Lofty Dreams

by EAfan

Summary

Receiving a LOFTY Dreams scholarship is Liz's opportunity to make her college dreams come true. However, now she has to deal with Will Darcy, an arrogant guy from a wealthy suburban high school. But maybe there's more to Will than meets the eye.

Notes

This was my very first Jane Austen fanfic, which I originally wrote in 2007. As such, some of the references to technology and pop culture might be a little dated. Nevertheless, I still hope you enjoy it!
Chapter 1

It was a cold, drizzly Monday in early October, the kind of day that made the streets of Longbourn City, as my neighborhood was called, look even more depressing than usual.

Inside Longbourn High, it wasn't much better. Between the overcast skies that were visible through the windows, the dull flickering of the fluorescent lights overhead, and my physics teacher's boring lecture, I had to do everything in my power to keep my eyes open.

I must have failed in that task, because I was suddenly jolted awake by the sound of my name on the PA system: "Elizabeth Bennet, please report to the guidance office." When my teacher nodded at me, I was more than happy to pick up my books and leave.

"Look what arrived today, Liz," said Ms. Taylor, my guidance counselor, as soon as I sat down in her office. She held up an envelope that bore the return address of the LOFTY Dreams Foundation. I jumped a little in my seat. "Did you open it yet?"

"No, it's addressed to you. Go ahead," she said, handing me the envelope.

I took it from her hand and ripped it apart. Pulling out the letter, I read aloud: "Dear Elizabeth: We are pleased to announce that you have been selected as one of ten winners of this year's LOFTY Dreams scholarships…" I stopped reading and started screaming.

Ms. Taylor laughed at my excitement. "Congrats, Liz. You really earned this."

I tried to calm down, but it was hard. The LOFTY Dreams scholarship would give me a full ride at the college of my choice, as long as it was located in Greater Meryton. If fact, it would make it possible for me to go to college at all. My parents were struggling to pay both the bills and my sister Janelle's tuition at Meryton State. There was no way they could afford to send both of us to college right now.

When I kept going on about the scholarship, Ms. Taylor reminded me that there was so much more. "Leadership training, academic support, summer internships… Liz, this is going to open up so many opportunities for you." She was right, and I couldn't wait to experience them all.

I had a yearbook meeting after school and got home about five o'clock. Our street looks like many in Longbourn City, with block after block of attached six-unit brownstone buildings. We lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of our building.

I could already hear the stereo blaring as I started up the stairs. As soon as I opened the door, I saw my younger sister Deirdre, who we call Dee, dancing in the living room. I went down the hall to the bedroom I share with my two sisters and dropped my backpack and jacket on the lower bunk of the bunk bed I share with Dee. My sister Janelle was lying on her stomach on her bed, covering her ears while trying to read a textbook.

"Didn't you tell her to turn it down?" I said.

Janelle shrugged. "I did. She won't listen."

I am not as nice as Janelle. I went back into the living room and flipped the stereo's volume button
about 180 degrees.

"What'd you do that for?" Dee yelled.

"Janelle's trying to study. You know you're supposed to wear the headphones."

"But I can't move around the room with them on!"

"Tough."

"That's why I keep saying I need an iPod," Dee said. "Then nobody would have to worry about my music."

I laughed. "Then you better get a job so you can buy one yourself."

Dee just rolled her eyes at me.

"Don't turn it back up," I warned. She made a face, but since at 5'6" I have three inches and about 15 pounds on her, I knew she would do what I said.

I walked to the kitchen to start dinner. The rice was ready and I was just taking the chicken out of the oven when my parents walked in the door. I was really happy to see Daddy, because I would be able to tell my family the good news at the same time.

Daddy worked as a custodian at an elementary school. It was a job he always liked because it kept him connected with what was going on in the schools, for our sakes. He usually left work at about 6:30 after cleaning and locking up following the after school programs, unless there was an evening event or meeting at the school. However, there was almost always something going on at some school in the city in the evenings. Lately, he had been picking up a lot of overtime hours by subbing for custodians at other schools who didn't want to work late.

When we were all seated at the table, Dee jumped in before I could bring up my news. "Daddy, can I get an iPod?"

"We don't have any iPod money," he said, biting into his chicken.

"Please, Daddy? That way I can play my music without bothering Janelle or Liz when they're studying."

"That's what I bought you the headphones for."

"Yeah, but I can't move around with the headphones on! Come on, Daddy, please?"

"I said no," he said firmly.

So Dee turned toward Ma. "Can you get me one then?"

"I don't know; maybe when I get my next check," Ma answered.

My father turned toward her. "What are you thinking, Ellie? This child does not need an iPod, not when we're trying to pay for Janelle's education. What she really needs is to get her butt into the books."

Dee wasn't giving up. "OK, then how about getting me a no-name one? I saw some for like $80 at Radio Shack. That's a lot cheaper than the real ones."
Daddy looked at her incredulously. "What world do you live in where $80 is cheap?"

Ma said, "I think I can do $80."

Dee, sitting next to her, threw her arms around her neck. "Oh, thank you, thank you! I love you, Mama!"

Daddy just shook his head. "Ellie… we have to start thinking about school for Liz, too."

"I want to do something nice for my baby. I can do that now and then. We'll work things out for Liz," Ma replied.

I rolled my eyes. I knew the conversation would go this way. My mother could be just as hard-lined as my father about "school first" when it came to Janelle and me, but she spoiled Dee rotten. That's partly because Dee is the youngest, but also because Ma and Dee are so much alike. Daddy always jokes about how she was the flirt in high school who all the boys liked, "but for some reason she chose me." Like my mother, Dee was the biggest flirt I knew.

I guess Daddy, knowing how Ma could be when it comes to Dee, figured this battle was lost, so he let it go. Now was my chance.

"You don't have to worry about paying for college for me anymore. I got the LOFTY Dreams scholarship," I said.

"Liz, that's awesome!" Janelle said.

Daddy grinned and wagged his finger at me. "Now see, that's the kind of thing I want to hear at dinner."

Ma got up to hug and kiss me. "Oh, my baby, I'm so proud of you!"

Dee sulked. "I thought I was your baby."

"You are my baby. You're my baby baby, and you're my sassy baby. Liz is my middle baby and my smart baby."

"What about me?" asked Janelle.

"Well, you're my big baby—"

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Janelle said with a smile.

"But you're also my pretty baby," Ma answered. "All three of you are my babies, and always will be."

"So what about me?" Daddy asked.

Oh no. Ma got that coy voice she gets sometimes and said, "You? You're my sexy baby."

Daddy flexed his pec muscles. "Ew, Daddy, don't do that!" Dee and I both shouted. Of course, that made him do it all the more, until we were all laughing.

After dinner, I went through the LOFTY Dreams paperwork with my parents, because I needed their signatures for me to participate in the program. There would be a welcome dinner on the last Saturday of October, monthly meetings throughout my senior year and freshman year in college, and a week-long retreat at someplace called the Hunsford Retreat Center during my spring break in April.
It was Dee's turn to do dishes, so I joined Janelle in the bedroom to work on my homework.

"Liz, I need to ask a favor of you," she said. "Remember that guy Chuck Benson I've been telling you about?"

"The one that's been sitting by you in your psych class?"

"Yeah, him. He's having a party at his house on Saturday, and he invited me to go."

I grinned and raised my eyebrows. "So you think he's interested?"

Janelle shook her head. "I don't know. He's inviting a lot of people to this party."

"Oh, Janelle, come on. Haven't you guys been having lunch together after class, too?"

She just shrugged. I swear, Janelle just didn't see herself the way other people did. Dee and I resemble Daddy, with the same round faces and dimples he has. We're what most people probably consider cute. Janelle is beautiful, just like my mother. Ma has gained some weight since her teen years, but she still turns men's heads.

I laughed. "If I was going to bet on it, I'd say he likes you."

Janelle smiled a little. "Maybe. But here's the thing: he lives out in Netherfield Park."

"So?"

"So? You know how much money people have out there? I'd be out of place. Plus, I have to talk Daddy into driving me there. I was kind of hoping that maybe you'd go with me?"

I thought about that for a minute. Daddy would be more willing to take us way out there if we were both going. Although I was pretty sure this guy Chuck probably liked Janelle, in case he didn't or was busy playing host, then Janelle and I could hang out together. And unlike Janelle, the thought of going out to Netherfield Park didn't intimidate me.

"Yeah, I'll go," I said. "It'll be fun."
Lofty Dreams ch. 2

Chapter Summary

I turned my head a little to hide my laugh. Yes, she was pretty, but her shirt was dry now and no longer see-through, and it looked like she had become an unwelcome appendage to Will. Definitely NOT his girlfriend.

Chapter 2

"Here?" Daddy said. "I have another two blocks to go." He glanced at the MapQuest directions in his hand.

"Yeah, here is fine, Daddy," Janelle answered. "We can walk the rest of the way."

"But anything could happen to you out here at night."

"Daddy, this is Netherfield Park, not Longbourn City," I said. "Nothing is going to happen to us out here."

I knew exactly why Janelle wanted Daddy to let us out early. She didn't want to get out of Daddy's old hooptie in front of Chuck's house.

Daddy sighed. "OK. But listen, I'll be back here at this stop at 11 o'clock sharp to pick you up."

"Eleven, Daddy! That's too early!" Janelle protested.

"OK, eleven thirty, but no later."

As Janelle and I got close to Chuck's house, we could hear the music and see cars lining the street in front of the large manicured lawn. Some of the cars were Jags and Mercedes, and I could better understand Janelle's concern about having Daddy drop us off here.

We had to step through people hanging out on the front steps to get in the door. Even as crowded as it was, it seemed like only a minute had passed before a nice-looking guy who was about 5'10" with milk chocolate skin approached us. When I saw the way he looked at Janelle before giving her a hug, I thought, this is Chuck, and he definitely likes her.

"Chuck, this is my sister, Liz," Janelle said loudly, trying to talk over the music.

"Nice to meet you," he said, smiling. He had a very nice smile. You have good taste, Janelle, I thought.

Chuck offered to take our coats and get us something to drink. I let him take my coat, but told him I was fine. On cue, Chuck took Janelle's hand and they headed off together.

I watched them walk away with a smile. Since I didn't know anyone, I decided to find a spot in a corner in the living room to people-watch. The crowd was multiracial, which I thought was cool, and a lot of people were dancing or just hanging out. I spotted a place to stand just as some girl bumped into me. She had been carrying a cup of Coke or something, which spilled on her blouse.
"Why don't you watch where you're going!" she shouted. "Look what you did!"

"Excuse me, but you bumped into me," I answered. "Besides, if you wash that out now, it'll come out."

"I didn't ask you!" she snapped, then turned away.

Welcome to Netherfield Park, I thought as I stifled a laugh. I watched her walk up a nearby staircase, heading to the bathroom I suppose. She passed a tall guy on her way up the stairs. I started to head back to the corner, and then I stopped and looked at the guy again.

Now, I pride myself on not being boy-crazy, so normally I don't stare like this. But something about this guy got my attention. He was about 6'2" and well-built. He had a handsome face, but that wasn't it. It was his eyes. He had some of the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. They were light brown, a little lighter than his skin, framed by really long lashes.

Suddenly, he looked down and caught me staring at him, and grinned. Oh, real smooth, Liz! I turned away, but this time I couldn't hold back my laugh. When I finally felt that I could turn back without embarrassment, he was still on the stairs, but now he was talking to the girl who had bumped into me earlier. His girlfriend? I wondered. Or maybe in her short skirt and now damp-and-slightly-see-through blouse, she was more interesting than I was in my black T-shirt and jeans. Oh, well.

I decided to go in search of something to drink or eat. I wandered into another room, where tables had been set up with a few remnants of pizza, subs, and soda pop. I was pouring myself a cup of ginger-ale when I noticed a woman trying to work her way through the crowd while carrying two platters of food. No one was moving out of her way.

I walked closer to her and shouted, "Coming through!" to some of the kids blocking her path to the table. That got a few of them to move. When she came closer, I asked if I could take one of the trays off her hands. She nodded and I took one.

She was an attractive black woman with a few strands of gray in her relaxed hair. "Listen, honey, can you grab one of those trays that's almost empty, and then put this one down?" she said.

I did so, and then followed her back to the kitchen with the empty tray in hand.

Because the kitchen had a swinging door that shut, it was several decibels quieter inside. There was hardly an empty spot on the kitchen table or counter, which were covered with food and beverages. The woman took the tray from me and placed it on the stove, along with the one in her hand.

She sat on a kitchen chair and offered me a seat. "Thank you so much! I'm Chuck's mom, Lois, by the way. What's your name?"

"I'm Liz."

"Are you a friend of Chuck's?"

"No, I just met him tonight. He's a classmate of my sister's." I didn't know what, if anything, his mother knew about Janelle, so I didn't say anything more than that.

"Well, welcome to my home. This is how I keep my sanity."

When she saw the surprised look on my face, she laughed. "I guess it doesn't look like it, because I'm so stressed tonight. What I mean is, hosting parties at my home for my kids keeps me sane, because I know where they are and what they're up to. I've been doing this since they were young teens. And
walking around to serve food allows me to keep an eye on things."

"It seems like you need extra help, though," I said with a grin.

"Usually my husband helps, but he's out of town this weekend."

"I don't really know anyone here, so I can help you, if you'd like."

Lois gave me an appreciative smile. "Would you? That would be great, and I'd love the company. Are you at Meryton State also?"

"No, I'm still in high school. I'm a senior at Longbourn High."

"Longbourn… my sister-in-law graduated from there, but that was way before your time. What kinds of things are you involved in at school?"

I told Lois about serving as editor of the yearbook, on the National Honor Society, as a student council representative, as a peer counselor and a member of the track team.

"You know, my nephew runs track also. He's a senior at Pemberley High School. I don't know if you'd know him—William Darcy?"

"I don't know him," I answered, "but I definitely know his name. I know he holds the state records in the 400 and 800 meter hurdles."

Lois nodded. "That's him. He's around here somewhere. If I see him the next time we go out, I'll introduce you."

Lois and I talked for the rest of the evening, taking periodic breaks to replenish the food and beverages. She told me that Chuck was the youngest of her three children. She also had a 25-year-old daughter who was newly married, and another daughter who was a senior at Spelman College in Atlanta. She asked all about my family, and about my college plans. When I told her about the LOFTY Dreams scholarship, she said that her nephew Will was also a recipient.

"I'm really happy about that, because it means he'll be here in town," she said. "Otherwise, I think he'd be off to someplace like Harvard or Stanford. His father—my younger brother Billy—was very active in the community, and I think Will looks at this as a way to honor his father's memory."

I wondered what had happened to her brother Billy, but it seemed rude to ask.

On one of our food runs, Lois said, "There's Will now. I'd like you to meet him." She called his name, and the cute guy with the pretty eyes I had noticed earlier started heading our way. I was surprised but happy. This was promising.

When he was a few feet away from us, the same girl who had bumped me earlier ran up also, and slipped her hand inside his arm. An annoyed look crossed Will's face.

I turned my head a little to hide my laugh. Yes, she was pretty, but her shirt was dry now and no longer see-through, and it looked like she had become an unwelcome appendage to Will. Definitely not his girlfriend.

Lois seemed a little surprised by the girl's sudden appearance, but she recovered quickly. "I'm Lois, Will's aunt," she said. "And you are?"

"Candy," the girl answered.
"Well, Candy and Will, I want you both to meet Liz." Lois held out her hands toward me. "Liz has been helping me out tonight."

They both spoke at once, but I caught what each of them said. From Candy: "Oh, I get it now! You're the help!" and from Will: "Why would I want to meet her?"

Lois gave them both a withering look. "No, Candy, she's a guest just like you are," she said coolly. "She's just being kind. And Will, I wanted you to meet her because she's going to be in the LOFTY Dreams program with you. But I guess now is not a good time. Why don't you both go back to the party? Will, I'll talk to you later."

As they walked away, I guess Will was fed up with his extra appendage. He shook her off his arm and said something sharp to her. She gave him a look and walked away.

As soon as Lois and I got back to the kitchen, I couldn't contain myself anymore. I burst out laughing.

"Oh, Liz, I'm so sorry," she said.

"No, please don't apologize!" I answered. "It didn't bother me at all."

"OK, maybe I don't owe you an apology for Candy, since I don't even know her. But I do for my nephew. He knows how I expect him to conduct himself in my home. And I will talk to him about it."

"Thank you, but you really don't need to, Lois," I said. "That was actually pretty entertaining."

Lois started laughing, too. "It was, wasn't it? Poor Will seemed like he was having trouble getting rid of her."

I noticed the clock on the stove; it was 11:08. I realized that in four food runs, I hadn't seen Janelle once. I had better find her so we could get ready to leave. "My father wants my sister and me to head out by 11:30," I said. "I should go look for her."

Lois gave me a hug. "Liz, it was such a pleasure meeting you! I hope I'll see you again."

"It was great meeting you, too, and I hope so also," I answered, hugging her back.

I finally found Janelle outside the house, in the backyard. There was a pool there, empty and covered now because it was fall. However, several people were hanging out around it. Chuck and Janelle were sitting on a lounge chair that was barely big enough for the two of them. He had his arm around her shoulder and their heads were close together.

So I wouldn't embarrass her, I tapped Chuck's shoulder. "I'm sorry," I told him when he looked up. "I'm still in high school so I have a curfew. And Janelle needs to take me home."

Chuck gave me a resigned look and stood up, holding out a hand to help Janelle up. "Liz, Janelle and I will get your coat and meet you out front."

Several minutes later Janelle and I were walking down the street to meet Daddy. "OK, chica," I said. "What was this about your not being sure he liked you? You two could barely have been any closer on that chair."

Janelle was beaming. "OK, OK, I was wrong!"
"He's very cute," I said, "And he seems like a nice guy."

"Oh, he is! So what about you? Did you meet anybody tonight?"

"I actually spent most of the night talking to Chuck's mother. She's really sweet. Did you get to meet her?"

"No! Chuck wouldn't let me. He said she would talk my ear off and ask me a bunch of questions, and he wouldn't get any time with me."

I laughed. "That's exactly what she did with me. Now she knows all about you."

Janelle's eyes got big. "What did you tell her?"

"Well, I didn't tell her you were his girlfriend, because at the time I didn't know. But I told her a lot of other things about you. I made sure she has a very good impression of you."

Janelle grinned. "Come on, we're going to be late meeting Daddy."

She grabbed my hand and we ran the rest of the way.
Oh God, I thought. We weren’t even here five minutes and she’d already broken her promise. Will watched me with an expression I couldn’t read, and I wanted to sink into the floor.

Chapter 3

On the day of the LOFTY Dreams welcome dinner, Ma and I spent the afternoon at my grandmother's beauty salon getting our hair and nails done. I am so not a dress person, but Ma convinced me to wear one of the two that I own, and Janelle did my make-up. Daddy teased me, saying, "Who is this beautiful young lady, and where is my daughter?"

When we were in the car, I asked my mother to promise not to embarrass me that night.

"When do I ever embarrass you? I never embarrass you!" she argued.

"Naw, your mother never embarrasses anybody," Daddy said, winking at me in the rearview mirror.

I smiled at Daddy and turned back to my mother. "Ma, yes, you do. Especially when you start bragging about me. Please don't do that tonight."

Ma twisted her mouth. "Ok, baby, if it will make you happy, I'll promise."

"Thank you."

After we entered the hotel, a woman at the front desk directed us to a small banquet hall on the second floor and told us that there would be a registration table outside.

When we reached the right area, we saw a boy with brown hair and glasses walking away from the registration table, with two people who appeared to be his grandparents. Ma hurried into the spot they'd just left.

"Excuse me, but I believe my son and I were next," came a very proper voice behind us.

I looked back and saw a tall, light-skinned black woman wearing a long leather coat and a tight-lipped expression. Even if I hadn't seen her son standing beside her, I would have known exactly who she was by the color of her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you there!" Ma replied cheerfully. "You go right ahead."

As Will and his mother stepped forward, his mother glared at Ma. "Maybe you should pay better attention," she said coldly.
"I said I was sorry," Ma snapped.

_Oh God_, I thought. We weren't even here five minutes and she'd already broken her promise. Will watched me with an expression I couldn't read, and I wanted to sink into the floor.

Daddy pulled Ma back by the elbow, saying her name in a really firm voice. "What?" Ma said, almost yelling at him. "I made a mistake, and that woman's acting like I did something to her."

"Ellie, just cool it. Remember what you said in the car," Daddy whispered in a tense voice. Fortunately, that stopped her. Sometimes my mother can get on a roll when she's attitudinal.

When it was our turn to register, a blond man with a moustache and goatee greeted us warmly, as if that whole little interlude hadn't happened. "I'm Paul, one of the instructors in the program," he said when we introduced ourselves. He handed me a folder. "Inside are your name tags and tonight's agenda, along with information about the program overall. You're at table three."

We entered the banquet hall. I looked around as we hung up our coats. The room contained eight round tables with seats for eight at each one. The tables were covered with china, candles, and napkins folded in really pretty patterns. It was very fancy, and I could feel the stupid grin on my face growing, I was so excited.

An Asian couple and girl and two older white men were sitting at table three. We introduced ourselves all around. One of the men was a Meryton City Councilor, and he and Daddy immediately started talking politics. The other one said he was a hospital executive.

The girl's name was Kathy Tranh. "Hey, Elizabeth, do you want to sit here?" she asked, indicating the seat next to her.

She had a friendly smile and I gladly sat down. "Everybody calls me Liz," I told her.

After I put my nametag on, which also read, "Longbourn High School," Kathy grinned and said, "We beat you guys last night."

I looked at her nametag, which said, "Northwood High School." They had trounced Longbourn at last night's football game, 24-3.

I groaned a little. "I know, I was there! You guys have that one player who kept making all those interceptions."

Kathy nodded. "Jamal. Now his head is going to be even bigger on Monday than it was before."

We started talking about school and all kinds of other stuff, while Ma talked the head off of Kathy's mother, who just nodded periodically. At one point, Kathy's mother asked her something in Vietnamese, and she answered.

"Does your mother speak English?" I asked.

"Not much," she answered.

I smiled to myself. I wasn't sure Ma realized this about Kathy's mother, as she just went on with her conversation.

Waiters in black pants and short red jackets started bringing plates of food to us. Once we started eating, a stocky middle-aged man walked up to the podium at the front of the room. He greeted everyone and introduced himself as Mark Cunningham, the chairman of the board of the LOFTY
Dreams Foundation, as well as the CEO of a corporation in the city.

He told us how he and several other business and civic leaders had founded LOFTY (Leaders of the Future: Today's Youth) Dreams five years earlier. They were concerned about Meryton, which, like many Midwestern cities, used to get its prosperity from manufacturing, but now had become a region of high unemployment and poverty.

"Another big issue was the brain drain," he said. "Meryton's best and brightest young people were leaving in droves for colleges and careers in other parts of the country, and most of them weren't returning.

"We asked ourselves, what could we do to change this and help Meryton regain its prosperity in the 21st century? From that question, the LOFTY Dreams Foundation was born. We decided that we would make an investment—and it's a significant financial investment on the part of a lot of important players in our community, including the colleges and universities—in ten exceptional high school students each year from a variety of different backgrounds.

"In return, we ask them to make an investment back into Greater Meryton. We ask them to choose to attend one of the nine colleges and universities in the metro area, which provide these students with four-year full tuition scholarships. Throughout their senior year in high school and four years of college, we provide summer internships, leadership training, support around academics and career planning, and exposure to the institutions and systems and processes that make our community viable. Our hope in doing so is that after graduation, they will choose to remain in Meryton and become a part of the solution of making this city an even greater place to work and live in the future."

He then introduced the executive director of the LOFTY Dreams Foundation, Dr. Sheila Maxwell, a woman he called "the driving force behind LOFTY Dreams." Dr. Maxwell was a tall, thin black woman with glasses and long braids tied behind her head with a scarf. She didn't stand still behind the podium, but rather walked around the front of the room with a lot of energy, and she spoke with a powerful voice.

"I want you all to take a moment and go back in time with me tonight. Think about when you were about five or six years old. What did you want to be when you grew up? Maybe it was something legendary, such as a pirate or a princess. Or maybe it was the biggest thing you could imagine: an astronaut, or the president, or the richest person on earth. Or maybe you had simpler goals, but you wanted to be four or five things, and you knew you could do it all: you wanted to be a police officer, a fire fighter, an actor and a doctor!

"Why do we think this way when we're young? It's because we have lofty dreams. We don't doubt for a minute that all of them are going to come true. We think the sky is the limit."

I glanced at my father, who looked deep in thought. He was a person who had given up a lot of his dreams in order to raise his family.

Sheila Maxwell continued. "Mark talked about what we want LOFTY Dreams to accomplish for Greater Meryton. I want to talk about what we want it to accomplish for your children. In a short while, you're going to meet the ten young people who have been selected as this year's scholarship winners. There are five young women and five young men; five youth from the city of Meryton proper, and five from the suburbs. You will notice that they're a very diverse group. That's intentional, because we believe that if we're going to change Meryton, it will involve all of us, from all backgrounds in our metropolitan area.

"But even more than that, we know that all young people, no matter who they are or where they
come from, have lofty dreams. We want to be a part of helping those dreams come true. We ask them for a two-year commitment—senior year and freshman year in college—after which they can evaluate it and decide whether or not they want to continue in the program until graduation. After that, they're free to move on to other places if they choose, although we hope they stay here in Meryton.

"During those five years that we work with them, we will give your children every support and resource we can to help them achieve their dreams. Your kids are awesome, and I'm sure you've already been bragging about them—"

At this, everyone laughed, and Ma said, "See? I told you I could brag about you!"

"Shhh!" I answered.

"However, society is becoming much more complicated and much faster paced, and even our best and brightest are often at a loss for how they can make a difference in the world today. We want to give them the tools to do just that. And I believe with all my heart that these young people will pass on their gifts to their peers, the next generation, and even us old fogies in a way that will transform us all. Thank you for being here tonight and welcome again."

She received a round of applause. Mark Cunningham returned to the podium and began introducing various political figures who were in the audience, starting with the mayor of Meryton. Each one came up in turn to congratulate us and share their support for the program. It started to get boring, and Ma said, "How many people are going to get up and say the same thing?"

Several people at the next table looked over at her as I mentally ticked off in my head. That was the third time Ma had gone back on her promise. Maybe I should have been more specific, instead of just telling her not to brag.

The councilman at our table laughed. "Don't you know we public officials like to hear ourselves talk? When it's my turn, I'll do the same."

Since there were several more on the agenda before they announced us, I decided that this would be a good time to find the restroom. I left the banquet hall in search of it. On my way back, I passed a tall, lanky guy in one of the waiter's uniforms, who said hello to me. I said hi and kept walking.

"Are you one of the kids getting the scholarship tonight?" he asked.

I said yes.

"You must be very smart, then," he said.

I shrugged.

He grinned and imitated my shrug. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Since he wasn't going away, I figured I might as well stop and talk to him. "It means there's no good way to answer that question. Anything you say makes you look bad. If you say yes, you sound conceited. If you say no, you're either lying or you really are stupid."

The guy laughed. I noticed that he was kind of cute.

"There, you've just told me. That was a good answer. That says to me that you're very smart," he said, enunciating the last two words.
That got a smile out of me. He held out his hand. "I'm Geo, by the way. What's your name?"

I shook his hand. "I'm Liz. Is Geo your real name, or did you take that from the Matrix movies?"

"No, dear, that's 'Neo.'"

"Oh, yeah, that's right."

"Plus, come on," he added. "If I was going to name myself something out of the Matrix, don't you think I'd name myself after the brotha? I'd call myself, 'Morpheus,'" he intoned, deepening his voice in a good imitation of Laurence Fishburne. I laughed.

"Actually, my real name is George. I go by Geo because it sounds cooler, doncha think?"

"You have a point."

We were interrupted by the sound of someone approaching. I looked over to see Will Darcy standing there staring at us. He looked really ticked off. Then, as quickly as he had come up, he turned on his heels and headed for the men's room.

The whole thing was so odd that as soon as he walked away, Geo and I both started laughing.

"What was THAT all about!" I said.

"Some people have no manners," Geo replied. "Will's always been like that."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "You know him?"

"Know him? I used to live with him, for almost three years. I used to be his foster brother."

"What a small world."

Geo pointed his finger at me. "See, another great observation. I knew you were very smart," he teased.

I grinned. "Yeah, right. So how'd you end up as his foster brother?"

"That's a very long story, and I have to get back to work. But tell you what…” Geo reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pen and a business card bearing the name and address of the hotel. He wrote on the back of the card and handed it to me. "That's my cell phone number. Call me sometime and I'll tell you."

I got back just in time, as Mark Cunningham and Dr. Maxwell started to announce the names of the ten students. Good thing, too, because I was second. Will came back in a few seconds after I did, which was also good, because he was third. Ma, of course, stood up and hollered, "That's my baby! That's my baby!" when my name was called.

As they called our names, we each came to the front of the room and received certificates: Michael Allen… Elizabeth Bennet… William Darcy, Jr…. Stacy Grange… Heather Linsky… Nathan Liu… Abner Ohene… Peter Marcovich… Anna Sanchez… and Kathy Tranh.

A photographer did a round of picture-taking, after which we all hung around and got to know each other. Except for Will. He and his mother must have taken off right away. I guess they assumed they were too good for the rest of us.
Chapter Summary

While answering Sheila, Will looked straight at me with a serious expression. "I think it's what you said earlier, Sheila. People shouldn't assume they know what other people are thinking."

He didn't really answer my question, but I decided to let it drop. Man, what a jerk! I thought. I was glad that most of the other kids in the program seemed pretty cool, because I was going to hate having to put up with Will.

Chapter 4

The first LOFTY Dreams monthly meeting took place on a Sunday evening in November, eight days after the dinner. We met, as we would for future meetings, in a classroom on the downtown campus of the University of Meryton, as this was one of the most central locations in the city.

