A Sure Thing

by catie56 (catharsis)

Summary

A modern re-telling of the classic story.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

The bell over the door clanged rather than jingled, and at quarter to eight in the morning, even in a hamlet like Meryton, it was clanging merrily, announcing the arrival of yet another resident in search of caffeine or conversation.

“Medium, extra hot, mocha, no foam, nonfat.” Elizabeth rattled it off like she was counting to 10. “And a muffin. That one.” Her fingernail clicked on the glass case as she pointed. Jonathan held up a cup—the small. “No,” she said. “I want a medium. I’m desperate for caffeine.” She added a bright smile to hide the fact that she wanted to strangle him.

‘Jonathan’ held up the correct size. “Mocha, extra hot, no foam, nonfat.” He flipped his ponytail and turned around. She’d known him as a child: babysat for him a few times and seen him in her younger sister’s fourth—no third—grade play. From somewhere in the back, she could hear John Lucas’ voice on the phone, ordering supplies, arranging something for later in the week. The shop was family owned; the only one in their small town. She’d been coming here for years, since the Lucas’ seasonal ice cream stand had been renovated to stay open in the winter, before Meryton had leapt aboard what John called ‘the espresso express’ and started speaking something that might once have been Italian. Elizabeth waved to the fourth person she’d run into this morning who remembered her from her days in pigtails and OshKosh B’gosh.

When Jonathan turned around, he held out his hand and said, with no enthusiasm, “Two-fifty. Anything else?”

With a sigh, she shook her head. It was his fifth day and the fifth time she had tried for a muffin, to no avail.

A cough came from behind her. A deep one, impatient. “She wanted that muffin.”

“Oh, nevermi-” Turning around, she met his eyes.

He had a nice face—not the kind that makes a girl swoon, although she felt a little lightheaded from whipping around to look at him. His was the kind of face that you find handsome over time, the kind that’s heart-stopping at the right angle, and radiates authority when paired with a well-cut business suit. Or maybe that was because his eyebrows were raised in challenge. Nice eyes, though, she thought. Green? No, hazel. Annoyed.

“You don’t want it?” He managed to make it an insult. “You should just speak up. I won’t stand for this kind of incompetence.”

“Actually,” she stage whispered, surreptitiously taking her change and giving him a sidelong glance, “this is his fifth day, and the fifth forgotten muffin. I’m prepared to settle for simply getting coffee—on the first day I got a large iced tea.” She smiled ruefully.

“Hmph.” Now it was his turn to attempt to get Jonathan’s full attention. “Double tall latte, nonfat, no foam, and that—” he flicked his finger on the glass, the sound cracking in Elizabeth’s ears —“muffin.”

A definite air of confidence and power rang out in the tone of his voice, which was neither loud nor cutting. Still, Jonathan bagged the muffin and handled the money in a flurry of activity that amazed Elizabeth. He hadn’t moved this fast since Lydia had chased him around the school hallway for the last gingersnap after that third grade musical.
Mr. Business looked at her. “I guess it’s all in how you ask.” Did he just wink? She turned and followed him, holding the muffin-filled bag he had dropped in her hand.

“You didn’t have to do that. I really can’t accept this.” The whole interaction was a bit surreal.

“Consider it payment for those four you missed.” He smirked.

She looked away, no response coming to mind. “You just have to know what you want and other people will too.” He looked at her pointedly.

She shook her head, loose ponytail shaking behind her and wisps flying around her face. “Don’t I look like someone who knows what she wants?” she tried to be condescending, but it came out sounding appalled.

He just kept looking at her. When he finally opened his mouth, the other employee behind the counter called her name. In three steps, she was away from those eyes. As she glanced at him over her shoulder, he finally spoke.

“I assumed you’d share with me.” It was demanding, not inviting, his eyes boring into hers.

She smiled, the syrupy sweet one—almost an imitation of Jane—but her sister never smiled with such thinly veiled annoyance. Elizabeth’s skirts swirled around her legs as she turned to give him her full attention.

“I guess it’s all in how you ask.” Completing the twirl, she pushed the door and walked into the bright morning sunlight, and the sound of the bell ringing made her laugh sound like music.

---

Elizabeth stood in the main room of Charles’ rental house, looking over the bookshelves that somehow, impossibly, held only books she’d already read or would never choose. Not even a magazine—and for a girl who read The Economist, Time, and even occasionally (and ironically) Martha Stewart Living, this was saying something. Wasn’t Charles in business? Wasn’t he contractually obligated to read Forbes in the interest of protecting his wealth? She knew, just knew, that Darcy was hiding the New York Times somewhere. She was almost desperate enough to ask him for it.

Last night had been brutal, between her worry over how severe her sister’s cold was proving to be and the awful conversation that had lasted far too long. Had she really resorted to asking for a recipe for salad? Elizabeth sighed, and stood on tiptoe to see the top shelves. Maybe there was some kind of mystery novel hidden up there.

She thought back to two evenings before. Caroline had been, well, nothing out of the ordinary, she guessed. The woman could talk. It didn’t matter that Darcy was emailing his sister, that Elizabeth was trying to lose herself however briefly in some history book about the Spanish-American War (likely printed only shortly after it had ended, from the dust and mildew on the pages). Caroline went on and on about Georgiana Darcy, how she must be so tall now, how good her piano playing must be. Even Elizabeth, with her cursory knowledge of Darcy’s mannerisms, knew that he was rapidly losing patience.

Hurst was a non-entity, piling up cans of beer and grunting at whatever sporting event was televised at that moment. Louisa wasn’t much better, although she at least had been good enough to page through some gossip magazine looking at the pictures, every so often cooing about some gown she had to have. Elizabeth wasn’t sure Louisa would ever get to wear the outfits even if she did buy them; even the private boxes at sports stadiums didn’t require that level of dress, and she couldn’t believe Hurst would take Louisa anywhere else. Elizabeth paused in her examination of
the shelves. The magazine. No, she thought, I will not stoop that low. I am not that bored. Besides, with all the flashing of dress wear that night, she’d pretty much seen all that was inside.

She thought for sure it couldn’t get worse, but last night had vaulted right past the first in the “hell on earth” competition. Between Caroline’s insistence that Elizabeth try some weird yoga position (she was certain that “Llama Lunge” was something Caroline’s instructor was trying to get into the lexicon) and Darcy’s comments about her figure, of all things, it had been painful and weird.

They had argued about their faults, which Elizabeth felt were pretty self-evident in Darcy’s case and certainly not worthy of discussion. He was proud. He was resentful. By his own admission, he wasn’t very forgiving. Yet he seemed to think that pride was something that was his due, had been earned. What had he said?

“When it’s true, there’s no reason to be ashamed of being cleverer or faster, or generally better than others. It’s not a failing if it’s accurate.”

The arrogance! It was clear he was controlling, the authority on everything that happened in that house, even if he was only a guest. From the way Caroline deferred to his preferences (he didn’t want to play games last night, so they didn’t), to how Charles tried desperately to avoid a fight (“This discussion is a little too heated, isn’t it? Anyone for some ice cream?”), they all treated him like some father-figure cum superhero, whose decisions were not to be questioned. She had taken to disagreeing with him just to be contrary. Also, it was amusing to watch Caroline try to appease him when she did it.

That interaction had afforded her the first glimpse of his smile. It confirmed that he had teeth, nice even, white teeth, obviously the product of good genetics and not orthodontia. She had involuntarily smiled in response, only because he had been so sardonic, so slyly insulting to Caroline—and also to her! She grimaced in remembrance.

Charles was the one bright spot. He was suitably caring toward Jane, asking about her health, offering to go to the pharmacy, unearthing cans of soup from the pantry. Elizabeth was very pleased to see how attentive he was, how his first thoughts were for Jane. She was sure they would be seriously dating before long.

Of course, if Darcy could just stop staring at her, the whole experience would be better. From that first day in the coffee shop, when his eyes had so captured her attention, she found that whenever she looked in his direction, he was already locked on her. She stopped in front of mirrors to check her teeth. She unconsciously smoothed her hair when he walked into a room. She picked at dirt on her skirt. Elizabeth couldn’t wait to go home, where she could be blissfully unconcerned about her appearance. This weekend was taking forever.

Even now, Darcy was sitting just behind her, had come in during her contemplations and was—yes! He was!—reading the Arts & Leisure section of the Times. Elizabeth unobtrusively pulled a volume from the shelves, The Grapes of Wrath, and settled into the wingback chair next to him, furious that he’d been hiding the Times and not sharing. Just as she cracked the spine, he stood up. Without even a glance, he walked out through the arched entryway, the click of his loafers sharp on the polished hardwood. She glared after him for a split second, then her lips curved into a wide smile.

He’d left the newspaper.
Chapter 2

An important fact about Meryton: nearly all of its residents were either related to each other, married to each other, or about to be one or the other.

Consequently, Meryton’s citizens all knew just enough about their neighbors to gossip with the authority and malice found only amongst family.

Elizabeth was surrounded by the usual suspects at her aunt’s house, although a few additions to the regular lineup made the conversational prospects brighter than normal.

Save one. She sighed inwardly and accepted a glass of wine from Bill. The appraiser sent to evaluate her father’s holdings had arrived a few days earlier—just after that ridiculous dinner turned weekend away with the Bingley siblings. He had declared he would stay for two weeks to look over the books, the properties, and apparently, the young women in residence at Longbourn Development Company. His prospects with the Bennet sisters might have been better if only he could talk about something other than Catherine de Bourgh, his boss, Ms. de Bourgh’s generous employment policies, the incredible family benefits she bestowed on her employees, and her own extensive property holdings.

Elizabeth’s father, of course, found Bill incredibly amusing in his devotion to the de Bourghs and Bill’s unabashed and pathetic attempts at flirting with the Bennet girls. Her mother had sized up his husband potential and was plotting matrimonial bliss for Elizabeth. As Bill fell onto the couch next to her, Elizabeth wondered what, precisely, her mother thought made him so appealing.

“Beth,” he began earnestly, over-starched white shirt scratching against her bare arm where they—to her chagrin—touched, “have I told you already how much I think you would absolutely love the trails around Ms. de Bourgh’s house?” He sloshed a bit of his own wine onto his black pants, narrowly missing her pale green skirt.

She tucked the skirt under her legs and moved fractionally farther away from him. Typically she would try to manipulate this conversation into a more amusing direction, but she’d already had her fun with him today.

“Yes, Bill,” she answered, “you may have mentioned it. Have you told—and” she spotted someone coming their way, “Hillary yet? Hillary Long, Bill Collins. He’s quite the traveler!” Okay, so that was a stretch. “Bill, Hillary has always wanted to see more of the countryside. I’m just going to go…” she glanced around helplessly, “over there. Enjoy yourselves!” And she was free.

Thankful that her mother was not here to witness that less-than-graceful escape from the oh-so-eligible Bill, Elizabeth scanned the room for distractions, which typically came in the form of sisters. Jane was chatting with their good friend Charlotte, and their heads were bent to examine Charlotte’s newest pair of shoes. Mary, next in line, was busy arguing with their uncle over the music they were playing—something new-age and jazzy—undoubtedly Mary was pushing for a more “refined” selection. Lydia and Katie, sitting with their aunt, were sampling the appetizers and ogling the town newcomers: a group of fit, tanned young men. Thank goodness the construction crew was hired for a short-term job and the men were only passing through Meryton. Elizabeth wasn’t sure her barely-legal sisters should have quite so much access to quite so many attractive men.

“It’s a good vintage for a rainy night, don’t you think?”

She jumped a bit; the voice had come from behind her and was rather sultry for the current setting.
Then, as she recognized George Wickham, she smiled.

“Actually, I’ve barely tried it. Is it raining? Seems warm to me.”

George was a terrific flirt, and he answered her in the same manner she’d addressed him, bantering about the weather and the party. All the while, Elizabeth was hoping he would fill her in on the real topic that interested her: Darcy.

Elizabeth first encountered George earlier in the week at the coffee shop when Lydia had been “studying” at a table near him. Eventually, after Elizabeth came in and sat down with her sister, Lydia’s attempts to strike up a conversation paid off, and George introduced himself.

When Darcy and Charles walked in, things got interesting. It was a small shop; the two men were hard to miss, especially since they were tall, imposing, attractive, and the subject of most of the town gossip these days. It wasn’t their entrance that was surprising; it was the cold fury on Darcy’s face when he saw George. George’s sudden sputtering of his coffee, red face, and incoherent mumbles only added to the mystery. Elizabeth hoped one of them—ideally the more talkative of the two—would be here tonight so she could finagle the info out of him.

“So,” he took a sip of his wine, “did you manage to get the coffee stain out of your jeans?” He had spilled some on her during what Elizabeth privately referred to as “The Showdown”. She nodded.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. I assume you know Darcy pretty well, if you’ve spent much time with him during his stay here. How long has he been in town?” He was looking at her intently, and she was pleased to have gained his interest so completely.

“About a month or so. We usually see each other at the coffee shop, that’s all. My sister is friends with Caroline, and we had to stay with her and her brother for a couple nights a few weeks ago. He was there too.”

“Darce is pretty hard to live with, isn’t he?” George smirked and took another drink.

“He’s very… aloof,” Elizabeth said carefully. “We were there by accident; Jane and I went for dinner, she got sick, and I can’t drive her car—standard transmission.” She shrugged. “Charles insisted that we just stay, but I think he was the only one excited about it. Darcy, especially, seemed to think he made too big a deal over it.”

Elizabeth frowned, thinking back to how enthusiastic Charles had been, calling it their “Welcome Weekend,” as though these seven adults needed to have a slumber party, play truth-or-dare, and eat junk food together to get along civilly in this small town. Or maybe he just thought his sisters were still fourteen. They did kind of act like teenagers.

In any case, Charles had been so earnest and smiling, and Jane so sniffly and pathetic that they had all agreed just to make the two of them happy.

“Does the town share your opinion? I noticed he wasn’t here tonight.” George inclined his head a little toward her.

Elizabeth recalled a month’s worth of run-ins at the coffee shop. Nearly every day they’d passed each other, waited in line, reached simultaneously for their drinks. Still, even when she tried to be friendly, even when she tried to overcome that first, challenging meeting, he seemed uninterested. He tapped the keys on his Blackberry, perused the front page of the New York Times, inspected his fingernails. Practically the whole town was there in the mornings, chatting before work, curious and attentive. They all played witness to his detached behavior; and they laughed when
she cracked jokes about it after he stalked out.

On the days when Charles and Jane were there—mercifully providing some distraction—Darcy would at least pretend to be a part of the conversation. She would catch him scrutinizing her, but only when she turned too quickly, before he could look away. She glared back, a silent challenge to him to reach across that rapidly growing chasm of dislike and disagreement and take part in the community. After that, he grew even more standoffish, offering brief replies to Jane’s quiet questions, pointed digs at Charles’ effusions, and sarcastic quips to her witty barbs.

George said her name, pulling her back into the present.

“Oh, we all love Charles, but Darcy’s not very well liked. He’s rather proud of himself, isn’t he?”

“Rather.” He grinned and winked his left eye very quickly.

Elizabeth smiled, feeling exceptionally witty and smart.

George turned serious. “But I’m glad the town has been able to see that. Darcy usually just impresses people with his wealth or frightens them with his manners. Clearly you’ve seen through that, Beth.”

She could overlook the nickname—although anyone else would get a sharp look and instant correction—when he complimented her perspicacity like that.

Smiling demurely, she replied, “Well, it hasn’t been long, but even knowing him just a bit, I’m certain he’s not very nice. Does this mean we won’t see you around very much while he’s in town?” She attempted a slight pout.

George cocked his head to the side and looked bemused. “Oh, no. I have no reason to avoid him. Darce can stay out of my way.” He smiled ruefully. “It’s really my story to tell anyway, not his. Mr. Darcy--his father--was quite the mentor to me as a boy.” He sighed, shook his head and took another sip. His eyes turned toward the floor as if he were collecting himself.

“Oh.” Elizabeth tried to look appropriately understanding; at the same time, her curiosity was nearly overwhelming. She rested her hand on his arm, trying to convey sympathy and caring. George smiled.

They were distracted for a moment by the change in music; Mary had apparently found some method of persuading Uncle Kevin to get rid of the jazz. Elizabeth grimaced as tinkling piano music assaulted their ears. George laughed at her expression, and Elizabeth couldn’t help smiling in response.

“It’s so nice to be around friendly people again! Makes me glad I took the job here. I never intended to work in construction, but, well, sometimes life takes you on a different path. Or I guess I should say someone—“ here he winked again, more suggestively, “put me on that other path.”

“No!” she gasped.

“Yes!” he mimicked, laughing. “Mr. Darcy really wanted me in the family business. I even studied finance for awhile. Wanted my MBA. But, you know, Darce and I grew up together.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Maybe I was a little too open about expressing how I felt about him. You know me, you see how I am; I’m a friendly guy, open about how I feel.” Here George smiled again, full lips curving up, a dimple emerging, one of his eyeteeth a little uneven, a little turned out. He spread his arms out before him, the drink in his hand tipping precariously. “Well, we’re very different, and if Darcy chooses not to honor someone else’s promises, what can I do?”
Now George raised his eyebrows and widened those bright blue eyes to her, his expression one of innocence.

“But doesn’t anyone else know about this? I don’t understand how he could keep that a secret.” They had moved over to the hors d’oeuvres now, and she was halfway through her second glass of wine. George had switched to rum and coke.

He gave her a very expressive look. “People know. The promises were actually made to my father, who was very, very loyal to Mr. Darcy. A real “company man.” I don’t think you understand how much Darce dislikes me. It must boil down to jealousy; his father liked me quite a lot, it must have been hard for him.” That George could still express that kind of compassion made him even more attractive. He chomped down on a chip covered with guacamole. “But he’s not the sort of person who… well, let’s just say he’s not the sort to compete for attention.”

She took a sip. “I thought he was rude. Proud. But… not so…” the wine made her head a bit fuzzy and she couldn’t find the right word. “Mean. Small.” George smiled and took another drink. “I mean you would think pride would make him want to honor your father’s loyalty.” She looked up into George’s smiling eyes.

“Oh, he has pride!” George chuckled. “Company pride; he takes very good care of his employees and he’s very much interested in expanding what they do. He’s very proud of his sister, and a lot of folks take that to mean that he’s a good brother.” He raised his eyebrows again.

“What’s she like, his sister?”

George smiled fondly, tilting his head a little, as if in reminiscence. “When she was younger, she was so fond of me. We spent a lot of time together.” He shook his head. “Now, though.” He sniffed. “She’s a snob. Not the same at all.”

It felt like, now that she had started listening to George, she couldn’t possibly know enough about Darcy, even if every word George said made her wish she’d dumped coffee all over him that first day. Elizabeth tucked her hair behind her ear and peered up at George’s tan face.

“How can someone like Darcy be friends with Charles?” The logic of this defied her wine-soaked brain. George had refilled her glass while he was talking. She set it on a nearby table.

“Well Darce certainly knows how to make people like him, even if he doesn’t always try very hard. He’s a different man with people he wants to impress, people like him.” George sniffed again. “But we’re not all worthy enough for the Great Darcy.”

Bill had left them to their conversation for quite some time, but apparently Hillary Long (and numerous other ladies) had grown bored with him, to the point that they had decided to foist him back onto Elizabeth. Bill and Hillary were crossing the room, Bill with a silly grin on his face, and Hillary with eyes narrowed at Elizabeth, who suspected she’d earned the glare by talking for so long with George.

Bill swung his arm toward Elizabeth’s shoulder, but she sidestepped him carefully, and he lurched awkwardly, nearly putting his elbow in the vegetable dip. Meanwhile, Hillary had sidled up to George, batting her eyelashes as she reached in front of him for a carrot.

“Beth!” Bill began warmly, clearly a bit emboldened by his conversations with other women and the drink in his hand. “I think this is exactly the kind of party that Ms. de Bourgh would like! Friendly people! Good conversation!” He smiled his goofy smile at her, and she tried to avoid standing near enough that she could smell his breath.
“Catherine de Bourgh?” George glanced up from Hillary’s question about where he worked out. He tilted his head toward Elizabeth. “You know she’s Darcy’s aunt, right? She’s got some master plan to connect their businesses; it involves her daughter… they’ve been planning it for ages. Ages.” He looked at her pointedly, but his face was just a little too close to hers for her to be comfortable.

“And,” George grinned, “she’s not very nice at all. Very bos-say.” He started laughing here, and swung his hips, and Hillary began laughing too, pulling him off toward the couch.

As she and Jane drove home with their sisters that night, Elizabeth stared out at the darkened streets. The other girls were all rather boisterous in the car, but she was quiet, contemplating everything she’d learned. George was… and Darcy…the whole story just… it was too much to think about this late at night.

She would clearly need a second opinion before deciding what to do.
Chapter 3

The hay was making her nose itch. Every year, Elizabeth suffered silently during the Harvest Festival, when Meryton was overtaken by hay bales, which were stacked at regular intervals around the main town park, on street corners, and all along her route to work. She rubbed her nose while she and Jane waited in line for funnel cake—with Bill.

“Okay, so what do you think?” She leaned in as if throwing down the gauntlet. “How can we continue to treat him normally when he’s hurt our friend?” The conversation was whispered, the continuation of several days of speculation.

“Oh, well,” Jane sighed and nervously played with the fastener on her wool coat. “I’m sure there’s been a big misunderstanding. We can’t really know.” She bit her lip and her eyes scanned the park, presumably for Charles.

“I think we can know, actually,” huffed Elizabeth. “It’s not that hard to blame someone. Although it would be nice if there were some evidence of what happened.”

Elizabeth’s curiosity—and a suggestion from Charlotte—compelled her to take an extra “coffee break” when Bill had somehow been distracted by another employee. She waded through online press accolades for Darcy’s charity work, his sister’s volunteer activities, and estimations of their family wealth, even obituary notices for his parents. George’s name had revealed very little; a MySpace page that she was sure he hadn’t updated in quite awhile—those pictures of him in Miami had to have been taken long ago—and a brief mention of him in conjunction with some investigation in a state farther south. Also, there were apparently a large number of George Wickham’s in Canada, so it was hard to be sure the last one was him. Anything earlier than the past three years required a subscription, which she didn’t have. The whole 15 minutes had been a huge dead end.

“But is he—” they had taken to calling Darcy by that ambiguous pronoun, stated rather ominously, as though he were the only male in the area “—is he really that bad? I mean, his friends really like him. They can’t be so mistaken.” Elizabeth sighed at Jane’s words. It was clear what was really at stake: Jane’s good opinion of Charles.

“Maybe the friends were mistaken. George was pretty clear about what happened when he told me. Why would he lie about that?”

“It’s just so hard to know for certain.” Jane whispered.

“I think it’s quite easy,” opined Elizabeth, as Bill once again demanded they pay attention to some insignificant aspect of the festival. “But still, see what you can find out from Chuck.”

Bill had been shadowing her for days; Elizabeth was starting to wonder if the appraisal was even close to being completed. He turned up in the mornings and she barely escaped to the coffee shop before he could monopolize her time. At lunch he talked at her through mouthfuls of half-chewed food. By the afternoons, he pretended to speak to her about “business,” but it was all an excuse to read over her shoulder. Elizabeth’s normally well-rounded world was spinning off its axis.

It had been a mistake, a moment of temporary insanity, when she’d mentioned the annual Harvest Festival as the highlight of the fall. Kids in costumes, adults sipping spiked cider. She’d had her first kiss with Johnny Lucas behind one of those strategically placed hay bales, and her win at the pumpkin carving contest when she was 10 was the stuff of legend. Well, personal legend, but memorable all the same. She had pictured herself holding hands with George this year, taking
home a stuffed animal from his win at the ring toss, maybe stealing a few more kisses behind those hay bales. Telling Bill about it had been—she groaned, remembering how he’d oohed and ahhed over the idea for days—well, she was just so looking forward to it she couldn’t help but talk about it. Even Darcy couldn’t spoil the evening for her, not if George would be there to balance the Darcy arrogance with his easygoing humor. Darcy. He was sure to be here tonight, and she was hoping for the chance to get him behind the hay and ask him some pointed questions.

Charles had decided to become the first ever corporate sponsor of the event. She recalled his mega-watt smile last week over coffee as he disclosed to Elizabeth and Jane that he’d heard from William Lucas that money was a bit tight this year.

“I decided, why not?” There was the irrepressible smile. Sometimes she thought he had veneers. “I would hate to see something like this tradition go away simply because there isn’t enough money to cover all the little expenses.”

“Oh, of course.” Darcy finally entered the conversation, smirking at Charles. “What a travesty if there aren’t enough apples to go in that filthy tub of water for little kids to stick their faces in, lose their teeth, and for what? Only to win a piece of candy. An absolute shame.” And then he was typing away again on the Blackberry.

Elizabeth had been stunned. So had Jan Goulding, the Festival’s activities chair, sitting directly behind them, her mouth hanging open, as she frantically crossed something off a list in front of her.

And so now there would be no bobbing for apples tonight. Did the man hate fun? Was he planning on ruining everything? He was off to a good start: George wasn’t here. One of the other crew members had slyly mentioned that maybe it was because someone else would be there. Of course. Was Darcy some sort of misery enforcement officer?

As she danced with Bill, averting her face and holding her body as far away from him as humanly possible, she could see Darcy standing to the side of the dance floor, next to Caroline. He was looking into the distance, watching—oh no, Lydia and Katie flirting and somehow exposing innocent children to something those kids shouldn’t see for a few more years. Apple bobbing was nothing in comparison to this.

The song ended, and she took Bill to get cider and talk with Charlotte. Bill was distracted by one of the craft booths, and Elizabeth slipped over to the line at the Lucas’ booth. “Charlotte!”

“Liz! You want the usual?” Elizabeth nodded.

“Take your time. I’m trying to hide out for a bit… “ She sensed him, rather than saw him approach. Then he was at her elbow, tall and wrapped in some kind of designer wool coat and beautiful angora scarf.

“Elizabeth.” Darcy’s voice drew her eyes to his. It was that same register as always, low and sharp, like he put so much effort into crisply pronouncing every syllable. “Come dance with me.”

Was it a question? She could only continue to look at his eyes; they were somehow brighter at night, with the twinkling lights of the festival reflected in them. And then she was nodding, accepting him—wait, accepting him?

“Finish your cider. I’ll come back in a few minutes.” He was gone again and she whirled around to face Charlotte, who was grinning.

“Relax. You’ll have fun. He’s a lot more interesting than George.” She added the last bit as
Elizabeth took one last sip of her drink and walked out to meet Darcy.

The band wasn’t too bad—a mix of town residents who played together every so often for these events. Darcy had timed it so they were playing a slower song, an REO Speedwagon cover that would usually make her cringe. He put his hand on her waist and she tried not to be distracted by the fact that he smelled really good. Cold, but really good, enough that her nose had stopped itching.

“Are we going to talk at all?” She said it to his chin, since looking up into those eyes was a dangerous game.

“I’ll talk about whatever you like.” He smiled then, and she focused on his shoulder.

“Well that’s a start. Don’t put too much effort into the conversation, Darce.” He squinted at the last bit, the nickname.

“Is it a rule that we have to talk? I don’t remember that one from my high school prom.”

“You have to talk a little bit. How awkward would it look for us to be standing here together, not saying anything? I’m not about to stare deeply into your eyes for ten minutes.” She figured it couldn’t hurt to at least establish one ground rule.

“So you’re trying to make me feel less awkward about this? Or is it that you feel awkward?” His scarf had some sort of print on it. Gray diamonds, darker and lighter—oh! She had to respond.

“Well it just seems so like both of us to only speak when we have something really important to say, something that will impress the other person. Small talk might be good for us. We can practice.” She thought that was challenging enough.

“That doesn’t sound anything like you.” He had somehow met her eyes. “But I suppose you think that’s pretty true of me.” They held the gaze for a moment, until she focused back on the scarf. How long was this song?

Then she noticed his hand was on the small of her back, her face much closer now to his neck than when they had started, her small hand warm in his grasp, pressed to his shoulder, her fingertips brushing the soft wool of his coat collar.

Something had to be done about this.

“There certainly are a lot of new people in town these days. Although you seemed pretty familiar with one of them already.” Elizabeth was close enough to feel his whole body tense at this, and his face seemed warmer now, heat radiating from where they were almost touching, nearly cheek to cheek.

“Well.” He paused. “You know what they say; familiarity breeds contempt.” The words were formed tightly, more than any she’d ever heard him say before.

“That was quite clear from my conversation with him.” This time she initiated the eye contact, a glare that was interrupted by William Lucas and his wife dancing closer to them.

“Beth! Doesn’t this seem like the most romantic Harvest Festival yet?” Darcy looked at him sharply. “I must say, your sister seems to think so.” His wife giggled as they waltzed off. Darcy was glaring at Charles, and Elizabeth twisted briefly to see them, dancing close together, Jane smiling dreamily.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you.” He looked apologetic as they resumed the rhythmic sway
they’d lost for a moment.

“It’s not ignoring if we’re both doing it.” The look on her sister’s face had struck Elizabeth deeply. *Romance.* She sighed.

“We could talk about books.” He was smiling again, gently this time, those lips curving up slightly and—

“No, I can’t think about reading right now.”

“Prefer to live in the moment?”

She peered up at him, recalling something he’d said once, when they were watching Caroline pose and posture in the living room at Charles’ house.

“I hold grudges. I’m not someone who can let things go easily.”

“You told me,” she began boldly, “that you were resentful, that you found it hard to forgive people. So you’re also careful not to let yourself be hurt too easily, right?”

“Yes.” He was frowning slightly at this non sequitur.

“And you’re never blinded by the things you want to see, by your own judgments?”

“I hope not.” The frown was deeper, some lines starting to form on his forehead.

“Because,” she looked up at his face again, “if people are not going to change their mind about something, or be forgiving, they should be certain that they’re judging correctly in the first place.”

“I agree.” He leaned in to whisper in her ear, his thumb brushing her sweater underneath her coat. “Why are you asking me this?”

The heat of his breath against her ear now caused her to stiffen. “I, uh, I want to know more about you.”

She felt the smile rather than saw it. “Why do you want to know so much?”

The band was slowing their tempo, finishing the song. Darcy pulled back and looked into her eyes, an unspoken challenge inhabiting the growing space between them. “Because.” Her voice was shakier than she would have liked. “I feel like I don’t know you at all.”

“No.” He was suddenly very grave. “No, I’m quite sure that you don’t.”
When he offered to pay for her coffee, that should have been her first clue that something was wrong. Bill sat across from her at the table facing Market Street. She was beginning to suspect that their knees kept bumping on purpose. It was starting to hurt.

He hadn’t stopped talking about how he thought her experience helping to manage her father’s properties could translate into a “killer job” at de Bourgh Financial Group, Inc. He knew of an open position right in her area, accounting. Wouldn’t she like to move to the city with him and work for the incomparable Ms. de Bourgh? He was certain that Ms. de Bourgh would love her, and her interview would be easy to arrange.

