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MARK OF CHARACTER

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE SOULMARK STORY

ENCHANTING TALES

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SARAH COURTNEY

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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To my family:

My husband Steve, who puts up with a great deal so that I can write!

And to my children, Margaret, Lavinia, Charles,

And especially to Elisabeth, Jocelyn, and Cecilia, who each named a kitten in this story.

# CHAPTER 1

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I

t is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a soulmark must be in want of her match. Elizabeth Bennet was no exception.

Elizabeth held back her anticipation as she joined her friend Charlotte at the edge of the dance floor at the Meryton assembly.

“Mr. Bingley has brought only two ladies after all! Do you know who they are?” Even to Charlotte, she was reluctant to reveal her eagerness by asking about the gentlemen.

Charlotte nodded, linking her arm through Elizabeth’s. “Mr. Bingley’s sisters, I understand. One of them is married to one gentleman, and the other is engaged to the other.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank. Only one gentleman was eligible, then. And she had heard nothing of Mr. Bingley having a soulmark.

She tried to mask her disappointment. “My mother will be displeased that neither of the other gentlemen is single.” How Mamma would have crowed at the idea of three eligible gentlemen entering the neighbourhood. At least she could be consoled with Mr. Bingley.

“Engaged is not married!” Lydia said brightly, squeezing between them. “Which gentleman is only engaged? I hope it’s the taller one.”

“Lydia!” Elizabeth scolded, but Charlotte only laughed.

“It is the taller one, but engaged is as good as married, Lydia, and you know it. Besides, my father said that it is a soulmatch. And you know there is no thwarting a soulmark.”

Elizabeth’s own soulmark had appeared at birth, so she knew well the significance of the match. Being soulmarked made one very fortunate, or very much . . . not. After all, the image of a flower imprinted on her back would either lead to a match of true love, or, if not fulfilled, a slow, wasting death. There was no middle ground.

Lydia sighed. “Three gentlemen, and only one eligible.” Elizabeth smiled slightly at the similarity of their thoughts. “And of course he will fall madly in love with Jane and never glance at the rest of us.” She tossed her curls and returned to Kitty to share the news.

Elizabeth cocked her head as she watched Sir William introduce Mr. Bingley to his new neighbours.

“Is it truly a soulmatch, or did you say that to discourage Lydia? Mrs. Phillips said the Bingleys were a town family, originally from trade.”

Charlotte shrugged. “Yes, Mr. Bingley clearly said it was a soulmatch between his sister and Mr. Darcy. It is a little odd, but then, Miss Bingley may have an affinity for the land even if her family has always lived in town. My father thinks that perhaps Mr. Bingley’s family was landed in the past. Mr. Darcy is an excellent catch for her. He will inherit an estate worth ten thousand pounds a year!”

“A good catch indeed.” Mr. Bingley was being introduced to Mamma and her sisters now. Most likely Mamma had been waving frantically for her to join them, but she had been too engrossed with Charlotte to notice. No matter; she would certainly meet Mr. Bingley in time. Sooner rather than later, she thought, considering his awestruck look as he was introduced to Jane.

Her eyes were again drawn to Mr. Darcy. He was a handsome man, very tall, with broad shoulders and dark hair.

She sighed. She had been hoping that among Mr. Bingley’s guests might be the gentleman who would match her soulmark. Her parents had already put out tentative enquiries throughout Meryton and the surrounding neighbourhoods, but with Papa’s refusal to take them all to London, she was forced to wait until gentlemen came to her.

She had time. Some time, anyway. She was only twenty, so she probably had ten years at least until the soul weakening. But her soulmark had appeared at birth, so that meant that her soulmatch was older than she was. If he was nearing thirty, he might start to feel the soul weakening soon, and it would only grow worse until they found each other and sealed the match with a kiss—and then cemented it with marriage. It was frustrating to wait, her own father’s indolence keeping her from her soulmatch. But it was an argument that had been repeated many times in the past year, and she was tired of it. Even if this was yet another lost opportunity, she would not allow it to ruin her evening.

From Mr. Bingley’s smile at Jane, and especially from Jane’s tentative smile back as he led her to the dance floor, she knew he was not the soulmatch she was waiting for. But Jane had no soulmark and was free to marry where she wished. Perhaps this Mr. Bingley would be the one.

Charlotte was not watching Mr. Bingley and Jane, but Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley. Surprisingly, they had not joined the dance together. Miss Bingley had accepted the hand of Mr. Goulding, but Mr. Darcy stood along the wall and watched the dance—not his soulmatch, either, but the dance itself.

“I wish I had a soulmark,” Charlotte said at last, a wistfulness in her tone that took Elizabeth by surprise.

Elizabeth turned to her friend. “Oh?”

Charlotte laughed a little. “Well, they say that a soulmark tends to draw two people together so that they are less likely to dwell on each other’s flaws. Perhaps if I had a soulmark myself, I would be more likely to find someone who would overlook my lack of beauty.” She shrugged as she looked out over the dancers. “But I suppose it is not to be. I have not your love for the land, anyway.”

Elizabeth could think of no response, but she squeezed Charlotte’s arm and received a wry smile.

Mr. Lucas came to claim her for a dance, then the younger Mr. Goulding, who was half a head shorter than her. After those lively dances, she took a seat near the dance floor to sit out a dance so that Charlotte would be given a turn. She could not hide her smile when Charlotte was taken to the floor with the same Mr. Goulding—as Charlotte had a good eight inches on him, Mr. Goulding struggled to raise his arm high enough on some of the turns.

“I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner! You had much better dance!”

The words cut into Elizabeth’s thoughts, and she half turned to see Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy speaking just a few pillars away. The words were Mr. Bingley’s, and his voice was jovial despite his words.

“I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. As I am engaged, I no longer consider it a social requirement, which might have been the only thing that would induce me.”

“Come now, Darcy. There is no reason an engaged man might not honour the room with a dance! It would be an excellent introduction to Meryton society.”

“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” Mr. Darcy said, looking towards Jane.

Elizabeth smiled at that. Even Mr. Darcy was forced to admit Jane’s beauty.

“She is an angel,” Mr. Bingley said with a laughing huff. “But there is one of her sisters, sitting half behind you, and she is just as pretty. Shall I introduce you?”

“Which do you mean?” Mr. Darcy said. He turned, and his eyes skimmed across Elizabeth without ever meeting hers. “She is not handsome enough to tempt me, and I am in no temper to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other gentlemen. Furthermore, you can imagine how much it would displease your sister.”

Mr. Bingley took a step back in dismay, stunned. “Darcy! She will hear you! You have been in a foul temper ever since . . .” He shook his head. “Well. Enjoy your solitude then, I suppose.” He went to rejoin Jane just as the musicians began the tune for the next dance.

Elizabeth sat frozen, heart pounding. Not handsome enough to tempt him? She had not dressed to tempt him! Did he regard all women as existing for his own pleasure?

She had no quarrel with him for considering Jane to be the most beautiful, of course; she had always been considered second to her sister. Second-prettiest girl in Meryton may not seem impressive to a man used to London beauties, but it was still no small thing. Well, if that was his opinion, so be it.

If it were not for the insult to herself, Elizabeth could have been satisfied at Mr. Darcy’s loyalty to his betrothed. As it was, she could at least take amusement in his arrogance. She crossed the room to join Charlotte, who was just finishing her dance with young Mr. Goulding, and relished the fun she would have in the retelling.

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Darcy blinked. Bingley’s words had come too late for him to realise how close the Bennet sister Bingley had indicated had been seated. He might have liked to satisfy himself that eavesdroppers never hear well of themselves, but he knew well that she had already been sitting in that chair when their conversation began, and he could hardly expect her to excuse herself to avoid overhearing.

He had half expected to see her go to her mother in misery, and he had steeled himself to deliver the necessary apology. Instead, she was speaking with a plain young woman a few years older, laughing as both women looked in his direction.

What could she possibly be saying that was so diverting? He watched as two other girls joined their group, and the one he had insulted began her tale afresh.

She pretended to stand stiffly against a column, chin high in an imperious gesture that reminded him of his aunt. She then stepped to the side and spoke brightly, hands waving as Bingley was wont to do. Then she was back to leaning against the column, austere, speaking down her nose at the others and then giving a dismissive wave.

All the young ladies burst into giggles and turned towards him.

He flushed red. Was she retelling his insult? Why? It did not exactly paint her in the best light, did it?

And surely he did not look so much like Lady Catherine?

He suddenly became aware that he was leaning against the column just as she had done, and that, in fact, he did have his chin raised rather high.

Swallowing, he stepped away from his support. He had better find something to do other than stand around and be mocked.

He considered making his way towards the card room—Hurst would be there, at least—when he heard a chorus of laughter from a group of matrons sitting where they could observe the dance.

“Mr. Bingley is so taken with my Jane!” the rosiest-cheeked one of the bunch exclaimed. She must be Mrs. Bennet, then, as Bingley was once again standing with that beauty. “Such a charming young gentleman, all ease and friendliness!”

One of the other women fanned her face, a frown marring her own expression as she watched the couple. “It must be such a relief to you, dear Mrs. Bennet, with the entailment. At least one daughter has a chance at a good marriage.”

Mrs. Bennet laughed a bit too loudly for Darcy’s liking. “You forget Elizabeth! With her soulmark, Lizzy is assured to marry a gentleman. You need not worry for my sake! Jane may fall in love where she chooses. And with her beauty, I am not at all surprised that Mr. Bingley has singled her out from the moment he saw her.”

Darcy did not know whether to smile at the woman’s set-down or be annoyed that his friend was being discussed as if he were the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters when he had only arrived in the assembly room a mere two hours ago.

A movement on the other side of the matrons caught his eye, and he saw Miss Bingley glare at the chattering women. To his surprise, she was not looking towards her brother where he stood with Miss Bennet, but towards where the other Bennet sister stood with her friends. Miss Bingley’s look was one of speculation, although he could not imagine why.

The Bennet sister was telling some story now, her eyes sparkling, her curls bouncing a little as she shook her head. Her form was light and delicate, but pleasing. Her skin was not as light as her older sister’s, and he wondered if she enjoyed the outdoors. It was a common trait in those with soulmarks, given their ties to the land.

“Mr. Darcy!”

Miss Bingley had reached him, and she slipped her arm through his before he could escape.

“What agonies you must be suffering! I cannot believe my brother dragged us to this . . . public assembly. There cannot be anyone here worth knowing.”

Without meaning to, Darcy let his gaze flicker to the Bennet sister, who was accepting a gentleman’s hand for the dance. When he looked back at Miss Bingley, her eyes were narrowed.

“May I have this dance?” he asked, before she could wonder at his inattention. At least she would be forced to relinquish his arm.

Dancing was not his favourite activity, especially with new acquaintances, but at the moment, he would have preferred the hand of any young lady in the room over that of the woman he was supposed to love.

His soulmatch. Miss Caroline Bingley.

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“It is too bad for you, Eliza,” Charlotte said once the Long girls had gone on their way. “I asked Miss Bingley, and she said that her brother is not soulmarked. So none of them are for you, it seems. I had not wanted to say anything when I heard of Mr. Bingley’s large party, but it might have been an opportunity for you. There are not so many strangers coming to Meryton, after all.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “That is true. I wish Papa would take me to London for a season. I do not know how he expects me to find my soulmatch in Meryton!”

“Well.” Charlotte frowned. “It is said that soulmatches always do come across each other. It would be impossible otherwise. What if one’s soulmatch lived in China? You are bound to find him eventually.”

Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy as he made a stealthy escape into the card room. Yes, if he would not dance, better that he should go into the card room and find employment there. Although she felt an odd pang not to see him in his haughty pose leaning against the column.

When she turned back to Charlotte, she saw that Miss Bingley, the sister who was engaged to Mr. Darcy, stood just behind her, watching Elizabeth. And odder yet, she looked displeased.

Charlotte noticed the young lady behind her as well, and she shifted to make the introductions. “Miss Bingley, this is my dear friend, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Eliza, this is Miss Bingley.”

They curtsied.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Miss Bingley said, sounding like she meant the exact opposite. “I believe you have already met my betrothed, Mr. Darcy?”

“Oh, not formally,” Elizabeth said, hiding a smile. “I do not believe he was introduced to anyone in the room, although I will admit that we did hear of his name from Sir William Lucas and Mr. Bingley.”

“And his family income, I would imagine.” Miss Bingley’s smile grew tighter. “I have made an excellent match. Everybody says it. Why, we are as good as married. I was so thrilled to find my soulmatch so easily.”

“As you should be,” Charlotte said. “Many people look for years for their mates.”

“Yes.” Miss Bingley’s eyes were still on Elizabeth. “Yes, they do. How unlucky for them.”

It seemed as if there was another layer to Miss Bingley’s words, but Elizabeth, despite her long practice deciphering her father’s pithy remarks, could not determine it.

# CHAPTER 2

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I

t surprised Elizabeth to be included in the invitation to dine with Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley. They had both befriended Jane, but Miss Bingley still seemed inexplicably hostile towards Elizabeth. Yet they had invited her along with Jane. How odd.

The reason became evident only a few minutes into their visit. Jane was unusually quiet and pale, possibly from becoming a little wet from the rain on her way from the carriage to the house. Miss Bingley paid her no mind, her entire attention on Elizabeth.

“I understand that you also have a soulmark!” Miss Bingley said in a voice that rang with false gaiety. “How amusing! I do not suppose the Bennets have often had soulmarks?”

“Oh, occasionally,” Elizabeth said lightly. “We have been landed gentry for many generations, you know.” It was not a falsehood—there were soulmarks indicated in the list of her ancestors in the family Bible.

“Hmm.” Miss Bingley pursed her lips. “But—forgive me—I believe I have heard that your family’s estate is entailed upon a cousin? And that there have been no soulmarks for several generations.”

Miss Bingley’s superior expression made her opinion of the Bennets and the impending loss of their estate clear. But Miss Bingley’s father had not even owned an estate, and despite her soulmark, her brother did not have one. What reason had she to think so highly of herself?

“It is,” Jane said blithely. “But Elizabeth’s soulmark makes it clear that the Bennets are not entirely out of favour with the land.”

“I see.” Miss Bingley’s eyes were sharp. “And may I ask what your soulmark depicts?”

“Certainly not.” Elizabeth’s answer was a little more abrupt than she had intended, but she was that shocked. Had Miss Bingley’s school taught her no manners at all? Perhaps the students had all been from trade like Miss Bingley and soulmarks had not come up. “Forgive me,” she said, trying to gentle her tone. “But you must know that soulmarks are private.”

“Oh, but I know a great many gentlemen in London, and I know you have no occasion to travel there. I would be happy to keep my eyes and ears open for a gentleman who might match your soulmark for you.”

Elizabeth’s face was tight as she returned Miss Bingley’s smile. “That is very kind of you. But soulmatches almost always find each other eventually.”

“Perhaps that is because they travel to town for the season and find each other.”

Mrs. Hurst smiled at them all. “I understand that you both travel to London sometimes to stay with your aunt and uncle. Pray tell, what part of town does your uncle live in? Perhaps we might call on you there. We are always in town for the season, you know.”

Jane tended to see the best of people, and usually even when someone was being rude, she ascribed the best intentions to their behaviour. But even she must be seeing through the Bingley sisters’ false kindness, for she was very pale except for two very red spots on her cheeks.

“He lives on Gracechurch Street,” Jane managed softly. “Near Cheapside.”

Elizabeth kept her smile on her face, even when Mrs. Hurst’s smile broadened and she shared a look with her sister. “Cheapside. How pleasant. The shops must be so close. Quite an easy trip for you.”

“Oh, yes. But we particularly enjoy spending time with our aunt and uncle and their children. The children are such dears, and I love to help with them.”

Miss Bingley’s eyes lit up. “How delightful! Have you considered working as a governess?”

Elizabeth could not stifle a gasp, and she turned to Jane.

Jane was trembling. She raised the back of her hand to her forehead just as her eyes closed. She swayed, and Elizabeth dived to catch her before she collapsed to the floor. Heart beating frantically, she clutched Jane to her. What was happening?

“Roberts,” Miss Bingley called languidly to one of the footmen, “get help. Miss Bennet is unwell.”

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“Oh, Lizzy.” Jane blinked back tears. “I cannot believe I fainted at the dinner table. What must Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley think of me?”

“They think it is terrible that you are suffering and hope that you will be well soon, that is all,” Elizabeth lied. They also probably thought this was all some sort of plot to win Mr. Bingley—perhaps planned by Elizabeth, since Miss Bingley seemed to think so poorly of her—but it would do no good to tell Jane that. “After all, is that not what you would think if Miss Bingley fell ill at Longbourn?”

“Oh.” Jane relaxed back into the sheets. “Yes, I suppose you are right. Thank you, Lizzy.”

“I have already spoken to Miss Bingley, and she has invited me to stay here until you are well.” Well, “felt compelled to invite” was probably more accurate. “So I will nurse you to good health!”

Jane’s soft laugh turned into a cough. “Dear Lizzy.” She blinked slowly. “Forgive me, but I think I will sleep a little. I cannot seem to keep my eyes open.”

“Sleep, then. It will do you good.”

A little while later, a maid came to tell Elizabeth that she was invited to join the others for dinner, and that the maid would stay and watch over Jane. Grateful, for Elizabeth was ravenous, she went downstairs to look for the dining room.

“Miss Elizabeth!” Mr. Bingley greeted her cheerfully upon her arrival. “How is your sister?”

“Very comfortable,” Elizabeth replied. “Thank you for your kindness in sending the maid. I am certain Jane will be well looked after.”

“It is so dreadful to have a cold,” Miss Bingley said with a sniff. “I detest being ill. I always feel as though I am an inconvenience to everyone around me.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Bingley, but he seemed oblivious to his sister’s insult.

“Miss Bingley, would you mention to your cook or housekeeper that Jane should not have anything with milk or cheese in it? I do not think it likely to be an issue anytime soon, as she cannot tolerate anything but tea and broth now, but they should know just in case.”

“Milk and cheese?” Miss Bingley raised an eyebrow and shared a look with her sister.

“Yes. They make her very ill, I am afraid.”

“Miss Bennet will receive every possible comfort,” Mr. Bingley assured her. “I will speak with Mrs. Nicholls myself.”

Miss Bingley looked exasperated at her brother’s usurpation of her role, but she said nothing.

As the first course was served, Mr. Bingley addressed Elizabeth. “Miss Elizabeth, I understand your sister does not have a soulmark?”

Well. That was one of the more unexpected ways he could have begun a conversation. Of course, she had some idea why he was asking.

“Brother!” Miss Bingley chastised. “Poor Miss Elizabeth is probably worried about Miss Bennet ill upstairs. It is hardly the time to discuss such things.”

Elizabeth looked at her in surprise. “No,” she said to the brother. “No, she does not have a soulmark.”

“But you do?”

She nodded. “The Bennets only have them occasionally, though. Maybe one a generation or so.” And yet it had been three generations since the last. Perhaps the Bennets really were declining. The name would end with her father, after all, unless his heir was willing to change his. “They are generally noted in the Bible that records the family births and deaths.”

Bingley grinned broadly. “How fascinating! Perhaps one day the Bingleys will have a similar tradition. I do not recall hearing of any other soulmarks before Caroline’s.”

“It really is too bad that Jane is ill,” Miss Bingley said, her eyes on her sister. “Louisa and I were just agreeing how uncomfortable it is to be ill, and especially at a house that is not your own.”

“I am surprised that your father does not take you to London to search for your soulmatch.” Mr. Darcy’s eyes met hers across the table, and she could not look away. She supposed he felt superior, since he had been in London and had found his match already. Yet he seemed the sort of man to whom everything came easily, so she was not surprised.

The only surprising thing was, in fact, that he had not already married her. They were a soulmatch—what were they waiting for? Why would he travel with her to her brother’s new estate without marrying her?

“Perhaps next year,” was all she could manage once she had remembered his comment.

Miss Bingley’s smile was brittle. “Do you often stay with your aunt and uncle in Cheapside?” Her eyes flicked to Mr. Darcy as if to be sure he heard, but Elizabeth was not embarrassed about the Gardiners or their home’s proximity to their warehouses. They were some of her favourite people.

“I do. Jane or I often stay with them for a few months each year. But this year it might be Mary who visits.”

The conversation moved on to favourite places and events in London, with Mr. Bingley leading the conversation with Elizabeth, his sisters joining in occasionally, Mr. Darcy rarely, and Mr. Hurst never.

Once the ladies withdrew from dinner, Elizabeth went upstairs again to see Jane. Finding her still sleeping, she felt she ought to return to the drawing room with the ladies, no matter how little she wanted to.

Thankfully, they had exhausted their litany of questions about her soulmark and their connections earlier, so Mrs. Hurst said little and Miss Bingley mostly lamented the gentlemen taking so long over their port.

Miss Bingley was not any happier once they came into the room, though, as Mr. Darcy took up a book and proceeded to ignore her.

Elizabeth hid her disappointment by taking up a book herself. Was this what she had to look forward to?

People spoke of soulmatches as having a great love, the soulmark indicating somehow the perfection of their match, the adoration they would share. Marks only appeared on those of an honourable character, people who had a special affinity for the land—but they were, beyond that, meant to fall in love. The land had chosen the right match for them. She had long thrilled at the idea of her soulmark and the gentleman it would lead her to, her perfect mate.

But this? This was a soulmatch?

She looked with puzzlement from Miss Bingley, who pretended to read a book only so she could force Mr. Darcy into explaining it to her, and Mr. Darcy, whose indifferent attitude towards his future bride did not seem to deter her. Their match seemed little better than her own parents’, and she and her sisters had all long lamented their parents’ unpleasant marriage.

For the first time, she worried about what her own soulmark might portend. If such a match was possible with a soulmark, what kind of mate would she have?

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Darcy locked the door to his room, leaving the key in the lock so that it could not be opened from the outside, then wedged a chair under the doorknob for good measure. Jones, his valet, would do the same in the dressing room to the door that led to the servants’ passage.

It did not sit well with him, this reluctance to consider his betrothed with any delight or pleasure. In fact, the idea of marrying Miss Caroline Bingley and having children with her—if anything, it made an icy shiver run down his spine.

Was he so cold, so closed off to emotions that even a soulmark could not penetrate his heart?

Wickham and even Georgiana had accused him of coldness in the past. What was it that Wickham had once said? “You are more statue than man.” His temper had risen hot at the insult, but now . . .

Could Wickham have been right all along? Was this why Wickham had been able to gain his father’s affections and attention, because he was so much warmer and open?

But how did one change?

And did he even want to, if that meant falling in love with Caroline Bingley?

He stretched, wincing at the twinge in his back. It had been aching since the ride from London. Perhaps he would have been better served sitting in the carriage instead of riding alongside, but he had never liked being confined in the carriage if the weather was fine.

And since his betrothal to Miss Bingley, everything felt confining.

The worst part was that he could not seem to take his eyes off Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

What was it about her that caught his attention? She was pretty—very pretty, even, though most would probably consider Caroline Bingley more handsome, and neither could compare to the incomparable Jane Bennet. If the eldest Miss Bennet had had a season in London . . . Even without a fortune or connections, she would probably have received the queen’s notice for her beauty alone.

No, it had not been for Miss Elizabeth’s beauty.

A flash of memory. There had been that moment when he had shamefully insulted her. He had not meant for her to overhear, but he had taken no precaution to prevent it, either. It was badly done of him.

In that moment, she could have reacted any number of ways. She might have burst into tears, or ignored him, or rushed out of the room. She might have gone to complain to her mother or Sir William, or perhaps gone to hint for a dance with some other gentleman to undermine his insult.

But she had laughed. She had retold the story with vigour and amusement, mimicking both him and Bingley and delighting her friends with the retelling. She had not spared her own vanity by hiding that a handsome, if ineligible, bachelor had insulted her looks. Instead, she had found a way to laugh at his rudeness.

Why? How could a young lady from a small village in the country, to whose society any new gentlemen must be a novelty and delight, so easily laugh off his insult?

He slipped under the cold sheets and shivered again, stretching his stiff, aching legs.

And why was it that when he thought of his own betrothed he felt nothing but coldness, yet he felt warm just thinking of Miss Elizabeth Bennet?

# CHAPTER 3

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ane was improving slowly, and Elizabeth could not help but be impatient. Mr. Bingley was the only one who seemed to appreciate her presence. Mr. Darcy would not stop glaring at her, and Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley clearly looked upon her with contempt.

She wished Jane well, of course, for Jane’s own sake, but also for hers. She was desperate to return to Longbourn, unruly as her family might be.

Mr. Bingley, Mr. Hurst, and the sisters were playing cards when she arrived downstairs, Mr. Darcy writing a letter at the desk.

Elizabeth again took up a book, but she did not read long before Miss Bingley’s conversation stole her attention.

“What are you writing so secretly over there?” Miss Bingley asked.

Mr. Darcy seemed surprised to be addressed. “It is no secret. I am writing to my sister.”

“Oh, dear Georgiana!” Miss Bingley exclaimed. “How I long to see her! Please tell her I long for the day when I can call her sister. I am certain that day will be soon.”

She paused expectantly, but Mr. Darcy did not respond.

Elizabeth was intrigued. Did that mean, then, that Miss Bingley was waiting for Mr. Darcy to set the date of the wedding? But was not that usually the domain of the bride-to-be?

“I hope that your pleasant fate has reassured her,” Mrs. Hurst said. “I know she was worried about finding her soulmatch. But now that she sees how easily it is done, surely she will be confident about finding her own when she comes out.”

Miss Darcy was soulmarked, then. Elizabeth was only a little surprised. Soulmarks must run strongly in Mr. Darcy’s family. That spoke well for their connection to the land and their people, even if Mr. Darcy was arrogant and thoughtless.

Miss Bingley’s lips were tight, and she seemed to be trying to send her sister a message by narrowing her eyes. What had Mrs. Hurst said that Miss Bingley objected to?

“You must give me leave to defer until my next letter,” Mr. Darcy said at last. “At present I have not room to do them justice.”

“Oh, but I will see her for Christmas and can tell her then.” Miss Bingley’s smile stretched as she turned away from her sister. “Christmas in London would be just perfect, do you not think? And it would make a lovely time for a wedding.” Her smile wavered when he did not respond.

“I love London at Christmas,” Mr. Bingley said. “But I have looked forward to Christmas in the country. I have heard tales from Darcy of ice-skating on the ponds, gathering mistletoe and holly, yule logs . . .”

“I cannot say whether it will be cold enough for ice-skating by Christmas,” Elizabeth said ruefully. “I do not believe it often is in Hertfordshire, although it may be farther north. But the rest are favourite traditions of ours as well.”

Mr. Bingley’s smile broadened. “Then I think we should stay in Hertfordshire for Christmas! It would be lovely to experience a country Christmas.”

“Charles!” Miss Bingley’s voice had grown very high-pitched. “You cannot mean it! You wish us to miss Christmas in London?”

Mr. Bingley put down his cards to stare at her. “What can you possibly be talking about, Caroline? A month ago you were thrilled to leave London and stay in the country. And then from the day of the assembly you have spoken of nothing but returning to London!” He shared a look with Mr. Darcy that seemed to say, “Are not women incomprehensible?”

He had noticed her hostility at the Meryton assembly, then. Or perhaps she had complained outright. Perhaps she had been expecting loftier company in the country? An earl or two to provide more refined company? Or maybe she was disappointed that they rarely had musicales or balls, only the seasonal assemblies and card parties and the like.

“You know how much I adore the country,” Miss Bingley said, placing a card down. “Indeed, I am always happiest when I am outdoors. And yet there is something utterly magical about Christmas in London, is there not? And Mr. Darcy and I do have a wedding to arrange.”

Darcy could feel her eyes on him, but he kept his focus on the letter he was supposedly writing and pretended he had heard nothing until she gave up and returned to her game.

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Jane was feeling a little better the following day. Not well enough to go back to Longbourn, but she was able to sit up in bed and take soup and dry toast, and she listened to Elizabeth reading to her for almost an hour before she yawned and asked to rest. Elizabeth hoped they might be on their way in another day or two.

Her spirits were high as she went out for a walk in Netherfield’s gardens. They were overgrown, not surprising since Netherfield had been vacant for some years before Mr. Bingley took the lease. But there were still late-blooming roses on the vines, and Elizabeth enjoyed the sight as she walked and occasionally skipped through the garden.

It was on one of her bouts of skipping that she almost ran into Mr. Darcy with a Bingley sister on each arm. They must have been walking in silence, as Elizabeth heard nothing until she rounded the corner and trod on Mr. Darcy’s shoe.

“Oh, I apologise!” she blurted. “I did not expect anyone to be here.”

“In our own gardens? Miss Elizabeth, surely you know that you are not the only young lady who enjoys walking outdoors.” Miss Bingley’s voice was high and fast as she spoke, and at the last she beamed at Mr. Darcy.

Of course. With Miss Bingley’s soulmark, Elizabeth should not have been surprised to find that she enjoyed spending time outdoors. While nobody entirely understood where soulmarks came from or their purpose, both the church and the British government had acknowledged that they seemed to have some strong connection to caring for the land. Those with soulmarks were destined to be the best stewards of the land, its crops and plants and forests, and the people who worked upon it or depended upon it. It was why they made the best landowners, stewards, and farmers. And even though there was furious debate over whether women with soulmarks were the best match for the man or the land, it was well known that they often enjoyed the outdoors as much as their husbands did.

Mr. Darcy had bent down to brush the dirt off his boot from Elizabeth’s shoe. Miss Bingley tried to reclaim his arm as he stood, but he had moved to Elizabeth’s other side.

“Shall you join us?” Mr. Darcy asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. “You are all three so charmingly grouped. It would not do to ruin the picturesque.” She took a step backwards, but she almost lost her balance when Mr. Darcy smiled.

It was not a polite smile, but a full, beaming smile that showed his dimples and teeth. In fact, he looked close to laughing.

“Are you fond of Gilpin, then?”

She winced to realise that he understood her reference. “Yes, sir.”

“Well.” He offered his arm to her. “There is no reason we cannot all four walk together for a little while.”

Reluctantly, she accepted his arm and matched her stride to his. She was pleased to see that he took long, quick strides. It was a cool day, but her arm in his felt very warm. There was something odd to the sensation, something almost pleasant. Why she should take pleasure in holding the arm of a man she did not like, she could not say.

“Mr. Darcy!” Miss Bingley called breathlessly. “You walk too fast, sir! The ladies cannot keep up.”

So she was not to be counted among the ladies, it seemed, as she could keep up naturally.

He did not respond, but he also did not slow down.

They walked up and down several paths in the garden in silence before Elizabeth felt it pressing in on her.

“May I enquire—how long have you been engaged?”

Mr. Darcy looked up quickly. “Since the summer,” he said. “Two months, I suppose.”

“Will you return to London to wed?”

“I had not thought—I suppose we will.”

Miss Bingley appeared, breathing hard and dragging Mrs. Hurst behind her.

“Now, Mr. Darcy, that was a diverting trick,” she gasped out. “Quite clever of you, really. And Miss Elizabeth! What a great walker you are! Your stride is almost mannish, indeed. I am impressed.”

Miss Bingley would have to try harder if she wished to insult Elizabeth. Elizabeth had always taken pride in her walking ability. It was not much, and it was not as impressive as talent on the pianoforte or with the needle or anything of that sort. But it was a small sort of accomplishment, at least to Elizabeth.

“Why, thank you, Miss Bingley. But please, do not compare yourself to me. Now that your brother is settled at an estate, I know you will have more opportunity to walk and improve your own strength and stamina. Why, by this time next year, you might be faster than I am!”

Elizabeth regretted her words almost immediately. She did not wish to stoop to Miss Bingley’s level. If only Jane were here. Somehow, Elizabeth always seemed to be able to hold her tongue when she knew Jane was listening, no matter the provocation.

Mr. Darcy, to her surprise, had a little quirk to his mouth that seemed to show his amusement, even if it came at the expense of his betrothed.

Miss Bingley was not so satisfied with that response as to continue the conversation, so she moved to take Mr. Darcy’s arm back into her possession. Elizabeth stepped back and allowed it.

“There was a rosebush I particularly wanted to inspect,” she said by way of an excuse. “I do not believe I have ever seen that colour before. I hope you will forgive me leaving you here.”

It might not be enough to put her back on Miss Bingley’s good side—somehow Elizabeth thought that impossible—but it did lead to the first genuine smile Elizabeth had seen from Miss Bingley.

And better yet, it led to Elizabeth being left alone in peace to enjoy the rose beds and her own imagination without interference.

If only Jane would be better tomorrow!

# CHAPTER 4

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T

he difficult thing with writing a letter in a public room was keeping its contents private from spying eyes.

It was not so much that he did not trust his betrothed—well, no, it was. He did not trust his betrothed.

It was an awful sensation to realise that the woman you were intended to marry, the woman who had been intended for you from the day of her birth, who bore your mark on her skin and would be your partner throughout life, was not trustworthy. If Miss Bingley knew about Georgiana’s indiscretion this summer . . . well, he did not trust that she would not use it against him if there was something she wanted.

And there was always something she wanted.

He heard his name from the group by the fireplace and looked up. Miss Bennet had been deemed well enough to come downstairs by the fire for a little while this evening, and she sat speaking with Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, and her sister.

“Will you not join us?” Miss Bingley asked him. “Miss Bennet and I were just discussing how pleasant weddings are.”

Darcy hid a groan but obeyed reluctantly. He would not take the seat she indicated, though, but stood by the fireplace and shifted some of the logs with the poker for something to do. She had an irritating tendency to shift closer and closer when they sat next to each other until their entire sides were pressed against each other. The mere thought made him shiver despite the warmth of the fire.

“How long have the two of you been engaged?” Miss Bennet asked politely.

“Two months,” Miss Bingley replied with a proud smile.

Bingley shook his head. “It never ceases to amaze me how different marriage is for those with soulmarks! One dinner party, a discovery that Caroline and Darcy had soulmarks that matched, and there! They were engaged on the spot.”

Darcy winced.

“Oh, Charles, there was a great deal more than that,” Miss Bingley said quickly. “You know that we had been good friends for two years and had a great deal of affection for each other even before the revelation! Of course, we could not act on it until we discovered that our soulmarks match.”

“Perhaps if people’s soulmarks were more widely known, they would find their match sooner,” Miss Bennet offered softly.

“Perhaps,” Darcy said. “And there are some who do make theirs known. But others may wish to have more discretion about how they will discover their soulmatch, or they may not be willing to marry yet, or they may want to avoid the chance that it could be counterfeited.”

In fact, a counterfeit mark was the very first thing he had worried about when Miss Bingley’s soulmark had been revealed. But there were two things that had made that possibility unlikely.

The first was that Miss Bingley had not known his soulmark, nor had she been the one to announce her own. His had been a well-kept secret, and the revelation of her own soulmark had been a slip from her sister during a dinner party at his parents’ townhouse in London.

“I confess, I am eager to discover who Caroline’s soulmatch might be,” Mrs. Hurst had said cheerfully at Darcy House during dinner. His parents had expressed polite interest in Miss Bingley’s soulmark after Mrs. Hurst had mentioned their desire to participate in the London season in search of the right gentleman. “I have always envied her for having a soulmark. It is lovely, too. A sweet william flower.”

Darcy’s heart had frozen. Her revelation had not escaped his parents, either, as both suddenly stiffened and Georgiana gasped.

“Louisa!” Miss Bingley had chided.

“Oh, dear.” Mrs. Hurst had turned bright red. “I apologise.”

“A sweet william flower?” Father had asked. Darcy had been unable to form a word. There was a burning in his chest, like indigestion, and he could not speak. Was he even breathing?

“Yes,” Miss Bingley said reluctantly. “Please keep it to yourselves. I have tried for discretion until I can attend the season and look for my soulmatch, and my sister did not mean to let it slip.”

Darcy had no idea what to say. Was it possible that her soulmark was some other flower and she was mistaken in her identification? Or perhaps it was a sweet william, but portrayed differently than his? After all, one might paint dozens of pictures of roses and no two look alike.

Father turned towards Darcy, his brow wrinkled with concern. “Son, I think we have to.”

All he could manage was a nod.

“Miss Bingley, we believe you might be a match for our son. Would you be willing to let my wife look at your soulmark? Mr. Bingley could examine Fitz’s, as I assume he is familiar with your mark?”

“I am afraid not,” Bingley said, frowning.

“That is no matter,” Mrs. Hurst said quickly. “Caroline had a painting done of it this summer to prepare for the season. We shall send for the painting, and then you may compare.” And thus had followed one of the most humiliating examinations of his life. At least he could be thankful that soulmarks appeared on the person’s back and not somewhere even more private.

The second reason Darcy knew that Miss Bingley had not counterfeited his soulmark was that his mother, suspicious herself, had examined it minutely. She had called for her brother’s wife, Lady Matlock, to give a less biased opinion, as Mother was not fond of Miss Bingley.

Mother had returned to speak privately with Darcy.

“We examined her carefully,” she confessed. “Neither of us could believe it at first. But her soulmark is an exact match. I was concerned enough to try wetting a finger and rubbing it across the mark to see if it might smear—I thought she might have drawn it on with ink, you see. But it did not smear.” Her smile turned wry. “Eleanor was even more doubtful than I was. She came prepared and dipped a finger into alcohol before running it across the mark.”

Mother lowered herself onto the sofa, and Darcy took the seat next to her. “It did not smear,” she whispered. “It is true. Miss Bingley is your soulmatch.” She looked up at him with wide eyes. “All of that time—I thought you were avoiding her. That you disliked her. And now . . . I suppose you were hiding your affection all along?”

He shrugged, unwilling to confess the truth. With Miss Bingley’s soulmark genuine, he would have to marry her. What good would it do to confess how little he esteemed her?

“You will have to seal it,” Mother said, and Darcy’s heart sank into his stomach. He had forgotten.

But Miss Bingley had not. Once the entire party, now enlarged with the presence of Lord and Lady Matlock and his cousin Lord Merton, had moved to the drawing room, it was time.

The very memory of it was unpleasant.

Darcy had reluctantly taken Miss Bingley into his arms and kissed her gently on the lips. The expected dramatic . . . something was completely underwhelming. At most, he felt a little dizzy with shock and somehow distant from himself, as if he were watching the events from a distance. Was this mild feeling of oddness what people were talking about when they described the wonders of the sealing kiss?

Miss Bingley had sighed with delight. “I have never imagined such a thing in my life!” she had rhapsodised. “It was as if bright lights were spinning and sparkling all about me! Suddenly, it was as if something that had always been missing simply dropped into place, and everything is now whole. Oh, Mr. Darcy.” She had simpered at him. “May I call you Fitzwilliam?”

He had swallowed. “Uh. I would prefer Mr. Darcy until our wedding. Or . . . Darcy, I suppose.”

Father, with his usual industrious attitude, immediately sat down to send a note to the bishop. Since soulmark marriages were required to be overseen by a bishop or archbishop to give the church’s special blessing, arrangements took time.

“Father,” Darcy said, finally finding his voice. “I would like to wait before setting a date for the wedding.”

At the surprised looks from all of his relatives, he racked his brain to find an excuse. “Bingley—Bingley had invited me to visit his new estate in Meryton. Miss Bingley will be there, and we have already sealed the match, so the delay will not risk soul weakening. And I would like to keep my visit as planned before . . . before the wedding.”

Father had been surprised but agreed nonetheless. And while Miss Bingley and her sister had been displeased, learning that he would accompany them to Hertfordshire mitigated their disappointment.

