

No More Tears

L. E. Smith

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To Charlene – who sought me out and didn't let me jump when frustrations mounted, whose gentle guidance and green ink slowly made me into a *tolerable* writer. I would have been lost without you, Tish.

Chapter One

London, September 1810

Fitzwilliam Darcy, having completed a most pleasant outing on a beautiful late summer's day, dismounted from his horse and made ready for his return to Derbyshire. As soon as he received word that his sister and her companion, Mrs. Younge, had arrived safely in Kent, he would leave for Pemberley. Shortly after he had entered the house, his butler delivered the awaited express, bowed, and discreetly left his young master alone in the study. Darcy noted the direction on the envelope and became uneasy; it was not in Georgiana's hand.

Moments later, the household was startled by cries of anguish emanating from the master's room. The butler and footman, hurrying to render aid, found a most unnerving sight – Darcy, sobbing as if his heart were breaking. As, indeed, it was.

“Mr. Darcy?” No response. “Sir?” the butler tried again. Still, no response.

In an action the man knew could cost him his position, the loyal butler surreptitiously scanned the open letter. He blanched and caught his breath as he read:

... I have been charged with relating to you the most distressing of news. There was an accident just outside the village of Leves Green. All within the carriage – your sister, her maid, and her companion – were instantly killed.

Georgiana Darcy, just fifteen years of age, was dead. Fitzwilliam Darcy was alone, the last of the Darcys of Pemberley.

London, One Year Later

Charles Bingley, having recently taken possession of a delightful Hertfordshire manor called Netherfield, was at present in London to collect a party to return with him.

Prodigiously pleased with the society of his new neighbours, he looked forward to an upcoming assembly ball in the near-by village of Meryton and desired that his two sisters and brother-in-law, Miss Caroline Bingley and Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, accompany

him. He was eager to convince his friend Darcy to come with him as well.

Bingley both desired Darcy's company and was concerned about his friend's low spirits. Even now, six months after the proscribed formal mourning, Darcy was rarely seen in company. There were whispers about Town regarding his mental state. Those few who had seen him were surprised that a man known for his reserve could have withdrawn that much deeper into himself. He was thin and looked ill. Bingley was convinced that were it not for the scruples of Darcy's valet, his normally fastidious friend would have paid little heed to his appearance. Speculation was rife about the disposition of Pemberley should the worst befall the current master. Darcy had no wife, no son, and no family closer than his Fitzwilliam and de Bourgh cousins. Hopeful matrons, dusting off their as-yet-unmarried daughters, were confident that one of the richest bachelors in all of England would be compelled to take a wife. And soon.

Charles Bingley knew what was being said of his friend and had determined to take him away from it all, even for a little while; away from the gossip, away from the rapacious matchmaking mamas, away from the London house too filled with the spectre of Georgiana.

“There is nothing for me in Hertfordshire. Indeed, there is nothing for me anywhere.”

“Good God, man! Listen to yourself. I know you still feel Georgiana's passing deeply, but you must begin to look to the future.”

“You do not understand. I failed her. I should have taken her to Kent myself. She would be alive if I had.”

Bingley saw Darcy's anguish and spoke gently to him. “You take too much upon yourself. There is no guarantee that your presence would have changed anything. Indeed, you might have been killed as well. It was an accident. You are not to blame.”

“Bingley, I have not the heart to argue with you. I shall always hold myself responsible. Nothing you say can change that.”

“Then we disagree. Still, it is insufficient reason not to travel with me to Netherfield. Hertfordshire holds no unpleasant memories for you. Darcy, I must insist.”

Darcy looked at his friend. Bingley was unaffectedly modest and had relied on Darcy's reasoning in many things, until Darcy's grief and withdrawal from society had forced Bingley to make his own decisions, to trust his own judgment. Darcy saw the look of determination on his friend's face and allowed himself to be swayed.

“Very well. I will go.”

All eyes were drawn to the heretofore unseen Netherfield party as three gentlemen and two ladies entered the Meryton assembly rooms. Equal in intensity to the general air of approval was the sigh of relief that the party did not consist of the seven gentlemen and twelve ladies that, rumour had it, would attend. Two of the gentlemen soon drew the attention of the room: Mr. Bingley for his air of amiability and the report of his five thousand a year; Mr. Darcy for his fine, tall person, noble mien, and the report of an income twice that of his friend. That they were single men in possession of good fortunes was sufficient to recommend them to the local residents; that each must be in want of a wife was universally understood. That both were handsome and appeared to be men of sense and education caused many of the ladies to become quite breathless. Even Mr. Bennet, who had accompanied his distaff flock only under threat of a fortnight's invasion of his sacrosanct library by his youngest daughters, was favourably impressed. Bingley spied Mr. Bennet and Sir William Lucas, both of whom had earlier called at Netherfield to welcome him to the neighbourhood and made his way towards them, Darcy at his side.

“Gentlemen, what a delightful assembly!”

“If you like to dance, I suppose it is delightful enough,” Mr. Bennet quipped. Darcy suppressed a smile.

“This is my friend, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley.”

“An honour, sir. Will you stay long in Hertfordshire?” Sir William asked.

“My plans are not yet fixed.”

“Do you plan to dance tonight, as does your friend?” Sir William continued. “As you can see, sir, we are graced with the presence of many fine young ladies, any of whom, I am certain, would be honoured to stand up with you.”

“No, sir, I shall not.” Even Sir William could see that Darcy would speak no further upon the subject. Mr. Bennet took it upon himself to redirect the conversation.

“Mr. Bingley, at least, has come for such an amusement and is in want of partners. This will not do. I must introduce you, sir, to some of the fine young ladies of whom Sir William spoke.”

Mr. Bennet and Sir William nodded to their wives, who had been impatiently awaiting the signal to approach.

“May I present Mrs. Bennet and my three eldest girls, Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary. Our two youngest daughters are dancing.”

“Mr. Bingley, allow me to introduce Lady Lucas, my eldest daughter, Charlotte, and my other daughter, Maria.”

“A pleasure, ladies. I hope you will oblige me this evening.”

Mr. Bingley's invitation was quickly and happily accepted by each of the young women. At that moment, he recalled Darcy, standing a step behind him.

“Where are my manners? May I introduce my friend, Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth, second of the Bennet daughters, often indulged in the practise of observing men as they were introduced to her elder sister, Jane, a woman of classic beauty upon whom few men could look without admiration. She was, therefore, surprised to witness an entirely unexpected reaction in Mr. Darcy. Was she mistaken, or did she see sadness, a despondency the lines of his bearing could not disguise, briefly overshadow his handsome features?

Before much else could be said, the music resumed, and Bingley led out Charlotte Lucas. Darcy made his way to the windows, seeking to avoid conversation, especially with Miss Bingley. In that, at least, he was unsuccessful.

Bingley claimed Elizabeth for the third set. His partner after Miss Lucas had been Miss Bennet, and he had been immediately captivated by her beauty and serene countenance. He was sorely disappointed when that dance ended, but Elizabeth's high spirits soon restored his normal good humour.

“Mr. Bingley, you dance very well.”

He laughed. “Thank you, Miss Bennet. I must return the compliment. You are very accomplished at the art.”

“You flatter me, sir. Well done! I cannot be cross with you any more.”

“Dare I ask how I have earned your displeasure?”

“You have brought with you a gentleman who declines to dance.”

“Darcy? He will not. He is still mourning his sister.”

Elizabeth felt all the pain and mortification of her ill-founded wit. “I beg forgiveness, sir, I did not know. I am surprised that he comes into society at all.”

“You have no need to apologise, Miss Bennet, it was impossible for you to have known. Miss Darcy did not survive a carriage accident one year ago. She was the last of his immediate family and Darcy still feels it keenly. But the truth is, he was never much for balls and assemblies.”

Bingley hesitated, then asked, “Miss Bennet, would you grant me a request?”

“That depends upon the request.”

“Well spoken. Miss Bennet, would you come with me to talk to my friend? Your wit and liveliness would be most welcome to him, I think.”

“I am not engaged for the next. I will talk to your friend if he desires it.”

“Thank you. I do not believe Darcy wishes to spend the rest of the night in the company of my sister Caroline.”

When the dance ended, Bingley escorted Elizabeth through the press of the assembly to the edge of the room by the windows, where stood Darcy and Caroline Bingley.

Bingley introduced Elizabeth to his sister and then addressed his friend.

“Darcy, I say, you are not dancing, but I hate to see you stand around. Miss Bennet is not engaged for the next set and has humoured me by agreeing to keep company with you while I introduce Caroline to some of our new neighbours.”

Bingley held out his hand to his sister. “Shall we, Caroline?”

Caroline Bingley cast a disdainful look over her shoulder, helpless as her brother led her to another part of the room. Elizabeth saw it and was amused by the undisguised wariness on that woman’s face. She turned to the source of Miss Bingley’s attentions – Mr. Darcy. The poor man looked adrift, plainly wanting to be any place other than an assembly in Hertfordshire.

“Mr. Darcy, would you be so kind as to fetch me some punch? I am afraid that the copious amount of conversation required when standing up with your friend has left me quite thirsty.”

Darcy bowed and left to obtain the desired refreshment. When he offered the glass to Elizabeth, she quietly thanked him and waited for him to speak. Several minutes passed without conversation as Darcy’s thoughts once again turned inward. It was only after hearing raucous laughter from some nearby revelers that his attention was drawn back to Elizabeth.

“Please forgive me, Miss Bennet. I fear that my thoughts are not present in this room tonight, and neither are my manners.”

Elizabeth looked at the man before her and felt compassion for him.

“Mr. Darcy, I believe I understand your distraction. Mr. Bingley told me of your loss. Allow me to offer my deepest sympathies.” Darcy bowed in acknowledgment. “You were thinking of her just now, were you not? And I believe you were thinking of her when you were introduced to my sister Jane and me.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked in astonishment.

“There was a look of sadness about you, sir. You are the first man I have seen respond to my sister, Jane, in that manner. I wondered, then, what could have caused it.”

“Very perceptive, Miss Bennet. Do you always study people so intently?”

“Only young men when they meet Jane. She is a beautiful woman, and is as beautiful of character as she is of face.” Elizabeth momentarily caught his gaze, then made a brief curtsy. “I have fulfilled my pledge to Mr. Bingley. I shall take leave of you now, sir.”

“Please, Miss Bennet. Do not leave. I have enjoyed your company.”

Elizabeth hesitated, unsure why Mr. Darcy would seek to extend the tête-à-tête. When she saw the pain in his eyes, however, and realised that he was sincere in his request, she consented to remain.

“Mr. Darcy, forgive my impertinence, but I must ask what brought you to an assembly such as this if you had neither plans to dance nor an inclination to socialize?”

“Friendship and courtesy, Miss Bennet. When Bingley asked me to come with him tonight, I could not refuse. I am his guest at Netherfield and I am fortunate to call him my friend. Thus, here I am, at a country assembly, with no intention of dancing and little desire for society.

“I am surprised, then, that Mr. Bingley asked you to come tonight. But your presence *is* welcome, sir.” Elizabeth smiled. “My father would enjoy your company, I believe. He is in another room with some of the gentlemen. May I direct you to them?”

“Yes, I would like that. Lead the way, Miss Bennet.”

As Elizabeth crossed the room towards the next, Darcy noticed that the balcony was unoccupied.

“Miss Bennet, I would like a breath of air before joining the other gentlemen. Would you come outside with me for a few minutes?” Darcy saw Elizabeth hesitate. “We would be in full view of the assembly if that is your concern.”

“Yes, so we would. Very well, it is a pleasant evening.”

As they walked to the railing, Elizabeth continued, “The heat of the rooms can become somewhat stifling.”

“Indeed.”

“How do you find Hertfordshire, sir?”

“From the little I have seen, it appears a pleasant enough place. We are a convenient distance from Town. Bingley is very pleased so far.”

“He has made a good impression on the neighbourhood. He is well on the way to becoming a favourite.”

“As he is wherever he goes. I often envy him.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I have not the ease in conversing with strangers that Bingley does.”

“You appear at ease with me, Mr. Darcy.”

“You are most kind. I was quite rude earlier. You came to converse with me as a favour to my friend, and I did not attend you.”

“I have forgiven your lapse. Truly, sir, you are now performing quite admirably.”

“A thing I do too rarely with other than my intimate acquaintances. Thank you for putting me at ease.”

Elizabeth smiled; she was flattered that he was making an effort to continue their conversation.

“I believe your father’s estate is nearby, Miss Bennet?”

“Longbourn is a mile from Meryton and some three miles from Netherfield. It has been in the Bennet family for many generations, but that is soon to end.”

“Why so?”

“The estate is entailed away from the female line and I have no brothers. Longbourn will pass to my father’s cousin, a Mr. Collins.”

“You have four sisters, am I correct?”

“Yes, and all of us out at the same time. Heaven help my poor father!”

They stood in silence for a moment.

“Come, let me take you to the gentlemen now. I believe the card tables are out, if you are so inclined. My father rarely plays, but he is always ready for sensible conversation. He gets little enough of *that* at Longbourn.”

Darcy found Mr. Bennet to be a pleasant, well-read man, and discovered in that gentleman an incisive, trenchant wit. When Bingley announced that it was time to leave, Darcy was amazed to realise that he had enjoyed the evening after all.

Later that evening, when the sisters were alone, Jane voiced the extent of her admiration for Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth enjoyed listening to her reserved sister speak so highly – and so warmly – of a gentleman.

“I give you leave to like him, Jane. You have liked many a stupider person.”

“And Mr. Darcy? Tell me your impressions of that gentleman.”

“Mr. Darcy is still mourning the loss of his sister. There is a great sadness in him.”

“Poor Mr. Darcy.”

“Yes. Sad he may be, but poor he most certainly is not.”

“As Mama has already noted.”

“He seems a sensible man. One conversation was not enough to draw many conclusions as to his character. Still, he is the friend of the amiable Mr. Bingley. He cannot be *too* disreputable; it would reflect poorly on your Mr. Bingley and that would never do!”

“But you like him.”

“My dear Jane, I am quite aware that men such as Mr. Darcy never pay court to any woman whose condition in life is so decidedly below their own. I shall enjoy his conversation when we are in company, and that is all I dare expect. I will guard my heart from anything beyond friendship.”

At Netherfield, Darcy lay awake in his bed, staring at the ceiling. Miss Elizabeth Bennet had been an unexpected and pleasant surprise. She seemed to be the kind of woman with whom he could enjoy spending many evenings. But such musings only led yet again to less pleasant if more pressing matters.

The loss of his beloved sister had turned duty into necessity. There was no getting around it; he was the last of his line. He must marry soon and quickly produce a Darcy heir. In a moment of what he later realised was sheer lunacy, he had entertained thoughts of offering for Miss Bingley. There was comfort in the idea of sealing his friendship with Bingley by becoming his brother. It took a mere quarter of an hour in Miss Bingley’s company to disabuse him of that notion. Under pressure from his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, he had seriously considered her daughter Anne as a prospective wife; but Anne’s sickly disposition raised too much uncertainty about her ability to bear children. Besides, Anne had shown a marked disinterest in Darcy, and something akin to dread about marriage in general – and motherhood in particular. He could likely bear a wife’s indifference, but he needed a son.

He had always intended to marry, but the vulgarities of the marriage market offended him. He was all too aware that he was marked as a much-desired catch, not for himself, but for his fortune and position in society. He had not found a woman he felt was worthy of a lifetime among the families of his acquaintance, and of course, there would always be time; some time in the future he was sure to find a

wife. As long as Georgiana lived, another Darcy was alive to carry on the family line. But now she was gone, and her death had underscored most painfully the inherent fragility of life and the foolishness of believing that there would always be time, that there would always be a future.

Truth be told, he was lonely and all too alone. Elizabeth Bennet had intrigued him, and for nearly the first time in his life, he could hope that he need not bear a wife's indifference in order to provide an heir. If a woman such as she could exist in a country town in Hertfordshire, surely he could find a more appropriate, but no less intriguing, bride hidden among the *ton*. Fulfilling his duty would not, perhaps, be so onerous a task after all.

The next fortnight saw the party from Netherfield meet frequently with the prominent families of the neighbourhood. The Bennets had dined with them four times between the assembly and the evening that a large party assembled at Lucas Lodge, the estate of Sir William Lucas.

Elizabeth was delighted to watch Jane's increasing preference for Mr. Bingley. She was proud of how her sister united great strength of feeling with a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner; it shielded the world in general as to her inclinations but would leave the gentleman with no question of her regard, should he seek to discover it. Elizabeth mentioned this to her good friend, Charlotte Lucas.

"This may seem so, but can be a disadvantage. She must be careful not to discourage his attentions by her caution. A woman ought to show *more* affection than she feels. Mr. Bingley may not realise the depth of her affection, if she does not help him along."

"If a woman is partial to a man and does not endeavour to conceal it, he must find out."

"Perhaps, if he sees her enough. But they have not had many hours together and always in a large party. They cannot have had more than a few moments alone. Jane must make the most of every moment they have together. Once she secures him, there is enough time for falling in love."

"An excellent plan, if all you seek is to be well married. I would follow it myself if I were determined to get a rich husband or any husband. But these are not Jane's feelings; she is not acting by design. She is not even certain of her *own* regard. She has not had time to learn his character."

"I wish Jane well. If she were married to him tomorrow, I should think she would have as good a chance at happiness as if she knew him for

twelvemonth. Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance."

"You make me laugh, Charlotte."

Elizabeth had become an object of interest to Mr. Darcy. He had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; upon further meetings, he discovered that her face was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. He came to understand that although her manners were not those of the fashionable world, their easy playfulness intrigued him. He enjoyed their conversations, and he determined to know more about her. Elizabeth was as aware of his interest as she was astonished by it. He scarce spoke to anyone from Hertfordshire except her and her father.

"What can he mean by seeking my company, Charlotte?"

"Perhaps he likes you, Eliza."

"Perhaps he is bored!"

"Why should he not wish to know you better? You are lively, where he is sombre. Considering the women in residence at Netherfield, it is no surprise that he yearns for a more challenging female as his foil."

"He is unlike any man I have ever met," she conceded.

"Do my ears deceive me or is Miss Elizabeth Bennet intrigued by a member of the opposite sex?"

"Charlotte, you assume too much."

"He is a strikingly handsome man."

"You claim not to be romantic."

"One does not need to be romantic to recognise when a man is attractive, Lizzy."

"Then we shall swoon together, dear Charlotte."

Both laughed and continued to discuss the most eligible men in the neighbourhood.

On Tuesday morning, nearly a fortnight after the gathering at Lucas Lodge, Jane received an invitation to dine at Netherfield with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. The gentlemen were engaged with the officers of the regiment quartered for the winter in Meryton. Mrs. Bennet sent Jane to Netherfield on horseback, for it looked like rain. Her purpose was served when, not long after Jane departed, the skies opened and rain poured down on the countryside. It was impossible for her to return. The extent of Mrs. Bennet's success was discovered when a note from Netherfield arrived the next morning announcing that Jane had taken ill. Elizabeth determined at once to see her elder sister, and because she was no horsewoman, walked the nearly three miles to the great house.

She arrived with boots and petticoats coated with mud. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were aghast at such an exhibition, but Mr. Bingley thought it showed an affection for her sister that he found very pleasing. Darcy wholeheartedly agreed though he did not voice such opinions. He did admit that he found her features brightened by the exercise. Elizabeth did not care; she thought only of Jane.

When it came time for Elizabeth to leave, Jane professed such a desire for her sister's companionship that Miss Bingley was obliged to convert the offer of a coach to Longbourn into a request for Elizabeth to stay at Netherfield through Jane's convalescence. A note was dispatched to inform her family and to retrieve a supply of clothing.

Elizabeth's time was chiefly spent caring for her sister. She rarely left Jane's room, other than for meals. Occasionally she would join the Bingley family downstairs although it was a duty she felt more necessary than pleasant. Miss Bingley's frequent assaults on the inferiority of the females in the country – which always included no small nod to her own and Mrs. Hurst's superiority – Elizabeth met with sweetness and tact.

In contrast to the hostess's behaviour was the gracious manner of the brother. Elizabeth found Mr. Bingley's kindness and concern for the health and comfort of her sister endearing. Jane would indeed be fortunate to be the recipient of his affections.

Mr. Bingley was all that was amiable, but his friend was another matter. He was not unfriendly; on the contrary, he was in every way the perfect gentleman. The perfect gentleman, that is, who enjoyed a good debate. When she was in his company he was not averse to expressing opinions she strongly suspected were not his own to provoke their verbal fencing. She wondered at his motives, finally putting it down to a desire for entertainment not available from the other residents of Netherfield.

She could not know that her poise greatly impressed Darcy, who was careful not to engage her in wordplay unless he was willing to defend himself against what he had come to realise was a worthy and challenging opponent. He spoke not to criticize, but to test – for it occurred to Darcy that perhaps in Miss Elizabeth Bennet he had met a woman worthy to be considered his equal.

Mrs. Bennet made an appearance at Netherfield, found little with which to be concerned, but proceeded nonetheless to bewail Jane's illness to her hosts. She fully expected Jane to recover by Sunday; her intent was that her daughter complete a full week's residence in Mr. Bingley's house. She instantly resolved to make

certain that the horses would not be available for the carriage until Monday. Mrs. Bennet had great hopes that the gentleman would soon declare himself and that her eldest would be settled in Netherfield before the spring.

Her family's visit was mortifying for Elizabeth. Had her mother and younger sisters been determined to prove to the Netherfield party that an alliance between a Bingley and a Bennet would unite families of unequal breeding, they could not have exposed themselves with greater vulgarity or lesser restraint. Elizabeth fled to the sanctuary of Jane's sick room as soon as the Longbourn ladies departed, telling her sister nothing of her family's disgrace.

On Saturday morning, Darcy escaped to the library to read his correspondence in peace; it was the one public room where he was left alone by Miss Bingley. He was in the middle of reading yet another letter from his uncle imploring him to find a wife when he heard the door open. He sat in momentary dread of the mistress of the house entering his safe haven, but was instead rewarded with an unexpected bounty: Elizabeth, in search of a book.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth. I hope Miss Bennet is feeling better?"

"Much, thank you. I did not expect to meet with anyone here. I came only to select a book. I will do so quickly and give you back your privacy."

"Do not hurry on my account. Although," he continued, seeming to suppress a smile, "given the small collection Bingley has here, it should not take you long to make a selection."

Elizabeth noticed the playfulness of his comment and decided to continue the teasing.

"Mr. Bingley did say he wished he had more books. I presume, were I perusing your library, I would have a much greater choice."

"Most assuredly."

Elizabeth pulled a volume off the shelf. "Nevertheless, I have found something that should amuse me. I shall leave you to your solitude."

"There is no need to leave because of me."

"Very well. Thank you. I need not return to Jane directly."

Darcy sat back down in his chair, and just in time. The sunlight flowing through the windows behind Elizabeth illuminated her figure to its advantage. He wondered what it would be like to hold her, to feel her form against his, to gently kiss her lips. His thoughts progressed at an alarming rate. He felt himself reacting to the sight before him in the most basic of ways, and hiding the evidence of her effect on him became pressing.

Elizabeth, blissfully unaware, sat down on a sofa opposite Darcy and began to read.

Darcy attempted to return his attention to his letter, but to no avail. He could not suppress the image of Elizabeth, the light shining through her dress, that he had been privileged to witness. He could think of nothing other than closing and locking the door so they would not be disturbed.

My God! It has been months without such thoughts and now they suddenly reappear? Control your baser urges, Darcy. Do not disgrace yourself. You are a gentleman, and she a gentleman's daughter.

Darcy looked again at Elizabeth. She was biting her lip in concentration, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, oblivious to his presence and her effect on him.

So unlike the other women of my acquaintance. Never throwing herself at me. Speaking kindly and considerate of my feelings. Even now she seeks to suppress a laugh to keep from disturbing me. Most singular!

It was unfortunate that a woman such as she was exiled in the country. She would never find a suitable marriage partner here. She would never be appreciated by any gentleman of this neighbourhood.

What about you, old man? You certainly find her appealing, in body and in character. She is healthy and stout; surely she would be able to provide the necessary heirs.

He glanced again at the letter in his hand. Impertinent his uncle's admonitions might be, but he was undoubtedly correct in principle: Darcy needed a legitimate heir, and for that he needed a wife. None of the ladies of the *ton* had captured his interest. None seemed capable of more than simpering, superficial conversation. With none could he envision spending a lifetime.

It would be months before the season began and a new slate of brides-in-waiting would debut. Miss Elizabeth Bennet was right in front of him. Now. Today.

She stirs desire in you: you appreciate her lively mind. Why not her?

Elizabeth, unaware that Darcy's thoughts were engaged in deciding her future, glanced at the mantel clock and noted that the time she had allotted to be away from Jane had come to an end. She stood to leave, bringing Darcy's focus abruptly back to the present.

"I must return to Jane now. Thank you for sharing the room with me, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy smiled. "My pleasure, as always, Miss Bennet."

Alone again, Darcy began to pace – his uncle's letter in his hand.

Why not?

Chapter Two

Jane had sufficiently recovered by Saturday that Elizabeth, desiring nothing more than a return to Longbourn, urged her to request the carriage from Mr. Bingley. He, in turn, expressed such doubt about the fullness of her recovery and concern for her comfort that Jane yielded to his pleas and consented to remain at Netherfield for one more night. Thus, it was not until after services on Sunday that the eldest Miss Bennets returned to their family.

Jane, as was her wont, was happy to be back among those she loved and knew best. Her regard for Mr. Bingley was undiminished, but despite her proximity to him during the previous five days, her illness had denied substantive discourse with him. Mrs. Bennet had been too clever; her scheme had effected Jane's residence in Mr. Bingley's house, but the nature of that residency precluded any noteworthy advancement toward fulfilling the dearest desire of her affectionate maternal heart. Jane had learned little more about the gentleman than that he was hospitable toward unexpected guests – and whatever information she could derive second-hand from Elizabeth's observations of him. Mr. Bingley had learned little more about the lady than that she suffered prettily in silence – and whatever information he could glean second-hand from Elizabeth. Jane remained uncertain of the degree of his regard and of the reasonableness of hers.

Elizabeth was delighted to remove from Netherfield and thankful to be spared further insincere civility from her reluctant hostess. Miss Bingley thought too little of her and too well of herself to make any genuine effort toward friendship. Mrs. Hurst was little better, and Mr. Hurst was often asleep. Only Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were pleasant; Mr. Bingley because of his nature, Mr. Darcy because of his familiarity with the party. Elizabeth quickly discerned how his manner improved when among his intimate friends. His continued politeness toward herself astonished her. She was of little consequence compared to such a great man, yet his manner toward her was as his social equal. It was all quite surprising, and, she admitted, more than a little puzzling.

Darcy was relieved that Elizabeth was no longer in residence. That he was attracted to her in the most basic of ways astonished him, but did not cloud his

judgment. He saw how well she comported herself and was confident that, with a little instruction, she would fare well in his circle of society. In short order, his mind was made up; he was ready to speak to her. He believed his heart was not engaged. If it were, he knew he would have had to avoid her.

Love was out of the question.

On the morning after the Bennet sisters departed Netherfield, Darcy ate an early and solitary breakfast and was out of the house before anyone else had come downstairs. He needed time to compose himself. He ordered his horse readied and was soon racing through the fields trying to work off his nervousness. Darcy had learned in the course of their conversations that Elizabeth liked to take walks in the mornings. He was confident that, after nearly a week of attending Jane, she would wish to resume her rambles as soon as may be. He determined the best place to wait for her would be just outside Longbourn's grounds. If she did not come that way within an hour, he would call at the house.

Darcy preferred his present course. A clandestine meeting, although unorthodox, would afford more time and privacy to discuss his offer and the reasons behind it. He was no fool; Elizabeth might accept without questioning him, but he sincerely doubted she would. That thirst for the truth, and the integrity it portended, was one reason he was making his offer in the first place. It was all very much like a business decision. In any agreement, there must always be negotiations. He expected no less today.

Within twenty minutes, his wait was rewarded. Elizabeth appeared. Thankfully, she was alone.

Elizabeth's thoughts were as far from Mr. Darcy as was possible. Her father had that morning informed the family of the imminent arrival of his cousin, a Mr. Collins. Based on his letter to Mr. Bennet announcing his visit, she felt that he surely must be an oddity. Her father certainly was curious to meet his heir. Thus, when she encountered Mr. Darcy, she was completely flustered.

"Mr. Darcy! Whatever are you doing here?"

"Enjoying a lovely autumn morning. May I walk with you?"

Elizabeth numbly nodded her consent and they took the path together, Darcy's horse left safely secured to a sapling. She clearly had not anticipated meeting anyone, certainly not this soon in her walk. But in a few moments, Elizabeth recovered her wits.

"Please excuse my earlier rudeness. It appears that this time it was I who did not speak with civility."

“Miss Bennet, following your gracious example from the night we first met, I, too, understand that you have a logical excuse for your words. I surprised you.”

Elizabeth smiled at his gallantry. “You are too kind. I should like the opportunity to begin again. Mr. Darcy, what brings you so close to Longbourn this fine morning?”

“I was riding my horse and thought I might find you here. I hope you do not resent my interruption of your privacy.”

“No sir, you only surprised me. I rarely encounter anyone on my walks.”

“You forget, madam, that you made mention of your habit to me.”

“I must have, sir, though it escapes me when. But here you are, so I must have betrayed myself to you.”

“Miss Bennet, I admit that I purposely sought you out this morning. I have a matter of great importance of which I wish to speak to you.”

“To me? What could be so important that you arrange this private conference?”

“Have you no guesses?”

Surely not that? Elizabeth’s mind raced with possibilities.

“You know that I have recently come out of mourning for my sister. You must understand what a great loss this was to me. My mother died many years ago, and my father nearly five years ago. I became my sister’s guardian only a year after I came of age. She was my only remaining family. I was inconsolable when I learned of her death.”

“You must have been very close.”

“As close as siblings can be who are so far apart in years. She was more than ten years my junior. She would have turned sixteen in February.”

“Again let me express my deepest sympathies for your loss.”

“I thank you, though earning your sympathy is not why I speak of this. When Georgiana died, I lost more than a sister. I lost the only other Darcy in my line. A cousin now stands to inherit the estate were I to die childless. For years I have resisted the efforts of the matchmaking mothers in England, preferring to remain in my single state. With Georgiana’s death, I can no longer neglect my duty to produce an heir.”

“I am sure you are acquainted with innumerable women who would be more than willing to become your bride.”

“Yes, and none of them interests me in the least. I have long been the object of desire of the unmarried ladies in society. My wealth, my estate, and my connections are highly coveted. Also, there are those of my family who have long considered a match

between my cousin Anne and me an inevitable eventuality. I must confess that I meditated on this possibility these past few months. However, Anne is of a sickly constitution, and I have serious concerns about her ability to have children at all. That is not a risk I wish to take.”

“Why are you speaking to me of this?”

“There is only one reason, Miss Bennet. We have known each other for only one month, yet in this short time, I have become convinced that you are ideally suited to become Mrs. Darcy. I have come today to offer my hand in marriage. I would be honoured if you would consent to become my wife.”

Elizabeth had suspected such an offer almost since the beginning of their conversation; nevertheless, she was shocked speechless to hear it spoken aloud. Darcy had anticipated her astonishment and was undisturbed by her temporary lack of words.

Moments later, Elizabeth responded.

“I am aware of the very great honour you have bestowed on me, sir. I suppose the prudent thing would be to accept your offer immediately, and with gratitude. However, I am not yet willing to give you an answer, for I have many questions to ask you first.”

“Very well, we have complete privacy.”

“First and foremost, sir, why me?”

“I have told you, Miss Bennet. I believe you are ideally suited to become my wife. We get on well together. Surely you have noticed the ease with which we fall into conversation. I told you that I do not perform well to strangers, yet this shortcoming has never hindered me when I am around you.”

“Mr. Darcy, let us be honest with each other. I suspect you know that I have no dowry to speak of, and I most certainly would bring no valuable connections into this marriage. I am very aware that, though I am the daughter of a gentleman, I am very much your social inferior.”

“Since you have spoken honestly, I will reply in the same manner. It may be true that you would bring little dowry into this marriage. However, the money that was intended for my sister is at my disposal. I have come to consider that thirty thousand pounds as your own, and should you accept me, I will settle that amount on you.”

Thirty thousand pounds!

“That is a great deal of money and entirely unexpected. You are overly generous.”

“It would provide you with your own income apart from any other monies granted in the settlements.”

“Still, sir, I have no useful connections. You must know this!”

They had come to a place where a log lay next to the path. Darcy motioned for Elizabeth to sit while he walked a few steps away. She waited for his answer.

"I know, Miss Bennet," Darcy finally said, his back turned.

"Surely in a marriage such as you are suggesting, connections are a matter for consideration. Fortune may be dismissed if the subsequent connections are of value."

When Darcy finally turned back to face Elizabeth, there was conviction in his eyes.

"It is precisely your principled willingness to acknowledge your lack of connections that is so appealing to me. Any other woman of my acquaintance would have accepted me without delay, covetous of my fortune and position. Yet, here I am, needing to convince you. Is this not proof that I understand what I am doing? I do not want a wife whose only desire is to make a brilliant match, whose only interest is her social position. I do not want a wife who is always looking, thinking, speaking for my approbation alone. You are not that kind of woman. Such companionship is worth the loss of any 'valuable alliances' I may be forfeiting by making you my choice."

"Your determination is very much in your favour."

Elizabeth looked at the man before her. They both knew it would be foolish for her to reject him. He was offering more than she could have expected in an alliance, more than she could have imagined. She knew that at least one of the Bennet daughters must marry very well to assure them all of a future once their father was gone. And now it was only her consent that kept her from achieving that security for herself and for her family. She liked Mr. Darcy, but could she see herself married to him? Surely, there would be a cost.

"What of my family? Would they be lost to me?"

Darcy hesitated, and for the first time looked uncomfortable.

"I know you have great affection for your family. Your walk to Netherfield to attend your sister is proof. Miss Bennet is every bit the gentlewoman you are, and I hope that, in time, your younger sisters may prove their good breeding as well. I will not stand before you and lie. I hold dear the respect of the Darcy name, and I expect our marriage will be much spoken of in the drawing rooms in London. I cannot sanction an invitation for your mother or your younger sisters to visit us, until you have established yourself as Mrs. Darcy. As for your father, I doubt he would want to stir from my library were he to join us in Town or at

Pemberley. I know what I have just said may seem ungenerous of me. Please understand, I am not asking you to abandon your family. I am asking you to use your good sense and discretion when considering the appropriate time to entertain them."

Elizabeth winced at his depiction of her family. She held many of the same opinions as he on the behaviour of her younger siblings and her parents, yet hearing them voiced by someone so wholly unconnected to her was disconcerting. Had this been any other discussion, she would have been angry; but it was not. He was as brutally honest with her as she was with him. There was too much at stake for them both for anything less than candour.

Elizabeth sighed. "Though it pains me to hear you speak so of my family, you are not unreasonable in your observations. What you have said of my mother is equally true of my Aunt and Uncle Phillips. But you have yet to meet my Uncle and Aunt Gardiner. They are people of fashion, and my uncle is a man of intelligence, taste, and good manners. Though he may be in trade, I could never be ashamed of them, sir. Many who now call themselves gentlemen owe the foundation of their fortunes to trade."

A silence fell between them as Elizabeth further weighed her answer. She stood up and began to walk again.

"Miss Bennet?"

"Please, may we just walk now? You have given me much to think on."

Elizabeth's feet took her down the familiar paths; she was oblivious to the man next to her. After nearly a quarter hour's ramble, she suddenly became aware of his presence – her silent companion.

"I must once again apologise to you, Mr. Darcy. I have been ignoring you."

"On the contrary, you have been giving me your every thought." Elizabeth coloured. "Have you come to any conclusions?"

"Not as yet. Tell me, what would be expected of me as Mrs. Darcy?"

"Your duties would be much the same as any gentleman's wife, only on a greater scale than you are accustomed – mistress of my estates at Pemberley and my house in London. I have two very capable housekeepers who would aid you in the transition. You would be responsible for entertaining guests in the appropriate manner as well as organising any special events. You would, of course, visit my – our – tenants. The Darcys have always seen to the needs of those under our care. It is also my intention that you

be presented at court, and that we be in London for the entirety of the season.”

“I foresee many new dresses if that were the case.” Darcy detected in this remark a glimmer of the return of Elizabeth’s lively wit and answered accordingly.

“I would have you look the part of Mrs. Darcy.”

“What else?”

“When we have children, they will have the nannies and governesses you never had.”

Thoughts of children sent Elizabeth’s mind in another direction; she would be expected to share his bed. How did she feel about that? He was handsome. If she had to submit to her wifely duties, she knew she could do much worse.

Again they fell into an easy silence until emerging on a crest of a hill.

“Hertfordshire is a pleasant country,” Darcy said. “Views like this only reinforce my good opinion.”

“Derbyshire must be quite different.”

“Yes. There is an untamed quality about it, a wildness that is exciting and at the same time comforting.”

“How so?”

“It demonstrates that there is something bigger than man. Something beyond our ability and capacity to control. Nature in its primitive state is never static.”

What an extraordinary answer. Almost as if spoken by a poet.

They stood together for many minutes, enjoying the view. On a cart path below, a lone farmer was driving a team of horses. The man seemed so far away from them. Elizabeth knew Darcy would be expecting an answer soon. To accept him meant a lifetime without want and security for her family, yet she knew she did not love him. Until today she had been careful to guard her heart from him. She had never considered that he would offer her anything more than friendship, and now he had offered marriage. She respected him, admired him, but was that a basis for marriage to him?

“Have you any more questions for me?”

He had told her all that she needed to know.

Elizabeth pondered everything they had discussed. How could she say *yes*? Yet each time she would start to form a refusal, something deep within her protested. She could not say *no*. Elizabeth glanced over at Darcy and began to imagine what her life would be like married to him. She smiled to herself thinking of the many discussions they already had and easily foreseeing a lifetime of mutual regard and stimulating conversation. Their lives together would be very different from her parents’.

Thus was her intended refusal transformed into an unexpected acceptance.

“I can only assume you would wish for a short engagement?” Elizabeth asked with the hint of a playful smile.

“Most men wish for a short betrothal, Miss Bennet. I must confess that I do as well. I alluded to this before, but there may be some very strong objections by my family. My uncle, the Earl, will not be pleased, nor will my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Lady Catherine is the mother of my cousin, Anne, of whom I spoke earlier. I would like for our marriage to take place soon, to lessen the prospect of interference from that quarter.”

“I would not wish to come between you and your remaining family,” Elizabeth stated with concern.

“Miss Bennet, that decision is mine.”

“Yet as your wife, I would suffer the consequences if a breach were to occur.”

“You speak as if that were a bad thing, madam. I am not so certain. My uncle and my aunt are too used to getting what they want. Frankly, I am tired of all their attempts to order my life. I am my own master and I will wed whom I choose!”

Elizabeth was impressed by the vehemence of his speech. He obviously was not overly bothered by the prospect of defying his family.

“Not all my family will react poorly to the news, Miss Bennet. There are those who will be happy for me. Only their opinion matters and I believe they will realise that you and I are a good match. I refuse to be concerned about the others.”

Elizabeth thought his answer reasonable and that it was best to move the conversation forward. “And how soon would you wish to wed?”

“Within a month.”

“You speak with some surety of my acceptance, Mr. Darcy. Has it occurred to you that perhaps I would say no?” She smiled. “I can see the answer on your face.”

Her playfulness had made him hopeful. Darcy knelt before Elizabeth and took her hand in his.

“Are you prepared to answer me? Will you have me, Miss Bennet?”

He drew her hand to his lips, never taking his eyes off her face.

Elizabeth had no logical reason to reject him. It was true that he had not spoken of love or even tender affection, but the respect he had shown her in allowing her questioning boded well for a future with this man. She liked him, she admired his intelligence and his honesty, and they did get on well together. She believed he was right – they were a good match.

“Yes, Mr. Darcy, I will marry you, in one month’s time, if that is your wish.”

Darcy stood, never relinquishing her hand, which he kissed again. He turned it over and kissed her wrist, and then her palm. His eyes, only just a few minutes before filled with conviction, now shone with a possessive passion.

“Please call me Fitzwilliam when we are alone.”

Elizabeth swallowed at the change in his demeanour.

“You may call me Elizabeth, then.”

“Elizabeth.” He leaned his head towards her and brushed his lips across hers.

Oh Lord! They both thought.

“I should go and speak to your father.”

“And it would be best if you allowed me to go inside a few minutes in advance of your call. It would not be ... conducive to the peace and tranquillity of the house should you be seen coming back with me.” Darcy nodded in understanding.

“Oh dear, I almost forgot. My cousin, a Mr. Collins, is arriving at Longbourn today and will be with us until Saturday next. It is good that you spoke to me before he arrived, Mr. ... Fitzwilliam.”

“It seems my timing is impeccable.”

They had begun to make their way back to Longbourn when Elizabeth suddenly asked, “Did you say your aunt is Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

“Yes, she lives at Rosings, near Hunsford in Kent.”

“How astonishing!”

“Pray, enlighten me?”

“This is most singular. My cousin is your aunt’s parson! He was quite effusive in his praise of her bounty and beneficence.” Mr. Darcy stopped walking. “This displeases you?” she asked.

“I would rather your cousin not know of our understanding at this time. I do not wish news of our engagement to reach Lady Catherine before I am prepared to announce it to her myself. All the more reason we should not be seen coming back together.”

“You spoke of her potential disapproval.”

“It is not potential, it is certain. In my opinion, it would be best for both of us that the news be withheld for the immediate future. I will still speak with your father this morning, but I ask you tell no one until a time your father and I agree upon.”

“This will leave even less time to prepare for the wedding.”

“Is this too much to ask of you?”

“A small wedding is preferable.”

“I shall travel to London, then, and have the settlements prepared. I will also procure a special

licence. Then we can wed whenever and wherever we choose.”

They began walking again, and soon Darcy’s horse was in sight.

“I will call in half an hour.”

“My father will be surprised.”

“As much as you were?” Darcy teased, hesitantly. It felt good to tease again.

“Undoubtedly!”

Darcy waited a full half-hour before presenting his card to the butler, asking to see the master of the house. In a matter of minutes, Darcy was seated in front of Mr. Bennet’s desk, its owner eyeing him in confusion. The two gentlemen made idle conversation until Mr. Bennet could no longer contain his curiosity.

“Mr. Darcy, what brings you to Longbourn this morning?”

“I have come with a request.”

“I shall do all that is in my power to oblige you.”

“Earlier today, I met with your daughter, Miss Elizabeth, and have asked for her hand in marriage. She has accepted me, and I have come to ask for your consent to our union.”

Much as his daughter before him, Mr. Bennet was speechless for several moments.

“Lizzy accepted you?”

“Yes, sir. I met her this morning on a path outside Longbourn.”

“A rather singular course of action.”

“I knew of Miss Elizabeth’s predilection to walking out in the morning. I guessed that after so many days at Netherfield, she would be anxious to resume her habit.”

“You took a risk that she would not be out today. It was a rather unconventional way to present your suit.”

“I was prepared to come to Longbourn to request a private interview if I did not meet with her.”

“I would have been more comfortable if you had.” Darcy did not fail to note the agitation in Mr. Bennet’s voice. Clearly he was not pleased.

“Point taken. However, my actions were guided by a desire to assure, to the best of my ability, our privacy.”

“It is a wonder, considering your course of action this morning, that you did not seek her out while she still resided at Netherfield,” Mr. Bennet said harshly.

“That was not something I would have done,” Darcy replied, trying to soothe the irritated father of his intended. “An agreement between us would have necessitated her removal from Netherfield before Miss Bennet was well enough to return to Longbourn. I

have too much respect for Miss Elizabeth to act in a manner that would so displease her. A day or two of waiting did not signify.”

Mr. Bennet studied the man before him.

“Excuse me for a few minutes. I will return shortly.”

Darcy knew that Mr. Bennet wanted to speak to Elizabeth. He would have done the same thing.

Mr. Bennet found Elizabeth in the breakfast room, thankfully alone. He closed the door behind him and Elizabeth could see a wistful look on his face. Involuntarily, she dropped her head and asked, “He is here?”

Her father knew he had lost her.

How can I refuse Elizabeth anything? He is her choice. How can I refuse Darcy? He is not the kind of man I would dare refuse anything he condescended to ask of me. But my Lizzy? Will she be happy in such a marriage? It is a condition greater than any I could ever dream as far as wealth and situation. There is only one reply I can give.

“Yes. I have just left your Mr. Darcy in my library. It is true, you have accepted him.”

“Yes.”

“Elizabeth,” he said with tender affection and concern, “it is not too late to stop this. Are you sure you know what you are doing? I know your disposition. You could neither be happy nor respectable unless you truly esteemed your husband – unless you looked up to him as your superior.”

“I do, Papa, I do esteem Mr. Darcy.”

“Your lively talents place you in danger of an unequal marriage if you do not. Please, Lizzy, I could not bear the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life.”

Elizabeth could hear the dejection in her father’s gentle voice and went to stand in his embrace.

“Mr. Darcy is a good man. I like him and greatly admire him. I know we have not known each other for long, but he has never been anything but respectful of me and of my feelings. It did not, and does not, matter to him that we are not equal in society. We even spoke of this when he offered. Believe me, he has thought this through thoroughly and has answered my reservations. Indeed, there is no reason for me to reject him.”

“You say you like him. Do you feel any affection for him?”

Elizabeth remembered their briefest of kisses and smiled coyly. “I believe there is something of that sort. Father, I know this is a decision of the intellect and not of the heart. I understand this. However, we

do get along well together. Is this not a good foundation for understanding and contentment?”

“I had hoped your romantic sensibilities would prevail.”

Elizabeth looked up and smiled at his dry remark.

“A woman should not dare believe she is the heroine of a novel.”

“A father can hope. I see you have made up your mind. Let us return to your young man. Forgive an old man his nostalgia.”

“I would not have you any other way.”

“You might have warned me he was coming.”

“And spoil the shock?”

Darcy was looking at the titles of some of the books in the room when Mr. Bennet returned with Elizabeth on his arm. Mr. Bennet walked to the gentleman and took Elizabeth’s hand and placed it in his.

“You have my consent and blessing to wed. Take care of her, son, she is my greatest treasure.” Mr. Bennet’s voice quivered.

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

Mr. Bennet, in an effort to gain his composure, walked to his desk and sat down.

“I suppose you are like most young men and are anxious to marry with all haste.”

“Papa, when I accepted Mr. Darcy’s proposal, I agreed to marry him within the month.”

“A month?” Mr. Bennet blanched at so short a time left with his favourite but bravely quipped, “Your mother will *not* be pleased.”

“If I may interrupt, Miss Elizabeth said you are expecting your cousin, Mr. Collins, who by amazing coincidence, is also the parson to my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“Lady Catherine is your aunt?”

“She is my late mother’s sister.”

“Mr. Collins will be most happy to make your acquaintance. I expect he will be overjoyed that his cousin will be married to the nephew of his esteemed patroness.”

“Yet my aunt will not. I believe the man is to be here until Saturday next?”

“That is his intention.”

“I am hesitant to announce the betrothal while your cousin is at Longbourn. I expect that he would write to my aunt at the earliest opportunity. It had been my intention to leave for Town tomorrow to meet with my solicitor, to secure a licence, and to speak with my family. I wish to tell them myself. I do not foresee returning before the end of the week, and it would be ungenerous of me to insist that the announcement of our engagement come only three

weeks before the wedding. To give Miss Elizabeth the four that I promised to provide would place the ceremony right before Christmas. This would be unfair to your entire family. Thus, I believe six weeks until the wedding is a more reasonable date. That is, if it meets with your approval.”

“I do agree to this. I can understand Mr. Darcy’s desire to relate our news to his closest relations in person.”

“I am uncomfortable keeping this between only the three of us.”

Darcy pulled a ring off his finger and handed it to Mr. Bennet.

“A sign of my pledge. This ring was my father’s and his father’s before that.”

Mr. Bennet nodded his acquiescence.

“Very well, the wedding will be in six weeks. Is Longbourn Church acceptable?”

“I have no objections. I would prefer a quiet ceremony.”

“As would I, Papa.”