We played some icebreaker games to get to know each other's names and other information about one another. Although there were five students from the city, only Kathy and I attended the Meryton Public Schools. Peter and Anna both went to Catholic schools, and Abner attended a science and technology charter school. The rest of the students attended suburban high schools, except for Michael, who went to an all-boys prep school.

One of the games we played required us to pair up for two minutes and discover something you had in common with the other person, and share something the other person probably didn't know about you. You were supposed to come up with something different with each person. Dr. Maxwell, who told us to call her Sheila, blew a whistle every two minutes to let us know when to switch. At the end of the game, we would have to share aloud as much as we could remember about one another.

When I was paired with Will, I suddenly thought that what we shared in common was the fact that his cousin was dating my sister. I giggled to myself as I realized that I probably wouldn't want to say that out loud later.

"Why is everything a joke to you?" Will asked, scowling.

I didn't know how to respond at first. "I was just thinking of something funny, that's all."

"Let's get this over with. What we share in common is that we both run track, and what you probably don't know about me is that my godfather is Marcus Henderson. Your turn."

I was a little surprised by his coldness. With everyone else, trying to get to know each other was fun. And I wasn't sure whether or not I was supposed to be impressed by his connection to Marcus Henderson, a high-profile defense attorney in Meryton, since that fact didn't really tell me anything about Will himself.

Since Will was the seventh student I had talked to, it took me a while to think of something new about myself. "What you don't know about me is that I don't know how to drive, but I know how to change the oil in my parents' car."
"That doesn't do you much good if you can't drive."

"You're not a very nice person, are you?"

Will folded his arms and glared at me.

This guy! He had insulted me—twice now, if I counted Chuck's party—and now he wanted to get mad when I called him on it? Well, I wouldn't let him get to me. I tried again. "This game is supposed to be fun, you know." The corners of his mouth twitched, like he almost smiled, but he kept his hostile stance.

With everyone else, we kept talking until the whistle blew, so I didn't want to just stare stupidly at Will for the next minute and a half. "Look, we need to talk to each other," I said.

"Why? What else do we need to say?"

"Oh, I don't know, anything… we could talk about the size of the room, the number of people in it…"

He glared at me again like he was even madder. *What is his problem?!* I wondered. Finally, I gave up. I didn't want to get to know him anyway. I was glad when I could switch to someone else.

After the get-to-know-you games, Sheila and Paul had us all sit in a circle to talk about the program. Paul, a doctoral student in adolescent psychology at the U. of Meryton, asked if we'd all had a chance to read the program schedule provided in the packets we'd received at the dinner. When we answered in the affirmative, he said, "So you know that at our December meeting, we'll focus on your college applications. Starting in January, we'll talk about succeeding in college, and deal with issues such as study skills, time management, connecting with resources at your schools and so forth. We'll also do a lot of teambuilding and some community service in preparation for the spring break retreat."

Sheila said, "I want to talk about the two ground rules for this program. When we go to the Hunsford Retreat Center in the spring, there will be a few more, but for now, there's just two. The first is participation. I want you to bring your whole selves into this. That's the only way you'll get the most out of this experience. That means I want you to speak up, say what you think and feel, and ask questions. Everything is on the table, and in fact, if you ask something of Paul or me, most of the time we'll turn the same question back around to the group.

"The second ground rule is respect. The only way you can ask people from very different backgrounds for their honesty and openness and have it work is if we establish an atmosphere of respect. That means that you speak to one another with respectful language, and that you speak from your own experiences. For example, if you disagree with someone, you don't say, 'You're wrong.' You can't know that for sure because you haven't walked in their shoes. Instead, you say, 'I disagree because this is my experience.'"

"The floor is now open for any questions you have," said Paul.

Abner, a husky, dark-skinned guy of about 5'9", spoke up. "I want to understand why you made the selections you made."

"What do you mean?" Sheila asked.

"Well, some people here are from places where their parents could probably write a check to pay for four years of college. I wonder why they would need a full scholarship."
"OK, everyone, what do you think?" Paul asked.

Stacy, a champion debater from the suburbs who wore her curly brown hair in a ponytail, laughed. "You weren't kidding when you said you'd turn questions back on us."

Sheila smiled. "I told you."

Heather, a tall blond girl who was student council president at her suburban high school, responded to Abner's question. "Not all scholarships are based on need. A lot of people get scholarships for academics or sports."

"Yeah, but this particular scholarship is about making our city better," Abner argued. "Shouldn't it go to some of the people in the city who need it the most?"

"Sheila, didn't you say something at the dinner about needing everybody to really help the city change?" asked Nathan, a muscular Asian boy who was on his high school's swim team.

"I did," Sheila answered. "The question is whether or not you agree with that."

When no one responded, Paul said, "Think about it this way. Are there advantages of having youth from wealthy backgrounds and youth who are not in the same program? And if so, how do they weigh against what Abner is saying about providing scholarships to those most in need?"

"I think need is a relative term," said Anna, a petite Latina girl who resembled Jessica Alba. "My family is doing pretty well, and while they could pay for me to attend a public college out of pocket, they can't afford for me to go to a private one. Plus, even though my father has done well on his own initiative, he never went to college. I'd still be the first in my family to go." Anna's father owned Meryton's Spanish-language radio station and newspaper, and she lived in a part of the city that was known for artsy types and yuppies.

"I don't know if this answers the question," I said. "I need the scholarship money to go to school, but that wasn't the only reason I applied. I really wanted to be in a program where I could meet other kids from different backgrounds and places. I don't have that chance very often, and I think it's a good thing."

"I totally agree," Stacy said. "That's one of the main reasons I applied, too."

"Any other thoughts?" Paul asked. "There are still four people we haven't heard from."

"All right, I'll go," Mike said. Mike was a dark-haired guy of about 6'4" who was an All-American basketball player at his high school. "If this is really about trying to prepare the leaders of the future for Meryton, then the scholarships should go to whoever is the best. Nothing else should be considered."

"Well, they obviously considered other things since we're balanced out by stuff like race, girls/boys, city/suburbs," Abner said. "So do you think they didn't pick the best?"

Michael laughed. "I didn't say that."

"But that's what you're thinking," Abner said.

Sheila held her hands up in a time-out gesture. "OK, stop right there. Let's revisit the ground rule about respect. Abner, you have no idea what Mike is thinking. You can only speak for yourself."

Abner opened his mouth as though he were going to argue the point, then shut it again and nodded.
"OK, Kathy, Will or Pete, what do you think?" Paul asked.

"I wish I had something new to add, but I don't," Kathy said. "I'm with Liz and Stacy. I think bringing different types of people together is great."

Pete, a thin guy with glasses who organized volunteer projects in his high school and neighborhood, pushed his brown hair out of his eyes. "I think one of the ideas behind LOFTY Dreams is that it's not supposed to be about ourselves. I assume you picked people who would not just think what they could get out of the program, but what they could give back. I need the scholarship, but I have friends who didn't get it who need it just as much as I do."

"I don't know…," Pete went on. "I guess being a part of this means we should think about these types of questions. In this case, helping other kids get to college, or making sure it's affordable, and what we could do now or in the future about things like that."

"That's a good point," I said.

"It's a great point," Sheila affirmed. "Taking what you learn here to serve others is exactly what we hope you'll get out of this."

"All right, Will?" Paul said.

"How am I supposed to follow that?" Will asked, leaning back in his seat.

Paul grinned. "That's what happens when you wait 'til last."

"I don't really have an opinion. I think everyone made some good points."

Abner chortled. "Oh, come on, man. You have to be thinking more than that."

Sheila shook her head. "There's one every year. I'm going to have to be all over you, aren't I, Abner?"

Abner laughed again. "You knew I was outspoken when you picked me for this, didn't you?"

"It's okay, Sheila," Stacy said. "I can argue with the best of them. I can keep him in check."

"Ooh," Abner said with a grin. "I think I've been challenged."

Sheila held up her hands again. "Okay, back to Will: You said everyone made good points, but several people made very different points. Is there any you agree with more than others?"

Will thought for a second. "Probably what Mike said. The program should just be for the best."

I don't know why his comment bothered me and made me feel that I had to respond. Maybe it was Mike and Abner's interaction about this, or maybe it was just the negative vibes I had felt from Will earlier. "So who is the best?" I challenged him.

"What do you mean?" Will asked.

"I could be wrong, but when I hear something like, 'just the best,' I wonder how you define it. I mean, everybody here is very different. We're not all senior class president and captain of the track team," I said, bringing up two of Will's leadership roles. I heard some chuckling from a few of the others.

I looked at Sheila and Paul. "Is it okay for me to be really honest?" I said.
"Of course," Sheila answered. "That's what we want, as long as it's respectful."

I turned directly to Will. "You go to Pemberley High, which is like the best public high school in the county, if not the state. Meanwhile, my high school almost lost its accreditation last year. I know I'm not supposed to speak for anyone else, but when you say, 'just the best,' I wonder if you think that someone from Longbourn High can't possibly be among the best."

"Was that okay?" I said, turning back to Sheila.

Sheila nodded. "What do you think, Will?"

While answering Sheila, Will looked straight at me with a serious expression. "I think it's what you said earlier, Sheila. People shouldn't assume they know what other people are thinking."

He didn't really answer my question, but I decided to let it drop. *Man, what a jerk!* I thought. I was glad that most of the other kids in the program seemed pretty cool, because I was going to hate having to put up with Will.

"Our time is almost up," Paul said. "Any conclusions from this discussion?"

"I think it's good that Pete reminded us that being in this program is about more than us," Kathy said.

"It seems like more people think it's good to bring different types of kids together than not, right?" Anna asked. Several of us nodded.

"How about you, Abner, since you started the discussion?" asked Sheila.

"Since the decisions have already been made about who's in the program, I guess you're stuck with me," Abner joked.

"Well, you're stuck with us rich kids from the suburbs too, so we're in the same boat," Stacy fired back, making the rest of us laugh.

Sheila smiled. "That's it for tonight. You have our numbers. If you need anything, don't hesitate to call Paul or me, or to make an appointment to see either of us here at the U. Otherwise, we'll see you next month."
After the LOFTY dinner, I asked Daddy what he thought about the things the woman had said about dreams. He answered, "My dreams are for you girls to have the chances I never had." I hugged him tightly that night, thinking how lucky my sisters and I were.

Chapter 5

It was Saturday morning, and my sisters and I were in the middle of a Triple B lecture. That was the name we had given to Daddy's rants years ago: Triple B for "Books Before Boys."

I think I heard my first one at age eight, and they had continued with regularity every few months since that time. The lecture went something like this:

"Never put a boy before your education! When you're finished getting your education, the boys will still be there. But if you put off your education, you might not get another chance. And don't forget: we've raised all the babies we're going to raise and we're not raising any more."

Although the words might change, those two basic themes remained the same: education first, and don't get pregnant. We had heard this lecture so often we were sick of it, but to be fair, I understood why Daddy was so intense about it. He had been a good student in high school and wanted to be the first one of the kids in his family to attend college. By the summer after his junior year, he was starting to make his plans.

But there was Ma, turning heads all over town, including Daddy's. Soon, she was pregnant. She left school in April of their senior year, and Janelle was born in May.

Daddy graduated in June, still thinking that he would attend college in the fall. Every day he would stop by my grandmother's house to visit Ma and Janelle, and it tore him up every night when he had to leave them. His own father had been in and out of his life, mostly out, and he never wanted that for his own children. And so instead of going off to college, he asked Ma to marry him. He was still planning to go to school at some point, but I came along in August of the following year and Dee was born a year and a half after that, and my parents could never afford it. Daddy's plans for his education ended up permanently on hold.

After the LOFTY dinner, I asked Daddy what he thought about the things the woman had said about dreams. He answered, "My dreams are for you girls to have the chances I never had." I hugged him tightly that night, thinking how lucky my sisters and I were. Some of my friends didn't even know their fathers, while our parents had been married for eighteen years. As annoying as they could be sometimes, I never doubted that they did what they did because they loved us.

Today's Triple B lecture began courtesy of Janelle, after she had asked to spend Thanksgiving with Chuck's family. Actually, that wasn't really it, since Ma and Daddy had met Chuck a few times and liked him, and had said yes to her having Thanksgiving dinner with him. The trigger was her second request to spend the rest of the weekend with the Bensons.
Ma liked the idea. "Shoot, I wish I had that kind of money, to just fly to New York City to go shopping." According to Janelle, this was a tradition in Chuck's family every year at this time.

When Daddy heard, though, he flipped. "There is no way in hell I'm going to let you spend a whole weekend in New York City with that boy!"

"Daddy, it's not like we're going to be alone," Janelle protested. "His parents and sister will be with us the whole time."

"I don't know if I feel good about that either," he responded. "Why are they willing to spend so much money on you, Janelle?"

"Will you at least call them, Daddy? Chuck's mother said she would talk to you about any concerns you had."

Daddy grumbled, but eventually he'd called Chuck's parents. They reassured him that Chuck and Janelle wouldn't be alone, that Janelle would share a hotel room with Chuck's sister, and that they just wanted to give Janelle a chance to experience New York City, since she'd never been there. Daddy finally agreed to let her go, but then subjected us all to a Triple B lecture as a consequence.

Later that evening, my parents had gone out to a movie, Janelle was out with Chuck, and Dee was at her friend Monique's house. I was in our bedroom trying to work on my college applications. I wanted to go to either Westcott University or McCaffrey College, the two most prestigious schools in Greater Meryton.

I had thought I had a good chance of getting into both of them until I became a part of the LOFTY Dreams program. Sheila and Paul had told us not to discuss our SAT scores, so of course, the first thing we did was discuss them. My scores were 580 on the critical reading, 600 on the writing, and 560 on the math. Not bad, but a lot of the kids in the program had done better, and Peter, Stacy and Will had near perfect scores.

Now I was focused on trying to make my essays really good. After several attempts, I grew frustrated and decided to forget about my applications, at least for tonight.

I stood up and stretched, and as I did so, I spotted the card Geo had given me on the dresser. I took it and went to the living room to use the phone.

When Geo answered, I said, "Hi, it's Liz. Do you remember meeting me at the hotel?"

"Of course I remember you. You're my very smart friend. How are you tonight?"

I smiled. "I'm good. I was just at home with nothing to do, so I thought about you and decided to call."

"Then we have something in common. I was sitting at home with nothing to do and hoping a pretty girl would call me. And what do you know."

Cute, I thought. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How old are you?"

"I just turned nineteen. Why?"
Good, not too old. "Just wondering. So what do you do when you're not working?"

"Weeeeeeell," Geo answered, stretching out the word, "I lead a boring life. Sitting around waiting
three weeks for a pretty girl to call."

I started laughing. "OK, it took me a while, but I'm calling now."

"Wanna make up for lost time?" he asked in a suggestive voice.

"I don't think so."

Geo laughed. "OK, I'll take that. When you lead a boring life, you have to take what you can get."

I changed the subject. "How long have you been working at the hotel?"

"A few months. It's all right. Serving food's not my goal, though."

"I didn't think it would be. You seem pretty smart yourself."

"Why, thank you. If you said it, Liz, it must be true."

I smiled again. I liked this guy. "What is your goal?"

"I want to be a chef."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I love to cook. I almost had a chance to go to culinary arts school, but Will got in the way of
that."

"That's right, you were going to tell me a story about how you ended up as his foster brother."

"It's a long, sad story. You sure you want to hear it?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Okay then. My mom was a crackhead, her boyfriend used to beat me, so I ended up in foster care at
age seven."

"Wow. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, it is what it is. But it made me a bad kid. I was always in trouble at school, and most of
the foster homes I was in didn't want to keep me for long."

"Geo, you don't have to tell me this if you don't want to."

"No, it's cool. When I was in middle school, I was in the rubber room. You know what that is,
right?"

"Yeah, that's what everybody at my school calls the class for kids doing in-school suspension."

"Well, that was me, because I was always getting into trouble. Then one day when I was there, a
man came to speak to my class. He said his name was Billy and he was a lawyer."

"That's Will's father, right?" I recalled Lois saying that her brother's name had been Billy.

"Yeah. He gave us one of those motivational speeches, about how those labels we had been given
weren't really who we were on the inside. I don't even remember everything he said. I just remember how he made me feel, like he was talking just to me, and he really wanted me to believe what he was saying. Afterward, I went up and asked if he would be my father."

"That was bold."

Geo laughed. "It was. I don't even know why I said that; it just popped out. He asked me about myself and I told him I was in foster care. He stared at me for a minute and then said, 'Let me talk to your teacher.'

"I thought that would be the last I'd hear from him, but a week later he came to my school and met with me and my teacher and social worker. He asked me how I would feel about coming to live with him."

"You must have been happy about that," I said.

"Oh, yeah. I was living with this old lady, and she was all right—she's the one who taught me how to cook. But she couldn't control me and I knew that sooner or later she'd be sending me back, too. It took about six months before I could go live with the Darcys. They had to go through foster care training and stuff like that. But during that time, Billy visited me every week or brought me to his house or took me out with his kids."

"What was it like when you finally went to live with them?"

"Really good in some ways. Billy was the first person in my life who ever really loved me and believed in me, and that made me want to do better for him. And Billy's daughter Jenny was cool, too. She looked up to me."

I noticed the conspicuous lack of mention of two people. "What about Will and his mother?"

Geo laughed a little. "Yeah… they were interesting. I always felt like Marletta didn't really want me there and that she was just going along with it for her husband's sake. As for Will, during those six months when I was waiting, he and I were real cool. He had always wanted a brother, and even though I was older, we were in the same grade because I got kept back once. But once I went to live with them, he was really jealous of the attention I got from his father. We didn't get along too well after that."

"Is that why you left?"

Geo was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "No, I left because Billy died."

"Oh," I said softly. I remembered Lois saying something about that, too. "How did he die?"

"He used to come home for dinner and to help us with our homework, and then go back to work and stay late. One night he was kind of sick and had taken some medicine that made him drowsy. On his way home he fell asleep at the wheel and crossed the median… Look, Liz, I don't want to talk about this."

"I'm sorry, Geo, I shouldn't have asked."

He paused. "It's all right. Anyway, after that, Marletta and Will decided to get rid of me."

"That's harsh."

"Yeah, it was."
"So where'd you go?"

"I lived in a group home until I turned eighteen, and then I was out on the streets for a while. Then I got in this program that helped me get my GED and the job I have. Now I rent a room from some people I know."

He said this very matter-of-factly, but my heart hurt for him. An idea came to me. "What do you do on the holidays? Like this Thanksgiving, for instance?"

"Let's see... I have a TV in my room, so I'll probably order a pizza and watch the bowl games."

"No, that's not what you'll be doing," I said.

"It's not?" Geo's playful tone had returned. "I knew you were smart, Liz, but I didn't know you could see the future."

I smiled. "I can. And what I see is that you'll be having Thanksgiving dinner with my family."
"So obviously they weren't going to help you go to cooking school." I said this calmly, but inside I was feeling outraged. How could Will and his mother treat Geo like that?!

Chapter 6

"What on earth are they doing?" my maternal grandmother said, responding to all the noise coming from the kitchen.

Daddy laughed. "Don't ask me. I'm not going in there to find out, either."

Geo had agreed to come over for Thanksgiving if he could help my mother cook. Now all of us in the living room were listening to their occasional outbursts of shouting and arguing.

Ma came out of the kitchen carrying a hot dish with potholders and wearing an exasperated expression. "Oh, that boy! I'm going to strangle him in a minute!"

Geo followed her a few seconds later, carrying the turkey. "You don't mean that," he said. "We're a team now, right, Miz B?"

Ma shook her head. "Nobody's ever going to share my kitchen again on Thanksgiving."

Geo laughed. "Just wait 'til everybody eats before you say that."

Ma rolled her eyes as we all started gathering around the table. "Messing with all my food," she said with a sour expression, although I could tell she really wanted to laugh.

"Did I mess with your greens?" Geo said. "No, right? So I didn't mess with all your food. I know better than to mess with a black woman's greens."

Finally my mother couldn't hold back and started laughing. "All right, all right, I just hope everybody likes it."

My mother's brother Mitch sat down and started filling up his plate. Grandma smacked him lightly in the back of the head. "Wait until we bless the food."

After Daddy said grace, he started carving the turkey while the rest of us sat down.

"What is this stuff?" Dee asked, pointing to a bowl in front of her.

"Those are pearl onions," Geo answered.

"You mean you just eat the onions by themselves, not as a part of something? Ugh."

Geo laughed. "Why don't you try them first, Dee, before you say that?"

"What's this?" Uncle Mitch asked, looking at a bowl containing a scarlet mash.
"It's cranberry sauce."

"That's not cranberry sauce! Cranberry sauce is round and smooth."

"You're talking about that stuff that comes in a can? That's not real cranberry sauce," Geo said. "This is made from actual cranberries."

"Cranberries don't come in a can?"

I laughed. "Of course not, Uncle Mitch. Cranberries are a fruit. They grow in a bog."

"What's a bog?" Dee asked.

Geo shook his head, laughing. "My people, my people! This is why we can't get ahead in America! Why don't y'all stop talking about the food and just try it? Expand your taste buds a little."

On that, everybody shut up and started eating. After a few minutes, Daddy said, "This isn't bad. Where'd you learn to cook like this?"

"I had a foster mother who taught me," Geo answered. "And when I lived with the Darcys, I used to try different recipes from their cookbooks."

"Who are the Darcys?" Ma asked.

"The family of one of the boys in my program, Ma. You remember the woman you almost got into it with at the welcome dinner?"

"You mean that snooty lady?" Ma cried. "You know those people, Geo?"

"They were my foster family for a while, too."

"How could you stand living with that woman?"

"It wasn't easy. She's not the nicest. And her son isn't much better. I would have had a chance to go to cooking school, if it weren't for them."

"What did they do?" Daddy asked.

I put my fork down. I really wanted to hear this story.

"I lived with them for almost three years, and for the first two and a half, it was two on two. Mr. Darcy and his daughter wanted me there, and Mrs. Darcy and her son didn't."

"Billy—that's Mr. Darcy—he really believed in me and thought I could be somebody. My grades weren't the best but we talked about the fact that since I liked to cook, I could study that and become a chef. He started a trust fund for me that he said would become mine when I turned eighteen. He told me I could use that money to go to school."

"But when I was seventeen, Billy died in a car accident. So Mrs. Darcy and her son Will started trying to get rid of me."

"Oh, baby, that must have been so hard for you," Grandma said.

"Yeah, it was. I had been with the Darcys longer than any other foster home I was in, so they were the closest thing to a real family I ever had. And I know I didn't have Billy's blood, but to me he was my real father. The worst part was some of the things Will did to me to get me out of there."
"What did he do?" I asked.

"He took his father's death really hard, which is understandable. He started cutting class and getting high. One day Mrs. Darcy found some weed behind a bookshelf. It was his, but he said it was mine. That was the excuse she was looking for, and she told me I had to go."

"Haters gotta hate," Dee declared.

"So obviously they weren't going to help you go to cooking school." I said this calmly, but inside I was feeling outraged. How could Will and his mother treat Geo like that?!

"Yeah, I came back when I was eighteen to ask about the trust that Billy had set up for me. I think Marletta—Mrs. Darcy—was going to let me have it, but then Will said that they didn't owe me anything. So she said no and told me to never come back to her house again."

"Umph," Ma said. "What kind of people are those, who would do something like that to you?"

Geo shrugged. "They forgot where they came from. Do you know that Mrs. Darcy grew up here in Longbourn City?"

"Really?" I said. Then I recalled Lois saying her sister-in-law graduated from Longbourn High.

"Yeah, but you know how it is. Some folks get a little money and think they're better than other black people. Billy was never like that, but Marletta definitely was. And her son picked up all her attitudes."

"I can believe that," I said.

After dinner, Geo and I beat Uncle Mitch and Dee in two hands of spades, and then Geo said he had to go. "I have to work tomorrow," he told me, "but on Saturday can I take you to a movie?"

I smiled. "Sounds good to me."

When Saturday finally came around, however, I didn’t end up having such a good time. Geo kept getting on my nerves. In the long line at the movie theater, he stood behind me and kept pressing himself against my butt. Finally I turned around. "Would you quit it?" I snapped.

"Sorry, baby, but it’s crowded in here."

"It’s not that crowded that you have to be all up on me. And don’t call me baby."

Now we were in the theater, watching *Get Rich or Die Tryin’*, a movie I really wanted to see, but Geo kept distracting me by kissing my neck and sucking on my ear. "Geo, stop!" I whispered.

When he wouldn’t cut it out, I got up and walked out to the lobby. Geo followed me out. When he caught up to me, he put his arms around my waist. "What’s wrong?"

I pulled away from him. "I really want to see that movie, and you’re not letting me watch it."

"Aw, Liz, you’re just so fine, and being with you is doing something to me."

"Yeah, but you don’t have to do it in the movies."

Geo raised his eyebrows and smiled suggestively. "So later then?"

I gave him an annoyed look. "No, not later either."
Geo stopped smiling. “OK, Liz, I understand. You’re a nice girl, and I’m treating you like a hoochie. I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

I thought about it a minute. “All right, I forgive you.”

Geo gave me a different smile this time, that cute little boy smile of his that I liked so much. “Thank you. That warms my heart.”

I smiled back. “Can we go back and finish watching the movie?”

We went back in, and Geo held my hand but otherwise behaved himself. On the way home, he put some slow jams on in his CD player. He had a nice ride, and I remember thinking that the hotel must pay him good for him to afford it.

When we arrived back at my place, Geo turned off the ignition. He gave me a playful grin. “Is it okay with you if I kiss you goodnight?”

I smiled back. “You can kiss me goodnight, but watch your hands.”

He gave me a deep French kiss and told me he’d call me tomorrow. I went upstairs to our apartment, wishing Janelle was around so I could talk to her about what I was feeling. I didn’t have a lot of experience. Okay, that was an understatement. I had had one boyfriend, Tyree, in eighth grade. And going together back then meant that we talked on the phone at night and kissed each other under the stairs at school.

In high school, I was too busy with my classes and extracurriculars to do much dating. Not to mention that some of my friends said I intimidated a lot of the boys. I guess my father’s BBB lectures had a bigger impact on me than I thought. I really wanted to go to college and didn’t want anything to hurt my chances. I liked Geo, but there no way I was going to let him get in the way of my education.

Janelle came back on Sunday afternoon, and she was absolutely glowing. Daddy had given her a hundred dollars before she left, “so those people don’t think we don’t have anything.” That could barely pay for two meals in New York City, she told me later. She had used the money to buy us all some small souvenir items.

She was laden down with packages, though, all with clothes that Chuck’s mother and sister had bought her. “I don’t like this,” Daddy said. “They shouldn’t be spending this kind of money on you.”

Janelle was trying to hold back her excitement around Daddy, but it was hard. So she changed the subject to the other things she had done while there. They had seen The Lion King on Broadway and visited the Museum of Modern Art. “It was such an educational experience!” she said, hoping to mollify Daddy.

Later that evening, Dee was on the computer in the living room, and Janelle and I were in our bedroom. Now we could really talk. “I love him, Liz. I love him so much! And he told me he loves me, too.”

Janelle started gushing about all the wonders of Chuck, and it made me laugh with delight. I had never seen my sister this way before. She tends to be the quiet, mellow one of the family.

After she had exhausted the subject of Chuck, at least temporarily, Janelle said, “Liz! I almost forgot! I met Chuck’s cousin Will at Thanksgiving dinner, and he told me he knows you.”

“Yeah, he does,” I answered. “We’re in the LOFTY Dreams program together.”
Janelle grinned. “Wouldn’t it be cool if you two ended up together? Then the four of us could all go out.”

“Janelle, that is not going to happen.”

“Why not? He’s really cute, and you have lots of chances to get to know each other.”

I hesitated. “Janelle… I know some things about Will that I don’t really like.”

Janelle looked puzzled. “Like what?”

I told her about my first few encounters with him, and about the things Geo had told me.

“Liz, are you sure you can believe what Geo’s saying? You don’t know the whole story.”

“If you could see Geo’s face and hear his voice when he talks about it, you would know it’s true. The things that happened really hurt him. Besides, from what I’ve seen of Will, I can believe he’s like that.”

“I don’t know, Liz. I mean, I don’t know either of them, but Chuck is really close to Will. I don’t think he would be if Will were really such a jerk. Or maybe he was like that for a while, because his father had just died. Grief can really mess people up. That doesn’t mean he’s that way all the time.”

“Maybe,” I said, but I was skeptical.

Janelle stretched out on her bed and smiled at me. “All right, so you won’t end up with Will. It sounds like you like this guy Geo, though. Why don’t you tell me about him?”
Chapter Summary

Aunt Haley grinned. "I think it would be very hard for any young man not to fall in love with you."

"That's because you're biased."

"That doesn't mean it's not true." Haley laughed. "I'll bet even this Will guy would fall in love with you, if you gave him a chance."

I shook my head, laughing. "Nah, he's too in love with himself."

Chapter 7

On the first Saturday in December, I joined my favorite aunt, Haley, to help her staff a table at the Longbourn Community Center's annual holiday crafts fair. Haley was a very talented artist who, in the last five or so years, had branched off from painting into making cloth handbags, scarves and jewelry. "It's hard to find buyers for paintings when times are hard," she had explained. "But people will always buy something they can use or wear." In addition to Aunt Haley's accessories, her table held wooden and soapstone sculptures she'd brought back from a trip to Senegal last year, and an array of natural soaps, body scrubs and essential oils created by the men of Hutchins House, a residence run by my grandpa Larry for men who'd been released from prison.

Because Aunt Haley had spent her youth with an ill mother and an absentee father, she had played a big role in raising her younger brothers, Daddy and my uncle Randolph. She had also been my paternal grandmother's nurse and caregiver during the last years of her life. Maybe because of having so much responsibility at a young age, Aunt Haley is now the epitome of an earthy-crunchy free spirit. She's a vegan, dreadlocked, hemp-wearing woman who radiates love. She can be brutally honest when she needs to be, however. She's both my biggest champion and my toughest critic.