Elizabeth was trying to watch Mary King and George through the window of the hardware store across the street, but the late autumn rain obscured whatever they were doing at the counter.

Bill was off again, expounding on how the apartment he had was just too much in need of a woman’s touch, and how he thought that she would really love decorating it—they were on a budget though, so she would have to get used to living simply, at least until his absolutely certain promotion. This continued for awhile, and she watched George run out to his truck. They hadn’t spoken since that night at her aunt’s, and again she wondered why. Suddenly she saw him stop, as a girl with a colorful umbrella walked by. Lydia. She’s far too young for him, Elizabeth thought, with some concern for her impulsive baby sister, but if she’s decided he’s the one for her, he won’t have time for me. Even as a child, Lydia wasn’t one to share her toys with her sisters.

She contemplated her empty coffee cup for a moment. It was enough of a signal that Charlotte gravitated toward their table.

“Refill?”

“Oh, yes, thanks, how nice of you!” Bill exclaimed. Elizabeth seized the opportunity to jump in.

“Listen Bill, I’m not sure why you think I’m contemplating or desire a change in my position—and I’m not an accountant. I’m really very happy here, working for my father. Also, I think it’s a bit forward to suggest that we move in together. I mean… we’re not even dating. Doesn’t it violate some hiring practice anyway?”

Could she have been more clear?

Apparently so.

“Oh, well, there are lots of apartments you could get until you’re more comfortable with me. And why wouldn’t you want to work in the city? I mean your father is doing just fine, but really, this town is going nowhere and…”

Elizabeth tuned out his incessant noise, and looked away. He had this one smudge of chocolate on the side of his lip, and staring at it was making her twitch.

“Maybe I wasn’t clear before. Thank you for the offer, but I’m going to stay here, work for my father, and that’s it.”

He actually shook his finger at her as his mouth opened in that peculiar gap-toothed grin. “You know I’ve heard about this bargaining approach before. You’re hoping I’ll offer you a bigger salary! Well, I’m certainly flattered that you think I’m the one who can arrange that, but you’ll have to talk with human resources. I actually know a guy who works there. He’s great; very
helpful. We’ll have dinner when we get back and you can ask him all your questions.” He grinned at her and reached for her hand.

Elizabeth stood up hastily.

“Listen—thanks for the coffee, thanks for thinking of me for the job. But the answer is still no. Absolutely no. Excuse me.” She rushed off to the bathroom, the one place where she knew he couldn’t follow her. As she passed Charlotte, she whispered, “Can you go distract him for me, please?”

She washed her hands, fixed some wayward strands of hair, and dealt with some mascara dust under her eyes. Elizabeth peered at her reflection. She looked tired. *Maybe because Jane has spent every night this week talking about Charles.* She grinned ruefully. Charles was away on business, and Jane missed their daily run-ins over coffee.

When Elizabeth emerged from the bathroom, several things caught her eye at once. Charlotte’s coffee pot on her former table, Charlotte sitting next to Bill, scribbling notes down while he waved his arms in the air about something. Words drifted toward her, “rapid advancement… 401K… dog park…”

She noticed that behind Charlotte the counter area seemed crowded. No, it was just Darcy and Caroline. Caroline was wearing some flashy trench coat and very carefully pronouncing the words “soy latte” to Jonathan. Darcy, as always, was looking straight at her. Did he have some kind of radar?

Just as she made her way to the door, past where they were waiting, his Blackberry chimed. “Excuse me.” As he stepped outside she heard him ask softly, “Is everything all right? We’ll be there soon.” The gentle tone of his voice startled her. Elizabeth had never heard him sound that way before.

Caroline heaved an exasperated sigh and turned to Elizabeth. “The service here, you know? I’m so happy we’ll be back in the city tonight, where they take much better care of you.”

“Oh, you’re leaving then?” Elizabeth pretended to study the pastries.

“Absolutely. With Charles gone, there’s no reason to stay. Darcy offered to drive me, since Louisa and Hurst were going to some awful football game. Anyway, Darcy really misses his sister, and you know, we all just can’t wait to see her again. She’s so sweet, and smart… and she and Charles get along so well. I think it’s safe to say we’ll see a lot of her when we’re in town. We usually do.” She looked past Elizabeth and exclaimed, “Oh, Jane! I’m so glad to see you. I would hate to leave without saying goodbye!”

Sure enough, Jane had come in just as Caroline had started speaking about Darcy’s sister. Elizabeth had forgotten about their prearranged “save me from Collins” meeting time. The two of them—well, mostly Caroline—chatted about the holidays, and keeping in touch, and… did Caroline really say, “maybe a wedding by summer”?

Elizabeth turned her head as Darcy returned, making his way to pick up their drinks. He said not a word, but his eyes didn’t waver from hers, although he sidestepped a crying toddler, several empty chairs, and Mr. Johnson’s errant umbrella.

“Oh! Looks like we’re off then!” Caroline kissed Jane on each cheek. With a wave for Elizabeth, who was trapped in Darcy’s magnetic gaze and hardly noticed, Caroline left. Darcy stood holding the door open, just a moment too long, an unreadable expression in his eyes. Elizabeth couldn’t look away as his broad shoulders filled the door frame, the sound of the rain louder as he walked
out. The clanging of the bell over the door brought her back to reality, and Elizabeth shook away the disorientation and turned to Jane, who was staring out the window, a confused look on her face. Elizabeth heard the roar of the engine and spun back just in time to see his silver BMW pull away from the shop, the sleek edges of the vehicle undefined against the gray horizon. They were gone.

From the direction of her former table she could hear Collins ask, “Do you think you’ll need a place to stay when you get to the city?”

After a short pause, Charlotte replied, “You know, I think I might.”
Chapter 5

“If I do this, I’ll finally be able to get a golden retriever.”

The logic of that statement escaped Elizabeth, but it seemed all too clear to Charlotte. She equated getting a job at de Bourgh Financial Group, Inc. (or DBFGI, as they insisted on calling it), and moving into Bill’s apartment with her only shot at owning Harper—she had already named the dog!

“I know you’ve wanted a puppy since we were kids. I just fail to understand where Collins fits into all this—unless he’s the dog?” Elizabeth sipped her latte and looked at Jane, who was staring out the window at two high school kids embracing across the street.

“Collins—I mean Bill—has been really encouraging of me in this process. He’s offered me a place to stay in the city, and helped me see that DBFGI is a place that fits my career goals and ambitions. And he loves dogs.” She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows, a bit like a retriever might do. Elizabeth bit back a giggle.

“Since when are you so worried about your ‘career goals and ambitions?’”

“Liz, I’m a licensed CPA who works as a waitress in her father’s coffee shop. He won’t even let me help with the books, telling me John has to learn since the business will be his one day. Plus, you know he thinks that it’s better for me to settle down and have kids, rather than pursuing what he calls my ‘silly business ideas.’ I’m going nowhere here, I’ve got nothing. I have to get out.”

“It just seems so sudden. I mean, why haven’t you ever said anything to me about this?” Now Jane was watching Bobby Jackson and Lauren Sherwood as they shared a piece of cheesecake at the back of the coffee shop. She was also silently and meticulously shredding her fourth paper napkin.

“I have said things to you! Remember when I passed the exam and was looking for a job? Remember when I went on interviews every week for three straight months? I came back to help out for awhile after my dad’s health problems, but I always thought I’d be working somewhere else by now. I’ve wanted a job with a firm just like this one for years. You’ve known about this, Liz, even if you didn’t want to accept it.” Charlotte was ticking off examples on her fingers, her voice growing louder in the quiet café.

“The job might be perfect for you, though from the way Collins described it that company sounds like my nightmare. But you’re really going to live with him? With Collins? It’s very likely that he doesn’t wear deodorant. And don’t get me started on his eating habits. If he were just a geek, it would be one thing, but Char, the man’s a drone. I don’t think he’s ever had an original thought!” Elizabeth shook her head as she recalled all the half-eaten food she’d seen during his visit and his incessant mimicry of Catherine de Bourgh’s ideas on small business management.

“Just because you’re looking for someone who can help you with the Sunday Times crossword puzzle doesn’t mean I am.” Charlotte took a drink of her coffee. “We talked a lot when you stranded him here on his visit. He’s hardworking, he seems to like me, he lives in a two bedroom, rent controlled apartment that allows pets. I’m not looking for romance here, I’m looking for an out. Sometimes I think it’s better not to ask too many questions before you take these kinds of steps with people. If I knew all his flaws, I might hesitate, and I’d miss it. This might be the only ticket I get.”

Charlotte had always been practical; she was the girl who kept a first aid kit in her school locker,
the girl who covered her books with brown paper bags after the first night of school, the woman who had the phone number of a cab company programmed into her cell phone. Even her shoe collection, loafers, black pumps, and a pair of running shoes, was down to earth and functional. This decision to leave town, on her terms, with safety nets securely in place, seemed so very much like her, but Elizabeth still felt like Char was settling.

The two sipped their coffee in silence for a moment; Jane was folding her fifth paper napkin into an origami swan.

“All right.” Elizabeth finally ended the stalemate. “I’ll wish you good luck, then, and wait for you to call and invite me for a weekend away. When are you going?” Elizabeth kept a sigh to herself, choosing to be the supportive friend instead of the challenger.

“Maybe a month or so. Bill took my application for me, and he’s arranging an interview. He thinks I’ll get the position, and if I do, I’ll probably start in January. You’d really come visit?” Charlotte seemed eager to hear that Elizabeth wouldn’t completely write her off.

“Of course! Name the time and I’m there! Maybe I can even take a week off; you know my dad’s pretty flexible with schedules.”

“Well…” Charlotte hesitated and Elizabeth was suddenly nervous. “Part of the job includes developing training seminars for small businesses that work with DBFGI, including some on tax laws. I’m supposed to be doing my first presentation in April. Why don’t you sign up? It would be great to see a friendly face in the class.”

“Tax law? That’s not really my area. I mean, I work with the rents a little, and some on the development side of things, but it’s really more—“

“Please, Liz,” Charlotte begged. “I’m so excited about this, but I know I’ll be lonely. You don’t have to understand it, just take good notes and be supportive. Please?”

“You win, I’ll be there. E-mail me the info when you know more.” She smiled. They would have fun in the city, in a new setting. Elizabeth could understand how Charlotte might find Meryton suffocating; she’d had the same thought on more than one occasion.

“I’d better get back to the front. Break’s over.” Charlotte tilted her mug to get the final drops of coffee out. “Plus I think you’ve got your hands full with this one.” She tilted her head toward Jane, who with eyes closed, was humming along with the soft rock playing in the café: Bette Midler; this was trouble.

Elizabeth and Jane had spent two weeks in temporary exile from the Longbourn Development Co. and their parents’ home. Their mother had flown into a fit at Charles’ departure and Charlotte’s theft of what Mrs. Bennet referred to as “Beth’s Golden Ticket,” somehow likening Bill Collins to a corporate Willy Wonka. Well, he was certainly odd enough. The two women were unable to pass through the office doors or walk across the threshold of their childhood home without hearing about how disappointing it was to have such lucrative opportunities cruelly torn away from Rita Bennet’s “dear girls.” As to the wishes of the dear girls themselves, only one was truly pining the loss. Unfortunately, at the moment she was doing so rather conspicuously.

“Jane,” Elizabeth said, reaching for her hand. The tinny music was bad enough, but Jane was more than slightly off-key and people were starting to stare. “Jane, do you want to talk about it?”

The thing was that they had not really spoken about it before this point. Jane and Elizabeth were sisters, almost best friends, but not quite confidantes. They shared an extensive wardrobe, one of their father’s best rental properties, a fierce loyalty to each other, and several facial features, but
not much else. Jane, a glass-half-full, Feng shui-devotee and advocate of all things “balanced,”
didn’t always understand Elizabeth’s need to dissect people’s motivations and understand their
flaws. Jane loved the world and thought the world loved Jane; her lengthy list of friendly ex-
boyfriends supported this notion. However different Jane and Elizabeth were in their worldviews,
they were very similar on essential issues. Their love for each other overcame their disparities, but
understanding the other’s disappointment could sometimes be a challenge.

“Caroline called me today,” Jane said quietly as she idly swept the paper napkin confetti she’d
made into her empty coffee mug. “They aren’t coming back.”

“She waited two weeks to call and tell you that?”

“She was shopping when she called, so we didn’t get to talk very long. She was with Darcy’s
sister. I could hear her in the background talking about perfume.” Now Jane was compulsively
arranging sugar packets in the container on the table. Blue, pink, white, yellow.

“Look, I’m sure if they’re not coming back, it’s not because of Charles.” There, she had said his
name. They had been avoiding it since he left.

Jane looked up at ‘Charles.’ In addition to Charlotte’s spontaneous career change, Elizabeth had
been giving The Heartbreak Kid (as Elizabeth privately referred to him) serious contemplation.
Charles, for all his boyish good looks and bright smiles, clearly was easily directed by his friends,
and she was more than a little angry about it. If it affected only him, well fine; he could let Darcy
dictate what flavor of ice cream to prefer, for all she cared. But when it involved Jane, then that
was a horse of a different color. She was sure Charles liked Jane, and just as sure that his sisters
and friend did not.

“I just want everyone, and especially Mom, to stop talking about it.” Jane sounded a bit plaintive,
and Elizabeth might have taken her more seriously if she weren’t staring at her cell phone the
whole time. “He was really sweet, but things are going to go back to normal and there’s no use
regretting him.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows and held up the swan. “Normal?”

“Charles didn’t make me any promises, and I should know better than to get my hopes up. I’m
not a girl anymore; I know how relationships work.” Jane seemed determined to blame only
herself, while Elizabeth was convinced that there were more than two people involved in the Love
Ballad of Charles and Jane.

“Listen, to me, Jane.” Elizabeth attempted to be patient but could not keep her slight irritation from
slipping in. “Charles seemed like a nice guy and all, you’re being very kind about this and I
admire you for it. You know I love you, and I’m your number one fan, but it’s time to take off the
rose-colored glasses. You cannot keep placing everyone’s actions in a positive light. It seems to
me that most people act fairly irrationally, and have no clue how to make good decisions. And
I’m thinking of two very recent examples,” she said pointedly, “one of whom we were just
discussing, and one of whom is pouring coffee across the room.” Elizabeth was perhaps more
vehement here than was necessary, but she was also sick of finding mismatched condiment lids
around the apartment.

“I think Charlotte’s making a good decision,” Jane protested. “She’s following her heart.”

“She’s moving in with Collins, Jane! You’ve spent far too much time with him to pretend that you
don’t know about his game show obsession.”

“Whatever. Don’t distract me. I know you’re trying to make me think badly of Charles, and really,
you shouldn’t. It wasn’t meant to be. He was a good friend, that’s all.”

“Not as good a friend to you as his were to him,” Elizabeth harrumphed.

“What do you mean?” Jane gave her a sharp look.

“Just that I think he’s not much of a rational, pros versus cons kind of decision maker. He’s much more the ‘what should I do, buddy?’ kind of guy, and he asked the wrong buddy. Buddies,” she amended.

“Maybe they know what’s best for him. Maybe he really does like… someone else.” Jane whispered the last bit.

Elizabeth just looked at Jane, scarcely believing that four sentences of overheard conversation could throw someone into this kind of emotional upheaval.

Jane met Elizabeth’s gaze, and suddenly her hands were steady. “No matter what anyone else thinks, how could they possibly try and persuade Charles against his own feelings? If you keep trying to convince me of it, I’m only going to think poorly of whoever talked him out of liking me. I’d be much happier just getting over making a stupid mistake, having believed something was there when it wasn’t. That’s much better than believing that people were intentionally trying to hurt me. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Jane stood up. “We’ve been drinking too much coffee lately. I need some French fries or something.”

Elizabeth knew then that while they might not talk about it, it wasn’t over.

The Christmas holidays softened Rita Bennet’s resentment, and she ceased explicitly commenting on the events of the fall. Elizabeth and Jane were able to resume their regular work schedule and visits to their parents, their peace interrupted only by Rita’s inevitable criticisms on their weight, marital status or ingratitude for her excellent advice. Elizabeth participated in the Bennet traditions with her usual good cheer, but silently observed that Jane’s paper snowflakes were a little less intricate and her decorating a bit more subdued than in previous years.

In January, Jane left for a few weeks to visit their aunt and uncle with the almost-believable excuse of job shadowing their uncle, but Elizabeth knew she was only trying to be that much closer to wherever Charles was. Jane was full of brave talk about moving on, but she had yet to accomplish it, which Elizabeth noted while searching for the missing mayonnaise lid shortly after New Year’s.

A few weeks later, on a snowy February morning, Elizabeth sat across from her father, asking his approval for time away in April.

“A visit to the city. To see Charlotte. And this is work related?” He sounded dubious.

“I need some time away. She’s teaching a short course she thinks I would like.”

“Well if you need a break I’m not sure how spending time with Collins is going to provide it, but sure, honey, you can go.” He looked at her over his reading glasses when he finished signing the form.

“So…tax law?” She saw the twinkle in his eye.

She rolled her eyes in response. “Yep. Tax law.”
Chapter 6

Bill and Charlotte were sitting very close together, hands clasped, when she arrived at their apartment. Elizabeth wasn’t quite sure how Charlotte could stand it; every time Elizabeth had touched Collins (and there were but a few unavoidable instances) his clammy, sweaty hand completely soaked hers. Charlotte jumped up and embraced her happily, and Elizabeth was struck by how much she had missed her friend: their daily chats, late night movie fests, even just seeing her around town. She tried, but couldn’t outmaneuver Bill, whose awkward hug prompted an instant resolution not to be left alone with him.

A yellow ball of fluff was rolling around their feet, and even Elizabeth couldn’t deny that Harper was an adorable addition to the household, although the carpet revealed that maybe he was a bit of an annoying one, too. She wisely decided then and there to keep her shoes stowed safely away and all clothes off the floor. Bill carried her bags, and Charlotte spent half an hour as tour guide for the 1,000 square feet she now inhabited, detailing their plans for redecoration—hardwood floors for one—with Bill chiming in about how ‘his lovely Charlotte’ had such a good eye for these things and how he couldn’t wait to get out the spackle and get started. Charlotte nodded absently at this, swiftly moving onto another room and another interior design challenge. Harper just chased after them with a soggy tennis ball.

The evening passed a bit more slowly than Elizabeth would have liked. Finally, pleading fatigue from her trip plus the delicious food Charlotte had “cooked”—frozen lasagna, garlic bread and vanilla ice cream for dessert—the two women escaped Bill’s raptures over Charlotte’s culinary skills to move into Charlotte’s room to discuss the minutia of Meryton life. They discussed it all, including Jane’s recent trip to the city, and what Charlotte thought of the situation.

“Well, Caroline did try to meet her for coffee, so that was a nice gesture.” Charlotte shrugged.

“Sure, and then she stayed for five minutes, complaining that she’d forgotten an ‘appointment’ across town. Really, Char, the woman is either a complete airhead or she didn’t want to be there.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

“Or both!”

“That too.” Elizabeth smiled.

“Tell me something,” Charlotte began, “Why doesn’t Jane just call Charles? It’s not as though we’re kids and need a go-between to talk to boys. Jane’s a grown woman!”

“I’m with you! I told her that a few weeks before she left. She told me that Charles didn’t give her his number,” Elizabeth shook her head, “and that she didn’t want to pressure him into a relationship. Mom has her reading ‘The Rules’ again, so I’m sure that’s playing a role in her traditional approach to this—is it even a relationship?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Whatever it is, it’s completely messed up.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Anyway, Jane hasn’t talked to Caroline since she came back, and she hasn’t heard from Charles. She seems to be doing better, but I’ll find the oddest things to let me know she’s not herself yet.”

“Like what?”

“Last week she decided the “chi” in our apartment was off so she started moving furniture. That’s
fine; its typical Jane behavior, but she stopped halfway because she got distracted and when I left, her dresser was still in the dining room! I love her, but thank goodness she knows better than to move my things around! Who knows where they would end up?"

They laughed for a while longer about that, and Elizabeth told her of George’s slimy “man about town” behavior. “Last I heard, he was dating both Lydia and Mary King, though I’m not sure either one knows about the other. He’s quite the gift giver, too. Lydia is always showing off some new piece of jewelry or shirt or something. Oh well, he’s cute, but I have no desire to compete for his attention. Not against those two.”

“Do you still believe his story about Darcy then?” Charlotte took a sip of her Merlot and raised her eyebrows. She’d always been pretty skeptical.

“Sure. Why not? I mean, it’s not like Darcy ever said anything to challenge it. Once Darcy left, George really let loose. I’m not sure that Darcy really made sure that George was evicted from his apartment, but I do believe that he played a role in making sure George never worked for the Darcys again. Didn’t he seem a little… vindictive… to you?”

“No, just super serious. And really into you.” Charlotte grinned and mocked the intense stare Darcy had usually directed at Elizabeth.

“Oh, please,” Elizabeth laughed. “He was just mad that I didn’t fall at his feet that first day. I’m sure he doesn’t even remember me.”

They talked late into the night, covering everything from how the coffee shop was doing without Charlotte to how Longbourn’s houses were renting. As she tried to get comfortable on the rock-hard mattress and flat pillow, Elizabeth vowed to herself that she would seek out the best coffee in the city the next morning so that Charlotte wouldn’t be insulted by a student sleeping through her first seminar.

Apparently that coffee was to be found in the lobby of the DBFGI headquarters, a shiny modern building with an industrial feel. Some kind of upbeat folk music was playing over the speakers, still audible over the buzzing voices in the crowded vestibule. Elizabeth stepped up to the chrome counter, devoid of any community notices or flyers, and smiled at the young employee, taking a quick glance at his name tag before she asked, “How are you this morning, Brad?”

“Lenny! Is that order up yet?” Brad shouted at one of the many green-polo clad workers arranging ingredients behind him. Turning back toward Elizabeth, he asked, “What would you like?” He held a black marker, already poised to take Elizabeth’s order.

“Oh, well, just a medium mocha, non-fat milk, no foam, and extra hot, please. Do you have any muffins?”

“Whatever is in the case is what we have.” He had already made the notes on her cup and was punching something into the computerized cash register.

“Blueberry, then, although I feel bad about taking the last—“

He cut her off. “Three-seventy-five, ma’am.” His hand was already outstretched to take her money.

“Oh, let me see if I have an extra quarter in here…. I know I put one…”

“Great. What can I get for you, sir?” He had already shifted his attention to the next person in line. Elizabeth placed her exact change on the counter and stepped to the side as the man in a well-tailored suit issued his rapid-fire order to Brad, who was shuffling cups in time with the
Next to her, a smartly dressed woman was speaking quietly but urgently into her cell phone, “Mother, I know you’ve been arranging it for weeks, but they won’t want to sit through that… yes, I know he said that he wanted to see our training modules, but… well I’m still not sure why we have to attend all the sessions… fine, I’ll be there in a few minutes.” She snapped the phone shut as she moved to pick up her drink from the counter. Elizabeth looked up to see Charlotte and Bill waving her over frantically.

She calmly walked toward them, holding her drink with both hands, avoiding the well-heeled men and women standing in small groups, many of whom were furiously texting or holding phones to their ears, oblivious to the world around them.

“Liz! Were you just eavesdropping?” Charlotte took her elbow and guided her to the bank of elevators.

“That was Anne de Bourgh!” Collins was hissing more than just words, spitting on her as they marched through the foyer. “She’s the Senior VP of Operations, and you were standing right next to her! What was she talking about? Did she mention me?”

Charlotte shot him a look. “I wonder if she knows you’re with us? Oh, I hope she wasn’t offended.”

Elizabeth blinked. “I really don’t think she even noticed me. She was on the phone with her mom.”

Bill looked like he’d wet his pants, or maybe just found out that Christmas was coming early. “Catherine de Bourgh?! Could you hear what she was saying? Did she mention me?”

By the time they’d gotten into one of the crowded cars, Elizabeth was pretty sure she would need to make a stop in the bathroom to touch up her makeup from all the spit collecting on her cheek. Charlotte was *tsking* and clucking next to her, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, the coffee wasn’t even that good. If the muffin was as dry as she thought it was going to be, Elizabeth was considering slipping out to find something edible at the break.

They stood at the back of the elevator, so when it arrived at the conference room floor, Bill had to push through a crowd for them to get out. Elizabeth could hear the sounds of people talking in the hallway as they exited the car.

“Look, small business tax law isn’t even relevant to me. I run a multi-million dollar corporation. I just want to see the basic outline, and then we can talk adaptation and implementation. I don’t have a week to spend sitting in meetings. I’m a busy man, Catherine.”

She knew that voice, knew the clipped tone and precise words, which somehow, despite the low register, carried over—or was it under—the dinging of the elevator doors, Bill’s grunts and Charlotte’s apologies.

Elizabeth couldn’t help it. She had to look.

She turned her head and there he was, directly outside the conference room door—Darcy, his intense hazel eyes fixed on her own.
Chapter 7

At least Darcy had finally turned off his Blackberry. She wasn’t certain that the incessant cadence of his fingers drumming on the table was much better, though. Elizabeth silently apologized to Charlotte and surreptitiously made a number of marks on her yellow note pad. Pushing it in Darcy’s direction, she dropped her pen on it, and watched his face out of the corner of her eye.

Darcy glanced up quickly when he saw it, and studied it for a moment. Ian covered a grin with his hand.

‘I.’ Darcy made a single bold stroke with his fountain pen. Elizabeth removed it from his hand and wrote ‘I’ in the middle of the string of lines. The left side of his mouth quirked up in what she assumed was an expression of victory.

‘T.’ It was an obvious second choice, particularly given his first, and she gave a slight nod. He wrote it in himself, next to his initial guess, and then paused, waiting to see if she would add another. Now he pressed the pen to his mouth as if thinking very hard about the next letter he would choose.

‘S’ was wrong, and she added a circle to the page. It was quickly joined by another straight line when his offer of ‘G’ was rejected outright.

Two wrong answers had dampened his confidence and she feigned attention to Charlotte’s explanation of taxpayer ID numbers while he paused. ‘K’ eventually won out, and she acknowledged his guess by writing it in as the first letter, and again just ahead of the ‘I’ and ‘T.’ He raised his eyebrows, but it was clear that he was pleased with himself.

He had figured out the ‘N’ quickly after that, and also the ‘C,’ which both slid into their places after and before his hard-earned ‘K’s. Now she could feel, rather than see, him contemplate her out of the corner of his eye, although she continued to stare resolutely at Charlotte. She tipped her head toward him, and he seemed to understand the gesture.

‘O.’ He made the loop decisively, and she took the still-warm pen from his hand, filling in the rest of the first word and first letter of the last. Gently placing the pen on the pad, she waited. He took it up, wrote in the final two ‘F’s, and turned to her. Now she set her hand on the table and began drumming her fingers, just as he had before. Something resembling a hasty cough came from Darcy’s other side, and when they both turned toward Ian, he was bright red.

“Perhaps you should try a glass of water, Mr. Fitzwilliam,” Catherine de Bourgh drawled impatiently from the front of the room where she was observing Charlotte and chiming in whenever she saw fit—which was often. Ian stood up hastily, moved to the back of the conference room, and picked up the carafe, shaking his head in bemusement as he began to pour.

When Elizabeth returned her attention to the front of the room, she noticed more writing on the legal pad.

*How’s your muffin?*

He had to know that it was disgusting. She’d taken three bites and left it sitting out for the first hour and a half of the training, through the introductions and the icebreaker. She had been amused at Darcy having to announce two truths and a lie about himself, especially when she very quickly guessed that “skydiving is my favorite pastime” was the fabricated item of the three.
Still, the foray into the world of hangman that they’d just taken was less about starting up a conversation and more about forcing him to behave respectfully toward Charlotte as a teacher. And to stop that annoying drumming, which had been distracting. Now he was bouncing his leg so quickly that her chair was shaking. She put her hand on his knee and he tensed and stilled. It should have been a light touch, but her hand seemed to want to linger just a fraction of a second too long. He had surprisingly muscular thighs.

Elizabeth blushed. Quickly, she picked up the pen and drew a sad face at the end of his question. Darcy looked unaccountably disappointed.

Charlotte had just wrested control of the training back from Catherine (and Bill, who was in the front row nodding along and taking notes despite the fact that he’d assisted Char with the PowerPoint last night). “Moving on,” she was saying, “we’ll now talk about setting up your software to make your business as efficient as possible.”

There was a cacophony of chirping and beeping as laptops were opened and start up procedures commenced, and a brief look crossed Charlotte’s face which made Elizabeth wonder if this was what she had envisioned for the training.

Darcy, whose computer had been open for most of the morning, took the opportunity to reach into his briefcase and remove something that looked familiar. Ian coughed and shook his head. Darcy shrugged and indicated his empty email “inbox.” He’d been awfully productive in the early portion of the training, but Elizabeth had hardly noticed. Apparently he’d mastered “silent typing” in business school.

She recognized the challenge for what it was when a barely-begun crossword puzzle appeared over their abandoned notes. Shifting her eyes quickly between the presentation screen at he front of the room and Catherine de Bourgh’s effusions over how modern technology had vastly improved the business environment, she added “Etna” to 45 across.

He completed 45 down using the ‘e’ to make “eros,” and she moved to 18 across where she filled in “Rogers” for the clue “Ginger and Fred.” They continued in their diversion—Darcy momentarily sticking on 13 down, and Elizabeth hesitating at 27 across—until Charlotte’s voice rang out: “So after the break we’ll begin discussing the home office deduction. There are several important regulations you’ll need to keep in mind. We’ll see everyone back here at 1:30. Lunch will be in the employee cafeteria on the 3rd floor. We have several reserved tables.” Elizabeth, intent on showing Darcy she could keep up, only now realized they were five minutes past the scheduled lunch break, and suddenly felt the wave of hunger she had been suppressing. She’d never even opened the QuickBooks program on her computer.

“Miss Bennet, is it?” Darcy quickly flipped the legal pad over the puzzle just as Catherine approached.

“Yes, Ms. de Bourgh, this is Beth Bennet, from Loungbourn, where I was working last fall.” Bill was at the great lady’s elbow, ready to assist her in whatever might be needed.

“I believe she prefers Elizabeth.” The sound of Darcy’s voice seemed to startle Bill and Charlotte. It was the first time Darcy had spoken to either of them that morning, watching disapprovingly as Bill fawned over Catherine and Charlotte attempted (somewhat successfully) to facilitate the introductions between Elizabeth, Ian Fitzwilliam, and, as Bill remarked “the incomparable Catherine de Bourgh.”

