

Chapter One

from *Mr. Darcy's Bargain*

“The young lady says she will not leave without speaking to you, sir.”

Darcy scowled at his butler. His servant had interrupted Darcy's meeting with his solicitor to say a Mr. Gardiner pleaded for a bit of Darcy's time. “What young lady?” Darcy demanded.

Even as he asked the question, he was aware of the hitch in his voice. How often had he fantasized about the woman who haunted his dreams marching into his home and demanding he love her? He fought the urge to close his eyes and bring forth an image of Elizabeth Bennet. More than ten months had passed since he left her in the parlor of Mr. Collins' cottage at Hunsford—left her to her misinterpretations. He had thought to present her with a letter of explanation regarding his part in separating her elder sister from Mr. Bingley and a defense of his interactions with Mr. Wickham, but after walking the length of the plantation at Rosings Park three times, Darcy abandoned the task. The letter remained unopened in the drawer of the night table beside his bed.

“A Miss Bennet, sir.”

Darcy did not know whether satisfaction was a proper response, but he knew the emotion nonetheless.

He spoke to the solicitor, “If you will pardon me, Hess, I suspect I should discover what brings these strangers to my threshold.”

Mr. Hess stood to gather his papers. “I understand, Mr. Darcy. I will have someone deliver the new documents later today. If you require my services after you have had time to examine the contract, send me word.”

“Thacker, see Mr. Hess out and then provide me ten minutes before you escort Mr. Gardiner and the lady up.”

“As you wish, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy felt a bit foolish requesting a few minutes to settle his composure before he looked upon Elizabeth Bennet again. Needless to say, the “Miss Bennet” waiting below could be another of Mr. Bennet’s daughters or even another young lady with the same surname, but Darcy doubted any other female would act so boldly as to call upon him and to demand to speak to him. Only Miss Elizabeth would dare to invade his privacy.

Although it was early in the day, Darcy poured himself a stiff drink and swallowed it quickly. He thought he had placed the memory of Elizabeth Bennet behind him, but, in truth, doing so was impossible. A book lying open on a table with an embroidered bookmark keeping the place brought him anguish. The scent of fresh cut lavender had him searching his house for a lost dream. Little things brought the lady’s image rushing to his memory. The passion she prompted in him was not an emotion Darcy knew previously or since.

“Yet, the lady shunned your offer of marriage,” he reminded his foolish hope. “If she were coming to Darcy House for you, Miss Elizabeth would not require another’s escort.”

To rid himself of misplaced aspirations, over the previous months, Darcy had relived each of Elizabeth’s accusations until they had shredded his heart completely. “*The feelings which you tell me have long prevented the acknowledgment of your regard can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.*” and “*Can you deny that you have done it?*” and “*Who that knows what his misfortunes have been can help feeling an interest in him?*” and “*You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me any other way than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.*”

“Perhaps I should have taken the lady into my arms and kissed her into submission,” he murmured.

A knock upon his study door sent Darcy's musings darting off into the deepest recesses of his mind. He turned as the door opened, and Thacker ushered "her" into his private retreat. He noted a man of some girth and dark hair stood behind her, but Darcy's gaze remained locked upon Elizabeth's countenance.

God! But he missed her! She was more beautiful than he recalled. Although he told himself repeatedly it was best to forget her, in reality, his heart sang with the possibility of renewing their acquaintance. Perhaps he could claim an opportunity to make amends. When Elizabeth refused him, for the first time in his life, Darcy held no means of solving the problem before him—that of his obsession with the woman.

A clearing of the gentleman's throat brought Darcy from his considerations. He belatedly recalled his manners and offered the pair a bow of greeting. Schooling his expression, he said, "Miss Elizabeth, what a pleasant surprise."

Surprise was the correct word, but how *pleasant* the experience would be was yet to be seen.

"Mr. Darcy," she said so softly he found the experience disconcerting. Did she fear he would turn her away?

"Please come in and have a seat. Would you care for refreshments?" He gestured her to the chairs arranged before his desk.

"No, sir," Elizabeth said in politeness. "We shall attempt to keep our business short." She folded her hands upon her lap. "If you will permit it, sir," she continued in stiff tones, "I would give you the acquaintance of my uncle."

The man remained standing. Darcy knew the look of her Uncle Phillips, for he took Phillips's companionship on several occasions when Darcy resided at Netherfield. The man before him must be the uncle from Cheapside.

"Certainly."