And thus the cage door had slammed around Darcy with the finality of a dungeon, the keys handed to a woman he had never admired, turning a mild dislike into loathing. The wedding now loomed ever closer, and the cage bars had only thickened.

It was now two months since that day, and he was no closer to being reconciled to his life with Caroline Bingley than he had been in that first dreaded moment.

He shook his head as Miss Bennet exclaimed in shock. “Counterfeited! I cannot imagine anyone would do such a thing.”

Miss Bingley raised her eyebrow as she looked from Miss Bennet to Miss Elizabeth. “Some people do not seem to know their place in society and are always grasping for more.” She smiled at Mr. Darcy. “For my part, I must say that I am relieved to be betrothed to such a perfect man as Mr. Darcy. I feel for you, Jane. In such a limited society as Meryton’s, you must be so lacking in opportunities to find a good husband! I beg you, do not latch onto the first man who comes your way. I am certain you will meet just the right man eventually. Perhaps even at your uncle’s house in London? He must visit with a good many wealthy tradesmen.”

Miss Elizabeth was listening with narrowed eyes. “Jane is not only beautiful, but she is also one of the finest people I know. Any man, whether from Meryton or beyond, would be lucky to call her his wife.”

Miss Bennet blushed. “Lizzy!”

“It is very true,” Bingley said. “You know, Darcy, I was always envious of your soulmark. I always thought I would have liked to have my life laid out for me as easy as all that. I am a rather simple man, you know. Not simple-minded, I hope, but enjoying the simple things in life. But now . . .” He smiled slightly at Miss Bennet before turning away. “Now I am thrilled to realise that I have the luxury of falling in love just as I will.”

“If only we all did,” Darcy muttered.

“What did you say?” Miss Elizabeth asked, a note of shock in her voice.

“Soulmarks,” Darcy said, avoiding Miss Bingley’s eyes. “The concept is . . . rather strange if one thinks about it. We know there is some connection between soulmarks and being good stewards of the land, but why are they connected to marriage? Do the soulmarked receive their marks because they are somehow ordained to fall in love? Or do they fall in love because they are soulmarked?”

Miss Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully. “I see. And how is it that people are soulmarked for someone they will likely meet during their lifetime? Or do they always meet that person? We know some people die of the soul weakening, but is it because they never met their mate, or because they somehow missed the signs and did not realise they had met them? Since they died of soul weakening without ever knowing, I suppose we, too, will never know.”

“Shall we have some music?” Miss Bingley said quickly. “Louisa, you will not mind my waking Mr. Hurst?”

Mrs. Hurst shook her head, but Darcy went on.

“It is a cruel process, I think. Knowing that because I received some odd marking when I was almost eight years old, I had to find a specific person to marry or I would die before I reach my fortieth birthday, and maybe much sooner.” He glanced towards his betrothed, suddenly realising how this all must sound to her. For all that he disliked her, he did not wish to hurt her.

“Of course, this is all speculation, as I did find my match.” He tried to smile at her, but he could feel its weakness.

“Do you not think it worth the risk, though? I have always dreamed of what it must be like to find my match. I have heard it described as coming home, or feeling as though you have found something you did not realise was missing.”

Darcy shook his head mutely as his betrothed began to play, but he would not dishonour her by continuing the conversation. Coming home? Finding a missing piece? No, it was more like being locked in a dank prison and being told it was his new home.

He returned to his chair and his letter, but his mind was not on Georgiana even as he held pen to paper.

If there was any day from the past that he could go back and obliterate, it would be that one. If only the conversation had not led in that direction, if Mrs. Hurst had never revealed her sister’s soulmark, he—

He would have died in the end. The soul weakening could come on any time after the mid-twenties or so, and sometimes its pace was slow, but it always killed in the end. And he had heard a theory that soulmatches who spent time near each other without sealing their match weakened much faster. He and Miss Bingley had seen each other a number of times over the past two years—they were already at risk.

He could not want that, not really. To die and leave his parents and Georgiana alone? Georgiana would be prey to more fortune hunters than Wickham, all wanting Pemberley, and she would be in a far more precarious position. What if her soulmatch was not prepared to care for Pemberley and all its dependants? What if she did not find her match and died from soul weakening herself?

“Do you write to Georgiana again?” Miss Bingley asked.

He jerked, flinging several drops of ink into the air, when he realised just how close she was leaning over him. He had not even noticed that she had finished her song.

Now his letter would look as blotted as one of Bingley’s, and Georgiana was sure to tease him about Bingley’s influence.

“Yes,” he said, shifting the inkwell before it, too, could fall victim to Miss Bingley’s cloying ways.

“I have never met a better brother than you,” she said. “Always writing to dear Georgiana.” She quickly turned towards Bingley, but he did not know if she was embarrassed to realise she had insulted her own brother, or if she was hoping that he had taken note of Darcy’s attention to his sister.

Thankfully this particular letter did not hold any secrets; he had only managed a few sentences during his time downstairs. Miss Bingley was reading it with interest.

He stretched his aching fingers and wrists. They were rather sore, considering that he had not written much yet. Trying to write, pen poised over the paper, was apparently just as strenuous as actually writing.

“I do hope we will return to London soon.” Miss Bingley observed the others in the room, her inspection focused on Bingley and Miss Bennet. “I think it would be the best for all of us. I particularly long to see your sister and parents again, and of course I should begin to plan our wedding!”

He stifled a groan. Their wedding. Mother had tentatively asked again about a date before he left for Netherfield, and he had put her off. Setting a date would make it final somehow. He had not dared reveal just how much he disliked Miss Bingley to his parents. They assumed, naturally, that he had been secretly in love with her for years. They were even trying to like her for his sake, although he knew they had never cared for her.

And Georgiana. That was the worst of it. Georgiana had always looked up to Miss Bingley, admiring her fashion sense and her confidence. He had kept them apart as much as he could, as he had no desire for his sister to turn into a Miss Bingley, or even a Lady Catherine—his aunt had a firm sense of her own status and position in the world. He did not envy his parents for having the job of telling Lady Catherine that he was engaged to a tradesman’s daughter.

But once they married, keeping Georgiana and Miss Bingley apart would be impossible unless he avoided his own sister as much as possible.

After Georgiana’s stumble this summer, he did not dare make things worse by exposing her to Miss Bingley’s constant compliments and effusions.

But how long did he dare put off the wedding?

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On what she desperately hoped would be her last full day at Netherfield, Elizabeth found herself in the room she always sought when she was disappointed—the library.

She had spoken with Jane about returning home, and Jane had conceded that it was time. She had asked Mr. Bingley if they might borrow the carriage, but he had protested their leaving so soon and begged them to stay for another day, and so of course, Jane had conceded.

They had been so close to going home! But at least it had been agreed upon that they would return home after services tomorrow, so there was only one day left. And now that Jane was almost well, there was no reason she could not read in the library and enjoy the peace and quiet for a quarter or half an hour.

Alas, she slipped into the library to discover she was not the only one who wished to spend a quiet afternoon reading.

Mr. Bingley’s library was one of the smallest she had ever seen. In fact, there might be more books on the table in her bedchamber at home than in his entire library. The space was respectable, with many shelves and comfortable chairs for reading, it was just . . . bereft of books.

“I believe the previous owners took their collection with them,” Mr. Darcy offered from his chair. “It will take Bingley a long time to build up a collection to fill this space, I would imagine.”

She nodded and began to examine the titles of the books. Considering how few there were, it made no sense that so many of them should have been shelved well above her head. If the owners had intended to make the books appear more numerous by spreading them out, they had failed miserably.

Pamela was visible on a shelf particularly high up. She frowned. Of all the books she had seen so far, it was probably the most interesting, along with having the added inducement of being a book her father owned, so that she could find her place in it and continue reading after her return to Longbourn.

She half turned to ask Mr. Darcy if he might reach it down for her, but she almost stumbled into an arm reaching up over her head. Mr. Darcy had anticipated her.

“Thank you,” she said as he lowered the book into her arms. “It is a puzzle why so many books are put out of reach, considering the size of the room.”

“Perhaps they had a great many small and curious children.”

Elizabeth laughed. To think that Mr. Darcy had a sense of humour!

And yet when she turned to look at him, his face was sober. If it were not for the smallest possible quirk to his mouth, she might have thought herself entirely mistaken.

“You must be impressive at cards,” Elizabeth said without thinking about it.

This time, a smile broke over his face. “Why is that, Miss Elizabeth?”

“You have a talent for hiding your emotions. Much like my sister Jane, in fact.”

Mr. Darcy sat in his chair and picked up his book again, but he did not open it.

“Do you ever envy your sister?”

Elizabeth blinked in surprise. For Jane’s beauty? It was true that there were moments when . . . but it did not do to dwell on it. Elizabeth knew well that she was widely considered to be beautiful, too, if second to Jane. That was well enough for her. But still, how did Mr. Darcy dare ask such a thing?”

“Since she does not have a soulmark, I mean?” he clarified after a moment of silence.

Somehow, that was even odder than what she had first thought he was asking.

“No,” Elizabeth said quickly, and then she considered. No, it was still true. “Why should I? It means that there is someone out there destined for me. How many people have that reassurance?”

“But she has the freedom to choose whom she will, according to her own preferences. Is that not something to be envied?”

Elizabeth shook her head slowly. “But soulmarks are supposed to match people who are entirely compatible. I have never heard of a bad soulmatch.”

Mr. Darcy was silent, and after a minute or two, he returned to his book.

Elizabeth was left wondering. Why would Mr. Darcy be so disapproving of soulmarks when he had a soulmatch? From everything she had ever heard, he should be happy and satisfied.

Was it possible that, for once, a soulmatch was wrong?

# CHAPTER 5

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T

he worst part of Mr. Collins’s arrival was realising that he was related to her.

Elizabeth and Jane had returned home at last, and Elizabeth had breathed a deep sigh of relief. Oh, to be home again.

Her relief had lasted for exactly one day, until her father’s announcement of the imminent visit by their cousin, Mr. Collins, who would inherit Longbourn after Papa’s death.

Mamma was not pleased.

“My venerable patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, always recommends peace and civility between family members. Why, the number of feuding relatives she has reunited is remarkable. It was she, in fact, who recommended that I come here to Longbourn. ‘Mr. Collins,’ said she, ‘I cannot tolerate discord between family members. You must go to Hertfordshire and make amends. There, you shall find a—’”

He sneezed wetly and fumbled in his pocket for a handkerchief. He pulled it out at last, a wrinkled, damp thing he used to wipe his nose. Before he could replace it in his pocket, he sneezed again.

“Forgive me,” he managed between sneezes, “but do you happen to have a cat in the house?”

“Certainly not,” said Mamma primly.

“Cook may keep one to hunt for mice in the larder,” Lydia offered. “Shall I ask her?”

“Please do. I cannot abide cats. They make me sneeze terribly. Forgi—achoo!”

Lydia hurried downstairs, but the frown did not leave Mr. Collins’s face. He looked around the room.

“Are you certain there is no cat in here?” He sneezed again. “I have not had such a reaction since the last time I was in the room with a cat.” He sneezed and turned the handkerchief in his hand, looking for a dry spot.

“I would know if we had a cat,” Mamma said, looking affronted.

Elizabeth shared a smile with her father.

To their amazement, Mr. Collins stood up and began to walk around the room, peering into corners. He sneezed again, twice.

“Mr. Collins!” Mamma stood up as well, hands on her hips. “I do not know what sort of things they get up to in . . . in . . . Kent, was it? But in Hertfordshire, it is certainly not appropriate to investigate a room for cats once the hostess has assured you that there is not, in fact, such a thing in this house.”

“I do apologise, madam.” Mr. Collins was very red as he retook his seat. “I had not meant to offend. It simply shocked me that I should feel such a powerful reaction when there is no cat about.”

Mary handed him a spare handkerchief, which he received gratefully.

Lydia appeared at the entrance to the drawing room, a look of amusement on her face. “Cook says she does not have one, but should we find one that is a good mouser, she would be happy to have it.”

Mr. Collins rubbed his nose, looking miserable.

“Perhaps after Mr. Collins has returned to his parish,” Papa said.

“Ah, yes.” Mr. Collins did not bother to tuck away the handkerchief this time but kept it on his lap. “Lady Catherine was very displeased to hear about the entailment of Longbourn. ‘For your sake, I am glad of it, Mr. Collins, but otherwise I have no tolerance for families who entail their estates away upon the male line. It leaves the ladies in a very precarious position, and I do not approve at all. Thankfully Rosings Park is not entailed.’ Rosings Park, you see, is the—” He held the handkerchief quite close to his face and breathed deeply a few times before it became clear the sneeze was not coming. “Estate of Lady—” This time, he sneezed before the handkerchief could reach his face. He rubbed his nose again. “Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” he finally finished.

“She sounds like a very reasonable woman,” Mamma said.

Elizabeth blinked. Mr. Collins was looking at Jane. No, not just looking. He eyed her as if she were some sort of delectable morsel tempting him from a plate.

Disgusting. She looked to Papa to see if he noticed, but he had opened a book on his lap and was sneaking looks at it while he nodded to the continuing conversation between Mamma and Mr. Collins.

Mamma and Mr. Collins were speaking in low voices now. That was suspicious. Mamma never spoke in a low voice.

Elizabeth leaned forward to listen, but she could only gather bits and pieces. “Mr. Bingley” and “Netherfield Park” were mentioned several times as Mr. Collins’s frown deepened.

Mr. Collins shook his head firmly and stood, moving to a new seat—this one next to Jane.

“Miss Bennet,” he said, giving her a disturbingly bright smile. He opened his mouth again, but he seemed at a loss for a moment before continuing. “Tell me, what accomplishments do you have? For I understand from my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, that it is typical of young ladies to spend their days practising their music, drawing, embroidery, and languages in order to better please the men who might choose them in marriage.”

Elizabeth clamped her lips shut before she said something that would insult her father’s heir, and she turned towards her father imploringly. Surely he would not let this continue.

“Her own daughter,” the indefatigable clergyman continued, “is unfortunately of a delicate constitution and unable to engage in such activities, but I am assured that with her family background, she would be impressive if she had been able to learn.”

“Is Lady Catherine talented, then?” Elizabeth broke in before he could address poor Jane again.

“She is, she is! She has often assured me she would have been a prodigy, if she had been taught.”

Elizabeth mulled over that bit of nonsense and almost missed Mr. Collins leaning towards Jane again. His look might have been meant to be seductive, but his reddened, dripping nose rather spoiled the effect. “So tell me, fair cousin, which accomplishments have you perfected? Do you play the pianoforte? Or the harp? Or perhaps your talents lie in drawing or painting?”

“I . . . I embroider,” Jane offered tentatively. “And I work in the stillroom.”

“Excellent!” Mr. Collins exclaimed. “That is even better than I could have hoped for. A clergyman’s wife is often called upon to console and aid women and children with those little ailments that are too small to trouble the apothecary for.”

“Mary is very talented in the stillroom as well!” Mamma cried anxiously, lying through her teeth. She looked from Mr. Collins to Jane.

“All of us have learned the basic remedies.” Elizabeth nodded towards Kitty and Lydia. “In fact, I would daresay that most of the girls in Meryton have done. Our friends the Lucases teach all of their daughters. Any gentleman, after all, could benefit from a wife who knows household remedies.”

Papa gave a little chuckle from behind his book, but even at Elizabeth’s glance, he did not look up.

And so continued the most tedious evening of Elizabeth’s life. Mr. Collins was determined to find out that Jane was the perfect wife for him—it seemed that Mr. Bingley’s prior interest and greater prospects meant nothing to him—and deterring him took the surprising partnership of Elizabeth and Mamma. Of course, Mamma meant to divert his attention to Mary, while Elizabeth did not think he deserved any Bennet sister at all.

Mr. Collins’s sniffling and sneezing improved a little over the course of the evening, leaving him to announce graciously that perhaps he had passed a cat without noticing on his way to the house. He still regularly stopped to rub his nose with his increasingly damp collection of handkerchiefs—including several newly embroidered ones he had found in a drawer and rubbed his moist hands on before anyone could exclaim—but at least every sentence was no longer punctuated by a sneeze.

The best part of the evening was the moment Elizabeth and her sisters could finally escape upstairs to bed. She was desperate to talk to Jane, to warn her about the look she had seen on Mr. Collins’s face. It could have escaped no one that Mr. Collins meant to marry Jane, but his unwillingness to accept discouragement did not speak well of him and was seriously concerning. If only Papa would intervene!

But something made her go into her room before progressing to Jane’s. And there, on her bed, was a cat.

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Miss Bingley leapt to her feet when Darcy entered the room in an unintentional parody of the civility men offered to ladies when they stood for them.

“Mr. Darcy!” she trilled. “Please, do come join Louisa and me. We were just discussing how pleasant it is to have one’s house to oneself again.”

Darcy grimaced at her inadvertent insult, but he could not think of an excuse and thus took a seat next to his betrothed. His eye fixed on the painting on the wall behind her.

Netherfield Park had come with several paintings already in place, but the lease had allowed for the Bingleys to add or remove the paintings if they had others they preferred, as long as the owners’ paintings were removed and stored carefully.

He had no objection to the idea in general, but he wished she had not chosen that particular painting to display.

Even worse, she caught him looking at it.

“Oh, do you like this landscape?” she asked. “It is one of Mr. Wickham’s, you know. He was reluctant to part with it, but I have always favoured it, and he finally relented. Such a kind gesture.”

Darcy nodded and forcibly withdrew his gaze, dropping it to where Mrs. Hurst fiddled with her bracelets.

It was not the subject of the painting that was an irritation, for all that it was an idealised version of Pemberley—well, that did grate on him a little, too—but anything painted by Wickham would chafe at his nerves these days.

After all, it had been painting through which he had touched Georgiana’s tender young heart.

During her visit to Ramsgate over the summer, Wickham had wooed her with his art. She had travelled with Mother’s chaperonage, of course, and both Darcy and his father had spent some of the summer there. But Wickham had somehow managed to excuse himself, as he always did, to spend the entire summer at her side. He had claimed that the beach was the ideal location for painting, and Father had gone along with it as usual.

Georgiana had not the talent that Wickham had at painting, but she did have an artistic soul, and of course drawing and painting were necessary accomplishments for a young lady. So she had spent hours under his tutelage and bonded with him over their shared love of art—even if her inclination tended more towards music than painting.

Painting lessons had progressed to promenades through the town and outings to the beach, Georgiana continuing to innocently think of him as a trusted friend. Even Mother had not realised just how much time the two had been spending together.

When he had declared his love, she had been flattered but unable to return his interest since she was soulmarked. His fury at the discovery had led her to flee and tell Mother.

Thank goodness for her soulmark. If she had not been destined for another mate, Darcy had no doubt that Wickham would have wooed her into marriage, either through an elopement or by getting her with child.

The existence of Georgiana’s soulmark was now widely known. After his engagement to Miss Bingley, the Bingleys had been told. Darcy was not in the least surprised when the news spread through the ton, given Miss Bingley’s predilection for gossip. He did not entirely regret it, though, as the knowledge should keep away at least some greedy potential suitors. If Wickham had known, would he have left Georgiana alone? Or would he have come up with some other scheme?

Darcy had tried to tell his father many times over the years about Wickham’s dissipation, but Father had always forgiven Wickham’s “youthful indiscretions” and claimed he would settle down in time. Wickham’s attempt to seduce Georgiana right under her father’s nose—while she was fifteen and not yet out—was the straw that finally, finally broke the camel’s back and allowed Father to see what Wickham had become.

Darcy could not blame Georgiana. She was young, she had been flattered, and she had trusted Wickham because her father had always trusted him. Admittedly, she should not have spent so much time alone with him, even if he was a family friend. But in Darcy’s view, it simply demonstrated why parents should have explicit conversations with their daughters about what was appropriate and what was not during courtship, instead of hiding everything and expecting young ladies to know right from wrong without explanation.

Miss Bingley knew Father was no longer sponsoring Wickham but not why. No doubt Wickham had spun her some tale of woe about how Father did not consider art sufficiently practical or some such rot. They had considered it safer not to hint towards any actual dispute between the Darcys and Wickham.

Miss Bingley and Wickham had been friends for years, which said something about Wickham’s ability to please and charm, considering that Miss Bingley was usually eager to befriend only with those she considered worthy stepping stones on the social ladder.

As they could not risk Miss Bingley getting even a hint of Georgiana’s near scandal this summer, there was no way to warn her away from Wickham, not after their long friendship. And there was no way for Darcy to hint to Miss Bingley that a painting of Wickham’s—of Pemberley, no less—should not grace her drawing room.

Miss Bingley, dissatisfied with his lack of response, had begun a conversation with her sister, but he could listen with only half an ear.

One of his greatest fears about his marriage with Miss Bingley was Georgiana. He worried that Miss Bingley would befriend Georgiana to the point where his sister might confide in his wife about George Wickham’s attempted seduction.

Even though Georgiana had never considered marrying him—her soulmark forbade it even if she had believed herself to be in love, which she had not—the gossip would be relentless and damaging if it got out. Georgiana’s soulmatch would be forced to marry her regardless, if she could find him, but it might damage his opinion of her before they even met, and it would certainly give him an advantage in the marriage negotiations. She would find it difficult to take her place in society and might be publicly humiliated.

He could warn Georgiana not to tell Miss Bingley. But Georgiana was young, and it would be a challenge to make her understand without worrying her by confessing his lack of feelings for his soulmatch. And the secret would have to be kept for many years—would Georgiana be able to avoid letting anything slip when on such intimate terms with Miss Bingley?

Darcy would do a great deal to avoid his sister’s ruin. And Miss Bingley would know it. He knew the kind of woman she was—she would not hesitate to remind him of her power over him and Georgiana every time she wished for a new bauble or carriage or to force him to stay in London or go to every ball or . . . well, anything.

The only way to survive marriage to Miss Bingley was on equal ground, not owing or allowing her anything that could be used against him. Which also meant that he had better shake this slight infatuation with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and quickly.

He flushed with shame at the thought. He had dreamed of her last night—dreamed of one woman while engaged to another. What did it say of him that he could do such a thing? That even a soulmark had no power over him to warm his heart to Miss Bingley? What was wrong with him? Father had always impressed upon him the importance of faithfulness and honour. He liked to think he was a man of character, but he had not realised just how shaky the foundation was.

It was said that those with soulmarks were honourable and trustworthy—that they did not just have an affinity for the land, but the ability and integrity to do the best for it. Having a soulmark was an honour. It pained him to think that . . . maybe he had been chosen wrongly.

He was beginning to suspect that his soulmark would ultimately lead to his destruction—one way or another.

# CHAPTER 6

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E

lizabeth stopped in the doorway. This was her room, was it not? She had the odd urge to back out into the passage and count doorways. But that was certainly her coverlet, her books left on the small table, her things strewn about the room.

But that was not her cat.

Thankful that cats did not make her sneeze, she took a few tentative steps into the room to get a better look.

He was a beautiful cat, calico with bold spots and splashes of black, caramel, and white. His face was beautiful, but he was one of the fattest cats she had ever seen.

Or was he?

Elizabeth leaned over the bed to get a better look. No, she was not fat. She was pregnant.

The cat half opened one eye, glared at Elizabeth, then rolled farther onto her side to continue her nap.

A laugh bubbled up, and Elizabeth hurried back out of the room and next door to Jane’s just as she had intended.

“Jane!” she whispered as she stepped into the room. “There is a cat.”

To her surprise, Lydia and Kitty were sitting on the bed, and all looked up as she entered.

“A cat?” Lydia asked, launching to her feet. “Where?”

“On my bed.”

Kitty giggled as all three girls followed Elizabeth back towards her bedchamber. Just as Elizabeth went to open the door, another door popped open and Mary poked her head out.

“What is happening?” she asked.

“Come on,” Kitty said, grabbing her arm. “Come and see!”

They all gathered around the cat on the bed.

“She is going to have kittens!” Lydia breathed. “Oh, how delightful!”

“Not on my bed!” Elizabeth stepped forward and stroked the cat. “Do you think she came indoors to have them?”

Kitty dropped onto the chair, staring awestruck at the cat.

“I do not think she is having them now,” Jane said. “She is sleeping soundly. I am surprised she has not awakened with all the noise.”

“She is as lazy as Lydia is in the morning.” Kitty poked her sister. “Lazy cat!”

The cat opened both eyes this time and stretched, taking in the roomful of girls in a glance. Then she yawned, showing a mouth full of sharp little teeth before curling back up into a ball—at least, as much of a ball as a cat of such impressive girth could manage—and going back to sleep.

“What shall we do with her? It seems cruel to put her out when she might have kittens any day.” Elizabeth cocked her head, considering the dilemma.

“Did Lydia not say that Cook would take a cat?”

“A good mouser,” Lydia said. “She can hardly catch mice in her condition, and her kittens will not be able to for some time. Besides, she is lazy!”

“Maybe she is only lazy because she is having kittens.”

“I think we should keep her a secret,” Mary said softly. “Mamma would not like being proven wrong about the cat. She could stay here, could she not? She is not in the room with Mr. Collins.”

“Mr. Collins!” Jane said. “Oh, we cannot keep a cat with Mr. Collins in the house.”

Lydia made a face and sat on the bed close to the cat. “Why not? It is not as if anybody wants him here. You heard his letter—he did not even wait for a proper invitation from Papa. He invited himself! We cannot be held responsible for having pets that make him sneeze when he arrives without warning.”

It was hardly Mr. Collins’s fault that the rest of them had had no warning when Papa had known for a fortnight, but the point was reasonable.

“Very well. I think—”

The door burst open, and Mamma appeared in the doorway. Lydia quickly shifted on the bed to block Mamma’s view of the cat.

“Girls!” Mamma’s brow furrowed at the sight of all of them together. “What are you all doing here? What is the commotion?”

“We were . . . discussing Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth said quickly, before Lydia could try to help by suggesting something outlandish.

“Oh, good,” Mamma said, waving at Kitty to get up from the chair before dropping onto it heavily. “One day, girls, you will know what it feels like to grow old and have tired knees at the end of the day.” She settled herself into the chair. “Now, I must talk to all of you. Mr. Collins is here for a wife.”

“Surely he has not come for such a purpose!” Jane said, shocked.

“He has, Jane, and he wants you,” Lydia said. “It is why Kitty and I came to warn you. He was looking at you in the most forward manner!”

“I tried to speak to him about that.” Mamma sighed heavily. “I told him all about Mr. Bingley.” Jane blushed. “But it seems he thinks rather well of himself and his prospects.”

“His early preferment from Lady Catherine de Bourgh does seem to have affected his humility,” Mary added.

Lydia giggled. “Clearly he has not looked in a mirror.”

“Lydia!”

Mamma shook her head. “Well, I will try to speak to your father again, but he finds it all excessively diverting.”

Kitty’s eyes went wide suddenly. “What if he has a soulmark? He might think Jane does, too, as the oldest.” Her eyes went to Elizabeth.

Lydia gasped, then both girls dissolved into giggles.

“He is not a match for mine,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I have not felt any sort of pull towards him, thank goodness.”

“Is that how it works?” Mary asked with a frown.

“Well, there must be some level of connection.” At least Elizabeth hoped so. There had to be some reason two people shared the same mark, and why soulmatches were notoriously good matches. “And he would hardly feel a pull towards Jane when she has none.”

“I have already explained to him that Jane is for Mr. Bingley, and Elizabeth has a soulmark,” Mamma said firmly. “So you will marry him, Mary.”

Mary gaped. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Mamma,” Elizabeth said. “You know I will marry. I must, with my soulmark. And he will almost certainly be a landowner.” Of course, there was a slight possibility that he might be a tenant farmer or steward, but that was not helpful to mention at the moment. “And if Jane marries Mr. Bingley, you will have two daughters married who can most likely take care of the others—and you. Mary does not need to marry Mr. Collins.”

Mamma looked from Mary, whose chin trembled as she met her mother’s eyes, to Elizabeth.

“No,” she said slowly. “Perhaps . . . perhaps not. But Mary, you might come to love him. You could try, could you not?”

Mary looked down at the floor. “I will try, Mamma.”

Elizabeth shuddered at the thought of Mr. Collins as a brother. But Mary was too clever to fall in love with such a man, surely.

“Please do not make her, if she cannot.” Jane put a hand on Mamma’s. “Please.”

“Very well.” Mamma stood up and brushed down her skirts. “Good night, girls.”

Elizabeth jumped up to close the door behind her, and Lydia fell backwards onto the bed with a laugh, careful not to squash the cat. “She did not guess at all! And this cat did not move. She is the laziest cat I have ever heard of!”

“Is she still alive?” Kitty asked, leaning over to see.

“Certainly. I can feel her breathing.” Lydia stroked the cat lightly.

As if she heard them, the cat yawned again without opening her eyes, stretched out her front paws, then finally opened her eyes and stood. Her tail flicked as she looked up at Kitty, then at the wall behind her.

“She gave you the cut direct!” Lydia squealed. “We should give her some imperious name. Like Queen Charlotte!”

“Lydia!” Jane admonished.

“No,” Lydia said, laughing, “I know! Lady Catherine de Bourgh!”

All five, including Jane, burst into giggles at that.

“Well, she is a lady cat,” Mary said. “Lady Cat would suit her well, and nobody would need to know her full name.”

Even Jane could not help smiling.

“Lady Cat, then,” Elizabeth said. “Now, the rest of you had better get off to your beds before Mamma comes in again!”

“Oh, but Lizzy, can I take her to my room? Please?” Lydia turned to Elizabeth with large, wheedling eyes.

“I think she likes it here,” Elizabeth said as Lady Cat settled herself back down.

“Fine.” Lydia threw herself backwards on the bed, landing almost on a pillow. “Then I shall sleep here tonight, and we can share her.”

The nights were getting colder, and it was the season where Jane and Elizabeth often shared a bed for warmth. “Very well. But no kicking.”

“I would not dare! Lady Cat has claws.” Lydia smiled sleepily as she reached out an arm to pet the cat.

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Little did Miss Bingley know that Darcy would have much preferred her punctuality to the perfection of her riding costume. She arrived at the stables expecting to be admired, but Darcy’s exasperation with her tardiness only left him seething with irritation as they finally rode towards Meryton with Bingley.

It was not as if they had any specific appointment to keep, but Darcy hated to stand about in the stables for no reason. He cared less when she was late for dinner, as he inevitably read a book he kept nearby for just that reason. But the stables were notably lacking.

When they married, he would have to keep a book in every room at Pemberley—including the stables—so that he would not be annoyed at her delays due to preening.

Bingley was just as impatient as Darcy, but Darcy did not dare start a conversation with him. If he had to hear another word about Bingley’s “angel” or how sweet and kind and amusing Miss Bennet was, he would leave both brother and sister to ride alone into the village.

Darcy was so aggrieved at the long wait that he mounted quickly once Miss Bingley arrived—too quickly. He was a little stiff from the long wait, and he failed to get his leg over in time, almost losing his grip. Embarrassingly, he had to have the groom continue to hold his stallion while he made a second, more successful attempt to mount and tried to keep from blaming Miss Bingley for his own impatience.

Miss Bingley kept up a steady conversation during their ride to Meryton, but Darcy, grateful that her comments never seemed to require much of a response, rode mutely at Bingley’s side. There was not much to see in Meryton, and he would have preferred to make the visit without Miss Bingley along, but at least the ride provided a little novelty.

To his surprise—although he supposed it should not have been, given that they apparently walked into Meryton regularly—the Bennet sisters were already in Meryton. The five young ladies were standing with an unfamiliar man.

The man was standing rather close to Miss Elizabeth. Darcy’s eyes narrowed. What relation was he to Miss Elizabeth? A suitor? An old friend? A relative?

“Good afternoon!” Bingley called down to the group, dismounting and striding over. “Miss Bennet, it is good to see you out walking! Are you completely recovered from your cold?”

“Yes, sir,” Miss Bennet said shyly.

Darcy waited impatiently while they shared niceties until finally, Miss Bennet turned to introduce the young man. “Mr. Bingley, this is our cousin, Mr. Collins, visiting from Kent.”

A cousin. Darcy felt a moment’s relief until he remembered something. Had he not heard something about Mr. Bennet’s estate being entailed upon a cousin? Was that this cousin?

If so, had he come to marry a Bennet sister? It was a logical course of action.

But Miss Elizabeth was soulmarked. She could not marry her cousin.

Unless her soulmark matched his.

A pang of something hit Darcy hard, and for a moment, he found it hard to breathe. It was as if something had been dangling just out of reach and he had been working his way up to jumping for it—and now it was yanked away impossibly high.

Despite his distraction, he felt eyes on him. He turned to see Miss Bingley staring at him, her eyes burning. Her expression was unreadable, but her jaw was tight.

“Darcy!”

He jerked in his saddle, and his horse sidestepped for a moment before he regained control.

His cousin Richard, of all people, was riding into the square.

# CHAPTER 7

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“Y

our parents are worried about you,” Richard said. “And frankly, so am I. You found your soulmatch in August, and yet you have not married nor even set a date. Most soulmatches are eager to wed the moment they discover their mate. Even Bingley has noticed something odd, and I do not think he would notice that his boots had been stolen off his feet and put on the dog until he stepped into a puddle. He invited me here to tease you into a good humour, you know. At least he thinks I am good company.”

“If you are willing to trade your entire brandy supply for the privilege,” Darcy said darkly, and Richard laughed.

Darcy stalked to the window, wishing they could have this conversation in the billiards room where at least he would have something to do with his hands. But he did not dare speak freely anywhere they might be overheard, so they were hiding in Darcy’s bedchamber.

“When you and Lady Cecily . . .” He swallowed. He had seen the two of them as they arrived at Bingley’s house. Richard had ridden while his wife, Lady Cecily, had stayed in the carriage—only because of her condition, as otherwise she loved to ride as much as Richard. When he handed her down from her carriage, though, they exchanged such a look of love that Darcy had felt compelled to look away.

“When we discovered our soulmarks?” Richard supplied.

Darcy nodded. “You already liked each other, I believe?”

Richard leaned back on Darcy’s chair thoughtfully. “Yes. It was not love at first sight or anything that dramatic. I do remember empathising with her—between her mother and Lady Catherine, someone was always speaking of what a disappointment she was compared to her sister. But I do not think my interest was piqued until I saw her ride one afternoon. We started meeting accidentally at the stables, as both of us preferred to be with our horses more than people, and eventually our meetings became intentional. And then . . . I do not know how it came up, but I believe she mentioned her soulmark. And that was the moment when—well, when I realised she was describing the same mark I bear, an indescribable joy flooded me. It was confirmation of what I wanted but did not think possible.”

Darcy’s jaw was clenched so hard that his teeth ached, but he could not make himself release it. He breathed slowly, carefully, seeing nothing through the dark window.

“Darcy,” Richard said softly, “was it not the same for you?”

Darcy pressed a fist against his mouth for a moment before he spun around. He had to tell someone. He did not dare tell Bingley. Miss Bingley was his sister! And how could he disappoint his parents?

“I dislike her,” he said, so gruffly that he was not sure Richard could make out the words. “I have always disliked her. And now . . . now I find myself feeling an irrational hatred towards her. I do not want to marry her, and I wish I had never found out about her soulmark! If it were not for Pemberley and my family and my responsibilities, I would rather die from the soul weakening than marry her!” He slammed the side of his fist against the wall hard enough to hurt.

Richard dropped the chair flat. “Darcy.”

“I know!” Darcy spun back around and went back to his window. “I know. I cannot. I will not. But what is wrong with me? It is clear that Miss Bingley feels all the longings of the soulmark. She constantly wants to speak with me, flirt with me, and I—what is wrong with me?”

“Is there any chance that the match is wrong? Perhaps her soulmark is merely similar—”

“Both my mother and your mother checked it themselves.” Darcy could hear the bitterness in his laugh. “Believe me, it was the first thing I thought of. They each looked at it separately but confirmed it. Mother even tried wetting it to see if it would smear like ink, and your mother tried rubbing it with alcohol! Besides, how could Miss Bingley have seen mine? You know I never even swim without my shirt on to prevent it from being seen.”

“Well.” Richard considered. “I cannot say the shirt helps much when it is wet.”

“Still, it is not as if she would have seen me with a wet shirt.”

“Bingley might have.”

“Bingley would never tell his sister. Besides, her soulmark is an exact match of mine. Can you imagine Bingley trying to describe it? ‘A flower of some sort. Petals? Oh, I could not say. Six or seven? No, more, perhaps. Or fewer. Round? Sharp? I had not given it a thought.’”

Richard laughed. “Well, that much is true. Still. There must be something wrong. Perhaps we should ask the vicar?”

Darcy took a deep breath. He had to tell Richard the whole.

“If anything, I feel a greater connection to . . . another woman than I do to Miss Bingley.” Darcy already felt a squirming deep in his stomach when he thought about it. He was engaged. Engaged to be married—as soon as he could bring himself to set the date. He was not a free man.

From the time he was young, his father had taught him about faith and faithfulness. Faithfulness to God, to his family, to the people of Pemberley . . . and to his wife. “Being faithful means not allowing yourself to be distracted from your responsibilities or to turn away when things get hard. Even a soulmatch does not magically absolve you of active faithfulness,” Father had said. “You will still have to work at your relationship, to love even when you disagree, to forgive even when you are angry.” How Father and Mother would be ashamed if they knew that Darcy already felt unfaithful to his soulmatch—and he had not even married her yet! What did it say about his character, about his integrity, that he cared so little about his greatest responsibility?

Richard winced. “I have to tell you, Darcy, when you decide to break the usual rules, you do it with abandon. This other woman—is it serious?”

As much as Darcy hated to admit it, it was not and never could be. “No. She is soulmarked to another. It is merely . . . a passing inclination. But it is odd, is it not, that I should feel more there than I do for my soulmatch?” His insides roiled at the lie. He felt more than a passing inclination for Miss Elizabeth, but he did not dare tell Richard just how much. Did he even know himself? It was all tangled up in his thoughts about Miss Bingley.

Did he dare ask Richard . . .

“What did it feel like,” he asked slowly, “when you sealed the soulmatch? The kiss?”

“The kiss?” Richard shook his head. “It . . . it was indescribable. If it were anyone but you asking, I would probably leave it at that, but, for your sake, I will try to explain.” He closed his eyes and stroked his chin. “It was almost overwhelming. I could not see—for a moment it was as if I were back on the battlefield and some sort of artillery had gone off in front of my eyes. There was this blinding flash that almost . . . sparkled, you might say. Brightness and brilliant colour that settled into this feeling of . . . rightness. Comfort.”

He seemed to be avoiding Darcy’s gaze as he shrugged. “Well. As they say.” Suddenly, he stood up and walked towards the door. He pushed it, and it swung shut with a click.

“I could have sworn it was closed,” he said, turning to Darcy with a shrug. “Still, we cannot be too careful in this house.”

At least they could be reassured that there was not likely to be anyone in this part of the house now.

Richard’s description was much like Miss Bingley’s had been. Hers, then, had been much as expected. It was only Darcy for whom it had gone wrong. He had felt stunned and disoriented, but that was nothing on the scale of what Richard described.

The problem was all on Darcy’s side.

“I wish I knew what to tell you,” Richard said softly, his eyes on Darcy. “I think Cecily and I had best stay until you are ready to return with us.”

Darcy nodded curtly, but he was filled with a warmth of affection for his cousin. At least he would not fight this battle alone.

