

Charlotte

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*For Sarah, Paige, Lauren, Tom. My book children.*

1811

## PROLOGUE

**N**O PROSPECTS – OR SO the neighbourhood believed. Her own family thought it. Her dearest friend Elizabeth assumed it with the blithe arrogance of someone who could give her own wit and liveliness free rein because she had the gloss of both youth and beauty.

Charlotte was about to prove them all wrong, God willing. That morning, that very minute in fact, she intended to go out and roll the dice with all the bravado of a rake in a London night-haunt. She brushed down the folds of her best poplin day dress, with its pattern of minute sage-green flower fronds against a white background – no chainmail and pennant, but armour of a sort. Peering at herself in the glass, she was satisfied with what she saw, in as much as a tall, plain, and angular woman of twenty-seven and no prospects could reasonably be satisfied.

She took one more look at herself – her hair was at its best in the mornings, freshly released from the curlpapers that tackled a tendency to lankness, and her colour would be higher once she had been walking a little. Then she reached for her new straw bonnet, trimmed with the same fabric as her dress. Gentlemen

did not notice such details, in her limited experience, but they responded to a sense of order, of patterns meshing. Anomalies in appearance startled them.

She tiptoed down the stairs, feeling no need to advertise her early rising. In the passage that led to the kitchen, she thought for a moment, then donned an apron that would protect her gown, slid her feet into sensible boots, and took up a trug and cutting knife. She intended to show off not only her physical charms, such as they were, but her more practical attributes; that, while fond of healthful exercise, she was nevertheless attentive to the gifts of the fields and woods. She would collect mushrooms and pick apples. And, if necessary, choose and cut late roses and early chrysanthemums for dressing the house. Her intention was to appear something more than handsome; she wanted to look like a chatelaine. Someone who would run a small household with efficiency, taste, and economy; someone who would bestow comfort and order.

She knew what she needed to do.

1818-1819

## CHAPTER I

THE BOBBING LIGHT AND SHADOW thrown by the candle woke Charlotte. She sat upright, not alarmed, but alert: there was no soft wail or snuffling from the room alongside. Her husband stood by her bedside, looking down at her with speechless compassion. His face shone wet in the sliding glow of the candle-flame; it gave the impression of movement to his face, and she realised that the hand that held the candlestick was shaking.

And then she knew, before he spoke, reaching for her with his other hand: 'Come, my dear.'

They stood beside the cot, still as statues, the only movement in their enmeshed fingers, kneading convulsively at each other's knuckles. Charlotte always imagined that if, when, this moment came, she would snatch up the little form, would shake, cajole, love it back to life. But after that first long look, bending over Tom with the candle held close to his beloved face, she had not moved. Even in the unreliable light, the purple stains under his eyes and the waxen appearance of the pinched nose were unmistakable. No breath disturbed those nostrils, or raised his chest.

Eventually, she tried to speak, but only a hoarse

growl came. Mr Collins nevertheless understood her: 'About half an hour ago, dearest. I came in to see him, and it was immediately apparent. I touched him; he was already quite cool.'

'What were . . . why did you go to him? Was he fretful?' Even as she spoke, she knew she made no sense. If Tom had made the slightest sound, she would have reached him before his father. She had had an extra ear attuned to him since the day of his birth more than three years ago, a sensitivity to any distress he might feel or encounter far more heightened than she had experienced with her daughters.

Her husband's hand clenched in time with the bobbing of his Adam's apple. 'I came in to pray for him. I do so every night. When I . . . when I found him, I could see there was no help. So I prayed, like I always do. I stood by him and prayed.'

And then Charlotte broke, a sheet of salt tearing from her eyes and nose as she scooped up the body, not yet cold, but long since past the warmth of a living child. She clutched him to the breasts that had nurtured him, a process that had given them both such delight, happy animal satisfaction on his part, pangs of more complicated joy on hers. She stroked the long little fingers, with nails like soap bubbles, that would never slide trustingly into her hand again. She kissed his neck, soft and pliant under the weight of his head, palmed his sturdy back, fixing the familiar scent of his skin in the atoms of her body. For one moment, the world slid sideways and righted itself: he still smelled like Tom, he couldn't possibly be dead,

they would prove all the surgeons wrong, he would wake and burble ‘Mama’ and she would kiss him and kiss him, all over his chubby hay-fragrant little body and face, and the globe would resume spinning on its everyday axis.