“I will speak to the parson as soon as you return, Mr. Darcy. The rest of the arrangements will be left to Elizabeth and my wife. Since you have postponed the wedding until after Christmas, I wish to extend you an invitation to spend that day at Longbourn.”

“As long as my presence is not required in Town, I will come.”

“Good, a little folly will do you some good. Have you any further items to discuss with me?”

“I should like to discuss elements of the settlement I shall ask my solicitor to draw up when I am in Town.”

“Lizzy, this is your signal to leave us.”

“One more matter before I go. Mr. Darcy, will you allow me to tell Jane of our understanding?”

“My eldest is the soul of discretion, she barely allows her own feelings to show, let alone betray a confidence.”

“I see no harm after your assurance of her secrecy.”

“Thank you. And now I will leave you to your business. Good day, Mr. Darcy, Papa.”

Chapter Three

Mr. Collins arrived as scheduled at four that afternoon. It did not take long for the gentleman to prove to be all that was hoped and feared; he had come to admire the Miss Bennets – and his future abode.

Mr. Bennet spoke little to his guest, his mind occupied by the earlier events of the day, despite what otherwise would have been the irresistible invitation to sport offered by Mr. Collins' breathtaking ability to expose the flaws of his character. Elizabeth was similarly distracted; the novelty of her new situation suppressed her normally lively manners, and Mr. Collins' foolish prattle soon began to grate on her nerves. Here was yet another example of her inferior, undesirable connections. She resolved to limit Mr. Darcy's exposure to her cousin and was grateful that he would be away to Town in the morning.

Elizabeth was eager to unburden herself to Jane, and waited impatiently for the clock to release them to the privacy of the bedchamber. After laughing at the foibles of their guest – though Jane was not as willing to acknowledge the man's ridiculousness – Elizabeth moved the conversation to her morning rendezvous. She hoped her sister would not be too disappointed in her choice.

"Jane, you will never guess who I met on my walk this morning."

"Charlotte?"

"No, not Charlotte. Mr. Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy? How astonishing! You must have walked a long way."

"Actually, he met me just outside Longbourn's gate."

"Strange he should be so near our house."

"He came particularly to speak with me in private. He knew I like to walk out early and chanced that he would meet me there."

"Oh Lizzy, was it proper of you to meet him so secretly?"

"Perhaps it was not the best course of action, but it is done."

"Whatever did he wish to discuss?"

"Jane ... I do not know how to tell you this ... Mr. Darcy came to offer marriage."

"Marriage? After so short an acquaintance? What did you say?"

"I said many things and asked many questions."

"Did you give him an answer?"

"Yes."

"Was that your answer to his question or mine?"

"Yes, to both. I accepted his offer."

"You are teasing me, Lizzy. Surely you are teasing me?" Jane was uncertain about her own reaction and unsure if her sister was teasing. "I know you like him, but do you like him well enough to marry him?"

"Papa asked the same thing of me. I admit that I asked Mr. Darcy many questions and was impressed with his responses. He has given the matter serious consideration. After our discussion I believe I will be very happy with him. I like him very much, Jane. I had no reason to say no."

"So you are engaged." Jane was bewildered. "Do you hold a tender affection for the man? Do you love him?"

"Not yet, Jane," Elizabeth admitted, "but I sense he is the kind of man I can learn to love. I already respect and admire him."

Jane, normally not one to question her sister, was amazed that Elizabeth would agree to such a match. She had always believed both of them would choose a mate with her heart.

"What about Mr. Darcy? Has he told you his feelings?"

"He has not proclaimed a passionate love for me if that is what you ask."

Jane appeared more troubled.

"Oh Lizzy, are you certain you know what you are doing? To marry without love is so unlike anything I ever imagined of you. I do not want to see you unhappy. Do not marry Mr. Darcy only for the sake of your family."

"Dearest, please do not worry. I admit that his wealth is to his advantage, but it was not my sole consideration. What is important to me is that we are well-matched in temperament and understanding."

"You do not seem at all like Mr. Darcy."

"What I mean is that we complement each other in our differences, but we are more like-minded than I expected. Not everyone is as similar as you and Mr. Bingley." Jane blushed at the inference. "There is a seriousness and depth to Fitzwilliam that I find fascinating. He is unlike any man I have ever known, and I must admit that I am drawn to him."

Elizabeth's declaration gave Jane hope.

"Perhaps you are already half in love with him without even knowing it."

Elizabeth laughed. "Perhaps. Tell me now, do you approve? I do not know how I would survive if you did not."

“If you believe Mr. Darcy can make you happy, and if you are content with your choice, so shall I be. Oh, but Lizzy, how grand you shall be!”

“I shall still be myself, only hidden beneath layers of finery.”

“You will be a credit to your husband. Mr. Darcy will be proud to have you by his side, as I am to call you my sister.”

“Oh Jane, you are too good.” Elizabeth was relieved to have finally reconciled Jane to the match. With a mischievous look in her eye she continued. “But after this evening, I can take solace in this: if the choice were between Mr. Darcy and our cousin, I dare say I could barely choose between them. I am fortunate that I face no such dilemma.”

It was many minutes before either could stop laughing.

Mr. Collins indeed had come to Longbourn determined to admire his cousins; more specifically, he had come to choose a bride from among the five unmarried sisters. Initially he was captivated by Jane. However, a quarter-hour’s tête-à-tête with Mrs. Bennet the next morning was sufficient to disabuse him of his aspirations; he learned of the general expectation that Jane would soon be engaged. To quell his disappointment, Mrs. Bennet informed him that she knew of no prepossession for any of her younger daughters. It was the work of a moment to transfer his designs from Jane to Elizabeth, next in order of birth and, in his opinion, of beauty.

A walk to Meryton had been proposed by Lydia, and all but Mary chose to venture forth. Mr. Collins, at the behest of Mr. Bennet, offered to escort his fair cousins. Once in Meryton, the attention of the ladies was soon diverted to a young man of a most gentlemanlike appearance, whom they had never seen before, walking on the opposite side of the street with an officer of the regiment. Lydia and Kitty contrived to place themselves in the path of the mysterious stranger and his companion. Mr. Wickham was the unknown gentleman’s name, and all was revealed when the sisters learned that he was a newly commissioned lieutenant in the militia.

As the parties exchanged the prescribed niceties of new acquaintances, Mr. Bingley came riding up the street. When he saw Jane, he immediately dismounted and came to greet her. He had intended to call at Longbourn to enquire after her health and was pleased to see that Jane was well enough to walk into Meryton. Upon being introduced to Mr. Wickham, he regarded that gentleman with a cool curiosity and said little more before taking his leave.

Mr. Collins escorted his cousins back to Longbourn not long after. Before they left, Mrs. Philips greeted them and invited the entire party to supper and cards the following evening. She had a fondness for the society of her nieces – and anyone else who would grace her parlour with their presence. Mr. Bennet was most happy to allow his cousin to accompany his daughters to the Philipses’. He looked forward to a peaceful time alone in his library.

At the Philipses’, the ladies were obliged to listen to Mr. Collins’ soliloquy on the merits of his noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and her great estate, Rosings, which to Mr. Collins’ great delight was separated from his parsonage only by a lane. The entrance of the rest of the gentlemen was, therefore, a great relief. Elizabeth was not surprised to see Mr. Wickham among them and his presence was welcomed by every female in the room. He looked around for a familiar face until he spied Elizabeth and came over to her.

Since she had come into society, Elizabeth had enjoyed the attentions of men. It was true that there were some men whose notice she could happily have done without, but in general, she enjoyed her conversations with the worthier of the opposite sex.

Mr. Wickham and Elizabeth were quickly immersed in a benign conversation on the weather and state of the roads in the surrounding neighbourhood, but however agreeably the conversation started, Elizabeth soon began to feel ill at ease. She wondered at her response to the gentleman. He had done nothing to cause suspicion of his motives. He appeared to desire only a lively discussion. No, there was nothing in his behaviour that merited concern. Then what caused this uncharacteristic disquietude?

Her companion stopped in mid-sentence and asked, “Are you unwell, Miss Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth recovered her composure. “It is nothing at all. I am afraid my thoughts had strayed. I apologise for my inattention.”

“I fear my recent absence from pleasant society may have made me too absurd to hold any woman’s attention.”

“Oh no,” Elizabeth laughed at his attempts of self-deprecation, “you have performed admirably. Please continue.”

They recommenced their exchange, but without the previous fervour, and soon parted to converse with other guests.

Elizabeth was careful to remain attentive to others for the rest of the evening. It was only after returning to Longbourn and retiring for the evening that she allowed herself to examine what had

happened that evening. She had been in the middle of an innocent conversation with Mr. Wickham when she began to experience a peculiar stirring in her soul. Elizabeth physically started when the answer came; the moment she understood what she was feeling was a shock.

She had felt disloyal to Mr. Darcy.

Something had changed during the two days of her betrothal; she had become bound to the man who would be her husband. To continue to act as if she were still unattached was a violation of her promise. It was a disguise, and she could not enjoy the company of any eligible man until the world knew that she was betrothed. It was an astonishing moment!

Elizabeth fell asleep wondering what other amendments would be wrought in her before her wedding. Truthfully, this period between being an available single woman and a publicly engaged lady was losing some of its charm.

Mr. Bingley called at Longbourn the next day to personally present his invitation to the long-expected ball at Netherfield, fixed for the following Tuesday. The prospect of a ball was extremely agreeable, and Elizabeth wondered if this would be the event at which her engagement was announced.

She had commenced a mental inventory of her possessions, deciding what would remain and what she would take into her marriage. There was little time to prepare for the wedding and her new life, and Elizabeth knew that the severity of her mother's nerves would be inversely proportional to the length of the interval between announcement and ceremony.

Her reverie was cut short by Mr. Collins declaring his intention to accept the invitation to the ball. He further declared his desire to dance with all of his cousins, then sought to secure Elizabeth for the first two dances. Seeing no way to decline, Elizabeth was forced to consent and for the first time wondered if Mr. Collins intended to make her his wife. The absurdity of the notion soon became more than she could bear, and Elizabeth excused herself.

Alone again in the safety of her chamber, Elizabeth wondered how Mr. Darcy fared. Was he having second thoughts? He had given his word and would stand by her now. Still, the one thing she did *not* want was a marriage tinged with regret.

Afraid of where her musings were leading, she returned her thoughts to the ball. Mr. Darcy certainly would make every attempt to attend. She hoped he would understand when he discovered that the first two dances had been claimed by her cousin. Surely

that man would cede those dances to Mr. Darcy once he learned of their betrothal.

Jane, privy to Elizabeth's true situation, came to comfort her.

"Mr. Darcy will not be angry. You could not have refused Mr. Collins without revealing more than you are currently at liberty to claim. All would have found it odd had you said you were reserving those dances for another."

Elizabeth smiled. "Once again, you have uncovered the heart of the matter. I had no choice. Jane, do you think Mr. Collins is paying rather pointed attentions to me?"

"He does seem most ... solicitous of your needs."

"He has selected me from among my sisters, I think, to become mistress of Hunsford Parsonage. If he continues in such a manner, I may find myself in a most uncomfortable interview."

"Not even our cousin could fancy himself in love in the span of four days."

"I do not know ..."

"Your Mr. Darcy will return soon, and this will prove to be idle speculation."

But Mr. Darcy could not return. The weather took a turn for the worse, and for four long days the residents of Longbourn were confined to the house. Even the shoe roses had to be obtained by proxy. Had there not been a ball to talk of and prepare for, the ladies would have been in a pitiable state.

It was not until the day of the ball that the weather improved.

Darcy sat in his carriage on his way back to Netherfield, reflecting on a wasted week.

He had left Hertfordshire early on the morning after he secured Elizabeth's promise of marriage. The journey to London was uneventful and by noon he was safely in his house. Mrs. Thomas was unperturbed at his sudden arrival, and soon there was a fire warming his chambers. He sent notes to his uncle's residence and to his solicitor's office. Unfortunately, the Earl had chosen to visit his sister, Lady Catherine, in Kent and was not expected back until the following week at the earliest. Darcy's inquiries to his solicitor were more fruitful. That man would come to see him in the morning.

Darcy had been tempted to ride to Kent the next day to meet with his uncle and his aunt; however, he reasoned that it would be better to finalise the wedding settlements before venturing to Rosings. Once the papers were in order, he would confront his family and then go directly to Hertfordshire.

What he had overlooked was the capriciousness of the English weather. By the time the documents were completed to his satisfaction, the rain had begun. He was forced to delay his trip into Kent for several days, then concluded that it would have to wait until after Bingley's blasted ball. Darcy had received an express confirming the Tuesday date, and knew that he must return to Netherfield in time. Bingley and Elizabeth would never forgive him if he missed it.

At least the marriage settlements were drawn up, the marriage licence secured, and a small gift for Elizabeth stowed safely in his pocket. He would not return to Hertfordshire empty handed, even if he had to turn around and head off to Kent only two days later.

When Darcy arrived at Netherfield, he immediately set about speaking to his host. He needed to inform Bingley of his understanding with Elizabeth as a precaution against unforeseen circumstances. Bingley was elated that his friend had found such a woman for a wife. Though surprised at the news, he had seen what Darcy could not – since he had come into Hertfordshire, and more specifically since he had met Elizabeth Bennet, Darcy's general mood had improved. Gone was the constant brooding. The man Darcy was before the death of Georgiana had begun to re-emerge. Now Bingley knew why, and secretly he was envious of his friend; for he, too, wished to marry a Miss Bennet. His declarations to Jane would have to wait a little longer. Nothing could induce him to usurp Darcy and Elizabeth's time in the sun. It was the least he could do for his friend, and since Darcy told him that the wedding would take place right after Christmas, Bingley knew he would not have to wait long to offer his addresses to his beloved Jane.

The air seemed alive with anticipation as the Bennet carriage rolled to Netherfield. Mrs. Bennet's nerves were momentarily forgotten while she imparted last minute instructions to her daughters. A ball was a lovely place for a gentleman to fall in love, and she had no intention of letting such an opportunity pass by unclaimed. She was sure that at least one of her daughters must come away from the evening on the path to the altar.

Caroline Bingley may have been a rather haughty creature, but she certainly was the consummate hostess. Netherfield sparkled for her guests. No one could remember the old house in finer array. Musicians had been hired from London and the finest food and drink awaited the neighbourhood.

Charles Bingley was delighted. He happily greeted his guests, patiently awaiting the one family

he wished to see most. When the Bennets finally arrived, he was stunned nearly senseless. Their party may have numbered eight, but he could see only one – Jane. Bingley somehow managed to acknowledge the people in line before the Bennets, but it was obvious that he knew not what he said. Mrs. Bennet's hopes were fuelled anew when she observed her host's reaction to her eldest daughter.

Darcy had sent a short note to Longbourn to apprise Mr. Bennet of the frustration of his plans to speak to his relatives because of the constant rain. Thus, Elizabeth was not too surprised when he did not immediately seek her out. She hoped he did not tarry too long and risk having all her dances taken by other men.

The first man to approach was none other than Mr. Wickham.

"Miss Elizabeth, may I have the honour of dancing with you this evening, if your dance card is not already full?"

Elizabeth smiled politely. "Mr. Wickham, I would be happy to dance with you. Only one other gentleman has had the chance to secure a set."

"I am too late, then, to open the ball with you?"

"Yes, I am afraid so, but you may have the second set if you wish."

"The second it shall be!"

Elizabeth flashed a smile that Mr. Wickham at first assumed was for him. When he noticed that the direction of her gaze was not at him but rather over his shoulder, he looked to see who had her favour. It took all his self-control to keep his chin from dropping, though he could not stop the colour draining from his face.

Darcy had delayed his approach to Elizabeth so as not to appear that he was singling her out. He could not go directly to her side as soon as she arrived; there would be talk, perfectly acceptable once their engagement was announced, but not yet. Thus, Darcy allowed himself to be drawn into conversation with a few men before setting off to secure a dance with his intended. When he finally found Elizabeth, he saw that she was speaking with some unknown officer. She would be a sought-after dance partner and he did not begrudge her, or the other men of the area, a chance to enjoy the dancing. It was only when the officer turned his head that the unknown became the despised.

Wickham bowed to his old friend. Darcy barely dropped his head in recognition.

"Darcy. Miss Elizabeth, if you will please excuse me, I will claim you later for our dance."

Elizabeth looked on in wonder. Clearly, Fitzwilliam knew Mr. Wickham. By the expression on his face, it was evident that he was not pleased to see the man again. But Darcy would not allow any trace of emotion in his voice when he finally spoke.

“Miss Elizabeth, would you care to dance this evening?”

“Of course, sir. The first and second sets are claimed, but that is all.”

“The third, then?”

“It is yours.”

“Pardon my asking, but are you opening with Mr. Wickham?”

Elizabeth heard a trace of animosity when he pronounced the man’s name. “Not at all. My cousin, Mr. Collins, has claimed the first.”

“I see.” Darcy then spoke in a low voice. “Be wary of the man, Elizabeth. I cannot speak of it now, but he is no longer counted among my friends.”

“I shall take your warning into consideration. Thank you, but you know I must dance with him.”

“Yes, unfortunately, I do. If we have the chance, I need to speak with you and your father tonight. I will seek him out and try to arrange something.” Darcy straightened up and said in a normal voice. “I look forward to the third set. Until then, madam.”

With dread and mortification, Elizabeth heard the musicians play the opening strains for the first dance. Mr. Collins promptly claimed his partner and led her to their place in the set. Elizabeth had no expectation of pleasure from the dance, which was fitting, as her partner, though enthusiastic, was one of the worst she had ever endured. She was certain her toes would be so bruised when they finished that she would not be able to stand up with another partner that night! Mr. Collins kept up a steady monologue, hinting that this was to be the first of many such balls they would attend together. Elizabeth might have become agitated at such insinuations had she not already been betrothed to another. She knew her mother would certainly support their cousin’s cause, even if her father did not. Thank heavens Mr. Collins would be forgotten when the wealth and stature of her true intended was revealed.

The decision to marry Mr. Darcy was a most pleasant and increasingly attractive alternative to the marriage market if such a thing was populated by many fools like her cousin.

Somehow Elizabeth and her toes survived her dances with Mr. Collins. She was more than happy to send the hapless parson off for refreshments while she talked to her friend, Charlotte Lucas.

“Your cousin seems to enjoy dancing.”

“Aye, but my feet do not enjoy dancing with him.”

“Lizzy!”

“Ever the practical one, Charlotte. But you were not the one he was dancing with. I believe when he returns, I will encourage him to ask you to dance. Then you may judge for yourself.”

Charlotte laughed at her friend’s impertinence. “You have always been good about sharing. I will gladly stand up with him, for your sake.”

“And the sake of my sisters. He has threatened to dance with us all.”

“What other partners do you have tonight?”

“Mr. Wickham has the next and then Mr. Darcy.”

“I daresay you will find your next two partners agreeable.”

“Perhaps. Here comes Mr. Collins. Smile in resignation to your fate, my dear friend.”

Elizabeth did indeed steer Mr. Collins to engage Charlotte for the next set. She felt slightly guilty at such machinations, until she remembered the many times Charlotte had manoeuvred her into singing on social occasions. No, Charlotte deserved her fate!

Mr. Wickham came to claim his dances. Darcy’s reaction was enough to put her on guard against the man, but she would not be intimidated. Her partner offered the usual niceties, complimenting her on her appearance and her skill at the dance. It was not long though until he broached the subject of his connection to Darcy.

“Tell me, Miss Elizabeth, have you known Mr. Darcy for very long?”

“A little over a month, why do you ask?”

“Can you tell me how long he plans to stay in the neighbourhood?”

“I believe I have heard that he will remain until around Christmas. Why do you ask?”

“If he was in residence for very long, I fear it would necessitate my removal.”

“I see,” Elizabeth replied without thought.

“No, Miss Bennet, you do not. Out of respect, I would be forced to go. He cannot abide my presence, nor do I blame him.”

They moved through the pattern of the dance while Elizabeth digested this new information.

“I have known Darcy all my life, and I have done him great wrong. He has every reason to run me through for the dishonourable way I repaid his friendship.”

“I do not understand why you are telling me this.”

“As I said, I have known Darcy all my life. I *know* him. He would not approach a woman at a ball

unless he counted her among his closest acquaintances." Elizabeth blushed at his insightfulness. "I wish to be honest with you, so as to convince you to pass along a message to Darcy for me. Would you please tell him that I will respect his wishes and do my utmost to stay away from him while he is in the neighbourhood."

"I will tell him."

"Also, please tell him that I will be leaving the ball as soon as this set is completed."

"Very well, I will convey this as well. I have promised the next to him."

"There is one more thing, if I may impose further." Elizabeth, slightly exasperated at his continued insistence, nodded her consent. "Please convey my deepest sympathies on the passing of Miss Darcy. I have nothing but fond memories of her, and I was truly saddened when I heard the news of her death."

"You should tell him that yourself, Mr. Wickham."

"If I thought he would listen, I would. Mr. Darcy's father was my godfather, and he loved me almost as a son. He paid for my education and had even intended a valuable living for me. I did not desire to enter the church and when old Mr. Darcy passed on, I asked his son for the value of the living. This I was given, and I started to study the law. Unfortunately, I was not wise in the safeguarding of Mr. Darcy's legacy to me and wasted it before I could become established my new profession. I even had the audacity to ask Darcy for the living when it became vacant. When he rightly refused, I am ashamed to say that I was rather vitriolic in my disappointment."

"Yet you can stand here today and speak so openly about your failings?"

"Yes, it was something Darcy said to me that finally pierced my selfishness. He told me he could not in good conscience entrust a parish and the proclamation of God's Holy Word to a man who had not the slightest understanding of or sympathy to such. He was correct. I knew the doctrines of the church, but practised them not. I would not make a good clergyman. I have since dedicated myself to become the man my godfather thought me to be."

"This is astonishing!"

"Do you not believe that God can change the heart of a man?"

"I believe it is possible, but I confess that am not inclined to trust proclamations of sudden transformations of character from a man I barely know."

"Neither would I. That is why I will endeavour to prove my constancy and my honesty. Test me over the coming months to see if I behave with honour."

"I will keep that in mind and speak to Mr. Darcy."

"He will confirm all I have told you, other than my change of heart. We have not met since I began my life anew. He is a good man, Miss Bennet, and for many years treated me better than I deserved."

Elizabeth pondered his words until the music ended the set.

"Thank you for the dance," Wickham said as he led her to her father. "I must leave now. Remember my words. Goodnight."

Mr. Bennet looked at the departing officer, then at a thoughtful Elizabeth and finally at a fretting Darcy as that gentleman approached. He wondered what all the fuss was about.

"Is there anything either of you would care to enlighten me about?"

"That man is not worth mentioning," Darcy replied.

"Indeed, that is the opinion of Mr. Wickham himself," Elizabeth answered.

"I am certain he said nothing good of me."

"On the contrary. He spoke only of himself and said you are right to despise him." Darcy was too amazed to respond. "He asked me to pass along a message. He vows to stay away from your notice, and to somehow prove that he has seen the error of his ways."

"He said this to you, a woman he barely knows?" Darcy asked incredulously.

"I am as surprised at his forwardness as you. He also offers his deepest sympathies, though belated, on the loss of your sister."

Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth watched the emotions Darcy was unable to check as they played across his face. Finally Darcy shook his head and gestured for Elizabeth's hand.

"The music begins. Shall we?"

Neither said much through the opening steps. Elizabeth could tell that her unexpected message from Wickham had unsettled Darcy. She set about calming him.

"I never thought I would admit this, but Miss Bingley has outdone herself this evening. Netherfield has never been shown to greater advantage."

"However our opinions of our hostess may concur," Darcy gave her a knowing look, "she has never lacked in her ability to organise a gathering of any type, be it afternoon tea or an elegant ball."

Elizabeth conceded that he was correct.

“Were you successful on your visit to Town? Mr. Bingley must have felt your absence acutely.”

“The business with my solicitor was concluded to my satisfaction. However, I had wished to pay a call upon my uncle, but he was away from London in Kent.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrow was raised at the mention of that particular county. “Do you have *many* relatives in Kent?”

“My aunt and cousin live there. I desire to see her and will be required to leave Netherfield again on Thursday to journey to my aunt’s.”

“Is your uncle visiting her?”

“Yes, he is. I should be able to speak to them both and be back in Hertfordshire on Saturday.” The look on Elizabeth’s face told him that she understood. “It is not that great a distance, only fifty miles.”

“Fifty miles *is* a great distance! Though if I stop and consider your fortune, such a distance is but a trifle to you.”

“Wealth does have certain advantages.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Wealth has a plethora of advantages, Mr. Darcy, as you are well aware.”

For the rest of the set they relaxed in pleasant conversation. It was always that way between them.

Elizabeth now knew no announcement of their understanding would come before Saturday. It was just as well, she reasoned, that Mr. Collins would likely pass Mr. Darcy on the road.

When the set ended, Darcy took Elizabeth back to her family. Yes, they would need to speak to her father tonight. She left the details of arranging the meeting to the two men.

During dinner, Mr. Bennet somehow kept his wife in check, and her dining companions were subjected only to her effusive admiration of the decorations, and her equally effusive appreciation of the food and wine. She may have hinted, once or thrice, that Jane would be the next to oversee such an event at Netherfield, but not too much to annoy.

After the meal, Mr. Bennet asked for Elizabeth’s company in the library in search of a particular book. Darcy surreptitiously joined them. He told Mr. Bennet of his struggles and frustrations in failing to contact his nearest relations. He was able to inform his future father-in-law of the marriage licence he had secured and of the settlements now laying in his room and requested a time the next day to call and review them. He also had Elizabeth’s gift to deliver and the visit to Longbourn would give him the opportunity to present it to her in a more appropriate setting.

Elizabeth was disappointed that Darcy would leave again so soon, but the rain of the past week gave him little choice in the matter. She had missed his company while he was in Town.

The rest of the evening was uneventful. Mary performed on the pianoforte while Elizabeth, Darcy and Mr. Bennet were absent, and Lydia was thoughtful enough to exhibit her worst behaviour at the same time. Elizabeth was blissfully unaware of what she had the good fortune to miss, and Mr. Collins was unaware that the nephew of his noble patroness was in attendance.

A tired party arrived home in the early hours of the morning, all but Elizabeth pleased with the events of the night, and all were soon asleep in their beds.

Chapter Four

Mr. Collins wasted little time in his quest to declare himself to Elizabeth. Twice she attempted to stop him; twice he brushed aside her hints. But when he launched into an excruciatingly detailed description of their future life together, Elizabeth was compelled to take matters firmly into her own hands.

“Mr. Collins, you presume too much. Let me answer you now. I am well aware of the honour of your proposal, and I thank you on behalf of all my family for seeking a bride from among us, but I cannot accept your hand in marriage.”

“I am by no means discouraged. I know some young ladies refuse the man they secretly mean to accept. I shall take your refusal as an indication that you wish to increase my love for you.”

“Sir, I am perfectly honest in my refusal. I cannot marry you sir. It is in every way impossible.”

“My love for you will overcome the impossible.”

“I beg you to excuse me.” Elizabeth fled the interview as quickly as she could. She suspected that sometime in the future she would look back on Mr. Collins’ love making with a great deal of amusement. For now, all she wanted was fresh air – preferably fresh air as far removed as possible from her cousin.

Mrs. Bennet was waiting outside the door to offer her congratulations to the newly engaged couple. But when Mr. Collins related Elizabeth’s words and his desire to overcome her hesitation, Mrs. Bennet grew concerned; she understood Elizabeth well enough to know that her daughter had no intention whatsoever of changing her mind. She immediately petitioned her husband to speak to his “headstrong” daughter.

“Let me first speak to Mr. Collins. Perhaps I can offer a remedy to your distress.”

“Yes, yes. Tell him you will make Lizzy accept him without delay.” She left before troubling to hear a response from her husband.

The mistress of Longbourn acted with great efficiency, and within moments, she had herded the heir into the library. For his part, Mr. Bennet realised that some considerable tact – if not outright equivocation – would be required to simultaneously keep his word to Darcy and Elizabeth and appease his wife and his cousin. He looked forward to the challenge with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at

the same time the most resolute composure of countenance.

“Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins, please be seated while we address the situation. I am not in the habit of interfering in the private matters of other men. Nevertheless, because one of my daughters is involved, I hope you will indulge me.” Mr. Collins nodded his consent. “Very well. Mrs. Bennet has informed me that you have asked for the hand of my daughter, Elizabeth, and she has refused you. Is this correct?”

“It is, sir. I cannot believe she is serious. The establishment I offer is highly desirable, and I assured her in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. My hand is not unworthy, and it is by no means assured that she will ever receive another offer.”

“You are correct sir, she never will. But not for the reason you believe. Elizabeth cannot accept your proposal because another has come before you.”

“What! I know of no such thing!” Mrs. Bennet cried.

“Of course not, my dear. Only I have been privy to this prior claim. So you see, Cousin, Elizabeth is by honour already bound to another. She could not possibly accept you, even if she wished it.”

“I see. Please allow me to apologise for placing you and Miss Elizabeth in such an awkward situation. I do beg your pardon, sir. I had no idea of any encumbrances with any of your daughters other than Miss Bennet.” Mr. Collins sputtered, drew air and appeared ready to launch himself into an extended speech of contrition.

Mr. Bennet swiftly interceded. “No apology is needed, sir.”

“Who is the man?” Mrs. Bennet could not believe that her second daughter had already reached some sort of understanding with anyone – much less that she, her own mother, was ignorant of the particulars.

“Ah, the material point. Elizabeth’s suitor wishes to remain unnamed for the moment, and I have agreed to keep the secret. He will return within a fortnight to announce his intentions. Until then, his identity will remain a mystery.”

With one more duty to perform, Mr. Bennet turned his full attention to the young clergyman. “Mr. Collins, I know my daughter has the ability to make men fall in love with her in a short amount of time, and any tender regard for her must be fragile. It would be impossible for your heart to recover quickly enough to form a lasting attachment before you leave. Therefore, if you still wish to seek a wife from among my available daughters, you are welcome to come to

Longbourn again. I can assure you that at the moment, no other man has come to speak with me about my other four daughters.”

“You forget Mr. Bingley and Jane, Husband. I am sure he is much in love with her, and I suspect you may be speaking with him soon.”

“We cannot discount Mr. Bingley,” Mr. Bennet said in all seriousness. “Well then, you are free to admire my three youngest daughters.”

“You are a gracious host, sir. I shall endeavour to spend the remaining time getting to know my three youngest cousins. If you will excuse me.”

“Mr. Collins, before you leave, I must solicit your promise of secrecy about what has passed between us. Nothing but the present circumstance would have caused me to take you into my confidence about Elizabeth’s suitor.”

“Yes, of course. It is best left unsaid. After all, who can keep a secret better than a clergyman? Now if you will excuse me.”

Although nearly overwhelmed by curiosity, Mrs. Bennet stood to follow him out of the room. She was most gratified when Mr. Bennet stopped her, and had the good grace to wait until Mr. Collins left the room before launching into her inquisition.

“Lizzy has a suitor! Why has no one told me? You take delight in vexing me! Who is it? Who is Lizzy’s suitor?”

“Mrs. Bennet, calm yourself. I have no intention of revealing his identity at this time. I gave my word and I will not be moved. You must wait until the proper time, like everyone else.”

Mrs. Bennet was not pleased. She wheedled and pleaded, threatened and cajoled. Mr. Bennet remained resolute.

“Oh! Very well. If you insist on being cruel, I have no choice but to wait – though I do not see why you cannot tell me who it is.” Mrs. Bennet turned to leave.

“Another word, my dear.”

She turned to him in agitation.

“What I said to Mr. Collins applies to you, as well. You are not to say anything to anyone until I give you leave.”

“I was only going to share my good fortune with my sister.”

“If you cannot give me your solemn vow to keep this to yourself, I will forbid you to leave the house until it is time to make the matter public.”

“Very well, if you insist. I will tell no one.”

“And you will not accost Lizzy for information. Is this clear?”

Mrs. Bennet huffed, “Perfectly. I will go and speak to Cook. When did you say her suitor would arrive?”

“I expect he will be revealed within the fortnight.”

“This will never do. How am I to know when he will be dining with us?”

“Mrs. Bennet, I doubt anyone will ever be disappointed at your table. Do not fret. He will be more interested in Elizabeth than in his plate.”

“That is all you know. Hill! Hill, I need to speak to you ...”

Mr. Bennet shut his door to drown out the exclamations of his wife. He glanced at his pocket watch and found there was still time to warn off Darcy. Without delay, he penned a note to his future son-in-law.

Mr. Darcy, do not come to Longbourn today. There have been some developments this morning that necessitate your continued absence. I can wait a few more days to see the papers. I will write with more explanation later. Rest assured, you are always welcome at Longbourn. I do this only to protect you and Elizabeth until such time as the point becomes moot.

Yours, etc.

G. Bennet

Satisfied with the contents, Mr. Bennet sealed the note and then placed it inside another sheet of paper, which he addressed to: *Mr. C. Bingley*. He called for a servant and instructed that the man deliver the missive directly into Mr. Bingley’s hand.

That accomplished, he poured himself a glass of port and speculated how long it would be before Mr. Bingley came to him for Jane. A little later, Mr. Bennet once again took quill in hand to compose an explanation of the morning’s events for Darcy. He was in no rush and took his time crafting a letter he suspected that Darcy would find quite amusing reading on his journey to Town on the morrow.

The Bennets’ servant delivered the note to the master of Netherfield, who broke the seal and promptly handed the interior page to Darcy.

“What is it?” Bingley asked his puzzled friend.

“Here, you read it, and see if you can make it out.”

Bingley took the proffered paper and rapidly read the contents. “I wonder what has happened. He only

asked you to not come today. He knows that you plan to return on Saturday. Perhaps this has something to do with his guest.”

“Collins is to leave that day, it is true. I suppose I should prepare for my journey. I see no reason why you cannot call on the Bennets. I know you wish it.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“Utterly. Go. Perhaps you will unravel the mystery. That is, if you can take your eyes off Miss Bennet long enough to do so.”

“You approve of her?”

“Considering that I am marrying her sister, I would be a hypocrite if I did not. Miss Bennet is a lovely woman. She reminds me of my own sister.”

Bingley put his hand on Darcy’s shoulder. “Higher praise you could not bestow.”

Bingley did call on Longbourn, but came back with no further intelligence other than that the lady of the house seemed unusually subdued. Darcy decided to wait for an explanation directly from Mr. Bennet and set about preparing for the journey to Kent. First he would stop in Town to call on one other aunt. Many of his plans for Elizabeth depended on the good sense of this relative.

This time when Darcy arrived in London, the staff was expecting him. Warm fires were laid in his rooms, and his cook had prepared a hot meal. Darcy took the time to eat and refresh himself before sending a note to Lady Victoria asking if he could see her that evening.

Lady Victoria Arnold was the eldest of Darcy’s mother’s siblings. She had greatly disappointed her father, the Earl, by marrying a man of great fortune but no title. Such an action could be forgiven of the younger two sisters, had they made such a choice, but their spouses were both descended from ancient families. Reginald Arnold had the misfortune of being only two generations removed from trade. His father had purchased an immense estate, but the stigma of new money was yet connected to him.

Victoria Fitzwilliam cared not a whit. The Earl had refused his consent when Arnold first came to him. Lady Victoria was incensed! Unless her father changed his mind, she vowed to refuse all suitors. He did not, and she did. Every effort to win the lady’s favour was soundly rebuffed until the woman in question turned one and twenty. On the night she came of age, she told her father that unless he agreed to allow her to marry the man of her choice, she would have no option but to elope. The Earl finally understood that his grand schemes for his eldest daughter were at an end. He conceded defeat and a

few weeks later, the lovers were finally united in matrimony.

That is not to say that her family welcomed her new husband with open arms. Tolerated was a more appropriate description. Victoria never forgave her brother or her sister Catherine for their disparaging attitude toward her new family. In fact, an estrangement took place, and only Darcy’s mother maintained cordial relations with the Arnolds. Lady Anne, the youngest child, abhorred the dissent, and her own marriage to an untitled gentleman had given her insight into her sister’s situation.

Darcy arrived at his aunt’s later that evening and had barely seated himself before the assault began.

“Out with it, Nephew. Why are you here?”

“It is lovely to see you again, Lady Victoria.”

“Darcy, you never call in the evening unless you have important news.”

“I travel to Kent in the morning.”

“To see my sister.”

“And your brother. The Earl is currently visiting Lady Catherine. Before I spoke to them I wished to speak with you.” Lady Victoria had known what he was going to say before he even said it.

“You are to be married,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Yes.”

“Will my siblings approve?”

“Lady Catherine will not.”

“Ah, so you are not going to marry Anne. I always knew you had more sense than that. From all reports, Anne would not have suited you at all. Will my brother be pleased with your choice of bride?”

“I am uncertain of his response.”

“But you doubt he will. Who is this creature who has finally ensnared the master of Pemberley? Do I know her?”

“Her name is Elizabeth Bennet. I would be surprised if you know of her or her family. Her father has a small estate in Hertfordshire, and she has lived all her life in that country.”

“A small estate, you say? How much of a dowry can she bring?”

“Next to nothing.”

“Useful connections?”

“Other than a cousin who is Lady Catherine’s new parson, none.”

Lady Victoria clapped her hands together in glee. “I would love to be present when you inform my sister of this little bit of information.”

“I rather suspected you would feel this way.”

After a moment of gloating over her sister's disappointment, however, her concern for her favourite nephew returned.

"As much as I enjoy disoblising Catherine, I am still anxious for you. Are you certain you have made a prudent choice? Are you so in love with your Miss Bennet that you have allowed your judgement to be clouded?"

"I assure you that my heart did not overrule my head. I carefully considered the disadvantages of the match before I offered marriage. I readily admit that my bride's condition in life is decidedly below my own and that she has precious little experience in society apart from that in Hertfordshire. But Elizabeth is not some foolish backwater chit. She is an intelligent and charming woman. I have no doubt that with a little time and proper guidance she will become a worthy mistress of Pemberley and a credit to the Darcy name."

"Am I correct in assuming that when you speak of proper guidance, you are referring to me?" Lady Victoria never minced her words. Her nephew was equally frank.

"Partially. It is my hope that you will help me guide Elizabeth through the deep waters of her first season in Town."

"She has no one else?"

"There is an aunt and uncle who live in Cheapside. I hardly think they qualify."

Darcy waited for his aunt to reply. It had not occurred to him that she might not support his decision. The longer she delayed, the more nervous he became.

"Bring Miss Bennet to me. If I find her to be as intelligent as you have represented, I will help you. If, however, I find her vulgar or too much the simpleton, I strongly suggest you find a way to extricate yourself from the situation and marry someone who understands what is required of your wife. Are we agreed?"

"It seems I have little choice. I will ask Mr. Bennet to allow Elizabeth to come to Town to shop for her trousseau. I will then make arrangements for you to meet her. Perhaps you could attend her one day while she visits the modistes?"

"An excellent idea! There is no occasion that reveals a woman's true character better than a day spent in the shops of London. Now then, tell me more about your lady. How and where did you meet?"

Darcy spent the next hour relating the details of his acquaintance with Elizabeth. When he left, his aunt suspected two things: that Miss Elizabeth Bennet must be a remarkable woman for Darcy to overlook

all the disadvantages of the match, and that her nephew was head over heels in love with the woman, even if he was oblivious to it himself.

The Darcy carriage pulled onto the cobble-stoned streets of London early the next morning. The lone passenger had instructed his driver not to over-tax the horses, as he was planning to return the very same day. Even with the leisurely pace, Darcy arrived at Rosings just past noon. He instructed the grooms that the horses were to be made ready for the return journey in the shortest time possible.

It was time to face his family.

Darcy was greeted by his surprised uncle and aunts; thankfully, his cousin was absent. Lady Catherine, the Earl, and his wife the Countess were gathered in one of Rosings' many ornate public rooms. Darcy had never liked Lady Catherine's ostentatious displays of wealth. There was nothing subtle about the house; it had been built to function as a clear declaration of the wealth of the owner. Every stick of furniture shouted the mistress' need for pomp, ceremony, and adulation. The furnishings were designed to intimidate. Darcy was never impressed.

"Darcy, what an unexpected surprise! What brings you to Kent?" Lady Catherine greeted her nephew.

Darcy acknowledged his elders with a respectful bow before sitting in a chair facing them.

"I have come to announce my engagement."

"You are finally ready to have the banns read to marry Anne."

"Pardon me, Aunt. I never said I was to wed my cousin."

"Of course you are. It was your mother's fondest wish. Your union has been anticipated for years."

"Lady Catherine, I am by neither honour nor inclination bound to fulfil your oft-stated wish to have me for a son-in-law."

"Come now, be reasonable. Marrying Anne would unite two great estates. This has always been expected of you," the Earl responded.

"With all due respect to my cousin, I am not marrying her. I have asked for the hand of another lady and she has accepted me. We are to be wed before the New Year."

"Enough of this nonsense; you are marrying Anne. Tell him, Brother."

"Catherine, I have spoken to him many times about the need to secure an heir for Pemberley. I know you must be disappointed that he has not chosen Anne, but give the boy a chance to speak." Lady Catherine met this with a cold glare. "Very well," the

Earl continued, “who is it that you think are you marrying?”

“I have gained the hand of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Bennet? I am not familiar with the name,” replied the perplexed family patriarch.

Lady Catherine furrowed her brow. “Bennet ... Bennet. That name is familiar. Where have I heard it before?”

“Your clergyman is to inherit the estate of his Cousin Bennet, the father of my future wife.”

“You are marrying the cousin of my parson? Have you lost all your senses?”

“I demand that you tell us more about this Miss Bennet,” added the Earl.

“Her father is a gentleman. His estate is in Hertfordshire near the town of Meryton, in the village of Longbourn. The estate is entailed upon Lady Catherine’s clergyman for the lack of a male heir by Mr. Bennet.”

“Is this Elizabeth his only daughter?” the Countess asked. It was the first words she had spoken since Darcy arrived.

“She is the second oldest of five daughters.”

“I sent Collins there to find a wife. Heaven forbid if he brings back a Bennet bride!” Lady Catherine was horrified.

Her brother ignored her outburst. “Has she been presented, at least?”

“No, she has lived all her life in the country.”

“An uncouth bride from the wilds of Hertfordshire? Tell me that she has family in Town whom we know.”

“None that you would know.”

The Earl groaned. “Fortune?”

“None to speak of.” Darcy was secretly enjoying his relatives’ shock.

“Does she have *any* redeeming values?” his uncle asked, his voice echoing his feeling of impending doom.

“She is witty, lively, and nothing like the simpering females I have been forced to endure since I came of age.”

“She is no one of any consequence,” the Earl pronounced. “My God, boy! You have disgraced us all! How DARE you marry so far beneath you! This alliance is a disgrace. We will be laughed at, ridiculed behind our backs by our peers.”

“That is none of my concern. I *will* marry the woman of my own choosing.”

“Your wife will not be recognised by any of us.”

“Any?”

“Oh my foolish sister may take a fancy to your wife, just to vex me. It matters little. It is *my* opinion on the matter that counts.”

“I shall not be swayed by *your* wishes, only my own. Resign yourself to this marriage. Tomorrow’s *Times* will carry an announcement of my betrothal. There is nothing you, or anyone, can do to stop this.” Darcy looked at them, daring them to act. None spoke.

Darcy stood to take his leave. “I confess I had anticipated your reactions to my announcement. It was only for the sake of my mother’s memory that I took the trouble to come in person rather than deliver the news by letter. When we meet in future, I hope you will give my wife the consideration that is her due. Until then, we have nothing left to discuss.”

Darcy walked to the door and calmly turned to say one last word. “Uncle, you have forgotten one thing. I am no longer a boy. I am a gentleman and my own master. Please try to remember that.”

Darcy was unsurprised when he heard his uncle calling to him. The abbreviated visit meant that Darcy’s carriage was not yet ready to leave. To pass the time, he decided take a tour of the park. He had no idea when or if he would return to Rosings. After the initial shock of the interview had passed, he knew one of his family would make another attempt to reason with him, and his uncle was the obvious choice.

“Ah, there you are. I was afraid I would miss you.”

“Uncle, unless you have come to tell me that you accept my choice of bride, there is little left to say.”

“You cannot expect me to let the matter lie where we left it.”

“No,” Darcy sighed. “I am not naïve enough to think you would.”

“Let us be reasonable. You cannot expect me to be overjoyed with your news. An engagement to *any* woman is a surprise. To one so beneath us is astounding.”

“A surprise? *You* were the one who insisted I find a bride before the first snow had fallen on Georgiana’s grave. My mourning period was not half over before you contrived to put me in the company of single women you deemed eligible to be my wife. Well, sir, I have done what you have asked – nay, demanded – of me. I have found a woman I want to marry, and before the New Year is upon us, I shall be wed.”

“We both know that it is not so simple. Your wife has a duty to uphold the Darcy and the Fitzwilliam names. How can you possibly expect me to rejoice that you are marrying a woman of no fortune and inferior birth? How can such a woman

live up to the honour of the position of Mrs. Darcy of Pemberley?"

"You judge her unworthy without having met her. For shame, sir."

"I do not need to meet this girl to know that she will struggle in her new role."

"Miss Bennet may struggle. It *will* take her time to assimilate herself into her new world. Nonetheless, if I doubted her aptitude for learning, I would not have made an offer to her. Let me be the judge of what I require in my wife."

"It would be so much simpler if you would just marry Anne."

Until this point Darcy had held his temper in check. After all, he knew his declaration would not sit well with his family. The frustrations of the last several days combined with the fatigue from travel conspired to loosen his pent up indignation.

"You stand here and tell me to marry my cousin, a woman of delicate constitution, who may never be able to bear me an heir. Your wish would mostly likely result in the end of my family's line. Tell me, did you plan our union in our cradles as well? Perhaps it was your idea in the first place, to consolidate the family wealth through marriage."

"The idea was first and always Catherine's and your mother's. They saw the advantage of the match, even if you do not."

"So I could be as *happy* as Lady Catherine and Sir Lewis were? Did your father pick my father for a son, as he picked Sir Lewis?"

"Your father was smitten with your mother. He may have lacked a title, but Pemberley was more than enough incentive to overcome any doubts my father or your mother had."

"Sir Lewis had Rosings – another jewel in the Fitzwilliam family crown. Tell me, was the knighthood part of Lady Catherine's dowry? It is a wonder that such has never been offered to me as an *incentive*."

The Earl started. Darcy saw it and knew he had unwittingly hit the mark.

"I see I have uncovered more of the truth. Was I to become Sir Fitzwilliam Darcy if I married Anne?" The older gentleman said nothing. His silence spoke volumes.

Darcy was disgusted. He wanted nothing more than to be alone and away from this place. Before he would go, he had one final question. "How is it that you can take such an interest in my marital state yet ignore the plight of your younger son?"

"What has Andrew to do with this?"

"I only wondered at the prodigious attention you have paid to my prospects, all the while knowing that my cousin needs to marry well. Have you no compassion for him?"

"He ... he is now just thirty, and he has a profession. A soldier is not necessarily in need of a wife."

"Save your excuses. You are wasting your breath with me. It is your son who ..."

A sudden thought occurred to Darcy at that moment. "Or did you have a bride in mind for him as well?"

His uncle would not meet his gaze.

"Georgiana! She was his ward and still only a child!"

"I have never suggested anything of the kind to you."

"No, you never had the chance. At least I have this one solace – that my sister was spared your manipulation."

"What is left is nothing but speculation."

"What is lost is any remaining respect I had for you. You do not care for me, for Anne, or even your own son. We are only the means to an end. I want no more of your schemes for the improvement of your family. I have my own family, Pemberley, and all the people dependent on me to consider. I would rather bring them a mistress who embraces them because she is a caring person than a woman intent only on elevating her position in society. Elizabeth Bennet *will* be Mrs. Darcy. Elizabeth Bennet *will* become a revered mistress of Pemberley. Elizabeth Bennet *will* bear my children. Unless you are ready to be reasonable, we have nothing left to say. Goodbye."

Darcy turned on his heel and strode purposefully to his waiting carriage. He tapped the roof and the driver prodded the horses to move. Not once, as the team pulled the coach away from the great house, did Darcy look anywhere but straight ahead.