“Sensible preference,” Catherine nodded. “Much more professional. Nicknames have no place in the business world. I never allow them.” She moved briskly toward the door. “As you’re Charlotte’s friend, we’ll have you at our table for lunch. I would not normally consider allowing a
training participant to sit with me, especially since we have such important guests,” here she indicated Darcy and Ian, who was leaning against the wall waiting for the elevator, “but I’ll make an exception for you. “

“Well, thank you, I guess,” Elizabeth replied, torn between mild amusement and sarcasm.

Bill looked at Elizabeth, and apparently feeling that she hadn’t properly verbalized her gratitude, he decided to fill in the gaps. “You have given us such an incredible opportunity to learn from you…” his voice could be heard trailing off as he followed her into the elevator.

After Catherine spent the elevator ride giving Charlotte several “teaching tips” for her afternoon session, Elizabeth and Darcy fell in behind the rest of the ‘elite’ group as they proceeded toward the cafeteria.

“Is your family well?” Darcy’s low voice startled Elizabeth out of her contemplation of the hallway décor—she had determined that chrome was both very hard to use in moderation and also difficult to keep clean.

“They’re fine. Jane was here—well, not here precisely, but in the city anyway—in January. I’m surprised that you didn’t run into her,” she said innocently.

“No, I didn’t. Did she have a nice time?” He was very polite, but Elizabeth’s face was turned up toward his profile, and though he stared straight ahead as he spoke, she thought his jaw tightened a little.

Bill rushed ahead to hold the door open for Catherine, who obviously expected this kind of deference from either him or one of the other men. He chased after her to hold her chair, letting the door fall closed in Elizabeth’s face. Darcy took hold of the handle and swept it open for Elizabeth, his hand hovering over her lower back as he followed her across the threshold, and it remained there as they moved to the other side of the room. Elizabeth took in the modern cafeteria setting, absently wondering if the chairs would be comfortable for more than five minutes, always aware of his hand brushing her back. Darcy seemed to know where they were going, and guided her to a private dining area in the corner. He pulled out a chair for Elizabeth—a comfortable one—and she found herself sitting between Ian and Darcy, who, in a flash, had removed his suit jacket and was smoothing his tie over a flat stomach before placing his napkin in his lap.

Catherine was already holding court at the head of the table, discussing the lunch service with a girl who appeared to be of about college-age, and who had been conscripted into waiting on them only as the group crossed the cafeteria. Elizabeth suddenly noticed another person at their table, a woman not much older than she was, who looked familiar to her for some reason. Aha! The woman had taken part in the training, sitting in front of Elizabeth, but had spent the morning playing solitaire on her laptop. ‘She missed a lot of moves,’ Elizabeth thought. ‘That’s really going to blow her score.’

Elizabeth shook off the thought. She should remember the woman’s name… what was it?

“Anne!” Catherine’s sharp voice suddenly forced all eyes toward her. “First of all, sit up straight. Secondly, they only have two low calorie, low sodium dishes today, so you’ll need to choose from the minestrone and garden salad. I,” she directed to the server, “will have the minestrone. And a Perrier.” Elizabeth felt sorry for Anne, whom she now remembered Bill identifying as Catherine’s daughter, and who looked as though she could probably do with eating a hamburger instead. Then she remembered that Anne had been secretly eating M&Ms all morning, and thought that perhaps she would be okay after all.

“The Caesar salad here is quite good, Elizabeth.” Darcy’s perfectly enunciated words were spoken low, as he leaned slightly toward her. Still, she jumped as though he had shouted loudly.
“Really? I think Elizabeth looks more like a club sandwich kind of girl,” Ian drawled. Elizabeth smiled as he winked at her.

Ian wasn’t attractive at all, she thought. His nose was too big for his face, his eyebrows were too bushy, and his mouth was somewhat crooked. He was pleasant and funny, though, enamored of his wife and two young children, and she had enjoyed hearing about how he and Darcy, who was actually his cousin and boss, had just returned from two weeks in Germany where they were assessing some property. Ian leaned back in his chair as the server came over. "The hamburger, rare," he ordered, studiously ignoring his aunt, "with everything on it, French fries on the side, and"—he looked up at the girl and winked—"you have that mayonnaise and garlic dip, right?" When the girl nodded seriously, Ian chuckled. "Excellent. Also, I’ll have a coke."

Darcy tsked audibly from her other side, and Elizabeth wondered why Ian’s eating habits mattered to him so much. She briefly considered the hamburger, just to see what Darcy might say, but unfortunately, she had already decided on the salad before he recommended it. Reluctantly, she ordered it "with dressing on the side, please," and watched as a small grin pulled at the side of Darcy’s mouth. He ordered the same thing, giving her a smile as he did so.

The waitress looked at them. “Did you two want to split a bread plate as well?”

“No, thank you,” Elizabeth answered.

“Yes, please,” Darcy said.

Darcy appeared surprised at Elizabeth’s answer, and turned to the waitress. “Why don’t you bring it, and Elizabeth can decide if she wants any later.”

Elizabeth very nearly stuck her tongue out at him.

Catherine spent the lunch break ignoring Elizabeth in favor of an eager audience of Bill and Charlotte, whose presence on either side of her gave her the ability to hold court on any number of perfectly inane topics, from the number of bagels delivered to the break room on Mondays, to the process of requesting leave time—which she always approved herself to keep on top of her employees’ vacation schedules.

This left Elizabeth free to continue discussing her travels with Ian, a conversation they had begun before the morning’s session. It turned out that they had visited a number of the same places, and shared nearly the same opinion on many of them. Darcy occasionally contributed the conversation, seemingly absorbed in his salad and the bread. Elizabeth had to admit that the bread did look good, and when she finally grew brave enough to sample a roll—Darcy had insisted several times—they reached simultaneously, hands brushing lightly. Elizabeth recoiled instantly, and Darcy recovered well by holding the plate out to her. She would have been more comfortable had they not—because he was left handed—gently bumped elbows for the entirety of the meal. Every touch seemed to her to be an assertion of Elizabeth’s intrusion on his personal space. Finally, when Darcy turned and grinned at their latest collision, Elizabeth stood and excused herself, leaving her half-finished salad, and headed for the safety of the ladies room.

She could feel his eyes on her when she reached the door.
“Moving on, we’ll discuss the best way to deal with multiple 1099 forms from your consulting work.” Charlotte smoothly transitioned through the training slides, while Elizabeth, grateful that Catherine de Bourgh was remaining silent for once so that Charlotte could speak, drained the last of her tepid coffee. It was nearly lunchtime on Friday, and the end of the training was finally in sight. Elizabeth’s love for Charlotte had managed to withstand nearly an entire week of Bill, Harper, tax law, the megalomaniacal Lady C (Elizabeth’s favorite of the secret nicknames she’d concocted), and the enigmatic Darcy, but her patience was wearing extremely thin. As Charlotte continued her monologue, Elizabeth reflected wearily on the week.

Tuesday:

Elizabeth had not enjoyed her second taste of DBFGI coffee any more than her first, and it had not helped her cope either during her first experience with “The Darcy Inquisition,” or with day one of what became a routine lunchtime cross-examination by Catherine. Elizabeth wondered if Darcy and Crazy Cathy (another private mental appellation) were working together to discover her every personality quirk, seamlessly alternating to double-team her before and during the training sessions, and leaving Charlotte to round out the evening with her need for affirmation about the day’s progress.

Tuesday’s questions ranged from Darcy’s morning inquiries of, “Do you think of yourself as a city person or a small town person? Would you want to live in the city permanently?” to Catherine’s assessment of her educational history over fat-free, salt-free and taste-free barley soup (ordered by Catherine for Elizabeth). After picking apart her major, classes, professors, extracurricular activities, GRE scores, and graduation information, Curious Catherine began to compare Elizabeth to Anne, whose “summa cum laude” from Wharton heralded her “unparalleled business pedigree” and predestined her for a position “as the youngest female executive in de Bourgh history.” Elizabeth wondered if Anne’s business degree included strategy classes in online poker, since from Elizabeth’s vantage point, that was what Anne spent most of her time doing.

Elizabeth longed to find a way to toss the word “nepotism” into the discussion, but she wasn’t dishonest enough to pretend that her own professional success was attributable solely to her hard work, and not in part to her father’s assistance. Since Catherine had a daughter and two nephews at the table, Elizabeth thought it might have occurred to her that Anne’s business acumen wasn’t exclusively responsible for her vice-presidency at DBFGI; apparently, Elizabeth would have been wrong.

Rounding out the strange day was her afternoon defeat to Darcy in their second day of the Times crossword competition. At the close of Tuesday’s session, the score was Darcy 2, Elizabeth 0.

Wednesday:

Mid-week seemed to be Darcy’s scheduled time to ponder relationships; when he happened upon her near the elevators that morning, he began asking about office romance. “Bill and Charlotte certainly seem well-matched. Do you think she made a good choice, coming here to be with him? What do you think of inter-office dating?” Elizabeth hoped that reminding him that her company was comprised of family members and two significantly older, married staff might answer the question without requiring an impassioned defense of Charlotte’s actions. It was too early in the
day to contemplate romance and Collins at the same time. Not that there was ever a good time of
day to contemplate Collins.

Catherine’s lunchtime investigation turned away from Elizabeth’s accomplishments, and toward
her family. “Your father’s company, I believe, mainly specializes in residential property, is that
correct?” Catherine demanded. At Elizabeth’s nod, she continued, “I understand it’s been
lucrative, but as I told Mr. Collins when he returned from his appraisal, we really recommend that
you diversify. Everyone successful knows that the real money is made in managing commercial
and industrial properties, not small residential buildings. You must have studied this in school,
Ms. Bennet.”

“Yes. I do have a graduate degree in business,” Elizabeth reminded Catherine, electing to avoid
discussing just how important “real money” was to her in light of other values like integrity and
community.

“Excellent. And I assume you have a hiring policy that ensures all your employees do as well?”
Catherine asked off-handedly as she moved the salt shaker away from a sullen Anne.

“It’s a family business, Ms. de Bourgh,” she said as politely as she could. “Several of my younger
sisters have not completed advanced degrees.”

Cat the Controlling looked sharply down her aquiline nose. “Why ever not? It’s so important in
today’s business climate to have qualified employees—whomever they may be. Your father
should insist that all of your sisters attend school.”

“He would like them to go, of course, but only if they express an interest,” Elizabeth returned,
attempting to remain courteous.

“What? That’s a ridiculous idea!” Catherine scoffed dismissively.

“He feels it would be a waste of money to support my sisters in an education they don’t want.”
Elizabeth had begun to have some difficulty holding onto her temper. Why was Catherine de
Boorish qualified to prescribe educational requirements for Longbourn, or critique her father’s
ideas? Elizabeth was determined to remain calm, breathing deeply and avenging her anger on a
stray piece of lettuce.

Catherine sniffed disdainfully. “Hmm. And how does your mother feel?”

“My mother never went to college; she agrees with my father.”

“She should know the value of a good education, then!” Catherine said. “When I was your age,
we had to fight to make it through business programs and into profitable occupations. There were
only two women in my graduating class, and we had to fight for everything – access to teachers,
even the right not to be patronized or demeaned by the male students and teachers. There weren’t
sexual harassment laws then, and I did my part to ensure that many young women across the
country have been able to prosecute those men who have kept them from advancing to the highest
ranks of business. I am always glad to help young women who are just beginning their
professional careers understand the tenacity they need to succeed. Part of that means attending a
qualified institution of higher learning and finishing at the top of the class. You must see that, Ms.
Bennet.”

Calmly placing her fork on the plate lest it accidentally find itself embedded in Catherine’s eye,
Elizabeth replied, “While I agree that education is a very important thing for anyone in our society,
and not just young women, I think that subjecting someone to a rigorous degree course simply
because she may be a certain age seems a bit wasteful.” Elizabeth paused, taking in Catherine’s
rapidly darkening expression. “My sisters are certainly able to study if they want to—they all have taken classes at the community college in Meryton—but to require them to pursue an advanced degree just for the sake of having one, before they’ve selected a career path, is rather more likely to make them resent the education instead of desiring it, don’t you think?” Elizabeth sipped her iced tea carefully to cool herself down.

Catherine the Not-so-Great appeared unsure as to how she should respond to Elizabeth’s statement. “You are certainly unafraid to express what you think!” she intoned. “Especially for someone who seems too young to be well-informed on the education of young women. Tell me, how old are you?”

“That’s certainly a personal question for such a professional environment.” Elizabeth smiled sweetly to soften the reprimand when she noticed the insta-frown on Catherine’s features. “I’ve finished college and graduate school, and worked with my father for several years. I assure you that I’m old enough to have an opinion.”

Catherine peered at her closely. “You can’t be thirty. When you’re thirty, you’ll change your mind.” Appearing satisfied with her own resolution, Catherine turned away.

It started raining in the afternoon, raindrops lashing against the conference room windows. Elizabeth grimaced as she thought of the cold, wet walk to the subway station with Bill and Charlotte.

They bundled up in the giant lobby before heading out to face the squall. Bill was fussing over the umbrella in his hand, opening it inside the building, then trying to force his way through the door, blocking those coming in out of the rain and the other staff who were trying to leave. Elizabeth covered her hand with her mouth, restraining her laughter, even as the cold, wet air from outside rushed in and made her shiver.

Just as Bill managed to wrestle his way outside, Darcy and Ian approached them, clad in expensive-looking trench coats and carrying umbrellas.

“Which way are you headed?” Ian asked.

“Toward Union Street Station,” Elizabeth answered. “I think it’s about four blocks.”

“Right,” Ian said. “We’re headed that way, too.”

Which was how Elizabeth soon found herself tucked against Darcy under the shelter of his extra-large umbrella, trying to match her steps to his long strides. She had resisted him at first, hunching her shoulders so they both fit without getting wet. After a few feet, she realized that he was also stooped over to hold the umbrella low enough for her, and rain was dripping directly against his neck running down the gap at his collar.

“Stop, Darcy,” she said. “This isn’t working; you’re still getting wet. I’ll just make a run for it.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” he said. “Let’s try this instead.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and stood close enough to muffle the noise of cars passing and rain falling, so close that the chill Elizabeth felt seeping into her faded more with every step they took.

They navigated the stairs with a little difficulty; Elizabeth had to laugh as Darcy tried to shake the last drops of rain off the umbrella without getting her wet. The five of them pushed through the rush hour traffic on the platform, the wind whistling in from upstairs and swirling all around them, nearly drowning out the whoosh of the train. Eventually, they managed to squeeze into a crowded car, where there was only room for them to stand, leaving Elizabeth unable to reach the nearest
pole.

She was unprepared for the lurch of the train as it pulled out of the station; the wet soles of her shoes slipped on the linoleum floor, and Elizabeth fell back against Darcy with a little cry.

He wrapped an arm around her waist immediately, and she managed to catch her footing again as he supported her. He smelled of rain and expensive cologne, and she felt him murmur “careful” against her ear before she pushed herself away from him--as much as she could without toppling the stranger on her other side.

She turned her head toward him and found herself staring at his right lapel. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“Oh, not a problem,” he replied softly, and perhaps as proof, his hand continued to hover over the small of her back.

For the remainder of their ten-minute journey, Elizabeth tried to brace herself for the jerks and pitches of the train. Still, she found she couldn’t help it as the momentum of the subway forced her to sway into the safe pressure of Darcy’s hand.

By the end of the night, Elizabeth’s only consolation was the narrowing gap in the crossword score total. Darcy: 2, Elizabeth: 1.

Thursday

Elizabeth decided that Darcy’s goal on Thursday was to make her feel like a silly, small-town girl. After stepping behind her in the coffee line, he asked, “Do you like the way that the building is designed, or do you prefer something more classic?” When Elizabeth told him she was not a fan of modern architecture, Darcy smiled, tilted his head, and nodded at her. Assuming this meant he thought her tastes unrefined and simplistic, she added, “Modern architecture reminds me of most modern men: smug, self-assured, and pretentious.” Darcy’s reply was cut short by Brad’s order taking and a loud blast of steam from the espresso machine.

Elizabeth’s annoyance with Darcy paled in comparison to the resentment she felt after Catherine used the lunch hour to dispense unwanted advice on “family planning”. It began when Career Counselor Cathy asked Elizabeth to detail her ten year professional goals. At Elizabeth’s smile and seemingly innocent claim to “not have any”, Catherine launched into a diatribe about the importance of charting one’s professional success early.

Suddenly Catherine’s eyes narrowed, and she asked quietly, “Ms. Bennet, I certainly hope you are not one of those women who is simply waiting for a man to sweep you off your feet so you can give up your career.” The words “give up” had a distinctly venomous quality to them, and a strangled coughing sound came from either Darcy or Ian.

“No, Ms. de Bourgh, I didn’t work as hard as I have to simply “give up” my vocation. But neither am I willing to cede all ideas of marriage and family to focus solely on my occupation.” Elizabeth realized that she was baiting the older woman, but she couldn’t help it. Catherine’s visible shock at this comment was far too amusing.

“While I grant that a husband can be a valuable tool for networking and advancing your own career, if you choose to be insensible of threats to the ultimate success of your work, at the very least you must have some kind of a plan for unexpected exigencies Ms. Bennet,” she instructed, actually pointing her soup spoon at Elizabeth while saying it. A glance at Anne found her taking advantage of the distraction to add salt to her pea soup. “You think now, when you are young, that you have all the time in the world to decide these things, and that you can ‘have it all,’ but you
are wrong. No, you must plan your future carefully to ensure that your goals can be reached. As your mentor”—Elizabeth started at this—“I must insist that you make a clear and concise list of your objectives, and then outline the steps that you will take. A woman cannot be too careful in these things; always remember that men are waiting at every step to keep you from reaching the top.”

Elizabeth, in the brief moments when Dr. de Blough offered her “counsel” to others, carefully watched Darcy’s reaction to his aunt’s advice. His response to Catherine’s input was to nod and perhaps offer a comment with his customary gravity. Elizabeth could never tell if he was seriously considering following some of the ridiculous—and rather dubious—ideas Catherine spouted.

Elizabeth’s outrage at Catherine’s presumption fueled her crossword play that afternoon, and the day closed with another Bennet victory, leaving the score tied at two all.

Friday

On her way to purchase yet another second-rate but essential cup of coffee that morning, Elizabeth decided that it was finally time to wrest the role of inquisitor away from Darcy. There were questions which had been plaguing her for months, and (hopefully) this would be her last opportunity to satisfy her curiosity. Meeting Darcy in the lobby as usual while awaiting the elevators, she smiled archly at him and offered her first sally: “You left very quickly last fall. Everyone was surprised—one day you were there, the next, gone.”

“Yes,” he replied quietly, “Charles had already left, and I had some business to see to; and, of course, my sister was anxious to see me.”

“Is there a chance any of you will ever come back? Charles’ lease was with my father, so if there was something lacking, we’d like to know.”

“I don’t think there was anything lacking, as you say. It was just time to move back. I don’t think Charles will return any time soon.”

She was quiet, then, as they boarded the crowded compartment, and evidently he took this to mean that her questions were answered. Smirking, he pulled his copy of the Times crossword puzzle from his briefcase and murmured, “Are you ready for another challenge? Do you think you have it in you?”

Elizabeth looked up at his face, at the hint of a dimple she had never noticed—but then she had never been this close when he smiled like that, pushed up against him in the crush of people. “Oh,” she answered slowly, “I think I have it in me.”

Four hours later, a note appeared on the yellow pad in front of her.

So… when are you two going to declare a winner?

Elizabeth was pulled away from her thoughts by the Ian’s question, but when she turned toward him, he was sitting calmly on her left side and nodding at something Charlotte was saying about 1099 forms for consultants. His sloppy handwriting on her notepad had interrupted her contemplation of Friday’s crossword. Darcy was quite the competitor, but she had bested him two days out of four, and this was the tie-breaker, the final showdown, and she could afford no slips. She could try the old “diversion” tactic, though, she mused. Making sure Darcy could see her, she began writing on the pad, hoping to draw his attention from the puzzle.

I hardly think Darcy would admit to losing. Even though he is. She added a smiley face to illustrate the joke.
Oh, please! Stop deluding yourself, Bennet. I’m four clues ahead of you. Darcy’s sudden, precise handwriting on the pad mocked her, as he returned to swiftly completing the clue for 14 down. Apparently creating a suitable diversion was more difficult than she thought.

Maybe. She paused to take in his smug expression. But I’ve won for the last two days, so enjoy your moment of glory, Darcy.

She gave him a sweet smile, and he *hmphed* and turned back to 46 down. She let him stew for a moment before continuing provocatively, And you might want to be careful; think of all the things I could tell Ian about you…When he glanced up at her, she gave him a pointed look, but he just smiled and held out his palm in a gesture that welcomed her to try.

Were you two like this in Meryton, too? Ian’s scribble stood out against their more measured lines.

“Ha!” it was a bit louder than it should have been, causing Darcy to look up from his ruminations and Charlotte to pause and issue a quizzical look. Elizabeth bowed her head in silent apology, and the session resumed.

Oh, no, she wrote. Instead he tried to show me how much better he was at getting what he wanted. He completely intimidated (or terrified) the newest employee at our local coffee shop. I think Jonathan still has nightmares about it, actually. She raised her eyebrows at Darcy, challenging him to retaliate.

Just because I think that when I’m paying for a service it should be delivered correctly and in a timely fashion does not make me an ogre. He raised his eyebrows to match hers.

Why? Because all ogres are green and friends with donkeys? That’s not a nice compliment for poor Ian.

‘Poor Ian’ offered a rueful smile and shook his head.

Does that make you Fiona? I don’t recall hearing you sing…

Elizabeth grimaced and rolled her eyes.

So you admit, then, that you’re not really interested in other people, you just want to protect your swamp coffee?

Don’t most people want a cup of coffee in the morning the way they like it? I don’t wake up as Miss Suzy Sunshine. Or Mr. Suzy Sunshine, for that matter.

Well, Oscar, I’m not exactly Rainbow Brite before my first sip either, but a little smile never hurt anyone. Maybe you should try it sometime.¹

Darcy apparently thought she meant at that moment, and sent her a disarming smile. Well, Felix, do you think this will work?²

Elizabeth bit her lip and realized he had misinterpreted her “Oscar the Grouch” reference³. Still, his smile, meant to make her capitulate to his superior arguments, or divert her from the puzzle, or simply to intimidate her, held her gaze for a moment before her attention was pulled back to the session.

Despite her handwritten taunts, they reached a tie that day, finally completing the puzzle. Darcy’s grin as he filled in the last blank was contagious, and Elizabeth couldn’t quite smother her answering smile. Catherine called him away then, and as the participants focused on a group
activity, Elizabeth and Ian fell into conversation.

“Has this week been a total waste of time for you, then?” she asked as they worked on a problem Charlotte had devised only the previous evening, as per one of Catherine’s tips.

“Well, I haven’t finished a New York Times crossword puzzle, but it hasn’t been all bad.” Elizabeth liked that Ian could find humor in his boredom. She had watched him as he made grocery lists, balanced his personal checkbook, and updated the contacts list on his Blackberry. Clearly the man needed a constructive task—or to be anywhere else. He shrugged. “I’m here because Darcy asked me to come. He obviously thinks it’s valuable.” As Ian said it, he looked at her a bit more intently.

“Why? If he’s here, that should be enough. Not that it hasn’t been lovely to meet you, but it seems a bit much to have you both come. Then again, I guess Darcy just likes to have his own way.” Elizabeth leaned in a bit closer to the computer to check their answers.

“He does, but then again who doesn’t? Darcy’s just a bit more apt to express what he wants than others, or perhaps express it a bit more insistently.”

“Is that why he brings you along?” Elizabeth teased. “He can’t find anyone else who can handle his expressions?”

Ian laughed. “It’s probably why he’s still single! Usually he’s not quite so forbidding. You should see him around his sister—anywhere else really, but especially with her—he wouldn’t frighten anyone then.”

Elizabeth clicked through a series of questions on the screen. “How old is his sister? I’ve heard about her from some acquaintances, but they never mentioned her age.”

“She’s 21. She’s about to finish her degree.”

“I bet Catherine’s pleased about that!” Elizabeth joked. “Seriously, though, the world can be tough at that age. My sisters are at that point—they’re still trying to figure things out, find their way in the world. I’m sure if she’s at all like Darcy she’ll be quite expressive about what she wants.” She continued to work on the task at hand, but turned to Ian when he was suddenly quiet.

“Then again,” she continued cheerfully, perceiving that he was inexplicably thrown by her comment, “the people who mentioned her most—Charles Bingley’s sisters, do you know them?—well they seemed to think she was as loveable as a pile of puppies, so maybe she doesn’t take after her brother. Maybe she’s more like her cousin?” Elizabeth smiled archly.

Ian sat up, seemingly relieved. “Yes, maybe she is. I do know Charles; quite well, in fact. He’s on the board at Darcy Holdings. He’s been a very valuable person to have there; he usually sees things the way Darcy does, and has helped push through some of Darcy’s less popular ideas. Not that there are many,” he added as an afterthought.

“Sees things the same way?” Elizabeth looked at Ian curiously. “You don’t think he’s been unduly influenced? Charles never seemed to me to be particularly decisive or visionary.”

“No, decisive is probably not the word I’d use to describe Charles.” Ian chuckled. “But Darcy’s gotten him out of some tight spots before—with money and relationships—so a few votes at board meetings is a pretty small way to repay him.”

“Relationships? How so?” Elizabeth asked the question casually, but her heart beat a little faster.

“Well,” Ian began, glancing around the room for a moment, “Bingley’s usually pretty unlucky in
love, especially recently. Darcy helped him to get out of a relationship before Charles had his heart broken this time, which is a pretty big victory.”

“Why was it Darcy’s job to prevent Charles’ heartbreak? Isn’t he a grown man?” Elizabeth tried to quell her indignation at what seemed to be the start of Charles’ good luck and the end of Jane’s.

“You don’t think it’s the duty of a friend to help out another friend if they’re in trouble?” Ian frowned.

“Since when is being in a relationship being in trouble?” They had dropped all pretense of work as Elizabeth turned to face Ian. “How did he spare Charles his heartbreak?”

“I don’t know.” Ian shook his head. “I only know that he did.” With that, he moved back to the computer.

Elizabeth sat in silence for another moment. “I still don’t understand why it was Darcy’s job to protect Charles from a broken heart, or why he would be the best judge. Does Darcy moonlight as a relationship counselor, or was this a special case?” Elizabeth softened her comment with a smile, but inwardly she was seething.

Ian laughed. “No, Dr. Darcy doesn’t have his own radio show or advice column. Although if you’d heard him talk about Bingley a few months ago, you might think he deserved one.” Still laughing over his Dr. Darcy reference, Ian completed the assignment they had been working on.

Elizabeth contemplated the conversation through the remainder of the day’s training, barely able to look at Darcy, and resolutely avoided his questions about her attendance at that evening’s closing dinner, which she promptly decided to skip. When she thought of Jane’s behavior over the last few months—the crazy furniture rearranging, the sudden avoidance of caffeine, the moments of silence when Jane’s attention would slip away—Elizabeth realized that whatever heartache Darcy had spared his friend, he had instead poured out on her sister.

Elizabeth’s mind whirled around all the things she knew of Darcy: his haughty silences in Meryton; the way he challenged her—at everything—as if besting her was his only goal; George’s story, which laid, if not all, at least a great deal of blame at Darcy’s door; and now his ‘counsel’ of Charles. The pieces refused to snap together into a whole picture of this complicated, disagreeable man. Still, Elizabeth resolved not to spend any more time attempting to figure it out. The sooner she was far away from him, the better.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who need a quick pop culture tutorial:

2: Felix (Unger): Darcy is referring to one half of “The Odd Couple,” the other half is Oscar Madison. The two are the main characters in the play by Neil Simon and later adapted into the 1968 film, starring Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau.

3: Oscar the Grouch: a Muppet character from the US version of the children’s program, Sesame Street, who lives inside a trash can. He’s very grouchy. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_the_Grouch
Elizabeth set her computer to the side—she had resumed her online search activities, focusing this time on Charles Bingley—and went to answer the knock at the door. A broad expanse of forest green was visible through the peephole. Thinking it might be Charlotte’s neighbor, Jake, she pulled the door open, leaving the chain on. To her astonishment, it was Darcy, clearly not dressed for a closing dinner at DBFGI. What is he doing here? Elizabeth thought.

He was flushed and didn’t look anything like his usual collected self. “Are you okay?” she couldn’t help blurtting out. She had never seen that much color in his cheeks and was afraid he would tell her Charlotte had been fired or harassed by a calorie-deprived Anne.

“Yes.” He answered curtly.

Then why was he here? He was supposed to be with the others, downtown, celebrating the end of the seminar.

“I’d like to come in,” he said. It was more a demand than a question.

She reflexively took off the chain and he swept through the door, filling the small entryway with his clearly agitated presence. He turned toward her as if to speak, and froze as his eyes slowly swept her body, taking in her sweatpants, tank top, and bare feet. He stared, motionless, at a mole on her right shoulder for several seconds.

“Um, sit down?” She was thoroughly confused.

“No.”

“Can I get you something? Water, maybe?” she started moving toward the kitchen.

“No.” He spoke more forcefully than last time. What was his problem? “Look…” he began, and then paused for another long moment. Suddenly he was in front of her, hand lightly touching her shoulder, thumb resting over her collarbone, hazel eyes intent on hers. “I came here, because I’ve finally worked up the nerve to tell you something. I like you. A lot. I think I might even love you. And it’s actually kind of painful to be away from you. Do you understand? After all our time together this week, you must feel the same way. I don’t want you to leave when I can’t go with you, and I’m fairly certain you don’t really want to go. I don’t want a long distance relationship with you.”

Did he think that she liked him? Elizabeth was standing so stiffly that she thought her knees might have locked. She would be stuck there, unable to move; she couldn’t breathe, either, and for a minute she thought she would faint. No. She shook her head and took two steps back. His fingers slipped from her shoulder, but the feel of his hand lingered on her skin. Bewildered, she raised her own hand to trace the warm place where his had rested.

“Did he think that she liked him? Elizabeth was standing so stiffly that she thought her knees might have locked. She would be stuck there, unable to move; she couldn’t breathe, either, and for a minute she thought she would faint. No. She shook her head and took two steps back. His fingers slipped from her shoulder, but the feel of his hand lingered on her skin. Bewildered, she raised her own hand to trace the warm place where his had rested.

“I know it’s really bad timing,” he was saying, “just as you’re leaving, but I didn’t want you to go without acknowledging how we both feel, to see if there was maybe a way you could stay. Not here. Not with these people, but somewhere else maybe? You could even stay with me. We can figure this out; I can figure this out—you’re a total surprise, you know?” Here he grinned at her ruefully, as if it were a private joke between them. “I never expected, well, someone like you, and I’m sure my friends—and my family—come to think of it, are going to absolutely tear into me about all of this. I mean, you’ve met a handful of them; do they seem like the kind of people who would understand this situation?” He shook his head and stepped forward again, both of his warm
hands now on her shoulders, his face looming over hers.