By calling her a free spirit, I don't mean that she's not responsible now—she runs her own office cleaning business and has twelve employees, in addition to her artwork. But she sets her own schedule, takes time off every year to travel to a different part of the world, and has never married or had children of her own. She attracts men like honey and has had some serious relationships, but as she says, "Settling down is not for me. I need my space and my freedom." It's our gain—the doting she wasn't giving to a husband and kids, she lavished on her nieces.

Aunt Haley stood to hug me when I arrived—a Haley hug is one of the most comforting things imaginable—and then offered me a greenish-brown juice, no doubt blended herself, in a clear
reusable cup. "Guava, mango, and kale," she said with a smile.

Although the color made me wary, I knew she wouldn't let me refuse without trying it first. Once I took the plunge, I found it surprisingly good and drank the whole thing.

Aunt Haley gave me a quick review of the procedures for scanning credit cards and filling out receipts, and we settled down to wait for our first customers.

"We missed you on Thanksgiving, honey," she said with a twinkle in her eyes. "Your grandpa said it was because of a young man. He must be something special."

My grandpa Larry, my dad's father, along with his wife Layla and Aunt Haley, cooks a big Thanksgiving breakfast at a homeless shelter each year, before heading back to Hutchins House to make Thanksgiving dinner for the men in residence there who have no place to go, and for any family or friends they want to invite. I've helped them the last two years before going home to eat with my family, but I bowed out this year because of Geo.

I smiled. "I don't know about all that. Geo's just a friend right now. He doesn't have any family, so I didn't want him to be alone on Thanksgiving."

"Geo's just a friend right now," she repeated. "So you like him and hope for something more?"

I shrugged. "I guess. I mean, I do like him, and I've kissed him already, but I've only known him for a few weeks. But he's cute, and he's funny, and there's something about him…"

"What's that something?"

I thought about it. "He's had a rough life. His mom was on drugs and he ended up in foster care. He lived with this foster family for three years, but the father of the family died, and then the mother and brother in the family tried to kick him out, and then they did kick him out, and—"

"Whoa, you've only known him a few weeks and he's already told you all this?"

"Well, it's kind of because of a coincidence. The brother from the foster family is in the LOFTY Dreams program with me."

"That's awkward, isn't it? Knowing the personal business of a young man you're going to be in the same program with for the next few years?"

"It was already awkward with Will. It's not like what Geo said made it any worse." I proceeded to tell her about my interactions with Will.

"Oh no NO," Haley kept shaking her head. "No, he DIDN'T! He really said, 'why would I want to meet you,' and 'I don't have anything to say to you'? To one of the smartest and most beautiful young women on the planet? Is his head screwed on all right? He better not cross my path, or I will knock some sense into him!"

I started laughing, and was soon rolling as Haley kept going, ending with, "Hey, I already like Geo better. At least he knows how to appreciate my niece!"

When we stopped laughing, Haley changed her tone. "Listen, it sounds like Geo has some good qualities, since he obviously appreciates yours. But with a background like his, he has to have some issues. I want you to be careful, Liz."

"I can take care of myself."
"I know, but hear me out. You're a very compassionate person, and there are men in this world who
like to take advantage of that. They may have a great sob story that pulls all your heartstrings, and
they'll try to get you to do for them what they should do for themselves. They'll tell you how much
they love you and need you, but you can't fix their problems for them. Just remember that."

"I hear you. I promise to take care of myself. I won't let Geo fall in love with me, if I can help it."

Aunt Haley grinned. "I think it would be very hard for any young man not to fall in love with you."

"That's because you're biased."

"That doesn't mean it's not true." Haley laughed. "I'll bet even this Will guy would fall in love with
you, if you gave him a chance."

I shook my head, laughing. "Nah, he's too in love with himself."

Haley made me promise once more than I would be careful when it came to Geo. We went on to talk
about other things, and ended up having a great day, with lots of sales, including all the items from
Hutchins House. Grandpa Larry would be happy, because during the winter months when their
gardens lay fallow, a lot of the House's income came from the sale of such items.

I was always happy when I could help out Grandpa Larry, I think because I was so proud of him. It's
weird, because he was an absentee father, and he really hurt Daddy, Aunt Haley and Uncle
Randolph a lot. But his failures, I think, made him so effective at working with men who had been in
prison. He had been a college dropout, a community activist who quit in despair, and a husband and
father who had abandoned his family. But then in his forties, he reinvented himself. He went back to
school and got his degree, founded Hutchins House, and re-entered the lives of his children. What he
hadn't been as a father, he made up for as a grandfather. He even opened himself up to love again,
marrying his wife Layla when he was fifty-two. Because he knew what it was like to overcome
mistakes, bad choices, and failure, he could really inspire his guys.

I saw Geo just two more times over the next several weeks. He worked a lot of nights, and I was
busy with my college applications. When we talked on the phone, he'd tell me how much he missed
me, and I wondered why I didn't feel the same way. Maybe our relationship was just too new for me
to have very strong feelings yet, or maybe Haley's warning was on my mind.

I hardly saw Janelle at all in December. She had finals and spent most of her evenings studying at the
library on campus, usually coming home just as I was getting ready for bed.

On the Saturday before Christmas, Ma and I went to the mall to buy presents. We had been there for
about three hours when we stopped to get something to eat at the food court. While eating, Ma
started on her own, more modified version of the Triple B lecture.

"Look at that girl, all up on that boy in front of everybody. Girl, don't you ever let me catch you
acting like that in a public place."

Ma was sitting opposite me at a small table, and I turned around to see who she was talking about.
Sure enough, a few feet away there was a girl with long weaves braided in her hair, sitting on some
boy's lap and engaged in an intense liplock. Between all of her hair and her being all over the guy, all
you could see of him was his legs.

I turned back and said, "Trust me, Ma, you won't see me acting like that."

My mother didn't answer, but continued to stare past me. "Oh, my Lord," she said.
I turned back around. The girl had come up for air and now the boy's face was visible. It was Geo. He looked up and saw me, looking guilty for a few seconds. Then he went back to kissing the girl.

Ma started to get up. "I can't believe he's carrying on with that girl right in front of you! After we had him in our home!"

I grabbed Ma's arm. "Ma, DON'T! Don't do anything and don't say anything! Let's just leave!"

"What, are you going to let him just treat you like that? Uh-uh," she said, trying to pull away from my strong grip.

"Ma, please," I begged her. "He is not worth it. I'd rather find out about this now than later. Let's just go, please."

Thankfully, she stopped, but she called Geo all kinds of names on the car ride home, and again when she relayed the story to Daddy and my sisters. Daddy asked me how I was feeling.

"Honestly? I don't really care. It wasn't like I was in love with him. And if that's the kind of guy he is, then I don't really want to be with him."

Actually, I was kind of relieved it was over. Sometimes, Geo said to me made me feel like he was coming on too strong, too fast, especially when I had so much to do in school and with getting ready for college. I guess Aunt Haley had been right, after all.
I didn't want to, but I turned to him and said, "I'm sorry, Will. I will try harder to not have a propensity to willfully misunderstand you."

Will suddenly smiled. "Me, too."

I shook my head, wanting to wipe away his arrogant grin. "You just can't say the words, can you," I mumbled.

Chapter 8

Our LOFTY Dreams meeting in January began, as had the previous one, with Sheila asking if anyone had anything they wanted to share since the last session.

Stacy raised her hand. "Um, this is kind of hard for me to talk about."

"Take your time," said Sheila.

Stacy tugged at the sleeves of her sweater for a while. I wondered what was wrong, because she usually seemed so upbeat. "Uh, I'm not sure I want to say this… but I feel like I need to, to give people time… especially before the trip in April. Because if anybody has a problem with it, I guess I need to know now." She was quiet for a moment before saying, "I'm gay."

The room was silent for a good thirty seconds. Finally, Abner broke the tension by saying, "So?" and everyone laughed.

Except Stacy, that is. "You say that, Abner, but I don't know what everyone else is thinking. I mean, my parents don't even know yet. I grew up hearing them say all kinds of negative things about gay people, and I'm afraid they'll reject me. I came out to my older brother last year, because I thought he'd be cool about it and make it easier to tell my parents, and he kind of freaked. So instead of helping me tell them, I had to make him promise not to tell them. I haven't even come out to anyone at school yet, because I'm scared it will get back to them. You guys are the first people I've told, besides my brother, because I figure we're all going to be together in April…"

"Why? Are you planning to hit on the girls when we're there?" Mike asked.

"Inappropriate, Mike," Paul said.

"She brought up the trip!"

"Mike," Sheila said in warning.
The room was quiet again until I spoke up. "Stacy, I don't know if this helps. One of my Aunt Haley's best friends is a lesbian. I was over my aunt's house once when I was about eight, and I got into an argument with my sister and called her gay. I don't think I even knew what the word meant; I had just heard kids use it as an insult on the playground. My aunt pulled me aside and explained to me what it meant, and told me about her friend Cheryl. She asked me how Cheryl might have felt if she was there and had heard me. I felt really bad, because I really liked Cheryl. Anyway, my aunt taught me that it doesn't matter who you're attracted to or who you love, what counts is what kind of person you are on the inside."

Stacy bit her lip and nodded. "Thanks, Liz."

"OK, I have a question," said Mike. "Is everyone supposed to share something like what Liz just said? Because what if we don't feel that way?"

"What do you think, everyone?" asked Sheila.

"I think Mike has a point," Will said.

Why was I not surprised? I tried not to roll my eyes.

Will turned to Stacy. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with your being a lesbian, because I don't think that." He looked up at the Sheila and Paul. "But someone else might say something else that I disagree with. So what are we supposed to do? You said for us to be honest, but what happens if your opinion hurts someone's feelings?"

I was watching Stacy's face, wondering what her emotions were, and Will's callous attitude angered me. "This is her life, it's not an opinion!" I snapped. "It's not like disagreeing about, I don't know, teenage curfews. You can't disagree with someone's life!"

"Why are you always jumping on me?" Will shot back. "Weren't you listening when I said I didn't think there was anything wrong with her being gay? But it's like you have this propensity to willfully misunderstand me!"

"Propensity?! Oh yeah, pull out your SAT practice words, Will!" I shouted.

"OK, stop!" Sheila called out. "What just went wrong there, folks?"

Abner crossed his arms, looking smug. "I didn't hear any 'I' statements. Just you, you, you."

"True," said Paul. "What else?"

"They forgot about Stacy," Pete said. "It became about Will and Liz."

He was right, and now I was really embarrassed. I don't know why I allowed Will to get to me like that! "I am so, so sorry, Stacy," I said to her. "I was wrong just now."

"Me too," Will said. Stacy nodded at both of us.

"I think you should apologize to each other as well," Sheila said.

I didn't want to, but I turned to him and said, "I'm sorry, Will. I will try harder to not… have a propensity to willfully misunderstand you."

Will suddenly smiled. "Me, too."

I shook my head, wanting to wipe away his arrogant grin. "You just can't say the words, can you," I
"Liz!" Paul said sharply.

"Sorry," I said again through gritted teeth.

Will continued to smirk, like he could barely contain his laughter, which made me even madder. "I actually can say the words: I'm sorry, Elizabeth." Looking more serious, he turned to Stacy. "And I'm really sorry, Stacy. I definitely didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

She was smiling now. "You didn't. This was actually kind of fun to watch."

"Despite the less than ideal way they handled it, I think Will and Liz both brought up good points," Sheila said. "As Liz said, Stacy was sharing about her life, not an opinion. And as Will said, sometimes we will disagree even about someone's life. So what do we do when that happens? What do you think, Stacy?"

Stacy took a deep breath. "The reason why I told you guys is because when we go on this retreat, it will be the first time in my life that I'm living with people who aren't my family. And no, I don't plan to hit on to any of the girls," she said, looking at Mike. "But we are going to be in close quarters, and I just wanted to know that I'd be accepted there. So I guess if I'm sharing something that's really personal about my life, I want people to really listen first and try to understand where I'm coming from before they express their opinions about it."

"What do you think, folks?" Paul asked. "Is that a good standard for us to adopt?"

We all agreed to it and the meeting then continued.

January also marked the beginning of the indoor track season, and I had practices almost every day after school, in addition to yearbook meetings. I got home most days after 6 PM. Our first meet was on the third Saturday in January, so we were able to leave school early on Friday afternoon.

When I got home, Janelle was in our room crying. "What's wrong?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She just opened her hand and held out some crumpled pieces of paper.

I unwrinkled the sheets. The first one was her report card. She had received two F's, a D, and a C. The second one was a letter from her academic advisor. It said that she had been placed on academic probation. She would be given until the end of the summer session to bring her grades up to a 2.0 and to make up the failed classes, or else she would have to withdraw from Meryton State.

"Oh, Janelle! What happened?"

Janelle wiped her eyes. "I had final papers in two of my classes that counted for half the grade, and I didn't finish them. And I tried studying for all my finals, but I was so behind in the reading that I could never catch up…"

"But, Janelle, you were studying so hard!"

"No, I wasn't," she said. "All those times I said I was in the library… sometimes I was, but most of the time I was with Chuck."

Janelle's voice got really quiet. "I started sleeping with him, Liz. After we got back from New York. We were always trying to find a place to be alone together, either his dorm room if his roommate wasn't around, or his house if his parents weren't home. Not that that was all we did together, but the
point is, we didn't do enough studying. And now Ma and Daddy are going to kill me."

"Janelle, you don't need to tell them you've been having sex with Chuck."

"You don't think they'll figure that out, when they wonder what I was doing all that time when I said I was studying? They are going to kill me, Liz." Fresh tears came to her eyes. "You know what the worst part is? I don't feel like I can do it."

"Do what?"

"Bring up my grades. So many times in class, I felt stupid. A lot of my classmates already know something about the topics before we study them, and I often still didn't understand even after doing the reading. I struggled to write the five-page papers we had early in the semester. When I found out that the final papers had to be twenty pages long, I panicked. I don't know how to write twenty pages about anything! So I blew them off. Yet some of the people around me made it seem like such a breeze."

"Janelle..." I sat down on the bed next to her. "I know what you're feeling. I feel that way when I go to my LOFTY Dreams meetings. I felt so proud of myself for doing well in AP English, and that's the only AP class at Longbourn. Some of the kids in my program go to high schools that offer sixteen different AP classes, and they'd already taken six or seven before they reached senior year! Let's face it, in some ways, Longbourn High sucks, and some of these kids are much better prepared than we are."

"I don't know if that makes me feel any better. Maybe I should just drop out, if I don't have what it takes to make it in college."

"NO, Janelle! You're as smart as anybody at your school! You just need to figure out how to manage the work, or get help or something."

Janelle started crying again. "Ma and Daddy are going to tell me I need to break up with Chuck."

I put my arm around her and hugged her. "You don't know that for sure. We'll talk to them together. I know that in one of the LOFTY meetings this spring, we're going to discuss time management and study skills. I could share what I learn with you. And we can do more studying together. And you and Chuck could commit to going to the library more. Maybe we can convince them that it's going to get better."

Janelle decided to wait until Sunday night to tell Ma and Daddy. She needed them to sign the letter from her academic advisor, but she figured, why ruin the whole weekend? She and Chuck went out on Saturday, and afterward, I asked her what he had said about the two of them studying more.

"I didn't tell him," she answered.

"Why not?"

"He got his report card, too. He earned a 3.0. Liz, he spent just as much time with me as I spent with him! You don't think he's going to wonder how he ended up with such a dumb girlfriend?"

"Janelle, you're not dumb. It's what I was saying before. Chuck probably started college better prepared than you did."

"It's more than that. You know that some the worst students at Meryton State are all from places like Longbourn City? They don't come to class, or they show up late, and a lot of them don't graduate. Chuck hates that, because he thinks it makes the African-American students on campus look bad as a
whole. How do you think he's going to feel when he finds out that I'm not any different from the rest?"

"You said yourself that you were spending time together instead of studying. Any problems you've had, he's been a part of."

"Yeah, but he managed to make up for it."

"You still need to tell him. If he really loves you, he'll want you to do better and try to help you."

I stayed by Janelle's side when she talked to Ma and Daddy on Sunday evening, and as predicted, they completely flipped out, Daddy especially. He told her she had to come home every evening and do her studying there. "But Daddy, some of the books I need to read are on reserve at the library. I can't bring them home," she said.

"Then you find a way to read those books during the day. Another thing—I don't want you on the phone with Chuck or going out with him until after your midterms, and you need to pass every one of them."

I knew Janelle wouldn't bring up the "I'm 18, so I can make my own choices" argument, because our parents would come back with the fact that she still lived under their roof and they still paid the bills.

"How am I going to tell Chuck?" she asked me later.

"You'll see him on campus. Talk to him. I know he'll understand."
Chapter Summary

"Ohhh," she said in understanding. "So Anna likes Will and that was a 'back off my man' type of thing?"
"I guess," I laughed, "but when it comes to Will Darcy, Anna had nothing to worry about from me."

Chapter 9

I was wrong. Chuck didn't understand. Janelle came home from school a few weeks later, looking very depressed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Chuck broke up with me."

"What? Why?"

"He was waiting for me after one of my classes today. He just walked up and said, 'I'm tired of this. It's over.'" Her voice sounded very weary.

I hugged her. "Oh, Janelle, I'm so sorry!"

"Doesn't matter. I don't really care anymore."

"You don't mean that!"

She looked at me and tried to smile. "Don't say that, Liz. I'm trying hard not to care, because otherwise I'd break down crying all the time. Do me a favor and help me pretend it doesn't matter, OK?"

"Okay," I promised, giving her another hug. What I was thinking, however, was what a jerk Chuck was to dump Janelle so heartlessly just before Valentine's Day. Was he as much of a snob as Janelle had feared he might be, looking down on her because of her bad grades? Or maybe he was frustrated because they weren't allowed to go out these days. If that was the case, he needed to understand that Janelle couldn't afford not to do well in school. He might have a rich family to fall back on, but we didn't. Succeeding in college was Janelle's only chance.

In any case, not caring about other people's struggles proved to me that as nice of a guy as Chuck might have seemed, he and his cousin were actually a lot alike. My initial impressions of Will continued to be confirmed at the previous Sunday's LOFTY Dreams meeting. This was the meeting about good study habits in college, which I had been looking forward to both for my own and Janelle's sake. The evening began with a small group. Will, Mike, Heather and Anna were all absent.

Kathy had been responding to a question Sheila had asked about how much critical thinking we do in school. "At my school, the teachers just want you to read the books, and then in tests or essays, write what the book said. If you do that well, you get an A. I feel like I do so much more thinking at my youth group"—Kathy was president of a Vietnamese youth organization—"but that's not really
"Maybe you're underestimating how important that experience is, Kathy," Paul said. "Are there ways that you can apply the thinking you do in your youth group to the learning you do in school?"

Suddenly, the door opened, and Will, Mike, Heather and Anna all casually strolled in, about twenty minutes late for our meeting.

"Nice of you to join us," Sheila said sarcastically. "We were just talking about the importance of asking good questions and learning how to think well. Kathy, go on."

Before Kathy could continue, Mike whispered something to Will and they both started laughing.

I made a sound of disgust. "It's bad enough that you were late, now you're treating this like it's a joke."

"Sorry," Mike said.

But Will, despite his claim at the last meeting of being able to apologize, made excuses instead. "I'm not even sure why I need to be here tonight," he said. "I had to take a whole semester class on study and thinking skills in ninth grade. There's nothing I could hear in one evening that I didn't already know."

No wonder he was late. He didn't think it mattered. "I guess you forgot that this program's not supposed to be about you," I said. "I personally need this meeting tonight. But since you don't, at least you could think about ways you can help the rest of us who do."

Will looked for a second as though he were going to argue with me, but then thought better of it. He smiled instead. "All right, I can do that."

"And how will you do that?" Paul asked.

Will continued to grin at me. "I can share my expertise." I sighed and rolled my eyes. Will's arrogance knew no bounds.

As the meeting was ending, Anna approached me. "Trying to get some bonus points?" she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Like you don't know."

I laughed. "Actually, I have no idea what you mean."

Anna gave me an icy glare. "It's not going to work, Liz."

I watched her walk away and wondered what the heck that was all about. She ran up to Will, placed her hand on his arm and said something to him. They both started laughing. Interesting.

Despite the tensions of the February meeting, I was eagerly looking forward to the next one. The Hunsford retreat was coming up, and I was so excited about it, I was counting down the days. The March LOFTY Dreams meeting was an extended one, during which we spent several hours stocking shelves at a food bank, and then went to the university where we talked about the plans for the trip. We would depart on a bus from the main gate at the U.M. campus at seven PM on the first Sunday in April, which coincided with the start of most of our spring break weeks, and we would return at one PM the following Sunday.
"The students from the previous classes have always said that the retreat is the highlight of the first year of the program," Sheila told us. "This is the time when everyone in the group really gets to know one another and bond."

"It's also a lot of fun," Paul added. "The Hunsford Retreat Center is located about two hours from Meryton, and it's an incredibly beautiful place. It's surrounded by woods, there are hiking trails, a lake with boating, a recreation center with a track, workout rooms, a pool, and squash courts. There is so much to do there."

"And you'll need it, too," Sheila laughed. "Because there's no electronic media there. You're not allowed to bring any electronics either, except cell phones and mp3 players. And your cell phones may or may not work, because the reception is poor. We'll let you check in with your parents on the center's landlines if needed."

"You're kidding," Abner said. "You mean no computers?"

"None," Sheila said.

"No TV either?" Heather added.

"Oh, no, I'll miss 'American Idol'!" Stacy said in a high-pitched voice that sounded a lot like Heather's. Heather glared at her but everyone else laughed, which was good, since it took the stunned looks off our faces.

"Don't worry, you'll survive," Sheila said, smiling.

Paul handed out sheets of paper to us. "These are contracts that you need to sign and have your parents or guardians sign."

"If you remember at the first meeting," Sheila said, "I mentioned that we have to add a few more rules to the program during the retreat because you'll be away from your homes and your parents. Also, there will be both religious and business groups at the retreat center the same time we are, so we need you to behave as responsibly as possible."

I read through the contract. It said that I would agree to participate in all program activities, and refrain from drugs, alcohol, sex, fighting, or the possession of any weapons. Failure to abide by any of these rules would result in termination from the program.

"What's up with the 'no sex' rule?" Mike asked. "You can't tell us that."

"Yeah, some of us are legal adults," Will added.

"I think most of your parents would agree to that one," Sheila answered.

Kathy and I were talking at the end of the meeting when Anna approached me again. It would have felt like déjà vu, except this time Heather was with her.

"Are you looking forward to the retreat, Liz?" Heather asked.

"Yeah, of course," I answered, a little suspicious of the fake-friendly expressions on their faces.

"Lots of chances to get to know the boys, right?" Anna said.

"There'll be lots of chances to get to know everyone," I said slowly.

They both started laughing and then walked away. Kathy looked at me in confusion. "What's wrong
with them?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. It's like they have it in for me or something, but I have no idea why."

I happened to look up in time to see Anna walk over to Will and touch his arm again, just like she had at the end of the last meeting, and it hit me. I pointed them out to Kathy.

"Ohhh," she said in understanding. "So Anna likes Will and that was a 'back off my man' type of thing?"

"I guess," I laughed, "but when it comes to Will Darcy, Anna had nothing to worry about from me."
Chapter Summary

Okay, this time I definitely heard him. I didn't know how to respond. Was he flirting with me? And if so, why? I didn't think his opinion of me was much higher than my opinion of him. Plus, he and Anna seemed joined at the hip whenever they were together. Maybe he was one of those guys who just flirted with whatever girl was around. He had to know of how good-looking he was.

Chapter 10

The first Sunday in April was a clear spring day, but the temperature had rapidly cooled by that evening when ten teenagers gathered, laden down with luggage, to say goodbye to their families. Ma made a bit of a scene over me (of course) and although I was embarrassed, I let her fuss. It made me feel warm and fuzzy to know my family would miss me, even though, I had to admit, I probably wouldn't miss them. I was much too excited about the trip.

Kathy and I sat together on the bus to Hunsford, discussing our college acceptance (and rejection!) letters, which had arrived during the previous week. "Where'd you get in?" she asked me.

"McCaffrey, U.M., and Meryton State. I'm kind of bummed because I really wanted Westcott, but I was waitlisted."

"So what's your second choice?"

"McCaffrey. That's where I'll end up. What about you?"

"U.M. and Oakwood Tech. I'll probably pick U.M."

Standing near the front of the bus, Sheila called for everyone's attention. "I hear many of you talking about your college acceptances. Congratulations to you all. Paul and I want to interrupt to go over the program schedule. We'll arrive about nine PM, in time to get settled before the retreat center's curfew, which is ten. We'll register and head right to our dorm."

"Why is there a curfew?" asked Heather.

"Partly for safety. There are animals in the woods, you know."

"Wild animals, huh? Cool," said Abner.

Sheila continued. "The other reason is that the retreat center wants to keep the noise level down after ten."

"That means in the dorms, too," Paul added. "After ten, we want all of the young men on their floor, and the young women on theirs, to keep the noise level down."

"Do we have a bedtime, too?" Stacy joked.

Sheila laughed. "No, you don't, but I want you to be wise about when you go to bed. If I catch any
of you falling asleep in our daytime sessions, I will not be happy."

Paul went on with the schedule. "The rec center opens at six AM, if anyone wants to work out. Breakfast is served in the cafeteria from seven to nine. You have maps of the whole campus so you'll know where everything is. We'll meet everyday in the Rosings Room of the conference center from nine AM sharp until one PM, although a couple days we'll go out for an activity. Your afternoons are free to do whatever you want. Lunch is from one to two, and dinner from five to seven."

"Basically, after one, you're free from Paul and me until seven that evening, when we pull you back together for about a half-hour in one of the lounges in the dorm for a fun activity or debrief," Sheila added with a smile. "Also, most days you'll have an assignment to complete from the day's lesson."

It was very dark when we finally arrived at the Hunsford Retreat Center and pulled up in front of the dormitory where we would stay. I looked around to gather my bearings before we entered the building. The night was eerily quiet, and without the street lights I was used to, the place seemed a little creepy.

We had one wing of the dormitory all to ourselves. There were two floors, both of which had a large communal bathroom, eight small dorm rooms and a lounge. Each room was furnished simply with a bed, a dresser, and a desk. The boys and Paul would bunk on the first floor, and the girls and Sheila would stay on the second.

There was a small alarm clock on the dresser of my room, and I set it for six AM. I had promised my track coach that I would run everyday while I was away, so I went straight to bed. In what seemed like no time, the alarm went off in the morning. I got up, put on my track suit and running shoes, and went to the bathroom to splash water in my face and brush my teeth.

Anna and Heather were in the bathroom when I arrived, both dressed in workout clothes and fussing with their hair.

"Where are you off to so early?" Heather asked.

"I'm going running," I answered. "And you?"

"What's it look like?" Anna snapped.

"You know, I could have been snotty and said something like that when Heather asked me, but I didn't," I said.

"I guess you missed an opportunity then," Anna said with a smug look on her face.

Annoyed, I shook my head and left the bathroom. When I got downstairs, Will was in front of the building, wearing his green and white Pemberley Panthers uniform. He was lifting his leg behind him in a quad stretch.

"I was hoping I'd see you," he said. "Want to run together?"

I didn't want to run with Will, but I knew a partner would help me. Not to mention that it was still dark outside. I remembered what Sheila had said about there being animals in the woods. I was a city kid, and if I were alone and saw even something small like a skunk or a snake, I'd probably freak out.

"Yeah, let's do it," I answered.

Will held out one of the maps of the campus under the light that illuminated the door entrance.
"There's a path that passes by the conference center and then the rec center, then down by the lake," he showed me. "We could follow it and then turn around and come back. It's probably about five miles. We can start walking when we return to the conference center to cool down."

I took a few minutes to stretch, and then we set off. The air still held the chilliness of early spring, so it felt great when I finally started to break a sweat. The path traveled downhill, and as we approached the lake, the sun started to rise.

When I saw the gold and pink colors reflecting off the crystal water, I couldn't help myself. I had never seen anything like it, and I stopped to take it all in.

Will had run a few feet past me before he noticed that I wasn't with him. He came back to where I was standing with my mouth hanging open. "Why'd you stop?"

"This is amazing," I said.

"This is nothing. Once when my family went on vacation—"

I interrupted him. "Since I wasn't on that vacation, I can't appreciate whatever you're going to say. So why don't you shut up and let me enjoy this?"

Will laughed. "Okay."

Our voices disturbed a bird that had been resting in the reeds beside the water. It lifted into the air and began to fly low across the lake, gently flapping its long wings.

"Is that a crane?" I whispered.

"I think so," Will answered, his voice also low.

When the bird finished its flight across the water and landed in a tree on the other side, I let out a small sigh. "That was beautiful."

"Kind of like you," Will said.

I blinked. Will had spoken so softly, I wasn't sure I heard him right. Or had I heard him say anything at all? I was too embarrassed to turn and look at him.

Will touched my arm and I jumped a little. "We should head back," he said.

The run back was much tougher. I was used to running on a track, not uphill on uneven terrain. Will soon left me in the dust. He was waiting for me by the conference center when I arrived, panting and short of breath.

Will crossed his arms. "Liz," he said, first smirking and then laughing.

"I'm not used to running outdoors," I managed to get out between breaths. I started laughing, too. "Pretty bad, huh?"

"You know what? Maybe we should work out together this afternoon. We could meet at the rec center, maybe from four to five, and I could show you some things that would help increase your stamina."

Did I want to accept this kind of offer from Will? He was a state record-holder, I reminded myself. It would be stupid not to.
"OK, sure."

As we walked back to cool down, I asked, "So where was this vacation?"

"What?"

"The vacation your family went on. You know, the one that was so much better than the lake here."

Will stared at me for a second before answering, I guess trying to figure out if I was being sarcastic, but I was really curious. "Lake Geneva in Switzerland," he finally said. "We went when I was twelve. The water was the clearest blue I've ever seen."

Switzerland, wow, I thought. "Did you go there to ski?" That was the only thing I knew about Switzerland.

He shook his head. "It was summer. We went to Europe for three weeks and visited a lot of the major cities. My mom had always wanted to go to Europe, and both my grandparents had died earlier that year and left us some money, so that gave us the chance."

