

1932 EXCERPT

KAREN M COX

1932: PRIDE & PREJUDICE REVISITED

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L

izzy, my dear, will you come into my library for a moment?"

Elizabeth Bennet looked up and rose from a red velvet chaise lounge, laying her book aside. Her father rarely asked her into his inner sanctum, although she had been in there more often than any of her four sisters or her mother.

Dr. Bennet had sequestered himself in there almost nonstop over the last month or so. The Bennet women never thought to ask him why; if he was working on a paper for publication or editing a journal article, it was his usual behavior. During those times, he only left the library for meals or the university where he taught his classes. But something about his demeanor when he appeared in the doorway caused a knot of anxiety in the pit of Elizabeth's stomach. He looked as though he hadn't slept well for days. He was subdued—dejected, even—and his shoulders slumped as he turned and headed down the hall.

She entered the study and closed the door quietly behind her.

Unsure of the situation, she decided a quiet approach was appropriate to her father's disposition.

"What is it, Papa? Is something the matter?"

Dr. Bennet stood at the window, looking out into the small garden below. His wife belted out shrill instructions to the two youngest girls, her strident tones traveling easily through the open window. Sensible garden plants such as tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, and beans grew in place of pretty daisies and morning glories this year.

"It's all too little, too late." He pushed the window sash down, shutting out the cacophony outside. Drawing a deep breath to fortify himself, he squared his shoulders and turned to face his brightest and most practical daughter.

Reading her concerned expression, he gave her a kind smile. "Have a seat, Lizzy. There is something I need to discuss with you."

Elizabeth came around the chair facing his desk and sat down, poised on the edge of her seat. "You sound worried. Please, won't you tell me what is wrong?"

He sat heavily in his high-backed leather chair. "I have been let go from the university."

"Let go?" She blinked several times, an uncomprehending look on her face.

"Yes, let go. Fired."

"What?" Elizabeth's eyes were round with shock. "But, why?"

"It seems the enrollment is down for next year, and with the financial situation the way it is, the university senate has decided to cut costs. One of those costs is 'extra' faculty."

"But you've been there for nine years!"

"Well, it would seem that nine years is a relatively short term of employment for a professor. Everyone else has been there longer, and I was the last hired."

"How long have you known?"

"Since May."

Elizabeth put her elbow on the arm of the chair and rubbed her forehead. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"Ah, well...I suppose I was hoping to find another position before I said anything. Give you good news with the bad."

Elizabeth sat in silence, not knowing what to say or how to console her father. This was a serious matter for all of them. Several of her friends had been required to relocate because their fathers had lost jobs, and many of her classmates had to leave college to work and help out their families. Sometimes a student would just disappear from class one day, never to be heard from again.

College! Elizabeth had not even considered how her father's loss might result in losses of her own. She had recently finished her sophomore year at her father's university. Without the reduction in tuition for professors' children—and without his income—there would be no money to pay for college. Her dream of being a teacher would quickly be devoured by the need to focus on the necessities of life: food, shelter, and clothing for seven people.

"Surely, there has to be something you could do—something *we* could do."

Dr. Bennet stared at the desk in front of him. "No. I've tried for two months to find work somewhere else—anywhere else—in my field, or even outside of it. There's nothing, not even a nibble."

"I'm so sorry."

"There's more." He grimaced, fiddling with an envelope on his desk. "I'm not sure if you were aware, but there is a mortgage on this house, which means a payment has to be made every month."

Elizabeth felt the blood drain from her cheeks; even her lips felt numb.

"Of course, without my income—"

"The payment can't be made, and the bank will take the house," she whispered. She looked at her father's face, and he nodded. *No wonder he looks so hopeless.* "Does Mama know?"

"Not yet."

"She loves this house."

"Yes, I am aware."

"Are there no savings? I thought you had other accounts—investments, that sort of thing." Elizabeth desperately grasped at any sliver

of information she could remember overhearing about her father's finances.

"I did have some money set aside, but because I started saving so late in my career, I thought I needed to catch up. So, to make money quickly, I invested most of my savings in the stock market."

Acid churned in her stomach.

"And of course, you know what happened there. When I was able to finally sell the portfolio last year, it was only a fraction of its original value.

"It is all my own fault. I should have saved more—should have taken better care of you all."

Elizabeth sat silent for a moment, turning over possibilities in her mind. "So, what happens now?"

"I received a letter from your uncle Ed Gardiner in Kentucky." He reached into the top desk drawer, drew out a piece of paper, covered with slanted, firm handwriting, and handed it to her.

Elizabeth looked up and raised her eyebrows in question, silently asking for permission.

Her father nodded. "Go ahead, daughter. You can read it."

