallow came from Elizabeth while she stared at them, trying to come to grips with what she'd heard. "I felt responsible. I may not have arranged the marriage, but I would have felt responsible. Mr Darcy would not have paid for them to wed if it was not for me." She took a deep breath as though she was trying to hold back tears and looked at Ellie. "You believe preventing Lydia's marriage would return me home."

"It's all I can think of," said Ellie, taking her hand. "What do you think?"

Elizabeth straightened and stood tall. "We can only make the attempt. 'Tis all we have."

Hand in hand, they turned to face Tom. "So, will you help us?" Ellie searched his eyes for something, anything that would mean he truly believed them.

"I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do." His shoulders slumped. "How could I possibly fix Lydia's situation? I live two hundred years after all of that happened. I cannot go back to eighteen-thirteen."

"No, but I can." Ellie drew herself up and stood straighter than she was a moment ago. "I know it sounds insane, but that's how this entire mess started. I was reading that book of letters you gave me when I fell asleep. Next thing I knew, I woke up in

Elizabeth's body on the morning she was supposed to tour Pemberley. It was me, not Lizzy, who ran in front of that carriage—I was trying to wake myself up because I thought all of it was a bizarre dream." The words poured from her mouth in a big rush and without ceasing. "When I first came back, you didn't exist because Lizzy died. You only returned after the second time I travelled back."

He flinched a little when she said how he hadn't existed, but his eyes never left hers. "Then how do you do it? How do you go to eighteen-thirteen? Do you have some strange machine or do you have to be in a specific place?" A strange glint she couldn't identify appeared in his eyes. "You don't own a DeLorean do you?" One side of his lip curved upwards, and she punched him in the arm.

He rubbed the spot she hit. "Hey, that hurt."

"Then don't make fun of us," said Ellie.

"I'm sorry. This is just so unreal." He cleared his throat and straightened. "So, exactly how do you travel to eighteen-thirteen?"

"Well, I don't know *exactly*. The sky turns sort of a weird purple-grey and sparks shoot across the sky, so we know when it's coming. Then, I am Elizabeth there while she is me here if that makes any sense at all. So far, it's happened two times, but I did seem to stay for a while the last time because I woke up twice after the carriage accident."

"How am I supposed to help you then?" he asked with an adorable frown. "It all seems impossible when you're the only one going back and forth."

Elizabeth stepped between them. "I believe Ellie to be correct. We require every detail of my youngest sister's elopement. We must prevent her marriage to Mr Wickham and hope the change returns me home."

"Will you help us?" asked Ellie again while she crossed her fingers behind her back. He had to say yes!

He looked at Elizabeth and then at Ellie where his eyes remained for at least a minute or two. "Yes, I will do what I can—not that I know what that is." He ran a hand through his hair.

Ellie, without thinking, threw her arms around his neck and pulled herself tight to him. "Thank you!" His body stiffened, and she suddenly felt awkward and stepped back. "Yes, well . . ."

"We'll need caffeine to keep us going." He reached for his phone and pressed a button. "Would you like some coffee?"

Ellie clasped her hands. "I love coffee, but would it be too much to ask for a glass of wine? It's been a long day." His dimples appeared and made her heart thump madly against her chest. How could a simple smile reduce her to mush?

"Never mind the caffeine, I think wine sounds perfect."

The sound of a throat clearing made them turn to Elizabeth, who wore a wide-eyed innocent expression. "Please do not forget my presence. I know behaviour between men and women is quite different in this day and age, but I am unaccustomed to such free expressions of affection." Tom's cheeks became a brilliant red and had to have matched her own, which burned.

"While I am eager to be home," continued Elizabeth, "I am also greatly fatigued and will not be of much aid unless I rest. I hope I do not ask too much, but might you have a bedchamber where I could retire?"

Tom started and felt around on the desk. "I am certain I can find the perfect room for you." He patted his pockets front and back. "We can fetch your bags from the car later or perhaps I should just have one of the farmhands pull your car from the field with the tractor?" He abandoned his search for whatever, grabbed his mobile, and made a call to arrange for Mildred to be brought to Pemberley. After he hit end, he led them through a maze of hallways Ellie hadn't seen on the tour. Eventually, they reached a door that Tom opened to reveal a huge bedroom. An enormous bed stood to one side with a large, square canopy attached to the ceiling and long, thick bed curtains.

"I believe it only fitting this room be yours, Mrs Darcy."

"My name is not Mrs Darcy. I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet." She stepped inside and turned in a circle with an amazed expression. "I do not understand the significance. Why should this be my bedchamber?"

Tom leaned against the door frame with a cheeky grin. "This is the room you shared with Fitzwilliam Darcy during your entire marriage. I thought you might prefer it to the others."

Her face became as red as Mildred. "'Tis not appropriate to discuss such matters. How do you? Never mind, I do not wish to know." She hurried into the hall. "Do you have another bedchamber I might use?"

"Lizzy," called Ellie, "there's no reason you can't sleep in that room. It's yours. You've already slept there."

She shook her head furiously. "Tis not mine yet. I have not lived that part of my life, and I do not feel I should reside there until I have. Besides, people do not discuss such matters. I do not discuss your sleeping arrangements with men."

"I haven't slept with any men since you've known me," exclaimed Ellie, shocked.

"But that does not mean you have never . . . I do not discuss such things because it is just not done." Elizabeth turned to Tom. "Is there not a simple guest suite I could use? A house this size must have a modest guest room."

"Those are all a part of the tour," explained Tom. "The family wing has been kept private, and because of the history, we've kept these rooms decorated similarly for the last two hundred years. I suppose a little more of that superstition, like how we don't move your portrait." He motioned down the hall with a slight jerk of his head. "Perhaps the mistress' suite? According to the journals and your letters, you never spent one night in there."

Elizabeth studied him almost like she was attempting to see if he was lying. "Very well, I suppose I will use the mistress' suite."

"Don't look too put out about it." Ellie grabbed her arm, and led her after Tom to the next door. "I'm sure it is an amazing room. Besides, Tom could always make us walk to the inn."

"You know very well he would not," protested Elizabeth. "He is a Darcy man, which likely means he is too noble for his own good." She smothered a yawn with her hand and gazed longingly at the large four poster bed. "I thank you for your hospitality, sir."

"Do you need anything else?" He scratched the back of his head. "I could get you a t-shirt to sleep in, but I am afraid I don't have much for a lady. All of the clothing from your time is preserved, and I don't dare open the boxes."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but I am so exhausted, I might just sleep in these clothes."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Sweet dreams then."

When they left Elizabeth, Ellie followed Tom to the kitchen where he poured each of them a glass of wine. He took a large swallow, looked at his wine, and then his eyes met hers. "I know I said I'd help you and Elizabeth, but I want something in return."

Ellie startled and clutched her glass a little tighter. "What is that?"

“I know you told me only part of the story. I want to know exactly how you and Elizabeth got into this mess—and everything you’ve done since you found her in twenty-seventeen.” His serious expression cracked, a brilliant smile overtook his features, and his dimples peeked from his cheeks. Her knees wobbled, but she remained standing.

She opened her mouth once, twice, but nothing came out. When had she become such a daft cow?

Fitzwilliam's Folly

Ellie didn't open her eyes, but shifted and stretched, settling into that snug nook where she was all warm and cosy. She rubbed her cheek against the soft fabric of her pillow while she inhaled the pleasant woodsy smell. What washing liquid did they use on their sheets? She really needed to get some, but she'd spend all day in bed if it smelled like this.

She froze. Wait a minute, when had Tom shown her to a room?

After he poured that first glass of wine, he took the bottle, and led her back to the library where they sat on a chunky couch near the large, marble-trimmed fireplace. Once they drank a second glass, things became a bit fuzzy. They talked rather late. She remembered that. She also remembered Tom fetching another bottle of wine, but nothing about a bedroom jogged her memory.

Her pillow rose and fell with a groan. She gasped and sat up like a shot. "Oh, crap!" she muttered, with the heel of her hand on her forehead. Rising that fast was a bad idea. She swallowed hard and when the pounding in her head stopped, she opened her eyes.

Tom lay there on the sofa, breathing evenly, his mouth slightly opened, and sleeping like the dead. Even all rumpled with a hint of a beard peeking from his chin, he still drew her attention like no one else. He had such thick, dark curls. They really were lovely. A part of her wanted to reach over and run her fingers through them, but then he might wake up and she'd be embarrassed.

She needed to stop ogling him, so she dropped her head to the back of the couch while she tried to wake up fully. She licked her lips and her teeth. Ewww! She hadn't brushed them after all that wine and her mouth felt like she'd been sucking on a woollen jumper. Water would be heavenly, but she'd have to find a way to get up without waking him. She peered around her, but before she could figure out the easiest way of moving without disturbing him, the loud ring of her mobile phone sent her scrambling for her handbag.

Tom sat straight up. "Wha?"

Ellie pressed the screen and put the phone to her ear. "Where have you been? I've called and called. I've been to your flat. *I even called Greg.*"

"Theresa?" Why had she asked? Who else would call and tell her off without even saying hello?

“Well, duh! Who else would it be? Where the hell are you?”

Tom swung his legs to the floor and rubbed his eyes. It was probably good that Theresa called. She covered her mouth with her hand and blew into it, grimacing when the air hit her nose. Her breath was about as fresh as a smelly sock. What if he’d tried to kiss her?

“Hellooo? Ellie! Will you answer me? I know you’re there. I can hear you breathing.”

“You might want to answer her,” said Tom with a deep chuckle.

She tore her eyes from his, so she could speak without making an idiot of herself. “I’m in Derbyshire.”

“Why would you go back? Oh, no. You didn’t go back for that wanker you said was handsome, did you?”

“Not exactly.” Okay, so her answer was a little uncertain, but it wasn’t like she could tell Theresa the truth.

Mr Handsome stood and left the room while Ellie shamelessly ogled his bum. Hopefully, he didn’t hear that last bit Theresa said!

“Not exactly? Ellie! You just got rid of one prick. You can’t get involved with another.”

“He’s not what I thought at first. He’s a good guy, but I misunderstood what someone said and got it all wrong. Besides, it’s not why I came up here. I had to fix something, but I can’t talk about that right now.”

“What about a job? Ellie, you’re supposed to be looking for one, remember?”

“Of course, I remember,” she huffed, “but something came up. Something I can’t put off.”

“I hope he’s worth it, because if he’s not, I’ll cut his balls off.” Theresa’s low tone sounded more threatening than normal and Ellie pulled the phone from her ear and looked at it. “Ellie?”

“It’s not like that, really. I swear, there’s a lot more going on than some handsome guy.” Tom returned with two cups that resembled coffee mugs, and Ellie immediately perked up. “I can’t talk about it right now. You’ll have to trust me. I gotta go. I’ll call you. I promise.”

“Ellie?”

"I'll call you," she repeated. "Bye." When she hung up, she took the cup Tom offered, the delicious scent of espresso and steamed milk flooding her senses and waking her just a little more. After taking a sip, she looked up to find a devilish grin on his face that made her toes curl.

"So, you think I'm handsome."

She hid her mouth behind her coffee. "What makes you think I was talking about you?"

"You don't have to admit it if you don't want to, but I heard you," he sang. "You think I'm handsome."

She set her coffee on the floor, stood up, and took a swing to hit him in the arm, but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her into his lap. His fingers dug into her ribs and she couldn't help but laugh so loud it echoed around the room.

He paused for a moment. "Do you admit you said it?"

"No." She giggled just before he began tickling her again. "Please! I can't breathe!"

They were both laughing when his hand stopped its torture and rested upon her waist right where her t-shirt had lifted to expose her bare midriff. With a gasp, she swallowed while their eyes didn't move one millimetre from the other's. Her breathing quickened. His warm palm made her insides quiver and his chin dipped closer and closer. Oh, God! Her breath! Before his incredibly soft-looking lips touched hers, she turned into his neck and hugged him tight.

"Ellie?" One of his hands rubbed up her back, but she didn't lift her face.

"I didn't brush my teeth after all that wine last night. My breath this morning is dreadful. The coffee can't have helped either. I want to, but I just can't."

His shoulders and chest shook. "Mine probably isn't any better, you know. My teeth haven't seen a toothbrush or toothpaste since yesterday morning." As she lifted her head, his lips brushed her temple. "I wouldn't have held your less than stellar breath against you."

"How gallant of you."

Before he could say another word, the door opened and Elizabeth entered, dressed in the gown she'd worn when Ellie first laid eyes upon her. She took one look at the two of them, turned multiple shades of red, and turned to face the other direction. "If you are going to behave in such an improper fashion, it would be more prudent to lock the door. Otherwise, you do not know who might interrupt."

Ellie used Tom's broad shoulders to stand. "We're not behaving improperly. We were talking."

Elizabeth's eyebrow lifted. "In my time, your placement on his lap would be scandalous. You could be forced to wed."

"Speaking of being forced to wed," interrupted Tom, "you wanted to learn about Lydia's elopement."

Ellie grabbed her coffee. "We do. Whatever you know, we need you to tell us."

He led them into the study where he retrieved a few books and some papers from a cabinet behind his desk. "These are both Fitzwilliam's and Elizabeth's journals from that time. Elizabeth's don't have much since she was still weak and recovering from the carriage accident. She does mention it after her recovery and what her husband went through to bring the marriage about. Fitzwilliam thoroughly detailed his search and included where he found them, so his will be more helpful."

The pages of Fitzwilliam's journal were yellowed and fragile, so Ellie turned them carefully, watching dates. When she reached April of eighteen-thirteen, there was a large gap of time between entries—he hadn't written again until June. "What happened?" she asked, frowning. He didn't write anything for almost two months."

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder and paled. "I am afraid the last entry is the morning he proposed to me."

Tom's eyebrows rose on his forehead. "If you don't mind telling me, why did you refuse him?"

"Oh, it was a dreadful declaration," she explained. "He listed every consideration that prevented him from proposing marriage in the past, including the situation of my family, the behaviour of my mother and sisters and sometimes my father. He thought his overcoming those faults spoke in his favour, I suppose. I had also discovered his role in separating my sister Jane from Mr Bingley. I could not marry the man responsible for the disappointed hopes of my favourite sister." She gave a decisive bob of her head. "I told him my opinion of him and said he was the last man on Earth I could be prevailed upon to marry. Much of it I now regret. I owe him an apology . . . if I ever see him again."

"You will," said Ellie. "We'll get you back. I promise."

"I appreciate your attempts to put me at ease." Elizabeth glanced at the portrait. "However, I would prefer to hear the truth of the matter. I will not pretend my situation

is easily solved, though I believe some of Tom's excellent tea would do wonders for my nerves."

Tom took the journal and flipped to August. "Here are the entries pertaining to Elizabeth's accident and Lydia's elopement. While you read through those, I'll call down to the kitchen."

Ellie read the three entries before she found one that provided the information she was looking for.

August 15th 1813

My visit to Mrs Younge today finally bore fruit. I am unsure of what I said that convinced her to give me Wickham's direction, yet she provided it without much inducement. Without delay, I hastened to the seedy boarding house in Saffron Hill where he and Miss Lydia resided together in the most dissolute of circumstances. She refused to leave him, but Wickham was willing to be induced in much the same manner as he always was.

We stepped outside while Miss Lydia dressed and discussed what he would require to wed the girl. Of course, he never had any intention of marrying her until money was mentioned. The small amount of pin money she possessed helped their passage to London and he was not averse to her sharing his bed, but he never intended for her to be more than a diversion. I wanted to beat the smug expression from his face when we agreed to a sum, but I confess, I would have paid infinitely more to ensure Elizabeth's happiness.

"Saffron Hill?" Ellie sighed and handed the book to Elizabeth, who began reading the entry while Tom set down his mobile and unrolled a map.

"I've done some research on that area, tracing property and historical records where I could. In eighteen-thirteen, the two properties marked with blue ticks were inns, which is probably what he meant when he said 'boarding house.'"

"I have other information, but I doubt it's useful. When Elizabeth's father died and Longbourn became the property of a Mr William Collins, Elizabeth kept Mr Bennet's journals and papers. I have the direction to the house where Lydia resided with a Colonel Forster and his wife in Brighton as well as a list of inns where they stayed on

their trip to London. Mr Bennet noted them as he found them. I have no idea why. He was quite thorough, however, and the information could help.”

Elizabeth picked up the worn book Tom placed in front of them. “Poor, stupid Lydia. My father never disciplined her as he ought, but he appears to have been diligent when it came to her retrieval. He did enjoy books and study. I imagine he approached this much like a problem to be solved.”

After a quick knock, the door opened and an older woman brought in a tray with tea, a cafetière, and breakfast food, and placed it on a table. “You haven’t eaten, Tom, and your friends haven’t either. Good hosts don’t starve their guests.” She glanced at the mess of old books and the map sprawled across the desk. “You’re not pouring over Lydia Bennet’s elopement again, are you?”

He grinned and placed an arm around her. “Millie, I’d like you to meet Ellie and well, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth curtsied. “’Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Millie’s eyes shifted between the portrait and Elizabeth, then widened for a fraction of a second. “Oh, Tom.” She gave a giggle. “The tourists will enjoy her, my dear. The likeness is remarkable.”

A small lift appeared to one side of Elizabeth’s lips. “If you will excuse me, I should prepare my tea before it goes cold.”

“I should help her,” muttered Ellie. “It was good to meet you.”

As she followed Elizabeth, Millie whispered, “No young lady will date you if you show them your obsession. I know it’s been a few years, but surely you know how to impress a girl—dinner, flowers, walks in the garden.”

“Yes, well, thank you, Millie. I’ll call down if I need anything else.”

“What was that little smile about?” asked Ellie, pouring more coffee.

“Her assumption. I admit the truth to be fantastical, but she never suspected the reason I am actually here. ’Tis amusing.”

Once Elizabeth made her tea, she placed two pieces of toast and two slices of bacon on a plate, and sat in the nearest chair. Tom scratched his head when he appeared beside her, scanned the tray, refilled his mug, and piled his plate with toast and the remaining bacon.

Ellie stared at him. Did he really just take the last of the bacon? “Hello! Bacon doesn’t grow on trees. I’d like some, too.”

Absentmindedly, he looked at her and her empty plate. “Sorry. You can have what you want. I promise I won’t bite as long as you don’t flap it about in my face like you did the Gardiners.”

Those swoon-worthy dimples appeared, and she rolled her eyes, taking some of the bacon from his plate as well as a couple pieces of toast. She bit her lip to keep from smiling at his silliness but hip bumped him before she took the seat across from Elizabeth.

He sat in the chair next to her. “Any theories on how to return Elizabeth?”

Ellie blew out a heavy exhale. “I wish I had some control over any of it. Everything has been so random. Maybe if I had the book you gave me of Lizzy’s letters, I could try reading it again and hope it works like the first time, but I don’t have it. It disappeared after Lizzy was hit by the post coach.”

“I imagine we shall be forced to wait until the sky changes as it did yesterday,” said Elizabeth, glancing out the closest window. “I will say that whatever has caused this has been quite unaccommodating. I am rather put out at the capricious nature of it all.”

Tom and Ellie both paused what they were doing and watched her. With what she said, one might think she would appear upset or even angry, but she sipped her tea and gazed at the roses in the garden until she noticed their looks. “Why do you stare at me so?”

Ellie finished her coffee and scooted out of her chair. “Tom, is there a loo close by? I’d like to change and brush my teeth.”

He pointed to a doorway Ellie hadn’t used before. “Since this wing is still part of the tour, you go into the old servants’ corridor and when it turns left, you’ll find the door ahead of you.”

She grabbed the rucksack they’d brought in from Mildred last night, and hurried to the water closet. She brushed her teeth and changed into the other outfit she’d brought. If she’d known she was going to see Tom, she would’ve brought something smarter, but it was too late now. When she rummaged around the bottom of the bag for her brush, her fingers bumped something hard—something she hadn’t packed.

Carefully her hand gripped it and pulled the mysterious object from her belongings while she stared at the cover in disbelief. The book? Had it magically appeared in her bag after her last trip to eighteen-thirteen? She ran the brush through her hair as fast as

she could, shoved it in her rucksack, and ran to the study. When she burst through the door, both Tom and Elizabeth startled.

“Look what I found!” she exclaimed, holding the book of Lizzy’s letters in front of her.

He tilted his head with a confused expression. “Is that?”

She nodded her head while she tossed her bag into the corner. “It was gone when I woke up that morning at the inn. I had it on the bed with me when I fell asleep, and I swear it wasn’t there when I packed my things. That isn’t even the same rucksack I used before. I never unpacked the other after finding Lizzy in my flat, so I used another when we hurried to leave London yesterday.”

Elizabeth took the book and turned it over in her hands. “But what does it mean?”

“It must’ve found its way back after the timeline changed,” said Tom doubtfully. “It sounds strange, but it’s the only thing I can think of.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and watched her over his glasses. “I’ve also wondered about something you told me last night.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, you said you thought you saw Elizabeth’s ghost.”

“I am still very much alive, thank you,” interjected Elizabeth. “I have no intention of haunting anything for a long time yet.”

“He means just before I travelled back and you appeared in twenty-seventeen. He wanted to know every detail of what happened, so we discussed it over wine last night.” When she turned to Tom, his eyebrows were raised. “I saw her outside the gates, near the road.”

“Will you show me?” requested Tom.

Elizabeth returned the book to Ellie. “If you do not object, I would prefer to remain. I want to be certain we have not missed any detail that might be of aid in locating Lydia.”

“I thought you preferred not to know too much.”

“I will restrict myself to the research Tom has offered. If we manage to save my sister, the details will change, will they not? Nothing will be precisely as it was.”

“She has a point,” said Tom. “What she’s reading is likely to be different if you can prevent Lydia and Wickham’s marriage.”

“Okay, but only what is on the table.” Ellie’s voice sounded horridly like a parent’s.

Tom grabbed her hand and tugged. "I'm sure she'll be okay for a half-hour or so. We won't be long. I promise."

Ellie looked between them, but couldn't resist following Tom when he led her out the door. Before she knew it, they passed through the gates where she lifted her arm and pointed. "There. I saw her right between those trees."

Her heart did a flip when he chuckled. It was a wonderful sound—rich and low. "Come with me." He pulled her by the hand through the trees to a large clearing. A stream cut through the lush, green grass that sloped downward where a small stone bridge was nestled before a wooded hill. The path wound from the bridge up to a folly set picturesquely in the trees.

"Fitzwilliam built it in honour of their marriage. Elizabeth adored this part of Pemberley—she mentions it often in her letters. They had picnics here and played with their children along the banks of the stream. When you said you saw Elizabeth near the front gates, I knew it must've been close."

They climbed to the folly and walked around. Near the door was an inscription:

*In honour of the marriage of Fitzwilliam Darcy to Elizabeth Bennet,
14 October 1813.*

*I was and am yours, freely and entirely to obey, to honour, love and fly with you,
when, where, and how, yourself might and may determine.**

Ellie turned to Tom, but before she could speak, hail began to pound the ground all around them and Tom practically dislocated her shoulder yanking her into the folly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she responded. She stepped to the door and leaned to better see the sky, which now was that same strange purple-grey. Several sparks shot through the clouds while she called him over, "Tom, come see."

His face was the picture of confusion when he noticed the shooting stars. "How's the sky dark enough for a meteor shower?"

She shook her head. "It's happening again. I don't know why, but the weather becomes worse each time." She looked over her shoulder. "We need to return to the house. I have to find Lizzy."

"We can't, not in this hail!"

“We have to,” she insisted. Before he could tell her no, she took off through the stinging pellets of ice and down the trail. Soon heavy footfalls followed close behind, thudding along the dirt path. The trees sheltered them most of the way down, but they were soon pelted again in the clearing. By the time Tom grasped her hand and led her down a different trail, the hail had given way to a driving rain and the path was flooding, becoming one enormous puddle.

Their steps created splashes as they ran until something snagged Ellie’s foot. The last thing she knew, she was falling face first into the mud, but she never hit the ground.

**From a love letter from Lord Byron to Lady Caroline Lamb*

An Evening in Dear Company

With a heaving gasp, Ellie jerked upright, fully expecting to land face first in the mud, but instead, a searing pain radiated through her chest and the wet muck never happened. She slowly opened her eyes and looked around the room, breathing in heavy pants.

“Lizzy?”

“Huh?”

She turned to find Mrs Gardiner moving to sit on the edge of the bed. Lizzy’s aunt brushed the curls away from Ellie’s face and smoothed the nightgown on her arms. “Finally, you are awake! The longer you slept the more worried I became, and you slept for so long.”

“How long?” asked Ellie, her voice again hoarse.

Mrs Gardiner peered at the clock on the mantel and back. “Close to one and twenty hours. Mr Newnham insisted you merely required the rest, but you would not rouse, no matter how we tried.”

“You mean I haven’t been awake since Mr Darcy’s visit?” Why ask such a silly question, of course she hadn’t been awake. Elizabeth was in twenty-seventeen with her and Tom. If neither of them were in eighteen-thirteen, Elizabeth’s body must have just waited for one of them to return? If so, what would happen if Elizabeth couldn’t return?

“No, but the gentleman thought of you a great deal while you slept, my dear.” She motioned to a side table where several clusters of flowers sat in delicate porcelain vases. “I believe he plundered an obliging field as well as his own hothouse.”

Before she could respond, the doctor approached the opposite side of the bed. “Do not think I have forgotten your dislike for the Willow Bark tea, but you will feel much better for drinking it. I do promise you.” She took the cup he handed her and downed the nasty stuff while he looked on. “Very good. Are you in any pain today? I hope it has diminished some since you were last awake.”

“I still ache a lot, and my ribs still really hurt here.” She pointed to one side just under her breast. “But it is better.”

“Capital,” he exclaimed. “I am glad to hear it.”

Now that she had a moment, she glanced around the bed. The last thing she remembered, she was running through the rain with Tom and she fell. Now, she was

sitting in bed—and in Elizabeth’s body. She must have jolted up as though she was waking from a nightmare, only this was the nightmare because she couldn’t return Elizabeth. No matter what she did, it didn’t work.

What had happened just before she returned last time? Mr Darcy had a visitor. She couldn’t remember his name to save her life, but he had news of Mr Wickham. Did Mr Darcy meet with him?

“Mrs Gardiner?”

Elizabeth’s aunt looked up, surprised. “Mrs Gardiner? You have never addressed me as such. Are you certain you are well?”

“I’m sorry,” Ellie responded. “I must be fuzzy-headed from sleeping for so long.” She slowly relaxed into the pillows Mrs Gardiner arranged behind her back. Hopefully, easing back would also keep her ribs from hurting like they did when she woke up.

“Fuzzy-headed?” Mrs Gardiner’s lips curved while she tucked the quilt around Ellie’s legs. “I suppose that is one way to describe that state of mind when one first wakes, though quite original.”

In some ways, what occurred next was similar to the last time she woke in Elizabeth’s time. Elizabeth’s aunt ensured she had broth and tea before insisting she rest for a time. Ellie protested she didn’t need to take a nap, but Mrs Gardiner didn’t listen.

She woke again when the room had dimmed considerably from earlier. When she scanned her surroundings, Mr Newnham rushed over. “Ah, you are awake again. I have told your aunt she should not fret, but I fear she does so regardless.” He handed her another dose of Willow Bark and rubbed his hands together happily when she drank it as quickly as she could. “Your aunt and uncle are at dinner with Mr Darcy and his guests. We spoke of you going down to be in company for a short time two days ago. Would you still care for such an outing?”

Ellie pushed herself to sit up, ignoring the pain in her joints and especially her chest. “Yes, I really, really would.” She began to push the covers off and shift her legs to the edge of the mattress, but Mr Newnham smiled and put a hand to her shoulder.

“Not so hasty if you please, miss,” he said. “Hetty shall return in a moment. She can help you dress while I have enough footmen assembled to carry the chaise to the drawing room.” He took a pocket watch from his coat, opened it, and nodded while he closed the lid. “You should be down by the time the ladies withdraw from dinner. Your

aunt should be prodigiously shocked, though I shall particularly enjoy Mr Darcy's expression when he sees you."

While he bustled around a small table of vials and cups, she sank into the pillows behind her. If Mr Darcy was still here, then did he not go after Wickham and Lydia? She withheld a groan. He had to save Lydia or they'd never get Elizabeth back. She began to tap her fingers on her leg. How long would this Hetty take, anyways?

A young maid entered and Mr Newnham glanced up from his work. "Ah, Hetty, I am glad to see you have returned. If you could aid Miss Bennet in putting on her best gown, she shall sit for a short time in company tonight." At the maid's wide eyes, he peered over his spectacles. "If she becomes too bored within the confines of this room, she might just declare mutiny against my orders to rest, though I trust she will alert us should she become too fatigued."

His gaze turned to Ellie, who nodded. Anything to get Elizabeth back. She'd definitely agree to anything.

Mr Newnham clapped his hands together. "I shall assemble some footmen outside the main door there." He pointed to the door where Mr Darcy entered for his visit. "Please notify us when you have her prepared." Hetty curtsied when he strode past her to depart.

Unlike the last time Ellie dressed in Elizabeth's clothes, the maid didn't make her wear stays. "It would be too taxing on your poor ribs," she said. Ellie had to admit, though, the lack of that evil bra made everything much more comfortable. The entire process of preparing made her short of breath, but she was able to regain her breathing while the maid styled her hair.

When she was ready, Hetty peeked out the door, and Mr Newnham returned and carried her to the chaise. The maid tucked quilts and blankets around her. Her foot had still been too swollen for a house slipper, so Hetty took a lot of time making sure it was covered. "It would not do for the gentlemen to see your feet or ankles."

It took everything Ellie had not to burst into peals of laughter. What was so bloody sexy about ankles or toes? She never did get those stories about foot fetishes that, no doubt, everyone heard. I mean feet were for standing, sometimes they smelled odd, and nothing about them screamed sex. Regency men were just strange!

When Hetty claimed she was settled, Mr Newnham fetched six rather tall, identically dressed men from the corridor, and then, stood behind them, giving orders and instructions.

“Now, Miss Bennet,” he said to her. “Please keep very still so you do not take a fall. If moving you becomes too painful, you must inform me so we can return you to this bedchamber.” He then raised his voice. “Keep her as steady as you can. We cannot afford to jostle her needlessly so please walk slowly.”

A moment later, she bit her lip while she was lifted. If only she could tell Theresa! The two of them could drink and giggle for hours over this. Of course, the men wore too many clothes compared to what she’d imagined and there wasn’t an extra to fan her with a large palm frond either. She choked back a giggle and Mr Newnham gave her a suspicious glance. She definitely needed to control herself or he’d have her brought straight back to bed.

