

One

*Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which
Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters.*

Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 61

On the day Miss Elizabeth Bennet wed Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, she did not mind dividing with her elder sister, Jane, the notice due a bride. Indeed, she had been delighted when Jane chose to marry Mr. Charles Bingley in a double ceremony. It seemed only right that two sisters and two men who were themselves particular friends should all embark on their new lives together, and she hoped the event presaged many happy hours spent in each other's company in the years ahead.

Elizabeth did mind, however, sharing the stage with Mr. Bingley's sister Caroline.

The new Mrs. Darcy glanced across the drawing room of Longbourn House. Miss Bingley and her fiancé, Mr. Frederick Parrish, sat beside each other on the sofa, monopolizing the attention of half the wedding guests. Their immediate spectators included two of Elizabeth's younger sisters, assorted aunts and uncles, and Caroline's sister, Louisa Hurst. The couple's chatter had also drawn the observation

of others in the room. Mr. Bennet looked on with amusement, her mother with annoyance, her cousin Mr. Collins in uncharacteristic silence, and the Gardiner children in awe. The audience wanted only the addition of the Prince Regent himself to comprise the most unlikely party in all England, but, unfortunately, no one had thought to invite him.

Elizabeth knew little of Mr. Parrish, in fact had never met the American before today. According to Miss Bingley, he was a gentleman of the first consequence. He had one townhouse, two carriages, three tailors, and could walk on water every other Tuesday. He also, anyone within auditory range had been given to understand, was a wealthy landowner, a patron of the arts, and a master of the intricate “ballroom” style of folding one’s cravat.

Elizabeth had not yet conversed with Mr. Parrish, and based on Miss Bingley’s praise had little inclination to do so. She suspected, however, that of the myriad attributes proclaimed by his fiancée, the gentleman’s chief recommendation lay in the simple fact that he had chosen Caroline, from among all the unattached young women of the Polite World, as the object of his affections. How an otherwise sensible-seeming man had allowed that to happen, Elizabeth could only speculate; she attributed it to either a momentary lapse of reason or a prolonged lapse of sobriety.

“Lizzy! Jane!” Mrs. Bennet bustled over to the quiet corner where, beckoned by early winter sunlight edging its way past the draperies, her second daughter had sought a moment’s respite from her social duties. Jane, concern clouding her face at their mother’s summons, hurried to join them.

Elizabeth sighed at the impending but not unexpected intrusion. She’d known her interlude would prove fleeting on a day such as this; nevertheless, she’d strayed over here to indulge in reflection. After one-and-twenty years, these were her final

hours as an inmate of this house, and, though not by nature an overly sentimental person, she'd wanted a chance to bid it farewell in her heart before going away. Fortunately, a very short span of time had sufficed. Her mind had soon wandered to Miss Bingley and other more prosaic thoughts, the interruption of which mattered little. "What is it, Mama?"

"My poor girls, how dare that woman try to spoil your day!" Mrs. Bennet, her bosom heaving and complexion flushed, expressed her indignation with all the wounded vanity the mother of two brides could muster. "To announce her own engagement at your wedding breakfast—"

Elizabeth wished her mother possessed a voice one-tenth its volume. "Mama, everyone here knows this is our day, not hers."

Jane extended a placating hand, as if to literally smooth their mother's ruffled feathers. "I am sure my new sister doesn't mean to draw notice toward herself."

At Jane's defense of Miss Bingley, Elizabeth couldn't stifle a laugh. "Dear Jane, only you could be so generous. She was circulating the news while we were still in the receiving line." Her gaze turned back to the newly betrothed couple. Miss Bingley beamed at something Mr. Parrish said, an expression Elizabeth had rarely seen on the woman's typically haughty countenance. It softened the severe lines of her cheekbones and upward tilt of her chin, lending her an almost pleasant aspect. "Much as I hate to admit it, he seems a good influence on her."

"He's more than that woman deserves," Mrs. Bennet whispered too loudly for Elizabeth's comfort. "And his fortune! Lady Lucas told me he just inherited an enormous sugar plantation in Louisiana. It has a French name . . . Mont-Joyo, or something like that. He's easily worth ten thousand a year. Ten thousand, Lizzy—same as your Mr. Darcy!" Her mother's tone became reverent at the mention of Mr. Darcy. Though he was

now her son-in-law, Mrs. Bennet, like many of Darcy's acquaintances, yet found him a formidable man.