But the child in her arms did not wake. And looking across at her openly weeping husband, she knew that he never would.



A small mercy: it was a mild, soft day, the sky a bowl of curds. Charlotte could not have borne the mockery of sunshine, or the misery of rain and spiteful wind, as they stood, a cluster of crows, in the churchyard. She adjusted Laura’s weight on her hip. Her second daughter’s warm body was the only thing anchoring her to the earth, to this place. Nothing else made sense, not the sexton, not the grave into which the pitifully tiny coffin was being lowered, not the words being intoned by the parson, not even the grief coming off her husband so thick she could almost taste it catching at the back of her throat.

He stood by her side, allowed on this occasion the role of the bereaved parent. Not even the most stoic clergyman could be expected to bury his own child, and so Lady Catherine had sent for a parson from a neighbouring parish to conduct Tom’s funeral.

Charlotte, in that slice of her mind that continued to function rationally, conceded that Lady Catherine had indeed been useful in the past few days. She had

written messages and made arrangements, she had offered mourning garments and shades, had even sent her carriage to Meryton to fetch the elder Lucases. She had objected to Charlotte's intention to bring Tom's small sisters to the graveyard, claiming that at almost five and six years of age they were too young – but, for once, she had allowed herself to be overruled without argument.

Charlotte, unable to look down into the grave, stared across it at the other mourners present. Her sister Maria was in tears, and her mother sobbing into a handkerchief, supported by her father, whose usually rubicund face was pale with distress. Lizzy had arrived the night before, escorted by her husband, Mr Darcy, who was standing beside her, all bleak gravity.

On some level, Charlotte was moved – even if slightly surprised – that her old friend, the mistress of Pemberley, should have made the journey down from Derbyshire to Kent for Tom's funeral. She and Mr Darcy were guests of Lady Catherine – an arrangement that might have been desperately awkward if not for the solemn circumstances. With pressing business to attend to, Mr Darcy would be leaving for London the next day, but Elizabeth would be staying at the Parsonage to keep Charlotte company during the first weeks of mourning.

Although, Charlotte noted – in the dispassionate way she kept noticing the crack in the glass of one of the windowpanes in the drawing room, the fungus speckling the leaves of the late roses in the garden – that Lizzy was gazing across at the bereaved family

with an expression on her face that could only be described as forlorn.

Laura wriggled in her arms as the first clods of earth fell on the coffin. 'Mama, I don't want Tom to be cold,' she wailed into her mother's ear. 'He doesn't like the dark.' Charlotte murmured the same lies she had been telling both girls since the day that had dawned relentlessly after the night Tom had perished: that their brother had gone to be with the angels, where there was no cold, or dark, or pain. Although how could she possibly know for certain? Was her husband certain?

She glanced over at him and Sarah, her little changeling: thin and whippy like her mother, and with her father's dark hair, her dark brown eyes were nothing like the grey and blue of her parents. She was in as much distress as Laura, flinching as each spadeful thudded onto the coffin, but remained silent, leaning against her father's side, a thumb jammed into her mouth.

Trying to keep herself tethered to the moment, to prevent herself floating outside the scene, as she so often had in the last days and hours, a state in which she looked down on herself with both detachment and such acuity she could see the pink line where she parted her hair, Charlotte turned her head back towards Lady Catherine, who stood on the other side of the grave. Like herself, her ladyship was wearing unrelieved black – although this was not so much a statement of condolence as a matter of habit. Nevertheless, Lady Catherine was gazing at her with a rare expression of sympathy on her craggy face and, as she caught Charlotte's eye,

she gave a small, tight nod of something close to approval. She had earlier complimented Charlotte on her fortitude, while seeming to use the words as code for something else.

Laura wailed again, softly, now just a general expression of misery and confusion, and at the same time, Mr Collins began to shudder. One hand still resting on his eldest daughter's shoulder, the other pressed a handkerchief to his face, and a long, low moan emerged from behind it. Something burst and surged through Charlotte's veins: it was as if he was feeling her agony, voicing it, giving her relief via emotional ventriloquism. She held Laura still more fiercely to her and, in a spasm of gratitude so violent it threatened to stop her breath, she stretched her other arm towards her husband, who still clasped Sarah. The hand she covered was cold, but their daughter's hair falling over it was warm and soft. And so it was at the grave of her son, with both her daughters present, that Charlotte Collins, née Lucas, realised that she loved her husband.