"That must have been hard, to lose both your grandparents in the same year."

He nodded. "Yeah, especially because they were the only ones I knew. I miss them."

I was suddenly embarrassed again, like maybe the conversation was becoming too personal, so I shut up for a while, even though I was brimming with questions I wanted to ask him about Europe.

He interrupted my thoughts. "What about you? Are your grandparents still alive?"

I smiled and nodded. "Five of them."

"How do you have five grandparents?"

"One of my grandmothers died when I was nine, and both my grandfathers are on their second marriage. If you add three living grandparents with two step-grandmothers, that's five."

"I wish I had that," Will said a little wistfully.

I shrugged. "I wish I could go to Europe."

He raised his eyebrows. "So I shouldn't be complaining? Is that what you're saying?"

It hit me that my comment probably sounded a little mean to a guy who had lost his dad and the only grandparents he knew. "Sorry, I didn't mean that. I like learning about different people's experiences, that's all. That's why we're here, right?"

Will nodded like he was deep in thought as we arrived back at the dorm. He patted my shoulder and thanked me for the run before heading down the boys' hallway.

During the morning session in the Rosings Room, we played several games that involved teambuilding, communication and problem-solving, and discussed them afterward. Our "homework" for the evening was to read the transcript of a Meryton City Council meeting.

When the session ended, Kathy and I walked out together to head for the cafeteria. Will stopped me. "Are we still on for four o'clock?" he asked. I nodded.

"What's at four?" Kathy asked after Will walked away.
"We're going to practice in the rec center. He's going to help me with my running."

"Didn't you guys go running this morning?"

"Yes."

Kathy looked at me quizzically. "Do you think he likes you, Liz?"

"Nope," I scoffed. "I'm pretty sure he and Anna are a thing." They had sat together on the bus, at break, and at the morning session.

"But he's spending a lot of time with you. And helping you with your running is pretty nice of him." She grinned mischievously. "I bet he likes you."

"Kathy," I argued. "This is not about liking me or helping me. It's about him." I recalled his smug grin when he talked about sharing his expertise back at one of our LOFTY meetings. Yeah, he wanted to share his expertise, all right. "This is about Will Darcy showing off how good he is. That's all."

"Maybe." She snickered. "Or maybe Anna does have something to worry about."

I just shook my head, laughing.

That afternoon, Will had me do so many drills that after an hour, I was exhausted. "Man, you're tough," I told him. "I guess you're trying to make sure I look good on the track?"

Will laughed. "I think you already look good, Liz, on or off the track."

Okay, this time I definitely heard him. I didn't know how to respond. Was he flirting with me? And if so, why? I didn't think his opinion of me was much higher than my opinion of him. Plus, he and Anna seemed joined at the hip whenever they were together. Maybe he was one of those guys who just flirted with whatever girl was around. He had to know of how good-looking he was.

Afterward, Will set up some hurdles along the track and asked if I would stay while he ran. I agreed, thinking it would be interesting to see the great William Darcy in action. He was smooth and he was fast and it was a pleasure to watch.

"He has nice legs, huh? Nice butt, too."

I turned to see Anna standing behind me. "I just wanted to watch him run," I said. "I want to see what I can learn."

Anna laughed. "Don't act so innocent, Liz. You're checking out his body, too."

I gave her a scornful look. "Not everybody is into him the way you are."

"I guess the real question isn't whose into him, but who he's into," she replied.

"Whatever." I had no desire to hang around any longer. "Well, enjoy," I said as I walked past her.

When Kathy and I went to dinner that evening, we joined a table where Stacy, Abner, Pete and Nathan were already sitting. There were about thirty adults in the cafeteria, and we were the only teenagers.

"Did you guys look at that transcript yet?" Stacy asked. "It's like thirty pages long! And so much of it is so boring!"
"I can't look at anything," Nathan said. "I'm going through Nintendo withdrawal symptoms."

"I hear you," said Abner. "I don't know how I'm going to make it without my Xbox." He grabbed Pete's shirt with shaky hands, like a junkie needing a fix. "My Xbox, where's my Xbox?" he rasped as the rest of us laughed.

We saw Will and Anna walk into the cafeteria, and Abner yelled, "Yo!" and waved them over. They looked at us, but headed for a table on the opposite side of the room. My first thought was that they wanted to be alone, but a few seconds later, Mike and Heather joined them.

"Huh," Abner said, watching them go. "I think we just got dissed."

"Even here, there's an in-crowd," I observed. "Imagine that."

"Why are they the in-crowd?" Nathan asked. "Why can't we be the in-crowd? There are more of us than there are of them."

"Silly boy," said Stacy. "The whole point of an in-crowd isn't to include people, it's to keep people out. Their little group is the princesses and the jocks."

"I'm a jock."

"You're a swimmer. That doesn't count."

"What about me?" Abner asked.

"You're not a jock, you're a science nerd," Nathan objected.

"I'm a wanna-be jock. I can't help it that my school only has 160 students and we don't have any sports teams."

"You know," Pete said, "you made some sexist assumptions in what you said earlier, Stacy."

"Oh, really?" Stacy said, looking amused.

"Right, because you classified them as either princesses or jocks. Where does someone like Liz fit in? I would assume she's at least as much of a jock as Will, since they're in the same sport."

Abner started laughing hard. "I love my man Pete! He always brings up the serious stuff."

"Hey, Liz," Kathy teased, "Maybe you could join them, and then they wouldn't be exclusive anymore."

"Oh, no," I said, shaking my head and laughing. "I do not want to be a part of their little group. I'm happy right here."
Chapter Summary

And now came my moment of truth: did I like him? Okay, he was cute. And smart. And a lot nicer than I had given him credit for. And those arms… stop it, Liz! Will was too much of a flirt for my taste, maybe even a player, I decided: the kind of guy you could trust as a friend but not a boyfriend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 11

As the week went on, we really did have a lot of fun. The daily workshops turned out to be very interesting. We discussed a variety of social and political topics, read stories about both famous people and ordinary people who stepped up and made big changes in their communities, and role-played situations involving leadership, communication, and compromise. After the morning sessions were over, my friends and I in the "out crowd," as we started calling ourselves, explored the whole range of activities at Hunsford, and found that after a day or so, we didn't miss the lack of TV/Internet/game systems/etc. all that much.

Will and I continued to run in the mornings and work out in the afternoons, and the return runs became much easier. We talked a lot about stuff we liked to do and about the retreat assignments during these times. During our walk back from Wednesday's early morning run, Will mentioned the previous night's readings about people who had inspired and led millions such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and I told him that my grandfather had known MLK.

"Wow." Will's eyes grew bright. "That's awesome! How did he know him?"

"He was a Civil Rights activist back in the '60s. He was involved in sit-ins, registering people to vote, all that."

"Do you ever feel like it's hard to live up to that? My dad was always drilling into me, 'You have so much, you have to give back,' and sometimes I wonder if I can live up to what he expected of me."

I was surprised to hear him share something so vulnerable, but I remembered him talking about missing his grandparents and realized that he wasn't always full of himself. So I really wanted to be nice in my response. "My grandfather would be the first to tell you that he hasn't always lived up to what he expected. But he says that there's enough need for good to be done in the world that there'll always be another chance to do it."

Will was quiet for a moment like he was pondering what I'd said. "You should tell everyone about your grandfather, Liz."

I shook my head.

"Why not? It would be inspiring."

"Because I don't want to sound like I'm bragging."
Will spread out his hands in a gesture of surprise. "You told me."

"That's because..." Why had I told Will? I certainly wasn't trying to impress him. But he was right; my grandfather was my hero. "OK, maybe I will. I can leave out the part about him knowing King."

"If you want to. I think it's inspiring, not bragging, but that's me." He turned to face me, smiling and walking backwards. "Hey, you know what else is inspiring?"

"What?"

"The sunsets around here! They're even better than the sunrises!"

"What time does it set?"

"About eight. I watched it yesterday."

About eight... On the previous two days after our seven PM debrief, the "out crowd" and I had played a couple of board games we had found in the dorm's lounges. But maybe I could talk them into watching the sunset for a while. I smiled back and nodded. "Sounds like fun!"

I wondered if our conversation about my grandfather was still on Will's mind later that morning. Instead of meeting in the Rosings Room, we met in the woods with one of the Hunsford staff members, who was there to lead us on a ropes course. A fifty-foot long rope bridge was strung up about twenty-five feet off the ground between two tall trees, and a zip line shot out from the second tree to the ground. Each of us took turns being strapped into a harness, which encircled your waist and upper thighs and then was clipped securely onto the rope contraption. During your turn, you had to climb up the first tree by stepping onto and gripping sturdy metal handles that had been drilled into the trunk. When you reached the top you had to walk across the rope bridge until you came to the second tree. Although the bridge was firmly attached to the two thick oaks and the fibers beneath your feet were strong enough to bear your weight, it wobbled as you walked and felt very unsteady, so it was hard not to wonder if you might fall. Once you arrived at the second tree, you grabbed the zip line and rappelled back to earth.

I was nervous while waiting for my turn, but once I started up the first tree, I found the experience thrilling. I could have done the whole thing again and again, but I knew from the way some of my classmates hesitated and how we all shouted encouragement to one another, that the purpose of this activity was to face our fears and work together.

This was especially true for Kathy. She climbed the first tree without a problem, but at the top, she froze and couldn't bring herself to start walking across the bridge, even though the harness would prevent her from falling and getting hurt. The rest of us cheered her on from the ground for several minutes, to no avail.

"You can climb back down, if you'd like," the instructor finally told her.

Kathy closed her eyes and didn't move. I wasn't sure whether she was scared even to come back down, or if she didn't want to give up yet and was trying to psych herself up.

Will walked over to the instructor and asked him something. The man nodded, and Will grabbed another harness, buckled himself in, and started to climb the tree. When he reached the top, he stood behind Kathy and whispered in her ear. I watched her nod, and then she opened her eyes, and grabbed the handles of the bridge. She slowly started walking across the bridge, with Will right behind her. It looked like he was saying, "You can do this, you're doing good, keep going," over and over.
By the time Kathy reached the zip line, we were all screaming in excitement for her. She hesitated again, and Will continued to whisper to her. Finally she grabbed the zip line and flew to the ground. The rest of us ran over to hug her and slap her back and congratulate her. Kathy was positively glowing, laughing with joy that she had overcome such a big challenge.

Will waited until the rest of us had cleared out of the way, and then zipped down to the ground himself. Kathy ran over to hug him and thank him. After he had unbuckled and stepped out of the harness, I walked over and said with a grin, "Good job. I'm sure Sheila and Paul will make you the topic of our discussion later."

He laughed, looking a little embarrassed, and it occurred to me that he had a beautiful smile.

Later that afternoon, my friends and I went boating on the lake, using the small rowboats that were available for retreat center guests. Kathy and I shared a boat, and during our ride, she mentioned Will's help that morning. "I can't believe he did that for me. He was so encouraging! He's a great guy, despite his friends." She grinned at me. "Plus, he's seriously handsome. I still think you should go for him, Liz."

I made a face. I had to admit I had been impressed by him that morning. Still, I couldn't get over the fact that sometimes he seemed to flirt with me but spent so much time with Anna. I was pretty sure they were an item, and if that was the case, Will was not my idea of a nice guy. "Maybe you should go for him, since you think he's so hot!"

"Actually," she whispered, "I kind of like Pete."

"Pete! Are you serious?" I shouted. "That is so great!"

Kathy, looking embarrassed, motioned for me to lower my voice so no one in the other boats could hear us. "He's really nice. And I think it's so cute the way his hair always falls in his eyes," she said.

"Do you think he likes you, too?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"I could ask him for you."

She begged me not to, so I promised I wouldn't. I spent the rest of the boat ride giggling at her, because I was so happy. Pete and Kathy were both such sweet people, they would make a great couple.

I was right about Will, though—definitely not a nice guy, at least when it came to relationships. He stopped our workout twenty minutes early on Wednesday afternoon, asking if I wanted to finish with some strength training. I agreed, and we headed to the weight room.

We were using two different nautilus machines when something occurred to me. "Hey, Anna won't know where to find us." Just as she had on Monday, Anna had showed up near the end of our workout on Tuesday, too.

Will completed his rep before answering. "So what?"

So what?! I repeated in my head, stifling my laughter. Glad you're not my boyfriend!

When we finished, Will asked me again if I wanted to watch the sunset. "Yeah, I do," I told him. "I asked Abner and the rest of my friends, and we're all going to watch it together tonight."
"You asked Abner? Oh," Will said. "OK, then. I guess I'll see you in the morning." He turned and rushed out the room without waiting for me, probably trying to catch Anna in case she was looking for him on the track.

The sunset that evening was a brilliant array of copper and magenta streaks across the sky. My friends and I watched it from a hilltop lookout tower, one Pete had discovered during his exploration of the campus. The gorgeous view silenced us, with the twittering of birds and rustling of wind through the trees providing background music.

We remained after it grew dark and observed the stars through a telescope bolted to the concrete wall of the tower. Nathan turned out to be an expert in the constellations, and as he labeled them for us we joked about those "name a star after your loved one" ads and how we'd react if any of us ever received such a gift. All in all, it was turning out to be a great week, one of the happiest I'd ever remember having.

The one uncomfortable thing remained the way Will, Heather, Mike and Anna closed themselves off from the rest of us outside of official program activities. Paul had even commented on it and asked us about it. "Ask them," Stacy said. "We have no idea why they're acting that way."

I didn't know whether or not Paul asked them that question, but I did. Or at least, I asked Will, on Thursday afternoon. "How come you and Anna and those guys don't hang out with everybody else?"

Will stared at me for a second and then shrugged. "We're friends. We were already becoming good friends before the retreat."

"That doesn't mean you can't be friends with the rest of us."

Will laughed, seeming uncomfortable. "It's nothing personal."

"It feels personal. It's like you think you're better than us."

Will tilted his head and grinned. "It works both ways, Liz. Why don't you come hang out with us?"

I snorted. "I don't think I'd be welcome. I already know Heather and Anna don't like me."

"Yeah, but they don't like anybody."

As if the meaning of what he'd said just hit him, Will looked startled. It made me laugh.

"You're not making a very good case, Will. If they don't like anybody, why are you friends with them?"

Will was quiet for a few seconds. "I don't have a good answer to that."

"Are your friends at school like them?"

"My closest friends, no," he answered, sounding a little pensive. "You'd find them pretty cool."

"Then I'm glad you have good people around you back home," I said gently. "But if you change your mind while you're here, my friends actually like people."

Will laughed, and it hit me again how much I liked seeing his smile.

I was still thinking about our conversation on Thursday evening at dinner when Will sat down beside me.
"Joining the peasants?" Abner asked him. I frowned, a little annoyed with Abner, because I wanted Will to feel welcome among my friends.

Will shrugged. "I can change where I sit now and then." He didn't stay long, however. About a minute or two later, when Anna and Mike walked in, he got up and joined them at their usual table.

"That was interesting," Stacy commented. "One of the in-crowd decides to sit with us, but only for a second. Wonder why?"

"Can't show his buddies he's sitting with the losers," Abner said. "We might rub off on him."

"I think he was here because of you," Kathy whispered in my ear. I didn't respond, because I felt a little hurt. If Will had sat down because of me, then why did he get up and move? Surely Abner's smart-alecky comment wasn't enough to drive him away. A second later, I kicked myself for letting a stupid guy like Will hurt me. He was with Anna, so what did I expect? I didn't even know why I cared.

With all the discussions we were having in our morning sessions, sooner or later the conversation had to turn to race and ethnicity, something we had all tiptoed around. It finally happened on Friday morning. Kathy and Abner shared some of their experiences being the children of immigrants, and Anna and Nathan talked about how people often assume they were first or second generation Americans, even though their U.S. roots were much deeper.

We were discussing whether or not embracing one's identity was more beneficial or divisive, when I took offense to this comment by Mike: "Black people who are my close friends, I don't see them as black."

"Why would you act like that's a compliment?" I asked.

"Speak from your own experience," Paul said.

I corrected myself. "Okay, I don't see that as a compliment. If someone legitimately doesn't see color, then I think they wouldn't see anybody's color and there would be no need to make a statement like that. If someone says to me, 'I don't see you as black,' I wonder what they think about the other people who they do see as black. It sounds to me like they're saying that they don't think much of black people in general, but they think of me as an exception."

"So you're saying I'm racist?" Mike asked.

"Your own experience," Paul repeated.

Mike tried again. "It feels to me like you're saying I'm a racist, Liz."

"That's not what I'm saying," I replied. "I'm just saying that I don't know if you know how that sounds to a person of color's ears."

Mike turned to Will. "You're my friend. You know I'm not a racist, right?"

Will held up his hands. "I'm not in this conversation."

"Will, come on!" Mike said in exasperation.

"Do you have any thoughts about this issue, Will?" Sheila asked.

Will leaned back in his seat. "No, I don't."
I wasn't sure why Will was so adamant about not joining the discussion, unless he felt that anything he said would alienate someone.

That afternoon on the track at the rec center, Will said he wanted to time me in the 200 meters, one of my events. I knew I had done better than I ever had as soon as I crossed the finish line. I heard Will shout, "Nice, Liz, nice!" as he looked at the stopwatch and then ran over and hugged me. He held me for a second or two longer than he needed to congratulate me, and I realized that I liked the feeling of his strong arms around me.

We both pulled away and Will asked, "Do you want to do the weight room again?"

I was relieved to be able to answer so I could forget about how good his muscled arms looked and felt. "Yeah, let's go."

When we got to the weight room, Abner was already there bench pressing. I sat at one of the leg machines to work my quads while I watched Will walk over to Abner. "Don't hurt yourself," Will said. "You sure that's not too much?"

I laughed to myself, thinking, *Guys are always so competitive!*

I was on my second set of reps when I heard Will and Abner arguing. "So you think that that because I live in Pemberley, I don't know what it means to be black?" Will was saying. I guess they were continuing the morning's discussion.

Abner, now sitting up, laughed harshly. "What could you know about it? You don't know what most of us have to go through. My parents came here from Ghana with nothing, and they work minimum-wage jobs. I live in the projects. Two kids in my building got shot last year. What do you know about stuff like that?"

I was no longer lifting. I was listening.

"You don't know what I've been through," Will said sharply. "I've never even met two of my uncles because they've been in prison my whole life."

Abner didn't acknowledge what Will said. "OK, case in point. You got into Westcott, right?"

"What's that have to do with anything?" Will answered.

"What's your class rank?"

"Twelfth."

"Liz here," Abner pointed at me, "is first in her class, and she was wait-listed. So you get all the advantages of attending the best public high school around, and because you also have a little melanin in your skin, they accept you into Westcott to boost their stats for students of color. But meanwhile, you've never had to overcome anything the way I have, or Liz has had to."

"Tenth grade was a hard year for me," Will said. "My rank would have been higher if it weren't for that."

Abner made a phony sympathetic face. "Aw, what happened, you weren't elected homecoming king?"

I saw the look that crossed Will's face. "Abner, cut it out," I said.
"Chill, Liz. Why are you defending him?"

Will and I spoke at the same time. Me: "I'm not defending him." Will: "I don't need her to defend me."

Abner looked back and forth between the two of us for a minute. Then he started laughing. "Man, I'm just busting on you because you live in Pemberley," he told Will. "I don't mean anything by it. But I guess I hit a nerve with that homecoming remark."

Will gave him a disgusted look and walked out.

"Abner, Will's father died," I said. "Tenth grade is probably when it happened."

The smile faded from Abner's face. "I didn't know that."

"Sometimes you joke around too much," I snapped at him, before turning to leave. I ran after Will, who was walking on the path back to the dorm.

"Are you okay?" I asked when I reached him.

"Yeah," he replied tersely.

"Don't listen to Abner; he can be a jerk sometimes." He didn't answer, so I went on. "I'm sorry about your dad. Is that when he died? When you were in tenth grade?"

Will nodded but said, "It's not really about my dad. It's all the other stuff."

"The race stuff? But why is that hard to talk about? I'm not trying to put you on the defensive or anything," I added quickly.

Will stopped and looked at me for a moment. "You know I was five years old the first time a kid on the playground called me the n-word? You think it's possible for me to grow up in Pemberley and not know I'm black?"

I shook my head. He went on to tell me some of his experiences being the only African-American male in his class. I had never been in that position, so I hadn't realized what it might be like to stand out like that, or why he might get tired of talking about it.

Later that evening, Abner caught up with me. "I apologized to your boy," he said. "We're still cool, right?"

"He's not my boy," I said. "I just feel like, you're both my friends, and as the three African-American students in this program, we should at least get along."

Right after I said those words, I realized with surprise that I really did consider Will a friend. I couldn't stand him when we first arrived, and now my feelings were totally different.

Abner grinned. "I understand. But I think you two might be more than just friends."

"That's not true," I said. "What about Anna?"

Abner raised his eyebrows, looking amused. "What about her?"

I shook my head. First Kathy and now Abner! I felt my stomach twisting a little, and I wasn't sure why. Was it possible that Will did like me, and that's why it occasionally seemed like he was flirting? No, I concluded. He wouldn't spend so much time with Anna if he liked me.
And now came my moment of truth: did I like him? Okay, he was cute. And smart. And a lot nicer than I had given him credit for. And those arms… *stop it, Liz!* Will was too much of a flirt for my taste, maybe even a player, I decided: the kind of guy you could trust as a friend but not a boyfriend.

That didn't stop me from being curious and wanting to know him better. On Saturday morning, as we were walking back to the dorm after our run, I asked Will something I had been wondering about since the previous day. "Do you really have two uncles in jail?"

"Why would I lie about that?" he replied angrily. "My mother's brothers."

An uncomfortable silence followed. To break it, I finally asked, "Would you tell me more about your dad?"

Will stopped for a second, and then continued walking. "He was the best. I always knew that his family was the most important thing to him. He had to work a lot of long hours, but he'd almost always come home for dinner, or to attend one of my meets, and then go back to work. Sometimes when he had to work weekends, he'd take me with him. When I was little I'd bring a Gameboy and play alongside him while he did his paperwork, and when I was older I'd do my homework."

Will stopped again and looked off into the distance. "Sometimes he used to embarrass me. Whenever my friends would come over, he'd try to engage them in conversations about politics or history. I used to think, 'Why can't you discuss something normal, like TV or sports?' After he died, a couple of my friends were talking about him. They said they were going to really miss him because he always talked to them like they were adults, and not kids. I realized then that my friends liked it when my dad had those conversations with them. They felt like he respected their intelligence and maturity. I wish I had appreciated that more when he was alive."

"It sounds like he was a great guy," I said.

"He was."

As we walked on in silence, I thought about my own father. It would devastate me if something happened to him, so I could only imagine what Will had been through. When we reached the dorm, Will paused before opening the door. "Liz," he said, "thanks for asking."

For a moment, it looked like he was going to say something else, but when he didn't, I just nodded and started up the stairs.

At lunch that day, Kathy proposed revisiting all the outdoor activities we had done earlier in the week, since it was our last full day at Hunsford and it had rained Friday afternoon, keeping us indoors. Everyone loved the idea, but I chewed my lip, thinking that it would be difficult to meet Will at four if we did that. So I did something unprecedented: I stood and walked over to the in-crowd's table.

"No one invited you," Anna said as I approached.

I smiled sweetly. "So? It's a free country. Will, can I talk to you?"

When he nodded and rose, Anna protested again, "Where are you going?!" I barely held in my snicker when a look from him shut her up.

We sat down at a nearby table and I told Will I was canceling our afternoon workout.

"Why?" he asked.
"So I can hang out with my friends, since it's our last day. Besides," I laughed, "I think we both deserve a break."

He was quiet for a moment before shrugging, a frown on his face. "Do what you want. Like you said, it's a free country." He stood up and rejoined his friends.

His response chilled me, and I had to take a few deep breaths before I could return to the out-crowd table. I didn't know why I again was giving Will the power to hurt me, but I decided I wasn't going to let him ruin my afternoon.

The retreat center had bikes that guests could borrow, and my friends and I rode them down to the lake, where we went boating again. From there, we rode by the Center's gardens, which were just starting to bud, and their chicken coops, where guests were allowed to scatter handfuls of corn and watch the birds eat. Finally, Stacy suggested returning to the lookout tower. The previous day's rain had prevented sunset watching, and since it was still overcast, viewing the sunset or stars that evening would be unlikely. But we still wanted a chance to revisit such a great spot.

As we sat on the tower's steps, we talked about what each of us considered the best parts of the week. "Right here, watching the stars," Nathan said.

"Showing off, you mean!" Abner teased, and Nathan laughed.

"The best thing for me was learning from everyone," Pete said. "I've never been someplace where people were this open and honest."

"Finally walking across that bridge," was Kathy's best memory. "That was so great, because I overcame my fear and did something I didn't think I could do."

"Go Kathy, go Kathy, go go go Kathy!" Abner chanted, making us laugh.

"I overcame my fears, too," Stacy said. "I was so worried that I could never really be myself and still have people like me and accept me. And I found that here with you guys."

"Awwww," Abner crooned.

Stacy grinned and kicked him playfully. "All right, dumbhead, what about you?"

Abner thought for a moment. "Realizing I was wrong and apologizing for it. That was new for me."

"What?!" Nathan shouted. "You admitted you were wrong about something? When did this happen?!"

We all laughed and Abner, chuckling, replied, "It happened. Just trust that it happened!" He looked at me as if to ask me to keep his secret.

I went next to take the heat off him. "I don't think I can pick a best memory. The whole week was so good. But maybe it was this afternoon. I loved hanging out with you guys and reminiscing with you."

Everyone agreed with me, and then we realized that it was getting late and we should probably get ready for dinner. As I mounted my bike to ride back, I found myself sighing. The afternoon had been perfect—except for one thing. Will had been an important part of the week for me, and I kind of wished he had been with us.
I would really love some feedback! Are you enjoying the story, and if so, why (or why not)? Thank you!

The next couple of chapters will include Will's POV.
Chapter Summary

Until now, he hadn't wanted to reveal his feelings. It was pretty obvious Anna liked him; Liz, he wasn't so sure about. She either ignored or didn't notice his attempts to flirt with her, including backing out of her promise to watch him run hurdles on Monday, and making plans with someone else—Abner of all people!—in response to his invitation to view the sunset. They'd had fun talking and getting to know each other, but Liz seemed to have the same easy rapport with most of the kids in the program. When you coupled that with all the slammed doors on his attempts at flirtation, he had no reason to think she considered him more than a friend.

Chapter Notes

When I first wrote Lofty Dreams, I also wrote two short stories to accompany it, to re-tell part of the story from Will's POV. For this version, however, I am incorporating the short stories into the larger one. The first of the two short stories was Will's viewpoint at Hunsford. You'll get that here, and in the next couple of chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 12: Hunsford, Part I: Will's POV

On Sunday morning, Will lunged forward on his right leg in order to stretch his left hamstring, and tried to calm his nerves. Where was Liz? She hadn't ever been late for their morning run. The sun would be up soon, which would diminish the impact of his carefully made plans.

He thought about the emotional roller coaster of the last week. It had been completely unexpected. He'd come to the LOFTY (Leaders of the Future: Today's Youth) Dreams retreat at Hunsford hoping to have fun and get to know both Anna and Liz better. They were both pretty hot, and if events led to more of a relationship with either one of them, he'd be satisfied.

Truthfully, he'd thought it was more likely to occur with Anna. Mike, Heather, Anna and he had been hanging out before the monthly LOFTY meetings, and Anna was definitely letting him know she was interested. But the week at Hunsford had barely begun before his interest in her started waning. For one thing, she was always trying to impress him, instead of being herself. For another, she and Heather liked to gossip and make fun of the other kids in the program. That was a real turn-off for him.

On the other hand, there was Liz. He'd thought she was beautiful from the first time he saw her. She had silky dark brown eyes and a smile that lit up her face with deep dimples and full lips that were just begging to be kissed. She was tall but feminine, with curves in all the right places, and had beautiful, shapely legs from running. Unlike with Anna, as the week went on, his attraction to Liz kept growing.

He was attracted to more than just her looks, however. He'd first realized it on Monday morning,
when Liz had stopped running to look at the lake during the sunrise. He'd been enthralled as he watched her face while she admired a bird's gentle flight over the water. What had drawn him so much? It was the look of joy on her face. Something as simple as the sunrise and a bird had made her feel so happy.

When was the last time he had felt really happy? It had been at least two years. No matter how much he tried to joke around and act cool, an emptiness and sorrow had pervaded him since his father's death.

The sadness filled his home life also. Sometimes his younger sister Jenny was in a good mood, and they'd have great talks. She was one of the few people in his life, along with his godfather Marcus and his cousin Chuck, whom he could be open with. But at other times, dark emotions would overtake Jenny and she'd hide in her room for days on end. Trying to be strong for their mother's sake, Will had never admitted how much Jenny's depression scared him.

Then there was his mother. Although he knew his mom loved him and Jenny, she had always been a somewhat stern and business-like person. His dad had been the fun, affectionate parent. Since his dad's death, however, and especially since she'd learned about how his former foster brother George had taken advantage of Jenny, his mom had become bitter and angry about the direction her life had taken.

Because of his respect for his parents and his commitment to sports, Will avoided drinking and drugs. Thus, one of the few avenues of relief from his melancholy was sex. Girls of all races had always liked him. He knew he was good-looking and that girls were attracted to his "pretty eyes." Will had become sexually active not long after his father's death. Yet even that wasn't really satisfying. His emotions were fickle and his dating relationships short-lived. He'd had a girlfriend the previous summer with whom he thought he might get serious, but she was a year older than him. When she went off to college in the fall, their relationship fizzled out. Since then, he hadn't really dated anyone, because now he knew he wanted more.

He was hoping to find that with Liz. He loved spending time with her. She laughed easily, most often at herself. She was honest to the point of bluntness, but never in a mean-spirited way. She made him feel as though he could share anything with her.