Elizabeth repeated the required niceties. “Mr. Darcy, may I present my uncle, Mr. Gardiner. Uncle, this is Mr. Darcy, the gentleman from Derbyshire of whom I spoke.”

Darcy liked the idea of Elizabeth speaking of him without absolute disdain.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy, for receiving us without notice,” the gentleman repeated as he assumed the seat beside his niece.

Darcy sat carefully so as not to crease his breeches. Somehow, he wished to appear at his best before Elizabeth. He thought it odd. Up until this very moment gray clouds filled the London skies outside his Town house’s windows, but as he turned to rest his gaze upon the woman who owned his heart, a single ray of sunshine claimed its target: the back of Elizabeth Bennet’s head. The effect was a flicker of fire dancing through the red strands of her auburn locks.

He could never know enough of her. Darcy permitted his eyes to drift over her features. Dark circles rested upon her cheeks. Needless to say, she had experienced more than one sleepless night, and Darcy wondered what brought her to distress.

“It has been nearly a year, Miss Elizabeth,” he stated the obvious as a beginning to their conversation. “I pray your family is in health.”

Tears misted Elizabeth’s eyes. “All but my father, sir,” she pronounced in strained tones. “Mr. Bennet experienced an episode recently.”

Mr. Gardiner reached for Elizabeth’s hand, and Darcy wished to slap the man’s hand away so Darcy might comfort her instead.

“Something serious?” he asked in empathetic tones.

Darcy knew first hand the devastation of losing a parent. He had felt at a loss since his revered father’s passing. That is until he encountered Elizabeth Bennet in Hertfordshire. He had latched his hopes to the

woman, praying she would assist him in making sense of his obligations, but he found himself still adrift.

“Perhaps I should answer for our Lizzy,” Mr. Gardiner suggested. “The doctor believes my Brother Bennet knew a spell with his heart. We pray for a speedy recovery.”

“I am sorry to hear it, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said in sincere sympathy. “I long recognized your devotion to Mr. Bennet. Yours is a relationship many would admire.”

Her voice held her emotions, but Elizabeth pronounced, “Such is my purpose in calling upon your household, sir. I would never think to disturb your peace unless the situation was not dire. I require your assistance.”

“My assistance?” Darcy questioned. “Are you in need of a more knowledgeable physician? I assure you Doctor Nott is excellent. I will gladly speak to the man upon your behalf.”

Elizabeth shot a pleading glance to her uncle, but Gardiner only nodded his encouragement. It shook Darcy to his core to view Elizabeth so distraught. In his memories of her, she was the most independent woman of his acquaintance.

“Although I am certain Mr. Bennet would thrive under Doctor Nott’s care, I was hoping you might intervene in a business affair, which brought on my father’s condition.” Darcy struggled not to flinch. “You wish me oversee one of Mr. Bennet’s business negotiations?” Darcy would find doing so beyond the pale. He could not fathom Mr. Bennet asking him to act in the man’s place.

Before Elizabeth could respond, Gardiner smoothly claimed the lead. “Mayhap I should explain the situation.”

Despite remaining uncomfortably tense, Darcy nodded his agreement. He suspected Gardiner’s tale would set Darcy’s sedate world into a whirlwind.

“Mr. Bennet, my Brother Phillips, Sir William Lucas, and many others among Meryton’s elite foolishly invested large sums in what they assumed was an offer that would provide them a quick tidy profit. Unfortunately, if what Elizabeth and I believe proves true, Mr. Bennet’s neighbors will lose more than their initial investments. As the situation appeared dire, when she realized the farce, our Elizabeth spoke to her father of her fears.”

“Which precipitated Mr. Bennet’s attack,” Elizabeth said with a catch in her throat. “My father’s current situation is my fault. I should have kept my counsel. If my foolish tongue causes Papa to...” She looked away quickly, but Darcy noticed how her bottom lip trembled.

“Like my Sister Bennet and Lizzy’s sisters,” Mr. Gardiner stated the obvious, “Elizabeth does not only fear the loss of a beloved husband and father, but also the eventual ascension of Mr. Collins as master of Longbourn.”

“Is Mr. Bennet’s condition so severe?” Darcy inquired in earnest.

“My Brother Bennet is not upon his death bed,” Gardiner assured, “but the physician believes him more fragile because of the questionable nature of this situation. Doctor Doughty knows of the financial maneuverings for the good physician also placed funds in the scheme. He remains silent on the subject only at Elizabeth’s encouragement. Our Lizzy convinced Doughty to hold his tongue until she could recruit my assistance and...”