Elizabeth observed Miss Bingley listening to Parrish with rapt attention. He cast his fiancée a warm smile, then broadened it to include the rest of his party. *Monts Joyeux*. She searched her rudimentary knowledge of French for a rough translation. Joyful Hills? The image of a home so named somehow suited the attentive, amiable man. But Miss Bingley was another matter. "I'm astonished that she consented to marry an American," she said. "One can't imagine her living in the United States. She'd consider it uncivilized."

"Maybe the size of Mr. Parrish's inheritance influenced her," Jane said. "It must be a very grand estate. I understand, however, that he plans to buy another property here in England." She lowered her voice so that it reached only Elizabeth's ears. "Perhaps Caroline will have her own Pemberley at last, Lizzy, now that she knows she'll never have yours."

Anticipation swept Elizabeth at the mention of Mr. Darcy's home in Derbyshire—now her home, too. Before Darcy became engaged, Miss Bingley had been obvious in her aspirations to one day cross Pemberley's threshold as its mistress. Apparently, she'd experienced more disappointment over failing to secure the estate than its owner, for no sooner had Darcy and Elizabeth set their wedding date than Miss Bingley embarked on a whirlwind courtship with Mr. Parrish. Somehow, in the space of mere weeks, Caroline had managed to win the affections of a very eligible bachelor.

Sensing someone's gaze upon her, Elizabeth raised her eyes to meet those of her new husband. Darcy stood some distance away, enduring the effusive congratulations of Mr. Collins, who had apparently found himself unequal to the effort of holding his own tongue long enough to overhear Mr. Parrish's words, and had therefore chosen to confer upon one of the bridegrooms his felicitations and sagacious marital counsel.

Despite Darcy's diverted attention, the clergyman continued his discourse unabated, completely insensible of the interruption in attendance to his soliloquy.

Though Darcy had cropped his dark brown hair a little shorter than usual for today, unruly curls yet wisped round his head. Short side-whiskers lent prominence to his strong jaw, while the lapels of his double-breasted coat accented the broad shoulders that so capably bore the weight of many responsibilities. Not of brawny build, he nevertheless exuded puissance, the noble virility of a classical marble bust come to life.

He towered over her cousin, his stature enabling her to see every nuance of his countenance. The man who could quell observers with the rise of a single dark brow bestowed upon her a look of infinite tenderness before returning his gaze to Mr. Collins.

"Miss Bingley can have every acre of Pemberley," she said softly. "I have the real fortune."

She glanced once more at her husband. Poor Darcy—stuck in the corner with Mr. Collins, and no end to the interview in sight! Noting that the servants had just laid out the tea table, she headed for it, intending to relieve Darcy's suffering by interrupting the conversation to offer refreshment. No sooner had she poured coffee to take to the gentlemen, however, than Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst approached the table.

"I'm positively parched." Miss Bingley took one of the cups from Elizabeth's hands.

Mrs. Hurst took the other. "Yes, it is very dry in this room."

Elizabeth forbore suggesting that perhaps Miss Bingley's thirst derived from having spent the morning talking excessively about herself and Mr. Parrish. Instead, she commented on that safest and most meaningful of all topics—the weather—observing that there had been little rainfall of late.

"A providential circumstance for your wedding," Mrs. Hurst said, "particularly since it was held in the country. Otherwise,

you would have risked dragging the hem of your gown through mud on your way into church.”

“And what a charming little church—not at all like the large London ones where so many in our circle have tied the knot. Here we could all be so snugly seated.” Miss Bingley’s voice held all of the usual smugness with which she addressed any of the Bennets. “Altogether a nice little affair from beginning to end. Do you not agree, Louisa? How fortunate you are, Eliza, to have had your mother to guide you in the planning.”

Elizabeth ignored the poorly stifled snicker that erupted from Mrs. Hurst. The Bingley sisters had never managed to mask their disdain for her mother, had seldom even tried. In moments of self-honesty, she conceded that their criticism was not without foundation. But their rudeness was. Mrs. Bennet might lack restraint and good judgment, but her silly behavior had at its root the sincere wish of seeing her five daughters securely settled, and maybe even happy. The Bingley sisters, in contrast, had demonstrated by words and deeds that they ultimately had no one’s interests at heart but their own.

“Mrs. Bennet must have taken particular pleasure in preparing for today, since she was unable to participate in your youngest sister’s wedding,” Mrs. Hurst said.

“Yes—how is Mrs. Wickham?” Miss Bingley asked.