The pitch of his voice was so much higher than normal, and he was rushing through his words, almost babbling; she had never seen Darcy so discomposed. Was this the same person who had been so cool to her every other time they had met? Elizabeth felt as if she were dreaming. This could not be real. Was he expecting--? She could not even finish the thought.

His eyes took on that intense look she remembered, and his voice was low again when he spoke - that familiar, quiet tone that always, paradoxically, cut through every other sound, but at the same time felt so restrained, almost intimate as it caressed her ears. “So. What’s your answer?” he insisted. “Will you stay?”

Utterly nonplussed, Elizabeth looked away for a moment, attempting to gather her shredded thoughts. She realized only now, during this long pause, that Harper had been racing wildly around their feet; why hadn’t they tripped over him?

Suddenly it all came rushing back to her. “No. No, I can’t stay—not here, not with you. I mean--” and she realized she should be polite “—thank you—for the invitation—but I need to go. I have to leave. I’m almost packed.” She held out the excuse as a meager offering, but Darcy did not appear ready to accept something that paltry.

He had started drawing tingling circles on her bare skin and she closed her eyes. He was so close to her, and the space between them seemed to crackle with electricity.

“So unpack. I know I haven’t said anything before, but you’ve been flirting with me for months, and several times this last week I thought—” Elizabeth’s sharp intake of breath stopped his quiet words.

“Flirting with you?” she croaked. “You mean doing the crossword? I had no idea you felt like this. I’m sorry you read something into my behavior, but there was nothing there on my end. Maybe that will help you get over it soon.” Elizabeth knew the last bit sounded more like something Jane would say, but she couldn’t think properly when he was so close and saying these things about her flirting with him.

“Get over it? Why would I want to get over it? You can’t be surprised that I’m at least interested, and truly it’s much more than interest. I adore you. I would never treat anyone else the way I’ve treated you this last week. You can’t just say no—at least give me a reason why you can’t stay.” Darcy’s voice was hoarse, desperate and throaty. Her eyes fluttered closed again, and she could feel that he had moved closer, if that were possible, and this was all leading somewhere it should not, could not go. Her eyes flew open.

“Give me a reason why I should!” His face was almost on hers, and she could see there was a deep green color to his eyes, sparking with surprise and—was that pain? What she saw there, in that flash, brought tears to her eyes. She blinked, and he had moved away, fingertips barely brushing her shoulders—*he has long arms*, she thought absently—and looking at her strangely.

“It’s not enough that I asked you? That I like you?” he asked incredulously. “What kind of reason do you need? Would you like me to do a cost-benefit analysis for you? Lay out the pros and the cons? Would that help you decide?” His tone was suddenly sharp.

“Oh, yes, please,” she snapped, responding to his anger. “Pros and cons would be great,” she drawled, her tone lower than usual, heavy with sarcasm. “I’ll help! Let’s start with the cons. First item: your attitude in Meryton. Second: breaking my sister’s heart. Third: wrecking George Wickham’s career.” Her hands settled on her hips, head tilted in a combination of defiance and accusation. She wasn’t yelling—neither of them had raised their voices—but the space between
them, which was formerly filled with an inexplicable magnetism, was now thick with tension.

“That’s funny. We have something else in common.” His words, slow, clipped, and weighted with anger, cut through the silence. “I agree with you: George Wickham definitely belongs in the con category.”

“Do you actually think comments like that make me want to be with you? With someone who can look at what he’s done and not feel even a shred of sympathy for the other person?”

“What on earth do you know that makes you think you can say that to me?” he said derisively. His eyes were steely now and she cut him off before he could go any further.

“Nothing!” She finally raised her voice for a moment, before bringing herself back under control. “That’s just it, Darcy, I know nothing about you. Nothing about why you’d act like that toward Wickham, nothing about where you get off involving yourself in my sister’s love life, not even how old you are or what you first name is! I’ve spent all this time with you and you seem to think I’ll just up and change my plans for you, but everything I know about you is from someone else.” She ticked names off on her fingers as she spoke. “From Ian, from George, from Charles, or, for crying out loud, from the Internet! You haven’t told me anything that would make me want to stay with you. Until tonight, I didn’t even have a clue that you liked me!”

“Well, excuse me, Elizabeth—” For the first time, he made her name sound like an insult “—for wanting to wait until I was sure about you. Do you think I planned for this to happen? Planned to fall for you? That I was just waiting until you came along to spill my life story? Bottling up my hurts and fears to share with you over coffee in the mornings where all of Meryton could listen in? I’m offering you the chance to know me now, and you’re throwing it back in my face. I thought you’d appreciate honesty, but perhaps you’re more a fan of Collins-like fawning?” His voice dropped. “Maybe, just maybe,” and here he came closer again, taking deliberate steps toward her as he spoke, “if I’d come here with flowers and told you that I think you’re beautiful, that all those mornings we met in line what I really wanted to do was sit with you for hours over coffee, holding your hand in mine, with no one else there but us, or that every time you tease me I want to kiss you—then would you believe me?” His voice had grown softer and softer as he drew closer, the hard edges slipping away and wistfulness seeping in, until it was practically a whisper, a plea.

He was close enough again that Elizabeth could see the pain in his eyes, and she felt the sincerity behind his words, but she could focus only on her fury. How dare he suggest that all she wanted was his flattery? That he might have reasons for the awful things he had done? She looked up at him and spoke in a dangerously even voice. “You’re fooling yourself if you think I wanted pretty words from you. All your ‘honesty’—she was angry enough to throw some air quotes in here—‘did was eliminate any guilt I would have felt in rejecting someone who clearly doesn’t respect me or anyone else.”

His eyes were wide, and there was that flash again—was it regret this time?—but she couldn’t stop herself now that she had started to speak. “We’ve spent enough time together that I’ve seen the way you treat everyone. You’re arrogant, conceited, and totally selfish. From our very first interaction I was shocked by the way you acted toward people. Open your mouth and do something besides give an order, Darcy! Try respecting people enough to ask them for what you want, instead of just demanding that they acquiesce to your every wish! Try asking them what they want for a change! That’s why I won’t stay with you—you never asked, you only demanded. It’s been that way from the very beginning!”

As she spoke, Darcy’s shoulders slowly sagged, his rigid posture collapsing in the now-dark apartment, to be replaced by sad resignation. They were so intent on each other that they had not even turned on the lights, but Elizabeth was still able to see him perfectly clearly when he closed his eyes, wincing as she finished the last sentence.
There was a long moment of silence, broken only by a deep, shaky breath from Elizabeth and the tinny laugh track from the neighbor’s television set echoing through the walls. Darcy nodded and slowly moved to leave.

His back to her, holding the heavy door open before walking through, he paused and turned slightly, his face in profile. “You leave tomorrow morning, then?” Elizabeth nodded, recognizing with a curious pang that he would not make one last plea for her to stay. Darcy would not beg. He looked at her for another long moment, and she noticed a weariness around his eyes that had not been there when he came in. Then he was gone, closing the door softly. The click as it brushed the frame was the only indication of his departure.

Elizabeth sank to the floor. Had that been real? No one had ever, ever spoken to her like that—about that—before. Darcy had said he adored her! Him! She knew she should appreciate his interest—as long ago as their first coffee meeting in Meryton, she had been attracted to him—but oh! Jane, and George, his demands, and his personality, and all the things she didn’t know about him had kept her from letting that attraction turn into anything more. And now! The argument. Elizabeth was no stranger to heated conversations, debates, or even shouting matches with her younger sisters. But this, this quiet, controlled, tense thing they had just shared—she could still hear the coolness of his tone, still feel the warmth of his hands on her skin, still recall his words, still see that flash of something in his eyes that she couldn’t quite identify but might have been anguish. Harper crawled into her lap and she stroked the puppy absently, reviewing what they had said, what he had said. If her legs had not started to tingle she would have stayed there all night, but mechanically she stood up, locked the door, brushed her teeth, and collapsed into bed, where, eventually, she fell into a fitful sleep.

She considered avoiding him the next morning, somehow sensing that their early morning coffee meetings would not end simply because of what had happened. But she was in the right, and her caffeine addiction would not be staved off by embarrassment, and she would face him if necessary. She hugged Charlotte goodbye, patted the puppy, and took a deep breath before walking out the door to start her journey home.

Elizabeth made her way back to the DBFGI building first, to the only coffee place she knew that was open this early and was on the way to the freeway. She walked in with her head held high, but was relieved to find it empty. She ordered firmly, traded early morning pleasantries with Brad, who was calmer and more collected today, and stood waiting for her order as Darcy came through the door. He wore the same intent look he’d had yesterday, and possibly the same striped oxford, now wrinkled, with the sleeves rolled back over his forearms. He paired his fierce stare and rumpled clothing with an uncharacteristic shadow of beard, and his right hand held an envelope. He looked younger and somehow more vulnerable than she had ever seen him, and Elizabeth had an unexpected desire to reach up and touch his stubbled cheek, but she suppressed the urge that ran through her and resolutely kept both hands on the counter.

“Good morning.” Darcy’s voice was low and tight, but she heard a note of fatigue as well and something harder to identify. “I hoped you’d be here, though I suppose the mail would—anyhow, this is for you.” She could not help looking in his eyes, searching for something, a hint of the tenderness he had displayed last night. Elizabeth found it, or a flicker of it, when their hands touched as she reached for the letter. Then she could see only a steely glint mixed with what she thought might be regret.

The barista handed her the coffee, distracting her from Darcy’s gaze. When she looked back, he was gone. Elizabeth stood, staring out the window, watching his silhouette motionless in the driver’s seat of his car—head tilted low, until his shoulders heaved with a single deep breath. Elizabeth stood stiffly, the paper coffee cup burning in her hand, wondering what he would do. She watched until his chin came up, the engine roared, and the car pulled away from the building,
the early morning light caressing the sleek frame.

Staring at the crisp envelope in her left hand, she moved to a table; her trip could wait. Turning the envelope over, examining the even pen strokes that spelled her name, she finally broke the seal, pulled out two sheets of crisp legal paper which were covered with his neat handwriting, and started to read.

It was incredible. She refused to believe it at first. By the time she’d read it three times, George’s tale was—if not an outright lie (and she suspected it was)—highly unlikely. As she finished her coffee, she concluded that George was a liar, a thief, and an opportunist, and Jane’s heartbreak was much more complicated than before. What Darcy was—*Fitzwilliam*, she corrected herself—well that was a bit less certain, but clearly he was not the monster she had thought him.

It was mystifying, but despite the anger she had felt last night, despite her confusion regarding their whole relationship, and despite her humiliation at being wrong, she began to wonder if this—if *he*—could possibly be the kind of man she wanted to love her.
The drive home gave her time to think. Along the lonely stretches of interstate and the uninterrupted quiet, Elizabeth considered all that had happened while she was away.

He might love her. That was what he said. He also told her that it was unexpected; that his family would tear into him over it. Surprised. He said he was surprised to be in love. Was that with her, or with anyone at all?

And the letter. With shock and disbelief Elizabeth had read and re-read his words to grasp the contents. She couldn’t recite all of it yet, but specific passages stuck in her memory as if they had been seared permanently into her mind. Elizabeth felt as if she were holding a piece of him when she held the letter—not necessarily the best piece, but a crucial part of the whole; some very necessary aspect of his heart or his mind, his essence, maybe, if that wasn’t too metaphysical. Had he known that she would feel that way? Is that why he chose a letter, rather than an email, something hasty, convenient and ephemeral? No, he was none of those things, and the meticulously written epistle tucked in her purse proved that to her time she looked at it.

Elizabeth had been forced to reach back to her business school training to fully understand what he had written.

*It was something called a Ponzi scheme,* he wrote, describing George’s transgressions. *I’d seen him try all sorts of scams when we were younger - pyramid schemes and get-rich-quick ideas - but this one was much better—or, I should say, worse. George was a con man, a serious one, luring people to invest with his “firm,” offering unlicensed securities, high payouts, and the promise of longer-term lucrative investments.*

George wasn’t the idea man, that title belonged to another, but he was the front man for the operation, enrolling duped investors into the scheme, relying on his charm and their trust in his word. Elizabeth could see how that role would fit him, and cringed as she recalled how he’d lied to her so many months ago.

*My sister, Georgiana, inherited the first installment of her trust fund when she turned 21, only a few months ago. She was younger than most people are when they receive so much money, but when my parents set up the fund, they felt that their children should be given increasing responsibility and taught sound financial principles early. She knew George from when she was a child, and she trusted him because I never mentioned his behavior with money or his questionable morals. Truthfully, I never thought it would be an issue; they had no reason to meet each other, but apparently he sought her out as part of his latest “project.”*

Elizabeth wasn’t clear about the amounts involved, but clearly Georgiana had made a fairly substantial initial investment – nearly the entirety of the first trust installment –and the only reason she hadn’t lost everything was because Darcy and Ian, as her trustees, still controlled the rest of her inheritance.

*When she wanted to invest it all—doubtless what George wanted the whole time—she had to have Ian and me co-sign the documents. We immediately knew that the setup wasn’t right, but by then George was gone, along with everything he’d been able to get from her already.*

Georgiana was not the only one who lost money; several other young heiresses were involved in
the scheme, no doubt drawn in by George’s charm and what Darcy referred to as the dubious promise that they would “show their trust fund managers that they were capable investors and financially astute.” Darcy informed her that George was now under investigation by the Securities & Exchange Commission.

I’m trusting you with this information, Elizabeth, so that you know what kind of a man he is. But please, keep it to yourself; the investigators haven’t been able to bring an indictment yet, and we’re working on bringing civil charges once they have. When all that takes place, I’m sure he’ll flee. That’s the only reason I couldn’t tell you about him in Meryton. If I’d told you, I would have violated the terms of the SEC investigation.

Darcy had offered her the case number as further proof of his assertions, and assured her that she could ask Ian about any of it too; he’d spoken with Ian, who was fully prepared to share the details with her if she wanted them. “On a different path, indeed,” she muttered, recalling George’s words from that long-ago party.

What is worse to me—more than the loss of the money—is the regret and anger Georgiana feels. Not only does she feel guilty about losing her money, but she feels like a fool because she trusted him, and she feels like she failed me and my trust in her. There is no way for her to have closure, other than to see George brought to justice.

Elizabeth had been deeply saddened reading about Georgiana’s consequent emotional withdrawal, and even by Darcy’s own confession of disappointment that his sister would act with such naïveté.

I have hope, though, that she won’t always be like this, that she’ll be willing to trust again at some point — herself as well as other people.

Elizabeth sighed, grateful and amazed that Darcy was showing her such trust in her after all she’d said, and checked the speedometer. Recollecting the next part of Darcy’s—Fitzwilliam’s—letter made her anxious.

Elizabeth, you said I broke your sister’s heart. I can only think of one way this might have occurred. I ask for your forgiveness and hope you’ll understand that it was one of those situations that no one wants to be in, but I made a difficult choice, and I hope that it was done for the best.

It seemed that Charles, he of the friendly demeanor and ready smile, was quite the ladies man. Or, at least, he wanted to be. Everyone’s friend and no one’s lover, he was consistently disappointed by romance, patted on the head like a puppy and sent on his way.

It’s difficult to see certain things about Charles if you don’t know him well. He’s not very confident, especially when it comes to women (he’s read nearly every relationship book ever written), and has been hurt badly in the past. Either he goes after the wrong women (who won’t give him the time of day), or he becomes the perfect friend and spoils it by trying for something more. Inevitably, we end up with him drinking too much and trying to forget another missed opportunity. I had seen it happen with Charles too often before, but this time the circumstances were a little bit different and I had to intervene.

Apparently, on the heels of Charles’ latest broken heart, he had encountered Georgiana, fresh from Wickham’s betrayal. The two had consoled each other, Charles’ sunny disposition dispersing the clouds of regret, and Georgiana’s shyness a welcome change from flirtation. They are not dating, not in love, at least not Charles, not yet, but I couldn’t watch the same thing happen to him again with Jane—not when I could spare him the pain of another rejection, and not when Georgiana’s own heart was at stake.
He wrote that Charles had been attracted to Jane, had enjoyed spending time with her, but more? Darcy—Fitzwilliam—had thought that Jane was like all the other kind, decent women Charles had met before: a heartbeat away from taking up with someone more dashing, charming, dangerous, or brooding. Elizabeth briefly wondered if Darcy ended up with most of Charles’ admirers, or at the very least, inspired the defection. Elizabeth did not yet want to examine why this was a disconcerting thought.

_I did tell Charles that she probably didn’t feel the same way he did; how was I to know? And, yes, I omitted some things. We – Caroline and I -- didn’t tell him that she had come to the city. That, I think, is the part I’m most ashamed of, but when Jane called Caroline, she never asked about Charles so I thought I had proof that it really was happening again._

Elizabeth gripped the steering wheel. Jane had come back from her trip a little better than when she left, but perhaps that was just from having certain knowledge of Caroline’s true feelings about her. She thought about her sister, and about the meetings between Jane and Charles. She realized that they’d never actually gone out on a date; they had spent a lot of time talking in the mornings over coffee—but not about anything serious, Elizabeth reminded herself—spent a weekend together when Jane was either sick or pounding Robitussin, and she’d seen them dance together once. Adding up the instances in her head, Elizabeth realized that she and Darcy had spent more time together than Jane and Charles. “What is there to be heartbroken about?” Elizabeth wondered aloud. “And how heartbroken could she really be if she gave up on him without ever picking up the phone to try to make things work?”

As she mused on heartbreak, her thoughts again turned to the writer of her compelling letter. He had surprised her with his candor, with the way that now she felt like she was maybe starting to know him—and like him—through these two sheets of paper. Darcy began not as she expected, with more accusations, an angry defense, or even another desperate plea to stay (although that had been more a romantic dream she’d imagined around 4 a.m. when thinking about that almost-kiss). No, he had just been honest: _I know now that you weren’t expecting me last night, nor are you looking for explanations this morning. But there are some things you need to know, things I need to tell you._ She found that as his pen had moved down the page, his tone had softened, until the very end when he’d written something that now almost made her cry:

_Last night I told you I thought I loved you. It’s still true this morning, so I’ll just finish this by apologizing for what I said that was hurtful, and by wishing you a safe trip home. You’ll never know how much I wanted it to go differently, to be writing you a different letter today._

Elizabeth took a deep breath and turned up the heater to combat her sudden chill. He had signed it Yours, Fitzwilliam, and she sighed again at knowing his name. That bizarrely old-fashioned, consonant-rich name fit him in a way that being a Brian, a Jesse, or even a Jonathan never would. Elizabeth could almost hear him saying it in the low tone that always seemed to reach her across a noisy room and twist itself around her spine, and since she was alone in the car and no one could hear her, she tried it, rolling the syllables on her tongue. Fitzwilliam. She tried to find that register that was peculiarly his and practiced saying first his name, wishing that, just once, she could have heard it from his lips. Then she tried to reproduce the way he said her own name—never, ever calling her Beth, or Liz, or Liza, only, always, Elizabeth. Without his eyes, without the intensity of his presence, it was not even close to the same.

It was then that it struck her, not how much she’d been wrong about—although there would be days and weeks to contemplate that issue—but just how much she’d hurt him. She couldn’t regret her decision, based on what she’d known at the time, but the memory of the pain in his eyes momentarily clouded her vision of the road before her. She knew she’d said some untrue things, and some harsh things, but she had also said some things that she felt were right. She didn’t know him; she still didn’t, despite his letter and despite knowing more today than she knew yesterday,
and she couldn’t have stayed, couldn’t have changed her plans indefinitely simply because he asked. But she could have tried harder to know him, to talk with him; she could have been kinder. She could have at least had coffee with him this morning. She could have done so many things differently.

Elizabeth sighed and deliberated about what her response to his letter should be. She should apologize, certainly, but for what? For rejecting him? She was sorry only for the words she had used; she still did not feel that leaving was wrong. For her unfounded accusations? He had explained his actions and history, and despite all the things she did not know about him yet, Elizabeth was fairly sure that he would not want to talk through those issues again. What was left to say? “I’m sorry that I didn’t want you,” she spoke into the silence. “I’m sorry that I undervalued you.” She shook her head and tried again, “I’m sorry that I didn’t let myself get to know you, that I said things that you didn’t deserve, and I’m sorry if my behavior led you to believe something that was untrue.” Yes, she could say those things, but why would she? Would saying these things make him feel better about what had happened? Would they relieve the pain she saw in his eyes? Would they make her feel any better? Even uttering them in the solitude of the car did not ease her conscience.

Elizabeth arrived home to a dark, cool apartment, with no evidence of Jane’s presence. She found a note on the coffee table:

L: James is back in town. We’re having dinner. Not sure when you’ll get back, or how late I’ll be out. Hope you had a great trip! –J

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows at Jane’s casual mention of her ex-boyfriend. Jane was friendly with all her exes, but James popped up more often than the others. Elizabeth pondered what this would mean for the future of Jane and Charles, and again wondered if Darcy had been right to warn Charles away.

As she began to unpack her things, separating out the laundry and the few things Charlotte had sent back for her family, Elizabeth unearthed a New York Times crossword—Wednesday’s, if she remembered correctly. It had been shoved in with her other seminar notes, and as she flipped through the pages, she saw Darcy’s bold handwriting often; her rejoinders were also strewn about the margins.

It struck her, as she perused their “conversations” that she and Darcy had been in a relationship, albeit not a traditional one, despite her unwillingness to acknowledge it. Her last moments of highway solitude had been spent speculating on how much to confide in Jane about the Darcy Conflict. She was bursting to share what had happened, to find some sympathy and vindication in Jane’s perspective and loyalty. If she were truly honest, a bit of vanity had even crept in; “This is the man who wanted me,” she longed to say, suddenly discovering his photo in a business article on the back page of the paper, “Can you believe it?”

Reviewing the notes they had written, however, stopped her short. The man who had written these things had claimed he loved her. He had shared personal, private information with her, and asked her not to disclose it. He respected her enough to explain his actions, and she had finally acknowledged that he was a man worthy of her respect, at the very least. Telling Jane, even about those issues that related to Charles, would not honor Darcy’s faith in Elizabeth. And there were some things that she was not ready to share with Jane, like that she could still feel his touch on her skin, or see the flash of pain in his eyes.

Elizabeth concluded that though she could reject Darcy, she could not betray him, at least not his trust. She would warn her father about George Wickham, she would mention that she spent time with Darcy, but she would not discuss what had happened between them. If she could not return his love, at least she could offer him her respect. Recalling his face, his posture as he drove away
that morning, Elizabeth thought that the pain she would feel in keeping quiet seemed small in comparison to what Darcy seemed to bear.

Sighing, Elizabeth set the papers to the side and moved to find the take-out menus. Regret always made her hungry for egg rolls.

---

Chapter End Notes

Deep breath. Longest author's note ever!

A Ponzi scheme, named after notorious criminal Charles Ponzi (but originating somewhat earlier), is a fraudulent investment scheme wherein investors pay into a fund, and receive payouts (or returns) from either their own money, or from subsequent investors. Investors are promised high short-term returns, and many may even re-invest in the scheme (as it initially offers a better return than any other traditional investment opportunity).

Recently, Bernard Madoff, a US businessman, pled guilty to what is considered the largest investment fraud ever committed by an individual (though there is doubt that he was able to do so alone) using an elaborate Ponzi scheme, with client losses estimated at $65 billion dollars. From The Economist: “Bernard Madoff pleaded guilty to running a Ponzi scheme in which he was paying early investors consistent returns by taking the money from later ones, with potential losses in the tens of billions of dollars” (April 4, 2009).

Madoff’s clients included wealthy businessmen, notable personalities (one report I heard included Larry King and author Elie Wiesel), and several charities and endowment funds. Many people who invested with Madoff lost all, or nearly all, of their assets. The implications are far-reaching, as many people were brought into the scam through wealth management brokers. Again, The Economist asks, “Just what were wealth managers doing to earn their fees if they could not spot the scam?” (April 4, 2009). Civil fraud charges have now been brought against a large investment fund in Massachusetts which steered investors toward the Madoff fund.

You can read a good summary of what a Ponzi scheme is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzi_scheme. You can also search for news reports on Madoff to learn more about his scheme and the results of his plea. I find the process Madoff used to recruit investors fascinating—he used his reputation and notoriety to entice people to invest with his firm—and completely appalling, particularly the regulatory aspects of banking which allowed this to go unnoticed (or unpunished) for so long. There is a great, extensive article in Vanity Fair
Chapter 11

The buds of early spring had given way to blooms as Elizabeth walked down Main Street with her father, on their way to the coffee shop.

“Dad, I think maybe Lydia should be more careful. I mean, what do we really know about George? Is he trustworthy? What kind of man George’s age dates a girl as young as Lydia?” Elizabeth thought that her father, a rational, logical man, was best appealed to on the grounds of reasonable doubt, rather than a full-fledged frontal attack. It was the same tactic she had employed—with success—when advocating the purchase of her first car at sixteen.

“So now you’ve decided that George deserves my scrutiny? What’s changed, my dear?” He smiled good-naturedly, the morning sun glinting off his graying hair.

“Nothing’s really changed, and I was never certain about him in the first place. But the longer things go on with her, the stranger it seems—after all, what can she have to offer him, really? And, more to the point, what does he have to offer her?”

“Oh, ho! You were never certain about him? You certainly seemed ready to believe him last fall.” Frank Bennet’s eyes were twinkling now, a sure sign he was not warming to her argument.

Elizabeth sighed. If vague generalities would not accomplish her purpose, then she would have to give up as much of the truth as she could tell. “Fine, Dad, maybe you’re right. But I’ve learned some things since then. George is bad news. Lydia won’t see anything but his charm, and he won’t be good for her. At least keep him from coming around the office so much.”

“Lizzy.” He used the childhood name that only those very dear to her could get away with. Stopping in front of the office, he put one hand on her shoulder. “What makes you think that Lydia isn’t trouble, too? I love your sister, but if George is hanging around, don’t you think I’m already skeptical of him? Let it run its course. I don’t have the time or energy to manage Lydia’s tantrums on top of everything else.”

“But—Dad—“

“No, Lizzy, just because you’ve finally realized what anyone not attracted to George has known since December, it doesn’t mean things need to change. Lydia will be fine. Now run along and get your coffee; you’ll feel better once you’ve had some caffeine.” He unlocked the office and left her standing on the sidewalk.

Elizabeth walked two blocks further, to the Lucas’ shop, contemplating the conversation. There was no way George could run his scam on Lydia—she had no money to invest—and even Darcy didn’t think George could carry out such a complex scheme on his own. What was worse was what her father implied; had he really known that George’s story was false? When she had asked him in October, all he had said was, “In cases like these, Lizzy, there’s rather more truth in what’s not said.” At the time, she thought he was being purposefully obtuse.

Elizabeth ordered an iced mocha, absently smiling at Jonathan as he took her cash and commented on how late she was that morning. Stepping aside, she took in the other patrons standing or sitting in small clusters around the shop.

They were people she had known since she was small, the neighbors and parents-of-childhood-friends who had watched her as she rode her first two-wheeler down Main Street in the annual Founder’s Parade. They had come to her ballet recitals and bought her Girl Scout cookies. These
were the people who had congratulated her on her MBA and welcomed her back to Meryton when she’d joined her father’s business. Still, Elizabeth couldn’t help but wonder, did these people really know her at all?

Did they realize that she had misjudged a good man, had encouraged them to dislike and disparage him?

What would they have said, she wondered, if they knew that when Darcy had come to her and offered her his affection, she had thrown it back at him without regard for his feelings?

Elizabeth shook off these irrelevant and unwelcome thoughts as Jonathan called her name, resolving to focus more on work and less on self-examination.

As she stepped into the sunshine, she immediately heard a smooth voice calling, “Beth!”

Elizabeth spun around and saw George approaching, an arm looped around Lydia’s waist.

“How was your trip? Everything you’d hoped and more?” George teased. It was the first time Elizabeth had seen him since returning a few weeks ago, and his presence reignited her already simmering anger at being deceived, at his crimes against Darcy and his sister. Now, as they stood on the sidewalk, George was leaning closer to her, grinning at her as though they shared a secret.

And trying to look down her blouse.

“Actually,” she replied in a casual tone, taking a step back, “I spent some time with your old friend Darcy while I was gone.”

“Really? My old friend—that’s funny!—and how was he? Still slaving away in pursuit of business success? Looking down his upper class nose at the unwashed masses?”

“No, we got along much better this time.” *What an inadequate statement,* she thought. “I found him much more interesting after spending some time with him.”

“What, has he learned some new jokes?” George asked. Lydia giggled and batted her eyelashes. Elizabeth twirled her straw, hoping the sound of screeching plastic would mask her sister’s irritating laughter.

“No, nothing like that,” she said coolly. “We just had a chance to talk. He has some fascinating stories about the business world; people he’s worked with, dubious business deals he’s exposed.”

George coughed.

Lydia, although by no means perceptive, knew enough of her sister and George to gather that the conversation had veered into dangerous waters.

“Beth!” Lydia interrupted; it was a name she knew Elizabeth hated. “Don’t you need to get to the office? You’re always complaining about how busy it is when I’m not there.” Her tone was warm, but her eyes were hard. Lydia was marking her territory.

“Yes, and why aren’t you there? I thought you were working today.” It was a subtle dig, a half-hearted attempt to separate them. Elizabeth didn’t really want Lydia at the office, but anywhere George wasn’t would be okay with her.

“Oh, I told Dad I had to study today.” She winked at George. “He knows I’m not coming in.” She ran her free hand over the waistband of George’s stonewashed jeans, resting her thumb against his belt buckle. He turned to her with raised eyebrows. “But if I’m going to get all my *studying* done,
I need some coffee.” Her voice had turned just a little more seductive than Elizabeth thought was appropriate on the open sidewalk, and apparently George took the hint.

“Right, well, nice bumping into you Beth.” He opened the door and walked through.

“Yeah, Beth, see you later.” Lydia waited until George had crossed the coffee shop threshold before tossing a triumphant look at Elizabeth and following him.

Disgusted, Elizabeth started the brief walk back to the office. Taking a sip of her drink, she wrinkled her nose. It was chocolate-flavored milk: no coffee at all. She sighed and tossed it into the nearest trash can. It was going to be a long day.

By the time Elizabeth reached home that evening, she was sure that all the tulips, daffodils and cherry blossoms in the world couldn’t lift her spirits. Broken copy machines, tenants late with the rent, missing property records, and a troubled accountant had conspired to leach all the joy from her day.