To take her mind off the footmen, Ellie began watching their path and the art they passed, recognising a little from when they brought Elizabeth to the master’s and mistress’ suites. Mr Darcy had put a dying Elizabeth in the family wing? Had he meant to keep her as close to him as possible?

When they approached the large staircase, her surroundings became more familiar. The house seemed a bit grander now than it did in her day, but how much more did it cost for Tom to keep things just so—especially with tours tromping through on a daily basis.

They set her down in a room decorated in shades of pale blue, similar to the sky, and bowed before they left through a door made to blend in with the panelling along the wall. Ladies’ voices carried in from the hall, and when four ladies entered, several gave sharp inhales when they noticed her.

The ginger-haired woman, who led the group, paused for a moment and curtsied. “Miss Bennet,” she greeted, before she continued inside. A rather tall, slender woman followed with dark hair and her head lifted a little, so she appeared to be staring down her nose at everything. Her lips puckered. “Miss Eliza,” she practically sneered before gliding over to join the ginger-haired woman.

Mrs Gardiner’s eyes were like saucers. “Lizzy! I remember this being mentioned, but are you certain this is wise. You slept two days after a mere visit. Two days!”

“I’m sure I’ll be okay.” Wait! Elizabeth didn’t use the word okay at all, did she? Oh, why bother! She couldn’t speak like Elizabeth if she’d been around her for years. This was hopeless!

That was when she noticed the girl standing behind Mrs Gardiner, her hands clasped in front of her and standing as rigid as a pole. Mrs Gardiner stepped to the side and with a motherly hand to the girl’s shoulder, steered her forward. “You have not yet met Miss Darcy, have you, Lizzy?”

“No,” she responded, shaking her head. “I haven’t.”

“Miss Bennet!” came a man’s voice from the doorway. She turned as Mr Darcy came striding into the room and dropped to his knee beside her. “When I heard you were awake and in the drawing room, well, I could not stay away. You slept for so long, I became concerned you had taken a turn for the worse.”

Her cheeks and neck burned she was so embarrassed. She wasn’t Elizabeth, so being on the receiving end of his affection was uncomfortable and awkward. She glanced behind him as the tall lady rolled her eyes and scoffed. Mr Darcy, however, didn’t appear to notice since he was too busy studying every detail of her face.

“I feel much better today, Mr Darcy. I promise.”

He looked behind him, rose, and steered the girl closer by her elbow. “Have you had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of my sister?” he asked eagerly.

“No, I haven’t.”

The two ladies to the side of the room burst into giggles and Mrs Gardiner frowned at them, but they continued to whisper dramatically despite the glare of Elizabeth’s aunt. Ellie found herself paying attention to them when Mr Gardiner strode in and placed a kiss to her cheek. “I am pleased to see you so well.”

“Miss Bennet?”

Her attention jerked back to Mr Darcy. “I’m so sorry. I was just distracted by how rude those women are.”

His eyes gave a momentary bulge while his sister covered her mouth with her hand. Mrs Gardiner exclaimed, “Lizzy!”

The two ladies both stared while the taller lady’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps that bump on your head has altered your perception.”

“I doubt it,” responded Ellie sweetly. “Perhaps my impeccable manners simply prevented me from criticising before.”

Both ladies emitted shrill giggles that pierced her eardrums. “Did you learn such manners from your mother or your aunt,” tittered the taller lady. “You must be the height of fashion in *Cheapside*.”

“Miss Bennet has just endured a horrific injury, Caroline,” scolded a man as he strode through the doorway. “I think we should all allow her time to heal. Louisa, Hurst is passed out in the dining room, and I have no intention of remaining with him while he snores.” The man stopped when he stood beside Mr Darcy. “Miss Bennet! I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you looking so well.” When he began speaking to her, his face transformed and a huge grin overtook his features. “Pray tell me, are all of your family well? Are all of your sisters still at Longbourn?”

Were Lizzy’s sisters at Longbourn? How was she supposed to answer that? Oh well, she had to say something! “Lydia is staying with friends in Brighton, but yes, the rest of my sisters are still at home.” She turned to Mr Darcy and whispered, “Where else would they have gone?”

Caroline and the one she now knew was Louisa burst into cackles, but Mr Darcy ignored them and pressed his sister forward. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I should like you to meet my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy.”

Miss Darcy’s hands remained clenched in front of her until she dropped them to curtsy, but she clasped them back together as soon as she rose. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Bennet. I have heard so much about you from my brother.”

“Really,” exclaimed Ellie. “I wonder what he said.”

The girl’s brows drew down in the middle. “I assure you he spoke nothing but praise for you. He admired your wit and spoke very well of your performance at the pianoforte. He said little gave him more pleasure.”

“I don’t know what I should say.” It was the truth. She didn’t have Elizabeth’s knowledge. How much did she know about Mr Darcy’s sister? “Your brother must have been exaggerating.”

“Oh no, he would never!”

The girl was so honestly confused that Ellie liked her then and there. She was not a snob or a shrew like Caroline and her sister. Instead, she was just a shy girl, looking for acceptance from the lady her brother hoped to marry.

“Please don’t be upset. I was only joking.” Miss Darcy’s shoulders relaxed, though she tilted her head and appeared confused.

“Miss Bennet, I set these aside for the next time you were awake,” exclaimed Mr Darcy as he re-entered the room. He must have disappeared to the library while she greeted his sister, because he now held out three small books with a hopeful smile. “I hope you approve. I remember you enjoying poetry at Netherfield.” Poetry? Blech! She would rather drink more willow bark tea!

Miss Darcy peered over his shoulder to read the titles. “Fitzwilliam, these are your favourites,” she observed while he reddened. “You read them so often. Will you not miss them?”

He coughed then once again knelt beside the chaise. “I hope they help you pass the time while you rest. I would be pleased to read to you should you wish it.”

His voice was so hopeful and adorable, but she didn’t need to be the one to see this side of him, Elizabeth did!

A footman entered carrying a small vase with pink roses. “Sir?”

“Oh, thank you, Matthew.” He took the bouquet and looked around a moment before rising to move a small table next to her. “I collected these for you earlier. I hoped to deliver them when you were awake. I had not thought you would join us so soon.”

She touched the blossoms carefully. Roses were never her favourite. Ellie preferred lilies, but these were lovely.

“I hoped she would remain in her rooms,” whispered Caroline to her sister who snorted and covered her nose with a handkerchief.

Ellie plastered on a fake smile. This woman was getting on her last nerve! “If you object to my company so much, Caroline, you should have gone somewhere else.”

Miss Darcy pressed her lips tightly together while her shoulders gave an abrupt jerk here and there, Mr Darcy’s eyes widened, but he looked down to the floor and cleared his throat. Mrs Gardiner stared at her as though she’d sprouted another head and a pair of horns.

“Well, I never,” cried Caroline.

“Learned manners?” asked Ellie. “I’m so sorry. I’m sure my aunt would be pleased to help you should you need it.”

Dear Caroline turned almost purple. “Nothing is amiss with my behaviour, and I do not require lessons on etiquette from a *tradesman’s wife*.” In a swish of skirts, the obnoxious woman left. Hopefully, Elizabeth wouldn’t be too upset with her for this. If she wanted, she could always blame it on that bump on the back of her head.

“Mr Darcy,” said a man standing in the door, a dour expression on his face. “Please forgive me for interrupting, but an urgent message has arrived for you from London. I was told you should read it immediately.”

While the ginger woman, Louisa, followed her sister from the drawing room, Mr Darcy broke the seal and read the contents of the letter. He covered his mouth with his fist and exhaled before he scanned the room. “Has Mrs Hurst followed Miss Bingley?”

Bingley leaned against the nearest chair. “Yes, perhaps she will retire, though she should wake Hurst and take him with her.”

“Please close the door,” Mr Darcy instructed. The man who delivered the note instantly complied. “I am afraid I have some distressing news.”

Ellie gripped the blankets. Please don’t be Lydia! Please don’t be Lydia!

“I know this must come as a shock, Miss Bennet, but upon your arrival at Pemberley, I sent a letter to your family. I just received a response from your father that contains the gravest of news.”

“What has happened?” enquired Mrs Gardiner.

“I am afraid Miss Lydia has left her friends in Brighton and thrown herself into the power of Mr Wickham. They were to elope to Scotland and have been traced as far as London, but no further. I am so sorry, Miss Bennet.” Miss Darcy gasped and covered her mouth with her hands while Mr and Mrs Gardiner closed their eyes in horror.

He had to go this time. He couldn’t remain at Pemberley. He had to save Lydia! “You need to find them, Mr Darcy. You need to get Lydia away from him!” Ellie’s heart beat frantically. If they didn’t fix Lydia’s situation with Wickham, would Elizabeth still go back? “You have to get Lydia away from him!”

“Miss Bennet,” he cried as he sat on the edge of the chaise and grasped her arms. “You must calm yourself.”

“Lizzy!” exclaimed Mr and Mrs Gardiner, who both appeared behind him.

“You must find them!” Her head throbbed and her chest was killing her. “You can’t let her marry him! He’ll kill her! They can’t marry.” Then she remembered. “Saffron Hill! They have to be in Saffron Hill!” she cried, the pain increasing in her chest. Spots appeared before her eyes and her vision began to spin. She closed her eyes and grasped her head. “She cannot marry him. No matter what happens, she must be saved! You must help her!”

Strong arms lifted her from the chaise. “Someone fetch Mr Newnham immediately!” As she was carried from the room, Mr Darcy cried, “Miss Bennet!” That was the last she heard before everything went black.

Searching Elizabeth's Memories

"Ellie!" cried a voice that could only be Elizabeth.

She groaned and pushed her hands against the muddy ground. The pounding against her skull felt as though she'd beaten it against a wall. "My head." Strong hands grasped her arms and helped her stand. When she opened her eyes, Tom stood in front of her, touching her hair then her arms and waist, ensuring she wasn't hurt.

"Are you okay?"

She put her hand to her forehead. "I'm covered in mud, and my head feels like it's been squeezed in a vice, but other than that, I'm perfect."

"Do not joke!" Elizabeth scolded with a finger wagging in Ellie's face. "Do you have any idea how long you were gone? We were frantic with worry!"

"Your aunt made me take a nap, so no, I don't know how long I was gone. Last time I felt like I'd been gone for days, but only seemed to return an hour or so later. I can't ever tell how long it's been." She pointed to Elizabeth. "Besides, you don't know how lucky you are I'm the one going back right now. You were badly injured, but I'm the one who hurts and has to take that nasty Willow Bark medicine the doctor keeps giving you. And I have Mr Darcy trying to court me. Me! It should be you. I feel so awkward. I don't want his flowers and poetry—I can't stand poetry!"

Elizabeth's jaw dropped. "He wrote you poetry?"

"No, he brought several books for me to read, but he did offer to read them to me. He also picked every wildflower in his fields and every rose in his hothouse for you, too. The man has it bad, and you could stand to cut him some slack."

"I do not know what that means," she said exasperated. "If you intend to lecture me, then please do so in words I can understand. I wish I knew why people have massacred the English language." She turned and began walking back towards the house.

Tom offered Ellie his hand to help her from the mud puddle she stood in. "Don't be too hard on her. I didn't know what to do when you vanished, so I ran back to the house. Elizabeth may have looked just like you at the time, but when she spoke, it was obvious who she really was. Because you reappeared in your car after your last disappearance, she told me off for leaving the spot where you vanished, and we hurried back to wait for you to return." They followed Elizabeth, who walked briskly several metres ahead of them. "When a few hours passed, she became terrified. She's really afraid that each time

you go back, it will become longer and longer until you don't return and she's stuck being you for the rest of her life."

"Well, I don't enjoy Regency life, so I don't particularly fancy that scenario either."

Tom nudged her. "Before we catch her up, what happened while you were there?"

"I took vile medicine, I was made to nap like a child, and then, I was taken downstairs after dinner." Suddenly, she remembered the most important bit and gasped. At Tom's questioning expression, she explained, "Before I returned, Mr Darcy received the letter—the one informing him of Lydia and Wickham running away from Brighton."

"So, it has begun?"

"Yes, and I don't know if I convinced Mr Darcy to go after them. I tried," she rambled. "Lizzy must believe I tried as hard as I could. I became so upset when he told us the contents of Mr Bennet's note that I blacked out and returned here. The last thing I heard was the poor man yelling orders to fetch the doctor while he lifted me and carried me upstairs."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm sure you did the best you could and I'm sure Lizzy will believe you, but all we can do is see if the journals changed."

Ellie wiped some mud from her cheek. "I'm surprised you remember this mess. So much changes whenever I go back. I'm glad we don't have to convince you of who Elizabeth is again, though."

Tom shrugged. "If I hadn't been with Elizabeth while we waited, I suppose I might not remember, but you may not have changed anything this time or it's possible you only altered something inconsequential. I mean the first time, you killed Elizabeth, and the second, you saved her. Both altered the future dramatically, but we won't know what happened this time until we check."

She let go of Tom's hand and ran ahead to Elizabeth, who still strode towards the house. "Please don't be angry with me. I can't control how long I'm there any more than I can control when I go back. I want you there to see for yourself how charming your Mr Darcy is. I want him to give *you* flowers and books of poetry." She leaned closer to Elizabeth and whispered, "I like my own Mr Darcy. I don't want yours."

One side of Elizabeth's lips curved. "Forgive me my ill-temper. I am quite aware you cannot dictate when you depart or return, which makes this all the more frustrating. I do like you and Tom is an amiable man, but I long to go home. When you were gone for so long—"

“You became scared we would be swapped permanently.”

She stopped and stared around her at the house and the grounds. “To think, of all this I am to be mistress. I know enough to understand I marry Mr Darcy for love, and we live a glorious life here—in this splendour. I do not require such luxuries, but I certainly shall not object.” She gave a small giggle. “I must say that he is also a vast improvement over Mr Collins, who my mother was adamant I accept.”

“Mr Collins was not hot?”

Her eyes rolled and she laughed harder. “I assume you are asking if he was handsome, and no, he was not. Even if he had been the least bit attractive, his personality would have rendered him small. He was not repulsive, yet he suffered from a decided lack of hygiene.”

“Eww,” drawled Ellie with her nose crinkled. “He didn’t bathe?”

“We do not bathe as often as you, I have noticed, but I believe he washed less than most.”

When Tom approached, he looked between them. “What’s so funny?”

“Lizzy was describing Mr Collins. He apparently proposed to her once.”

Tom laughed. “Ah, I have read of his proposal. Didn’t he say, “I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “How do you know that?”

He grinned. “I’ve read your journals, remember?”

She eyed him warily. “I am not certain how I feel about your knowledge of such intimate details of my life. You have a way of mortifying me with what I have unintentionally told you.”

“I did not mean to embarrass you,” he said, “but little facts and phrases pop into my head when you mention things that I recognise.” He held an arm out in the direction of the house. “While I would love to stand around and learn as much as I can from you, we should really check those journals to see if anything has changed. We don’t know when one of you will travel again.”

When they entered Pemberley, Millie, who was standing in the Great Hall, took one look at Ellie and shooed her to shower and change while Elizabeth and Tom went to the study. Ellie didn’t look forward to putting on her clothes from yesterday, but needs must and all that. Millie took her to a bedroom where she put a pair of joggers and a t-

shirt on the bed before Ellie could remove her old clothes from her rucksack. Then, she showed Ellie the bathroom, how to work the taps, and where to put her muddy jeans and blouse to be washed.

When she departed, Ellie took in a deep breath. The bathroom smelled like Tom's cologne. She opened a drawer on the vanity and found a razor, a brush, and other bits and bobs that all carried more of his tell-tale smell.

With a last sniff of his cologne, she removed her clothes, showered, taking a big whiff of the soap, and wrapped a towel around herself before she wandered around the room. The bed was antique and similar to those in the rest of the house, but had a large canopy of sorts on the ceiling with no bed curtains. A modern duvet and pillows were spread haphazardly across the bed he hadn't made presumably before she and Elizabeth came to Pemberley.

As much as she wanted to snoop around, she needed to return, so she reluctantly brushed her hair and changed into the clothes Millie provided, which were too large. She folded the waistband on the joggers several times and the Cambridge t-shirt hung past her hips, but Tom's clothes worked in a pinch. With a grin, she put her brush back in her rucksack, leaving her bag there to return to the study.

Tom looked up, gave her a once over when she entered. "You did change Lydia's fate, but not in the way you hoped."

"Well?" Ellie bit her lip and lifted her eyebrows.

"Fitzwilliam did leave Pemberley and searched for Lydia and Wickham," explained Tom, "but you must have insisted Wickham and Lydia not marry and he honoured your request. Instead, Wickham was given passage to what we now call Canada, more specifically Nova Scotia, and Lydia was secluded from society. The family told the neighbourhood she visited a cousin in Shropshire, but in reality, she was with child."

"He still married Lizzy, right?" She glanced from one to the other, a worried pang in her stomach.

"Yes," answered Elizabeth. "We were wed, though not without some gossip and scandal attached to the union."

"But Lizzy didn't go back. If we saved Lydia, then why is Lizzy still here?"

Tom handed her an open journal. The handwriting wasn't Fitzwilliam's, it was more feminine. She looked to Elizabeth. "Is this yours?"

Elizabeth gave an uncomfortable dip of her chin. "We found some information in Mr Darcy's, but Tom thought mine might reveal more of Lydia's fate. He was correct."

She skimmed through the entries until a passage made her pause and read through it again more carefully.

I received a letter from Mama this morning. Poor Lydia laboured for nearly three days before succumbing, taking Wickham's unborn child with her. She was distraught when he chose money and passage over marriage to her. She railed at Fitzwilliam and I, and we shouldered the blame without argument, though Wickham was the villain. Mama said Lydia confessed to know the truth of Wickham before she died, but Mama still blames Fitzwilliam for not paying the wastrel to wed her youngest daughter. He did so at my behest. I am to blame. I pray Lydia finds peace. I hope someday, I shall find peace as well as absolution.

"We didn't save Lydia." The words hung in the air, making it thick and difficult to breathe.

"No," whispered Elizabeth. "But you have done what you could. Please do not think I hold you responsible. You could not have known what would occur."

"We'll figure out something." Ellie shut the book with a snap, her voice insistent. "We have to. You will go back and everything will be perfect. You'll see."

"Shall I hold you to that promise?" Elizabeth's eyebrow raised. "'Tis a difficult vow to uphold since we do not know how to remedy our problem."

"Well, we'll just have to think harder," said Ellie, looking at the map still spread on the table. "We have to get you back. We will get you back."

Elizabeth picked up a different journal and stared at the writing, appearing more serious now than she ever had. Since they'd met, a glint of something lit her eye, even when she was about to cry, but that quality had disappeared.

"What are you reading?" Ellie peered over her shoulder, recognising the now familiar, solid strokes of Fitzwilliam's handwriting.

"I have never been so frightened as I was when Elizabeth fainted in my arms," read Elizabeth softly. "I thought she died and a part of my chest was no more than a hollow void until Mr Newnham found her heartbeat and relieved my worry. My place is with Elizabeth, but her last words begged me to find her sister so find her I must. I shall do

my heart's desire as swiftly as possible for I want nothing more than to be at her side. Once I return, God willing, I shall never be parted from her again."

Ellie and Tom both watched her as though she might shatter into a million pieces. Instead, she gave a shudder. "Elizabeth," said Tom in a soothing voice. "You do remember Wickham's history with your husband?"

She frowned while she set the book on the table. "He is not my husband yet, but yes, you read the letter he gave me at Hunsford. I have not forgotten a bit of it."

"Did it ever occur to you that Wickham picked Lydia because he knew Fitzwilliam fancied you?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened and her mouth opened and closed several times. "But how would he know?"

"Those two grew up here together and shared a room at Cambridge. Wickham would know Fitzwilliam better than a lot of people. He might've recognised the signs that Fitzwilliam Darcy was fighting his attraction to you. What better way to destroy any hope Fitzwilliam had of you than to ruin your sister."

"How despicable!" she exclaimed. "But Mr Darcy indicated in his journal that Wickham required her pin money for passage to London."

"Right, but he could have managed to persuade any number of ladies for funds, couldn't he? Why Lydia Bennet?"

Elizabeth put her hands to her face and shook her head. When she removed them, her expression didn't appear as though she were upset, but she stood straight and determined. "Would you mind terribly if I took a walk? I need to clear my mind."

"I'd prefer you stay close to the house," requested Tom. "I know you are accustomed to long rambles but if you get hurt, it might be more difficult to get you home."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I am not a small child. I can manage on my own. I have taken many a solitary ramble near Longbourn. Ellie, you are more independent than I, surely you agree with me."

Ellie startled. She hadn't expected to be put on the spot like this. "I understand, Lizzy, but I agree with Tom. If the sky begins to act all strange again, I'll need to find you quickly. I don't know what it would do, but I just can't help but think it's important that we're together. I won't be able to track you down if I don't know where you are."

"Very well," she said, exasperated. "I doubt I shall be more than an hour. Would it be possible to have tea when I return?"

Tom smiled. "I will ensure it's ready and waiting for you."

With a decisive nod, Elizabeth left, leaving she and Tom alone. When Ellie turned, he stood beside her with a grin. "Millie gave you some of my clothes I see."

"I assumed she did."

He grinned wider, revealing his lovely white teeth and dimples. Her knees would've knocked together if it hadn't been for the soft fleece of the joggers. "I rather like you like this." He tugged at the hem of the shirt before grabbing a chunk of it and pulling her into his arms.

"You prefer me looking a right mess?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I like you wearing my comfy clothes." He sniffed her shoulder. "And wet from using my shower. I rather like that you smell of my soap as well." Goosebumps broke out down her arms and her back as his eyes met hers. He leaned closer and her mouth went dry. He was going to kiss her! His warm breath fanned on her cheek as he drew nearer and nearer. She sighed when his lips touched hers, but he didn't linger long before he pulled back. Then, he paused for only a moment before he dove back in for more.

His lips were like velvet as they caressed hers and her brain wouldn't work no matter how hard she tried to think. What was he doing to her? She'd never speak a coherent sentence again if he continued like he was, and she needed at least a part of her brain to figure out what to do about Elizabeth. His lips lifted from hers and branded the soft flesh beneath her ear.

After one last peck to the lips, he straightened with a smile so wide on his face, it could've powered the National Grid. "I should teach you everything there is to know about Lydia."

"Lydia? Who's Lydia?"

At the sound of his low chuckle, she buried her face in his chest. Why did he always turn her into a babbling puddle of mush?

The Search for Elizabeth

Ellie dropped her head onto the back of the sofa and groaned. “No, no more. I need a break.”

“I know it’s a lot of information, but if you’re going to save Lydia, you’re going to need to know it all,” insisted Tom.

“Remind me again why Lizzy isn’t going through this torture?”

He laughed that low rumble that made her toes curl and her knees go weak and slipped his hand under her hair, his fingers massaging into the knots of her tension-filled neck. “Because we all agreed the less she learned about her future the better, remember?”

She covered her tired eyes with her hands. “So, I have to recite every inn from Brighton to London like I’m listing the kings of England in a history lesson? I can’t do this.” She sounded like a petulant child, but she didn’t care. Forty-eight hours of cramming this tedious information into her skull as though she was stuffing herself into a particularly tight pair of skinny jeans had made her this way. Her head was going to explode!

Last night, she had even dreamt she travelled from Brighton to London on one of those terrible reality shows like *The Amazing Race* and had to check in at every inn Lydia did to win. She and Fitzwilliam Darcy were actually paired together against Lydia and Wickham, who had a huge head start. Every time they stopped at an inn, Wickham and Lydia had left only a few hours before. Catching them was hopeless. She couldn’t even escape while she slept!

Tom nuzzled around her ear, planting a small kiss to the shell. “Would coffee help? Or, it’s almost time for dinner. I could open a bottle of wine.”

She moaned and turned her face towards his. “Wine would be lovely,” she mumbled, cupping his cheek with her palm.

His face was relaxed as he held her gaze. “Red or white?”

“I don’t care as long as it’s wine.” Ellie leaned in and pressed her lips to his, wanting him to forget Lydia for just a little while. It didn’t hurt that she adored kissing him, running her fingers through his hair, tracing the muscles on his chest with her hands. When it came to snogging Tom Darcy, she was like a child in a sweet shop. She couldn’t get enough.

“Ellie.” He placed one last kiss to her chin. “I’ll never get the wine if you keep distracting me this way.”

“I like being a distraction.”

She pulled him back in. She wanted to cheer when he didn’t argue but applied himself to studying her lips rather than the maps and journals spread on the coffee table. Before long, they were laid out on the sofa while Tom mapped a trail from her ear down her neck, his breath tickling the fine wisps of hair behind her ear. The clock on the mantel chimed and he groaned and stopped the lovely things he was doing. “I really like you, Ellie, but I don’t want to rush things. I want this to be more than just a fling.” He lifted his head to look her in the eye. “We need to stop before the brain in my head completely shuts down in favour of the brain somewhere else.” He turned a bit red when he said the last, which was so cute. He was very sweet to want to wait like he did.

“I want this to be more than a fling, too.”

After one more kiss to her lips, he rose, tugging at the legs of his trousers when he stood. “I’ll be back with the wine if you can move all of this.” He motioned to the journals and maps on the table. “I don’t want to spill wine on any of it. Even white could smear the ink.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.” She grinned while she watched Tom’s well-formed bum as he left, then carefully stacked the maps protected by plastic film and moved them to Tom’s desk. Fitzwilliam’s journals went into one pile and Elizabeth’s another, placing hers near the corner. When the top most of Elizabeth’s journals slid to the floor and fell open with a thud, Ellie leaned down to pick it up, finding it coincidentally on the entry about Lydia’s death.

She had wondered since her return about Lydia’s demise, which she was certain occurred earlier now than what happened originally. Why had Lydia died so much sooner? And how could Lydia have died bearing a child in a later timeline that never existed in the first?

She was still staring at the journal entry when Tom returned, a bottle of red wine in one hand and two glasses in the other.

“Find something interesting?” he asked, pouring them both a large serving.

“No, it fell and happened to open to the page where Lizzy mentions Lydia’s death. It got me thinking.”

His forehead crinkled and his brows drew together. “How so?”

“Well, in the original timeline, Lydia lived longer didn’t she? I mean, she didn’t die until she was older.”

He scratched the back of his head. “I think she and Wickham were married almost ten years when she died. I would normally check the year for you, but since the journals have changed, I can’t.” His forehead furrowed. “It’s so strange knowing that. Why is this such a big deal?”

“Well, why when she lived longer in the first timeline did she not die in childbirth or have a child? Wouldn’t something like that had to have happened?”

With a shrug, he rested his wine on his knee. “Who says she didn’t?”

“Pardon?”

“Who says she wasn’t pregnant early in their marriage? You have to remember that Wickham was abusive. She probably lost the baby early in the pregnancy due to either stress or a beating Wickham gave her. They also didn’t have much money, so I could easily imagine him forcing her to get rid of it as well. I’ve read of teas and herbs that ladies used for such a purpose. There’s really no way of knowing for sure, but it’s more than likely what happened.”

She blew out a noisy breath. “I suppose you’re right. I never considered those possibilities.”

“How many women, even today, miscarry without realising they were ever pregnant. They didn’t know for sure that a woman was pregnant for months in those days because they had no way of testing them, so the mother had to wait until she felt the baby move. If Lydia lost it early enough, it would never have been mentioned—not that Wickham or Lydia were thoughtful enough to leave journals. I did have a handful of letters from Lydia to Elizabeth, but they were all rather shallow. Mostly, she asked for money when Wickham’s debts became too severe. Vapid descriptions of assemblies and parties for the officers filled the remainder.”

“I don’t suppose there were letters from Wickham then?” she asked, wondering if the man ever thought of more than himself.

He frowned. “One or two, but they’re worse than Lydia’s. He bragged constantly about marrying into Darcy’s family and demanded money to ensure Mrs Darcy never worried about her sister.”

“But he wasn’t a part of the Darcy family,” she interrupted. “He married Lizzy’s sister.”

“In that time, he would’ve been considered a brother, even if it was only by marriage, and he enjoyed rubbing Fitzwilliam’s nose in it.”

“He sounds like a megalomaniac and a right prick.”

One side of his lips curved. “He was definitely both.”

They began to have a more date-like chat after that, discussing favourite movies, music, and random nonsense. When they finished their wine, Ellie, who had been resting her head against his shoulder, leaned it back so she could see his face. “Do you know where Lizzy went? She said she would walk in the rose garden, but that was a couple of hours ago.”

He peered out of the window with his brows furrowed. “I don’t see her, but I am certain she is okay.”

Ellie sighed and curled her legs on the sofa. “I think she’s worried because nothing has happened for so long. It’s been a couple of days and there hasn’t even been a random shooting star in the night sky much less during the day. We just never know when something is going to happen, and we can’t force it—no matter how much she wants to return.”

“I’m sure she’s frustrated, but one of you has to go back sometime or I would cease to exist, wouldn’t I? I mean, that’s the obvious way to know that she still returns. You said that she didn’t wake in eighteen-thirteen while you were here. Eventually, one of you has to go back or everything would be different.”

“I suppose,” she responded slowly. “But so much has changed from when I travelled back the first time. Honestly, though, I don’t think she’s looking at the situation the way you are. She probably feels like the longer she is away from home, the less likely it is she’s going to return.”

“Unfortunately, it makes sense.”

The last thing she wanted to do was leave the cosy spot beside Tom on the sofa, but they needed to find Elizabeth. Reluctantly, she unfurled her legs and rose. “We should find her for dinner anyhow. Maybe we can even figure out something to cheer her up?”

“What do you have in mind?” He smiled and followed as she picked up her cardigan from a nearby chair and pulled it on.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it. This isn’t exactly something that can be solved with a special pudding or bag of sweets, is it?”

He laced his fingers with hers. “No, it isn’t. Why don’t we search for her first, then I’ll see if Millie has any suggestions? I can make up some excuse like she broke up with her boyfriend or the like.”

They searched the house first. Tom figured she probably returned after a long ramble and found a convenient window seat to sit in and read, but even after checking every window in the main rooms, they couldn’t find her. They walked in all of the gardens around the house, even hunting down a gardener to let them into the locked, walled garden just to be sure she wasn’t there, but still had no luck.

“Could she have walked out to the folly?” asked Tom. “She seemed intrigued by it when we mentioned it. Perhaps she wanted to see it for herself since she didn’t get to see it the last time you travelled back.”

“Maybe, but even though she was more than a little annoyed by our request that she stay near the house, she has never gone beyond the lake or the forest. I don’t believe for one second that she would walk as far as the folly.”

He looked around the grounds as he blew out a breath. “We’ve checked everywhere else. I don’t know where else she could be.”