“She is well,” Elizabeth responded civilly. In other words, Lydia was still infatuated with the wastrel she’d married, and therefore as happy as a flighty, thoughtless, self-absorbed girl can be. Though Elizabeth loved her sister, the remembrance of last summer’s scandalous elopement yet pained her, and she felt guilty relief that when Wickham’s previous misconduct toward the Darcy family rendered it impossible to include him on today’s guest list, Lydia had chosen to remain with her husband at his military post in Newcastle rather than attend the nuptials.

“Have you any advice for those of us who will soon follow

you down the aisle?" Miss Bingley pressed, casting a conspiratorial smirk at Mrs. Hurst. Louisa leaned forward for Elizabeth's response.

"With your own taste to guide you, I am sure your celebration could derive no further benefit from my opinions."

The Bingley sisters returned to their party, where Caroline continued to hold court with Mr. Parrish. The American's distinct accent seemed to entertain its listeners independent of whatever he had to say.

Elizabeth poured more coffee and carried it to Darcy and Mr. Collins. "Forgive the interruption, gentlemen, but I thought you might appreciate something to drink. I've been informed that it's dry in here."

Darcy's look of gratitude had nothing to do with the refreshment.

"Cousin Elizabeth, your eagerness to serve your new husband does you credit." Mr. Collins accepted the coffee but could not leave off talking long enough to taste it. "Do allow me to express once more my most heartfelt wishes for your future happiness. Though, as I was just expressing to Mr. Darcy, it grieves me that you entered into the matrimonial state without his aunt's permission. You will, I am sure, be gladdened to hear that her ladyship still tolerates the mention of your husband's name in her presence, an omen which leads me to believe that if you applied to Lady Catherine with the utmost humility and the deference to which one of her rank is entitled, she may in due course yet condescend to approve the match."

"What a relief! I know not how Mr. Darcy and I will get on until we obtain her approbation."

"Thank goodness you realize the seriousness of the situation. I had feared you were insensible of the grave insult you have paid her ladyship—"

"Mr. Collins," she said as if addressing him in confidence, "I have just come into the knowledge that there is another

couple here who could benefit from your insights on marriage.” She directed his attention toward the sofa. “Miss Bingley and Mr. Parrish have just announced their engagement, and only moments ago, the lady was seeking my counsel on planning the ceremony. Certainly you—longer married than I, and a clergyman besides—could offer her valuable instruction.”

Mr. Collins nodded enthusiastically. “I could indeed. There is so much a betrothed couple ought to consider—”

“And they should consider it all.”

“Before I depart, I shall make myself better acquainted with them.”

“Why delay?” Elizabeth asked. “There is an empty seat near Miss Bingley. This is the perfect occasion to share your knowledge.”

The clergyman wanted no further encouragement. “You are right, cousin Elizabeth. Wisdom can never be imparted too early. If you and Mr. Darcy will excuse me?”

“Of course.”

Mr. Collins hastened to Miss Bingley’s side, eliciting an expression of horror from that lady and a charge of satisfaction from Elizabeth.

“I had no idea I married a woman capable of such cruelty to another of her sex.”

She met Darcy’s smile. “I merely thought that someone so desirous of attention and someone so generous in extending it should be united in conversation.”

“Somehow, I doubt Miss Bingley agrees.”

“I can call him back, if you wish.”

“Do not dare.”

Spotting Charlotte Collins approaching the tea table, she contemplated how much luckier she was than her friend, in having found a life partner worthy of her respect. Charlotte had gone into her marriage fully sensible of her husband’s

oddities, and managed Mr. Collins skillfully, but Elizabeth nevertheless preferred her own definition of happiness.

Darcy followed her gaze. "I am glad your friend Mrs. Collins could be here. Have you had much opportunity to visit with her?"

"Very little. I've been trying to devote a bit of time to each of our guests. As a consequence, I feel I've spent the morning talking ceaselessly but saying nothing."

"Then you shall fit right in with the *haut ton*."

She looked up at him, this man with whom she was now joined. "Everyone wants a few minutes with the bride," she said quietly, "and all I want are a few minutes with you."

"Only a few? I had counted on a lifetime."

Her mischievous spirit returned. "Did you not realize? I took you on probation."

"And how have I acquitted myself thus far?" He regarded her with amusement.

"Beyond every expectation. Not that there was ever much doubt of my keeping you, but a man willing for my sake alone to bear the conversation of Mr. Collins has no equal."

Their social obligations compelled them to part. Darcy went to the Gardiners, while Elizabeth met Mrs. Collins at the tea table. She embraced her friend, noting immediately her thickened waist.