How he wished he had never come to Hertfordshire.

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The morning was blessedly free of Mr. Collins, but of course it could not last.

Mr. Collins’s entrance to the drawing room was preceded by a sneeze.

“Are you certain—” He cut himself off at a look from Mamma. Elizabeth and Lydia exchanged secret smiles, but a glance at Jane showed the guilt written on her face.

He rubbed his nose miserably. “Perhaps there is a cushion made from cat hair?”

“Not in my drawing room.” Mamma sniffed.

Elizabeth felt a yank on her arm and turned to see Lydia gesturing frantically. Following Lydia’s gaze, she saw Lady Cat slumbering peacefully in Kitty’s embroidery bag.

If Mr. Collins or Mamma looked in this direction . . .

The embroidery bag was near the edge of the sofa, though. Elizabeth was just able to reach it with her foot and nudge it until it was out of sight.

Lady Cat did not like her bag moving, though.

“Meow!” she cried.

Mr. Collins’s ears practically perked up. “What was that?”

Kitty coughed a few times, allowing her coughs to climb in pitch. “I apologise,” she said after a moment. “There is dust in the air, I think.”

“Kitty, do not keep coughing so!” Mamma exclaimed. “Have some compassion for my poor nerves.”

“Your nerves?” Mr. Collins’s face was reddening. “My own nerves are shattered. For a moment, I thought I heard a . . . a . . .” He drifted off. “Never mind.” After another sneeze and use of his handkerchief, he started again.

“I have to say, I have several times been invited to dine at Rosings Park, the home of my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Lydia let loose a giggle, which she quickly covered with a cough.

“And never,” Mr. Collins went on rather more loudly, “have I had call to sneeze in such a place. Perhaps you might consider speaking to your maids to see if they are doing their jobs dust—dust—ACHOO!” He buried his face in his handkerchief.

Mr. Hill stepped into the room to announce they had visitors—Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, and a Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Colonel Fitzwilliam turned out to be the man in regimentals they had glimpsed in Meryton. Lydia and Kitty had swooned over his red coat, but Elizabeth had mostly noticed Mr. Darcy’s surprised greeting before the party had left together. Now that she knew they were cousins, she could see a little family resemblance, although the colonel was light where Mr. Darcy was dark. The shape of their faces, though, was very similar, and they were both tall and broad-shouldered.

Elizabeth expected Mr. Darcy to take his usual stance near the window, but instead, he took the seat on the chair nearest her, leaving Miss Bingley looking with dismay at the seat next to Elizabeth’s mother.

Unfortunately, the seat he took also had a perfect view of the cat.

Perhaps he would not look down and notice her there. After all, a sleeping cat could easily blend in with the room around her.

But it was not to be. Mr. Darcy’s eyes locked onto the cat almost the moment he sat down. He smiled slightly and looked up at Elizabeth, but she held a finger to her lips quickly. An odd look came over his face when he saw her gesture, but he frowned and nodded.

Their exchange did not pass unnoticed. Miss Bingley’s eyes were narrowed on Elizabeth, who gave her most innocent look back.

“Mr. Darcy? Colonel Fitzwilliam?” Mr. Collins bounced off his seat and hurried towards the colonel. “I am right, I think, in assuming you are the nephews of my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh! Indeed I am sure I am!”

He then looked to Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was seated almost across from him. “You must allow me to—to—ACHOO!” He sneezed just as he was reaching forward to offer his hand to Colonel Fitzwilliam, unfortunately spraying the poor colonel in the process.

The colonel stood quickly, his face frozen in a look of disgust.

“Oh!” Mary said, jumping to her feet. “Please, sir, take my handkerchief!” She thrust it at him, and he wiped his face without looking at Mr. Collins.

“I do apologise!” Mr. Collins said, pulling out his own sodden handkerchief and trying to thrust it at the colonel’s face. “Please, allow me . . .”

He drew in a quick breath as if he was about to sneeze again, and the colonel quickly leaned backwards and away, almost smashing poor Mary in the process.

“Mr. Bingley!” Lydia said, speaking quickly before Mr. Collins could try anything else, “did you not promise us a ball? We are counting on you to keep your word, you know!”

Mr. Bingley, who had been staring horror-struck and helpless as Mr. Collins assaulted Colonel Fitzwilliam, brightened.

“Yes, I did!” he said. “And now that your sister is well, I have been contemplating the right date for the ball. I did think to have it next week, but there have been several difficulties with the house—the windows in the ballroom and that sort of thing—that I have had to delay it.”

Miss Bingley’s mouth grew tight at this, and Elizabeth wondered wryly if she had been hoping to have the ball earlier so that she could attempt to convince her brother to return to London afterwards. Now she would have to stay in Hertfordshire at least until after the ball. Elizabeth could not regret it for Jane’s sake, even if she did for her own.

Mr. Bingley’s smile was still bright as he addressed her sisters. “What say you to the second Tuesday in December?”

Lydia, Kitty, and Mamma squealed at the idea. Miss Bingley winced at the noise, and Elizabeth felt her cheeks grow warm. But Mr. Bingley was only smiling broadly back—no, not at Lydia, whom he had been addressing, but at Jane. And Jane was blushing and smiling back.

Elizabeth turned slightly to see Mr. Darcy. He seemed disapproving of the display, his brow furrowed a little, but he said nothing. And at least he had not mentioned Lady Cat.

Mr. Collins cleared his throat. “It is a pity, I must say, that I will be required to return to my parish in Hunsford before the date of your ball, Mr. Bingley. Otherwise, I would have been honoured to attend with my cousins. Attend, and even dance with them, for I have always thought that a ball given by a respectable gentleman such as yourself can have no evil tendencies. I could, of course, be excused from my duties at any time, as my curate is always eager to take up the responsibilities on Sundays. But I did tell Mr. Bennet that I was staying only through Saturday . . .” He looked beseechingly at Papa.

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped. The effrontery of the man! She tried to catch Papa’s eye to shake her head, but Papa was already answering him.

“That is too bad. But I am certain that returning to the side of your noble patroness will have its own rewards.”

Mamma was practically wriggling in her chair, and Elizabeth bit her lip as Mamma looked to Mary. “Oh, but Mary . . .”

“It must be rather tiresome to hold balls here,” Miss Bingley broke in. “Why, I have had to send to London for an endless number of things that are simply not found in the country at the quality I am accustomed to. However do you manage it?”

Mamma looked at her in surprise. “You will find that our tastes are often not as particular as those in London. As long as the music is good for dancing and there are candles and food enough, I find that most people are satisfied with the pleasant company and entertainments of dancing and cards.”

“The music! I could not find a single group in Hertfordshire worth listening to, I assure you. I had to send to London. I could not imagine hosting a ball with instruments so out of tune.”

Elizabeth appreciated the warning glance Mr. Bingley gave his sister. “Caroline,” he said with a laugh, “has always been particular in her tastes and, I daresay, would do anything to get her way. At least we are long past the years of tantrums and destroying my favourite tin soldiers or rocking horse!”

“Not unlike our dear Lydia,” Mary said darkly.

“I never destroyed any tin soldiers,” Lydia said with a grin. “How does one even destroy a tin soldier? Toss it into the fire?”

“A blacksmith’s forge,” Mr. Bingley said, the side of his mouth twitching.

“Charles!” Miss Bingley said sharply. “I will thank you not to dredge up those long-ago days. I was a child. All children do such things.”

“Not Jane,” Kitty said brightly.

“That is true,” Mr. Bingley admitted to his sister. “By the time you went away to school, you were a different girl.”

Lydia shuddered. “Thank goodness I was never sent away to school. How dull I would be now!” She looked slyly at Miss Bingley.

Mr. Collins sneezed several times in succession. “I apologise,” he said to the colonel and Mr. Darcy for at least the third time. “I sneeze whenever there is a cat around. The Bennets have no cat, but for some reason I cannot seem to—ACHOO!”

Mr. Darcy’s gaze shot to Elizabeth, and she bit her lip and shrugged, feeling the heat rise to her face again.

To her surprise, he grinned and shrugged back. “Shall we perhaps all walk outside?” he asked. “It is a fine day today, if a little cloudy, but the stable master assures us that we shall see a great deal of rain in the next few days.”

The others acceded, and soon the entire party was outside, Mr. Collins making a display of breathing in deeply in the cat-free air. He moved as if to offer Jane his arm, but Mr. Bingley was there before him, and he looked after them in dismay.

To Elizabeth’s surprise, Mr. Darcy did not offer his betrothed an arm. Instead, he offered it to Elizabeth, then hurried them ahead before the others could keep up. Was he trying to escape his betrothed? He had not chosen to sit near her in the drawing room, either.

Once they were out of earshot if they spoke quietly, he asked, “Miss Elizabeth, you must satisfy my curiosity! Why is there a cat in an embroidery bag in your drawing room, and why was it a secret?”

“A cat? What cat?” Elizabeth asked, giving him a look of mischief.

“Now, Miss Elizabeth, if you will not play fair, neither shall I. I must demand an explanation in exchange for my silence.”

“Oh, now you are resorting to extortion to satisfy your curiosity, are you? Have you not heard that ‘curiosity killed the cat’? Very apropos, do you not think?”

“Miss Elizabeth . . .” His voice was deep and mock-threatening, sending chills down her spine. But not from fear, for the quirk to his mouth proved him teasing. No, there was something pleasurable about listening to his deep voice, especially when he teased. To think, Mr. Darcy could tease!

“Very well,” she said with a show of reluctance. “We do not know where the cat came from. In fact, it was Mr. Collins who ‘discovered’ her first. From the time he entered the house, he has been sneezing and asking about cats. But it was not until I went upstairs that first night that I found the cat lying on my bed.”

Perhaps she should not have mentioned her bed, for Mr. Darcy turned very red and cleared his throat several times. “That must have been a surprise,” he said at last.

Mr. Collins walked just ahead of them, trotting behind Mr. Bingley and Jane. So far, he was unsuccessful in his attempts to pull her attention away from Mr. Bingley, but Elizabeth prepared herself to intervene if he tried again.

“Yes, well. We realised that she is . . . expecting an interesting event. So we could not put her out, nor give her to Cook for a mouser. We decided it was best not to tell Mamma or Mr. Collins for now.”

Mr. Collins had stopped following Jane on foot, but he was following her with narrowed eyes and a considering expression. It was small wonder, as Mr. Bingley’s face as he looked upon Jane was easy to read. He practically glowed with affection, and Jane’s eyes were bright as she met his.

“And the embroidery bag?”

Elizabeth sighed. “I have no idea. Perhaps Kitty or Lydia put her there as a prank?” She considered. “Although Lydia seemed surprised to find her there.”

“Maybe she is looking for a good place to have her kittens,” Mr. Darcy suggested. “My sister’s cat disappeared for a few days when her kittens were due. Mrs. Reynolds—my housekeeper—nearly fainted when she found the cat, with kittens, in her linen closet.”

“That is a good thought. I do not know how close she is to delivering.”

Mr. Darcy cleared his throat again. “But perhaps . . . it does seem a little unkind to Mr. Collins.”

“I do feel guilty over that. And even more guilty that I do not feel quite guilty enough to move the poor cat to the stables or confess her existence.”

“I suppose it is a viable way to make sure Mr. Collins does leave as planned.”

“He spoke of staying for Mr. Bingley’s ball! That would be over three weeks! We only expected him to stay through Saturday.”

A panting from behind them caught their attention, and both turned to see Mr. Collins hurrying up. He nudged his way between them.

“Thank you so much for entertaining my dear cousin, Mr. Darcy,” he said. “I had promised to show her the roses I was hoping to take cuttings from. If you will excuse us.”

Elizabeth stared at him in dismay. He was still panting, although clearly trying to hide it, and sweat beaded his brow despite the cool of the day. His eyes, though, were on her now. Had he given up on Jane at last? For Jane’s sake, she could be relieved, but she wished she were not the one who would have to entertain him.

“Cuttings? Forgive me, Mr. Collins, but perhaps it was another of my sisters you were speaking with. Maybe Kitty? You might ask her about the cuttings.” She would owe Kitty a new ribbon for sending Mr. Collins to her, but she did not dare send him to Mary and risk him transferring his affections to her. There was no chance of him developing an interest in Kitty, at least. She might be bright and merry, but she was also far too young and silly.

Mr. Darcy stepped around Mr. Collins. “Miss Elizabeth, perhaps—”

“Darcy!” They turned to see Colonel Fitzwilliam walking their way. “We are preparing to return to Netherfield.”

“Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth.” He gave her an apologetic look before bowing to her and Mr. Collins. “Mr. Collins.”

Mr. Collins watched him leave with a look of pleasure on his face. “At last. Miss Elizabeth, I must speak with you on a matter of some delicacy. I do hope that you are not putting yourself forward with Mr. Darcy.”

“I—”

“You are aware, you must be, that he is soulmarked and an engaged man.” He wrinkled his brow. “It is not the kind of match to which Mr. Darcy could have aspired in the usual way of things, of course—in fact, Lady Catherine confided in me that she would have liked him for a son-in-law. However, her daughter was born without a soulmark, and Mr. Darcy’s own mark came in when, presumably, his soulmatch was born. Yet still, the match has been sanctioned by both of their families, and I know you would not wish to interfere.”

“I would not dream—”

“Excellent,” Mr. Collins said. “Still, your obvious interest in him does make one wonder about your supposed soulmark.”

“My supposed soulmark?”

He chuckled. “Now, my dear cousin, we are family! I hope that you will not feel the need for pretence with me!”

What in the world was he trying to say?

“I see now that cousin Jane already has a beau. I had hoped—but we will not dwell on that. I must reluctantly concede that Mr. Bingley, having already inherited his wealth, might be considered by some to have better prospects than me. And one must give some allowance for prior claim.”

Still smiling, he said, “Now, I hope you will show me Longbourn’s roses. It was an excuse, of course, and I hope you will forgive me for it. But I am fond of roses, and all flowers, really. Vegetables as well. I have a lovely garden at Hunsford, and Lady Catherine has given me a great deal of advice about the best methods to grow . . .”

Elizabeth trailed after him, bemused and rather concerned.

# CHAPTER 8

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T

he next day, Elizabeth was surprised to leave the haberdashery in Meryton and see Miss Bingley passing by. She had not thought Miss Bingley shopped in Meryton, instead preferring to order her things from London, as she had mentioned doing for the ball.

“Miss Elizabeth!” Miss Bingley smiled at her, a look that put her immediately on her guard. “How pleasant to come across you! I was just on my way to the milliner’s shop, and I simply must have your opinion on a hat.”

Curious, Elizabeth allowed herself to be dragged along in Miss Bingley’s wake, but the other woman’s sudden friendliness did not deceive her. What did Miss Bingley want?

She was required to admire two hats and share Miss Bingley’s disgust for a third before Miss Bingley began the conversation Elizabeth had been expecting—and yet not expecting.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Miss Bingley began, her eyes downcast. “You have observed, I am certain, that I have been less than . . . amiable in your presence.”

Elizabeth blinked. “I have,” she said slowly.

“It is not your fault,” Miss Bingley said. “It is . . .” She made a sound alarmingly like a sniffle.

“Miss Bingley?” If this were Charlotte or one of her sisters, she might have put a comforting arm around her. But this was Miss Bingley!

“You see . . . well, I must go back to when it began. In London, at a dinner party at Darcy House, my sister accidentally revealed my soulmark, and Mr. Darcy’s family realised immediately that it matched his. His mother and aunt verified it personally, while my brother verified his. But Mr. Darcy . . .” Miss Bingley’s mouth turned down. “Do you mind if we walk a little?”

Elizabeth glanced around the millinery. The only other customer was at the other end of the shop speaking with Mrs. Hatter, but she willingly followed Miss Bingley into the street. They walked along past the shops until they had reached the square, where Miss Bingley took her arm. It was sparsely populated at this time of day, and so open that it would be obvious if anyone walked within earshot.

“Mr. Darcy was never happy about the match,” Miss Bingley said. “He had hoped for a match from a noble family, like his father. His mother is Lady Anne Darcy, daughter of the Earl of Matlock, and he expected to make at least as good a match himself.”

Elizabeth nodded, things falling into place at last. “He was displeased because your family was in trade?”

“Yes. They were not even in trade very long. My great-grandfather was the younger son of a gentleman. He bought a mill with his inheritance and then passed it to my grandfather, and then to my father. My father longed to return to our rightful place in the gentry, so he sold the mill and was intending to purchase an estate when he died unexpectedly.”

Perhaps that was Miss Bingley’s connection to the land. If her brother purchased Netherfield or another estate, they would be landed gentry. And Elizabeth had seen her walking about Netherfield’s gardens at least once. Perhaps she had not had a great deal to do with the land in the past, being more of a city dweller, but would develop stronger ties once she married.

“Your connection to trade is very little, then. The mills are sold, and your brother intends to purchase an estate. Mr. Darcy seems friendly with your brother. I am surprised that he would hold it against you.”

Miss Bingley kicked a stone in front of her. “He condescends to offer friendship to my brother, yes, but it is not an equal friendship. He advises my brother, guides him, introduces him to the right sort of acquaintance. But he does not receive the same in return. He holds himself above us. I believe that is why he was unwilling to seal the soulmatch.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened involuntarily. “The soulmatch is not sealed?” She was stunned. It was one thing to be unhappy with your match, she supposed. She had never heard of such a thing before, but then, most of her knowledge about soulmatches came from books and the newspapers. She had thought that a person was naturally attracted to and interested in their soulmatch from the start.

But not to seal the soulmatch? It meant that both Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley were still vulnerable to the soul weakening. Until they had shared their first kiss, it did not matter that they were betrothed—the match was not sealed. For Mr. Darcy not to seal the match and then to put off the wedding . . .

“Why?” she whispered. “It leaves both of you vulnerable. And what solution does he hope to find? There is no fighting the soulmatch. You will have to marry in the end.”

Miss Bingley nodded miserably. “We will have to marry in the end. I love him dearly, but . . .” She swallowed visibly. “It grows harder every day. We are together, and yet the soulmatch is unsealed. Our soulmatch begins to . . . well, fester is perhaps not quite the right word, but it will do. It begins to pain me and anger me. It is twisting into something unrecognisable. I have already noticed that he pays attention to every young lady except for me. I think the soulmatch is going sour and turning him against me.”

Elizabeth was aghast. Could it really do that? She had never heard of such a thing. She had heard of seemingly ineligible marriages—a duke whose soulmark had matched him to the daughter of an impoverished country gentleman and such—and the occasional attempt to resist the soulmark due to family pressure, especially in the past before the soul weakening was understood. But she had never heard of someone deliberately rejecting their soulmatch.

A giggle from across the square caught Elizabeth’s attention, and she looked up to see Kitty and Lydia speaking with several of the officers from the militia.

“I am very sorry for you,” Elizabeth said quickly, anxious to get her sisters away before they garnered too much notice. “But I am not certain why you are telling me this.”

“You must have noticed that you are one of the young women he is turning to,” Miss Bingley said, frowning as she, too, watched Kitty and Lydia. “As well as a few others. His eye is roving. I cannot express the pain I find myself in when I see it. I want both to warn you, and to ask for your help. Will you try to distance yourself from him?”

Elizabeth considered. “I will see what I can do,” she said at last. “I hope you will forgive me, but I must speak with my sisters.” Lydia was laughing and grabbing at the hat of one of the officers. He laughed and dodged away.

“Lydia!” she said as she approached, grabbing her sister by the upper arm. “Did you have the chance to look at the bonnet in the window at the milliner’s?”

Kitty went silent, and Lydia frowned at her, but she clearly got the hint.

“Not yet,” Lydia said petulantly.

“Forgive me for taking my sisters away,” Elizabeth addressed the officers. “We have one more errand before we return to Longbourn.” With that, she took one sister on each arm and led them down the street.

“We were being lively and amiable,” Lydia said before Elizabeth could say anything. “That is all.”

“Mr. Bingley is lively and amiable. He would not go so far as to touch a young woman or her clothing on the street, beyond offering his arm, and he would not be so loud as to be heard across the square.” She had gone too far with that last, and she realised it a moment too late.

“He would!” Lydia said. “He called out to us when we met in Meryton the other day. And that officer from the regulars, Colonel Fitzwilliam, he called out to Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth sighed. “You are right. More latitude is given to gentlemen. More propriety is expected of ladies. But girls, it is not considered polite to giggle so loudly that you can be heard across the street, or to call out to the officers. You will be seen as flirts.”

“We are already seen as flirts!” Lydia protested. “They all like us!”

“They like to laugh, and they find you diverting. But that does not mean that they respect you. And you damage your own chances of marriage in the future. No gentleman wants a lady who will flirt with other gentlemen.”

Lydia turned her head to look behind them. “Was that Miss Bingley you were speaking to, Lizzy?”

“It was.”

“What did she want?” Kitty asked.

“To ask my opinion about a hat.”

“And to warn you away from Mr. Darcy, no doubt.” Lydia smiled mischievously.

“Lydia!”

“Was it not true?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Well, yes.”

Lydia shook her head. “I always thought love would be simpler if I had a soulmark. But it seems ‘the course of true love never did run smooth,’ soulmark or not.”

Elizabeth smiled. So Papa’s lessons on Shakespeare had done some good.

“No, it certainly does not,” she said thoughtfully. “Not even with a soulmark.”

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“Lady Catherine was most displeased,” Mr. Collins droned on, and Elizabeth and Kitty shared a secret smile. The feline version of Lady Catherine was, in fact, sleeping upstairs. At least, Elizabeth hoped that she was, for Mr. Collins’s sake. He had been droning on about Lady Catherine’s preferences for most of the evening, but there had been no sneezing.

“Miss Millicent would have been an excellent choice for a wife. Lady Catherine agreed with me. It might have been all settled but that Miss Millicent was called away abruptly to visit an aunt in Gloucester.” Mr. Collins sighed heavily. “Oh, if only she knew what an opportunity she missed, she would be distraught. And of course her older sister was already engaged—rather suddenly, too. I might have thought she would wait to speak to me, since I clearly mentioned my desire for a wife during the sermon a mere week before. But perhaps she was too eager to retain the ‘bird in hand,’ so to speak.”

Lydia gave a short little laugh, startling Mr. Collins into a frown, and Elizabeth hid her own smile behind her hand.

“I thought Miss Baker might do, although her eyes are just a little closer together than they ought to be, in my humble opinion. I did call on her once, but not long afterwards she caught some form of influenza and was sent to the seaside to recover. A sickly wife would not suit me at all. I need an active, useful sort of person, as Lady Catherine has often declared. But after that there was no other young lady near Hunsford who was . . . well, the other young ladies were either plain or not eligible for other reasons. That was when Lady Catherine suggested I come here, as I had mentioned a family of five handsome cousins.”

His eyes met Elizabeth’s, and he gave her a short little bow. She looked away quickly.

“I am pleased to hear that word of my daughters’ beauty has travelled all the way to Kent,” Papa said drily, “although I cannot imagine how.”

“Miss Bennet’s beauty is without equal, you must admit that,” Mr. Collins said.

Mrs. Bennet waved her handkerchief. “My Jane is a beauty. Even Mr. Bingley, who has undoubtedly met many handsome young ladies in society in town, could not resist her charms. I am sure we will see a wedding there soon.”

Jane’s eyes were on her needlework, but Elizabeth could see her flush, and she looked to her father, wishing he would say something to stop Mamma. But he merely chuckled.

“Yes.” Mr. Collins looked from Jane to Elizabeth. “I do regret that I was not able to visit you sooner, Mr. Bennet.”

Thank the Lord that he had not. If Jane had never met Mr. Bingley, she might have considered herself duty-bound to accept Mr. Collins for the sake of her family. After all, Elizabeth’s soulmark might destine her for somebody who loved the land, but if he happened to be a poor tenant farmer or steward he would hardly be in a position to support her mother and sisters. And even if Mr. Bingley and Mr. Collins had arrived at the same time, would she have turned down Mr. Collins if he proposed first? Would Mr. Bingley have favoured Jane if Mr. Collins had already been courting her? It did not bear thinking of.

Mr. Collins cleared his throat. “Furthermore, my father told me how your line is fading. No soulmarks in several generations, and now no sons to inherit. I thought I could ease the blow if . . . but I should not speak precipitously.” He smiled broadly at Elizabeth.

Raising an eyebrow, Elizabeth said, “No soulmarks in several generations? You have forgotten mine, Mr. Collins.”

“Ah. Yes.” His look was one of indulgence. “Your soulmark. Still, it is inescapable that the Bennet line is in decline. The connection with the land has been broken.”

“Mr. Collins, can I interest you in a game of backgammon?” Papa asked, his face red.

Would Mr. Collins last until Saturday? Papa was a peaceful gentleman, more at home with his books and port than with people. But if Mr. Collins continued to insult him and the “Bennet line,” Papa might be roused enough to send him from Longbourn with a swift kick to the rear.

Elizabeth was no longer surprised that Papa and the elder Mr. Collins had not got along if the father was anything like the son. And to think Mr. Collins considered this offering an olive branch!

It was a relief to finally be upstairs and away from the addlepated prattler. Jane joined her in her room, and they curled up on the bed with Lady Cat between them.

“Mr. Collins looks at you a great deal, Lizzy,” Jane observed as she stroked Lady Cat.

“I cannot think why. He knows about my soulmark.”

“It is odd. Perhaps his interest in our family is not solely romantic? He might recognise that you are Papa’s favourite and believe he is somehow currying favour.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I am glad that his interest in you has waned. I suppose it took meeting Mr. Bingley and seeing his handsome face for him to recognise that he had no chance.”

Jane laughed. “Lizzy!”

They lay back on the bed, looking up at the ceiling and stroking the cat until she purred.

“Mr. Bingley is handsome,” Elizabeth said slowly, “and he seems a good man. But his sisters . . . do you think you will be able to manage them? I would hate to see you fighting to be the mistress of your own house.” Then she remembered and made a face. Poor Mr. Darcy. “Well, I suppose Miss Bingley will be married to Mr. Darcy. But do Mr. and Mrs. Hurst always live with Mr. Bingley?”

“I think they often do.” Jane’s smile was weak. “They do not care to live with Mr. Hurst’s parents. But Miss Bingley . . . I think Mrs. Hurst will not be so bad once her sister is married and gone.”

“That is a relief.” Miss Bingley was the worst of the two. “I hope you will not have to see Miss Bingley much after her marriage. She is utterly . . .” Elizabeth trailed off. Jane would not care to have her future sister insulted. “Well, you know.”

Jane sighed heavily but did not respond right away. Finally, she said softly, “She was worse as a child, you know. It was shocking, hearing from Mr. Bingley about her selfishness and manipulations even when she was very small. I was not sure I could believe anybody so bad. But . . . I do believe it. Mr. Bingley would not lie, and he, like me, prefers to think the best of people. He says that Mrs. Hurst got the worst of it, as they were expected to play together more, and the only way she survived their childhood was by learning to be just as manipulative. Would you believe he apologised to me for their behaviour?”

“That much does sound like Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth said wryly.

Jane laughed. “It does. He says that Miss Bingley was much improved by school, though. It was a little odd, as school was horrid for Mrs. Hurst—I believe many of the other girls looked down on a tradesman’s daughter—but once Miss Bingley started a few years later, it improved for both of them.”

“Perhaps it was her soulmark,” Elizabeth mused.

“I wondered the same thing. Mr. Bingley said that even he did not know about it when she was a child—apparently their parents had sworn her to secrecy—but that after their parents died, she no longer felt the need to hide it. I would imagine it won her respect in school. Perhaps that was all she needed, to feel respected by her classmates, and that is why her behaviour improved.”

“Perhaps.” Elizabeth hid a smile. Jane would look for the best explanation possible. She saw it as far more likely that Miss Bingley enjoyed the adulation of her peers and had tempered her behaviour because she had what she wanted. She had probably boasted constantly of her future husband, who would certainly be handsome, wealthy, and well-connected. Not that she had been wrong.

Elizabeth sighed. If only she had been. To think, what if Miss Bingley had been soulmatched to someone like Mr. Collins!

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Darcy’s attention was drawn away from his book when he caught, amidst Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst’s conversation, the name “Elizabeth Bennet.”

He looked up. The sisters sat together by the fire, Mr. Hurst asleep on the sofa next to his wife, Miss Bingley across from them. Bingley was standing by the fire, poker in hand, but staring off into the distance. Thinking of Miss Bennet and her flaxen hair, no doubt.

“Their mother must have had quite the time when they were babies!” Mrs. Hurst exclaimed. “I wonder if she had a nursemaid for each. And to have three more girls afterwards! I suppose she must have been quite desperate to have a son to fulfil the entailment.”

Darcy frowned. He had not realised Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were so close in age.

“Miss Bennet is almost three-and-twenty, then?”

Mrs. Hurst nodded. “In a month or two, I believe she said. And Miss Elizabeth is almost two-and-twenty, just about a year younger.”

An odd pang filled Darcy. For all that he knew Miss Bingley was his soulmatch, there had been a part of him that wondered. Perhaps there was some mistake. Miss Elizabeth had a soulmark as well, of course.

But if Miss Elizabeth was almost two-and-twenty, she was two years too old. While soulmarks developed gradually in the older partner, making it challenging to know the exact date of the soulmatch’s birth, he knew that it had begun in the second half of 1791, making his soulmatch twenty.

Like Miss Bingley.

He had not truly dared to consider that he might have the wrong soulmatch. After all, his mother and aunt had verified it, and neither had wished it to be true. They had even done their best to discredit it, but they could not. No, it was not reasonable to think that something had gone wrong, that Miss Elizabeth was his true soulmatch. He had never believed it.

And yet . . . and yet to realise that, beyond all doubt, it was impossible . . . he felt bereft. Had he somehow been holding onto the hope that it might be true, holding on against all odds?

At least now he knew. He would have to resign himself to Miss Bingley. Somehow.

“Our mother arranged things far more appropriately,” Miss Bingley said. “I intend to follow her model. Every two years is the healthiest and most dignified way about it. And five children! Such excess, especially of young ladies. No more than two girls is appropriate, although two sons would be ideal, just in case.”

Darcy bit back a groan at the idea that a mother could determine exactly the spacing and sex of her children. Well, perhaps she had some influence on the spacing, but only some. His mother had tried for almost ten years after his birth before Georgiana came along.

“By the by, Charles, the butler wishes to speak to you tomorrow morning about the chimney in the ballroom.” Miss Bingley realised that her brother was still looking blankly into the fire. “Charles!”

He jerked. “Yes?”

“Hammonds wishes to speak to you tomorrow morning about the chimney in the ballroom. It smokes.”

Bingley frowned. “I had intended to call upon the ladies at Longbourn tomorrow morning.”

Mrs. Hurst shook her head. “You cannot hie off to Longbourn and abandon your responsibilities here. If we are to have a ball, the chimney in the ballroom must be dealt with. I am sure Mr. Darcy would tell you that it is one of the many duties of a landowner.”

At Bingley’s beseeching look, Darcy shrugged. “I apologise, but Mrs. Hurst is right. Perhaps the meeting will be short and you can make arrangements for a chimney sweeper or mason quickly and then have time to ride out.”

“Oh, but such work is never quick,” Miss Bingley said. “You should not count on it being quick.”

Darcy eyed her warily. If Miss Bingley could have been capable of damaging the chimney in the ballroom, he might have suspected her of doing so in order to prevent her brother from calling on Miss Bennet. She might not be capable of such damage, but he did believe her cunning enough to inform her brother of the damage at the most opportune—for her purposes—time, such as to keep him away from Miss Bennet.

He sighed and turned away. Such paltry arts disgusted him. And this was the woman he was to call his wife.

# CHAPTER 9

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T

he last thing Darcy wanted to do on a dreary, wet Monday was to go to dinner at Longbourn.

It was not that he disliked Longbourn or its inhabitants. In fact, one might say it was quite the opposite. He was finding that he liked Longbourn’s inhabitants, or at least one in particular, more than he should.

If only he did not have this blasted soulmark! What he would not give to be in Hertfordshire unencumbered, free to meet people on his own terms.

Instead, he was very much encumbered, with Miss Bingley clinging to his arm as if she expected him to bolt for the door at any moment. He could not even move freely, and from time to time he had to fight the urge to shake her off like a dog after a dunking in the pond.

The dinner itself was a brief release from Miss Bingley’s cloying presence as she was seated, to her dismay, at the far end of the table. Darcy was distracted during the first course by watching Miss Elizabeth, who was across the table. But eventually he found himself drawn into the lively discussion between Mr. Bennet and Bingley.

“I would be delighted, sir,” Bingley was saying brightly to Mr. Bennet, “but I am afraid my mornings and afternoons have often been taken up by Netherfield these days. It is astounding the damage that neglect has done to the estate. Furniture damaged, stone crumbling, chimneys needing repairs.”

“Ah, yes, the difficulties of land ownership.” Mr. Bennet gestured with his fork. “Have you given any attention to the north field yet? I know the Martins have complained about problems with erosion and poor soil.”

Bingley groaned. “Well, the fields are not really my purview, but I will ask the steward to make sure the north field is being looked into. My responsibilities extend to the house and immediate grounds only. Thank goodness, or I would not last three months and I would lose my bet with Hurst.”

Darcy scoffed, and Bingley looked up with a laugh.

“Darcy does not approve of my bet, you see. Hurst bet me that I like society too much to live in the country and that I would hie back to town within three months. I am determined to prove him wrong.”

“Never gamble with Hurst,” Darcy advised. “I have never seen a luckier man in my life. Even when a bet looks to be a sure thing, if it is against Hurst, you will meet disaster in the end.”

“The only exception I ever remember was Wickham,” Bingley said, wagging a finger.

Darcy winced. He would just as soon never hear that man’s name again, but he had not confided in Bingley about his latest perfidy. Bingley was a loyal friend, but he was not the best at keeping secrets from his sisters.

“He once bet Hurst that he could humiliate Darcy in his fencing club. Of course Hurst assumed he meant in a bout, but Wickham found a way to win his bet without picking up a foil. He dumped a bucket of cold water on Darcy just after he finished a match.”

Miss Elizabeth gasped in shock and turned to Darcy, the colour rising in her cheeks. “I suppose you did not like his way of winning his bet any more than Mr. Hurst appreciated losing it!”

Bingley laughed heartily. “There was a roaring debate for some weeks over the situation. Some took Wickham’s side and said that he had humiliated Darcy in his fencing club, others felt that the wording was clear that the humiliation should have taken the form of a bout. Come to think of it, I do not know the ultimate resolution.”

“It was a stalemate, I believe,” Darcy said. “Neither paid out. I would not recommend betting with Wickham, either, although for very different reasons.” He wished that he were skilled enough in conversation to know how to redirect it, but he had never been good at such things.

“You have a soulmark?” Miss Lydia said loudly from several seats away, and Darcy jerked with surprise. Miss Lydia was seated near the centre of the table next to the colonel of the regiment, Colonel Forster, who had apparently delivered this earth-shattering news. Darcy would never have thought of the gruff, whiskery colonel having a soulmark. But Darcy remembered that the amiable colonel’s father owned an estate near St. Alban’s that he loved dearly.

“Yes,” the colonel said more quietly.

Miss Lydia looked towards Miss Elizabeth, but the colonel went on.

“I have already found my soulmatch, in fact.”

Miss Lydia’s face was very childlike in some ways, especially in her inability to hide her feelings quickly. “Really!” she exclaimed, but her face had fallen into disappointment. For herself? Or had she thought of the colonel as a match for a friend or her sister?

“She is considerably younger than I am,” Colonel Forster said. “When we discovered our match two years ago, she was not yet sixteen. Considering the age difference, we decided, once we sealed the match, that it was best to wait a few years before the wedding. She will be eighteen next month, so I will take leave and travel to her father’s house to discuss setting a date.”

Darcy nodded. That was sensible. How difficult for the colonel to have a soulmatch so much younger than himself! The man must be thirty, or close to it, and to be matched to a girl of eighteen!

He should be grateful that Miss Bingley was only eight years younger. He had thought it a great difference when he was a boy of eight whose soulmark had just appeared and realised that he was matched to a baby. Now he realised it could have been much worse—at least as far as the age difference went. It was bad enough in other ways.

He shook himself as he realised he was looking at Miss Elizabeth again. She was laughing as she answered something Bingley said, and the sparkle in her eyes practically lit up the room.

It was odd that Mr. Bennet had never taken Miss Elizabeth to town for a season. How did he expect her to find her soulmatch here in such a limited society? She was still young, granted, at two-and-twenty, but she had no way of knowing how old her soulmatch was. If he were much older, like Colonel Forster was to his betrothed, then her soulmatch could already be suffering from the soul weakening. What was Mr. Bennet waiting for?

Unless he already knew her soulmatch’s identity.

Darcy frowned, considering Mr. Collins. It would explain a great deal. Mr. Bennet knew how old Mr. Collins was—young enough that soul weakness was not likely yet. He was in touch with him, so if Mr. Collins did start to suffer, Mr. Bennet would be aware right away. He would obviously have no reason to take Miss Elizabeth to London.

And it might explain why he was allowing Mr. Collins to simper and smirk at Miss Elizabeth without interfering. The man was seated between her and Miss Mary and had spent most of the meal trying to pull her attention away from Bingley on her other side. If Mr. Collins knew she was soulmarked, surely he would have given up by now, or at the very least, Mr. Bennet would have stopped him.

If anything, Mr. Bennet seemed amused. Perhaps he thought that the couple needed time to come to know each other? Did the bond simply take longer for some couples?

He would not have considered Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Collins to be a good couple in the least, but his own parents were very different from each other. His father was cheerful, amiable, and loved to talk. He was friends with everyone, from the local nobility and gentry to the tradesmen and even his own servants.

Mother was the complete opposite. She was very shy and most at home with her husband and children. She was kind to the servants, and they loved her, but she did not converse easily with them. She made polite conversation when it was required of her, but she had only a few dear friends, and the rest of her acquaintance were people she interacted with in order to be polite.

And yet somehow, they fit together like hand and glove. Father’s bright liveliness kept Mother laughing and provided her with friendships she otherwise might not have found. Mother’s quiet peacefulness provided Father the haven he craved, and her steadiness encouraged him in more serious and intellectual pursuits. Where one faltered, the other stood strong.

His stomach clenched, and he suddenly found that he could not stand the smell of the excellent fish Mrs. Bennet was serving, even though he usually loved fish.

The thought of Miss Elizabeth with that chattering, nonsensical, pompous man was horrifying. It was worse, somehow, to think of them as being a soulmatch. If she had been unmarked and had chosen him for practical reasons—Darcy had heard the man was to inherit her father’s estate—that might have been more palatable. But to think that they were a soulmatch? That they would love each other until the end of their lives?

The idea rankled, but he did not dare explore too closely just why that was.

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Elizabeth might have thought Lady Cecily arrogant or imperious upon her first impression if she had not noticed the lady’s hands shaking as she clenched them on her lap. She was not haughty, it seemed, but shy.

Elizabeth set upon the task of drawing her out while the ladies waited for the gentlemen to return from their port, and she was having some success when she realised she could hear purring.

Without losing the thread of her conversation, for she would not want Lady Cecily to think she was distracted or uninterested, she looked around. Where was that purr coming from?

The table next to the sofa trembled slightly, and Elizabeth realised that one of the drawers had been left open and the hefty cat had curled up into it.

Lady Cecily followed her gaze and saw the cat.

“Yours?” she asked.

Elizabeth glanced around before leaning close in. “In a way. But she is a great secret, so please do not mention her.”