She didn’t think he was correct, but she could understand why he felt it was a possibility. With a shrug, Ellie took his hand and they walked the most direct trail from the house to the folly. But, after a look around the outside, where they disturbed a squirrel who voiced his irritation by chattering at them, and peering inside, they realised she wasn’t there either. Where could she have gone?

As they hurried back, Tom stopped in his tracks on the bridge and looked at Ellie excitedly. “Could she have gone back without us realising?”

“I don’t see how. It’s been cloudy, but there’s been no rain or hail or we would’ve heard it in the study. We would’ve known somehow, wouldn’t we? Or would we forget she was ever here?” Fear twisted her gut. “We won’t forget her when she goes back, will we? I mean, she’s my friend. I don’t want to forget any of this—even if it has been stressful and frustrating.”

“I don’t know,” he answered with concern written on his expression. “I wish I could tell you for sure, but this isn’t exactly something that happens to me every day.”

She laughed tiredly. “I remember thinking the same thing when this all started.”

“The two of you have been through a lot together in a short time. I’m sure you’ve become close.”

Ellie stared out at the swans gliding across the glassy lake. "I suppose. She doesn't share much of what she's thinking, but we've had some fun since I found her."

"You took her to a pub," he said with humour. "I just can't imagine Elizabeth Darcy in a modern pub." His shoulders slumped as though he just remembered she was missing. He blew out a noisy breath. "You're right. She has to be here somewhere." He glanced around him. "Ellie, does Elizabeth know how to swim?"

Her eyes hurt from how wide they became. "If she drowned, you wouldn't exist."

"Unless that was how she returned."

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. She's here somewhere."

"It wouldn't hurt to walk around it—at least the part nearer the house."

Without another idea, his suggestion was the best they had, so she followed when he tugged her to the bank. A half-hour and a pair of muddied Converse later, Ellie sat on the front lawn and ungracefully dropped back to lie on the grass. "I'm knackered. We must've walked twenty miles and still found no sign of her."

"I'm just glad the house is closed to the public for the day. If it wasn't, we'd have had to search the tour groups and worry about her blending in with the people on the grounds." With a shake of his head, a corner of his lips twitched. "Twenty miles? Exaggerate much?"

She stuck out her tongue at him. "I don't go to the gym, and I don't enjoy exercise, but you might persuade me to run if you chased me with a gun."

He sat beside her on the grass with a teasing glint in his eye. "What if I just dangled some wine or chocolate in front of you?"

"You take your life in your hands. I might just knock you out and take whatever you are dangling in front of me."

"Such violence," he said, laughing

"Never tease a woman with wine and chocolate. We can't be held responsible when men behave so irrationally." He was flirting with her and she loved every minute, but they needed to find Elizabeth. "Where do we look now?"

"Perhaps we should start our search from the beginning?"

"What?" she cried. "You must be joking."

"This isn't exactly a confined area. We could've just barely missed Elizabeth at any point."

She groaned and pulled herself to her feet. “Okay, let’s go. The sooner we do this, the sooner we can eat. I’m getting hungry.”

He grabbed her hand and tugged her behind him to the library and the study. When they were certain she wasn’t there, they searched the entirety of the house, including the attics and the old servants’ corridors this time, just to ensure they checked everywhere. They even asked Mille to keep Elizabeth with her should she happen to return without them.

Once they were convinced she wasn’t in the house, they returned to the grounds, deciding to work from the furthest point to the house. The squirrel told them off once again when they returned to the folly, but they ignored him and searched more thoroughly than they had the first time. The gardens closer to the house followed, but no matter where they looked, Elizabeth couldn’t be found.

They passed a few groundskeepers along the way, but none of them had seen Elizabeth either. This was ridiculous! No one could simply vanish into thin air! She had to be here!

Frustrated and extremely tired, they stopped after checking the front lawn one more time. Ellie turned and looked all around her while Tom ended a call to Millie on his mobile phone. “She hasn’t seen her.”

For the first time, Ellie became scared and worried. She again scanned the pond and the grounds around the house, finally letting her eyes go over every window of Pemberley’s façade. That was when her eye jerked to a movement on the roof. Something in her chest gave a lurch, and she ran closer and squinted.

“Do you see something?” asked Tom as he followed.

“There,” she said, pointing to a lone figure standing near the corner on the eastern most side. Based on the style of her dress and the bonnet she wore, she was definitely Elizabeth. She didn’t move and appeared to stare into the peaks, her arms wrapped around herself as the breeze billowed the shawl from her arms. “Now, how did she get up there?”

Fears and Revelations

“How do I get up there?”

“Through a staircase at the end of the family wing. Just pass the corridor for the attics and take the stairs to the left.” Tom paused and then added as though it was an afterthought, “Fitzwilliam used to take her up there to watch the sunrise over the lake.”

Ellie glanced over her shoulder at him. “Does she know that?”

He shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. I haven’t mentioned it, and she hasn’t been around her journals since that first day. It’s possible she could’ve read it then I suppose.”

“Or it could just be a coincidence.”

“That’s possible, too.” He watched Elizabeth a moment more. “Why do you think she went up there?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. To be alone? To think? I know she’s upset, but I don’t think she intends to jump if that’s what you’re asking.”

His eyes met Ellie’s and he lifted his eyebrows. “It did occur to me.”

“She knows that if she ceases to exist, so do you and a lot of other people. I know she wants to go back. If she . . .” Ellie waved her hand in front of her as though she was speaking of something dirty. “If she, well, she’s sensible, you know. I just don’t think she would do it.”

“You’ve known her longer than I have, so I’ll have to agree with you I suppose.”

After a big breath in and a noisy exhale, she nodded her head. “Okay, I’m going up there,” she said, as though she knew exactly what she was doing. “Could you keep an eye on her until I find my way?”

With his eyes back on Elizabeth, he gave a heavy exhale. “Okay, but be careful.”

Ellie jogged up the front steps and inside the front door. Finding her way to the family wing was simple enough. She’d become pretty accustomed to getting around the large house in the past couple of days, so it didn’t take long for her to pass Elizabeth’s room, her room, and then Tom’s. When she reached the window at the end of the corridor, an open door to her left appeared to lead into a servants’ passageway. She headed up until she reached the attics. With that final turn and the last set of stairs Tom told her about, she finally reached the door that led outside.

Elizabeth hadn't moved since Ellie left the ground and still stared out into the peaks. Ellie, however, cautiously peered over the edge and waved down to Tom, who held up his hand in response.

"I had not thought you would find me." Elizabeth's voice was soft and had a brittle quality Ellie was not used to hearing.

"It's almost time for dinner." Ellie hoped she sounded upbeat and happy. She definitely didn't want to sound as petrified as she was. Elizabeth was definitely out of sorts, but why the roof of all places? Ellie needed to snap her out of it if she could—she just couldn't look down. "Tom and I hoped you would join us."

"I thank you for your consideration, but I am afraid I do not feel much like eating."

"Tea then?" asked Ellie. "I know how you love the tea here."

Elizabeth turned to her with her jaw dropped and an incredulous stare. "I know I said I wished for tea upon my return, but I have stood here and stared at the gardens since, fretting over still being here." She held out her hands towards the landscape in front of her. "Nothing has happened for two days, and you ask if I desire tea? Are you addled?"

"No, but I do not see how standing up here helps anything." She leaned forward just enough to peer over the edge again. Why did she look? She wasn't supposed to, but something always made her do it!

One side of Elizabeth's lips curved. "You are afraid of heights," she observed.

Ellie crossed her arms over her chest. "Why is that funny?"

As she shook her head, Elizabeth laughed. "Do you not see the humour? You are exceedingly independent, you have braved every situation before us without flinching. You jumped before a post coach for goodness sakes, yet you are cowed by such a simple thing."

"Cowed?" Ellie stiffened. "Are you comparing me to one of those daft creatures in the field?"

"Gracious no! I mean you are intimidated by it! You were suspicious of me when you found me in your home, but you never showed fear. I have seen many emotions from you over the last week—worry, excitement, nervousness—but never have I thought you scared."

Ellie stepped back another foot from the edge. "So? I am afraid of heights. You should've seen me when Theresa dragged me on the London Eye after some guy she

thought was hot. I spent an hour with my eyes closed and trying to pretend I was anywhere but there.”

“I can only assume the London Eye is tall.”

“It’s that big, round ride we passed when we left London.”

“Ah, I believe I understand now.” Elizabeth returned to staring at the scenery before her and not speaking.

After a minute or so had passed, Ellie threw up her arms and let them fall to her sides. “Is that all?”

That annoying eyebrow quirked upwards. “Is what all?”

Ellie huffed. “I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal if I’m afraid of something. Doesn’t everyone fear something? You’re scared of not going home, aren’t you?”

“I did fear never returning at first, but I have discovered I now fear something more.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ellie.

Tears pooled along her bottom lashes and she took a shaky breath. “I once thought Mr Darcy was the last man in the world I could be prevailed upon to marry. Now I am terrified I may never see him again. I am terrified he is somewhere thinking ill of me.”

“The man loves you, Lizzy. Even with my bizarre behaviour by the standards of your time, the man still adored you. He couldn’t think badly of you if he tried.”

“What if I never have the opportunity to beg his forgiveness? I was unpardonably rude when he proposed.”

Ellie grasped Elizabeth’s hand and tugged so that she looked at her. “I don’t know how, but we’ll get you back. You will have your chance to apologise. I promise.”

“You cannot promise what you cannot control,” cried Elizabeth, who now had tears trailing down her cheeks. “I once thought him so proud. I prayed that he was far from home when my aunt wished to tour Pemberley—not because I still carried a dislike for him, but because I was too embarrassed by my treatment of him in Kent. I should not have presumed I knew his character from one meeting.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I have been such a fool. At the assembly, he drew my notice from the start. His tall bearing and handsome visage were like no other and made my insides flutter when he looked in my direction. When he insulted me, I laughed and pretended he had not hurt me, but it was a lie. I may not have spoken the words, but I

lied just the same. Vanity, not pride, has been my weakness, and should I not return to my own time, I will pay dearly for it.”

“Do you mean when he said, ‘She is tolerable, I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me?’” At Elizabeth’s sudden pallor, she chuckled. “You shouldn’t blame yourself, you know. He was terribly rude and according to Tom, bemoaned his stupidity often in his journals—he knew he was wrong, too.”

“But I should not have allowed his behaviour to prejudice me so. He carried himself so stiffly and he was so formal. He said he was ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers, but I never thought to discover what lay behind his behaviour. If I had, we both might have acted differently at Hunsford. Perhaps, I would have accepted his proposal.”

“Do you regret telling him no?” asked Ellie, hoping Elizabeth would finally admit to her feelings, whatever they were.

“I suppose.” She bit her lip and bounced a bit in place. “I just do not know. I could never accept such a declaration as he gave at Hunsford, but I . . .” Her shoulders slumped. “I love him. I do not know how or why it has happened, but when faced with the prospect of never seeing him again, my chest is so tight I cannot breathe.”

That was when Ellie noticed Elizabeth’s chest and shoulders almost shaking she was panting so. *Crap!* If she didn’t slow down her breathing, Elizabeth would have a panic attack. “Calm down.” Ellie put her hands on Elizabeth’s shoulders and looked her in the eye. “You need to inhale nice and slow.” Elizabeth did as Ellie wanted and then they exhaled together, blowing it out of their mouths. “Good!”

“How is this good, Ellie? I love him, but I can’t get back to eighteen-thirteen to tell him.”

“We’ll figure it out. We have to. You can’t stay here forever without drastically altering everything, and I refuse to live my life in stays and dresses. I can’t do it. I have to have jeans, and fancy espresso machines, and my own handsome Darcy with a great bum and sexy glasses.”

“You do not care one jot for propriety, do you?” Elizabeth giggled through her tears.

“I am completely proper for the twenty-first century, which is why I couldn’t survive in the nineteenth.”

Ellie looked up at the sky that almost appeared to be fading. “Lizzy, look at the sky.”

As they gazed upward, the clouds and sky sort of swirled and changed until it turned that strange purple-grey shade they'd both seen before. A rush of wind blew one side of her hair in her face, and she drew a finger along her cheek to pull it behind her ear as the first star shot across the sky.

"Is that what I think it is? I do not understand. Why now?"

She grinned at Elizabeth. "We always seem to learn something or discover something in order for it to happen. Maybe you needed to say you loved him. Who knows?" The wind began to blow in gusts and a few raindrops began to fall, making Ellie take Elizabeth's hand. "I do think we should go inside. Don't you?"

"What if we are supposed to stay here?" yelled Elizabeth over the wind as it began to howl.

"Whether I'm inside, outside, or in a car has never mattered before. I don't know why it would make a difference this time. Besides, the other day it hailed. I don't want to get knocked out by an over-large chunk of ice."

"Ellie!" Tom's voice could barely be heard between the distance and the crazy weather. "You need to get inside!"

"See!" she exclaimed. "Even Tom thinks we shouldn't stay here."

The rain picked up and began to come down in sheets—nothing like typical misty English rain—and Ellie began to panic. Where was the door? She couldn't see a foot in front of her face much less across the roof. The only reason she knew Elizabeth's location was because of their clasped hands.

"I cannot see!" yelled Elizabeth.

"I know, I can't either."

"Which way do you think?"

Ellie squinted and tried to make out anything. "Do you see what looks like a shadow? Could that be the top of the stairs?"

"I cannot be certain, but I suppose it could be."

With tiny steps, Ellie began moving towards what they hoped was the way inside, but when the hail began to fall, she pulled Elizabeth forward, her strides longer.

"Can you see where you are taking us?" called Elizabeth over the pinging of hailstones off the roof and the wind whirling around them.

"No, but one way or another we're going to find that door!"

"But—"

Ellie's foot hit something hard, but she was walking too quickly. Before she could prevent it, she tripped and fell forward, expecting to meet the hard surface of the roof, but instead her shoulder gave a jolt that felt as though her arm would be ripped from the socket.

"Ellie!" came Elizabeth's blood-curdling scream.

With an oomph, she hit a stone wall and her foot struck something that gave just as she heard the sound of glass shattering to bits. Oh no! No, no, no! Her heart began beating a mile a minute as she managed to make out the trim around Pemberley's roof above her.

She looked down, but with the rain and what seemed like fog below her, she couldn't see the ground. When she looked up, Elizabeth, who was hanging over the edge, held her arm. "I don't know if I can hold on!" The wind made it difficult to hear Elizabeth's voice while they struggled to clasp their other hands.

Her feet scrambled along the limestone wall in an attempt to find any sort of a foothold, but she couldn't get any sort of traction no matter how hard she tried. "What if you try to pull me up? If you can get me even part way, I might be able to climb the rest."

Elizabeth must have managed to hear her because she gave a huge heave, and Ellie felt herself being dragged a few centimetres up the wall only to drop right back down where she was. "I cannot," she sobbed. "I do not possess the strength."

The toe of Ellie's Converse caught something. She had no idea what it was, but it didn't matter. As long as it gave her that boost she needed. She made sure her foot was planted well, then pulled Elizabeth's arms as she tried to hoist herself up. Elizabeth cried out and there was a loud crack from below.

She dropped like an anvil in an old Looney Tunes cartoon. Her arm jolted painfully when Elizabeth grabbed Ellie's arm with both of her hands. As she almost bounced, Elizabeth's grip tightened, but Ellie, with a sudden plummet, realised Elizabeth wasn't preventing her fall, but was sliding over the edge with her.

Elizabeth's scream echoed through the storm around them as they both fell. A weird light seemed to shine through the fog and Ellie turned her head to the side a little so the glare didn't hurt her eyes. All of a sudden, the lantern and the carriage it was attached to, emerged from the haze, headed directly for them. Wait! How in the world it driving without the ground?

She closed her eyes tight, bracing for impact. If Ellie could manage it, she would hit the ground first so Elizabeth would live. Tom would have to see to it she was returned to eighteen-thirteen, but he was smarter than Ellie. He could do it.

Only, the impact she expected never came and everything went black.



Ellie gave a great inhale and jolted awake. She blinked several times and stared at the site across from her. How in the bloody world?

Carefully, she lifted onto her elbow, shook her head, and looked again. No, Elizabeth was definitely lying beside her in a bed of all places. How did they go from hanging from the side of Pemberley to a bed?

She scanned the room and it was all she could do to keep her eyes in the sockets as she sat up. It had been a while since she'd been in the room at the inn in Lambton, especially looking like this. When she looked back down at Elizabeth, she suddenly noticed her friend's nightgown was that same frilly white cotton one Ellie had worn when she first woke up in eighteen-thirteen last time. When she glanced down at her clothes, she was wearing the jeans and blouse she'd worn in twenty-seventeen—almost a reversal of eras from when she first found Elizabeth in her flat.

Elizabeth's eyelashes fluttered and her eyes slowly opened. Her forehead creased when she saw Ellie, and she rose to sit. "Where are we?" She glanced around the room, and her eyes widened much like Ellie's had before. "We are back!" she cried.

She clamped a hand over Elizabeth's mouth. "Not so loud. We don't know exactly when and I can't be found wearing these clothes, can I?"

After giving a quick once over to Ellie's ensemble, she smiled. "No, we must see you properly attired lest you be considered a heretic of sorts."

Ellie bounced from the bed and peeked out the window, hoping no one could see her from the street below. Men on horseback plodded down the dirt road while a few ladies and their children walked into a building across the road.

"I think this is the morning of the accident," whispered Ellie loudly. "How?"

With a scramble from the bed, Elizabeth joined her staring out the panes of glass. “I do not believe it. Why would we come to this point in time? Would we not return to Pemberley after the accident? This makes no sense.”

“When has any of this made sense?”

“Truer words have never been spoken.” Elizabeth shook her head as she gaped at the scene before them. “But how do we know for certain whether this is the morning of the accident? We cannot walk into the street and hope Mr Darcy comes along.”

Ellie glanced around them, hoping to find something to prove when and where they were. Well, they did know where, so when was the major problem.

A knock came from the door and Ellie’s head jolted to Elizabeth, whose eyebrow lifted in silent question. The latch began to sound and Ellie panicked, jumped across the bed, and leaned her weight against it.

Mrs Gardiner had come into the room the morning of the accident. What if it was her? She couldn’t find Ellie dressed as she was.

“What are you about?” asked Elizabeth while she hurried over.

“If it’s your aunt, she can’t find me here like this.”

That was when they both heard it. Ellie couldn’t say that she hadn’t known it would happen, but something inside her still jumped when she heard Mrs Gardiner’s voice.

“Lizzy? Are you awake?”

The Aunt, the Accent, and Him

Ellie widened her eyes and glared at Elizabeth, who bolted forward to join her in leaning against the door.

“Yes,” called Elizabeth through the wood against her cheek. “I woke some time ago but could not go back to sleep. I have been reading ever since.” Elizabeth shrugged at Ellie and mouthed, “I did not know what to say.”

Elizabeth jumped when Mrs Gardiner’s voice carried through the door once more. “Very well. I shall send you my maid to help you dress.”

“No!” cried Elizabeth frantically before she seemed to think twice about it. “I thank you for the offer, Aunt, but I do not require her aid. I shall join you at breakfast.”

“You will require warm water, though, Lizzy. There is a chill in the air. It would not do to refresh yourself with the water from last night.”

“Of course, you are correct. If you could have some sent up?”

“Lizzy, are you certain you are well?”

“I am quite well but a little out of sorts at the prospect of visiting Pemberley. I merely wished for some time to myself. I hope you will forgive me?”

Ellie released the breath she was holding. Her excuse was good, but would Mrs Gardiner buy it?

“I suppose it is understandable. Do not tarry for long, however, your uncle and I hoped for time to tour the gardens as well.”

The planked wooden floor of the passageway creaked when Mrs Gardiner left and they both removed their weight from the door. Elizabeth walked to the bed and dropped onto the mattress. “We shall require a reasonable excuse for who you are. No one would believe the truth, and I have no desire to see the inside of Bedlam.”

Ellie began to bite her thumbnail while she went to the window and stared at what was happening on the street below. After all this time, Elizabeth was finally here with her, but they had to do more than just re-unite her with Mr Darcy. They had to save Lydia, too. Wait! Lydia!

“What if I am an old friend of yours who holidayed in Brighton. That way, I spent time in Lydia’s company. I was travelling north with a party of friends when I bumped into you here, at the inn.”

Elizabeth stood, her face looked like she'd just found a spare fifty-pound note in the pocket of her jeans. "You could bring me news of my sister's intended elopement!" she exclaimed. "We could save her."

"That was the idea. What do you think?"

"If we catch Mr Darcy on the street, I believe the idea would work perfectly, but what if we miss him?"

"Then we go to Pemberley. In the original timeline, you met Mr Darcy on Pemberley's grounds when you toured the house with your aunt and uncle."

Her eyes had a brightness and humour that had begun to disappear during those last few days in twenty-seventeen.

Elizabeth clasped her hands in front of her. "We need to dress lest we miss him. We would have more time to save Lydia if we can locate him sooner." She threw open the lid of her trunk and began tossing items on the bed. Stockings, ribbons, and stays all landed in a pile until a knock at the door made her rise. "What do we do with you? My aunt's maid cannot see you here."

In a big hurry, Ellie scanned the room. She couldn't hide behind the screen because it didn't sit flush to the floor. The maid would see her feet. Her only choice was to . . . "I'll stand behind the door while you open it. Just make sure she doesn't close it when she enters."

With a large shift, Ellie took a step, but the floorboard let out a large groan and she froze. Elizabeth rolled her eyes and waved her further back. When she was in place, Elizabeth opened the door.

"Good mornin', Miss Bennet. I hope ya slept well."

Ellie watched Elizabeth's back while she stood and leaned on the edge of the open door, ensuring it stayed open while quick footsteps moved away from them.

"I did, thank you," responded Elizabeth, who stood so straight she appeared as though she had a pole shoved up her back.

"We should close the door so I can aid ya in your toilette, miss."

"I would prefer to attend to such matters myself this morning, but I do appreciate your offer."

"But your aunt sent me to help ya." The girl's voice was a little higher than it was normally. What if Elizabeth gave in?

“My aunt will not blame you. I crave some solitude this morning, so I shall dress myself. I promise I shall not appear at breakfast without my shoes or without wearing my chemise.”

A nervous giggle came from the maid. “Ya do usually fend for yourself, but I know ya would not do those things. I think your aunt wanted ya just so for Pemberley, though.”

“I promise I shall look my best.”

A long silence followed and Ellie’s stomach clenched while she waited. This was killer not being able to see what was going on, but when Elizabeth began to relax so did Ellie. When the door closed behind Mrs Gardiner’s maid, they both slumped.

“My aunt is suspicious or she would not have insisted the maid attend me.”

“You could always confess about Mr Darcy’s proposal,” suggested Ellie. “Wouldn’t that explain any strange behaviour?”

She bustled over to the bed and began to sort through everything. “Possibly, but we need to worry about hastening our way to the street before the post coach arrives. The towelling is beside the water. I shall help you to dress, and then, you can be of aid to me should I require it.”

After a quick wipe of her face and arms, Elizabeth handed her the chemise, which she put on, but when she passed her the stays, Ellie came from behind the partition and frowned. “No, this thing is a torture device. I thought it was brilliant when I first put it on last time because my boobs looked so good, but I couldn’t breathe and it felt like I had an underwire stabbing me in the ribs.”

Elizabeth frowned. “I do not know what an underwire is, but it will be noticeable if you do not wear them.”

Ellie grimaced and pulled them over her head. When she was finally in the gown, she emerged to find Elizabeth already wearing her chemise and stays.

“I am thankful I packed spare undergarments. I would not always, but with the long journey and the walking my aunt and uncle planned, I thought a second set prudent.” Elizabeth pushed Ellie down in front of the vanity table and then stared. “Your hair is shorter than most ladies, but I think I can manage something passable at least.”

By the time she was finished, Ellie’s scalp stung and her hair was pulled impossibly tight on her head. How she missed being in Elizabeth’s body right now! Her hair was a bit heavy, but at least the maid hadn’t pulled most of it out trying to style it!

She watched while Elizabeth hurried to fix her own hair and put on a gown. When they both finally stood before the mirror, Elizabeth examined Ellie's appearance. "'Tis the best I could do. The gown is a mite short, though not indecent.'" She pulled two pairs of boots from under the bed.

Crap! She hadn't considered shoes! Elizabeth had worn hers when she needed to, so they shouldn't be a problem. Ellie sat on the bed and slipped her foot into the opening, which wasn't difficult, but when she pushed her foot further in, her toes had to squinch together to fit. She stopped before she pulled it all the way on.

"Lizzy, did my shoes fit you?"

Elizabeth gave her a look of pity. "They were a little loose. My sisters and I use old, torn handkerchiefs when we borrow each other's slippers, so I used the thin cloths in the water closet to keep yours from shifting around on my feet."

After a big breath in, Ellie closed her eyes and pulled. When she had the boot fully on, the walls pressed against her skin, not painfully, but in an uncomfortable way. Of course, she wasn't standing yet. Hopefully, they wouldn't be walking much!"

"Can you manage?" asked Elizabeth.

"I'll make do. We need to get going, though."

Elizabeth stuffed a cloth and a few coins in a small bag and handed it to Ellie before taking another she had in the trunk. "It would look odd should you not have a reticule." Soon, they were both wearing what Elizabeth called spencers and also held gloves and bonnets.

When Ellie looked at Elizabeth, she was staring at her oddly. "What is it?"

"If I ask you a question, will you do your best to answer it, speaking as we do in this time?"

Ellie's eyes widened. "I'm not very good at it."

Elizabeth seemed not to listen since she continued, "Miss Forrester, are you from London?"

With a groan, Ellie slumped then drew herself straight again. "Indeedy, I am, miss. I've lived there for the duration of my life."

A giggle burst from Elizabeth's lips, she covered her mouth, and murmured, "Forgive me." She stared at Ellie for another moment and then shook her head. "It would be best if you did not speak."

When she turned to exit the door, Ellie grabbed Elizabeth's arm. "Where did we meet?"

"In the corridor on the way to breakfast," answered Elizabeth quickly. "I would not be allowed in the common rooms without my aunt or uncle, so it is the best response."

To be on the safe side, Elizabeth walked slightly ahead, peering around corners and ensuring they weren't seen coming from the Gardiner's suite together before they headed down the stairs to the same private room as when Ellie first travelled back.

Elizabeth paused just before they entered at the sound of Mrs Gardiner's voice. "I cannot make heads or tails of it, Edward. She has never locked the door or prevented my entry to her bedchamber. What could she have been hiding?"

"You are overreacting, my dear. Lizzy is not one to behave improperly. Perhaps she truly wanted some time to herself. She is likely at sixes and sevens at the prospect of meeting Mr Darcy again. After all, she never found pleasure in his company in the past."

"I hope you are correct," said Mrs Gardiner.

"I am. You shall see. Tea and a good breakfast will set her to rights and she shall be her usual self once she realises these great men are rarely at home. Please do not ruin our day by fretting." The lady gave a sigh. Her husband's attempts to soothe her did not seem to have helped.

"Good mornin', miss."

Ellie and Elizabeth both jumped and attempted a smile at the girl who approached from the opposite direction with a tray. The servant stopped before the door and stared at her, and Elizabeth turned and lifted her eyebrow at Ellie. "We should go in."

"Ah! Here she is!" exclaimed the gentleman, before standing and gesturing to Ellie. "But who is this?"

Elizabeth held out a hand to Ellie. "This is a friend of mine, Miss Eliza Forrester. She was travelling north from Brighton with a party of friends, but she found herself separated from them this morning. I happened upon her when I was leaving our rooms. I hope you do not mind, but I invited her to join us."

Mr Gardiner bowed and his wife curtsied while Elizabeth gave her a glare and motioned where her aunt and uncle couldn't see for Ellie to do the same. She nearly stumbled, but once she straightened, she smiled. "It is pleasurable to meet you."

Elizabeth closed her eyes and let out an almost imperceptible groan.

“You are welcome to join us. Hannah was just laying out our meal, so the food should be nice and warm.”

“Thank you,” she responded as she and Elizabeth took the other two chairs at the table.

Following Elizabeth’s lead, Ellie tried to be as graceful and use Elizabeth’s manners to serve herself. When Mrs Gardiner spoke to Mr Gardiner, Elizabeth leant over and whispered, “I thought I said not to talk.” Ellie checked to make sure the Gardiners weren’t looking and stuck her tongue out at Elizabeth.

Mrs Gardiner straightened and clasped her hands. “I know you are uneasy about visiting Pemberley, Lizzy, but I appreciate your willingness to go, despite your misgivings.”

After swallowing her bite of toast, Elizabeth clenched her hands in her lap. “Actually, Aunt, I have decided I was nonsensical. I have heard so much about the place and now anticipate viewing such splendour for myself.”

Both the Gardiners stopped what they were doing and gaped at Elizabeth. Mrs Gardiner, after glancing at her husband, dabbed her lip with her napkin. “Your change in attitude is quite sudden.”

Elizabeth lifted a shoulder. “I cannot explain at present, but should we happen to meet Mr Darcy, I shall be well. I have considered the matter and decided not to dislike the man as I once did.”

“You cannot make such a startling revelation and not explain,” said Mr Gardiner. “You are being mysterious, which is not like you.”

“I understand, Uncle, but I beg you to allow me my own counsel. I cannot explain much without revealing several confidences.”

The flat set of his lips and his exhale told how he didn’t like her response. “I would never ask you to violate a confidence, but you have always been honest and trustworthy. I suppose we shall have to trust in your judgement.”

“I appreciate your faith in me,” she said softly. “I promise I shall not disappoint you.”

Her aunt grasped Elizabeth’s hand. “We are certain you will not.”

Ellie felt rather awkward—as though she were intruding. She glanced at the clock, biting her lip. She didn’t remember what time she’d run out and was hit by the post coach. How should she determine when they had to depart? And how would they get

away from the Gardiners long enough to approach Mr Darcy? “Might I take in the view?” she requested, pointing at the window. “I might see one of my friends outside.”

Mrs Gardiner gave a dip of her chin. “Of course.”

Elizabeth gave her a confused look, but Ellie wandered to the window anyway and watched the street below. Nothing seemed familiar. The buildings were similar to the last time she was here, people and riders on horseback travelled up and down the road, and a lone dog ran across, probably barking at a stray cat. Then, three boys ran to the horse chestnut tree on the green across from the blacksmith’s and began to climb its branches.

With a gasp, she whirled around and waved to get Elizabeth’s attention. The Gardiners weren’t watching, they were speaking of something to one another, so when Elizabeth looked up, Ellie began pointing to the door and mouthing, “We have to go!”

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. “What?” she said silently.