“And mine,” Darcy finished the man’s sentence. “If you would, Mr. Gardiner, please explain the nature of this investment.”

Gardiner appeared relieved by Darcy’s response. “When Elizabeth summoned me to Longbourn, I took the liberty to study the papers presented to Mr. Bennet. Only a man who held knowledge of the law would recognize the circular nature of the contracts. The terms appear quite simple, but there is no means for this venture to prove anything but

a disaster. How my Brother Phillips overlooked the obvious is beyond my understanding!”

Darcy said evenly, “Most country men of law rarely encounter complicated contracts.”

“I suppose so,” Gardiner continued, “but I make it fair practice never to sign any legal papers I do not fully understand. Yet, Bennet and the others trusted the man with whom they did business. Moreover, the lure of a quick profit was more than any of Mr. Bennet’s neighbors could withstand.”

“What were the terms of the proposition?” Darcy asked, intrigued by the tale.

Gardiner shook his head in what appeared to be disbelief. “Pure profit,” the man announced. “Ten percent interest paid bi-weekly. If a person invested a hundred pounds, he would earn more than twenty pounds per month.”

Darcy’s eyebrow shot upward in recognition of the ludicrous scheme. “Invest one hundred and earn an additional twenty,” he said in honest disapproval. “How could anyone think earning a fortune so easy?”

“The legal language provides the contract the appearance of complicated negotiations. Needless to say, not all the investors provided one hundred pounds. If I understand the situation correctly, some of Mr. Bennet’s servants combined their savings with others from Sir William’s staff. They agreed to split the profit, while others placed more than a hundred in the scheme.”

“And has anyone known the stated profit?” Darcy inquired. It interested him that someone devised such an ingenious plan.

Elizabeth resumed the tale. “All were presented with the required first interest payment.” She glanced in worry to Darcy. “Then the master of this plan encouraged the investors to add the interest to the initial fund.

Next time they would receive eleven pounds for each one hundred ten pounds. That would be one and twenty pounds for a one month's profit."

"The investors readily agreed," Darcy summarized.

"Naturally," Elizabeth acknowledged. "The easiest coins anyone ever made." Sarcasm marked her tone.

"And who managed to convince the good citizens of Meryton to part with their hard-earned funds?" he asked.

Elizabeth glanced away as if she hoped to earn reassurance. At length, her gaze returned to Darcy's. "Mr. Wickham," she said without emotion.

At length, Darcy understood the lady's turning to him for assistance. Elizabeth had placed her trust in Wickham only to have the man betray her. The idea of her coming willingly to his household had taken root, and a flicker of expectation had claimed Darcy's heart, only to be drenched by the woman's tears for a scoundrel.

"Elizabeth tells me you hold knowledge of Mr. Wickham's previous manipulations," Gardiner spoke in businesslike tones, but Darcy's interest in the investigation had waned.

"I do, but..." he began.

Elizabeth interrupted. "Please, Mr. Darcy. I know we last parted with ill-chosen words, but there is no other who could devise a means to recover the initial funds from a man such as Mr. Wickham. I fear he has spent the hard-earned pennies of so many. I blame myself for I did not listen to the doubts I held long before returning to Longbourn from Kent. I egregiously disabused your chronicle of Mr. Wickham's reputation, as well as the warnings of my Aunt Gardiner and Mrs. Collins. I fully accept my faults, but I beg you not to punish others who require your benevolence because you wish no contact with me."

Mr. Gardiner opened his mouth to chastise his niece for her familiarity, but Darcy motioned the man to silence. The "business" between him and

Elizabeth required settlement before they could address Mr. Wickham's schemes.

Without polite humor, Darcy asked, "Do you regret your choices?"

"Some," she said softly. Elizabeth turned to her uncle to ask, "Might Mr. Darcy and I have a private moment? There are unfinished discussions to address."

"I will not have your reputation spoiled by leaving you alone with Mr. Darcy," Gardiner protested.

Darcy gestured to two chairs seated close together before the hearth.

"Miss Elizabeth and I will remove to the chairs my sister and I regularly use after supper. You may view us at all times."

Gardiner scowled, but he nodded his agreement. Elizabeth stood immediately, and Darcy followed her to the seating. As perverse as it may seem to others, he enjoyed the display of the gentle sway of her hips; yet, he missed the spirited stride through which she moved through life.

Once seated, Elizabeth continued in hushed tones. "What you wish to know is if I regret denying your plight?"

"Do you?" Darcy asked in humorless tones.