Lady Cecily smiled conspiratorially. “I have seen nothing.”

With her eyes on Lady Cecily so as not to draw attention to her movements, Elizabeth stretched out her arm and gently nudged the drawer most of the way shut. With any luck, nobody else would mention the cat either.

Lydia dropped dramatically into the seat next to Elizabeth, Kitty following suit in the neighbouring chair.

“When will the gentlemen come?” Lydia said, a hand to her forehead. “I am desperate for some diversion.”

“They have been gone ever so long.” Kitty perched delicately on the chair. “Tell me you have some interesting gossip to speak of.”

“I am afraid I do not,” Elizabeth said. “We have been speaking of Lady Cecily’s horse.”

“Oh!” Lydia sat up straight. “I long for a horse! What colour is it? Is it a mare or a gelding? Spirited or calm?”

Lady Cecily looked slightly overwhelmed by the questions, but she answered gamely, “Palomino, mare, spirited.” Then she took a deep breath and added, “I would have no other. I need a horse who likes to jump and dance.”

“Dance?” Lydia was intrigued.

“Yes, dance! Not like humans, of course. But she likes to prance around with excitement.”

The door opened, and the gentlemen entered. Elizabeth found herself looking for Mr. Darcy, then blushed as she realised it.

He was an engaged man. She should not be thinking of him or wondering what he was thinking or where he would sit. There, he would take that seat nearest Miss Bingley and Mamma, and that would be the end of it.

But he did not. He walked to the window that was just behind Elizabeth and stared into the darkness. Could he make anything out? Or was he looking at the reflection in the window, or perhaps just lost in thought?

Her cheeks warmed when she realised that her gaze had followed him and that at least two others had noticed—Miss Bingley and Colonel Fitzwilliam. She turned back to Lady Cecily, who had noticed nothing.

“Meow.”

To her horror, the sound had emanated from the drawer she had shut earlier. The cat was awake for once and desperate to make itself heard.

Lydia’s eyes were wide as she looked from Elizabeth to the drawer. Then she laughed. Loudly.

“Oh, how clever of you, Kitty!” She stood and moved to stand next to Colonel Forster, who was speaking with Colonel Fitzwilliam on Lady Cecily’s other side.

Lady Cat meowed again, but Lydia covered it with a laugh.

“Colonel Forster, Colonel Fitzwilliam, you must hear what Kitty just said to me! Kitty, come here!” She waved to Kitty. “We were talking about the officers of the militia in comparison with the regulars, and Kitty suggested it would be amusing to see a contest of some sort between the two! Do you not agree?”

Mr. Collins sneezed twice on the other side of the room.

There was another meow, and Elizabeth fumbled to open the drawer without attracting attention while Lydia went on loudly.

“Kitty suggested cricket, but I quite rightly told her that would not work. Can you imagine? Cricket in November! And of course we only have one officer from the regulars here, so making teams would be impossible.”

The drawer was far harder to open than shut, but it was finally open enough to retrieve the cat. But Lady Cat was neither happy in her drawer nor happy to be removed from it. She meowed again, and only Lydia’s raucous laughter, now joined with Kitty’s, kept Mr. Collins from hearing it from where he stood on the opposite side of the room.

Elizabeth tried to scoop her hands under the cat, but the cat was too large and the drawer too far away to get a good grip.

Suddenly, a pair of larger hands reached under the cat and lifted her gently out, then deposited her on Elizabeth’s lap. She looked up in surprise to see Mr. Darcy leaning over her, his dark eyes gleaming with mischief.

She smiled back. Now, what to do with Lady Cat?

It seemed the cat had ideas of her own. With a spring that belied her usual slothfulness, she leapt from Elizabeth’s lap and disappeared under the sofa.

Lady Cecily and Mr. Darcy both appeared to be holding in laughter. Mr. Darcy took the seat next to Lady Cecily, presumably to make his move towards the drawer seem natural.

Mr. Collins sneezed into his handkerchief and apologised profusely to Mr. Bingley, presumably the owner of said handkerchief.

“And that is when I thought of it!” Lydia exclaimed, glancing back at Elizabeth and the drawer. A look of relief crossed her face when Elizabeth smiled and nodded at her. “Billiards!”

“But Lydia, we do not have a billiards room!” Kitty said, looking confused.

“And that is what Kitty said that was so clever,” Lydia said at last. She smiled at the two very confused gentlemen and moved back to her seat next to Elizabeth. Pretending to adjust her skirts, she whispered to Elizabeth, “And that is how it is done.”

Elizabeth coughed to hide her laugh as Kitty, confused, followed in her sister’s wake.

Thankfully, Lady Cat did not make any other appearances in the drawing room during the visit. Elizabeth assumed Lady Cat had left the area, since Mr. Collins’s sneezing finally settled into the occasional sniffle. She was grateful, as she had quite enough to contend with without having to hide any cats.

Miss Bingley, for one. The woman seemed to take delight in vexing her. When she moved to refill her cup, Miss Bingley joined her.

“I hope that you have given consideration to what I suggested the other day,” Miss Bingley said.

She nodded but said nothing, blowing on her drink to cool it.

“Yet you seem to be sitting quite close to Mr. Darcy this evening.” Miss Bingley’s eyes were cold.

“You will notice that I was sitting there first.” Elizabeth fought to keep her voice mild under this provocation.

“I can see that for the excuse it is.” Miss Bingley’s smile broadened, and Elizabeth was bemused until she realised that Miss Bingley had noticed Mr. Darcy watching them.

“Will you join us, Mr. Darcy?” she asked.

“I had better not,” he said. “I can imagine two reasons for you to be standing together, and my interruption would be welcome in neither case.”

Miss Bingley tittered. “Oh, dear. What can he mean, Miss Eliza?”

“I think it better not to ask,” Elizabeth said. She gave Mr. Darcy a pleading look. She might not know what his two reasons were, but any sort of interaction in front of Miss Bingley would only make his betrothed more furious in the end, no matter what she pretended in public.

“Oh, but I must insist on knowing his meaning!”

Their conversation had drawn the attention of the others around them, and Elizabeth’s face heated uncomfortably as she realised they were all waiting for his response.

“Why, either the two of you have confidences to share, or you are aware that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in standing by the fire. In the first, I should be in your way, and in the second, I can admire you much better from here.”

The gentlemen laughed uproariously, and most of the women looked on with amusement, although Mamma looked only confused. But Elizabeth could sense the tension coming from Miss Bingley, no matter that she laughed along with the others. Miss Bingley was very much aware that the compliment was not for her alone.

“Mr. Darcy! I have never heard of anything so shocking!” Miss Bingley waved her hand as if fanning herself. She moved across the room towards him, and just as she neared him, Elizabeth heard her say more quietly, “Perhaps it is time to set the wedding date, do you not agree? A Christmas wedding would suit me well.”

Elizabeth felt unaccountably melancholy as she took her tea back to sit with Lady Cecily. She could not say why, exactly, but somehow the evening felt duller.

Lady Cecily gave her a shy smile when she took her seat, though, and that reminded Elizabeth of something.

“Lady Cecily, forgive me my forwardness, but I understand that you and Colonel Fitzwilliam are a soulmatch?”

Lady Cecily nodded, her cheeks pink. “Yes, we are.” Her eyes widened. “Are you—”

“I have a soulmark,” Elizabeth said quietly. “Although I have not yet found my match.”

“Ohhh.” Lady Cecily gave her a sympathetic look. “I remember those days of uncertainty. My mother was . . . rather trying. She has never approved of me, you see. I believe it is my hair.” She tugged lightly on one of her red curls.

Much like Mamma, although it was Elizabeth’s wit and independence that Mamma did not approve of. If only she were more like Jane . . .

Elizabeth shook her head to remove the thought. “When you met Colonel Fitzwilliam, did you know right away?”

Frowning, Lady Cecily shook her head. “No, I do not think so. Not right away. He was just another gentleman at first. I did not take any special notice of him the first few times we met in a drawing room. It was not until we met in the stables that we recognised a . . . I do not know how to say it. A similarity of spirit, perhaps? We did not know we were a soulmatch yet, but that was the first moment that I think I felt a connection between us.”

The closest Elizabeth had ever come to feeling a connection to a man was with—of all people—Mr. Darcy! Would she even recognise a soul connection when she felt it?

“How did you realise your soulmarks were the same?” It was something she had pondered for many years. People did not usually make public their soulmarks. But then how did you know that another person’s matched yours? Did one person declare that theirs was a flower, and then the other person would admit that theirs was a sweet william flower, and then the first person said that theirs was the same? Thus each risking only a little at a time?

Perhaps if her father took her to London for a season, the way most fathers of young ladies with soulmarks did, she would understand the rules. Or maybe she would be just as lost.

“How does—”

“Cousin Elizabeth!” Mr. Collins took the seat left vacant when Lydia had moved to speak to the officers. “I apologise! I had fully intended to pay you every possible attention this evening, but Miss Mary required my attention in a discussion about Fordyce’s Sermons.”

Mary was watching Elizabeth, and when she saw Elizabeth look up, she made a pained face and then grinned. Elizabeth grinned back.

“I have completely forgotten whether I have described my gardens at Hunsford to you. They are my pride and joy. Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself condescended to walk through them when she came to see my improvements, and she said to me, ‘Mr. Collins, I am pleased to see you take the gardens in hand. They were sadly neglected by your predecessor, and I cannot tolerate a man who does not take proper care of his gardens.’”

Mr. Collins was quite serious in his endeavour to pay her every attention, as he did not let up in his conversation for the rest of the evening. Elizabeth’s ears were still ringing with it when she finally made her way to her bedroom to find Lady Cat asleep in the exact middle of her bed.

# CHAPTER 10

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r. Collins’s habit of sleeping late in the mornings was the thin thread keeping Elizabeth from going mad. His endless conversation and his sneezing—and the guilt she felt over the reason for that—was relentless, and her escapes in the morning had become utterly essential to her survival. And Mr. Collins’s.

He was still particularly attentive to her, which was a puzzle. He had accepted Mr. Bingley’s prior “claim” to Jane, moving on to Elizabeth, but then why was her soulmark not enough to make him move onto Mary?

One possibility was that he had a soulmark himself and was waiting to see if theirs matched, but that seemed very unlikely. He was descended from her father’s line, but his father was the younger son and their line had not held land for several generations.

Of course, that had been enough for Miss Bingley to have a soulmark.

The other possibility was that he somehow misunderstood Mamma or how soulmarks worked. It seemed unlikely but possible, she supposed. He seemed to be the sort of man who decided something without evidence and then required a great deal of proof to change his position, so perhaps his knowledge of soulmarks was incorrect.

She crested the hill of Oakham Mount to see a gentleman already there, his back to her. It took only a moment for her to recognise him.

“Mr. Darcy!”

Turning, she looked down the other side of the hill for his party, but he took several quick steps in her direction.

“Do not leave on my account, Miss Bennet. I did not realise you came this far on your morning walks. I felt a need for a ride and saw this hill from the distance.”

She was not surprised. It was a tempting prospect and her favourite place to walk whenever she was in the mood to go a long distance.

“It has a beautiful view,” she said. “Did you notice that you can see right past Meryton to Haye Park? I enjoy the prospect from above. You can see people in Meryton but not make out who they are.”

“Delightful.” He followed her gaze. “In Derbyshire, I have a favourite hill that overlooks a nearby town, Lambton. It is too far to make out people in the town, but I spent many hours as a boy being entertained by the sheep visible on some of the tenants’ land. They follow each other single file in a line sometimes, which always diverted me.”

They watched the tiny figures in Meryton move about for a few minutes before Elizabeth spoke again.

“Thank you for helping with the cat last night. I could not think how to get her out of that drawer without anybody noticing.”

He made a short bow. “Your sister Miss Lydia deserves a great deal of the credit. She was very clever covering for the cat’s meowing.”

“Yes, it does make me wonder just what she is covering all the other times she is loud,” Elizabeth said ruefully.

He laughed. “And how is your cat doing after her adventure?”

“She was well and sleeping in my bedroom when I went upstairs, but I have not seen her this morning.” Elizabeth’s face heated at the reference to her bedroom, and she noticed that Mr. Darcy’s colour was very high as well. “Do you have any pets?” she asked quickly.

“I do. I have a cat at Pemberley. Well, it was my sister Georgiana’s cat, but for some reason it has taken a liking to me. It follows me around the house and spends much of the day in my study or the library. I had to find another cat to keep Georgiana company—the one who delivered the litter of kittens in the linen closet.”

Elizabeth smiled at the reference. “Cats do like to choose their masters—if we dare call ourselves that—do they not? And so your poor sister lost her cat. It was good of you to get her another. Has that one stayed with her? What of its kittens?”

“It has, thankfully. She is always complaining about fur getting into her embroidery, but I know she does not really mind. She took great pride in distributing its kittens to all of her friends once they were old enough.”

“What is your cat’s name?”

He looked down with a smile. “Bootsie. In my defence, I did not dare rename him after his defection. Does your new cat have a name?”

“Lady Cat. Although I suppose that is a nickname. Her full name is Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Mr. Darcy fell into a coughing fit.

“Mr. Darcy?”

He held a hand up, and she realised that his coughing had transformed into laughter.

“Mr. Darcy?”

“I apologise,” he gasped. “It is simply that . . . well, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is my aunt.”

She looked at him in horror, remembering that Mr. Collins had mentioned the relationship, but he was still grinning broadly.

“I assume there is a reason for the name?”

“Well.” Elizabeth bit her lip to hide a smile. “She was rather imperious. And from Mr. Collins’s description—”

“Say no more. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is the perfect name in that case. My aunt is rather imperious. And the layers of meaning are clever, since she is indeed a lady cat.”

“That is what Kitty said.”

His expression sobered, and he gestured to the log that someone had helpfully left on the mount for visitors. Elizabeth gingerly took a seat next to him.

“May I ask . . . Mr. Collins seems to be eager for your favour, but it was my understanding that you have a soulmark, so—”

“I do not know,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “He seems determined to pay me his attentions, but Mamma says that she told him about my soulmark. I wish my father would speak to him, but . . .” She took a deep breath. “He does not like to make an effort at anything, really. I have tried, but . . . it is a rather inappropriate conversation to be having with a man who has not yet made any formal request.”

Mr. Darcy leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking unseeing out over the farmland. “Soulmarks seem to add an additional complication to our lives, do they not? My parents . . . well, they have always worried about the soul weakening. I had a younger brother, the ‘spare,’ in terms of the inheritance. He was the only one of their children without a soulmark, and I think that made him a real spare in their minds. Oh, they loved all of us, I know, but he was the one they did not have to worry about. Until he died of a fever when he was eleven.”

“Oh, no.” Elizabeth reached out to put her hand on Mr. Darcy’s, remembering just in time that he was not, in fact, one of her sisters. “I am so sorry, Mr. Darcy. That must have been terrible for all of you.”

“It was a long time ago.” His voice was stiff. “I thought my world was breaking at the time. And my parents . . . I do not think they ever recovered. Not just from his loss, but also from the worry about the fate of Pemberley if I did not find my soulmatch.” His voice grew shaky. “They were so happy when I found Miss Bingley.”

Poor Mr. Darcy. Soulmatch or not, Elizabeth did not think Miss Bingley seemed right for him.

Elizabeth looked up to realise just how close they were sitting. If Miss Bingley saw them . . .

She leapt to her feet. Mr. Darcy followed more slowly, looking bemused.

“I should return to Longbourn,” she said quickly. “My family will be looking for me.” Her heart was racing with the desperate need to get away. She could not bear to stay here a moment longer.

Mr. Darcy bowed, his brow a little furrowed, but he said nothing.

As she hurried down the mount, Elizabeth realised that he had not offered to escort her back to Longbourn as a gentleman might have.

She knew why.

Much as she hated to admit it, Miss Bingley was right. She did need to keep some distance from Mr. Darcy. He might have already found his soulmatch, but she had not, and she was finding that she liked Mr. Darcy far more than she should.

Her heart could not take another morning like this.

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Darcy was breathing hard as he dismounted outside the stables. Keeping up with Richard on horse was always a challenge, and his cousin had seemed particularly energetic this morning.

Shaking his head, Bingley laughed as the stable hands came out to take their horses. “Not that I have ever doubted it, Colonel, but I certainly see why you chose to be a cavalry officer.”

“You should have seen him as a boy. It was a good thing he was only the spare, else he would have had his mother in hysterics every time he mounted up.”

“Oh, she was anyway.”

Lady Cecily emerged from the stables just as a boy came running around the corner from the direction of the house.

“Not again,” Bingley said with a groan.

“Sir, Mrs. Nicholls requests your presence, sir,” the boy said, panting as he bowed.

“What is it now?” Bingley handed the reins to the nearest stable boy as he turned to follow.

Not realising that Bingley’s question was rhetorical, the boy answered in a rather charming imitation of the butler. “I am sure I could not say, sir.” He then ruined his mimicry by adding, “But it may have to do with the goat in the wine cellar.”

“Not the wine!” Richard cried, and Bingley took off on the boy’s heels. “Hurst will have his head.”

Richard greeted his wife as she joined them. “Hiding in the stables with the horses again?” he teased.

“I may not be able to ride these days, but I could not bear it if I could not visit Llamrei on occasion.” She half turned back towards the stable as if her thoughts were still with her beloved horse. It must be painful to be too unwell to ride when one was so much in love with horses.

“She would be good breeding stock,” Richard mused. “Although I would imagine you would hate to lose the riding time while she is foaling. Perhaps we can time her breeding with yours.”

Lady Cecily glared at her husband, but Darcy found himself mulling over Richard’s words. Since when did Richard breed horses?

“Breeding?”

“Ah.” Richard looked abashed. “It seems the answer to my soulmark has arrived in the form of a letter.” At Darcy’s questioning look, he added, “The connection to the land.”

It was a little unusual for a second son to have a soulmark, since second sons usually went into the law, clergy, military, or something of that sort. If the first son did not have a soulmark, it might mean that the “spare” would inherit after all. But since Richard’s older brother also had one, it left them uncertain in what way Richard would serve the land—since that was what soulmarks always foretold, in the end.

“My mother’s uncle has written to me. Since his son’s death, he has been uncertain what should become of his estate. He finally decided that he wishes to leave it to me. His good health means that may not happen anytime soon, but he has invited me and Cecily to live there as soon as may be. Knowing my interest in horses, he thought I might like to run a breeding stable while I learn the estate.”

Richard’s simple recital of the facts did not fool Darcy for a moment. “Richard! This is it! The opportunity you have been waiting for since you were a boy!”

Richard finally cracked a grin. “I am still becoming accustomed to the idea,” he admitted. “The letter arrived yesterday, and other than Cecily, I was not ready to tell anyone else until now.”

“He will sell his commission after we leave Netherfield Park,” Lady Cecily said. “Thank goodness.” She slipped her arm through her husband’s and leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment, and Darcy smiled at her gesture.

They separated at the house to change out of their riding clothes before breakfast. Darcy was not looking forward to Miss Bingley’s constant attentions over the meal.

He was both pleased and anxious when he saw the letter from his mother waiting for him at breakfast. Miss Bingley had one from her as well, which was a relief. She would be too busy reading her own letter to read his over his shoulder as she was wont to do. But what if Mother insisted that he set a date for the wedding?

“Oh, how delightful!” Miss Bingley exclaimed. “It is quite the thing, is it not, to write to one’s future daughter-in-law? Yet how perfectly your mother accomplishes it. I have never seen such a lovely hand.”

Darcy held back an exasperated sigh as he attempted to concentrate on his own letter.

Dear Fitz,

I hope this letter finds you well. We have missed you very much, especially as your aunt and I have been eager to begin planning your wedding. You can imagine our astonishment as the weeks pass by without a word about the date. To think that you have been engaged for over two months—to your soulmatch—and have not even set a date yet!

“Your mother is eager to begin planning our wedding and wishes to know what sort of flowers I prefer! How considerate she is. I declare, Lady Anne is the perfect example of just what a daughter of the nobility should be.”

I wrote a letter to your intended as well. I apologise for my previous remarks about not being fond of her. I will try to appreciate her as my daughter-in-law. With her background, she may not be accustomed to planning large events, so I thought it best to have her start with something enjoyable and simple, the flowers.

“Roses, certainly. Do they not represent love?” Miss Bingley beamed at him. He stared at her blankly. What had she been talking about? He had been caught up in amusement at his mother’s words.

Mother was no Lady Catherine, but she had been brought up to think well of herself and her elevated birth. Father’s friendship with the senior Mr. Bingley had done a great deal to change that, but the discovery of Miss Bingley’s soulmark had brought her old attitudes back up a little, probably mostly out of her dislike of the young woman. Darcy could not blame her.

“Oh, and lilies!” He was startled out of his reverie by Miss Bingley’s exclamation, and he lifted the letter closer to his face, hoping his betrothed would understand his hint and read her own letter without commentary.

Do you intend to marry from London or Pemberley? After your wedding, I would be happy to stay with you and Miss Bingley either at Pemberley or in London so that I may instruct her on how to manage the household and arrange social events. I do not wish to cast aspersions on her abilities, but her last dinner party was not what I would expect from a Mrs. Darcy.

Darcy winced. He remembered the dinner party at Bingley’s London house well. Miss Bingley had been so determined to make a good impression on the Darcys that she had made a terrible one. She could not stop talking about her fortune, demanding their compliments on her expensive redecorating, fawning over everything any of the Darcys did, interrupting their conversation to beg for compliments for herself and her arrangements, and unintentionally insulting her own cook in front of the servants by disparaging the meal and claiming to have been used to much better. Thank goodness he had not been engaged to her at that time, or he would have melted in embarrassment.

“She mentioned my last dinner party in London!” Miss Bingley crowed. “She said that she would love to take me in hand and introduce me to the housekeeper and explain how dinner parties are arranged at Darcy House! Oh, how wonderful to hear that I made a good impression!”

Your sister has returned from her trip to Leicestershire with my brother and sister, and she is much recovered from the summer. Your father has made his sincere apologies for encouraging that man to think himself a part of the family, and so the incident is behind us.

A word of caution—I wrote to my sister Catherine to tell her of your soulmatch, and she is not best pleased. I will invite her to join me here. Perhaps helping with the wedding preparations will resign her to the match, but I would not be surprised if you receive a letter from her. Be gentle with her, please, even if she does try your patience.

Come home soon, my darling.

Miss Bingley sighed happily and let her letter flutter onto the table. “I cannot tell you how pleased I was to realise I would be marrying into your family. How pleasant it is to know that I shall be with people of the right sort of connections.”

She leaned across the table towards Darcy’s letter. “May I read yours?” she asked just as her fingers snagged the edge of it.

“Certainly not!” he said sharply, yanking the letter away before she could read it. Although he would not mind Miss Bingley taken down a peg by reading what his mother truly thought of her, his mother would be furious to know that her private letters to her son were being read by another—especially Miss Bingley. Perhaps he might hint to his mother to include a lesson on privacy in her training.

Miss Bingley pulled back in surprise and affront, but she quickly turned her interest to her plate now that her letter was read. Darcy tucked the letter into a pocket just in case she should try to sneak a glimpse of it later.

Distracted, he returned to his breakfast, but he mulled over his mother’s words as he ate. It had been a long time since he had witnessed his usually warm, kind mother so . . . condescending. It seemed Miss Bingley and her grasping nature brought the worst out in her.

Miss Bingley tended to bring out the worst in everybody.

# CHAPTER 11

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“M

iss Elizabeth!” Mr. Collins greeted her upon her return to the house. She was instantly on her guard, for delight was written all over his face—and resignation all over the faces of her sisters.

“Good morning, Mr. Collins,” she said cautiously.

“I have excellent news to share with you. I wrote to Lady Catherine a few days ago, and today I received a response. She has given me permission to stay for another week!”

Elizabeth glanced at her father, who shrugged. Mr. Collins had not asked his host, then, but had simply assumed he was welcome.

Could she bear another week of Mr. Collins?

Mr. Collins’s eyes were still on her, and he appeared to be waiting for a response.

“Will your parish not miss you?” she asked tentatively.

“No, indeed! For I had engaged the services of a curate, and he will continue to act in my stead. It will be an excellent experience for him.” Mr. Collins smiled at all the Bennets. “I had it in mind to read to you a bit from Fordyce’s Sermons this afternoon. I have been remiss in your education, I realise, and now that I have another week here, I plan to do it justice.”

Elizabeth waited until her sisters had reluctantly filed into the drawing room before slipping into the library behind her father.

Papa handed her a section of the newspaper as he seated himself behind his desk, but Elizabeth shook her head and put it down.

“Papa,” she began slowly, “have you noticed that Mr. Collins appears to have a special interest in me?”

“Who could help but have a special interest in my wittiest daughter?” Mr. Bennet shook out his paper and smiled at her. “Mr. Collins is cleverer than I expected to recognise that.”

“Papa,” she said firmly. “You know what kind of interest I am speaking of. Romantic interest. I begin to think he has designs on me.” She leaned forward. “I wonder if he does not understand the nature of soulmarks, perhaps.”

“Our life is a comedy of errors, is it not? But then, I hear that Shakespeare did draw from real life, so I suppose it should not come as a complete surprise. As for Mr. Collins, his father was particularly ignorant and illiterate. Mr. Collins may not have had much exposure to the idea of soulmarks at all.”

“Could you not explain it to him?”

Papa chuckled. “And lose my entertainment? I have been more diverted watching him try to win you over than I have been in the past two years. And just think, Lizzy. By keeping his attention on you, you are saving poor Mary from the same. She would not laugh it off as easily as you do, my dear.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “Papa.”

“Now, my dear, I am afraid you will have to return to the drawing room and put up with listening to a bit of Fordyce. If you hide in here with me, Mr. Collins will soon come looking for you. But nobody will mind if your thoughts wander while he reads that rubbish. Another week, and he will be gone. I will write to his Lady Catherine myself if he attempts to extend his visit again.” He picked up his book, but Elizabeth hesitated.

“Papa, I am twenty years old now.”

He looked up and winked. “Do not boast, my dear. It is unbecoming.”

“My soulmatch could be five or even ten years older than me! He could be experiencing the soul weakening soon if we do not find him.”

Papa lowered his book and raised his eyebrows. “People do not experience the soul weakening until they are five-and-thirty or even older, my dear. You do not really think your soulmatch is an old man with flannel waistcoats, do you? He would hardly be able to keep up with you.”

“It is not impossible,” she said firmly. “You heard about Colonel Forster’s soulmatch. She is a good twelve years younger than him at least. Besides, there is no magical age at which the soul weakening begins. It can start much younger. And he will begin to worry that he will not find his match. What if he cannot afford to tarry in London for long? He would have expected me two years ago at least!”

“I have always thought that being crossed in love now and again does a girl a world of good. It must be equally good for the other sex, then. He will appreciate you all the more for having had to wait a few years to find you. If he is clever, he will progress through the counties one by one seeking his bride. Lucky for him that Hertfordshire starts with an ‘H.’ He would not even have to visit half the counties if he goes about it alphabetically. Far luckier than Westmorland, although not quite as good as Berkshire.”

Fury mounted in Elizabeth’s breast. “You know full well only a fool like Mr. Collins would visit the counties alphabetically instead of geographically. I beg you would be serious for once!” She swallowed hard, willing the heat in her cheeks to dissipate. Papa never liked it when she argued with emotion. “You are risking my life with this delay. What will you do in two years, or five, when my soulmatch has not appeared as if by magic? Will you take me to London then or simply argue that my symptoms are not soul weakening but some ague?”

Papa blanched, and for a moment, Elizabeth thought she had finally convinced him. He blinked rapidly, looking up at the ceiling, before turning away and lifting his book to his eyes again.

“You can depend upon it, my dear, that if five years have passed, or if you show symptoms of illness, I will take you to London in the fastest carriage available, and you may attend every assembly in town. Until then, I am afraid you will have to content yourself with waiting. But do not fear. I will write to any acquaintance I can think of and ask if they know any man with a soulmatch older than you, will that do?”

Elizabeth sighed. The plan was not a bad one, but it was likely that Papa would forget his suggestion the moment she left the room. He hated writing letters and was likely to put it off until he could safely claim forgetfulness and be done with the matter entirely.

Swallowing her disappointment in her father, Elizabeth made her way back to the drawing room and the tedium of listening to Fordyce read aloud in the dullest way imaginable. At least she would be able to escape Mr. Collins and her father for a little while this evening, as they were invited to the Gouldings’ for dinner and cards. She could speak to Charlotte and avoid all irritating gentlemen for a few hours.

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Escaping Mr. Collins’s presence at the Gouldings’ party was not as easy as Elizabeth had hoped.

He followed her throughout the room, joining in every conversation with non-sequiturs or comparisons to Lady Catherine, her daughter, Rosings Park, or Hunsford. He changed the subject occasionally to his opinions as a clergyman, his excellent living, and his expertise in all matters.

Even Mr. Bingley only lasted for about five minutes of conversation before he found an excuse to move elsewhere, and he had outlasted every other one of Mr. Collins’s conversational partners by two minutes.

When Charlotte Lucas came to Elizabeth’s side, all she could feel was relief. Charlotte was too patient and sensible to be frightened off by Mr. Collins, was she not?

“I apologise,” Charlotte said with a smile. “One of my younger brothers is ill, and my father was not willing to leave until he was certain John had recovered enough to be safe. My mother stayed with him.”

“Mamma will be disappointed to miss her. I hope that John recovers soon!” Elizabeth turned to Mr. Collins. “Mr. Collins, this is my dear friend Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte, Mr. Collins is my father’s heir. He is a rector with a living in Kent.”

Charlotte turned bright eyes to Mr. Collins. “I have heard that Kent is lovely, although I have never been there.”

“It is the loveliest county!” he exclaimed. “Why, my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has travelled extensively, and she does not hesitate to say that Kent is the most beautiful of counties. And of course, the area around Rosings Park is particularly fine. Rosings Park is famous for its rose gardens, and travellers come from all over to walk through them during the summer.”

Elizabeth could feel the tension in her shoulders release a little. Thank goodness for Charlotte.

Mr. Collins’s attention was not drawn away sufficiently for her to escape, but at least she was not required to respond to the fourth description of the gardens at Rosings Park she had heard that evening.

She took advantage of her moments of freedom to look around the room. Haye Park was crowded with people this evening. Along with the Gouldings themselves and the Lucases and Bennets, the Netherfield Park party had been invited, as had several militia officers.

Her eyes lit on Mr. Darcy standing near the window, and she could not look away. His dark eyes watchful, he was standing silently next to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. Miss Bingley, for her part, seemed oblivious to Mr. Darcy’s inattention as she and Mrs. Hurst talked.

But, Elizabeth realised with a start, Miss Bingley was not unaware after all. As she watched, Miss Bingley glanced quickly at Mr. Darcy and frowned. Then her gaze sought Elizabeth’s, and she crossed the room towards her.

“Miss Elizabeth!” she greeted her brightly. “And Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas, of course. What a pleasure to see you all here!”

“The pleasure is mine, Miss Bingley,” Mr. Collins said with a bow. “I have been so delighted to be included in the neighbourhood’s activities during my visit here. It puts me in mind of the affability of my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who has invited me several times to dine with her on Sundays after church and always sends me home in a carriage. It is my opinion that you can often tell the very wealthy by their generosity to others.”

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh?” Miss Bingley said, a small smile sneaking across her face. “Why, she is the aunt of Mr. Darcy, my friend over there.” She indicated Mr. Darcy. Had the scene in Longbourn’s drawing room completely escaped her notice? Elizabeth hid a smile at the memory of Mr. Collins throwing himself at Colonel Fitzwilliam with a damp handkerchief.

“Indeed, I am aware of their connection. How pleasant it must be to have a relative of Lady Catherine de Bourgh staying in your very home! What condescension, what affability, for him to give your brother such attention when your family is from trade!”

Miss Bingley’s smile tightened, and Elizabeth bit her lip to hide her own grin.

“Have you spoken to him yet?” Miss Bingley went on after a moment’s recovery. “I am sure he would enjoy hearing anything you can tell him about his aunt and cousin.”

“An excellent idea! Why, I cannot think why I did not already speak to him of his cousin’s improving health! I promise you, I will not forget your kindness to me. I must speak with Mr. Darcy directly!”

“Forgive me, Eliza, but I should accompany him,” Charlotte said, with a head tilt that promised she would keep Mr. Collins from overwhelming Mr. Darcy with stories about his aunt.

Elizabeth nodded, although she sighed internally at being left alone with Miss Bingley.

“Your suitor is charming,” Miss Bingley said with a nod towards Mr. Collins.

“He is not my suitor. As you know, I have a soulmark. I will have to wait for my soulmatch.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Miss Bingley tapped her chin. “But he is the heir to Longbourn, is he not? He seems eager to marry a Bennet daughter. Which of your sisters will it be? Catherine and Lydia are clearly too young, and he does not seem the sort of man to marry the one plain daughter in a family of so-called beauties. Jane must be his choice, then. An excellent choice, since she is the eldest, and it is fitting that she would be mistress of Longbourn after her mother.”

“Jane is not for Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth said with gritted teeth.

“Oh, I think she will have him if she must. She is more practical than you are, and she knows how low your family’s prospects are. After all, you may think yourself blessed because you have a soulmark and will thus marry a gentleman. But he might be a mere farmer, you know. There is no guarantee that a soulmarked man will have an estate of his own.” Her teeth gleamed as she smiled. “There is no certainty that your husband will be able or willing to provide for your family. Jane must do the practical thing and marry Mr. Collins.”

It would not be polite to mention Jane’s affection for Mr. Bingley or his for her, but oh, how Elizabeth wanted to. Miss Bingley might be determined to separate Mr. Bingley from her sister, but Mr. Bingley was his own man. His sister could not force him to drop the acquaintance.

He had been paying a great deal of attention to Jane for almost two months now. He had dominated her time during every party or event they had both attended since October. If he did not propose now, all of Meryton would think him a bounder and Jane ill-used.

Her eyes were drawn across the room to where Mr. Bingley stood—but, to her surprise, he was not with Jane. He was surrounded by several of the young ladies from Meryton. Miss Long had thrown back her head in laughter, and Harriet Goulding . . . did she have her arm in his? Maria Lucas stood far too close at his other side, smiling brightly up at him.

Elizabeth could not see Mr. Bingley’s face from her angle, but she could see Jane’s. Jane stood with Mrs. Hurst and Mrs. Long now, but there was a tightness about her mouth that Elizabeth had not seen for some time.

What was going on?

Some of Elizabeth’s uncertainty must have showed on her face, as Miss Bingley’s smile only grew wider.

“It is a pity that you were not born the daughter of an earl,” Elizabeth said after grasping for a response and a steady voice. “I believe you enjoy arranging other people’s lives as much as Lady Catherine de Bourgh appears to.”

“That is certainly a height to aspire to,” a deep voice said from behind her, and Elizabeth turned to see Mr. Darcy. His voice was sober, but she thought she could detect a small quirk to his lips. “My aunt is unmatched in her enjoyment of giving orders and arranging other people to her satisfaction.”

“And does she try to arrange your life?” Elizabeth asked him with a smile.

“She does. Until I developed my soulmark at age eight, she was determined I would marry her daughter. I was not fond of the idea, given that my cousin was only a babe at the time.”

Miss Bingley tittered. “And yet I am even younger than your cousin! For shame, Mr. Darcy.”

“I suppose a difference of seven or eight years seems like a huge thing when one is only a child.” She was speaking with Mr. Darcy, the one person she had been determined to avoid during the Gouldings’ party. But he was the one who had approached her, likely because his betrothed had first. What else could she have done?

“I was dismayed at the idea of marrying someone who could not climb trees or fish in the ponds,” Mr. Darcy said with a laugh. “I suppose it is a good thing my list of requirements in a wife changed considerably over the years.”

Miss Bingley slipped her arm through his and smiled up at him. “Of course! You required a wife with a thorough knowledge of music, singing, dancing, drawing, and the modern languages, as well as a general air of sophistication and grace.”

Elizabeth frowned. “But in this case, I think the only real requirement was a matching soulmark, was it not?”

“It was indeed.” Mr. Darcy’s voice was very low. “But perhaps the incomprehensible process of soulmatches takes one’s preferences in a partner into account.” His eyes met Miss Bingley’s. “I have always appreciated those who choose to improve their minds by extensive reading.”

Miss Bingley’s smile wavered for a moment. “Yes. I am very fond of reading, as Mr. Darcy is well aware! I am delighted that Pemberley is said to have such a fine library! I could stand anything as long as I had a book.”

“Ah, books,” Mr. Collins said from just over Elizabeth’s left shoulder. “I have already begun to add to my small collection at Hunsford. When I say small, of course, I mean in comparison to the great library at Rosings Park, which I must always consider the standard in what a proper library should be. As a clergyman, it would not be appropriate for me to have a library on that scale, but I pride myself on taking pains to collect those books Lady Catherine recommends as being ideal for a clergyman in my position. Fordyce’s Sermons was one of the very first I added to my collection.”

“I suppose you have several Bibles as well?” Mr. Darcy said when Mr. Collins paused for breath. “The clergyman at Kympton keeps several, in English as well as in Aramaic, Hebrew, ancient Greek, and the Latin Vulgate. Mr. Riverwood finds there is a great deal to learn by comparing the different translations and often discusses the meanings of the original words during his sermons. I find the subject fascinating.”

“Ah. Well, uh, I do have a Bible, of course,” Mr. Collins stuttered. “But Lady Catherine had not mentioned—my classes at Cambridge did not—that is, it has been some time since I have had to work on translations—well. In truth, the Bible has been so well translated into English that I do not see a reason at this point to delve into long-dead languages.”

Miss Bingley pulled on Mr. Darcy’s arm so that he was forced to lean towards her. “I do apologise, Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Collins. We promised to speak with Mrs. Goulding this evening. But you do make a lovely couple.” She led Mr. Darcy away, leaving Elizabeth to listen to Mr. Collins as he continued to discuss the three books he had added to his library without seeming to notice that he had lost more than half his audience.

The sound of the pianoforte, followed by a squeal of glee, indicated that Lydia had managed to convince Mrs. Goulding that dancing was in order.

Mr. Collins bowed over Elizabeth’s hand before she could escape. “My dear cousin Elizabeth, I hope you will honour me with a dance. For I cannot imagine a more delightful way of spending the evening. Lady Catherine has herself proclaimed excellent dancing as a sign of a well-bred individual.” With that, he took her hand and pulled her towards the dance, taking no notice of her attempts to demur.

One set of dances could not be so bad, and then she would encourage Mr. Collins to ask some of the other young ladies and have the chance to escape him for a little while.

The dance began, and Elizabeth immediately regretted not having been firmer in her rejection. Mr. Collins was a terrible dancer, apologising when he should have been attending and going in the wrong direction more than once. After the second time he trod on her foot, she had to fight to keep from glaring at him as he cheerfully bounced around her.

Her relief was almost overwhelming when their set of dances finally ended, but her escape was not as easy as she had expected. Mr. Collins took her hand as they left the dance floor and guided her towards a quiet side of the room.

“I cannot conceive a more delightful evening than this,” he said, still holding her hand. She had to tug it free before he would release it. “Let us take a few minutes to regain our breath and then we shall happily join the next dance.”

“Mr. Collins!” She took a step back from him. “I cannot dance a second time in a row with you. Consider how it would look to my neighbours.”

“It is not uncommon for engaged couples to enjoy a second dance,” he protested.