“We have to go!” She pointed furiously at the door again. Come on, Elizabeth! She had to understand at some point, didn’t she?

When she looked again at the Gardiners, they were staring at her with their mouths open—fortunately, they had no food in there!

“Sorry, but I thought I saw one of my friends.”

Though she appeared to want to bury her face in her hands, Elizabeth placed her napkin upon the table. “Perhaps I should escort Eliza outside. I do not believe she should be without a companion in an inn, much less in a strange town.”

Mrs Gardiner glanced between the two of them. “I do not see the harm in it. We shall be departing in the next half-hour so do not go far.”

“We shall not,” she answered while rising from her seat. “We shall be just in front of the inn.”

They walked out of the room as normally as they could, but once they were in the corridor, Ellie grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and tugged her towards the stairs. “If we don’t hurry, we’ll be too late.”

“You know the precise time?” asked Elizabeth as she put on her bonnet.

“No, but I looked out of the window before I ran downstairs and in front of the post coach last time. The same boys just ran to play on the green.” Ellie followed Elizabeth’s lead and put on her bonnet and gloves.

When they reached the front room, they stopped talking and wove through the few people who were speaking with the proprietor behind the counter. Ellie turned the latch and squinted when the sudden brightness of the outdoors assaulted her senses. Elizabeth followed her across the road where they watched the front of the inn.

Elizabeth stepped beside her. "How much longer?"

"Just wait a moment," said Ellie, holding up her hand. That was when the commotion and the noise of the post coach and its team could be heard as it rounded the corner.

"I cannot believe you jumped in front of that."

"I thought this was all some fantastic dream. If I'd known it was reality, I would never have thought of doing it."

As much as she wanted to watch the coach, she scanned the street. That was when she saw him. Dressed in the finest of riding attire, he sat tall and statuesque upon his horse that trotted in the opposite direction of the post coach. No wonder he'd stopped. He had a perfect view of the accident when it happened.

"There he is," she said to Elizabeth. "Are you ready?"

"I do not know if I can manage this. What if he does not believe me?"

"He will believe you. You were just terrified you'd never see him again, and now, you are delaying. Let's go. We have to save Lydia, remember? Let's get you your happy ever after."

Elizabeth pulled in a huge breath and almost lunged forward, walking in a hurry towards Mr Darcy's horse while Ellie trailed behind her. That was when Ellie had what she thought was the most brilliant idea. She took a running step and grabbed the back of Elizabeth's bonnet, which was not tied snugly around her chin, causing it to fall from her head and onto her back.

A gasp came from Elizabeth as she stopped and reached for her hat to place it back on her head. That was when they heard a deep, familiar voice exclaim, "Miss Bennet!"

Questions, Schemes, and Ultimatums

“Miss Bennet!”

Elizabeth glanced back at Ellie exasperated and hurried to put on her bonnet while Mr Darcy, after stopping his horse and staring as though he'd seen a ghost, approached. In a fluid motion, he dismounted, stepped forward, and bowed gracefully before Elizabeth, who still struggled to straighten her bonnet as she stumbled over her own foot in a pathetic attempt at a curtsy. Both of them blushed and turned vivid shades of red until Ellie thought Elizabeth might burst. Was she holding her breath? She'd pass out if she kept on!

“Miss Bennet,” he repeated, “I must say how surprised I am to find you in Lambton. Have you been in the area long?”

Elizabeth clasped her hands before her and shifted in place. “We have been here but two days, sir.”

“And where are you staying?”

“At the inn.” Elizabeth pointed to the building nearby while Mr Darcy never removed his eyes from her.

He gave an odd sort of chuckle. “Of course. I suppose you have travelled with your family?” He peered over at Ellie, but only for a second before his eyes latched greedily back on Elizabeth. “I hope they are well.”

Ellie pressed her lips together to keep from making a sarcastic comment. She'd thought it before, but how could Elizabeth ever have thought Mr Darcy didn't like her? The man drank her in with his eyes like he was savouring an expensive glass of wine. Seriously? Did the man ever blink? He'd have to soon or his eyes might dry up!

“I am here with my aunt and uncle. My family with the exception of my youngest sister, however, are at Longbourn and are quite well. I thank you.”

He looked to Ellie again. “Would you do me the honour of introducing me to your friend?”

Elizabeth angled and held out a shaky hand towards her. “Mr Darcy, this is Miss Eliza Forrester, a good friend of mine from London.”

Ellie gave a wobbly curtsy. “It's lovely to meet you.”

He gave her a peculiar almost frown while he bowed, but couldn't keep his eyes from Elizabeth for long and quickly ignored Ellie in favour of his infatuation. “I could

not help but notice that you mentioned Miss Lydia specifically. I hope she is not unwell?"

Elizabeth peeked at Ellie. They'd hoped he would ask since it would not be as acceptable for Elizabeth to unload her family's dirty laundry without a sort of invitation. "I do not believe her to be unwell," she began, her voice hesitant. "She is staying in Brighton with friends, though I confess this morning I have heard news of her that worries me exceedingly."

His brows furrowed. "But you said you believed her to be well."

"Oh, she is well in body, but I fear she may have found herself in a troublesome situation. Miss Forrester, you see, was also in Brighton until a few days ago when she decided to travel north with her party. She has relayed some disturbing information regarding my sister that has me at sixes and sevens."

While Elizabeth spoke, she began wringing her hands and tears pooled in her eyes. Of course, her emotions weren't scripted, but were Elizabeth's true feelings on Lydia's situation. Mr Darcy stepped closer, obviously sympathetic to Elizabeth's upset, though not as close as Ellie would like. He watched her with such intensity Ellie was surprised Elizabeth wasn't bursting into flame. What was with this time period? Why couldn't he just pull her in his arms and kiss her right there in the street? It was so frustrating!

"Surely she is in the care of someone responsible?"

"She is the particular friend of Mrs Forster, the colonel's wife, but I fear Mrs Forster is just as silly and heedless as Lydia. I am not certain if the colonel knows of her plans. I cannot imagine my sister informing him of them."

"Her plans?" His brows drew down in the middle.

"Even before Lydia departed Meryton, she has oft times enjoyed the society of Mr Wickham. I have heard they are thrown together often in Brighton. You must know him well enough to know what he is capable of—your history with the man must give you some idea of the rest." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper at the last.

His eyes flared and he looked around them. "But are you certain? Could there be any mistake in the matter?"

Clutching her reticule, Elizabeth swallowed and shook her head. "I fear not. Lydia has confided in my good friend here, certainly bragging of what she believes to be her good fortune in securing him in marriage. Since she did not know we would happen

upon one another here, Miss Forrester sent me a letter at Longbourn, but I shall not receive it until our return. By then, I know it will be too late. Lydia will be lost to us.”

Mr Darcy’s concerned expression was everything Ellie could’ve hoped for. His forehead sported worry lines and he brought his fist to his mouth several times as though fighting an emotional response. When Elizabeth finished her last statement, he turned to the inn. “Perhaps we should continue this where we have more privacy and perhaps we could get you something for your relief. A glass of wine, maybe?”

He tugged at his horse’s reins as he walked beside Elizabeth towards the inn. When they approached, a young boy rushed forward from the stable and took the horse, accepting a coin from Mr Darcy for his trouble.

As they neared the door, it opened and they came face to face with the Gardiners. “Lizzy!” exclaimed Mrs Gardiner with her hand to her chest. “We were just going to search for you. Are you ready to depart?”

“Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour?”

The Gardiner’s both gaped at the tall, handsome stranger behind Elizabeth with some concern, but before they could speak, their niece rushed out, “Mr Darcy, may I present my uncle Mr Edward Gardiner and his wife, Mrs Gardiner.”

He dipped his chin in greeting. “Forgive me for delaying your outing, but Miss Bennet was relaying some information to me of the utmost importance.”

Her aunt and uncle almost appeared comical with their similarly raised eyebrows and open mouths as they turned to Elizabeth. “You were?” asked her uncle.

Instead of Elizabeth responding as they might have expected, Mr Darcy nodded. “Yes, sir, but I believe the remainder is better said without the possibility of being overheard. If you have a private room, we could discuss it there or I would be happy to arrange for a room if it is necessary.”

Both of the Gardiners appeared extremely displeased, but led the way back up to the breakfast parlour they had just occupied, closing the door behind them once they were all inside. Her uncle removed his hat and crossed his arms over his chest. “We just sat down to breakfast together, Lizzy. If you had such important information for Mr Darcy, why did you not say as much then? In fact, you have behaved in the most peculiar manner this morning. First, you would not allow your aunt inside your bedchamber, not to mention your sudden interest in visiting a place you wished to avoid

until today.” He dipped his head, obviously conveying his meaning while not offending Mr Darcy.

“Because I only just learnt of Lydia’s intentions when I happened upon Miss Forrester this morning.” She tugged at her gloves, removing them and her hat while she spoke. “While I have every faith in you and my aunt, Mr Darcy is familiar with the man whose schemes could ruin our family. I require his opinion and counsel if he is generous enough to provide it.”

Mrs Gardiner stepped forward and took Elizabeth’s hands. “Calm yourself, my dear. I confess I am quite confused by the bits and pieces you have told us as well as by what you have not. Please tell us all you have learnt from the beginning.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “When I left our rooms this morning for breakfast, I happened upon Miss Forrester, as you well know. As I said earlier, she was travelling north with a party of friends that broke their journey here. Unfortunately, they were separated. Before travelling, Miss Forrester spent the last few weeks in Brighton where she was in the company of Lydia on several occasions. Before she departed, my silly, stupid sister confided in Miss Forrester her intention of eloping with Mr Wickham.”

Though Mr and Mrs Gardiner both gasped and appeared shocked, her uncle’s shock quickly turned to disbelief. “She is by no means unprotected,” he defended. “But I would imagine Lydia is doing no more than bragging in the hopes of making herself more important than she is. I doubt there is any reason for concern.”

Mr Darcy, who closed his eyes at Elizabeth’s revelation, opened them, and shook his head. “I find it unlikely he intends to marry her, but he might spin such a web if he intends to ruin her. He has used such deception in the past.”

“I saw them together a lot,” interjected Ellie, probably a little louder than she should. “They were always together at parties and Lydia was definitely flirting with him. I’m certain they hooked up.”

Elizabeth’s eyes flared at Ellie. Yes, Elizabeth had told her not to say a word, but the Gardiners weren’t taking this seriously! Elizabeth had to convince them and if she wasn’t able to do it on her own, it was up to Ellie to make them see. Lydia had to be saved since now, it wasn’t so much Elizabeth needing to return as it was Ellie wanting to go home when this was all over. “I also overheard the officers laughing about Wickham using Lydia. He is messing with her head and she doesn’t see it at all. She believes he wants to marry her. He’ll lie to her, con her, and before anyone can fix it, she’ll be lost.”

“Where do you hail from, Miss Forrester?” asked Mr Gardiner, narrowing his eyes. “You have a peculiar accent. I have travelled all over England, but I am afraid I cannot place it.”

Elizabeth gave an indignant huff. “Really, Uncle. I have been acquainted with Miss Forrester for long enough to know she only means to help. What does it matter where she lives?”

“You must admit it is suspicious, Lizzy,” her uncle pointed out. “I have never heard you mention a Miss Forrester before, ever. Then, she appears today as though from nothing, having lost her party of friends, and tells you this story of Lydia and an elopement. Why should we believe her?”

Standing to her fullest height, Elizabeth’s eyes shot daggers. “Miss Forrester’s integrity in this matter is unimpeachable. I would trust her with my life and that of any of my family, including Jane. She informed me of Lydia’s intentions without expectation of reward and has offered her help. She merely wishes to be of aid. If you refuse to believe Miss Forrester, I insist you trust me on this matter. I would never lie about something this important. You must know that.”

“Lizzy,” her aunt attempted to soothe. “You cannot deny that your uncle’s concern is valid. This young woman appears and is either silent or speaks in an odd fashion, and you have never made mention of a Miss Forrester to me either.”

Ellie put a hand to Elizabeth’s shoulder, scrambling together a lie. “I am originally from London, but my family travels a lot so I am not often there. I have been to America and India which could be why you do not recognise my accent. I would not upset Lizzy like I have if I didn’t think it was absolutely necessary. Lydia is in trouble. I promise.” Unfortunately, Mr and Mrs Gardiner didn’t look convinced at all and Mr Darcy’s eyes narrowed a little when he looked at her. What if he was sceptical now, too?”

“I am aware of Mr Wickham’s charm with the fairer sex and his debauchery,” said Mr Darcy. “If Miss Lydia claims they will elope, he has likely concocted some scheme and proposed to her for some nefarious purpose. For some time, he has sought a wife with a fortune. If he desires to live in the style he has always coveted, he must wed for money. He will not take Miss Lydia for his wife. He is deceiving her.”

“There, you heard Mr Darcy!” cried Mr Gardiner with an outstretched arm in Mr Darcy’s direction. “Mr Wickham would have no interest in eloping with Lydia since she

has no fortune. Colonel Forster would also prevent any such schemes or send Lydia home to your father.”

“He has no intention of marrying her.” Elizabeth was near tears and barely holding herself together. Why were her aunt and uncle so stubborn? Somehow, they needed to be convinced or they could kiss Lydia goodbye. “Mr Darcy also said he is possibly deceiving her in some way, Uncle! Why can you not accept this as a possibility?”

“”Tis too much and too sudden to be accepted without question, Lizzy,” said her uncle. “Why have we had no letters from Longbourn? Surely, Colonel Forster would notify your father if such a scheme were afoot.”

“Perhaps this letter has not yet been delivered.” Both of Elizabeth’s arms fell to her sides and her hands clenched into tight fists. “I intend to try to prevent Lydia from ruining herself and our entire family’s respectability. If you do not believe Miss Forrester, then you may do as you wish and continue on to Pemberley. Eliza and I will forge ahead on our own.”

“You cannot be serious!” yelled Mr Gardiner. “I forbid it! You are under my protection and my authority. I will not have you traipsing all over England on a wild goose chase!”

Despite her respect for her uncle, Elizabeth didn’t back down. “I have my pin money, and I have no qualms travelling by post coach with Eliza should it be necessary.” Her aunt and uncle heaved in a shocked breath while Mr Darcy seemed more like he was fighting a smile than horrified by his beloved’s presumption. “You may not believe my friend, but I have every faith in her trustworthiness. Aunt, Uncle, I am disappointed you do not trust me—”

“Lizzy,” chided her aunt. “Do not say that which you might regret.”

Elizabeth’s lashes were wet with unshed tears while she blinked rapidly. “I shall go to my sister’s aid. With or without your help. Though, I do wish you would trust me. If a tragedy befalls my sister, I would feel responsible because I knew and did not go to her aid. I could never forgive myself.”

A look passed between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. In Elizabeth’s letter, Mr Darcy spoke of his sister’s planned elopement with Mr Wickham. Could he identify with her feelings in such a situation? He must or he would not have wanted to hear every dirty detail—not that they could share everything they knew. If they did that, they’d never get anywhere but the nearest asylum.

“I shall help you.” All eyes turned to Mr Darcy, who still maintained a straight face. “Mr Wickham should never be trusted with a young lady’s virtue. As I said earlier, if Miss Lydia claims they will elope, he has likely concocted some scheme and proposed to her for some nefarious purpose, since, for some time, he has sought a wife with a fortune. I also could not allow Miss Bennet or Miss Forrester to travel by post coach and without the proper protection.”

“She must still have my permission, Mr Darcy,” said Mr Gardiner, throwing his hands in the air. What would happen if Mr Gardiner didn’t let Elizabeth go? Would she be willing to sneak out during the night?

“With all due respect, sir. Your niece has indicated her intention of travelling by post coach, if necessary, with no one to accompany her but her friend. You cannot guard her day and night to prevent her from departing without your knowledge. I would much prefer to ensure her safety than leave her to her own devices.”

“I apologise for imposing as I have, Mr Darcy.” Elizabeth wrung her hands. “I just do not see any other way.”

“Please do not apologise,” he said soothingly. “Were I in a similar situation, I would act in precisely the same manner.” He studied Elizabeth’s expression as he slightly dipped his head. “I hope you realise that I am in earnest in my offer to be of aid, but I must make arrangements as soon as possible. Before I begin, I must ask, do you desire my help? Will you accept my aid?”

Tours, Travels, and Near Confessions

“Yes!” Elizabeth’s entire body jumped when she responded. “I am humbled and honoured by your generosity, sir. I thank you for your offer and accept.”

A barely noticeable curve appeared on Mr Darcy’s lips and Ellie wondered if he believed Elizabeth’s claims about Lydia or if he was simply over the moon about being in Elizabeth’s company for the trip to Brighton. She’d need to talk to Elizabeth soon. Depending on how long it took to get to Brighton, they might have to catch Wickham and Lydia on the road.

Before she could whisper in Elizabeth’s ear, Mr Gardiner rubbed the shiny, bald top of his head. “Even with the roads in good condition and a decent carriage, we are a four-day’s journey from Brighton. If we encounter rain or muddy roads, the trip could be significantly longer. I am hesitant to give any of this much credence, but if this story is true, we have little way of preventing what is already set in motion.”

“We can use my coach,” offered Mr Darcy. “Days are long this time of year. We could depart as soon as you are packed, or I could have my servants gather your belongings and follow. If we hope to catch them, we will need to travel day and night without stopping for sleep.” He set a direct gaze at Elizabeth. “I warn you, this is not an endeavour for the faint of heart.”

With an outstretched hand, Elizabeth approached Mr Darcy. “I have no objections to what you propose, Mr Darcy. I cannot thank you enough for your willingness to help my family.” He bowed over her hand, while her aunt and uncle shared a perplexed look.

Mr Gardiner let out an exasperated breath. “Mr Darcy, you cannot believe this story to be true? Please understand, I trust my niece, but I believe this to be set upon nothing. Lydia would lie for the sheer attention of it, and I have never met this young woman in my life.” He pointed to Ellie, acting more frustrated than angry.

With his hands clasped behind his back, Mr Darcy’s expression spoke of sympathy. “Regardless of whether the situation is true or not, Miss Bennet believes with her entire being this will occur, and I trust *her*. If she has been misled, we shall know soon enough. In the meantime, I have a younger sister, and if I were in Miss Bennet’s place, I would pray for someone to trust in my judgement so I could do my utmost to save her. I shall be at Miss Bennet’s disposal until we discover what has become of Miss Lydia.”

“We should arrange for our trunks to be readied,” murmured Mrs Gardiner. Her aunt was obviously not going to allow her beloved niece to travel for several days in a coach with a stranger and Mr Darcy despite her disappointment in cutting her holiday short. “I am not certain of how you came to be involved, Mr Darcy, but should this all be true, our family will certainly owe you a debt of gratitude.” Mrs Gardiner’s tone was wary and disappointed all at the same time. “Edward?”

He held up his hands and blew out a frustrated breath. “I shall settle the bill with the innkeeper. He levelled an odd look at Ellie before he followed his wife out, leaving Mr Darcy with the two of them.

This was it! An opportunity for Elizabeth to set everything right! Ellie walked to the window and pretended the view outside was as interesting as her favourite show on the telly, but nothing but silence came from behind her. Only the scuffling of feet along the wood floor reached her ears. Oh, come on, Lizzy!

Elizabeth slumped into a chair and sighed, causing Mr Darcy to rush to her side. “Is there nothing you could take to give you relief? A glass of wine—shall I get you one? You are very ill.”

Thank you, but I am as well as I can be,” she began, but paused for a moment before continuing, “Before another word is said, I must beg your forgiveness for our encounter in Hunsford. I was intemperate and should not have abused you so.”

“What did you say that I did not deserve?” He spoke so softly Ellie had to strain to hear. “My behaviour was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence.”

“We will not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to that evening,” said Elizabeth. “The conduct of neither, if strictly examined, was irreproachable. But since then we have both, I hope, improved in civility.”

“I should have warned Meryton of Mr Wickham’s dissolute ways. Your sister might not be at risk if I had thought to speak more openly of my dealings with the man.”

“You could not risk those you love.”

“Those circumstances need not have been mentioned. Mr Wickham has done enough to warrant a wide berth from respectable families and merchants alike without considering the offences against my family.”

“Regardless,” said Elizabeth, and Ellie could just imagine the slight shake of her head and her determined expression as she brought the conversation back to the original

topic. "I cannot express how thankful I am for your faith and willingness to be of aid. I am ashamed of the manner in which I treated you. You are truly the best of men."

Ellie bit her lip, stiffened, and waited. Would he take this as her declaration or would he assume she meant nothing more than she was mistaken?

"Do you truly mean that?" His voice held a note of awe and disbelief.

"I do. You could have been as sceptical as my aunt and uncle, yet you believed me without question and offered your coach to escort us. My gratitude knows no bounds."

No! Ellie cringed and bit her lip, remembering Mr Darcy's reaction when she was in Elizabeth's place and said she was "grateful." He had not been thrilled.

"I have no wish for your gratitude," he almost spat out.

"Yet you have it. I only hope one day you will forgive me for my misjudgement and cruel words." Elizabeth's tone hardened. She had no idea how she'd offended him.

He sighed. "I was, perhaps, angry at first, but then my anger took a proper direction. I assure you, I forgave you long ago, so think on it no more. I should arrange for a carriage to transport you and your aunt and uncle to Pemberley so we can depart from there. If you will excuse me."

His heavy footfalls carried him from the room, and Ellie turned around to find a baffled Elizabeth. "What did I say?" she asked. "I did not mean to cause such offence."

"You said you were grateful. I said the same thing one time when I was you and he became upset then, too."

"But I am grateful." Her brows drew down in the middle while she glanced at the door and back. "He is so stubborn and insufferable! What could he possibly find objectionable in my gratitude?"

"He doesn't want you to feel like you have to be with him."

"Oh, good heavens! For a man who claims to love me, he should know I would never accept his hand out of gratitude or obligation. He can be the most infuriating man!" She stalked over to the window and looked outside a moment muttering under her breath.

"How we spend a lifetime together and as happy as Tom said is beyond my comprehension."

Ellie didn't have the best record when it came to love, but she still decided to try. "People in love are not always wise and don't often see things in the most obvious way. They say 'love is blind' and it really is, you know? Greg was an ass for the entire time we were together, but I ignored it because I thought I loved him. Mr Darcy probably

remembers what you said to him when he proposed and fears you will never love him. The thought of you marrying him only because you feel 'grateful' would be a kick in the balls."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Elizabeth wide-eyed. "I am unfamiliar with that phrase."

"A kick in the balls?" At Elizabeth's nod, Ellie pointed to the juncture of her legs. "You know, a kick to the most sensitive part of his body."

Elizabeth blushed. "I know a little of farm animals, but I know very little of what is beneath a man's clothes. Do not tell me more for I fear I might be tempted to stare when I finally learn."

After they both giggled, Elizabeth sighed and shook her head. "He is such a proud man, but in the very best sense of course. I never treated him civilly in the past. I thought he was disagreeable and enjoyed challenging him. Now, it seems I cannot speak to him without offending him."

"The two of you will work it out." Ellie grinned and winked. "You have several days in a carriage to do it, too."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, "with you, my aunt, and my uncle. I cannot speak of my feelings so freely. That may be the way of those in your day, but I must wait for him to confess his love before I can tell him mine."

They both jumped in their boots, literally, when Mr Darcy returned. "I passed Mr Gardiner in the hall. Mrs Gardiner's maid is packing your trunk, and the carriage I have arranged from the inn will return to convey the servants and your belongings to Pemberley as soon as the trunks are prepared. It awaits us out front."

Elizabeth took a few steps so she stood directly in front of him. "I had no intention of offending you earlier. Please forgive me."

His lips pressed together. "I am pleased you have pardoned me for my dreadful words at Hunsford, but I have no desire for your gratitude. I would never have you feel obliged to me." His mouth curled like he tasted something disgusting.

Ellie couldn't resist peeking. Elizabeth's one eyebrow arched. "And what would I be obliged to do, Mr Darcy?"

His mouth opened and closed several times while his forehead crinkled. "I—I am not sure."

She took her gloves from the table and began to pull them onto her fingers. "Oh, I think you know, and I would hope you know my character better than to believe I

would do anything, particularly making a decision that affects my entire life, out of obligation, sir.” She put on her bonnet and hurried out the door.

Ellie grabbed her own hat and gloves, and rushed after Elizabeth, catching her just outside the door. “You certainly told him off.” With a giggle, they hurried down the stairs

Instead of the look of triumph Ellie expected, Elizabeth pressed a hand to her stomach. “I have likely ruined any hope and doomed Tom.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. You already said you were horrible to him when you first knew him, and he still fell in love with you. I don’t think you need to stress about setting him straight now.”

“I hope you are referring to the state of my nerves.” They stepped into the sunlight and blinked until their eyes adjusted, but turned quickly at the sound of someone’s throat clearing behind them.

“I appreciate your clarification, Miss Bennet.” He held out his hand towards the carriage in front of them. “Would you care to wait inside until your aunt and uncle join us? They should not be long.”

“Thank you, Mr Darcy,” she responded. With the help of his hand, they both boarded the carriage. Elizabeth insisted Ellie sit in the far corner so Elizabeth would have to sit beside her aunt. “Otherwise, she might insist on speaking to you. I would also not be averse to you feigning sleep for as much of the journey as possible.”

“Glad to know I am so useless,” said Ellie drily.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I never said as much, as you are well aware. My aunt and uncle are suspicious of you and it would be best if you give them nothing else to hold against you.” Ellie opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when Elizabeth turned to watch Mr Darcy through the window.

He now sat tall upon his large stallion while it stomped and snorted in frustration at being idle. As he turned his horse in a small circle, he looked up and it appeared their eyes met until he had to complete the circuit. Elizabeth looked down to her hands in her lap, her cheeks pinker than usual.

When the Gardiner’s joined them, Mrs Gardiner sat in the seat across from Ellie with her husband beside her rather than with Elizabeth. With the intention of behaving as much like Elizabeth as she could, Ellie stared out of the window or at her reticule when they began moving and avoided making eye contact with the woman. She didn’t

feel that Mrs Gardiner was particularly angry with her or found her threatening, but instead, it was like Mrs Gardiner was trying to figure her out. How she wished she could've enjoyed her first carriage ride, but the strange prickling feeling of being watched kept her from relaxing and expressing her excitement.

Elizabeth took Ellie's hand when they entered the Pemberley gates and held tight as they approached the house. The light limestone glistened in the pleasant weather and the sun's rays glinted from the lake, two swans gliding gracefully across its surface. The house had never looked so beautiful. It was not so dissimilar to the way it looked in the future, but several little details differentiated this Pemberley from the one Ellie was more accustomed to and made it seem in better repair.

Upon their entrance, the surprised housekeeper and obviously Ruby Reynolds' ancestor, Mrs Reynolds, showed them to a comfortable drawing room, but when Mr Darcy explained the Gardiners had planned to tour the house that day, she showed them around while Mr Darcy attended whatever business he had to complete before they could leave.

Mrs Gardiner's demeanour improved while Mrs Reynolds ushered them into sumptuous rooms, pointing out bits and bobs about the family and the history of the home. Elizabeth's aunt had so looked forward to seeing Pemberley that she must have been pleased not to miss it because of Ellie and Elizabeth's foolishness.

Tea and little cakes and biscuits waited for them when they returned to the dining room and Mrs Gardiner gushed about the tour and the bits she enjoyed the most until Mr Darcy joined them.

He just began to lower himself into a chair when Mrs Gardiner dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. "Mr Darcy, would you mind if my husband and I walked around the gardens closest to the house before we depart?"

He stood and held out his arm. "I do not mind at all. I am certain a walk would be beneficial before such a long journey. I shall send for a gardener to give you a tour."

"Please sit and enjoy your refreshments, sir," insisted Mrs Gardiner. "We are content to walk and enjoy the scenery. We would not wish to be an imposition. Would we, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth glanced back and forth between Mr Darcy and her aunt and uncle. "Of course not."

Mrs Gardiner held out her hand. "Will you not join us?"

“I believe I should remain with my friend,” responded Elizabeth. “I hope that is acceptable.”

Mr and Mrs Gardiner looked between Elizabeth, Mr Darcy, and Ellie. Were they attempting to decide if Mr Darcy was keeping an eye on Ellie and Elizabeth or whether Ellie was a decent chaperone for Elizabeth and Mr Darcy?

They appeared disappointed when they left the room, but Mr Darcy, after whispering a few words to a departing footman, returned and sat in the chair closest to Elizabeth. Ellie pressed her lips together tight to keep from grinning and walked to the window.

“I hope you enjoyed your tour, Miss Bennet?”

“I did, very much.” Her voice warmed as she spoke and Ellie could just imagine her smile.

“I hope you found Pemberley to your liking?” In contrast to Elizabeth’s tone, Mr Darcy’s was stiff and uncomfortable.

“’Tis a fine house and the grounds, from what I have seen, are stunning. I am certain there are few who would find Pemberley wanting.”

“I have only ever cared that you approve.” He spoke softer and in a way that sounded yearning.

“I do,” Elizabeth almost whispered. “I approve of it very much.”

Ellie peeked back for a moment because she had to see Mr Darcy’s reaction—it did not disappoint, either. While Elizabeth sat with her hands clenched in her lap, Mr Darcy sat frozen and staring. How could a man be so tongue-tied!

“’Tis unfortunate we must hasten to leave. My sister and a party of friends will arrive later today. There are some who can claim an acquaintance with you.”

At her confused look, he set his teacup back in its saucer. “Mr Bingley and his sisters. My sister has been quite eager to make your acquaintance, but we must depart before that can happen.”

“I had not realised you expected guests. Please forgive me for involving you in my family’s affairs when you undoubtedly have more important demands on your time.” Out of the corner of Ellie’s eye, Elizabeth became visible when she began pacing before the fireplace. “I should greatly enjoy meeting your sister should the occasion arise. I am certain she is an amiable young lady.”

“Please do not distress yourself,” said Mr Darcy, who stopped Elizabeth’s frantic back and forth by placing his hands on her shoulders. “I was in earnest when I offered to be of aid to you. My sister and her companion do not require my supervision, and the Bingleys and the Hursts will not linger as they would with my company but depart for Yorkshire on the morrow.” He removed his hands while Elizabeth’s lip curved just a little.

“I am causing you so much trouble. You are very kind to put up with it.”

His low laugh sounded so much like Tom’s and Ellie started at the familiarity of it. She missed Tom. Had he disappeared when they fell or did he even remember any of this at all? Her stomach tightened and she shook it out of her head. She couldn’t think about Tom right now. They had to find Lydia. Then, she could concentrate on Tom all she wanted.

“I am certain you believe intervening a necessity. Besides, I could never think you a bother. You must know that.”