Elizabeth paused in consideration. "I am known within my family as the one who speaks her opinions openly, but such is a false assumption. I do speak with some fervor when I feel a wrong was perpetrated. Even so, I never speak without careful examination, and I always reevaluate my interactions. Unfortunately, sometimes only experience proves the true tutor."

"You avoid the question, Miss Elizabeth."

She smiled knowingly. "I suppose I do for I possess no answer that satisfies me." Darcy slowly sucked in a deep breath. "Before I can assist

you, I must know when you recognized Mr. Wickham's talents for persuasion."

"Must we revisit that night in Kent, Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth's gaze sharpened.

"Must we dissect each accusation before you will agree to assist me?" "It is not the only means to secure my agreement," Darcy proclaimed. Elizabeth countered, "Did I err in arriving on your threshold today?"

"Your uncle has identified Mr. Wickham's deceit. Surely a man of Mr. Gardiner's aplomb can devise a plan to secure Mr. Wickham's return of the Meryton funds."

"If we do not act quickly, there may be nothing remaining to claim for the recovery. From what I have learned from Mrs. Forster, the Meryton militia will soon depart for Brighton, and eventually on to the northern shires. For the moment, Mr. Wickham regularly chronicles the steady climb of the profits for any who ask. Such is what the good people of Meryton spend in the village shops. They purchase items on credit, living on the dream fed to them by Mr. Wickham. Why does it matter when I recognized Mr. Wickham's manipulations? What matters are the lives of innocents!" Her voice rose quickly, but Darcy shushed Elizabeth's growing ire. "Do you wish me to beg, Mr. Darcy? If so, you may hold the pleasure of seeing me thoroughly chastised and upon my knees. Simply tell me what you desire, sir, and it is yours." She inhaled sharply and waited Darcy's reply.

"I want you, Elizabeth. I want you at my side as my wife—as the mistress of my households, and..." Darcy paused for dramatic effect. He meant to shock her. "And I want you in my bed at night."

Elizabeth responded as Darcy expected. She blushed prettily, but her eyes sparked with anger. "Surely you jest, sir. As simple as that. You expect me to agree to a marriage proposal?"

Darcy leaned back into the cushions. “It is not as if you have not had time to ‘reevaluate our previous interactions,’” he said with practiced calm. “I suppose you must decide how badly you wish to save the meager funds of your Meryton neighbors and how much value you place upon Mr. Bennet’s reputation. I assume many will blame your father for their losses, for it was at your and your sisters’ encouragement that Mr. Bennet welcomed Mr. Wickham into his home.”

Elizabeth’s bottom lip trembled, but her chin notched higher. Those eyes that had haunted him for months met his in feminine outrage, mixed with desolation. Darcy always admired her tenaciousness, even when he could easily read upon her features the creative means Elizabeth constructed for his absolute destruction, but today, tarring and feathering was the least of his worries. He wished to corner a wild animal and tame it to his liking. In truth, he wondered if he were up to the task.

“If I refuse your most excellent offer,” she asked in cynicism.

Darcy did not move a muscle. “I will permit you and Mr. Gardiner your leave,” he said without the emotions screaming for him to do the begging. “You refused me previously, but before you do so a second time, realize what you are denying. Look about you, Miss Elizabeth. Would being Mistress of Darcy House be so dire a consequence? Would not securing your mother’s and your sisters’ futures be a bargain? You know I would never treat you without respect. Is my offer such a hard one to swallow?”

“Purely business?” she questioned.

“A marriage of convenience.”

Elizabeth leaned in Darcy’s direction and lowered her voice further.

“Why would you set such conditions, sir?”

Darcy leaned forward to meet her inquiry. “Do you wish the truth or the soft parlor talk Society demands?” He had attempted to win Elizabeth’s heart by following Society’s strictures and had failed miserably. He

assumed one could not lose something he never owned, so he pushed against the boundaries of good breeding.

“The truth, sir,” Elizabeth said boldly.

In brutally honest tones, Darcy pronounced aloud what he never permitted another to know. “For more than a year, I thought of you as my future wife. I can imagine no other to replace you, but even if you refuse me a second time, I will exhaust a good portion of each day praying you know health and happiness. I wish you to marry me so I might spend the remainder of my days watching a smile of delight claiming your lips, knowing the pride of observing you heavy with our children, and observing you grow old within my embrace.”

A surprised look crossed Elizabeth’s feature. “Oh?” she whispered.