“Yet we are not engaged, and I have the soulmark of another man.” She did not like his odd smile that crept over his face.

“Trust me, my dear, nobody will think it odd for you to accept a second dance from me.”

“Forgive me,” a deeper voice said from behind Mr. Collins, and they both turned to see Mr. Darcy standing before them, “but I believe Miss Elizabeth promised me this dance.”

She took his hand even as Mr. Collins was spluttering in outrage. “How could she—you could not possibly have asked—you did not even know there would be dancing!”

Elizabeth allowed Mr. Darcy to lead her towards the dance floor without responding. Why, oh why, did she have to be related to that pompous oaf of a man?

“Thank you,” she said quietly as they took their places on the floor. Miss Bingley was partnered with Mr. Harrington, but Elizabeth’s partner did not escape her notice. It was a wonder Elizabeth did not catch fire under the heat of that glare.

With only a few couples, there was little room for conversation and certainly nothing beyond what could be overheard by others. But she was able to observe that Mr. Darcy danced very well indeed and to wish that the fire were not quite so hot, as she could not seem to cool her cheeks.

Elizabeth needed to find her soulmatch, and quickly. These burgeoning feelings for Mr. Darcy were only increased by his thoughtful rescue from Mr. Collins. She could not afford to fall in love with him! He was engaged to another woman. He had a soulmatch! And so did she, somewhere.

Her hand was warm inside her glove as she slipped it in and out of Mr. Darcy’s, and she found she could not meet his eye.

What if her soulmatch could not compare to Mr. Darcy? What if the man she was meant for paled in comparison to this man she was coming to—

No, she dared not think such a thing, not even in her own whirling mind.

Her soulmatch was her destiny, the perfect man for her. He would adore her, and she him. When she met him, his height—even if it was several inches shorter than Mr. Darcy’s—would be the ideal match for hers. His hair—even if it was a dull mouse colour in comparison to the rich chestnut of Mr. Darcy’s curls—would become the exact colour she found most pleasing. Would it not? Was that not how soulmatches worked?

The music ended, and Mr. Darcy bowed over her hand. She raised her other hand to cover her tremulous smile that might give away her emotions.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy,” she said in a voice that even she could hear was pitched lower than usual.

His brow furrowed, but he bowed over her hand without a word.

Charlotte was standing at the edge of the dance floor with Mr. Collins, and Elizabeth shot her a grateful glance as he led her out next. If Mr. Collins asked Elizabeth for another dance, she would plead exhaustion. She would not miss dancing. But she would move closer to larger groups of people so that Mr. Collins could not try to lead her off alone again.

“Jane,” she said softly as she joined her sister.

Jane’s smile was tremulous. “You looked lovely, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy dances well.”

“He does indeed.” Elizabeth squeezed Jane’s hand as they looked towards Mr. Bingley.

As if he had noticed them watching, he looked up, bemused. Was he confused by his sudden popularity with all the young ladies of Meryton? Or with Jane’s reaction to it?

“Did you try joining him?” Elizabeth asked her softly.

Jane nodded. “I thought nothing of it of course. Mr. Bingley is amiable and well-liked—why should others not wish to talk to him? But Miss Long and the Misses Harrington . . .” She bit her lip. “They politely hinted that I should leave Mr. Bingley alone.”

Taken aback, Elizabeth asked, “What did Mr. Bingley say?”

“I am not certain he heard. They were very quiet.” She took in a shaky breath. “Do you think . . . do you think that Mr. Bingley wishes for less of my attention? They are not cruel girls. Perhaps they wished to give me a polite hint?”

Elizabeth was shaking her head before Jane finished. “The idea! Jane, you do not seek Mr. Bingley out. He seeks you out at every opportunity! If he did not wish to speak with you, he would not cross the room to come to your side on his own.”

“But it may be that he did so in the past but has now tired of my company.”

Elizabeth’s gaze fell upon Miss Bingley. She was engaged in conversation with Mr. Darcy and Mrs. Hurst, but the look on her face was one of triumph.

“Come, Jane.” Not waiting for an answer, she slipped her arm through Jane’s and propelled her across the room to where Mr. Bingley kept court with his admirers.

She did not mistake his look of relief as she and Jane joined him.

“J—Miss Bennet! Miss Elizabeth.” He smiled broadly at them both. “I was just telling Miss Maria about the latest disaster at Netherfield. Just as we were about to leave this evening, Mrs. Nicholls told me that something got into the larder and destroyed half the food stored there.” He shook his head in dismay. “Caroline suggested that I stay home to deal with the problem, but I cannot imagine what my sisters think I can do about it. I gave Mrs. Nicholls permission to order more and suggested that they get another cat for the kitchen and look at ways to protect the food from rodents, but I am sure she thought of the same things herself and was only humouring me. Thankfully, it did not keep me from this delightful party!”

“Delightful!” Miss Maria echoed, and Mr. Bingley gave her an odd look and moved closer to Jane.

“Oh, I believe they are about to start another dance.” Miss Goulding batted her eyelashes. “Would you believe I have not had a dance all evening? My feet are practically aching from the need for activity.”

“If they are aching, you ought to rest them.” Miss Harriet glared at her sister. “My feet are full of energy! Indeed, I can hardly keep still.”

Mr. Bingley blinked and turned rather desperately to Jane. “Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour of a dance?”

Miss Maria audibly sighed, and Miss Harriet looked from Mr. Bingley to Jane with confusion in her eyes. “But—”

“It would be my pleasure,” Jane said, pink-cheeked as Mr. Bingley led her to the dance floor.

“Well, I never!” Miss Harriet looked daggers at them as they left. “To think I spent all that effort!”

“It is almost as if he wants to dance with her,” Miss Maria said softly.

“Of course he does!”

They had forgotten Elizabeth was there, for they gave her sheepish smiles before dispersing through the room, leaving her confused.

Why would all of the young ladies in Meryton suddenly think Mr. Bingley wished to be kept from Jane? Miss Bingley had to be at the root of it somehow.

# CHAPTER 12

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D

arcy should not have indulged himself by joining in Miss Elizabeth’s conversation with Miss Bingley last night, even to escape the unctuous Mr. Collins. He knew he should not have, and yet he could not resist.

Bingley was fretting. He had received a letter from the owner of Netherfield declaring that the rent was overdue, but Bingley knew he had paid it. He had been sitting down to write to his solicitor as Darcy left, and he would have to look through the massive pile of paperwork on his desk to find the receipt, a project likely to take most of the day, so he had sent Darcy to ride without him.

Darcy had fought temptation and won. This morning, he would not allow himself to chance meeting her. Miss Elizabeth would most likely walk to Oakham Mount, as it was a fine, sunny, cool day, dry and perfect for walking. If she did not, she would walk the grounds of Longbourn and possibly the paths to the east side of the estate, where she usually did.

He would not allow himself to explore why he paid such attention to her typical paths.

Instead, he would ride into Meryton. It was not far, but he had wakened with his legs stiff and sore, so he would eschew walking. Perhaps he had ridden a bit too hard the previous day, racing Richard across Bingley’s north pasture while Bingley judged. Although his right shoulder had been aching for days. Was it the change of seasons?

Still, a slow, short ride would not overtax his legs or his shoulder. He would enjoy the surprisingly beautiful weather for December, exercise his mount, and perhaps find a bauble to send to Georgiana.

His mind was on Georgiana and on his reasons for avoiding Miss Elizabeth, and so he was momentarily confused when he dismounted his horse near the blacksmith’s only to see Miss Elizabeth standing in front of him.

From her expression, he rather thought she had come to Meryton to avoid him as well.

“Miss Elizabeth!”

“Mr. Darcy.” She curtsied, her eyes darting away from his.

“I . . . hope you are well.”

She glanced up at him. “Very well, thank you. And you?”

“Very well. I thought I would take a walk into Meryton today.”

“It is a fine day for it.”

“It is.”

They stood there for a moment. Darcy suddenly felt all the awkwardness of having arms. Was this really how he usually stood, with them hanging by his sides? He had never given it much thought.

“May I walk with you towards Longbourn?”

“You may.” They turned back towards the road that led towards Longbourn and Netherfield.

Darcy felt that odd twinge in his shoulder again, and he tried to stretch a little without drawing attention to it. He wanted to speak, but he could not think of what to say. And yet every moment with Miss Elizabeth was precious. He had not even set out to meet her, but now that he had, he could not bear to end their time together too quickly.

“Does Miss Bingley walk out as often as you do?” Miss Elizabeth asked. “I have not seen her, but I suppose she keeps to the gardens at Netherfield?”

“She does not care to be outdoors,” Darcy said without thinking, and then he frowned. It was odd, was it not, that she cared so little about the land? Was it not one of the main traits of being soulmarked? In London, it had been easy to assume it was because there were only the parks to walk in—and she did like to walk or ride in Hyde Park at the fashionable hour. But the only times he had seen her outdoors here were when she was looking for him.

Maybe it was something that would happen naturally, or once she was married and had an estate to look after. Although it was amusing to picture Miss Bingley working in a garden or walking through the fields.

His attention was brought back to Miss Elizabeth when she cleared her throat. “Mr. Darcy, I must . . . I must thank you for coming to my rescue at the Gouldings’ party.”

He remembered her look of frustration and despair when Mr. Collins had cornered her and was urging her to dance a second time in a row. Now that he knew that Mr. Collins was not her soulmatch, he felt fury at Mr. Bennet’s unwillingness to intercede on his daughter’s behalf.

Her tone was almost tentative, rather unlike her usual sportive way of speaking. Without thought, he teased her, “I suppose you hardly expected me to take on the temporary role of white knight?”

She laughed. “I could not say, Mr. Darcy. Your character has been intriguing to make out, to say the least.”

She knew more than she realised. He had been confident once, deeply rooted in his place in life, with very little to trouble or vex him. But since August, everything he had known had crumbled away like rotten wood. He had not been his true self, at least not the self he had thought he was, for months now.

“I have been a selfish being all my life,” he said slowly. “Not cruel, I do not think, but the kind of selfishness that comes when everything you want or need comes easily.”

He had never been denied something he wanted, never asked his father for a horse and received a pony, never requested to take fencing lessons and was taught boxing instead.

He had never wanted a wife he could adore and been told he must marry one he loathed.

“I would guess that you are perhaps selfish in some things, and shockingly unselfish in others. But are we not all like that? I am furious when Lydia takes one of my ribbons, but I would happily give any of them to Jane if she needed one.”

“Perhaps that has to do with your feelings about those particular sisters.”

“Oh, no, you will not lure me into saying anything about Lydia! I would suspect her hiding amongst the brambles there, ready to jump out and take me to task in a moment! She has a talent for turning up in the most unsuspected places.”

Laughing heartily, he said, “My cousin Richard is the same. Colonel Fitzwilliam, that is. He loves to surprise me. I will be caught up in writing letters in my study in London, believing him safely abroad, or training his troops in Brighton, something of that sort. He will burst in the door, my poor butler trailing after him with apologies. I believe it is Richard’s main form of entertainment.”

“He sounds like the best sort of friend for you,” Miss Elizabeth said with a mock stern expression. “Somebody to keep you from becoming too complacent.”

“I suppose we all need such friends.” Darcy realised with surprise that they had turned down the lane towards Longbourn. He had meant to walk her only as far as the turnoff that split towards Longbourn and Netherfield. But she had not said anything either. He smiled slightly. “You, perhaps, are that person for Miss Bennet.”

She laughed. “And she is my Mr. Darcy, voice of sobriety and reason!”

“I often am the voice of sobriety. He is very fond of my brandy.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, but it was a comfortable sort of silence.

“I hope your family are well,” she said at least. “Are they in London? Or in Derbyshire?”

“They are in London at the moment,” he said. “And they are . . . tolerably well. My sister . . .”

He longed to unburden himself. But did he dare? He had gone to great lengths to keep Georgiana’s relationship with Wickham a secret from Miss Bingley. And yet somehow with Miss Elizabeth, he held no such concern. He knew she would keep it to herself. Guilt ate away at him, knowing he was about to confide in a woman who was not his betrothed, and yet he could not stop himself.

“My family experienced a . . . well, something of a betrayal this summer, although I suppose it sounds melodramatic to phrase it that way. My father’s steward had a son that my father was fond of. He supported him at school and Cambridge with the intention that he might spend time on his art. He is very talented, I will admit that, although he has never truly applied himself. And he spends a great deal of time—and money—carousing and entertaining himself.”

“Not unlike many young men of that age, I suppose.”

“That is true.” Darcy grimaced. He had to admit that Wickham was not worse than many others of his acquaintance, although the others at least had the income to allow for their spending. “He travelled with us to the sea this summer, and there he attempted to use their shared interests in art to convince my sister he was in love with her.”

Miss Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “But . . . is she not soulmarked?”

“She is. My family tend to keep their soulmarks secret, though, and he did not know. His goal was her fortune of thirty thousand pounds. His affection was completely feigned. Georgiana was heartbroken, believing that he had a real brotherly affection for her and that she unintentionally encouraged him to feel more. Thankfully, she is recovering.” Somehow telling Miss Elizabeth about it had released something inside him, a tightness that he had not noticed until it relaxed.

“The poor girl,” Miss Elizabeth said, and he found the tightness unwind even further at this proof that she did not blame his sister. “Is she anxious about finding her soulmatch?”

“A little more now than she was, I think. She is still very young, but as she approaches her first season, she feels the pressure of it.”

“What happened to the steward’s son?”

“My father sent him off and stopped his allowance. I have not seen him since, thankfully, although Miss Bingley keeps one of his paintings in her drawing room. She is good friends with him and does not know about recent events.” He hoped Miss Elizabeth would not ask why he had told her and not his betrothed.

“You do not ask her to remove it?” Her eyes were full of sympathy.

“I have . . . not yet found the right way to tell her about her friend.” He spoke lightly, hoping she would not hear the misdirection in his explanation.

“I hope your sister finds comfort with your parents. She must miss you, though.”

“And I miss her.” But they had found it difficult to be together too much, as she knew well how much he had disliked Mr. Wickham. “I have made it a goal to find some little trinket to send her back during my visit here, but I have been sadly remiss in my duty. It was much simpler to pick presents for her when dolls were still the favoured gift.”

She accepted his change to lighter topics readily. “Yes, buying presents for my young cousins is always easier than choosing gifts for their parents.”

Longbourn house was now in sight, and to Darcy’s surprise, he realised he and Miss Elizabeth were walking arm-in-arm. When had he offered her his arm? It felt so natural for her to be there that he had not even done it consciously.

She smiled up at him, and Darcy leaned in to kiss her just as naturally as he had offered her his arm.

At the last moment, when his face was just inches from hers, he pulled back with a start.

What was he doing? He had almost kissed her—on a public road—while he was engaged to another woman! And not just any other woman, his soulmatch!

Darcy cursed and spun away, running a hand through his hair. He could not bear to look at Miss Elizabeth, to see the shock and horror that must be on her face.

“Forgive me,” he said without turning around. “I do not know what came over me. I should . . . I must return to Netherfield.”

“Wait!” she called out before he could take more than a couple of strides. Her voice sounded odd, hoarse and almost shaky, but he did not dare turn to face her. “Please.”

“What is it?” he bit off, immediately ashamed of his tone. It was not Miss Elizabeth’s fault that he found her so utterly tempting.

She paused for so long that he almost began walking again. It felt as if every muscle in his body was tense, ready to run. His mind was churning so much that he almost did not understand her words when she did begin to speak.

“Why . . . why did you not seal your match with Miss Bingley?”

Of all things he might have expected her to say after their almost kiss, this was the oddest response.

“What are you talking about?”

“Miss Bingley said . . .” Her voice faltered. “She said you were unhappy with the match because her father was in trade and that you do not want to accept it.”

“I do not want the match!” he said, whirling around at last.

Her face was very pale, her eyes wide.

Unable to stop, he continued, “I have never wanted the match! But it is not because Miss Bingley’s father was in trade! It is because I detest her! I loathe this match with every fibre of my being.”

Miss Elizabeth stared at him, her mouth open in . . . was it shock? Dismay? He could not read her expression.

He spun back around and stalked towards Netherfield, cursing silently when he realised he had left his horse standing in Meryton. Had he even remembered to tie Bastien to a post or give the reins to the blacksmith’s stable boy? He had been so distracted by the sight of Elizabeth—Miss Elizabeth—that he had given his poor horse no further thought.

If he had tied Bastien properly, or if someone else had tied him before he could wander off, then the horse was still in Meryton. If he had not tied Bastien, the horse might be on his way back to Netherfield and his familiar stable by now. Which meant that either location might be the wrong one, and he almost certainly had a great deal of walking to do.

The walk had not seemed nearly so far with Miss Elizabeth by his side. And now his back was aching. He was not used to walking so much, he supposed. He much preferred riding.

How could she think he would leave the soulmatch unsealed? Simply because Miss Bingley’s father had been in trade? Of course he had kissed her as soon as his mother had verified the match—although he had not felt anything in particular, nothing like what Richard had described.

Everyone knew that a soulmatch was your match, regardless of class or rank. It was true that Darcy had not imagined having a soulmatch with a woman with such close ties to trade, but that was hardly the problem. Elizabeth Bennet herself had a tradesman uncle, for all that her father was a gentleman, but that would not stop Darcy if . . .

It was fruitless to allow himself to think more along those lines.

If he had had better control over his temper, he would have—should have—assured her that he and Miss Bingley had sealed their soulmatch. He had dutifully kissed her, even submitting to the humiliation of doing so in front of his family and hers.

Listening to Richard’s description of what the sealing had been like for him had been painful. He had felt none of the rightness, the magic, that Richard had spoken of.

When they were boys, Wickham had often accused him of being cold and unfeeling. When Wickham led them both into trouble and they got a lashing—whether by branch or by tongue—Darcy had held himself firm, not allowing himself to cry or beg for leniency. When they had grown older and Wickham’s idea of fun had grown along with him—and not in the right direction—and Darcy had refused to join him, Wickham had called him cold and dull.

Darcy had never believed it. He felt strongly about things, especially the people he loved, even if he did not show it outwardly.

But either something had gone wrong with his soulmarking, or there was something terribly wrong with him.

# CHAPTER 13

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P

erhaps Mamma was not so ridiculous with her complaints about her nerves after all. For as Elizabeth walked up the lane towards Longbourn, she felt as if her nerves were raw.

Mr. Darcy had not told her anything she had not already known, if she had given it thought. All the signs had been there. He was the impossibility—a gentleman who detested his soulmatch.

It brought into question all of the laws and rules and knowledge that she had ever heard about soulmatches. It made her fear her own soulmatch.

What madness was it, to hate one’s soulmatch? Was it a failure on Mr. Darcy’s part? Or had something gone wrong with his soulmark?

The worst part was that Elizabeth felt a sense of relief. It was cruel of her to be pleased that Mr. Darcy did not like Miss Bingley and did not wish to marry her. And foolish. Elizabeth had her own soulmark. Mr. Darcy was not for her.

The house was concerningly quiet as Elizabeth entered, and she wondered if everyone was still sleeping at this late hour. Unlikely, but it would have been pleasant, as she did not feel prepared to face her mother and her sisters with so many uncomfortable feelings swirling around.

Instead of going to the morning room, where Mamma might be gathered with her sisters and Mr. Collins, she went to the back parlour. It was too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer, so it was received little use beyond one of the girls needing a moment of privacy or, long ago, a good hiding place during their childish games.

The chair was not comfortable, but she dropped onto it and covered her hot face with her cool hands.

Maybe something really was going wrong with soulmarks. Were others having the same problem? She had seen nothing in the papers, but perhaps nobody was willing to admit such a shameful thing.

For her own soulmark seemed to be going as awry as Mr. Darcy’s. It should have protected her from falling in love until she met her own soulmatch. But every moment she spent with Mr. Darcy, her feelings for him deepened. It was like sinking ever so slowly into a pond, knowing that there was no escape and that kicking and thrashing about only postponed the eventual submersion.

The door opened and closed behind her, and Elizabeth whirled, expecting it to be Jane come to see what was wrong. But it was not Jane.

Mr. Collins was closing the door behind him, a strange smile lighting his face.

“Miss Elizabeth! I am pleased that you have returned from your walk, for I have something important to discuss with you.”

Her stomach twisted with sudden anxiety. “Mr. Collins, we should not be in this room with the door shut.”

Mr. Collins took a step into the room, still standing in front of the door. “It does not signify, my dear. Even your dear mother, I am sure, would give us a few minutes of privacy if I asked for an audience with you.”

“An audience? Sir—” This had to be the most mortifying experience of her life.

“You are a clever girl, and I know my attentions to you cannot have gone unnoticed. Almost from the moment I entered the house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with my feelings on the subject, perhaps I should address my reasons for marrying.”

“Mr. Collins!” Elizabeth managed to interrupt at last. “Please, you must understand how impossible this is. I am soulmarked. I have a soulmatch somewhere in the world, and I must marry him, or I will take ill and die. Have you not heard of the soul weakening?”

Mr. Collins’s smile took on a sweetness that seemed anything but genuine. “Yes, yes, I have heard several times about this supposed soulmark.”

“Supposed?” she cried. Just what was the man thinking?

“But I know the truth. After all, you are some twenty years old, are you not?”

“Yes . . .” Elizabeth answered, bemused.

“Then, if you have a soulmark, why have you not found him yet? You have been out for years. You have had ample time to find him.

He did have a point there. “My father does not care for London, so I must wait here in Hertfordshire for him to come in search of me.” She dutifully parroted her father’s words, little as she agreed with them. It made the most sense for all people with soulmarks to gather in one place to find each other. Did her father truly plan to take her to London eventually? But by the time he did, her soulmatch might have given up on London! Her father’s indolence could cost her so much, but she had been arguing with him since her coming out, to no avail.

“My dear Miss Elizabeth, surely you know that is not how soulmarks work. One goes to London for the season and hears about potential matches. I also find it odd that someone of your level of society would even pretend to aspire to a soulmark. My honourable patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, had said that only the noblest bear soulmarks.”

“Why, that is not true at all!” Elizabeth felt heat rising in her. “Soulmarks choose those who will be the best stewards of the land, not those with titles. Tenant farmers and stewards and sheep herders have been known to develop soulmarks. Besides, my father is a gentleman.” Elizabeth took a deep breath to calm herself. “His family has held this estate for some eight hundred years.”

“Yes,” Mr. Collins said, his voice dripping with condescension, “but your mother’s father was a country attorney, was he not? And several generations removed from the gentry himself. None of your mother’s children had any connection to the land. No, I see what is going on here.”

“What do you think is going on here?” Elizabeth asked, curiosity and amusement warring with her annoyance.

“Why, you aspire to some higher connection than the heir of Longbourn. Perhaps you think that Miss Bennet marrying this gentleman neighbour will catapult you into the higher levels of society. Lady Catherine has often talked of families who get the wrong idea to what kind of marriage their daughters might expect.”

“Mr. Collins, I assure you—” Elizabeth began, but she stopped when he raised his hand in front of her.

“No, Miss Elizabeth, you must give me credit of knowing far more about the way of the world than a sheltered young lady. I do not blame you. It must have been your mother who suggested the idea. I assume your intent was to keep the gentlemen of Meryton away until you could find some elevated match, then you would spread it about that he was your soulmatch, and nobody in Meryton would need to know the truth.”

“I do have a soulmark, Mr. Collins. The very idea of lying about such a thing is ridiculous. Furthermore, I have no desire to be ‘catapulted’ into higher levels of society. If you will not accept the truth from me, then perhaps you ought to apply to my father.”

Mr. Collins shook his head, the smile still on his face. “Your father has certainly not seen any such thing either and has taken your mother’s word for it. I have heard of ladies pretending to have soulmarks to avoid unwanted suitors, and I cannot think ill of you for choosing such a method to preserve yourself in this small society, even if I must chide you gently for what one might call ‘bearing false witness.’ Still, you must acknowledge my superior claim. Not only am I a rector with an excellent situation in Hunsford, I will inherit Longbourn upon your father’s death. I came here with the resolve of marrying one of his daughters. While I reluctantly agreed to cede the eldest to another suitor, I see no reason to consider you unavailable.”

“But—”

“If you would prefer,” he said loudly, speaking over her and taking another step forward, “I will pretend to have a soulmark myself so that your lies will not be exposed to your neighbours.”

“Mr. Collins!” she said firmly. “It matters not to me whether you believe I have a soulmark. I know that I do. I will not marry you, sir, and I would not agree to marry you even if I did not have one.”

Her words had no effect on him.

“Unless you would wish to show me your soulmark—”

“Show you her soulmark?”

They both looked up to see Lydia peeking through the door.

“Goodness, Mr. Collins! I have heard people accuse the officers of the militia of being forward, but they would never dare ask a woman to display her bare back to a man!”

“I am her cousin and a member of the clergy!” Mr. Collins said, waving his hand in the air. “There can be no impropriety in that!”

Lydia stepped into the room, Mary pushing her in from behind.

“Mr. Collins!” Mary said, sounding scandalised. “You cannot have it both ways! If you are a close enough relation to see her bare back without being married to her, then you are too close a relation to marry her.”

Mr. Collins’s face wrinkled in confusion. “No, of course not. Cousins are permitted to marry—”

“But not to see each other unclothed,” Mary said firmly.

“Oh, Mr. Collins!” Mamma now pushed behind Lydia and Mary, and the small parlour became very crowded, especially when Kitty followed her in.

Elizabeth could not mind. Mr. Collins had never been threatening, but there was still something deeply uncomfortable about being alone in a room with him, especially with the door closed.

“Have you considered Mary?” Mamma asked, ignoring the shocked gasp from poor Mary herself. “She is neither in love with another nor soulmarked.”

Elizabeth glared at her mother. After their conversations, Mamma would still throw Mary at him?

But Mr. Collins would have none of it.

“Five daughters, and none of them are appropriate,” he said, throwing his hands in the air. “I will report back to Lady Catherine that I have done my best, and nobody could expect anything else. I know what I am worth, and I will not marry the plain one or one of the silly ones.”

Lydia’s gasp and Mary’s teary “Mr. Collins!” followed him as he stalked up the stairs.

“I take my leave of you!” he called back down. “I will not stay another night in such a place!”

“Well, good riddance,” Lydia said. “Ignore him, Mary. You would not want to marry an addlepated fool like him, anyway.”

There was a scream and a thump from upstairs, and the girls raced past Mamma to the passage.

Mr. Collins appeared at the landing above, his face purple. He sneezed.

“I knew it! I knew it!” he shrieked, frantically yanking his handkerchief from his pocket. “I knew there was a cat!”

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh!” Kitty wailed. “What have you done with her?”

He sneezed. “There are cats in my drawer! Dozens of them nested in my underthings!”

Kitty bolted upstairs, pushing around him and darting into his room, Lydia just behind.

“What name did you just say?” Mr. Collins asked in sudden confusion.

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” Mary said primly as she followed her sisters more sedately up the stairs. “We thought Lady Cat the perfect name.”

“There is a cat?” Mamma’s voice was faint.

Jane took her arm. “There, there, Mamma. There was not a cat at first. She appeared that first night after Mr. Collins arrived.”

“Kittens!” came the squeal from Mr. Collins’s room. “Lady Cat had kittens in Mr. Collins’s drawer!”

Mr. Collins sank onto a stair and put his head in his hands. “I will not stay a moment more,” he said.

“Do you promise?” Lydia asked, emerging from his room with a bright grin.

“Lydia!” Mary hushed her, laughing.

Elizabeth stopped at the stairs just below him, looking up at him. She frowned.

Mr. Collins was ridiculous. He was foolish and ignorant and demanding. She did not regret her refusal, of course, and she would have refused him even if she had had no soulmark.

All the same, it had been a foolish prank to hide the cat’s presence from him during his visit. Mr. Darcy had hinted at the same, yet he had helped them continue to hide the cat when they disagreed. He was a good friend.

“I apologise, Mr. Collins,” she said, and she found that she meant it. “We were unwilling to put the cat out, given that she was about to have kittens. But I should have, at the very least, kept her in my room during your visit.”

He sneezed and looked up at her, his eyes red and watery. “Yes,” he said. “You should have.”

“Well.” Papa’s voice came from behind her. “I see that you are on your way at last, Mr. Collins. I will send Hill to pack your room, and it seems I owe you something to replace your under—your clothing, as I cannot expect you will want to keep them now. You may return to your noble patroness with my blessing, telling her that you did as she commanded and attempted to choose a bride from among your cousins. It will be good for your parish to choose a wife from among their daughters, and now that you have done your duty, you will be free to do so. And, Mr. Collins, if I may offer you a word of advice? Lady Catherine may have given you the living, but she cannot rescind it. Furthermore, your wife will be yours for life, both during your time at Hunsford and once you have inherited Longbourn and live here wholly removed from her. Choose your wife yourself, not one Lady Catherine chooses for you.”

It was the longest speech Elizabeth had ever heard her father make, and she blinked as he returned to his study.

His advice was even reasonable. But why could he not have spoken to Mr. Collins when she had first asked and saved them this week of frustration?

“Three kittens!” Lydia called down the stairs. “Kitty and I have already named two. Do you want to name the last, Elizabeth, since you found the cat first?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, smiling. At last, Mr. Collins was on his way home, and she had a kitten to name.

If she could only stop thinking about Mr. Darcy, everything would be well.

# CHAPTER 14

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arcy returned to Netherfield to find an unexpected guest waiting for him.

“Aunt!”

Lady Catherine de Bourgh rose from the chair with as much pomp as a queen rising from her throne, Louisa Hurst and Lady Cecily looking terrified at her side. Miss Bingley was nowhere in sight.

“Darcy.” Her eyes were narrowed as she gave him her hand to bow over. “I have found you at last.”

Darcy fought to keep the heat from rising to his face. His parents had deliberately kept his whereabouts from Lady Catherine after they had sent word of the discovery of his soulmatch and he had left for Hertfordshire.

Lady Catherine had always had a strict view of society’s ranks. She did not care for “upstart” tradesmen joining the ranks of the nobility and gentry by buying property from the proceeds of their labours.

She had harboured high hopes for Darcy’s marriage, assuming that his soulmark would lead him to a young lady of worth—perhaps even a duke’s daughter!

“What is this I hear about your soulmatch? A tradesman’s daughter? Darcy, this is not to be borne!”

Darcy met Lady Cecily’s eyes, asking silently where Miss Bingley was. For all his dislike of his betrothed, he would not expose her to Lady Catherine’s vitriol if he could avoid it.

Lady Cecily raised her eyebrows and turned to Mrs. Hurst, who also looked uncertain.

“Lady Catherine, would you accompany me outdoors? I would love to speak to you of my soulmatch.” Not true at all, of course, but it was best that he get her away from the rest of the members of the household. His aunt held Darcy in affection just as she did all of her nieces and nephews, but she was certain to have strong views about his soulmatch that would be best not overheard.

She took his arm willingly and, thankfully, waited until they were walking through the garden at a safe distance from the house before continuing.

“A tradesman’s daughter, Darcy? Impossible! You know it to be impossible!”

“Clearly it is not,” he said drily.

“You know soulmarks come from the land! They are a marking of a noble spirit. This girl from the city claims to have one? She has taken you in!”

“Land ownership has never been a requirement to have a soulmark. Many who work the land without owning it have developed soulmarks. And since women rarely own property, their love for the land may not be apparent until their marriage.”

“But Miss Caroline Bingley! I have heard enough of her pretensions from your mother.”

While Darcy could not help but share her dismay, he said simply, “Both my mother and Lady Matlock have verified her soulmark. It matches mine.”

“Ink.” Lady Catherine’s voice was dismissive.

“Your sister suspected the same, and so they checked thoroughly,” he countered. “They were both convinced of its authenticity. Besides, how could Miss Bingley know what my soulmark was in order to counterfeit it? You know how careful I have been to hide it.”

Lady Catherine deflated. “Darcy . . .” Her step faltered for a moment, and Darcy tensed his arm a little to provide her more support. They had left the gardens now and were following the path across the lawn. “If you had not been soulmarked, you could have married my Anne.”

Darcy gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Lady Catherine . . .”

“I know.” She gave a low laugh. “You and Anne have never seen eye to eye. I . . .” Her voice trailed off, and she gave a deep sigh. “Her health has been so poor these past years. I worry . . . I worry that the reason she has no soulmark herself is that she will not live long enough to marry.” Left unspoken was the thought that even if she did, she might not live to bear children.

Darcy’s heart clenched at the look of fear and heartbreak on her face.

“Marriage might be dangerous for her,” he said gently. “But you know we will always take care of her. Richard, Merton, Georgiana. She would always be welcome with any of us. Or perhaps . . .” He contemplated for a moment. “Perhaps there might be a gentleman who would be happy with a marriage in name only.”

“But then she would have no children.”

He could not read Lady Catherine’s tone, so he assured her, “Aunt, you know it is better that she not try to carry a child. Since Rosings is not entailed, she could take in a ward or even several, if she wishes it. Are you not always complaining about de Bourgh cousins having more children than they can afford?”

She gave a ghost of a smile at this. “Well, yes.”

Before he could make further argument, they rounded the stone wall that marked the edge of the lane towards Meryton and saw Miss Elizabeth on the road before them.

She smiled up at him, although he had the impression that she had been unhappy only moments before. Still, her eyes were, as usual, brightened by the exercise, and he adored the little curls that had tugged themselves loose from their neat arrangement to add themselves to the usual decorative spirals that framed her face.

He could not help smiling back as he bowed.

“Ah,” Lady Catherine said softly before either could say a word. “I see it now. The connection between you two. It is almost visible, like a gossamer thread spinning through the air from one to the other.” She sighed. “It almost makes me wish that I had a soulmark myself.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “I apologise for the delay in introductions, Lady Catherine. This is Miss Elizabeth Bennet, one of Bingley’s neighbours. Miss Elizabeth, my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Both women’s eyes widened in shock, although he imagined for very different reasons. The naming of Miss Elizabeth’s cat did not escape him as his aunt gasped aloud.

“This is the woman that my . . . that Mr. Collins is going to propose to?”

Miss Elizabeth turned bright red at the moment—a colour which seemed to affect every bit of visible skin in a way Darcy did not dare to think too much of—and looked down to the ground with a tight smile.

“Or perhaps he already has?” Lady Catherine touched a finger to her nose. “Hmm. And you have declined.”

Miss Elizabeth looked up with a start, and Darcy hid a grin.

“Well . . . yes.”

“I do not blame you,” Lady Catherine said. “I will never forgive Lady Metcalf for recommending that gibbering fool. No doubt it was her idea of a prank of some kind. And to think that I sent Miss Pope to her, the best governess I have come across! I shall steal her back if I have the slightest opportunity.”

Miss Elizabeth laughed. “I will admit that Mr. Collins had us all a little confused. You see, I have a soulmark. He has some idea that I am only pretending to have a soulmark, as only those of the highest ranks carry them.” She hesitated. “He said that you had said something of the sort, but perhaps he was misunderstanding.”

Lady Catherine sighed. “Soulmarks began in the nobility, of course, but I am aware of their existence in others with close ties to the land.” She gave Darcy a look of wry amusement. “I will admit that his endless prattling does make my mind wander, so I may have agreed with something unintentionally. To think he proposed to a woman with a soulmark! I mentioned that he might consider marrying into your family to preserve you from an uncomfortable situation when your estate passes to him, but of course any suggestion of mine becomes a command in his mind.”

“Lizzy!” Miss Mary appeared around the corner. “Mamma says that Mr. Collins has gone, and you can return—” She caught sight of Darcy and Lady Catherine and blanched. “Forgive me,” she said with a curtsy. “My mother has sent me to fetch my sister.”

“It seems I am wanted at home. It was a pleasure to meet you, Lady Catherine. Mr. Darcy.” She curtsied to both before going with her sister.

Lady Catherine watched them go before turning to Darcy with a speculative glance that made his insides churn.

“She is not your soulmatch.”

“No.” How Darcy wished he could have answered in the affirmative.

A furrow marred Lady Catherine’s brow as she examined his face and turned again to look in the direction Miss Elizabeth had gone.

“How odd.”

“She named her cat after you,” Darcy said quickly to distract Lady Catherine, as already he could feel his face heating. Lady Catherine was far too observant.

His aunt’s brow went from concerned to confused. “She named her cat after me?”

“It seems Mr. Collins painted a rather imperious picture of you, and the Bennet girls have a cat who seemed to fit that description as well, so they named her in your honour. I believe they have shortened it to ‘Lady Cat.’”

Lady Catherine’s face was scrunched into the oddest expression he had ever seen her make. For a long moment, Darcy thought he might have picked the wrong topic to distract his aunt with. But then she boomed with laughter.

“A cat. Goodness, Mr. Collins does have a great deal to answer for. I think I must get him a wife—one who is not too sensible to marry him but is sensible enough to train him a little in subtle ways. Where I will find such a young lady, I cannot say. The young ladies in the parish seem to flee or become engaged whenever he shows the least interest in them.”

She took Darcy’s arm as they turned back towards Netherfield.

“I am surprised that Mr. Collins stayed at Longbourn for so long with a cat about the house. They make him cough and sneeze something dreadful.” She was silent for a moment. “If Anne did not also dislike cats, I would get one myself. Then perhaps Mr. Collins would not hint so strongly at being invited over every Sunday evening after service.”

She stopped short, and Darcy was forced to stop with her.

“If Anne did find some nice young man to marry, I might move to the dower house. Then I could get a cat of my own.” She smiled at the thought. “Some cats are excellent at chasing away mice. Mine would be excellent at chasing away clergyman.”

# CHAPTER 15

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I

n the wake of Mr. Collins’s exit, even Mamma was willing to admit that he was a fool. Why, he had proposed to the daughter with a soulmark, instead of turning to the perfectly good third daughter who would have accepted him! Or so Mamma believed, even if Mary herself was not so sure. Still, after Mr. Collins’s ridiculous proposal, Mamma was willing to concede that he would not have made a good husband to any of them.

At least Mr. Collins’s departure meant that Lady Cat was no longer in hiding. Mamma had reluctantly agreed to allow her to stay as a pet when met with the unanimous pleading of all of her daughters. She had, however, been removed from Mr. Collins’s former drawers and relocated to a cosy basket in the back parlour. Kitty had taken advantage of the soft morning light to begin drawing Lady Cat and her kittens’ first portrait.

Elizabeth had not avoided Oakham Mount this morning out of cowardice. She was perfectly capable of meeting with Mr. Darcy in a calm, ordinary manner. But all the same, she thought it probably better that she avoid temptation. Mr. Darcy was too handsome, too clever, and too intriguing for his own good—and hers.

Just as she turned the corner towards Longbourn house, she saw him approaching in the lane. Her heart lurched. He did not have the same desire to avoid her as she did him, but what that meant, she could not say.

“I did not think you usually walked this far.” If she kept their conversation light and amusing, it would be safer. “Or has your horse thrown you, and you have limped your way to Longbourn for assistance remounting?” She pretended to inspect his calves with narrowed eyes, but quickly realised her mistake. Mr. Darcy did have well-built legs that did not need the padding that Mr. Hurst seemed to think fashionable.

“Bastien is too trustworthy a mount for that.” He offered her his arm, and she reluctantly took it. “How is Lady Cat?”

Elizabeth smiled. “I suppose you do not know. She had her kittens!”

“Oh, excellent news! Did she surprise your housekeeper by having them in the linen closet?”

Elizabeth winced. “As to that . . . she had them in a drawer in Mr. Collins’s room.”