On Friday, he had tried to stay out of a discussion about race relations in the LOFTY meeting in the morning, and later that afternoon got in a conflict with Abner, the only other African-American guy in the program, when Abner accused him of not knowing what it meant to be black. It reminded him of some of the fights he used to have with George, which were still a raw wound with him.

But Liz had helped. She'd left to follow him instead of staying with Abner in the weight room where the argument had taken place, and she'd called Abner a jerk for his behavior. He smiled, remembering it. Abner and Liz were good friends, and Will had wondered on more than one occasion whether they liked each other. But her response dispelled that particular fear.

Liz had asked him about the argument. "I'm not trying to put you on the defensive," she said. "I just wonder why race issues are so difficult for you to talk about."

Her gentle expression made him feel safe. "You know that I'm the only African-American guy in my class, Liz?"

"Wow," she said quietly.

"Yeah, there are two black girls, and me. So whenever anything about race comes up, it seems like my teachers or other kids always want me to answer for black people as a whole, or for black males"
specifically.

"I don't feel like I can do that. Despite what Abner says, it's not that I don't know I'm black or I'm not proud of it, because I am. I just don't feel like I can answer for anyone but myself. So I get tired of the topic. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does," she said.

He had never been able to articulate these feelings before, and he wondered how she felt, because her opinion was important to him. "So what do you think?"

"About what Abner said? I think it's stupid," she answered. That didn't help, since he wasn't sure what she meant.

Liz must have noticed his perplexed look, because she explained further. "Everybody's different, Will. How can anyone say there's one set of experiences you have to have, or else you're not black? That's just silly. People should just be able to be themselves." She grinned at him. "Anyway, I don't think you look in the mirror and see a white guy, if that's what you're asking. Like you said, you couldn't grow up in Pemberley and not know."

Will smiled again as he remembered this. Liz had made him feel completely understood and accepted. That was why he'd answered her when she asked him about his father on Saturday morning. His dad was a subject he almost never discussed with anyone, mostly because he was afraid of breaking down.

Liz had listened intently as he shared some of his memories of his father. He'd felt her sympathetic presence as he gave her a piece of his heart. Now he felt confident he could trust her with his whole heart.

Until now, he hadn't wanted to reveal his feelings. It was pretty obvious Anna liked him; Liz, he wasn't so sure about. She either ignored or didn't notice his attempts to flirt with her, including backing out of her promise to watch him run hurdles on Monday, and making plans with someone else—Abner of all people!—in response to his invitation to view the sunset. They'd had fun talking and getting to know each other, but Liz seemed to have the same easy rapport with most of the kids in the program. When you coupled that with all the slammed doors on his attempts at flirtation, he had no reason to think she considered him more than a friend.

On Friday afternoon, however, he'd hugged her after her great 200 meter dash in practice. He'd seen her sweet expression and felt the sparks between them when he held her, and he started to believe that maybe, just maybe she liked him as much as he liked her.

Saturday had been a crazy day, continuing to jumble his emotions. At lunchtime, Liz had canceled their afternoon workout and he'd snapped at her because of it. When he returned to the table where he had been sitting with Anna, Mike and Heather, all three of them were laughing.

"What'd you say to her?" Mike snickered. "She looks like she's going to cry."

Will just shook his head, refusing to answer.

"That's what she gets," Anna added. "She shouldn't have come over here in the first place."

He turned to glare at Anna, who shut up immediately. He had tried so hard to hide his feelings for Liz, not wanting to get teased for liking someone who didn't like him back. But he was certain Anna knew, and that her ongoing nastiness toward the other girl was due to jealousy.
He'd bowed out of their afternoon plans, wondering, not for the first time, why he was friends with people whose company he so often found unpleasant. Heather was the least bad of the three of them, mostly just following Anna's lead. But he was sick of Anna's sniping at Liz, and as much as he had originally liked Mike because of the interests they shared in common, he had come to realize that the guy could sometimes be downright mean.

To calm down, he'd gone running. When he reached the lake, he sat down on a rock near the edge of the water and picked at blades of tall grass, trying to figure out how a day he'd had so much hope for had gone so wrong.

The problem began, he knew, with his petulant response to Liz's cancellation of their workout. He had looked forward to spending time with her on their last full day at Hunsford—but she had made it clear she wanted to be with her friends, not him. He was understandably disappointed, but his reaction was inexcusable. What if instead he had told her about his desire to spend time with her, or even asked if he could tag along with her friends? She might have been open to either idea. At the very least, he wouldn't have hurt her feelings, or made her a target for his friends' ridicule.

After moping for a while and accomplishing nothing except generating disgust for his stupidity, he decided to return to the dorm where he napped for the rest of the afternoon and woke up in time for dinner.

"I'm glad we're leaving tomorrow!" Mike said over a plate of manicotti. "I'm so sick of this place."

"Oh come on, it hasn't been that bad," Heather argued. "We've had some fun."

Mike snorted. "Okay, maybe a little. But man, I miss my car!"

Heather laughed. "Oh, me, too. And my friends, and my boyfriend."

"Oh, Conner," Mike teased her in a falsetto voice about the boy she'd talked about all week. "You're going to be all over him when you get back!"

Heather grinned and agreed, and then asked Anna what she missed about home.

"I don't know," she answered softly. "My family, I guess."

Will looked at Anna curiously. She was oddly quiet and subdued.

"You're joking, right?" Mike asked Anna. "I know I'm not looking forward to having my dad get on my case again."

Anna shrugged, and Mike turned the question to Will.

"I'm not ready to go," Will admitted. Parts of the week had been really good. The morning workshops had been fun, and he loved being out in nature. His family used to be avid campers, but they hadn't gone since his dad died. The week at Hunsford made him realize how much he missed it. Most of all, Will had loved hanging out with Liz. Because of her, he wasn't yet ready to leave.

"Hah!" Mike said. "You've got to be sick of the freaks and geeks, right?" He tilted his head toward the group sitting a few tables away.

Will didn't answer, but looked longingly at the table where the other six LOFTY Dreams kids sat, talking and laughing. He envied them—they seemed to be having such a good time, and more important, Liz was with them.
"I know I am!" Heather laughed, but Anna just watched Will with concern. Maybe she was finally starting to realize that she had no chance with him.

When he stood up to drop off his tray and dishes on the conveyor belt to the kitchen, Liz approached him again. He held his breath, afraid she was mad at him, but exhaled when he saw her smile gently. "I'm sorry about this afternoon, but thanks for understanding," she said. "We had a really good time."

He nodded, a little ashamed since he definitely had *not* been understanding.

"Are we still on for the morning?"

"Running?" he asked stupidly.

She grinned. "What else?"

He met her eyes, soft and sparkling with humor, and nodded.

Her face lit up in a huge smile. "Good! I'm looking forward to it!"

He watched her walk away, his face warm and his heart beating quickly. She was looking forward to the morning, to running with him. He had another chance!

As he started back to the dorm, Anna ran to join him. She remained quieter than usual, and he didn't attempt to make up for her lack of conversation. Finally, she blurted out, "Will you go to prom with me?"

"What?" he asked. He didn't quite understand her.

Anna took a deep breath and tried again. "I wanted to know if you would go to my prom with me."

His first instinct was to laugh with derision and tell her he had no interest in going anywhere with her. But thinking about Liz and how sweet she had been with him, even though he didn't deserve it, restrained him. "When is it?" he asked instead.

He sighed with relief when she told him the date. "Thanks, but I can't," he said. "My own prom is the same night, and I already have a date."

"Oh," Anna said softly. She looked down. "Okay. I guess I'll see you back at the dorm then."

She picked up her pace and passed him, and was soon some distance ahead of him. Will wasn't sorry to see her go. He hadn't lied to her. His school's prom *was* that night, and he and Kayla, a long-time friend who served as senior class vice-president while he was president, had agreed to go together only if neither of them had another date. In other words, they were both free to cancel with one another if a better offer came along. The truth was, he didn't consider Anna a better offer. He wanted to save that spot for Liz.

He was already planning how he would ask her. When they ran in the morning, he would stop her by the same spot where they had first watched the sunrise together. He would tell her all the reasons why he liked her. He'd tell her how beautiful he thought she was. He'd ask her to dinner, the movies, prom, anywhere where he could spend time with her. And he'd kiss those beautiful lips of hers.

On Saturday night after curfew, when all the guys were hanging out in the hallway on their floor, poor Pete was getting razzed by the rest of them while he tried to work up the courage to ask out Kathy, one of the girls in the program.
"So what about you?" Mike had asked him. "Are you hooking up with Anna when this is over?"

"Nah, not interested," Will replied.

"Why not?" Mike asked. "She's ready to give you whatever you want."

That jerk Abner had to speak up. "I know why not. It's because you like Liz, right, Will?"

Will shook his head, trying to feign nonchalance. But he couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face.

"Look at your face!" Nathan had shouted.

Abner started laughing. "Dang, I was just guessing. I hit the bull's eye!"

Will let out several loud expletives as the razzing that had been directed at Pete turned on him.

Abner held up his hands and laughed. "Just so you know, I'm not your competition. I have a girlfriend back home. Liz and I are just friends."

Will wanted to roar in frustration. Abner knew he was jealous of him. Why couldn't he hide his emotions better?

Mike had remained quiet throughout. When the rest of the guys settled down, he asked, "What do you see in Liz?"

Will was taken aback by his critical tone. "Let's see, she's pretty and she's sweet and she has a nice body. Why are you asking?"

"What, do you plan to take her out to Pemberley or something? You think a girl from Longbourn City is going to fit in out there?"

Pete and Nathan looked a little astonished by the direction of the conversation, while Abner said, "Aw, no. I don't believe you just said that."

"I'll take her wherever I want to take her," Will retorted.

"You think your mother would approve of that? Come on, Will! She has street written all over her."

"You're pushing it, Mike," Abner said in a threatening voice.

"Stay out of this up, Abner," Will said. "Mike, who I decide to go out with is none of your damn business."

"What about Anna? Is she my damn business? Because she's my friend, and you've been letting her think you liked her. Now you're telling me you want to pursue ghetto girl?"

"Oh, HELL NO!" Abner shouted.

"SHUT UP, ABNER!" Will shouted back.

At this point, Pete went to summon Paul, one of the program's counselors, from his room. When he emerged, Will and Mike were in a shouting match. "Both of you, go to your rooms and cool down!" Paul ordered.

Will had brooded in his room that night. As obnoxious as Mike's opinions were, he was afraid the
other boy might be right. Liz was from Longbourn City, a low-income inner-city neighborhood. Will lived in Pemberley, one of Meryton’s wealthiest suburbs. Will’s mother had grown up in Longbourn City and had told him horror stories of the place she’d vowed never to return to. But she’d allowed the old neighborhood back in when they’d taken in George as a foster child. George had brought the street life and all its dysfunction into their home, and his mom had sworn, "Never again." Mike was right; she wouldn't approve.

Then there was Janelle, Liz’s sister. As beautiful if not more so than Liz, she had seemed like such a nice girl when his cousin Chuck first started dating her. After about four months, though, she had started messing around behind Chuck’s back and had broken his heart. Is that what he would have to look forward to with Liz?

Now as Will waited anxiously for Liz to arrive for their Sunday morning run, he knew he still wanted her, still cared for her deeply. But he was no longer so confident that this relationship was meant to be.

Chapter End Notes

I'd still love some comments!
Chapter 13, Hunsford, Part II: Will and Liz's POVs

(Liz)

On Sunday morning as I walked downstairs to prepare for my run, I felt a sudden and familiar cramping in my abdomen. Shoot! I thought. It was a few days early and I hadn't brought anything with me.

I ran back upstairs and knocked on Kathy's door. It took her a minute to answer. Wearing pajamas, she yawned as she opened the door.

"Sorry to wake you," I said. "I started my period early. Do you have any pads or tampons?"

Kathy rubbed her eyes. "Just a minute." She returned a few seconds later with a tampon in hand.

"You're a lifesaver! Thanks."

Kathy gave me a sleepy wave and shut the door. I went to the bathroom and entered one of the stalls. A few seconds later, I heard the bathroom door open and Heather's voice. "What's wrong?"

"My stupid contact lens is irritating my eye this morning," Anna replied.

I heard the water running. "What'd he say?" Heather asked.

"He said his own prom was the same night and he was already going with someone."

Is that Will they're talking about? I wondered. Probably.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't want to seem desperate," Anna said. "It's his move. Besides, I think he likes her more than me."

"No, he doesn't," Heather objected. "He spends more time with you."

"Oh right, when he runs with her every morning and works out with her every afternoon?"

Now they were talking about me. I froze in place.

"So what?" Heather went on. "They both run. I can't believe he would choose her over you. I hate to put it this way, but she's really ghetto. Look how she always argues with him. And did you see how her mother acted at the first dinner?"

"Well, some guys like ghetto," Anna answered.

"Yeah, for one thing only." She and Anna both laughed.

"Trust me on this. Will is not into her. Remember when he told us how he talked his cousin into breaking up with some girl from Longbourn City? Don't you think he'd have better taste for himself than for his cousin? Hey, are you done?"

"Yeah, it feels better. So you think I still have a chance?" Anna's voice faded as I heard the bathroom
When I reached for the toilet handle, my hand was shaking. Will had talked Chuck into breaking up with Janelle! Janelle had been so worried that Chuck would look down on her for her bad grades and for being from Longbourn City. It sounded like Will had pushed him in that direction—and then bragged about it to his friends!

I shoved the stall door open. If that was what he thought about my sister, what did he think about me? Just two days ago I realized that I had started considering Will a friend, forgetting all the reasons I couldn't stand him before coming to Hunsford. Now all those reasons came back to me. As I washed my hands, a lump formed in my throat and I thought about going back to my room and crawling under the covers. Instead, I splashed my face with icy cold water, refusing to give him the satisfaction of making me nurse any pain over him. Besides, I had made a promise to my coach.

But that didn't mean I had to run with Will.

I hurried down the stairs and out the front door, right past Will who was stretching.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," he said.

Without warming up, I took off running. I heard Will shout, "Wait up!" I ran faster.

It was stupid, stupid! I hadn't warmed up and I couldn't outrun him. He soon caught up, as he did each time I sped up. "You want to race, huh?" he said.

I was furious, and my adrenaline was surging. I didn't even see the rock I tripped over until I was on the ground and a sharp pain shot through my right leg.

Will was by my side in an instant. "Are you okay? What were you trying to do?" he asked, in a mild rebuke.

My sides were cramping and I was gasping for breath so hard, I couldn't answer. It TICKED me off that he wasn't even breathing hard.

Will placed his hand on my back as he knelt beside me. "Try to take some slow deep breaths."

I breathed in and out a few times and my heart and lungs started to calm down. "Do you think you can stand?" Will asked.

I nodded, and he helped me up. I gritted my teeth in pain. "It's my right ankle," I said.

Will helped me walk over to one of the benches that lined the path. After I sat down, Will sat next to me and lifted my right leg onto his knee. "I'm going to take a look at it, OK?"

I nodded, and he removed my shoe and sock and pushed up the bottom of my pants leg. He pressed his fingers around my ankle and rotated my foot a little. I winced, but it wasn't unbearable.

"I don't think it's sprained, so you should be all right," Will said. "When you feel up to it, we can walk to the infirmary and get it wrapped."

I didn't answer, finding, to my dismay, my anger calming as a result of his help. After we sat in silence for a minute, Will rested his hand on my shin and looked at me. "This is good, because I wanted a chance to talk to you anyway, Liz."

Something in his tone caught my attention.
"I know it seems crazy," he went on. "Some people wonder what I see in you. But I really like you, a lot. I'm hoping we can go out together after we get back."

I was speechless. Yes, almost everyone now was saying that he liked me, but I was still shocked to hear him say it—especially couched in what was basically an insult.

I guess Will took my silence as an invitation, because he leaned toward me and gently kissed me.

And then, without thinking, I kissed him back. Before I realized what I was doing, my hands were touching his face to pull him closer. His lips were soft, his breath sweet and minty. I felt my heart beating rapidly as his tongue started to dance around mine. It was like I had been waiting for this moment forever.

Will pulled back, touched my face and smiled. "I guess that's a yes, huh?"

Something about his cocky grin and arrogant voice snapped me back to reality. I started shaking my head. "Will, I will NEVER go out with you."

Will looked a little stunned for a second, as if he couldn't believe any girl would ever turn him down. "Wait a minute. You were just kissing me, too. That wasn't my imagination."

"No, it was a mistake," I snapped back.

Will laughed harshly. "What's with this attitude? You know how many girls would love to go out with me? I don't know how many guys are lining up at your door."

My rage came rushing back fiercely. "Oh my God, I don't believe you just said that! You are the most conceited boy I've ever met in my life! You think because girls like Anna fall all over you, that you're doing me some kind of favor? Uh-uh," I said, shaking my head again. "I have more self-respect than that, and you are the last person on earth I would ever go out with!"

I dropped my right leg to the ground. Injured ankle or not, I didn't want him touching me.

Will's expression was no longer so smug. "So you think you're all that now? You just don't like the fact that I'm honest. Someone did ask me that, because they couldn't understand what I saw in you. I guess they were right, especially after all the game-playing you did this week."

"Game-playing? What are you talking about?!" I exhaled, wondering how I could have let him fool me. Will's true character, which I had forgotten about, was now visible. "You know what? This is not about me. I don't care what you think of me. It's about you. You're the biggest jerk I know, especially after what you did to Janelle and Geo."

Will looked perplexed. "What'd I do to Janelle? And who is Geo?"

"You talked Chuck into breaking up with Janelle, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did that! She was playing him. I wasn't going to sit there and let that happen."

"Their relationship was none of your business! You didn't know what was going on, or how much you hurt my sister. And you ruined Geo's life, too!"

"I don't even know who Geo is!"

"George. He started with nothing, and you took even what little he had away from him!"

Will stood up, looking shocked. "George? You're talking about George?! What did he tell you?"
"He told me how you lied to your mother and told her that some weed you had was his, so she kicked him out and he ended up on the streets. He also told me how your father set aside money for him to go to cooking school but you told your mother not to give it to him. So now he's stuck serving food at a hotel because of you!"

Will looked at me coldly. "You don't know what you're talking about, Liz."

"I know more than I want to know about you."

"Fine. Forget I said anything." He bent down and picked up my shoe and sock and tossed them onto the bench next to me. Then he took off running down the path.

=================================

(Will)

Liz finally arrived, and Will's heart started beating faster as soon as he saw her. To his surprise, she took off running instead of waiting for him. He wasn't sure what Liz was trying to do. Race him? Yeah, her speed and stamina had improved a lot over the course of the week, but he was still faster. So he treated it as a joke, catching up to her, then letting her surge ahead again.

Maybe he shouldn't have done that, because Liz soon tripped and fell, hurting herself pretty badly. He helped her stand up and walk over to a bench. As they sat together, Will thought to himself that this wasn't exactly what he had planned. The sun was now completely up and they were nowhere near the lake. But it was now or never, because he felt himself losing courage as each minute passed.

Will finally pushed himself to speak. "I know it seems crazy," he said. "Some people wonder what I see in you. But I really like you, a lot. I'm hoping we can go out together after we get back."

He winced inside right after he said the words. Somehow, he'd managed to forget the speech he'd practiced about how much he liked her, and all he could think of were the objections Mike had raised. He was afraid to see her reaction, but he forced himself to look at her face.

She looked a little surprised, but not angry, which was a relief. He was so close to her face, and he kept thinking how pretty she was and how much he wanted to kiss her. So he did.

Will felt as though he were on cloud nine when Liz reached out her hands to pull him closer, and when she parted her lips to kiss him deeply.

Seconds later, his dream come true fell apart when Liz declared that she would never go out with him.

Will couldn't have been more stunned had she slapped him. "Wait a minute. You were just kissing me, too. That wasn't my imagination."

"No, it was a mistake," she retorted.

Now his pride was wounded, and he snapped back, shocking himself with his words. What was wrong with him? He was supposed to be telling Liz how much he cared about her, and all that was coming out were insults. And Liz, furious, screamed that he was the last person on earth she would ever go out with.

If her earlier words felt like a slap, this felt like a stab in the heart. He recalled all the moments of rejection by her that week—walking out on after promising him she'd watch him run hurdles, mocking his sunset invitation, canceling their last workout. She had clearly been stringing him along,
but like a fool, he had kept coming back for more.

Hurt and trying desperately to save his ego, he lashed out at Liz. She yelled back about him causing his cousin Chuck to break up her sister Janelle—which was true, but there were reasons for that—and then she crushed him with her next accusation: that he had ruined his former foster brother's life. In an instant he was back in the rage and humiliation he'd felt months ago at the LOFTY Dreams welcome dinner when he'd seen her and George together, laughing at him.

Liz kept ranting that Will had gotten George kicked out of their home, that Will had denied George his chance to go to school, and that all of George's problems were his fault.

Will couldn't believe what he was hearing. He looked at Liz coldly. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I know more than I want to know about you."

The look of loathing on her face crushed all his hopes. "Fine. Forget I said anything," he said. He tossed Liz's shoe and sock onto the bench next to her, and took off running down the path.

Will ran faster and farther than he had before, into the woods that surrounded the Hunsford Retreat Center. He ran until he was exhausted. He stopped, bending over and placing his hands on his knees to catch his breath. What on earth had happened back there? Why had she reacted like that when she'd kissed him too? Maybe he'd imagined the sparks between them on Friday afternoon, but he hadn't imagined the kiss.

What kind of game was Liz playing? She had been screwing with his mind since he met her, laughing at him with George, trying to make him jealous with Abner, kissing him only to go off on him. No girl had ever made him feel this crazy, or this lost.

He thought about Liz's accusations. Janelle? How could she blame him for Chuck's break-up with Janelle, when Janelle had been the one who'd cheated? And George had filled Liz's head with lies. He'd obviously spent a lot more time talking to her than the night he'd seen them at the hotel. He was enraged at George, who always hurt the women he loved: his mom, his sister, and now Liz.

There, he'd thought it: He loved Liz. He really loved her. That's why this hurt so much. And even though she hadn't been his girlfriend, he now knew what Chuck felt when Janelle betrayed him. He felt heartbroken.

He was soaked with sweat and needed a shower. He started walking back to the dormitory, still furious, praying that no one got in his way.
Chapter 14, Hunsford, Part III: Will and Liz’s POVs

(Liz)

I slowly put on my sock and shoe. My head and ankle were both throbbing, and my cramps were killing me. It was a while before I trusted myself to stand up. I limped back to the rec center, where the infirmary was located.

Anna approached me as soon as I entered the rec center, as though she had been waiting for me. “What were you doing kissing my man?” she demanded.

I was caught off guard for a second, and then I realized that the bench where we had been sitting was visible from the rec center.

“He’s your man, huh? Well, you’re welcome to him, ‘cause I don’t want him.” I tried to walk past Anna, but she blocked my way.

I was already mad and in pain, and so I overreacted. “What is your problem, bitch!” I shouted. “I told you I don’t want him!”

“You’re the bitch, bitch!” Anna shouted back. She shoved me and because of my ankle, down I went.

Anna was all over me, hitting me in the face and clawing me with her nails. I grabbed her hair and kneed her in the stomach. That knocked her away for a minute, but then she came right back at me.

I heard a lot of shouting, and then felt Anna being pulled off me. I looked up to see myself surrounded by people: Sheila holding Anna back, Mike, Abner, Heather, and some of the staff and guests of the retreat center.

“Get up, Liz,” Sheila said sternly.

“I can’t,” I answered. “My leg…”

Abner bent down to help me up. Sheila looked at those of us from the LOFTY program. “I want all of you to head back to the dorm right now.”

“But I’m not finished with my workout,” Mike protested.

“I don’t care,” Sheila said. “Anybody else from LOFTY Dreams here?”

“Nathan might be in the pool,” Heather said.

“OK, I want you to go find him and tell him to get dressed and get back to the dorm right away. Mike, I want you to ask the infirmary for some towels and ice packs. I expect all of you back at the dorms in ten minutes. Abner, you help Liz and follow me.”

As we walked back, Sheila called Paul on the walkie-talkie they were using to communicate, so he
was waiting for us when we reached the lobby of the dorm. “Remember the discussion we talked about having with everyone?” she asked him. “We need to bump it up. These two—” she motioned to Anna and me, “—had a fight this morning. Get everyone together in the lounge to talk about this.”

“Is everyone around?” Paul asked.

“Mike, Heather and Nathan are on their way back from the rec center. Everyone else should be here.”

“Will’s out running,” Anna said softly.

Sheila looked at her watch. “He should be back soon. If not, have Pete go look for him. I’m going to take Anna and Liz into one of the empty rooms to talk.”

Abner helped me onto the bed in one of the empty dorm rooms, and then left. Sheila told Anna to sit at the desk.

“Okay, ladies, let’s talk. What happened this morning?”

Neither Anna nor I said anything.

Sheila shook her head. “You know, Paul and I were already planning to have a discussion with everyone today. This is the third year we’ve had this retreat, and we’ve never seen such juvenile behavior among the young people that come. You’re all supposed to be student leaders,” she said, emphasizing the last word. “Yet we’ve seen an unbelievable amount of pettiness and cliquishness this week, culminating in this.”

There was a knock at the door. Sheila opened it, and Mike came in with some ice packs and towels. Sheila thanked him and shut the door behind him. She popped the first ice pack and helped me place it on my ankle, then handed me another one for my face.

“Come on, Anna, Liz, this is your chance to talk about this.” When we still didn’t say anything, Sheila’s voice got tougher. “Part of our ability to keep bringing students back each year depends on being able to assure the retreat center that you will behave like adults. Understand that you have jeopardized the future of this program!”

A flood of shame washed through me, and I felt hot tears stinging my eyes.

Sheila’s next words were worse. “I have to remind you both that you signed a contract saying that you would abide by certain rules, one of which was no fighting. Which leaves me no choice but to terminate you from the program.”

My tears turned to loud sobs. In an instant, I saw all my dreams disappear, leaving me with only my parents’ profound disappointment and anger, and my own. A second later, Anna started crying, too.

There was another knock at the door. Paul stuck his head in. “Sheila… I think you better come hear this.”

Sheila grabbed a box of tissue that was on the dresser and handed some sheets to both of us. “I trust I can leave you here and nothing will happen. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

**~**

(Will)
It was fortunate that Will was stopped by the only guy in the program he couldn’t get mad at. It was Pete, gentle, quiet Pete, who met him at the entrance of the dorm and told him Paul wanted everyone to meet in the lounge.

“I have to shower,” Will said.

“No time,” Pete answered. “Paul wants to meet with us now.”

They’ll just have to put up with my smell, Will thought as he lifted his t-shirt to wipe the sweat off his face. He didn’t care.

After entering the lounge, Will leaned against a back wall, away from everyone else who was sitting down, and half-listened as Paul berated them for their juvenile behavior and conflicts. When Paul mentioned that Liz and Anna had had a fight, Will came to full attention. He suddenly realized that Liz and Anna weren’t in the room. They had been fighting? About what?

As soon as he asked himself the question, he knew the answer. They had been fighting about him.

“What’s going to happen to them?” Heather asked.

“Well, they signed a contract that stipulates that fighting is cause for termination,” Paul answered. “So this means they’ll be asked to leave the program.”

Will’s first thought was selfish. If Liz had to leave the LOFTY Dreams program, he might never see her again. The anger and hurt he’d felt earlier was instantly forgotten. His fear of losing her was enough to make him cry out against what Paul was saying.

His second thought was more selfless. If Liz had to leave the program, she would lose her scholarship. She was one of the students who needed it financially. Without it, she wouldn’t be able to go to college. And Anna—Anna had talked about needing it too, at least to attend a private college.

“No, no, you can’t do that!” Will shouted.

Everyone turned and stared at him. “You have something to say, Will?” Paul asked.

If there was one thing Will hated, it was being the center of attention when he felt out of control. His emotions were chaotic, and he was sure everyone else in the room could see it. But screw it. For once in his life, he wasn’t going to care what other people thought. He had to say something; it was the only chance Liz and Anna had.

“You can’t kick them out. They need those scholarships!” he said.

“They signed a contract, Will,” Paul replied. “They knew this could happen.”

“Let me talk to Sheila, then!” Will countered, asking for the program’s director. “I want to talk to her about this.”

Paul was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “OK, I’ll go get her.”

While they waited for Paul to return with Sheila, Will tried to calm his thoughts. His dad had been a lawyer. If this were one of his father’s cases and he had to defend Liz and Anna, what would he say? Will thought through some arguments in their favor, not as much as he wanted to by the time Paul and Sheila returned, but enough that maybe it would make a difference.
Sheila soon entered the lounge with Paul. While the other eight students were sitting on the sofa, chairs or floor, Will was still standing and leaning against the back wall.

“We were talking about the likely consequence for Anna and Liz, and someone raised some objections. I thought you should hear them,” Paul said.

Sheila nodded, and Paul said, “Go on, Will.”

Will stepped forward and took a deep breath. “When we talked about criminal justice this week, one of the things we discussed was what really makes the system just. I don’t think making Liz and Anna leave the program would be just.”

“Why not?” Sheila asked.

“Because it has such long-term consequences. You’re talking about their college educations and their whole futures that are now at-risk or maybe even over because of a one-time thing.”

“That’s true any time someone breaks a law, though, isn’t it?” Sheila asked.

“Yeah, but we didn’t have any input into those laws. That’s another thing you taught us—that we all have the right to have input into the rules and laws of our community. Well, this is our community,” Will said, looking around at the other students. “We should have some say in this.”

“I seem to remember some of you complaining about the ‘no sex’ rule.”

“Yes, but that was a joke. This is serious.” There was a note of desperation in Will’s voice.

Sheila thought for a moment. “Okay, Will, that makes sense. This is your community here. So I’d like to hear from the rest of this community. What do you think about what Will is saying?”

“I think he’s right about it being too severe a punishment,” Kathy said.

“Yeah, but they knew the rules,” Nathan said. “You don’t go changing the rules every time you don’t like the consequences. What if they’d had drugs here, or weapons? Would you be saying the same thing?”