"Charlotte, I must tell you again how pleased I am that you managed to come."

"I would not have missed it. Had Lady Catherine withheld permission for Mr. Collins to attend, I would have urgently wished to visit my mother once more before my confinement, or developed a craving for cream that could be satisfied only by the Lucas Lodge dairy. My husband is so nervous about my 'delicate state of health' that he would not dare refuse me."

As Charlotte tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, Elizabeth noted that a few strands of grey had emerged amid

the auburn since she last saw her friend. “You are feeling well?”

“Very, despite her ladyship’s insistence that I behave as an invalid—when I’m not attending to matters she deems more important, of course.”

She poured tea for herself and Charlotte. “I wonder that Mr. Darcy’s aunt spared her clergyman leave to attend a wedding she herself has denounced.”

“I suspect she approved our being present so that she could demand an account of all the sordid details upon our return.”

“And what will you report?”

“Let’s see . . .” She cocked her head, studying Elizabeth with keen blue eyes. “Mrs. Darcy looked radiant in a full dress of Brussels lace over white silk, with a low yet modest neckline, high waist, short sleeves, and a wreath of orange blossoms securing her veil.” Her gaze darted across the room. “Her bridegroom wore a dark blue dress coat, white waistcoat, highly starched cravat, and—” She turned back to Elizabeth. “Really, are gentlemen’s clothes half so interesting? What else? The wedding breakfast featured eight courses and three wines. And so on. But those are the particulars her ladyship will enquire about. What she won’t ask, but what I shall endeavor to reveal, is that her nephew appeared as happy as his new bride.”

“Despite having ruined his great family with disgraceful connections?” Elizabeth mocked Lady Catherine’s contemptuous tone. “She will not be pleased at the knowledge.”

“I am. I hoped for this event when you visited us last spring, you know. Perhaps in time her ladyship will come to accept you.”

“I am told that if I grovel sufficiently, such felicity may be mine.”

Charlotte stirred milk into her tea, her expression turning serious. “I shall surely miss your visits otherwise. You must

write often, and tell me about your new life. Do you plan a honeymoon trip?"

"Not immediately. Jane and Mr. Bingley have invited us to stay at Netherfield tonight. We'll depart for Derbyshire with Mr. Darcy's sister in the morning. With Christmas approaching, we want simply to get settled at Pemberley before the Gardiners join us three weeks hence. Perhaps we'll go away in spring."

She lingered long with Charlotte, conscious that circumstances surrounding their respective marriages meant that this could be her last opportunity to see her friend for quite a while. Periodically, laughter and exclamations erupted from Miss Bingley's party, drawing their gazes in that direction. Elizabeth had expected the assembly to disperse upon Mr. Collins's arrival, but Mr. Parrish apparently had such a pleasing manner of address that he'd managed to rescue the conversation from the painful death it would have suffered under the clergyman's enthusiastic participation. The American was currently sharing a tale from his homeland, his style quite animated.

"Mr. Bingley's sister has made a good match," Charlotte noted. "It appears she'll enjoy both fortune and affection in her marriage."

"Yes, though one suspects she would have accepted Mr. Parrish for his fortune alone. He certainly seems a better catch than her sister's husband." A quick scan for Mr. Hurst found him dozing on the room's other sofa, an empty sherry glass balanced on his expansive abdomen.

"Her fiancé is certainly a handsome man." In that particular, Elizabeth agreed. Mr. Parrish was tall and slender, with sandy brown hair and an open countenance. "Do you know much about him?" Charlotte asked.

"No more than what Miss Bingley put into general circulation today. She introduced him to me only as 'Mr. Frederick Par-

rish of Louisiana.' I confess to mounting curiosity, however. Shall we make ourselves better acquainted?"

"By all means."

"Some believe," Mr. Parrish was saying as they approached, "on nights of the new moon, the poor mademoiselle's spirit yet haunts the Place d'Armes."

"Good Lord!" Elizabeth's sister Kitty exclaimed. "I tremble just to hear it! Have you ever seen her apparition yourself?"

"No, Miss Bennet. Nor any of New Orleans's other famous ghosts."

"There are more? Oh, tell us of another!"

Despite Elizabeth's predisposition to think unfavorably of Miss Bingley's betrothed, Mr. Parrish did seem a spellbinding storyteller. Even Mr. Bennet, though some distance away, appeared to attend Parrish's words more closely than those of his own companion. But perhaps that was because her father was presently subject to the befuddled discourse of Mr. Edwards. The elderly vicar who had officiated this morning's ceremony suffered from declining wits, a condition that had led to some fascinating sermons in recent years.