Her dark mood was exasperated by the conversations of the morning, the undercurrent of pain and truth in Darcy’s letter, and her seemingly chronic lack of sleep—caused in no small part by the recollections of their last conversation. The words she had so cruelly tossed at him had the troubling habit of pricking her conscience just as she slipped into bed at night. Elizabeth wanted nothing more than a pint of rocky road and a sad, sentimental film.

Before her solitary plans could be accomplished, though, Elizabeth had to serve as a fashion consultant for Jane. “The purple sweater over the calf-length dress. It brings out your eyes,” Elizabeth suggested as Jane twirled around in a flowery confection.

“Lizzy, I told you that I wore that last time I went out somewhere nice with James.” Jane sighed and twirled again. “You really don’t like this?”

Elizabeth looked away from the evening news, which had not been helping her feelings of dejection. “When was the last time you wore that outfit when you dated James?”

“Um…” Jane counted on her fingers, “I think when he asked me to his cousin’s wedding, maybe…2 years ago?”

“And you really think he’s going to remember what you wore?” Elizabeth raised her eyebrows.

“Well if he’s looked at the pictures recently, he might.”

“Jane,” Elizabeth sighed, turning back to the update on Zimbabwe, “when was the last time you looked at pictures from our cousin’s wedding?”

“I don’t know, but I haven’t been on a real date in so long. Not since, well, before.” Jane grew quiet.

“Before… Charles?” Elizabeth asked, muting the television volume. Jane nodded. “Jane, it’s been almost six months. You never had a real date with him. Why are you so upset by it?”

“I don’t know,” Jane sighed unhappily. “I guess it’s just that this never happens to me. I never leave a relationship so unresolved. I always have a good idea of what went wrong, and how each of us feels. This time, it’s different. I really liked Charles, and I thought he liked me, so why didn’t it work out? At first, I was really upset that he was gone without a word, but now it’s the not knowing where we stand that bothers me. Even when James and I broke up last time, we both knew that it wasn’t right, that we weren’t in the same place and we agreed that we would be friends. And we’ve managed to do that.” She paused to look at her dress. “Though I admit,” she
said thoughtfully, “that James has asked me out several times now, even after we agreed on just being friends.”

“Well maybe you need to let go of Charles, then,” Elizabeth said gently. “I know it seems like something went wrong, but maybe it was just a case of two people who didn’t work out. Maybe James showing up again would have ruined any relationship you had with Charles anyway. You still have feelings for James, don’t you?”

Jane cocked her head thoughtfully. “I think I’ll always have feelings for James. We grew up together; we have so many memories. I mean we dated in high school, and off and on in — and after — college, and now… We always seem to enjoy being together, but we just never really figured out how do that long-term. I guess we do keep finding our way back to each other.”

“Jane,” Elizabeth grinned, “it sounds to me like that relationship is pretty unresolved too. In fact, now that I think about it, it’s kind of a theme with you. Remember all the poems that intern of Dad’s wrote for you when we were in college? You kept them, and you two promised to keep in touch but you didn’t keep it up for long. And don’t forget about that guy you met when we went to Florida for Spring Break. You called each other for a month after that, but eventually it just faded away.”

Jane pursed her lips. “Well we can’t all just cut people off the way you do, Elizabeth. You’ve never been friends with your exes. You shut them down completely and yank all hope away from them; it’s quite merciless, really.”

Elizabeth was taken aback at Jane’s cool tone. “Well,” she said slowly, “I guess we just have different approaches to break ups.”

“I guess we do,” Jane sniffed. “I think I’m going to wear the dress.” She disappeared into the bedroom to find shoes and a purse.

Elizabeth barely noticed when James came to pick Jane up, absorbed in mulling over their conversation, and half listening to the UN debate over North Korea.
Chapter 12

It wasn’t until she was surrounded by half a dozen partially full containers of Chinese food and the credits were rolling on *Clueless* that Elizabeth allowed herself to think more seriously about Jane’s words.

Picking at the last of the lo mein, Elizabeth thought about that word: *merciless*. It wasn’t true, not really, and Elizabeth expected Jane would apologize for the remark in the morning. Even now, she was probably fretting over it while James tried to coax and charm her into laughing at his bad jokes. Elizabeth had seen the trick work before.

She and Jane had always had such different approaches to judging people and relationships. Jane, a bit too deferential, too kind, too willing to see the best in people. Elizabeth, more cynical, more sure of her own opinions, less understanding of others’ faults.

Put that way, they weren’t very attractive character traits, Elizabeth thought. It was where her previous relationships had gone sour, and why she didn’t care to continue them when they ended. She had heard ‘I can change, baby,’ and ‘you just don’t understand,’ listened to those pleas morph into diatribes on her unreasonable expectations, statements like ‘if you *really* loved me, you’d accept me as I am,’ and invectives on her ‘dominance’. Was it any wonder she felt like slamming, double-locking, and barricading the door on those relationships?

This thing with Darcy, though, was different. He hadn’t called her names or belittled her. He hadn’t said *anything* about her, other than that she was wrong. Oh, he’d assumed and demanded, and that was why she’d grown upset so quickly, but he hadn’t told her she had no right to say no, had instead been surprised—and hurt—when she did. She still had a visceral reaction to thinking of how she’d told him that she didn’t want him, tossing his words back in his face, baldly calling it a rejection. She clenched her fists, winced, and shivered slightly at the memory.

Elizabeth sighed and, in an attempt to shake off the memory, cleared the dishes, stacking containers neatly in the refrigerator, puttering around the kitchen, tidying her mess.

Still, her jumbled thoughts followed into the kitchen, and it didn’t help that when she cracked open a fortune cookie, her proverb read: “It is better for a man to be incorrect in business than to be incorrect in love.”

“That’s not a fortune!” Elizabeth taunted the slip of paper. “And I’m not a man! What about *women*? When can *we* be wrong?”

Maybe that was the difference, she thought, as she crunched on the slightly stale cookie. The reason that she couldn’t put the argument with Darcy behind her, couldn’t shake the regret. Because this time, she hadn’t thrown over some man who didn’t appreciate or respect her, who was afraid of her. This time she had been *wrong*, had said things to him based on misinformation, on willfully believing a lie.

She had been wrong about Charlotte, too, had based her assessments of the situation on what she, herself, would want. She had judged harshly and nearly lost a friendship over it. With Charlotte, though, Elizabeth had found a way to make it right; her visit had put most of the tension from their argument behind them and reforged their friendship.

Would it be possible to do something similar with Darcy? Not to give him the wrong idea— that she would want the relationship he had held out to her—but to close out the one they had. He deserved to know that he was right about things, though he was wrong about some, too, and it
seemed important to say that, especially after the honesty and trust he’d shown in his letter.

Elizabeth made a cup of peppermint tea and carried it to her bedroom. Carefully, unfolding Darcy’s letter, she read through it again, sipping her tea, hoping the heat and steam would chase away her lingering embarrassment.

When the teacup was empty and the letter securely tucked back into her dresser drawer, Elizabeth propped her pillows against the wall and let a sliver of moonlight illuminate the blank page of the notepad in her hands.

By the time she heard Jane and James softly wish each other goodnight, and Jane’s happy post-date sigh, she had scribbled out all but a single word:

Fitzwilliam,

Thank you for

I wanted to tell

I’m not sure what to say

Elizabeth groaned and turned her face into the pillows. How could he be so eloquent while she felt so inarticulate? She tried again.

You once told me that you were resentful, but I don’t believe that anymore.

Her pen hovered over the next sentence, trying to decide if she should tell him of her self-realizations, trying to put the words together. Your letter made me consider a lot of things, and I’m not happy with what I’ve discovered about myself. What did you see in me, a silly, judgmental girl?

Elizabeth scratched out the last line vigorously.

I owe you an apology for the things that I said, and the way that I treated you. In light of your explanations, I’m ashamed of the accusations I threw at you, at the assumptions I made without bothering to ask you first.

She paused again, cringing again in embarrassment as she remembered the things she had said to him that night.

I don’t know if our paths will ever cross again, but I wanted you to know that I’m thankful that you shared these things with me. It helped me to understand you better, and I sincerely regret not making an effort to do so when I first had the chance.

As she held the pen over the paper, Elizabeth’s deep sigh quickly became a yawn. Slipping lower against the pillows, she considered whether to sign it Sincerely or Always. Glancing at her sloppy handwriting, Elizabeth began to doodle in the margins, little flowers, stars, a squiggly line that was almost heart-shaped until she made another loop. She was distracted by the dancing shadows on her curtains, created as the branches outside her window moved in the breeze. Wondering if it might rain, Elizabeth slouched further down into the blankets. A few moments later, she drifted off to sleep.

Elizabeth awoke to Jane’s hasty knocking on her door and rushed words about being late and a misplaced hair dryer. The draft of her letter was crumpled in her fist, pressed against her cheek, warm and sticky from being held so close. Her ballpoint pen had leaked blue ink on the white sheets, and her usually precise handwriting had bled together, blots that looked like they had
flowed out of the heart of the paper. The word ‘resentful’ was the only clearly legible word on the page.

In the light of morning, as she hurried through hair washing, dressing and mascara application, Elizabeth felt foolish for thinking that Darcy might even want to read her paltry apology. At another shout from Jane, she tossed the unfinished letter onto the pile of other rejects. Maybe one day soon she would finish a draft and have the courage to send it. Elizabeth hurried out the door to get to the office on time.

A morning cup of coffee, fetched with lots of grumbling by Lydia, restored most of Elizabeth’s equilibrium, and what remained of her melancholy was chased away by an email from her favorite aunt.

Lizzy!

I’ve convinced your uncle that we need a vacation, and he’s decided that the two of us will be entirely too bored without someone to entertain us, which means you, my dear sweet niece (look at me, pretending to be ancient—my 36th birthday is next week!), are invited!

As Elizabeth read, her heavy regret receded a bit, gradually replaced by anticipation.

We considered the Caribbean, France, and Napa, but then we thought realistically and realized we wanted (and could afford) a good, old-fashioned road trip with lots of junk food, dive bars, and bad music. (I’ve been blaring Prince for days… he’s threatening to see a lawyer! Isn’t he funny?) Of course, since your uncle, the old fart (don’t ever marry a man 10 years older than you are, they’re simply no fun after 45), has decided that his newest passion is restoring old homes, (and damn it, he’s got me into it too!) we’re heading north and going antiquing. There are a ton of places to visit, and he’s promised me we can go see my old house and haunts in Lambton. (don’t tell, but I’m going to try to get him to make out with me under the bleachers! Come to think of it, you’re not invited along for that part.)

Elizabeth’s heart leapt at the mention of Lambton. She knew it was close to Darcy’s home; she had heard Charles mention it at some point as being part of the ‘Great Darcy Heritage’. It was the perfect opportunity to slip a letter into Darcy’s mailbox—surely she could find it once she was there—and it gave her a deadline of sorts, as well as the hope of falling asleep at a reasonable hour again.

Now you see why we’ll need to be entertained. With all the antiquities surrounding us, (and I’m including Eric in that!) we need some young blood to keep us lively. I’ve already emailed Jane to ask if she’ll stay with the kids… they need a good influence every now and then, with me as a mother! I’ll make sure you get plenty of coffee, and occasionally a chance to choose the road music. Eric has already started hiding my Bon Jovi tapes.

So… in or out, kiddo?

Love,

Auntie M

p.s. Anyone you want to bring along? Whatever happened with the Coffee King of Meryton?

Elizabeth laughed at her aunt’s note. Moira Fields had married Eric Gardiner when she was 23 years old, just as Elizabeth was entering her tumultuous high school years. Elizabeth’s Aunt Phyllis had already claimed the traditional “aunt” duties of pinching cheeks and asking about school and Auntie Mo wisely took a different approach to her new nieces. Elizabeth and Jane
instantly bonded with their favorite uncle’s new wife, the source of all fashion knowledge (from her work as a buyer at a posh department store) and recipient of all top-secret boy talk. The three had enjoyed a close relationship ever since.

Elizabeth clicked reply and began typing.

_Auntie Mo!_

_How did you know I needed to get away? If you can ensure that some of that junk food includes nachos with the fake orange cheese, I am in for sure! Tell Uncle Eric that if he refuses to let you listen to Bon Jovi, I’m going to make him listen to my Lilith Fair ’98 mix CD. On repeat._

_Of course, I can only say yes for sure if you send me the dates, dear aunt. If only I had a cute boy of my own to bring along! Then you wouldn’t have to feel bad about sneaking off to make out while your innocent niece was left all alone in a new city._

_Your plan to stick the kids with Jane is excellent. They’ll be just wild enough to snap her out of the last of her funk. Have you gotten the marker stains off your walls yet?_

_Antiques + Junk Food + Coffee = Very Happy Lizzy_

_Big Kiss (for you AND the children of the corn),_

_L
Chapter 13

Was it some rule of the universe that sunglasses—and lip gloss, come to think of it—always migrated to the bottom of whatever bag you carried?

Elizabeth rifled through her purse, annoyed. It wasn’t so much the sunglasses that perturbed her, but the fact that everything she’d expected about this day, even this place, had turned out differently.

Elizabeth had thought it would be just another old house, filled with old things and musty smells. It wasn’t.

Well, it wasn’t just a house. It was two houses, set on acres of forested land, which had been cleared in places for a sweeping expanse of green lawn and several large garden areas.

All this land had a name: Pemberley. Elizabeth wasn’t sure if it referred to the whole area, or only to the colonial museum they had been trying to find.

She had gaped as they slowly drove through the massive park, along a winding path with tall birch trees planted along both sides, their branches arching over the road. It was a simple beauty, sunlight filtering through the leaves and dancing along the pavement.

Then, just as he’d done six times in the last four days, Eric took a wrong turn.

When they pulled up to a sprawling, modern home, Elizabeth knew that they weren’t looking at the crown jewel of the Lambton Preservation Society’s Colonial Home Tour. The three of them had stood on the driveway for approximately thirty seconds before Mo spotted an old schoolmate. The fact that Jeff Parker was halfway up a ladder stringing fairy lights in a tree didn’t stop Mo from carrying on a loud conversation about the good old days while Elizabeth and Eric looked on, bemused.

Caterers, gardeners, cleaners, men with a tent, and even a horse trainer or two walked by while Mo and Jeff discussed the fate of Suzy Sullivan (nee Parker), Mo’s best friend from the LHS cheerleading squad who had moved to Alaska after graduation.

Just as Jeff started to pull out photos of his children, a well-dressed woman with a clipboard approached Eric and Elizabeth, introduced herself as Eileen Reynolds, and told them to follow her inside.

Apparently, she thought they were the florists.

The mistake was easily made, Elizabeth supposed, as they’d been standing near a van with the words “Lambton Laurels” painted on the side. Eric and Elizabeth made it as far as the spacious foyer before Eric explained that they were not, in fact, delivering floral arrangements. Elizabeth was spying into the adjacent rooms, secretly wondering if she could try some of the furniture arrangements and fabrics in her own apartment, when Eileen said:

“I’m terribly sorry for the confusion; Mr. Darcy phoned about an hour ago and is on his way. He’s had a long trip, and it’s an important weekend for him, so I’m really trying to make everything perfect before he arrives.”

Eric chuckled and shrugged off the misunderstanding, but Elizabeth hardly heard a word of it. She was too busy digesting Eileen’s statement while staring at the framed photo on the wall of the
family room. The photo of a younger, smiling Fitzwilliam Darcy, in a suit and tie, standing next to a middle-aged couple and holding a diploma.

She glanced around the room, taking in more frames, more photos: Darcy at the beach; with a beaming teenage girl who must have been his sister; in formal wear; in a Little League uniform. With every frozen image of his smile—even the one of him as a sandy-haired boy missing a front tooth—Elizabeth felt the same sinking realization: *I am in Darcy’s house.*

This realization was quickly followed by the impulse to *run.*

Eric, however, was busy making a new friend, and neither he nor Eileen noticed Elizabeth standing in the center of the room, wide-eyed and trembling.

As Eileen escorted them out, Elizabeth noticed other details she’d missed. The understated elegance of the dining room; the bookshelves in nearly every room; the austerity and functionality of the furnishings. It was a little formal, but never intimidating. It was *him,* really, and she loved it and hated it for making her feel guilty and immature.

Of course, once they made it to the front porch, Mo had wandered over and discovered that Eileen Reynolds was the mother-in-law of her former classmate, Stephanie Peterson. After a few minutes spent catching up and promising to pass on Mo’s contact information, Eric had started asking questions about the house.

Eileen had given them a detailed account of the construction process and mentioned her boss’ kindness, generosity and love of the community at least five times. Eric had turned to Elizabeth and asked, “Wait, Lizzy, is this the same Darcy you told us about in the fall?”

Eileen’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You know Mr. Darcy? Through your aunt?”

Elizabeth couldn’t help but blush, mortified, and stammered that she knew Darcy, but that they hadn’t actually travelled this way to visit him. “Just, um, just passing through. To see the antiques.”

Eric had given her a puzzled look, and carried on asking about Darcy. This prompted another soliloquy on his management style and how well he was leading the company. The guests he was expecting were all board members, and the coming weekend was an executive retreat.

Mo apparently decided that the flush on Elizabeth’s cheeks wasn’t the first signs of sunburn and began asking even more personal questions about Darcy.

“Oh, he’s not married,” Eileen said. “He’s very devoted to his family and the company, and that doesn’t leave much time for dating, I guess. Besides,” she joked. “I might be a little biased, but I’m not sure who would be good enough. I tried to set him up with my daughter once, but I guess when you’ve known each other since preschool, it’s not really a blind date.”

It was only a few moments after this that Elizabeth set off across the grounds to find the museum. It was a long walk, but preferable to getting back in the car with Eric and Mo and what would undoubtedly be a barrage of questions. Especially after Eileen had given a little sigh and said, “I do wish Mr. Darcy would find someone nice and settle down. Sometimes I think he’s a bit lonely.”

“As if I didn’t feel bad enough already,” Elizabeth muttered, still seeking the elusive eyewear—but the praise she’d heard for Darcy tumbled around in her head like a child doing somersaults on that glorious front lawn.

Giving up the glasses for lost, and taking one last look at the envelope addressed to “Mr. F.
Darcy” shoved in her bag, she brushed a few strands of hair off her sweaty neck, and straightened. The mid-morning sun made it difficult to spot Eric and Mo, but a shape in the driveway, silhouetted against the sunlight, was suddenly distinct.

“No,” she breathed. But yes, it was, and she very nearly resumed the sunglasses search to keep from just standing there, watching him walk toward her.

“Hello.” That deep, low voice was out of place amidst what a moment ago had been alive with chirping birds, whirring lawn mowers and pounding hammers but now seemed to be filled with measured silence.

For an instant, it seemed as if every living thing on the estate had turned toward them.

“Hi.” Elizabeth blinked twice. “I didn’t know—you’re early aren’t you?” And it was too much, looking at his face, which had grown impossibly more familiar despite their separation. She dove back into the bag, hoping to hide the blush on her cheeks.

“No—Yes—I mean—” he stuttered. “How are you?”

“I can’t find my sunglasses.” It was true. It wasn’t everything, but it was true.

“Aren’t they on your head?” Of course they were. She reached up, just as he moved to tap them, and their hands touched, stilled, and then he was blushing too, and they were both looking at their feet, her eyes flitting back up, trying to see as much as she could without actually looking.

“Yeah, um, thanks. So… this is looking to be quite the party.”

“Oh—” he grimaced “—the executive retreat. We had the space, and I haven’t invited people here in so long…” He peered at her again. “But, how are you?”

At the moment, she was struggling to separate her glasses from her unruly hair.

Darcy’s mobile started to vibrate, and he fumbled with the phone and a set of keys as he tried to answer. “I’ll be… excuse me.” He spun around and walked away.

Elizabeth stood there for a few moments, watching his confident stride and broad shoulders as he moved toward the house. He suddenly stopped, turned, and she felt him stare for a long moment. She held that gaze, across the distance, for as long as she could, but the sun was in her eyes, and when she blinked, he had turned again.

She felt a great urge to sit down on the grass and cry.

Instead, she made her way down a tree-lined path, in the shade of giant oaks. If he was going to be here, she would find a spot far, far away and hide. She thought that tactic would buy her at least fifteen minutes in which to restore her equilibrium and determine how to give him the letter and escape. Then, the second part of her plan: if forced to speak, she would say only things she knew for certain, no conjecture, no ambiguity. She would not be cruel.

Of course the best possible scenario (what she was now thinking of as Plan B) would be to find her aunt and uncle while hiding from Darcy, and tell them the most important fact: they had to leave. Now.

Elizabeth implemented Plan A immediately, following the path as it twisted near a small stream. There was even a little wooden bridge built over it, and she decided to risk her luck crossing it. Finding it sturdy and steady, she made her way to the other side, and a patch of flowering bushes that she noticed. Elizabeth wondered if she could add a photography clause to the plan, because
the place where she found herself was absolutely breathtaking. Digging through her shoulder bag again to find her camera, she was too distracted to notice another person making his way across the bridge until he spoke.

“Elizabeth.” Darcy’s voice seemed quieter than usual, hushed by the natural canopy above.

“You found me.” She hoped it sounded less accusatory to him.

“Were you hiding?” He tilted his head as he asked the question.

“Maybe a little,” she admitted sheepishly. He grinned, and she decided to jump ahead to Plan C: stay and see what might happen next.

“Can I show you something?”

She took in the hesitant expression on his face and thought that, despite her nervousness, despite feeling that she should run away as fast as she could before hurting him again, she could do this one thing. She smiled tentatively.

“Sure.”

He led her back across the bridge, up the path, and toward an older house that looked to Elizabeth’s untrained eye like it had been immaculately restored. Walking past half a dozen small tables on the veranda, they entered what must have been the original kitchen, but it had been transformed into a modern coffee house, complete with espresso machine and soft classical music.

“Emily!” Darcy greeted the girl behind the counter in the friendliest voice Elizabeth had ever heard him use. The teenager looked up and smiled warmly.

“Mr. D! How are you? I didn’t know you were coming back! No wonder they’ve rolled out the red carpet.”

“Yes, well, we’re having guests, so it’s not only for me. Although you know how I like to make an entrance.” Darcy smiled ruefully and Emily laughed.

Elizabeth thought she was dreaming. Was this the same man she’d met in Meryton?

He turned to Elizabeth then. “This is Emily, she’s worked here since we opened four years ago, and her mother is the director of the preservation society. Emily, this is Elizabeth, she’s a huge fan of coffee. And muffins. Do you have any back there?”

“We have some blueberry, would that be okay? What kind of coffee do you like, Elizabeth?” Emily was very friendly, but also efficient, as she moved about the small counter area. “Mr. D, do you want your usual?”

“Sure, thanks. Elizabeth?” He looked a bit worried now, still waiting for her answer. Elizabeth realized she’d been staring at him.

“Oh! Yes, I’ll just have an iced mocha. Non-fat milk, if you have it.” She smiled to cover her embarrassment.

“Of course we have it! It’s all Mr. D will drink. He’s so particular.” Emily winked, and Darcy rolled his eyes.

Darcy and Emily chatted amiably while Elizabeth looked on. He was so different, but still—bizarrely—the same, his tone warmer, his actions more relaxed, but still he carried himself in that
confident way she had once mistakenly called arrogant.

When Elizabeth offered to pay, he adamantly refused. She noticed that he slipped a generous amount for Emily into her tip jar, before she followed him toward a bench with a beautiful view of the lawn and garden.

“You aren’t here alone, are you?” He slowed his pace a bit so she could catch up.

“No. My aunt and uncle drove over. I think they’re in the gardens somewhere.”

“So you didn’t just appear on my lawn?” Elizabeth looked up at him and was a bit startled by his grin.

“I thought about it,” she said, smiling. She could hardly help the blush she felt on her cheeks as she said, “Actually, we took a wrong turn and saw your house first.”

“Did you like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” she answered, and blushed again when she saw him look down and smile into his coffee mug.

“From here we should be able to see them when they come back toward the museum.” He spoke quietly as they reached the small seat near a flowering hedge. They both turned and sat down at the same time, and Elizabeth somehow misjudged the distance. She ended up closer to him than she realized, the soft fabric of his shirt brushing her bare arm. She could feel the closeness, the heat of him on her skin. Despite the cool drink in her hand, the soft breeze, and the shade of a nearby maple tree, Elizabeth still felt flushed.

“How’s your coffee?” Darcy inquired politely.

“Really good, thanks.” She nodded, not quite able to look at his face when it would be so close to hers.

“Is it better than the coffee in Meryton?”

This succeeded in turning her head, and she saw something in his eyes—the sparkle of a tease alongside a hint of insecurity. She grinned.

“Well I don’t know,” she spoke slowly, drawing out the words, recognizing the opportunity to do more than just make polite conversation. “I mean, it’s hard to evaluate it after just a few sips. Some things take time to decide. Especially when you have as refined a coffee palate as I do.”

He smiled. “Yes. Maybe you just need another chance to try it—the coffee, I mean—before you make up your mind.”

“You might be right,” Elizabeth suspected he had realized they were not only discussing the coffee. “I already know I like it. It’s,” here she glanced at him and returned his smile, “some of the best coffee I’ve ever had. Now I just need to decide if it’s my favorite.”

Darcy’s expression suddenly turned serious, and for a moment she grew worried, until he said, “I think you’ll only know for sure after you try the muffin.”

Elizabeth laughed at his unexpected humor. “Yes, you know my love for a good muffin!”

He was smiling again. “I also know that you don’t like to share.”
Elizabeth rolled her eyes as she gestured to him to take some. As she chewed, she considered when to give him the letter—whether to give him the letter, really.

She had memorized the contents, from the cautious beginning to the end where she had written *I hope someday we’ll meet again and I’ll be able to show you how right I think you are about nearly everything you said. Maybe then we’ll get to share that coffee you wanted and we’ll have the conversations we should have had before.* That day was today, and here they were, drinking coffee, laughing together, and enjoying each other’s company, underneath all the nerves. Handing over that solemn letter with apologies and weighted words would ruin this new, fragile thing happening between them.

Elizabeth felt suddenly grateful, realizing that he was not the kind of man to wait for awkward apologies or succumb to the nerves of the moment. She still wanted the chance to talk about all that had passed between them, but somehow knew that it was more important to simply be together now, to match his hospitality and openness with friendship and kindness. They would have time for the rest.

“Tell me something,” she started, “why did you decide to put in a coffee shop?”

“It seemed like a good idea, a way to provide funds for the upkeep of the house. The employees are technically paid by my company—we officially own Pemberley house, so we paid all the renovation costs—but the profits go to the Lambton Preservation Society. It’s a nice way to support other local efforts that we can’t bankroll, and it’s a good write-off. Plus it keeps this place from being too corporate. But I’m always nervous that we’re infringing too much, making something a business that should be there for free so that people can enjoy it.”

Darcy was so earnest, and she hadn’t heard him speak so many words together other than the last time—no, she wouldn’t think of *that* and spoil their time together now.

“What do you think of the house?” She was surprised by his question, and struggled to answer.

“I haven’t seen much, actually. But what I did see, I liked a lot. I guess the gardens were probably my favorite, but the tiny sitting room in the back looked so cozy. And of course, I always love anywhere I can drink coffee. What do you like best here?” She smiled at him, hoping to encourage him to continue talking.

“This is my favorite part of the house, the coffee shop. I was worried that the contractor and the architect would tell me we couldn’t make it work. The electricity, you know, to run everything and the refrigeration systems… it might’ve been too modern for this place. But they did it.”

She smiled widely. “You’ve done an amazing job here. The house is beautiful.”

Darcy looked at her closely. “I’m really glad you think so.”

Elizabeth felt herself blush under his gaze.

He cleared his throat. “Elizabeth, I know you didn’t come here to meet me, and I don’t even know how long you’re staying, but my sister is coming just after lunch, and I know she would love to meet you. Is it possible for you to meet up with us somewhere, whenever it’s convenient?”

“I don’t know what our plans are, but I’m sure my aunt and uncle would like some time to themselves. They don’t get to escape their children very often.” She smiled shyly as his face lit up.

“Charles will be here too. Since he’s on our board, he’s coming for the executive retreat. I’m sure he’d like to see you again.” The thought seemed to sober him. He looked up from his coffee.
She smiled briefly. “It will be good to see him again, too. Could we meet back here? Now that I’ve had some more of it, I’m almost ready to declare this coffee the winner. Another taste test might seal it for me.”

Darcy visibly relaxed as they confirmed their plans for the afternoon. All too soon they spotted Eric and Mo making their way up the winding garden path, holding hands and laughing.

The foursome moved to a table on the porch. They spent time chatting about the house, the gardens, and the small town nearby. Darcy and Mo traded memories—although she was a few years older than him, they had some mutual acquaintances. Just after noon, Eric checked his watch and said regretfully, “Well, ladies, we should get going, we have lunch plans with one of Mo’s old teachers.”

“Besides,” Mo added, “I’m sure you have a few things to take care of now that you’re home, right Fitz?”

He smiled at her; Mo had the ability to put people at ease and figure out their childhood nicknames within moments of having met them. “Only a few things, but this has been very pleasant.” He looked at Elizabeth with warmth in his eyes. “Can you come about three?”

Elizabeth tilted her head to hide a shy smile. “Of course.”

Darcy accompanied them to their car then, and as they pulled away, she saw him walking back toward his house, the bright noon sun glinting in his hair.

Mo twisted around in the front seat to look Elizabeth in the eye. “So Lizzy, that was the Coffee King? Are we going to see you under the bleachers later?” She gave Elizabeth a bawdy wink.

“I think you can go ahead without us.”

Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at Mo, who just grinned and replied enigmatically, “I’m sure you’ll have other chances.”
A late afternoon breeze teased the ends of Elizabeth’s hair as she smiled at Fitzwilliam across what she had come to think of as their table.

“I admit it. This coffee is better than what we have in Meryton.”

“Thank you.” Darcy’s quiet pleasure at her compliment was obvious. Then again, he had started needling her again half an hour ago about the quality of their favorite coffee hangouts, so perhaps he was just gloating. “I, however, will admit that yours has a better community feel. Here we get too many tourists, so most of the Lambton residents only stop in and then leave. In Meryton, they all stay and chat.”

Elizabeth recalled Darcy’s expression when she had walked in this afternoon, a strange mix of nerves and elation. She wondered if the thrill she felt at seeing his face light up would pass with time. Whoa, Lizzy, she schooled her thoughts, you have no idea if this is just a one-time thing.

Georgiana and Charles were running errands in town before joining them, and for a moment Elizabeth thought that she and Darcy would end up making awkward small talk, dancing away from topics neither seemed ready to address.

Instead, they filled the unforeseen time together with light conversation and gentle teasing. He was as open as Elizabeth had ever seen him, relaxed and confident, smiling at her while telling stories about his childhood. She laughed—really laughed, at his clever insight and wry humor—and found that she enjoyed simply being with him.