The journey to London was accomplished before dark. His time in Kent had played out much as he expected. Darcy knew his uncle and aunts would respond as they did. When he placed himself in their situation, he could even imagine himself reacting the way they had. But it did not excuse their attempt to force him into a life of their making.

Since his father died, Darcy had endeavoured to be a good landlord and a good master. He longed for the same praise as had once been lavished upon his predecessor. In his quest to live up to the expectations of his position, he had gradually come to realise that he must be his own man. Never had he felt more confidence in himself than when he was in the

presence of Elizabeth Bennet. Effortlessly, she drew him out from his normal reserve. She truly listened to him. She valued the man inside, and he found it irresistible.

When he pondered his future, one thought, one word, came to mind repeatedly: companionship. He wanted it, he needed it, and in Elizabeth Bennet he had found a woman who could provide it. Her intellect would challenge him; her liveliness would complement his tendency toward sombreness. His uncle, the Earl, and his aunt, Lady Catherine, would never be able to comprehend this. Suddenly and unexpectedly Darcy felt pity for them. Both married and with children of their own, yet they both were still very much alone. Just as he had been until he met Elizabeth.

Mr. Collins had spent most of Wednesday mourning the loss of the love of his life. He spent most of Thursday observing the three youngest Bennet girls, and most of Friday debating how soon he could approach Mr. Bennet for permission to court Mary. He hoped an invitation to his cousin Elizabeth's wedding might be forthcoming; he could use that time to woo the middle Bennet child.

Mr. Bennet suspected that Collins would next attach himself to Mary. Her tendency toward moralizing might very well appeal to a man of the cloth. Still, considering what Darcy had told him of his expectation for the meeting with his aunt, Mr. Bennet had serious reservations that Collins' convictions would survive his patroness' denunciation of Fitzwilliam Darcy and the entire Bennet clan. In short, Mr. Bennet was counting the hours until Collins was safely on the road back to Hunsford, with no matters of honour to compel him to return. Mary did not deserve such a fool for a mate. Lydia, on the other hand ...

So it was on Saturday morning that one unmourned, if acknowledged, suitor was bid farewell, while one welcome, if anonymous, suitor was eagerly awaited. Darcy did not disappoint. By three in the afternoon, accompanied by Bingley, he rode to Longbourn to make the momentous call.

Chapter Five

It was a most fortuitous time for Darcy and Bingley to call at Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet was visiting her sister Philips in Meryton and had taken Lydia and Kitty with her. Elizabeth could not believe her good luck. When she spied the two gentlemen approaching on horseback, a bolt of nervous anticipation shot through her. Jane saw her shiver.

“They are coming,” was all Elizabeth said – and all that needed to be said. It was Jane’s turn to anticipate the presence of her *amore*.

Elizabeth faced a bit of a conundrum. She wished to join Darcy and her father in the library, but knew Jane would be uncomfortable alone with Mr. Bingley. That gentleman’s attentions were very promising, and Jane was encouraging him as much as her character and disposition allowed. The only other potential chaperone was Mary, but Mary was entrenched in her room, and Elizabeth knew it would take time to coax her into coming downstairs. After a slight hesitation, she made her decision and hurried to the door.

“Elizabeth Bennet, do not dare leave me alone!”

“I promise to return before the gentlemen are announced and, with any luck, with Mary in tow.”

“Then hurry!” Jane pleaded to the now empty room. Breathlessly, Elizabeth walked into her next youngest sister’s room, grabbed her hand, and began to pull the surprised girl into the hall.

“Elizabeth, wait!”

“We have no time to lose.”

“I am in the middle of an important section of my book.”

“That can wait. Right now, I need you in the drawing room. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy are at this very moment on our doorstep, and I promised Jane that I would not leave her alone with Mr. Bingley.”

“But you and Mr. Darcy will be there. Why do you need me?”

“I have no time to explain. Please, trust me when I say I need your help.” Elizabeth opened the drawing room door to find a pacing and very nervous Jane.

“Oh my, I was so worried you would not come before ...”

The door opened again and Mr. Bingley, and Mr. Bingley alone, was announced. As the others moved to be seated, Elizabeth politely excused herself. Mary looked at Elizabeth in amazement.

Jane gently placed her hand on Mary’s and whispered, “Do not fret, you will soon understand.”

With a sigh, Mary realised that Elizabeth had kept to the letter – if not the spirit – of her promise to not leave Jane alone with Mr. Bingley. She shrugged, saw that Jane and Bingley were already oblivious to her presence and returned to her book. Several minutes later, she abruptly remembered that Elizabeth told her Mr. Darcy had also come to call. Here was Mr. Bingley, but where was Mr. Darcy? For that matter, where had Elizabeth run off to? Mary’s book was quite suddenly considerably less engrossing than it had been only moments ago.

Elizabeth knocked on the library door and entered before her father had a chance to respond.

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Bennet teased, “is there something you need? It is only Mr. Darcy and I here, and you undoubtedly have no desire to spend more of your time in the gentleman’s company than is absolutely necessary.”

Elizabeth kissed her father’s cheek before sitting next to Darcy. He in turn took her hand and brought it to his lips before returning his attention to Mr. Bennet. Elizabeth’s fingers burned where his lips had touched her bare skin, but Darcy seemed unaware of the effects of his kiss.

“Your young man has just told me that he has completed his quest and there is no longer any impediment to announcing your betrothal. All that remains is for you to tell your mother and sisters. When might you muster up the courage for such revelations? I am certain your mother’s nerves will deliver an outstanding performance.”

Darcy was unable to hide his displeasure at the inference behind Mr. Bennet’s words. Elizabeth had always overlooked her father’s inappropriate speeches regarding the follies of their family; this time she felt all the shame that such behaviour should produce. Fortunately, Mr. Bennet did not notice Darcy’s momentary lapse in hiding his true opinion, and Elizabeth quickly bridged the silence before it could become uncomfortable.

“I shall tell Mama this evening. I believe she would prefer to have at least a full day to plan dinner for my intended.”

“Yes, the first meal with a daughter’s fiancé should be one of the crowning moments in a mother’s life. Mr. Darcy, you must join us tomorrow.”

“I shall be honoured.”

“Undoubtedly!” Mr. Bennet quipped.

This time Darcy shared in the general amusement. Elizabeth was relieved that he could see the humour and truth in her father’s comment and

realise that her father had not again spoken disrespectfully of his wife. Even were she the daughter of a peer, Darcy would be subjected to the same kind of attention. A daughter well married was every mother's goal.

Darcy did not expound on the meeting in Kent; he was much more forthcoming about his talk with Lady Victoria and his desire for Elizabeth to meet his aunt in Town before the wedding. Elizabeth already planned an excursion to the city to acquire items for her trousseau. It was agreed that they would travel to London the following week.

"There is one detail I would like to settle before we go any further," said Mr. Bennet. "I think it wise to set a wedding date before Elizabeth speaks to her mother. We had determined that the ceremony should take place during the week following Christmas. Do either of you have a preference for the exact date?"

"Christmas Day is a Wednesday. I believe Friday or Monday would be acceptable. What is your opinion, Elizabeth?" Darcy answered.

"I see the wisdom in either day. However, may I suggest Monday the 29th? That would give any family who wishes to come time to travel. Surely the Gardiners can stay that long?"

"I doubt my brother would need to return to Town before then. If Mr. Darcy has no objections, then the 29th it shall be." Darcy nodded in affirmation. "Very good. Mr. Darcy, you must have spent much of the day travelling. Perhaps you should take advantage of the fine weather and walk with the ladies and Mr. Bingley. I have been told he is somewhere on these grounds right now, undoubtedly in Jane's company."

When they entered the drawing room, Elizabeth took pity on Mary and announced her engagement then and there. Bingley was relieved to finally be able to express his good wishes. Darcy cautioned them that Mrs. Bennet had yet to be told, and all agreed to keep the news to themselves for one more day. Soon all five were walking the lanes around Longbourn; mercifully, Elizabeth and Darcy were allowed to walk alone behind the other three.

The conversation between the couple naturally directed itself to the events of the last week, for they had hardly any time alone since becoming engaged. Elizabeth regaled Darcy with a retelling of Mr. Collins' ill-timed addresses. She could see that the subject made him uneasy and reassured him that even had she not been promised to him, Mr. Collins would still have been refused.

"I have no doubt that you would have refused the man. That is not what troubles me."

"Then what does?"

"That such a man could fancy himself so violently in love after so short an acquaintance."

"You had not known me much longer before you made me an offer."

"True, but our situations bear little resemblance. I did not profess feelings that could exist only in my imagination. Mr. Collins' supposed regard for you will quickly fade, and I have no doubt that he will soon find another object for his attentions."

"You do not believe in love at first sight?"

"I have seen it, but I have never seen such a thing last a year through. Too often couples carried away by feelings of passion marry quickly. In a twelvemonth, passion has sunk into indifference. Within a few years, most are barely speaking to each other, yet they are bound in wedlock until death."

"You have many more acquaintances than I, and it is not surprising that you have seen this." Elizabeth walked several more paces before continuing. "Do you worry that this fate will befall us?"

Darcy heard the concern in Elizabeth's voice. He took her hand in his and squeezed it to reassure her.

"I do not profess to know what our future holds, but I have the utmost faith that such will not befall us. It is true that we have not known each other for long, but in that time, you have become one of my closest friends. I believe that the like-mindedness that exists between us is a better foundation for a happy marriage than the randomness of rash passion. It is not because I believe no passion will exist between us, but because we share a desire for something even more important."

"And what is that?"

"Companionship. Compatibility manifested in mutual regard, stimulating conversation, respect for the opinion of the other. Your intelligence and lively wit would demand no less from me. I alluded to it when I proposed. It is the one quality that I most sought in a wife. Surely you have experienced it when we are together?"

"Yes, I have. I will not deny that it was a primary reason I accepted you."

"Elizabeth, I cannot guarantee you martial bliss. That is inherently unreasonable to assume to be a certainty between two people when they wed. Only time will reveal our fate. I can, however, offer you my respect and my honesty."

Then after a short pause Darcy added, "And Elizabeth, while I said before that passion was not the

reason I asked you to marry me, know that you are a beautiful woman and that I do desire you.”

Each turned to search the other’s face. Elizabeth blushed. “How unlucky that you should have a reasonable answer to give, and that I should be so reasonable as to admit it!” She smiled, and they continued walking.

“Fitzwilliam ... It still sounds so strange to call you that.”

“I like it when you call me by my name.”

“Fitzwilliam, tell me of Kent. How did your relations react to our news?”

Darcy’s jaw tightened. Elizabeth could see that he was perturbed. “They were not pleased. Elizabeth, please do not question me further on this. It is still upsetting to remember their words to me.”

“I did not mean to cause offence.”

“It is not you who has offended. Forgive me, my dear, I did not mean to accuse you. Let us speak no more of it.”

“As you wish.” Elizabeth hesitated, then asked, “Will you tell me of your meeting in London with your other aunt?”

Darcy immediately relaxed. “My aunt, Lady Victoria, would very much like to meet you.”

“As you said. Please tell me about her.”

Darcy told her of his aunt’s courtship and marriage to Reginald Arnold. Elizabeth was surprised.

“A love match?” she asked.

“I do not think so, at least not in the beginning. As a lad my mother told me that Aunt Victoria had decided that she wished to marry my uncle and once she had set her mind on it, no one could dissuade her. The Fitzwilliam clan have a decided tendency towards independence and obstinacy.”

“Have you inherited it?”

“I would not know.”

“Hmm,” Elizabeth replied before returning to the subject of his aunt. “You said it did not begin as a love match, yet this implies that it became one.”

“Yes, it did. It was obvious to anyone who saw them together that they held each other in tender regard. When my uncle died two years ago, my aunt was devastated.”

“To lose a beloved spouse must have been a blow.”

“Her sons rallied around her, as did her friends. Due to my aunt’s position in society as the daughter of an earl, and my uncle’s wealth, she has many acquaintances in both the titled and gentry classes of upper society. Those she called friends came to her side when her grief was greatest. Aunt Victoria chose well.”

“She sounds quite formidable.”

“Aye, she is. But she is a sensible woman who refuses to make hasty judgements.”

“You mean to say that I must win her approval.”

“If you wish to think of it in that manner, yes. You need not be afraid. She will find you a person of value as long as you are yourself.”

“I sense her approval is important to you.”

“It is. I ... I have hopes that at least one of my immediate family members will not oppose you.”

“Fitzwilliam, what happened in Kent obviously distresses you. I do not understand why you still wish to marry me with such apparent opposition from your relatives.

“Elizabeth, it is nothing I did not anticipate. I admit that the reception I received in Kent was unpleasant, but I was not so naïve to expect anything else. Without going into specifics, I lost most of my respect for my uncle, and I refuse to bend to the will of a man whom I cannot esteem. I made it clear that I am my own man.”

“Promise me that you will someday confide in me what happened?”

“I will.” They walked a little further.

“This enmity still troubles me.”

“I would not have it do so. The objections that they raised reflect only their own characters. I am entirely content in my decision and prospect of our marriage.”

Elizabeth saw that he did not wish to discuss the matter further and wisely decided to change the subject. “Have you any family on your father’s side?”

“I have no aunts or uncles on my father’s side. My father was the eldest of five children. He had three sisters and one brother. None of the girls survived childhood. After my father married and I was born, my Uncle Robert joined the army and was killed. He had never married.”

“How tragic! Your poor father! Do you have any cousins on your mother’s side, or would you rather not speak about them now?”

“No, I have nothing against them. My uncle, the Earl of Perryton, and his wife have three children. Their oldest son, Martin, is to inherit. The second, Andrew, is a colonel in His Majesty’s Army. He and I were very close growing up, and we both were my sister’s guardians. The youngest, Harriet, is married to Viscount Northem.

“Aunt Catherine, married Sir Lewis de Bourgh, and they have one daughter, Anne. I believe you have heard much about her.” They both smiled at his inference to Mr. Collins.

“Aunt Victoria and Uncle Reginald had four sons. The oldest is Michael, and he inherited the estate when my uncle died. Michael is married to Helen, and they have three children. His brother, Charles, was given the living for the family estate. The third son, Bartholomew, is the rector of Kympton near Pemberley, and the youngest son, Joseph, is at university, preparing for a career in the law.”

“Two sons in the Church. I am surprised at least one did not go into the army or the navy.”

“None of them wished it. My cousins prefer a life serving others and serving God. The middle two are too gentle in nature to make good fighting men. The youngest loves to debate, so he will do well as a barrister.”

“Do you have other cousins?”

“No, the rest of my relations are all much further removed. In fact, right now, my heir is the grandson of my father’s uncle.”

“No wonder you are in a hurry to marry!” Elizabeth teased.

She was not prepared for the look on his face when he replied, “More than you know.”

His look told her that although he was not marrying her in blind lust, he recognised that desire was part of their attraction. Thoughts of the unknown thrilled her, and his hand over hers suddenly felt much warmer. Elizabeth attempted to rein in these unfamiliar feelings through more conversation. She remembered the new book she had received just that afternoon.

“Thank you again for your gift. It is a handsome diary.”

“I am pleased you like it. I did not know if you kept one.”

“I do, but I am nearing the end of the current one. It is most fitting to begin a new book as I begin my new life. Do you keep a journal as well?”

“My father gave me my first when I was preparing to leave for school. It has been the habit of many generations of the masters of Pemberley to keep a diary. He felt it was a good time for me to learn to do the same. I confess this was one motivation for the gift. Not all the mistresses of Pemberley have kept a diary, but many have.”

“It would please you if I did.”

“Of course, hence the gift!”

“You are a fortunate man, Fitzwilliam. I have secreted my thoughts on paper for many years now and have no intention of stopping.”

“When we get to Derbyshire I will show you the collection of the old journals. They are kept in a

locked section of the library. Right now, only I have the key to them. You shall have it too, if you wish.”

“I do wish it. I would very much like to know more of your family’s history.”

“It will be part of your family’s history, too, Elizabeth, and our children’s. Soon you shall be a Darcy. Elizabeth Darcy. I like the sound of that.”

When he said her new name he did not just say it as much as he caressed it. All doubts were sublimated in the sensations that his voicing her future name produced.

Elizabeth spent the evening preparing her speech to her mother. As the household prepared for bed, Elizabeth went to her mother’s chambers. She had no expectations for her mother’s reaction other than that it would be extreme; she was, therefore, thoroughly shocked when Mrs. Bennet could not speak for many minutes after she was told. This silence was, unfortunately, short lived. Mrs. Bennet had expected that Elizabeth would be comfortably settled with her unnamed fiancé, but never in her wildest dreams had she considered a man of ten thousand a year. What wealth her Lizzy would have! What advantages to share with her family! Hang the hedgerows, Mrs. Bennet would never have to worry for her security in life again!

The following week

The coach with the Darcy crest rumbled down the road to London, its owner the sole occupant. It had been another trying week for Fitzwilliam Darcy. At dinner on Saturday he announced his engagement to the family at Netherfield. Bingley had known for days, but continued to express his sincere congratulations; his sisters were another matter entirely. Mrs. Hurst, at least, had the grace to withhold her opinion, but Miss Bingley was not so well composed. Caroline insisted that Darcy must be joking, and a cruel joke at that. Elizabeth Bennet of all people! When her brother confirmed his friend’s sincerity, she managed to convey the depth of her outrage in a few short sentences before Bingley was able to interrupt her, lest she go too far.

Darcy knew that Caroline Bingley would be disappointed; her hopes for a match with him had long been displayed. He had allowed her outburst – that one time. If she were savvy enough to understand that she risked losing his notice and any hope of future invitations to Pemberley, she would have to come to terms with his marriage.

The next morning, Darcy met Elizabeth and her family for church. His presence at her side garnered

many surprised looks and guaranteed many inquiries once the service was over. However, it served its purpose. By the time the other parishioners returned to their homes, Darcy and Elizabeth's engagement was common knowledge. Mrs. Bennet saw to that.

Dinner that night at Longbourn was torture of another kind. Since Darcy had come into society, he had suffered the effusive attentions of nearly every unmarried woman to whom he was introduced. Only marginally more distasteful were their mothers. Constantly seeking his favour, constantly promoting the interests of their daughters, such women became extremely tiresome. Elizabeth Bennet may not have been like most of the marriageable women he met, but her mother was every bit the rapacious matchmaker he abhorred. And even now, with the match made, the betrothal announced, the wedding date set, she would not rest. Her not so subtle hints about the advantages he could bestow on her family, most especially in securing rich husbands for her youngest girls, wore on his nerves. Sly inferences to Elizabeth's use of feminine arts to catch him in marriage caused him to sink further into himself. It took tremendous self-control to hide his revulsion. He was grateful only for the fact that his relations did not witness the spectacle.

After supper, Mr. Bennet took pity on Darcy and whisked him away for port and cigars. The gentleman did have his moments – the bad and the good. When they rejoined the women, Darcy could see that Elizabeth did all that she could to shield him from her mother and had enlisted Jane's help as well. When Mrs. Bennet required Elizabeth's notice, Jane was there to take her place. And so the evening continued until it was time for Darcy to return to Netherfield. Elizabeth saw him out. Her words and posture told him she was just as relieved as he that the evening was finally over. She thanked him for his forbearance and bade him goodnight. Had Mr. Bennet not been watching, Darcy would have kissed her. Surely he had earned that reward! But it was not meant to be; Darcy said farewell and rode away.

During the next few days, Mrs. Bennet found that she required Elizabeth's presence as she made calls on her neighbours; her time to display her daughter and exult in the capture of the greatest prize the country had ever seen was short, and she intended to make the most of it. Elizabeth found consolation in Darcy's daily calls at Longbourn after the ladies had returned. The weather was favourable, and Elizabeth and Darcy escaped to walk the grounds at every opportunity. They spoke of many inconsequential things. They shared stories of their childhoods, retold memories of loved ones now passed, and talked of their immediate

future. Darcy was thankful that the Gardiners would house the Bennets while they were in Town.

He was soon on his way to London to await the Bennets' arrival. Darcy wished to have a few days to personally prepare his house and staff to receive a visit from the next mistress. The added bonus of this early return to London was his removal from daily exposure to a sullen Miss Bingley and an overbearing Mrs. Bennet. He began counting the days ... two and twenty more and he would take Elizabeth away from such unsuitable company.

The Bennets arrived at Gracechurch Street on Monday afternoon. Mr. Bennet had sent Jane with Elizabeth for support. He had volunteered to remain at Longbourn with Mary, Kitty, and Lydia knowing that his eldest daughters could manage their mother, with their uncle and aunt's help. Mr. Bingley had gallantly offered to escort the ladies to London, as Mr. Bennet suspected he would.

Darcy called at the Gardiners that same evening to extend an invitation to come to his house so that Elizabeth could inspect her future residence. Before Darcy could escape, he was invited to stay for dinner. Darcy remembered how much Elizabeth had praised her uncle and aunt, and he rapidly ascertained that her description of the couple was accurate. He had worried that Mr. Gardiner would be like his sister, but thankfully, that was not the case. On the whole, the evening was pleasant, and if not for Mrs. Bennet, Darcy would have called the experience quite surprisingly enjoyable.

On Tuesday, the ladies began shopping in earnest. Wednesday morning was again dedicated to expanding Elizabeth's trousseau, but the afternoon was reserved for her first real foray into her new life.

When the coach arrived at an elegant house in a fashionable district, none of the four ladies said much; each was too much in awe of the size and splendour of Elizabeth's future abode. Not for the first time did Elizabeth contemplate the great gulf in situation and social standing that she would cross with her marriage to Mr. Darcy. She made an effort to compose herself as the women were shown into a sitting room where Darcy and an older woman were waiting to receive them. He wasted no time in making the introductions.

"Ladies, may I present my aunt, Lady Victoria Arnold."

"It is an honour to meet you, Lady Victoria," Elizabeth said when she rose from her curtsey. "Mr. Darcy has spoken often of you and your family, and with great affection."

“Has he now?” Lady Victoria motioned for Elizabeth to sit beside her.

“He has nothing but the highest respect for you.”

“He was always an obliging boy. But he is a boy no longer and soon to be wed. Darcy told me that I have been commissioned to take you shopping tomorrow.”

“I am grateful for your consideration, my Lady.

“I look forward to getting better acquainted with my future niece.”

Lady Victoria spent a few more minutes conversing with the rest of the party, then took her leave.

Darcy summoned his housekeeper, Mrs. Thomas, to accompany them on a tour of the house. The size and sheer number of rooms, the beauty and grace of the furnishings, all were striking. Netherfield was a fine country residence, but Darcy House was all that was sophistication and elegance without ostentation. Several times, Jane gave Elizabeth a little look, concerned for her sister’s equanimity. Elizabeth remained outwardly serene, but inwardly, she wondered at her ability to be mistress of such a household. Darcy House was enormous, but she knew that Pemberley was even larger. Would she be successful in managing such an immense estate? She communicated her anxiety to Jane with a lift of her eyebrows and a slight tip of her head. Jane gave a small nod in acknowledgment.

Mrs. Gardiner, although evidently impressed, was true to her own good sense. She asked intelligent questions about several of the more interesting architectural features, and was her usual consummate example of breeding and fine manners. Mrs. Bennet was her usual consummate example, but less of fine manners than of unrestrained sensibility. She was initially so much in awe of the house and of her daughter’s future aunt that she had, for the most part, remained mercifully silent. However, as the tour progressed, the grandeur of the place where her daughter would soon preside as mistress unleashed her normal exuberant self. If Darcy was offended by his bride’s mother’s exaltations, Elizabeth could not fault him; for all the earlier restraint, her mother was her mother still. Elizabeth loved all her family, but she was not blind to their faults and the predisposition of some to unseemly behaviour.

Finally, the party arrived at the family wing and the mistress’ chambers. They were delightful, if not a bit dated.

Darcy pulled Elizabeth away from the others. “How do you like your rooms?”

“Most pleasant. I will be comfortable here.”

“It is yours to do with as you please. It is exactly as my mother left it.”

“Exactly?”

“Perhaps ‘exactly’ is not the proper word, but nothing has been changed since her passing. My father wished it to remain as it was.”

“And you continued to honour his request.”

“I suppose I thought I would leave it to the next mistress to decide.”

“Did this extend to your own quarters?”

“No, I could not stay in them as they were. Too many memories of the former inhabitant. I had my rooms redecorated. Do not feel that you need to retain these unaltered.”

“I admit that the style is not exactly to my taste, but I am in no rush to redecorate for the sake of change itself. I have quite enough to hold my attention in the immediate future.”

“Very well. But you will promise to address this at a later date.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You may depend upon it! I am not overly fond of certain colours that now adorn the walls.”

“Then I shall have them changed at once.”

“Fitzwilliam.” Elizabeth paused before proceeding further, afraid that her mother or aunt had heard her use his Christian name. “All in good time. In general, the accommodations are delightful, and I can certainly wait until I have time to devote my attention to it.”

“Elizabeth.” Darcy leaned a little closer. “I have a confession to make.”

“A confession?”

“I never liked the colours my mother chose, either.”

“Then why have you not changed them?”

“I have told you. I wished to leave it for the next inhabitant of the suite.”

“In that case, perhaps I shall give it my earliest attention. Would that please you?”

“Most definitely. When we are in Town after the wedding, we can look at fabrics and such.”

“A reasonable plan of action.” Elizabeth moved away from him. “But I think the others grow weary of our private conversation.”

“I have monopolized you long enough. Let us have tea before you must return to the Gardiners’.”

Lady Victoria arrived at Gracechurch Street the next morning to collect Elizabeth and Jane for a day of shopping. The previous day’s brief meeting had done nothing to discredit Elizabeth in the older woman’s eyes, but it had not caused her to bestow her

blessing, either. If Elizabeth was intimidated by the prospect of spending the day in the company of the sole Darcy relation who did not already disapprove of her, she did her best not to show it. Some credit must be given, she admitted, to Jane's calming presence; her older sister always was a good influence on her.

The three ladies were deposited in front of Lady Victoria's favourite modiste. Elizabeth had never shopped in this particular street, as she knew such places were beyond her family's means. But she was to be a Darcy, and Fitzwilliam had pledged to supplement Elizabeth's funds to enable her to dress like a Darcy. For the first time in her life, her choices would be guided by the dictates of fashion, not the dictates of prudence and economy. She was determined to relax, attend to the task at hand, and enjoy herself.

Once settled in a comfortable private room, designs and sketches were produced for the ladies' perusal. Elizabeth and Jane had similar tastes in clothing, but this did not preclude Elizabeth from asking her soon-to-be aunt's advice.

"Lady Victoria, I know Mr. Darcy wishes that I choose gowns appropriate for an evening out, but I am afraid my country upbringing does not serve me well here. I have little knowledge of what is now fashionable in Town. Perhaps you would help me choose suitable styles for such gowns?"

"A reasonable request." Picking up several sketches, Lady Victoria calmly handed them to Elizabeth. "I think you will find that these designs are the height of current fashion."

Elizabeth shared them with Jane and noted the daring cuts. "I have seen something similar in the fashion magazines. These are indeed beautiful, but I believe they require considerable discernment when selecting the appropriate material. Here again, my Lady, your advice would be both invaluable and welcome."

There now, I have done it. I have asked for her assistance in the most respectful way I know. The next move is hers.

Lady Victoria's eyes revealed nothing as she regarded Elizabeth for a moment; she nodded, called for their things, and escorted the sisters to the elegant establishment of a respected silk mercer where some of the most beautiful fabrics Elizabeth and Jane had ever seen were being brought out for approval. Lady Victoria made subtle suggestions; Elizabeth quickly understood and was able to request the most suitable materials. Jane's knowledge of her sister's preferences was a perfect complement to the older woman's knowledge of fashion's tastes. In less time than she

would have thought possible, Elizabeth had selected the patterns and materials for nearly a dozen of the many exquisite gowns required by the woman who would become Mrs. Darcy.

Such taxing endeavours required tea. Lady Victoria suggested a shop just down the street and they decided it was not too far to walk. Seated with tea and cake, her ladyship began to question Elizabeth.

"My nephew has told you of his desire to have you presented at Court after your marriage."

"He has spoken of this." Elizabeth's voice held little pleasure.

"You do not wish to do so?"

"My wishes are irrelevant. I accept that it is expected of the wife of Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and if my husband desires it, I will submit to it. I understand his reasoning well enough. He thinks of the future and of our children. It is for him and for them that I would do this, no matter how little pleasure I may find in the idea."

"So you would rather not make your curtsy?"

"Lady Victoria, I do not find validation of my worth as an individual in the rituals of the privileged. Neither do I scorn the honour. I simply do not require it for my own happiness."

A smile tugged at the corners of the older woman's mouth. "Well said, Miss Elizabeth, well said." Lady Victoria took another sip of tea, then addressed Jane. "Your sister will miss you, I think, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth noted the change in Lady Victoria's tone and expression and was relieved to discover that Darcy's aunt did not seem to hold her in derision. She still was unsure how the lady felt about her, but Elizabeth began to hope they could, eventually, share the kind of camaraderie that she had with her Aunt Gardiner. They chatted for a while longer and then continued on the ever-expanding mission to clothe Elizabeth as befitted her future station in life.

Later that evening, Darcy called upon his aunt at the Arnold residence.

"Your Elizabeth is neither conceited nor too vain."

"Too vain?"

"All women are somewhat vain, Darcy. A worthy woman does not allow her vanity to overrule her good sense."

"You approve of her, then?"

"At this time, I do not *disapprove*. She seems a clever, witty, unpretentious woman. You could have done much worse, even among the *ton*. However, she

has much to learn, and you will spend a small fortune just to see her suitably attired.”

“I have foreseen this. Is it your intention to help Elizabeth spend my money thusly?”

“She will need someone to help her. You would only be in the way.”

Darcy smiled at his aunt’s teasing; he knew it to be a sign of her growing respect for his intended bride.

“You have taken it upon yourself to see her clothed as befits her station. Are you also willing to assist her preparations for the forthcoming season and her presentation at St James’s?”

“Will you be in Town much before then?”

“No. Only a few weeks, at most, before April.”

“That could present a problem. When would I be able to call?”

“I see your point. This is why I wish to invite you to Pemberley, if Michael and Helen can bear to let you come.”

“I think my son and his wife could be persuaded to part with me.” Lady Victoria rolled her eyes. “Poor Helen. I think she has had the most difficult time of us all since my husband’s death. I love her dearly, but I sometimes wish she would exert herself more as the mistress of the house that she now is.”

“She shows character in deferring to you.”

“Think of it as you may. Oh, I appreciate her concern for my feelings, but you mistake me. She needs to grow into her role, and sometimes I think my presence hinders her.”

“All the more reason to come to Pemberley.”

“Have you considered that I might do the same to your wife?”

“Miss Bennet is not Helen.”

“For your sake, I hope not. You need a wife to challenge you.”

Darcy smiled. “I agree. Please come to Pemberley.”

“Please speak with Miss Bennet.”

“I will, although I am certain Elizabeth will agree that you are indispensable. If that is not enough, I will tell your son that I am abducting his mother, and he need not bother trying to get you back.”

Lady Victoria laughed. “You are a Fitzwilliam – *much* too accustomed to getting your own way. Speak to Miss Bennet; if she agrees, I will come.”

Chapter Six

The following Monday found Darcy once again on the road to Hertfordshire, this time sharing his coach and the journey with Bingley, both travelling with the Bennet coach back to Netherfield and Longbourn. The friends had lapsed into a comfortable silence not long after leaving the outskirts of the great city. Of Bingley's thoughts he knew not; for his own part, Darcy was quietly reviewing the experiences of the previous week.

He had dined three times with Elizabeth's family at Gracechurch Street and had to admit that the Gardiners were very respectable people. Still, he found it difficult to reconcile how a man of such good manners, taste, and sensibility as Mr. Gardiner could have as a sister a woman of so little sense or decorum as Mrs. Bennet. Then again, the same could be said of Elizabeth and Jane Bennet in comparison to their younger sisters. Time spent with certain members of his prospective family only confirmed both his belief that Elizabeth had the grace and poise to adapt to her new position, and his relief that Hertfordshire was a long two-day's journey from Derbyshire.

However, he and Elizabeth would be in Town, only half a day's journey from Longbourn, for the many months of the season. Mrs. Bennet would most certainly expect an invitation to visit them in London, and he was equally certain that she would insist on bringing her younger daughters. If no invitations were forthcoming, curiosity – or worse, matchmaking madness – might even lead her to arrive unannounced. She had dropped too many less-than-subtle hints that she expected her daughter's marriage to put Elizabeth's sisters in the path of rich men, in effect making Darcy responsible for finding them wealthy husbands. The very thought of introducing the silly Kitty and Lydia to Society, neither of whom had the faintest sense of propriety, was too awful to consider.

Thus, temporarily pre-empting his future mother-in-law became very appealing. Darcy reasoned that if he hosted a dinner at his townhouse for the three Bennet ladies now in London along with their Gardiner relations, he could more easily justify a lack of an invitation for his new relations soon after the wedding. As for the issue of the younger Bennet girls, he would make known to Mrs. Bennet that this first season was for Mrs. Darcy, and Mrs. Darcy alone.

Pleased with his scheme, he asked Lady Victoria to act as his hostess for the dinner; she was happy to offer her assistance and take advantage of another opportunity to observe Elizabeth.

The Gracechurch Street party arrived for the dinner just slightly more than fashionably late. Darcy quickly saw that Elizabeth was annoyed and tentatively concluded that Mrs. Bennet had orchestrated the delay. Elizabeth's apologies for their tardiness seemed to confirm his suspicions.

"Do not concern yourself," Darcy said to Elizabeth with a wave of his hand. "You are here now, and we still have nearly half an hour before dinner is served."

"Thank you for your understanding. Please extend my apologies to Lady Victoria. Mama was ... inconveniently delayed."

Elizabeth tried very hard to not roll her eyes, but was not entirely successful, despite her evident concern that they had offended Darcy's aunt. Darcy quietly reassured her, then deftly changed the subject.

"Has your time in Town been sufficient for your needs?"

"For now, yes."

"We will return here for a short time after the wedding and then again before the season. We can address your remaining requirements at that time."

"You are quite the fashion authority, Mr. Darcy. First the décor of my chambers, and now the adornment of my person. Is there anything else you wish to redecorate?"

Darcy's eyes sparked in amusement. He admired Elizabeth's ability to throw off her earlier agitation and not allow it to interfere with her present mood.

"Not at this time. However, when we are married, I retain the right to make further suggestions. You must allow that I need time to discover your secrets."

"You believe me a mystery?"

"All women are mysteries. Any prudent man will admit that."

"I believe I should add sensible to the list of your qualities."

They returned their attention to the others, and the rest of the evening was, on the whole, pleasant for all.

Lady Victoria stayed on after the other guests had departed, knowing that her nephew would wish to hear her appraisal. They sat beside the fire in the library, conversing and sipping their tea. Not wanting to over-tire his older relative by detaining her much longer, Darcy quickly moved the conversation to the events of the night.

"Tell me your opinion of the evening."

“Your Elizabeth grows in my estimation. She handled herself well tonight, considering the situation.” Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Come now, you know to what I am referring. I still cannot believe that you picked Miss Bennet knowing that you would be gaining such a mother-in-law. She is just like my brother’s wife!”

“I will not tell the Earl you said that.”

“I have told him much the same to his face. Harriet Bennet and Alice Fitzwilliam could be sisters as far as temperament.”

“I had noticed. It was another reason I could not summarily dismiss Elizabeth as a potential bride. She is adept at dealing with her mother. I reasoned that this experience would serve her well when in company with certain of my family and with the *ton*. Having a foolish wife has not harmed my uncle’s standing in society.”

“Perhaps not, but a title excuses more grievous faults than having a silly wife.”

“True, but the Darcy name and what it represents has some cachet. I have every confidence that my future wife will be a success, despite her relations. It is unlikely that society will be greatly exposed to Mrs. Bennet and I will see – with your help – that Elizabeth has first established herself as Mrs. Darcy before introducing her mother to any of our society.”

“I begin to suspect that your deliberations in considering whether to offer marriage were much more thorough than anyone knows.” Again Darcy raised his eyebrow. “You have made your point,” the lady conceded. “I am not implying that I have fallen under some spell cast by Miss Bennet. However, all I have learned of her so far is in her favour.”

“That is all I ever asked.”

A heavy sigh from across the carriage brought Darcy back to the present.

“What can elicit such from you, Bingley?”

“What?”

“All the lovesick noises you are making lead me to believe that you would prefer a different companion in this coach.”

“Sometimes you are insufferable. Please tell me you would not prefer that Miss Elizabeth were here in my place.”

“Certainly, but then she would be Mrs. Darcy, and we would be heading *away* from Longbourn.”

“In two more weeks you shall. I envy you.”

“What of your Miss Bennet? Just what are your intentions towards her? As if I need to ask.”

“Ha! I see that you will enjoy being the elder brother. And no, you should not need to ask. I will plead my suit very soon.”

“You have no doubt of its successful outcome?”

Bingley looked startled, then uneasy. “Has Miss Elizabeth confided ... do you have reason to think ...?”

“Calm yourself, I am toying with you. Despite the serenity of her countenance, no one who knows her could doubt that Miss Bennet is devoted to you. And as I have told you many times, she is a lovely woman. I am pleased to call her sister ... and will be honoured to call you brother.”

Bingley’s relief was palpable. “Thank you for that. I also am honoured at the prospect of becoming your brother, despite your ill-conceived sense of humour, and Miss Elizabeth will be a welcome addition and delightful contrast to my current coterie of sisters. I assure you that I will speak to Miss Bennet soon. In the meantime, enjoy all the attention, old man.”

“I gladly bequeath to you all the joy of Mrs. Bennet’s attentions and ministrations. Your time will come, after your betrothal. At least in returning to Netherfield I have a better chance of seeing you before my own wedding.”

Bingley coloured at Darcy’s pronouncement and tried to defend himself. “I had things to do while in London.”

“Such as calling on Miss Bennet?”

“Among others, yes.”

“I think you spent more time at the Gardiners’ than anywhere else.”

“Do not take offence, but the company there was much easier on the eyes.”

The friends laughed in easy understanding, and the rest of the journey was spent in pleasant and companionable conversation.

As Christmas drew near, the Hertfordshire weather turned very cold. The ground was white with frost, the vegetation brown and dormant, the skies grey and often threatening snow. Such conditions encouraged all but the hardiest of outdoor enthusiasts to remain comfortably warm indoors. Elizabeth was one of the few who nevertheless ventured forth, but whether she did so because of her love of walking or from a desire to seek sanctuary from the endless preparations for her wedding was debatable. Whatever their motivation, Elizabeth’s rambles offered Darcy a rare opportunity to spend time with her alone.

“Elizabeth!” Darcy called in greeting as he came towards her on his horse.

“Fitzwilliam! I see you have found me yet again.”

“You did conveniently mention that this is your favourite route in such weather.”

“I am delighted to discover that you are a man who can take a hint. Another addition to the ever-growing list of qualities that I find admirable in you.”

“Someday you must share your list with me.”

Darcy dismounted from his horse and offered his arm to Elizabeth. She gladly accepted, and the two continued on together.

“Are the arrangements I proposed for our time after the wedding agreeable to you?” Darcy asked.

“Yes, indeed they are. Spending a few days in Town then time alone in Brighton is an excellent idea. And I must admit I am eager to see Pemberley. I have heard so much about it, and I am looking forward to becoming settled in my new home.”

“Lady Victoria has agreed to visit us at Pemberley. I hope you are not now displeased with the idea.”

“No, not at all.”

“Elizabeth, I would not have asked her to come unless I believed it important. You will need her advice as you prepare for the season.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth sighed, “I know.”

“This troubles you?”

Elizabeth walked several more paces before answering. “Sometimes I wonder why you chose me. You should be marrying a woman who was brought up to fill such a position.”

Darcy stopped and turned to face Elizabeth. After glancing around to confirm their privacy, he touched his lips to hers. What began as a soft, reassuring kiss unexpectedly deepened as Elizabeth responded to him. Without thought they moved into an embrace, each one’s hands, at the same time both cautious and bold, exploring the unknown territory of a caress.

The sound of a dog barking somewhere in the distance snapped Darcy from his stupor, and he slowly and ever so gently ended the passionate interlude. Neither wanted the sensations of the moment to end; Elizabeth allowed him to pull her into an embrace, laying her head against his chest while her breathing calmed. She was amazed at how much she needed the reassurance of his touch.

The first time he kissed her, on the morning he proposed, had opened a door to feelings Elizabeth had never experienced; the initial awakenings of desire were born that day. Her body was that of a woman, but until that moment, she had not known what it meant to *feel* like a woman. Until that moment, so

many things that had been puzzling or mysterious could finally be understood.

To be attracted to a man was one thing; to feel a man’s body under one’s fingertips was another thing entirely.

“Elizabeth, each day I grow more and more convinced that you are the best woman for me, and I look forward to taking you as my wife. I know that you will always make me proud.”

“I hope I will, Fitzwilliam.”

“Where is the confident Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“She is getting married, sir. In less than a fortnight. And if she tells you she is not apprehensive, she is lying.”

“All brides are apprehensive, or so I have been told.”

“And bridegrooms? Are they apprehensive, too?”

“Yes, if they are honest with themselves. Marriage is never to be entered into lightly. Men wonder what the future holds as much as their brides do.”

Elizabeth looked up at Darcy.

“Thank you, Fitzwilliam,” she said quietly. They shared one final, brief kiss before Elizabeth, smiling and strangely content, stepped out of his embrace, took his hand, and turned to walk down the path back to Longbourn.

The remaining days before Christmas were filled with activity. There were the usual round of holiday visits, dinners, and parties to attend, supplemented this year by festivities marking the forthcoming marriage. Darcy’s presence as the grand prize was essential, and he bore it with admirable calmness. He called at Longbourn every day, usually accompanied by Bingley, who was happy to leave his sullen sister at Netherfield. Caroline had little inclination to visit the home of her victorious rival; she often cited the cold as a reason to remain behind with her sister, when she bothered to make any excuse at all.

Darcy was surprised to discover that he was looking forward to the Christmas celebrations. It had been a very long time since Pemberley was as merry as Longbourn. Last year, the first without Georgiana, had been too full of sorrow and regret and the years after his mother’s and then father’s deaths were far from memorable. He began to envision future holidays surrounded by a large family of his own; he hoped Elizabeth would consent to more children than the requisite “heir and a spare.”

He recalled her surprise at the delight he took in the Gardiners’ offspring. He had always been fond of children and could not understand why people always

seemed so astonished by his evident enjoyment of them. Was not everyone a child before they grew to adulthood? Had they forgotten the wonder of discovery and the refreshing honesty found in the very young? Even Wickham had been a carefree boy at one time. His vicious tendencies displayed only as he grew older.

Darcy saw the pleasure Elizabeth took in the company of her family. Yes, he noticed when she was annoyed – and when she was embarrassed – but she did not allow such things to interfere with her enjoyment of her final Christmas with her sisters and parents. Indeed, he had discerned a few wistful looks on her face. She would miss Longbourn, of that he had no doubt. Perhaps, one day, they would return to Hertfordshire for the holiday. He could not imagine inviting the Bennets to Pemberley for Christmas; the chance of being indefinitely snowed in with them was more than he could contemplate. Summer was a much better option; estate business would provide an excuse whenever he needed a respite from his in-laws.

The Gardiners had delayed their arrival until the day before Christmas, but their stay in Hertfordshire would extend until after the wedding. Mr. Bennet seemed relieved to have another male residing in the house and almost as soon as was polite, whisked Mr. Gardiner away to his library, asking Darcy to join them. Once safely ensconced, Mr. Bennet poured each a glass of port.

“You wasted little time,” Mr. Gardiner teased his brother.

“Before you ask, Brother, the wedding preparations are progressing nicely. In one week’s time, this man,” Mr. Bennet raised his glass to Darcy, “will marry my very deserving second daughter, robbing me forever of the most sensible companion in this house.”

“You have covered a variety of subjects in one very short speech,” quipped Mr. Gardiner as he quaffed his port.

“You have not been subjected to my wife lately.”

“On the contrary, sir, you recently allowed me the pleasure of hosting my sister for more than a week.”

“Touché!” Mr. Bennet conceded with a smile. “I trust your journey was uneventful?”

“Of course. We made excellent time, no matter what my sister may believe. The children have been looking forward to the visit and the wedding.”

“Back to the wedding so quickly! If you must remind me of my coming doom perhaps you have some advice for this young man.”

Mr. Gardiner made a great show of considering his words. He had enjoyed getting to know the gentleman from Derbyshire. Darcy was always civil and seemed to be taking pains to get acquainted with the family, if only for Elizabeth’s sake. He had not detected love on either Darcy’s or Elizabeth’s part, but he did see fondness and respect between them. Perhaps this was the right time for a particular piece of advice.

“Mr. Darcy, the best advice I received before I married came from my late father-in-law. He told me to heed the words from scripture, ‘Do not let the sun go down on your anger.’ He said that was especially true in marriage. It is inevitable that you will have disagreements, especially with such a strong-willed individual as Elizabeth. If you allow yourself to harbour anger, it will fester over time and turn to resentment. It is better to separate, contemplate the situation, then attempt to resolve your differences with all due haste. The longer an issue remains unresolved, the more it is able to hurt both of you deeply, and the longer it will take to overcome.”

Darcy instantly saw the wisdom in Mr. Gardiner’s words. “Thank you, sir. I shall remember your words and your kindness in sharing them.”

Darcy awoke very early on Christmas morning. It was only six o’clock and the sun would not rise for more than two hours. He tried to go back to sleep, but to no avail. Finally, frustrated, he got out of bed and pulled on his heavy robe, then stoked the fire to warm the room. That task accomplished, he lit a candle and sat at his writing desk. In the years since becoming Master of Pemberley, he had developed the habit of writing letters to his departed father. Putting his thoughts onto paper thusly always seemed to help him through the loneliness.

Christmas Morning, 1811

Dear Father,

Another Christmas has come, the fifth without you, and once again I find myself awake too early and with pen in hand.

This will be my second Christmas alone, but in reality our family began to leave me when Mother passed on. You, Georgiana, and I always tried to celebrate the day together and with some success, although we both know that Christmas was never the same without Mother. Then five years ago, you left Georgiana and me to face the

world alone. It was so very difficult. How could I ever hope to replace you? Andrew and I tried to be the best guardians for Georgiana, and I fancy that we were tolerable. She certainly lacked for nothing – with the exception of the love of a parent. Only you and Mother could ever truly give her that.

In my previous letters, I have told you how difficult the next four Christmases were for us. I think that on this day we always felt the loss of you most keenly. Then the accident last autumn robbed me of the last of our family. I have told you of my tears, my melancholy, and my emptiness. In all my life I never felt so insignificant as I did one year ago today. Who was this Fitzwilliam Darcy? Would he, could he, ever find meaning and contentment again? No one I held dear remained. Only my tenants were left for me to look after. Much is still the same today; I have no one to care for. But that will change in five days.

Father, I am to be married. I marry a woman of little fortune, fewer connections, but great character. The Earl and his wife are displeased. Lady Catherine is furious. Only Lady Victoria has given my future wife any notice. You should know your sister-in-law well enough to appreciate that she would be the only one to afford my Elizabeth the honest opportunity to win her approval. My bride-to-be is Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, Hertfordshire. Her father is a gentleman of an insignificant estate. He sends his daughters to seek husbands armed only with their charms and minuscule dowries, and yet his Elizabeth has managed to secure me. How could I choose such a woman, you may ask? An excellent question.

Father, if you had met Elizabeth and knew nothing of her background, if she had an earl for a grandfather and twenty thousand pounds to her name, you would have no hesitation in approving of her as my wife. Indeed, she would have been a prize had she been launched in society with a season in Town. She is intelligent, witty, handsome, full of life and good health. She is exactly the kind of woman I have always thought would suit me. Because the money designated for Georgiana will remain with the estate, I did not feel the need to replace it with a well-dowered bride. I am willing to overlook Elizabeth's lack of

connections when I consider how little I care to be in society. And while Elizabeth has not grown up in the best of environments to prepare her to be the next mistress of Pemberley, the simple fact that she has overcome these obstacles to become a dignified young lady speaks most eloquently of the quality of her character, her sense of decorum, and her abilities.