A shuddering breath broke the quiet after Mr Darcy’s words. “I have been so wrong,” whispered Elizabeth, “so blind.”

Mr Darcy’s fingers hesitantly reached towards Elizabeth’s face, trailing from her temple to her chin while Elizabeth’s eyes closed and she tilted her head into his hand.

“Elizabeth—”

“Mr Darcy, the coach is prepared and awaits you in front of the house,” said the footman who suddenly appeared in the doorway.

Elizabeth shifted back and watched the empty fireplace while Mr Darcy clenched his hands at his sides. “Thank you, Matthew.”

Ellie reached to the closest tray, picked up a tiny apricot tart, and shoved it into her mouth whole in a way that would have appalled Mrs Gardiner. So much for all this standing about at windows like a daft cow! It was getting them nowhere!

Boredom, Books, and Betrothals

Ellie stared at the trees and fields as they passed endlessly by the window. How did people travel like this? No music, no audiobooks, and no phones with Bluetooth to keep your mind busy. She couldn't talk to the Gardiners because they were suspicious of her, and Elizabeth had told her to keep quiet anyway. She was bored. Bored, bored, bored!

They'd left hours ago, shortly after the footman delivered the message of the coach being prepared. The Gardiners were fetched from the grounds, and Mr Darcy allowed them to select books if they wished from his library before they loaded into the carriage and left Pemberley. Problem was that Ellie didn't know what book to choose because most of what she liked to read hadn't been written yet. There were definitely no Mills and Boon bodice rippers and she wasn't reading poetry!

For a while, Mr Gardiner and Mr Darcy spoke of business matters and investments, but that might as well have been electronics instructions as far as Ellie was concerned. The two men were silent now, but she couldn't speak to Elizabeth without whispering and she worried that was considered rude. Whispering to one person in a group was rude—even in her time, wasn't it?

She also didn't want to attract Mrs Gardiner's attention any more than she already had. The lady now read from a small book she carried in her reticule, but Ellie didn't doubt that Elizabeth's aunt would forget about that book instantly if she spoke.

The coach had already stopped once for a change of horses, but with the rush of their trip, they didn't go inside the inn for tea. Instead, they all visited the "necessary" and returned aboard the coach as soon as it was ready for the next two-hour leg. How she missed modern plumbing at that moment! Even a petrol station toilet was preferable to what she had to use in the nineteenth century. She shuddered at the thought.

At least the seats in Mr Darcy's coach didn't feel like sitting on the squished, flat cushion of a church pew like the carriage from the inn. Mr Gardiner seemed to find them comfortable enough since he now appeared to be sleeping with his head leaned against the side wall.

Mr Darcy, who now rode with them rather than riding his horse, stared at Elizabeth, who did not let it faze her, but stared right back in return when she wasn't trying to read the book he gave her from his library. Well done, Lizzy! If he was still in doubt of her feelings by the end of all this, he would need to be checked for brain damage. Elizabeth

definitely didn't leave any room for misinterpretation with the slight curve of her lips and the almost flirtatious look in her eye when she glanced between the page and him. He couldn't be so dense, could he?

The horses began to slow, and Mr Darcy broke his gaze from his favourite view to peer out the window. "We have arrived at the next coaching inn."

Ellie leaned towards the glass to take in the small village that lay beyond while Mr Darcy's man set the step and opened the door. Once Mr Darcy and Mr Gardiner helped the ladies from the coach, Mr Darcy spoke with the driver then returned. "There are four carriages before us, so we must wait. We could take refreshments in the inn if anyone is hungry?"

"I believe that would be prudent, sir," responded Mrs Gardiner.

A strange smell hit Ellie's nose when they entered and she coughed in an attempt not to gag. She hadn't noticed anything at the inn in Lambton, but this inn was busier and they were forced to walk through a group of people who reeked of stale sweat and body odour. With a wave of her hand, she swallowed and followed Elizabeth. Good Lord! When had these people bathed last?

She breathed easier when they were shown into a private room and served a type of stew and crusty bread followed by tea and cake, which was better than anything Ellie had ever eaten in the twenty-first century—although the tea was rather weak. She smiled, remembering Elizabeth's letter and the book Tom gave her. How she wished she had that to read now!

After Elizabeth and Ellie finished their tea, they wanted to walk through the village before being confined once again to the carriage, but Mrs Gardiner preferred to remain behind. Her aunt and uncle did, however, agree to allow Elizabeth to walk with Mr Darcy as an escort, so Ellie followed Elizabeth and Mr Darcy from the inn.

When they had walked the full length of the street and were about to turn back, Mr Darcy stopped and faced Elizabeth, causing Ellie to come to a sudden halt or run into his side. "What you said before we left the inn. It has given me reason to hope as I have scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before."

Ellie bit her lip and at Mr Darcy's quick glance in her direction, she turned, took a few steps away, and watched the ducks waddle around the small pond near the churchyard.

She heard his deep breath. "I must ask before we lose what little privacy we have. You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. *My* affections and wishes are unchanged; but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever."

"My feelings, they are so different to what they were then."

"Truly?" he asked, his tone speaking of his astonishment.

"Yes, truly." Elizabeth's laugh rang as clear as a church bell on Sunday morning. "I meant what I said. I do consider you the best of men. I realised, only when I thought it was too late, how much I love you."

"Why would it be too late?"

"Because of Lydia's foolishness. Do you truly want to connect yourself with a family in disgrace? How do I allow you to put your own sister's future at risk?"

Ellie peeked out of the corner of her eye to find him holding both of Elizabeth's hands. "I shall find a solution. I will find a way for us to marry. I promise you."

Elizabeth giggled. "Was that a proposal of marriage, Mr Darcy?"

His low chuckle joined hers. "I suppose I did forget an important step, did I not?"

"A lady only becomes betrothed once and I confess I would prefer to be asked properly if you do not object."

"My dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, you must allow me to tell you how I ardently admire and love you." At her groan, his dimples appeared. "I have loved you since you first turned your sparkling eyes in my direction. At Hunsford, you showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. You humbled me, and I did no more than merely exist until I happened upon you again in Lambton. I do not merely wish to exist, Elizabeth. I need you to live. Would you make me the happiest of men and marry me?"

Elizabeth sniffled. "Yes, I will marry you, Fitzwilliam Darcy. I need you as well."

If they had been in a more private place, Ellie was sure he would've taken her in his arms, but since they stood in the street and people were milling around the village, they simply grinned like fools at one another.

Ellie was so happy! They were engaged! When she returned, Tom would be there waiting and Pemberley would be looking as it did when she left. She'd accomplished most of what she was supposed to, but now, they had to find Lydia so everything was perfect.

After Elizabeth and Mr Darcy whispered to one another for a moment, Elizabeth rushed over to Ellie and hugged her. "He asked me to marry him. We are betrothed!"

"I heard," she said softly. "I am so excited for you."

Elizabeth drew back with her hands still on Ellie's shoulders "If only I could see you so happy."

"I am sure I will be once I go home."

With shaky hands, Elizabeth brushed a tear from her cheek. "Of course, I shall never see you and Tom again once you return."

"Don't let it depress you now," urged Ellie. "The man of your dreams just asked you to marry him. When I return, you know I will never forget you, and I will be happy as a clam with Tom. I don't want you to be sad. Okay?"

"Of course, you are correct."

They turned when Mr Darcy approached. "We should see if the coach is ready to depart."

Before Elizabeth could take Ellie's arm, Ellie pushed her forward to walk with Mr Darcy again while she trailed behind. Their voices were low, but Ellie concentrated as hard as she could to eavesdrop.

"May I ask how you know Miss Forrester?"

"I made her acquaintance in Cheapside in London. She has become a very dear friend." Well, it wasn't so far from the truth. She only left out that it wasn't in eighteen-thirteen.

"Have you known her long?"

"Not tolerably long, but we have spoken often and been rather open with one another. I would trust her with my life." She halted in her tracks, reached back, and tugged Ellie forward. "I understand why my aunt and uncle have their reservations, but I beg of you to trust me." The Gardiners emerged from the inn, and Ellie elbowed Elizabeth to show her. "I cannot tell you everything right now, but I will. You have to trust that I know Lydia is in trouble, and if we do not intervene, she will be lost to my family forever. I do not desire such guilt on my conscience."

He peered over his shoulder at the Gardiners and nodded, though he didn't appear completely convinced. "I will do all that I can to be of aid." He levelled a steely gaze on Ellie. "But be warned, madam. If you have deceived Elizabeth and cause her harm, you shall pay for it dearly."

Ellie grinned widely. "Why, Mr Darcy, I could say exactly the same to you."

He jolted a little, obviously shocked at her statement. "I beg your pardon."

"If you hurt Lizzy, I will make sure you pay."

His eyebrows lifted. She doubted anyone ever challenged him or took him to task as she had. He probably fell for Elizabeth because she wasn't drooling over him like Miss Bingley, hoping to make herself look better by agreeing with his every word and sneering at the competition. That woman definitely had a shock coming to her when she found out about his engagement to Elizabeth!

After a pause and a long study of her face and eyes, he dipped a slight bow with his head. "I am glad we agree."

He must've been satisfied with Ellie's threat since he offered her the arm not occupied by Elizabeth to make their way to the coach. He wasn't necessarily friendly, but her willingness to stand up for Elizabeth seemed to garner her some respect. If only Mr and Mrs Gardiner were so easy!

Once they all were tucked back inside, they continued south. According to Elizabeth, Mr Darcy's driver was keeping a swift speed, though it seemed a little slow to Ellie. After all, a car could travel much faster than a carriage.

By the time the sun began to set, the novelty of the carriage had long worn off for Ellie. Despite the plush interiors and that the rig was well-sprung according to Mrs Gardiner, Ellie was becoming claustrophobic and restless.

When she and Elizabeth walked around at the next coaching inn, Ellie stretched her neck. "Is this really a four-day trip?"

Elizabeth's forehead crinkled. "What is amiss? You have driven long distances in Mildred. This should not be so different, though we are travelling at a slower pace."

"There aren't five people in Mildred when I drive somewhere, and Mildred doesn't hit every pothole in the road."

Elizabeth smiled and gave her a sidelong glance. "Really? Then I have a different memory of riding in your car than you. When we are in the coach again, you should try to sleep. That would help you pass the time."

"Miss Bennet?" Mr Darcy approached and bent in a fraction. "I have spoken with my driver. As long as we continue through the night, he believes we should make London by tomorrow evening."

Elizabeth's hand flew to her chest. "I never considered your driver. How will he ever manage such a long journey?"

His eyes warmed while he gazed at his betrothed. "You are too good to consider his comfort, but he assures me he will be well. He requires little sleep and often finds a quiet place to nap when we change horses. I do believe London will be as far as he can manage before he requires a long rest, however. I thought perhaps we could break our journey there. We could stay at my home and set out again the next day. Do you have any objections?"

"Ellie?" Elizabeth looked at her with such an honest question in her eyes. Elizabeth hadn't studied the notes her father had made, so she didn't know a lot of the information—even Ellie's knowledge was limited since none of the journals made mention of the date Lydia supposedly left for Gretna Green.

"I don't think it will be a problem, but I don't know when Wickham intends to leave with Lydia."

"What if he departs before we can stop them?" asked Elizabeth in a worried tone.

"Then, we know the inns where he will stop. I could always make a list, and we could use the same ones as we travel south to make sure we don't miss them somewhere." Ellie squeezed her friend's hand in the hopes of soothing her.

Mr Darcy's suspicious eyes settled on Ellie, prickling at her skin. "How do you know where they will change horses? Elizabeth, are you certain she is not in league with Wickham?"

"Fitzwilliam," soothed Elizabeth, "I know beyond any doubt that Ellie has nothing to do with Mr Wickham."

"I thought you said her name is Eliza Forrester." His frame stiffened and his eyes narrowed in her direction. "Perhaps we should discuss what you could not tell me earlier."

"Do you trust me?" Elizabeth stood before him, holding his gaze. "I shall not lie to you, but 'tis a long and rather incredible story. I fear you will not believe us should we tell you the entire truth of the matter."

He glanced over his shoulder to Elizabeth's aunt and uncle as they entered the inn. "I assume you have not told the Gardiners?"

"No way," blurted Ellie. "Don't get me wrong. They're lovely people, but they'd think we were mental, especially since we have no proof."

His lips pressed into a fine line. "Perhaps I should hear your tale before they return then."

"But even should you find it too fantastical, you will bring us to Brighton, will you not?" Elizabeth searched his face. "I have to save Lydia. She cannot elope with Mr Wickham."

His hand took hers. "You have my word to continue on to Brighton. I do not doubt *you*, but I need to know what is off about her." He motioned with his head to Ellie. "And to ensure she is not a danger to you. I love you too much to have you harmed when I could prevent it."

Elizabeth's eyes met Ellie's. Ellie shrugged. It was time to see if it hit the fan and their ride to Brighton turned into Cinderella's coach at midnight.

"Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, I would like you to make the acquaintance of Miss Elizabeth Forrester—her family and friends call her Ellie. You see, I first met Ellie when I awoke from my first night's sleep at the inn in Lambton. Only when I woke, I was not in Lambton as I was when I retired."

His eyebrows dipped down over his eyes. "I do not understand."

"Would you agree to listen, without interruption, to the entirety before asking questions?" asked Elizabeth.

"If you think it necessary."

So, Elizabeth, with Ellie's help, explained all of it. How they first met, how Ellie jumped in front of the post coach to wake from her "dream," how Ellie kept travelling back and attempting to fix the timeline while urging Mr Darcy to help Lydia, and finally, how they fell from Pemberley's roof to end up once again at the inn. When Elizabeth finished, she wrung her hands in front of her. "Well, what do you think?"

He gave an incredulous bark of a laugh and ran his hand over his face. "You did not exaggerate when you claimed it to be incredible. If your friend did not stand before me, I would say you had a particularly imaginative dream brought on by some bad wine at dinner, but your friend does not fit here. Her speech and the way she carries herself is simply not right somehow. What I wonder is why would you and she trade places? What connection does she have to the Darcy or the Bennet families?"

Elizabeth grinned and stepped to his side so they both stared at Ellie, making her want to shrink back into the coming night. "I believe she is to be the great love of our descendent, Tom Darcy."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "Lizzy, I think it's a little early to call Tom my great love."

"You said this Tom was helping you."

"Yes, Tom is the historian for the Darcys in twenty-seventeen. He graciously allowed Ellie and I to study my journals as well as yours. I did not desire to know too much of our future, so I did not read much of them. Ellie learned more in order to help Lydia without me."

"Why without you?"

"Because I did not know when I would be able to come back. We thought Ellie needed to fix Lydia's situation before I could return but somehow the fall accomplished it instead. Now, we have to save Lydia so Ellie can return to her own time and Tom."

Elizabeth took Mr Darcy's forearm in both hands and looked up at him. "Do you believe us?" Her voice was so hopeful, and Ellie held her breath, nervous for her. If Mr Darcy said no, he could end their journey then and there.

He ran his hand down her cheek. "I have no doubt you give this every credit, and I trust you. I hope you will forgive me, but it is the best I can do."

Ellie grasped Elizabeth's hand. "I know! You could tell him about his journals."

He scratched the back of his neck, suddenly awkward. "You mentioned journals, but you requested I wait to ask questions and I forgot. You have read my thoughts?"

"I had not intended to," confessed Elizabeth. "Tom spoke of things you had said, and then Ellie commented about a length of time when you had not penned an entry. When I looked at the date, I realised the last entry was before you proposed at Hunsford."

"I was too disgusted with myself. I do not think I even looked at them since then."

"Do you remember how we told you about the way we originally met again?" asked Elizabeth.

His eyebrows drew down in the middle. "You said we met on the grounds when you toured Pemberley."

"Yes, you wrote in your journal that evening."

"I wrote in my journal today, before we left Pemberley." He spoke as though he'd seen a ghost.

"It makes sense," commented Ellie. "You probably just missed each other in the original timeline and Lizzy left the inn just after you passed. The only reason we knew you would be there today was because of the carriage accident."

Mr Darcy ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the stars that were just beginning to appear. "There is so much we do not know of the world, but even this defies all belief. Yet, I cannot explain things away. You know of my journal, which is always under lock and key." He started. "If you were on the roof of Pemberley, how did you find your way?"

Elizabeth's lip curved up on one side. "Now that I have taken Mrs Reynolds tour, I know the servants' passage at the end of the family wing is not a place she takes visitors."

He covered his mouth with his hand. "Good Lord!"

They let him regain his composure before Elizabeth took his hand and held it between her own. "Do you wish to enquire anything further of us?"

"Yes," he responded in a faint voice. "How many children did you say we have again?"

Sore Bums, London, and Snogging

Ellie breathed a tremendous sigh of relief when they reached London. Despite Elizabeth suggesting she sleep, she hadn't managed a wink, her back and bum were sore from sitting for so long, and she was going to have a fit if she didn't get out of the coach soon! Her one consolation was Mr and Mrs Gardiner lost a certain amount of interest in her after the first day, replacing stares at her with long examinations of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy.

She had to admit their body language had changed since Elizabeth's acceptance of his proposal. He held Elizabeth's hand a little longer when he helped her from the carriage, he watched her as they travelled, he blushed and smiled in her direction more than he had before, and he remained to speak with Elizabeth and Ellie during each stop to change horses. While the differences were subtle to most people, to the Gardiners, who knew Elizabeth better than most, the sudden acceptance of Mr Darcy's attentions must've been surprising.

It was dark when they reached Mayfair, which was considerably different than the last time Ellie had seen it, but she'd kept from commenting because of the Gardiners. Mr Darcy agreed with Elizabeth that her inability to phrase her speech as they did in that time period only put their rescue of Lydia at risk, so Ellie needed to remain as quiet as possible. It wasn't like it was the easiest thing in the world, but she had kept quiet for the rest of their trip. Now, she itched to say anything! Even burping out loud would be a relief!

When they pulled before a rather large house on Curzon Street, Mr Darcy stepped from the carriage first and handed Elizabeth and Ellie down once the Gardiners exited. The Darcys only owned Pemberley in the future, so Ellie figured this home must've been sold to pay death duties or debts sometime after Elizabeth's and Fitzwilliam's time. As far as she knew, this house didn't exist anymore. She'd walked down Curzon Street in the future, and she didn't remember it.

Mr Darcy turned to Mr Gardiner as they entered. "Once you have rested, sir, I would like to speak to you on a matter of some importance."

The Gardiners gave pointed glances to one another while the butler and housekeeper saw to their coats and hats. "I believe I would prefer to have the discussion now than later. I admit to finding a great deal of this puzzling, not to mention your

immediate acceptance of this lady's tales." He dipped his chin in Ellie's direction. "I have also noticed a marked difference in your manner with my niece since the first evening of our travels."

It couldn't be said that Mr Darcy lacked patience! He allowed Mr Gardiner to say what he needed to before agreeing. "Mr Gardiner, I understand. If you will follow me to my study, I hope to answer any questions you might have. Meanwhile, the ladies can rest until we need to set off once again."

"I would prefer to remain," interjected Elizabeth.

Mrs Gardiner shook her head tiredly. "Lizzy, it is not necessary. Allow your uncle to be of use to you." The poor lady was so exhausted she almost swayed where she stood. Ellie could certainly relate to how the woman appeared. After all, Ellie wanted nothing more than a pillow and a soft bed—at least for a little while. Too bad she couldn't have a hot water bottle for her aching bum as well!

Elizabeth stood tall and lifted her chin just a little. "I do not mean to take from my uncle's responsibility, but I want to be certain any misunderstandings are avoided. I wish for my opinion to be known."

"Lizzy," began Mr Gardiner, however, before he could say more, Elizabeth grasped Ellie's hand and turned to Mr Darcy. "Please lead the way, sir."

A slight twitch of his lips was the only hint that Mr Darcy found Elizabeth's actions amusing. "Mrs Thomas, please see to it Mrs Gardiner is shown to her rooms and is comfortable."

The housekeeper bobbed a curtsey and held out an arm to the stairs. "Mrs Gardiner?" Elizabeth's aunt pressed her lips tightly together, obviously displeased with her niece's stubbornness, but followed the servant instead of arguing.

Mr Darcy led them through a door off the entry hall to a wood panelled room with a series of built-in bookshelves along one wall, a fireplace on the other, and a window through which the black outlines of the street and the houses across the road could be made out through the dark.

After excusing the butler, he waited until the door was closed before standing behind his desk, the fingertips of one hand set on the surface. "Mr Gardiner, I am aware I will be required to speak with Mr Bennet at the first available opportunity, but I thought that as Miss Bennet's guardian, you should be apprised of certain information."

Mr Gardiner's bushy eyebrows lifted. "If you had not broached the subject, you may believe I would have insisted upon it before we departed this house." Fortunately, his stern tone didn't seem to upset Mr Darcy.

"I understand and would feel the same were I in your position." He cleared his throat. "Mr Gardiner, when we stopped to change horses in Loughborough, I proposed marriage to Miss Bennet and she accepted me. I ask for your consent until Mr Bennet's permission can be sought."

With a glance in Elizabeth's direction, Mr Gardiner opened and closed his mouth twice and blinked. "You mean you had no understanding before we began this journey?"

"No, Uncle," answered Elizabeth. "Miss Forrester and I happened upon Mr Darcy as he rode through Lambton, and I requested his aid in saving Lydia."

He stepped closer to Elizabeth. "Did you accept him out of gratitude or because he insisted upon it in return for this wild goose chase?"

"No!" cried Elizabeth. "Do you really believe I would accept a man for no other reason but gratitude or as some strange form of payment?"

Mr Darcy put both hands upon his desk and leaned forward. "I would never have asked for Elizabeth's hand if I thought she would accept for reasons other than affection, and I will say this once and for all, I would never use the welfare of her sister as a method of forcing her hand."

Mr Gardiner held up both hands with his palms out while Ellie sank into a chair near the fireplace. "Mr Darcy, you must understand my point of view. Until we met you in Lambton, our niece never spoke well of you, and until that very morning, she was uncomfortable at the thought of touring Pemberley. I have every reason to be sceptical of the timing of your betrothal."

"Only because I have not told all and sundry what I have learnt since I was last in company with Mr Darcy at Rosings," cried Elizabeth, throwing her hands up and letting them drop to her sides. "I learnt the truth of Mr Wickham, who has all the appearance of goodness, but lacks common decency. I also now know the truth of Mr Darcy, who is one of the best men I have ever known. Forgive me for keeping my own counsel on matters I felt I could not divulge. I shared little with you and my aunt. I did confess some of my knowledge to Jane, but we agreed to conceal what we knew."

“You could not have known,” soothed Mr Darcy. “Wickham is a practiced deceiver and you had no reason to believe his schemes would touch your family so.”

Her uncle peered over his spectacles at his niece. “Are you saying you carry an affection for Mr Darcy?”

Tears pooled on her bottom lashes as she fought a sob. “I do. I fear how the repercussions of Lydia’s foolishness will affect him and his sister, but he has sworn to wed me regardless. I wish I could set him free for his own good, but I am too selfish. I cannot do so without tearing my own heart from my chest and destroying it.”

Ellie bit her bottom lip to prevent an enormous grin when Mr Darcy pulled a teary Elizabeth into his arms. Mr Gardiner had to accept Elizabeth’s feelings after that announcement! How could he do anything else?

“Very well, Lizzy. You have made your feelings known on the matter, though I cannot condone this behaviour. You may have an understanding, but you are hardly wed. I must ask you to refrain from flaunting propriety in such a manner.”

The two separated and Mr Darcy handed Elizabeth his handkerchief. “Forgive me. I do not like seeing Elizabeth upset.”

Mr Gardiner crossed his arms over his chest. “You have my consent until Mr Bennet’s permission can be sought. Now, what of her.” One arm extended and his finger pointed directly at Ellie, making her startle.

“Me?” she cried.

“Yes, miss, you. You appeared at the inn with this story of Lydia. Elizabeth believes you without question, though my wife and I cannot fathom why. But what we do not understand is why a man of sense and education—like Mr Darcy—is not suspicious of all of this.”

Mr Darcy cleared his throat. “During our travels, I have spoken to Elizabeth and Miss Forrester of Miss Lydia’s elopement, and I have every reason to believe the story is true. I know enough of Wickham’s perfidy to believe him capable of lying to the young lady and persuading her to join him, and I have witnessed Miss Lydia’s lack of restraint whilst in company. Forgive me, sir, but she would think it all a grand adventure until Wickham leaves her destitute and with some disease in Seven Dials.”

“So, you have met Miss Forrester on a previous occasion?” asked Mr Gardiner.

“No, but I trust Elizabeth. I know she would not tell me a falsehood, so I must conclude that what she tells me of Miss Lydia’s situation is nothing but the truth.” Mr

Darcy clasped his hands behind his back. "I understand why you might have reservations, but you must know that Elizabeth would never conjure a tale such as this or insist upon this journey if she did not believe with her entire being a legitimate threat exists."

Elizabeth stepped to her uncle and took his hands. "I know I have not a shred of proof to show you what I say is happening, but it is. I know it is difficult, and you have never met Miss Forrester until now, but I assure you, she means me no harm. She is here to be of aid to us."

He blew out a heavy breath and looked at Elizabeth, then Ellie for a long while, and lastly at Mr Darcy. "You will protect Lizzy. No matter what occurs."

"You have my word," replied Mr Darcy, extending his hand.

Once the men shook hands, Mr Gardiner rubbed his balding head. "I must rest before we set out again."

"Of course." Mr Darcy poked his head out the door and a moment later a footman appeared to escort Mr Gardiner to his room.

When he looked to Elizabeth to accompany him, she took a small step back. "Miss Forrester and I have some information to impart to Mr Darcy before we retire, but we shall not be long."

"Be certain you get some sleep." Mr Gardiner's gaze passed over each of them. "We shall be of no use to Lydia if we are fighting fatigue when we locate her."

When he left the room, Elizabeth giggled. "I believe that is the longest you have remained silent since we met, Ellie. How difficult did you find it?"

"Haha," said Ellie, rising from her seat. "If you have a pen and paper, I can make a list of the inns from London to Brighton."

Mr Darcy pulled some paper, a pen, and a bottle of ink from his desk and placed it on the surface. She picked up the pen and stared at the tip. Were they serious? It looked like novelty quills they sold in gift shops—like the one at Winchester Cathedral. How was she supposed to write with this?

With a bubbling giggle, Elizabeth took the pen from Ellie's hand. "If we want it legible, perhaps I should write the list." She looked to Mr Darcy. "Pens in the future do not work in quite the same manner."

His forehead furrowed, and he watched while Ellie slowly rattled off the names of inns and towns along the trip to Brighton. When they'd committed them all to paper,

Mr Darcy began preparations for the remainder of their journey by arranging for changes of horses at the inns Ellie listed.

“How do you intend to separate your sister from Wickham when we find them? Have you given it any thought?”

Elizabeth sighed. “She is likely to be stubborn as a mule.”

“She believes she’s going to marry him,” added Ellie. “Originally, you, Mr Darcy, paid Wickham a load of money to go through with the ceremony since he had no intention of doing it to begin with. I don’t think she realised what she married until they moved north, to Newcastle. Tom said that was when Lydia’s first letter asking for funds arrived for Lizzy.”

“Wickham would not have treated her well,” observed Mr Darcy.

“No, he did not.” Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest as though she were cold. “I would imagine she lived a very sad life, which is why it is so important to remedy the situation if we can.”

He took Elizabeth’s hand in both of his. “I promise to do what I can to save her.”

Ellie turned to the fireplace and stared at a figurine of a lady on the mantelpiece.

“I know you will,” whispered Elizabeth.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie saw him kiss Elizabeth’s knuckles on both hands and then press his lips to her forehead. “You should sleep while you can. Morning will arrive swiftly and we must set off with the sunrise.”

Elizabeth rose on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Fitzwilliam. You cannot know what your faith means to me. You truly are the best of men.”

“Elizabeth,” he breathed as she pulled away. She didn’t make it far before he pulled her back and claimed her lips. Ellie turned away until a hand tugged at her elbow.

“We must go.” Elizabeth stood at Ellie’s shoulder, her face pinker than Ellie had ever seen it. They remained quiet as they departed the study. A maid waited for them in the hall and promptly showed them to Ellie’s room and then Elizabeth’s across the hall.

“If ya be needin’ anythin’, don’t hesitate to ask.” She bobbed a curtsy and left them alone. Before Elizabeth could disappear into her bedchamber, Ellie pulled Elizabeth into her own and shut the door.

“For someone who was so scandalised by Tom and me, you sure don’t have any problems snogging your Mr Darcy.”

“Snogging?”

“Kissing!”

“Oh!” giggled Elizabeth. “Our situation is a bit different since we are betrothed, but yes, I have no problems kissing Fitzwilliam.”

Ellie leaned back against the door and lifted her eyebrows. “Uh huh. Fitzwilliam.”

“You are determined to see me mortified!”

“Yes, I am.” She put her hands on Elizabeth’s shoulders. “I’m just so excited for you!”

Elizabeth yawned. “Perhaps I could be more excited if this exhaustion was not so overwhelming.”

“I know, but I don’t know how I’m ever going to sleep,” gushed Ellie. “I have a million things swirling around in my mind and I don’t know how to make it stop.”

Elizabeth’s chin jolted back a little. “A million things swirling in your mind?”

“Yes, my mind is sort of spinning with everything we need to do and everything I want. I want to help you find and save Lydia, I want to go home, I hope Tom remembers everything, though I doubt he will, and I’m worried about never going back at the same time.”

“Perhaps you should not drink so much tea.”

“It’s not the tea!”

Elizabeth walked behind her and began to unfasten Ellie’s gown. “Take everything off but your chemise and climb into the bed. Once you close your eyes, imagine walking around the grounds at Pemberley with Tom, and I am certain you will drift right to sleep. When you wake, we will be off to save Lydia. I am certain once we accomplish our mission, you will return to twenty-seventeen.”

Once Ellie was tucked in, Elizabeth blew the candles out around the room. “Sleep well.”

“Good night.” She hadn’t been joking. How was she ever to go to sleep?

The latch of the door sounded when Elizabeth left, so Ellie closed her eyes and did as Elizabeth suggested.

When she next opened her eyes, sunlight streamed through the cracks in the draperies. Her heart pounding in her chest, she rushed to the draperies and ripped them back. People walked along the pavements and the sun was high in the sky. They were supposed to leave hours ago. What the bloody hell happened?

Words, Welfare, and Wickham

Ellie pulled her eyes from a well-dressed man in a topcoat, so tight it rivalled the modern trend in skinny jeans, to the clock on the mantelpiece—eleven! Why were they still in London? Did Mr Gardiner manage to convince Mr Darcy to call off the search? Elizabeth wouldn't have let them leave her there, would she? No, she would never do that.