Through it all, she felt the unexpected affinity they shared, and she had to quiet the voice that occasionally reminded her that this, more than anything else, was what she had thrown away when she had rejected him. Was it possible she could have another chance?

Darcy’s contented smile grew warmer as he noticed two figures approaching from the direction of his home. As they drew near, it was obvious that the two had linked arms and the woman was laughing quietly at whatever the man was telling her. As they climbed the stairs to the porch, the two pulled apart.

“Elizabeth Bennet! It’s so good to see you again!” Charles’ effusive greeting was more than she expected, and she accepted his warm handshake and bright smile with one of her own. Darcy was standing off to the side with his arm around a tall young woman whose features were similar to his own.

“Elizabeth, I’d like you to meet my sister, Georgiana Darcy.” His voice was a touch more formal than it had been when it had been just the two of them. Elizabeth widened her smile, directing it first at him, and then at his sister, and offered her hand in greeting.

“It’s absolutely lovely to meet you,” Elizabeth began. “I’ve heard so many wonderful things about you.”

"No more than what I’ve heard about you, I'm certain.” There was a wariness about Georgiana, an innate shyness coupled with a timidity that could easily have been mistaken for snobbery. Yet Elizabeth did not feel that she was being evaluated, did not feel judged. Instead she felt that Georgiana was struggling to both form her own opinion of Elizabeth and trust her brother at the same time.
“I understand congratulations are in order! Your—Fitzwilliam—tells me you’ve just finished university. Do you have any plans for the fall?” Elizabeth had first used Darcy’s name during their earlier conversation. It was such a small thing, but his eyes had softened and his smile widened when she said it. Elizabeth determined to call him by name as often as possible.

“Yes,” Georgiana answered softly, “I’ll be starting graduate school.”

While Charles and Darcy wandered into the shop for coffee and pastries, Elizabeth asked more about Georgiana’s new program, apartment, and plans for the remainder of the summer. Each reply grew more confident than the last, and Elizabeth felt that perhaps, after an hour together, Georgiana might actually venture to ask her a question or two.

Darcy sat next to Elizabeth, their small table now crowded with mugs and plates. He pulled his chair closer, and his leg brushed against hers. The feel of the coarse hair on his calves against her smooth skin sent tingles up her spine.

Despite the momentary distraction, Elizabeth noticed Charles’ attentive behavior to Georgiana, and the way her eyes followed his movements as he sat down. Next to Charles’ extraversion, Georgiana’s reserve seemed more pronounced. Even so, the three of them made a point of including her in the discussion, and she contributed her quiet agreement to nearly everything they said. Elizabeth could see Georgiana’s careful defenses receding as she laughed with Charles and Fitzwilliam.

Eventually, Charles began to ask about their mutual friends in Meryton. “How’s your family doing? Are all your sisters still working with you?”

“Well, there’s some debate as to whether Lydia does any actual work, but yes, we’re all still helping my father,” she joked. Elizabeth had resolved that unless he brought up Jane’s name, she would not.

Charles went on to inquire about other people he met while staying in town. Elizabeth answered politely, but realized that the topic was probably fairly boring for the Darcys. “Tell me more about this executive retreat! Darcy’s been pretty tight-lipped about what takes place. Any super-secret rituals? Do you play pranks on each other?”

Georgiana looked a little shocked that Elizabeth would ask such a thing, but as the two men chuckled appreciatively, she offered a half-smile.

As Charles detailed some of the week’s activities, Elizabeth felt Darcy’s arm rest along the back of her chair, grazing the bare skin of her shoulder. It was a hesitant touch, and could just as easily have been attributed to the tight arrangement of chairs and people, but when Elizabeth glanced at him, he was regarding her nervously. She leaned into his touch, more than was perhaps wise, given the uncertain nature of her feelings and their relationship. When he smiled, she noticed a dimple on the right side of his face.

“Tell me more about your vacation,” Charles began. “How on earth did you find this place? Darcy, what did you think when you found her here?”

“He was shocked, but so was I.” Elizabeth smiled up at him. Her stomach gave a little flutter at the warm expression she saw as he gazed at her.

“I’ll admit to having one of those ‘of all the coffee shops, in all the towns, in all the world,’ kind of moments.” He tried to force his voice into a bad impression of Humphrey Bogart here, and Elizabeth rolled her eyes.
“If we were going to meet again anywhere in the world, it was going to be near a coffee shop,” Elizabeth said. “I’m here with my aunt and uncle, on a road trip, visiting a bunch of small towns around the state, looking at antiques. It’s been fun.”

They shared their impressions of the various towns she was visiting, giving Georgiana an opportunity to participate more in the conversation; having grown up near so many of the attractions on their itinerary, she had visited almost all of the same places and gave Elizabeth several shopping tips. Elizabeth asked her to write these down; Darcy was running his thumb along her bare arm, and the sensory overload this produced eliminated any chance that she would remember Georgiana’s advice. Elizabeth’s memory was consumed with storing the feel of his hand on her skin.

Finally Emily came outside to collect their empty mugs with a cheeky reminder that, despite owning the house, they had to abide by the hours of operation like everyone else.

Elizabeth reluctantly pulled away from Darcy’s touch, noting the flicker of disappointment in his eyes as she did so. After expressing their wish to meet her aunt and uncle before they continued traveling, Charles and Georgiana began the short trip across the lawn.

Elizabeth and Darcy went back through the house toward the front entrance. Their arms brushed as they walked down the narrow hallway, and Elizabeth impulsively slipped her fingers into his. If her heart had been racing before, the rush of emotion this provoked, and her heart’s extra leap when he tightened his grip made her fear it would explode.

When they reached her vehicle, Darcy turned toward her. “Elizabeth, I know we’ve spent nearly the whole day together already, but…” he paused, looking at her anxiously. “Could we have dinner together before you go? Just us.”

She squeezed his hand and smiled into his eyes. “I’d really like that. My aunt is planning something for tomorrow, so it would have to be tonight—but I know your sister just got in, and —”

“Tonight is perfect.” He smiled and reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She sighed as his fingers grazed her cheek, and his expression changed to something she could only define as purposeful. Leaning in, he brushed his lips against the ridge of her cheekbone, just below the corner of her eye. The softness of his touch, the warmth of his face against hers, and his mere presence made Elizabeth’s eyes flutter closed.

They stood that way for a moment, hands clasped, Darcy leaning in, Elizabeth tilting her face toward his. She was almost certain he would kiss her again, but instead felt a soft breath against her skin, a soft sigh.

“Yes, I’ll pick you up in an hour?” He said as he pulled away. The glow of twilight caught on his skin and Elizabeth thought that she had never seen a man look so handsome before.

“Perfect,” she echoed softly, torn between wanting to reach up and kiss him, and waiting until later. Reaching for her keys, she unlocked the car and climbed in.

He leaned over the open door and gave her a breathtaking smile. “I’ll see you very soon, Elizabeth.”

Heart in her throat, she nodded. As she pulled away he lifted one arm in farewell. Perhaps tonight they could talk about what went wrong in April, and maybe, if she was very lucky, she wouldn’t have to decide whether to kiss him, only when.
Her room was cool and quiet when she returned, and Elizabeth found a note on the table.

*L—I have gone out... perhaps you can guess where. Don’t wait up, unless you’re prepared to give me some details!* – M

Elizabeth smiled at her aunt’s scribbles, but turned serious when she thought of the letter still hiding in her purse. Pulling it out, she ran her finger over the name she had written so carefully.

The day had been perfect, unspoiled by the weight of their previous argument. Was it even her job—as the spurner—to bring up the subject of their relationship, or was that left to the spurned? Her stomach was already a knotted mess of nerves and anxiety as she rushed through her pre-date preparations, and reflecting on how she’d treated Darcy in April didn’t help.

She cast the letter aside, wondering if the time for writing had passed, wondering if perhaps now they could just talk openly about the mistakes they’d made.

Just before she put on her shoes, Elizabeth heard her phone ringing across the room. She dug through her purse and finally pulled it out. “Jane? What’s wrong? Why are you... what? She... when?”

Darcy’s knock, loud and assured, sounded from the other side of the door.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, rushing to answer. “But didn’t they...” Darcy looked on in confusion as Elizabeth fumbled with the door, finally stepping out of his way. She sent him an apologetic look and then spoke into the phone, “Jane, how did this happen?”

Elizabeth could feel the blood draining from her face, her limbs trembling as Jane spoke frantically. “No, they aren’t here right now, but when they get back... Yes, I’ll call them. We’ll figure out a way to get there. Tomorrow? All right, you go talk to Mom. Call me if anything else happens. Love you, too. Bye.” Elizabeth collapsed into the desk chair, all but whispering her final words.

Stunned, she hardly moved for a few moments before realizing that she was sitting in a shadow because Darcy was blocking the light.

“I think I know the answer, but is everything all right? What happened? Can I do something? To help, I mean?”

She looked up then, felt the tears pricking painfully at the back of her eyes, welling up and threatening to spill over. She blinked several times, and felt one teardrop form on the edge of her eyelashes, felt it slide down the side of her face. “No, I don’t think you can help with this. Lydia’s been arrested. She’s being charged with fraud.”

“What?”

“Yes. Apparently she’s stolen hundreds of thousands of dollars from our tenants, and the police have uncovered loans that she took out using other people’s names. She was denied bail because the money is missing and they think she could flee. Apparently she opened an account at another bank somewhere, but it’s empty now.” Elizabeth shook her head, the extent of her sister’s alleged crimes overwhelming her.

“How did she get the numbers?”

“Lydia denies it; she says she never took anyone’s information. But according to Jane, the investigators found several items that were purchased using the stolen information.” She felt the tears rolling down her cheeks, onto her neck, and couldn’t keep from letting out a hiccuping sob.
“Lydia says they were gifts.”

“From whom?” She could barely see his face through her tears, but she couldn’t look away - she had to know what he would do when he found out.

“George—” her voice cracked, “—Wickham bought them for her.”

The shock on his face was apparent. “Was he arrested too?”

“No. He’s gone. No one has seen him in days. My father mentioned him to the investigators, but they said his name isn’t on any of the accounts, and they can’t prove that he used the numbers. They won’t charge him without evidence, and right now it all points to Lydia.”

In the weeks after their argument, Elizabeth had been haunted by her memory of Darcy’s expression as she rejected him. What she hadn’t remembered was just how hard Darcy could look when he was upset. His mouth was set in a tight, straight line, his shoulders were stiff, his posture unyielding. Seeing his expression, she covered her face and let herself sob. She felt his hand grip her shoulder, but the tender passion she had felt earlier was gone, and when she peeked at him, he was turned toward the window.

Was this the same man she had been with this afternoon? The same man who caressed her arm? Smiled at her so warmly? Spoke to her so softly? Those caresses, those smiles, those words seemed a lifetime ago, everything fading into the background of what this might mean for her sister, for their family business.

“You said that you’d call your aunt and uncle. Do you want me to do it for you?”

“I have to call them, but I have no idea what to say.” Elizabeth felt it then, her last chance slipping away. She would return to Meryton, try to pick up the pieces of this disaster, and regretfully file Darcy under Not Meant to Be in her catalogue of relationships. Another opportunity with him was gone, and she didn’t think they were playing with a three strikes rule.

The misery welled up and overflowed in a paroxysm of tears. “I’m so ashamed! I knew—you told me he what he was—and I knew he was in the office with Lydia, but I didn’t insist, didn’t check! And now… we’ll lose the business, and Lydia will go to jail! Why didn’t I say anything?”

Darcy had taken her phone off the table, and was punching Eric’s number into his Blackberry. Sobbing, Elizabeth heard snatches of conversation in his quiet tone without bothering to listen for the condemnation she knew she’d hear in his voice.

When he hung up the phone, she looked at him, pleading with her eyes. “Don’t tell your sister, please.” With a gasp, she realized what else was at stake. “And Charles,” she began, “rented from us. I don’t know if he… I don’t know the extent of the theft. He might have lost…” Elizabeth trailed off, humiliated that Darcy’s friend should face financial troubles because of her sister’s behavior.

She stood to start packing, but abruptly sat back down, the crisis washing over her again. “We could lose everything. Some of those properties we just manage for other owners—what if their tenants can’t pay? We’ll be bankrupt, and what if people sue? We can’t afford legal fees like that!” She turned her wide, tearful eyes to Darcy’s cold ones. “There’s no way this can end well.”

“Yes, he’s completely destroyed you.” Darcy’s tone was cold, his face a mask of suppressed rage. “Will your uncle be able to help? Isn’t he a lawyer?”

“Kevin doesn’t know about criminal law. Eric might be able to help, but he does tax law, estates, this is out of his experience.” Elizabeth tried to keep the hopelessness out of her tone.
They sat in tense silence. Elizabeth was sure that Darcy was just waiting for her aunt and uncle to come back before leaving. He probably thought she was unstable, immature, crying and wailing instead of doing something to fix the problem. She was never like this, but all the nerves bundling in her stomach before her date had fissured at Jane’s news, and the aftershocks that made her hands tremble and her throat tighten only felt worse when she realized that after this, she would never see him again. He was a good man, she knew that, but even good men could not be expected to overlook crimes against their best friend—especially not in favor of a girl who had so cruelly rejected them once before.

Darcy stood suddenly, as if he had heard her thoughts. “I’m sorry I’ve stayed so long when you obviously want to be alone. I’ll leave you my card,” he added, reaching into his pocket. “You, or perhaps your uncle, can call me if you have any news.”

Elizabeth nodded, taking the card from his hands. “I’m sorry,” she offered quietly. “About dinner. About everything.” It wasn’t nearly enough, not nearly everything she had hoped to tell him, but it was all she had to give him now. Even her letter—filled with hopeful sentiments and fruitless wishes—could not make him forget that she had not trusted him at first, that her actions might have cost his friend thousands of dollars.

Darcy looked at her for a long moment. “I’m sorry, too. So sorry.” Elizabeth stared as he left the room, saw the door sweep closed behind him, and wondered if she would always be watching him walk away.
Chapter 15

“I have been renting from you for the last ten years, Beth,” Brent Long stated, a trifle condescendingly, “and you know, I thought we trusted each other. I want to take your word that this theft from my bank account isn’t due to Longbourn’s incompetence, but I’m having a hard time seeing past the $10,000 I just lost.” Now he sounded angry.

“Mr. Long,” Elizabeth began softly, “I understand how vulnerable and upset you feel right now—believe me, I feel the same way—“

“Did you lose money?” he interrupted harshly.

“No, not personally, but our company accounts were affected,” she replied.

“Well until you have to look your child in the face and tell him he might not be able to go to college in ten years because some jerk pretended to be his dad and stole what his parents had scraped together for his education fund, then I suggest you stop lecturing me on how I feel.” Brent’s nostrils flared as he spoke, and Elizabeth took a deep breath to steel herself.

“Mr. Long, the only thing I can offer you right now is my sincere apologies for the trouble that you’re suffering, and a month’s reprieve for the rent on your condo until we have a better handle on the problem. We simply don’t have any more information, and until we do, my hands are tied.” Elizabeth tried to sound conciliatory, but privately agreed that the solution was meaningless. A month would not be enough time to fix everything. Not without a miraculous lottery win or other windfall.

“I have to get back to work, so I’ll take what you’re offering for now, but if things aren’t settled in one month, I’m coming back down here and I’m going to speak to your father.” Coming from the former Meryton High All-State linebacker, whose shoulders filled the door frame he occupied, Elizabeth considered this a threat.

“I understand, Mr. Long,” Elizabeth replied. “Give my best to Donna and J.J., and again, I’m very sorry.”

He did not reply, but instead turned and walked out the door. Elizabeth sighed and covered her face with her hands. It was the third meeting today that had ended in exactly the same manner, and frankly, she was relieved that she had avoided being threatened with a lawsuit. So far.

From the conference room next door, she could hear the sound of her youngest sister’s voice. Elizabeth could not quite make out the words, but her father, Lydia, and Uncle Kevin had been locked inside for the entire morning trying to figure out Lydia’s case. After only three days in prison, Lydia had been allowed to go free on bail, although all of her accounts, credit cards, and assets were frozen. The judge’s unexpected decision had been welcome, but life with Lydia—especially Lydia the Felon, as Mary called her—was no picnic.

The days since Elizabeth’s return from Pemberley – and from her all too brief time with Darcy – had been a waking nightmare, from which she could not seem to rouse. While her uncles were working almost constantly, and sometimes remotely, trying to prove Lydia’s innocence, Elizabeth and her father were attempting to salvage the company. Longbourn maintained records for hundreds of tenants and a number of owner-clients, and stored confidential account information for nearly all of them. The extent of the damage was staggering. Frank Bennet’s participation was more than a little distracted, as he was also responsible for handling his wife and helping with Lydia’s case when he could.
And then there were the apologies.

Charles had been one of those whose savings had been looted, and it had taken Elizabeth two days to work up the nerve to call and offer an apology. In fact, she had worked through the whole of her list before returning to his name. Not surprisingly, Jane had looked at the list, blanched, and volunteered to call the M through Z tenants. Fortunately, Elizabeth had ended up discussing the issue in detail with Charles’ accountant, and had avoided talking with him personally.

She was not sure if it was better or worse to have things handled so distantly; it removed the embarrassment, certainly, but also kept her from asking Charles about Darcy. Despite her humiliation, anguish, and confusion over the man, she really did want to know what Darcy was doing, where he was doing it, and if, perhaps, he was thinking about her while doing whatever it was he was doing.

Elizabeth knew that Darcy had been angry about what had happened, but a tiny part of her wished that he were more upset about their dinner date being cancelled than anything else. It was a silly, foolish thing to think, and given the mess that surrounded her, Elizabeth knew that it wasn’t true. But silly and foolish was infinitely preferable to the grim reality she was facing.

For her part, once Uncle Eric’s car had reached the highway, righteous anger over Lydia’s actions overwhelmed her earlier despair.

“Lizzy,” Eric had said, “I know it looks bad, but how much do you think Lydia could have stolen? She’s not exactly a criminal genius. Not to mention, she’s lazy. Do you really believe your sister would take hundreds of thousands of dollars of other people’s money? That typically takes a lot of effort.”

“I should say no,” Elizabeth had responded, “I should believe that my sister is an ethical, responsible person. But she isn’t. And for the past six months—maybe even longer—she’s been dating this guy, George Wickham”—she spat the name like a hideous epithet—“and even if she wasn’t trying to steal, I’d be willing to bet that he was.”

“Lizzy, just promise me you’ll do one thing,” Mo had said. Elizabeth had nodded seriously. “When you see Lydia, give her a swift kick in the ass.”

Then Mo had cranked the radio and Fiona Apple’s voice had drowned out the opportunity for any further conversation.

Elizabeth had not been able to deliver the promised ass-kicking. Instead she had used the indignation to fuel her 16-hours-a-day work schedule. Lydia didn’t seem to understand the extent of the damage but Elizabeth certainly did. Now, along with indignation, she could add guilt over the fact that J.J. Long would not be able to pay for college in ten years.

Elizabeth could barely speak two words to her youngest sister without wanting to scream that it was Lydia’s fault that their business was going under—not to mention the fact that Darcy would probably never speak to her again. It was for Jane’s sake (and the sake of her own pride, she supposed) that she held back and channeled that rage into productivity.

“Elizabeth,” Jane stuck her head in the office, “Do you have the new keys to the filing cabinet? I need to get a few records out before I visit the Mitchells.”

“Sure,” Elizabeth took the key out of her top drawer and passed it to her sister. “I can’t believe Lydia let George do her filing.”

Jane simply shrugged and walked out the door, calling over her shoulder, “I’ll be right back!”
The facts of the case were emerging, and Lydia’s culpability was becoming clearer. In her role as receptionist, Lydia handled all of the rental applications, processed rent cheques, and filed automatic pay requests to the accounting department. She had, in a spectacular display of poor judgment, allowed George Wickham access to these documents. He had helped her make copies, watched her desk (and computer) while she did other things, and even assisted her with filing. With such opportunities, George had had ample time to take account data, social security numbers, and other identifying information, and had clearly taken advantage of every single minute.

At least half of their clients had lost something in the mess, with a few losing many thousands of dollars from their savings accounts. George had applied for loans in the names of others, then promptly taken the cash and defaulted. Those clients were threatening to sue if Longbourn did not make restitution for their insecure handling of personal information. There was rumbling that Longbourn had breached its fiduciary duty to all of its clients, and Elizabeth was worried about the possible repercussions.

While the thefts were easily traced back to Lydia, it was very difficult to transfer the blame to George. As the prosecutor told her father, “If what you’re saying is true, then not only this Wickham character, but anyone who came in while Lydia was away from the desk, at least the 10 other employees at Longbourn, and even you, Mr. Bennet, had access to this information. Should we prosecute all of you?”

“Elizabeth,” her father’s tired voice floated through her office doorway. “We’re going again to some of the banks to see if they can tell us anything. Can you handle things here?” Frank Bennet had aged at least 5 years in the past two weeks. His face was gaunt, there were deep circles under his eyes, and his normally broad shoulders were sagging under the strain of the problem. As Elizabeth looked at him under the glare of fluorescent lights, she wondered if she should suggest he schedule an appointment with Dr. Jones.

“Sure, Dad.” She tried to smile normally. “We’ll keep everything under control. I’ve almost finished the list of exemptions. Then we’ll figure out how long they can go before we need to have everything settled.” It was the wrong thing to say because Frank closed his eyes, pain etched across his features.

“Thanks for taking care of that. I think I can meet with you about that tonight. Will you be here late?” She nodded at him. “Lizzy,” he sighed, “I should have listened when you said George was trouble. I—well, I’m sorry that you have to help pick up the pieces when this is my fault. Thank you for not saying ‘I told you so.’”

“Dad,” she said quietly, “it’s first and foremost Lydia’s fault. My biggest question is why you hired her in the first place. She doesn’t exactly have a great work ethic.”

“You know, at first I only thought about taking her on because your mother begged me. I thought it would be good for Lydia to get some work experience.”

“I know that much already,” Elizabeth said wryly, “Remember the day when Lydia tried to convince you that she was qualified for my job by taking all my calls and sitting in my chair all morning? Or the dinner when Mom tried to bribe me to go on a leave of absence so that Lydia could ‘fill in for me’ indefinitely?” Elizabeth’s grin faded and she spoke seriously. “Dad, I just wish I knew why you gave her so much responsibility over this stuff.” She gestured to the piles of applications on her desk.

He sighed. “Elizabeth, I never imagined that Lydia could be this thoughtless. I knew she was irresponsible, even silly, but giving up client information like this? I just assumed that copying, filing and occasionally visiting with clients would be perfect for her.” Frank shook his head.
resignedly, “Even when you told me about George, I really didn’t think he would try anything here. All of this is something I thought was completely beyond Lydia.”

Elizabeth realized that instead of having a serious discussion about her father’s mistaken judgments and indulgence of his youngest child, she was only making him feel worse. It was her turn to sigh. “Let’s not focus on the rest of it, let’s just try to get everything under control. We’ll have lots of time to deal with assigning blame later.”

“Lizzy,” he shook his head and continued, “I realize that I was unwilling to change things around here, or to upset your sister. Regret is good for someone my age; it teaches us that we still don’t know everything.” He smiled sardonically. “You know me -- I’ll get over it soon enough.”

A few minutes later, he left with Kevin and a petulant Lydia, who was complaining that she had to cancel a nail appointment.

The office was quiet; Jane was still out meeting with several of their tenants, and the remaining staff had gone for lunch. With the stress on the company, anyone whose last name wasn’t ‘Bennet’ had taken to being as far away as possible when they were not needed at the office. Elizabeth suspected that several of them had been updating their resumes earlier that morning.

Fishing in her purse for a nutrition bar, Elizabeth set aside her melancholy and turned back to the files in front of her.

Instead of seeing numbers and tenant information, Elizabeth could only see what might have been if none of this had happened. She had been so close to that date with Darcy, so close to apologizing, clearing the air, and taking back her rejection. She had nearly been ready to suggest that she abandon her aunt and uncle to spend more time at Pemberley during the remainder of her vacation, even just another afternoon. Quite the reversal of her opinion in April; she could imagine how smug he would be about that, how his lips would curl in that satisfied smile that made her a little weak at the knees.

She wished the spell that Pemberley had cast could have lasted just a little longer. Just a few more hours, really, enough time to bring them together before her world fell apart.

The phone rang, startling her out of her reverie and causing Elizabeth to look around for a minute to find the receiver, buried under a pile of records.

“Lizzy!” Her uncle’s voice sounded oddly cheery given the stress and strain he had been under the last time they spoke.

“Hi, Eric. You sound happy. What’s going on?” She shifted the phone to her other hand as she leaned back in her chair and rolled her neck to ease the tension that had settled between her shoulder blades.

“I have excellent news! I just spoke with the prosecutor. The judge is going to drop all of the charges against Lydia except a minor one, and I think we can get her probation and a hefty fine rather than jail time.”

“What? That’s wonderful news! How did this happen?”

“The police found Wickham in Atlanta. He was trying to get a flight out of the country, but his passport is expired and he couldn’t get away. Plus he was with the woman who matched the descriptions the bank tellers gave us of the person who opened the accounts.”

The one piece of evidence that had stood out in the case against Lydia was the insistence of more than one bank employee that ‘Lydia Bennet’ was a short, thin, redhead. When the investigators
met Elizabeth’s tall, curvy, brown-haired sister, they were a bit confused.

“Eric, that’s amazing! They’ve arrested him, right?” Elizabeth’s voice was growing more and more shrill with her excitement.

“Yes, they have him in custody.”

“Did they find the money?” Elizabeth asked anxiously. “How do we get it back in the accounts?”

“Oh, yes, the money is… you’ll have it in a few days.” Eric’s voice sounded a little strangled here. “Wickham, um, had all the account numbers with him, so they can identify what he’s taken and where it went. Your tenants and clients should have their money back… um, fairly soon. That’s my guess. But Lizzy, you can’t tell them they’ll get it yet. The police have to… um, they have to check the money first. It’s going to go directly to the banks.”

Elizabeth went weak with relief. “Eric that is such good news! I wasn’t sure how we were going to handle not having the money this month. How did they find him? Do you know?”

“Um, find him? Wickham?” He sounded distracted, or possibly confused. “Someone identified him. I guess he’s being investigated for some other scam, so his information came up at the airport.”

“But who told you? I thought they said that he wasn’t being considered in the investigation?” Elizabeth had stood up and was pacing around the office as best she could while tethered to her desk by the phone cord.

“The… um, one of the guys helping with the, um, the problem let me know. And then the prosecutor called.” Eric coughed.

“So Lydia won’t have to serve time?” Elizabeth stopped walking and stared out the window at a small child with an ice cream cone melting all over his hands.

“Nope.” Eric’s voice breached her distraction. “She’ll probably be on probation for quite awhile, and she’ll never be able to get another credit card after this, but she probably shouldn’t have one of those anyway.” Elizabeth could hear Eric smiling through the phone. Lydia’s spending habits were well-known in the family.

“Wow. That’s incredible. I’m so relieved!” Elizabeth was smiling again, truly smiling for the first time in two weeks.

“Yes, I just need to speak with your father, to go over some things. Is he there?” Eric was back to business now.

“No, he went back to the banks with Lydia and Kevin. You could probably catch him on his cell.” Elizabeth completed the call with Eric and decided to treat herself to an extra large coffee, now that bankruptcy was not looming over their heads.

Her walk to and from the coffee shop gave her a chance to think about what had happened, the quick resolution to the heartache and worry of the past few weeks.

The humidity in the mid-August air made her blouse cling to her back, and static electricity seemed to crackle in the air as the wind blew storm clouds toward Meryton. A flicker of lightning appeared on the horizon. Elizabeth recalled that she had left the window in her bedroom open the night before and considered racing home to close it before the rain came.

She needed to go to the grocery store, though; after her time away and the strain of the past two
weeks, they had no food in the apartment. Various other household chores flitted through her mind, and Elizabeth smiled; for the first time since leaving for her trip, she felt that life might be returning to normal. The smile was followed by a frown; the ‘normal’ she remembered predated the presence of Fitzwilliam Darcy in her life. Suddenly that old reality was not so appealing.

As the first drops of rain splashed on her travel mug, Elizabeth dashed into the office and grabbed her keys. Like it or not, the rain was here and she had chores to do. Umbrella in hand, she went out to face the storm.
**Chapter 16**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

_Sunday, 5:45 p.m._

“Well all I’m saying is that blue really is _not_ your color, Mary. You’re more of an autumn. Jewel tones simply wash you out. You need some nice earthy shades.” Rita Bennet pointed a spoon loaded with mashed potatoes at her middle daughter, who responded by taking a gulp of wine and rolling her eyes.

“Mom,” Jane intervened calmly, “I actually gave Mary that shirt for Christmas. I think it looks nice on her. The cut really flatters her waistline, but you can’t see that while she’s sitting at the table.”

“Oh, well, yes, Jane, we all know your fashion sense is impeccable, but next year, why don’t you look for something in a nice mustard color for Mary. It will really bring out the brown of her eyes.” Rita nodded to herself and began to cut into her ham.

“Speaking of mustard,” Frank’s wry voice came from the head of the table, “would someone pass it to me please?”

Elizabeth reached for the container and gave it to her father, whose subtle wink signaled a welcome return to his good humor. It was their first family dinner since Lydia’s run-in with what Rita only referred to as “The Law”. Elizabeth wondered how soon Katie could get arrested to give them another break.

5:57 p.m.

“Dad, I really don’t think it’s too much to ask that you change the rules about casual Fridays. They are supposed to be _casual_, after all.” Katie pouted at Frank and nearly knocked over Jane’s water glass with her exaggerated gestures.

“Katie, your definition of ‘casual’ includes tube tops and jean shorts vaguely resembling underwear. There are many things I will do to rent properties, but even I draw the line at making our clients think that an evening with my daughters is included in the fee.” Frank shook his head and took a bite of dinner roll.

“That tube top was totally tasteful,” Katie glared.

“Which one?” Lydia chimed in. “The light pink one? With the ruffle?”

“Yes,” Katie replied. “And I wore it with that cute skirt I have, the one that makes my ass look—”

Mary coughed.

“Katie, you know you aren’t supposed to wear light pink. You’re a winter, for goodness sake. _Fuchsia_. That’s what you should wear.” Rita reached for the butter dish.

“Whatever, Mom, it’s cute. And, Dad, you’re just angry because I gave _one_ guy my number _one_ time when I showed an apartment. And we only went out _once_, and I didn’t even sleep with him. Okay?”
“Oh, yes, I feel much better about it now. By all means, let’s make every day casual day, so long as you don’t actually sleep with any of our tenants.”

“Well, Frank, I haven’t been on a vacation in three years. Meanwhile your daughters are...
Elizabeth pursed her lips and replied coolly, “Perhaps you recall that my vacation was cut short so I could come home and work.”