Mrs Darcy paced up and down the drawing room, as Charlotte tried in vain to make both herself and her guest comfortable, offering a seat by the fire, to send for refreshments. Since finding her son dead, she had found it impossible to settle – to lie or sit or stand in any one place for more than a few minutes – without wanting to leap to her feet and hasten elsewhere, anywhere. It was a while before she realised she was

trying to escape pain the same way a mouse would try to escape a toying cat. This made condolence visits even more than usually difficult – while gratified at the kindness of parishioners and neighbours, every several minutes she found herself battling the impulse to rise and flee the room. But this morning Elizabeth outdid her in restlessness. Her face was wan, and there were shadows under the famously brilliant eyes, now immortalised by one of London's most sought-after portrait artists.

'I cannot comprehend the enormity of your loss, my dearest Charlotte,' she said. 'To lose a beloved child, and a son, not yet four years old! It is too cruel, no matter how much reason – and indeed the teachings of your husband, and the convictions of mine – may attempt to console or soothe.'

She paused and wrung her hands. With the detached part of her brain, Charlotte registered that she had never seen her friend do such a thing before. Elizabeth went on, 'I do not mean to burden you. That would be unfeeling, a piece of unkindness. But I must impose on our friendship, your patience, and good heart, even at such a time. I miscarried a few months ago. The baby was a boy.'

Charlotte raised her head, surprised and yet not surprised, uncertain what to say. Lizzy burst out, 'It is the second child I have lost in these past three years. Charlotte, forgive me – while I cannot pretend to understand what it must be to have a living, breathing child perish, how my own losses gnaw at me!'

Now the brilliance of Elizabeth's eyes owed something

to the tears that trembled in them. 'It has been a shock – a ruinous shock – to realise how ill-prepared I was for marriage. How ill-prepared both Mr Darcy and I were. We believed our regard for each other had been tested, that it had grown to overcome all that stood in our way – the distinctions between us, the differences in our temper, his pride, my hasty prejudice. He had done so much for me, my family. His love was in no doubt, and the strength of my feelings matched his. There was nothing, I thought, that we could not discuss, could not face together. I was a fool.'

She sat down at last on the sofa next to her friend, and said, 'I did not see the truth that stared me in the face: a great man, from a great family, marries for one reason primarily: to beget heirs. Neither of us gave this any thought. We believed that children, a son – or two or three – would present themselves as if by magic. But it has been five and a half years, and there is still no infant in the nursery. I walk through the chambers of that great house, knowing myself to be the envy of many who do not consider me fit for the office of being its mistress. And I pass beneath the eyes of all those portraits, those Darcy ancestors, all witness to my failure, watching me break the chain.'

Charlotte murmured the necessary words of hope and encouragement, or at least she tried to, but Lizzy went on: 'I live in terror of one of the stone-faced doctors who attend me opining that there can be no more children, or attempts to bear one. If that happens, Charlotte, I swear I shall jump off the Pemberley bridge.'

She began to weep in earnest, as her friend sat

dry-eyed beside her. 'Fitzwilliam would have been better off wedded to a brood mare. For that is what is required for these great estates, these honourable names. Succession. And my husband is of course too much the gentleman to reproach me for my failure in this regard. So we do not and cannot speak of it. And we speak less and less.'

Charlotte's mind took a vertiginous leap: she had not yet thought of Tom's death in these terms – of what it might presage for her daughters. And even as she stumbled through the required assurances that Lizzy would surely indeed soon have issue, the thought occurred to her at the same time as her friend put it into words: 'But what if I give birth to a girl?'

Charlotte felt an old rage rise up in her. Tom was beyond her help, but this was a new anxiety. With her beloved and damaged son gone, and with him the security of his inheritance of the Longbourn estate, how could she safeguard her daughters? How was she to assure them a home and the respectability this proffered, beyond the lottery of matrimony? If Lizzy had daughters, they would at least have considerable dowries – in which case, Pemberley could go to Bonaparte for all Charlotte cared.

Her mind scoured clear by grief, the reality of her situation came into sharp focus: she and her daughters were at risk of falling into the same trap that had yawned before Elizabeth's family, the Bennets: their future inheritance entailed away from them because they were mere females.