“But that’s different,” argued Stacy. “If someone had weapons or drugs here, they would have had to deliberately bring them from home. I don’t think either Liz or Anna came here thinking they were going to fight. They probably didn’t even wake up this morning thinking they were going to fight. It just happened.”

“You make it sound like they had no choice in the matter,” Mike objected. “No one made them fight each other. They had a choice. They could have stopped it before it happened.”

“I think Stacy has a point,” Abner interjected. “How many times this week have some of us gotten really heated with each other? It could have happened to any one of us.”

Will inhaled. It had almost happened between Mike and him the night before. Still, Mike just shook his head. “So you’re saying there should be no consequences?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Will said. “I’m just saying that the consequence doesn’t have to be as harsh as kicking them out.”

“What would be an alternative?” Paul asked.

Will looked around and bit his lip. “I don’t know.”
Sheila held up her hand. “Let me stop you for a second. I think this is a discussion that needs to continue. I’d like you to continue it to a resolution. I want you to decide whether or not Liz and Anna should have to leave the program, and if not, what the alternative would be. You can decide how you want to decide—whether by vote, or coming to a consensus or some other way. I’m going to let you hammer this out. Will, I want to talk to you.”

Will was startled for a second as Sheila motioned him to follow her. He kept looking back toward the lounge as they walked toward an empty dorm room. When they entered, Sheila left the door ajar and asked Will to sit on the bed, while she leaned against the desk.

Will’s anxiety was sky-high. He had no idea how the other students would decide Liz and Anna’s fates, and he wouldn’t be there to argue in their favor.

“I see you keep looking back, Will. I think you’re worried about how this is going to turn out. I’m wondering why you’re so concerned.”

When Will didn’t answer, Sheila held up her hands. “No one’s talking today! Will, I think I already know the reason, but I want to hear you say it. You’re an adult now. Act like it.”

Will looked up at Sheila. “I think they might have been fighting about me.”

In a gentler tone, Sheila said, “I thought that might be the case. So you feel partly responsible for what happened, and don’t want to see anything bad happen to the girls because of it?”

Will nodded.

Sheila sighed and spoke softly. “Will, I’ve been watching you sending mixed signals to both Anna and Liz all week. Didn’t you realize that someone’s feelings would get hurt? And now I have two young women crying their eyes out in the next room because of it.”

With his elbows resting on his knees, Will lowered his head into his hands. He hadn’t meant to hurt anyone. He’d been confused about his failed attempts to communicate his attraction to Liz, and it had seemed easier to retreat and hang out with his friends, which included Anna, rather than expose himself to possible rejection and ridicule.

“I’m really disappointed in you.”

Will raised his eyes to Sheila for a moment, and then lowered them again. He respected Sheila, and her words were painful.

“Will, you showed so much promise when we accepted you into this program. Do you remember what you talked about in your interview?”

“My dad,” Will said quietly.

“That’s right; your dad. You talked about his integrity, his hard work, the way he served other people. And you talked about how much you wanted to be like him. I haven’t seen much of that in you this week.”

“I work hard,” Will said, without much conviction.

“Maybe on the track,” Sheila said. “I don’t think you work very hard anywhere else in your life. You’re so talented, you pretty much coast through life. So here’s my advice to you: stop coasting. And please stop playing with the feelings of these young women, whether it’s Anna or Liz or anyone else. Instead, why don’t you take some time to think about how you can build your character,
and become the man you want to be, a man like your father."

Sheila rose to her feet, while Will lowered his head even further into his hands. As Sheila reached for the handle of the door, she paused. “By the way, I have seen signs of your dad in you, like when you helped Kathy. And that speech you made this morning? I think it’s something your father would have been very proud of.” She exited the room, gently closing the door behind her.

After she left, Will tried to will himself not to cry. When he felt tears forming, he squeezed his fingers into the corners of his eyes to hold them back.

He missed his dad. He missed him so much. His aunt Lois had said something to him after his father’s funeral, when he had told her it wasn’t fair that he was gone. “You had a father who loved you for almost sixteen years, Will,” she said. “Some people never have that.”

Sometimes that was enough to get him through the sorrow, but not always. He had felt the loss most acutely on his eighteenth birthday in February. He had become a man, and his dad wasn’t there to see it.

Even worse, his dad hadn’t been there to teach him how to be a man. He had no idea what he was doing. He couldn’t even tell the girl he loved that he loved her without screwing that up.

Liz. No wonder Liz hated him. He had treated her horribly, not just today but going back to the first time they met in the fall. He doubted that there was anything he could do to make things right with her, but maybe he could explain about Chuck and George and she wouldn’t think he was such an awful person. The thought of exposing what had happened to Jenny to someone outside the family scared him, but the thought of Liz hating him scared him more.

He’d take a shower and change clothes, and then take a walk this time, to the spot by the lake where he had hoped to first tell Liz how much he liked her. He would think about what he could say to her to help fix the mess he had created.

Chapter End Notes

I would love some comments! Begging, here! :)


Chapter 15, Hunsford, Part IV: Will and Liz's POVs

(Liz)

When I finally stopped crying, my sadness turned to hate. I hated Will more than I'd ever hated anyone in my life. I wasn't even angry at Anna anymore; she was one of his victims, too. All I could think about were all the lives that Will had messed up: mine, Anna's, Geo's, Janelle's. It made my already pounding head feel even worse.

Sheila was gone a lot longer than a few minutes, and the wait was agonizing. At one point, Anna said, "This is like when your parents make you wait in your room until they decide how they want to punish you." We both started laughing, and were still laughing when Sheila finally walked back in.

"Well, this is good to see," Sheila said. "And I have even better news for you. Your classmates decided that they didn't want you to be terminated from the program, and they've worked out an alternative set of consequences instead."

Anna and I both started laughing, crying and shouting at the same time. Sheila walked over to each of us and hugged us. Then she stepped back. "You need to hear what the consequences are."

That sobered us up very quickly. "The first thing is that I'm to mediate the situation between you, to make sure it's resolved," Sheila said. "The fact that you were laughing together when I came back in gives me a lot of hope that that won't be an issue.

"The second thing is that you have to plan and carry out a community service project together. Your classmates have said that it should be something related to conflict resolution or what happened between you this morning. You need to complete it before the end of the school year. I want you to figure out a way to plan it together, and communicate with me every week about what your plans are and how you're going to make it work. Is that clear?"

We both nodded, with smiles on our faces and feelings of relief inside.

"Now that you know that you have nothing to fear, let's talk about what happened so you can put it behind you. Part one of your consequences starts now."

"Sheila," I said slowly. "I started it. I was in a bad mood anyway. I had hurt myself running, and I just started my period, so I have really bad cramps and a headache. If I wasn't feeling so bad, I don't think I would have acted like that. But I was, so when Anna got in my way, I called her a bitch."

Sheila nodded. "That word. We women do a lot of damage to one another with that word, don't we?"

"Liz didn't start it," Anna said. "I did. I was jealous of her, so I got in her face on purpose. I wanted to start something with her."

"Why were you jealous?" Sheila asked gently.

Anna's eyes glistened a little. "Because I saw her kissing the boy I like."

"Just so you know, I've talked to Will," Sheila said. "He understands that he played a role in this, and that he hurt both of you."
I turned to Anna. "Anna, I meant what I said earlier. I don't want him. I don't even like him. In fact, right now I hate him. I'll stay away from him. You don't have anything to worry about from me."

"Even if that's how you feel, that won't change how he feels," Anna responded. "He really likes you, Liz."

I just shook my head. Maybe he had liked me before, but I doubted he still would after this morning.

"So what do you two think you need to move past this?" Sheila asked.

"I'm not mad at Anna," I said. "As far as I'm concerned, it's over."

"So a little Advil and you'll be fine, right, Liz?" Sheila said. I smiled.

"What about you, Anna?" she asked.

Anna looked down at her hands. "I don't know," she said. "I mean, I'm not really mad at Liz anymore. I am mad at Will though. I guess I just have to get over it, but it still hurts."

Sheila walked over and placed her hand on Anna's shoulder. "It sounds to me that you agree this is over between you. Am I right?" We both nodded.

"I also hear, however, that you both still have some pretty negative feelings toward Will. That's understandable, and I'm not going to minimize that. Since you'll continue to be a part of LOFTY Dreams with Will, you're going to have to interact with him. So at some point, there needs to be resolution with him as well. I do think he feels really bad about what happened, and that will produce some changes on his part. In the meantime, you both have my number, if you want to talk to me more about this."

Sheila looked at her watch. "It's 8:45, and the bus leaves at eleven. Have you eaten breakfast yet?" We shook our heads.

"Well, let's do this. Liz, I'll take you to the infirmary, and Anna, why don't you eat breakfast. Would you also get a plate of food for Liz to go, because the cafeteria will be closed by the time she's done?"

"I can do that," Anna said.

About an hour later, I had had my ankle wrapped in an ACE bandage and antibiotic ointment applied to my face, and was given a cane to keep. The nurse confirmed that my ankle didn't seem to be seriously injured, and said it would be better after a few days of rest. Anna had brought me a plate of pancakes and sausage, along with some juice. I ate quickly and then unwrapped my foot temporarily in order to take a shower.

When I finished, Kathy was waiting by my room. "I thought you might need some help," she said. She helped me pack my stuff while I got dressed.

"I don't know how I can thank everybody enough for deciding we could stay," I said. "When I thought we were getting kicked out of the program, I just wanted to die. I thought my life was over."

"If you want to thank somebody, thank Will," Kathy said. "He's the one that stood up for you and Anna. The rest of us just got on board."

"Will?" I looked at her in surprise. "Really?"
"Yeah, really. He brought up a lot of the things we learned this week. Like how, if we have the right to have input into the laws of our community in general, then we have that right here at this retreat too, so we should have some say in what happens to you and Anna. He really defended you guys, and then Paul went to get Sheila, who said that all of us could decide the outcome."

I was a little stunned by what Kathy just told me. I thought about Sheila saying that Will felt bad about what had happened.

Kathy carried my bags to the bus, and Pete put them in the overhead rack, since Kathy couldn't reach it. I smiled a little when Kathy sat next to Pete in the seat in front of me. I sat alone so I could elevate my leg, which was fine with me. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I had too many of my own thoughts to wrestle with.

I knew he wasn't on the bus as soon as I got on, and I kicked myself for being so aware of his presence, or lack thereof. This was confirmed when Sheila boarded the bus to do a head count.

"Will's not here," Nathan called out. Paul jumped off the bus to go look for him.

About twenty minutes later, Will came running onto the bus. He didn't look at anyone as he boarded and took a seat toward the back. The two-hour bus ride back to Meryton was much quieter for everyone than the trip to Hunsford had been.

When we arrived, I knew that Sheila was going to talk to Ma and Daddy and Anna's parents. She'd told us she had to, starting with mine, since my wounds were so visible. I stood off to the side while Sheila told my parents what happened. I caught sight of Will, who was standing about fifty feet away with his mother and a girl who was probably his sister. He looked over at me and for a brief moment, I recalled how I'd felt when he kissed me. I didn't want to think about that … or how much I'd miss him. So I shook the memory from my head and turned away.

**~~**

(Will)

Will was leaning against a tree by the lake when he heard his name. He looked up to see Paul standing nearby.

"Are you okay?" Paul asked.

Will nodded.

"Do you want to talk?"

Will shook his head.

"OK, then. You're late, by the way. Everyone is on the bus waiting for you. Why don't you run and get your stuff so we can get going?"

Will stood up and started walking toward the dorm.

"I said run, Will."

He turned and looked at Paul. "Can I ask you first what happened to Liz and Anna?"

"Your classmates agreed with you. They decided they could stay. They'll have to do a community service project as an alternative consequence."
If Will's heart hadn't felt so heavy, he would have smiled. He turned and ran back to the dorm, gathered his bags, and raced to the bus. He didn't want to look at or talk to anyone as he boarded.

When the bus arrived at the University of Meryton campus two hours later, his mom and sister were waiting for him. "How was it?" his mother asked as she hugged him.

"It was okay," he answered.

Jenny, perceptive as always, asked if he was all right. Will nodded.

He suddenly spotted Liz, standing about fifty feet away from him. Her parents were nearby, talking to Sheila. Liz was something of a mess, with scratches and swellings on her face, an ACE bandage wrapped around her ankle, and leaning on a cane. Yet she still looked beautiful to him.

Liz caught his eye, and her expression wasn't one of anger or hatred, merely thoughtful. *I love you, Elizabeth Bennet*, he thought, as she turned away.
Chapter 16

My parents handled the news of my fight surprisingly well. Daddy seemed more sad than angry. "First Janelle, and now you. I thought I raised you better."

I felt awful. "You did raise us well, Daddy. I think me and Janelle have both learned our lessons."

Dee, of course, gave me a hard time. "I'm supposed to be the boy-crazy one, and I've never even been in a fight over a boy," she smirked.

Janelle pressed me for details, which I refused to give. I felt really bad about that—I had always told her everything—but I didn't want to talk about it.

The next day at school, my coach was upset that I'd be out of commission for a few days, but thrilled with the fact that I'd practiced for at least two hours a day while I was gone. He probably would have been even happier had I told him I'd practiced with Will Darcy, but I didn't want him to know.

On Monday evening, I finished my homework and was about to give up the computer to Janelle. I decided to check my email first. The newest message was from William Darcy, with "PLEASE DON'T DELETE!" written in the subject line. I opened it and read:

Liz,

I'm not writing to ask you what I asked you yesterday. You made it pretty clear what you think about that.

You said some things yesterday that, if they were true, it would make sense why you think I'm a horrible person. I want you to understand what the truth is from my perspective.

The first thing you said was that I made Chuck break up with Janelle. Chuck is more than just a cousin to me; he's like my brother. He really loved Janelle, and thought things were going well between them. Suddenly, she stopped calling him, stopped taking his calls, and started avoiding him on campus. When he did see her, she acted like nothing was wrong, and told him she was just busy. That made him keep hoping, even though she was breaking his heart.

In my experience, when a girl starts acting like that, it's because she's found someone else. I tried telling him that, and he didn't want to hear it. But I kept telling him until he believed it, because I wasn't going to stand by and watch someone treat Chuck like that. You said it was none of my business. When it involves Chuck, it is. You said Janelle was really hurt. Well, it was killing Chuck. I don't apologize for stepping in.

I grimaced as I read the last paragraph. Oh, Janelle! I thought. I had told her she needed to be upfront with Chuck. It sounded like she never was. I read on.

The second thing you said was that I ruined George's life. There's so much more to that story that you don't know about. I've never talked about this with anyone but my family and people who are close to us, but I want you to understand what really happened.

My parents took George in as a foster child when I was 13 years old. He'd been through a lot of abuse and had already been in a lot of trouble by the time he moved in with us. For a long time, he seemed to do really well. I think that's because he'd always wanted a father, and was so close to my
dad that he didn't want to let him down.

I was almost 16 when my father died in a car accident. It shattered my family. All three of us—George, my sister Jenny, and I—started acting out and not doing well in school. My mother was doing her best to hold us all together. We were going to grief counseling, and I think it was helping Jenny and me, but it just made George madder and madder. I think for him, he felt like he'd already lost so much in his life, and now when he finally had something good, that was snatched away, too.

George started skipping school and getting high on a regular basis. What he told you about my mother finding pot in the house was true. But it was his, not mine. And even then, my mom didn't kick him out because of it. She wanted to help him. She tried to get him into drug counseling, but he wouldn't go. She talked to his teachers and counselors at school, his social worker, everybody, to try to figure out how to help George.

One day, my mom came home from work early because she wasn't feeling well. She walked in on George and Jenny getting high and having sex. It was at that point that my mother said he had to go. She wanted to help him, but not at the expense of her own child. As my mom talked more to Jenny about it, it came out that she and George had been messing around for months. Jenny was only fourteen.

My godfather told my mother that she could press sexual assault charges against George, but it would be hard to prove, because they were both teenagers and Jenny said it was consensual. Plus, my mother didn't want to put Jenny through that. Since that time, I've seen Jenny go through huge ups and downs as she deals with what happened to her. She's sixteen now, she sometimes gets really depressed and she's still in counseling. That makes it very hard for me to ever forgive George for what he did.

As far as George's education, my father had set up a trust that legally belonged to him when he turned eighteen. My mother couldn't rescind it, even if she had wanted to. He came to see us after his birthday, and my mother told him what to do to gain access to it. I think there was about $20,000 in the trust, more than enough for him to go to culinary arts school. Since he didn't use the money for that, who knows what he did with it.

I'm glad you're still in the program.

Will

When I finished reading the email, I felt sick inside. I shut down the Internet and rushed to my room. I threw myself on my bed and banged on it with my hand. How could I have believed Geo? How could I have let a guy like that into my home, and gone out with him, and even let him touch me?

The next emotion I felt was even stronger. I felt so much compassion for Will, his mother and sister. I thought of Will's words to Abner—"You don't know what I've been through"—and I realized it was true. For all his family's money and my own family's lack of it, we had never been through what the Darcys had been through.

Janelle walked into the bedroom and shut the door. "Do you want to talk, sweetie?" she asked me.

I sat up and nodded. "I just got an email from Will," I said.

"Will? Chuck's cousin Will?"

I nodded. "He's the one I got into a fight about at the retreat. He kissed me yesterday."

"He kissed you! Liz, there's a lot you haven't been telling me!"
So I started from the beginning, leaving out only the part about Will convincing Chuck to break up with her. I was in enough pain; it didn't seem fair to bring that up and cause some hurt for Janelle, too. Bless her, she didn't say, 'I told you so,' about Geo. She told me she felt sorry for him as well as the Darcys. "It doesn't excuse what he did, but he's been through a lot, too."

"The thing I really feel bad about," I said, "is that I still believed the things Geo told me, even after I knew he was a liar."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, shrugging my shoulders.

"Maybe you were looking for a reason not to like Will."

My head snapped toward my sister. "I don't like him, Janelle!"

She grinned at me. "You sure about that?"

My cheeks started burning. I covered my face with my hands and tried to force myself not to smile. "OK, OK, I liked kissing him! But I'm not some silly boy-crazy girl like Dee who falls for a guy just because he's cute!"

"You fell for Geo."

She had me there. "All the more reason not to make the same mistake twice."

"Will's not Geo," Janelle said softly. "And whenever you do fall in love, I hope you think the guy is cute and you like kissing him."

I was silent, full of conflicting emotions and not sure what to say. Janelle seemed to sense this and gave me a hug. "Liz, it's okay to not be sure what you're feeling about Will. Maybe you just need some time to figure it out."
Chapter 17

"I think that's a great idea," Sheila said. "Where do you plan to do it?"

It was Saturday morning, and Anna and I were checking in with her on a three-way phone call.

"I talked to a woman from the East Meryton Youth Center," I answered. "She said it's a big issue for them and she'd love to have us come. We just have to work out when Anna and I can do it, since there's so much end-of-year stuff going on."

"Well, let me know, because I definitely want to be there."

"Sheila, you have to be there!" Anna said. "If we're going to act this out, we need you to play your part."

"I'm part of it also? I can do that," Sheila said, laughing. "I think this will go over really well, so my hat's off to you both. By the way, I really appreciated the email you sent everyone, too."

"That was Liz's idea," Anna said.

"Yeah, but Anna came up with the idea of the presentation," I added.

Sheila laughed again. "Are you trying to outdo each other saying good stuff now? Seriously, no matter who came up with what, it shows a lot of maturity on both your parts."

The email she was referring to had gone out on Wednesday. What neither of them knew was how Will's email to me had prompted the idea. I went to bed on Monday night wondering whether and how I should reply to Will. On Tuesday morning, I decided against it. With a clearer head, I realized that the mixed-up feelings I had described to Janelle were nothing more than physical attraction coupled with feeling sorry for him.

Even though I had been completely wrong about Geo, and I could understand although not agree with his interference with Chuck and Janelle, Will was still one of the most conceited guys I knew. And as much as I hated to admit it, the things he'd said about me personally had really hurt. No, at this point, I just wanted to get Will Darcy out of my life altogether.

I did, however, feel that I owed him some acknowledgment for standing up for us so that we could remain in the LOFTY Dreams program. I didn't know how to let him know without encouraging any more communication between us. Then I remembered that the decision for us to stay hadn't been his alone—everyone had arrived at it together. I called Anna and we decided to write a joint email to everyone in the program, in which we apologized for our behavior and thanked them for giving us a second chance.

The next few weeks were crazy. I sent in my acceptance reply to McCaffrey, and at our May LOFTY meeting, we discussed the possibilities and expectations for our summer internships, and signed up for interviews. Will said hello to me that evening, but thankfully, he didn't try to have a conversation.

In addition, I had finals and my AP English exam and had a blast at the prom, which I attended with Tony, a friend since kindergarten. The best part of the month of May was the Meryton City Finals in track and field. Longbourn High came in second place overall—the best we'd done in my four years
there. I came in third in the 200 meter dash with my personal best time, and we won the 4 by 200 relay, with me as anchor. The coach gave us a pizza party to celebrate.

Early June had three big events. On Tuesday, Anna and I would do our presentation, and Friday night was my high school graduation. As valedictorian, I had to give a speech on Friday, and I was much less nervous about that than about the Tuesday presentation. On Sunday afternoon, there would be an end-of-year celebration picnic at a state park for all the students in the LOFTY program from the past three years and their families.

I met Anna at a quarter to four on Tuesday afternoon outside the East Meryton Youth Center.

"Are you ready?" I asked her.

"I think so, but I'm nervous," she answered.

"Me too, but I keep thinking that if what we do makes a difference, it's worth it. I just hope Sheila gets here soon."

"I invited Heather to come," Anna said. "She said she would try to make it."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Anna and I were now friends, but Heather remained the one girl from the program that I wasn't sure I really liked or trusted.

Sheila arrived a minute later with a confident smile that helped set us both at ease. We entered the building and asked for Lanisha Cooper, a youth worker who ran programs for girls ages ten to fourteen.

Lanisha was an energetic, athletic-looking woman in her early twenties. "I am so glad you're here. We've had two fights in the last week, and they really need to hear what you have to say. I have about twenty girls who I brought together for this."

She led us to a large room on the second floor, where girls were laughing and talking while sitting on a motley arrangement of chairs and one old sofa. "Listen up, everybody," Lanisha said in a commanding voice.

When the room was quieter, she introduced Anna, Sheila and me and told them we had a presentation to make. That was my cue. I stepped outside the door, then opened it and entered again.

Anna approached me as soon as I entered, as though she had been waiting for me. "What were you doing kissing my man?" she demanded. And from there, we re-enacted our fight from April.

When we started, some girls gasped, while others started cheering the fight on. When I was on the ground with Anna over me, I heard someone shout, "Damn, she's getting her butt whooped!" As planned, Sheila pulled Anna away. I stood up and we both yelled, "FREEZE!" and turned to face the girls.

Most of the girls seemed genuinely shocked that we hadn't really been fighting, but one girl said, "I knew it was fake."

So we wouldn't lose their attention, I stepped forward. "As Lanisha said, my name is Liz Bennet, and I'm about to graduate from Longbourn High. Yes, today this fight was fake, but almost two months ago, it wasn't."

"Y'all was fighting like that for real?" another girl asked.
"Two months ago, that's exactly what happened," said Anna. "I'm Anna Sanchez, and I just graduated two weeks ago from St. Mary's."

The girl who had declared the fight a fake, a heavy-set girl of about thirteen, said, "How you supposed to be from Longbourn and you let a girl from St. Mary's beat you like that? My sister goes to Longbourn and she woulda took her down."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Tiana," she answered.

"OK, Tiana, here's what happened. I had just started my period—"

"Oh, so you was on the rag, huh?" Tiana said, and everybody laughed.

"Yeah, I was, and you know how you feel when that's the case." I saw a lot of girls nod their heads.

"Then on top of that, I had been running that morning and I fell and twisted my ankle. So I was in no kind of condition to fight anybody."

Anna jumped in and pointed to me. "Look at her. Liz is taller than me and stronger than me. I was lucky I caught her on a bad day. I can guarantee you that if it weren't the case, I would have been the one getting my butt whooped."

"But that's neither here nor there," I said. "What we really want to talk to you about is why we were fighting, and what almost happened to us because of it."

Anna and I talked about almost losing our scholarships, and what that would have meant for our futures. We asked them about consequences they or people they knew have experienced from fighting, and heard things such as getting suspended or expelled from school, and having fights escalate to involve other friends or family members, or turn more violent with knives or guns.

"That's a big issue," Anna said. "A lot of times we don't think about the consequences in advance. We just think that we're mad and we want to take out our anger on the other person. But afterwards, I kept thinking about how I almost messed up my whole life because of this."

"I didn't think either," I added. "I just went off. So what can you do, when you're in that situation, to help yourself stop and think before it turns into a fight?"

A lot of the girls didn't think there was anything you could do, because, as some said, if either of us had backed down, we would have looked like punks who were open game for anybody else. Then one small girl spoke up quietly. "You didn't have to call her a bitch."

I nodded. "That's exactly right. I didn't have to say that. By calling Anna a name like that, I took this to a whole new level. Who knows, if I hadn't said that, maybe we would have been able to talk it out."

I looked up and noticed Heather standing by the door. I didn't know when she had arrived.

Sheila then stepped in. "I have to take some blame, too. I think that as adults, part of our responsibility is to step in when we see something starting. Because you're young, you don't always think long-term, and we need to help you do that. I watched for a whole week while one boy sent mixed signals about his interest to two different girls, and I thought on a few occasions that it could turn ugly. Yet I never talked to any of them about it. That was my mistake."
"I agree," Lanisha said. "I think it's clear that most of you don't want to have to deal with the consequences of fighting, and most of you don't even want to fight. It's just that sometimes you don't feel like you have any way out. Am I right in thinking that a lot of you would appreciate the adults around stepping in before something starts?"

Several of the girls said yes, and then we started discussing the best way for adults to help us, and also how we could help one another, as friends, to avoid fighting.

Our discussion went on for about another twenty minutes, when Lanisha said we only had time for a few more questions.

Tiana raised her hand and asked, "Did either of y'all end up with that boy?"

Anna smiled and said, "No, actually, I met somebody else recently and we've been going out."

I just shook my head.

"Do you have another boyfriend?" Tiana asked me.

"No, I don't," I answered. "But that's okay. I have a lot of friends, including both girls and boys. When you feel good about who you are on the inside, you don't have to have a boyfriend to have fun or enjoy life."

"You mean you don't ever even think about him?" Tiana pressed.

"OK, Tiana, that's enough," Lanisha said. "We're definitely out of time. Why don't you all show them some love and give them some applause."

The girls clapped and cheered loudly, and Lanisha hugged Anna and me and thanked us profusely. "You have given my girls so much to think about," she said.

As we prepared to leave, Anna gave Heather a big hug and thanked her for coming. "You found it okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, and you were right, nobody bothered me," said Heather.

"I told you so!" Anna said.

"What did you think, Heather?" Sheila asked.

"It was really good," she said. "I mean, I thought about my own high school. We don't have a lot of physical fights, but people fight in other ways, on Facebook and stuff like that. In some ways, that might be worse, because it's harder for adults to realize what's going on and step in."

Sheila grinned. "Maybe you can come up with a presentation of your own on cyber-bullying."

"No! NO! I did NOT volunteer for anything!" Heather shouted. The rest of us laughed.

During the bus ride home, Tiana's final question stayed on my mind. What I had told her was true—I usually did have a good time and didn't really care that I didn't have a boyfriend. But I thought about Will a lot more often than I would have liked. As much as I wanted to forget him, there were times when memories of talking with him, running with him and laughing with him came back to me. In those moments, I saw his eyes and his smile, and I remembered his arms around me and his lips against mine, creating feelings unlike any I had ever had for anyone.
Lofty Dreams ch. 18 (The Picnic Pt 1, with Will & Liz's POVs)

Chapter Notes

Jack and Jill is a social organization for children and teens founded by wealthy African-American mothers in the early part of the 20th century, at a time when black people were barred from participation in many similar organizations. Over the years, it developed a bit of a reputation for snobbery. Jack and Jill has seen a resurgence in recent years as mothers living in predominantly white suburbs look for ways to help their children connect with other African-American youth. When I first posted "Lofty Dreams" on another site, a couple of readers asked why it included no humorous mentions of Jack and Jill. In their honor, here it is.

Chapter 18: The Picnic, Part I: Will & Liz's POVs

(Will)

Will was expecting to have a miserable day.

He really didn't want to go to the LOFTY Dreams end-of-year picnic, but he knew he couldn't opt out without raising questions from his mother. The last thing he wanted was to get her started again.

He'd been reduced to begging his cousin Chuck to come, just so he'd have someone to talk to, that's how bad it was. Then his Aunt Lois and Uncle Jeff had said they wanted to come, too, which was okay—maybe they'd help keep his mom occupied.

The sad fact was that he didn't have any friends left in the LOFTY (Leaders of the Future: Today's Youth) Dreams program. Ironic, given how popular he was at his high school. There would be students at the picnic from the older LOFTY classes, but Will wasn't in the mood to get to know anyone new. Although he wouldn't put it past the program directors, Sheila and Paul, to plan some corny get-to-know-you game between the classes, he thought wryly. He'd have to figure out how to slip away in case that happened.

He knew that the problems within his own LOFTY class were his fault. He hadn't tried to become friends with most of the kids. Of those he had been close to, Mike and Anna were no longer speaking to him, and Heather would go along with whatever Anna did.

As for Liz... she was a subject that was painful to think about. He knew she still hated him. She hadn't responded to his email. Not that he'd expected her to, but he'd had a small flicker of hope that maybe it would make a difference. When he'd seen her at the May LOFTY Dreams meeting, he knew that it hadn't. She barely acknowledged him when he'd said hello.

Sheila had stopped him after that meeting and asked how he was doing since her talk with him at the LOFTY Dreams retreat in April. "Other than feeling like pond scum?" he wanted to respond. Sheila had told him he was a disgrace to his late father, his hero and the person he most wanted to emulate. Okay, she hadn't said those words exactly, but that's how he'd heard it. How did she think he would be doing after that?