Darcy smiled easily at her. It was gratifying to leave the woman speechless for a change. “I am certain Mr. Gardiner wonders of our secrecy. I will step from the room for a few minutes so you might make your explanations. I will order us a light meal, and we can continue our negotiations while we eat.” He stood to glance down upon her upturned face. His body blocked Mr. Gardiner’s view, and so Darcy stroked a finger lightly along Elizabeth’s cheek. “Before you depart Darcy House today, Elizabeth,” he whispered, “you must decide whether being my wife would be so undesirable. But know there will be no more opportunities for you to change your mind. Like marriage, your choice today is forever.”

Her cheek still burned where he had stroked it. Elizabeth could not believe Mr.

Darcy’s touch could be so seductive. Certainly, on more than one occasion over the

months that followed her refusal of the man, she had marveled at the idea that Mr. Darcy could affect her. Heaven help her, the man's touch could prove addictive if she permitted it. Elizabeth wished to race after him and beg the gentleman to caress her cheek again just to determine if it was as she thought and not some aberration. She wished to find protection in his embrace. This business with Mr. Wickham was too devastating, and she wanted to place the responsibility upon another's shoulders. Without thinking, she closed her eyes to consider Mr. Darcy's classically handsome features and how confidence never failed him.

"Lizzy?" Her uncle claimed the seat Mr. Darcy had vacated. "Did Mr. Darcy dismiss you? Are we to be shown the door?"

"No, Uncle," she explained. "The gentleman asked us to dine with him, so we might discuss the Meryton dilemma in more detail."

"Then what has you so visibly moved? You appear quite pale."

With a stern effort, Elizabeth gave herself a mental shake. "Only a bit of mayhem from the ordinary," she assured her relation. "Mr. Darcy agreed to assist us if I accept his hand in marriage."

Mr. Gardiner blustered, "Surely you speak an untruth. If Mr. Darcy truly wished to claim you to wife, taking advantage of your current circumstances is beyond good *ton*. And he calls himself a gentleman," her uncle said in disgust. "We will depart this moment. I will not have you subjected to Mr. Darcy's manipulations."

Elizabeth stayed her uncle's rise by resting her hand upon his forearm. "Mr. Darcy's offer is not a manipulation, Uncle. I have not confided a private secret to anyone until now. Mr. Darcy proposed when we were in Kent last April."

"I do not understand, Lizzy. Did you refuse the man? I congratulate you for your denial of Mr. Collins, for the man is a pompous prat, but how could you turn from the offer of a man of Mr. Darcy's stature?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes in exasperation. “I thought my opinions absolutes. I suspected Mr. Darcy had a hand in Mr. Bingley’s removal from Netherfield, and I foolishly believed Mr. Wickham’s accusations against Mr. Darcy.”

“Needless to say you learned the hard lesson of believing a scoundrel of Wickham’s nature, and as to Mr. Bingley, I am not impressed with any man who permits his opinions to be so easily swayed. I doubt Bingley deserves a woman as sweet natured as our Jane.” Her uncle caught Elizabeth’s hand. “You know I adore my youngest sister, but your mother is an excessively foolish woman. Mrs. Bennet never understood your nature, and therefore, she meant to mold you into another Jane. You have listened to your mother’s criticisms too often, and although you pretend to hold no care for Mrs. Bennet’s opinions, you bear them as if they were a cherished cloak. I suspect Mr. Darcy offered you more than his hand during the course of your acquaintance. A set down, perhaps? Or a snub you could not forgive?”

Scouring her brain for some sort of clever retort, Elizabeth finally settled upon the truth. “Both. Mr. Darcy expressed a desire for finer society than he discovered in Meryton.”

“I imagine those with Town bronze would think as such. Like Mr. Darcy, I am not always best pleased with many I discover in your Aunt Phillips’ parlor.”

Elizabeth paused to weigh her response. “I wish I had your good sense always whispering in my ear,” she confessed.

“Will you accept Mr. Darcy this time?” Mr. Gardiner inquired.

Elizabeth glanced to the still open door. “I do not wish to submit to Mr. Darcy simply to convince him to assist us. Neither do I wish to claim the title of Mrs. Darcy for the sole purpose of securing the futures of my mother and sisters.”

“What if the gentleman held you in affection?”

“The man has me at a disadvantage,” Elizabeth admitted. “There’s no means to determine his emotional attachment. I know the words of his affections that he spoke in Kent. I also know what he says now, but how am I to recognize the depth of his regard if he uses our joining as a bargaining tool in our negotiations.”

Her uncle’s eyes sparked with mischief. “Then I suspect you should accept the man and sort out the madness afterward. You may always cry off if you no longer wish the connection.”