She rushed from the window and began trying to dress herself. Parts of it were easy. She could manage the stockings and stays well enough on her own, but the stupid fastenings on the gown. As she mumbled curses, she contorted her shoulders and arms in an attempt to close the back, but it just wasn't working.

At the sudden sensation of being watched, she froze and glanced around. The maid who showed them to their rooms the night before stood in the doorway, giggling softly while she watched. "Would ya care for some help, miss?"

"Yes," said Ellie. She needed to say as little as possible, but how could she do that when she didn't know what was going on?

The girl chuckled as she worked. "The ones ya managed to hook were crooked." When she was done, Ellie started for the door, but the maid stepped to the dressing table and pulled out the seat. "We need ta fix your hair before ya go down, miss."

Ellie hurried to the mirror and looked at her reflection. She had bits of fringe sticking up in all directions and the curls Elizabeth had so carefully managed were flat as a digestive biscuit. She was amazed they lasted at all, though. Frustrated, she plopped into the seat.

While the maid gathered what she needed, Ellie peeked back at the clock. She needed to ask, but how to phrase it? Oh, sod it! "We were supposed to depart for Brighton early this morning. Do you know why we haven't?"

The maid began pulling and tugging at her hair to style it in some way or another while Ellie clenched her teeth. "Not really, miss. Word below stairs is Mr Darcy sent out several messages last night, and that one or two letters arrived for him early this mornin'. He then gave orders to let everyone sleep."

Mr Darcy said to let everyone sleep? What did he discover that changed their plans so much? What if he decided Ellie was a big, fat liar? Well, that wouldn't work at all! They had to find Lydia and find her soon!

Once the maid was finished with her hair, she bounded from the chair and through the door. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she followed voices into the dining room where Mr Darcy and Elizabeth sat at one end of a long table with a footman and a maid standing against the far wall. Where were the Gardiners?

“Why are we still in London?” she asked. Her voice was a little loud, but what right did he have to change their plans?

Before she could say anything else, Elizabeth jumped from her chair and rushed over while Mr Darcy motioned for the servants to leave them.

“We have no need of further travel,” explained Elizabeth. “Please, sit and have some breakfast. I am sure it would do you good. We need to discuss what Mr Darcy learnt during the night.”

Mr Darcy was standing when Elizabeth pulled her to the table and steered her into a chair. Elizabeth didn’t sit, however, but took the plate in front of Ellie and disappeared behind her.

“I hope you slept well, Miss Forrester?” Mr Darcy sat down and seemed to study her while he waited for her answer.

“Too well. I should’ve been awakened long ago.” The plate Elizabeth had taken appeared before her laden with toast and bacon. Elizabeth took her seat.

He sipped from his cup and swallowed. “I hope you do not find me presumptuous, but before I planned the next portion of our journey, I sent an enquiry to the first inn on your list with descriptions of Miss Lydia and Wickham. Upon his arrival, my messenger did not even have to present the note to the innkeeper.”

Ellie looked between the two of them. “I don’t understand.”

“Matthew is trustworthy, so I told him I was searching for Wickham and that he would be travelling with a young lady. He was to discover what he could without alerting anyone to our search for Miss Lydia before presenting my enquiry to the innkeeper. A few coins in the hands of one or two of the men playing cards revealed that Wickham stopped at the first inn a few days ago. Miss Lydia was with him. While they waited for the next leg of their journey, Wickham lost nearly three crowns gambling.”

“So, they are in London.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “It would seem so.”

“But we know where they are!” She grasped Elizabeth’s arm. “Don’t you remember the maps? They’re in Saffron Hill. We even know which properties it could be. We just

need to go there. I would just have to remember which buildings don't exist in the future and we can figure it out from there."

"Mr Darcy already has a man searching the area."

She looked at Elizabeth. "But it would be faster if we went down there ourselves."

"No," insisted Mr Darcy. "Saffron Hill is not a safe place for any lady."

"Oh, please!" waved away Ellie. "You should try living in London in twenty-seventeen."

Mr Darcy's forehead crinkled. "Has town become more degenerate than it is now? I would have hoped it had improved."

"I'm sure in some ways it has improved, but there are different reasons it isn't always safe in the future. I took Elizabeth around a little. She could probably compare it better than I could."

"Tis exceedingly different and was quite entertaining." Elizabeth appeared more like she was critiquing a book than discussing the differences between nineteenth and twenty-first century London. "I found the horseless carriages extremely fascinating. Ellie has one of her own. Its name is Mildred."

Mr Darcy's eyebrows rose. "Horseless carriages?"

Elizabeth nodded, but Ellie startled and quickly looked around the table, frowning. "Where are the Gardiners? They aren't still sleeping, are they?"

"No," answered Elizabeth. "They departed for Cheapside an hour ago."

"They left you here?"

Elizabeth winced at the loud, high pitch of Ellie's shocked voice. "Despite their insistence, I refused to leave you. It would not be proper after all. They only agreed at Mr Darcy's assurance that the two of us would always be in the company of a maid or you—once you were awake, that is."

"Forgive me for not having you roused earlier, Miss Forrester. I knew you, Elizabeth, and the Gardiners required rest, and I had the means to conduct our investigation while allowing you to sleep."

A further study of Mr Darcy revealed his exhaustion. The man allowed them to sleep, but must've been woken up several times during the night to make the next arrangements. He didn't have the luxury of sleeping for as long as he needed.

They all jumped at a light rap from the servants' entrance. "Yes?" called Mr Darcy.

A footman stepped inside and bowed. "Forgive the interruption, sir, but you wished to be informed when Matthew returned."

Mr Darcy wiped his mouth. "Yes, thank you. Please have him meet me in my study." The footman departed and Mr Darcy placed his hand on Elizabeth's. "I shall return to inform you of his findings." At Elizabeth's nod, he rose and exited the room.

Despite the tension in the air, Ellie took a bite of her bacon while Elizabeth poured what she assumed was tea into a cup, but when she lifted it, it was too dark. "Coffee?" she asked excitedly.

"Mr Darcy asked whether you preferred tea or coffee. He drinks coffee as well."

"Bless him," she murmured, stirring in a little milk and sugar. She closed her eyes and moaned when the bold flavour touched her tongue. It wasn't exactly Costa, but it would work.

Elizabeth grinned. "I knew you would be pleased."

"You must've been up early if you told Mr Darcy where they are staying."

With a shrug of one shoulder, Elizabeth took a sip of her tea. "I have never been a sound sleeper. I heard voices in the corridor when Mr Darcy was awakened by his butler. A maid had given me the use of one of Miss Darcy's dressing gowns, so I put it on with haste and followed them down to Mr Darcy's study."

"What time was that?"

"The clock struck four while Mr Darcy and I discussed what should be done. When he called for his messenger to return, he sent me to my bedchamber since I was not presentable."

Ellie couldn't help but grin. "You were alone with Mr Darcy, in his study, and in only your shift and dressing gown?"

"Hush!" scolded Elizabeth as she blushed.

Before Ellie could react, Mr Darcy strode back into the dining room. "He found them. I thought I might have to bribe Mrs Younge, but with your information, that will not be necessary. I must say I am relieved. I have no wish to give that woman more money than I already have."

He downed the rest of his coffee. "Forgive me, Elizabeth, but I must go. The carriage is being prepared and I have requested a maid and a footman to accompany me."

“What do you intend to do?” asked Ellie. “Lydia won’t leave Wickham. That was one of the biggest problems you mentioned in your journals. She insisted on staying with him. She swore they would be married sooner or later, so what difference did it make if she remained. Lizzy is your best chance of getting her to come with us.”

He pressed his lips together and exhaled heavily. “No, I cannot allow the two of you to accompany me. Saffron Hill is filled with the worst sort of miscreants and filth. I could not live with myself if Elizabeth were harmed, and the Gardiners would never forgive me. ‘Tis too much of a risk.”

“You said you were to bring a maid, but I’ll be there, too,” countered Ellie. “Propriety is covered and neither of us will let anything happen to Lizzy. You have my word to protect her with my life should it be necessary.”

His eyes held hers while he clasped his hands behind his back. A stiffness was usually present in his bearing, but he looked as rigid as a pole at the moment. He clenched and released his jaw several times and shook his head. “I appreciate your words, Miss Forrester, but—”

Elizabeth stepped forward and grasped his arm. “She has a valid argument. Lydia has always been spoilt and headstrong. I doubt she can be prevailed upon easily, and I do not want you to pay Wickham one shilling if it can be helped. He does not deserve it.”

Worried eyes gazed upon Elizabeth and his hand cupped her cheek. “I cannot lose you now that you have finally accepted me. Please do not ask this of me.”

“You will not lose me,” whispered Elizabeth. “We shall walk straight into the inn or boarding house, retrieve Lydia, and depart without delay.”

His shoulders dropped as though all the air had suddenly left his body. “You will never just acquiesce to my wishes, will you?”

A bubbly giggle burst from Elizabeth. “You would never have fallen in love with me if I did.”

Ellie returned to the table and finished her coffee and bacon, giving the two a moment of privacy. Once she’d wiped her hands on her napkin, Elizabeth grabbed her arm. “The carriage is ready and Mr Darcy prefers we board in the stable yard to prevent gossip.”

He nodded. “Just in the event an acquaintance or meddlesome matron happens to be passing. Should we manage to retrieve Miss Lydia, we shall have enough difficulty

with her reputation. I would prefer no one know of Elizabeth accompanying me to that part of town.”

A maid entered with their spencers, gloves, and bonnets. Once they were prepared, they were led through a good-sized garden behind the house to the carriage just through the gate. Mr Darcy handed them inside, and the maid joined them while a rather fit footman climbed on top with the driver, and two other men climbed aboard a small seat on the back.

Before they left the mews, the draperies were released to cover the windows and for some odd reason, no one spoke. Elizabeth stared at her hands clasped in her lap, Mr Darcy watched Elizabeth, and the maid leaned her head against the side of the carriage to peer through a small portion not covered by the thick fabric.

It didn't take long before the silence began to irritate Ellie. She itched to speak—to start a conversation, but with the maid there, it just wasn't a good idea. By the time they stopped and the carriage shifted with the men climbing down on the outside, she breathed a sigh of relief. They couldn't continue to remain quiet now.

Mr Darcy was the first to exit when the door opened and after a few words with his men, he helped Elizabeth and Ellie step down to the street. Before she could really look around, the odour hit Ellie like a punch square in the nose and she swallowed a heave. What was that smell? To her, it was this nauseating combination of a rank public toilet, something rotten, and bad body odour. Elizabeth opened her reticule, fished out a handkerchief, and covered her nose, sending Ellie scrambling to do the same before she was sick.

As they entered the building in front of them, the sound of men cheering came from a room to the back. It sounded a lot like a pub on the night of a big football game, so nothing alarming at least. A dirty-looking man came from a door to the right and leered as he passed, giving a mostly toothless grin. Ellie shuddered before the footman, who accompanied them, stepped between them and gave a nasty glare in the man's direction.

She peered around and noticed the men from the back of the carriage, the footman, and Mr Darcy surrounded her and Elizabeth in a sort of bubble of protection. She should've known he wouldn't take any chances, and while she didn't need his mollycoddling, she definitely appreciated his protectiveness of Elizabeth.

After a few words with the innkeeper, they climbed a narrow stairway and filed down a corridor that didn't smell any better than the outside. When they reached

somewhere in the middle, Mr Darcy stopped and rapped loudly upon a slightly crooked door.

There was some movement inside and whispers before the door opened to a handsomely dishevelled man in what appeared to be a white blouse that was open at the collar, breeches, and tall black boots.

“Darcy!” he exclaimed. “I did not know you enjoyed the pleasures of this part of town.”

“George!” called a girlish voice behind him in a whiny voice. “Who is it? Is it the gentleman you were expecting?”

“Not exactly, my dear.” His eyes darted to Elizabeth and his lips curved into a wicked smirk. “Well, well, well. Who do we have here? I see I am not the only one to avail myself of the delights of a Bennet sister.”

Before Wickham could say another word, Mr Darcy levelled a vicious right hook to the prick’s jaw, sending him to the floor. Ellie snickered and Elizabeth elbowed her in the ribs while Darcy’s men shoved Wickham’s body to the side and entered, closing the door behind them.

Mr Darcy quickly turned his back and Elizabeth gasped. “Lydia! Cover yourself this instant!”

All Ellie could do was gape at the girl lying on the bed in her chemise, because though she could easily fill a D cup, when you really looked at her face, she still appeared really young. The ties at the top of her chemise were undone and the material gaped apart, exposing the top of one of her breasts, and one bare leg was bent at the knee.

She lazily twirled a curl of her hair around one of her fingers. “Lizzy! Have you come for my wedding? Is it not exciting? I shall be the first of my sisters to marry. You will be jealous, will you not? After all, you once preferred George. I know you did.”

After searching the room, Elizabeth began to gather Lydia’s clothes, tossed them on the bed, and stood with her hands on her hips. “We need to get you dressed. We are leaving.”

“La! I am to be married!” she exclaimed. “Whether it happens today or next week is of no matter. I am to be married to my dear George.”

A thud came from Wickham attempting to lift himself from the floor while he laughed. A sound that wasn't charming at all, but almost evil. "You think she will go with you so easily? She is quite attached to me, you know."

Elizabeth grabbed Lydia and jerked her to the side of the mattress. "Lydia Grace Bennet, you will dress, and we will go to our Uncle Gardiner's. You will certainly not be marrying Mr Wickham!"

Lydia stood and stepped nose to nose with Elizabeth. "I will remain where I am."

"No, you most certainly will not!"

Wickham chuckled and drew himself up to standing. "I might be persuaded to let her go."

At his words, everyone, including Lydia, turned to Wickham with their mouths open in shock, but Wickham only smirked more. "She has been a great deal of fun and her pin money was convenient for the journey, but for the payment of my debts and a few thousand to live on, I would be willing to part with her."

Lydia's jaw dropped. "You said you loved me!" she screeched.

Wickham shrugged carelessly. "I did when the occasion suited, but I have no desire to be shackled to you for the rest of my life. You were the one who assumed we would elope. I just let you believe what you wished."

Ellie gasped as Lydia lunged across the room and started hitting Wickham with whatever she could manage. With little to no effort, he pushed her forcefully from him, sending her bodily into the footboard of the bed before she slid to the floor. A strange thud echoed around the room as her head hit the floor, and she was still.

Lydia's Outcome

When Lydia hit the floor, all hell broke loose. Mr Darcy's men grabbed Wickham by the arms while Ellie, shaking in anger from seeing the way he treated Lydia, ran forward and lifted her knee as hard as she could into his bits and pieces. He made a deep grunting noise and doubled over in a useless attempt to grab himself, but couldn't get his hands to his balls because of Mr Darcy's men heaving him into a nearby chair. The tallest of them grabbed a long strip of white fabric to one side and bound Wickham's hands while Elizabeth dropped to her knees beside Lydia.

"You bitch!" muttered Wickham, writhing in the seat.

Ellie lifted an eyebrow and stepped closer. "Is that supposed to offend me, because I've been called worse, you know? You should've kept it in your trousers. Maybe next time you'll think twice before putting it where it doesn't belong."

Mr Darcy's only reaction was a lift of his eyebrows while his men chuckled under their breaths. They finished binding him and Ellie turned back to Elizabeth, who knelt beside Lydia with tears streaking down her cheeks. She stroked the hair back from her youngest sister's face and begged her to wake, but Lydia didn't move.

Ellie knelt on Lydia's other side and pressed a finger under her jaw to find a pulse, which was there, but when Ellie compared it to her own, it seemed a little slower. She'd never been trained as a first aider, and at the moment, really wished she had.

"You cannot do this, Darcy!" yelled Wickham, struggling to free his hands. "I will ruin the little doxie without a second thought."

"Might be difficult from debtor's prison," said Mr Darcy. Wickham turned white as a sheet, and Mr Darcy shifted to stand over the worthless toe rag. "Do you think I paid your debts for all these years and never kept a record of the payments? How long do you think it will take to pay off nearly a thousand pounds? Of course, once I pay this establishment and any current debts, that sum could rise a few hundred pounds. The militia could have you released, but I believe they would be more interested in trying you for desertion."

He looked to Elizabeth. "Is Miss Lydia able to be moved to the carriage?"

Elizabeth checked over her sister once more. "I believe so. She breathes, but Miss Forrester and I need to make her presentable before we leave this room." She tied the

ribbons on Lydia's chemise and grabbed the gown from the bed behind her. "Please help me," she begged Ellie.

She would've helped her anyway, but Elizabeth's tone broke her heart. The poor dear had wanted to save her sister more than anything and now, her sister lay unconscious. What else could go wrong? She'd wondered it before, but what if Lydia couldn't be saved?

Ellie lifted Lydia's head and shoulders while Elizabeth slid the gown over, but Ellie almost dropped her when someone bellowed. She and Elizabeth turned at the sound of a sickening crack to find one of Mr Darcy's men towering over Wickham whose head now lolled to one side.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I wasn't expecting him to yell like that."

"No apology is necessary. Since we want to attract as little attention as possible, I would have done the same." He lifted Wickham's head by the hair. "It appears as though you have broken his nose."

"Yes, sir."

Mr Darcy rummaged in a small sack and handed his man a few coins. "Well done, Graham. Let us hope his crooked visage renders him less attractive to the ladies. It will be better for them if it does."

With Ellie's help, they managed to draw the gown down Lydia's legs and roll her to fasten it in the back. Elizabeth slipped Lydia's boots on her feet and tied them. Then, while Ellie kept an eye on Lydia, Elizabeth threw Lydia's belongings that were spread all over the room inside a trunk. Finally, she scanned the room. "I think I gathered it all, but I care not if I did not. We need to get her to my uncle's house."

Mr Darcy grabbed a long tan overcoat from a hook, spread it on the floor, and they carefully lifted Lydia, setting her on the coat. Once she was wrapped inside, he lifted her, and Elizabeth put a bonnet on her head. She'd be less likely to be recognised that way.

After gesturing to his men to gather the trunk, they made their way down the narrow corridor and stairway to the carriage. Once Ellie, Elizabeth, and Lydia were inside, Mr Darcy grasped Elizabeth's hand. "Remain here. I must pay for Wickham's lodgings and make arrangements for him. My driver and the man remaining are both armed. You will be safe with them." He kissed her knuckles before he slammed the door shut and disappeared back inside the building.

The maid seated beside Lydia kept her from falling on the floor while Lydia flopped forward with a groan. "Lord, my head."

Elizabeth leaned from the seat opposite and put her hands to Lydia's cheeks. "We shall get you some laudanum when we reach Uncle Gardiner's." Lydia groaned again and the maid gently coaxed her to rest against her shoulder.

It seemed like they sat there for an hour before Mr Darcy finally bounded down the front steps of the inn and jumped inside. When the door closed, he knocked his walking stick against the roof and they began to move. "Is she well?"

"She roused enough to say her head hurt, but never opened her eyes."

His lips pressed to a fine line and one of his hands remained clenched while the other searched out Elizabeth's. She blushed a little but let him have his way. "What happened with Mr Wickham?" she asked.

"My men are delivering him with an accounting of his debts to King's Bench. He will not have the funds to buy his freedom any time soon. He should not have it for years with his habits. Of course, as I said to Wickham, the militia could try him for desertion if they choose."

"What do we do about Lydia's reputation?" she whispered.

He sighed and ran his hand through his curls. "I have more than one idea for that, but I believe we should consult with your uncle before a decision is made."

She leaned her head against the back of the seat. "Thank you. You had no obligation to help us find Lydia, yet you have done so without asking anything in return."

A small smile curved his lip to one side. "Yet I have gained a treasure more precious than I could have ever imagined when I only hoped to improve your opinion of me."

"My opinion of you improved long ago."

He raised their joined hands and pressed his lips to the back of Elizabeth's hand, making Ellie sigh. They had Lydia, and she seemed well enough. How long would she have to wait before returning to Tom? A part of her couldn't wait, but a part of her worried. What if he didn't remember any of this? After all, this was a pretty significant change to the past.

When they arrived at the Gardiners', Ellie gazed up at the house in wonder. How did it look so similar but at the same time so different? The business on the ground floor was gone and the entire street was more of a neighbourhood than it was in her day.

Once the housekeeper saw Elizabeth, she allowed them inside quickly and led them to an upstairs room where they could put Lydia. Mr Darcy requested to meet with Mr Gardiner, and after he lay Lydia down, returned to the parlour to wait. Elizabeth plopped onto the bed and stared at her sister. "Stupid, foolish girl!" she muttered. "Mama always indulged her and Papa allowed it, and now, she is ruined irrevocably."

"Maybe Mr Darcy can fix things?"

"Fix things?" Elizabeth's voice was disbelieving and high-pitched. "No one can restore her innocence. We do not know how far word of her elopement has spread."

"Don't get depressed so soon. Let's see what Mr Darcy wants to do."

"I suppose you are correct." She stood and looked down at her sister. "Would you help me to ready her for the physician? Mr Darcy said he would send for one."

"Yes, of course."

Following Elizabeth's lead, they did almost the opposite of what they did at the inn. They removed Lydia's gown and her chemise, changing her into a nightgown Elizabeth took from a cupboard. Carefully, Elizabeth brushed her sister's hair but did not plait it. "She has a lump on the back of her head."

Ellie felt weird about it, but touched the place Elizabeth showed her. "It's really not that big. She probably has a concussion, but I don't know what to do about it."

The door opened and Mrs Gardiner hurried inside with a dark brown bottle and a glass of wine. "I owe you an apology, Lizzy. Your insistence that Lydia was eloping came as such a shock in Lambton that it made it difficult to credit, yet you were correct." She glanced at Ellie. "We owe you an apology as well, young lady. You attempted to help us, and we were defiant when we actually owe you a debt of gratitude."

She stood awkwardly, resisting the urge to agree with her, while Mrs Gardiner set the items on the table by the bed and brushed a lock of hair from Lydia's forehead. "Mr Darcy has sent for a physician. Perhaps we should wait until he arrives to give her the laudanum. If she needs to wake, it might prevent it."

"What about Willow Bark?" offered Ellie. "Would that keep her from waking?" She bit her lip at Mrs Gardiner's surprised look in her direction.

"No, and I think he could still give her the laudanum if he wished. I believe I have a small amount, but I shall send Lucy out for more. I shall be but a moment."

Unfortunately, Mrs Gardiner didn't return straight away but sent word with a maid that she was out of Willow Bark, and rather than entrust it to a servant, she walked down to the apothecary herself for more.

Not long after the maid left, Lydia moaned and clutched her head. "It hurts." She tried to sit up, but swallowed hard and dropped back down to the bed. "Lizzy, make it stop."

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you know where you are?"

Lydia blinked a few times and glanced around. "At Uncle Gardiner's."

"Do you know why?"

"Because you had to ruin the perfectly lovely time I was having with George." Her tone was petulant, like the spoilt child she was.

"Lovely?" cried Elizabeth. "He used you. Or are you just too dim-witted to understand? He took your money and your maidenhood, and he would have eventually left you in that hovel alone and penniless had we not found you."

"I know. You need not remind me," Lydia whinged. "He is the one who hurt me, so why are you scolding me?"

"Because your behaviour put you in that situation. You, no doubt, flirted and behaved shamelessly in Brighton or he would have never thought of bringing you to London. You agreed to an elopement—something you should never have done—and gave him your virtue before you were wed. You have ruined us all!"

"Oh, tosh! No one will care. What I did was not so bad."

Elizabeth gave an incredulous laugh. "Yes, it was! What if you fall with child? Do you want to be sent away?"

"Mama would never allow that to happen, besides, George ensured I would not get with child."

Ellie's fists were clenched at her sides and she'd been biting her cheek to keep from speaking, but could Lydia really be so clueless? "How did he do that?"

"Why should I tell you?" asked Lydia, glaring at Ellie as though she had a third eye and a hairy mole.

Elizabeth stepped beside Ellie with a bit of a blush on her cheeks. "I would care to hear this as well."

Looking up at them from the pillow, Lydia opened her mouth several times before she shrugged. "I do not have to tell you." She turned to Ellie. "Besides, I do not even know who *you* are."

"Ellie helped me save you from that man, and that is all you need know," fumed Elizabeth. "You can answer her questions as though they come from me. You will be answering them from Aunt Gardiner or Papa if you do not tell us anyway."

"Ha! As if I would tell Papa."

"Then, you may as well enlighten us, Sister."

Lydia inched up the headboard a little and tucked her hands in her armpits. "He did not finish inside me," she mumbled, refusing to look at them.

"And you think that will make a difference?" asked Ellie. "That's hardly a dependable method."

"How would you know?" Lydia sat up quickly and swayed. "George said it would work."

Ellie huffed and put her hands on her hips. Lydia was as stubborn as a mule. "He lied—just like when he said he'd marry you?"

"I was to be the first of my sisters to marry! He said he loved me! I would have had the most dashing husband and been the envy of all my sisters."

Elizabeth pushed Lydia to lie back before she fell to the floor and gave herself another bump on the head. "And now you will likely be the ruin of us and no man will have you. Do not sit up again. I shall not help you if you fall off the bed."

Mrs Gardiner entered. "Your argument can be heard at the bottom of the stairs. Lizzy, perhaps you and Miss Forrester should go to the parlour. Your father is here and wishes to speak with you. I will sit with Lydia until the physician comes."

She followed Elizabeth into the corridor and down the stairs. The voices of several men could be heard through the door, and Elizabeth knocked before someone called, "Enter!"

Mr Darcy was the first to stand when he saw Elizabeth, and the stranger in the room, who must've been her father, chuckled at the eager expression upon Mr Darcy's face. "I now see what you have been saying, Gardiner. He is certainly besotted." Mr Bennet hugged his daughter. "You showed great foresight and maturity when you predicted Lydia's actions in Brighton. I was a fool to make sport of you." He leaned around to see Ellie. "Would you introduce me to your friend?"

She turned and held out a hand in Ellie's direction. "Mr Thomas Bennet, may I present Miss Eliza Forrester. She has been of great aid in discovering Lydia's whereabouts."

Mr Bennet bowed. "My brother Gardiner has told me much of you, young lady. I am not certain why you have helped us, but I can never repay you for your information."

Ellie gulped and glanced around her. Mr Bennet definitely expected some sort of a response! "I am pleased I could be of . . . help? I expect nothing for what I am happy to do." She looked at Elizabeth, who grinned.

"How is Lydia?" asked Mr Gardiner.

With a roll of her eyes, Elizabeth shrugged. "Petulant, whinging, and infuriating."

At a knock from the front door, Mr Gardiner excused himself. After watching him leave, Mr Bennet sighed. "Mr Darcy has one or two ideas to hopefully minimize any damage to the family's respectability. He has also requested my permission and blessing to marry you, which I must admit came as quite a shock. I have given him my consent. He is the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse anything which he condescended to ask. I do hope you are as resigned to have him as he is to have you."

Elizabeth took her father's hand. "I am, Papa. He is the best of men. I love him dearly."

"Well, then." He sighed. "I suppose there is nothing to be done for it. I shall have to beat some sense into Lydia and Kitty or I shall run mad."

A tiny giggle came from Elizabeth as she kissed her father's cheek. "What ideas have you for Lydia's reputation?"

"I thought we should marry," suggested Mr Darcy. "We could claim I sent a carriage and a maid for Lydia and her note to Mrs Forster was nothing more than a poorly conceived joke."

"Do you truly believe that will work?" Ellie fought the urge to adjust her stays. Why did those stupid things like to dig into her ribs at the worst moments? "It just seems so simple."

"Colonel Forster is in town, searching for Wickham. I believe he would gladly accept the excuse," offered Mr Bennet. "Lydia would no longer be his responsibility. My only concern is Meryton. My wife took to her bed when the letter from the Colonel arrived. I cannot imagine word has not spread to the village."

Mr Darcy ran a hand over his mouth. "I could contact Bingley. After we are wed, we could all journey together to Meryton. Miss Lydia's return with us as well as the stories of her attendance at our wedding would help quell some of the rumours."

"As would Mr Darcy's willingness to marry me." When everyone looked at Elizabeth, she held up her hands. "Those in Meryton believe Mr Darcy to be of the proudest sort. Most of our neighbourhood would not believe Mr Darcy is willing to marry a Bennet sister if Lydia attempted an elopement."

Mr Bennet sat heavily in his chair. "I can see your point, but you must realise that there will still be talk. Not everyone will believe the tale, and I cannot say as I blame them."

"There will be doubts, but my marriage to Elizabeth should go far to keeping you in good standing with your neighbours. If Mr Bingley returns to court Miss Bennet, that would also do your family's reputation good. No one could hold Lydia's foolishness against you."

"What if she falls with child?" Ellie glanced to each one of them. That was the phrasing Elizabeth and Lydia used, and it was the one problem with Mr Darcy's plan.

Mr Darcy's cheeks turned rather red. "Mrs Gardiner mentioned an herb called Tansy. She intended to purchase some with the Willow Bark. It is said to prevent such conditions. If she shows signs of having conceived, we shall make arrangements for her."

"We must hope it is effective then," said Elizabeth with one eyebrow lifted.

"What say you, Lizzy?" asked her father. "Do you mind if your wedding is a hurried affair? Mr Darcy has offered to procure a license and send for your mother and your sisters."

Her betrothed shifted from foot to foot. "I know it would not be in the chapel at Longbourn, but we could be wed as soon as your family arrives."

Elizabeth stepped toe to toe with him, placed her hands to his chest, and lifted on her tiptoes. "I care not for a trunk of new gowns or teas and dinners. I want nothing more than to be married to you."

"Then I suppose I must send for your family," whispered Mr Darcy.

Mothers!

“Oh! My poor nerves,” muttered Mrs Bennet. Ellie turned from her place in the window seat as Elizabeth’s mother looked around the room and then hurried out. With a small smile, Ellie leaned her head back against the wall and watched the people stroll along the pavement on Gracechurch Street.

The day after Lydia’s recovery and the plan of Elizabeth’s wedding was finalised, Mr Darcy sent a carriage to Hertfordshire to retrieve the remaining Bennets for the wedding while Mrs Gardiner, Elizabeth, and Ellie purchased fabric and arranged for Elizabeth’s wedding clothes.

After only one day of shopping in eighteen-thirteen, Ellie would never take Primark and Peacocks for granted again. The process was so very different than what Ellie was accustomed to. She preferred seeing something she liked and simply buying it to sifting through patterns and the endless tiny details Elizabeth endured for one gown. It was mental!

Though the Bennets arrived that evening, Mr Darcy delayed two more days until the arrival of his sister. What none of them had realised before leaving Pemberley was that Mr Darcy had left instructions and a note for Mr Bingley as well as his sister upon their arrival.