Surprisingly, Sheila didn't object to his mumbled non-answer. Instead, she'd asked whether or not he
had a man in his life who he could talk to.

He shrugged. "My godfather, I guess."

Sheila nodded. "You might want to tell him what happened. See what he thinks."

So he had. He had told Marcus that he needed to talk to him, and they had gone out to eat. "There's this girl..." Will began, and then hesitated for so long that Marcus asked, "Wait, you didn't get someone pregnant, did you?"

"What? No!" Will responded.

Marcus held up his hands. "Just checking. So what's this girl's name?"


"All right, then. Tell me about Elizabeth."

Will had, and Marcus mostly listened in silence, nodding compassionately. However, when Will got to the part about encouraging his cousin Chuck to break up with Liz's sister Janelle, Marcus had actually facepalmed.

"You think I shouldn't have done that," Will said slowly, feeling foolish since Marcus' expression obviously conveyed just that.

Instead of confirming, Marcus said, "Did you know there was a time when your mother and I didn't get along?"

"Really?" Will asked in surprise. His mother wasn't the easiest person to deal with, but she and Marcus were good friends. "Why?"

"Because I thought that she was going to hurt your dad, and she thought I was going to hurt Susan."

"Why'd you think that?" Will asked. He knew the story of how his parents met. His dad's best friend Marcus had started dating his mom's best friend Susan, and Susan had set Will's parents up on a date. However, he didn't know much about how things proceeded from there, other than that his parents eventually got married, and Marcus and Susan broke up.

"Susan and Billy were both wonderful, kind, sweet, loving people. I always thought it was ironic that they never got together and instead chose me and your mom. Meanwhile, your mom and I both had rougher backgrounds, and had dealt with a lot of mistrust and pain." He shrugged. "That stuff comes out in your relationships."

Will nodded, thinking back to his young childhood when his parents used to fight a lot, with his mom often screaming and hurling insults at his father. He recalled all the times he had tried to console Jenny, who was afraid their parents would get divorced, with a comfort he himself didn't feel. But their parents had worked through a lot of their struggles, and their marriage and lives had gotten much, much better.

Until his dad died.

"The reason I'm telling you this," Marcus went on, "is that although Marletta and I let each other know that we didn't trust each other, we never shared that with Susan and your dad."

"Why not?"
"Because it wasn't our place. Billy and Susan were adults. They had to work out their relationships for themselves. And looking back, I'm so glad I stayed out of it. What if I had interfered, and it led to Billy breaking up with your mom?"

Will looked up in shock. His family would have never come to be.

Marcus made that point explicit. "They had some hard times, but overall, your mom and dad were very happy together. And best of all, they had you and Jenny. None of that would have happened if I had convinced them to break up."

"But..." Will interjected, "Janelle cheated on Chuck." That still mattered, didn't it?

"You don't know that for sure, do you? You just know she started to avoid him, and drew that conclusion. Listen, men can be knuckleheads sometimes, and women sometimes expect us to realize it. Maybe Chuck did something to hurt Janelle, and she was giving him the silent treatment until he figured it out. Instead, you told him to end it."

Will swallowed hard. "Okay, so I was stupid. But what should I do now? Liz didn't reply to my email, and she wouldn't talk to me at the last meeting."

"Did you apologize to her in the email, or were you just trying to justify yourself?"

When Will didn't respond, the answer was obvious to Marcus. "Well then, apologizing to her might help," he told him. "And after that, just be a friend to her. Don't put any pressure on her for anything else. If something more is meant to be, it'll happen."

Will left that dinner loathing himself even more. He had hurt Liz badly, he could see that now more than ever, and he wanted to make it right. But how do you apologize to someone who won't even talk to you? And how do you be a friend to someone who hates your guts?

At least his mother's lectures had finally died down. She'd been all over his case, wondering why he was so moody after coming back from the retreat at Hunsford, especially since she'd been told that the event was supposed to be such a great experience for the participants.

Then she talked to Mike's mom. His mother and Mrs. Allen had met at the LOFTY welcome dinner in October and had stayed in touch. Mike had come back from the retreat in a bad mood, also, and apparently, he'd told his mother what had happened.

His mother threw a fit after the phone call. "What on earth is wrong with you?" she had yelled. "I did NOT raise you to act like some 'playa' from the 'hood, having girls fight over you. And this whole thing would involve three kids of color! You know how bad that makes us look to people like Mrs. Allen?"

By "us," Will knew his mother meant black people. "Did Mrs. Allen say something about that?"

"She didn't have to! I could tell what she was thinking. You're supposed to represent us better than that!"

There she went, with "us" again. Will rolled his eyes and tuned her out as she continued yelling.

When screaming didn't work, she tried the guilt trip. "This is all my fault. Your father and I moved out to Pemberley because we wanted you and Jenny to go to the best schools. But we should have realized that you wouldn't have many dating opportunities because of it."

He almost laughed. Did his mom really believe that his dating pool was limited at Pemberley High?
He wondered if he should enlighten her.

"I knew I should have gotten you involved with Jack and Jill! And because I didn't, you fall for the first pretty black girl who comes along, no matter how ghetto she is."

Ghetto. That was what Mike had called Liz, too, simply because of where she grew up. It was a label that made no sense, and because Will loved Liz, it stung like a personal insult. Liz was beautiful, smart, sweet, and funny. Why couldn't they see that?

Eventually his mother stopped carrying on, and then his younger sister picked up where she left off, only teasing him instead. Jenny couldn't help but hear all the commotion, and had pressed him for more details. "I have to meet this girl who has you all wrapped around her finger!" she said.

Jenny had been teasing him nonstop that morning. "So is today the day I'm going to meet your girlfriend?" she asked mischievously.

"Forget about it!" he joked back. "There's no way I'm going to let you get anywhere near her."

Actually, he had a lot of affection for his sister and would love to introduce her to Liz. His joking was a way of deflecting the fact that he doubted Liz would even talk to him.

His mom let him drive them to the picnic in his new car, a concession, he figured, for all the fighting they had been doing lately.

The picnic was held at a large state park on a sunny Sunday afternoon in June. Balloons and LOFTY Dreams signs directed them to an area with several long picnic tables. Two caterers were standing in a covered pavilion, grilling burgers and hotdogs, and a variety of side dishes and beverages were available. His aunt and uncle and cousin were already there, sitting at a table and eating.

Will clasped hands with Chuck and Uncle Jeff, and allowed Aunt Lois to kiss him as they sat down. "They have touch football going on over there," Chuck said. "Want to join a game later?"

Will nodded absently. He was scanning the area to see if he could see Liz. He finally spotted her when he and his mom and Jenny got up to get plates of food. She was sitting with her parents at a nearby picnic table. There was another girl with them, laughing loudly. Another sister, he guessed. The Bennet sisters all seemed to be really pretty.

Liz looked up for a moment, and he could see her face. His heart did a flip-flop. If he had thought he'd be over his feelings by now, he couldn't have been more mistaken. He was just as much in love with her as ever.

"I don't know why I got this pop," his mother complained, looking at the can of cola in her hand after they returned to their seats. "I hate sweet drinks on a hot day. Will, will you see if they have any water over there?"

He walked back over to the pavilion and started searching through the ice-filled barrels that contained beverages. He had spotted a bottle of water and was fishing it out when he heard someone call his name. He looked up to see Anna standing there.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asked.

"Go ahead," he replied tersely. He didn't want to talk to Anna.

He immediately regretted snapping at her when he saw the uneasy look that crossed her face. Anna
fidgeted with the necklace she was wearing, sliding the charm back and forth across the chain.

"Liz and I did the community service project this past week," she said, referring to the consequence she and Liz had received for fighting at the retreat. "It went well. She's pretty cool."

Will nodded wordlessly.

"You really like her, don't you?"

Will felt himself tense up. Then he looked at Anna's face. There was no hostility there, nor had there been in her voice. He softened. "Yeah, I do."

"I know you were trying to let me down easy at Hunsford, but I wasn't listening, because I didn't want to hear it. I know I got in the middle of you and Liz. I'm sorry about that, and I hope it works out for you and her. That's all I wanted to say."

Without waiting for his reply, Anna turned and walked away. Will stood in silent surprise for a minute. Then he began to feel oddly encouraged, for the first time that day. If Anna's attitude had changed so much in two months, maybe Liz's had as well.

He returned to the table where his family was sitting and gave his mother the bottle of water. He wanted to go talk to Liz, but she was still sitting with her parents. He'd wait and see if he could catch her alone. He started eating his burger.

About ten minutes later, he saw Liz rise and walk away. He stood to see if he could catch up with her, but Kathy, another girl from the LOFTY program, was by Liz's side before he could start moving. Will sat back down.

Several minutes later, Liz was sitting at another picnic table with all of the girls from their LOFTY Dreams class. He was starting to feel like he'd never have a chance to talk to her.

Maybe he should go over there anyway. He'd already made a fool of himself at Hunsford, so it wasn't like it could get any worse. By the end of the retreat, everyone had known he liked her. So what did it matter if he walked over there to talk to her?

Will made a decision, and stood up again.

~~*~~

(Liz)

"Is it okay if I go look for some of my friends?" I asked Ma and Daddy. They were both busy eating at the LOFTY picnic on Sunday afternoon. Janelle had had to work, but Dee was there, off checking out a bunch of guys who were playing touch football.

"Oh, baby, go," Ma said. "You know us; we'll find some people to talk to."

I grinned. Ma would talk to anybody, so I knew she was right.

I found Kathy and we sat down at an empty picnic table to talk. Anna soon joined us. Within minutes, Stacy and Heather were also sitting with us. Everyone was excited to hear that Kathy and Pete had gone to both her prom and his prom together.

"Oh, I have to tell you guys who I went to prom with!" Anna said. "One of my friends has a cousin who just finished his sophomore year at Princeton. He had just come home for the summer and my
friend told him that I needed a prom date so he took me. Oh my God, he is so cute! And he was so nice. He took me out again last week. His name is Mario."

"Forget about these high school seniors, huh?" Heather said, and we all laughed.

Anna flicked her hands. "Kids—who needs them? I want a real man!"

"Hi, Will," Stacy said.

I looked behind me to see Will standing there, and my heart started racing. Since Tuesday and Tiana's question, I had thought about him non-stop. After everyone greeted him, he said, "Liz, will you take a walk with me?"

Nervous, I looked around at the other girls. Anna grinned. "I don't know why you're looking at us. You don't need our permission!" They all laughed again.

I stood and started walking through the park with Will. Neither of us said anything for about a minute, and then we both talked at once.

"Go ahead," Will said.

"I was just going to say congratulations. I saw that Pemberley came in second place in the state this year and you broke your own record twice."

Will grinned. "Yeah, it was a good way to end senior year. And how about you? Anchoring the winning 4 x 200 team in the Meryton city finals?"

"You know about that?" I said.

"After all that coaching of you, did you think I wasn't going to follow how you did? I'm proud of you."

I felt my face get hot, and was thankful that I was a little too dark to visibly blush. "Yeah, I never really thanked you for helping me out. I guess I never really thanked you for a lot of things. For standing up for me and Anna. And for your email and telling me what happened with Geo. I know that probably wasn't easy."

"So you did read it."

"Yeah… I'm sorry I didn't answer."

"It's okay, Liz, I wasn't expecting a reply."

"I can't believe I believed the things Geo told me."

Will shrugged. "He can be convincing."

Embarrassed at what a fool I'd been, I changed the subject. "I saw the summer internship list. That's cool that you'll be in the DA's office."

"Yeah, I thought it would be good to learn about the prosecution side of things. See if it's anything like Law and Order." We went on to talk about my own internship at a nonprofit organization, and then were quiet again.

After a minute, Will stopped and looked at me. "Liz, I'm very, very sorry I was such a jerk at Hunsford. You were right to go off on me like you did."
I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't help it; I laughed, thinking, *Hey, he really can apologize!*

I regretted my laughter as soon as I saw Will's earnest expression. Besides, he wasn't the only one who had been wrong. "I appreciate your apology. I'm sorry, too. I wasn't very nice, either."

He smiled wryly. "I deserved it. Anyway, I was wondering if we could start over and be friends."

I smiled. "Yes, we can definitely be friends."

"So you won't delete my emails even if I don't write, 'PLEASE DON'T DELETE' on them?"

I laughed. "No, I promise I'll read all your emails."

Will's smile widened. "Listen, my sister's here and she wants to meet you. Can I introduce you?"

"Sure. I'd love to meet her."

He led me to a nearby picnic table. I recognized Will's mom and the girl who'd been with them when they picked him up from the retreat on the far side of the table, along with a husky man with salt and pepper hair. Chuck and Lois were sitting on the side of the table closest to us. Will's mother was watching the other four play cards.

Chuck jumped up from the table immediately and gave me a hug, with his mother right behind him.

"It's great to see you, Liz," Lois said. "And congratulations on graduation."

"Thank you."

"How are your parents and your sisters?" Chuck asked.

"They're doing great," I answered. "They're all here except for Janelle, who had to work. She's taking some summer classes and working at the east side Target," I said. I don't know why I threw that in, but maybe he'd stop by to see her sometime.

Will placed his hand on my shoulder. "Liz, this is my mother, Marletta Darcy, my uncle Jeff Benson, and my sister, Jenny."

Will's uncle stood and reached across the table to shake my hand. Mrs. Darcy just nodded at me as I said hello. Jenny, however, stood and walked around the table. She was taller than I was and very pretty, with the same golden brown eyes as her mother and brother. When she reached me, she gave me a hug. "I've wanted to meet you for so long! Will's told me a lot about you."

"Oh, really?" I said. I glanced over at Will, wondering what he might have said. "Good stuff, I hope."

Jenny grinned. "Very." She and I talked for a few minutes. She told me that she loved to dance and to write, and would be spending the summer in a dance program and working on her poetry.

"Jennifer, you're holding up the game," Mrs. Darcy said tersely.

Jenny smiled apologetically. "I've got to go. It was really nice to meet you, and I hope to see you again."

"Same here," I replied, and hugged her again.

For a second, Will looked as if he were going to hug me also. Finally, he said, "I'll see you later, Liz."
Thanks for coming over."

I told everyone goodbye and walked back to the table where the other LOFTY girls were sitting. I swear all of them greeted me with big grins on their faces.

"Well?" asked Heather.

"Well, what?" I answered.

"Oh, come on, Liz!" Stacy replied. "What'd he say, what'd he do, are you two going to hook up? We want the juice."

"There is no juice," I answered. "We're friends, that's all. He took me over and introduced me to his family and I came back. That's it."

Anna laughed. "You heard what she just said, right? He introduced her to his family, and she wants to act like nothing's going on."

"I give you guys to the end of the summer," Kathy said.

I let them keep joking and didn't respond, but I couldn't keep the smile off my face. I could finally admit it: I really liked him.
Chapter 19: The Picnic, Part II: Will’s POV

It had seemed like a good idea, but now that he was standing about ten feet away from Liz, he couldn’t work up the nerve to keep going. Liz’s back was to him, and so far, none of the other girls had noticed him. He started to turn and walk away.

“Hi, Will,” Stacy said.

The girls all looked at him. Liz turned around, and he felt his pulse racing.

Everyone said hello to him. Everyone, that is, except Liz, who hadn’t opened her mouth. “Have a seat,” Stacy offered.

He didn’t want that. He wanted to talk to Liz alone. So he took a deep breath and said, “Liz, would you take a walk with me?”

When Liz turned back around to face the other girls, Anna said to her, “I don’t know why you’re looking at us. You don’t need our permission!” The rest of the girls laughed, and Will himself smiled. He’d have to thank Anna for that later.

Liz stood up and started walking beside him. It had been two months since he had been this close to her, and he almost felt like he was going to stop breathing. She looked so good. She was wearing shorts, a tank top and sandals, which allowed him to admire her nice body and great legs. Her straightened, shoulder-length hair was blowing a little in the breeze. And then there was her beautiful face. She was the kind of girl who didn’t need make-up to be pretty.

Will didn’t mind just walking quietly and looking at her, but he figured he should say something sooner or later. Liz started talking the same moment he did, which broke the ice. They spoke first about their end of year track and field races, and Liz was surprised to hear that he’d been following her stats. He didn’t tell her that he had almost shown up at the Meryton City Finals to watch her run. He had had these fantasies about how she would react with joy when she saw him at the meet. But then reality hit, and he knew it would be a bad idea.

As good as it felt to talk to her about anything, Will’s heart started thumping when she thanked him for standing up for her and for his email. He tried to respond casually, but he was elated. Not only did she no longer hate him, but she knew that the things George had told her weren’t true. His former foster brother George had done a lot of damage to his family, especially to Jenny, in the wake of their dad’s death. George told Liz a lot of lies about their family, blaming Will especially, which was one of the reasons why Liz had resented Will so much.

They continued to walk through the park, talking about their upcoming summer internships. Will decided to take a chance on Marcus’ advice. He apologized and asked Liz whether they could be friends. When she said yes, Will was so ecstatic that he almost blurted out that he loved her. He tried to calm himself down by asking if he could introduce her to his sister.

“Sure. I’d love to meet her.”

Will led Liz to the table where his family was sitting, and introduced her to those that didn’t yet
know her. His Aunt Lois and Chuck greeted her warmly, but Jenny was the one who really made a big deal out of it. He cringed in embarrassment when Jenny said that she’d heard a lot about Liz.

“You’re younger, right?” Liz asked Jenny.

“Yeah, sixteen.”

“What are you doing with your summer?”

“I’m in a modern dance troupe. We rehearse every day and we’ll be doing some performances at the end of the summer. I’m also working on my poetry.”

“That’s really cool,” Liz said. “I like to write, too, but I’m not much of a poet. I do mostly journal writing.”

“So do I, but poetry is where I really get my feelings out. I submitted some stuff to my school’s literary magazine, but most of my poems I just write for me.”

Will’s heart felt really full. He was so glad to see Jenny getting along with his girl—. OK, she wasn’t his girlfriend. Yet. But he was starting to believe that she could be.

Of course, his mother had to ruin the moment. “Jennifer, you’re holding up the game,” Mom said, in the curt tone he was all too familiar with.

Jenny and Liz hugged each other and said goodbye. Liz turned and looked at him, and he wanted to hug her too. Screw it, he really wanted to kiss her. He still recalled kissing her at Hunsford. And he was starting to forget the fact that she’d kicked him to the curb a minute later.

It took every ounce of energy he had to not take her into his arms right there in front of everyone. Instead, he said, “I’ll see you later, Liz. Thanks for coming over.”

Liz said goodbye to his family and walked away. He watched her go, remembering the feel of her in his arms, the softness of her skin, and the sweetness of her lips on his.

After she had gone, Will realized he could forget about being cool where Liz was concerned. When he sat down at the table, he knew he couldn’t erase the stupid grin he was wearing. No one in his family said anything, but they were all staring at him. Chuck and Uncle Jeff were both grinning, and Aunt Lois had a twinkle in her eye.

Jenny finally broke the silence by laughing. “Will, you should see the look on your face! I can see why you like her. She’s really pretty, and she seems very nice.”

“You have good taste, Will,” his uncle added.

“Is she your girlfriend now?” his mother asked. He heard the anger in her voice.

That succeeded in getting him to stop smiling. “No, Mom, she’s just my friend.”

“I didn’t notice you bringing any of your other friends over.”

“Jenny wanted to meet Liz.”

“Oh, I see. Have you been telling Jenny about your other friends, too?”

He shook his head, his good mood now spoiled. “Mom… let’s not start again.”
“Why not? We’ve had this conversation before, but it obviously didn’t get through to you.”

“Marletta, maybe this isn’t the time and place for this,” Aunt Lois said.

“Oh, it’s definitely the time and place. After all we’ve been through, how could you get involved with a girl like her?”

Will glared at his mother. “What do you mean, a girl like her?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I want to hear you say it!” Will could barely contain his fury. “When I look at Liz, I see someone who’s intelligent, caring and college-bound. But you obviously have a different opinion. I want you to come out and say it!”

“All right, I will! She reminds me of some of those little tramps I grew up with. All they thought about was how they could get a man and get into his bed.”

Will was hurt and incredulous. “How could say that? You don’t even know her.”

“Both of you should stop,” Uncle Jeff warned.

His mother didn’t stop, though. “Are you so in love with this girl that you’re blind? She got into a fight over you! And her mother almost started a fight with me at the dinner last fall. You’ve been sheltered, so you don’t realize that for some people, that’s their whole way of life. That kind of street behavior is all they know.”

His mother was a hypocrite. Liz’s mother had apologized to her last fall. His mom was the one who tried to start something. She might be more sophisticated about it, but she was as nasty as anyone.

Will stood up. He suddenly felt weary. He was sick of fighting with his mother. He didn’t want to fight this battle. Not here, not now. Not ever, really.

He rested his hands on the table and leaned toward his mother. “You don’t have anything to worry about. Liz isn’t interested in me, so we’re just friends.” He turned toward his sister and relatives. “I’ll see you later.”

“Where are you going?” his mother demanded.

Will looked at his uncle. “Will you take Mom and Jenny home?”

His uncle nodded. “Will you take Mom and Jenny home?”

He turned and started walking toward the parking lot. “I’ll come with you,” Chuck said, jumping up to join him.

“Don’t walk away from me, young man!” his mother shouted.

“Let them go,” he heard his aunt say.

He and Chuck reached the parking lot, and Will pressed the button to disable his car alarm.

Chuck started smiling when he saw the car. “A Jeep Cherokee? Sweet. So how do you like driving this baby?”

Will knew his cousin was trying to cheer him up, and to a small degree, it was working. No matter
how angry he was, it was hard not to be excited about getting a new SUV as a graduation present.

They both got in, and Will started the engine. He had no idea where he was going; he just wanted to drive.

“What’s up with you and Liz?” Chuck asked.

“Nothing.”

“That’s not how it looked to me.”

“Doesn’t matter. There’s nothing going on,” Will said bitterly.

“But you have some feelings for her.”

Will looked briefly at Chuck. If anyone would understand, it would be him. “I love her.”

“You love her, yet there’s nothing going on.”

“She doesn’t love me back.”

Chuck grinned. “I feel your pain. You know, there’s either something really special about these Bennet girls, or something really screwed up about us.”

That got Will to smile. “Or both.”

“Yeah, it’s probably both.” Chuck shook his head. “I don’t know if the stuff with George has messed up her perception, but I can’t get over what Aunt Marletta said about Liz. If she weren’t so mad, it would be funny.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she doesn’t realize what a tight rein their parents have kept on those girls. Janelle was so damn innocent when we first got together.”

Will snickered. “You corrupted her, huh?”

“No comment,” Chuck laughed. His expression then turned more sober. “Seriously, that’s why it was so hard to believe what Janelle did. You kept telling me she had someone else and that all the evidence pointed to it, and I couldn’t see it, because she was so sweet and innocent.”

Will suddenly felt very uncomfortable. He recalled Marcus telling him that he didn’t know for sure that Janelle had cheated. Was it possible that he had been as wrong about Janelle as his mother was about Liz? And that his interference, supposedly to keep Chuck from being hurt, was as misguided as his mom’s?

Chuck went on. “I think you’re wrong, though, when you said Liz doesn’t love you back.”

Will glanced quickly at Chuck, and then turned his eyes back to the road.

“We were laughing about how you were looking at her, but it seemed to me that she was looking at you the same way.”

Could he really believe that? Liz had told him that he was the last person on earth she would ever go out with. But that was before she knew how George had lied to her. And she had kissed him back at Hunsford. Before she had gotten mad at him, she had kissed him.
He was getting ahead of himself. Marcus had said not to put pressure on her, but to just be her friend. And she was willing to be his friend. For now, maybe that was enough.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Chuck asked.

“I don’t know,” Will grinned slyly. “How about Target?”

They both started laughing. As his tension lifted, Will thought to himself that life was looking better than it had in weeks.

Today wasn’t such a bad day after all.

Chapter End Notes

I would love, love, love some comments!
Chapter 20

Summer began, and for the first time all three Bennet girls were working. Janelle had started a job working at Target, in addition to taking the two make-up classes she needed. Dee got a city-funded summer job assisting in a Head Start program. I was working in the headquarters of Community Change of Meryton, a large nonprofit that offered a variety of different social services, such as day care, senior services, and food pantries, at satellite sites around the city.

I had a half hour lunch break and because the weather was so nice most days, I usually found a spot in a nearby park to eat my lunch. On Wednesday during my second week of work, Aunt Haley joined me.

We had just started to eat when I heard my name. I looked up to see Will waving at me. He was in line at a pushcart that sold wraps and fruit smoothies, the same one where Aunt Haley had purchased her meal. I was surprised to see him because we were nowhere near the downtown courthouse where he was working. He was wearing tan slacks, a loosened tie and a white collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He looked very nice.

I stood up and walked over to him. "Hey, what are you doing around here?"

"I have to do some research for my supervisor at the law library across the street. Are you eating lunch?"

I nodded. "I like to eat here in the park."

"May I join you?"

I smiled. "I'm eating with my aunt, but sure."

Will paid for his food and we walked over to join Haley on the bench. I introduced them, and wondered briefly what he would think of her with her waist-long dreadlocks and colorful African clothing. Aunt Haley stood up and ignored Will's proffered hand, embracing him instead. "Sorry, I'm a hugger," she said. He smiled, looking a bit bashful but pleased.

"So how do you know each other?" she asked when we were all seated.

"The LOFTY Dreams program," Will said. "I'm doing my internship at the DA's office, and I was just telling Liz that I've been sent to do research at the law library."

"Nice." Haley paused to take a bite of her veggie wrap. "Are you enjoying your job?"

"It's really cool," he replied as he pulled paper off a straw and stuck it into his smoothie. "I do a lot of grunt work, obviously, filing and photocopying. But I also get to sit in on some trials, which is incredible. It can go from boring to scary to sad to thrilling in an instant."

Haley nodded. "I'll bet. My father—Liz's granddad—runs a program with ex-offenders and he would describe his work the same way. But his reward is helping people find that spark of hope that helps them change. And some of these folks, if you knew what they had done in the past, would terrify you."

Will looked fascinated and asked Haley several more questions about Grandpa Larry's program and
Haley's own work as an artist.

I was munching on the sandwich I had brought from home when he turned to ask me about my internship. I frowned a little, thinking how boring my work sounded compared to Will's, Grandpa's and Haley's. "I'm assisting the Director of Development at Community Change of Meryton. I do things such as write thank-you letters to people who give donations and enter the information about donations we receive in a database."

I paused for a moment, before remembering that there was a part of my job I really liked. "The best part is that I get to visit some of our programs around the city to take photos and interview people, and then I write stories for the newsletter about it. I like making connections with people who are being helped."

"That's great, Liz," Will said. "I'll bet you feel the same reward your grandfather feels."

I smiled at him, realizing he was right and feeling very grateful to Will in that moment. "Yeah, I do."

Haley had finished eating and started gathering the paper goods that had held her food and drink. "Here, let me get that," Will offered, and he stood to carry both their trash to a receptacle near the edge of the park.

As soon as he walked away, Haley leaned toward me and whispered, "He's a keeper, Liz. He's polite, intelligent, caring, and good-looking, too! Girl, if I was twenty-five years younger…"

"Aunt Haley!"

She grinned cheekily. "But he's yours, so of course I would never take him from you!"

I frowned. "He's not mine, exactly."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I think I blew it with him," I sighed. He was willing to be my friend now, but…

Haley lifted her eyebrows above her sunglasses. "He wouldn't by chance be the one you told me you didn't like back in December?"

I nodded reluctantly.

She said, "My my, how things change!" with such a silly smirk on her face that we both laughed.

"What's changed?"

My face grew hot as Will appeared before us. Fortunately, Haley saved me from having to speak. "Private joke, sorry." She stood and gave him another hug. "It was really wonderful to meet you, Will. I have some errands to run, but you two enjoy the rest of this beautiful day."

"You didn't tell me…” I started to say, but Haley's wink when she reached out her arms to me shut me up.

I laughed again as she walked away. Haley was the best judge of character I knew. And if she would have gone for Will when she was my age… well, that said something huge about Will.

"Are you laughing at me again?"

His voice startled me. "No, I…"
"Good, because I'll admit it: I get a little insecure when you laugh at me."

I pursed my lips. "That might be a problem if you're around me a lot, because I love to laugh."

He leaned toward me, his face suddenly close to mine. "Am I going to be around you a lot?"

I was having trouble breathing. "Maybe," I was finally able to squeak.

Will sat back and smiled. "Then I can get used to it."

Okay, now I was feeling like an idiot. In an effort to gain control of myself, I changed the subject. "It must have taken you a while to get over here from downtown."

"Not really. I drove." Will grinned. "I got a car for graduation, so I use any excuse I can to drive it."

I smiled, enjoying his obvious pleasure in sharing this. I thought about how excited I had been to get a cell phone as a graduation present from my parents, which Daddy only agreed to provided I pay the bills for it myself. I couldn't imagine getting a car as a present.

"Hey, you told me once that you can't drive. How come?" he asked.

"Because I can't afford to take driver's ed."

"You can't?"

"No, it's too expensive. My father has taken me out a few times to practice in a parking lot. But…" I started laughing. "You'd have to see my parents' car. I wouldn't trust myself in it on the road. And Aunt Haley would teach me, but she drives a truck. Thank you, but I think I'll start with a car. I'm saving up some money for lessons one of these days. Maybe even by the end of the summer."

"I could teach you."

I looked at him skeptically. "In your new car?"

He grinned. "Yeah, why not?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Okay, then. If you trust me that much…"

Will laughed. "The real question is, do you trust me?"

I didn't even have to think about it. "Yeah, I do." He looked at me in that instant with an expression that sent a shiver of warmth down my spine.

Will broke the silence that followed. "You know, your aunt's an amazing woman."

I knew I was beaming by this point. Was he going to keep making me feel this good? "She really is. And she's the adult in my life that I can really talk to when I can't go to my parents."

Will nodded. "I have that with my godfather Marcus. And it's a good thing, too, because I love Chuck, but he's six months older than me. What does he know?"