Why had she never taken Mrs Bennet's anxiety, the

‘nerves’ they had all mocked, seriously? The business of her life was to find her daughters husbands: what else could it be, given the blind roll of the dice that exposed them all to the kind of poverty perhaps worse than that seen in hovels; that of genteel beggary, of imposing upon distant male relatives who had their own children to set up in life, of being grateful for a roof, no matter how reluctantly or resentfully it was offered.

Elizabeth’s marriage had changed all that; indeed, her sister Jane’s alliance with Mr Bingley alone had offered the remaining unmarried Bennet sisters, Mary and Kitty, a substantial degree of protection. While they might one day lack a home to call their own, they need never fear want as long as they could reside with one or the other of their elder sisters. But on the other hand, Charlotte could see there was no way out for the Darcy line; only males could inherit an estate as profitable, as *visible* as Pemberley.

Charlotte set her lips. Silently, she vowed to spend the rest of her days circumventing the law of the land so that her daughters need fear neither penury nor charity, as had been the case for herself and her sisters, and indeed many of the daughters of the families she knew. She had no idea how to proceed in this regard, and little understanding of what instruments could be useful, but she knew better than most what dogged determination might do.

Besides, she had an unexpected example of success in this regard, perhaps even an ally, right next door: Lady Catherine had inherited Rosings upon becoming a widow. Even more impressive, she had secured the

inheritance for her daughter, Anne de Bourgh. And if Lady Catherine, with her strictures on rank and society, could manage such a thing, surely it was within the bounds of possibility?

## CHAPTER II

SOME DAYS WERE BETTER THAN others. Somehow, the hours were endured. Letters addressed to the bereaved parents continued to arrive, and responding to these provided some object to each monstrous day. Lady Lucas wrote to her daughter almost daily, not even awaiting any reply, and although each note repeated the substance of the last, Charlotte valued these tokens of her mother's affection. Lizzy was not the only member of the Bennet family to try to comfort her; she was touched to receive from Mrs Bingley, Elizabeth's elder sister, a letter of condolence all the more sweet for its evident sincerity. As the mother of two young boys and a by-word for kindness, Jane was deeply affected by Charlotte's loss and, while she had no remedy to offer for grief, the indication of her care was itself soothing.

The weeks trudged by. Charlotte found that watching how differently her daughters experienced time to adults was enlightening: there were hours when they ran, played, and whooped as joyously as if nothing more grievous than a grazed knee had ever marred their days. It was their knack for forgetting she marvelled at. There were moments when she envied

them this gift; at others, she understood that they might never remember their younger brother, and the very idea made her feel as if her skin had been removed with a paring knife.

Her memories of Tom were at that stage not yet memories, but as much part of her daily life as rising, dressing, breakfasting, feeding the chickens, and all the routines to which she now clung as a means of passaging through days as thick as treacle and grey as ash. He was with her everywhere, sometimes receding momentarily, but mostly at the edge of her vision, her hearing.

Katie, the maid, her florid face swollen with tears, and Mrs Brown, the housekeeper, had each offered to pack away his clothing and toys, but Charlotte had refused to allow this. Lady Catherine had, on one of her visits, indicated that she would send over one of her maids to undertake the sad task, but Charlotte, accustomed to acquiescence, along with biting her tongue a hundred times in the presence of her ladyship, had uttered a flat refusal, excused herself, and left the room.

Normally, such rebellion would have been punished with a withdrawal of attention from Rosings, with no cucumbers from the hothouses or invitations to drink tea after church until Charlotte and her husband had made an adequately fulsome display of regret, but this time, no umbrage was taken. Lady Catherine continued to call on Charlotte in the mornings, on which occasions they spoke of the weather, the health of their respective surviving children, and the prowess of Charlotte's hens, while acknowledging the superiority

of the Rosings poultry. The matter of Tom's few possessions was not alluded to again.

So the days were bearable, most of the time, if only just, leavened as they were by the presence and playfulness of her daughters, as well as the attentions of her husband. Charlotte sometimes wondered if he too had felt that shift in the tone of her emotions as they had stood by Tom's grave. She dreaded his uttering platitudes that might drive away her unexpected new warmth for him, but he was quieter than usual, his customary torrent of wordage muted by real grief.