You might ask if I love her. I will answer that I do not. I esteem and respect her. I am fond of her. I desire her. But my heart has not, and will not, be touched. On this I am firmly resolved. Romantic love is one thing; the reality of living is another.

In Elizabeth I have found a companion with whom I can share my life. Next Christmas, I will not be alone. Elizabeth, my wife, will be with me. Perhaps I will be content enough not to feel compelled to write to you again. Perhaps I will have news of an expected heir to Pemberley, if God is generous. Perhaps is a word of many possibilities.

Father, at long last I understand how life must have been for you after Mother died. How did you go on for so long without a confidant? I can do so no longer. I can no longer be alone. I hope you will be happy for me, Father, and I pray that I have not disappointed you with my choice. I wish you were still here so that I could gain your blessing. Most of all, I want to find peace and rest on this the day of the Saviour's birth.

Until next time, whenever that may be, I remain your loving son,

Fitzwilliam

Darcy reread the letter, sealed and addressed it, then laid it on the desk. A few minutes later, he picked it up again and stood in front of the fireplace in deep contemplation. He ran his fingers over the dried ink that spelled out his father's name. Then he did what he had done with all the letters he had written to his deceased father. He tossed it into the flames ... and walked away.

Darcy was the first down for breakfast. He had nearly finished when Bingley bounded into the room.

“Happy Christmas, Darcy!”

“Happy Christmas, my friend. You appear to be in decidedly good humour this morning.”

“It is a beautiful day, and I look forward to attending church.”

“I have no doubt why,” Darcy teased. “I hope the others appear soon. You may be late, but I shall not be.”

“You will go with the Bennets back to Longbourn?”

“Yes, and spend the afternoon there”

“I hope you have a pleasant time.”

“You wish you were going in my place; admit it man!”

“And miss spending the day with my family? No, well, yes, I am a bit envious.”

“If you ceased dallying around ...”

“Darcy, all in good time. You just concentrate on getting yourself to the altar, and I will do the same for myself.”

“I still do not understand why you are waiting.” Bingley refused to take the hint. “You are not going to tell me, are you?”

Bingley laughed. “Fine! I am waiting until after your marriage. I have rather enjoyed being able to court Miss Bennet with some degree of privacy. The wedding preparations have served as a distraction for ... certain members of the Bennet household.”

Darcy looked at his friend with a new measure of respect; Bingley was more astute than he realised.

Darcy decided to ride to the church for Christmas services and left behind an agitated Bingley. *Trust Caroline to be late to church.* He met the Bennets and Gardiners at the church door and offered his arm to escort Elizabeth inside.

“The next time we meet in this building will be for our wedding,” Darcy whispered as they walked to their pew.

“And when I head again in this direction, I shall be on the arm of my father,” Elizabeth whispered back.

“Ah yes, but I will have the pleasure of escorting you in the other.”

“Whether it will be a pleasure or a punishment is yet to be determined.”

“If marriage to a woman such as you is a punishment, then I am a very lucky man.”

“You have yet to see me at my worst. I am a fright when I first wake.”

“I most definitely look forward to testing that assertion.”

Elizabeth blushed and decided in the name of all things holy to desist with the present course of their conversation. When they were safely seated, she pulled out her prayer book.

“Did you bring yours?”

Darcy opened his coat and took out his well-worn copy.

“It is good to see you so well prepared.”

“I try.”

“Shhhh, it is time be quiet.”

After exchanging best wishes of the day, the Netherfield party returned home and Darcy accompanied the Bennets back to Longbourn. The Gardiner children were eager to open their presents, and after some good-humoured stalling by the adults, the young ones were at last given their gifts.

Darcy also had brought gifts for his new family: a brooch for each of Elizabeth’s sisters, a necklace for Mrs. Bennet that sent her into raptures, books for Mr. Bennet. To Mr. Gardiner he gave some fishing gear, and to Mrs. Gardiner an exquisite shawl. He had even remembered to bring toys for the Gardiner children.

The last gift he presented was Elizabeth’s and he watched as she opened a worn and faded box to reveal a pearl necklace that had belonged to his mother. Her eyes shone with gratitude and unshed tears; she knew he had given her something very special to him.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam! Thank you,” she said softly.

He smiled at her earnest delight. He had many memories of his mother wearing the necklace, and he always knew that someday the pearls would grace the neck of his wife. He had intended them as a wedding gift, but something had compelled him to give them to her today.

“When we are alone, you must tell me about these. I am certain there is a story,” Elizabeth whispered.

“How did you know?”

“The box is not new and shows the sign of frequent handling.”

“You are correct; they were my mother’s and my grandmother’s before her. I will tell you more. Later.”

“Lizzy, show us what you have!” demanded Mrs. Bennet.

“Allow me,” Darcy said as he put the pearls around Elizabeth’s neck.

“You see, Mr. Bennet! It is just as I said. What fine jewels Lizzy will have.”

Darcy chose to ignore Mrs. Bennet’s indiscreet remark, dwelling instead on the joy he felt from giving each of his gifts, and in particular his bride’s heartfelt appreciation of his mother’s heirloom. Elizabeth chose that moment to give her gift to him.

“I am almost afraid to give you this, after yours to me.”

“Nonsense. May I open it now?”

“Please do, before my courage falters.”

Darcy unwrapped the parcel to find several men’s handkerchiefs that Elizabeth had monogrammed, each one with a different design. The first had a simple D, the second an F and the third an interlocking F and E.

“I took the liberty of embroidering one with our initials. I hope it was not too presumptuous.”

“In five days we will be man and wife; of course, I do not mind. Thank you; these are lovely.”

“I picked out a more masculine motif for you. I thought it suited you.”

“That was very thoughtful – an admirable quality in a woman.” His smile vanquished any doubts of the suitability of her gift.

Darcy did not stay very late at Longbourn. He intended to ride his horse back to Netherfield and wanted to leave before he lost the light. Elizabeth walked him out.

“I had a pleasant time. Please thank your father again for inviting me.”

“I doubt you ever experienced anything quite like Christmas at Longbourn.”

“No, Pemberley has always been rather subdued. I think the lack of a large family party might best account for it. In a few years, God willing, we will have children of our own to spoil.”

“And to add noise. Thank you again for the pearls. They are exquisite.”

“Wear them for our wedding.”

“I can think of nothing more appropriate. Now, please be careful on your ride to Netherfield. It would not do for the bridegroom to get lost so soon before his nuptials.”

Seeing that they were truly alone, Darcy kissed Elizabeth.

“Goodnight, Elizabeth. I will call again tomorrow, and hopefully Bingley will join me.”

“Jane will like that. Goodnight, Fitzwilliam.”

Two days before the wedding, Elizabeth swept into her father’s book room and leaned against the door she closed behind her. Mr. Bennet was entertained by the flustered look on her face.

“Wedding plans too much for you today? Has your mother come up with yet another ancillary detail in need of immediate attention lest the ceremony be cancelled?”

Elizabeth answered him with a wry smile. “Indeed, sir, I have just discovered that there is an acute shortage of blue ribbon to complete the already overly elaborate decorations in the church. Mama is

convinced Mr. Darcy will be most displeased if she does not procure the desired final adornment.”

“I doubt your Mr. Darcy will care one jot about the decorations, if he notices them at all.”

“True enough.” Elizabeth sat down on the sofa opposite her father. “As much as I look forward to the end of the hectic schedule my mother has set up to the very day of my wedding, I believe I shall come to miss the ... activity of my sisters and mother once I am settled into my new residence.”

“And I shall miss your good sense. You are leaving me with your younger sisters, three of the silliest girls in the country, and only Jane to apply to for intelligent conversation – and I fear that she will not be with me much longer, either.”

Elizabeth reached for her father’s hand. “Poor Papa, how you shall suffer!”

“It is my own doing,” he sighed. “Perhaps I should make more of an effort with Mary. Of my three youngest offspring, she seems to possess the most redeeming qualities.”

“I shall miss you,” Elizabeth said softly, and kissed her father’s cheek.

For a moment, tears welled up in the eyes of both. She had always enjoyed a special relationship with her father, and had spent many hours with him and his beloved books – reading, talking, listening, learning. To him she owed the quality of her education and the sharpening of her intellect. They had debated the merits of authors and laughed at the follies of their neighbours. But now that time was at an end.

Mr. Bennet composed himself with a sigh, released his favourite’s hand and turned back to his book. For several minutes, Elizabeth watched him in silence, lost in thought.

“Does something trouble you, my dear?”

Startled, Elizabeth blushed and lowered her eyes. “Not exactly troubles me.”

“Something has captured your attention. Are you regretting your choice of life partner? One word from you and I shall not hesitate to speak to Mr. Darcy.”

“No, I have no regrets, but much to think upon. Some questions about marriage weigh heavily.”

Mr. Bennet squirmed in his seat.

“Has something your mother said frightened you?”

Elizabeth was momentarily confused. Once she realised what he was implying, she began to laugh.

“You mistake my meaning. Mama has taken time to inform me of some of my more intimate duties; that is not what troubles me.”

“I am afraid I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Elizabeth paused, then continued, “You know that my marriage is not a love match. I respect and admire Mr. Darcy, but I do not love him. I have developed deep affection for him since our engagement, but that is all. I believe he feels the same. I know that matches such as ours are common in his social sphere, but I wish to find fulfilment in my marriage, beyond even being merely a mother to his children. What must I do to maintain my husband’s regard and be a true partner to him in our life together?”

Mr. Bennet steepled his fingers and contemplated his daughter’s words. “My dear child, a love match is no guarantee of success in matrimony, and I daresay even some who marry entirely for the purpose of uniting great estates surprise themselves with their felicity. It is not the presence or absence of love that defines them; it is how well each can revere and appreciate the other over a lifetime.” A look of something very much like regret flitted over his face.

“You told me before I consented to your betrothal that Mr. Darcy had never been anything but respectful toward you and that you got along well together. Can I assume this still holds true? Have you learned anything about his character to cause you uneasiness?”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth replied, “quite the opposite. Each encounter seems to support my opinion that we are well matched in outlook and temperament. I am unhappy that most of his family is opposed to the match, but Mr. Darcy has assured me that is of little concern to him.”

“Yes, I agree, it seems to be the case. It also tells me that creating his own family is important to him and something that he will not jeopardize lightly. He has no immediate family, am I correct?”

“None closer than his aunts, uncle, and cousins, since the death of his parents and sister. His current heir is the grandson of his great-uncle.”

“Ah, I begin to understand his desire to marry quickly.”

“He has admitted as much. And I will admit to *you*, that I am uneasy about my ability to assume the role of mistress of Pemberley. It is a very great estate.”

“Nonsense, child. I daresay Mr. Darcy is a better judge of your suitability. He would not have offered for you had he significant reservations on that point.” Mr. Bennet looked closely at his daughter and saw that she was not yet convinced. “Elizabeth, you are an intelligent woman and I believe absolutely that you

can accomplish whatever you put your mind to. Mr. Darcy most certainly wishes for you to succeed, and will undoubtedly provide you with any instruction and guidance that you might require. You must not lose faith in your courage or your confidence. They are two of your finest qualities.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth smiled ruefully. “I must say that I am mortified to realise that I am having a fit of nerves that even Mama would envy.”

Mr. Bennet laughed. “The longer I am acquainted with Mr. Darcy, the more I believe that in essentials, you and he are indeed well-matched. That is a good and enviable foundation on which to build a life together.

“Make no mistake, momentous change is ahead. A new life it most certainly will be. You are too intelligent to imagine that your marriage will be always without conflict, without those small and large bumps in the road that make life both unpredictable and exhilarating. But if you and your husband are to be true companions in life, you must dedicate yourselves to the marriage; you must choose to walk together in honour and mutual regard, providing support and comfort in difficult times. The only alternative is to walk apart, living common but separate lives. I know you will make the right choice.”

“I shall try, if for no other reason than to justify your faith in me.”

“I should be happier if you justified your faith in yourself. But have pity on your poor father and do not forget me.”

“I could never forget my family.”

“Your family will be your husband, Elizabeth. Your loyalty *must* belong to him, first and foremost. Do not deceive yourself; you will leave your life in Hertfordshire far behind and become mistress of Pemberley and a great lady of society ... and I am prodigiously proud of you.”

The night before her wedding, Elizabeth lay awake, staring at the ceiling of her bedroom. It was very late, and the rest of the house was asleep. She had spoken once more with her mother and her aunt, received their sometimes-conflicting last advice, and then retired to her chambers. She and Jane then spent a long time talking, knowing that this was their final night together.

“Are you happy, Lizzy?”

“Yes, I believe I am.”

“I will miss you. I cannot believe the time has come for one of us to leave.”

“Dear Jane, I doubt very much that you will be at Longbourn this time next year. Mr. Bingley is quite

evidently devoted to you.” Jane blushed. “Tell me honestly, do you love him?”

“With all my heart.”

“Then all will be well. I am content to know that you, the most beautiful of form and face, will marry the man of her dreams.”

“He still must ask,” Jane said demurely.

“He will. And soon.”

“And you? Is Mr. Darcy the man of your dreams?”

Elizabeth looked down in her lap and was silent for several moments. “I could not have dreamed of a better match,” she finally said without lifting her head.

“You are evading the question. Is he the man you dreamt of marrying?”

“I think he is. I certainly hope so since I *am* marrying him in the morning.”

“Do be serious. I have never before questioned your judgment.” Jane raised her hand to forestall a protest from her sister. “We are not so poor, you know, or with so few prospects, that you must sacrifice every better feeling to worldly advantage.”

“Jane, I . . .”

Once again Jane stopped her. “I know what it is to love,” here Jane blushed, but bravely continued, “and because of that love, I want to spend my life as Mr. Bingley’s wife. But you have told me that your marriage will be more of the intellect than the heart. I must know, you must assure me, that you truly believe you will find happiness with Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth might have laughed to see her sister far more nervous on the eve of a wedding than the bride, had she not perceived the real concern beneath Jane’s agitation. She hastened to give Jane the assurances her sister sought, reiterating all the reasons she believed it was a good and proper match, and – when Jane still seemed unsatisfied – admitting that her affection for Mr. Darcy had grown during the weeks of their engagement. What she could *not* admit, even to Jane, were the sensations she felt when Darcy kissed her; the mere thought caused her to become fascinated by an errant thread in her bedclothes, thankful that the dim candlelight masked the colour rising to her cheeks.

Jane gently lifted Elizabeth’s chin and looked into her sister’s eyes; she saw what Elizabeth could not yet see.

“Answer me honestly. Do you love him?”

“I . . . I do not know.”

Still holding her younger sister’s gaze, Jane spoke with unusual deliberation. “Elizabeth, when you know, *tell* him.”

They settled under the covers and Jane quickly fell asleep. Elizabeth was less fortunate, her mind unsettled. Her sister rarely insisted that she do anything; the strength and emotion behind Jane’s request affected her greatly. *Was* she falling in love with Fitzwilliam? If she were, could she then be happy in marriage to a man who might never love her? Would Fitzwilliam welcome her love? And if he did not . . .?

Her mind would not allow her slumber, but she knew she needed rest. She had felt ill that evening, the thought of leaving all she knew very nearly overwhelming. She slipped out of bed, wrapped her robe around herself for warmth, and sat by the window. Frost had covered the edges of the panes, but she was able to see well enough though the central portions. She would miss the old estate, but she also admitted that she was excited. What an adventure was before her! There was a whole world beyond Hertfordshire and the little portion of Town she had seen, and tomorrow the door to that world, and a whole new life, would be opened for her. Her guide would be her friend – her husband – and there was no one she would rather have lead her than Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Chapter Seven

Not ten weeks ago, Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley were entirely ignorant of the existence of the other. Now, three days before the start of a new year, a bride walked down the aisle of her parish church to stand with her groom.

Bingley and Jane were in their places as bridesmaid and groomsman. The eyes of the congregation, fixed upon the bridal pair, betrayed more, perhaps, than their owners intended – triumph, love, envy, approval, regret, hope.

“...I, Elizabeth, take thee, Fitzwilliam, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to ... to love,” Elizabeth nearly faltered as an odd feeling overcame her. She had no time to consider it, so continued, “cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my troth.”

When Darcy slipped the wedding ring on her finger, Elizabeth was amazed at the finality of it. Her fate was sealed; she felt bonded to Darcy in a strange, new, everlasting way. She looked from their joined hands to his face. She saw him blink in surprise, and wondered what it was he saw on her features that unsettled him. The service continued, and their attention was drawn back to the words of the minister. The blessing was announced. It was done. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy found themselves accepting congratulations from family and friends.

Darcy had little family present: only Lady Victoria, her eldest son Michael Arnold, his wife Helen, and her youngest son, Joseph. None of the other family had condescended to attend. Darcy was disappointed but not surprised that his cousin, Colonel Andrew Fitzwilliam, was absent. Since the death of Georgiana, they had not seen each other much. The Colonel had his duties, and the one person who had kept them close was now gone. Darcy was sure the Earl had made it abundantly clear that he would not approve of his second born's attendance at an event of which he so vehemently disapproved. If Andrew did not defy his father's wishes, neither would his siblings. Darcy had not bothered to extend invitations to his more distant relations, none of whom he had seen since his father's death five years prior.

Elizabeth's family contingent was considerably larger: her parents and sisters, the Gardiners and their children, the Philipses, plus a few close friends from the neighbourhood, but only a very few.

“Mrs. Darcy, we should remove to Longbourn,” her husband said.

“It will be some time before I become accustomed to hearing myself called that. If I do not immediately respond, please do not automatically assume that I am ignoring you.”

Darcy laughed. “Come, wife, our wedding breakfast awaits. You know we cannot remain long if we are to make London tonight, and I for one am famished.”

Mrs. Bennet always kept an excellent table, and the breakfast was, by everyone's account, superb. Darcy was indeed intent on leaving early and had so informed Mr. Bennet.

As loath as he was to have his Lizzy leave, Mr. Bennet recognised good sense when he saw it – and that Elizabeth was no longer his.

Thus, all too soon for everyone except the bridegroom, the couple made their goodbyes. Darcy led his wife towards his aunt and cousins.

“Thank you so much for coming.”

“Of course, Darcy. It was a lovely wedding and breakfast. Mrs. Darcy, I will be certain to give my compliments to your mother.”

“We will call on you before we travel to Derbyshire,” Darcy told them. He spoke with his cousins while Elizabeth had a brief word with her new aunt.

“When should we expect you at Pemberley, your ladyship?”

“I shall give you a few weeks to acquaint yourself with the house. Perhaps some time in February? We can arrange a date before you travel to Derbyshire.”

“I confess I am eager for your advice on the season.”

“And your presentation at court. Fear not, we will have sufficient time to prepare you for that.”

Darcy returned his attention to Elizabeth. “It is time to take leave of your family.”

Elizabeth's farewells to Jane and her father were the most difficult. It was unimaginable that she would not be seeing them every day.

“Oh, Father, do not be sad.”

The master of Longbourn's eyes had grown misty as he embraced his second-born. “You must allow an old man to be sentimental on the day of his daughter's wedding.”

“Promise you will answer my letters?”

“I can safely say that I might.”

Elizabeth laughed. "I suppose I must be content with that." Leaning close so that no one else could hear, she said, "When I am settled, I shall invite you to come to us. It may not be until after the season, but I do hope to see you at Pemberley before the days of summer are completed."

"I understand, my child," he smiled, glancing quickly at his wife. "All in good time."

With one last, quick hug, Elizabeth released her father and went to Jane. Enfolded in each other's arms, neither wanted to be the one to let loose. Finally, Elizabeth realised they could not maintain their positions any longer and moved slightly away, but only enough to look at Jane's face.

"I will see you again soon."

"I know, Lizzy. But I feel so ..."

"Yes, I understand. I will miss you, too."

"You will write?"

"On that you may depend! I shall rely on you to keep me abreast of all the news. Of a certain anticipated event, I demand an express at the earliest possible moment," Elizabeth said with a smug look on her face, after a glimpse at Mr. Bingley.

"If."

"When, Jane, when?"

"Mr. Darcy has no idea what an incorrigible woman he has married."

"Do not be so quick to assume, Miss Bennet," came the reply in a decidedly masculine voice.

"Take good care of my sister, sir."

Darcy bowed to Jane, "You have my word." He turned to Elizabeth, "Are you ready?"

She nodded, afraid to speak lest the tears that threatened return.

Both were soon settled in the carriage. Elizabeth looked back, waving to her family and friends, as the horses slowly drew her away from her old life and into her new.

As soon as Longbourn was out of sight, Darcy moved to sit next to Elizabeth. He noticed that she was chilled, carefully covered them both with a rug, then pulled her close. "Are you warmer now?"

"Much, thank you." She snuggled against his shoulder.

Darcy kissed Elizabeth's hair. She was content to sit as she was, and Darcy seemed so inclined as well. After they had travelled a mile or two, she felt a little conversation would keep her from falling asleep. She asked him about the service.

"It was a little different from any other wedding I have attended."

"Yes, since this time, you were the one being married."

Elizabeth felt him smile. "That did make it a novel experience. Truthfully, I do not remember much of what was said."

"I certainly hope you remember your vows!"

"Of course, how could I forget? I doubt you will allow my memory to be faulty in that regard."

"You may count on that, Fitzwilliam."

"And you, Mrs. Darcy, what do you recall?"

"As little as you, I confess."

But that was not entirely true. She did recall one thing with absolute clarity: her reaction to her vows. She had not yet had time to contemplate its meaning. Soon though, she would need to understand what had happened. For now, she needed to talk to her husband about the forthcoming evening. It would not be a comfortable conversation, but not as painful as she felt. Elizabeth had awakened that morning to proof that even the best plans go awry.

Darcy continued, "Then I shall be allowed to claim ignorance, and you will not be able to refute it." Elizabeth forced a laugh. "Elizabeth, have I said something to offend you?"

"Not at all. My mind was wandering."

"I see." Darcy paused. "Will you tell me?"

Elizabeth sighed. It had to be done. But she couldn't look him in the face.

"Fitzwilliam, I ... I don't know how to tell you." She began to fidget. "I am concerned that you will be disappointed ..."

Darcy stiffened and sat upright, forcing Elizabeth to do the same.

"What is it?"

"When I awoke this morning ... Fitzwilliam, how knowledgeable are you in the ways of a woman?"

"I know that a woman ..." Comprehension dawned. "Are you trying to tell me that your courses have begun?"

Elizabeth was relieved that he had so easily understood her meaning.

"This morning. It was not expected. It came very early for me. I assume the stress of the wedding ... If you still wish ..."

"I thought women usually planned their wedding dates so that this would not occur. I am only surprised, that is all."

He was being gallant, but she could see that he was disappointed. Truth be told, so was she. "No more surprised than I. A rather inauspicious start to our married life. Fitzwilliam, I ..."

He gently placed a finger to her lips. "Elizabeth, hush. It was my desire that we marry so quickly. We

did not expect that it would begin this way, but nature evidently had other ideas. We have a lifetime ahead of us. If this is the worst we ever face, we would count ourselves lucky. Come, wife, let us be philosophical and consider the bright side.”

“There is a bright side?”

“We did marry very soon after we met. We both know that nothing improper occurred between us, but I suspect there will be speculation that we were forced into this marriage. A lack of an heir in less than nine months will stifle such gossip.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I suppose that is something, although it is the *only* good I can see. I have been anticipating our wedding night since you proposed. And kissed me.”

Darcy’s expression became more serious. He tucked a stray curl behind Elizabeth’s ear, then leaned in and kissed her.

“I cannot promise that an heir will not appear in nine months,” he said softly, “however, I intend to make every effort to see that it comes about, and I certainly have no plans of spending my wedding night in my own bed. May I come to you tonight?”

Elizabeth was relieved he was so understanding. “I have no wish to be alone tonight, either. You may come to me, my husband.”

She gave him a shy smile and tucked her head under his chin. Darcy sighed and pulled his wife more firmly to his chest. Safe within his embrace, she closed her eyes and thought of the pleasure his touch brought. With that delicious sensation in mind, Elizabeth Darcy fell asleep.

The light was almost gone when the carriage arrived at the Darcy townhouse. The servants had turned out in their finest to welcome their new mistress. After a few words of thanks, Darcy took Elizabeth to her chambers to refresh and change for dinner.

Elizabeth’s new maid was waiting for her. The choice of an appropriate attendant had caused a small disagreement between Elizabeth and Darcy. She wanted one of the young servants from Longbourn as her lady’s maid, more as a comfortable reminder of her old life than anything else, but Darcy was adamant that his wife have a French maid, as was fashionable. Each understood the other’s reasoning, but eventually Elizabeth came to appreciate that a country servant inexperienced in the ways of society would find it difficult to fulfil the demands of the position; she conceded. Mrs. Thomas selected a suitable young woman, who understood that the post was provisional, pending Mrs. Darcy’s approval.

Young Marie was nervous, Elizabeth could tell. *No more nervous than I*, she thought. Elizabeth spoke French well enough, but she decided to test the woman’s English.

“Marie, have you held this type of position before?”

“Oui, Madame. I was the maid for Miss Henrietta Wyatt, daughter of Sir James Wyatt,” she replied, with a decided accent.

“Mrs. Thomas told me that you are quite an expert seamstress.”

“Oui, Madame. Miss Wyatt regularly wished me to alter her gowns.”

Elizabeth studied the choice of gowns Marie had laid out for her. They were all appropriate for evening, which pleased Elizabeth. At least Marie knew that part of her duties.

“I also understand that you have no family in England.”

“Non, Madame. I came to this country three years ago after my father died.”

“Did you know much English before you came here?”

“Non, Madame. I have learned it since I arrived.”

“Marie, you speak exclusively in English, yet you use the French forms of yes and no?”

“Habit, Madame. My former mistress liked me to say ‘oui’ and ‘non.’ If you prefer, I will try to remember not to do that.”

“Marie, will you please say something to me in French.”

“Votre voyage à Londres a-t-il été agréable?”

Elizabeth did not initially respond, but creased her brow in concentration. “Please say something else.”

“Je vous propose la robe bleue. La couleur vous va très bien.”

“Thank you, please resume in English.”

“Perhaps the green gown, Madame?”

“Le voyage en voiture s’est achevé sans incidents.”

Marie was surprised at her response.

“I did not realise that you understood me before, Madame. I thought you might just want to hear me say something in French.”

“Yes, but only to determine if I could understand you. I have had few opportunities to use my French in conversation and was unsure of myself. Now that I know I can understand you, I ask that you please speak to me in English. However, if I address you in French, you are to answer me thus. There are times when I may wish to say something in front of another servant that I do not wish them to understand.”

“Oui ... Yes, Madame. I will remember.”

“Good, then I will wear the blue gown, as you suggested. Oh, Marie, I am in need of certain ... other items. They were sent ahead in my trunks which you have already unpacked.”

The maid raised an eyebrow, but said nothing and retrieved the desired things. Marie helped her undress, bathe, and don her garments. Next the maid was asked to do her hair. Elizabeth was curious what she would do.

“Do you wish me to style your hair the way it was, or do you wish something else?”

“For tonight, the same.”

Elizabeth was satisfied with the quick work the maid made of her hair. When she was ready, she sent Marie to inform her husband’s man that the mistress was ready to go downstairs. Darcy came at once to escort her to dinner.

The cook had gone to special lengths for the meal. Elizabeth was very appreciative of the efforts and asked that her thanks be extended to the cook and all who had prepared the meal. She noticed that Darcy appeared to approve of her decision to praise the servants.

“You have a very efficient staff, Fitzwilliam. They should be commended.”

“The fact that you chose to recognise their efforts does please me, and it will please them, as well. If you persist in this course, you will have a very loyal staff at your disposal.”

“It is obvious that they are loyal to you. I, on the other hand, have yet to earn their respect. I believe kindness and civility can go a long way towards that goal.”

“Hence, I am pleased. Now that the meal is over, shall we retire to the drawing room? Or would you prefer the music room, or perhaps the library?”

“The library, if you please. However, if you wish for me to play for you, I will oblige.”

Darcy stood and offered his hand to assist Elizabeth.

“Not tonight.” He pulled her up and tucked her arm into his. “Come, then.”

The couple spent a companionable hour in the library. Darcy showed Elizabeth how the volumes were organized and pointed out some of his favourites. They discussed a few of the books they had both read and Elizabeth chose a few to take to her rooms.

It was still fairly early when Darcy suggested they retire for the evening.

“I admit that I am tired. It has been a long day, and we did spend several hours in the carriage. You dozed, but I did not,” he confessed.

They walked up the stairs and stopped at Elizabeth’s door.

“Come to me in half an hour,” she said, and stepped over the threshold. Darcy watched her look out at him as she closed the door. He stood for a moment, shook his head, then walked to his own room.

Marie was waiting and had laid out a choice of nightgowns: Elizabeth’s most luxurious silk one and a more serviceable, warmer, cotton one. As much as she longed to don the silk garment, Elizabeth thought it would be unfair to torment her very understanding husband. She would save that surprise for several nights later.

“This one tonight, Marie. I will wear the other later in the week.”

“As you wish, Madame. May I assist you?”

The servant did her job efficiently and then took down Elizabeth’s hair to brush it out.

“Shall I leave it loose or plait it?”

“Loose, please. Thank you, Marie. You may go now. I will ring when I am ready for you in the morning.”

The maid curtsied, said “Goodnight, Mrs. Darcy,” and left the room.

Elizabeth was alone at last, but not for long. A few minutes later, she heard a knock on the door that connected her chambers with her husband’s.

“Come in, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy was dressed in what Elizabeth assumed was a nightshirt under his robe. He carried a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

“I thought we might make a small toast to the day of our marriage before going to sleep.”

“Thank you, Fitzwilliam. That is a delightful idea.”

He sat near her and poured each a glass.

“To the marriage of true minds. To you, Elizabeth, and to this day. Thank you for becoming my wife.”

Elizabeth was profoundly moved. She looked at him, knowing not what to say, as an unexpected feeling of happiness and contentment bubbled up within her. “Thank you, Fitzwilliam.”

They sat in companionable silence, staring into the flames, until at last Darcy spoke.

“Elizabeth, if you prefer that I return to my room, just ask and I will go.”

“No, Fitzwilliam, I would like you to be with me. That is, if you still wish it.”

Darcy gently took Elizabeth's hand and looked into her eyes. "Yes, I do."

They sat quietly holding hands for some time. Elizabeth felt herself becoming drowsy under the hypnotic spell of the dancing light of the fire and the effects of the drink. She shook her head and looked at her husband; his grip had relaxed and his chin had dropped along with his eyelids. She squeezed his hand and softly said his name.

"Fitzwilliam. Fitzwilliam. Should we not go to bed now?"

His eyes fluttered open, and he stretched his arms above his head.

"Forgive me for falling asleep, Elizabeth. It would be wise to sleep in the bed rather than these chairs. Not to mention much warmer in another few hours."

They walked to the bed. Darcy took off his robe. Elizabeth saw that he did, in fact, have on a nightshirt. And only a nightshirt. She looked at his bare legs and swallowed.

"Am I frightening you, my dear?"

"What?"

"Elizabeth, you are staring."

"Oh, I, uhm ..."

She hurriedly removed her robe and nearly dove under the covers.

"You *are* afraid of me." Elizabeth heard the amusement in his voice. He lay on the bed and pulled the covers over himself. They were together in the bed, but their bodies were not touching.

Elizabeth knew that this was decidedly *not* how her wedding night should have progressed. What would her mother think of her now? Her appreciation of the absurd exerted itself, and she had to stop herself from laughing out loud. She might have controlled herself had she not felt her husband start to shake. He was also trying not to laugh. Finally, neither could hold in their mirth, and they burst out laughing together.

"At least I know you find this as humorous as I do."

"Pathetic might be a more appropriate term," Elizabeth quipped

Darcy rolled onto his side facing his bride. "Turn on your side facing away from me, and move back towards me. I would like to fall asleep holding you." Elizabeth obeyed, and he put his arm over her waist. "This is much better." Darcy kissed her hair. "Goodnight, Elizabeth."

"Goodnight, Fitzwilliam."

Elizabeth awoke a few hours later. It was the unfamiliar sensation of an arm around her that had

roused her – well that, plus the soft snoring of her husband. She felt a great need to look at the man sharing her bed. Not wishing to lose the exquisite feel of his touch, she carefully turned towards him until she was lying on her side, looking him fully in the face.

By the dim light of the dying fire, she could just make out his features. He looked so different asleep, so much younger, so much more relaxed. She had not fully comprehended how very young Darcy had been when he inherited a vast estate to rule and a young sister to rear until he told her that he was but two-and-twenty at the time his father died, not much older than she was now. His demeanour often showed the weight of that burden.

Of all the people he could have chosen, it was she to whom he would reveal himself. She alone would see all sides of the man: the dutiful master of Pemberley, the loyal friend, the gentleman, the lonely man, the husband, and – eventually – the father. How had she not seen this so clearly before? As his wife, it was now her duty to see that his loneliness was a thing of the past. Had she not vowed that very thing to him before God and their families just that morning?

I, Elizabeth, take thee, Fitzwilliam, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my troth."

After she had accepted Darcy's proposal, Elizabeth had spent many hours contemplating the vows she would make to him. For her, they were a sacred covenant between her and her mate. She had analysed the familiar phrases word by word, to determine if, in good conscience, she could give each promise to him. There was only one word that gave her pause, one word she wondered if she could repeat with sincerity: *love*. Both Jane and her father, in his own way, had asked if she loved Darcy. She had answered both of them in the negative. She did not love him as she understood the romantic meaning of the word.

But during her contemplations, Elizabeth considered that there were many forms of love. She loved her parents and sisters. She loved her uncles and aunts. She loved her cousins. She loved her – now former – home, Longbourn. She loved to laugh.

Darcy had become, she realised, a friend whom she loved as surely as she loved her other close friends.

And so she had been at peace. She could recite her vows with honour and integrity. That was why she had been so surprised to stumble over that very word “love” when the time came to vow it. She had convinced herself that it meant one thing; as she lay in bed facing her husband, she was astonished to find that she meant something else. The love she actually vowed to give was not what she had expected to give.

What love did she mean? She gasped in surprise. When had it happened? Had standing at the altar before God and witnesses unleashed what was already there?

“I love you, Fitzwilliam,” she whispered almost without sound, almost as a test; and with perfect clarity, she understood that she meant it. Not as an altruistic proclamation of love for her fellow man; she loved him in the way a woman should love only her husband.

Elizabeth smiled. *Affection, indeed!* She wanted to stroke her husband’s face with her hand, capture his lips with her own, tell him of her devotion and love.

Before she acted upon the impulse, she stopped. It was too soon – for her and for him. She needed to meditate on this change in her feeling before she was ready to tell Fitzwilliam. And would he welcome this from her? He had never once intimated that he loved her. Thus, despite Jane’s plea to tell him, Elizabeth let him sleep. This was not the time for romantic declarations. He had not asked for her love; for now, that must be her guide.

Before she could continue her thoughts, Darcy stirred and tried to pull her closer to him. He must have sensed that they did not fit together as before, and his eyes flickered open.

“You are awake,” he murmured, “roll over.” Elizabeth did as she was bid. “Hmm, better. Go back ... to ... sleep ...”

A few moments later she heard him start to lightly snore again. Suppressing the urge to giggle, Elizabeth covered his hand with hers. It felt right that way. She relished his touch and considered how good it was that she was now his. With that, she fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

Elizabeth awoke to the unusual sensation of a finger running up and down her arm. Momentarily confused as to why Jane would do such a thing, she abruptly remembered that it was no longer her sister who shared her bed. Turning her head, she beheld her husband propped up on an arm looking at her.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to wake.”

“Good morning,” she said groggily.

“For a woman who professes to enjoy early morning constitutionals, you certainly slept later than I would have supposed.”

“I was under the impression that a bride was given the benefit of the doubt as to how late she could sleep.”

“Only when the groom awakens *after* she does. Did you sleep well?”

“Mmmm, yes. This is a very comfortable bed.” Elizabeth’s stomach rumbled.

“Is that a sign that we should get dressed and break our fast?” Darcy enquired.

Elizabeth laughed softly. “I think it is a good idea.” Darcy made no effort to move. “Fitzwilliam, I thought you said you wanted breakfast.”

“I did say that.” He rolled onto his back and put his hands behind his head. “Just as I was beginning to anticipate relaxing in bed for the rest of the morning.”

Seeing that he was not going to leave, Elizabeth was compelled to gain his attention.

“Fitzwilliam.”

“Yes?”

“You need to go to your chambers to dress, and I need my maid.”

“Why?”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “I need to refresh myself.”

“Oh ... Then I shall leave you. Let me ring for your maid. Shall I order extra water be made ready?”

“Yes, please, on both counts.”

Almost immediately after Darcy left, Marie entered Elizabeth’s chambers. Elizabeth guessed that the maid had been at the ready for her summons, since she, too, had anticipated Elizabeth’s needs and had already requested that water be prepared for her mistress’s use.

Refreshed and dressed, Elizabeth had a few minutes to herself before Darcy came to escort her

downstairs. She knew she needed time to reflect on the astonishing discovery of her altered feelings. There was a part of her that rejoiced in her newfound love; how much richer her life suddenly seemed! How could it be a bad thing to be in love with one’s husband? But another part of her – the dispassionate, logical Elizabeth who had accepted Darcy’s proposal – sounded a warning. Her romantic love for her husband was an entirely unexpected complication; it could directly affect her marriage. Darcy could be displeased, or even reject her love. It was not part of their agreement; their union was to be built on friendship and compatibility. If she told him of her feelings, would their friendship survive? Could she spend the rest of her life loving a man, being daily at his side, with no assurance that he would, or even could, reciprocate?

With such thoughts floating through her mind, she decided that, for now, it would be prudent to say nothing until she could better ascertain the potential ramifications to their relationship. To do that, she needed to know if Darcy had considered whether love might play a part in their marriage. She believed she understood her husband’s character in general, but admitted she knew little of him in the specific. She had time to become better acquainted with him and with her new situation – as his wife and in her love for him – before she would tell him how dear he had become. It was better that she understood what he thought and what she felt, so that when the time came, she would be better prepared to confess all – and to accept the consequences.

At breakfast, Elizabeth asked Darcy what he had planned for the day.

“I hoped that you would accompany me on an excursion this morning.”

“Where to?”

“I ordered something made for you. I wanted it to be delivered before the wedding, but it was not finished. However, a note came yesterday to say that it was ready for inspection.”

“What is it?”

“That, Mrs. Darcy, is a surprise.”

No matter how hard Elizabeth tried, she was unable to compel Darcy to reveal where they were bound. It was only when their carriage stopped at its destination that Darcy explained their errand.

“This is a furniture maker’s shop, one of the most fashionable in Town. Before I returned to Hertfordshire for the wedding, I commissioned a piece for you – and that is all I will tell you until we see it.”

Once inside, the Darcys were shown a large, exquisitely rendered writing desk. Elizabeth was delighted with its subtle and sophisticated lines.

“Do you like it?” Darcy asked, though there was little doubt of Elizabeth’s affirmation present in his voice.

“Yes, it is a lovely piece. Thank you.”

“I believe it will be perfect for your rooms.”

“I was thinking the same. You anticipated my tastes very well.”

“Good. Then I will have them proceed with the rest of the order.”

“You ordered more?”

“Yes, of course. You said that you wished to redecorate your rooms. I assumed you meant furnishings for your sitting room as well as your bedchamber. I noted which pieces seemed to delight you most when you toured the house and I considered what would compliment what we already have. The owner here is a much sought-after craftsman. I felt it important to initiate an order so your rooms would be complete when we return for the season. Indeed, part of my reason for bringing you here today is to finalize the selection of pieces for your sitting room.”

Elizabeth was not entirely certain she was pleased with her husband’s presumptions in proceeding without her participation. However, she did admit his tastes matched hers, and she would most likely have picked what he had, or at least something very similar. Deciding it was prudent to graciously accept his initiative on her behalf, she pushed her annoyance to the back of her mind, and with Darcy’s help, decided on the pieces to complete the order.

The skies were clear and the air brisk as they journeyed back to their townhouse. Inside the carriage, Darcy told Elizabeth of his plans for the next few days.

“I know we talked of going to Brighton on Thursday, but we will delay our departure until Monday.”

“Is there a reason for the change?”

To Elizabeth’s amazement, her husband appeared to be blushing. “I, err ... I had hoped that our first time together as husband and wife would be in our own house. You said you would be able to ... I believe a week is sufficient for that purpose?”

She knew she should take pity on her clearly disconcerted husband, but Elizabeth enjoyed watching his discomfort too much to rescue him just yet.

“Is a week’s time enough?”

“Enough time for what?” she asked, not quite innocently.

“Elizabeth, please!”

She laughed merrily. “Yes, unless this is the *second* time this week my body decides to be uncooperative.”

“Thank you. Are you finished teasing me?”

“For now, Fitzwilliam.”

He answered with a groan.

Once home, they retreated to the familiar setting of the library. She and Darcy had discussed the need to become better acquainted with each other during this less pressured time, and Elizabeth was determined to make the most of the few weeks they would have together in relative privacy.

“Fitzwilliam, will you tell me some of the memories you have of this room? I would like to know more of your past.”

“Hmmm. Let me see. A fond memory?”

“As you like.”

“I remember when I was a lad of about eleven. We were in Town for the season. I came in search of a book my father had spoken to me about the previous evening and discovered my mother sitting where you are now. She asked what I was looking for and then told me where to find it. When I had the book in hand, she invited me to sit with her while we both read.

“Of course, I was more than happy to accede. Before I knew it, my eyes grew heavy, and I lay down with my head in her lap. She would let me do that from time to time. I noticed a change in her, her belly was much larger than I remembered, and I asked her about it. That was when she told me she was with child. I do not think I have a happier memory of my mother than that day.”

Elizabeth looked affectionately at her husband. He was far away, lost in his thoughts.

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

Darcy gave her a small smile. “And what of you? Tell me, what memories does a library bring to mind?”

“A room like this will always remind me of my father. Other than our meals together, I think I saw my father most in the company of his books. What education we were given beyond the rudimentaries of reading, writing and mathematics, came at the direction of Papa. He encouraged the honest pursuit of knowledge, never discouraging my desire to learn.”

“He was your teacher, then?”

“More my advisor. He pointed out books he thought I might find beneficial, but he always left it to me to apply myself.” Elizabeth thought better of her statement. “No, that is not entirely true. He did teach me French. He decided the study of another language

required active participation on his part, if I were to learn how to speak it and not just to read it.”

“Do you know any other languages besides English and French?”

“I can muddle my way through some German and Italian, but I can hardly be described as a proficient.”

“Would you like to learn either better?”

“Yes, but I fear I have little time to properly apply myself to that study. Just learning to be your wife is more than enough of a challenge for me at present. After the season, perhaps?”

“I will secure masters for any subject you wish.”

“You are most generous. I thank you.” Elizabeth was touched by her husband’s solicitude, but was yet again amazed at how easily all things were settled by the very rich. She had vaguely understood that she would never want for anything as Darcy’s wife, but that understanding had not included the knowledge that whatever she desired could be hers as well, with little more thought than she had previously given to buying ribbons.

“It is nothing. You are Mrs. Darcy, after all.”

After dinner, they retired to the music room, where Elizabeth played for her husband.

“I can assure you that one thing I *will* do to prepare for the season is apply myself to practise!” Elizabeth exclaimed after a mistake-filled rendition of a Mozart sonata.

“I was prepared to censor the pianoforte, not the pianist. It must be a year since I last had it tuned.”

“You are being very gallant. While I will concede that the pianoforte is in need of some attention, that in no way excuses my failure to practise. I think it prudent that I forgo improving my German until I can better demonstrate on this instrument.”

“Very well,” Darcy laughed, “but I reserve the right to enjoy the fruits of your efforts as well as occasionally indulging myself by listening to your ‘creative’ fingerings.”

Elizabeth laughed back and began to play another piece, this time purposefully making mistakes.

Unable to hide his amusement and his reactions to the discordant notes, Darcy cried, “You have proven your point, madam.”

Elizabeth smiled and finished the song without error.

“Do you intend to often torment me like that?”

“Only when you provoke me.”

Darcy abruptly changed the subjects. “Elizabeth, tomorrow the decorators will bring fabrics for your rooms and the furniture you selected today.”

“So soon?”

“We will not be in Town long.”

“When did you arrange this? We have hardly been out of each other’s company.”

“Before the wedding, of course. You did tell me you wished to redecorate. Are you displeased?”

Elizabeth paused, willing her annoyance with his presumption to subside. “Not at all. I am only surprised that you took the trouble.”

“You will quickly discover that I am a man of action. Once I come to a decision, I waste little time. I asked you to marry me the day after I decided to do so.”

“I begin to comprehend that, sir. Still ...”

“Still?” There was a trace of annoyance in his voice.

“You are my husband and I recognise that you have authority over me. I ask only that on matters directly affecting me that you demonstrate your respect by asking my opinion on the subject *before* you make a decision.”

“Ordering furniture without your knowledge was not meant to demonstrate my newly granted position, Elizabeth. I only wanted to please you. I thought it would be a pleasant surprise.” Darcy seemed genuinely puzzled.

“Yes, in many ways it was.” Elizabeth paused, choosing her words carefully. She wanted her husband to understand. “It was very considerate of you to attend to my needs in this manner. Do not mistake me, Fitzwilliam, I very much approve of your choices and will be perfectly content with them in my rooms. Every day I reside in this house, I will see what we ordered this morning. I would have preferred to have a say in the original decision, as a matter of principle. Can you comprehend why something that affects me so intimately is *my* concern as well as yours?”

Darcy considered Elizabeth’s words. “I have answered to no one since my father died. Your request is reasonable, and I will consult you, as I am able. However, I cannot promise to always oblige you. Situations might arise that make it impractical or even impossible. The habit is deeply ingrained and will not be discarded overnight.”

“I understand, and I appreciate your assurances. I fully expect your memory will fail you from time to time, and I must learn to accept that, just as I must learn to accept many other things now that I am your wife.” Elizabeth smiled, to remove any sting that her words might imply. “I am, perhaps, as unaccustomed

to someone making decisions on my behalf, however benignly, as you are in having someone question yours.”

“Then tomorrow is acceptable for the decorators?”

“You do not give in easily, sir.” Elizabeth laughed. “I will do my best to graciously accept your arrangements for expediting the improvement of my chambers.”

On the last evening of the year, the Darcys marked the end of one year and the beginning of another with little fanfare. They sat, as usual, in the music room after dinner.

“At Longbourn tonight, Papa will gather all the household around the hearth and instruct them to hold hands. Just before midnight, he will stand next to the front door. When the clock begins to chime, he will open the door and hold it open until the last of the hour has struck.”

“I have heard of others who do the same, though my father never did so at Pemberley.”

“My father always complains of the cold draft. Each year he swears that the next year we would have a clock with a faster chime.”

“Somehow I doubt he will follow through on his threats.”

“Of course not. My mother has her nerves; he has a slowly chiming clock.”

Darcy cocked his eyebrow. “It does not seem a fair comparison.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You forget papa has the compensation of a thick library door. I assure you that when mama suffers from *her* nervous complaints, my father demands his solitude with *his* books.”

“Indeed.”

As Elizabeth softly laughed, she fingered the pearl necklace her husband had given her at Christmas.

“Fitzwilliam, you promised to tell me more about this necklace and why you wished that I wear it for our wedding.”

“They were my mother’s and my grandmother’s before her. For the last five – now six – generations, every Darcy bride and every Darcy daughter has worn those pearls on her wedding day. One day, God willing, our daughters and the brides of our sons will wear them for their own weddings.” Elizabeth put her hand on his. “But the pearls belong to the mistress of Pemberley. When we are at home there, I will show you the portraits of your predecessors. Each of the previous five chatelaines are wearing that necklace.”

Then Darcy fingered the necklace nestled against Elizabeth’s throat. “I have many memories of my mother wearing it. She told me that as she held me, I was quite fond of playing with the pearls when I was small. Actually, the necklace had to be restrung after I pulled too hard and broke it. We had quite a time hunting for all the loose beads. I remember laughing as I watched a hugely tall, immensely dignified footman crawling around on his hands and knees. Needless to say, Mother was not nearly as amused.”

Darcy’s mood became pensive. “It was the last time Mother allowed me to touch the necklace. Elizabeth, promise me that the pearls will grace your neck when you sit for your first portrait.”