“Well at least you went in the first place,” Rita said. “It’s not like you actually know anything about decorating or antiques. I have no idea why your aunt asked you anyhow.”

“I have a few ideas,” Elizabeth responded quietly.

“Does anyone need more water?” asked Jane politely, holding up a pitcher. “Mary? Katie? Water?”

6:41 p.m.

“There’s no way I am putting my hands in that dishwater,” Lydia whined. “I just had a manicure.”

“Me either,” Katie added. “I am so not touching those dirty plates.”

“That’s fine, I’ll be happy to wash,” offered Jane, moving toward the sink. “Can you two split the drying?”

“Why can’t mom just use the dishwasher?” Lydia continued. “Every week we have to wash this stupid china. Better yet, we should go out to dinner. There’s this hot new waiter at Chili’s.”

“Oh, the one with the brown hair? Matt, Mike, something like that?” Katie asked. When Lydia nodded, she went on, “Oh, he’s totally hooking up with Mary King already. Not that Mary’s stopped you in the past,” Katie winked.

“Well I don’t want Mary’s sloppy seconds. Unless he dumps her first, of course. And George was a special case.” Lydia wriggled her eyebrows and snapped a towel at Katie.

“Oh yeah, he was special all right,” Elizabeth added from the kitchen table where she was packing up leftovers.

“Whatever. You’re just jealous that he liked me better than you,” Lydia accused.

“Jealous that he framed you for any number of felonies? That must be it. I’m just longing for a man who will visit me in jail.” Elizabeth put the back of her hand to her forehead in mock swoon. “Oh, George, just wait until I get my parole and we can be together forever, or until you rob me blind again.”

Mary snickered as she brought in more plates from the dining room.

“Say what you will about George, but he gave me some really great presents. Better than what your boyfriends gave you… if you can even remember that long ago,” Lydia smirked.

“Presents that he bought with other people’s money. Really romantic, Lyd. Are you hoping your future fiancée shoplifts your engagement ring?” Elizabeth shook her head as she searched for a lid.

“Whatsoever, Beth, but even the special lawyer that came to get me out of jail said that George had spared no expense. That’s a direct quote, okay, so maybe you should think about that.”

“Lydia Christine Bennet!” Frank’s voice thundered through the kitchen, and Elizabeth whirled around to face him. “Your incarceration is no joke, and I believe we had a long talk about what you were and were not able to discuss upon your release.” The look he gave her was the fiercest
Elizabeth had seen cross his face in years. “Now, I was going to take out the garbage. Why don’t you come along and help me.”

Lydia actually looked somewhat abashed at this, setting the dish towel on the counter and sullenly following Frank through the kitchen door toward the garage.

Elizabeth was amazed, not by Lydia’s continuing defense of George, but by her sudden change in attitude after that rebuke, and by the fact that her father was involved. A special lawyer? What did that mean?

Monday, 10:13 a.m.

Elizabeth stood in the doorway to her father’s office and cleared her throat. “Hey, Boss, got time for some coffee?” She lifted the “World’s Greatest Dad” mug in her right hand to show him.

“Only if my favorite daughter will drink it with me.” Frank sent her an indulgent smile.

“Why do you think I came in here?” Elizabeth teased.

“Bribery, of course. You need me to sign off on those contracts. I’m wise to your game, Lizzy.” He held out his hand. “Give me that folder you’re hiding under your arm. I don’t want to get coffee on the important paperwork.”

Elizabeth placed their cups on his mahogany desk and handed the documents to him. She settled into the chair across from him and studied her father. He still had a full head of hair, now more gray—and even white—than the deep brown she remembered as a child. It was still early in the day, but he had rolled up his shirtsleeves, and she smiled at this. He hated wearing anything constricting on his wrists, even a watch. Elizabeth and her sisters had made countless friendship bracelets for him that mysteriously went missing only hours after they had been tied around his arm.

“I did want to ask you a question, Dad. Not about contracts.” Elizabeth gave him her best smile, the one she used to charm DMV staff into retaking a bad driver’s license picture and waiters into an extra refill. At Frank’s raised eyebrow, she began, “Last night, when Lydia said—”

“Elizabeth, I am not going to discuss Lydia’s case with you. It’s finished, and we simply need to move on.” Frank’s voice had lost the warmth from before and taken on what their family had termed his “Dad Voice”. She rarely heard it anymore, but recognized it instantly.

“Daddy, if there’s more to the case, I might need to know so that I can—”

“Elizabeth, I don’t want to hear about it. You have all the information that you need to handle your side of things. I’m asking you to trust me. Now, you have your contracts, so unless there’s anything else, I need to make a few phone calls.”

Elizabeth knew a dismissal when she heard one, and nodded. “No, that’s it. Thanks, Dad.” She headed back to her office, wondering what exactly he was hiding.

1:07 p.m.

Elizabeth twirled a pen and stared at the phone. She should just call and ask. That would be the sensible thing to do. She lifted the receiver and dialed slowly.

Two rings passed, and then the answer, “Hello.”

“Hi, is this my favorite uncle?” Elizabeth replied smoothly.
“I think so… is this my favorite niece?” Eric teased in response.

“Of course it is.”

“Great, what can I do for you, Jane?” he replied.

“Wait a minute! I thought I was your favorite!”

“And so you are, Lizzy, mostly because you fall for that joke every time,” Eric chuckled.

“Twice is not every time,” Elizabeth pouted.

“Well, then favorite niece, what can I do for you?”

“I have some, um, outstanding questions about Lydia’s case and the money,” Elizabeth began.

“Oh?” Eric asked, “Have you spoken with Kevin about this?”

“No, he’s not really—well, I wanted to ask you first.” Elizabeth did not consider Kevin to be a legal mastermind, and would prefer to bypass him entirely.

“Well, I’ll see what I can answer then.” Elizabeth could picture Eric shrugging his shoulders and leaning back in his oversized desk chair.

“Um, so first, the question is about how we got the money so fast.” Elizabeth hesitated. “How did they put it back so quickly?”

“We discussed this, Elizabeth,” Eric stated calmly. “When they caught Wickham, he gave them the account numbers. They used those to put the funds back. What’s the problem? Did you want them to keep it longer?”

“No, no, that’s not it at all, it just seemed really… fast. Faster than the legal system usually works. Anyway, Lydia mentioned that she saw a special lawyer at the jail, and I was just wondering—“

“Did you ask your father about this?” Eric interrupted.

“Yes,” Elizabeth replied shortly.

“And what did he say?” Eric sounded like he was talking to one of his pre-school-aged children.

“He said to let it go. But—“

“Then you should listen to him, Elizabeth. Trust him. It’s all taken care of. Just go back to normal.” Eric sounded too patronizing. Usually, he was a firm advocate of questioning the system, seeking out truth, going after justice. It was something he and Elizabeth had in common.

“Fine,” she sighed. “But I’m not happy about it.”

“Of course you’re not,” Eric chuckled. “But when have you ever been happy about Lydia’s punishments?”

“I think she was grounded once when I was in high school,” Elizabeth offered. Eric laughed heartily.

“Well, I must be off. I have a meeting in ten minutes. But Lizzy?”

“Yes?” she asked hopefully.
“You’re still my favorite niece.”

“I love you too, Eric. Talk to you later.”

“Bye Liz.”

Elizabeth hung up the phone dissatisfied. How else could she get her hands on the info?

4:25 p.m.

Elizabeth typed furiously, every so often glancing up to make sure her father was still sitting in his office—she could just glimpse his door, which had been shut since their coffee break that morning.

Mo,

By now you’ve heard. The charges—except for aiding and abetting fraud—were dropped, and Lyd has 5 years’ probation and a boatload of community service to do. Her credit rating is completely blown, so that should save Dad a couple thousand dollars in the next few years. Things are going back to normal here and I’ve actually eaten dinner at home three nights this week, which is a huge improvement. Well, an improvement in my work hours, anyway. We’re still waiting to hear about one of the threatened lawsuits, but Kevin is pretty sure they’ll settle. For a guy who usually handles custody disputes, he’s quickly become very knowledgeable about litigation. Phyllis, of course, can’t stop talking about her husband the high-powered attorney. (even when we wish she would. You should hear how she says “Ah-tourney”, by the way.)

Here’s the thing: I’m not totally satisfied with the outcome, at least how it was reached. Lyd said she saw a different lawyer with Kev at the jail. When she mentioned him, Dad sent her a look that I haven’t seen him use since she ran into the street when she was five. The bank found the funds (and released them) remarkably quickly, but all Eric will say about that is that when they caught George he gave them all the account information. Dad won’t give me any more info, and Lyd is… well, she’s Lydia. In other words, no help at all.

I smell a rat (about 4 of them actually). The whole thing has finished up too quickly and too neatly for my taste. My amateur detecting abilities have reached their limit, though, and your questioning techniques are probably better than mine. My guess is that most of the answers lie with your husband. Do you want to put your Law & Order skills to use here and do some investigating?

I think I have some fingerprinting dust left over from my 4th grade mystery book obsession. Let me know if you need it.

Love,

Encyclopedia Brown

6:15 p.m.

“Elizabeth! Dinner’s ready,” Jane called from the kitchen. Elizabeth could smell the garlic bread from her room.

“Coming!” Elizabeth clicked the send/receive button again, and her heart leapt when she saw an incoming message.

Thirty seconds later, her heart plummeted again when she realized it was from a property
management mailing list. She closed the laptop and ran down to eat with Jane.

7:48 p.m.

Still no email. Of course, Mo was probably busy with bath time for the kids, which Elizabeth knew from experience was quite an ordeal. But was it too much to ask for even a little note to say “Got your mail, will reply soon”?

9:57 p.m.

Elizabeth dropped the remote and ran to her room when she heard the ding that sounded for new mail.

It was from a college roommate, announcing her engagement.

11:04 p.m.

Elizabeth closed the laptop, crawled into bed and switched off the light.

11:17 p.m.

No new messages. Elizabeth groaned and fell back onto her pillows.

Tuesday, 10:39 a.m.

Elizabeth nearly spilled her coffee when the indicator popped up to tell her Mo had responded. Shooing an employee out of the office under the pretext of needing to make a phone call, she shut the door and began to read.

Dear Nancy Drew,

I won’t divulge my top-secret persuasive techniques (it’s really better that you don’t know), but your uncle spilled the beans. You should consider hanging a shingle, Nance, because not much gets past you… although I have to confess I’m surprised you didn’t know already, courtesy of your very own Ned Nickerson. What a babe! Here’s the 411:

“Ned” apparently called some hot shot federal lawyers and investigators about the case after he saw you. They got in touch with Eric. Pretty much, Kev was just there to keep us in the loop, be a pretty face, and defend Lydia against the charges they ended up bringing against her. Sorry, but you can’t use this to knock Phyllis down a few pegs (at least not for a few years). Anyhow, the Big Guys had the Wickham connection from Your Ned so they already had some evidence on him that the locals couldn’t track down. Apparently the woman they found him with, Sharon Younge, has worked with him before. She used one of the fake credit cards they applied for, which was a much bigger tip off than the passport thing. You know the rest of that story. Bastards.

The funds are a little trickier, and as I’m no math whiz, Eric had to dumb it down for me, so you can continue your investigations on your own after this. There’s apparently some family connection between the bank W. used and the one you use. Ned made another call, I guess, and located the money before they caught W. and they were able to get everything back. Sort of. Apparently there was some “fronting” of money. All I can say is it sounds to me like Mr. Nickerson has deep pockets. We saw him yesterday, actually, at this little indie coffeehouse. It was pretty clear he and your uncle had been meeting secretly. They were acting like the CIA with all this business of ‘did you get the thing I sent?’ and ‘you heard about the meeting?’ I think they enjoyed the clandestine stuff a bit much. Perhaps they can be the Hardy Boys to your Nancy Drew? Now I’ve mixed my metaphors.
Anyway, Nan, that’s the situation. But just so you know, your father doesn’t know everything about where the money came from; he thinks it’s something Eric worked out. It’s fine that you know, but please don’t say anything. That was a specific request Eric made (and I think he’s still protecting Ned, but I understand why).

Anyway, if you decide to go into the Private Eye business, let me know. I find the idea of dressing all in black and sneaking around pretty fun. Of course, my first case should be investigating you and the real situation with Mr. Ned. I have quite a few clues to run with, and a killer interviewing technique (as you noted). If you know what’s good for you, you’ll ‘fess up now and save me the hassle of finding my magnifying glass. Not to mention that I’ll tell you where the comfy spot is under those bleachers.

Damn. Dora the Explorer just ended, which means my adorable ankle biter will be looking for me.

Love,

Jessica Fletcher (but younger, hotter, and without a typewriter)

Elizabeth smiled at the signature, but it faded quickly. Her aunt was treating everything with a light heart, yet she what she had divulged was serious. Darcy had spent considerable money and used his influence with the investigators to make this happen. Why would he do that?

11:33 a.m.

Elizabeth decided to go back to the source, and sent off another quick note.

All right Murder She Wrote, I’ll give you the details if you answer just one more question for me.

Did “Ned” say why he was so interested in helping?

Back to my busy schedule of tracking down clues,

Nancy

12:48 p.m.

Elizabeth waited for a reply, turning over possibilities in her head, and even making a list on her legal pad.

1. Guilt: He didn’t offer to help when we met in Lambton, he feels bad;

2. Job: He’s secretly an SEC investigator;

3. ??: Just to help me?

The second option was easy to discard; he would have mentioned that in his letter, and really, the man couldn’t run a major corporation while also holding down a government job at the same time. So he probably wasn’t required to help, which meant he had chosen to do so.

The first option made some sense. Although he had given her his card before he walked out of her room, which for him was tantamount to an invitation to call. When Bill Collins had asked for Darcy’s business card, Darcy had asked Bill to call the main office number and ask for his secretary.
Which left option number three.

Even when she was able to list the logical reasons why it was simply impossible—after all, men did not sacrifice hundreds of thousands of dollars and their dignity for women who cruelly insulted them—Elizabeth was not certain of his feelings. Because men in love also did not walk away from a woman they loved in her time of need, did they? Yes, he was angry, she knew that, but he could have talked to her about it. Well, she amended inwardly, anyone other than Fitzwilliam Darcy could have talked about it with a girl they loved, a girl who told him she didn’t even like him. Darcy barely opens his mouth anyway. He would only say something after the fact.

Tuesday, 9:57 p.m.

Elizabeth ran from the bathroom to her computer at the sound of the ding. Opening the email from Mo, she read the brief note three times before anything sunk in.

According to Ned, it was his fault that no one knew that Wickham was a criminal and a liar, especially once he knew that W had turned up in town. He told Eric that if he had been more open about his private affairs, then maybe something like this might have been prevented.

Of course, if there were, say, another reason, it would be up to River Heights’ most beloved amateur sleuth to figure it out.

Follow the clues, my dear, and I’m sure you’ll find the truth.

Oh, and Eric says he’s sorry that he lied to you, but he promised Darcy not to tell. I told him that he could avoid breaking promises and pissing off his niece if he learned to be a better liar.

Now, wasn’t there some mention of details? Don’t make me sic my kids on you. They’re bored and looking for an excuse to wreak havoc.

11:27 p.m.

Elizabeth sighed and rolled over in bed. Her aunt’s thinly veiled hints confirmed what that very quiet voice had been saying all along. Certainly Darcy felt himself responsible; he was the sort of man whose life was spent “fixing things,” and this was under his jurisdiction—if only a little.

She should have known from the moment she left him that he would do something like this. Yet the other reason her aunt provided—that Elizabeth herself was somehow connected to his motivation—would need to be considered carefully. Even if he had not done it for her (or only for her), he had still interfered in her affairs. Elizabeth was independent, yes, and keen to make her own way in the world, but she recognized his unparalleled generosity as, perhaps, another sort of declaration of his feelings. It might not be love, but he certainly felt something.

Yet, if he did care for her, why hadn’t he included her in his plans, or at least called her or e-mailed at some point?

Most of all, she wanted to ask him why he had done it. And she wanted to ask him face-to-face.

Thursday, 2:37 a.m.

How ironic, Elizabeth thought as she stared up at her bedroom ceiling, I’ve gone from wanting an apology to simply wanting him.
Chapter 17

And a hush falls over the crowd, Elizabeth thought as she ducked into the coffee shop before work on Tuesday. The regular crowd had abandoned their morning conversations, and even the sound of steaming milk had stopped as she entered. So they haven’t stopped gossiping about us yet.

Elizabeth had successfully avoided being in the café at peak hours for the past few weeks. She knew that the residents of Meryton, with their tendency to be involved in each others’ lives, would stare, ask impertinent questions, and critique every little change in her appearance. They might even speculate on where she got the money to buy her latte. In short, she would be miserable for the seven minutes and 34 seconds it took to get her drink.

Or the 11 minutes and 48 seconds it took to get a drink, convince Jonathan to change it to the correct drink, and walk out the door.

“Well hello there, Beth!” Lorraine Lucas’ sugary sweet voice was the first to split the silence. “It’s been awhile since we’ve seen you in the mornings. Come on over and say hello.” Mrs. Lucas motioned, and a flash of light nearly blinded Elizabeth; the woman’s hands glittered with rings, and a hefty tennis bracelet glinted around her wrist.

“Hi there, Mrs. Lucas,” Elizabeth responded politely, managing to smile a little. “How are you doing? It has been awhile since I’ve seen you.” Elizabeth omitted the word ‘intentionally’.

“I know,” the older lady drawled and smiled slyly at her table-mates Evelyn Long, the no-longer-college-bound J.J.’s grandmother, and Linda Goulding, a retired schoolteacher. “I was just telling the gals that it’s been ages since we’ve seen most of you Bennet girls around town. Your mother, as you know, has been feeling too under the weather to make it to our bridge group and morning coffee chats these past few weeks.”

Elizabeth wisely did not mention that her mother had been perfectly healthy, not to mention perfectly appalling, at their last Sunday dinner, when she had once again— incredibly— introduced the idea of Lydia taking on more responsibility at Longbourn.

“Yes, I know she’s missed seeing you all.” Elizabeth decided this was an appropriate response, and as close to the truth as she could get without lying. Her mother’s actual wording had been something akin to, ‘If Lizzy and Mary would just get things back to normal and help your father with work, I might be able to see my friends again instead of being stuck like a prisoner in this house. Not to mention that I’m the only one who cares enough to console Lydia after her terrible ordeal, while you all treat her like an outcast.’

“Well, honey,” Mrs. Goulding spoke up, and Elizabeth could still remember that same voice doing countless book readings in the fourth grade, “if you see your mother, can you tell her we’ll be taking the next month off anyway?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Long chimed in, “Lorraine and Bill are going on a cruise, and my sweet Tom is taking me on a little getaway as well. And Linda is going to be helping with her new grandbaby.”

“Wow,” Elizabeth feigned interest. “Sounds like you’re all very busy.”

“Well, our children are grown and out of the house, and our mortgages are paid off, so why not travel?” Mrs. Lucas asked. “Oh, by the way, did Charlotte tell you about her promotion?”
“No,” Elizabeth replied, “we haven’t spoken for a few weeks. It sounds very exciting.”

“Oh, we’re so proud of her, although Bill and I do wish she would find a nice man and settle down.” The others at the table, save Elizabeth, nodded in sympathy. “But she’s now the assistant manager of her department, and she’s moving into her own place next month.”

“Really?” Elizabeth asked curiously. “What about Bill Collins?”

Mrs. Lucas made a face. “Well we never liked him much, and certainly didn’t approve of their… situation…but fortunately it didn’t work out between them. Charlotte’s just started dating a lawyer; he’s a junior partner in his firm.” Her tone held obvious pride for her eldest daughter.

“I guess if she’s happy, that’s great.” Elizabeth could hardly believe that her friend would dump even Bill Collins so quickly—especially after all their plans for renovating his apartment in April.

“How could she not be happy? She has a good job and an excellent boyfriend. What more could a girl ask for? Well, perhaps a ring. Oh, and did I tell you that my Maria got engaged last weekend?”

“How lovely!” Mrs. Long gushed. “Will she have a spring wedding like Deirdre did? She and her husband planned their own wedding so well that now they have their own event-planning business, and it’s one of the top places in the city.”

Elizabeth remembered why, besides the recent debacle, she usually avoided these women. The constant rivalry over whose children had been most successful was draining even on a good day, and even more so these days, when the single, childless, financially unstable (and felonious) Bennet sisters were easily bested. Elizabeth almost felt a pang of sympathy for her mother, realizing just why Rita Bennet was on self-imposed house arrest until the situation improved—or one of the other ladies’ offspring behaved inappropriately.

“Oh, but Elizabeth, here we are going on about our plans and we haven’t even asked about how you’re doing these days. How are things at Longbourn?” To her relief, Mrs. Goulding’s voice had taken on an air of real concern.

“Things are getting back to normal now. It’s been a difficult time for all of us.” Elizabeth smiled at the woman who had first introduced her to Anne of Green Gables. “Thanks for asking, Mrs. Goulding.”

“It is such a sad thing, what happened to Longbourn.” Mrs. Lucas shook her head in mock sympathy, and Elizabeth thought she heard a soft tsk escape before her mother’s ‘friend’ continued, “I tried to tell your mother to keep Lydia away from that George Wickham, but she just said that every girl needs to date a bad boy at least once in her life.”

Mrs. Long sniffed reproachfully. “Beth, what’s your father doing about everything? There were some very serious problems, according to my son. He told me all about your meeting.”

Elizabeth chose not to take the bait Mrs. Long was dangling before her. Instead, she replied that her father was working hard to get everything back to normal and they were expecting things to improve soon.

Yet, though she would never admit it out loud, she regarded Longbourn’s recent disaster as something completely preventable and wholly embarrassing for the company. Beyond that, Elizabeth was struggling with how to manage her anger that, as Longbourn’s president, her father had been negligent and careless. Addressing the issues also fell to him, but Frank Bennet had relied heavily on his daughters to do what he could—or would—not.
Elizabeth’s ambivalence was fueled by the sense that, while this saga was at least out of the public eye, it still wasn’t over.

On the surface, Longbourn had adapted to deal with the consequences of Lydia’s mistakes. A policy-loving Mary had written copious new regulations for ensuring data security and confidentiality. Enforcement, however, had never been her father’s strong suit, and Elizabeth found herself thrust into the role of policy translator and disciplinarian. She was frequently called upon to explain the purpose behind Mary’s convoluted documents, and forced to scold and chide employees who continued to treat important information casually. She found being the boss everyone resented utterly exhausting.

When her father had asked her to take a meeting with a representative from DBFGI, Elizabeth had agreed reluctantly and prayed that Bill Collins would not be the representative across the table. Collins had sent a strongly worded letter to Longbourn in the midst of the crisis, essentially cutting off any future relationship: “I’m sure you understand that a corporation like DBFGI, which prides itself on its stellar reputation, success, and most of all, integrity, can no longer welcome your company among its elite circle of partners.” The call had come yesterday, requesting a meeting for this morning.

If her father’s appearance had been more robust, Elizabeth might have argued more about taking the meeting, but he still seemed haggard after their recent troubles, and her love for him overcame her disappointment. The appointment was today, and Elizabeth knew that coffee would be essential to get through it. Longbourn would eventually need to work with DBFGI again, and groveling required more caffeine than usual.

After politely chatting with her mother’s friends for a few more minutes, and attempting not to reveal any personal information that could later be exploited as gossip, Elizabeth managed to excuse herself by mentioning her meeting. She thought that it was rather unfair to force someone into a conversation before she had had any caffeine (or a stiff drink, she amended ruefully), especially one filled with so many subtle insults.

Quietly releasing a huge sigh of relief, Elizabeth moved to stand in the line that had grown considerably longer since she had come in. Jonathan was working the register again, and Elizabeth groaned inwardly as yet another impediment prevented her from preparing for the meeting. With longing, she thought of Darcy’s coffee shop at Pemberley, which of course made her think of Darcy, and she spent the next 10 minutes in line considering all the possible reasons he would involve himself with Longbourn’s finances. Then she spent five more minutes wondering when—if—she would see him again.

Elizabeth finally made it to the front of the line, with only 20 minutes to spare before the Mystery Representative was due to arrive. “I’d like a large non-fat, extra hot mocha, please.”

“Oh-kay,” Jonathan replied, turning to the girl making the coffees, “Hey, Brittany, did you hear about that new movie comin’ out? The one where the hero works at Starbucks?”

“Is his name Jonathan?” Brittany replied flirtatiously. Elizabeth vaguely recognized her as a high school student Lydia had been friends with before graduating.

“Maybe. He’s definitely what you would call ‘mild-mannered.’” Jonathan wiggled his eyebrows and Brittany giggled. Elizabeth, already weary of false conversation and forced enthusiasm, decided she had had enough of young adolescent mating rituals and snapped her fingers.

“Jonathan! The mocha?” Elizabeth looked at him expectantly.

“Oh, sorry Beth. You wanted a cappuccino, right?” he asked casually, reaching for a much too
“No!” Elizabeth practically shouted before lowering her voice, her tone icy. “I want a large. Non-fat. Mocha. The same thing I order every day.” Elizabeth bit off the ends of the words, hoping that the added anger would snap him into action.

Jonathan stared at her in astonishment. “Okay already! Sorry, Beth.” He reached for the correct size and poised his pen to write down her order.

Brittany chose that time to brush up against him on the way to the coffee maker. “Sorry, Jonathan. Hey, have you been working out? Your biceps are getting huge.” She wrapped her hand around his right arm—the one holding the pen—and he flexed it. Brittany giggled again, and Elizabeth was tempted to tell her that giggling was not a valid form of communication. Ever.

“You like that, huh?” Jonathan asked suggestively. “Hey, do you want tickets to the… gun show this weekend?” He flexed both his arms as he said it.

“You know what I want?” Elizabeth interrupted loudly. “I want a large, non-fat mocha.”

“Geez, we’re just having a little fun,” Brittany sneered.

“Well, I’m glad your job is such a riot. But some of us want our coffee so we can go do real work.”

The two separated, and Elizabeth paid for the coffee—leaving only a few cents as a tip—silently wishing that some giant coffee franchise would come in and replace what was, in pre-Jonathan days, a beloved hangout. She waited while Brittany steamed the milk as slowly as she could. “It’s fine,” Elizabeth finally said, impatiently shifting from one foot to the other. “I’ll just take it regular, not extra hot.”

“Oh, but you ordered it extra hot, and I want to be absolutely sure to get it just right for you. After all, it’s so much fun to make coffee all day. I’m just having a riot doing my job. You wouldn’t want to rush me.” Brittany smiled sweetly, and Elizabeth began to realize why this girl and Lydia had been friends—and likely how the friendship had ended.

Taking the cup from Brittany, Elizabeth contemplated whether or not to reply, but realized she would be late if she got locked into battle with the girl, rather than rushing back to the office.

With her first sip as she trudged down the sidewalk, Elizabeth knew it had been a mistake to take on Brittany that morning. Running her tongue over her teeth to loosen the coffee grounds she felt settling at her gum line, Elizabeth pitched the mint-raspberry-mocha-hazelnut latte into a trash bin.

Elizabeth considered her morning so far. It was the first time she had encountered the spitefulness of Meryton up-close since Lydia’s arrest, but she was aware that it had been developing for weeks. Even without having to deal with Jonathan, her mother’s ‘friends’ had left a bad taste in her mouth—one that Brittany’s Brew had not helped to erase. Elizabeth sighed, and her mind drifted back to Darcy as she hurried along the sidewalk.

As Elizabeth grew more and more disillusioned with her family life, her beloved small town, and even her work, she found herself dwelling more and more on Fitzwilliam Darcy. She thought about the words he said in April, the ones she had angrily tossed back in his face; she thought of their time at Pemberley, how he had touched her arm, kissed her, how the world had opened up at that point, and anything had seemed possible.

Of course, it also seemed that the bizarre magnetism that existed between them only occurred at precisely the wrong moments, pulling them together only to rip them apart.
Somewhere in their journey, somewhere in the time spent apart rather than together, Elizabeth had realized that Darcy was not only a man she could love, but that he was one she wanted to love, and maybe she even did, at least a little. She picked up her pace as the front window of Longbourn came into view.

“Ms. Bennet,” a strident voice rang out through the office as Elizabeth stepped across the threshold. “I assume we’ll be meeting in an office or conference room? This,” The Voice took on a condescending tone, “is hardly the place for an important and confidential meeting.”

Elizabeth turned in the direction of the speaker, wondering if the sudden acid in her stomach was from the coffee grounds, or from recognition and dread. This was her 9:30 meeting?
Standing in the Longbourn Development Company vestibule, dressed in a gray checked suit and sensible, square-toed, hideous pumps, was Catherine de Bourgh. She was sneering at the open layout of the small office while the Longbourn staff gaped at her.

Elizabeth attempted to recover her composure, wishing for a moment that she’d had more than a sip of awful coffee. With a deep breath, she smiled and offered a handshake to the Dragon Lady.

“Good morning, Ms. de Bourgh. Katie, can you make some coffee, please?”

Ignoring the resigned sigh from her younger sister, Elizabeth led the older woman to the back conference room, pausing briefly to gather the files she needed from her office.

“I’m surprised that you would take this meeting yourself, Ms. de Bourgh,” Elizabeth said. “Longbourn has paid back all of our outstanding loans as of June 1. Are you here to discuss the substance of Mr. Collins’ letter? I’m hopeful that you’ll still consider extending DBFGI credit to Longbourn and that the relationship between our companies can be repaired.” Elizabeth smiled politely at the older woman.

“I am not here to discuss Mr. Collins’ letter or its contents,” Ms. de Bourgh replied. “I have much more important matters to address.”

Removing her blazer and hanging it over the back of an empty chair, Catherine positioned herself at the head of the table, glaring at Elizabeth across the room.

“Although you have limited business experience, you must be aware of the gossip circulating in the business community about Longbourn.” Catherine placed her palms on the table and leaned forward, narrowing her eyes. “I’m here to set the record straight regarding the future of Longbourn and Darcy Holdings.”

“Excuse me?”

“It has come to my attention that your company is in the midst of negotiations with my nephew’s company, Darcy Holdings. Apparently, Darcy is trying to purchase Longbourn.” Catherine raised her eyebrows and stared at Elizabeth expectantly.

Elizabeth crossed her arms and stared back.

Catherine gave a long-suffering sigh. “Of course you understand, Ms. Bennet, how I felt when this ridiculous piece of gossip came to my attention. Obviously, given your current financial situation and uncertain future, it would be a disastrous purchase. You cannot possibly think anyone would believe that my nephew would take such a risk.”

“Yet you must think someone believes it. You came all this way to hear me tell you the rumor is a lie.”

Catherine opened her mouth to reply, but Elizabeth continued.