Theirs was not a union in which marital candour or intimate communication had ever featured; Charlotte had always considered that part of the bargain she had struck was to withhold, even hide, her true feelings and thoughts. Marriage had required her to become an even more than ordinarily contained person, and she assumed the same held for her spouse. So they had no way in which to find their way towards one another through words; but now Mr Collins would hover over her chair after meals, come and find her at intervals in the day to enquire after her health; he would press her hand, pat her shoulder, or kiss her forehead, gestures she received gratefully.

The nights were the problem. Charlotte went to her bed the way a witch or heretic went to the pile of faggots: knowing that certain torture lay ahead, but with no avenue of escape. She could have summoned a doctor or apothecary – Lady Catherine would have been delighted to be consulted for advice on such a matter – and asked for a sleeping draught. But she was

afraid that after years of sleeping with one ear open, she might, if insensible, somehow miss a sound indicating that Sarah or Laura were in distress or afflicted, that her inability to wake might prove fatal.

And what she could barely articulate to herself was the hope that if she remained alert, she might hear the familiar chirruping indicating that Tom needed her. That she would take a candle into his nursery to see him light up with smiles at the sight of her, chubby arms windmilling over the edge of the cot, eager to wrap themselves around her neck. That she would scoop him up into her arms, slot him onto her hip and tuck his head into the crook of her neck, the nightmare of the present dissolving, the flow of life reverting to its normal channels, no longer jarringly out of step.

This meant that she dared not take wine with dinner, not even when Lady Catherine sent over a half-dozen bottles of Constantia wine from her late husband's cellar, a magnanimous gesture that had required both a full-page letter of thanks and a visit for the sole purpose of expressing gratitude.

So Charlotte would lie in sheets that would grow rumpled as the hours crawled by, rehearsing that last day of Tom's life endlessly, wondering if there was a sign she had missed, something she could have done to change the events of the night. Had he been unduly subdued? Had she missed his catching a cold? She should have supervised his supper instead of leaving it to Katie, fed him special treats. Why had she not played with him longer that day? Held him tighter? How could she have kissed him goodnight so lightly,

unconcerned, with no sense of the savage beast waiting to snatch him away, to tear her world to pieces? How could she not have known nemesis was waiting, hidden and leering in the shadows, for her to lower him into his cot and walk away, leaving him unguarded?

Her mind would roam further into thornier fields: should they have consulted more doctors? Heaven knows, Lady Catherine had recommended enough, as well as having so much to say that one might be forgiven for thinking her an expert on water on the brain. Had they accepted too easily the claim that his condition was untreatable, apart from the regular draining of fluid from his poor swollen head? He had always seemed so content, with none of the fretfulness one might expect of a child with such an impairment: he loved his food, the games they played, music . . . Oh God, she had promised him and his sisters a visit to the piano in the housekeeper's room at Rosings, for one of their occasional sing-along sorties – why had she postponed an outing he would have enjoyed so much? Why had she trusted that another day would come, another tomorrow, and another? *Wait, not yet, not yet*, her heart cried. *I am not ready*. And then, as the clock downstairs chimed away the plodding hours: *I shall never be ready*.

She would at last wrench her mind away from such self-flagellation, only to have the fate of her daughters rise like a spectre. Within ten years, Sarah would be sixteen, Laura close to fifteen; precious little time to find a means of securing their futures, if that security was to be provided in the form of a sum sufficient for

independence. How could she possibly set by enough? She ran their household with such efficiency, she made a small annual profit; not for nothing was she the child of William Lucas, a merchant before his elevation in society. But she had no illusions of being able to provide substantially for both girls. She would have to find a legal way around the Longbourn entail, and how was she to succeed where Mr Bennet had failed? Lady Catherine might be cultivated as an ally: she who had managed to preserve Rosings for her daughter. But how was she to approach her ladyship on such a matter, and in such a way that Mr Collins – who would most likely be appalled to discover his own wife intended tampering with his inheritance – did not find out?

She drew up numerous plans, friends who might be prevailed upon to assist, avenues to pursue; but in those bleak midnight hours, she quailed at the enormity of the task and her own ignorance of the law.