Mr. Darcy gave a short burst of laughter before catching himself. “Cats do often love being around those who dislike them.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “You were right, you know. I should not have kept her a secret from Mr. Collins. I have been feeling guilty ever since. He was . . . well, we were looking forward to the day he returned to Lady Catherine—the noble patroness, not the cat—but it was still unkind to let him suffer.”

“Rather unwise of him to invite himself to visit without verifying whether your family kept a cat or not,” he said.

“Yes, well, the answer would have been no, if he had asked. Lady Cat arrived on the same day he did, and we did not even know it until later that day.” Although now that she knew how irritating Mr. Collins was as a guest, she was determined that they would always keep a cat in the house.

Darcy shook his head. “I am shocked that Mr. Collins would believe you only pretended to have a soulmark. It would be an impossible fiction. I hope you were not forced into the indignity of revealing your mark.”

“Certainly not! I would have declined him even if I did not have a soulmark. It was merely an additional reason.” She watched curiously as Kitty ran out of the house and into the gardens. She had been thinking a great deal about her soulmark lately. “Do you think . . . do you think it unwise of my father not to take me to London?”

“I confess, I do not understand it. Does he not want you to find your soulmatch? I remember that Colonel Forster spoke at dinner about his soulmatch being only seventeen, and he is around thirty. If your soulmatch is as much older than you, he could already be suffering from the soul weakening.”

“Yes.” She pondered for a moment. She had never dared speak her theory aloud, even to Jane, but somehow Mr. Darcy inspired confidence. “I believe . . . as unpleasant as it sounds, I believe my father is a little jealous of my soulmark.”

“Jealous?” Mr. Darcy’s brow furrowed.

“He is not soulmarked, and neither was his father. Neither had that deep connection to the land that one associates with being soulmarked. He is happier in his library, and he knows it, but I think . . . I think he feels a little ashamed that he does not care more for the land. He does not care enough to change his behaviour, but I think the shame is there anyway. And then to have only daughters and know that the estate will leave his family line? I think he feels his family’s failure there.”

“It would be a bitter pill to swallow.” Mr. Darcy rubbed his chin. “I know it would hurt a great deal to think that my inadequacies had caused the loss of my family’s land to another.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “He has sent me to visit the Gardiners, my aunt and uncle in London, a few times. But they do not move in the right circles, I suppose, as we did not hear of any potential soulmatches there.” She added darkly, “Perhaps that allows Papa to feel that he has done something, even if it is not enough.”

“Lady Cat!”

They both looked up to see both Kitty and Lydia now running back and forth between the gardens and the edge of the wood.

“Kitty, what is wrong?” Elizabeth called.

“It is Lady Cat! She shot out the door when Lydia opened it, and now she is nowhere to be seen!”

“I have never seen a cat move that fast in my life,” Lydia said, sounding torn between concern and amusement.

“A missing cat,” Mr. Darcy said, moving towards the gardens. “I have helped my sister find a few of those in my day. Usually up a tree and requiring many words from my valet at the state of my breeches, but perhaps you will be luckier.”

“Lady Cat has been the laziest cat imaginable. It is hard to fathom that she would be up a tree,” Elizabeth said, her eyes nevertheless flitting from tree to tree in search of a spot of colour.

“There!” Mr. Darcy pointed, and he practically pulled Elizabeth along as they hurried to a crumbled corner of the garden wall. “I believe I see something just there.”

Elizabeth saw it, too. Was that a bit of white fur? The other colours blended in too well to distinguish.

“Lady Cat!” she called softly as they approached the wall. “Here, kitty!”

Mr. Darcy supported her arm as she leaned over the shorter wall towards the cat’s hiding place. Suddenly, a ball of fur came shooting out of the wall, bounced off Elizabeth, and went careering across the garden.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy tumbled backwards. He flung one arm around Elizabeth protectively, but the other grabbed the wall behind her and kept them from falling.

She looked up into his face, only inches from hers. His arms around her felt so right. His eyes gazed down at her so closely that she could see the warmth in them, and something more.

Was it her imagination that she saw a yearning there to match hers?

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and she lifted her face in anticipation. As he leaned in, she slid her arms around his neck, her eyes closing of their own accord.

“I have her!” crowed Lydia from the other side of the garden. “Goodness, she is fast!”

Mr. Darcy jerked backward and out of her grasp so quickly that his head slammed into the wall, and Elizabeth flinched.

She had wanted him to kiss her. Had longed for him to kiss her. Yet she knew that he was not hers, could never be hers.

Tears filled her eyes, and she pushed away from Mr. Darcy and frantically brushed at them before he could see.

“Miss Elizabeth, I . . .” He ran his hand through his hair, turning away from her. “I will stay another few days, through Bingley’s ball, but then I must travel to London. My parents and sister are there, and we will celebrate Christmas together.” He hesitated. “I do not anticipate returning to Netherfield Park.”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard. “I see. I . . . I wish you a happy Christmas, then. And my best wishes to your sister.”

If only she could tell him what was in her heart . . . but it would not be fair to him. He had to return to his family, to marry Miss Bingley. She was nothing but a distraction. She could be nothing more.

“Thank you. I hope that you and your family enjoy the delights of the season.” He cleared his throat, and his eyes met hers for a moment as if he had something else to say. But if he did, he did not say it.

“Good-bye, Miss Elizabeth.” He bowed.

His farewell had a tone of finality to it that struck her to the core. But it was right. It was the only possible way. There was no way to escape the soulmarks that bond them to others. She curtsied, blinking back tears.

“Good-bye, Mr. Darcy.”

If only the ball were already over! Then he would go to London, and she would force herself to forget that she had ever met Mr. Darcy.

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Elizabeth held the kitten against her cheek, feeling its soft downy fur and enjoying its warm body.

Lady Cat meowed up at her anxiously, and Elizabeth sighed. The cat saw nothing wrong with temporarily abdicating her motherly duties for an occasional romp about the garden—showing far more energy than any of them had expected—but heaven forbid someone should hold one of her babies for too long.

“Very well. You may have her back,” she said, lowering the kitten to its mother’s side. Lady Cat licked it, giving Elizabeth a baleful look before snuggling the kitten against her side. The other two kittens, who had been dislodged when Lady Cat had stood, scrambled to reach their mother’s warmth again.

“You can name that one, if you like,” Lydia said, leaning back against the wall. The girls had arranged Lady Cat and her kittens on a blanket in a box in Elizabeth’s room and were taking turns visiting so as not to overwhelm the new mother.

“Very kind of you,” Elizabeth said wryly.

“Kitty and I already picked our names. Mine’s Hopper,” she said, pointing to the grey one, “and hers is Betsy. We thought you should name the orange one, since it seems to be your favourite. And Lady Cat did choose you first.”

It was true; the orange was her favourite. But right now, when Elizabeth was so close to tears that only her focus on soft fur and plaintive mews were keeping her from falling apart, naming the kitten was the last thing on her mind.

She had almost kissed him! Almost kissed a man who was betrothed to another! The shame and mortification were overwhelming every time she thought of it—and she had thought of little else.

What must he think of her?

It was not as if her desires could have gone unnoticed. He could not have missed her arms around him—why, she thought her fingers might have even slipped into his hair at the nape of his neck! She could still almost feel the tingle in her fingertips.

Every time she thought of it, she could feel her skin burning at the memory. She purposely kept her face down so that Lydia would not notice.

She was wanton. Practically an adulteress. She longed for a man who was betrothed to another! And she herself was meant for some other man, a man to whom she owed her honour and faithfulness. What would he think of her if he knew?

Probably no better than she thought of herself. She wiped her eyes and picked up her kitten again, holding it to her cheek and turning away from Lydia.

And Mr. Darcy! He had been about to kiss her as well, had he not? Frowning, she forced herself to think back.

Yes, he had. She had not mistaken that.

But what did it mean? How could he find his soulmatch so unbearable and yet be attracted to her? What kind of man preferred another over his soulmatch, the woman chosen for him by God?

Could a philanderer have a soulmatch? Was his loathing for Miss Bingley just a lie to win Elizabeth’s affection, assuming that he could have his cake and eat it, too? But surely such a man would not deserve a soulmatch, would he?

But a soulmatch was about matching a couple to the land they would care for. Although she had never heard of any of the soulmarked being dishonourable in other ways. Usually they were lauded as being men and women of character and goodness. Much like Jane, really.

Besides, she could not see Mr. Darcy as such a man. Every instinct rebelled against it.

If only there was some sort of manual or guide to how soulmarks worked. Even the church, which had given the concept a great deal of study since soulmarks had begun to appear in the Middle Ages, knew only a little. Soulmarks appeared without human intervention, they marked couples meant to marry, and somehow that couple were destined to be the best stewards of the land in their way.

And none of that explained the pull that Elizabeth felt towards Mr. Darcy. Or that he seemed to feel for her.

“You do not have to name her now.”

Elizabeth looked up to see Lydia watching her with dark eyes that were, for once, solemn.

“Thank you, Lydia,” she managed.

Lydia frowned and stroked the grey kitten. “Are you well? You seem . . . sad.”

The gentleness in Lydia’s tone brought tears to Elizabeth’s eyes. “I . . . I am sad.”

“Is it because of Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth blinked, anxiety flaring. What did Lydia know? “What do you mean?” she asked cautiously.

“I think you like Mr. Darcy and feel bad for him.” Lydia looked down at the kitten she was petting. “And feel bad that he has to marry so disagreeable a woman as Miss Bingley.”

A laugh escaped before Elizabeth could help it. “She is utterly disagreeable, is she not?”

“Terrible. I know Mr. Darcy insulted you that first day, but he has not seemed so bad since.”

It was strange, like looking at a portrait of oneself from years ago, to think of the day of the insult. It was not so long ago, really. Less than two months’ time had passed. And yet it felt a lifetime ago. Had she been shocked? Dismayed? Amused? All three at once? She could no longer grasp the fleeting memory.

No, her thoughts of Mr. Darcy were so different now. The insult had long since been replaced with Mr. Darcy’s willingness to keep Lady Cat’s secret—although teasing Elizabeth about it all the while—his kind intervention when Mr. Collins attempted to command all her attention at the Gouldings’ party, and a dozen other small moments of friendship between them.

Friendship. How could such a pleasant word be so laden with pain and despair?

She loved Mr. Darcy. Loved him with a fervour that was no less sincere for being hopeless. Doomed from the moment when she realised that he was already engaged to his soulmatch. No, doomed from shortly after her birth, when her own soulmark to some unidentified man had begun to form on her skin, forever separating her from the man she would come to love.

Worse, she did not dare tell Lydia, nor even Jane, the truth of it. How could she confess to them the forbidden feelings she felt for Mr. Darcy? Not only did she not dare confess such a terrible thing, but she could not bear speaking of it. Saying the words aloud would make it . . . undeniable. And that she could not bear.

“No.” Elizabeth stroked her own kitten, running her finger along its tiny tail, which was sticking out straight as it eagerly nursed from its mother. “He has not seemed so bad since.” She took a slow breath, struggling to keep her voice even. “But he is leaving after the Netherfield Ball, going to London, so I think that will be the last we will see of Miss Bingley as well.”

“She will be Mrs. Darcy if she returns.” Lydia yawned and sat back. “If she returns. But if Mr. Bingley marries Jane . . .”

A sudden pain squeezed at Elizabeth’s heart, and she winced and rubbed at her chest.

Lydia looked up sharply. “You do not think Mr. Bingley will leave with them, do you?”

“I hope not, for Jane’s sake.” But for her own sake, she hoped that Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were not very close friends, else she would be thrust into his company regularly if Mr. Bingley married Jane.

Lydia yawned again. “I should go to bed, I suppose. I am completely exhausted.” She cocked her head as she looked at Elizabeth. “Lizzy, do you think I might walk with you tomorrow?”

“Of course!” Elizabeth eyed her, curious. She had been curtailing her walks lately, unable to bear the idea of running into Mr. Darcy, but she would not have to fear being alone with him if Lydia came along. “You are always welcome. I am surprised that you would not prefer to walk into Meryton with Kitty.”

Lydia grinned slyly. “Kitty is to walk into Meryton with Maria Lucas. I may have played a little prank on Captain Carter today, and he will not be best pleased to see me just yet. I had better wait a day or two until he has forgotten a little. But I cannot stand to stay home all day or I shall go mad!”

Elizabeth laughed, giving the kitten one last pat before standing up. “Then you had best get some sleep, as I like to walk early!”

Lydia made a face. “Very well. Do not leave without me!”

“I shall throw a pillow at your face if you are not awake in time.”

Elizabeth shook her head as Lydia left. It was odd to her that Lydia would not simply go walking by herself. But Lydia always delighted in having people around her. She was rarely quiet for long, and she disliked being alone. Maybe a kitten would be good for Lydia. It could keep her company when everyone else was busy.

Elizabeth resolved to ask her mother if they might keep Lydia’s favourite kitten in the house.

If only she dared to ask to keep the orange as well. But Lydia needed a kitten more. And the other kittens could be sent to the barn, where Elizabeth would be able to visit.

They would not be gone forever like Mr. Darcy.

And with that thought, she fell onto her bed and buried her face in the pillow. She had held off all day by Herculean effort, but now, alone at last, she allowed herself to cry out her heartache.

# CHAPTER 16

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D

arcy squinted, groaning, as his valet opened the curtains and pale glimmers of sunlight streamed in.

“Hawkins, close that, would you?” he grumbled.

“Sir, Colonel Fitzwilliam asked me to rouse you,” his valet said.

Darcy ran a hand over his face. “Did he say why?”

“Something about ‘lolling about in bed all day,’ sir.”

Darcy grimaced as he slowly sat up, holding his aching head. “How late is it?”

“I could not say, sir.”

Darcy pushed himself to his feet reluctantly, crossed the room, and took up his pocket watch. Why, it was still hours before breakfast, at least as Miss Bingley served it. What the devil was Richard up to?

He felt as if he had been up all night drinking. He had, admittedly, had a few drinks, but nothing out of the ordinary for an evening with Richard. But after the other men had gone off to seek their beds, he had stayed, staring into the fire for hours.

He had almost kissed Miss Elizabeth! And it had not even been his own restraint—or hers—that had prevented it, but a mere coincidental interruption by her sister’s shout.

A small part of him was pleased that Miss Elizabeth had appeared ready to return his kiss. Indeed, she had closed her eyes and leaned in expectantly.

He shifted uncomfortably at the memory. Oh, how he had wanted to!

What kind of man was he? Surely only a man like Wickham would want to kiss one woman while betrothed to another! How could he have fallen so low?

His mind had churned frantically, desperate for some way out. But there was none. Brief dreams danced through his brain, images of escaping to Italy with Miss Elizabeth or hiding out in a cottage at Pemberley.

But it all came down to the soul weakening. He could not avoid Miss Bingley, could not break the engagement and refuse to marry her. If he tried, he would die. And so would she. And worst of all, he would condemn Elizabeth to the same.

Even if he had been willing to lose his own life in the end for a few precious months with Miss Elizabeth, he could not bear the thought of destroying her as well. And even Miss Bingley did not deserve to die in such a way. No matter how much he disliked her, he could not condemn her to an early death.

Was that why the power of a soulmark was accompanied by the curse of soul weakening? To force recipients into going against their own inclinations by threat of death? Were there others who fought against the tyranny of destiny?

He had always considered himself an upright, dutiful, responsible, honourable man. But was it only because he had been so little tested? Nothing that had been asked of him had gone too much against his own desires, and so it was not so difficult to do what was right. Until now.

But now, when he was put to the test, he had failed. Failed over and over again since he had first met Miss Elizabeth—no, since the moment Miss Bingley had been revealed as his soulmatch.

The blame could not be laid on his love for Miss Elizabeth.

He sucked in a quick breath in surprise. Yet he could not deny the truth.

He loved Miss Elizabeth. It was wrong, it was impossible, it was ill-fated. And yet it was absolutely true.

His eyes closed in despair. Putting a label to his feelings made it all worse somehow. And yet they were only that, only feelings. Feelings could be conquered, feelings could be overcome. Feelings came second to duty. They had to. Yes, even his feelings of dislike for his betrothed.

For one long moment, he allowed himself to give in to despair. To the recognition of the dismal, cold life he had ahead of him in fulfilling his duty to his land, his country, and his soon-to-be wife. The misery was all the worse knowing what could have been.

Then he forced himself to push it aside and throw his shoulders back. He would find satisfaction in doing his duty, in serving his people and the land they depended on. He loved Pemberley, and it was worth the sacrifice. He would marry as the soulmark commanded.

And so would she. Elizabeth would marry some unknown man who would, he hoped, love her to the depth of his being. She deserved to be loved like that.

He would learn to love Miss Bingley, at least in the way that one loves an irritating relative that they do not otherwise like or respect.

He allowed his valet to dress him in his riding costume. If Richard was looking for him this early, he most likely wanted someone to ride out with. Perhaps he, too, had had a rough night.

“There you are!” Richard boomed as he joined him and Bingley downstairs, and Darcy winced. His head was pounding from the lack of sleep, his legs were still sore, and his back ached. For a man of eight-and-twenty years, he was feeling an extraordinary number of aches lately. He felt a new sympathy for his uncle’s groans upon alighting from a carriage after a long ride.

“Darcy, old boy,” Bingley said, slapping him on the back. “Fitzwilliam and I have decided that you have moped long enough. Come along.”

“Moped?” Darcy asked, affronted, as he followed the other two outside. It was a cool, dry day, and he felt the last vestiges of sleep leave him as he followed the others towards the stables, leaves crunching beneath his feet.

Richard gave him a sidelong glance. “Yes, moped. You are miserable and are a bear to live with. So Bingley and I thought we would take you out for a run.”

Darcy could not stop a dark chuckle from escaping as they entered the stable, where several grooms stood waiting with their horses. They would “take him out for a run” like an overeager puppy, would they?

But it was exactly what he needed. He wanted one morning without feeling trapped in his own thoughts.

Yet again, he found himself struggling to mount. A frisson of fear ran down his spine. What was wrong with him? Had he done some injury to himself without realising it? Thankfully, Richard did not notice, otherwise he would never have heard the end of it. And by the time he was mounted, his tension eased. He could keep up with Richard without a problem. His difficulty mounting must just be because of his sore muscles, nothing that could not be cured by exercise.

“I must say, Bingley, I am surprised you were willing to get up so early.” Richard winked at the younger man. “Although I have heard that you have been calling on Longbourn rather early these days.”

“If I am going to visit, I have to do it early,” Bingley said wryly, “before something else requires my attention at Netherfield. I say, Darcy, I never imagined there were so many things that could go wrong with a house. An entire estate, perhaps, with grounds and tenant farms and the like, but a rented house? It is astounding.”

“I would suspect Miss Bingley of intentional destruction to keep you from visiting Miss Bennet,” Richard said, “if it were not that she could not be responsible for blocked chimneys and vermin in the pantry.”

“Still, she does not mind taking advantage of the opportunity to keep me home most of the day,” Bingley said bitterly. “And when we do go out, she has often accepted invitations for us at various houses that are not Longbourn.”

It was something of a relief to hear of Bingley’s problems instead of thinking of his own. It was surprising that Netherfield Park was experiencing so many problems. Pemberley was much larger, but such issues were much fewer. Of course, his servants had been working together and on the estate much longer, which might explain the difference. They might be more confident handling such things themselves without coming to him, whereas the Netherfield servants might feel compelled to ascertain how Bingley wanted things done.

Bingley did not care to race, but he was still happy to run hard with them across the bare fields. They found a beautiful horse path through the woods that was too much of a challenge at more than a canter, but it was diverting to find their way through and jump over the occasional fallen log.

At last, they returned the horses to the stables. But when Darcy was expecting to head back to the house, Richard grabbed his arm.

“It is still early,” he said. “Come on, we are going down to the pond.”

The pond at the very edge of Netherfield’s grounds was not very large, certainly not large enough for fishing. It was more ornamental than anything else. It was shallow, which made Darcy wonder whether it might freeze later in the winter for ice skating.

When they reached the pond, Richard grinned. “Do you remember at Cambridge, when Stanich dared you to jump into the pond in December?”

“Oh, no.” Darcy backed away from the pond, hands up. “That was almost ten years ago, and I like to think I have grown in wisdom and maturity a great deal since.”

Bingley laughed. “Fitzwilliam, a pound says he will not do it.”

Richard eyed him. “I shall take that bet. What shall you bet me, Darcy, if I jump in?”

“Nothing. It is a fool’s game. You will get a cold, and to what purpose?”

“Bingley,” Richard said, cocking his head to the side, “do you sometimes get the impression that Darcy has become an aged clergyman? Or perhaps a solicitor who likes to keep his pens in a neat row on his desk, his stack of papers exactly one inch away from each edge?”

Bingley laughed and pulled off his coat. “Come on, we shall all go in. I shall happily accept my loss if it means I get to see Darcy soaking wet in the pond.”

Richard stripped off his jacket and sat down to remove his boots. “It is not Derbyshire, Darcy. It is not even freezing out here. Take a foolish risk for once, man.”

Darcy staggered. For once, he would be willing to take a foolish risk, if only he could see a way to do it without cursing himself and Miss Bingley—and Miss Elizabeth and her soulmatch—to an early death.

The pond would be freezing cold. Well, perhaps not literally, as the temperature was hovering just above freezing, enough that they could see their breath but not cold enough for the pond to ice over. But it would still be miserably cold.

Maybe a cold swim was just what he needed.

Laughing, Bingley stood back from the pond, took off at a run, and leapt into the air. At the last moment, he wrapped his arms around his knees so that he landed with a massive splash that soaked Richard.

With a roar, Richard followed him in with a mighty leap.

Shaking his head, Darcy sat down to tug his boots off. Dropping his coat on the ground behind him, he considered wading in.

No, Bingley and Richard had the right of it. Best to get in quick before he lost his nerve.

Yelling, Darcy took his own running leap and landed right between the two men, soaking both all over again.

Richard dived at him, shoving him under the water, and Darcy went under. For a moment, the icy darkness of the pond closed around him, and his heart clenched.

Then he was above the surface again, sputtering. He shoved Richard away, but he could not help laughing.

They did not linger. The water was too cold for that. If this had been Derbyshire, they probably would not have made it even this long.

Following the others up the bank, Darcy slipped and fell to his knees.

“Darcy!” Bingley called back, taking a step towards him.

Holding up a hand to show that he was well, Darcy tried to stand. But for a moment, it was as if his leg and back muscles had seized in place. He could not make himself move.

“Darcy, are you well?” Richard was making his way back down the bank towards Darcy.

With a mighty heave, Darcy pushed himself to his feet, shaking his head and sending drops of water flying.

“I think my muscles stiffened up in that cold!” he said quickly, but he saw the glance that Bingley gave Richard. And the frown had not left Richard’s face.

“Are you injured?” Bingley asked. “You had trouble mounting your horse the other day.”

“Mounting your horse?” Richard’s voice showed his shock.

“I have been a little sore lately,” Darcy said. “Perhaps I have not had a good bout of fencing for too long.”

“We had better fix that, then!” Richard turned to Bingley. “Your ballroom would be ideal if your sister were not arranging a ball there.”

Bingley shrugged. “The centre of the ballroom is left empty for dancing, anyway. I cannot see why we could not squeeze in a bout. Perhaps while Caroline is busy elsewhere.”

Richard laughed, and the two turned towards the house.

Darcy leaned over to pick up his coat and boots—he would carry them indoors to avoid ruining either. Behind him, someone gasped.

He turned around in shock to see Miss Elizabeth standing at the edge of the woods by the pond. She was stock still, staring at him.

Despite the cold, heat rose in his cheeks as he realised the sight he must be presenting. Here he was, without coat or cravat or boots, wearing a soaked white shirt that was plastered to his skin and probably mostly translucent, his hair in disarray. What must she think of him now?

He swallowed. It should not matter what she thought of him. Tomorrow was Bingley’s ball, and after that, he would return to London and his parents and sister.

And to his wedding. The moment he returned to London, his mother would expect to set the date. He would have to do it. It was not fair to Miss Bingley to put it off any longer.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said awkwardly. He realised for the first time that her sister, Miss Lydia, was standing just a few feet behind her. “I had not expected to see you here.”

“Nor . . . nor had I,” she stammered. “I mean, I had not expected to see you here either. Even though you live—not live, but are staying here. I would not have dreamed of . . .” Here she trailed off, and her face grew crimson.

“We had gone for a walk and did not realise how far we had come,” Miss Lydia said quickly. “Forgive us. I am certain you will wish to return to the house to, uh, dry off.” Now it was her turn to blush as she looked past him at the others. “And warm up. Good day.”

The ladies curtsied and hurried off, and Darcy was left with the feeling that he probably ought to throw himself back into the cold pond before his friend and cousin saw him.

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Elizabeth’s mind whirled as she hurried back towards Longbourn. She did not know what to think or feel, and despite the cool wind, she could still tell that her face and even ears were burning with embarrassment.

“Lizzy!” Lydia called, laughing. “I did want exercise, but this may be a bit much, even for me!”

Elizabeth slowed only a little. She could not stop, she could not. Her thoughts were spinning so quickly she had to be moving as well.

“That was lucky! I shall have to tell Kitty, and she will feel foolish for going into Meryton instead. What a view we had! Colonel Fitzwilliam has a great deal of muscle, does he not?”

Had the colonel been there as well? Elizabeth had not noticed, although it would explain why Mr. Darcy had been swimming in the pond. It seemed like the sort of brash game his cousin would think of, from the little she knew of Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“And Mr. Bingley is so handsome! Jane is so lucky.” Lydia sighed. “I shall have to remember to throw a bucket of water on any gentlemen I am considering as husbands so that I can get a good look. One must know all the facts to make a good decision, do you not think?”

They had reached Longbourn, and Elizabeth merely gave her a look of exasperation before she escaped to her bedchamber. She had to think.

After pacing the room for some ten minutes, she realised this would not do. She needed somebody to talk to. Where was Jane when she needed her?

Her mother and sisters looked up in surprise as she hurried into the parlour. “Lizzy?” Jane asked. “What is wrong?”

Without saying a word, Elizabeth grabbed Jane’s hand and pulled her to her feet.

“Lizzy?” Mamma asked with a frown. “What are you doing?”

“I need to speak with Jane,” Elizabeth said hurriedly. “We will be back soon, I promise.”

Jane, laughing, allowed herself to be pulled upstairs to Elizabeth’s bedroom.

Jane sat at Elizabeth’s toilette table and turned the chair around to face her sister.

“Well?”

“Jane.” Elizabeth’s heart was beating so quickly she felt ill. She lowered herself slowly onto the edge of the bed. “I do not know where to begin.” But as she said that, she found that she did.

“Lydia and I went walking this morning. She wanted a good, long walk, but I did not wish to . . . I could not take her to Oakham Mount. So we went across the fields and through that bit of wood, and we came out right by Netherfield’s pond.”

Jane furrowed her brow. “That is at the far end of Netherfield’s property. Was something wrong?”

Elizabeth choked out a laugh. “Wrong? No. It is just . . . we did not expect anyone to be nearby, of course. We came out from the wood near the pond and would have turned towards the walking path, but we saw . . .” Elizabeth swallowed and put her cool hands to her face to stop the heat she could feel colouring her face and ears. She cleared her throat. “The men had been swimming.”

“Without clothes?” Jane squeaked.

Elizabeth was startled into laughing. “No, no! Or, well, they had taken off their coats and boots. And that is the issue.” She took a deep breath. “I saw his soulmark, Jane.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Whose?”

“Mr. Darcy’s! When we first stepped out of the woods, his back was towards me. With his shirt so wet, it was almost translucent, and I could see his soulmark clearly.”

“And?” Jane looked bemused.

“It was a sweet william flower. His soulmark matches mine, Jane!”

# CHAPTER 17

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ane stood up so abruptly she almost knocked over the chair. “Lizzy, that is impossible.”

“It is supposed to be, yes.”

“You must have been mistaken! He has his soulmatch already! Perhaps it was some other kind of flower.”

“No!” Elizabeth stood and paced to the window, looking outside blankly. In some distant part of her brain, it registered that her stance was much like Mr. Darcy’s when he was uncomfortable. “It was not a mistake. Jane, I swear to you, I saw it clearly. I was not far away, and you must believe that I know my soulmark well.”

She nodded towards the drawing that hung on the wall by her bed. Kitty had completed it two years ago, when Elizabeth was about to turn eighteen, so that Elizabeth would be able to clearly picture and describe the soulmark that was difficult for her to see herself.

“You agreed that it was a good likeness at the time, did you not?” she asked.

Jane studied the drawing. Then, sighing, she moved to Elizabeth’s back and diligently unbuttoned the top buttons until she could lower Elizabeth’s shift.

Fighting the urge to tense her muscles, Elizabeth held herself stiffly as her sister examined it. This was the mystery that explained everything! Mr. Darcy’s loathing of his soulmatch, their yearning for each other—everything! The soulmarks matched; she knew they must!

Finally, Jane re-buttoned her gown and took her seat again. She huffed out a breath.

“It is a good likeness,” she said at last. “But . . . I do not mean to doubt you. It is only that . . .”

“Either two women have the matching soulmark for the same gentleman, or Miss Bingley is only pretending to hers.”

Jane shook her head. “There is a third possibility—that she is somehow mistaken. Her soulmark might be very similar.”

“I suppose there are a great many people in the world.” Elizabeth did not believe it for a moment. “There must be other people with soulmarks of similar flowers.”

“Yes, exactly.” Jane’s face showed her relief. She hated to think ill of others. Then she frowned.

“But, Lizzy, people with soulmarks have a strong affection for each other. You and Mr. Darcy . . .” She hesitated, her eyes searching Elizabeth’s face. “You have not mentioned affection.”

Elizabeth took Jane’s hand and sat down on the bed facing her. “Jane . . . I have not been honest with you. Or, that is, I have not told you everything.”

“You love Mr. Darcy.” Jane’s eyes were wide.

“Yes.” Elizabeth turned Jane’s hand over in hers. “Forgive me for not telling you. I have been so ashamed of my longing for him.”

“Longing!” Jane threaded her fingers in Elizabeth’s and squeezed her hand comfortingly. “Oh, Lizzy! How long have you loved him?”

“It has been coming on so gradually, I hardly know. I did not care much for him at the assembly, but I was intrigued by him, I think. Even then, I believe the soulmark was beginning its work. After that . . . oh, I could not say exactly, but very quickly I came to esteem him, and then long for him. It was not until . . .” Her face warmed. “He almost kissed me in the garden when we were looking for Lady Cat.”

Jane stood in surprise. “Kissed you!”

“Almost kissed me. We did not . . .” The heat rose higher in her cheeks. “We were interrupted before we could kiss. But after that, I could not stop thinking of him, and that was the moment I realised I loved him.”

“And he almost kissed you.” Jane looked thoughtful. “Then he feels the pull, too. And towards you and not towards Miss Bingley, I think. What will you do?”

“I will tell Mr. Darcy.” The thought simultaneously thrilled her and made her sick to her stomach. She let herself fall backwards on her bed to stare at the ceiling for a moment as her heart raced with fear and excitement. What would Mr. Darcy think? Would he doubt her? Think her fit for Bedlam? Would he be angry? Or would he be as relieved as she was?

She rolled to push up to her feet and put her hand on something wet and disgusting.

“Ugh!” she cried, leaping to her feet and looking down at her bed. On the centre of the pillow lay a fat, headless mouse. The head, a few inches away, appeared to be what she had touched. “Oh, no!”

“Jane!” Lydia pushed open the door. “Mother says that you and Lizzy are to return downstairs! Mr. Bingley has come to call!” She glimpsed Elizabeth’s pillow. “Oh, how delightful! Lady Cat is a good mouser after all! Cook will be pleased.”

Elizabeth did not share her delight, but, after all, it was not Lydia’s pillow that Lady Cat had deposited her hunting trophy on. Then Lydia’s words finally registered, and she blanched.

“Did Mr. Darcy accompany him?”

Lydia shook her head. “He came alone.”

“We had best go down,” Jane said, standing.

Elizabeth nodded, but she was already considering what to do next. Why had she not spoken to Mr. Darcy immediately? She had been too stunned, too overcome by the awkwardness of the moment to say anything at the pond.

But it did not matter. She could go to Netherfield once Bingley was gone. Calling on Miss Bingley—no, Mrs. Hurst would be better—would be her excuse. Lydia would come along if she asked, especially as she was still avoiding going into Meryton since her prank. Somehow, she would find a way to speak with Mr. Darcy while she was there. Perhaps Lydia could provide a distraction if necessary.

She would make him listen to her about the soulmark. He would believe her. He had to believe her.

After all, it made sense. Mr. Darcy disliked Miss Bingley, even though soulmarks were supposed to match you to the one you would love. He and Elizabeth had felt an instant connection—well, perhaps not instant. She remembered the assembly at Meryton with an odd little lurch in her stomach. But very quickly, they had found themselves drawn to each other. They were opposites in some ways and so similar in others. Being with Mr. Darcy was as comfortable and natural and essential as breathing. Theirs was the true soulmatch. It had to be.

She had only to convince Mr. Darcy before he left for London—and married Miss Bingley.

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Mr. Bingley was pleasant and cheerful as he always was, but Elizabeth could not help but wish he had not come. Barring that, she wished he would go on his way as soon as possible. It would be impolite to sneak off to Netherfield while Mr. Bingley was visiting, especially as her mother had dragged her sisters out of the room on some flimsy excuse and left Elizabeth as a desultory chaperon, but she was anxious to speak to Mr. Darcy.

Not that she had decided exactly what to say. Her mind spun with the revelations of the morning already, and she had no idea how she would approach the subject. Perhaps waiting until they were together and then letting the words come as they would was the simplest plan.

“—his art,” Mr. Bingley was saying to Jane. “If she had not borne a soulmark, I might have thought he and Caroline would make a match of it. They always had their heads together at every opportunity. But of course a portrait painter would not have suited her, even with his connection to the Darcys.”

“Was he a second son?” Jane asked.

“Oh, no. He was the son of the older Mr. Darcy’s steward, but he was given a gentleman’s education.”

“Forgive me, of whom are we speaking?” Elizabeth asked.

“An old acquaintance,” Mr. Bingley said, looking over at her. “Mr. Wickham. I suggested that he might paint a portrait of Miss Bennet, as she said she has never had hers done. I have always thought his portraits the most perfect and lifelike. Miss Bennet’s beauty should be preserved for the delight of future generations.”

Elizabeth smiled at this compliment to her sister, while Jane blushed and looked down. No matter how many times Jane was told she was beautiful, it always embarrassed her. It had not made her vain, as it would for many girls, for she was too sweet for that.

Lydia, on the other hand, was showing every sign of being as beautiful as Jane once she reached the same age. Elizabeth shuddered to think of what similar compliments might do to her.

But wait. The steward’s son. He was the one Mr. Darcy had spoken of, the man who had pretended to fall in love with Miss Darcy in an attempt to win her fortune, not knowing of her soulmark.

She frowned. Wickham. She did not recall Mr. Darcy giving her the name of the steward’s son, but somehow the name Wickham sounded familiar.

“Darcy is not overfond of Wickham, though I think it is some longstanding rivalry,” Mr. Bingley went on. “Darcy usually bested him in bouts of fencing.”

Fencing!

“Was he the man you mentioned once, the man who played a prank on Mr. Darcy at the fencing parlour?” Jane would not thank her for interfering in her conversation, but anything about Mr. Darcy interested Elizabeth, and there was something that niggled at her about this Mr. Wickham—beyond the fact that she did not think he would be happy Mr. Bingley was recommending him as a portrait artist for Jane.

“He was.” Mr. Bingley’s smile grew into a sly grin. “I understand that Darcy’s father thought the prank rather amusing, but Darcy did not.”

She turned to her embroidery and left Jane and Mr. Bingley to talk in peace, still contemplating what it was that bothered her about Mr. Bingley’s story, and occasionally looking at the clock to calculate how much longer Mr. Bingley was likely to stay and how soon she could escape to see Mr. Darcy.

Would it be odd if she set off for Netherfield on foot the moment Mr. Bingley left? She was, at least, saved from the temptation of asking if she might return to Netherfield with him by the simple expedient that he had ridden his horse over, and she was no horsewoman.

Mrs. Hill suddenly appeared in the room. “Uh, Miss Elizabeth,” she said, giving an awkward glance at Jane and Mr. Bingley, “you are needed in the back parlour.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes for a moment. So, Mamma had decided that this should be Mr. Bingley’s moment, had she? But what if he had plans to propose at the ball? Proposing at the ball was the sort of romantic gesture she could see a gentleman like Mr. Bingley preferring.

She obeyed her mother’s orders in spirit, if not law. Once the door closed behind her, she told Mrs. Hill, “Please tell my mother I have gone to the stillroom.” She would give them a few minutes alone, but she would not wait in a back parlour with Mamma crowing with delight over the engagement she was certain would happen.

That odd niggling feeling returned as she inventoried the amount of rosewater they had left. Had Mr. Wickham still been Mr. Darcy’s friend when he had played his little prank at the fencing parlour? Or had they already fallen out? How would she feel if someone like Caroline Bingley dumped water on her in public? Why, most of her dresses would be almost transparent if soaked enough, which would certainly add to the humiliation.

Not unlike Mr. Darcy’s swim in the pond this morning. Her face heated at the memory.

She put her cool hands to her cheeks. It was not only the realisation that his soulmark matched hers, but also the sight of him dressed so . . . improperly. And really, as Lydia had crowed, his shirt concealed almost nothing when it was wet.

She froze, hands clenched around a bottle.

There were too many thoughts rushing through her brain to make sense of them all. Mr. Darcy. His wet shirt. His transparent wet shirt. His soulmark visible through said wet shirt.

And it was not the only time he had been wet in public. He had been soaked through at his fencing parlour, thanks to Mr. Wickham’s prank. How wet exactly had he been? It was hard to say. A “bucket of water” dumped on him might have soaked him through, or it could have just splashed him a little, or even mostly wet the front of his shirt, not the back.

But there were too many other things that fit. Mr. Wickham was a great friend of Miss Bingley’s. They had spent a great deal of time together.

And Mr. Wickham was a portrait painter. An artist.

Elizabeth sat down hard on one of the stools. She could not see for the black fog rushing in around her vision. For a moment, she felt as if the whole world were pulsing around her.

Maybe Mr. Wickham was not a suitor, but a co-conspirator. Maybe Miss Bingley had paid him to find out what Mr. Darcy’s soulmark was and to paint it for her.

That was where Elizabeth was stymied. What then? Had Miss Bingley had it inked onto herself? Perhaps Mr. Wickham had made a painting for her, and she had someone paint it on her from the illustration. Surely she would not have risked the scandal of having Mr. Wickham do it.

It made the most sense. The ink would soak into the skin, and after a day or so it probably would look like a soulmark. Would it be enough to pass muster? It must have been convincing indeed for Mr. Darcy to be so certain it was real.

Miss Bingley would have to have the ink reapplied every few days to keep the false soulmark looking real. She must have someone helping her at Netherfield Park.

Mrs. Hurst? She seemed the most likely. She was Miss Bingley’s closest friend and would also benefit from her sister marrying Mr. Darcy. She would keep the secret, and Miss Bingley would not have to expose her back to a man or risk being discovered.