“I would not have it any other way.”

The clock struck midnight, breaking the silence that had fallen. Darcy poured them each a glass of champagne.

“What is past is prologue.* To new beginnings.”

The next days were a flurry of fabrics, colours, samples, and drawings. Elizabeth chose, with her husband’s counsel, a green colour scheme for her rooms. The covering for the walls and for the sitting room furniture was selected, and Darcy proposed several paintings from the family’s collection that could be hung.

The days were filled with improvements – to her rooms, and in the newlyweds’ understanding of each other – but the nights continued to be chaste encounters. Once in her chambers, husband and wife did little more than share a glass of wine, talk, and then share a bed – but only to sleep.

Once again Elizabeth awoke in the middle of the night, enveloped in her husband’s arms. Each night he asked to come to her, knowing that her time was not yet finished. Each night, they shared nothing more than a glass of wine and a quick, chaste kiss before snuggling against each other and falling asleep. Elizabeth was perplexed by her husband’s seemingly passionless response to this most intimate position; it was such a contrast to his increasingly passionate kisses and caresses stolen at odd moments of the day.

As she lay enjoying the still-novel feeling of his embrace, it dawned on her that his indifferent demeanour in their bed was more a function of self-control rather than a lack of desire. She knew he preferred to wait to consummate their marriage until all traces of her courses had disappeared. The ride in the carriage after the wedding should have shown her how quickly the physical need could build between them. Just thinking about the effect of his touch

caused her to tremble. The excitement of the unknown and, until now, the forbidden, along with her husband's kisses, made her impatient, and she once again cursed her body for making them wait. Still, the delay had given her time, for which she was now exceedingly grateful – time to re-evaluate her state of mind and her emotions.

Elizabeth had come to some decisions regarding her more intimate duties as a wife. Her mother had engaged her in a frank discussion about what to expect, and although thankful for her mother's candour, Elizabeth was not sure she would make the same choices as her mother. Elizabeth Darcy would not be a woman who turned her husband away from her bed, as she believed her mother eventually had, when there was no longer hope that Harriet Bennet would conceive a son.

Elizabeth believed that her physical relationship with her husband should not be defined solely by the need for a Darcy heir. She had the feeling, more intuition than experience, that it would be in the marriage bed where the two would forge and strengthen the bond without which they could not be true partners in life. Passion, certainly, would play its part; but what Elizabeth sought was intimacy of the mind as well as of the body, and she reasoned that could be achieved only when each opened completely to the other. Darcy may not wish to share all the burdens he carried, but she would help when and where he would allow it. Her relationship with Jane had taught her the value of a confidante. She would rely on her husband and hope that her husband would rely on her.

Had her opinion been all drawn from her own family, she knew she would not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. But she also was privy to the excellent example of her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, whose happiness and contentment in the marital state was undeniable. What she sought was not unobtainable, where respect, esteem, and confidence existed between partners.

But what of love?

Should it make any difference?

A good question. Darcy had never spoken of love; he had not changed his expectations of her. She was to be his companion, his wife, and the means by which the Darcy line would continue. How she approached him in the privacy of her own chambers would not affect that, whether she loved him or not. She was prepared to abandon the dictates of polite society when it came to being his lover. Should not her love for him be an even stronger inducement to

overcome her maidenly modesty for his, their, pleasure?

Elizabeth decided that it was. She knew she loved him, and intrinsic to that love was a desire for his happiness. She only hoped that she had properly discerned what it was he wanted. Otherwise, in a few nights, she would be a very embarrassed bride, standing before her bridegroom.

On Saturday morning, Elizabeth knew that everything would change. Finally rid of the extra articles necessary for her modesty and comfort, Elizabeth's mood altered. Darcy noticed an increased flirtatiousness, and when he gathered the courage to enquire of their source, Elizabeth only teased him, explaining that although she had been feeling indisposed of late, now she felt invigorated. If he understood her unspoken message, he did not let on, and since he was not very forthcoming, then neither would she be. Two could play at that game.

That afternoon, Elizabeth practised on the pianoforte. Struggling with a particularly difficult passage, she stopped and grunted in frustration.

"Georgiana struggled with that piece, as well."

"Fitzwilliam! I did not hear you enter."

"I did not wish to disturb you. After your outburst, however, I thought you could use a distraction,"

Elizabeth laughed. "Come, sit by me. I take it your sister played. Little wonder you have such a fine instrument here."

Darcy brought a chair and sat next to her, close enough to turn the pages of the music. "I enjoyed providing Georgiana with the finest of everything."

"Did she play well?"

"Yes, very well. She devoted hours and hours to her music. I think she found her sanctuary in it. After Mother and Father died, she and I had few sources of amusement."

"You were lonely."

"I suppose we were. The rift between Aunt Victoria and the rest of the family too often placed my sister and me in the difficult situation of being in the middle."

Elizabeth saw the sadness that was still a part of him.

"Does my playing bring to mind memories best left forgotten?"

Darcy seemed puzzled until recognition dawned. "Oh, no! Not at all. I enjoy hearing you play. When you play the pieces that Georgiana loved, it reminds me of her as she was happiest, with her music. Georgiana is gone, but I have no desire to wipe her

from my memory to or pretend she never existed. Remembering her happier times is a great comfort to me.”

“You still miss her.”

“Yes, obviously, and my parents as well – as you would miss your family if they were lost to you as mine are to me. Elizabeth, please, music brings joy and beauty to life. I want you to play whenever you wish. I want you to feel uninhibited when playing in my presence. Let us make good, new memories – to fade the unpleasant, old ones.

“We are just beginning to know and truly understand each other. I admit to you that before I came to Hertfordshire my life was increasingly lonely. I needed – wanted – someone to share it with me, and it was not long after I met you that I knew you would be my choice. People may wonder at our match, but let me assure you that I am satisfied we made the right decision to marry.

“And heavens, if I decided to stop enjoying everything my family loved because those things remind me of them, I would never get out of bed in the morning!”

Elizabeth listened intently to his words. She smiled and began to play a song from memory, a sweet simple tune. It was the perfect choice. Darcy looked at his wife, marvelling anew at her uncanny ability to understand and respond to him so perfectly and so completely.

That evening Marie laid Elizabeth’s silk nightgown on the bed and hesitated to add a cotton one.

“You are correct, Marie,” Elizabeth said, “I do not need that one tonight.”

“I will bring the matching silk robe.”

“No, not tonight. Leave a wool one.”

“Madame?”

“Just for tonight. I must have some surprises for the master.”

Marie raised an eyebrow. It was evident she understood Elizabeth’s meaning. “Oui, Madame,” she said, and smiled as she fetched the thick wool robe.

“You may go now. Goodnight, Marie.”

“Mrs. Darcy?”

“Yes, Marie?”

Marie gave Elizabeth a shy smile. “Mr. Darcy will be very pleased.”

“Thank you, Marie,” came Elizabeth’s soft reply.

“Bonne nuit, Madame.”

As soon as Elizabeth was alone, all the nervousness she had tried to suppress came upon her in full force. Did she have the courage to do what she

planned? Would her husband be pleased? She was *quite* ready for the glass of wine he would bring.

The knock came.

“Enter.”

Darcy strode in, wine and glasses in hand. Elizabeth could tell that he was a little disappointed to again find her in her heavy robe.

Ah, you expected to see something quite different, did you not? Patience.

Elizabeth fought a small smile of triumph as Darcy sat in his usual chair and offered her the usual nightcap, which she accepted with an unusual eagerness that Darcy appeared not to notice. She rather quickly finished her wine, then stood, took two steps, and stopped. Darcy could see her hands fiddling with the ties of her robe.

She turned, stood directly in front of her husband, and very deliberately opened her robe, revealing the nearly transparent silken gown underneath, a wisp of a covering that left little to his imagination. She slowly shrugged off the robe, watching as his eyes widened. Elizabeth most definitely had Darcy’s complete attention. His gaze roamed over her body, and she saw passion kindled in him.

“Fitzwilliam.”

His eyes immediately returned to her face.

“Before we married, you spoke of a desire that our marriage be different from those of your peers. You said you wanted companionship and you offered me your honesty and respect. I gladly receive them from you. You spoke of one other thing. Do you remember?”

His eyes answered her.

Passion.

“I know what is expected from two people in our situation, what polite society says is proper behaviour. In the privacy of our own chambers, I do not believe that is what you want, nor is that what I wish.”

Never taking her eyes from his, Elizabeth slid first one shoulder, and then the other out of their silky covering and let the garment fall to ground at her feet. Darcy’s eyes slowly travelled down her now naked form and then back to her face.

“Are you pleased?” she asked in a near whisper. She felt as if she were blushing from her crown to her toes.

He gave her a tender smile and answered, “More than you can know.”

Elizabeth shyly stepped towards her husband, silently praying fervently that her courage would not fail her. She undid Darcy’s belt and removed his robe. He offered no resistance – although Elizabeth saw that he was trembling – as she reached for his nightshirt,

then removed it. When she stepped back, she saw that he was looking at her intently, his gaze tinged with surprise and pleasure.

“Fitzwilliam, I know nothing of the arts of a woman. You must teach me. Omit nothing. I am, and will always be, yours alone to make into your ideal lover.”

He hesitated only a moment before closing the distance between them and sweeping his wife into his arms.

Later, when at last they fell asleep embracing, Elizabeth Bennet was no more. That night, in her house in London, by the tender attentions of her husband, she was irrevocably ushered into womanhood. She had, truly and at last, become Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

* Shakespeare, *The Tempest* – Act 2, Scene 1

Chapter Nine

Darcy woke to the exquisite feeling of flesh against flesh. If lying with a cotton-gowned Elizabeth had been agreeable, holding a naked Elizabeth, now truly his wife, was infinitely better.

She could not know that offering herself to him had been the single most erotic moment of his life. Even the memory of it caused a frisson of delight. He wanted to ride to his uncle's house and thank him for causing him to choose *this* woman as his wife. In his haste to both oblige his family by taking a wife and disoblige the Earl and Lady Catherine by choosing a woman of comparatively humble social standing, he had unwittingly chosen a treasure.

Last night as Elizabeth stood naked and willing before him, his first impulse was to carry her to the bed and immediately consummate their marriage, so lost was he in the passion she had unleashed. Fortunately, that compulsion did not have enough time to become action before her words took root in his mind.

Teach me.

Two simple words, one profound challenge. Even as he held her, he was at a loss how to proceed. How could he prove himself worthy of her trust in him in this most intimate act to come? Where should he start? She had done an admirable job thus far by offering herself so unconditionally. Darcy realised then that she had unwittingly demonstrated an innate knowledge of a truth it had taken him years to understand – in the physical union of a man and a woman, it was as gratifying to impart as it was to accept. Indeed, to give pleasure could bring even greater satisfaction than to receive it.

Elizabeth's offering was first and foremost an unselfish act, motivated by a desire to please him. He had almost selfishly taken, without thought of giving in return, and *that* would have been a betrayal of the absolute trust she had shown him. How could he be so insensitive? He was ashamed of himself, and it struck him so forcefully that he momentarily pulled away, confusing Elizabeth.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

Darcy could see the bewilderment on her face. He shook his head.

"Nothing. Forgive me, I was about to do something very foolish."

"What? Have I displeased you?"

"No, no." He kissed her again. "I am very pleased."

"Then why?"

Darcy recaptured her lips. "Shhh," he said against her mouth, "It is nothing. Concentrate on what is happening now, and what is to come."

That interlude had given him the restraint he needed to consider the task before him. The marriage bed could be something very beautiful for them and Elizabeth had asked him to make it so. The prospect was paradoxically both exciting and overwhelming.

She was a fresh canvas, ready to become a representation of the true beauty of the womanly form, and he was the unprepared artist.

He began to speak to her, urging her to talk to him, guiding her through their initial voyage of discovery. It was a slow and tender process; they had no demands on their time but their own. Before he allowed himself to finally make her his wife, he made sure she experienced the same release he knew he would soon have. Then, and only then, did he make Elizabeth his.

Sunlight was streaming through the windows when Elizabeth finally emerged from her slumber. She pulled the covers up under her chin to ward off the chill, and it was only then she discovered that she was alone. Disappointment coursed through her; she had not thought he would leave her for his own bed after all that had happened last night.

Feeling all the pain of his abandonment, she was startled when the door between their chambers opened, and her husband sauntered back into the room.

"You are finally awake! Good. I had some tea and toast brought up to us. More food will come when we call for it."

Darcy walked over to the bed and climbed back in. When he took off his robe, Elizabeth was shocked to see that he had no clothing on under it. She got an even greater shock when he lay down beside her.

"Your hands and feet are freezing!"

"Hmm, and I can think of no better way to warm them."

"Fitzwilliam! You are incorrigible."

"I know."

"Insufferable man! Where is the tea you spoke of?"

"In the other room."

"Are you going to bring it to me?"

"But it is so much colder away from you."

"The tea will warm you. Would you please bring it here?"

"If you insist. But I expect payment for my labour."

"Your price, sir?"

“You will discover it soon enough.”

“Fitzwilliam, get the tea.”

“Must I?”

“Yes. Go!”

Darcy reluctantly swung his legs out of bed. Pulling on his robe, he brought Elizabeth her tea. When they had finished, he took her cup and plate and laid the tray next to the bed.

“I believe I spoke of my wages.”

“So you did. What do you have in mind?”

Darcy pulled the counterpane partially off her, and began to explore her thoroughly with his lips.

“Fitzwilliam,” she hissed, though not at all displeased with his attentions. “It is daytime!”

“Yes, and I must admit you are even more breathtaking in the light of day.”

“But it is *not* done!”

“I assure you, the amount of light in the room matters not. It is as delightful in light as it is in darkness.”

“What would society think if they knew?”

“Frankly, I do not care. You did tell me last night that you did not want the expectations of our station to influence who we are – or what we do – in private.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “Yes, but I never imagined it would be during the day!”

“Elizabeth, stop thinking and feel.”

“I ... I will try.”

“And let me make one thing perfectly clear, Mrs. Darcy. Neither of us is going beyond our chambers today. So please disabuse yourself of any notion of the need to make an appearance downstairs. Today, you are mine, and I do not feel like sharing you with anyone. Have I made myself clear?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

“Good. And now it is time to learn another lesson.”

“What would that be?”

“Sometimes the best way to learn is by experimenting. I volunteer to be your subject.”

“Very generous of you.”

“Yes, it is. Now then, you may commence today’s assignment.”

Darcy had not been quite accurate in his prediction. He and Elizabeth did not emerge from their chambers until after noon the *following* day. Only their impending departure for Brighton the next morning could induce him to quit her presence, and he was sorely tempted to cancel the expedition altogether. But he had planned the trip for a reason.

And so, at first light, they found themselves on the road to Brighton.

The house he had taken afforded a good view of the channel. Elizabeth could not see the water when they arrived, as it was past sundown, but she could hear the surf and smell the tang of the sea. The house had been built within the last five years and was situated in the most fashionable quarter of the town. The latter was one of its most redeeming qualities, and the main reason Darcy had chosen it.

The man himself was pleased with what he saw. He had never been to Brighton, but the seaside town had the advantage of being within a day’s journey from London, boasted elegant housing arrangements, and most importantly, offered a miniature version of the London social scene. People of fashion came to Brighton, and there would be opportunities for his wife to associate with a few of his peers without becoming overwhelmed. It was the perfect place for her first foray into the world as Mrs. Darcy.

Elizabeth had been disappointed that she had not received a letter from Jane; she was convinced that her own wedding to Fitzwilliam had been the only impediment to Mr. Bingley’s long anticipated proposal. But on the evening of their first full day in Brighton, her faith in her sister and her suitor was finally rewarded.

Elizabeth tore open the missive and eagerly began to read.

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

My dearest sister,

Do not be cross that I have not sent this missive by express. I was unsure of your location and decided it best to post to your house in Town with the knowledge that if you were not there, it would be forwarded with your other correspondence to Brighton.

I will not toy with you any longer. You were right about Mr. Bingley; we are to be married! Oh Lizzy, this happiness is almost more than I can endure. How could anyone be as blessed as am I? What have I done to deserve such a fate? I am afraid to pinch myself lest I be dreaming.

A broad smile spread over Elizabeth face.

“Whatever the news, it must be excellent to make you so pleased.”

“Mr. Bingley has finally proposed.”

“I was wondering how much longer he would tarry.”

Elizabeth continued reading.

You will never let me rest until I reveal all, so I shall diligently recount the pertinent information.

Mr. Bingley called the day after your wedding. Mama shamelessly contrived to leave us alone. I must say that although I was mortified, Mr. Bingley only smiled and laughed to himself. He knew EXACTLY what Mother was doing and later confessed to taking great delight in vexing her by not proposing. We actually spent most of our time alone speaking about the weather and the condition of the roads. At the time, this made perfect sense as he had just that morning bid farewell to the last of his houseguests.

When Mama returned to the drawing room, she was none too happy to see us seated in the same places we had occupied when she left us.

Mr. Bingley called again a few days later, and this time, our father joined us. Yes, I said our father! Mama was visibly unhappy with his presence. I was relieved. Even I was growing weary of her relentless matchmaking. She has no notion of how embarrassing it can be for us. You are very fortunate to be married, my dear Mrs. Darcy! Needless to say, Mr. Bingley left promising to call again.

Oh, Lizzy, you will never guess what happened when he came. Kitty spied him first, and we heard him enter the house, but he did not come to us for a full ten minutes! Finally, I was summoned to see Papa, who was standing outside the dining room. He kissed me on the forehead and told me to wait for him inside the room, and that he would return shortly. I suppose I should not have been shocked by what happened next, but I am being truthful when I tell you I was unprepared for what I met. HE was there, waiting for me. Mr. Bingley walked to where I stood, for I could not move. He tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and then took my hand in his and brought it up to his lips. Oh, Sister, I could barely breathe! He smiled and then dropped to his knee and said the most precious words I have ever heard.

“Miss Bennet. I was taught that when a man was ready to tell a woman that he loved her, that he should also be prepared to complete the phrase with a question. I am ready. Jane, I love you with all that I am. Will you do me the great honour of becoming my wife? Will you marry me?”

I started to cry and somehow managed to say “yes.” Oh what bliss! He told me how dear I had become to him. He told me many things I shall always treasure. He also confessed that he had been waiting to ask me for weeks, but did not wish to deflect any attention from you before your wedding, not for your sake alone, but for my new brother’s as well. Charles greatly respects your Mr. Darcy. He also had granted our father’s request for a brief respite from wedding preparations. Charles told me he had first revealed his intentions to Papa many weeks ago and had obtained his permission to court me.

That, my dearest Sister, is the sum of my news. I eagerly await your reply. I am more than curious as to the resolution of our discussion on your last night at Longbourn. Have you discovered your heart? Have you told your husband?

Write soon!

Yours affectionately,

Jane

“It seems that Mr. Bingley delayed asking Jane to marry him out of deference to his friend! I should be cross with you, Mr. Darcy, for delaying the happiness of a most beloved sister.”

Darcy laughed. “You assign me too much influence over the gentleman. It was entirely his own doing. I believe he wanted your sister to glory in the undivided attentions of your mother.”

“Now I am cross with Mr. Bingley! Heaven help my father. Derbyshire is becoming an even more appealing locale for the next few months, given its distance from Longbourn.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Undoubtedly!”

The dancing was well underway when the Darcys arrived. The room was not overfull; this was not the season when many normally journeyed to the seaside. Still, the Assembly Room was open, offering society to those who were in town. Darcy steered Elizabeth into the room with the practised ease of a man accustomed

to being an object of interest. He recognised a passing acquaintance, a Mr. Humphries, and prepared to introduce his wife.

“Mr. Darcy! What an honour to meet you again. In Brighton of all places.” The man spoke to Darcy, but his gaze wandered to Elizabeth.

“Allow me to introduce you. Mrs. Darcy, this is Mr. Humphries. And sir, this is my wife.”

“A pleasure, Mrs. Darcy. I read of your engagement and wedding in the papers. My congratulations on your nuptials. My own wife is dancing at the moment,” Mr. Humphries pointed to a woman dancing with one of the many officers in attendance. “May I introduce her later?”

“Of course,” Darcy replied, with no expression of approbation or contempt.

“And may I claim a dance with you this evening, Mrs. Darcy?” The gentleman seemed eager to secure such a prestigious and lovely partner.

“After the next, sir. I dance first with my husband.”

Darcy decided to take control of the conversation. “How long have you been in Brighton?”

“We arrived before Christmas.”

“Are there many families in town?”

“Not many more than you see here tonight. There is a regiment of soldiers, of course, but I am afraid things have been rather dull.”

Just then, Darcy spotted another familiar face. The man in question was making his way toward them.

“I say, Darcy. I would never have expected you to bring your lovely wife here. Mrs. Darcy, it is a pleasure to meet you at last.”

“Thank you, sir. And whom do I have the honour of meeting?” asked a slightly confused Elizabeth.

Mr. Humphries took this as a cue to leave and bowed before walking away without another word. Darcy eyed the new gentleman carefully, trying to ascertain the man’s intent.

“Mrs. Darcy, may I present my cousin, Colonel Andrew Fitzwilliam. His father, the Earl of Perryton is my mother’s brother.”

“Ah! Mr. Darcy has told me much about you, sir.”

“Should I claim innocence?”

“Hardly. He had nothing but praise.”

“Then I should thank my cousin for his tact.”

“What brings you from London?” Darcy enquired.

“A soldier goes where he is told. I am at the mercy of General Abernathy, I am afraid. His whims prevented me from attending your wedding.”

“We understand, Colonel,” Elizabeth replied.

Darcy could see that his wife sensed tension between the men.

“Yes, duty first. However, since you are here now, would you dine with Mrs. Darcy and me in the next few days?”

The Colonel happily accepted. He solicited Elizabeth’s hand for a dance and before he left them, introduced another officer, a Colonel Harris, and his wife. Colonel Harris was the commanding officer of the regiment currently quartered at Brighton.

The music changed, and Darcy claimed his first dance with Elizabeth.

“You are surprised to see your cousin?”

“Quite.” She raised an eyebrow. After only one week of marriage, Darcy could easily recognise his wife’s moods. He knew they would discuss this later.

“This is only the second time we have danced together, sir. You dance very well. I believe I shall be the envy of every woman.”

“Whether they shall envy or pity you is debatable. I am afraid I would rather not dance with any woman other than you.”

“Should I be flattered, or do you simply dislike the activity?”

Darcy smiled. “My like or dislike is wholly dependent on my partner.”

“Then you admit you enjoy dancing with me?”

“I have only two experiences to draw upon, but yes, I can more easily endure the occupation when accompanied by you.”

“Fortunate for you that for once, it is the women who are in scarce quantity. You may sit by yourself, while I am compelled to dance.”

“Few here are worthy of your notice,” Darcy said with a tinge of disappointment. “Then again, dancing is the order of the evening, and I suppose you must oblige the other gentlemen.”

Elizabeth responded only with a slight scowl. Darcy had no idea what he had said to displease her. He decided not to continue their conversation, instead allowing himself to take pleasure in the remainder of the dance.

While Elizabeth danced the next with Mr. Humphries, Darcy stalked the sides of the room. He was disappointed not to find anyone else he knew, and acknowledged to himself that perhaps he had been overly optimistic about the quality of people who would be in Brighton at this time. Conversely, there was no one of importance present to witness any impropriety

on Elizabeth's part, should one occur. He did not anticipate any foolish action from his wife. However, this was her first exposure to a level of society higher than that to which she was accustomed, and until he saw her meet the challenge, there would be doubt lingering in the back of his mind.

The night progressed. The Darcys made many new acquaintances, though none, to Darcy's disappointment, who could even pretend to belong to his circle in society. To Darcy's great relief, his qualms about his wife's comportment were without foundation. Elizabeth displayed all the superior manners he had come to expect and respect. She may have been friendlier than he would have wished, but her liveliness was part of what had attracted him in the first place. Surely, as she became more knowledgeable about what was appropriate to her position as Mrs. Darcy, she would recognise when restraint was appropriate, and more importantly, when it was allowed to be relaxed. Within limits, of course.

As they lay in bed together after again enjoying the physical bliss of lovers, Elizabeth broached a subject that had occupied her thoughts all evening.

"Did you enjoy the assembly tonight?" she enquired of her husband.

"As much as I ever do. I have never particularly enjoyed *any* assembly."

"I confess that I had a lovely evening. I was very pleased with several new acquaintances, including your cousin."

"Elizabeth, I commend your ability to strike up a conversation, but please do not become too attached to any of the people we met tonight, with the exception of my cousin, of course. I doubt we will associate with them again after we leave Brighton."

"Why ever not?"

"They are decidedly beneath us socially. I see no need for more than passing acquaintance with anyone we meet here."

Elizabeth propped her head on her hand to better look at him. "They seem like good people, not unlike those I grew up among."

"My point exactly. Society in Meryton is not the same as society in London."

"My family is a respected part of the Hertfordshire gentry."

"Elizabeth, your family is another matter entirely."

"I see little difference."

"I see a great difference. They are now connected to me, and it is assuredly the best connection they possess. Even you must admit this. Your sister's engagement to Bingley will further enhance your family's status, although not, of course, as much as our alliance has." Darcy was slightly frustrated with Elizabeth's inability to see as he did. To him, it was obvious that the people they met tonight would be below their notice when those from his normal sphere were present.

"You alluded to this when I proposed. Surely you see that as my wife, you now travel in the upper sphere of the *ton*? None of the ladies and gentlemen we met tonight do, not even the Humphries. While we are here, I have no objection to being in their company. However, after we leave, it is unlikely that we will meet any of them again. We simply do not travel in the same circles."

"I think I understand your reasoning, but surely you do not intend to snub them should we meet again?"

"Certainly not. That would be rude. What I mean is, we will not go out of our way to associate with them. Elizabeth, please, give them credit, too. The men and women we met tonight are older and understand the difference in social rank. Only the most brazen and deluded of social climbers would solicit increased intimacy with us. Let us simply enjoy their company for now and leave it at that."

"Is Derbyshire so stratified?"

"No, not at all. The differences in wealth and situation are somewhat blurred, as they are in Meryton. You will find more large landowners than you are accustomed to, as well as smaller ones like your father. However, Pemberley is one of the larger estates, and we do hold a position of respect among our peers. Mind you, Pemberley is no Chatsworth. Very few estates in England are."

"I look forward to seeing Pemberley with my own eyes. I have heard so much about it."

"I think there is no finer house in the country, but I am naturally prejudiced."

"Naturally."

Darcy smiled and reached over to caress his wife's face. He wanted to put an end to future discussion about who would be welcome in their home.

"Elizabeth, you may not like it, but we are prisoners of our society and class; everyone is. We cannot escape certain expectations, no matter how we may wish it."

"I suppose you are right. Be patient with me."

Darcy knew by the look on her face and the tone of voice that she was not reconciled with his explanations,

however much she tried to hide it, but he had no intention of continuing the discussion.

“I will.” His reply conveyed that the subject was closed.

“I have one more matter I wish to discuss tonight – your cousin. Are you displeased he is in Brighton and that we are to dine with him?”

“Not displeased.”

“But not pleased. I could see you were not overjoyed to see him again. Are you harbouring resentment over his failure to attend our wedding?”

“That is a difficult question to answer. I fully understand that he may not have wished to anger his father. Still, Andrew is a grown man. His excuse that he was at the mercy of the General rings false. He has never had any difficulty securing time away from his commission’s duties to travel to Rosings every Easter with me.”

“Has it occurred to you that he has come to Brighton on our account?”

“I do not follow your reasoning.”

“Fitzwilliam, I can empathize with your cousin’s reluctance to displease his parents. He cannot possibly maintain his style of living on a soldier’s stipend. Two months ago, I faced the same dilemma. I knew I needed to marry well or face a form of poverty when my father was gone.”

“Yet, I had to persuade you to marry me.”

“You were quite persuasive, too.” She grinned. “I was able to overcome the fantasy of marrying for the deepest affection by the reasoning of a respectable gentleman, willing to overlook my lack of connections and dowry. But I digress. If your cousin retains as much independence as you assert, is it not possible he decided this was the best way to meet me without incurring the wrath of his father?”

“I will concede that possibility.” Darcy frowned. “I should not be so affected by this. We have scarcely seen each other since the accident. I would not consider us to be great friends.”

“Still, you felt the sting of his absence. It must have reminded you of others who could not be there.”

“You could be correct. I cannot say.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath before continuing.

“I count myself most fortunate. I have married a man I admire, respect, and now love.”

Darcy immediately tensed. *No. She cannot mean what she said.*

“You love me?”

Elizabeth sighed. “I need not ask if this pleases you. Your tone speaks volumes, and I admit I am not surprised.”

Darcy rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

“If you are not surprised, then why have you told me? Have I ever asked for your love?”

“No, Fitzwilliam, you have not. Yet you have it.”

She waited for him to respond. He said nothing.

“The night before the wedding, Jane asked me if I was in love with you. I told her I did not know. She then said to me, ‘Elizabeth, when you do, tell him.’”

“Do you always do as your sister suggests?”

“Not at all, but I heed her advice when I find it sensible and wise. Fitzwilliam, I realised at the moment I vowed to honour, love, and obey you that I love you as a woman should love her husband. I have pondered long and hard at the wonder of it *and* the ramifications of telling you. I know full well that you have never asked for my love. I suspected that you did not wish for me to love you, and though I cannot understand your reasoning, I cannot change what I feel for you. How can one deny the beating of her heart?”

“I could have chosen not to tell you, to wait and see if you would come to love me. I did not keep silent because that would be disrespectful to the friendship we have built. You are a man of integrity; you are honest; you do not profess feelings not your own for my approbation. You have answered my questions with an openness that at times astounds me. You have never made me feel inferior. You have earned the right to hear the same truth from me.”

Darcy was silent for a long moment, and when he spoke, he could not look at her. “I do not know what to say.”

“Say nothing. I wish you to know and accept that I love you and will always seek your happiness. I ask nothing of you beyond this. I cannot deny my greatest hope that someday, you will love me as I love you. But if not, I hope that you continue to like me, to respect and esteem me ... that you will always be my friend.” Elizabeth added in a shy voice, “And my lover.”

Darcy could not stop himself; her final comment made him smile. He rolled back onto his side to face her.

“Elizabeth, I cannot ask you to stop loving me, but I will ask you not to speak of it. I cannot promise what I can no longer give – to you – or to anyone. But you are my life’s companion and my lover.” Darcy reached to caress her face with his finger. “As much as I hate to admit it, you were right to tell me. It will be less awkward for both of us now that it is out in the open. I would not have you harbour such deep secrets from me.”

Elizabeth leaned over and kissed him. “Thank you.”

“For accepting your kiss?”

“For listening to me. For not becoming angry or upset.”

“Elizabeth, any man would be flattered to know that he inspired such devotion without consciously encouraging it. Now, wife, come lie next to me.”

Elizabeth obeyed and soon fell asleep spooned against her beloved’s body. Darcy was not so fortunate. He lay awake replaying Elizabeth’s confession.

It could be worse. I could actually return her love. Then what heartache would befall us?

Chapter Ten

Colonel Fitzwilliam called at the Darcys well before dinner. The gentlemen disappeared into the study; Elizabeth had learned enough about her husband to know that he would bring his cousin to her when he was ready.

The men said little as they went through the ritual of selecting cigars and pouring drinks.

“I did not know you were working for General Abernathy.”

“For the last six months or so. You and I have not been in each other’s company since my current assignment began.”

“It is hard to believe it has been that long since we spoke.”

“We both had our duties.” The Colonel took another drink. “Mrs. Darcy seems to be a very amiable woman. My father will be relieved.”

A muscle twitched in Darcy’s jaw. “I can imagine what the Earl has said about Elizabeth.”

“You have no idea what your announcement has wrought. I was thankful that I was obliged to be away during most of your engagement.”

“Your father and our aunt made their feelings quite clear on the matter, I assure you.”

“To the rest of the family, as well. After you left Kent, they spent the next several days attempting to come up with schemes to prevent your marriage to Miss Bennet.” The Colonel laughed softly. “After they saw the formal announcement, they knew it was a hopeless cause.”

“How do you know this?” Darcy thought he knew the answer, but decided to test his cousin.

“Lady Catherine returned to Town with my parents; Anne came, too. Martin, Harriet and Northerm were summoned to Alton House, as was I. We were informed of your meeting at Rosings.”

“A family conference?”

“Yes. Even Aunt Victoria was asked to come, but she refused. The Earl made it abundantly clear that he would be extremely disappointed if any of us witnessed your wedding. I am sorry, old man. I hope you know that I wanted to be there, but I cannot easily afford to alienate my father. I am unfortunately dependent on his good will to continue living comfortably as a gentleman.”

“Elizabeth suggested the same the other evening. Will your dining with us tonight cause you to fall into disfavour? If so, I would not have had you risk it.”

“No, you may rest easy. I will see that he credits my presence here this evening as seizing the opportunity to convey the family’s, shall we say, ‘official’ stance about your situation.” The Colonel paused and took a sip of his brandy.

“I have yet to tell you the rest of the discussion. Lady Catherine was very insistent that your wife not be recognised, but my father was able to prevail. He saw more potential for harm than for good by such a course. Mind you, he was furious. He is angry with you still, but realistic enough to understand that ostracizing you and your wife would produce more problems than it solved.”

“Yes, more problems for them. What, then, should I expect from the family?”

“Indifferent acceptance. You and Mrs. Darcy will be acknowledged in public, but no effort will be made to encourage intimacy.”

“In other words, I am to be treated as a wayward child, patronized for my indiscretions.”

“If you would put it in those terms, yes.”

Darcy sighed. It was not as bad as it could have been. “So they will acknowledge Elizabeth?”

“To a point, and in public. Do not expect invitations to intimate family gatherings or visiting to and fro.” The Colonel laughed ruefully. “In that, you might count yourself fortunate. However, I think it politic to wait to tell my father that he is a fool to dismiss your wife without even taking the time to meet her. She is a lovely woman, Darcy, and it is obvious that she is very fond of you.”

“Obvious?”

“Heavens, yes! The way she looks at you, the smiles she gives you – men will be jealous of you, Cousin.” Darcy’s brow furrowed; he was not at all pleased. The Colonel was surprised. “Do you not want your wife’s good opinion?”

“I never said that.”

“You did not look pleased when I spoke about it.”

“I am not happy that she is so unguarded of her feelings.”

“Darcy, you have been married for less than two weeks. I see nothing about which to censure your wife. She is *supposed* to be enamoured of you.”

“Still, it will not do if she continues in such a blatant way when we are in Town for the season.”

“Darcy, let me give you a little advice about women. Do not make the mistake of attributing to them your own ideas of how the world ought to behave. They are different creatures from you and me,

and I for one am nearly always at a loss to know what they are thinking. I am confident that you have told your wife what is expected of her. In the few hours I have been in her presence, I developed no doubts that she will do as you ask, but in her own, feminine way.”

Darcy was thoughtful. “You are correct, of course. But your father and our aunt will be most vigilant and unforgiving in their observation of Elizabeth. I do not want her behaviour to provide any confirmation of their opinion that I chose beneath me. I would not give them that satisfaction.”

“You wish to show that they were wrong. Darcy, for your sake and your wife’s, I hope and pray that you shall. And speaking of the lady in question, shall we join her now?”

“... And so the general addressed the poor colonel sitting across from me, ‘I see no reason why your regiment should not be ready to fight the French at a moment’s notice. Surely if worse came to worse, your officers could challenge theirs to a ball, since improving their dancing skill appears all for which they have time. Heaven forbid that they should actually drill!’”

Elizabeth’s laughter filled the room at Colonel Fitzwilliam’s tale. “What did the poor man say to that?”

“There was nothing he could say. I was very glad I was not in his shoes.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam had spent much of the dinner hour regaling Elizabeth and Darcy with tales from his army life. Gradually, any misgivings the Darceys had experienced in anticipation of the evening faded away. The good colonel was not handsome of face, but he was, in person and address, proof that a true gentleman was a manifestation of good breeding and even better character. He and Elizabeth engaged in spirited conversation while Darcy remained a mostly silent observer.

“How long shall you remain in Brighton, Colonel?” Elizabeth asked.

“The general’s intent was for me to remain about a week. He is expecting a report on the regiment’s preparations and readiness when I return.”

“How very fortunate for us to be here at the same time as you.”

“I was never so surprised as when I spied my cousin at the Assembly, Mrs. Darcy. Had I known that you were here, I would have called as soon as my duties permitted.”

The evening progressed equally amiably, and the Darceys and the Colonel parted on the best of terms possible.

After the Colonel left, Darcy related to Elizabeth what his cousin had discussed.

“I must say it was nothing more than you expected,” she remarked.

“This places an unfair burden on you.”

“Fitzwilliam, from the day of your proposal, I have known, apparently better than you, that the greater burden of obtaining acceptance of our union would be mine. Nothing that has happened since has altered my understanding of the matter.”

“We have never truly discussed what you may expect during the coming season.”

“Other than my wardrobe.”

“I do not speak of what you will wear, Elizabeth, I speak of those who are spiteful and cruel and would like nothing better than to see you overwhelmed, even humiliated.”

“You will find such people everywhere, even in such inconsequential places as Meryton.”

“Yet if my family, well, at least those under the Earl’s thumb, are so intent on indifference, it will make things worse, not better. The *ton* will pick up on their attitude, no matter what my uncle believes.”

“Lady Victoria is not part of their scheme. I must take some consolation from that. Did you believe they would act any differently?”

“No, I did not. I could even argue that I incited such a response by my behaviour in Kent when I informed them of our betrothal. It could never be mistaken as conciliatory.”

“You have spoken very little of what occurred at Rosings.”

“And I do not wish to talk about it now. Suffice it to say that my relations acted exactly as I anticipated. So it is little wonder that we are to be treated the same way now.”

“It will make my first season that much more challenging,” Elizabeth agreed.

“You shall not have to bear it alone. I will not forsake you in the face of the harridans of society.”

“Fitzwilliam, you are an honourable man, and I would expect nothing less than your support, as you are able. However, you are not the unknown country upstart who married one of the ‘most eligible men in England,’ as my mother once called you. There will be many times when you are safely away with the gentlemen, and I shall be left to fend for myself among those ‘harridans’ in the drawing rooms of society.”

“When you speak that way about drawing rooms, you make them sound absolutely primitive.”

Elizabeth laughed, breaking the tension. “In their own way, they might be. Fear not, I will survive. By the time Lady Victoria has finished with me, I shall be impervious to even the most subtle of attacks. Besides, there will be good, honourable people in those same drawing rooms. I shall make it a point to meet them.”

“Elizabeth, do not think my aunt is coming only ...”

“We both know very well why she is coming to Pemberley. Truly, dearest, I am not offended, far from it. I know nothing about being presented at Court, or the intricacies of higher society. I look forward to learning much from Lady Victoria. And if I feel she is overstepping, I am perfectly willing to tell her so.

“I am determined to be concerned only with matters over which I have control, Fitzwilliam. I have confidence in the rightness of your actions, and I believe myself capable of becoming the Mrs. Darcy you expect and deserve. Surely the world in general has too much sense to remain fascinated for very long with any scorn they may perceive from some members of your ... our family towards me. Perhaps we should wish for an enormous scandal during the season to distract the *ton*?”

And on that note, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy adjourned to their chambers.

On the morning of their last full day in Brighton, Elizabeth marvelled at what she beheld – clear, bright, crisp weather. It was a rare thing in the dead of the English winter. The sunshine warmed her cheeks as they walked along the seaside, and a gentle wind made those same cheeks pink.

“Are you warm enough?” Darcy enquired as Elizabeth leaned into him.

“I shall manage. I refuse to waste the opportunity to enjoy the sun. It is so seldom that I have the chance at this time of year.”

Once assured that Elizabeth was not too cold, Darcy was content to continue their ramble for he, too, luxuriated in the warmth of the sunshine. They walked in silence, satisfied to listen to the sound of the surf and the sea gulls, each immersed in their own musings.

Elizabeth’s thoughts were tuned to the man beside her. It had been a revealing fortnight. They had come to Brighton to learn more about each other, and, she suspected, to give him the opportunity to gently introduce her into his level of society. He had been disappointed not to meet anyone he knew, or knew to be of his class. Darcy’s reaction to the people they did encounter was unexpected, to say the least. Elizabeth

had known her husband to be a man proud of his estate, his family name, and his station in life. She did not suspect that he could look so disdainfully on people he believed to be decidedly below him. His attitude was confirmed each time they ventured from their lodgings. They had walked about the town when the weather allowed and attended several events in the evenings. His prejudice needed little inducement. Something as trivial as an inferior cut of clothing was enough for him to judge the worthiness of a new acquaintance, to exhibit that same *hauteur* he had displayed the very first time they had ventured into society at the assembly room. They had even discussed it. She would not have let the subject drop as easily as she had were she not so intent on confessing her feelings that night; she had simply swept past it. It was not until later, when she was alone with her thoughts, that she was able to further consider the words and actions of her spouse.

What were her opinions on the subject? Elizabeth was not one to think of herself as very far above others, but she had to admit that her exposure to higher society, where gradations of rank were evidently of considerable importance, had been extremely limited before her marriage. She now understood that although her father was also a gentleman, there were more significant differences than she had anticipated between Mr. Bennet’s situation and her husband’s. It occurred to her that Darcy had, from the first, merely tolerated her relations. But to be truthful, though she loved her family, she had often been disgusted by the unseemly manners and foolishness of her mother, her three younger sisters, and her Aunt Philips. To hold her husband guilty for feelings she herself owned was ungenerous. He did appear to respect her father, despite his lack of connections, and he seemed genuinely happy for Jane and Mr. Bingley. His opinion of the Gardiners was unclear.

She knew no one was perfect, that everyone had flaws; she might have uncovered Darcy’s. Clearly, this could become an issue between them if she were not careful. No one had taught her how to respond, in a way that did not contradict her vows, when she did not agree with her husband. It was something she would have to learn on her own. She could either accept his prejudices, dwell on them, or try to use her influence to soften his manner. Perhaps she should wait; it had been but a fortnight since she had noticed this disdainful side of his character, and with only a small segment of society. She could observe his manner at Pemberley and when among Derbyshire society, before deciding what to do. Above all, he was

her husband, and she had vowed to love, honour, and obey him.

While Elizabeth was contemplating the pride of her husband, Darcy was just as occupied thinking about his wife.

His purpose in coming to Brighton had been met, though the outcome had caught him off guard. He and Elizabeth were now quite comfortable with each other, whether in the privacy of their chambers or strolling along the seaside, as they were now. She continued to demonstrate the superiority of her understanding, and Darcy relished the thought that he would enjoy her intelligence and wit for many years to come. The cold months of winter no longer seemed so daunting as when, virtually alone and housebound at Pemberley, he first accepted that his family was gone and that he must take a wife.

And what a wife he had taken! Elizabeth certainly seemed to enjoy warming his bed – an unexpected, but very welcome, surprise. Though he was still not comfortable with the knowledge that his wife was in love with him, he was beginning to see that the result of her confession need not be total doom. If anything, it allowed Elizabeth greater freedom to enjoy their intimate times together. Her willingness to become more adventurous surprised and delighted him. Since her declaration, he noticed an even greater passion when they were alone together, a greater tenderness, a greater enjoyment in the physical expression of her love. She cleaved to him in a way he had never before experienced with a woman. He admitted that it moved him, and that he savoured his time in her arms. At the same time, he knew he must protect his own heart. He could not allow his need for her body to turn into a devotion of an even more intimate, and most ardent, kind.

Darcy had been concerned about Elizabeth's behaviour towards him in public after their dinner with Colonel Fitzwilliam. If his confirmed bachelor of a cousin could discern her feelings, would she betray herself in society?

He need not have worried.

The next event they attended was a concert. Some time after they arrived, he found Elizabeth to be unusually quiet and reserved, although she assured him that she was well. Darcy was not convinced, and enquired if she wished to leave. He was surprised when she asked him to escort her outside for some fresh air. Once alone, Elizabeth told him that she had only been attempting to follow his wish not to become attached to the people they encountered in Brighton.

At that point, he realised that when in society such as this, the mask he donned ill-suited Elizabeth. To conceal the artless sincerity that had first attracted him would repress too much of her.

Darcy confessed that he now saw the injustice of asking her to act in a way contrary to her nature, and told her to enjoy herself as well as she could, knowing that she would likely never meet these people again. Elizabeth visibly relaxed, and rewarded him with a smile – a smile that demanded one in return. They returned indoors, and she seemed more like the Elizabeth he had married. As long as she could discern the sincerity of the people she would meet in future and make sound judgements about the worthiness of their character and situation, he was content to allow her a certain freedom of expression in company that she so obviously enjoyed. But that would change; Elizabeth must learn to be more guarded when among the *ton*. The liveliness he so appreciated in his wife would be less valued by London society, where stricter rules of decorum prevailed. Thank God Lady Victoria would be there to guide her through the first few weeks of the season! Without that matron's experience, he wondered if his wife could emerge from the dreaded drawing rooms with the Darcy name unscathed. So much of her acceptance into society depended on a good initial impression. His family had made it clear, through Fitzwilliam, that they would not seek to humble his bride, but neither were they of any mind to aid her. At least the Earl had not become an outright enemy. Darcy vowed that Elizabeth's comportment would do nothing to change that.

Elizabeth *would* be recognised as a worthy Mrs. Darcy.

The Darcy coach slowly traversed the last five miles of the long journey from London to Pemberley. Darcy could have sworn that every inhabitant of Lambton, the small market town that bordered his estate, sought a glimpse of the new mistress of the Great House. Windows were thrown open and dogs danced around the wheels of the carriage, barking heralds of the Darcys' progress through the main thoroughfare of the town. Elizabeth maintained a pleasant look on her face as they made their way, neither acknowledging nor ignoring the curious horde. Surprised and a little disconcerted at the villagers' interest, she was not entirely sure what was expected from her, and her mind was otherwise occupied: she was eager to see the manor she would preside over and tired from the long journey that had brought her there.

After the Darcys left Brighton, they had stayed in Town for a few days. For Elizabeth, there seemed to be no end to the list of items deemed indispensable to a woman of her new rank. She had stopped trying to keep track of all the fabric that the seamstresses of her household, and a few outside her household, would transform into a myriad of gowns for her to wear. Surely she had acquired more in the few weeks since her marriage than in her entire existence to that point! Being imprisoned in a carriage for consecutive days was not a pleasant thought, but when they finally left Town, Elizabeth was happy to escape from endless trips to drapers, craftsmen, and High Street merchants.

Now, three long and draining days later, the journey was finally nearing its end. It was nearly an hour since they passed through Lambton, and they had been travelling uphill for not quite half that time. As they reached the crest of the hill, Darcy ordered the coach to stop, opened the door and handed Elizabeth out. She was rendered speechless by the sight before her – an immense, grand house on the other side of a valley.

Of all this I am to be mistress?

“Do you like it?”

“Fitzwilliam, nothing you have told me has done it justice.” Elizabeth’s surprise and awe were evident. Her fatigue instantly vanished.

“Come, let us continue on to the house. There are many people who have long awaited your arrival. I want to get there before we lose the light.”

When the carriage arrived at the house, Darcy quickly escorted his wife inside. The front hall was filled with servants dressed in assorted livery, and the atmosphere fairly crackled with anticipation and excitement. Darcy made a short speech thanking the staff for their warm welcome of his bride, allowed Elizabeth to briefly greet the servants, then dismissed them to their tasks with the promise of punch and cake with their dinner that night in celebration of his marriage. Elizabeth was pleased to discern an unspoken affection toward their master.

A light repast was available when they wished, and was gratefully accepted sooner rather than later. Both Darcys were tired, and food and rest were all they desired. As the fires in the grates throughout the great house burned low, master and mistress drifted off to sleep in the room that had belonged to the late Lady Anne Darcy, once again occupied after so many empty years.

Elizabeth had no idea of the time when she awoke. It was still dark out, no great surprise at that

time of year. She was alone in bed, but only because her husband was tending to the fire.

“I tried to be quiet and not wake you. I was concerned that if I did not do something with the fire, the room would be too cold for you at first light.”

“You must be chilled; hurry and finish so you can come back to bed.” Elizabeth pulled back the covers when he came to join her. “Lie on your side of the bed and warm up before you inflict your cold hands and feet on me,” she commanded.