## CHAPTER III

CHARLOTTE FOUND HERSELF AFFLICTED BY a more private matter of bodily health as well. A few days after the funeral, she had begun her monthly courses earlier than usual. Charlotte was physically robust, and this was not usually a matter that troubled her, but after more than a week passed with the flow as heavy as ever, she grew alarmed. Visions of a canker or wastage that would render her daughters motherless haunted her already hideous nights. She was tempted to mention the matter to Elizabeth, who, after the early impulse that had led her to share her own sorrows, had shown her old friend nothing but kindness and many attempts at solicitous distraction during the fortnight of her visit. But something held Charlotte back from discussing the vagaries of the female body with a friend who had recently suffered a miscarriage.

When another week had passed, with no lessening of her problem, she paid a discreet visit to Mrs Talbot, the village midwife, under the guise of dropping off napkins for a parishioner's laying-in. Mrs Talbot had delivered all three of Charlotte's children, and the two women were close without the expectations or rituals of friendship. She uttered condolences all the more

sincere for being terse, and did not allude to Tom's condition or suggest that his death had been in any way some sort of merciful release, commenting only on the sweetness of his temper.

The conversation turned to Charlotte's weeping body, and the midwife was able to reassure her that such a physical reaction was, if not normal, certainly not unusual in the wake of grief: 'It is a bodily expression of mourning. I have seen it before in women who are sorrowing. It may persist for a while. In the meantime, take plenty of beef broth, and eat liver if you can.' She also recommended drinking a tea of raspberry leaves in the mornings, and chamomile before retiring. 'And you may indeed find wine helpful, but no more than a glass at a time,' she cautioned.

Greatly relieved, and with the sense of pleasant exhaustion that often follows relief, Charlotte took Mrs Talbot's advice and a package of herbs. Whether it was the raspberry-leaf tea or nature taking its course, after a few more weeks, Charlotte's body settled back into its usual schedule.

But still she could not sleep. She stumbled through the days red-eyed and frantic for rest, dozing off in her sewing chair or at her household accounts and jerking awake, sweating in panic. To her shame, she found herself snapping at Katie, knocking over her water-glass, breaking crockery, crying out in near-hysteria when Laura slipped while trying to climb a stile into the cow-pasture. She was either weak with fatigue or as restless as a caged animal, desperate to walk for miles, swinging her arms, seeing and speaking

to no one. But the deepening winter thwarted her, both with the darkness that settled earlier each day, and with rain and fog that did not invite strolling. Besides, the wife of a clergyman – much less one who had the Hunsford living and the patronage of Rosings – could not roam the lanes and fields at will. She required an object for any journeys she made, and there were only so many parish visits she could make.

Her husband at least had the usual business of his office, and the winter pruning to attend to – the walnut and mulberry trees had to be cut back while their sap was dormant, to prevent weeping – and he would sally forth with leather gloves, knives and a bullhook, returning hours later with a face red-chapped by cold, exertion, and the private expression of grief. At those moments, his wife almost envied him his labours, even when the east wind nagged with the sting of sleet.

One evening, Charlotte found herself almost feverish with agitation and exhaustion. Mr Collins, concerned and perplexed as to how best to provide comfort, had finally broached one of Lady Catherine's bottles at dinner, and the silky red liquor had provided his wife with welcome warmth, colouring her cheeks and easing some of the knots from her neck and shoulders, which, these days, felt permanently crimped.

But after retiring to bed, she found herself as tense as always. She thrashed for what felt like hours, conscious of a semi-familiar pressure in her lower body she associated with the middle months of pregnancy. The heat of the wine had slid from her throat, chest and fingers to pool in her pelvis, thudding along with her pulse.

Charlotte did not have the vocabulary to give a name to sexual hunger, but she did know that the sense of urgency and loneliness she felt could no longer be endured. Sitting up in bed and flinging back the quilt, she called, 'Mr Collins!' Then, more loudly, 'William!' She was about to scramble out of bed to go and wake her husband when she heard footsteps and fumbling at the dressing-room door.

He stumbled into her bedchamber dishevelled in the dim light, and extremely anxious: 'My dearest Charlotte, whatever is the matter? Are you taken ill? Must we send to Rosings? Should I wake the servants?'

By now, she had managed to light her bedside candle, hands shaking, and saw that he had come to her with such alacrity, he had not even put a shawl or gown on over his nightclothes. Unable to speak, but hoping he could see that nothing physical ailed her, she simply stretched out her arms. He bustled to her side and bent to embrace her. She snared him around the waist and lay back, tugging him towards her. At his slight resistance, born of confusion, she urged, 'Get into bed, William. You'll freeze to death otherwise.'