In fact, Mr. Wickham might even be misled. Miss Bingley could easily have told him that she had reason to suspect that Mr. Darcy’s soulmark matched her own and that she wanted to be sure before approaching him. Once he had given her the painting, if her sister was skilled enough, she could ink it onto Miss Bingley herself.

Soulmarks were unique and beautiful, but they were also not particularly complex works of art. Kitty could certainly adequately ink a soulmark onto someone if she had wanted to do such a thing.

Miss Bingley might not even keep up the soulmark all the time. Since it was not visible outside her clothes, it was not likely to be visible until her wedding night, so she might wait until just before the wedding to have it reapplied.

Or perhaps not. Miss Bingley would not risk accidental exposure ruining everything.

Elizabeth took deep, slow breaths while she got her thoughts in order.

This was all still assumption and inference. But it made so much sense. Why Miss Bingley had waited until she was twenty to tell Mr. Darcy about her soulmark—because she had to find out what his soulmark was, which required a great deal of planning and plotting.

Elizabeth frowned, looking in the direction of the room that currently held Jane and Mr. Bingley. What did Mr. Bingley know?

Presumably, if Elizabeth’s suppositions were right, Miss Bingley did not have a soulmark at all.

If so, then how had Mr. Bingley accepted the appearance of a soulmark? Since Mr. Darcy was older than her, it should have appeared at her birth.

Was it possible for a brother not to know whether a sister had a soulmark or not? Had his sisters convinced him that Miss Bingley had had one all along? Without a brother herself, she had no idea whether brother and sister pairings would necessarily know such a thing about each other.

She heard the sounds of Mr. Bingley calling farewells at the door. She would speak with Jane. After all, if Miss Bingley’s soulmark was only ink, it should be possible to expose her treachery.

And besides, she should really find out if Jane was now engaged to Mr. Bingley.

# CHAPTER 18

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“D

arcy,” Miss Bingley called as he passed the parlour where she sat with her sister.

He hesitated, then reluctantly joined them.

She was holding a letter, and she waved it delicately in the air. “I have received the most delightful letter from dear Georgiana! My, but how she anticipates becoming my sister! And I must admit that I am just as anxious to become hers. She is the sweetest girl.”

Darcy bowed his head at the compliments to his sister, but he felt an odd tension in the air. There was something Miss Bingley was waiting to discuss. He could see the taut edge to her bright smile.

“It is odd, though, that she seems to be under the impression that there are kittens here!” She gave a little trilling laugh. “Kittens, of all things!”

And there it was. Darcy sighed internally. He had mentioned the kittens in passing to Georgiana because he knew how much she adored cats. Poor Georgiana struggled to find anything to write to Miss Bingley about, but she felt obligated since Miss Bingley was soon to become her sister. She must have assumed the kittens were at Netherfield. He had not thought to mention Longbourn.

Well, that was not strictly true. He had fought not to mention Longbourn or its inhabitants. He already spent too much time thinking of one inhabitant specifically, and the last thing he needed was for Georgiana to ask too many questions about Miss Elizabeth.

“I had heard that kittens were born at Longbourn,” he explained simply. “Georgiana loves cats, so I mentioned them to her in passing.”

“Longbourn.” Miss Bingley implied a great deal in that single word. “And from whom did you hear this news? I had not heard that you had visited Longbourn recently.”

“Lady Catherine and I happened across two of the Bennet sisters when we went outside to walk a few days ago.” Not strictly a lie, even if it was not when he had heard.

“Hmm.” Miss Bingley’s eyes narrowed before she pasted on another large smile. “Kittens. How lovely.”

Darcy was not certain how to respond to that, so he bowed to the ladies and moved to leave.

“Darcy!” Miss Bingley called again in that grating tone. It set his teeth on edge when she called him “Darcy” without the honorific, but he supposed he had best get used to it. Once they married, he could hardly insist she call him “Mr. Darcy” in private.

“Yes?”

“You are not going to Longbourn today, are you?”

He clenched the edge of the sofa. “I did not intend to, no.”

“Good.” She nodded at him, satisfied. “I think it better that you spend less time there in the future. Poor Mrs. Bennet has five daughters to marry off. It is hardly kind to visit often when you, dear sir, are the handsomest man in the county and are, of course, very much taken.”

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Jane was not engaged to Mr. Bingley.

“Do not think I did not notice you leave the room, Lizzy,” Jane said, shaking her head.

“Mamma made me!” She had been gone far longer than she had intended, given the revelation that had occurred to her in the stillroom.

Jane bit her lip and looked away. “Well. It was uncomfortable for a minute or two after you left. Mr. Bingley and I were very aware of being left alone. And there were moments when . . . when I thought he was about to say something of importance. But he did not. He spoke of the ball and his preparations—would you believe he is going to London right now?”

“London?” Elizabeth sat up quickly. “Now? He will barely make it there by sundown, and his ball is tomorrow!”

“Miss Bingley has it in hand, it seems, except that she discovered that some of the items she ordered from London did not arrive, and so she has sent her brother to London to retrieve them. He rides there tonight, and then he will return tomorrow just in time for the ball.”

“Why, he will be exhausted!” Elizabeth could not imagine spending four hours in the saddle two days in a row and then immediately dancing all evening. She grimaced as she realised that that might be exactly Miss Bingley’s goal—to prevent him from dancing much during the night. She seemed almost as determined to keep her brother from Jane as she did to hold onto her own false match with Mr. Darcy.

Jane twisted her fingers together. “I hope he is safe. He laughed and said that he has ridden as far many times before. And of course, he is a lively sort of gentleman with a great deal of energy. I do hope he will still be ready to dance at the ball.”

Elizabeth took one of Jane’s hands in hers. “I hope so, too.” She took a deep breath. “Jane, do you remember Mr. Bingley’s story about the man who dumped a bucket of water on Mr. Darcy at a fencing club?”

Jane nodded, frowning.

“It occurred to me that Mr. Darcy’s soulmark may have been exposed in the process.”

Jane cocked her head. “You have the look of someone who has discovered a great secret.”

“Miss Bingley is great friends with the gentleman. He is a portrait artist. And it occurs to me that a man with an artistic mind might be able to make a painting or drawing of what he saw.”

Jane gasped. “You think he gave it to Miss Bingley?”

“And that she had her sister ink on a soulmark to match.”

Jane put her hands to her face. “I cannot think she would do such a thing. I cannot. I know she is unkind to you, but . . . but how could anyone do such a thing? And yet when you say it, it all fits together . . . but it is impossible, it is surely impossible!”

“It is also impossible for two women to have soulmarks for the same man. And you know how much he dislikes her. How does that fit with what we know, what everyone knows, about soulmarks?”

Jane shook her head.

“I have a plan.”

Jane did not remove her hands from her face. “Of course you do,” she said, her voice muffled, but Elizabeth could detect a hint of a smile.

“During the Netherfield ball, what if I were to accidentally dump a bucket of water on Miss Bingley?”

Jane gasped and lowered her hands, staring at Elizabeth in dismay. “You would not! Oh, Lizzy!”

“It would smear the ink of her soulmark and expose her.” In more ways than one. But if Miss Bingley had truly feigned a soulmark, she deserved to be publicly exposed.

Jane glared at her. “Lizzy. You know you cannot do it. For one thing, what if you are wrong? You would humiliate her, create a massive scandal, and ruin your own reputation.”

“I am not wrong.”

“I begin to think you may be right,” Jane admitted reluctantly. “But all the same. Even if Miss Bingley does have an inked imitation of a soulmark, what if the ink is too old and does not run? What if her dress is too dark or thick to see the soulmark through it? After all, Mr. Darcy was wearing a thin white lawn shirt when you were able to see his, but a lady at a ball would be wearing several layers. What if you missed and only drenched her hair or skirts?”

“I would not miss,” Elizabeth said hotly, “although the rest of your points are valid.” She sighed.

“Would it not be easier to simply tell Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth swallowed. It would. If he believed her.

He would want to believe her, she was sure. But the whole idea was so outrageous. Would he trust in his own dislike of, and knowledge of, Miss Bingley? He had been friends with her for so very long. Would he be willing to entertain the thought of her as a murderer?

She did not dare mention that part to Jane. Jane might, perhaps, have realised it already. Or she might not have.

Not marrying one’s soulmatch meant death. It was unpredictable how long it would take, but most people began to feel the symptoms by age five-and-thirty or so. Some felt them sooner, some later. And it was rare to live until forty if one did not find and marry their soulmatch.

Miss Bingley was condemning Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth to a slow, miserable death with her pretence.

Elizabeth shuddered at the thought. “Very well, Jane,” she said. “I do not think I could have borne the wait until tomorrow, anyway. I will walk to Netherfield and speak to Mr. Darcy directly as I had planned.”

“You cannot present yourself at Netherfield alone!” Jane said, sounding scandalised. “But . . . I cannot . . .”

“I will take Lydia and call on Mrs. Hurst.”

“Good.” Jane’s relief was clear. She had never liked confrontations. Lydia, on the other hand, thrived on them.

Riding would be quicker, faster, and less muddy. But it would require sitting on a horse. At least she could use the walk to determine what she would say, and perhaps suggest ways that Lydia could keep Mrs. Hurst distracted if necessary. Lydia loved subterfuge and would probably help as long as Elizabeth promised to explain everything later, and once she had spoken to Mr. Darcy, everything would be revealed anyway.

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Miss Bingley was up to something. Darcy was not sure what it was, but he was familiar enough with her machinations to know that she had plans and he would not like them.

First, she had sent Bingley to London on some flimsy pretext. She had suggested that he travel with Bingley as well, which had immediately set his hackles up. If Bingley was going to London to pick up some needed supplies, what good would Darcy be? It was hardly necessary to have two men.

Furthermore, when Bingley had expressed doubts about taking the carriage to London and back in the short time available, Miss Bingley had suggested he ride.

To London. To pick up supplies for the ball.

Where Bingley was supposed to carry said supplies, Darcy could not say. In saddle bags, perhaps? Miss Bingley had not specified, and Bingley, of course, had not asked.

She had been infuriated when she discovered that Bingley had gone to Longbourn after breakfast. Only Bingley’s lack of announcement upon his return mollified her a little, but Darcy knew it meant nothing. If Bingley had proposed to Miss Bennet, which he supposed was what Miss Bingley was trying to avoid, he might prefer to wait and announce it at the ball.

But Bingley was hardly a man to hide his emotions, and he did not have the excitement and delight of a newly engaged man. He did not seem disappointed, either, so Darcy assumed he had not proposed and been rejected—not that any woman in her right mind would reject the affable and wealthy Bingley as a husband.

If it were only Miss Bingley’s plots in regards her brother, Darcy would not have been suspicious. She was always attempting to lead him around by the nose, and she had made no secret of her disdain for the Bennets, except perhaps to Miss Bennet herself.

But she had been very anxious to keep Darcy busy as well. Yesterday, she had asked him to search the library for a book—a task that should have provided no challenge in such a library—but she had been unable to describe it in any detail. He had come out several times to tell her he had been unable to find it, and she had given him an entirely different description and sent him back in again. He had finally given up and spent hours reading one of the few decent books there, emerging only to tell her he had not found it. She had not seemed disappointed at all.

Furthermore, one of the times he had come out, he had overheard her speaking with the butler. Something about being far too busy preparing for the ball and unable to receive visitors, which seemed rather impolite even for Miss Bingley.

Today, she had first tried to convince him to ride to Hertford for some last-minute item that it was too late to send to London for and was absolutely essential. When he would not, she had pouted, but then attempted to order him to keep Hurst and Mrs. Hurst entertained with cards while she prepared the house.

Thank goodness Richard had suggested a fencing bout instead.

Miss Bingley’s response, though, made him suspicious. She was happy to allow him and Richard to have their bout in the ballroom, despite the servants coming in and out to decorate for the ball.

“As Colonel Fitzwilliam says, large areas will be left open for dancing anyway,” she said with a bright smile, “so I see no reason why you should not have your sport there.”

She was not the sort of lady whom he would usually consider open to potential disruption of her plans, so her reaction bemused him. But what could she be plotting? Perhaps she expected them to fence in a state of undress, and thus she thought to come upon them unawares and create a situation where their marriage had to happen sooner than later? After all, she could not have missed Darcy’s avoidance of setting a wedding date.

Fortunately, Lady Cecily was willing to stand guard, and he and Richard fought in their riding costumes. Richard had rolled his eyes when Darcy explained why, but he understood the need for it.

But Miss Bingley did not come upon them at all. She occasionally came to the door of the ballroom to give orders to the servants, but she came no farther and showed no interest in his activities beyond looking to see if they were still fencing. Odd.

“Point!” Richard crowed as he touched Darcy’s shoulder again with his foil. “You know, I thought fighting this way was the worst idea ever, but I have come completely around now that I have vanquished you twice. Perhaps next time we should fence in our coats as well, do you think?”

Darcy laughed and shook his head, but as he rolled his sore shoulders, he frowned. He usually beat Richard in two bouts out of three. Richard was stronger and faster, but he was accustomed to fighting with heavier weapons, and he had not had as much opportunity to keep up with his forms during his years on the battlefield. While Darcy had no doubts that Richard could best him in a full-out battle, Darcy usually won at fencing.

His legs were still a little sore as well, although thankfully they had not seized again as they had the other morning.

Perhaps he ought to visit a physician upon his return to London. His father had an aunt who had suffered a sort of wasting ailment, although it had been her muscles that had slowly wasted away despite everything the physicians had tried, until she was confined to bed for the last years of her life.

But that could not happen to Darcy, surely. He was active and rarely took ill. It must just be exercise—or lack thereof—or perhaps too much of the wrong sort?

He longed to tell Richard, but telling him would admit that there was a real problem, not just an occasional lapse of muscle strength. Richard would make too much of it.

Thankfully, his strength held out for their bouts, although he was sore afterwards, and Richard could not stop crowing.

Could he use exhaustion to get out of dancing much at the ball? Miss Bingley would not object if he confined himself to only a few dances, he thought. Although she would not appreciate his idea of dancing with Miss Elizabeth.

It would be their last day together. It could not hurt for him to indulge himself this one last time, surely.

As he winced at a twinge in his back while making his way upstairs, he happened to glance out a window. Two hooded figures were leaving on foot. It was unpleasant weather for a walk, and yet the visitors had clearly been to the front door, not the back. He wondered that they did not ride or take a carriage. What business did they have with the mistress of the house the day of her ball?

# CHAPTER 19

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lizabeth was fuming as she arrived at Mr. Bingley’s ball. She barely noticed the chandeliers, numerous expensive candles, or the decorative marzipan shaped to look like swans.

She had walked to Netherfield Park with Lydia both yesterday and today in the hopes of speaking to Mr. Darcy. But both days, as if Miss Bingley knew her plot had been discovered, the butler had met them at the door to tell her that all the gentlemen were out and the ladies were busy preparing for the ball and could not visit. With Elizabeth, she supposed, Miss Bingley felt no need to keep up a pretence of civility.

Elizabeth had circled around Netherfield at a distance today, looking towards the stables to see if, by any chance, Mr. Darcy was out for a ride. But she had caught no glimpse of him.

Despite the threat of rain, she had gone to both Meryton and Oakham Mount in vain. She had not seen him, and now she had sore ankles and felt vaguely ill all over, as if a cold were coming on. But illness could not stop her from going to Netherfield for the ball, not with so much at stake.

She was certain to find an opportunity to speak with Mr. Darcy at the ball. It was not the setting she would have chosen to speak with him privately, but if all else failed, she could resort to dumping water over Miss Bingley. Although where she would get a bucket of water at a ball, she could not say.

Jane had agreed to tell Mr. Bingley about Elizabeth’s soulmark at dinner. If Elizabeth could not find privacy enough to tell Mr. Darcy, his friend could tell him.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. Nerves. Now she sounded like her mother! Caroline Bingley could do that to people.

Mr. Bingley was busy with the receiving line, as was his sister, so Elizabeth searched the room for Mr. Darcy. But he was not there.

It was not until this moment that she felt a real fear. Mr. Darcy had once mentioned disliking balls, and Mr. Bingley had told him that he might go to bed early if he chose. She had been amused at the time, assuming it an idle threat.

Was it possible that Mr. Darcy really did loathe balls to the extent that he would hide in his room rather than attend one? Would Miss Bingley even allow it? After all, it was her ball, and he was her betrothed.

But he might also be avoiding Elizabeth, and Miss Bingley would be in support of that. After all, he had made his intentions clear. He was going back to London after the ball, and they would not see each other again.

It was a wonder, now she thought of it, that they had not realised at that moment. Why would a man have to escape the temptation of one woman if he were soulmatched to another?

The music began to play for the first dance, and Elizabeth watched as Mr. Bingley led Jane to the floor. At least one sister would have pleasure in the ball.

If she did not find Mr. Darcy, Jane would tell Mr. Bingley. All would be well.

Why, then, did she still feel anxiety twisting at her stomach?

Miss Bingley moved to the head of the dance, and Elizabeth saw with shock that her partner was none other than Mr. Darcy! He was here!

Had he been hiding? Avoiding her? Or had he simply come down late?

The dance began, and Elizabeth fumed to watch him going down the dance with Miss Bingley. That evil . . . she had no words for Miss Bingley’s treachery. Or at least no words that she could use in polite society.

Miss Bingley was ready to see Mr. Darcy die—and Elizabeth as well—so that she might marry well!

Elizabeth had often thought Jane had too rosy a view of the world. When Jane did hear of something unkind, she was utterly shocked, as if she had to revise her entire perception of the world.

Now Elizabeth felt a little like Jane, astounded to realise that there could be such evil in the world. She might have heard of worse crimes in the papers and scandal sheets, but to see it in her ordinary life was completely shocking.

“May I ask why you are glaring at our hostess as if you wish you could set her aflame?”

Elizabeth turned to smile at Charlotte Lucas. “I had not thought of incineration, but now that you mention it . . .”

They shared a grin before Elizabeth shrugged.

“In all honesty, I should probably not speak of it just now. But if you will be patient, I think I will be able to tell you tomorrow.” Much as she longed to confide in her friend, it did not seem right to tell Charlotte before she had told Mr. Darcy himself.

“How intriguing.” Charlotte looked from Elizabeth to Miss Bingley and her partner, then back to Elizabeth. Her eyes narrowed. “Very intriguing,” she said. “Now, I have heard that your cousin has left already! I am surprised that he went back to Kent without a wife.”

Elizabeth blushed. “Well . . .”

“Ah.” Charlotte cocked her head. “But you are soulmarked.”

“He thought I was only pretending.” Elizabeth tried to keep the bitterness from her voice, but she did not know whether she was successful.

Charlotte gaped at her. “Pretending?”

“So that I could avoid unwanted suitors in Meryton, apparently.”

Charlotte shook her head. “I might have considered him,” she said, taking Elizabeth by surprise. “But I do not think I could have tolerated that degree of wilful ignorance.”

“Considered him?” Surely Charlotte did not mean . . . “Considered marrying him?”

“Well.” Charlotte looked down. “I will not, now. But yes, I would marry just about any man who could provide me with security. I have never had any fortune or beauty, and now I no longer even have youth.” She met Elizabeth’s eyes for only a moment before looking towards the dancing couples. “I have no soulmark. There is no guaranteed future for me.”

Elizabeth swallowed. The idea of Charlotte marrying Mr. Collins was horrible. But what choice did Charlotte have? Not every woman found romantic love, and any marriage was better than spinsterhood.

A pang of guilt hit her. She had a soulmark. She knew, had always known, that there was a man destined for her. She had always had confidence in her future, whether she had partners at an assembly or not.

Knowing nothing else to say, Elizabeth took Charlotte’s hand in her own and squeezed it.

Charlotte did not look back at her—she had the idea that Charlotte was blinking rapidly to avoid tears—but she squeezed back.

It was just as well that nobody had asked her to dance the first. Her legs ached from all the walking she had done in the past few days, and her head felt just a little cloudy. But she would not give into discomfort, not now.

After the first dance, Mr. Darcy looked out into the crowd, and Elizabeth had the sense that he was looking for her. He looked abashed when Miss Bingley said something to him and took his arm.

Biding her time, Elizabeth waited until Miss Bingley finally left Mr. Darcy’s side before approaching.

She did not make it. Mrs. Hurst stopped her with a smile so broad her teeth were visible.

“Miss Elizabeth!” she said brightly. “I am so delighted you were able to attend! Are Caroline’s decorations not superb?”

“I am impressed,” Elizabeth said honestly, looking around. “It is lovely and elegant.”

“We have missed you immensely since your departure from Netherfield, you know,” Mrs. Hurst said, taking her arm and beginning a stroll along the edge of the room. “We were just saying how bereft we are without your wit.”

Mrs. Hurst, then, was helping her sister. No matter what she said, Elizabeth knew well that she and her sister were not “bereft.” It was clear that Mrs. Hurst wanted to keep Elizabeth away from Mr. Darcy as much as her sister did.

Unfortunately, it did not matter that she knew Mrs. Hurst merely wanted to distract her. She could not politely walk away, and Mrs. Hurst was intentionally oblivious to Elizabeth’s hints of having something else to do. Mrs. Hurst’s grip was a little too tight to be friendly. Tight enough, in fact, that her arm ached.

They knew.

Whether they knew that Elizabeth had figured out that Miss Bingley’s soulmark was faked, she could not say. But they certainly knew that she was Mr. Darcy’s soulmatch and that she was desperate to speak to him.

Her head ached, and she felt dizzy as she looked around the ballroom. The lights suddenly seemed too bright, the music too loud.

Miss Bingley might have known from the beginning. It would explain her early antipathy to Elizabeth. She had seen her as a rival—not just a rival, but the rival. The one who was meant for Mr. Darcy. Had Miss Bingley seen something they did not? Even at that first assembly, her behaviour would suggest that she had somehow known.

Once or twice, Elizabeth caught a glimpse of Mr. Darcy looking her way. His eyes burned with emotion. Was he as desperate to speak to her as she was to him? But by the time Mrs. Hurst released her, she could not see him in the crowded room.

“Lizzy.”

Elizabeth turned to Jane with surprise. Jane was shockingly pale, the hair around her face damp with sweat.

“Lizzy,” Jane said again, her voice shaky. “I feel very unwell. I cannot . . . I need to go home.”

“Of course!” Elizabeth said, springing into action. “You stay here, or against that wall, and I will find Papa and we will take you home.” Poor Jane! To be so very ill on the night of Mr. Bingley’s ball. Was it something serious to have set in so quickly?

She found Charlotte on her way to her father and asked her to stay with Jane while they made arrangements.

Papa was relieved to be released to his peaceful library after the noise of the ball, and he was quite agreeable to take Jane home. Elizabeth went to Mamma next, as Mamma might be concerned about Jane’s sudden illness. But Mamma was enjoying herself far too much to leave just yet and was certain Jane was feeling a simple relapse from her cold last month.

Just as Elizabeth went to collect her outerwear along with Jane’s, she remembered.

Jane was ill—she needed Elizabeth. But this was Elizabeth’s last opportunity to speak with Mr. Darcy. Once he went to London, he would be out of her reach. She might be able to convince her father that he should send her to London, but it would take time, and Mr. Darcy might be wed by then.

But how could she leave Jane alone?

“I will be well,” Jane whispered as Elizabeth supported her to the carriage. “I believe I may have accidentally eaten something with cheese.”

Some of Elizabeth’s tension released. She had been present at several of Jane’s accidental bouts with milk or cheese and knew well the uncomfortable results. Jane would be well, but she would want privacy for several hours.

As if she could read Elizabeth’s mind, Jane squeezed her hand. “You must stay and speak with Mr. Darcy or Mr. Bingley. I will not be here to speak with Mr. Bingley for you.” She looked back towards the ballroom. “Go on, Lizzy.” She gave Elizabeth a weak smile. “Then come back and tell me about it. It will be good to have something to think about other than my stomach.”

Elizabeth returned to the ballroom determined. Enough of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley and their plots. She would simply pull free if Mrs. Hurst tried to take her arm again. A little headache was nothing in comparison to the disaster that awaited her if she failed.

She entered the ballroom and looked about for Mr. Darcy. He was dancing with Mrs. Hurst. She sighed. Mr. Bingley was dancing as well. At least Mrs. Hurst was too busy to accost her, but it hardly mattered when both of the people she wished to speak to were dancing.

“Miss Bennet!” Miss Bingley was at her side. “I have been longing to introduce you to a friend of mine. If you will come this way.”

Mr. Darcy was still dancing. Miss Bingley could not truly want to introduce her to a friend—but what did she want? Elizabeth followed hesitantly. There was no way she would go with Miss Bingley onto a balcony or out of the ballroom, but Miss Bingley was only moving towards the side of the room. They passed the massive fireplace where a servant was stoking the fire. They stopped, and Miss Bingley looked around with a bemused expression that Elizabeth was sure was feigned.

“Now, where did she go? Oh!”

Miss Bingley’s eyes went wide as she stared over Elizabeth’s shoulder. Elizabeth spun around to see the servant moving towards her, carrying a pail on his shoulder.

Before Elizabeth could dodge out of the way, he tripped, dumping the entire pail of soot all over her.

Elizabeth was too startled to cry out. She stared down at her ruined dress, blackened with soot.

“Oh, dear Miss Elizabeth! How could that fool be so clumsy! You will lose your position for this!” she hissed at the servant.

Elizabeth blinked. He did not look distraught in the slightest. In fact, he wore a slight smile on his face. He bowed and strode out of the room.

Miss Bingley looked Elizabeth up and down, tsking. “You poor thing. And your sister has already gone home in your family’s carriage! I will call our carriage to take you back home so that you may bathe. I do apologise, Miss Elizabeth. Our own servants are of course well-trained, but one must hire additional servants for a ball, and one never knows what sort of training they may have. He shall lose his position at once, I assure you.”

Others nearby had stopped to stare, and Elizabeth was sure she was a sight. Most of the soot was on the front of her dress, but her neck, arms, and probably face were liberally blackened as well.

Strangling Miss Bingley in the ballroom of Netherfield might be momentarily gratifying, but it would disgrace her family and end at the noose. She did not dare say a word, for fear that she would scream at the devious, deceitful woman in front of all of Meryton.

The servant had not taken it upon himself to collect a pail of soot in the middle of the ballroom, and there was absolutely no reason he would carry it on his shoulder instead of by the handle. The “accident” was clearly contrived by Miss Bingley to keep her away from Mr. Darcy.

And the worst part was . . . it just might work.

# CHAPTER 20

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ushing into the retiring room, Elizabeth fought to keep down her raging emotions as she considered her options.

She could not go back into the ballroom as if she were not covered with soot and try to speak with Mr. Darcy. She could only imagine the rumours that would arise about where Miss Elizabeth had been and whether she had climbed inside a chimney to get that covered, and then they would speculate about what she had been doing to get so dirty, and before she knew it, her reputation would be as sullied as her dress.

But the ball was not even half over. Supper would be served in about half an hour. If she allowed the Netherfield carriage to take her back to Longbourn, she could clean the soot off, change into a new dress, and return before the end of the ball. Even better, Miss Bingley would not expect her to return. She might be able to slip into the ballroom and find Mr. Darcy before Miss Bingley knew she was there. He would ask her to dance the last dance, and she would tell him the truth about their soulmarks as they circled and passed each other in the dance.

Half an hour to travel to Longbourn, half an hour back. How long would it take her to wash and dress? Her heart sank as she calculated.

The door to the retiring room opened behind her. Miss Bingley had come to tell her the carriage was ready for Longbourn.

“Eliza.”

Elizabeth twisted to see Charlotte Lucas standing just inside the door.

“Charlotte!” she exclaimed. “I am afraid I am unfit for company.”

Charlotte took the nearest seat. “I saw.” She shook her head. “That artful, conniving woman.” She paused. “He is your soulmatch, is he not?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“Then hers is false.” Charlotte caught her breath. “She would see both of you die of soul weakening so that she can have his name and fortune.”

“I must speak with him.” Elizabeth looked down at her soot-covered gown. “Or someone must. Would you speak with him? She would not suspect you.”

Charlotte shook her head slowly. “I would,” she said, “but I think it has to be you. Fortunately, I am not needed at this ball any longer. I have had two dances, which was as much as I could expect.” She reached behind her and began to unlace her dress. “Take your dress off and wash up in the basin.” She grimaced. “We may need to ask a servant to refill it . . . a few times. Then we will switch dresses. It is lucky we are close to the same size!”

“Charlotte, I could not—”

“You can.” Charlotte stepped out of her gown. “It is also lucky that both of us often have to dress without maids, as I would not want your sooty hands trying to unlace my gown. Hurry, and perhaps you can speak to him at supper.”

Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears and her fingers trembled as she removed her gown. “I do not know how to thank you.”

“It is what friends do. Besides, I suspect that Miss Bingley may have been busier than you realise.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth scrubbed at her face and arms, despairing at how quickly the water in the basin turned black. Thankfully, there was a maid assigned to the retiring room, and as soon as she peeked into the room to offer assistance, Charlotte sent her scurrying to refill the basin.

“I had a talk with Maria after the party at Haye Park. I was bemused by her sudden interest in Mr. Bingley, considering how open he has been about his affection for Jane. Maria told me that Miss Bingley had spoken of her brother, confiding that he was secretly interested in Maria, but that Jane was always demanding his attention and preventing him from speaking with anyone else. Maria was thrilled to think that Mr. Bingley might be harbouring a secret interest in her, the foolish girl.” Charlotte shook her head. “Anyone could see that it is Mr. Bingley who seeks out Jane, not the reverse. Why would he be interested in Maria, with whom he has barely spoken? She does not have Jane’s beauty, either.”

“Poor Maria.”

Charlotte scoffed. “Poor Maria, indeed. From the behaviour of all the young ladies at the party, though, I would wager a guess that Miss Bingley repeated this tale with all of them.”

“He has complained several times about problems with the house requiring his attention,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully as she scrubbed between her fingers. How had soot gotten itself into every crevice of her skin? “I wonder if Miss Bingley had something to do with that after all. She could not have created all the problems herself, but then, she was not the one who dumped the pail of soot on me, either.”

“She has an ally among the servants.” Charlotte tapped her chin. “Or several. She must be paying them well. It is really too bad that Jane became ill tonight. If Mr. Bingley had proposed, Miss Bingley would have had to stop interfering there, at least.”

It was true that Elizabeth and Charlotte were of a similar size, although Charlotte’s gowns had a little more room in the bosom than Elizabeth’s. But it was cleaning herself that took most of the time and a full four basins of water.

“There is still soot in my hair,” Elizabeth said, examining it closely in the mirror.

“Then it is good you are not blond like Jane.” Charlotte looked down at her soot-covered gown. “Nobody will notice it in your hair. You smell like a chimney, but that cannot be helped and will not create a scandal.”

Elizabeth nodded. “She cannot possibly have another pail of soot to dump upon me.” She squeezed Charlotte’s hands in a final gesture of thanks.

Charlotte smiled as she walked towards the entrance where Netherfield’s carriage awaited her. “I will enjoy making use of Miss Bingley’s carriage to carry my soot-covered self back to Lucas Lodge,” she admitted.

“Just do not get too much soot on the seats. It is Mr. Bingley’s carriage, after all, not hers.”

“Duly noted. The best of luck to you, Eliza!”

Elizabeth took a deep breath before returning to the ballroom and slipping into the crowd. The music had ended, and everyone was making their way to the dining room for the meal.

Unfortunately, her late arrival put her too late to find a seat near Mr. Darcy or Mr. Bingley. By the time she arrived, the seats near them were taken. The next goal, therefore, was to avoid the notice of Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst so that she could approach one of the men after dinner.

“My nerves have been plaguing me all evening,” Mamma cried to Lady Lucas, “for Jane was forced to leave early, and you know Mr. Bingley was most likely planning to propose to her this evening.”

Elizabeth wished she could slide out from her chair and hide under the table. Even from her obscure location, she could see Mr. Bingley turning bright red as he pretended not to hear, and Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were whispering furiously to themselves.

“Now there will be a great match,” Mamma went on, oblivious to the hints Lady Lucas was giving her. “And that will mean two of my girls will marry well, for you know Lizzy has a soulmark, which means she will marry a gentleman.”

“Darcy!”

A cacophony of voices brought Elizabeth to her feet, and she stared in horror at the other end of the table. Mr. Darcy had collapsed onto the table, narrowly missing his white soup.

“I knew you were ill!” Colonel Fitzwilliam was booming, yanking his cousin to his feet. “Come, we must get you to bed and call for a physician!”

“No!” Miss Bingley said shrilly. “We will find no better than a country apothecary here. We must take him to London—now, tonight—to see the best physicians!”

“No!” Mr. Darcy said, pushing his cousin away. “I am well enough. It was a moment of . . . of weakness. I will retire to my bedchamber, and we will return to London tomorrow as scheduled.”

His eyes met Elizabeth’s, and she felt a pang in her chest at the look in them. Loss, despair, frustration. He pushed back his chair and stood, but then he wobbled, and his cousin darted back in to put an arm around his shoulders.

“Hawkins!” the colonel called to the nearest footman. “Help me take him to the retiring room.”

“Of course, sir.”

“No!” Miss Bingley wailed, but the colonel and footman were already helping Darcy towards the doorway. Miss Bingley whirled to face her brother. “This is what comes of allowing Mr. Darcy to get wet through from that frigid pond!”

Elizabeth had stood frozen as she watched Mr. Darcy’s cousin and friends help him. She longed to rush to his side, but with their soulmatch unacknowledged—

With their soulmatch unacknowledged . . .

A pit formed at the base of Elizabeth’s stomach. This was not an ordinary ailment. He was not ill from his swim, despite the cold weather. He was suffering from the soul weakening!

And there was only one cure.

She shoved her chair out of the way and rushed towards the entrance of the ballroom at an unladylike pace, but she was not the only one anxious to get to Mr. Darcy, if for different reasons. Not only had his entire party gone out with him, including the Hursts and Colonel Fitzwilliam’s wife, but it seemed half the crowd at the ball intended to satisfy their curiosity. She supposed that his collapse was the most exciting thing to happen at a ball in recent memory, but his life was at stake!

“If you would excuse me,” she began saying as she slipped between Lady Lucas and Mr. Goulding, but by the time she was attempting to pass the Harringtons, the most she spared was a curt “Excuse me!”

If only she had been on the other side of the ballroom!

When she reached the wide passageway, she saw that people were gathered outside the retiring room trying to peer inside, so he must be in there.

Mrs. Hurst and Lady Cecily, the colonel’s wife, stood as if on guard at the door.

“Perhaps I can be of assistance!” Sir William boomed. “I have brought Mr. Jones to you, you see!”

“The village apothecary,” Mrs. Hurst sneered. “I am afraid that Mr. Darcy’s symptoms are too severe for your help at this time. His cousin is preparing him for the return to London, where he will be seen by the best of physicians.”

Lady Cecily gave Sir William and Mr. Jones a sympathetic smile before looking back down at the floor, but she did not shift her position.

Elizabeth pushed forward, ignoring Mary King’s yelp of dismay as she stepped on her foot. But before she could slip past Sir William and into the room, Mrs. Hurst glimpsed her.

“Please, everyone,” she said, waving a hand languidly, “return to the ball. We have everything under control here.” Her gesture looked relaxed, but her eyes were sharp on Elizabeth.

There were murmurs from the curious onlookers, and Sir William turned to face them all. “She is correct. Ladies and gentlemen, let us return to the ball and leave Mr. Bingley to tend to his guest. Goulding, would you ask the musicians to begin playing again?” And with that, the portly gentleman herded the crowd back towards the ballroom entrance.

Elizabeth ducked past him. She had to get to Mr. Darcy.

Miss Bingley’s shrill voice rose above the colonel’s. “This would never have happened if he had married me already! We would be in London and not this cesspool of disease!”

Elizabeth tried to step into the room, but Mrs. Hurst shifted to block her.

“I apologise, Miss Elizabeth, but it is best that guests return to the ballroom. Colonel Fitzwilliam has his cousin well in hand.” Now that the crowd had moved from the doorway, Mrs. Hurst moved to shut the door.

Elizabeth stepped forward to prevent the door from closing. “I believe I can help,” she said firmly. “Let me pass.”

There was a sudden shuffling inside the room as Miss Bingley sprang to her feet and joined her sister and Lady Cecily at the doorway.

“Mr. Darcy does not need a crowd hovering over him,” Miss Bingley said on a hiss. “Return to the ballroom.”

Elizabeth tried to push past them, but she could not. “I need to see Mr. Darcy. Colonel Fitzwilliam! Mr. Bingley!” she called to the others. “Please, I know something that could help Mr. Darcy!”

“Come in,” said Mr. Bingley.

“What is this?” Colonel Fitzwilliam called back. “My cousin’s health is not a matter for curiosity!”

Did she dare declare in front of everyone that her soulmark matched Mr. Darcy’s? Would anyone believe her?

She took a deep breath and pushed hard between Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, ignoring all strictures of polite behaviour.

“Miss Elizabeth!” Miss Bingley cried, but Elizabeth stopped short as she caught a glimpse of Mr. Darcy stretched out on the fainting couch. His complexion was so pale as to be frightening.

“Does he still breathe?” she asked, her own breath caught in her throat at the sight.

The colonel leapt to his feet at the sight of her. “Miss Elizabeth, what are you doing here?”

Elizabeth was yanked backwards, and she twisted to see Miss Bingley pulling at her from behind. “Such country manners, intruding on a private family situation,” Miss Bingley said formally, but her teeth were bared in anger.

Miss Bingley knew. She knew he had collapsed from soul weakening. She knew she was killing him. And she did not care. She was probably rushing him to London so she could have their marriage performed before his death.

Suddenly, Miss Bingley let go of her arms, and Elizabeth fell to her knees. She looked back to see Lydia pushing Miss Bingley out of the way. Thank goodness that her youngest sister was also the tallest and broadest!

“Let my sister through!” Lydia commanded. “Her soulmark matches Mr. Darcy’s too!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam let out a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a groan, and Elizabeth used the moment of distraction to dive for Mr. Darcy.

He was awake, his dark eyes on hers, and there was something of hope on his face. But he looked waxen, his skin pale and clammy, and there was no time to dither or consider her reputation.

“No!” shouted Miss Bingley, but it was too late.

Elizabeth leaned over Mr. Darcy and kissed him on the mouth.

For all that he looked like a statue, his lips were most certainly not. Warm and soft, they felt so natural against Elizabeth’s that it was as if she had been kissing him all her life, that she had been born to kiss this man.

And then he was returning the kiss with an eagerness she had not anticipated. In a moment, he was sitting up and pushing her back, his lips caressing hers with sudden vigour and a hunger she happily matched.

There were sounds around her, but they were distant and echoing, as if she had plugged her ears with wax before a cacophony began around her. She could have sworn that bright lights and colours flashed around them—was this what it was like to kiss? No wonder young ladies risked everything for the gentlemen they loved.

Finally, reluctantly, they drew apart. Elizabeth was impossibly light, as if a previously unnoticed pressure in her chest and ears had suddenly lifted. The cloudiness and even the pain in her legs were gone, leaving her feeling full of energy. A voice from behind them broke into their reverie.

“Good God.”

# CHAPTER 21

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D

arcy blinked, and Miss Elizabeth’s eyes came into focus before him. His cousin’s exclamation had broken through the spell of the sealing kiss.

The sealing kiss.

Miss Elizabeth had blushed a bright red, and her eyes were anxious on his.

The room had gone silent. He released Miss Elizabeth reluctantly, revelling in the discovery that his illness had vanished as if by magic. Except it had not, of course, been magic. It had been his soulmark.