“I would warm up much faster if I held you.”

“True, but then *I* would also be cold.”

Darcy stayed on his side of the mattress. “How do you like Pemberley, Mrs. Darcy?”

“From what I have seen, I like it very much indeed.”

“I shall give you a proper tour in the morning. Unless ...”

“Unless what?”

Darcy threw back the covers from both of them and put on his robe.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth hissed. “In case you forgot, it is *cold* in here.” She pulled the blanket back over herself. Darcy did not notice; he had failed to locate one of Elizabeth’s heavy robes and was on his way to his dressing room. A minute later, he came back with another of his own robes and held it out to his wife.

“I could not locate yours, so I fetched one of mine.”

“You wish me to put on your robe?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So that I might show you some of the house.”

“Now? Fitzwilliam, it is cold, it is dark, it is the middle of the night. What would the servants say if they saw us?”

“The servants know to keep their thoughts to themselves. As for the cold, that is why I brought you one of my robes. As for the dark, I will light the candles on the branches and take it with us. Now, are you getting out of bed, or do I need to roust you myself?”

“Oh, very well,” Elizabeth grumbled. It really was the middle of the night.

Feeling a bit like a mischievous schoolboy, Darcy hurried the still reluctant Elizabeth down the stairs. The candles barely threw enough light for them to see, but with bright moonlight streaming through the windows, they could see just enough to make their excursion worthwhile.

“Most of the principal rooms are on this floor. The dining room, music room, library, my study, and

the main hall are all here. When all the doors are open, you can see from one end of the house to the other.”

They walked through the progression of rooms, stopping to talk about their uses and their furnishings. Elizabeth was impressed by the elegance of it all – from the carpets, to furnishings, to what she could make out of the paintings on the walls. It was quite evident that generations of Darcys had been patrons of the arts, if the sheer volume of artwork was any indication.

“The family portraits are in the main hall. I commissioned one of you, which you will sit for it as soon as we return to Town. With any luck, it will be ready when you are presented.”

“Such a thing is necessary,” she said in resignation.

“Most definitely. It would be odd if you did not have a portrait to unveil while we are in London.”

“I have never had my likeness taken. My mother could never convince my father to have one done. I rather think it was because he despaired of my ever being able to sit still long enough.”

As they walked along the gallery, looking at the various Darcys of the past, a light came towards them from the opposite direction.

“Who goes there?” a deep voice challenged from the darkness beyond.

“I could ask the same of you,” Darcy retorted.

“Mr. Darcy! Forgive me, sir. I heard voices and came to investigate.”

“You have discovered their source, and you may now go.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Darcy, sir.”

“And John?”

“Sir?”

“Well done. I am pleased to see that you are not asleep at your post.”

“Thank you, sir. Goodnight, sir, madam.”

Elizabeth, who found the situation quite diverting, was valiantly trying to suppress a laugh when she saw the expression on her husband’s face. He looked ... playful? Yet another new facet of her husband’s character! She was undone, and laughter spilled from them both.

What a complex man I have married.

“I think I like this night-time rambling. The house does not seem as intimidating when there are no servants underfoot.”

“Intimidating? I would think you are a woman whose courage rises at every attempt to intimidate her.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Fitzwilliam, you know that Longbourn, and even Netherfield, are nothing to

Pemberley. I can scarcely believe that I am mistress of such a place. How on earth did I ever think I could manage a household of this size?”

It took him several moments to formulate an answer, and in that breath of time, Elizabeth convinced herself that her husband shared her opinion; he was merely choosing his words. Thus, those words, when they came, surprised her.

“I believe that what you *think* yourself capable of and what you truly *are* capable of do not always coincide.”

“You think I am ready now?”

“I think that if you are not, you will be in time. In the interim, Mrs. Reynolds can continue to act as she has since my mother died. You need not feel obliged to relieve her of all her duties at once. Besides, if you did, what would she have left to do?”

“This is no trifling matter, Mr. Darcy!” Thankfully for him, she smiled as she spoke.

“I do not trifle with you. Soon, Elizabeth, sooner than you expect, this transition will be complete, and you will reign as rightful mistress of Pemberley, with no need of anyone’s assistance or interference.”

“The faith you have in me is at times overwhelming. But I am most grateful, husband. Thank you.” They stood now in front of his portrait. “I do not wish to disappoint you, or the man on the canvas before me.”

“There is barely enough light to make out my features.”

“Enough to see that you are a formidable man, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy offered his arm and guided them back to the warmth of the mistress’ chambers. And the warmth of the mistress’ bed.

Darcy allocated the next several days to showing Elizabeth the house and, weather permitting, parts of the estate. Elizabeth was astonished by the amount of land her husband controlled, which only accentuated all the more the vast – and vastly underestimated – differences in their stations in life when they married. She had known that Pemberley was a great estate, but “great” had been a vague and relative term, her frame of reference confined to Longbourn, Netherfield, and short tours of fine country houses, about which she knew nothing beyond the quality of their furnishings. What power for good and for evil Darcy held in his hands! So many people were under his care, so many relied upon him and Pemberley for their prosperity; not only the servants and field hands, but the town of Lambton, as well.

She also noticed another change in his manners. While in Hertfordshire, he was somewhat guarded; in Brighton, aloof. At Pemberley, he was relaxed, yet there was an earnest concern for the fate of those who were dependent on him. She heard him spoken of as the kindest of landlords and the most generous of masters. From what Elizabeth observed, she would agree with that assessment, but this was still in contrast to the haughtiness he showed in Brighton. It was somewhat of a mystery how the same man could act so differently in company from one locale to the next. She wondered what the inevitable social events in the neighbourhood would entail. How would he behave among his neighbours, and what would he – and they – expect of her?

There was one particular part of the house that he did not immediately show her. She knew there was a floor in the guest wing that they had yet to inspect and wondered when he would take her there. She was left in suspense for only an additional day. Darcy found her finishing a consultation with the housekeeper.

“I have neglected to show you one part of the house, Mrs. Darcy. Would you care to see it now?”

“I am at your disposal. Mrs. Reynolds and I have completed our business.” The older lady discreetly withdrew. Darcy led the way through many doors and up a flight of stairs.

“This wing contains the remainder of the guest quarters.”

“We are some distance from the family apartments, are we not?”

“Yes, nearly the opposite end of the house.”

“A perfect location for unruly family members?”

Darcy smiled a little and patted his wife’s hand. “Yes, a perfect place.”

Elizabeth wondered at his evident reluctance to show her these chambers. The rooms were handsomely fitted, but nothing more than she expected to find at Pemberley, and little different from other chambers she had already seen. Until they came to the last one. Elizabeth was astonished. It was at least as large as her own quarters, and the furniture and wall coverings, though clearly from an earlier era, were especially elegant and richly adorned. A great bed dominated the view. It was unlike any other room in the house, the kind of room she imagined that royalty would inhabit. She turned and looked at Darcy, questions written all over her face.

“This room was prepared for a visit by the Prince of Wales in 1716. It is still referred to as the Wales Bedroom.” Darcy sighed and continued on. “Before my father died, he told me the room’s secret. The Prince invited himself to stay at Pemberley during one

of his journeys into Derbyshire. Though not happy with the prospect of hosting the man, my great-great grandfather ordered that no expense be spared to prepare suitable accommodations for him. My ancestor hoped to cultivate ties to the future monarch that would result in benefits to Pemberley and the family.

“Alas, though the Prince came with a host of attendants, his wife did not accompany him. Unknown to my great-great grandfather, two of His Royal Highness’ paramours also came as guests of the Prince. Word is that the women were surprised to see each other. The exact events of that night have thankfully been lost to the mists of time. All that is known is that a highly indignant Prince of Wales left Pemberley the next day, followed shortly by the departures of the two women in question, headed in opposite directions, and just as ill-tempered and put out as the Prince. God only knows what happened in this room or how my ancestor was able to keep the incident from becoming public knowledge. Never before or since has there been a situation that could have brought shame and scorn down on our family’s good name.

Elizabeth was amused at the dire look on her husband’s face.

“Fitzwilliam, I believe that the Prince was rather infamous for his mistresses. Your family has nothing of which to be ashamed.”

“It is no small matter, Elizabeth.” His tone signified just how serious he was. “For generations, the Darcys have scrupulously avoided scandal. For such disreputable behaviour to have taken place under our own roof was unpardonable. I am mortified to think on it.”

“Then why have you told me?”

“As a token of my respect. Would you rather I had not? We have spoken honestly with each other from the first. I hesitated to bring you here precisely because I struggled with what I should reveal. In the end, the truth prevailed, although I am still uneasy speaking of such things with you, as any decent man should be. To take a mistress is bad enough. To have two at the same time – and under the same roof – is unconscionable.”

“Has the room been used since?”

“No. No member of the royal household has come to Pemberley since then. The room is normally kept closed. I had Mrs. Reynolds open it for your benefit.”

Elizabeth took one more long look about the room. “Fitzwilliam, it is a room fit for a king.” After a

short pause she added, "Perhaps it is good enough to impress my mother?"

Mrs. Bennet's son-in-law wisely kept his opinion to himself.

As for Mrs. Bennet's daughter, a small smile flitted across her lips as a daring thought sprang to life. It entirely escaped Darcy's notice.

A few days later, Marie gave the housekeeper a note from her mistress. Mrs. Reynolds read the instructions and looked at the maid in wonder.

"Do you know what Mrs. Darcy has requested?"

"Oui, and Madame asks if it can be accomplished today? Or will it require an additional day?"

"Inform Mrs. Darcy that all will be ready this evening. Those rooms were cleaned recently, and it should not take long to prepare them as requested."

Before Elizabeth retired for the night, she asked Darcy to wait for her in the study. He was surprised, but acquiesced. After a while, but not so long as to try Darcy's patience, a footman delivered a note to the master.

I await you in the place fit for the ruler of my heart.

~ED~

Darcy's blood pounded through his veins.

The Wales Bedroom. It had to be.

He seized a candleholder and quickly walked to the door of the opulent room he had shown Elizabeth only a few days before. As he entered, Darcy felt warm air assault his face, in marked contrast to the chill of the darkened hallway. A blaze raged in the firebox, casting dancing light across the room. Illuminated by the warm glow of dozens of candles was Elizabeth Darcy, lying against the pillows on the massive bed, her auburn locks cascading over her shoulders. She wore a nearly transparent ivory nightgown that clung to her, outlining the curves of her body against the dark drapes of the bed linen.

"Mr. Darcy, you have come at last."

Trembling, he walked to the edge of the bed and stood before her.

"We should not be here."

Elizabeth put her finger to his lips.

"You told me that the future ruler of England met his mistresses here." Sliding her finger slowly down his lips, down his neck, and onto his chest, she continued in her most seductive voice, "Fitzwilliam, am I not your mistress?"

"No ... Yes."

"Which is it?"

"Both."

Elizabeth smiled in triumph. She snaked her arms about his waist and with a passionate kiss pulled him down onto the bed. He could do nothing but obey her

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Chapter Eleven

Early February

A large carriage pulled into the circular carriage sweep leading to the front steps of Pemberley, where the master and mistress were waiting. The coachman opened the door and Darcy extended his hand to assist his guest.

“Lady Victoria, welcome to Pemberley.”

“Darcy, attentive as ever. Mrs. Darcy, how nice to see you again.”

“Thank you. We are delighted that you are here. Please, come inside where it is warm.”

Once within and her ladyship was divested of her wrap, Elizabeth asked, “Lady Victoria, would you prefer refreshments now, or to go to your rooms directly? Your usual chambers have been made ready for you.”

“Then there is no need to show me the way. I would like to attend to a few things first. After that, I would be delighted to join you.”

“Allow me to accompany you,” Darcy said, tucking his aunt’s arm into his.

“I know my way, Darcy.”

“I insist. Mrs. Darcy, I will return to you shortly.”

Elizabeth took her dismissal with good grace, and repaired to the drawing room.

“Elizabeth looks well, Darcy. At least you have not been starving the poor woman.”

“You know very well that I would never do such a thing. A man appreciates a soft woman.”

“Ha! I have always maintained such, but you are the first man other than my Reginald to say so plainly.” She smiled. “Tell me truly; are you as happy as you appear?”

“I would say that I am a very contented man, Aunt. My wife is an amazing woman.”

“Have all your doubts been answered?”

“Mostly, I confess. She has a natural aptitude for her responsibilities. However, there is still the season and St James’s Court. I will not rest easy until that challenge and our first ball are past.”

“That is wise of you. How quickly has she settled into her role as mistress of Pemberley?”

“More rapidly than I dared hope. We have yet to entertain anyone from the neighbourhood, with the

exception of Mr. Mitchell, the parson, who came for tea last Sunday, but I have enough faith in Elizabeth to press forward as planned with our social obligations.”

“Good, good. I shall be down to join you and your wife within the half-hour. Darcy, it is a pleasure to be here now that Pemberley once again has a proper mistress.”

Lady Victoria did not tarry in her rooms and was back with her hosts in good time.

“We expect Mr. Bartholomew Arnold to arrive on Monday,” Elizabeth told her as she poured the tea.

“Monday? My son is most attentive to his parish duties. Have you met him, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Not yet. The weather has been very cold and I am told that Kympton is several hours away. Mr. Darcy suggested timing his invitation coincident with your arrival.”

“That is most considerate. I have not seen him in months, not since he announced his engagement.”

“We have invited Miss Tell and her family to dine with us while he is here.”

“Excellent!”

Darcy added, “Our neighbours, the Halleys, will be joining the Tells.”

“A full table of guests! Your first, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Presiding over, yes, as you are no doubt aware.”

“Come, come, my dear.” She patted Elizabeth’s hand reassuringly. “You have been married for little more than a month, and travelled about the country at that. I would have been surprised had you already hosted a dinner party, or any social gathering, for that matter.”

Lady Victoria had decided to be generous, at least initially, with her praise of her nephew’s wife. There would be time enough to test the young woman in the coming weeks, and it was best to begin her visit on pleasant terms.

“I have every confidence that it will be a delightful evening. If we lack for entertainment, we can ask my son to sing the praises of the bewitching Miss Amelia Tell.”

Darcy nearly choked on his drink.

“I see you have been subjected to my son’s rhapsodies over his intended, Darcy.”

He arched his brow. Elizabeth answered for him. “My husband has described Mr. Arnold’s enthusiasm about his choice of wife.”

“Enthusiasm is a fine choice of words. The man is completely besotted and the lady in question seems equally afflicted. It will serve them well; the realities of a clergyman’s life are significantly different from what Miss Tell has known. But you have given him a

valuable living, Darcy. They should be comfortable enough in Kympton.”

“I was pleased to have such a fine man to bestow it upon. Its former intended recipient was rather less suitable. Elizabeth, you met that man at Bingley’s ball.”

“Yes, I remember him. He told me that he would not have made a good clergyman.”

“No, not at all. I hear nothing but praise for my cousin, and it comforts me to know that the people of the parish are so well tended.”

“I am looking forward to making his acquaintance, and meeting some of our neighbours.”

“One must start somewhere, my dear,” Lady Victoria said in assurance.

Later, when she retired for the evening, Lady Victoria declined Darcy’s invitation to escort her to her rooms, instead choosing Elizabeth’s company.

“I would not have you think that I have come only to give your husband my impressions of you, my dear,” she laughed. “I am delighted to be at Pemberley once again. It has been too long.”

“When were you last here?”

“Several years ago. Not long after Fitzwilliam’s father died, I came to stay with him and Georgiana. They were both so alone. I stayed for several months as Fitzwilliam grew into his role as master. I returned twice for visits, but never stayed long. I intended to return the summer before last, but after Georgiana’s accident, your husband was not entertaining guests.”

“He told me he was not at Pemberley often during that time. Only as much as the estate required.”

“You are with him here, now. I hope you do not resent my presence.”

“I beg your pardon, but that is nonsense. We both know why Mr. Darcy asked you to come.” Elizabeth turned and looked Lady Victoria full in the face. “Madam, I truly welcome your assistance and am most grateful for it. I freely admit that I need all the help and advice that you are willing to provide. Heavens, I even need someone to teach me how to walk in a Court dress!”

Darcy’s aunt eyed her nephew’s wife. She could see that the young woman spoke truthfully and without guile. There was an artlessness about Elizabeth that the older woman found endearing. Her first impressions had proved valid – Elizabeth was an intelligent woman who could become an accepted member of the *ton*. If Lady Victoria Arnold had any say in the matter, Elizabeth Darcy would do just that.

The sounds of a pianoforte echoed through the house. Lady Victoria followed the melody to the

music room where she found the mistress steadfastly working her way through a difficult passage. Elizabeth did not hear the other woman enter, and, after a rather dreadful chord, stopped and gave voice to her frustrations.

“Leave it to you, Lizzy, to ignore the one accomplishment that you need as a hostess.”

“Do not be so severe on yourself, Mrs. Darcy. You are playing a rather challenging piece.”

Elizabeth threw her hand to her chest, startled.

“I did not hear you enter. Forgive me.”

“You have a good notion of the fingerings. It will come to you in time.”

“It would come to me sooner had I spent more time practicing while growing up! I have not applied myself so diligently in years. Mr. Darcy insists that I spend time each day improving myself on the instrument. I would rather spend my time learning about Pemberley, but I understand his position and thus, do as I am asked.”

“Ah yes, the dreaded exhibiting. Be thankful when you are old enough, or have enough children, to be past such displays. Has Darcy offered to bring you a master?”

“Yes, which I have declined at present. It would be a hideous waste to bring a master all the way from London when an hour a day is all I can spare for the instrument. Once we are in Town, I will avail myself of a teacher, but for now, I am left to my own devices. Unless you are able to assist me?”

“No, you are doing quite well enough without my interference. I should let you continue.”

“Please, stay. I have practised enough for one day. I would enjoy your company, and we have a Court dress to discuss.”

“Ah, yes, the feathers and hoops. Have you a selected a design?”

“Not as yet, although my maid and I have had several conversations about her experiences with Miss Wyatt, who made her curtsy while Marie was in her service. I have also reviewed the latest published fashion plates. I have to admit that when younger, my sister Jane and I agreed that we were very happy not to have to wear such complicated gowns.” Elizabeth sighed. “It does seem an enormous waste of time and money on regalia that I will wear only once.”

“Perhaps, but the Queen is very insistent about what must be worn.”

“Fortunately, Marie seems to have a talent for designing elaborate gowns. She has shown me some of her drawings, and I would like you to see them as well. Work on the gown must commence very soon if it is to be ready in time.”

“Do you have all the fabrics and hoops that are needed?”

“I believe so. I was very busy during the few days we were in Town. The basic components of the dress are in my possession, and the servants are awaiting direction.”

The two ladies spoke with Elizabeth’s maid, then with the other seamstresses on the staff. Lady Victoria counselled against elaborate embroidery, favouring instead the use of subtle colour and different textures to achieve the desired effect. Her reasoning was two-fold – to save time, and to free some of the ladies to work on other garments; Elizabeth still needed a great many new gowns. Marie, responsible for designing the Court dress, was also delegated the task of creating a mock headdress and a hooped skirt with train that Elizabeth would use to rehearse for her debut.

The much-anticipated Bartholomew Arnold finally arrived at Pemberley. Darcy was pleased to have another man in the family party; all the talk of gowns, Court protocol, headdresses, and the need for this item or that had sorely tested his resolve to bring his wife before the Court.

Arnold laughed at the look on his cousin’s face when Darcy described what had occupied Elizabeth and Lady Victoria.

“If you had waited for a later date, you would not be in the throes of the females’ schemes,” Arnold remarked when he and Darcy were alone after dinner.

“You, my innocent cousin, do not understand my tactics. The sooner the date, the sooner this will be a distant memory. My wife shall have her day in the Queen’s Drawing Rooms and her night at the ball we shall hold to mark the occasion. Following that, I may disappear back into the country.”

“Only to reappear when *your* daughter performs her curtsy.”

“You have forgotten that you have no sisters. My wife may bear only sons.”

“Enough of this! I am to be married in a month to a wonderful woman, and frankly, I have no pity to spare on you. You have your bride, I await mine.”

“Ah, yes, the wedding, how *could* I have forgotten?”

“You need not be so sarcastic.”

“You need not be so verbose in extolling Miss Tell’s virtues.”

“I am not stopping you from extolling Mrs. Darcy’s virtues. She is a handsome and clever woman, Cousin. It is apparent that my mother likes her, even if she claimed she was not ready to form a judgement

when they first met. Mrs. Darcy seems to have won her favour.”

“To my relief. Elizabeth needed a sponsor and an advisor. Aunt Victoria graciously consented to act as both.

“You do know that the Tells and the Halleys come to Pemberley for dinner on the day after tomorrow?”

“Miss Tell informed me by letter.”

“You should be thankful that your intended lives so near. Waiting for letters would otherwise be interminable.”

“Her family resides close enough to easily visit, yet far enough to prevent the journey from becoming an everyday occurrence.”

“I count the distance from Elizabeth’s family in Hertfordshire as a definite advantage. A woman can settle too near her parents. Fortunately, you have nothing to worry about. The Tells are a reputable, well-bred family. You can have no cause to repine.”

“I take it, then, that your circumstances are not as favourable?”

“Elizabeth’s mother could be Aunt Alice’s long-lost twin sister.”

“So that is the lay of the land! I have not had the privilege of spending as much time as you with the Earl and his family, but enough to pity our cousins. I am thankful for my parents, Mother especially. So unlike the Earl, or Lady Catherine.”

“Your mother is nothing like her siblings, my own mother excluded.”

“Much to my own and my brothers’ joy – and relief.”

Pemberley was readied for the pre-nuptial dinner with the Tells and the Halleys. Mr. Mitchell, the Darcys’ parson, had also been included in the invitation. An early meal was planned and rooms readied, should the weather turn poor precluding the families from travelling home under the light of the moon. Bartholomew Arnold was very eager for his intended bride to arrive; Darcy, Elizabeth, and Lady Victoria had all laughed at his lovesick impatience.

Elizabeth might have also teased her new cousin, but she was far too nervous. The dinner would be her first official event as Pemberley’s newest mistress; she was anxious that the evening be a success. Darcy assured her that she had no cause for concern. The families had known each other for years, and he had every confidence that their guests were eager to be pleased and would find her as charming as he knew she was.

That is easy for him to say, she mused. *He is not the interloper*. She had not grown up with these people. To make matters worse, she likely would be the youngest person present – the hostess younger than all her guests! Percival and Evelina Halley had raised and married off all their children; they had ten grandchildren to dote on, and a few more on the way. Miss Tell was the last of her siblings to marry, and Elizabeth had learned that Amelia was two years older than she. Mr. Mitchell, a widower, had three grown children.

The Tells' carriage was first to arrive. Arnold was there to open the door as soon as the conveyance came to rest. He handed out a beautiful young woman before giving way to an older gentleman who followed next out of the carriage. Everyone quickly went inside to escape the cold.

"Mrs. Darcy, may I present Miss Amelia Tell."

"Miss Tell, a pleasure. I have heard so much about you and your family."

The gentleman from the carriage and the older woman on his arm were in turn introduced.

The older gentleman adjusted his spectacles. "Charmed, madam. I have been anxious to meet the woman who finally captured my diffident neighbour."

Mr. Tell and his wife smiled in genuine pleasure at making Elizabeth's acquaintance and their hostess immediately relaxed, instinctively knowing that these were good people. Their years of friendship with the Pemberley family had predisposed them to approve of Darcy's choice.

Within half an hour, the Halleys arrived, followed shortly by Mr. Mitchell, making the party an even ten. They gathered in a parlour to await the summons to dinner. As was customary in the country, they would eat earlier than they would in Town; Elizabeth had planned a two-course meal with a light late supper to be served just prior to her guests' departure.

The food was praised, the conversation was pleasant, and all seemed to enjoy each other's company. After dinner, the women left the men to their pursuits, and Elizabeth had a chance to become better acquainted with the ladies.

"Mrs. Darcy, I am told you came from Hertfordshire," said Mrs. Halley.

"Yes, my father's estate, Longbourn, is near the town of Meryton."

"That is where you met Mr. Darcy?" Mrs. Tell asked.

"His friend, Mr. Bingley, leased a nearby estate, and Mr. Darcy came to visit. We met at an assembly.

Mr. Bingley is to marry my elder sister at the end of March."

"Both friends smitten with sisters! How charming!" Mrs. Tell continued, "Do you have other siblings?"

"Yes, three younger sisters."

"No brother to inherit? It is fortunate that you were able to secure such a husband."

Elizabeth inwardly bristled, then rallied her composure. Mrs. Tell's tone was not cutting, and she did, after all, speak only the simple truth. *Stop it, Lizzie! If you take offence at such a small and surely unintentional slight, how will you survive London's drawing rooms? Some of those matrons will make a real effort to draw blood*. She drew a breath, then smiled at the speaker. "I consider myself the most fortunate woman in the world, Mrs. Tell. You all know what an excellent man my husband is – you must agree that there is no finer."

"Mrs. Darcy, I am afraid you will not find us in complete agreement," said Lady Victoria. "I think it safe to say that every woman should believe that her own husband is the better man."

"Forgive me, I did not mean to disparage ..."

Mrs. Tell graciously put an end to Elizabeth's discomposure. "Mrs. Darcy, I, for one, think it quite romantic that you have such strong feelings for your husband."

"As do I," Amelia Tell said to further reassure Elizabeth. "I can very much understand your feelings."

"Marriage seems to suit your husband," Mrs. Tell continued. "I have not seen him so congenial since before Miss Darcy's death, although he was not what one would call an unreserved man." The other ladies nodded in agreement. "He never prattled away like some young men do these days. Always so very serious."

Lady Victoria joined the conversation. "Not that he was always so reserved. When he was a lad, he got into his own share of mischief. My sister's letters would be full of this or that bit of boyish mayhem. He certainly kept his parents' attention. I have many stories I could tell, as could the other ladies whose sons he played with as a youth. Alas, with the death of his mother, he lost some of that *joie de vivre*."

"And then when George Darcy died, he became Master of Pemberley and proved himself as the man his parents raised him to be," Mrs. Halley added. "It was extraordinary, if you consider it. So young and so many responsibilities."

Elizabeth smiled at the fondness these women, who had known Darcy from the time he was born, held for her husband.

The three older women began to reminisce about people whom Elizabeth did not know, and Miss Tell took the opportunity to engage her in private discourse.

“Do not fret. I have never met some of the people they are speaking of now. I am thankful for the chance to get to know you better. We will be cousins soon.” Both young women smiled.

“I met Mr. Arnold only a few days ago. I like him very much. He is a pleasant and intelligent man, most eager to be married.”

Amelia laughed. “We both are! My parents insisted on a long engagement, but as the months have dragged on, I think Mother has begun to regret that decision. I suspect she is tired of my complaints about waiting.”

“My own engagement was rather short, not even two months.”

“I envy you.”

“It did not seem enviable at the time. Everything was so hectic. I think I was more relieved than happy when the wedding was over.”

“You are happy now, though. No one who has seen you with Mr. Darcy can doubt it. I have known him all my life, and I am pleased that he has found a woman who could bring joy back into his life and into this house.”

The two women talked together until the gentlemen rejoined them, the older ladies content to let the two progress in their acquaintance. Elizabeth and Amelia, they knew, could develop an enduring friendship, founded on a similarity of age and temperament, kinship through their husbands, and the relatively short distance between their marital residences. The matrons were correct. Elizabeth and Amelia formed a good opinion of each other that evening, which would develop into a strong bond and secure a lifelong friendship. Jane would always hold that special place in Elizabeth’s heart that belonged only to a beloved sister, but Elizabeth would later call Amelia her closest friend after Jane.

The weather held and the dinner guests made it safely to their homes in a clear, bright moonlight. Darcy was pleased. The evening had gone very well indeed and Elizabeth had demonstrated that she was the consummate hostess. Lady Victoria complimented her before retiring for the night. And Darcy showed his satisfaction in a way only a lover could do.

A few days later, Bartholomew Arnold returned to Kympton, while his mother remained with the Darcys. Her presence was no intrusion. She and Elizabeth spent several hours each day discussing the upcoming season in Town. Lady Victoria did her best to educate her protégé on the many potential pitfalls the young woman would face in her foray into society. Elizabeth learned with whom Darcy was on good terms, and more importantly, with whom he was not. The complex web of social ties was drilled into the young woman, until she could identify each member of each prominent family she was likely to meet. Her education also included a thorough briefing on the scandals and scuttlebutt of the *ton*, and especially those associated with her new family.

Lady Victoria was not a sympathetic taskmaster. “Elizabeth,” she would say, “if you fail to remember that Lady Seaton coveted your husband as a son-in-law, and are not on your guard when you meet her, you may justly draw her scorn and ridicule. Trust me, the woman is as vindictive as they come, and she will not be pleased that some country nobody stole Darcy from her daughter, no matter how repellent that simpering creature may be!”

The lessons also continued about Court.

“You must never turn your back on the Queen, which can make moving difficult when you must walk backwards. Concentrate on what I have told you!” Lady Victoria would say as Elizabeth practised wearing the hooped skirt that was shaped similarly to the dress she would wear at St James’s.

Elizabeth bore all of the testing with good grace. Her new aunt would be purposely caustic, trying to goad her into losing her poise and her temper. Lady Victoria rarely succeeded, unless Elizabeth was particularly tired from attending to her other duties as mistress, or had an unsatisfactory time practicing on the pianoforte.

The work on Elizabeth’s Court dress was also moving forward. Several fittings were held to assure that the special gown designed to be worn before royalty would fit perfectly. Other gowns that Elizabeth would need were being sewn as well. After consultation with Lady Victoria and Mrs. Reynolds, additional women were employed to produce the raiment necessary for Mrs. Darcy.

Elizabeth was tired. She wanted nothing more than for it all to be over – the fuss and the fittings, the lessons, the presentation, the season, the testing that would determine, once and she hoped for all, her suitability as a Darcy bride. She wanted nothing more than to settle in comfortably with her husband here at Pemberley, far away from that handful of social

arbiters in London who had the power to decide if she was worthy of their notice. What gave them the right? What if she failed? Not a few times, she found herself frustrated or very close to anger. Not a few times, she questioned her decision to enter into this marriage. But then she would spy her husband, and her love for him filled her with strength and happiness. A lifetime with Fitzwilliam Darcy was worth anything. He had been most perceptive; she discovered within herself an unexpected courage that rose at the thought of any attempt to intimidate her. It would serve her well in the months ahead.

The seemingly endless fittings continued daily. One in particular stood out in both Elizabeth's and Lady Victoria's mind. Marie was once again checking the suitability of the fit of the bodice of the court dress. As the maid fretted and pulled at the garment's neckline, Elizabeth winced in pain.

"Marie, faites attention, s'il vous plaît ! Je suis très sensible là-bas, comme vous le savez bien !"

"Pardonnez-moi, Madame, je vous en prie! Je serais plus prudente dorénavant."

Lady Victoria's attention was immediately drawn to the lack of English in the exchange, and by the implied meaning behind the words. She looked more closely at her new niece, studying her for signs of change. She could see nothing different, but did not fail to notice the blush that coloured Elizabeth's cheeks, and the young woman's inability to meet her eyes.

Interesting.

The wedding of Amelia Tell and Bartholomew Arnold was finally near at hand. The Earl consented to attend the ceremony as a sign of family approval. Lady Catherine could not be bothered to travel so far in winter, and in any event, her contempt for Darcy's marriage outweighed, in her mind, all other considerations. Many months ago, well before the Bennet-Darcy wedding, it had been agreed that the Fitzwilliams and Arnolds were to stay at Pemberley. The now-strained relationship between Darcy and his uncle, and the continuing coolness between the Earl and Lady Victoria, dictated that the Earl and his wife stay elsewhere. The Tells would host them; there was, fortunately, a prior acquaintance between the families.

Elizabeth was relieved that at least one potentially explosive situation seemed to have been averted, but they would still play host to the entire Arnold clan. Michael Arnold and his wife Helen, Charles Arnold, and Joseph Arnold would come to see their brother married. None of the Fitzwilliam cousins would attend. Colonel Fitzwilliam sent his respects,

but his army duties prevented his journey to Derbyshire. No one had expected his siblings to come and thus, were not disappointed when they begged off.

The first week of March found the Darcys inundated with family. Pemberley was nearer to the church where the wedding would take place than Kympton, which was in the opposite direction. Amelia Tell would be married from her father's house, in the church where she had been baptized, and where she had worshipped since childhood.

Both Darcys rejoiced in opening Pemberley to so many of their family and sharing the happiness of their cousins. Elizabeth was delighted to further her acquaintance with the oldest and youngest Arnold sons and to meet Charles, who had been unable to come to Hertfordshire for her wedding. Michael's wife, Helen, as she knew from their previous meetings, was a delightful woman, and Elizabeth enjoyed the time she was able to spend with Lady Victoria and her daughter-in-law.

The groom was the last to arrive at Pemberley. True to his convictions, he discharged his pastoral duties on Sunday before travelling to Pemberley to be with his family one last time before he became a married man.

The night before the wedding was a special evening. Elizabeth had arranged for all of the groom's favourites to be served at dinner. The family party reminisced about days gone by: exploits from their youth, fond remembrances of those no longer alive, and hopes for the future filled the conversation that night.

After Elizabeth led the women to the drawing room following the meal, Darcy and Michael Arnold, as the married men, offered Bartholomew a few words of wisdom. When Darcy spoke of finding happiness and contentment in his marital union, the brothers were amazed to hear such words from their cousin. But his ease and seeming satisfaction with his life gave his words added power and authority. Even Michael was impressed. To those who did not truly know Darcy, he appeared to be the same man he had always been; to those who knew him well, it was evident that something *had* changed. All the Arnolds believed it was for the better, and only Darcy was oblivious to it all.

The men shared their spirits, cigars, and advice then reconvened with the ladies. The rest of the evening was spent listening to Elizabeth and Helen Arnold play the pianoforte; even the matriarch, Lady Victoria, was prevailed upon to provide a song.

As the evening came to a close, Darcy had several special bottles of wine brought in. Once everyone was in possession of a glass, he began.

“Bartholomew, some of my earliest memories are of you trailing behind, trying to be included in play with your older brothers and me. Little could I imagine the men we would one day become. When you chose to make the church your profession, one of my greatest delights as master of Pemberley was to bestow upon you the living at Kympton. Since the day you were installed in the parish, you have proven yourself a worthy man of the cloth. You have also proved worthy of the hand of one of my dearest friends, a woman I have known all of her life. Had you *not* been so worthy, I would never have allowed you near Amelia.” Everyone laughed.

“Tomorrow, you will take your biggest step towards happiness when you take Amelia Tell for your wife. Honour and cherish her as a husband ought, and you will secure an excellent helpmeet for all the days of your life. I am happy for you, and I am happy for Amelia. May God give you harmony and joy all the days of your life together. May your household expand with the gift of children, who will bring you delight as you grow old. And finally, may you never exceed your income.”

Again all laughed as they raised their glasses. It was a memorable end to a perfect evening.

Before retiring for the evening, Darcy made a point of speaking privately with the groom to be.

“I owe you an apology,” Darcy said. “Were it not for my disagreement with our uncle, the family party would have been more complete.”

“Do not worry, my friend. My brothers and I never have been close to our Fitzwilliam kin. The Earl never made an effort to know us; I am not sure he ever truly accepted us. I think his attendance is as much predicated on a design not to offend Amelia’s family as to support mine.”

“The Earl has always been concerned about appearances.”

“Thus he came to Derbyshire and brought his wife, but not his children. Darcy, I understand his motives and refuse to allow you to assume responsibility for his prejudices, much less his failings. He has not even had the courtesy to pay his respects to your new wife, despite being in the neighbourhood. I know you extended the invitation. The less thought of him, the better.”

“But the connection is important and you should retain it if at all possible.”

“I am a clergyman, Darcy.”

“You are a gentleman by birth. Remember your children before you dismiss it out of hand.”

“Oh, very well then, I shall. But enough of this. Off to your wife, old man. I look forward to privilege going to *mine* tomorrow.”

The following day, two young lovers were joined forever in holy matrimony. All those present rejoiced in the new union. At the wedding breakfast, Elizabeth was at last introduced to the Earl and his wife. The meeting was short; both couples were unfailingly polite for a few strained minutes until they could make their excuses and find more agreeable conversation with people they actually liked.

In the days following, the Darcys’ guests vacated Pemberley, including Lady Victoria, who travelled back to Town with her three sons and daughter-in-law. Neither did the Darcys tarry long at Pemberley. Preparations were made for the journey south. Directions were given for the upkeep of the house while the family was not in residence. Trunks were packed and carts were loaded with all that would be needed during the next few months. It was time to return to London society.

To Netherfield, first, they would go. Jane and Bingley’s wedding would take place at the end of the month, and Elizabeth wanted to be near her sister for at least the last few days before she shed the name of Bennet. Then the Darcys would journey to London, where all their hopes for Elizabeth’s entry into society waited.

Chapter Twelve

After a long three days' journey to Hertfordshire, Elizabeth was in no mood to suffer the false sincerity of Caroline Bingley, although 'false sincerity' might have been too charitable a phrase. Miss Bingley carried a thinly veiled contempt for Mrs. Darcy that her brother had tried, unsuccessfully, to check.

Neither had Mr. Darcy forgotten Miss Bingley's cutting remarks for his then fiancée when last he was at Netherfield. Nor did he fail to remember his resolve never again to allow that woman to speak of Elizabeth in such a hateful manner without serious consequences. Another outburst such as he had experienced when he announced his betrothal and Caroline Bingley would be banished forever from both his London house and Pemberley. He hoped, for Charles' sake, it would not come to that, but a man must uphold the honour of his wife.

Thus, when they finally arrived at Netherfield, both Darcys were silently relieved that Caroline Bingley was nowhere to be seen; it was her amiable brother Charles who greeted their guests. Darcy asked that they be excused to go directly to their rooms, pleading fatigue. Despite his excitement about his impending nuptials, and his joy at seeing his friends, Bingley was observant enough to comprehend that Mrs. Darcy was desirous of rest, and in evident need of it.

Her solicitous husband led Elizabeth to the room he had occupied as a bachelor on his previous visits. Although he had told Bingley that he might join him later, whether either Darcy appeared downstairs that evening would depend entirely on Elizabeth's strength. If she preferred to retire for the evening, he would join her, as he had every night since they were wed.

Darcy dismissed both his wife's maid, Marie, and Morton, his own valet. He had sensed Elizabeth's fatigue as they walked up the stairs. For the first time ever, she leaned heavily on his arm for support. How could a carriage ride – albeit one of three days' duration – so sap her strength? It had been, in his opinion, an especially easy journey.

He insisted that Elizabeth lie down directly, a request with which she readily complied. Darcy helped her out of her dress and corset before tucking her beneath the covers. Too concerned to leave her

alone, he removed his shoes, jacket, waistcoat, and cravat and lay with her on the bed. Elizabeth pressed herself against him; soon her breathing slowed, and Darcy was relieved to see that his wife was asleep. He resisted the urge to return to his host, instead succumbing to the even greater urge to remain with the woman in his arms. When she woke, he would ask if she was unwell. Until then, he would join her in slumber.

A sound in the hallway awakened them.

"How long have I been asleep?" Elizabeth groggily enquired.

"Just short of three hours."

"Who would have suspected that riding in a coach, a well sprung Darcy coach at that, could be so taxing?"

"Elizabeth, I am worried. It is not like you to be so tired after such little exertion. Please, tell me, are you ill?"

Indeed, Darcy sounded most concerned. Elizabeth noted his apprehension before a smile slowly diffused across her face.

"Fitzwilliam, my fatigue should soon pass." She toyed with a lock of his hair. "You have commented on the large volume of correspondence between Longbourn and Pemberley."

Darcy was confused by the apparent change of subject. His wife endeavoured to enlighten him: "My mother has taken great pains to inform me of all the different symptoms of a woman who is with child, hoping, no doubt, that I would soon exhibit enough of them to confirm that she was to be a grandmother."

"You are with child?" Darcy's face and voice reflected a myriad of emotions: astonishment, hesitation, hope – and something else entirely pleasant: the first cautious flickerings of joy.

"I cannot be certain until the child quickens, but yes, I believe I am carrying your heir."

Elizabeth was gratified to see his initial concerns dissolve into happiness. Without warning, he kissed her, laughing as he broke away.

"I am to be a father!"

"I believe that was one of your stipulations when you asked me to be your wife."

"Indeed!" He was very pleased and took some time showing her! "How long have you suspected? When will the baby come?"

Elizabeth laughed at his enthusiasm. He was as happy as she.

"I have suspected for only a few weeks, and I believe our child will arrive around the beginning of October. I told you on our wedding night that my monthly courses are normally very regular. When they did not come when expected, I dismissed it as another

inconsistency due to the burdens of my new situation. However, as time passed, my suspicions were aroused. After all," Elizabeth touched his hip, "you were diligent in teaching me how a lover ought to act. I do not believe a single day has passed without your excellent instruction." Darcy smiled. "Mama has continually inundated me with unsolicited advice, no doubt hoping for confirmation of her conjectures."

"Does she know?"

"Fitzwilliam! How could you think that I would tell her, of all people, before I told you?"

"Forgive me, Elizabeth." Darcy's hand reverently caressed her still taut stomach. "Are there other signs?"

"Oh yes! I am surprised that you have not noticed. My breasts have changed, darling. They are larger and somewhat tender."

He moved his hand to tenderly caress each one. "I thought it was my imagination." He covered one and measured it with the span of his fingers. "Does it hurt when I touch you here?"

"Not if you touch me as you do now. They are not constantly sore, but if you could be careful, it would make this more pleasurable." It was Elizabeth's turn to move her hands. She pulled his head towards her with one and caressed the bulge in his breeches with the other. "Make me yours again, Fitzwilliam."

He hesitated. "Will it endanger the child?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Another piece of my mother's wisdom. No, it does not."

"Thank God!"

Darcy never did return downstairs that evening; he was much more agreeably engaged.

Caroline Bingley was in a foul mood. Not only had both Darcys retired to their rooms immediately after their arrival and not returned downstairs even once during the previous evening, but this morning Mr. Darcy was actually smiling. At his wife! Miss Bingley had rarely seen the man smile at anyone other than his dear, departed sister. He had certainly never bestowed a sincere look of pleasure upon her, but there he sat, across from his wife, and he could not keep his eyes off the woman. Charles was the one who normally resembled the love-sick puppy, not Mr. Darcy.

"Are you fully recovered from your journey, Mrs. Darcy?"

"Yes. Thank you, Miss Bingley."

"Your room, does it meet with your satisfaction?"

"Certainly. Mr. Darcy told me that it is the same one he occupied when he last stayed at Netherfield. It

met with his approval then, and it is more than comfortable enough for us now."

It took Miss Bingley a few moments to realise that Eliza Darcy had not stayed in the room she had been given, but had spent the night in Darcy's. Suppressing her horror at the knowledge that husband and wife were sharing one room – and one bed – she coolly replied, "Do not hesitate to ask if you are in need of anything."

Unable to watch the disgusting display of connubial bliss before her, Miss Bingley excused herself to see to some matter or other that needed her attention. She was not missed.

The time for the inevitable call on Longbourn arrived. Darcy knew that Elizabeth was eager to see Jane, but he shared none of her enthusiasm for visiting her family. Perhaps he would be able to escape with Mr. Bennet before too long. Prolonged exposure to his mother-in-law was dangerous to his sanity – and to his hearing.

Mrs. Bennet did not disappoint.

"My dear Mrs. Darcy! You have come to Longbourn at last!" Elizabeth gave her spouse a wry smile before stepping out of the coach and into the arms of her adoring mother; she was clearly now Mrs. Bennet's favourite child.

Mrs. Bennet stepped back from Elizabeth and examined her from head to toe. "I had hoped that you might be showing signs of increasing by now, Lizzy. After all, Mr. Darcy expects an heir and it is your duty to produce one."

"Mother!" Elizabeth hissed.

"Well, why else would he marry you? A good, stout, healthy country-bred woman strong enough to birth many children; that is what he must have seen in you."

"This is not the time or the place to discuss this. I beg that we be allowed into the house so I may greet the rest of my family."

Elizabeth was clearly unhappy with her mother's vulgar display. Only his wife's anticipation of seeing her father and her sisters kept Darcy from returning Elizabeth to their carriage and escaping back to Netherfield. *Something must be done about Mrs. Bennet.*

Darcy followed his wife into the house, and saw Mr. Bennet watching his married daughter and her mother with obvious amusement. Jane smiled at her sister, and Darcy could see how impatient she was to greet her. He was glad he had not acted on his first impulse and fled Longbourn. Mary stood silently and stoically biding her time, Kitty appeared happy to see

Elizabeth, Lydia looked bored. They were all exactly as he remembered them.

When the party finally settled in the drawing room, Darcy felt like a prized stallion. He and Elizabeth sat on a divan, the centre of attention. He hoped that his father-in-law would soon grow tired of the spectacle and retreat to his books; Darcy would be right behind him. Fortunately, the ladies' questions were directed to Elizabeth, and he was saved from participating in the inane conversation. From time to time, he surreptitiously glanced at Mr. Bennet, silently entreating that gentleman to abandon the entertainment in the drawing room for the serenity of the library. When the master of the house at last stood to leave, Darcy was on his feet and following before Mrs. Bennet had a chance to react. He gave Elizabeth a guilty little smile as he fled the room.

Once the men had departed, Elizabeth's interrogation intensified.

"Lizzy, is Pemberley as grand as we have heard? Your letters spoke little of the house."

"Pemberley is very large, but not overly ornate, Mama. There is an elegance to it that I find most pleasing. What matters most to me is the integrity and generosity of its owner. The estate is a reflection of its master and inasmuch as it is, I am content."

Mrs. Bennet was not to be distracted. She cared little about the integrity and generosity of Pemberley's owner, providing, as it did, fewer morsels that she could use to impress her neighbours than would its splendours. "The house must be all that I have heard and better than I imagined! And to think that my daughter is its mistress. Your cleverness in securing such a fine husband has saved us all."

"Mother, I never sought to secure Mr. Darcy."

"Of course not." Mrs. Bennet winked. "Mrs. Darcy. Ooh, how wonderful that sounds! And now Jane is to be wed. Two daughters married! Lizzy, you must invite your sisters to stay with you. Jane, too, after you are Mrs. Bingley. Both of your husbands have houses in Town. Think of the balls you will attend, and the society! You must take your sisters so that they, too, will be thrown into the path of rich men."

Elizabeth knew where this was headed; Mrs. Bennet was nearly in raptures again as she contemplated three, four, or even five daughters equally well-married. Her daughter quite deliberately steered the conversation to Jane's wedding. Mrs. Bennet never tired of talking of wedding preparations and blithely followed Elizabeth's lead.

"Jane, at least, has had a proper engagement, with enough time to arrange an appropriate wedding

day. You married too quickly, Lizzie, to organize the sort of wedding that your husband's exalted position deserved."

"I assure you, madam, that Mr. Darcy and I were more than satisfied with our wedding day." Elizabeth then added, "And you certainly made it memorable."

Mrs. Bennet smiled patronizingly and returned to Jane's impending nuptials. Lydia and Kitty, having already heard all that their mother could possibly say on the subject, began talking among themselves about the latest gossip from Meryton. Neither had any news to report, but at least the topic was more interesting than anything their mother had to say. Mary simply picked up a book and started reading.

Mrs. Bennet returned to another of her favourite subjects, albeit in a softer voice than normal.

"Have you begun to provide Mr. Darcy with an heir? He looked more than willing to take you to his bed when he married you."

"Mother," Elizabeth hissed, "This is not the appropriate place to discuss such things."

"Oh, the younger girls are not listening and I have already told Jane about her wifely duties. I want to know if you are with child yet. Come now, I birthed five daughters. I know how men are."

Elizabeth coloured, unwilling to discuss the subject.

"As I have told you in every one of my letters, when there is news of that sort to report, be assured that my husband and I will tell you at the proper time."

"But have you looked for the signs that I mentioned in my letters? You never answered me. You realise that once you are with child, you can send your husband away from your bed."

"Mother! I must insist that you respect my wishes on this matter. I have nothing more to say. Let us converse on something more suitable for my unmarried sisters' ears."