Mentioning Chuck made me think of Janelle, and I became very quiet.

"What are you thinking?" Will asked.

"About my sister. In your email, you told me why you stepped in between her and Chuck. Can I tell
"Why didn't she tell him the truth?" he asked when I finished my story.

I sighed. "I know she should have. It's just that Chuck had said some things about students from places like Longbourn City who were screwing up in class. She thought he'd look down on her, too."

Will was quiet for a moment after I said this, so I went on. "Anyway, I was wondering if maybe you'd tell this to Chuck?"

"I thought I messed up the first time by interfering."

"This wouldn't be interfering. You'd just be giving Chuck information. He can decide what to do with it."

Will thought about that for a moment, and then said, "All right, I'll tell him."

My cell phone beeped. "That's my alarm," I said. "I do that so I'm not late getting back from lunch."

We both stood up. "Liz, if I get a chance to come back here to do research, would you like to have lunch again?" Will asked.

I nodded. "I would like that a lot."

Will pulled out his own phone. "Let me get your phone number." He entered my number in his phone and dialed it so I'd have his, and then we said goodbye.

As I started to walk away, he called my name. "What would you think about having a driving lesson this Saturday?" he asked when I turned.

I smiled. "That would be great."

"Okay, I'll call you to set it up."

I practically skipped back to work. I had a date with Will! No—calm down. Not a date, just a driving lesson. I doubted Will would ask out a girl who had told him he was the last guy in the world she would ever go out with. Still, I was looking forward to it.

Janelle was at home when I arrived that evening, so I pulled my head out of the clouds. "Hey, can I talk to you about something?"

She glanced up from the textbook she was reading and nodded.

"You never told Chuck about being on academic probation, did you?"

She looked down again and didn't answer.

"Janelle, why not?" I respected my sister so much, but since talking to Will, I realized that I hadn't really considered what Chuck must have felt when she pulled away from him.

"You know why," she said softly.

"I know what you said. I know you were scared he might look down on you. But he wouldn't have known what was going on, and that couldn't have been easy for him." I sighed in frustration. "Do you still love him? I mean, would you take him back if you could?"
Janelle looked as if she might cry. "Of course, but why would he want me?"

The anger I was starting to feel dissipated. My sister was beautiful, sweet, smart—and utterly lacking in self-esteem. I guess I had known this for a long time, but now that fact was staring me in the face. I could tell her how amazing she was, but would she believe me?

I tried something different. "You know how I screwed everything up with Will at the retreat?"

Now she smiled. "I thought you said you didn't like him."

I grinned back. "Okay, so I was lying."

She bounced a little on her bed. "I knew it! I knew it!"

"Let me finish," I spoke over her, tamping down on my laughter. "My point is, I made some assumptions about Will, and I was completely wrong. And now I have all these regrets. I think maybe you and Chuck did the same thing."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Chuck assumed that students from Longbourn City who were struggling or who missed class did it because they didn't care or couldn't hack it. But you know how you told me how hard it's been to be work full time this summer with a schedule that keeps changing, and still try to do well?"

Janelle nodded. "You're right, I didn't think about that." I could see her mentally ticking off friends of hers who were in just that situation.

"So if you didn't think of it, why would Chuck? Especially since his parents can totally afford to pay for school for him."

"Okay, I can see that. So he made an assumption, and you know what they say about assuming."

"Yup," I grinned, thinking about what to 'assume' makes of 'u' and 'me.' I paused before speaking again. "But you made some assumptions, too."

"About me not being cut out for college? Yeah, you're right. I'm doing so much better now that I'm used to the workload and studying more."

"I was actually talking about you making assumptions about Chuck," I said quietly.

Janelle looked at me sharply, so I had to inhale to finish my thought. "You assumed he wouldn't understand, so you weren't honest with him. And Janelle, you have to be honest with each other if you're going to make a relationship work."

She sighed and didn't answer. At that moment, Ma knocked on our bedroom door. "Janelle, phone for you," she said.

Janelle looked surprised, but whispered, "Let's finish this conversation later," before she rose from her bed to take the call.
I followed her out into the living room in time to hear the surprise in her voice as she started speaking. A few seconds later, she entered the bathroom—the only place in our apartment where no one could walk in on you—and shut the door. *Oh wow, it has to be Chuck,* I thought, biting my lip to keep from laughing. Will must have talked to him already.

About a half an hour later, Dee started griping. "Who is Janelle still talking to? I need to use the phone." She headed to the bathroom, probably to bang on the door.

I stepped in her way. "Leave her alone, Dee. You're the one who usually hogs the phone. Let her have a chance for once."

Dee glared at me. "Okay, then, let me use your phone."

"I'm not letting you use up all my minutes, not when I'm paying for it!"

Dee threw up her hands in exasperation.

An hour later, Janelle was still on the phone and my younger sister was still complaining, so I finally gave in and tossed her my phone. Dee ran into our bedroom with it. About ten minutes later, Daddy banged on the bathroom door because he needed to use it.

Janelle emerged soon thereafter, trying hard to keep a straight face. She gave me a knowing look, and I told my mother we were going downstairs to sit on the stoop.

We both started laughing as soon as we got downstairs. "Tell me, chica," I said. "That was Chuck, wasn't it?"

"Yes!" she squealed. "He still loves me, Liz! He said he never stopped loving me." She sighed. "You were right. I should have been honest with him. I apologized and told him I should have trusted him more. And then he apologized to me. He thought I was cheating on him and he was so hurt, but he says that now he knows he should have trusted me, too."

When I just nodded, she grinned and said, "Go ahead. You can say I told you so!"

I shook my head. I had made plenty of my own mistakes, and couldn't judge my sister's.

"Anyway, I told him what was really going on, and he said he understood. His parents weren't all that happy with his 3.0 either, because they thought he could do better. I think this time around, we'll probably both be more focused."

"I'm so happy for you! When are you going to see him?"

"Tomorrow. I'm glad it's the one day that I don't work. He's going to pick me up about 6:30 and take me out."

Her radiant smile suddenly turned into a sly grin. "So how is it that you suddenly want to talk to me about Chuck the same day he decides to call?"

"Uh, I kind of ran into Will today, and we talked about you guys," I admitted sheepishly.

Janelle's jaw dropped. "Liz! Girl, you have been holding back on me! You have all this advice about being honest in a relationship, but what about with your sister! I don't believe you!"

I fell out laughing as she grabbed me and squeezed me. "Tell me *everything,* she demanded. "I'm not letting you go until you do!"
Chapter 21

The next day, Thursday, I got home as usual at about 6 PM. I was almost as excited as Janelle about her getting back together with Chuck. I'd have to call or email Will to let him know how much I appreciated it.

When I came home, however, my mother was sitting on the sofa crying, Janelle was trying to comfort her, and my father, looking upset, was on the phone.

"What's going on?" I asked Janelle.

"Dee got arrested," she said.

"She what!?"

"She was with that punk Geo!" my mother shouted through her tears.

I knelt beside my mother. "What happened?"

Janelle answered. "She was in a car with Geo, and they had both been drinking. The police pulled them over and searched the car, and found a couple of bags of crack. They got arrested for DUI and possession."

"Oh, my God," I said. I thought of Dee's desperation to use the phone the night before. Was it Geo she had been so eager to talk to? I was suddenly stricken with guilt, because I had let her use my phone last night, and because it was through me that she knew Geo in the first place.

I inhaled, trying to ignore my own feelings and figure out what was happening. "What's Daddy trying to do?"

"He's calling people to see if he can borrow money to hire a lawyer. Dee has a hearing in the morning."

"Where is she now?"

"She's at a juvenile lock-up someplace."

Daddy got off the phone and sat down in his chair beside us. He looked really tired and defeated.

"How'd it go, Daddy?" I asked.

"Not that well. Your uncle Mitch said he'd give me $100, Haley's giving me $500, and my friend Dwayne said he could loan me another $300. That's not nearly enough."

"What about my tuition money?" Janelle said.

"No, Janelle! Don't even bring that up! That's for your education and we're not touching it."

"But if you have to have a public defender, do you think it will work out okay?" Janelle asked.

My father rubbed his forehead. "I don't know. Everyone I talk to says you want to avoid that if at all possible."
The doorbell rang. I got up and went to the door. Our intercom hadn't worked in years, but the buzzer did. "What should I do, Janelle?" I asked.

"Daddy, Chuck is coming to see me," Janelle said. "Can Liz let him in?"

Daddy made a "whatever" gesture with his hand. I pressed the buzzer.

When the knock came a minute later, I opened the door. I was really surprised to see Will standing beside Chuck.

After watching me stand there for a few seconds, Chuck said, "Can we come in?"

"Oh, yeah, come on," I said foggily. I opened the door wider to let them in.

They both entered and I watched Will look around. I suddenly felt embarrassed by our second-hand furniture and the junkiness of our apartment.

Chuck hurried to Janelle's side. "What's the matter?" he asked when he saw her face.

"My sister Dee got arrested," she answered.

"With that punk Geo!" my mother cried. "I can't believe she was with him?"

"Is your mother talking about George?" Will asked me.

I nodded. "They were drinking and driving and had drugs in the car. My father's trying to figure out how to hire a lawyer."

Will turned away from me. "Chuck, we probably should go."

"This wouldn't be a good time for us to go out, would it?" Chuck asked Janelle. She shook her head.

"Let's go, Chuck," Will said again. He sounded agitated.

Chuck kissed Janelle's cheek. "I'll call you later." He looked at my parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, I'm sorry we came at a bad time like this."

My father nodded and they left. As he was leaving, Will neither looked at me nor said goodbye.

We helped my father make more phone calls and came up with another $400, but it was still short of the $1,500 he needed to hire a lawyer on retainer.

As I got into bed that night, I felt a hollow pit in my stomach. I knew I was worried about Dee, but I realized it was more than that.

It was Will. It was the way he'd looked around our apartment, and the way he'd wanted to leave so fast. I thought about what Heather had said about me at Hunsford: that I was too ghetto for Will. Is that how he saw me? Why wouldn't he, when my sister had just become another ghetto statistic? And with Geo of all people, who had hurt his family so much.

I wanted to cry. Now that I realized how much Will meant to me, I had lost any chance I had with him.

On Friday, both my parents took the day off from work to attend Dee's hearing. I said some silent prayers for Dee while I was at my job.
I was unsure what to expect when I got home from work that evening. When I arrived, however, Dee was home, although much more subdued than I'd ever seen her. My father seemed to be in a much better mood, and Ma acted like she had just won the lottery.

"Can I assume it went well today?" I asked.

Daddy beamed. "Much better than we could have hoped."

"The public defender was that good?"

"We didn't have a public defender!" Ma cried. "Marcus Henderson himself is defending Dee!"

"You're kidding!" I said.

"Nope," Daddy said. "You know how he's always on TV because he's representing wealthy athletes? Well, I guess he also takes on a certain number of cases for free, what they call pro bono."

"And he's doing my baby's case for free!" Ma said. "Oh, and he is just as FINE in person as he is on TV, with his bald head and fancy suit."

I was trying to take all this in. "How did he even find out about Dee?"

"I don't know," Daddy answered. "But he went before the judge today to persuade him that Dee could come home with us, and to push up her court date as soon as possible. Her trial is next Friday."

"Does he think her chances are good?"

"He said they're very good. He said that the fact that she walked into the courtroom with two parents would already impress a judge, because they almost never see two parents. Plus, Dee's never been in trouble, her grades are okay, and she's been working a summer job, so that's in her favor. He said that the fact that she met Geo here in our home, rather than on the streets, means that she could assume he was a safe person. Her fingerprints weren't on the bags of crack, and Geo's were, so she probably didn't know about them. And then there's the fact that she's a juvenile and Geo's an adult. The only negative is that she was drinking. Otherwise, he feels like he has a good chance of convincing the judge to drop the charges against her."

"That's great news!" I said, relieved.

"And you know Marcus Henderson. He just makes you feel like—ooh!" Ma shivered a little. "The jury will definitely believe him."

"There is no jury, Ellie," Daddy said. "It's a juvenile case. There's just a judge."

"Then he'll make the judge feel that way!"

Even with my family's happiness, the butterflies in my stomach didn't go away. I remember Will telling me at the first LOFTY meeting that Marcus Henderson was his godfather—and he'd mentioned him again two days ago at the park. It couldn't be a coincidence that he'd shown up to take Dee's case, could it? Had Will arranged for that? And if he had, was it possible that he still liked me?

But he hadn't called to set up our driving lesson like he'd promised.

Janelle got home from work about ten and couldn't understand why I didn't seem happier about the day's developments. "It's Will," I told her. "I'm not sure if he likes me anymore. He acted like he
couldn't wait to leave yesterday."

Janelle laughed. "Oh come on, Liz! He and Chuck both left because it wasn't a good time. Anyway, he certainly didn't come here last night to see me! If you're unsure how he feels, why don't you ask him?"

"But—"

"But nothing. Look at it this way. After the way that you dogged him at the retreat, do you think he's going to put himself out there like that again? No, this time, you need to make the first move."
Chapter 22

On Saturday morning, I woke up thinking about what Janelle said. I wanted to find out first whether or not Will was responsible for Marcus Henderson taking on Dee's case. I decided to text him a message: "Thx for MH." I sent it, and waited to see how he would respond.

I went to the laundromat that morning, and was almost done folding clothes at about noon when I heard my phone beep. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw that I had a new text message from Will. I read: "Ur welcome." So I took a deep breath and wrote back: "Btw I rly rly like u." Then I thought I should send an additional message, "Not just bc of MH."

A few seconds later, my phone rang. "Do you mean that, Liz?" Will asked as soon as I answered.

"I do, I really do," I replied.

"When can I see you?"

"How about now?"

"I'll be there in about 45 minutes."

I threw the clothes in the laundry bag and hurried home. Our apartment was quiet, because Janelle was working, Ma and Dee were out shopping, and Daddy was snoring in his chair in the living room.

I dropped the laundry bag on my bed and ran to the bathroom. I was so nervous and excited I could barely think clearly. OK, my hair. I grabbed the flat iron and plugged it in. I brushed my teeth twice and applied some mascara and lip gloss. I ran the flat iron through my hair, twisting at the bottom to curl the ends. I also rubbed lotion on my legs several times to make sure there was no ash anywhere.

When I was ready, I sat down in the living room, but I couldn't sit still. I kept getting up and walking around, and checking my cell phone to see what time it was. Finally, my phone rang again.

"Liz, I'm outside," Will said. "Can I come up?"

"Uh, sure. I'll buzz you in."

A minute later I heard a knock on the door. When I opened it, I was so happy to see Will's handsome face that I pulled him inside, shut the door, threw my arms around him and kissed him.

To my surprise, he pulled back. "You're not going to go off on me again afterward, are you?" he asked tentatively.

I giggled, remembering the aftermath of our last kiss. "I won't, I promise!"

With that, he smiled and took me in his arms, kissing me gently at first and then more deeply. My arms slipped around his neck and I moved closer; I wanted him to forget the past and understand how much he meant to me here and now.

When we finally stopped kissing, Will looked at me with a huge smile on his face. "I guess you do really like me!" I laughed, and he held out a bouquet wrapped in pretty cellophane paper that had
gotten a little crushed by our embrace. "Here, these are for you."

"Thank you," I said a little shyly as I took the bouquet from him. Other than the corsage I'd received from my prom date, no one had ever bought me flowers. I opened the paper a little. Inside were a dozen red roses surrounded by baby's breath.

"I think we have a vase in the kitchen," I said.

As he followed me, he spotted Daddy stretched out in his chair. "Sorry, Liz, I didn't realize your dad was sleeping."

"It's OK," I said, as I knelt to look under the sink for the vase. When I found it, I filled it with water and then took the roses out of the paper and started to place them in the vase.

"You should cut them," Will said. "The stems, I mean."

"OK. How?"

He asked me for a sharp knife and showed me how to cut the bottom of the stems off at an angle. Then he placed the roses in the vase for me and placed the vase in the center of the small kitchen table.

"They're beautiful," I said.

"So are you," Will answered.

I looked down as my face grew warm. I felt Will put his arms around me. I hugged him tightly, listening to his heartbeat and feeling my own against his chest.

"Do you want to go out somewhere?" Will asked.

I nodded and pulled away from him. "Let me write my parents a note," I said.

I locked up our apartment, and Will took my hand as we walked down the stairs. Ashley and Marquis, two of the little kids who lived in my building, were sitting on the stoop outside. "Is that your boyfriend, Liz?" Ashley asked as we passed them.

Will squeezed my hand tighter as I looked at him and smiled. "Yes, it is," I answered.

When we reached his car, a new SUV, Will held open the passenger door for me. "This is the car you got for graduation?" I asked, after he climbed in and put his seatbelt on.

"This is it. So where would you like to go?"

"The Meryton City Festival is going on today. What about that?"

"That sounds like fun."

In the car, I thanked him for arranging for Marcus Henderson to defend Dee. "My parents are so grateful," I said. "They don't know it's because of you. They think it was just good luck."

"Please don't tell them, Liz," Will said, "I don't want credit or anything. I just didn't want your family to be hurt by George the way my family has been."

We had to park a few blocks away and walk to the city park where the festival was being held. We were both hungry when we arrived, so we visited the food area first. After purchasing plates of food
and bottled water, we sat at a picnic table to eat babyback ribs, potato salad and fruit salad.

Will kept staring at me, which was a little embarrassing, given that ribs are a rather messy food to eat. "Can you stop looking at me until we're done?" I asked.

Will laughed. "No, I can't. Do you know how long I've been waiting to be with you like this?"

"How long?"

"I've liked you since the first time I saw you, Liz."

I looked at him with surprise. "You're kidding!"

"I'm not. I still remember when I first saw you, standing near the bottom of the stairs at Chuck's house. You were looking at me. You were checking me out, weren't you?"

I made a face. "Yeah, I was," I admitted.

"I remember thinking, 'Hey, she's cute,' and then you turned away and started laughing because I'd caught you staring. Then I thought, 'She has a sense of humor. I like that, too.' I was about to come down and introduce myself, but I was intercepted first."

I smiled as I remembered that girl Candy who'd been all over him at Chuck's party. Then I paused. "Will, if you've liked me all this time… I mean, for a long time, it didn't seem that way."

Will winced. "I know. I felt like every time I had a chance to meet you or get to know you, something didn't go right. There was Candy at the party, my mom being rude to your mom at the dinner, and then seeing you with George at the dinner. And it didn't help that you and George started laughing at me that night. After that, I was embarrassed just to talk to you. Then when we were paired up at the first LOFTY meeting and you started laughing again, I thought that maybe George had said something about me. I didn't react very well, but I think it was because I was interested in you."

I wiped my hands on a towelette and placed one hand over his. "What I was laughing about the night of the LOFTY meeting was Chuck and Janelle being what we shared in common."

Will slipped his fingers between mine and grinned. "OK, your turn. When did you first like me?"

"At Hunsford. You really grew on me that week!"

"I thought you hated me there."

"I did! But I also liked you. That's a pretty confusing situation to be in, when you both like and hate a guy at the same time."

Will shook his head, chuckling. "I knew you had kissed me back!"

We both laughed as I nodded to admit that I had. "It was actually a great kiss," I told him. He leaned toward me and touched my lips with his to remind me of that fact.

"So when did you stop hating me?"

"The same day I turned you down, when I heard that you'd stood up for me and Anna. And when I got your email the next day and realized how wrong I'd been about you."

Will stroked my hand with his thumb. "That Sunday was kind of a painful day for me. First you
rejected me, and then when you were done, Sheila took what was left of my ego and smacked it around. You could have wiped up the floor with me after that."

"Are you serious?" I asked, shocked. But then I remembered being on the receiving end of Sheila's disappointment, and I understood.

Will laughed. "Unfortunately, yes. Sheila had you and Anna in one room, and me in another. She let me know just how much I had been screwing up. You know what? I don't mean unfortunately. She was right. I was a coward, Liz. I cared too much about what other people thought of me. And because of that, I really hurt you."

"Is that why you were late getting back to the bus?"

Will nodded. "I had a lot to think about."

I squeezed his fingers. "After the things I said to you that day, I'm glad you didn't give up on me."

"First of all, I said some pretty harsh things to you that day, too, things I wished I could take back right after I said them. And second," Will said, his voice dropping, "you were worth it."

When I saw the tender look on his face, I knew at that moment that I loved him.

We stayed at the festival until it closed at 9 PM, riding carnival rides, playing games and eating. During the last half hour, we sat on a grassy lawn listening to a band that played old school R&B music. Will sat behind me with his hands resting lightly on my shoulders. Toward the end, as I leaned back against him, he whispered in my ear, "The sun is setting."

I looked up and exhaled at the sight. Even amid the lights and sounds of the city rather than the tranquility of nature, it was gorgeous. "You wanted me to watch this with you at Hunsford, didn't you?" I realized with regret.

"Well, yeah," Will answered softly, laughing a little and brushing my cheek with his lips, "but this will be the first of many."

When we finally left the park, I knew it had been the absolute best day of my life. We had forgotten all about the driving lesson, but I didn't care.

It was dark when we arrived back at my street and Will pulled over to the curb. I knew he was going to reach for me as soon as he turned the car off. As we kissed each other passionately for what had to be at least ten minutes, I felt an intense desire for him like nothing I had ever felt before. It both thrilled me and scared me a little. Finally, I broke away from him and said, "I should go in."

Will nodded. "Let me walk you."

Outside my apartment, he hugged me tightly. "I don't want to let you go," he said.

"I know; I feel the same way. Listen, would you come over tomorrow, maybe for dinner? I want you to get to know my parents."

"I'll be here," Will said with a smile. He kissed my cheek, and we both said goodnight.

I went inside and found myself face-to-face with my angry father. "Where have you been with this boy all this time?" he demanded.

"We went to the festival, Daddy. We were in public the whole day."
"How come you didn't answer my calls?"

I pulled my phone out and saw that I had several missed messages. "It was loud there. I guess I didn't hear it."

"Liz, those are some serious flowers in there, which means this boy has some serious feelings about you. You're starting school in a few weeks. We've already been through Janelle getting caught up in a relationship at the expense of her education. I don't want you going through that, too. And isn't he the one that did all those things to Geo?"

"Daddy, Geo lied to us. I would think after how he treated both me and Dee, you'd realize he can't be trusted."

"You may be right, but that doesn't mean I can trust this boy either."

"I trust him, Daddy. I love him."

My father placed his hands on my shoulders. "I'm not saying he's not a good person, Liz. But I was an 18-year-old boy once, in love with a beautiful young woman, and it's a hell of a thing to try to keep your hormones under control."

I hugged him. "I know, Daddy. I hear what you're saying. Right now, succeeding in college is the most important thing to me. I'm not going to let you down."
Chapter 23

"Liz, did you hear me? I just asked if you had finished the story yet."

I snapped out of my daydream and looked at Karen, my boss. "I'm sorry, my head was somewhere else."

"Are you all right? You don't usually act this way."

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll get to that story right away."

It was Monday afternoon, and I was having the hardest time keeping my mind focused on work. I kept thinking about Will. We'd had a great time with him at dinner the night before. Afterward, Daddy had taken Will downstairs and they were outside for about 45 minutes before Will came back up to tell me goodnight. I was dying to know what they had talked about.

I turned my attention back to the article I was writing. I was almost done when Karen stopped by my desk again. "There's a woman from the LOFTY Dreams program here to see you. I told her she could meet with you in the conference room."

I gritted my teeth. Sheila had told us that she and Paul would pay visits to all our internship sites. Normally I would have welcomed her visit, but today my game was so off that I didn't want to see her.

When I entered the conference room, I was shocked to see Mrs. Darcy. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't have a lot of time, so I'll get right to the point," she said in her clipped tone. "I want you to stay away from my son."

"Um… your son is eighteen. He can choose who he wants to associate with."

"I don't care how old he is, he's still living in my house and I'm still his mother."

"He won't be in your house much longer. And you may be his mother, but you're not mine. You can't tell me who I can or can't spend time with."

Her cold expression turned vicious. "You listen here, missy. I have worked too damn hard to give my kids a better life than I had. I'm not about to watch some little whore from Longbourn City get herself pregnant and derail my son's college and career plans!"

I was so stunned that it took me a minute to respond. "How dare you! You don't know anything about me! I'm not sleeping with your son, not that it's any of your business, and I have my own college and career plans I'm thinking about."
"How long do you think that's going to last, when my son is in love with you? You can take a girl out of the ghetto but you can't take the ghetto out of the girl."

"I guess that's true of you, huh?"

"You're DAMNED RIGHT!" she shouted. I looked around, hoping there was no one near the conference room who could hear her.

Mrs. Darcy went on. "I will take you down, if I have to. I know you and some other little tramp got into a fight over my son at the retreat. I know your sister got arrested with that little creep George. You already have strikes against you, and you better believe that after I talk to the folks at LOFTY Dreams, you'll be out of that program so fast your head will spin!"

I was so angry I could barely breathe, but I tried to keep my voice level. "You're a sad woman if you're so threatened by a teenage girl that you have to act this way."

"I do what I have to do."

I stood up and turned toward the door.

"I'm not finished yet!" Mrs. Darcy yelled.

"No, you are," I snapped. "You're done. Goodbye."

I exited and tried to walk as calmly as I could to the restroom. I was shaking and on the verge of tears. I didn't think she could cause trouble for me with the LOFTY program, but I wasn't sure. And would she keep Will away from me? As I splashed water in my face, one thing she said came back to me: "my son is in love with you." If I could hold on to that, maybe I could calm down enough to get through the rest of the day.

I somehow made it through until five o'clock. When I got home, I told my parents I wasn't feeling well and went to my room to lie down. I hadn't been there long when I heard my phone ringing on the dresser.

I picked it up and saw Will's ID. "Hi," I answered, a little nervously.

"Liz, are you at home? I need to see you." He sounded upset. "I'll be there as soon as I can, OK?"

"I'll be here."

Will called me when he arrived and asked me to come downstairs. When I opened the front door, he stepped in and hugged me. "Can we sit outside and talk?" he asked.

As we sat on the stoop of my building, Will put his arm around my shoulder and I leaned into him. People were hanging out up and down the street while music blared, one of my neighbors repaired his car, and Ashley and another girl played jacks on the sidewalk.

"My neighborhood is so much quieter than this," Will observed.

We held each other for several minutes before Will spoke again. "I know my mother went to see you, Liz."

I didn't know how to respond.

Will lifted my chin with his hand so he could look me in the eyes. "I'm so sorry she said what she said to you. She had no right to say those things."
"I wonder how she knew about the fight and about Dee," I said.

"I think she learned about the fight from Mike's mom. As for Dee, my godfather called her. He thought she should know that he was taking on a case that involved George. He said he was doing it as a favor to my girlfriend, and my mom wanted to know what girlfriend he was talking about."

"Why would Mike's mother talk to her about what happened in Hunsford?"

"Because…” Will looked down. "Mike and I got into a big conflict there, and we weren't speaking to each other for a while."

"Why?" I asked. And then it hit me. "He's the one who couldn't understand what you saw in me."

Will didn't answer, but his face gave it away. Some of the hurt I had felt that last Sunday in Hunsford came back. "When you first told me you liked me, why did you repeat what Mike said?"

Will shook his head. "I'm sorry I said that, and I've regretted it ever since. To be fair to Mike, I think he thought he was defending Anna. But he did it by putting you down. I was so mad at him that night, I almost hit him. Still, I was nervous and unsure about whether you liked me, so in the back of my mind, I wondered if he was right."

"Was he?" I asked sharply.

Will placed both his hands on my face and looked at me with his gorgeous eyes. "No, not at all! No, you were right about me. I was arrogant and conceited, and I really didn't have a right to be. The things you said, and what Sheila said to me, made me face that for the first time."

"Some of the things your mother said to me really hurt," I said. "She thinks I'm going to bring you down."

Will caressed my cheek. "Liz, my mother grew up around here, and she had a rough childhood. You already know that both her brothers are in prison, and her sister has three kids by three different men. Mom is the only one who finished high school, and she worked her way through college. She feels like she barely made it out, and has this fear of ending up back where she came from. That's what scared her so much about what happened between George and Jenny. I told her that you're not her, your family is not her family, and that I'm a better person because of you."

"She doesn't want me to see you."

"I don't care. She told me about her threat, too. I told her that if she ever did anything to hurt you, I would cut off my relationship with her."

I sat up and looked at him. "Will, you don't mean that!"

"Yes, I do. There's nothing she can do to me. I have money of my own, and college is paid for. But she would never want to lose me, so I know she's not going to do anything to you. Thank you, by the way."

"For what?"

"For standing up to her. I know she can be intimidating. I don't usually stand up to her very well, but hearing how you did gave me the courage to do the same thing."

I smiled a little. "Your mother said something else. She said you're in love with me. Is that true?"
"What do you think?"

"I hope it's true, because I'm in love with you."

Will grinned. "I thought it was obvious."

I smiled back. "It would still be nice to hear you say it."

Will looked at me with such warmth in his beautiful eyes that it took my breath away. His hand still caressing my cheek, he said, "I love you, Elizabeth Bennet. I love you very much."

I kissed him. I know what my mother is always saying about acting that way in public, but at that moment I didn't care. I heard Ashley say, "Ooh, Liz, you're kissing!" Will and I both started laughing as we let go of each other.

"So," I said. "What did you and my father talk about last night?"

"I can't tell you. Man to man stuff."

"Oh, come on! I really want to know!"

"Nah, you don't need to know!" Will said teasingly.

I tried to give him a sweet, pleading look and he burst out laughing. "That's not going to work! I'll just tell you this: he knows I love you, and he approves."

I put my arms around his waist, and he squeezed me tight. "I love you, too, William Darcy. And I think you and I are going to be striving to reach our lofty dreams together," I said.

Will leaned his forehead against mine and kissed me. "Definitely."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I would love to hear any comments or feedback you have.

I did write a sequel to this story back in 2009 (since my D&E are obviously too young to get married and live happily ever after at the end of Lofty Dreams, I wanted to explore what came next). I will hopefully find time to revisit and revise that story and post it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!