Elizabeth, his precious Elizabeth, was his soulmatch.

“Now that is what a soul bonding looks like!” Lady Cecily said. She immediately flushed and looked down at the floor when everyone turned to look at her.

Richard coughed. “I must agree with my wife. That was unmistakably a soul bonding. An ordinary kiss is not usually accompanied by . . . I do not even know how to describe it. It was as if the two of you were glowing.”

“I wager that did not happen with Miss Bingley!” Miss Lydia crowed.

Miss Bingley was clinging to Mrs. Hurst, but she shot Miss Lydia a fierce glare.

Darcy rolled his shoulders and realised with relief that the aches and twinges were gone. He felt perfectly fine.

“Certainly not,” he said slowly, his eyes on his betrothed. His former betrothed. “I felt nothing of the sort. The only thing I felt as our engagement progressed was dismay and distaste for my betrothed.” It was ungentlemanly to say such a thing. A mere month ago, he would never have dared, no matter how true it was.

And yet, if his suspicions were correct, Miss Bingley most definitely deserved it, and worse.

“Miss Bingley falsified her soulmark,” Miss Elizabeth said beside him. “Most likely it is only ink. It took me far too long to realise, but it is the only explanation that makes sense.”

“Rubbish,” Miss Bingley spat out. “One cannot feign a soulmark. Mr. Darcy’s mother and aunt verified it!”

Darcy shook his head. “My own feelings proved it false, except that I did not understand why. When has a man ever disliked his own soulmatch? Furthermore, it is now clear that the illness that overcame me finally at dinner was the soul weakening. I had been feeling symptoms for weeks but never imagined the cause, as I thought I had sealed my soulmatch!”

The lightness he felt was not only the relief of aches and pain from the soul weakening. It was as if his spirit had grown lighter with Miss Elizabeth’s kiss and the realisation that he was not the dishonourable knave he had begun to consider himself. Perhaps it had been wrong of him to long for one woman while engaged to another. But he had been forced into the engagement despite feeling it all wrong from the start. And now he knew why. It had not been his character truly at fault all along—it had been Miss Bingley’s.

“Caroline!” Bingley was looking at his sister in shock. “Did you . . . how could . . .” He looked to Darcy, his brow furrowed. “How could she feign a soulmark, Darcy? Is it possible that . . . I mean, are they always between only two people?”

“Do you mean, is Darcy prepared to start his own harem?” Hurst cackled at his joke.

“If that were the case,” Darcy said, trying for patience despite the ridiculousness of the suggestion, “then I would feel the same pull towards your sister that I feel towards Miss Elizabeth. But I do not. And yet from the moment—well, perhaps not the moment we met, but soon afterwards—I had felt an attraction to Miss Elizabeth that I struggled against, believing that Miss Bingley was my soulmatch and that I had an obligation to her. But I never had the expected feelings for Miss Bingley.”

“Mr. Darcy!” Miss Bingley moved to grab his arm. “Please, consider what you are saying! You were happy to be matched with me until this . . . this conniving upstart ruined everything! I would not have put it past her to be using some sort of . . . perhaps some sort of drug on you! Anyone can see it!”

Darcy looked to Richard, who sat heavily on one of the chairs. “No,” Richard said firmly, though his eyes were still wide with wonder. “No, Darcy was not satisfied and happy to be matched with you before. I noticed problems from the moment of my arrival, problems that only grew worse, and he confided in me that he abhorred his soulmatch. Furthermore,” he said, holding up his hand when she tried to interrupt him, “I know that he was not fond of you even before he met Miss Elizabeth. You cannot accuse her of influencing him before they met.”

“Ha!” Miss Bingley crowed. “But he admits himself that he disliked Miss Elizabeth on his first meeting with her as well! It is clear that the soulmatch overcomes initial aversion.”

“Not at all,” Darcy said mildly. “I will admit that I dismissed Miss Elizabeth when I first saw her, but almost as soon as I did, I began to find her intriguing.” Miss Elizabeth gave him an impish smile, and he grinned back. “And Miss Elizabeth had good reason to dislike me. But for both of us, those initial impressions were soon overcome, and within weeks we felt a strong bond with each other. But you, Miss Bingley, I had met many, many times. I never had any particular reason to dislike you—if anything, I was predisposed to like you because of your brother. And yet I did not. We were acquainted for years before you suddenly revealed your soulmark to match mine.”

“I was not the one who revealed it!” Miss Bingley’s voice had gone shrill. “It was Louisa!”

“Louisa?” Bingley sounded confused. “Did you . . . did you know all of this?”

Mrs. Hurst sat down heavily. “Caroline, it is too late to hide it.”

There was a shocked silence in the room.

Miss Lydia finally burst out laughing. “Such a good joke!” she said, before her laugh died away. “Although . . . would Mr. Darcy not die if he did not marry his soulmatch?”

Miss Bingley looked away, but Darcy could see her face reddening.

“You were willing to murder me,” Darcy said coldly, “so that you could . . . what was your plan? Did you want the prestige of a soulmark to a rich man? To inherit Pemberley?

“You would have killed us!” Darcy could no longer contain his fury at Miss Bingley. “Not only me, whom you profess to love, but Miss Elizabeth, too—an innocent in all of this! No wonder you have disliked her from the moment you met her. Did you realise from the assembly that she was my match? Was Pemberley worth that much to you? You were willing to deprive me of my soulmatch, thus killing both of us, so that you could have my name and fortune?”

His stomach clenched at the thought that Elizabeth could have died a slow and painful death from soul weakening because of Miss Bingley’s cruelty—and his own foolishness. Now that he looked back, it was obvious that her soulmark had been feigned. He had allowed his own self-doubts and Wickham’s taunts about his coldness to let him think that in hundreds of years of soulmarks, only his had failed.

“She was anxious to bring you back to London for a physician,” Lady Cecily said quietly. “Perhaps, once she reached London, she intended to persuade you that you were feeling ill because there had been too much time between your soul bonding and the wedding, and that you should marry her quickly.”

At Miss Bingley’s quick intake of breath, he knew that had been exactly her plan.

Richard cleared his throat. “There is a theory that the soul weakening comes on much faster when one is in the proximity of one’s soulmatch without sealing it. I believe there were a few matches long ago where the parents disapproved and attempted to keep the couple from bonding. But since the couple would see each other regularly, the soul weakening came on quickly, and the parents were eventually forced to acquiesce or risk losing their children. I think we have seen evidence of that ourselves, as Darcy’s soul weakening worsened very quickly. Perhaps she thought you would die so quickly after the wedding that nobody would suspect.”

Bingley glared at his oldest sister. “I think you had better tell us everything.”

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All eyes were on Mrs. Hurst now. Miss Bingley stood near the door, mouth clamped stubbornly shut and fury blazing in her eyes, but she said nothing. Elizabeth would not have been surprised if Miss Bingley were to stalk off, but Colonel Fitzwilliam and his wife had both taken up positions directly blocking the door.

Mrs. Hurst wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. “You remember when I started at school, Charles. It was awful. Most of the girls had fathers who were gentlemen or even nobles. They were cruel to those of us from trade, constantly teasing or pranking or hurting us. I hated it so much. But then . . . there was this girl. Her father was only a mill owner, but she had a soulmark. And the rest were awed by it. Only a few girls at the school had soulmarks, you see. And that was when I realised . . . if I had had a soulmark, they would have left me alone, too. Or even respected me. It was too late for me, as they already knew I did not. But Caroline would be starting at school in a few years.”

Bingley looked from one sister to the other. “But Caroline . . .” He fell silent.

“Caroline was a tyrant. We remember what she was like as a child.” Mrs. Hurst shook her head. “Her tantrums and manipulations were legendary. But I realised that it also meant she was capable of carrying out a great deception. And so she was. She latched onto my plan immediately. We knew you needed to believe she had a soulmark, so we arranged to have you overhear a conversation between us in which I mentioned her soulmark, and she ‘admitted’ that our parents had asked her to keep it a secret from everyone—even you.”

Mr. Bingley dropped into a chair. “I remember that. It was the first time I had heard of Caroline’s soulmark. But I did not think they knew I could hear, and the way they presented it . . . it all made sense.”

“It was very clever,” Elizabeth conceded reluctantly. Thank goodness Lydia had never thought to do such a thing. She would have thought it a lark.

“Once she had planted the idea, she watered it here and there, mentioning it when Charles was most likely to overhear but would think the conversation private. Or saying things about having good reason to believe she would marry a gentleman.”

Mr. Bingley nodded.

“Brilliant!” Lydia tossed her curls. “I shall have to remember that tactic for working on Papa. Perhaps Maria Lucas would be willing to observe how desperately out of fashion my gowns are and ask why my father never buys me new ones.”

Elizabeth resisted the urge to laugh or cry at the idea of Lydia trying her new tactic. She met Mr. Darcy’s eyes and was thankful that he too seemed to find the humour in it, instead of the stern disapproval at Lydia’s foolishness she might have expected.

Mrs. Hurst continued. “I then ‘let it slip’ at school that my younger sister had a soulmark to prepare the way. We used ink then to make a simple symbol on her back—a letter A, I believe it was. We did not know much then about what soulmarks should look like. But she was careful to always keep it covered, except that every once in a while, she would allow just a little to show while dressing or the like, but not enough for anybody to identify it. School was easier—for us both—and I thought, for a time, that it would end there.”

“You always were short-sighted,” Miss Bingley muttered.

“I only did it to avoid the cruelties of those girls!” Mrs. Hurst protested. “They were awful, and Father did not care! Even after he died, our aunt and uncle insisted we stay at that school. What else were we to do?”

Elizabeth could think of countless other things, but she kept silent.

“But the deception did not stop after you left the school.” Colonel Fitzwilliam leaned forward. “Whose idea was that?”

Mrs. Hurst sighed. “Certainly not mine. But you know, brother, what she was like! She is not changed, she just hides it better. If I had protested or refused to help her . . .” She shuddered. “I could not!”

“When did she decide on me?” Mr. Darcy asked.

She turned to him. “During one of Charles’s visits from Cambridge, he mentioned that you had a soulmark. He had already spoken about how kind it was of you to take him in hand, introduce him around, that sort of thing, since you had a great deal more wealth and connections than he did. That was enough to interest Caroline. But it was not until she saw you in person one day in London—you recognised Charles on Bond Street and greeted him and were introduced to the rest of us—that she chose you. Handsome, rich, connected—you were exactly what she was determined to have for herself.”

Elizabeth glanced at Darcy. It was true. He was incredibly handsome, especially when he smiled. She flushed when he caught her looking, turning back to Mrs. Hurst’s attempts to defend her choices.

“But you had to know it would be murder.” Mr. Bingley’s face was pale. “Pretending to have a soulmark is one thing, but claiming to be matched to a specific man is something else entirely.”

“I know!” Mrs. Hurst bit her lip before bursting out, “I wished I could stop her, but I did not know how! I was the one who had started it, and . . . well, I thought it would be impossible for her to find a man who fit. After all, she would have to find a man whose soulmatch was born the same year she was, in 1791, and around the same time of year at that. It should have been impossible.”

“I was born in 1791 as well,” Elizabeth admitted. “In June.” It was a shock to think that the coincidence of that had been the foundation of the lie. How many other men in England would Miss Bingley have ever come across with soulmatches born in the same year?

“She was born in May.” Mrs. Hurst wrung her hands. “Charles let it slip that Mr. Darcy’s soulmark appeared when he was about eight, and we worked out the math, but we did not know what month. If anybody had questioned it, she could have claimed that it took a little while for soulmarks to appear sometimes, or that perhaps her parents had obscured her birthday to protect her. She always had an explanation for everything.”

“This is all lies!” Miss Bingley declared, her hands on her hips. “Louisa is simply concocting this entire story to discredit me. You all believe that my soulmark is feigned, that it is simply ink, do you not? Very well, then test it.”

Mr. Darcy’s brow furrowed as he turned towards Elizabeth. “My mother and my aunt both tested it. It was not ink or anything of that sort. They were suspicious enough that my aunt even tried alcohol on it, to see if it would smear.”

Elizabeth shook her head in bewilderment, but Colonel Fitzwilliam was the one who saw the answer first.

“A tattoo?” he said in shock, staring at Miss Bingley.

“A tattoo,” Mrs. Hurst confirmed. “Of course, first Caroline had to learn what Mr. Darcy’s soulmark was, and that was more complicated than she expected, since he kept it well hidden. It was not until she befriended Wickham and convinced him to help her that she discovered it.”

“The pail of water at the fencing club,” Elizabeth said. “I was certain that had to have been it, once I heard that he was an artist. Although I believed he made a picture for you and that you were inking it on Miss Bingley.” The idea of a tattoo would never have occurred to her.

“Pail of water?” Hurst asked. “Our bet?” He turned to Miss Bingley in horror. “That bet with Wickham was just part of your plot against Darcy? I will wring his useless neck when I see him next.”

“What bet?” Lady Cecily asked.

“Mr. Wickham made a bet with my husband that he could humiliate Mr. Darcy at his club. The intent was to provide an excuse for dumping a pail of water on Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Hurst explained to Lady Cecily. “So that the soulmark would be visible through his wet shirt.”

“Just like it was at the pond!” Lydia crowed. “It is impressive how translucent white shirts can be, especially when stretched taut against muscular—”

“Lydia!” Elizabeth chastised sharply.

“I was only going to say ‘backs,’” Lydia said with a pout. As if that somehow made it better.

Mrs. Hurst looked down at her feet. “Wickham knew of a talented tattooist. Wickham painted a perfect imitation of Mr. Darcy’s soulmark and they brought it to the tattooist to be applied. A really good tattoo, you know, looks much like a soulmark. The tattooist warned her that it might fade in the future, but that was years away, and she would be safely married by then.”

Mr. Darcy’s hands were clenched into fists. “It would be too late,” he said darkly. “I would be trapped in a marriage that would lead to my death.”

Mr. Hurst gave a mirthless chuckle. “Caroline has often talked about how rich widows are the only truly free, independent women in the country, with their wealth and power all to themselves. I had never realised she intended to join their number by murder.”

All eyes were on Miss Bingley now, but she still glared back mutinously. “Everyone knows the soul weakening is a ridiculous lie! It is simply an excuse so that people can marry their soulmatch without repercussions.”

“You sound like those people who, when told that a certain food makes someone sick to their stomach, secretly hide some in their food to prove them a liar—and then feign shock when the person becomes ill,” Lady Cecily said softly.

Elizabeth gasped. “Jane! Jane left the ball early because something made her ill. She thought there might have been cheese in something she ate.” She frowned. “But she left before dinner. What could she have eaten?”

“Caroline asked Jane if she might taste the marzipan she ordered for dessert,” Mr. Bingley said grimly. Elizabeth had never imagined he could look so angry. “Of course, nobody would ever put cheese in marzipan.”

“She has never had trouble with marzipan before.”

“I shall have Cook summoned,” Mr. Bingley said, his eyes still on his sister. “She can tell me whether there is any cheese in the marzipan.”

Miss Bingley sighed gustily. “Marzipan comes in many flavours! I cannot be held responsible for knowing that one marzipan might be made with cheese if another is not. And how was I to know Miss Bennet could not eat cheese?”

“You knew perfectly well!” Elizabeth cried. “We told you during our time at Netherfield, and you gave the cook orders not to include milk or cheese in any food that did not usually contain it, so that Jane could easily avoid it.”

Mr. Bingley looked ill. He was looking at his sister as if he had never known her before.

“What I do not understand,” Mr. Darcy said slowly, “is why Wickham would help Miss Bingley. I have never known him to help anyone without getting something in return, even if they were friends.”

“She promised him . . .” Mrs. Hurst looked at her sister anxiously.

“I promised him nothing,” Miss Bingley broke in. “He is naught but the son of Mr. Darcy’s steward. Why should I promise him anything?”

“She promised to marry him,” Mrs. Hurst said quickly. “After she was widowed.”

The room fell silent, and Mr. Darcy looked stricken. No wonder. Given Mr. Wickham’s history with his family, the idea that his beloved estate could be in the hands of Mr. Wickham must be heart-wrenching. The estate itself might be left to Miss Darcy if Mr. Darcy died, unless Mr. Darcy had an heir with Miss Bingley by then, but . . . Her stomach clenched as she wondered suddenly whether Miss Darcy might have some sort of tragic accident, thus forcing the elder Mr. Darcy to leave his estate to his son’s widow.

Mr. Wickham had been hedging his bets, then. He had made plans with Miss Bingley to help her kill Mr. Darcy, but he had also been trying to win Miss Darcy at the same time. If one plan had failed, the other would still get him access to Pemberley’s coffers, if not the estate itself.

“I would never have married him,” Miss Bingley snarled. “Marry the son of a steward?”

“It is interesting that marrying beneath you is beyond the pale,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam, “but murder is not.”

Mr. Bingley, still looking rather green, took a step towards Miss Bingley. “Were you anybody but my sister, I would consider calling a magistrate,” he said slowly. “As it is . . . Caroline, I believe the only thing to do is to send you back to our family in Scarborough. I am clearly not the best person to instruct you, but it is clear you do need instruction.”

“No!” With a cry, Miss Bingley hurled herself at Elizabeth, fingers outstretched like claws.

Elizabeth dodged, but before Miss Bingley even reached her, Mr. Darcy stepped between them, and she slammed uselessly into his chest. Colonel Fitzwilliam grabbed her by the arm, and Mr. Bingley took the other.

“I believe it is time for Miss Bingley to retire to her room,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said firmly to her brother.

Mr. Bingley nodded, his colour returning. “It is clear she cannot stay here at Netherfield Park, nor do I trust her in London. She will have to return to my father’s relatives in the north. And you, Louisa. Hurst, you had better take Louisa to her room for the night. I expect both of you to leave my house first thing tomorrow morning, and she will not be welcome back.”

Over Miss Bingley’s angry protestations, the two men exited the room with their captive, followed closely by the Hursts.

“Lydia?” Kitty appeared at the open doorway. “Lizzy? There you are! I have not seen the two of you in an age, and Mamma is beside herself.”

Mamma appeared behind Kitty, waving her fan furiously. “Lydia! Lizzy! Oh, the two of you have no compassion on my poor nerves! Lizzy, why are you wearing Charlotte Lucas’s dress?”

Elizabeth blinked and looked down at her gown. With all the revelations, she had almost forgotten the change. “Miss Bingley had one of the servants dump soot on me—”

Kitty and Lady Cecily gasped simultaneously.

“I would have had to leave the ball early, but I was desperate to speak with Mr. Darcy and tell him about our soulmarks. Charlotte offered to exchange gowns so that I might have the opportunity.”

“Then she is a true friend,” Mr. Darcy said.

“Soulmarks?” Mamma fanned faster.

Lydia was practically bouncing with excitement. “Lizzy has a soulmark that matches Mr. Darcy’s, Mamma. I was going to tell him at the ball—I even brought that drawing of Lizzy’s soulmark so that I could prove it to him—but I never got the chance when he collapsed. I never would have expected Mr. Darcy, of all people, to faint in the middle of dinner!”

Mamma’s fan was fluttering so rapidly it was barely visible. “Lizzy’s . . . soulmark?”

“Yes, as it turns out, Miss Bingley’s was only a tattoo. Lizzy is the one who is Mr. Darcy’s soulmatch.” Lydia scowled at Elizabeth. “All this talking! Are you to marry Mr. Darcy, Lizzy? I cannot wait in suspense any longer!”

Mr. Darcy smiled. “Then I will not try your patience, madam.” He stepped forward and took Elizabeth’s hands in his. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I love you, and only you. I longed for you even when I thought I should not, and my heart feels ready to burst for joy at the realisation that we truly were meant for each other. Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Elizabeth’s own heart beat rapidly as she stepped into his arms. “I will.”

Mindless of their audience, Mr. Darcy spun her around, laughing, before he stepped back. What a thrill it was to know that she could inspire such a serious man to bouts of gaiety, and in front of her mother and sisters and his cousin’s wife, no less! She beamed up at him.

“Thank the Lord, we are saved!” Mamma crowed.

# CHAPTER 22

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D

arcy was sublimely happy. In fact, he could not remember another day in his life so filled with joy. He found himself laughing readily at Richard’s foolish jokes and rather enjoying Mr. Bennet teasing him.

After all, he was married to Elizabeth Bennet, this was his wedding breakfast, and life could not be more perfect.

Or could it?

Elizabeth was standing with his mother and Georgiana, with whom she had been having a cheerful, teasing conversation not five minutes ago. But now she was not laughing. She was not even smiling. She was looking at something with concern.

He followed her gaze to see Mr. Collins speaking animatedly with Mary Bennet. Mr. Collins was speaking rapidly, and from his gestures, Darcy thought he might be describing the chimney at Rosings. He seemed to admire that chimney piece a great deal, as it came up in conversation far more than one’s patroness’s chimney piece really should.

Mary looked torn between amusement and annoyance when, to Mr. Darcy’s shock, Mr. Collins bowed over her hand and lifted it towards his face. Was he attempting to court Mary?

He turned back to reassure Elizabeth that he would happily provide for her sisters so that none had to marry Mr. Collins, but someone else stepped forward. It was Miss Lucas.

Miss Lucas joined the couple and had soon drawn Mr. Collins’s attention to herself. Mary made a lucky escape.

And yet Elizabeth was still looking concerned. Ah. Miss Lucas needed to marry, and far more than any of the Bennet sisters now that Elizabeth was married. Would she accept Mr. Collins?

Elizabeth gave Darcy a weak smile. “Do not mind me,” she said. “I am just . . . I hope that Mr. Collins does not have any intentions for this surprise visit.” Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had both been surprised when Mr. Collins arrived in Meryton the day before the wedding with the express intention of attending. He had taken a room at the inn in the village, but he was clearly still dismayed about the Bennets’ cat. He had not sneezed once during the wedding breakfast, though, so it seemed that Lady Cat was somewhere not in the drawing room.

Miss Lucas was still speaking to Mr. Collins—or, rather, listening to Mr. Collins with a shocking amount of patience, and Darcy wondered. She was not very pretty, and at her age and without a fortune, she might feel obligated to accept Mr. Collins.

She deserved better. She had shown her selflessness—and cleverness—when she had exchanged gowns with Elizabeth at Bingley’s ball. If it had not been for that, Elizabeth might have been forced to create a scandal by appearing at dinner covered in soot, or she might have run into difficulties returning if she had gone all the way home to change. The very idea that she might not have been there when he collapsed gave Darcy the shivers. He could so easily have spent the rest of his days—and they would have been short, due to the soul weakening—with Miss Bingley. A more dreadful fate he could not imagine.

When Mrs. Phillips took Mr. Collins away, Darcy squeezed Elizabeth’s hand and left her for the moment. He went to speak with Miss Lucas.

“Miss Lucas,” he began, clearing his throat uncomfortably. “I . . . I hope you will not take it as interfering, but I happened to notice your conversation with Mr. Collins. And it occurred to me that some might consider him an eligible match—”

Miss Lucas chuckled darkly. “I suppose you want to recommend against him?” She sighed. “I know what he was like to the Bennets, and I am well aware of his adulation for Lady Catherine de Bourgh. At the ball, I told Elizabeth I would no longer consider him. But now . . .”

“Now you are reminded that he has a good living and is still in want of a wife?”

Miss Lucas nodded.

“I see. I will not stop you, if that is what you truly want.” He paused, considering how best to phrase the next without insulting the poor woman. “You have been limited in your choices, I believe, by the size of the neighbourhood and the number of families. But I have come to know your better qualities, and I think there are other gentlemen who would as well, if you were exposed to a larger society. Elizabeth and I are to travel to Derbyshire, and I imagine she will find it sometimes lonely to be amidst strangers. Perhaps in a month or two, you might join us there?” He raised an eyebrow. “The vicar of Kympton is a widower with no children. He is a good, honourable man, and I have always admired him. If he will not do, I know of several others in the area who might be interesting possibilities.”

“Are you turned matchmaker then, Mr. Darcy, now that you have your own soulmatch?” Miss Lucas might tease, but he could see a gleam of interest in her eyes. He hoped that Mr. Riverwood liked her. He did think they would make a good match.

“I thank you for the invitation,” Miss Lucas said at last. “I would be pleased to accept. And if you would not mind a small suggestion—you might consider making an invitation to Miss Lydia at some point as well.”

They both turned to where Miss Lydia stood laughing, head thrown back, amidst several officers.

“She has a great deal of potential, I think, but her parents are not good for her. Lizzy is, and I think if she were removed from her mother’s influence, it would do her a world of good.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. Elizabeth had told him more about her sisters, and he agreed that Miss Lydia only wanted for friendly attention and a bit of stern direction—and perhaps some education. He wondered if anybody had ever taught her to ride. His mother would enjoy having a young lady to take under her wing, and she and Georgiana were close in age.

When they had first met, Georgiana had been a little shocked at Lydia’s boldness, and Lydia had thought Georgiana a little too shy and dull. But they had become fast friends over fashion and novels, and now Georgiana was smiling as she was pulled into groups of girls by Lydia, and he had caught Lydia looking longingly at the pianoforte.

“An excellent suggestion, Miss Lucas.”

At last, it was time to leave for Pemberley. His parents and Georgiana had already departed, taking the bishop with them, but they would stay in London for a fortnight to give Darcy and Elizabeth time alone at Pemberley. The thought of showing Elizabeth all of his favourite spots at Pemberley and having her all to himself was thrilling.

Just as they had said their good-byes and were about to leave, Elizabeth gasped. “Just a moment!” she told him before she raced out of the room.

She seemed a little sad on her return, and he put his arm around her once they were settled into the carriage. “What is it, my love?” It was not unexpected for her to feel a little sombre about leaving everyone she knew and loved, of course, but it seemed that something in particular had saddened her.

“Oh.” She gave a little forced laugh. “Well, it is just that I went to say good-bye to Lady Cat and her kittens. I have become reluctantly fond of Lady Cat, and most especially my favourite of her kittens, a little orange striped one I named Cece. I would have liked to take it with me, but it is too young to leave its mother.”

Darcy stroked her arm, loving that he now had the freedom to do so. “I have good reason to believe that we will be returning for Jane and Bingley’s wedding in a month or two.”

“A month or two!” She sat up straight. “He is planning to propose?”

“He is probably doing so as we speak. He planned to propose at the ball, but when Jane went home ill, that was delayed. And then with our quick wedding, he thought it best to wait.” Once he had found his true soulmatch, he had been eager for the wedding, and soulmatches were not required to wait to call the banns. As soon as his delighted and very relieved family could be collected from London and the bishop reasoned with—and bribed—they had wed. Only afterwards did it occur to him that if they had waited a little longer, Bingley could have proposed and the sisters could have been married together. Still, he could not regret their hurried wedding.

He smiled down at his wife. “Perhaps by the time we return, the kitten will be ready for a trip to Pemberley.”

“Oh!” She sat up, staring at him. “We could take her back home?”

A pleasant feeling rushed through him at her words. She had called Pemberley “home” even though she had not yet seen it. “Yes, of course. I thought we might also collect Miss Lucas at the same time. I think a trip to Pemberley would be good for her, and Kympton has a single vicar—”

Elizabeth broke into peals of laughter. “Oh, you wonderful, wonderful man!” she exclaimed.

And then she had his lapels in her hands, and she pulled him into a kiss. “Dearest,” she said between kisses. “The best of men.”

“Can this be real?”

Darcy did not realise he had spoken aloud until Elizabeth stopped and faced him with sparkling eyes and a look of mischief.

“Do you think you are dreaming?”

“If I am, it is a lovely dream. Ouch!” She had pinched him, the minx!

Raising her hands in surrender, she said with a laugh, “I merely wanted to assure you that you are, in fact, happily married to your true soulmatch and on your way home with her.”

She knew him too well. A part of him still wondered and worried whether this was all a fantastical dream, and he would wake up to find himself still engaged to Caroline Bingley. But no. His engagement to Miss Bingley had never felt right, never felt like a real soulmatch. That was the dream—nightmare, really. This, at last, was the truth.

Stroking the soft curls he had admired for so long, he whispered, “Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth.”

“You were worth it, you know,” she said softly. She tentatively reached her hand to touch his cheek, and he closed his eyes and leaned into her touch. “You were worth the wait, the longing, the agony, the despair.” Her voice caught on that last. “Every moment of these past two months in which my feelings ran the gamut from dislike to love to hopelessness, it was all worth it. Because now we are here, together, on our way to our future.”

“Nothing shall ever keep us apart again,” he vowed. They had work to do, good work, in overseeing Pemberley and raising their own children to love and protect the land that provided them with so much. But he no longer felt caged, trapped by his own soulmark. They were free at last. “I love you,” he whispered.

“And I love you.” She slid her hands into the hair at the back of his neck and pulled his face down to hers.

Darcy smiled as he fell into kissing her. Yes, he was sublimely happy. There was simply no other way to put it.

# EPILOGUE

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“I

t was a tattoo?” Bennet said with shock, sitting back on his haunches. “She actually had a false soulmark tattooed on her back?”

“I thought only sailors got tattoos!” little Jane said. She shook her head so that her curls flew about her face. “Not ladies!”

Elizabeth smiled at the children as they listened to their father’s story. “I suppose she did not think that ink would stand up to scrutiny.” She stroked young Richard’s curls away from his face as he slept snuggled up against her.

Jane scrunched her face in confusion. “What is scrutiny?”

“Careful examination,” Darcy said. “My mother would never have been fooled by mere ink.”

“Grandmamma is too clever for that,” Bennet said with certainty.

“She certainly is!” Anne said, appearing in the doorway. “Are you children still awake?”

Elizabeth smiled at her mother-in-law. She loved to pretend to “find” them in the evenings with the children, as if she did not take just as much delight as they did in bedtime stories.

Darcy laughed. “Who are you including as ‘children?’” He smiled at his mother and patted a place on Bennet’s bed next to him. “We were just telling the children about how we met and discovered our soulmarks.”

“Ahh.” Anne smiled and sat down next to her son. “Then I shall sit for the end of that story.”

“While there is some humour in the story now,” Elizabeth said to her children, “it was a difficult time for both of us.”

“For all of us,” Anne said. “Your grandpapa and I were also worried when we saw how unhappy your father was. It was why we were relieved when he did not wish to rush the wedding, and even more relieved when word came that he had found his true soulmatch.” She nodded to Elizabeth, a warm light in her eyes. “We were delighted to meet your mother.”

“I want to know what happened to that awful Miss Bingley!” Jane said, bouncing a little.

“Boiling oil!” Bennet cried. “Tar and feathers! Or maybe she was drawn and quartered!”

“Perhaps we ought to have a talk with Miss Teasdale about your bedtime reading,” Darcy said with a laugh. “Do you even know what ‘drawn and quartered’ means?”

Elizabeth shook her head, smiling. She had better reassure the poor governess tomorrow that Darcy was only teasing—as he had finally learned to do—as they knew full well Bennet’s talent for discovering things he ought not to know. Not to mention the influence of his cousins!

“No.” Bennet stuck his lip out. “But it must be really painful.”

“Her brother sent her to her relatives in Yorkshire,” Elizabeth said before Bennet could ask what it did mean. “She lost her position in society and, to some extent, her respectability. Her actions could not be hidden, even though none of us made the story public. Enough people had known, due to her boasting, that she had a soulmark that matched your father’s. When his soulmark was found to truly match mine, it was obvious what had occurred. She was ostracised from polite society even in Yorkshire. She did marry eventually, I believe, but it was not a remarkable match.”

Bennet scrunched his nose. “That is all? She did not even have her toenails pulled out?”

“Bennet!” Jane shook her head with disapproval. “Do not be ridiculous.”

“Mr. Wickham, then. He is a man. Surely he was drawn and quartered.”

Elizabeth stifled a laugh, but Darcy heaved a sigh.

“My father stepped in where Wickham was concerned and found a position for him in a law office in Canada, working for a very strict barrister with a number of powerful connections. He is still there, working long hours under the barrister’s watchful eye.”

Bennet huffed.

“There is an important reason we tell you this story often.” Darcy leaned forward to ruffle his son’s hair.

Bennet sighed. “I know, I know. Do not show or tell anyone what your soulmark is.”

“I see that you remember.” Darcy tweaked his nose. “And Jane? Why should you not tell anyone about your soulmark?”

“So that they do not pretend?”

He nodded. “So that they cannot claim to be your soulmatch when they are not. Keep it secret until you suspect you have found your match.”

“But how do you find your match when you cannot tell anyone?” Bennet’s brow furrowed. “And it did not stop Miss Bingley from finding out yours secretly. Would it not be easier to tell it broadly so that your true match hears of it? And then you will not be tricked by someone claiming to know it.”

“Well, when you are an adult, you can choose to do so if you think it better. But you cannot take back a secret once it is known. Keep it secret until you are old enough to begin your search for your wife, and then you can make your own decision. Even so, keep in mind that the soulmark is only the indication of a real connection. If you do not feel anything for the one whose soulmark you bear, or if you feel a strong bond with someone you do not think is a match, be careful.”

“Bennet’s soulmatch is a baby,” Jane said with a giggle.

Bennet scowled. “You were a baby when you got your soulmatch! Maybe your soulmatch was ten when you were born, and he made a face and said he hated babies!”

“He did not!”

“Children!” Elizabeth handed Richard to Anne and sat down between them. “Your father was eight years old when he got the soulmark that matched him to me. But it did not matter that I was a baby then, because we did not meet until I was twenty. And by then, the age difference did not seem so great. Bennet is only six years older than his soulmatch, that is not too much. By the time she is eighteen, it will seem perfectly proper. Now, I think it is time for both of you to hurry off to bed. Your governess is waiting.”

Hearing her cue, Miss Teasdale stepped into the room to collect her charges. Hugs and kisses abounded, and then Elizabeth, Darcy, and Anne said good night and left the nursery.

“Has George returned from Matlock?” Elizabeth asked Anne as they began down the stairs. She did not think he would have missed their nightly ritual if he were home, but he had expected to be home hours before now.

“He has.” Anne grinned. “But it seems he took a shortcut to return earlier, and said shortcut was rather . . . muddier than expected. So he has gone to bathe before joining us downstairs.”

Darcy leaned towards Elizabeth. “You should have seen his trousers. Six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain.”

Elizabeth laughed.

Despite the many years since their marriage, Anne still hurried ahead to reach her husband first, making Elizabeth smile. She loved to see Anne and George together and to envision what her own marriage might look like in another twenty years.

“Ahh!” she gasped as she was suddenly yanked around a corner. Startled, she looked up into her husband’s laughing eyes as he pressed her against the wall in the dark. “Darcy!” she scolded with a laugh.

“Mother will not miss us for a few minutes,” he whispered huskily, and then they were kissing as if they were the couple who had been separated for a week.

When they came up for air, Elizabeth found herself with both hands inside Darcy’s coat. He was considerably rumpled, which would probably amuse both of his parents at dinner.

“Do you often drag poor maidens into dark passages to kiss them senseless?” she teased.

“Not nearly often enough,” he growled, leading to another bout of kissing.

“We shall never make it to dinner at this rate,” she gasped finally. They both pulled away at last and made an effort to straight his coat and her gown and their considerably tousled hair. It was a hopeless business.

“This will not fool anyone,” Elizabeth said with a sigh.

Darcy bowed and offered her his arm. “Forgive me, my dear,” he said as they moved sedately back into the main passage and on their way downstairs. “Retelling the story of that autumn and my false engagement was . . .” He paused in search of the word. “It brought back a number of painful memories. Good ones as well, of course, but I suppose I felt the deep desire to stake my claim on my beloved wife.”

Elizabeth nodded and leaned close against him as they neared the drawing room. “In some ways, it feels like a distant memory. In other ways, it feels as if it happened yesterday.”

“There you are at last!” George boomed as they entered the room. “Anne was certain you had become lost on your way downstairs.”

Anne looked to be fighting valiantly to hold back her amusement, and George’s mouth twitched much like Darcy’s did when he was diverted.

“You must admit, it is a shockingly large house.” Elizabeth waved her hand vaguely. “Sometimes I am certain it adds a room from time to time just to vex me.”

The butler came in to tell them that dinner was served, and they all moved to the dining room to take their seats.

“Bennet was going on about people being drawn and quartered,” Darcy said as they were served the first course. “I am going to have to have a talk with Richard about appropriate bedtime stories. I confiscated that pirate book last week, but I suspect he has been telling the cousins tall tales again.”

Anne laughed. “I believe you were about Bennet’s age when you and Richard were sword fighting in the portrait gallery and making each other walk the plank on the stone walls in the garden.”

“Certainly not!” Darcy looked at them in mock horror. “You must be thinking of some other mischievous boys.”

“Do not worry for your grandchildren,” Elizabeth assured her parents-in-law. “He has not actually confiscated the book per se. He just wants to be the one to read it to Bennet himself as an excuse for rereading his favourite pirate stories.”

Darcy groaned. “There are no secrets in this house. Well, Father, how was everybody at Matlock?”

“Very well! I saw your sister briefly,” George said. “She and Lord Carmichael were passing through on their way back to Bridwell.”

“And how was Lady Carmichael?” Darcy asked.

Elizabeth threw her husband a look of exasperation. “She has been married for two months now. You are allowed to call her Georgiana again.”

“She is rather proud of being Lady Carmichael at last,” Darcy said firmly. “It certainly took them long enough to find each other, and they did not even have outside interference to complicate things.”

In a rather odd situation, Georgiana and her husband had been born only a few weeks apart. Their soulmarks had both appeared so soon after birth that both had assumed their soulmate was older. That, combined with Lord Carmichael’s ailing mother and his father’s early death, both of which had kept him from spending much time in London looking for his soulmatch, had meant that the couple were both five-and-twenty before they found each other at last.

Elizabeth worried about her own children. Astonishingly, all three had soulmarks, even young Richard, whose mark had appeared just after his third birthday. They would all have to find their soulmatch, or they would risk dying of the soul weakening. Elizabeth would probably not be at peace until they were all safely matched and married. And then she might have grandchildren to worry about!

But despite the risk, she was thrilled for them. After almost ten years of marriage to Darcy, she knew well what delight there was in being married to one’s soulmatch.

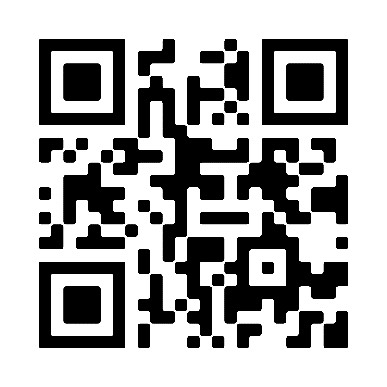
He was precisely the man for her. A man of character, of ideals, of integrity. And a man with a subtle but sharp sense of humour, who enjoyed her teasing and valued her independence and spirit. She still did not know how soulmarks worked, but she did know that theirs had been exactly right.

They had always been meant for each other.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah is a homeschooling mom of six kids, ages fourteen to four. Her first introduction to Jane Austen was the BBC mini-series of Pride and Prejudice, which aired when she was fifteen. The first scene she ever saw was Mr. Wickham telling his story to Elizabeth Bennet, and Sarah asked her mother if he was meant to be the hero. She didn't like him and didn't plan to continue watching if he was. Assured by her mother that he was not the hero, she kept watching and fell in love with Jane Austen's most beloved work. The first time she read the novel, she read the final page and immediately flipped back to the first to start again, unwilling to let it go.

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