Mrs. Bennet was not happy with her married daughter's refusal to elaborate.

"Oh very well. You always were the headstrong one. But you must promise that I shall be the first to know."

"My husband deserves that honour."

"Yes, yes, of course. After you tell him you must write to me immediately."

At last, Jane, embarrassed by the conversation she had just witnessed and eager to have her sister to herself, took pity on Elizabeth and asked if she wished to see her bridal gown.

"Oh yes! Take Mrs. Darcy to your room and show her your gown. I have never seen anything so

fine on one of my daughters before.” Mrs. Bennet conveniently overlooked the exquisite gown that Elizabeth was wearing.

Once safely upstairs, Elizabeth closed the door to Jane’s room and leaned against it, sighing in relief.

“Some things will never change.”

“Mother is excited.”

“Our mother is exactly as she has always been. My leaving Longbourn affected no change in her, except to make her even more determined to find rich husbands for her other daughters.”

The reunited sisters embraced and both laughed at the truth of Elizabeth’s words.

“I have missed you so much.”

“As I have you, Jane. You must tell me everything you have not already told me in your letters – after you show me your wedding dress.”

Jane brought out the gown she would wear when she exchanged the name of Bennet for Bingley.

“Oh Jane, I can see this on you even now. You will be the most beautiful bride ever!”

“Mama was insistent that no expense be spared. Thankfully, Aunt Gardiner came to my aid when we selected the fabric and trim. You know Mama’s weakness for lace.”

The sisters then eagerly shared all the things left unspoken in their letters. Elizabeth was overjoyed to see Jane’s absolute love for Mr. Bingley and to hear her sister’s assurances that the gentleman returned her feelings in kind. But Elizabeth, seeing these deep and tender emotions suffuse Jane’s entire being, was left with a tinge of sadness, wondering if she was doomed to a life of unrequited love. For the first time, the question arose in her mind: could she truly be content to love, but not be loved?

“Elizabeth.” Jane spoke softly, breaking her sister’s reverie. “Have you told him?” *That you love him* was unnecessary. Elizabeth understood her sister perfectly.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“In Brighton, about a week after the wedding.”

“It did not take long for you to see what was already in your heart.”

“I knew it the day of the wedding.”

Jane noticed the lack of enthusiasm in Elizabeth’s voice. “He has yet to tell you his feelings?”

“Jane, I do not expect him ever to love me. I do not know if he will be able to love me, or anyone else. He has told me this himself, and I have resigned myself to the fact that my husband may never have the depth of feeling for me that I have for him.”

“Oh, Lizzie, can you be happy in that knowledge?”

Elizabeth hesitated, now a little less sure of herself. The strength of her longing to have with Darcy what Jane had with Mr. Bingley surprised her. But facts were facts, and regret was an indulgence. She might not yet have Darcy’s love, but she still had hope.

“Yes, I believe I can. But do not mistake me, Jane, I am content. He has given me everything he promised when he offered for me, but he never promised me his heart. I will spend the rest of my days loving him and being the companion he asked me to be. Believe me, I have thought much on this. I can never be as happy as you, for you are too good – but I can be, I will be, I am content to be Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy.” Jane looked at her with compassion. “Am I making any sense?”

“You make perfect sense. Elizabeth, I know you understood exactly what kind of a marriage you were entering with Mr. Darcy. You chose a path of friendship and security, both financial and emotional. Your husband is exactly the kind of man who would challenge you intellectually and whom you could respect and esteem. The only thing you did not expect was the depth of affection you feel for him. I see no reason why this should bring unhappiness. Who is to say that Mr. Darcy does not return the same feelings? He does not look displeased with you.”

“He has never given me any indication that he regrets our union. He seems at ease with our situation.” Elizabeth and Darcy had agreed to keep the knowledge of her pregnancy between them. As much as Elizabeth wanted to tell her sister the good news, she enjoyed the shared secret with her husband even more.

A look of mischief appeared on Elizabeth’s face. “Though he cannot be overjoyed at the amount of money he has spent on my wardrobe. Jane, if Mr. Bingley insists that you be dressed in clothing befitting your new station, you will spend every spare hour in Town for next two months either buying fabrics or being fitted for new gowns!”

Dinner was a struggle for Elizabeth. Her time away from Longbourn and her association with Darcy’s family and neighbours had given her a new perspective on the unseemly displays of her mother, father, and three younger sisters. Only Jane escaped censure. Elizabeth had often been uncomfortable with the manners of her family, but now she wondered how she had failed to see just how dreadful their behaviour really was. She was never more thankful that

Derbyshire was so far away and that her father detested Town. She would see Jane and Mr. Bingley, she was sure; Bingley was one of her husband's close friends. They would entertain each other when in London, and when she and Darcy were compelled to visit Hertfordshire, Netherfield would be a refuge. Elizabeth speculated how long she could neglect issuing an invitation to her family to visit Pemberley and, thereby, delay the mortification she would surely feel when her mother rhapsodised about the splendour of the Darcy estate.

Such were her thoughts as she and her husband returned to Netherfield. Neither was of a disposition to converse on the trip back.

Elizabeth suddenly realised the direction of her musings, and was shamed. How could she think so ill of her own flesh and blood? How could she belittle the people whom she loved? They did not deserve such condemnation, especially from her. Her attitude was the same as her husband had displayed in Brighton that had so troubled her less than three months previously. Had the wealth and privilege she now enjoyed so quickly altered her that she was unable to see the value of people beyond their rank in society and the propriety of their manners?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Darcy's hand reaching across the carriage to rest on her knee.

"Elizabeth, what has distressed you so?"

Not wishing to confess the true source of her agitation, her agile mind quickly leapt to the problem made evident by their visit to Longbourn.

"Fitzwilliam, what are we to do about my family and the ball? I refuse to dishonour them by not extending an invitation, but I am afraid of what shame their behaviour might bring on me, which would also reflect on you. If it were only Jane, Mary, and my father, I would not be overly concerned. But my mother, Kitty, and Lydia! My father has done nothing to check them. My youngest sisters are silly, ignorant, and vain. They do not know how to act at home, much less in proper society, and Mama – she will tell everyone she meets how her two eldest daughters have caught rich husbands. Oh dearest, I cannot bear to think on it!"

Darcy moved to sit next to Elizabeth and pull her into his arms. "You have expressed my own sentiments and concerns. We are in agreement that something must be done. However, we need not make any decision at this moment. Let me speak to Bingley. Perhaps your family can stay with them in Town. We can claim, justly, that you have much to prepare. As for your younger sisters and mother, I have no

solution at present, but we still have time to think of something."

"What a troublesome wife you have!"

"Elizabeth, I entered our marriage well aware that your family would provide obstacles to your acceptance into the *ton*. Do not become discouraged at the first challenge. Let me do what needs to be done."

Nevertheless, they did discuss what could be done. The following morning, with a letter from Elizabeth in hand, Darcy called at Longbourn.

Mr. Bennet was surprised to see his son-in-law so early in the day, but graciously welcomed him into the library.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this morning? You have already married my daughter; I fear there is little left of mine that you could desire."

"On the contrary, sir, I have need of assistance on a matter of great importance."

"And that is?"

Darcy handed over the sealed missive. "Elizabeth asked me to give you this letter. Please read it before we continue."

Mr. Bennet's curiosity was clearly aroused. He broke the seal and began to read.

My Beloved Father,

I have asked my husband to deliver this letter into your hands this morning. My presence at Longbourn would have defeated the purpose of his visit, but I could not allow him to call on you without sending this affirmation of the news we have to share. Papa, I have every reason to believe that I am with child. We cannot be certain for at least a month, but all indications point to such a conclusion. As a father, you must understand the overwhelming emotions we are now experiencing, and I do not know who is more amazed, Mr. Darcy or myself. Each day I grow more and more convinced that marrying Mr. Darcy was the single wisest choice I will ever make in my life. I am more than happy with this news; I am elated. We have decided to tell you because of what my husband must now speak to you about. For my sake, and even more for the sake of the babe I now carry within me, please listen to all that he has to say.

I remain your devoted daughter,

Elizabeth Darcy

George Bennet looked up to see the confirmation in the eyes of his reserved son-in-law. Darcy thought he saw a tear forming.

“It is true? My little girl is to be a mother?” Darcy nodded. “Elizabeth tells me there is more.”

“First of all, you are the only other person with whom we have shared this news. Elizabeth told me only two days ago. Until the babe quickens, we do not plan to tell anyone else.”

“Especially my wife. I understand your meaning, sir, but why tell me?”

Darcy continued. “I was about to come to that point. After much discussion, Elizabeth believed it best that you be told her condition so that you would be more agreeable to the petition I must now make. As you may know, Elizabeth will be presented at Court on the 21st of April.”

“Mrs. Bennet may have mentioned it a time or two.”

“You might also suspect that we are to hold a ball two days following to mark the occasion, and to formally introduce Elizabeth to the *ton* as my wife. Elizabeth’s news gives me reason to be concerned for her well-being. The pressure she will be under for the next month is great, and the very last thing I wish to do is to add to her burdens.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Sir, I know that you and your wife would normally expect an invitation to stay with us in Town in anticipation of these events. I am concerned that the duties of hostess will be more than Elizabeth can manage without over-taxing herself. I have taken the liberty of speaking to Bingley, and without revealing Elizabeth’s state, have asked if he would be gracious enough to allow your family, which will also be his by then, to stay at the Bingley townhouse.”

“Mr. Bingley, being a man who wishes to oblige his friends, agreed.” It was not a question.

“Without hesitation.”

“Poor Jane.”

“I hope you can understand why I have taken this course of action.” Darcy paused. “And I hope that you are not offended.”

“I find your reasoning entirely justified. I cannot say that I would have done differently if I were in your place.”

Darcy hesitated a moment.

“There is more that I need to say on this subject. When I spoke of the ball, I said that it was Elizabeth’s official *début* as Mrs. Darcy. She will be under intense scrutiny for the entire evening; indeed, for the entire time we are in London. Mr. Bennet, it is my intent that

nothing jeopardize her acceptance into society, if I can prevent it.”

There was an immediate escalation of tension in the room.

“What are you saying, Mr. Darcy?” Mr. Bennet’s tone was cold and defensive.

“Sir, I am concerned about the behaviour of some members of this household and their ability to act with decorum and discretion.”

“Speak plainly, sir.”

Darcy sighed. “We both know that Miss Lydia is too young to be out in society. Tell me, is she truly ‘out’?”

“She and her mother may consider it so, but no, she is not. She is too young to be attending balls in London,” Mr. Bennet said wearily. “To answer your next question, Kitty is ‘out’ and any invitation you extend to our family would include her. However, Kitty, when not in the company of Lydia, is less insipid. Actually, she is rather shy and withdrawn.”

“Elizabeth shares your estimation of Miss Catherine. I hope you can appreciate the difficult position I am in. I do not wish to insult you or your family, but I must first protect mine.” There was one person’s name left unsaid. Neither man wished to be the one to say it. “Mr. Bennet, my one remaining request of you today is this. Will you speak to your wife and impress upon her the importance of the ball to Elizabeth’s acceptance in the *ton*. I know she will be very proud of her daughter. I know she will want to tell everyone how proud she is of her daughter. I am concerned that her *enthusiasm* on the subject will not be received in a manner that will do her or Elizabeth credit.”

Mr. Bennet regarded the man before him for several moments. “It has been a long time since my wife has held her tongue for anyone or anything. I am not blind to her faults, Mr. Darcy, but I know not how to comply with your request.”

“Impress upon her the absolute importance of the event for Elizabeth and for Elizabeth’s future children.” Even Darcy knew that he sounded heavy-handed.

“Give me time. I still have nearly a month to think of something. If all else fails, I will have a servant slip Mrs. Bennet a sleeping draught.”

Darcy knew he had to be content with that answer. He had done what he had come to do, save one thing. “Mr. Bennet, please understand that I have come here today as the head of *my* family. Please do not resent Elizabeth for what *I* have said. She loves *her* family and wants them to share in her honour. If

you are angry with what I have said, be angry with me, not with her.”

Mr. Bennet nodded his understanding. “Would you care for something to drink?”

“No, thank you. I should return to Netherfield and my wife. Expect to receive our invitations soon.” Darcy stood and shook his host’s hand. “Until next time.”

After Darcy had gone, Mr. Bennet poured himself a drink and reviewed the remarkable conversation. The nerve of the man! Had Mr. Darcy said what he had said about his family in any other manner, Mr. Bennet would have felt compelled to call him out. The arrogance, the conceit – the justice of his assertions were difficult to accept. For all the haughtiness of his address, the man was right. Damn him! Mr. Bennet felt every insult to his method of presiding over his household, and he knew they were deserved.

He banged his now-empty glass on the desk. George Bennet may have failed his wife and his children, but this was one time he could do something to help his worthy daughter. Elizabeth, and Jane for that matter, deserved that he try. It was the least that he could do. However, he was still thoroughly annoyed that he would also have to do it for the proud man who had married his favourite daughter. It took all his self control not to lash out in anger. Thank God Elizabeth had the sense to send her note to prepare him for her husband’s cutting words.

Damn him!

On the day Jane Bennet become Mrs. Charles Bingley, many compared that wedding to the one three months prior when Elizabeth Bennet married Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire. They may have noted how much grander were the preparations for this wedding, how much more lavish the wedding breakfast, and how much larger the trousseau of the bride. Neither of the two couples in question cared one jot. What truly mattered to each was that they were irrevocably married.

After the wedding breakfast, the two couples left for London in separate coaches. Darcy was eager to escape from his Longbourn relations and bring Elizabeth back to Town; there was so much yet to be accomplished in the coming weeks. Bingley was adamant that he and Jane spend their first night as husband and wife without the responsibilities of a house full of family members who had come for the wedding, as were presently at Netherfield. Caroline could enjoy being hostess one last time for all he

cared. His only desire was to bed his wife without fear of interruption.

The Darcys had been in London for a week when they received an unexpected caller.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam! We did not know you were in Town.”

“I have come to pay my compliments. You are both looking well. Marriage definitely seems to agree with you, Cousin.”

After a few minutes of exchanging pleasantries, the Colonel revealed his motivation for coming. “I bring an invitation to call at Afton House tomorrow.”

“Is this an invitation or a summons?” Darcy asked darkly.

“I would suppose that entirely depends on you. My parents wish to meet Mrs. Darcy again. They were unsure of their reception here. At least that was my father’s impression of the situation between the two of you, when last you spoke.”

“Humph!”

“Darcy, the Earl would like your wife to meet his children in private and avoid meeting for the first time in some public place – a situation that would be extremely awkward for all parties.”

“Please tell your parents that we will be happy to call in the morning,” Elizabeth said, taking control of the situation.

“Happy?” Darcy scoffed. “No, but my wife is correct. As little as I wish to see my uncle and aunt, it is the prudent thing to do.”

“With my siblings in attendance, it will be just like old times, eh Darcy?” Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed nervously.

“I will reserve judgement until after tomorrow.”

Elizabeth was not surprised when they arrived at the enormous London home of the Fitzwilliams. Afton House was, after all, the residence of an earl.

“Shall we?” Darcy asked before they climbed the steps to the front entrance. The butler greeted them at the door.

“Lord and Lady Perryton are expecting you.”

He led them to the room in which the Fitzwilliam clan had assembled. Darcy made the introductions, and Elizabeth curtsied as she met each of her new family members. She had been introduced to Darcy’s uncle and aunt in Derbyshire at Bartholomew Arnold’s wedding, but only now had a chance to study them closely, and was finally able to match more faces to the names her husband and Lady Victoria had made sure she remembered.

Lord Harold Fitzwilliam, the family patriarch, was a fairly tall man with greying hair. Lady Alice

Fitzwilliam appeared to be in her fifties, was still a handsome woman, and must have been a great beauty in her youth. The Earl's eldest son, Martin, Viscount Newman, and his wife, Matilda, were a formidable looking couple. He was a younger version of his father, but with his mother's eyes. Viscountess Newman had a classic beauty and reminded Elizabeth somewhat of her own sister, Jane, but the woman's countenance lacked the look of kindness that was always present on Mrs. Bingley's face. Harriet, Viscountess Northem, the Fitzwilliam's only daughter, and her husband, Josiah, were the last to be introduced. Lady Northem took after her mother in all but her light brown hair. Her husband was neither as tall nor as svelte as the Fitzwilliam men.

"Darcy, I have learned from my sister that your wife is to be presented at court," said the Earl.

"Lady Victoria kindly offered to be Mrs. Darcy's sponsor."

"I understand that the date is the 21st of April?"

"Yes, sir," Darcy said, his taut jaw telling Elizabeth exactly how uncomfortable he was.

"Mrs. Darcy, are your preparations proceeding smoothly?"

"Yes, my lord. Lady Victoria has been a very thorough instructor."

"Good. It gives me comfort to know that you are being so well looked after."

Elizabeth thought she understood him perfectly – he was implying that she would be lost without his sister's help.

"When will you hold the ball to mark the occasion?"

"Two days after St James's." Darcy stopped to ponder his next words. "Would this sudden desire to appear reconciled mean that you would accept an invitation to that evening's festivities?"

"Darcy, I know what I said to you at Rosings, but our failure to attend your wife's ball would reflect poorly on us as well as on you. Despite what you may believe, I am a reasonable man. That is another reason I asked you to come here today. It is far better for the family to meet your wife for the first time here, now, than elsewhere. People might think it odd, and I do not condone gossip."

"No, I daresay you do not." Darcy paused. "Does Lady Catherine share this unexpected civility?"

It was the Earl's turn to sigh. "No, she does not. She refuses to listen to reason, unsurprisingly. If you were to invite her, no doubt you would receive a rather vitriolic response."

Up to this point, the rest of the Fitzwilliam clan had allowed the two men, with the brief exception of

the direct question to Elizabeth, to converse alone. However, with the mention of a ball, a new voice was heard.

"A ball! How could I have failed to consider that you would be holding a ball in Mrs. Darcy's honour? Yes, we must attend; you know how much I *adore* balls." All eyes immediately shifted to an excited Alice Fitzwilliam and all except Elizabeth stiffened. She noted the responses around her in wonder, but only for a few moments.

"I remember the ball my parents held for me when I came out in society. My father was an Earl as well, if you did not know. Oh the dancing that night! I had a partner for every set. That was when I met my Harold, before his father died, and he became Earl." The Countess grew more and more excited as she grew more and more nostalgic. Elizabeth recognised the look on the faces of the rest of the family: the same mortification she felt whenever her mother acted in such an inappropriate manner.

Elizabeth was astonished by a revelation – the Countess of Perryton was, in essentials, exactly the same sort of nervous and silly woman as her own mother. Whatever feelings of inferiority she might have had when she walked into Afton House that day disappeared with the knowledge that even the rich and titled could be as undignified as a country family like the Bennets of Longbourn. It was liberating!

Chapter Thirteen

London, April 1812

Elizabeth was lost in thought as she waited to be summoned before the Royal Court. Each of the foregathered ladies wore the similarly styled, oddly shaped hooped dress that protocol and Queen Charlotte demanded. Each was crowned with an elaborate ostrich feather headdress; each was draped with precious jewels – symbols of status, wealth, and worthiness to be presented to the Court of St. James on this day. Many of the ladies made idle talk to soothe their nerves.

Elizabeth knew none of them, and felt no particular affinity for them. For all the others, *this* was their proper place. For all the others, this was the culmination of a lifetime's preparation and expectation, inevitable from the day of their birth, more entitlement than honour. For all the others, but not Elizabeth Darcy, née Bennet.

Her unlikely journey to this small room had begun less than seven months ago, when she first set eyes on Fitzwilliam Darcy at the Meryton Assembly. At that moment, this event became her destiny. How easily fate might have decreed that this day – and more – never occur. How easily might that fleeting look of sadness have escaped her notice as he was introduced to Jane; how easily might she have been blinded by the reticence that hid the estimable man, misreading his character, dismissing him as unworthy of her notice and civility. How easily might she have never known love.

Lady Victoria touched Elizabeth's elbow. "It is time," she said, gently easing her niece into the present. Elizabeth smiled slightly, took a breath, and walked with the other bejewelled young women out of the Gallery toward the drawing room where Her Majesty, The Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, held Court. What Elizabeth could not see, but was readily evident to Lady Victoria, were the subtle ways she stood out from the other women. Though the cut of her gown was governed by strict protocol, its differing shades of green accentuated her auburn hair and fair complexion; the Darcy emeralds and diamonds glistened at her throat. She was the only married woman to be presented to the Court that day, and though still very young, was nonetheless a few

years older than the others. The maturity in her features lent a certain *gravitas* to her countenance that enhanced her natural dignity. More notably, there was something about a woman who was with child that made her beauty bloom in full force. Elizabeth was noticed.

A half-hour later, the Lord Chamberlain announced, "Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy."

Lady Victoria pressed Elizabeth's arm, urging her forward. With a confidence and deportment rooted in hours of practise, Elizabeth gracefully glided before Queen Charlotte, curtsied deeply, then kissed the proffered hand.

"Mrs. Darcy, I am told that you are recently married."

"Yes, but four months, Your Majesty." Elizabeth knew to respond solely and specifically to any pleasantries the Queen offered.

"I am also told that you are new to London. Where were you born?"

"Hertfordshire, Ma'am."

"I see. You have lived all your life close to London?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Queen regarded Elizabeth for a moment. "You are a lovely woman, my dear. Your husband must surely consider himself a lucky man."

"Thank you, Ma'am, but I consider myself the fortunate one in our union. My husband is the best of men."

"Well said." With that, the Queen nodded and Elizabeth was dismissed from the Royal Presence. She made one final deep curtsy and slowly backed away, making every effort to move gracefully as an attentive footman assisted with her long train. *Pray God I do not stumble and fall flat on my back! What an impression that would make!*

Lady Victoria was quickly at her side once Elizabeth was safely away. "Breathe," she whispered. Elizabeth exhaled; she had not even realised that she was holding her breath.

"Thank heavens *that* is finally over. When can we leave?" With the dreaded presentation finally behind her, Elizabeth smothered simultaneous impulses to flee as fast as she could, burst into tears, and laugh out loud at the absurd seriousness of it all.

"Soon. Watch, and follow my lead. We will be out of the palace and back in your carriage more quickly than you can imagine."

Darcy had never been so relieved to see another person as he was to see Elizabeth after her presentation. *Ordeal, more precisely*, he corrected himself. As fetching as Elizabeth looked, he was glad

that he would never again have to look at her in that oddly styled garb. He briefly considered forbidding her from ever wearing feathers again, but he had better sense than to attempt to dictate fashion to any woman. He also knew that such a dictum was unnecessary; Elizabeth had shown a willingness to dress at the height of fashion but without the gaudy ornamentation that some women employed – Miss Bingley immediately came to mind – in their attempt to secure attention.

Elizabeth walked up the stairway towards her chambers, pulling at the pins that held her headdress in place, and instructing her maid to help her change – immediately.

Lady Victoria stood beside Darcy and laughed quietly. “At least she waited until now to loosen her hair. I believe I would have begun to remove the headdress in the carriage.”

They walked to the drawing room. “Were there any ... mishaps?”

“None at all, nor should you have anticipated that there would be.” Lady Victoria glared at her nephew. “Elizabeth handled herself with all the grace and charm you *know* she possesses. Whatever the state of her nerves, she betrayed no trepidation when called before the Queen. After exchanging a few words, she was dismissed and the next poor girl took her place. Darcy, you have no idea how terrifying the experience can be for a young woman. It makes the lack of a daughter of my own more palatable.”

“I will only rest easy once the ball is over.”

Lady Victoria shook her head.

“It is disappointing, Fitzwilliam, that I now have more confidence in your wife than you do.”

“I have every belief that all will go well. I am trying not to be overconfident and thereby underestimate the challenges that Elizabeth still faces.”

“I say you worry needlessly.” She sighed. “The Queen called your wife a lovely woman.” Darcy looked pleasantly surprised. “Elizabeth is proving herself to be every bit the gracious creature you found her to be in the wilds of Hertfordshire. All she needed was the chance to exhibit those virtues in a larger society to be properly acknowledged as a woman worthy of notice.”

“I am pleased then, of the outcome of today’s events. That does ease my mind somewhat concerning the ball.”

“Have you received replies to all the invitations?”

“Most. The Earl and Countess are coming, as are all my cousins – except Anne, of course. Elizabeth’s

parents, her aunt and uncle from Gracechurch Street, and her two younger sisters will be attending, as well.”

“Two? I thought your wife had three younger sisters.”

“The youngest will not attend. She is far too young, and far too silly. Elizabeth’s older sister is lately married, as you know, and she and her husband are hosting the family. They arrived yesterday and we are to dine with them this evening.”

“From one engagement to another. Are you certain Elizabeth has the stamina for such a demanding schedule?”

Darcy looked askance at his aunt, wondering how much she knew. “Elizabeth has time to rest before we go to the Bingleys.”

“The preparations for the ball – does she not still have much to do?”

Darcy smiled. “Are you searching for a compliment? You know full well that Elizabeth, with your invaluable assistance, has everything under control. Mrs. Thomas assures me that all is proceeding according to plans. Elizabeth’s main task is to rest. Only a few minor details still need her attention.”

“My dear, unenlightened nephew. When planning a ball, there are always many more ‘minor details’ and last-minute arrangements than you can possibly anticipate!”

“That, my aunt, is why you are here! Do not deny it. I know you are deriving great pleasure from bringing my wife into society.”

“I will admit that in the beginning my reasons for agreeing to help were not entirely altruistic. I wanted to disoblige my siblings as much as you did.” Lady Victoria’s expression softened. “But as I came to know Elizabeth better, I developed a great fondness for her. She has become quite dear to me. I should never have doubted your choice, Darcy. Despite her lack of dowry or connections, you have done well. Very well, indeed.”

Darcy was sincerely touched by his aunt’s approbation. “Your approval means much to me. I will be eternally grateful for all that you have done for us.”

At that moment, they heard the rustle of fabric that preceded Elizabeth’s entrance. She grinned as she plopped down into a chair in a rather undignified manner. Lady Victoria feigned disapproval – for several moments – until she returned Elizabeth’s impertinent look.

“Do not let my brother or sister see you like that.”

“Risk the tenuous good opinion I now enjoy from that quarter? I would not dream of it.”

“Feeling a little less restricted in your current attire, Elizabeth?”

“Lady Victoria, I am shocked! Who would not feel bereft after abandoning the proper dress of the court?”

“Elizabeth, after all the time we have spent together, will you not now call me Aunt?”

Darcy beamed.

“I would be delighted, Aunt,” Elizabeth replied, enjoying the sound of the word rolling off her tongue.

“Darcy tells me that you are to dine with your family this evening.”

“My sister and her husband are hosting a dinner tonight, yes. Mama will be eager to hear about *everything*, but it will be good to see them all again. Tomorrow they will call here.”

“A frontal attack,” Darcy quipped.

“Mr. Darcy, for shame!” Elizabeth could not hide the smile on her face. “We thought it best to acquaint the rest of my family with the house. Especially Lydia.”

“Lydia is your youngest sister?”

“Yes, Lady ... Aunt. She is but fifteen, too young to be out in society, although she has been allowed to attend assemblies in Meryton.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “Mr. Bennet and I agreed that it was best if Miss Lydia did not attend.”

“How well was that news received, or have you heard?”

“I have. Not well at all, until Mr. Bennet consented to Miss Lydia’s rather forceful request to accompany the family to London. And she will be fitted for several new gowns as recompense for missing the ball.”

“When Lydia learned that she would have more new dresses than her sisters, she became much more reconciled to her exclusion,” Elizabeth added.

“If the thought of more new gowns than her sisters was enough to placate her displeasure, then she *is* too young to be attending a London ball.” Both Darcys were in perfect agreement with Lady Victoria, after which she rose and took her leave. “I should be going now. Give my regards to Mrs. Bingley. I will call again tomorrow.”

As she walked with her nephew to her carriage, Lady Victoria had one last bit of advice. “Darcy, you must do everything in your power to make certain that my sister-in-law is not left alone in the company of Elizabeth’s mother.”

The Darcys had dined in Town several times with the Bingleys since the latter couple’s wedding. Happily for the Darcys, Miss Bingley was staying with the Hursts and Charles Bingley did not wish to return to Hertfordshire until after the season. He preferred the relative privacy of his London house and was deriving great pleasure in showering his wife with gifts and extra funds to increase her wardrobe, just as Elizabeth had predicted. Thus, the sisters were able to spend more time together than they had anticipated, shopping and preparing for Elizabeth’s presentation and ball. It was also during this time that Jane was privileged to further her intimacy with Lady Victoria, who seemed to live at Darcy House rather than with her own family. Helen Arnold often accompanied her mother-in-law shopping and thence to the Darcy residence. Elizabeth was delighted that the most important people in her life enjoyed each other’s company as much as they did.

With each passing day, Elizabeth saw subtle changes to her body brought on by her unborn child. She dearly wished to confide in her sister, and in any event, she was so often in Jane’s company – and that of dressmakers – that she was convinced her sister would soon discern the signs and come to a rightful conclusion. She disliked keeping such a momentous secret from her beloved Jane, and regretted the absence of another female with whom she could discuss her situation. She persuaded her husband to allow her to reveal to Jane and Charles that she was with child; it would have been unfair to ask her sister to keep such happy information from her own husband. Elizabeth was as delighted to impart the news as Jane was to hear it; Darcy suffered Bingley’s effusive congratulations with equanimity but was clearly pleased with his good fortune. Both Bingleys agreed to secrecy, until such a time as the Darcys announced their anticipation of an heir to the rest of the family.

So it was that eleven people, including five Bennets, two Darcys, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, were gathered for the evening at the Bingleys’. Nine of them might as well have been mute; ten of them soon wished they were deaf. Mrs. Bennet desired to hear every detail of Elizabeth’s presentation – from her preparations to the ride to St. James’s, from minute descriptions of the Queen to the wall coverings of each of the rooms. Elizabeth, knowing that the inquisition would end only when her mother was satisfied, patiently answered each question, while fervently nurturing the hope that her father would intercede and exert some control over his wife. Alas, it was not to be.

Fortunately, Elizabeth was an exemplary storyteller, despite her mother's interruptions and exclamations; when she had finished, her attentive audience felt as if they had been at Court with her.

The next morning, the same party reconvened in the Darcys' drawing room. Mrs. Bennet had been unusually quiet when she first arrived, her jaw dropping in awe – a facial expression copied by her two youngest daughters. She had forgotten how truly elegant the Darcys' townhouse was, despite her new familiarity with splendours available to the very rich in the form of Mr. Bingley's London house. Soon enough, she regained her voice and began to rhapsodise about every wonder on which her eyes fell, and it seemed that everything on which her eyes fell was deemed a wonder worthy of her rhapsodies, although she had toured the house less than four months earlier. It was no more than Elizabeth or her husband expected; for his part, Darcy was beginning to harbour grave doubts about Mr. Bennet's determination – and ability – to influence his wife's behaviour.

The Darcys led everyone through the house. Even the Bingleys joined in, though both had seen it before, not wanting to be separated from the rest of the family. Once the entire house had been explored, all returned to the drawing room.

"Lord, Lizzy, what a grand house you have. I am exhausted from walking through it," Lydia said, flouncing into a chair and settling into the same unladylike pose that Elizabeth had struck the day before.

Elizabeth gave Darcy a knowing look, and he valiantly tried to keep from rolling his eyes as he remembered Elizabeth's recent behaviour.

"Mrs. Darcy, what plans do you have for other improvements? You did say your personal chambers are finished."

"The house is fine as it is, Mama. I see no need to make changes only for the sake of making changes. I have not spent much time here in the months since we married. Any consideration for new furniture or further decorating will have to wait until after the season. I have more pressing matters to attend to at present."

"A wise decision, my dear," Mrs. Gardiner said in support of her niece.

Elizabeth noticed that an addition had been made to the drawing room.

"Mr. Darcy, is that what I think it is?" she asked her husband. He smiled and walked over to what could only be a covered painting.

"I ordered it placed here if it came while we were touring the house. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, please!"

Darcy drew off the cloth covering the newly completed portrait; Elizabeth had sat for it soon after they arrived in Town.

"Obviously, based on the background, the portraitist did not have much time to complete this commission. I hope to have another done soon, to be hung at Pemberley."

"I see that you are finally grown up, Lizzy, and can sit still long enough to have your picture painted," said Mr. Bennet.

"Oh, Mr. Bennet, of course she is!" Mrs. Bennet scolded her husband, who shrugged his shoulders and surreptitiously winked at his daughter. Elizabeth smiled.

As soon as was polite, Darcy, never comfortable in the presence of his mother-in-law, asked the men to join him in the library.

Mr. Bennet was again impressed as he entered the room. So many books! "Darcy, Bingley tells me that the library here, as remarkable as it is, is nothing compared to that at Pemberley."

"What you see here is a fraction of what Pemberley boasts, which has been the work of many generations and contains the bulk of the family collection."

"When I finally visit you in Derbyshire, you will need go no further than that room to find me. I might even ask for a blanket and sleep there. I dare say I could do the same here."

"I, for one, have no doubts that my brother speaks the truth," said Mr. Gardiner with a smile. "All of his acquaintances know that his fondness for the written word is matched only by his devotion to his port. I think he would consider himself a most fortunate man were he to die quietly with a book folded across his chest and a bottle of port on the table beside him."

"As long as it was empty! One would not wish to leave good port undrunk." All four laughed, at ease with each other, the friendly conversation, and the absence of clucking females.

"Do you think my wife is facing the same scrutiny about the preparations for the ball that she faced last night about her presentation?" Darcy asked.

"Undoubtedly! As sure as her mother is offering all kinds of last minute suggestions. Do not fret. Elizabeth knows how to deal with her mother."

“What of Miss Lydia? I cannot believe she is happy about being left at Bingley’s tomorrow. Truthfully, I was surprised that she came to Town.”

“Son,” Mr. Bennet said looking Darcy in straight in the eye, “one must pick one’s battles. I would have had no peace had I not allowed her to come. As it is, she accepted the situation only when I told her of the new gowns she would receive in lieu of the pleasure of attending the ball tomorrow evening. Like most things, it will be forgotten as soon as she is old enough to attend another event like it here in Town.”

“Who will stay with her?”

“Actually, Lydia will come to Gracechurch Street tomorrow,” Mr. Gardiner answered. “Mrs. Gardiner suggested that Lydia would be less agitated if she did not have to watch her sisters’ preparations. It may surprise you to learn that Lydia is very fond of her cousins and enjoys playing with them. She will spend the night at our house and return to the Bingleys the next day.”

“An excellent plan, gentlemen,” Darcy acknowledged.

“How long do think the women will continue talking together?” Bingley asked.

Darcy laughed, clapping his friend on the back. “They could go on all afternoon, but knowing my wife, she will send for us when she is finished with it. For now, enjoy the quiet. Mr. Bennet, I noticed your eyes wandering along the bookshelves. Would you like to peruse them for something that suits your taste? Bingley here never seems to have the time for books, and I doubt he has much from which to choose.”

“Darcy!” Bingley protested, laughing.

“You yourself have confessed your shocking neglect of the family library.”

Knowing he was caught, Bingley resigned himself to his fate and let the other men tease him. In the midst of this, Darcy had a quiet aside with his father-in-law. He was curious to know whether Mr. Bennet had approached Mrs. Bennet on the subject of her behaviour at the ball. That gentleman briefly sketched his endeavours to curb his wife’s exuberance.

“Before we left Hertfordshire, we heard that the regiment quartered in Meryton is to encamp at Brighton for the summer. When Mrs. Bennet learned that the Colonel’s wife planned to go sea bathing, she decided she must go sea bathing as well. I let it be known to her that I would never consent to such a scheme if she did not promise to curb her manners or wagging tongue for her precious daughter’s ball.”

“This will have the desired effect?”

“It should, and I could think of nothing else to say to her.”

“What of the officer I warned you about?” Darcy asked.

“I had a word with my brother-in-law, Mr. Philips. You may recall that he is an attorney in Meryton. He thanked me for the information and had a few words with some of the tradesmen, reminding them it was not a good idea to offer too much credit to His Majesty’s soldiers. He assures me that if an officer were deeply in debt, he would have heard of it. I have kept my eye on Mr. Wickham myself and have found nothing to reproach him over. Perhaps his change of heart was real after all.”

“No news of trifling with the affections of any ladies in the neighbourhood?”

“None. He has been the perfect gentleman during his time in Hertfordshire, as far as we have been able to discover.”

“I appreciate your diligence. It appears that I have worried for nothing.”

“You were quite right to bring it to my attention. I am relieved there is nothing untoward in his character, or that of the other officers, to report.”

Darcy and Mr. Bennet returned their attention to the other two gentlemen. The four passed the time in discussion until, as Darcy had predicted, Elizabeth sent word that their presence was required with the ladies.

Elizabeth was speaking when the men returned to the parlour.

“Mama, there is little left for me to do. Every room has been thoroughly cleaned, as has every piece of silver, china, and crystal. The candles and lamps are readied. The flowers and greenery will be placed tomorrow. The food is being prepared, and I certainly will not bother the cook or meddle in the kitchen. Clayton, our butler, has directed the servants to remove all the doors that are to be taken down. Everything will be ready in time.” Darcy’s increasingly fine-tuned ears detected an undercurrent of exasperation in his wife’s manner. As accustomed as she was to her mother’s foibles, Elizabeth nevertheless had her limit.

“Mrs. Bennet, Lady Victoria assures me that all is well. She is a veteran of many such balls, and has assisted Mrs. Darcy for the last several months, to plan and prepare for tomorrow night,” Darcy said as he sat next to his bride. He suspected that his mother-in-law was a little put out not to have been asked to help her own daughter, and he wanted to squash any discord before it surfaced. “My aunt would have performed a similar service for my sister when she

came out. We all knew, madam, that you would be consumed by your preparations for Mrs. Bingley's wedding, and felt it unfair to further burden you."

Mrs. Bennet simpered. Mr. Bennet looked at his son-in-law with undisguised admiration. Elizabeth's eyes widened, but she maintained her composure. Darcy, seemingly oblivious, continued: "Lady Victoria, you recall, was Mrs. Darcy's sponsor at St James's and it was only natural that she lend her knowledge and vast experience as a member of the *ton*."

"Yes, yes. My Lizzy must make a good impression. I am so excited for her and for my other daughters. Who knows what handsome, rich men they will meet?"

Darcy did not know how to respond, and before he could gather his wits, Mrs. Bennet had introduced a related, if more dangerous, topic.

"Oh, Mr. Darcy, it is such a shame that my dear Lydia will not attend the ball. She so loves to dance, and there will certainly be many pleasant partners for her among your guests. Do you not agree, sir, that it would be a very good thing indeed were my youngest to honour your wife with her presence tomorrow evening?"

Darcy was undone; he could summon no thought, no words, to deflect Mrs. Bennet. For the first time in his life, Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley was utterly thwarted. Rescue came unexpectedly from the lips of his tormentor, who now directed her attention to the man she held responsible for Lydia's banishment.

"Mr. Bennet, this is all *your* doing. How can you be so disagreeable? Surely you can see that there is no reason to deny Lydia. I simply cannot comprehend such hard-heartedness in any of my family. It is all very vexing."

"Mrs. Bennet, enough of such talk," said her husband. "I remain resolute." He nodded at Darcy, then turned back to his wife. "Come now, madam, we have taxed our hosts' patience and fortitude quite long enough. It is time to make our goodbyes. Thank you, Darcy, Elizabeth, for your courtesies and hospitality."

Mr. Bennet bent to kiss his daughter on the cheek. "Rest child, for both your sakes." Elizabeth and her father shared a silent moment of understanding.

"I will, Father," she answered softly. "Thank you."

When they were finally alone, Darcy ordered Elizabeth to her chambers to rest, a command she was all too happy to obey.

It had been many years since a ball had been hosted in the Darcys' London residence. Elizabeth and

Lady Victoria had worked long and hard in planning the evening. The decorations and the food were but a trifle compared to the most important task: devising a guest list. Because the evening included dancing, care was taken that the ballroom would not be overly crowded; this, by necessity, placed a limit on the number of guests. Lady Victoria and Elizabeth spent hours determining first who must be invited. Then, after consulting with Darcy, they filled out the remainder of the guest list. The individuals chosen were those who would be more disposed to accept Elizabeth than to dismiss her without taking the trouble of forming an acquaintance. Lady Victoria was satisfied with their choices and relieved when most had accepted.

All the planning coalesced in one moment when the musicians began playing for the first dance, and Darcy led Elizabeth to her rightful place at the head of the set. Within minutes, the approving nods of some of the onlookers could be seen. The Darcys made an elegant picture as they moved in harmony with the music and with each other. At least the new Mrs. Darcy knew how to dance.

Lady Victoria watched with pride as her nephew and niece moved gracefully down the line. Her thoughts drifted to the past, to the last time a ball had been held in this house. Her sister, Lady Anne Darcy, looked regal as she danced with her husband. The birth of two children – and the loss of several more, though few knew of them – had done little to change her handsome looks and figure. She was a beautiful woman, and she was comfortable in her station in life. While some still looked down on her for marrying beneath her, she was happy with her choice. George Darcy was wealthier than many of her so-called peers. He had no title, but he had the coin that allowed her to live the kind of life she had come to expect as her birthright. Lady Anne had already begun to form plans for her son's entrance into society, but until then, she would continue to host balls in Town and in Derbyshire. Lady Victoria and Lady Anne had rekindled their former intimacy after the latter's marriage, and they enjoyed each other's company and each other's family. After the dance concluded, the two sisters had found each other.

"Harold and Alice are not coming tonight, I take it," said Lady Victoria.

"They sent their regrets. They have not yet arrived in Town from their estate."

"Catherine?"

"She and Lewis are still in Kent. Rather, she is in Kent. Who knows where Lewis is? At least tonight I need not discuss Anne and Fitzwilliam."

"I wish she would leave the poor boy alone. I am sorry that my favourite nephew is subjected to that. He is still a boy."

"He can do so much better than my niece, like his father before him. My namesake, while rich, was not born a daughter of a peer."

"I would hope that he would marry a woman he could respect and hold in affection."

"Not everyone chooses your path, Victoria."

"You chose it."

"No entirely. We both know I did not. I did well for myself, and I wish my son and my daughter to do better. You must hold these same hopes for Michael, at least."

"I wish him to be happy, Anne, whoever his choice may be. Is that not what you wish for Fitzwilliam?"

"I wish to see my son dancing in this very house with his wife—a woman of beauty and intelligence, an accomplished woman who will make the other ladies envious. I want the men to look at my son and wish they were in his place. That is what I wish."

Lady Victoria returned to the present, wondering what her sister would have said had she been alive tonight. She had died unexpectedly not too long after that ball, many years ago. Elizabeth was all that Anne had wanted for her son, with the glaring exceptions of coming into the marriage penniless with nary a nobleman in the family tree. Would Anne have accepted her? Somehow Lady Victoria believed she would not, at least not at first, just as she suspected her nephew would not have married Elizabeth Bennet had he not needed a wife, had he not had Georgiana's dowry, had her brother not pushed him too far. In the eyes of society, he had acted foolishly – and in the process won a prize. Tonight, the *ton* would begin to learn just what a prize Elizabeth Darcy truly was. Even Anne would have come to know it, had she lived to see it.

"Your nephew's wife seems an elegant creature."

Lost in thought, Lady Victoria was startled by the voice at her ear. She turned to see her old friend, Charlotta Atkins, standing next to her.

"Forgive me, Charlotta, I did not see you until now." She laughed. *"I refuse to bias you with my opinion. You must judge the woman for yourself."*

"You like her." Lady Victoria did not reply. *"I have known you too long, Victoria. Very well, I will judge her on my own, but with your good*

recommendation, I am disposed to approve of her already."

At that, Lady Victoria smiled. *"If all the others here this evening were so fair minded, Mrs. Darcy's acceptance would be assured. She is a credit to my nephew."*

"That is high praise coming from you. You do not suffer fools lightly."

"I have had far too much practise doing that very thing. Come, the dance is over. I would like you to meet my niece again. A receiving line is not the place to form an acquaintance."

Thus began a scene that was repeated many times that evening. Lady Victoria made an effort to recommend Elizabeth and further her acquaintance with as many people as possible.

As many favourable opinions as Elizabeth made, there were others who had come strictly out of curiosity to see Darcy's country-bred bride. Their invitations were matters of form; certain people simply had to be invited, no matter Darcy's preferences. A number of these were not disposed to like the new Mrs. Darcy on principle and would not allow one ball to sway their opinion too favourably. Lady Victoria overheard snippets of conversations of several of these ladies.

"She is pretty enough, but not as handsome as I expected to turn Darcy's head ..."

"We shall see how she handles the rest of the season ..."

"Mrs. Darcy seems at ease in her own house. Will she be as confident at Lord and Lady Westlings' ball?"

"I heard he took her to Pemberley to teach her proper manners ..."

"Lady Victoria probably planned everything for the poor woman ..."

It was nothing more than expected. Women like that would always populate their society. She was thankful that there were others, like her friend Charlotta Atkins, who were more substantial than the shallow creatures she had just overheard.

Darcy was pleased with how the evening was proceeding. He enjoyed dancing with his wife, both to open the ball and before dinner. Elizabeth's card was full; Lady Victoria's son, Michael, claimed her for a

dance, as did Charles Bingley. Even Darcy's cousin, Viscount Newman, danced with her. The Bennets were under good regulation. He had spoken with his new brother, Bingley – now there was a benefit to his marriage that he never would have imagined – about the importance of the evening not only to Elizabeth, but to Jane as well. It went against his friend's nature to think ill of his new family, yet he was in agreement that checking Mrs. Bennet's behaviour was to everyone's benefit. Thus, they had worked together to blunt that lady's silliness. The Gardiners had become unsolicited allies. Mrs. Gardiner spent considerable time with her sister, guiding the conversation and calming the woman when she became agitated. Darcy recognised all of these machinations; it was exactly the type of scheme the Earl used when he wished for decorum from his own wife.

The Countess was one person he had most ardently worked to keep away from his mother-in-law. The thought of the two of them together, here, tonight, was enough to make him blanch. Theirs was a pairing to be avoided at all costs.

Therefore, when the meal was finished and the dancing had resumed, Darcy and Bingley were mortified when Caroline Bingley – Caroline Bingley of all people – manoeuvred the introduction of the very ladies they had worked so hard to keep apart.

Damn the woman, Darcy thought as he noticed the smile of satisfaction on Miss Bingley's face. *Hers was an invitation only made in deference to Bingley, and she repays us with this!*

As Darcy strode over to the two matrons, he could hear their conversation well before he drew close.

"Your son is the handsome soldier dancing with Mrs. Darcy? You must be very proud."

"Indeed I am. His father, the Earl, talked of him going into the Navy, but I protested vociferously! No son of mine would spend his youth on the seas, and I so prefer a red coat to the blue of the navy."

"I have always had a soft spot for a red coat myself. I remember the regiment that was encamped nearby when I was a girl. I cried a full week when they left. We have another regiment quartered near our estate now. Life shall be so dull when they depart for Brighton."

"Oh, you must go to Brighton someday. Sea bathing is quite the thing to do!"

"I have already asked my husband to take us there. He has promised to strongly consider it. I have great hopes of pressing him to agree to a holiday."

"Lady Perryton, Mrs. Bennet, I see that you have met," Darcy said, imposing himself in the conversation.

"Really, Darcy, I do not understand why you did not introduce us. I was very curious to meet your wife's parents. Mrs. Bennet, you must call on us before you leave Town."

Oh Lord, Darcy groaned to himself. *How is it that one moment my aunt is determined to dismiss Elizabeth and her family, and the next she is behaving as if she has discovered a long-lost sister?*

He looked about for someone to come to his rescue and was relieved to see his uncle making his way across the room, a look of concern on his face, a look Darcy was certain he mirrored.

"There you are, my dear. I have come to claim you for the next dance."

"Dance?" Lady Perryton replied in surprise.

"This is a ball, and I did promise to dance at least one set with you. Come, they are about to begin."

"First let me introduce Mrs. Darcy's mother, Mrs. Bennet. I have asked her to call before she returns to Hertfordshire."

"Mrs. Bennet." Lord Perryton bowed. "Excuse us, the dance is about to begin."