Mr. Parrish rose upon sighting the two ladies. "Please, Mrs. Darcy, take my seat."

His address marked the first time someone had called her "Mrs. Darcy," and she experienced a small rush at the sound of the words. Miss Bingley, however, did not look nearly so delighted by them—unless it had been Parrish's offer of the place next to her that caused displeasure to enter her eyes. No matter. Elizabeth could think of many places, some of them in the barn, where she would rather sit than directly beside Miss Bingley.

She returned his smile. "I would not separate a newly engaged couple for the world." She instead sat down across from Parrish and Miss Bingley to better observe them together. Charlotte took a seat beside her husband.

“Allow me to compliment you on a lovely wedding,” said Mr. Parrish. They were words she’d heard often enough today, yet his warm manner made Elizabeth believe he actually meant them.

“Allow me to congratulate you on your forthcoming one. Have you fixed upon a date?”

“Wednesday next, by special license,” Miss Bingley declared.

Elizabeth suppressed growing irritation at Caroline’s timing. First she had announced her engagement today; now she planned to wed next week. Why must the woman schedule her own nuptials so soon after theirs? Merely to broadcast Mr. Parrish’s ability to pay the substantial fee required for the license?

Ruefully, she thought of the idyllic plans she’d just described to Charlotte. She and Mr. Darcy could not with propriety escape attendance at Miss Bingley’s wedding simply to advance their own domestic felicity. Now, instead of retiring to Pemberley for the winter, they would scarcely reach it before having to return. “So soon?” she asked, entertaining an irrational hope that she had somehow misheard.

Mr. Parrish regarded Miss Bingley with an ardent look, seeming to draw sustenance from the mere sight of her. “I’m afraid I cannot remain patient any longer than that. Caroline has utterly enchanted me.” He turned to Elizabeth. “The ceremony will take place in London. You and Mr. Darcy will attend, won’t you?”

Not yet ready to commit irrevocably to altering their Pemberley plans, she hedged. “Provided the weather permits travel.”

“A sensible response. Even well-traveled roads can be unpredictable this time of year—I discovered that when I arrived in London last December to my first taste of winter. It took me some time to grow accustomed to your English weather.”

“I daresay it’s a good deal different than Louisiana. How do you get on now?”

He grinned. “Under an umbrella, most days. That is, when I can see where I’m going through all the fog.”

The fog—*that* explained Mr. Parrish’s attraction to Miss Bingley. He could not see what he was getting himself into.

“A twelvemonth is a long time to be away from home,” Elizabeth said. “Do you miss the States?”

“Not as much as I thought I would. When my father passed away, I wanted a change of scenery, so I came here in search of my mother’s relatives in Hampshire. Sadly, I found none living. But I fell in love with the country—and my dear Caroline.” He glanced at Miss Bingley once more, his countenance full of more admiration than Elizabeth had ever thought Caroline capable of earning. Miss Bingley, who had appeared vexed that any of Mr. Parrish’s attention had been focused on someone other than herself, now allowed a smile to once more cross her features.

“And when will you return to Monts Joyeux?”

“Mr. Parrish intends to sell his plantation,” Miss Bingley said quickly. “We’ll purchase an estate here in England. Until then, we’ll live in town. He’s leased a house in Upper Brook Street.”

So obvious was Miss Bingley’s lack of interest in ever laying eyes on Mr. Parrish’s home, that Elizabeth wondered whether his decision to sell it had come before or after their courtship began. She had little time to ponder the question, however, as her Aunt Gardiner soon caught her gaze and discreetly beckoned. Elizabeth made her apologies and headed over to where her aunt and uncle yet stood with Mr. Darcy. His sister, Georgiana, had joined them.

Her husband took her arm. “I have a proposal for you.”

“Another one? You’ve only just made good on your last.”

“Not for want of resolution, I assure you.”

“Yes, I know—we could have wed weeks ago, had we but considered no one’s feelings save our own. Whatever were we

thinking? Next time we shall have to do the business in a hasty manner, as seems to be the fashion, so as to trouble as many people as possible.”

“Next time?”

“My mother is in such a state of rapture over marrying off two of her daughters on the same day, that I have determined to make this an annual event. Though in alternating years, perhaps I should marry Bingley and you should wed Jane, just to keep the clergyman in a perpetual state of confusion.” Indeed, Mr. Edwards had tripped over everybody’s names so many times in the double ceremony that Elizabeth could not be certain that the four of them weren’t all married to each other.