Longbourn Farm, Meryton, Kentucky

July 6, 1932

Dear Thomas,

I received your letter on Thursday last. I am most profoundly sorry about the loss of your university position. I well remember how happy you were to finally be settled and working with your books, as you always loved to do. I have several colleagues in academia struggling as you are right now. The times are very bad indeed. I'm not quite sure how we will extricate ourselves from this economic mess; perhaps a new leader will have a different approach. Hoover's laissez-faire policies obviously did not work, and I fear his recent proposals are too little, too late. Ironic, isn't it, as he was the poor man's friend a few short years ago, head of the American Relief Administration and such.

You should not blame yourself for the situation in which you have landed, because you are certainly not alone. No layperson could have foreseen the

widespread panic and devastation our markets and banks have suffered since '29. I, myself, lost a considerable sum in the months following the stock market crash. Such is the price of our individual and societal avarice, I'm afraid, and a pity all our children must suffer because of it.

I regret that I cannot help you in the manner that you wrote to me. To be honest, I have no money to lend. Cash flow is almost at a standstill in our little corner of the South. Do not worry for us though, we are getting by. My veterinary practice is not overflowing with cash money, but my services are still valuable to the farmers around the area and, therefore, worth bartering for. I have been paid in various types of materials, foods, and supplies—eggs, cloth, cornmeal and such, and even a mama goat last month! (Madeline was not so pleased with that payment, especially when she found the little fiend gorging herself on the carrot patch in back of the barn!)

I do think I might have a solution for you, though, or at least a safety net for the time being. As you may remember, I ceased planting crops after our father died a few years back—too much for me to handle in addition to the vet office, and there was little farming help to be found at that time. Besides, as my agriculture colleagues and some of the older folk around here informed me, the soil was becoming increasingly depleted by planting the same crops year after year. Prices were also coming down, making it hard to break even in farming. Most people, having no other recourse, planted more, driving the price down even further.

But I digress. The land at Longbourn has had its rest now and is probably ready for planting again, as long as we rotate the crops. I know you despise farming, but it would be a way to support your family until a teaching position could be found. Additionally, there is the farmhouse where Fanny, Agnes, and I grew up. It is in some disrepair and has little in the way of modern conveniences, but it is structurally sound and would be big enough to house your brood of chicks. (I jest with you—you know how I love your girls.)

I will neither charge, nor accept, any rent on the fields or the house. I think it unfair that property is generally handed down only to sons. Unfortunately, my father was old-fashioned that way. Longbourn was Fanny's childhood home after all, even though it was left in my care. She has as much right to live there as I. We will help you with any startup costs, seed, tools, etcetera, as much as we are able, and you can reimburse those costs after you are back

on your feet. You are a smart man, and if my memory serves, you have quite a wealth of knowledge regarding farming, having grown up on one yourself.

I think this arrangement would suit us both. The farm would be put to good use, and your family would be sheltered and fed. Having a large number of mouths to feed can be an advantage, in that you have willing hands available as well. Who knows, perhaps my sister will even learn to practice some economy when she is back around her old stomping ground!

I joke, Thomas, a poor attempt to whistle in the dark, but I truly would be happy to have you all here. My love for my sister, and for you and your children, requires me to assist you in any way I can. Please consider it most carefully. I await your answer, brother.

Sincerely,

Edward Gardiner

Dr. Bennet got up and walked around his desk, sitting on the edge and reaching for his daughter's hand. "I have decided to accept your uncle's generous offer. We leave for Longbourn in two weeks."

"Two weeks! Do we have to go so soon?"

"We must vacate the house by the end of the month, Lizzy."

Tears gathered in her eyes, and her lip trembled, but she nodded as she carefully folded the letter and stood so she could lay it on the desk.

He gripped her hands and looked directly in her eyes. "Please, Lizzy, I will need your help, your level head, and your strength if we are to come out on the other side of this." His voice broke. "I know it is not fair to ask this of you..."

Lizzy put her arms around her father and felt his shoulders shake with silent sobs. His grief and despair frightened her more than anything else he said during their entire conversation. Reining in his emotions, he released her with a quick embrace and stood up straight. He wiped his eyes and laughed without mirth. "I am not looking forward to my next conversation with your mother."

"It has been a while since Uncle Ed was around us for any length of time, hasn't it?"

"I suppose. What made you think of that?"

“Oh, just something he wrote.” She tried to cover her fear with a carefree grin, “whistling in the dark” as her uncle said in his letter. “Uncle Ed must not know us very well if he thinks Kitty and Lydia will ever have ‘willing hands’ for farm work.”

Dr. Bennet chuckled and expelled a big sigh. “You may be right.” He paused for several seconds, thinking. Then, he gently patted her on the shoulder. “I know things look bleak right now, but try not to worry, daughter. I believe in the end, all will be well.”

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