While Miss Darcy and her companion were to rest for a day and follow Mr Darcy back to London, Mr Bingley and his sisters weren’t to remain the week like they’d originally planned. Instead, they were to continue their journey to Yorkshire when Miss Darcy departed.

Since they moved to Gracechurch Street, Mr Darcy had called daily, but he had not stopped by today because he expected Miss Darcy.

Mrs Bennet bustled in again and began to search through embroidery baskets and the cushions on the chairs and the sofa. “I must have left it here somewhere,” she mumbled. “Why that girl had to wed Mr Darcy now rather than have a perfectly decent betrothal is beyond me. Mr Darcy is so proud and disagreeable. He will never allow me to plan a party or a tea to show him off to the neighbours. He will take Lizzy and disappear north.” She sighed. “At least he is rich. What pin money and jewels she will have.” She gave a little tinkling giggle and Ellie pressed her lips together. Mrs Bennet was a piece of work!

“May I help you find something, Mrs Bennet?”

Elizabeth’s mother jumped and pressed her hand to her chest. “Miss Forrester! I did not see you there! You should not scare me in such a fashion. I might die of fright!”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. “Forgive me.”

“Lizzy will be the death of me. She plans this travesty of a marriage without so much as a fortnight to plan—I have a few days! My sister does not even know the best warehouses. She could not have bought Lizzy appropriate wedding clothes. My husband should never have entrusted that to her.”

“Lizzy’s wedding clothes will be beautiful,” said Ellie. “Mrs Gardiner selected some lovely fabrics and paid quite a sum from what I understand.”

“Yes, well, my sister *is* always well turned out. I suppose she did well enough, though I am certain the gowns are very plain. Lizzy has never used enough lace, and I know her aunt indulged her whims.” She glanced around. “Now, where was I?”

“You were searching for something.”

“Was I?” Mrs Bennet shook her head. “I suppose I shall remember later. I still do not understand why Lizzy is having the wedding breakfast here when it should be at Mr Darcy’s. His home is sure to be much grander. Can you imagine what his friends will say when they learn his wedding breakfast was in Cheapside? Oh, where is that girl? She needs to change her mind on this ridiculousness.”

“How is Miss Lydia today?”

Ellie knew how Lydia was doing since she’d spoken to her earlier, but Elizabeth wouldn’t want to have this conversation with her mother for the fiftieth time in the last few days. She was already being driven mad with demands and questions from Mrs Bennet. The wedding tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough for any of them!

“Lydia? I suppose she is well enough. I have yet to speak with her today. She is still confined to her bedchamber as punishment for that terrible joke she played. Making us believe she had eloped with that man was quite uncharitable! She is a lively girl—so agreeable—but I nearly fainted when I heard the news from Colonel Forster’s note.”

A part of her should feel guilty. The Tansy tea, they insisted Lydia drink, had upset her stomach, and fortunately, Mr Bennet’s restricting her to her bedroom had prevented the girl from pestering everyone in the house because she felt unwell. Ellie and Elizabeth had checked in on her first thing, but had left her to whinge on her own after a

moment or two. Lydia didn't need Mrs Bennet hovering over her, but neither did Elizabeth.

"Perhaps you should look in on her," offered Ellie. "She was still sleeping when I peeked in her room earlier."

"Still asleep? She does like to keep town hours—even at Longbourn, but 'tis quite late."

Completely distracted, Mrs Bennet hurried from the room as Elizabeth peeked from another door. "Is it quite safe?"

Ellie waved her inside. "Yes, she's off to pester Lydia."

"Lydia does feel poorly. She will not be best pleased to find Mama waking her. You must have forgotten to mention that Jane is sitting with her."

"I didn't forget." Elizabeth raised her eyebrow and Ellie shrugged. "I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't resist. I was enjoying the quiet and watching the people walk by when your mother came in. She was going to find you and complain for the millionth time about the wedding."

"Oh, Mama," she exhaled. "I appreciate your effort to save me from my mother's complaints. I know there is precious little quiet to be had with my mother and sisters here. I apologise. I know you are unaccustomed to such exuberance. At least my aunt took Kitty and Mary to the shops today."

"You have no reason to be sorry. Please don't think I am rude, but I didn't expect to still be here. I thought I'd have returned and would be with Tom by now." She'd been thinking of Tom before Mrs Bennet entered. The way he treated her—so much better than Greg ever did—and the way he could turn her into a puddle of mush with a look, and his kisses, well, her toes curled in her slippers just thinking about those.

"I have no wish for you to tell me what you are thinking."

Ellie's cheeks warmed. "I miss Tom."

"I could tell that much. giggI just have no wish to know what you miss about him."

At a knock on the front door, Elizabeth ran to the window and turned back to them, beaming. "Mr Darcy has come."

"Don't you mean Fitzwilliam?" teased Ellie with a grin.

"Hush!" Elizabeth's face turned bright red. "People do not use given names as frequently as we do family names. After all these years, my mother still calls my father

Mr Bennet. I have never heard her refer to him by his given name. You must remember that the future is very different.”

Before Ellie could respond, the door opened and Mr Darcy was announced. He entered and stepped to the side as a young woman shifted along beside him.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Eliza Forrester, may I present my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy.” The girl, who couldn’t be any older than Lydia, stood with her hands clasped before her and her eyes wide. She looked petrified. And Mrs Bennet complained of her nerves!

“I am very pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Elizabeth as she curtsied. Ellie smiled and tried her best to curtsy without falling on her face. She wobbled a little, but not nearly as bad as she had before. At least she was improving.

“I am honoured to finally make your acquaintance as well.” Miss Darcy spoke slowly and carefully. “I have heard much of you from my brother and have been eager to meet you.”

“Your brother is too kind.” Elizabeth blushed as she always did when she spoke of Mr Darcy. Eventually, she’d have to get over that. Perhaps her wedding night would... No, she’d probably blush more furiously than she did now. “I have heard that you play and sing very well.”

“Not very well,” said Miss Darcy, looking at her hands. The girl was painfully shy. Elizabeth should be able to help her with that. How *did* Miss Darcy turn out? She’d never considered it before. She’d have to check Elizabeth and Mr Darcy’s journals when she returned, even though Tom could probably tell her.

“Forgive me for not offering sooner, but would you care to sit?” Elizabeth’s giggle seemed to relax Miss Darcy a little since she relaxed while they all sat. “I hope you had an easy journey?”

“As easy as it could be. I was just so surprised when I received my brother’s note upon our arrival at Pemberley. Mr Bingley was obliged to go to Yorkshire or he and his sisters would have returned to London with me. I believe he intends to conclude his business as swiftly as possible and make his return.”

“He sent a letter with Georgiana expressing his wish to return to Netherfield,” added Mr Darcy. “I requested his permission to open the house in the event we returned to Meryton.” He shifted in his seat and appeared a little ill at ease. Had he planned to continue his courtship of Elizabeth if she hadn’t accepted him in London?

Before another word could be said, the door opened and Mrs Bennet stopped in the doorway, obviously shocked that she didn't know there were visitors. "I beg your pardon for not being present when you arrived, Mr Darcy," she suddenly gushed. "Lydia required my presence."

Mr Darcy stood and bowed while his sister curtsied. "I understand your need to see to your daughter. My sister was eager to make Miss Elizabeth's acquaintance and found she could not wait until the wedding tomorrow."

Mrs Bennet's eyes latched onto Miss Darcy. "Of course, you wished to meet your new sister." Ellie winced at the shrill tone of the woman's voice—it was amazing that dogs weren't the only ones who could hear it. She almost expected them to be howling from the street.

"I have always wished for a sister. I look forward to knowing Miss Elizabeth better."

"Well, you shall have five, though you might prefer some of us over others," joked Elizabeth.

"Oh, Lizzy!" her mother scolded. "You always did think yourself so important. I blame your father for indulging you so." Mr Darcy stared at his feet with his hands clenched, Georgiana's eyes widened, and Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

"And you haven't indulged Miss Lydia?" interjected Ellie. In the past few days, she'd hated the way Mrs Bennet always found some way to put her friend down. She knew she shouldn't say a word, but people who are angry are rarely wise. "I only met you three days ago, but you constantly tell Lizzy how she isn't as pretty as Jane or how she isn't as lively as Lydia. Jane is beautiful, but so is Lizzy. She's also witty and intelligent. She would never dream of playing the joke Lydia did." She was itching to rant at Mrs Bennet because Lydia had actually eloped, but they'd kept the information from the woman. If they hadn't, she would've told everyone what really happened as well as their cover story. She'd ruin everything.

"Ellie," whispered Elizabeth.

"Sod it! I know I shouldn't say anything, Lizzy, but I'm sick to death of it. I don't know how you've lived with it for so long."

A sputter came from Mrs Bennet, and Ellie turned to find her red-faced. "I have never been so insulted!"

“It is about time someone insulted you then,” continued Ellie. “If I was Lizzy, I’d marry Mr Darcy, move to Derbyshire, and having nothing at all to do with you. Lord knows she’d be happier for it.”

“Ellie!” Elizabeth’s voice was more insistent this time.

Ellie huffed and looked at her. “What?” Then, she really looked at her. Elizabeth’s hand was on her arm, and she was begging Ellie to stop with her eyes. When Ellie glanced around, Georgiana stared at the floor, Mr Darcy watched Elizabeth, and Mrs Bennet breathed heavily but hadn’t moved. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

A sniffle came from Mrs Bennet. “Perhaps I should return home if you do not want me here.”

“Lizzy has never said that, I never said that, and you know it.” She should probably keep her mouth shut, but Mrs Bennet was now going to twist everything. How many times had she watched her do something similar over the last couple of days?

“Ellie is correct, Mama. I do want you at my wedding.”

“But you intend to leave me behind because I was such a terrible mother,” griped Mrs Bennet. “Do not lie. Your friend would not have said as much if you believed otherwise.”

“I have never said you were a terrible mother. I have never enjoyed being compared to Jane or Lydia and found wanting, but I did not complain of it to Miss Forrester.”

“She is correct, Mrs Bennet. I have witnessed how you’ve treated your daughter since your arrival and I didn’t like it. I believe Lizzy deserves better. She has so many amazing qualities that you don’t recognise. You should look and see what the rest of us do—what Mr Darcy does. When you say Lizzy isn’t as handsome as Jane, you insult his sense of beauty because he must find her beautiful to want to marry her.”

Mrs Bennet blinked and turned to Mr Darcy. “I never considered it in such a manner. You think Lizzy pretty?”

His face warmed and a small smile graced his lips as he looked at Elizabeth. “She is the most handsome woman of my acquaintance.”

Elizabeth’s mother gawked back and forth at Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. “Well, I suppose there is no accounting for it.” An awkward silence fell over the group until Mrs Bennet suddenly scanned the room. “I have forgotten why I came in here again. If you would please excuse me, I have so much to prepare for tomorrow. If only you could have

a betrothal like all and sundry. We could have teas and dinners and I could introduce Mr Darcy to our neighbours.”

“Mr Darcy has met our neighbours,” said Elizabeth.

“True, but not as your intended.”

“We will wed on the morrow, Mama.”

A displeased sniff came from Mrs Bennet. “Yes, I suppose you are impatient.” Her head shot up. “Or have you breached propriety. Are you with child, Lizzy?”

“Mama! No!” cried Elizabeth while Georgiana covered her mouth. She almost appeared as though she were crying, but when she snorted, she gave up and sat in her chair, holding her stomach.

“Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. I had not meant to laugh.”

“My sisters call me Lizzy. I hope you will as well.”

Georgiana broke into a huge grin while Mrs Bennet exhaled. “Well, if you are with child, be prepared for talk when it is born.”

“Mama, Mr Darcy has always been a perfect gentleman.”

“Oh, my poor nerves. Why must you be so stubborn? Where did I leave my salts?” Mrs Bennet patted her gown and peered around her before she left the room. A steady creaking let them know she was heading back up the stairs.

Ellie sank into her chair. “I’m so sorry, Lizzy. I find her funny at times, but I hate the way she speaks to you.”

“I know you made an attempt to help, but she has behaved thus my entire life. No one has ever thought to correct her in the past, so I am unsure if your chastisement will do anything. I do appreciate your effort.”

“If you do not benefit,” interjected Miss Darcy in a small voice, “your sisters might.”

“I apologise that you witnessed such a display.” Elizabeth motioned to the chair. “If you like, I can order some tea and we can talk more. I would like to get to know you better as well.”

“I would like that.”

Elizabeth rang for a servant while Mr Darcy sat once again. When Elizabeth and Miss Darcy began speaking more of music, Ellie startled at Mr Darcy’s low voice.

“I do not care for Mrs Bennet’s treatment of Elizabeth either, but I have no authority to reprimand her behaviour until Elizabeth and I are wed. I understand your frustration with her and I thank you for being a friend to Elizabeth.”

She studied his expression. Was he serious? “I am certain what I did was not proper by today’s standards.”

“No, but maybe it should be. If more people had taken Mrs Bennet to task, we might not have had to search out her youngest daughter in Saffron Hill.”

“I can only agree with you there.”

“Elizabeth explained how you have no control over when you return, but I hope you will be present tomorrow. It would mean a great deal to the both of us. You helped bring us together. I can never repay you for that.”

Ellie shook her head. “You wouldn’t have needed me to bring you together if I hadn’t messed up the timeline to begin with. I have enjoyed meeting both of you. I hope everything works out as it should, especially with Lydia.”

“Little does she know that she owes her life to you as well.”

“Lizzy, too. Lizzy was quite determined.”

Mr Darcy gazed at Elizabeth with such love it made her miss Tom. “I am certain she was.” He cleared his throat and lifted his eyebrows. “So, tell me of this descendant of mine. I am curious how we compare.”

With a gasp, Ellie squirmed a bit. “You can’t ask me to compare the two of you. I could not do it. You resemble one another, and you have similarities, but to me, you aren’t the same at all.”

“Then tell me how we differ?”

Elizabeth lifted her eyebrow at Ellie while she continued to speak with Miss Darcy. Ellie sighed. Nope, there was no getting out of it! She was stuck.

Weddings, Weather, and Windows

Ellie gave a girly sigh when the vicar pronounced Elizabeth and Mr Darcy man and wife. There was no kiss, like in the modern-day ceremonies she was used to, but the deliriously happy expressions on their faces satisfied Ellie just as much. She'd seen them kiss before anyways.

As they both signed the register, Mrs Bennet wept loudly from her seat in front of Ellie. "A daughter married, *and* to a man of ten-thousand a year! Did you ever think we could be so fortunate?" she whispered so all could hear. Mr Bennet shushed her, but she waved away his scolding with her handkerchief and continued to sniff loudly.

Unfortunately for Ellie, Lydia was told before the wedding to sit beside her. Neither of them preferred that seating arrangement, but Elizabeth and Mr Darcy had insisted on it. That morning, when Lydia had protested loudly of being made to get out of bed and go to the church, Elizabeth had told her in detail Ellie's attack on Wickham and threatened to have Ellie do the same to Lydia if she tried to ruin the day. As it turned out, Lydia could be loud and obnoxious, but she was a massive wimp.

Jane stood up with Elizabeth, and Mary, who would've been preferred by leaps and bounds to Lydia, was seated beside Mrs Gardiner. Kitty had been quiet for the wedding, but she sat between Mr and Mrs Gardiner with a dreamy expression on her face.

Lydia gave a scoff and took a deep breath when Mr Darcy gazed adoringly at Elizabeth. Oh Lord, Lydia wasn't going to say something, was she? Before a word could escape her lips, Ellie elbowed her hard in the ribs.

"Ow!" She gave Lydia as evil a look as she could, which made Lydia flinch and sit quiet, making Ellie snicker quietly at her retreat.

A bubbling laugh came from Elizabeth at Lydia's sulking when she passed. She smiled at Ellie and winked. On the way to the church, Elizabeth had said she owed Ellie a great debt, but Ellie hoped she wouldn't stay long enough in eighteen-thirteen for Elizabeth to repay it. She loved Elizabeth, but she wanted to go home!

The family stood and followed the happy couple wishing them well, the ladies all kissing the bride on the cheek. Elizabeth stretched out her hands when she saw Ellie. "I am so glad you stayed for the wedding."

"As much as I want to go home, I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

As soon as their family delivered their wishes of joy, everyone moved to step outside so they could return to the Gardiners for the wedding breakfast. The day had been brilliant and sunny when they arrived, so Ellie braced herself for the bright sunlight when the doors opened. When the sun didn't immediately blind her, she stopped squinting and gawked.

"Look at the sky," said Mrs Gardiner in wonder.

She turned to Elizabeth, who lifted her eyebrow and dragged her through the doors where they came to an abrupt stop. The day was no longer bright and the sun didn't beam down on them like it had before. Instead, the sky had become covered with those clouds she had definitely seen several times now and everything had that same strange purplish-grey tinge.

When she looked to Elizabeth, her friend shrugged. "Perhaps you were meant to see us married?"

"I suppose." Her trips back and forth had never made much sense or followed any particular pattern, so why should it now?

"You should ride with us. It would not do for you to suddenly disappear while in a carriage with my family. You might give my mother an apoplexy." Elizabeth pulled her toward Mr Darcy's carriage while Mrs Bennet protested vehemently that Ellie should be riding with the Gardiners since the newlyweds no longer required a chaperon. Did that daft woman believe they would have their wedding night on the way to the Gardiner's or something? What could her riding with them hurt?

When Elizabeth and Mr Darcy both insisted on Ellie joining them, Mr Bennet herded his wife inside their own carriage for the ride to Gracechurch Street. While they travelled, the wind picked up and great gusts howled around the carriage, making it rock and lurch. Elizabeth peered out of the window. "There are no shooting stars yet."

"Shooting stars? In the middle of the day? I do not remember you mentioning such a spectacle," commented Mr Darcy in a surprised tone. "That would be a sight indeed, though the strange hue of everything is odd enough."

They made it to the Gardiners before the weather worsened, and Elizabeth and Ellie hurried inside. Before the rest of their group entered, Elizabeth grabbed her hands and pulled her into a small study. "Before you vanish, I want to thank you. I enjoyed seeing the future very much, and I cannot express enough my appreciation for your help in saving Lydia. You are a dear and true friend, Ellie Forrester. I shall never forget you."

She blinked and swallowed. “You will make me cry if you keep it up.”

Ellie squeezed Elizabeth’s hands. “I messed your life up so badly that I had to fix things. I couldn’t let you and your Mr Darcy die. I’ve loved meeting you, though. It was so much fun teaching you how to live in twenty-seventeen.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I gave up trying to teach you to speak like us. I am afraid you are a hopeless cause.”

“I can’t argue with you. I did try sometimes and I think I did better—unless I was angry.”

Mr Darcy entered and held out his hand to her. “I must thank you for helping Elizabeth and I find one another. Your loyalty and friendship are valued by us both.”

At the sound of the ladies gasping in the hall, they hurried out to hear and see the pinging of small hailstones against the glass of the windows.

“’Tis bad luck,” wailed Mrs Bennet, fluttering her handkerchief.

With a smile, Mr Darcy looked meaningfully at Ellie. “On the contrary, I believe it is an omen of good fortune. It has brought us all together, has it not?” Kitty, Mary, and Mrs Bennet stared at him as though he were insane while the rest of their party still watched the weather.

Mrs Gardiner tapped Mrs Bennet on the forearm with her fan. “Of course, it is not bad luck.” She leaned closer to Elizabeth’s mother and whispered, “You should not upset Lizzy on her wedding day. The weather must be a disappointment in itself without you becoming overwrought.” When she straightened, she clasped her hands together. “We should all move to the parlour. Tea and refreshments will be brought in soon and the meal will be served directly.”

Ellie looked back and forth between those going into the parlour and the stairs. How was she to be with everyone when she could disappear at any minute? It would be noticed if she asked to go to the room she’d shared with Elizabeth since they moved to the Gardiners—particularly if she remained for the rest of the day. Before she could speak with Elizabeth, Mrs Bennet shooed her and Mr Darcy into the parlour while Ellie hung back, trying to figure out what to do.

“You will join us, will you not, Miss Forrester?” Her head jolted to Mr Bennet, who stood near the door with an expression that eerily resembled Elizabeth. “I am certain my Lizzy would appreciate your presence.”

Without a reasonable excuse, Ellie allowed Mr Bennet to escort her inside where she sat in the window seat, which was not far from Elizabeth, but not in the centre of all the attention. For the first few minutes, she couldn't sit still, worried she would shock everyone with her sudden vanishing act. The clock ticked but it seemed to go as slow as a snail on pavement. Why wouldn't something—anything happen?

What felt like hours later, they moved to the dining room where it was much more difficult to hide, seated at a table with three assembled families as she was. She did her best to eat the lovely meal placed before her, but was too out of sorts. When was she to return to Tom? This was ridiculous! It always seemed like when she didn't want to go back, she did, and now that she wanted to go home, she wasn't. Why couldn't she control anything?

While she tried not to worry, she watched Elizabeth and Mr Darcy more or less ignore their families as they bent their heads close together and spoke quietly. Meanwhile, the wind continued to howl and groan around the back of the house, causing some to stop eating and widen their eyes. This was so not typical English weather!

When the meal concluded and the family made to move back to the parlour, Elizabeth grasped her wrist. After Mrs Bennet finally hurried out, Mr Darcy closed the door behind her.

"Fitzwilliam believes he knows why you have not returned to twenty-seventeen," said Elizabeth hurriedly.

She gave a little start. "Really? How?"

"During the meal, Elizabeth and I spoke of each instance of your travelling back in time and we seem to have noticed a pattern."

"A pattern?"

He lifted a shoulder. "A pattern of sorts, I suppose."

Ellie thought of the times she'd travelled and shook her head. "I don't see any pattern. They were all too random."

"But they were not," he said with a smile. "Each of your instances of time travel was induced by a fall or near-death experience of some sort."

"Think of it." Elizabeth searched her eyes. "Whenever you travelled back, you fell somehow, and whenever you told me of your return to the future, it was due to either your jumping in front of the post coach or a severe problem with my health."

“What about when Mildred crashed into that field?”

“The car left the ground briefly. Did you not feel it?” asked Elizabeth.

“No, I don’t remember anything after crashing through the fence.” She shook her head. “There was also the very first time, before I jumped in front of the post coach. I didn’t fall or have a near death experience then. I simply fell asleep reading your letters.”

Mr Darcy tilted his head down and looked at her. “You *fell* asleep?”

“But that shouldn’t count, should it?” She looked between the two of them. This was truly mental. Travelling home to Tom would take her risking her life somehow?

Elizabeth grasped her by the arms. “The weather and sky disturbances that were always a prelude to our travelling have occurred, but you have not gone anywhere. Perhaps you need to fall.”

“Lizzy, I can’t exactly go to the top of the stairs and throw myself down. Too many people would notice.”

Elizabeth shook her head and bit her lip. “No, but you can go to the windows on the top floor—the ones where your flat will be and jump from there. Those rooms are a link to your future and then you would have the fall as the spark to light the fire so to speak. Fitzwilliam and I believe it is your best chance.”

“And what if I hit the ground with a tremendous splat.”

Mr Darcy winced while Lizzy huffed. “Really? You threw yourself in front of a post coach and fell from the roof of Pemberley, and now, you’re afraid of jumping from a second-floor window?”

“I thought I was dreaming when I jumped in front of those horses and I didn’t fall from the roof of Pemberley on purpose.”

“What if you are dreaming now?” asked Elizabeth.

“You know I’m not, though!” What was Elizabeth doing? This wasn’t like she was doing a bomb¹ into the local leisure centre’s pool. It was more like diving from one of those giant platforms in the Olympics. It was insane!

“Ellie! You must return if you are to be our great, great, great, great granddaughter.”

“I think you missed a great in there.”

Elizabeth squeezed her hands tightly. “You made me see that I had to take a leap and trust in my feelings for Fitzwilliam. Now, you must take a leap and trust your feelings for Tom. He will be waiting there for you when you return.”

“What if he doesn’t remember any of this?”

“Then, start from that drink he promised you.” Elizabeth gave her a sidelong look. “Would you really object to having a first kiss again?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I just don’t want to have this as a secret I can’t share with him.”

“Miss Forrester,” interrupted Mr Darcy, “you will not know unless you return. If you desire a life with him, you must face your fears.” He took her hand and bowed over it. “I must say I have enjoyed making your acquaintance. I shall never be able to repay you for your assistance in bringing Elizabeth and I together. I wish you well and joy in your life.”

Ellie felt all warm inside and couldn’t help but grin. “Thank you. I am glad to have met you also.”

Elizabeth threw her arms around Ellie and embraced her tightly. “I shall miss you. If only I had a portrait of you as you will have of me.” She cleared her throat. “You must go. There are servants’ stairs just off that corridor, there.” She pointed to the far corner of the room. “You must hurry.” After one last hug, Elizabeth backed from Ellie and followed Mr Darcy through the door, watching Ellie until the door closed.

A sound came from the kitchens and Ellie rushed to the stairs but didn’t run up the steps. She was too afraid of tripping on the hem of Elizabeth’s gown. When she reached the first floor, she glanced up and down the hallway. With no one around, she took the next flight of stairs to the attics and the hall that would one day be outside of her flat in London. It had barely changed in two hundred years except that the paint was in better condition and didn’t peel from the walls like it did in the future.

Trailing her fingers down the plastered wall, she made her way to the second to last door—one of the few along that passageway that remained in twenty-seventeen. Several more doors existed in this time, but when Ellie entered the servant’s room and looked around, she realised why.

The rooms were not large at all, just enough for a bed, a small bedside table, and a wardrobe. By the time she lived here, the walls between the bedchamber at the end of the hall as well as the walls between the next room or so on the other side were knocked down to form her flat—and she thought her flat was tiny!

What would be her parlour window was directly across the room, so she walked over and opened it as far as it would go, but it wasn’t enough. The wind rushed through

the small opening and hailstones pattered against the glass. Hopefully, the hail would stop before she jumped. She really didn't want to get pelted and bruised by ice on her way down.

She pushed again at the window, but it wouldn't budge. What was she going to do? She couldn't fit through an opening that size! She pulled a small chair over and stood on it to have more leverage and heaved against the window.

Nothing happened.

She jiggled it and then jammed her shoulder into the frame. "Ow!" She winced and rubbed her shoulder.

"Miss Forrester?"

As she spun to see who said her name, she fell from the chair, landing on her bum in an ungraceful pile.

"Oh! Forgive me for startling you." Kitty ran over and helped Ellie stand. "Are you well?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I went to my bedchamber to retrieve the novel I am reading—I am ever so fond of Ms Radcliffe—and I saw you come up here. Out of curiosity, I followed."

"You should return to the party."

"Does Lizzy know where you are?" asked Kitty, peering around Ellie at the window. "I am certain she desires your attendance as well."

"Lizzy knows exactly where I am and why."

"Then can I not remain with you? Mary keeps reciting moral platitudes about marriage, which is such a bore! And, I am still angry with Lydia. She told me the truth of what happened at Brighton and how Mr Darcy, Lizzy, and you found her."

Ellie's eyes stung when they widened. "She told you that?"

"Yes," she said. "I confess I thought it to be romantic at first, but people in Meryton treated us differently when they thought Lydia had eloped. Some families would not speak to us and Jane appeared so worried." She bit at her lip for a moment and sighed. "Mr Wickham did not really want to marry Lydia, did he?"

She shook her head. "No, he didn't, but look, you can't tell anyone what you know—not even your mother."

"Lord, if I told Mama, she would tell all and sundry of Lydia's ruin. I do not want people to treat me like they did before. I will not tell a soul."

“If you need to speak of it, you can talk to Lizzy, your aunt, or your father. They all know the truth.”

Kitty glanced around her again. “What are you trying to do?”

She peeked back at the window. “I . . . I needed fresh air so I was trying to open the window, but it seems to be stuck.”

Kitty walked around Ellie, put her hand around the edge of the window, shook it a bit, and then, pushed it open like it was the easiest thing in the world. When she turned, she scanned the room. “It does not appear that a servant occupies this bedchamber.”

“No,” she said looking around. “It’s pretty empty.”

When would she leave? Now that the window was open, she couldn’t just throw herself through. What if Kitty had major psychological issues after witnessing that? She might think Ellie was trying to off herself.

“Look, Kitty, I hope you won’t think badly of me, but I really need some quiet. That’s why Elizabeth told me to come up here.”

“Oh! I had not realised. I hope you will forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Kitty perked up. “I do not give a whit what Lydia says. You are not a horrid piece of baggage.”

A giggle escaped before Ellie could stop it. “Is that what she calls me?”

With a nod, Kitty giggled awkwardly. “I should not have repeated Lydia’s words.”

“It’s okay. I’m not worried about what Lydia thinks of me. I understand from Lizzy that you used to follow Lydia in everything she did. I hope you’ll do your own thing from now on. People will find you more interesting if you think for yourself.”

She scrunched up her nose. “I believe I know what you mean, though you explain it in a very odd fashion.”

“I’m afraid I have a bit of a headache,” Ellie lied.

“Oh, forgive me. I almost forgot you were seeking quiet. I should return to the wedding breakfast before I am missed anyhow. You will return soon?”

Ellie shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe. If the quiet helps my head.”

Once she left and closed the door behind her, Ellie climbed into the window and froze, perched on the sill. What was she doing? This wasn’t a dream. She couldn’t just jump from a window, could she? She looked down and wobbled before pulling herself back so she was balanced again. This was mental! She wasn’t doing this!

A mixture of rain and hail continued to fall from the sky and she closed her eyes, trying one more time to jump, but the problem wasn't actually jumping. It was the ground—she didn't want to hit it!

Trying not to think of the pavement and the street below, she took a deep breath and tried to psych herself into it. She lunged forward but never lost her hold on the window frame. Instead, she only gripped it harder.

“Crap!” she cried. “Why can't I do this?”

What she needed was to regroup and start again. She would get out of the window and then talk herself back into it. Carefully, she shifted one foot back, but her foot suddenly wouldn't budge. She tried to move it again, but it was stuck in the fabric of Elizabeth's gown.

She tried kicking back to free it, but found herself falling forward and flapping her arms like a bird to regain her balance. Wait a minute? When had she let go of the window?

A scream rent the air as she plummeted down. That was when she saw them. Two lights piercing through the torrents of rain from the sky. She squinted. Were those headlights? Then, everything went black.

What Happened: Part One

With a giant heaving inhale, Ellie startled awake, but two strong hands covered her shoulders, preventing her from moving. “Careful, you don’t want to jar your leg.”