“And during the years I’m wed to Jane, will she assail my ears with such outrageousness as this?”

“I venture not. Life with her will be orderly, peaceful, and predictable.”

“Then I will have none of it.”

She smiled up at him, happy that the light teasing which had marked their courtship had extended—at least so far—into their marriage. She didn’t know what she would do if her more straightlaced husband ever became impatient with the liveliness of her mind. “So tell me, what is this proposal of which you spoke?”

He glanced at Georgiana and the Gardiners. “Would it disappoint you greatly to postpone our journey to Derbyshire?”

The query came as little surprise. “Until after Miss Bingley’s wedding?” She sighed. Much as they longed to reach Pemberley, remaining in Hertfordshire was the more sensible course. “I’m sure Jane won’t mind us extending our stay at Netherfield.”

“I have a different notion—I thought we could honeymoon in London while we wait. We can go to the theatre, perhaps some museums. You could meet more of my social acquaint-

tance. If we leave within the hour, we can be at the townhouse by dinner.”

“And you can have it to yourselves,” added Mrs. Gardiner. “Miss Darcy has consented to return to London with us as our guest.”

Elizabeth turned to Georgiana in surprise. Since their father’s death, Darcy’s sister had made London her primary residence. “But the townhouse is your home.”

The young woman laid a gentle hand on her arm. “A newlywed couple deserves some privacy. And our family has been just my brother and me for so long that I’m looking forward to getting to know yours better. I’ll accompany you to Pemberley after Miss Bingley’s wedding, or I can simply travel with the Gardiners. Please say yes, Elizabeth—will you refuse the very first request of your new sister?”

“Of course not.” She felt a twinge of disappointment, as she’d been looking forward to settling into her new home with her new husband. The delay, however, would be of short duration, and Darcy had devised a pleasant way to pass the interim.

She turned to him with an arch look. “But it’s going to cost you.”

“Indeed?”

“Surely you cannot expect your wife to stay a week in London without visiting a shop or two?”

Mr. Gardiner chuckled. “Welcome to the life of a married man, Mr. Darcy. Beware, or she’ll make a Grand Tour of every draper and milliner in Oxford Street.”

“Nay, I have trunks full of new wedding clothes.”

“Where, then?” Darcy asked.

She tilted her chin, her eyes delivering her husband a playful dare. “Can you not guess?”

His gaze narrowed as he studied her. “Will this errand take us to Piccadilly?” he said finally.

“It shall.”

“Then it will indeed cost me dearly.” He gave her an approving smile before turning to Mr. Gardiner. “Did my wife wish to examine the latest muslins at Grafton House, the expense would be small, for she yet shies from spending my money on herself. Instead, she lures me to Hatchard’s bookshop, where I will be tempted to purchase more than she does.”

“As I recall, Pemberley’s collection is already quite extensive,” said Mr. Gardiner. “But the library of a great house can never have too many books.”

“Agreed. Particularly if there are any deficiencies that want correction to accommodate my new wife’s reading tastes.”

“Fortunately, Elizabeth is hardly one to fill your shelves with nothing but gothic romances, as some young ladies would.”

While Mr. Gardiner’s statement was true, she felt called upon to defend a genre that had provided her many hours’ enjoyment. “Though, Uncle, I do take pleasure in them, as in many other things, and will probably add a few to Pemberley’s shelves.”

“You shall be happy to discover, then, that the library already holds quite a few novels, including gothics,” Georgiana said. “We own all of Mrs. Radcliffe’s books. My brother has even read *Udolpho*.”

“A ‘horrid mystery’ in every sense of the phrase,” Darcy declared.

“But diverting?” Elizabeth challenged.

“Yes,” he admitted. “And if you want a trunkful of similar tales, I will happily indulge you.”

“What think you, Georgiana?” Elizabeth asked, her gaze never leaving Darcy. “Will I always enjoy such generosity from your brother, or must I seize it while we’re still in early days?”

He replied as if they stood alone. “All I have is ever yours.”

At last, they took leave of their guests. As their carriage headed toward London, Elizabeth pondered the irony of Miss

Bingley keeping her away from Pemberley just a little bit longer. But then Darcy took her hand in his and gave her a kiss that chased away all unpleasant thoughts.

Let Miss Bingley bask in the glow of her own newfound love. Today Elizabeth could begrudge no one happiness.

Next week, however—that would be another matter. When it came to warm feelings toward Caroline Bingley, even newlywed bliss had its limits.