1. Spring 3

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Bennet." Zareen's voice is hoarse, and Erik can hear she's truly sorry. She's messed this up, and now she really understands how much. "I wasn't thinking. I know that sounds dumb, but I wasn't thinking that way. I just felt so at home here. Like this was my home too. Like you were kinda my grandparents."

He wonders if anyone else hears the past tense. He sees that Zee's cracking, but it's also letting some light in. It's shining through her.

"I know I've ruined everything, and I can't believe how stupid I was. What a ...." Zee searches for the right words again and finds them this time. They come out in a rush. "What a counterfeit module, what an embossed carbuncle, what a monstrous malefactor, a measureless liar, a carcass fit for hounds I've been." There's a certain serenity in her voice by the end of this rendition of insults.

A snort comes out of Mr. Bennet's mouth, and there's a ripple of a smile on Mrs. Bennet's face. Quince looks sick.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Mr. Bennet says with more kindness than he's exhibited before. "I also see that my daughter has certainly made an impression on you." He sneaks a peek at Quince, who sits whey-faced.

Zee's embarrassed now, but she courageously goes on. "And I'm so sorry that I ruined your bear bush."

By the look on their faces, both he and Zee realize they haven't seen it yet.

"The bush that's a bear." Zee waves vaguely out toward the backyard. "From your play. A couple of branches got broken off. We didn't mean to do it. I think one of the football players hit it going for a pass."

The Bennets exchange another look. This time it's with fondness.

"*Or in the night, imagining some fear, how easy is a bush supposed a bear*," Mr. Bennet intones in a British accent.

"When Robin was younger—" Mrs. Bennet starts.

"And the bush was younger," Mr. Bennet inserts.

"He and his friends battered that poor thing something awful," Mrs. Bennet finishes. "There were times I never thought it would recover, but it always did. A couple of broken branches won't faze it a bit. And you know, I think Carlos—our gardener—has been wanting to give it a good shearing for quite some time. It loses its grizzly-ness every couple of years, but it always comes back."