“Longbourn would be an important and profitable acquisition for any major corporation, were we interested in such a merger. It’s not out of the question to think that we might be considering consolidating or merging our successful family business with a well-respected corporation.” Elizabeth held her chin high.
“Very pretty words, Ms. Bennet. But I’m not here to listen to a list of Longbourn’s virtues and values. I demand to know whether you are negotiating the sale of Longbourn with my nephew.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth moved to sit in one of the chairs, saying, “I wasn’t aware I had to disclose private business details to the representative of a company that just severed their relationship with us.”

“Don’t be coy,” Catherine said scathingly, leaning away from the table and crossing her arms without looking away from Elizabeth. She pursed her lips. “Especially since I can just imagine you--” Catherine waved her hand dismissively--”or some other uneducated and ambitious family member starting just this kind of rumor to make your shabby little mom and pop outfit more appealing to investors.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “Why would anyone in my family think they could convince a credible investor to believe it? You’ve already declared that Darcy purchasing Longbourn would be impossible.”

“It should be impossible!” Catherine paced the length of the room twice before stopping a few feet from Elizabeth.

“Yet other impossible things have taken place in my lifetime, and I’ve learned to check my facts carefully. My nephew is generally risk-averse, at least in these cases, and he wouldn’t usually consider a purchase like this. Perhaps Longbourn—or maybe even you, no matter how outraged you want to pretend to be-- made him an offer he couldn’t refuse?”

“I don’t imagine Mr. Darcy has a difficult time refusing anything he doesn’t want, no matter how good the offer is,” Elizabeth said.

“Don’t pretend to be naive. I wouldn’t put it past you to try anything that would help you to get ahead.” Catherine sniffed disdainfully, with a pointed glance at Elizabeth’s v-neck blouse.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in astonishment. It was true that Darcy had not been far from her thoughts in the past few weeks. But not once had it crossed her mind to offer to sell Longbourn to him. And if she had thought of seducing him--which sounded so much more offensive coming from Catherine--it wasn’t motivated by the potential financial rewards. Elizabeth shook her head to clear the sudden image of Darcy in this very conference room, considering another type of merger altogether.

“If Longbourn was considering accepting a purchase offer,” Elizabeth said coldly, “I would certainly not be at liberty to discuss it. I won’t even address your other insinuations.”

“You’re too stubborn for your own good, Ms. Bennet. Need I remind you of how gracious DBFGI has been to you and to your company?”

Elizabeth could hardly keep from rolling her eyes as Catherine began lecturing her.

“I personally advised you last spring, which I almost never do, and the business relationship that exists between DBFGI and Longbourn has always been cordial. In fact, we had quite a bit of mutual trust; our loans were repaid, and more funds were available to you—until your company jeopardized its own future with gross negligence. I came here today expecting forthright and honest answers. Instead, you’ve been vague and evasive, and nearly insubordinate. Enough! I am used to being given the information I want, when I want it.”

“Perhaps others are inclined to acquiesce to your every whim but, unfortunately, I’m not one of those people. A statement like the one you just made certainly doesn’t make me want to divulge
any information to you. Perhaps you’ve forgotten that you’re in my office now, Ms. de Bourgh, and not the reverse?"

“Do you have any idea who I am? Aside from being an esteemed executive who deserves your respect, and someone who could make the future of your business very difficult, as Darcy’s aunt and colleague, nay, investor, I have a right to know about the decisions he makes for his company. I cannot allow you to diminish the value of my nephew’s company, or the prestige of our corporate name, by permitting such an ill-advised sale to take place.”

“Ah, but you have very little right to know about my company, Ms. de Bourgh,” Elizabeth stated, rising to face her opponent. “I believe you forfeited that when you denied our application for future funding. Longbourn owes you nothing.”

“Let me be clear, Ms. Bennet. This merger that you seem so intent upon pursuing cannot take place. DBFGI has been in talks for years to negotiate a merger with Darcy Holdings which would preclude your buyout.” She tossed her head, arms held akimbo, and smiled in triumph.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “If you are so certain that DBFGI’s merger would preclude a purchase of Longbourn, why would you suspect Darcy of making an offer? Your argument is completely illogical.”

Catherine raised her chin, eyes flashing with disdain. “A merger of this nature is not a typical sale. We have been planning for this at DBFGI almost since I joined the company—many years ago, soon after my sister married Darcy’s father. The sale was planned for when both companies were financially solvent and certain other requirements were met.”

Catherine began pacing again. “Only when my daughter was elected to the Board of Directors, and since Darcy has been able to consolidate agreement amongst his own Board, is it possible to move forward. DBFGI has been willing for years to begin the process, but Darcy has consistently told us to wait, claiming that his business was not yet ready to move in this direction, or that the economic downturn and credit crunch made it difficult to consider an alliance with a financial institution. Now, at the very time when the merger could take place, your small, struggling company, with no avenues for expansion, could jeopardize our future. Our Board would never vote for such a merger. You and your family are obstructing lucrative opportunities in an uncertain financial market. You are aware that this is the opposite of good business practice, Ms. Bennet?”

“Ms. de Bourgh, I am perfectly aware of good business practice,” Elizabeth replied, “but I am also aware of the legalities of such a merger, and I know that both parties must consent before an acquisition can take place. Perhaps DBFGI has done all it can to promote this merger, but accomplishing it depends on the willingness of Darcy Holdings’ Board. In the meantime, I see no compelling legal reason why Longbourn could or should not move ahead with a sale, if Darcy is willing as well.” Elizabeth tilted her head expectantly.

“Because it completely violates the dictates of capitalism and a free market economy!” Catherine exploded. “You think an influx of capital will revive your struggling business, but it violates your fiduciary duty to your investors to merge with a company only to reduce its value. Do not expect to shamelessly sell yourselves to Darcy Holdings and upset the plans of a financial powerhouse such as DBFGI without consequences.”

Catherine leaned over the table and pointed her index finger at Elizabeth. “Trust me, Ms. Bennet, I have many contacts in the business world, and my colleagues will side with me. You may sell your company, but Longbourn will never amount to anything.”

“Yes, losing your backing would be unfortunate—although we seemed to have survived thus far,” Elizabeth frowned in mock consideration and continued, “but I imagine the advantages we would
have as a part of Darcy’s company would make your insults a very small price to pay.”

“Let me remind you of the history of DBFGI. We are a very old, well-respected financial institution with a history of conservative lending and impressive customer service. Darcy Holdings has a similarly stellar record in a related field, acquiring and expanding profitable corporations, supporting growth industries, and leading investment in emerging markets.” Catherine de Bourgh gesticulated wildly as she paced, and Elizabeth wondered if she would wear a path into the carpet.

Catherine stopped, turned an icy glare on Elizabeth, and said, “Your company has little to offer, no reputation, and hardly a profit margin. You must see that Longbourn doesn’t fit the profile of previous acquisitions for Darcy Holdings, and that this sale would make it very difficult for your new parent company to avoid bankruptcy.”

“I was under the impression that you didn’t want to hear corporate PR from me, Ms. de Bourgh,” Elizabeth said, “especially in regard to our status or financial prospects.”

The de Bourgh Death Stare evaporated for a moment, and Elizabeth wondered if the flash of white teeth was meant to be a smile or a warning. “Then answer this for me: has Darcy made you an offer?”

Elizabeth considered the factors in play. There was no purchase offer, and Elizabeth herself generally refused on principle to be bullied into revealing information. Yet, Catherine could be quite damaging in her retribution toward Longbourn—without the rumored protection of Darcy Holdings—if Elizabeth continued to stonewall her.

“No.” Elizabeth replied quietly.

“Excellent.” Catherine sat down, crossing her legs and, despite her words, still radiating displeasure. “Will you give me your word not to enter into negotiations with him?”

“Absolutely not. If Darcy approaches me, I see no reason why I should not speak with him.”

With every argument that Catherine had lobbied against the merger, Elizabeth grew more and more curious about Darcy’s intentions in assisting Lydia, helping to fund Longbourn’s recovery, and why he had tried to keep his actions a secret. Could he really mean to involve himself in only the financials? She had been hoping he might wish to be more personally involved.

After a tense silence, Catherine stood. “I certainly expected to find you more willing to compromise than this, Ms. Bennet. I came to Meryton for a purpose, and I am not prepared to leave before it is accomplished.”

“Shall I arrange for your mail to be delivered here?” Elizabeth retorted, tired of the argument. “Let’s not forget, Ms. de Bourgh, that you arrived at my office, refused to speak with me about any actual business between our two companies, and have spent our meeting insisting that I reveal privileged information. The objections you’ve raised are completely illogical, unfounded, and offensive.” Now Elizabeth rose and placed her hands on the conference table.

“I’m not certain, Ms. de Bourgh, what prompted you to think I could be intimidated and insulted into revealing what you want to know. I have already given you more information than your inquiry merits, and you’ll have to be satisfied with that. You have clearly underestimated my susceptibility to your persuasive tactics, and as for your nephew, I suspect he would not look very kindly upon your interference—particularly if he is interested in acquiring our company.” Elizabeth scowled. “Now, if we won’t be discussing any relevant business, I can show you to the door.”
“You have a very dangerous attitude, Ms. Bennet,” Catherine growled, rising to face her. “Especially considering we haven’t finished our discussion. I’ve refrained from mentioning how the latest problems, as you so charmingly call them, will impact this merger you seem to think might actually happen. If you seriously think that you can sell your nearly-bankrupt company and no one will remember the illicit activity that took place here—that no one will comment on accusations of fraud and criminal investigations, you are sorely mistaken.”

Catherine laughed derisively. “Do you truly believe that I would allow my nephew’s business to take on such a scandalous venture? That I would let Darcy Holdings embroil itself with felons? That I would step aside in favor of such a dishonest enterprise? I repeat, you are sorely mistaken, Ms. Bennet.”

“I think that’s quite enough, Ms. de Bourgh,” Elizabeth replied icily. “Personally, with that kind of power, I’m confused as to why you came to speak with me today instead of going directly to your nephew. As it stands, I cannot imagine how else you could possibly insult me.”

“Just one moment, Ms. Bennet.” Catherine’s voice took on a false, syrupy quality that immediately raised Elizabeth’s hackles. “I have one more ‘tactic’ as you call it, which you may find more persuasive than simple requests for information. I suggest you take a very close look at it, and assess your company’s priorities very carefully. I will only offer this once.” She removed a file folder from her attaché and threw it onto the table with a thwack. “In this folder you will find the necessary documents assuring Longbourn of our continued financing—"

“Provided we agree to your stipulations?”

“As you would with any of our other contracts,” was Catherine’s matter of fact rejoinder. “And the most important of those terms is that I will provide sufficient funding to ensure that Longbourn remains an independently owned and operated company. You will not need to sell to Darcy—or anyone else—so long as DBFGI provides your backing. Should your company’s performance improve substantially over a predetermined length of time, DBFGI will hold open the possibility of acquiring Longbourn ourselves. Then,” Catherine smirked, “the irrational hope you seem to hold out of being allied with Darcy’s company can be realized after all.”

“Ms. de Bourgh.” Elizabeth calmly slid the unopened folder toward the older woman, “I was wrong. Apparently you can be more insulting. As much as I would like to ensure Longbourn’s future financial stability, I find that DBFGI is no longer our best option for obtaining the necessary credit to do so. And, now, I believe this meeting is finished.”

She walked across the room and opened the door as Catherine huffed and shrugged into her blazer.

“So this is it? Shall I announce your reckless decisions to your employees then? Are you truly unconcerned with the impact your decision will have on your staff? Do you have any business sense, any at all?” Catherine continued to harangue Elizabeth as they moved briskly toward the foyer.

“I think I’ve been perfectly clear about my decision, Ms. de Bourgh. Good day.”

“You’ve decided to pursue the sale then?”

“I have decided to act in the best interest of my family, my employees, and my clients. In other words, I’m not basing my decision on your advice.” Elizabeth held the front door open.

“You are determined to ruin a respectable business? You are determined to make my nephew the laughing-stock of the financial community?”
“Not at all! I’m determined to make a decision based on what is in the best interest of my company and your nephew can decide for himself what is best for his.”

Catherine rolled her eyes. “I don’t have time for frivolous debates. I will be informed if an offer is made. And I demand that you give my offer the due consideration it merits.” She pointed a finger at Elizabeth. “I will expect to hear from you within three days. If you’ve not responded by then, you’ll hear from me. And that conversation will not go as well as this one did.”

With that, Catherine swept out of the office. Katie was still standing in the hallway with their coffee, trying to keep hold of the cups that had nearly spilled as Hurricane Catherine blew through.

Elizabeth grabbed one of the coffees off of Katie’s tray, wishing it were an Irish coffee instead of the sludge Katie tended to brew. She slammed her office door and sank into her chair, sipping the hot beverage.

Setting the coffee on the desk, Elizabeth stood and stared out her window at the ring of birch trees around the parking lot that she had helped her father plant when they moved into this building.

Sighing heavily, Elizabeth considered the meeting. She knew that Darcy had no compelling interest in purchasing Longbourn. She turned the idea over in her head, realizing that Catherine must have stumbled upon the rumor. A senseless rumor from a misinformed source, Elizabeth thought. Perhaps Bill Collins had uncovered something about Darcy’s financial assistance to Longbourn—perhaps Darcy was not the top secret Superman he thought he was—and somehow twisted it into this imaginary purchase offer.

Elizabeth suspected that Catherine would be informing Darcy of their “conversation” and Elizabeth’s rudeness, if only to discourage him from purchasing Longbourn. Despite her complete lack of tact, Catherine was still Darcy’s aunt, and as Elizabeth herself had recently learned, sometimes family members felt compelled to stand behind even their most obnoxious relatives. Would Darcy do that?

Elizabeth was a rational woman, a smart woman, a woman not given to thinking obsessively about men, at least not before she met Darcy. She had already spent countless hours wondering at Darcy’s motivation, questioning his tactics, and debating his feelings, as well as her own. At what point should she abandon her wishes and hopes and let it—let him—go?

Elizabeth sighed and ran her fingers through her hair in frustration.

She would wait, at least for a while, to find out what he would do. If he actually listens to something Catherine de Bourgh says, Elizabeth decided, then he’s not the man I thought he was. Unless, Elizabeth paused as the realization washed over her, he agreed with her in the first place.

Taking one last pull on her coffee, Elizabeth turned her focus back to her work. Three days. If Catherine could offer her three days to decide, she could extend the same deadline to Darcy. If he didn’t call in three days, she would… well, she would do something.
“No, I think they definitely like you more. Who could resist you?”

“But you’re their uncle! They can’t like me more than you!”

Elizabeth sighed into her coffee mug. Jane and James had been discussing James’ nephews for the past twenty minutes. She had moved past being a third wheel and become only a silent observer. As James leaned over and gave Jane a kiss on the cheek, Elizabeth turned her head to roll her eyes in the direction of the window. She was happy that Jane was happy, but that didn’t mean she needed to witness all that happiness. Especially when it was boring.

A flash of silver at the curb caught her eye. It was a BMW, and it hadn’t been there a few moments ago when Elizabeth had watched Rachel Jackson nearly crash her bicycle into a parking meter as she gaped at Jasper Armstrong’s latest hairstyle.

Elizabeth knew that BMW.

It had been parked in front of the coffee shop, blending in with a gray November rain. She had seen it again in April, but then it had been occupied by a tired, disappointed man. She gripped the edge of the table as she leaned toward the glass, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, before realizing how foolish she must look. BMW made thousands of those cars. It couldn’t be his.

Except that it was. She knew it, knew that as soon as she turned her head, he would be there.

Very slowly, Elizabeth turned, first, toward Jane, who was giggling with James over a story in a magazine, oblivious to the fact that the whole world was changing, right before their eyes.

Her eyes swept across the rest of the room, past the bulletin board full of announcements for “rummage sale’s” and local concerts, past Mr. and Mrs. Rice and their old, wrinkled hands clasped across a small table, until finally, finally, there he was.

Darcy’s hands were thrust into the pockets of his jeans, his shoulders hunched and the fabric of his polo shirt pulled taut across the muscles of his back. He was staring at his shoes, or maybe at the cracked tile Elizabeth knew was just in front of him, and then, suddenly, he wasn’t. He was looking right at her.

She stood, but didn’t move, and watched as he walked toward her, stopping only once, when tiny Rosie Williams toddled in front of him. Elizabeth choked on a laugh as he tried to avoid stepping on the girl.

“Elizabeth.” He said her name like he couldn’t believe she was there, and Elizabeth blinked at him, one hand still on the back of her chair, anchoring her to something solid, reminding her that this was real.

“I--this must look terrible,” he said, shaking his head. “I wasn’t trying to-- well, I was going to come to your office and I drove here, and then, when I got here, it was...”

“Saturday.”

“Yes. Saturday.” He shrugged, a gesture of helplessness. It looked so out of place, so unpracticed on him. “I’m not following you.”

Elizabeth couldn’t stop the laugh that bubbled up, as much a release of tension and hysteria as one
of merriment. If only he knew! How many days had she wished for him to come back, to run into
him unexpectedly? How often had she thought of what she would say?

Darcy was smiling at her, a little confused. Elizabeth wiped a tear from her eye.

“I never thought you were,” she said, unable to keep a lingering smile off her face.

They might have stood there all day, while the other coffee shop patrons wondered why Elizabeth
Bennet was smiling at a man she’d never professed to like. Fortunately, Jane had pulled herself
away from James and interrupted the awkward silence.

“Elizabeth, we’re going, so you can have the table if you want.” She smiled at Darcy as she and
James gathered their things. “It’s good to see you again,” she said.

“Yes, I hope you’re well.”

It was inane, but it gave Elizabeth a moment to compose herself and invite Darcy to sit down.

“I’d rather go somewhere else, if it’s all right.”

Elizabeth saw the curious looks that Mrs. Rice was giving him, and wondered how she had never
noticed just how close together the tables were set. Suddenly it seemed almost claustrophobic in
the shop. She picked up her purse.

“We can go anywhere you want.”

Apparently “anywhere” was “nowhere”; they wandered along Main Street toward Meryton’s only
park, but it didn’t seem that Darcy had a particular destination in mind.

Elizabeth was trying to think of some way to start a conversation, but “Why are you here?”
sounded slightly accusatory. Glancing up at him, she saw that Darcy was frowning. As they
crossed Market Street--still without saying a word--and the Longbourn office came into view, she
decided that almost anything was better than silence.

Reaching out, Elizabeth placed her hand on Darcy’s bare forearm. He stopped, turned, and at the
expectant look on his face, she could only wrap her hand around his wrist, stare at her toes, and
blurt: “Thank you. For what you did.”

She stared up at him anxiously. He looked slightly confused for a moment, but even as his
expression slowly changed to one of understanding, Elizabeth continued. “With Lydia, I mean,
and the money. You didn’t have to do it, and my family doesn’t know it was you, or at least how
much of it was you. They would want to thank you too, but I won’t say anything, if you don’t
want.”

“Elizabeth.”

She paused, Darcy’s forehead was creased, with confusion or anger, she wasn’t sure. Suddenly
realizing she was still holding his wrist, his pulse thrumming beneath her fingers, and she let go,
startled. Darcy reached over and gently took her hand back in his, twining their fingers together.

“You don’t have to thank me. I did what I thought was right, what needed to be done. I should
have been honest with you from the start.”

“No, that’s--”

“That’s not--it’s not the point, really.” He shook his head. “It’s done. I didn’t come here to dredge
“It doesn’t, won’t,” Elizabeth said. “I’d already realized that you’re not--not what I thought you were.”

Darcy stepped forward, taking her other hand in his, and now he was so close to her, just a few inches away, his head tilted down so she could see the gentle sweep of his eyelashes on his flushed cheeks when he blinked.

“I’m trying, Elizabeth, trying so hard not to read this wrong, like I did before. If you don’t want this, with me, you have to say something. I’ve never--I don’t know how to be clearer, other than to ask you--”

She lifted up on her tiptoes and kissed him. It wasn’t much, just a brush of the lips, and she was a little off-balance and came down too quickly, but oh, it was worth it, after all the waiting and the wondering, the uncertainty and regret.

Darcy seemed to think so, too. A slightly incredulous grin was sneaking across his face.

“You have a dimple,” Elizabeth said. “I never noticed.”

“Only when I’m very happy,” he replied, leaning down to kiss her again.

The roar of sports car came closer, and then a few loud honks, before a girl yelled, “Get a room, lovebirds!” It sounded like Lydia.

“Charming,” Elizabeth said, blushing with embarrassment, inadvertently resting her head against Darcy’s chest as she tried to hide her face. She could feel him chuckle.

They walked a bit further, Darcy still holding tightly to her hand, making a lap of the park, too busy talking about inconsequential things and just looking at each other to realize that they’d been around the walking trails nearly twice. Laughing, Elizabeth led Darcy back toward her apartment, the late afternoon sun lending everything a golden, tawny hue.

“Jane?” Elizabeth crossed her fingers in front of her as they entered the apartment, hoping that her sister and James were anywhere but here. An afternoon of secret smiles and lingering, casual touches in the park was enough to make her want all the privacy their apartment could offer.

Turning back toward Darcy, she shrugged, but couldn’t keep from grinning as she said, “I guess Jane isn’t here.”

Darcy’s smile made her heart give a little flutter, before it set to beating in double time as he felt his hand slide around to the small of her back, his thumb just skimming the bare skin at her jacket collar.

“Elizabeth,” Darcy murmured, “this is--it’s so much more than I expected.”

He placed one hand on her waist, while the other traced the line of her cheek.

His breath was no more than a whisper against her skin when he asked, “Can we try this again, with a little more warning?”

“Yes.” It was scarcely more than a sigh. She felt the warmth of his lips near hers, and tilted her head just a fraction as she crossed the space that separated them, the gulf between the past and the present. The first kiss lasted only a moment, a delicious few seconds, before they parted, his hand sliding around to the small of her back, her eyes opening and fluttering closed again before he pressed his mouth decisively to hers. Her nerve endings tingled, and the whole left side of her
body hummed at his touch. She heard bells tinkling, and then Darcy pulled back, frowning, and murmured, “Elizabeth, are you… vibrating?”

Flustered, she realized that her phone was ringing, shoved into her pocket. She pulled it out and looked at him, slightly confused, and whispered, “I think it’s your aunt.”

Darcy placed his forehead against hers, taking a deep breath. “I’ll probably hate myself for saying this later, but maybe you should take it.”

Elizabeth answered up the call, but before she could speak, Catherine’s voice rang out in the silence. “Ms. Bennet, I have waited very patiently for your response. Now I am forced to call you outside of working hours regarding something that should already be completed. Someone of my standing should never be kept waiting, nor should I have had to call you regarding a business matter of such importance.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth with such confusion, she could only laugh and hand the phone over to him with a challenging look, mouthing, “you talk to her.”

“Catherine,” he stated, and Elizabeth smiled at his clipped tone; he had been so easygoing during their time together, she’d almost forgotten he could sound like that. “I’m not sure why you feel the need to harass Elizabeth on a Saturday, but enough.” She heard Catherine begin to speak, and Darcy cut her off, winking conspiratorially at Elizabeth. “I told you yesterday that none of it was your concern,” he said, “Just leave it alone. Please.” Elizabeth heard the click of the end call button as Darcy shook his head.

Leaning forward and placing her hands against his chest, Elizabeth kissed him again as the phone vibrated and jingled once more. She could feel him fumbling with it, somewhere behind her, and finally, it was quiet.

-----

It was snowing when Elizabeth awoke, her arm stretched out across the mattress, fisting the cold top sheet. She lifted herself up on an elbow, shivering, and blinked at the clock. 4:30 a.m. With a sigh, she dropped her head back onto the pillow and curled herself under the blankets again.

She stared out the window for a while, watching the snow drift past, the sky starting to lighten, slowly, as dawn turned the deep black sky to charcoal gray. It was January third, and she had to go back to work today. Elizabeth bit her lip, looked at the clock, and reached for her cell phone.

“This sucks. I miss you.”

It probably wasn’t the kind of text message Darcy would want to wake up to, but Elizabeth was pretty sure Jane and James didn’t want her bouncing over to their room to announce it. Plus, she didn’t want to talk to Jane.

She wanted Darcy. She didn’t even want to talk with him, not really. No, she’d much rather he be there, where she could reach across the bed, curl into him and not let go for approximately forever.

Her phone rang, and she jumped, even though she knew who it must be.

“Sorry I woke you.”

“You didn’t. I was trying to decide if I should get up anyway. I didn’t sleep very well.”

“Hmm.” If she closed eyes and pretended very hard, she could almost, almost convince herself that he was next to her.
“Elizabeth, I can’t do this anymore.”

_That_ was enough to chase away any lingering drowsiness.

“No, that came out wrong,” he said. “I mean, I can’t do the distance thing anymore. It isn’t working. I _miss_ you.”

“I miss you, too,” she grumbled. “Two weeks was too long. I got used to you.”

“Wow, I was expecting something much more romantic after that heartfelt text message. I’m a habit?”

“Well if you were _here_, I’d have a reason to be all mushy. I’m not going to use all my best material when you can’t even reward me for it.”

“What kind of a reward did you have in mind?” His voice was a little husky.

“Ask me in two weeks.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Two more weeks until you’ll be here.” She could almost see him, hair mussed against the pillows, and his forearm thrown over his eyes, blocking out the light slanting through the curtains.

“You’re right,” she whispered. “We can’t do this anymore.”

“Well, we kind of have to,” Darcy sighed again. “We talked about this, and neither of us can relocate.”

“One of us could,” she said slowly.

“I can’t, I really can’t, and I’m sorry. I would, you know I would, but I can’t put all those people out of jobs or ask them to—“

“Not you.”

“Wait, what?”

“Me. I could move. _I will_ move, if you want me to.”

“Of course I want you to, but Elizabeth, it’s your family business. I wouldn’t ask you to give it up for—“

“You aren’t _asking_. I’m telling you I will, if you want me to. And if you’re willing to have a permanent, unemployed houseguest. Though the unemployment wouldn’t be permanent, I hope.”

“We can’t make this decision over the phone. Before six a.m.”

“I think we just did.”

They were both silent for a moment, and Elizabeth could picture him now, sitting up in bed, staring out his window, working through what this would mean, what would change. The snow was still swirling outside the window, and she could see how it was accumulating on the tree branches.

“Your dad is going to hate me.”
“He’s not.”

“He is. So is your mom.”

“We’ll tell them about the money, then. That should sway them in your favor.”

“Elizabeth.”

She laughed, then, and stretched out under the blankets, tingling with the possibilities.

“But think. No more saying goodbye after only a couple of days. No more leaving work at 4:30 on a Friday so I can beat the traffic and get to see you faster.”

“No more waking up to your text messages at 5 a.m. because you can’t sleep.”

“Okay, not fair. We both do that.”

“You should know one thing before you make this decision: I have been known to drink milk from the carton.”

“You’re right. I’m changing my mind.”

Now it was his turn to chuckle, and Elizabeth felt her toes curl at the sound of it, throaty and still a little sleepy.

“Are we really doing this?”

“I think we are,” he said, and she could hear the edge of wonder in his tone, as though he couldn’t quite believe that she would want to be with him.

“I love you,” she whispered it into the phone, as though maybe by saying it quietly, it would reach him, wrap around him, and bring him to her faster, a lasso of emotion and need.

“Elizabeth, you don’t even know.” He sighed, and she felt the affection his voice, warming her more than all her fleece blankets. “I love you, too.”

-----

“You know,” Darcy said to her hesitantly one day in June, “I never did ask you why you changed your mind about me.”

They were carrying their coffee from Old Pemberley to New Pemberley, as Elizabeth called them, though Darcy insisted that it was pretentious to name a modern house. “Was it the letter?”

“The letter helped.” Elizabeth smiled at him; Darcy was so cute when he asked about the early tenuous days of their relationship, as though he was afraid that reminding her would resurrect those long-forgotten feelings.

“Really? It just ‘helped?’ Are you going to tell me, or are you having too much fun teasing me?” Darcy rolled his eyes, but she could see that he was playing along.

“I think,” Elizabeth said slowly, “that what really changed my mind was when I discovered that you had a coffee shop in your backyard.” At his startled look, she laughed and took his hand. “Seriously?”

He was smiling now too, but his eyes were focused. “Seriously.”
“It was... you. I was so mistaken and so cruel to you. When I realized how wrong I’d been, well, when I started to look more closely at the things you said and did, you were everything I wanted.” She shrugged, still self-conscious over a year later.

Darcy liked that answer. Elizabeth could tell because he pulled her to face him, halting their progress halfway between the two houses.

“Here,” he said firmly. “Here is where you were standing when I saw you again. When I went back to the house, before I found you over the bridge, all I could think was, ‘She’s here at Pemberley. That has to be a reason to hope.’ You humbled me, Elizabeth, that night in April, and still all I wanted was to have another chance.”

Elizabeth smiled up at him. He rarely spoke so openly about his feelings, especially those from when he’d been uncertain of her.

“Were you in love with me then?” she asked softly, captivated once more by the expressiveness—and what it revealed—in his eyes.

“Elizabeth,” he said earnestly, “I don’t remember what it feels like not to love you. That’s how long it’s been.”

Elizabeth blushed, and if not for the steaming coffee in her right hand, and his fingers trapping her left, she might have thrown her arms around him.

He leaned in, his mouth almost touching hers, and whispered, “I want to marry you.”

She was slightly shocked, but only for a moment before the rightness of it struck her. Darcy wouldn’t plan an elaborate proposal; he was only occasionally romantic, his practicality and her rationality easily keeping them from becoming too starry-eyed. The urgent whisper, the beseeching look in his eyes, even the way he had intertwined their fingers—these were the signs of his adoration, and also his nerves.

Elizabeth lifted her chin so she could look him in the eye and whispered confidently, “I want to marry you, too.”

He kissed her then, long and slow, a touch both familiar and still able to make her stomach flutter and knees a little weak. Elizabeth let her coffee cup fall to the ground as she closed the fractional distance between them.

When they parted slightly, his arms were still around her waist, one finger tracing a circle on her lower back. Hers were clasped behind his neck, brushing against the fine strands of hair at his nape. Darcy looked at her very seriously. “When?”

“Whenever you want,” Elizabeth replied with a bright smile. She leaned up to kiss him again, but instead, Darcy lifted her up and spun her around, laughing at her surprise.

“Now,” he said, and the sun glinting in his hair made it seem like he was glowing.

Elizabeth laughed. “Maybe when I have a dress. And my sandals aren’t covered in steamed milk. And we should probably invite your sister.”

He rolled his eyes and wrapped his arms around her. They stood on the lawn for some time, murmuring quiet nonsense and trading kisses, the grass around them growing warm and sticky as their coffee dried in the sun.
End Notes

Cheers and thanks to tree, for extraordinary editing, and thanks to Rachel as well for help on the original draft.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!