He scrambled under the covers with her, still hugging her awkwardly, still murmuring queries: 'Are you in distress, my dear? Are you sure you are not ill, or in any pain?'

'I am quite well. But I cannot sleep!' It came out as a wail that caused Mr Collins to cluck with great tenderness. 'Here,' Charlotte added, with a fine disregard for logical sequence, 'your feet are blocks of ice. Warm them on mine.'

They lay wordless for a minute, tangling their legs together, panting slightly. Then, with blind instinct, she pushed up the tail of his nightgown and ran her hands up his back, digging her nails into his flesh. He began to kiss her all over her face, and she was overtaken by animal hunger that had her dragging up her own gown, and lunging upwards with her hips.

He all but fell into her, burying himself in the warmest part of her, and they both groaned. It was usual during their congress for Charlotte to lie still, but this time she bucked under him, unable to stifle her cries. Within seconds, she began to spasm in an agony of relief. He gasped and shuddered in response, and tears welled from Charlotte's eyes. It was a while before she realised that he too had shed the tears wetting her face.

Eventually, her grip on her husband slackened. She wriggled in his arms until he rolled alongside her, and then she hugged him again, less forcefully. He cradled her head against his chest, and she began to weep, but quietly. She cried for a long time before detaching herself and sitting up to search for a handkerchief. Stretching brought new awareness of how the wires in her body had uncoiled and loosened, and she took and kissed Mr Collins's hand gratefully.

He in turn sat up preparatory to leaving, and began to thank her, as was their usual pattern. Again, she tugged him back down. 'Stay.' And at his perplexity, she recited, 'Ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.'

She sensed him smiling at that, as he should, the

words coming from the vows in the Book of Common Prayer he read whenever joining in matrimony members of his congregation.

‘Perhaps we may be blessed with another child. I had hoped – I did not want to intrude on your grief – is it too soon to speak of such matters, my dear?’ But Charlotte, on the verge of voluptuous sleep, did not answer.



After that, things were a little better. Whenever she was having an especially bad night, Charlotte would call her husband, and he would hasten into her chamber, making ritual enquiries as to her health. She would reach out to him, they would couple both frantically and slightly furtively, then lie heaving in each other's arms. Sometimes one or the other would shed tears. Occasionally Mr Collins would express the tentative hope that their nocturnal activities would result in another child. Charlotte understood that this arose from his slight discomfort at the shamelessness of their marital incontinence. Their conjugal relations had indeed become first sporadic, and then rare following Tom's birth, something Charlotte had not particularly regretted. She did not know if this had arisen from reticence on the part of her husband – perhaps in response to her deep preoccupation with her youngest child – or the fact that regardless of his frailty, Tom, as the future heir of Longbourn, provided them all with the semblance of a secure future.

Neither had she cared to enquire. Having had three children in under five years, while not in the first flush of youth, she had welcomed the respite from pregnancy and child-bearing, the weariness that bit deep to the bone, the combination of hunger and nausea in the early months of carrying a child, the indigestion of the later months, the softening and swelling and leaking of her body. She did not begrudge the physical tax of bringing her beloved children into the world, and had refused the services of a wet nurse for each one, preferring to nourish her infants herself, even as Lady Catherine tutted and scolded; but she had enjoyed having her body to herself once Tom had been weaned. All the satisfaction she needed, she found in the affection of her three children, the physicality of their small bodies, the unselfconsciousness of their caresses.

While she welcomed the re-entry of Mr Collins to her boudoir, and the embraces that undid the knots in her body, she also knew that Tom could not be replaced, no matter how beloved a new infant would no doubt be. She was not yet ready for there to be another occupant of the cot in the nursery. So after another discreet visit to Mrs Talbot, Charlotte made certain to drink pennyroyal tea for a week each month, an ancient remedy against conception, according to the midwife. Meanwhile, ever-practical, she learned to lay out cloths to protect the bedsheets from undue amounts of laundering. And after these marital encounters, she would sleep.

She still startled awake with a cry of alarm from dreams of a child calling her, she still woke before dawn,

fretting over her daughters, but those few hours of deep physical relaxation and slumber made it possible to taste the toasted bread and bramble jam served at breakfast, to calculate her accounts with her usual accuracy, to adjust the amount of corn fed to the hens to encourage better laying, to smile more widely and curtsy more deeply when Lady Catherine came to call.