She pressed her palm to her forehead and blinked hard as she strained to look around the room—not that she could see a thing! “Where am I?” It probably sounded like a silly question, but her eyes weren’t focussing. Everything was just one big, hazy blur.

“You’re at the hospital in Lambton.”

“Hospital?” She concentrated on the dark blob that was just beginning to clear a little. She was certain it was him, but she couldn’t see his face. After a few more blinks, the blurry form of what she thought was a dark-haired man stood over her. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them one more time. It was him! “Tom,” she breathed in relief. “We did it. We saved Lydia, and I saw Lizzy marry Fitzwilliam. But, I don’t understand how I got here. I should’ve returned to Pemberley after the fall.”

Now that her vision had focussed completely, she scanned her surroundings. She didn’t frequent many hospitals, but this one was the poshest one she’d ever seen. She appeared to be the only person in the room. There wasn’t even another bed. The niggling ache that had been annoying her since she woke suddenly began to throb. She groaned and reached down to try to touch it.

“What hurts?” he asked with concern etched on his features.

“My leg.”

“Just your leg?”

“Yes. Why? Should something else hurt, too?”

“I was just making sure,” he soothed. “Let me tell the nurse you’re awake. I’ll be right back.” After he stepped outside for a moment, he returned to sit on the side of her bed. “Do you remember how we met?”

“Yes, of course.” She cleared her throat, trying to get rid of the last of that gravelly sound from her voice. “We met in the study at Pemberley. I had crept past the barrier because I was fascinated by Elizabeth Darcy’s portrait and wanted to get a closer look. You asked me for a drink.”

A corner of his lips lifted. “I did. Do you remember what happened after?”

He suddenly looked really concerned. She knew exactly what happened after, but she was beginning to wonder if he did—well, at least if he remembered her version of things. “I talked to Marion in the gift shop. Then, I started walking towards Lambton when Theresa called. That’s when that bloke tried to run me over with his car.”

He jerked like she surprised him and leaned a bit closer. “Can you describe the car? I am certain the police would be very interested.”

“Police? Why would the police be interested? It’s not like he hit me. He was just a prick who was driving too fast and nearly hit me.”

Tom appeared confused and tilted his head. “If he didn’t hit you, then what do you remember happening after that?”

“I walked back to the inn. The weather was so strange. You must’ve seen it. The sky got all cloudy and everything had that bizarre purplish-grey colour to it. I thought the rain would start coming down in buckets, but I was still dry when I made it to Lambton.”

He took her hand while he shook his head. “Ellie, you never made it back to the inn.”

Something flared in her stomach, and she began to breathe a little quicker. “What do you mean I never made it back to the inn? Of course, I did.” She knew the timeline would be changed when she returned, but did he really not remember the time she and Elizabeth spent at Pemberley?

“Ellie, you were found by one of our gardeners along the road. No one saw what happened, but you were unconscious along the verge. An ambulance was called, and you were brought here.”

“And no one knows what happened?” she asked quietly, the truth suddenly hitting her like a punch in the face. He *had* forgotten when the timeline changed. He didn’t remember any of it—the long conversations in the library, the kissing, their holding hands. She wanted to cry!

“No, but with the broken leg and your other injuries, they assumed you were hit by a car.”

Other injuries? She gulped and shifted as best she could without jostling her leg. When she moved, her body suddenly ached in places she hadn’t noticed before and when she rubbed her arm, she winced. She lifted it to find a good-sized abrasion stretching along the outside of her forearm.

A thud that sounded like a door shutting made her turn as a smiling nurse seemed to appear beside her. "I see Mr Darcy is correct and you are finally conscious. Are you in any pain?"

"My leg aches and I feel as though I've exercised, but I know I haven't."

With a chuckle, she straightened the sheets and wrapped something to take her blood pressure around her arm. While she pumped it up, she asked, "What would you rate your pain?"

"Huh?" What did that mean? Rate your pain. What blooming idiot came up with that idea?

"Is it a two or a three—annoying but doesn't necessarily hurt too badly, or is it five where it hurts a fair amount?" The nurse picked up a piece of paper and wrote on it for a moment before watching Ellie expectantly.

"How high does this rating go? I mean can you give it a hundred?" The nurse stood straight and put her hands on her hips. Tom looked down to his lap while his shoulders shook.

"Excruciating pain would be a ten." The nurse didn't sound too thrilled. Perhaps she should just answer her question.

"I don't know. Six for my leg, I guess, and four or so for my body? It's not terrible, but it's definitely more than a little annoying."

"I'll bring you something for the pain. Are you hungry at all?"

She shook her head while she swallowed at the thought of food. "No, I'm a little queasy really. It's not bad though."

The nurse checked the bag of fluids hanging on a nearby pole, and Ellie, for the first time, noticed the tubing running to a vein on the back of her hand. She froze. How bad had she been hurt?

"I'll be back in two ticks."

When she hurried out, Ellie looked at Tom. "How long have I been here?"

"You've been out of it for three days. That lump on your head has gone down considerably since they brought you in."

"What lump?" She reached for her hair, and Tom steered her hand to the spot. She sucked in a breath at a stinging jolt when she found the spot. Just barely grazing it with her fingers hurt! "I'm surprised I don't have a huge headache with that there."

"Me too," he commented with his eyebrows raised.

“May I ask you a question?”

His forehead crinkled. “Yes.”

“What happened to Lydia? I mean after Lizzy and Mr Darcy saved her.”

He gave a wicked hot grin. “So, you read some of Elizabeth Darcy’s letters?”

Crap! He really didn’t remember any of Elizabeth being in twenty-seventeen. A small part of her had still held out hope he would ask what happened when they fell from Pemberley’s roof. Why couldn’t he know it all, so she wouldn’t have to quickly think of something to tell him. “I read a little.”

“Where did you leave off?”

What if she said something that wasn’t in the book? She couldn’t say the last thing she knew was their wedding. Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam were both there. Elizabeth wouldn’t have written to him of that. “I don’t remember. But, didn’t Lydia run away with some bloke named Wickham?”

“She did,” he confirmed, giving her a strange look. “She was staying in Brighton with friends, and he persuaded her to elope. He had no intention of marrying her, but he used her money to get them to London. He used her as well.”

“But Fitzwilliam Darcy helped Elizabeth find her sister.”

“Yes, they found her in a seedy inn in Saffron Hill. Fitzwilliam had Wickham jailed for his debts, and they took Lydia to her uncle’s house on Gracechurch Street. Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam married several days later to help hide her sister’s transgression. They claimed Fitzwilliam sent a carriage for Lydia, and her note, saying she eloped with Wickham, was nothing more than a poorly done joke.”

It took everything in her not to become impatient. She knew all of this already! When was he going to get to the rest? “But what happened to Lydia? Did she get pregnant? Did she die in childbirth? What?”

His eyebrows drew down in them middle. “No, she returned to Meryton with her parents and sisters. Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth spent the fortnight after their wedding at a nearby estate called Netherfield, long enough to know Lydia wasn’t going to have Wickham’s child. Then, they left for Pemberley.”

The Tansy tea must have worked. Thank goodness! Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam didn’t need to worry about Lydia any more than they already had. “Did Lydia ever marry?”

“Not right away. She remained with her parents until they both died and the cousin, Mr Collins, took possession of the estate. That was when Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth hired her a companion and let her live in the Dower house at Pemberley. She lived happily there until she was about thirty-five when a local widower took an interest in her. They were married a month after he came out of mourning.”

“Did she ever have children?”

“No, but the letters I have of hers seem content. She was not as selfish and spoilt by then and she didn’t seem to want for anything. She only lived another ten years after her marriage.”

“How did she die?” It came out almost whispered. Unlike when she read Elizabeth’s letters that night at the inn, Lydia was real to her now. She’d touched her and talked to her and now, she was gone. So were Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth, but she shoved that to the back of her mind. She couldn’t think of that right now or she’d cry.

“From what Elizabeth said in her journal, they believed Lydia died of consumption.”

“Well, I suppose that’s better than before,” she mumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing.” The nurse entered, gave her an anti-inflammatory and something for the nausea, and left again straightaway. Once she was gone, Ellie scanned the controls on the bed. “How do I sit up?”

“Right here,” said Tom, pressing the button for her. When she was comfortable, she covered his hand with hers. He started and stared as she whipped her hand away. He didn’t remember! She couldn’t forget that or he’d think her an idiot.

“Did the lie about the letter work?” Maybe that would distract him from her mistake? How she wished he knew everything!

“What letter?”

“That Lydia made a terrible joke by saying she eloped with Wickham.”

“Oh! Yes, for the most part, it did. Elizabeth mentioned several families questioned the story, but none of them shunned the Bennets. They didn’t want to offend the Darcys, and later, once Elizabeth’s sister Jane married Fitzwilliam’s friend, the Bingleys.”

“That’s good.” What a relief! They hadn’t gone through all of it—travelling back and forth in time, the fall from Pemberley’s roof, the endless ride from Pemberley to London in a carriage, the sore bum—for nothing!

“Yes, it was good. Elizabeth was very satisfied with her sister’s lot. I remember in one journal entry she commented, ‘Lydia would never have lived this long if we had not changed her circumstances so drastically.’ I can’t explain it, but it was a peculiar entry.”

It wasn’t peculiar at all to Ellie. She understood what Elizabeth meant and agreed.

“Did you want to know anything else about Elizabeth?”

She bit her lip while she thought. She knew how many children they had, or did she? “They had eight children, right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. She picked at the blanket on the bed. What else could she ask without giving anything away? He’d think she was mental if she told him the truth of it all. “Are you okay?”

Ellie ded. “Yes, just a bit tired, I suppose.”

His warm hand covered hers and she inhaled at the pleasant shock of his touch. “Why don’t you lay there and close your eyes?”

“Will you stay and talk to me?”

“I could tell you more of Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth if you like?” Her eyes were closed, but his tone was hopeful. He always did love to speak of them, and considering how much she wanted to know every detail of their lives, she didn’t want to stop him.

“That sounds lovely.”

“Since you’re interested in Lydia’s situation, I could tell you more of what happened. Both Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth chronicled that time thoroughly in their journals.”

It was all Ellie could do not to crinkle her nose. She knew all of it, but she couldn’t tell him that. “Okay.”

He gave her a side-long look. “You aren’t humouring me, are you?”

Yes and no. She did want to hear of Elizabeth, just not the part she had been a part of. “No, I’d like to know more about Elizabeth.”

He told her the story in great detail while she faded in and out. His accounting from the journals was exactly what had happened—except the truth of Elizabeth’s time travel and her presence. Could it have all been a dream? What if it had been some bizarre, crazy-realistic dream? They hadn’t mentioned her at all in their journal? It’s not like

they could call her by name, but they could've at least said that they had the help of a friend.

When he finished the story, their eyes met, and he ran his thumb along the back of her hand. It brushed the hospital bracelet that shifted up her arm, so he started to adjust it on her wrist when it angled in his direction, making him pause. "Your surname is Forrester? You didn't mention that when we met."

"I didn't know it was important."

"Not necessarily important." He shook his head. "I don't usually mention it because I never thought it was significant, but Elizabeth mentions a friend named Miss Forrester in her journals from time to time."

What? She did mention her? Elizabeth never mentioned knowing anyone else by that name and neither did her relations, so it had to be her. "What did she say about her?"

"I can show them to you sometime if you like. Miss Forrester helped Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam find Lydia. Both of them also credit her with bringing them together."

"Really?"

He leaned against her bed. "She was with Elizabeth in Lambton when Fitzwilliam found Elizabeth there. She travelled to London with them and remained long enough to see them married. They both mention how they wished she hadn't had to depart the day of the wedding, but they understood her need to go and wished her well."

Ellie's vision blurred with tears. "They did?" It was real! She knew it was real! She used her free hand to dab the tears from her face until he handed her a tissue. "Thank you."

They sat in silence for a short time, but it wasn't awkward or strained. Finally, she looked down at her leg and sighed. "Did the doctor say how long I'll have to stay?"

"I would imagine you'll have to stay here for a few days more. That bump on your head really knocked you out." His brows drew down in the middle. "Are you in a great hurry to go?"

"Not exactly, but I don't have a job, and I'm not far from being out of money. I can't pay rent, so I'll have to get my things from my flat before the end of the month."

With a squeeze to her hand, he covered their joined hands with his free one. "Well, you can't exactly go running back to London with that leg. You have two weeks, so why don't we take things a day at a time. When you're released, you can stay at Pemberley

until you're healed. I can even make arrangements to have your flat packed and put into storage here until you are well."

"I can't let you pay for that," she exclaimed.

"If it means that much to you, you can pay me back when you find a job." He leaned closer and grinned. "Besides, it will be a lot easier for us to have that drink if you're staying at Pemberley."

She couldn't argue with that, but did she want to be dependent on him so early in their relationship? She'd need to get onto her own two feet and soon.

"I can see the gears turning in that brain of yours," he teased. "There's nothing you can do at the moment, so there's no point in worrying."

"Are you sure I can't work somehow at Pemberley? I could work shifts in the gift shop or something?"

"With a broken leg?"

"There has to be something."

His gentle fingers brushed a wisp of hair from her eyes. "Let's get you well, and then we'll talk about it. It won't do you any good to press yourself before you can manage it."

A low growl escaped from her throat. He was sweet, but so stubborn!

"I hope that isn't how you feel about me." He laughed. "Because I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

She couldn't help but grin. "I believe I can live with that."

What Happened: Part Two

6 months later...

Ellie stepped out of the office into the light breeze, leaned her head back to feel the sun on her face, and inhaled the fresh air. It was such a gorgeous day! She looked back once at the sign for the estate agent's office. It was so good to take care of herself again! She hadn't minded spending those first few weeks out of the hospital with Tom, but she felt awkward without him remembering the same past she did—she didn't want him to think she was using him.

The notion, however, never seemed to enter Tom's head. He had tried to create a position for her at Pemberley, but in the end, she'd refused to allow it—nothing like getting a job by being the girlfriend of the boss to breed resentment. Besides, if things continued with Tom, she could work at Pemberley later. She was okay at the estate agent's. Was it the perfect job? No, but it wasn't terrible and it paid her bills. She was happy and things with Tom were perfect.

With a skip, she stepped down onto the pavement and walked towards High Street. She stopped into Boots and bought some conditioner. She had a date with Tom that evening, and she wanted to wash and dry her hair before he picked her up.

As she left the store, she marvelled at the difference between Lambton before her trip to eighteen-thirteen and now. Sure, it was still a quaint market town, but it was just a little nicer than it was before—buildings were kept up a little better, and it was a bit larger. She'd noticed the difference the day Tom drove her home from the hospital. It was the first thing that jumped out at her then, but over time, she'd become used to it.

When she was able to leave the hospital, Tom set her up in a posh bedchamber at Pemberley. Since she couldn't pay the rent, her flat in London needed to be cleared before the end of the month, and well, she couldn't do it with her broken leg, so Tom arranged for her flat to be packed and put into storage in Derbyshire.

Once the doctor said Ellie could return to work, she insisted upon finding a place of her own and a job that Tom didn't arrange for her. Fortunately, the local estate agent desperately needed an experienced employee, so the job part was easy. After all, she'd been an estate agent in London. But, Tom, even though he tried and tried, couldn't convince her to remain at Pemberley.

When he knew he'd never get his way, he offered an old gamekeeper's cottage on the edge of the grounds rent-free. It was adorable! It was tiny, but bigger than her flat in London with window boxes bursting with flowers. She was thrilled when she persuaded him to accept some rent, even if she knew he could get more—much more.

Her phone buzzed and after recognising Theresa's phone number, she hit the answer button. "You promised to call me yesterday!" yelled Theresa's irritated voice.

"I got caught up at work. I had a last-minute appointment to show this big house a few miles from town, and I spent the entire afternoon working up the paperwork so they could make an offer."

"You could've called me after."

"I know, but I was tired and Tom came over to watch a movie on the telly. I fell asleep before it was over. What was so important that I *had* to call you then?" Theresa was one to exaggerate, so it probably wasn't important.

"Oh, only that Greg is trying to get in touch with you," she said a little drawled out.

"You can't be serious. Why? It's been forever. Like I'd ever consider getting back together with *him*." She had Tom, and he was loads better as a boyfriend than Greg had ever been.

"I can't tell you why, but he came to me for your new number." She could just imagine Theresa rolling her eyes. "I told him to go to hell, but I thought I'd warn you just in case he finds some tosser to give it to him.

"Thanks. Knowing him, he wanted a booty call or something equally ridiculous. I'll be sure to avoid him if he calls." At least she remembered his number. It should be pretty easy to ignore.

Theresa chuckled. "Sounds like a plan to me. What do you have planned for tonight?"

"I have a date with Tom," she said, positive she was grinning from ear to ear.

"When don't you have a date with Mr Tall, Dark, and Hunky? Well, I have to go. A group of us are going to the pub tonight."

"You're coming up again in a couple of weeks, aren't you?"

"I'll be there! I'm looking forward to it. Someone's knocking at the door. I gotta go!"

"Talk to you later," said Ellie before ending the call.

When she looked up, she was passing the inn. That always made her smile. She couldn't help it. It was still so similar that sometimes she stopped as she walked down

the opposite side of the street, like she did today, to see it from the same vantage point as she had when they stopped Fitzwilliam in the road. Carriages no longer entered and exited through the gates. Instead, a lovely beer garden beckoned the locals to have a pint and catch up under the cheerful umbrellas.

“Ellie!” She turned at Tom’s voice and her heart beat a little faster as he jogged up to her. “I hoped to catch you when you got off work. Charlotte told me which direction you walked.”

“I had a stop to make on my way home.”

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips, took her bag, and then, her hand, lacing their fingers together while they walked toward the closest car park. “I hoped you’d come straight to Pemberley.”

“But I wanted to change first.”

“Why? I think you look splendid.”

“I’m wearing work clothes,” she complained. “I found this cute little dress when Theresa and I went shopping in Matlock last week. I thought I’d wear that.”

When they reached the car, he tossed her bag in the backseat and drew her closer. “You did? Then, I suppose I’ll have to drive you home first. You know if you lived at Pemberley, this would be much easier.”

“I know, but you have to understand why I won’t.”

He gave a tiny pout. “I don’t care what my family thinks. I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

“Well, I do. After the accident, if I’d stayed at Pemberley indefinitely, they would’ve thought I was only with you for a free place to live.”

He brushed her hair behind her ear and sighed. “I’d know better.”

She hugged him tight. “And I love you for it, but I’m perfectly happy at the cottage.”

“I hope not too perfectly,” he mumbled while he drew back. After another peck to the lips, he opened the door for her. As they rode through Lambton, she leaned back against the headrest and watched him drive. “Tom?”

“Hmm?”

“You once told me that Fitzwilliam Darcy owned half of Derbyshire and made some prudent investments.”

His eyebrows drew together in that adorable way that made her smile. “Yes, he was very prudent.”

“What were those investments?”

“Oh! I can’t believe I’ve never spoken of it before,” he said. “Nothing crazy really. When talk began of building a railway across England, he invested early on and made a fortune. He also instructed his sons to invest in ‘horseless carriages’ if the opportunity arose.”

It took everything she had to hold in her laughter. “And they did?”

“Yes, several of them did. They’d thought he was daft when he proposed it, though. He’d already made enough through the railway to see each of his sons settled with estates, but the profits allowed a great deal of the property to remain in the family. He had other investments, but those two were the most profitable. A lot of families with land and estates like Pemberley have had to sell property because of death taxes, but we have managed to retain ours. He also put a good bit of money into the town.”

Since she’d returned from eighteen-thirteen. She’d gotten bits and pieces out of Tom, but never the full story. It looked like Elizabeth told Fitzwilliam a lot about the future and they’d decided to use that information for the improvement of their family’s situation. She couldn’t blame them, really. Anyone in their position would do the same.

“Why the sudden curiosity about it?”

“I’ve wondered for a while now.”

He pulled through the gates and took a side road that led to the cottage while Ellie watched the last of the tourists walking the grounds. Tom had done an amazing job maintaining the house and marketing it. Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth’s wealth had also made them more well-known in this timeline. People flocked to Pemberley for a taste of a different time, movies were filmed on its grounds and within its walls, and locals had yearly subscriptions so they could walk the trails through the woods and gardens whenever they pleased.

She ran inside when Tom pulled in front of the cottage and sprinted up the stairs. She’d somehow managed to remove her work clothes before she heard Tom close the front door. She called down, “I’ll be ready in two ticks!” Her tube of antiperspirant was on the dresser. She didn’t have time for a shower, so she slathered on some more and sprayed a bit more perfume. It would have to do!

Once she’d put on the dress, she ran a brush through her hair, threw on her jewellery, and looked in the mirror. Oh, well! Not what she’d wanted, but good enough.

She grabbed her strappy wedge sandals and her hand bag and ran back down to the kitchen where Tom sat on a barstool, checking his phone.

“You didn’t have to hurry.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No, you didn’t.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her between his legs, his hands on her waist. “I do like this dress, though.”

“You can hardly see it with me so close.”

“The bottom of the skirt swishing around your legs caught my attention when you walked through the door. You know I like anything that shows your legs.” His hand snaked around her back, pulled her flush to him, and pressed his lips to the spot over her heart. “But I love what’s in here the most.”

She dragged his face to hers for a kiss, but the moment his hands began to wander, she pushed him back. “Hold on a minute there. Don’t distract me. I’m hungry.”

He turned her around. “Then, finish getting ready. We have food waiting for us at the house.”

She slipped on her shoes as they walked to the door and after she was settled in the car, he drove her the two-minute trip to the main house. When they walked inside, he gave her hand a tug. “Can I show you something before dinner?”

“I guess. Is it important?”

His shoulders lifted in a small shrug. “I don’t know, but I’d like to tell you sooner rather than later.”

What was that supposed to mean? Why would he be nervous about showing her something? Was she not going to like it? Had one of his ancestors turned into a Mr Rochester and locked someone in the attic? It was a little fantastical, but who said it couldn’t happen?

He led her up the stairs and down the portrait gallery toward the family wing. She pulled back, so he stopped before the portrait of Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth. She liked to look at it when she missed them. They were about ten years older than when she knew them, but they still looked so happy. Knowing they had a good life helped soothe the ache from missing them.

With a little squeeze to her hand, he drew her attention. “Come on,” he said quietly. They didn’t speak as he led her down a corridor to a door she remembered well. When

he opened it, she stepped through and looked around Elizabeth's room. She even took a deep inhale through her nose, hoping to catch a faint trace of Elizabeth's perfume.

"This was Elizabeth Darcy's bedchamber. Very little has been changed since she used it. We've kept it in repair, but tried to keep everything intact. Their children left the rooms as they were when they died, but it was later generations that kept them as almost a museum."

She released his hand and stepped to the dressing table. A worn brush and a several small, crystal bottles decorated the top. She lifted one of them, removed the stopper, and sniffed. Traces of that scent she'd searched for when she entered tickled her nostrils and she closed her eyes. "This was hers."

"Yes," he responded as though she'd asked a question. "Ellie?"

"Yeah?" She carefully set the bottle down and turned.

"Do you remember when I learnt your surname?" One of his eyebrows lifted much like Elizabeth's had.

"Do you mean in the hospital?"

He nodded. "I have a confession to make that I should've done long ago. I just couldn't believe it was all true."

"What was all true?"

He leaned against the post of Elizabeth's bed. "Just after the New Year, I was contacted by the solicitors that have handled the Darcy's legal affairs for as long as I can remember. I was asked to meet with a Mr Dell in regards to a matter involving me and the estate."

"I don't understand."

"Mr Dell explained to me some very unusual requests from Fitzwilliam Darcy's will. His children and grandchildren ensured the will and its stipulations were remembered and passed along if the family changed solicitors, but were kept a secret after."

"That is sort of strange, I guess. What could he have left that was so unusual?"

He walked to a wardrobe along one wall, opened the door, and removed something. She couldn't tell what it was until he turned, holding a small wooden chest. "This."

"A box?" she asked. What was so special about a wooden box?

"I don't know. I was given a letter from Fitzwilliam Darcy himself. It was addressed to Tom Darcy and the instructions were not to give it to me until twenty-seventeen along with the box."

Her mouth went dry and it was all she could do to croak, "What did it say?"

"He sent his greetings and requested I become guardian of this chest until I met a young lady named Miss Elizabeth Forrester. When I did, I was to give it to her."

Ellie grasped a bedpost to keep from falling over. How had they managed it? So much could've gone wrong before she was given this. What if she'd never received it? What if? "But you didn't give it to me when you met me."

"No, I didn't realise you were Elizabeth Forrester. Not at first anyway. I didn't know until I saw your hospital bracelet that day."

"But you still waited."

"The entire thing was mental. How would Fitzwilliam Darcy know about *me* much less a woman I met two hundred years after his existence? I waited to get to know you before I confessed. I know it isn't what Fitzwilliam requested, but I wanted to understand why it was you."

A part of her should be angry at him withholding something that was meant for her, but she wasn't. In an odd way, she understood why he would hesitate. It must've been surreal. "Did you ever figure that out?"

"No, instead, I fell in love with you. I may not have told you everything, but I do want you to know that I never lied to you about that."

"I never thought you did," she confessed softly.

He shook his head. "I've wondered for months what this contained, but I never opened it. I didn't feel it was right for me to do so." He lifted his arm and held out a tiny, old-fashioned key. "If you'd like to open it alone, I can go, but I was hoping I could stay."

With trembling fingers, she took the key, and he placed the chest on the bed. When the lock turned and the lid was lifted, she gasped at what lay inside. It wasn't anything of great value to most people, but was priceless to her. She carefully picked up a bundle of letters tied with a ribbon and traced her name, written in Elizabeth's steady and smooth handwriting.

"How is this possible?" he whispered at her shoulder.

"It's a long and incredible story that I wasn't sure you'd believe." She lifted out several more bundles of letters and a small journal.

“Would you mind telling me now?” Her stomach growled and they both laughed.
“How about over dinner?”

“I’d like that.”

She returned the precious letters to the chest and Tom carried it to the library where a candlelit dinner awaited them. While they ate and drank wine, she told him everything—her version of their meeting, what happened when she returned to Lambton, the first trip to eighteen-thirteen, and everything that followed. When she finally reached the point where she woke up in the Lambton Hospital, she sat back with her glass of wine and waited.

He blinked several times and gave an incredulous bark. “It’s almost too bizarre to be true, but how else can I explain that?” He pointed to the chest. “It also explains what you said to me when you first woke up and realised it was me.”

“About saving Lydia?”

“Yes, I couldn’t understand what you meant? Then you asked all of the questions about that time. Elizabeth alludes to it in the letters I published, but you knew information that wasn’t in the letters. I wasn’t sure what to make of it.”

“Do you believe me?”

He shook his head. “I can’t explain it, but I do.” He reached over and opened the lid to the chest. “Do you mind sharing them with me? If they’re too personal, I understand, but so many little things in their journals suddenly make sense. I just want to know what I’m missing.”

“Lizzy knew that most people would think her a nutter if she mentioned travelling to the future. We managed to convince Fitzwilliam, but only because we knew things we couldn’t have known otherwise—when he wrote in his journal or didn’t, what he wrote, and his feelings. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with it at first, but I think he learnt to ignore it.”

She set her glass of wine down and pulled the first letter from the stack. Afraid she might tear it, she broke the seal gently and took her time unfolding the page.

“September 3rd 1813

“Dearest Ellie,

“I have had so much I wished to tell you since you departed, yet I have been uncertain of a means to do so. Fitzwilliam, the dear man, has listened to my predicament patiently and proposed a solution. We do not know if it will be successful, yet we feel

we must try. We know we shall not receive your responses to our correspondence, but we can speak to you by what means we have available to us. It is all we have and we must be content with it.

“Fitzwilliam and I have discussed our travels through time often since our marriage. He is of the same mind as I am and believes the past was altered to such an extent, Tom will not remember when you return. I apologise for not saying as much when we last spoke, but you were so full of promise. I could not take your hope from you when I did not know for certain.

“I know you missed Tom while you passed that time with us, and I hope your reunion was all you hoped it would be. Until I write again,

“Yours,

“Lizzy.”

He stood and walked over to Elizabeth’s portrait, staring while he ran his hand through his curls. “What was she like while visiting twenty-seventeen?”

Ellie giggled. “Curious, funny, and not frightened of anything really. She was fascinated by the ‘horseless carriages,’ which is probably why they told their children to invest in them. She rode the tube with me in London, and told a bloke off for trying to pick her up on Gracechurch Street.”

She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around him. “You liked her a lot,” she whispered near his ear.

“I wish I could remember.”

“Me too.”

He turned and took her in his embrace. His lips caressed hers and his fingers trailed along her neck, sending shivers down her back. “I wish I remembered what happened between us, too. It didn’t take long for me to realise you are perfect for me, but if I knew what had happened, I would’ve known sooner.”

“But I returned before you helped us. You lost memories, but not time.”

“I want to keep all of my memories of you—especially this one.” He released her and slowly dropped to one knee. “Miss Elizabeth Forrester—Ellie, will you marry me?”

Her vision blurred and she choked back a sob. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes!”

When he stood, he picked her up and twirled her around. After her feet were back on the floor, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box, and opened it. She laughed and sobbed all at once when she recognised it. “It’s Lizzy’s.”

“Now, it’s yours if you’d like it.”

She nodded and wiped the tears from her cheeks with one hand while he put the ring on her other finger. “Do you think Elizabeth would approve?” he asked.

“She told Fitzwilliam that you were *my* Mr Darcy. She called you my ‘great love,’ so yes.”

A brilliant grin appeared on his face. “Did she really call me that?”

“She did.”

He blew out a long breath. “This is still so strange. I thought the chest was some sort of oddity. I kind of thought it would be empty and would be something we could never explain.

“Did it make a difference? Would you have proposed even if the chest didn’t exist?”

His eyebrows drew down in the middle. “The letter I received only made me more sceptical when I first knew you were Elizabeth Forrester, but I always liked spending time with you. At first, I made the excuse that you weren’t ready for it all. I mean, how do you tell someone they have a one hundred and fifty-year old inheritance?

She took in a deep breath and released it slowly. “I just need to be sure you want to marry me for me and not because of Lizzy and Fitzwilliam.”

He pulled her so close she was pressed against him. “I know. I’ve given it a lot of thought as well. As fast as things progressed between us, I never thought it was fast enough. I always want to be with you. As much as I’m fascinated by the story of Elizabeth Darcy, my feelings for you are separate. I want to be with *you*—forever.”

“I love you, Tom Darcy.”

He gave her a side-long glance. “You never thought about Fitzwilliam? Some say he was a handsome man.” he teased.

“Never,” she laughed. “You’re my Mr Darcy. There’s no comparison.”

That low chuckle rumbled against her chest. “Just checking.”

The End!