Darcy was amazed by how efficiently his uncle managed to separate Elizabeth's mother from the Countess. From the pleased look on her face, she failed to notice the intended slight.

"Bless me, the Countess asked me to call on her!" she exclaimed. "Such an elegant woman, and what an exquisite gown. I have rarely seen such fine lace." As Mrs. Bennet continued her raptures, Darcy again looked around for help, his desperation increasing in proportion to the speed and volume of his mother-in-law's grandiloquence. This time, it came in the form of Charles and Jane Bingley. He noted with admiration Jane's serene countenance as she engaged her mother in conversation, gently asking questions about the events of the evening in a way that encouraged composure rather than wild gesticulations. It was not much different from the way one calmed a rather high-strung horse, Darcy thought, as he made good his escape.

He found Elizabeth in conversation with a couple. Their backs were to him, but he could tell by his wife's posture that she took no pleasure in their company. Darcy slipped to her side and discovered the identity of the man and woman: It was the Bridens. Mrs. Briden had pursued him for years in hopes of securing him for her only daughter. Miss Briden was even more repugnant than Miss Bingley. Why in the world had he consented to their invitation?

Apparently, Lady Victoria had believed that the Bridens were in some way essential to the evening.

“Mr. Darcy, we were delighted to receive your invitation,” Mrs. Briden purred. “So many people are curious about your wife. Mrs. Darcy, you simply must come to the soirée I am hosting next week.”

“If we are not otherwise engaged, I will make every attempt to attend,” Elizabeth replied graciously.

“Excellent!” Mrs. Briden turned her attentions back to Darcy. “I have been trying to obtain Mrs. Darcy’s agreement to attend for many minutes before you came. Your presence must have been the inducement that was needed.”

“I believe Mrs. Darcy was only thinking of me. Our plans are not fully fixed and we have not had the opportunity to compare the invitations we received tonight.” Darcy was desperately trying to extricate Elizabeth from an uncomfortable conversation and an unwelcome invitation.

“I see your game, sir! An afternoon with the ladies is not how I prefer to spend my time, either. You are welcome to join the other husbands at my club while the ladies gather at my home,” Mr. Briden offered.

Darcy was beginning to panic; he did not wish Elizabeth to go the bloody soirée nor did he want to spend the afternoon with the men Mr. Briden called friends. “As my wife said, we must first consult our appointment book. Thank you for your kind invitation, Mrs. Briden, Mr. Briden.”

Darcy bowed; Elizabeth immediately followed with a curtsy, then was led away to more desirable company.

Later, after the last guests had gone, he carried a slumbering Elizabeth to her bed and rang for the maid.

“Marie, undress your mistress as best you can. I will return after I have spoken to Clayton and Mrs. Thomas.”

“Oui, Monsieur. I will do my best not to wake her.”

Darcy smiled kindly. “I doubt you could wake her now. Goodnight, Marie.”

The first rays of the morning light streaked across the sky as Fitzwilliam Darcy at last lay down next to his wife. He was exhausted, but deeply content. The ball had been a success and his wife’s behaviour had been above reproach. Elizabeth had conducted herself admirably. The foundation of her admission into the *ton* was laid. With the right invitations and the continued, albeit grudging, cooperation of the Earl and Countess, her future acceptance, and that of their unborn child, would be secured. The irony – that he

now assiduously sought the approval of the very society he despised for its hypocrisy – escaped him.

Chapter Fourteen

The sun had passed its zenith by the time Elizabeth finally awoke, happy to find her husband pressed against her side and snoring in her ear. The child she was carrying had the oddest effect on her; she could no longer sleep for too many hours without needing to take care of certain necessities.

Her body must have cooled considerably while she was up and about, because as soon as she snuggled next to Darcy, he awoke.

“Good grief, madam, your hands are cold!”

“Oh, Fitzwilliam, I am sorry. Go back to sleep.”

“What time is it?”

“After one. I should call for Marie.”

“Mrs. Darcy, you will do no such thing.”

“I need to instruct the staff.”

“I spoke to both Mrs. Thomas and Clayton before I retired. The servants know what to do, and we would only be in their way. I am the only person in this house who needs you now, and I strictly forbid you to leave this bed until I say that you may.”

“But ...”

“Elizabeth, I will brook no arguments. You have had an exhausting three days, and it is important that you rest. If you will not do so for yourself, do so for my sake and for the child’s.”

“Very well, I relent. I hope that Clayton will not have to turn away callers.”

“Anyone foolish enough to call today deserves to be turned away. They might send their cards, but no one will come before tomorrow.”

“I must bow to your superior knowledge of London Society and will stay by your side. I hope we do not grow restless from inactivity.”

Darcy ran his finger down Elizabeth’s arm. “If you fear boredom, I can think of ample ways to pass the time.”

“You just admonished me to rest!”

“I have changed my mind.”

Elizabeth was extremely attentive to his suggestions, and each was quickly overtaken by a passion only the other could fulfill.

Lying together afterwards, Darcy expounded on his impressions of the evening. “You were magnificent, Elizabeth! You moved through the dances with style and grace. You met incivility and insincerity with honesty and integrity.” *I do not know*

why I ever doubted her. “I was proud to present you to the assembly as my wife.”

She blushed under his praise. “You know that I wanted to please you, my husband.”

“I know,” he said before he placed a kiss upon her brow, “and once again you proved how fortunate I am to have found you. I shall always be grateful to Bingley for insisting that I come to Hertfordshire. Who knew such a treasure awaited me there?”

Elizabeth gloried in his commendation. He had never been so munificent in his praise of her, and for the first time she felt that he might, someday, be able to return her affections.

She desired to tell him how much she esteemed him, how she longed to make him perfectly content. But more than anything, Elizabeth wanted to tell him again how very much she loved him; she knew equally well that he did not wish to hear those last words falling from her lips. She poured all of her feelings into a look she prayed he understood.

The next morning, Elizabeth surveyed the stack of cards that had been left since the ball. There were a prodigious number, far too many to be only from her guests of two nights ago. Darcy seemed unsurprised at the numbers and wordlessly extended his hand for the cards. He quickly placed them into three piles: one for those who had not been to the ball, one for those who had come and whose company he could tolerate, and one for those who came to the ball whom he would rather not see anytime soon. Elizabeth asked him to revisit the first group and divide that as he had done the others.

“It seems a fruitless exercise. Those with whom I wish to associate were sent invitations to the ball.”

“Humour me. It is possible that someone has called whom you know and like but who did not attend the other night.”

“As you wish, though I do not recall seeing any that fit those criteria.” Darcy nonetheless reviewed the stack of cards in question and did find two from respected acquaintances. “The Worthingtons and the Connors – I must not have been paying close attention. They are both old friends of the family. We should return their call. I am surprised that they are in Town. Neither family has been in London during the season for several years. Had I known, I would have asked them to the ball. My aunt will be interested to know they are here.”

The Darcys were still eating breakfast when Michael and Helen Arnold were announced. They had come at the specific request of his mother. Lady Victoria had guided Elizabeth through her presentation and her introductory ball; it was time for

Mrs. Darcy to show society some autonomy from her new aunt. Helen was experienced in the drawing rooms of London. Michael was more outgoing than his cousin Darcy, and would provide that gentleman with an ally in the expected assault of the curious and the nosy.

The callers came throughout the late morning and into the early afternoon. Some, like Mr. and Mrs. Marshall, who had an estate near Pemberley, came with a genuine desire to meet the new Mrs. Darcy.

"How lovely to finally meet you. I had a letter from Mrs. Halley recounting dinner at Pemberley," Mrs. Marshall said to Elizabeth.

"We had a wonderful evening, and I enjoyed making the Halleys' acquaintance. The weather was not conducive to entertaining, else we would have met more of our neighbours."

"I quite understand. I commented to Mr. Marshall how cold it was in Derbyshire this year. I also believe you were not long at Pemberley. We must have you and your husband to Monksbridge Manor."

"Mrs. Darcy, Monksbridge Manor is about fifteen miles north of Pemberley," Mr. Marshall added.

"Mr. Darcy has spoken of it. He tells me it is a fine estate."

"Nothing compared to Pemberley, I am sure," Mr. Marshall laughed, "but we live comfortably enough."

Elizabeth was soothed by the friendliness of the Marshalls and Darcy's ease around them. This was in contrast with the next callers, the Bridens. Mrs. Briden immediately brought up the subject of her planned party.

"You simply must come! It will be an opportune time to introduce you to more of our circle."

Elizabeth was unsure how to respond. "Again, I must thank you for your invitation, but our plans are not yet settled."

"Of course. May I ask if you play? I am in need of more ladies willing to exhibit."

"I do play, Mrs. Briden, though not as well as I would wish."

"I take great pleasure in hearing my wife play," Darcy said tersely. "She has devoted much time to improving on the pianoforte, and while I never thought her unaccomplished, her diligence has paid off handsomely. Mrs. Darcy is being modest."

"Wonderful!" Mrs. Briden chose to ignore Darcy's tone. "I would dearly love to have you play at the party!"

Elizabeth knew she had no choice. If she attended, her husband evidently desired that she perform.

"I would be honoured, assuming we have no previous commitment," Elizabeth said, resigned to her fate. Unless they did have a prior engagement, she would be performing at Mrs. Briden's party. She wondered at the woman's persistence, knowing that she had once hoped to secure Darcy for her daughter. Elizabeth could only credit their motives as a wish to remain on good terms with the family. For what purpose, she could hardly guess.

The Bridens took their leave, content that their mission to secure at least Mrs. Darcy's attendance at next week's event had been a success.

There were a few callers whose behaviour approached open hostility. With such people, Elizabeth was glad for the presence of the Arnolds. Lady Settleton was a particularly un-amiable caller. A friend of the two younger Fitzwilliam sisters, Lady Settleton believed that only a woman as highborn as Lady Anne Darcy was worthy of replacing that lady as mistress of Pemberley.

"Where are *you* from, Mrs. Darcy?" the lady asked. Her emphasis on "you" was not a friendly one.

"From Hertfordshire. My father's estate is there."

"What is your family's name?"

"Bennet, ma'am."

"Bennet? I have never heard of anyone by the name of Bennet."

"My father prefers the country and seldom comes to Town."

"The Bennet estate, Longbourn, is lovely. I can understand why Mr. Bennet chooses to remain at home," Helen Arnold interjected.

"You have seen it?"

"When Mr. and Mrs. Darcy married, my husband, Lady Victoria, and I travelled to Hertfordshire for the wedding."

"At least, Mrs. Darcy, your father is a gentleman."

"As is my husband, Lady Settleton." Elizabeth managed to keep her tone civil and calm, but the undisguised insolence of her caller was beginning to wear thin.

"Lady Catherine is a great friend of mine, Mrs. Darcy, and I had the highest regard for her late sister, Lady Anne. I was very curious to meet the woman who finally filled that great lady's place."

"I doubt that any woman could replace Lady Anne, madam. Fortunately, my husband desired a wife, not a mother."

Neither Darcy nor Helen Arnold could completely suppress smiles at Elizabeth's well-worded response. In one small exchange, Elizabeth Darcy had demonstrated that she possessed the ability to defend herself against hostile encounters with grace, dignity, and a biting wit. Lady Settleton appeared to recognise that, young and country-bred though she might be, Mrs. Darcy was not easily intimidated; she ceased her interrogation, falling back on acceptable small talk to fill the time before she could politely leave. No doubt to send a complete, if somewhat less than objective, report of the fateful meeting to her great friend, Lady Catherine.

When the last of the callers had left, Elizabeth leaned back, closed her eyes and massaged her temples. Feeling slightly better, she opened her eyes, and with a bemused smile addressed the Arnolds: "I cannot thank you enough for coming today. Several times, you came to our rescue. I suspect that my husband is grateful he did not have to spend four hours fending off over-talkative females and their spouses."

"You were marvellous, Mrs. Darcy. It was our pleasure to be of assistance," Michael Arnold said. "Darcy, what say you to a drink at our club?"

Elizabeth saw that her husband was hesitant to accept. "Go, I need to rest after doing battle with the matrons of society."

"As long as you do not object, Elizabeth. White's in an hour, Arnold?"

"Make it two. I need to take my wife home first."

"Now that that is all settled," Helen Arnold announced, "we should be leaving. Please call on us tomorrow or the day after, Mrs. Darcy. Lady Victoria will be eager to hear all the particulars."

"Yes, I am sure she will." Elizabeth laughed. "Please convey my regards, and tell her that I will try to call tomorrow." A weary Elizabeth again thanked her cousins as they said their goodbyes. Once they had left, she needed no instructions from her husband; she simply held out her arm for him to assist her to her chambers to a well-earned rest.

Michael Arnold found Darcy seated in a secluded corner of their club, two glasses of amber liquid on the table beside him.

"I took the liberty of ordering for you," Darcy said as his cousin sat across from him.

"To Mrs. Darcy," Arnold toasted, lifting the crystal towards his companion, who nodded and returned the salute.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you and Mrs. Arnold for your assistance today. You know how much I detest receiving callers."

"Ha! That, my reserved cousin, is an understatement! Still, you acquitted yourself well. You scarce spoke ten words to most of the callers, and I was more than happy to spend my time watching you squirm."

"I did note that your participation in the conversation was quite restricted."

"When one is held captive in a drawing room on such a fine morning, a man must preserve his right to silence. He never knows when he will be called upon to defend himself or his lady. Speaking of his lady, how long do you anticipate remaining in London before you and your bride return to Pemberley?"

"Our plans are not firmly fixed, but as of this moment, we will forego Royal Ascot and leave for the north at the end of May. That should give Mrs. Darcy ample time to become known in society."

"Before you retire to await the birth of your child?"

Darcy started. "But ... how?"

"My mother. Who else? She only confided her suspicions because of her concern for Mrs. Darcy."

"Is my wife's condition that obvious?" Darcy asked in agitation.

"Not unless you are looking for telltale signs. I would not have guessed it, but I took the time to closely examine Mrs. Darcy after my mother's comments in that direction. From my first acquaintance, I noticed her light and pleasing figure. Now she has more ... a softer look to her, the same sort of look I saw when Helen was with child. The style of her dresses still hides the most compelling evidence, but as she continues to increase, she will not be able to hide her situation."

Darcy was somewhat distressed. He had assumed that they would be able to conceal Elizabeth's state for at least another month, to give her as much time as possible to establish herself. But now it seemed that the changes to her body would make it impossible for her to show herself in public much longer. They would have to retire to Pemberley much sooner than he planned. His broodings nearly caused him to miss his companion's next remark.

"It is certain, absolutely certain, that she is with child?"

"All signs point to a child, but she has yet to feel it quicken. It is possible that it could happen any day, but it would be very early indeed."

"I remember well the day I felt the movements of my unborn child for the very first time."

Darcy did not say anything; he only stared at the remaining contents of his glass.

“When will you tell the family?”

“Mr. Bennet knows, and Mr. and Mrs. Bingley, but so far no others – except you, that is.”

“And my mother and my wife.”

Darcy smiled. “I will tell Mrs. Darcy. She will be relieved to at last share the news with Lady Victoria. As for the rest of the family, all other announcements will be delayed until the baby quickens, or we are on our way back to Pemberley. The Bennets depart for Hertfordshire in a few days, and when we return to Derbyshire, we will trace our steps through that country.”

“An excellent plan, old man. Let me be the first of your family to congratulate you and wish for a safe delivery and a healthy child.” Arnold looked pointedly at his cousin and friend. “Your life will never be the same once you become a father.”

“In a manner of speaking, I have already been a father.”

Arnold knew that Darcy referred to his late sister. “In some ways, yes. But to know that you are holding a new life that is a part of you, that you have yet to experience. *Nothing* can prepare you for that moment, or the realization of the awesome responsibility you will carry with you until your child becomes an adult and begins a family of his own.”

There was nothing Darcy could think to say in response.

The next few days were filled with responding to the cards that had been delivered since the ball. Darcy helped Elizabeth divide the senders into two categories: those to whom she could send her card with a servant and those she would deliver personally.

Elizabeth called at the Arnolds’ townhouse the next day, and addressed the issue of her situation with the ladies of the house.

“My husband tells me that he had a very interesting discussion with Mr. Arnold at their club,” Elizabeth said to Helen Arnold with a raised brow.

“Elizabeth, I can hardly believe he broached the subject. It was most improper.”

“Most, but if I have learned one thing in the time I have been married to Mr. Darcy, it is that the Fitzwilliam clan possesses a frankness in their speech unlike any family I have known.”

Lady Victoria ignored Elizabeth’s jest and asked, “When do you expect the baby?”

That comment earned a smile from both Elizabeth and Helen. “Around the beginning of October, I believe.”

“It is too soon for you to have felt the babe’s quickening. Are you certain?”

“As certain as I can be, and since you believed it well enough to speak of it with your son, I doubt you think it otherwise.”

“Yes, I have seen changes in your appearance since you married. However, I would not have noticed had I not helped prepare you for your curtsy at St James’s, and observed your fittings. I am so happy for you, dear. You look well, and my nephew looks as happy as I have ever seen him. That alone brings me great joy.”

Only one family dinner remained before the Bennets’ departure for Longbourn. This time, Elizabeth would preside over the table, as the gathering was to be held at the Darcys’. She was slightly guilty about the relief she felt in the knowledge that her mother and younger siblings would soon be safely tucked away in Hertfordshire. She and Darcy had briefly considered announcing their news to all her family, but had decided against that for the present, at least until she felt the child move.

The day arrived, as did all the family. It soon became evident that Mrs. Bennet remained overwhelmed by the splendour in which her two eldest daughters lived and could not be prevailed upon to cease commenting upon it. Elizabeth had told Darcy of the call she had made with her mother on his aunt, the Countess. The meeting was exactly what he had expected, exactly what he had feared: the two older ladies had spent their time gossiping and rhapsodizing over the details of the ball. Fortunately, neither other members of the Fitzwilliam clan nor other visitors witnessed the encounter, for which Darcy was gratefully relieved. His aunt’s title and position in society would continue to shield her from ridicule; his mother-in-law had no such protection.

Darcy grew more firm in his opinion that his original request to Elizabeth about her family had been justified. It would be unwise to invite the Bennets to stay with them until Elizabeth was firmly accepted by society. They had been in public together only once, at the ball, and although Mrs. Bennet’s behaviour was restrained, her performance while visiting his aunt proved that such an amendment of manner was fleeting. She had said and done as she pleased for too many years for him to expect a permanent reformation of her actions and words.

His worries extended to the Bingleys as well. Bingley was only just establishing his foothold into better society, shedding the stigma of new money

made from trade. Marriage to the daughter of a landed gentleman, the leasing of an estate, and his new family connection to Darcy had helped. However, if Mrs. Bennet managed to secure another invitation to stay with the Bingleys too soon, Bingley was in as much danger of suffering some public humiliation as Darcy. He determined to speak with Bingley on the matter as soon as possible.

During the meal, the inane chatter of Elizabeth's mother and two youngest sisters was a trial on Darcy's forbearance. In an effort to curb the disgust such a display aroused in him, he focused his attention on the Gardiners. Elizabeth's uncle was nothing like his sister, and once again, Darcy pondered how two siblings could be so different. Then he recalled that the same held true for his wife and Mrs. Bingley, and their younger siblings. He had developed a respect for Mr. Gardiner despite his profession, relieved that his wife had some relations of whom they need not be ashamed. The conversation turned to the summer, and the Gardiners revealed that they were planning a trip to the Lakes.

"I am not certain my business will allow us the time necessary to make as prolonged a journey as we hope," Mr. Gardiner confessed.

"If not the Lakes, then where?" Darcy asked.

"Mrs. Gardiner has hinted that an abbreviated itinerary to visit no further north than the Peaks would be acceptable. She spent many years of her youth in Derbyshire, not far from your estate, I believe. For the longest time, she has wished to return to Lambton to show me the place where she spent those happy days."

"Lambton is but five miles from Pemberley! If you decide to travel to Derbyshire, I hope you will stay with us, providing it does not interfere with any plans you have already made."

"That is generous of you, Mr. Darcy, but as I said, our plans are not yet set. Certainly, if we do travel to Derbyshire, we would be delighted to accept your hospitality."

"Let your enjoyment of the art of fishing be an added incentive to stay at Pemberley. The sport is excellent, and I can provide you with rod and tackle."

"Derbyshire sounds more and more like the desired destination of our summer ramblings," Mr. Gardiner laughed. "Perhaps I should make certain that my business does *not* allow time to visit the Lakes!"

That night, as Darcy and Elizabeth lay together in bed discussing the events of the evening, Elizabeth brought up the subject of her uncle and aunt.

"I was delighted when you invited them to Pemberley. Thank you, husband."

"There is no need to thank me. I like your uncle. He is an intelligent man and pleasant company."

"Much different from the rest of my family. Come now, I know that is your opinion."

"Elizabeth ..."

"Fitzwilliam, I agree with you. I love my family, but I am aware of their deficiencies. Uncle and Aunt Gardiner are wonderful people. Their home was a haven for Jane and me, as we grew to womanhood. My aunt provided an example of what a lady *should* be. I confess, I patterned my behaviour after hers, instead of those who lived closer."

"The Gardiners are fine people."

"My aunt told me they had planned to ask my sister Mary to accompany them, but with your offer, they are unsure that they will do so."

"Why not?"

"Because you did not know she might be with them when you spoke to my uncle, and they were not sure you would have extended the invitation had you known."

Darcy hesitated before responding. "I have always been polite to your sister."

"Aye, you have, but my uncle and aunt are keen observers. They know you are uncomfortable around the Bennets, but they do not hold that against you." Elizabeth flashed a wry smile. "Few are comfortable around the Bennets."

"I am comfortable enough around you."

"That is because I am a Darcy now, and carrying the Darcy heir."

"I was comfortable before we married. But you are correct," he nuzzled her ear, "you are a Darcy now, and I want you that way."

Soon all conversation other than words of passion was ended as Darcy showed his lover exactly how happy he was that she now bore his family name – and his child.

After much discussion, the Darcys decided that Elizabeth would attend the Bridens' party. A note accepting the invitation was dispatched. A number of the ladies would be performing on the pianoforte, and Darcy felt this was an appropriate venue for Elizabeth to play in public for the first time since their marriage. She agreed, though not entirely happy with the choice of hosts. Like her husband, she did not particularly like or enjoy the Bridens' society. However, she was discerning enough to know that some acquaintances were encouraged because of the mutual social benefit to all parties involved.

The Bridens obviously were desirous of the continued connection, despite their failed attempt to

attach Darcy to their daughter, and Elizabeth was not adverse claiming the benefits of such an association for themselves. The Bridens, while untitled, moved in the highest of circles. Mrs. Briden was friends with many influential women in London society, and although Elizabeth did not desire Mrs. Briden's good opinion, she could not risk that woman's displeasure. The party was one such occasion where both families would benefit. Mrs. Briden would claim the honour of satisfying some of the curiosity of Darcy's bride by producing the young woman at her house. Elizabeth would meet more of the *ton* in a neutral setting.

Mrs. Briden was sensible enough to place Elizabeth's song in the middle of the performances. As eager as she was to hear her guest play, she knew it would not do to make her unduly nervous by asking her to exhibit first. When it was time for Elizabeth to take her place at the instrument, she breathed deeply before losing herself in the music. Her playing *had* improved! Months of daily practise allowed her to execute the piece nearly flawlessly. Any mistakes she made were minor and were rendered inconsequential by her easy and unaffected manner. The applause seemed sincere, and Elizabeth returned to her seat gratified with the result, though she could not be prevailed upon to play again.

Once the musical portion of the gathering was over, the ladies were served refreshments. Elizabeth recognised many familiar faces but struggled to put names with most. Mrs. Briden, ever the attentive hostess, was quick to congratulate Elizabeth on her playing and remained by her side for several minutes, providing the invaluable service of mentioning the names of the other ladies who approached them. One woman who Elizabeth had no problem remembering was Mrs. Atkins, the particular friend of Lady Victoria.

"Mrs. Darcy, may I congratulate you on your performance. It was lovely."

"Thank you, ma'am. You are very kind."

Mrs. Atkins leaned in closer so only Elizabeth could hear her. "Lady Victoria told me you had been practicing most diligently since your marriage."

"Mr. Darcy has a fondness for music."

A woman unknown to Elizabeth approached. "Mrs. Kenney, how wonderful to see you today. Have you been introduced to Mrs. Darcy?" Mrs. Atkins asked.

With that simple act, Elizabeth had her champion for the evening. There were women who did not know what to make of the new Mrs. Darcy. Their sense of superiority predisposed them to think ill of the upstart. Elizabeth Darcy had no prior connections to

recommend her, so it was rumoured, and she did not show any particular deference to her social superiors. Elizabeth could feel the scrutiny she was under and did her best to not offend. She understood the situation in which she found herself, and although thankful for the tacit support of Lady Victoria in the form of her friend Mrs. Atkins, she was glad that Darcy's aunt was not in attendance. Sooner or later, Elizabeth knew she must face the *ton* alone, and she believed that Mrs. Briden's party was the perfect place to start. Here, no one could accuse her of hiding behind her influential new relative.

In the Darcy coach returning from the party, Elizabeth reflected on the outing. Everything had gone well. Her playing was up to the standard she had set for herself. She met many new ladies and had not embarrassed herself or shamed her husband. He would be pleased when she recounted the events.

Now that Elizabeth had made several public appearances, the Darcys fell headlong into a full social calendar. They attended balls and dinners, plays and operas. They hosted dinner parties at their house. Darcy kept a close eye on his wife. He knew from their intimate times that her body continued to change and increase; he doubted they would be able to finish out the season in London, as he had hoped. Her condition would soon be apparent, and it would not do for her to be seen in polite society while obviously with child. Until then, they picked their outings to accrue the greatest social benefit in the time they had remaining. Darcy watched carefully and waited patiently for the final confirmation of her state.

That happy event happened, fortuitously, on an evening they had chosen to remain at home. Elizabeth was sitting close to the fire reading a book when she let out a small gasp.

"Elizabeth, are you well?" Darcy immediately asked, concerned. She closed her eyes and seemed not to hear him. He reached over to touch her. "Are you well?" She opened her eyes.

"I think I just felt the babe move." Her eyes were shining.

"Truly?"

"Yes, I felt a fluttering here." Elizabeth laid her hand on her expanded stomach.

"Do you still feel anything?"

"No, it was only for a moment. I was waiting to see if it would recur, but it has not."

"This is wonderful! Had you not thought that it would happen soon? It must be the child!"

Elizabeth smiled at his enthusiasm. He really was a dear man. He would not say so, but she knew he

cared deeply for her. She was convinced he would be a doting father, and she thought with amusement how he struggled not to be overprotective of her in her expectant state. Suddenly, she could not wait to feel the new life within her move again. She could not wait until the child was large enough for Darcy to feel it kick and move within her. She could not wait to give him the heir he so desperately deserved.

Much to her husband's surprise, Elizabeth stood and pulled him to his feet.

"I think this is cause for a celebration," Elizabeth said in a voice he could not misunderstand. She snaked her arms around his neck and pulled his head down for a kiss. "Take me to bed, Fitzwilliam," she whispered against his lips.

His reaction was immediate. She felt his manhood press against her stomach as their kiss deepened. Moments later, he swept her into his arms and carried her to her chamber. When the door slammed shut, the household knew better than to disturb the master and his mistress.

The quickening of his heir convinced Darcy that their stay in London was over. It was time to return to Derbyshire; his child would be born where it ought to be, at Pemberley. Darcy had gradually reduced the number of engagements that he and Elizabeth accepted, and none further out than a week or so at a time. The one or two to which they were committed could easily be missed. Regrets were sent and plans were made to leave the following week.

On the journey, they would stop in Hertfordshire to discharge one last duty – to inform Mrs. Bennet that she was to be a grandmother. They had a standing invitation to stay at Netherfield whenever they called at Longbourn – whether the Bingleys were in residence or not. Darcy appreciated his friend's hospitality, knowing full well how insupportable it would be to stay at Longbourn. His nerves could not handle that stress.

To Hertfordshire they went, determined to stay only one night before continuing the trek northward. The Bingleys returned to Netherfield at the same time; Jane desired one last evening with her sister before they would be separated for many months.

Once installed at Netherfield, the Bingleys and the Darcys together made the pilgrimage to the Bennet ancestral home. Mrs. Bennet was all aflutter as Hill ushered them into the drawing room.

"My dear Mrs. Darcy and Mrs. Bingley! What an unexpected surprise. You did not tell us you would be in Hertfordshire so soon. It is always such a pleasure

to see my two oldest girls and your handsome husbands."

Bingley accepted Mrs. Bennet's words good-naturedly and greeted his sisters and father-in-law. Darcy was more taciturn, something Mr. Bennet did not miss. He rather suspected he knew the reason for his two daughters' removal from Town. Surely Elizabeth was ready to tell her mother about the baby.

Mrs. Bennet thought nothing of the sudden call. Instead, she asked both couples what parties they had attended, what plays they had seen, and what new people they had met in London in the weeks since the Bennets had returned to Hertfordshire. Her curiosity eventually satisfied on that score, she then demanded that her daughters tell her about the latest fashions, but before either could answer, she startled her visitors with her own pronouncement.

"It matters little here, now that the regiment has moved to Brighton. At least Lydia is enjoying herself."

"Pardon, Madam? What do you mean about Lydia?" Darcy asked, immediately interested. He had noticed the youngest Bennet's absence. The relative tranquillity of the household made it impossible *not* to notice.

"Did I not write to either of you? I was certain I did. Lydia was asked by Mrs. Forster to go to Brighton as her particular friend. They left a fortnight ago."

Darcy turned to Mr. Bennet. "You gave your consent?"

"After Lydia's disappointment over not attending your wife's ball, I would have had no peace at Longbourn unless I consented. Colonel Forster is a sensible man and will see to it that Lydia stays out of trouble."

"I hope, sir," Darcy said a few minutes later in a quieter voice so Mrs. Bennet would not hear, "that you spoke most forcefully to the Forsters. Lydia may not have a large dowry, but her connections have vastly improved with her sisters' marriages, and I fear she could be easy prey to a fortune hunter."

"I did speak with him most strenuously on the matter. I also cautioned Lydia. She appeared to understand the sincerity of my concern for her well-being and promised to act responsibly."

Darcy looked at Mr. Bennet sceptically. He doubted Lydia bothered to listen to anyone who said anything she did not wish to hear. Perhaps it would behove him to send a trusted servant to Brighton to keep an eye on her. He would confer with Elizabeth and make a decision later.

“With Mary travelling with my brother and sister to visit you, only Kitty will be home to attend me,” Elizabeth’s mother continued.

“It was bound to happen sooner or later, Mrs. Bennet,” Mr. Bennet answered. “What else would you expect when you finally marry off the last of your daughters?”

“It is all so sudden, that is all. This time last year, all five girls were at Longbourn.”

“And lamenting your fate should I die before any one of them married. As you can see, your concern was for naught. Your two daughters have made fine matches, and their husbands, who stand before you, are honourable men. You have no cause to repine.”

That speech was followed by silence. Elizabeth caught Darcy’s eye. He nodded, and she addressed the entire room.

“The reason Mr. Darcy and I have stopped on our journey to Derbyshire is to inform you ... that I am with child. The baby should be born around the beginning of October.”

When she finished speaking, she, Darcy, the Bingleys and Mr. Bennet braced themselves for the reaction. Everyone was surprised when Mary rushed over to embrace Elizabeth before anyone spoke.

“Oh Lizzy! I am going to be an aunt!” Mary squealed in delight. Elizabeth laughed, hugged her sister, then turned to embrace Kitty, who had joined them.

“Mama?” Mrs. Bennet sat dead still, a look of disbelief on her face. “Mama?”

Mrs. Bennet began to shudder, then flew to Elizabeth’s arms. “My dear Lizzy! A child! And so soon! For once, you listened to me! Of course, it must be a boy. Mr. Darcy must have a son!”

Elizabeth laughed at her mother’s continuing effusions. The gathering broke up soon afterwards, Mrs. Bennet insisting that Elizabeth return to Netherfield to rest. There should be no chances taken with her first grandson. The Netherfield party returned to that house for a quiet evening.

Early the next morning, not long after first light, Elizabeth and her husband bade their hosts goodbye and settled into their spacious carriage to begin the rest of the journey back to Pemberley. It was time for the Darcys to take up residence in their family’s ancient abode to await the arrival of the next generation.

Chapter Fifteen

The Darcys arrived at Pemberley two days after leaving Longbourn. There was much to be done in preparation for the baby who would arrive in four months. Everyone, from the master to the scullery maids, looked forward to the day when the sound of a child would once again fill the halls of the estate.

In the first week of August, the Gardiners made their long-awaited appearance. Elizabeth was overjoyed to see her aunt and uncle again, all the more so since they had brought Mary with them. Derbyshire was lovely, but she missed her family. The letters between Pemberley, Longbourn, and Netherfield managed to placate only temporarily her desire to be with those whom she loved and who openly loved her in return.

Elizabeth had also come to both understand and appreciate her husband's pride in his estate and heritage. His was an old family, long respected in Derbyshire. Even the house was a testament to the centuries of influence and vast wealth of the Darcys. She knew that Darcy was still uncomfortable with her relatives, and that the greatest obstacle he had overcome in asking for her hand was the impropriety and unseemly behaviour of some of her family members. That was another reason she was so happy to host her uncle and aunt; they were, at least, relations Elizabeth had never been ashamed to call her own.

Mrs. Gardiner was the first to greet Elizabeth.

"Oh my stars, Elizabeth. It is *so* good to see you again!"

"Welcome to Pemberley, Aunt." The other travellers came to join them. "Mary, Uncle, welcome to Pemberley."

Mary stared at the building before her and whispered, "Lizzy, this place is enormous!"

"It is only a house, Mary. Come, Mr. Darcy is meeting with his steward about a pressing estate matter but is eager to welcome you when they finish. I have refreshments readied for us, unless you would rather rest from your journey first. In that case, I will take you directly to your rooms."

"I would like to wash away the dust of the road," Mrs. Gardiner admitted.

"As would I," said Mary.

Mr. Gardiner laughed. "I think that is your cue to show us to our rooms."

"You were always so astute, Uncle. Right this way. The servants will bring your belongings."

Elizabeth led them up the great staircase and to the family quarters. They came to Mary's room first. Her sister was astonished when she entered.

"Lizzy, this is the grandest room in which I have ever stayed."

"Quite different from our bedrooms in Longbourn, I agree. Does it meet with your satisfaction? If not, I can have you placed in another room."

Mary saw that she was being teased. "I *suppose* I can endure it, although it is not at all what I am accustomed to," she said with a perfectly straight face, then burst out laughing.

Elizabeth smiled at this less serious Mary. "When you are ready, ring for the servant to bring you to me. It is not difficult to become disoriented in this house."

Next, Elizabeth escorted the Gardiners to their rooms.

"These are for your use. I hope they meet with your approval."

Mrs. Gardiner walked around a moment, then linked her arm with Elizabeth. "What a lovely room! Thank you, my dear."

"You truly like it?"

"There are few who would not."

Elizabeth smiled. "Your good opinion is important to me."

"I am still struggling with the realisation that my little Elizabeth is mistress of all this and will soon give birth to the heir of Pemberley."

Elizabeth kissed her aunt on the cheek. "I have missed you. Refresh yourself, then come downstairs. My husband and I will await you there."

Darcy had joined Elizabeth in one of the sitting rooms by the time their guests returned downstairs.

"Mr. Gardiner, perhaps tomorrow you will join me in a quest for trout?"

"I would be delighted, sir."

Elizabeth thanked her husband with a radiant smile. The ladies made plans for a tour of the park.

After the tour of the park the next day, Mary wished to explore the shelves of the library. The men were still out fishing, giving Elizabeth some much-appreciated time alone with her aunt. The ladies chose to walk through one of the gardens near the house.

"Elizabeth, I do not believe I have ever seen you so happy, or so beautiful."

"I am happy. Though how you can say I am beautiful with *this*," she put her hand on her swollen belly, "to carry, I do not know."

Mrs. Gardiner stopped and took Elizabeth's hands in her own.

"My dear, there is nothing more glorious than a woman growing heavy with child and a look of contentment in her eyes. You are stunning."

"I feel huge!"

Mrs. Gardiner laughed, "I will not attempt to deny that you are increased in size. I will only say that you are lovely, no matter what you may think. I have birthed four children, and I am very aware of the feelings you possess."

"Thank you, Aunt."

Mrs. Gardiner squeezed Elizabeth's hands, then let them go; they resumed their leisurely ramble.

"When I was a girl growing up in Lambton, never did I think I would know anyone who lived in this grand house. And now my niece is wife to the master of Pemberley! How are you adjusting to being mistress all of this?" She swept her hand. "Do you feel comfortable in your position?"

"I confess that it has been, at times, overwhelming. When Fitzwilliam asked me to marry him, we talked about many things. We both understood that although I am a gentleman's daughter, Longbourn is not Pemberley. He was more confident in my aptitude than I. Pemberley is far grander than I imagined, and I had little appreciation of the intricacies of life among the *haute monde*. Thus, I have spent the seven months since my marriage doing everything in my power not to disappoint his belief in me."

"From all that I have seen, he must be pleased."

"Yes, so far."

"You do not sound like the confident Lizzy I know."

Elizabeth took her time replying. "I am not certain I am that woman any more. Sometimes when I am alone, I ponder all the changes that have taken place in my life since last November. My life was much simpler then – in many ways, I was just a carefree girl." Again Elizabeth paused, but her aunt sensed she was not finished and held her tongue. "Now, too many people are dependent on me to live such a selfish life. Pemberley deserves a responsible mistress. The people are accustomed to it. Did you know that most of the servants have spent their entire lives in service to the Darcys? Many of their parents served at Pemberley before them, and in some cases, their grandparents."

"It shows a remarkable loyalty to the family and that they have been treated fairly."

"Exactly my point! I have developed an enormous respect for the burdens and responsibilities that my husband shoulders. I manage only the household. He was given the entire estate at roughly the same age."

"I suspect he felt as overwhelmed then as you do now," Mrs. Gardiner suggested.

"I suppose so."

"Have you and he spoken of this?"

"We have, at times. He tries to reassure me, and I do believe that he is pleased. Yet for him it was different; he was born to this life. He was raised to be the master of Pemberley. I was raised to be the wife of a man with, at best, a small estate, of a rank equal to that of my father's, assuming I were fortunate enough to secure such a match. Now look at me. A gentleman's daughter and a gentleman's wife I may be, but there is a greater distance between the two situations than I ever thought possible. How have I come to such a place?"

"Elizabeth, listen to me. Yes, you made a splendid match, greater than any of us could have imagined. You have had so many challenges put before you since you married. Of course you feel a stranger to the woman you were before you married. That, my dear niece, is as it should be."

"I do not understand."

"Child, do you honestly think I am the same girl who married your uncle? When you become someone's wife, you leave your old life behind. You create a new family and you learn that your new family is unique to the two of you – no matter how you came into the union. You have changed because you are now truly a woman. And Elizabeth, your husband will have changed too, even if you cannot yet recognise it. It is the natural way of things and if he had not, I doubt you would be so in love with him."

Elizabeth blushed. "He has become very dear to me."

"There is nothing wrong with loving your spouse, especially when he loves you in return."

They continued to walk along, Elizabeth pondering her aunt's observations and hoping that she had seen too little, rather than that her aunt had fancied too much.

Late in the afternoon, they all sat talking together in a drawing room when an express arrived for Darcy.

"It is from Bingley," he told the others and hastened to open it. Inside was another letter, addressed to Elizabeth, which he handed to her as he

deciphered the contents of his own missive. The look of concentration on his face intensified and quickly turned to something more ominous. Elizabeth held her unopened letter, captivated by her husband. He broke his reverie and looked at his wife.

“I think you should read your letter.”

Elizabeth hurriedly broke the seal; she was shocked by what she read.

“Bingley’s news is the same?”

“Yes.”

“What has happened? Are the children safe?” Mrs. Gardiner asked anxiously.

“Yours are, Mrs. Gardiner,” came Darcy’s cryptic reply. He handed his letter to Mr. Gardiner. “Perhaps you should read it aloud. It concerns us all.” Elizabeth wished that her husband would come to her and take her hand. He did not.

Darcy,

I write to you with the most extraordinary and disturbing news. Two nights ago, an express arrived at Longbourn. The news it contained was shocking. It was from Colonel Forster, commanding officer of the regiment that recently decamped from Meryton to Brighton, who had invited our sister Lydia to join him as his wife’s particular friend. What no one knew was that Lydia had formed an affection for one of the officers of the regiment, and on Saturday night, she eloped with the man. She left a note for Mrs. Forster telling her that she and the officer, Mr. Wickham, were bound for Gretna Green.

Colonel Foster immediately set out to follow them. However, he found no trace of them on the other side of Town. We must conclude that the couple is in hiding somewhere in London. I must ask you now to do that which will bring you no pleasure. Please come to London and help Mr. Bennet and me search for Lydia and Wickham. Mr. Gardiner’s presence would also be greatly appreciated. I wish to God there was some other way. Come quickly.

Your brother,

C Bingley

They sat mute, too shaken to feel anything but Lydia’s shame.

Darcy spoke first, and in a clipped manner: “I will leave at first light for London. Will you join me Mr. Gardiner?”

That gentleman looked at his wife before he answered.

“Thank you for the offer . . .”

“Uncle,” Elizabeth interrupted, “Jane has written as well, and requested that you and Aunt come first to Hertfordshire. She and Kitty have the added responsibility of the children, and Mama cannot be left alone.”

“I doubt that your mother is much help with the children.” Mr. Gardiner turned to his wife. “We should return to Hertfordshire for Jane and Kitty’s sake.”

“I agree.”

“Mr. Darcy, thank you for your generous offer, but I must decline. I will take my wife and niece” – he glanced apologetically towards Mary – “back to Longbourn and then join you in Town as soon as I can.”

“Cannot Mary remain with Elizabeth?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“Jane will need her more than I will, Aunt.”

“But the child?”

“I am not friendless here. Uncle is right. Mary must return to Hertfordshire with you.”

Darcy spoke again. “Please excuse me. I must give instructions for the servants to prepare for an early departure. Mrs. Darcy, may I have a private word?”

She followed him to a far corner of the room.

“I do not want to leave you alone, but you cannot travel in your condition. I am concerned for your health and the safety of the child.”

“I know,” she said, resigned to be the one left behind to wait.

“Please see to our guests. I shall return shortly.”

Everyone retired early in preparation for the journey the next day. Darcy prepared for bed and came into Elizabeth’s room. Silently, he slipped under the covers and embraced Elizabeth. Neither spoke for several minutes. Darcy knew she was awake, but he could not, for the life of him, think of anything to say.

“What will you do?” he at last heard her say.

“I will do everything in my power to prevent a scandal.”

“They must marry.”

Darcy did not reply.

“If Lydia does not return to Hertfordshire a married woman, she will be ruined and her shame complete.”

“I know. I have a vested interest in this, too.”

“I did not mean to imply that we are not involved, only a simpleton could fail to understand this. I ... I fear for Mary and Kitty.”

“Shhh, rest. We both need our sleep for the days ahead.”

“Promise me that you will be careful.”

“I have no intention of being lured into a situation where my honour or my safety is jeopardised.”

Elizabeth looked at him for a moment as tears filled her eyes. When she again spoke, her voice was full of emotion.

“I am mortified at what has happened. I am deeply embarrassed by the reckless actions of my youngest sister. The thought of bringing shame to your name and your house is almost too much to bear. You were right in all your concerns about my family. I cannot apologise or ask for your forgiveness enough for what you must now do. I know you will do everything in your power to protect us from scandal. And Fitzwilliam, I know you do not like for me to say this to you, but I must before you leave. I love you and I will miss you terribly while we are apart.”

By dawn the next morning, Darcy had readied himself for his journey. Before departing, he re-entered Elizabeth’s room, softly kissed her, and placed his hand gently against her swollen belly. At the doorway, he turned and took one long last look at his still slumbering wife.

The two days’ journey to London gave Darcy a great deal of time to analyse the situation as his coach sped ever onward. He was certain that Wickham never intended to go to Scotland; he believed the man’s motivation was entirely mercenary and that the family would soon hear from him, undoubtedly demanding a large payment in exchange for marriage to Lydia. Otherwise, Wickham had no reason to take the girl to London or to disappear so completely among the mass of humanity living in the capital.

Darcy also comprehended that his boyhood playmate’s envy and resentment – that an accident of birth had denied him a life of wealth and status – knew no bounds. Being denied the living at Kympton was the least of it. Wickham wanted revenge and recompense – for all the things he believed himself entitled, as if he were a true son of Pemberley. Wickham’s acts of contrition in Hertfordshire were nothing but a ruse, as false as the man himself.

Darcy knew that he must be prepared, and he needed help if scandal were to be averted. With that in mind, when they arrived on the outskirts of the city

around dinnertime of the second day, he instructed his driver to travel to his cousin’s lodgings.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was as startled by Darcy’s grave demeanour as he was by his cousin’s unexpected arrival. “Darcy! I thought you were at Pemberley. What brings you to London?”

“I need your help.”

“What has happened?”

“It is a complicated story, and it involves George Wickham.”

The Colonel grew angrier with each passing minute as Darcy told him the news; he was more than willing to help execute the plan Darcy had formulated.

“I know the perfect man for the job. I will send a note to him immediately.”

It was not long before Colonel Walter Hall arrived. A half-hour later, the three men shook hands, and Darcy left to call on Michael Arnold.

“Darcy, what the devil are you doing here and at this time of night?”

“Forgive me for disturbing you so late in the evening. I have a grave problem.”

“Is it Elizabeth, or the child?”

“No, but her youngest sister has done something very foolish.”

Darcy spent the next two hours briefing his cousin on Lydia’s situation and his plans to resolve the crisis.

“Will you help me find the man?”

“I will do what I can. You are correct; it affects us all. Mother will not be pleased if we do not succeed.”

“Many people will be displeased if I fail.”

“Stay the night here, Fitzwilliam. Wickham may have your house watched in anticipation of your arrival. Even one day might make a difference.”

“Thank you, Michael. I am sorry to bring this upon you.”

“We are family. Say nothing more about it.”

Darcy called on his brother-in-law the next morning.

“Darcy, I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you,” Bingley said.

“I came as quickly as I could. Is Mr. Bennet here?”

“Yes, he should join us shortly. Frankly, I am concerned about him. This has been a mighty blow, and he seems to have aged since this nightmare began.”

“Perhaps we should try to convince him to return to Longbourn and leave Lydia to us?”

“Lydia, no matter how foolish, is still my daughter, Darcy,” Mr. Bennet said as he came into the room.

“Sir, I am not questioning your authority or responsibility for Lydia. I meant only to indicate my willingness to represent you in this affair.”

“We need to find the pair first,” Bingley said, trying to turn the conversation to a less confrontational path.

“I know Wickham, Mr. Bennet; he grew up on my estate – as you might recall from our discussion last November at the ball at Netherfield.” Darcy then reviewed his history with the man and gave his opinions on the bounder’s motives. “You are wasting your time searching for them,” Darcy said. “Wickham *wants* to be found and will, therefore, present himself to us before long. I suggest we would be better served preparing for that eventuality.”

“I concur, Darcy,” Mr. Bennet replied. “What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“Your daughter must be married,” Darcy stated flatly.

“To gain such a son-in-law! From what you have told me, he will demand more than I can ever pay.”

“I have no intention of George Wickham becoming my brother.”

“But Darcy, you just said ...” Bingley said in confusion.

“Bingley, what I meant is that Lydia must be wed ... to *some* man. There is more than one way to resolve the matter.”

Mr. Bennet caught his meaning instantly. “You are going to pay another man to marry her.”

Darcy answered with a slight nod.

“How shall we find her, let alone convince her to come away from Wickham?” Bingley asked.

“You must trust me to accomplish it. This is another reason why I should be the one who faces Wickham. I know him; I can goad him into making a mistake, giving us the time we need to find Lydia. Once she is discovered, it will be up to you, Mr. Bennet, to bring her back to her family.”

“Very well, Darcy, I give you leave to act in my stead with Wickham. I will await my part with Lydia. You may still want Bingley to go with you.”

“As long as you follow my lead,” Darcy said and looked into Bingley’s eyes, “I welcome your company.”

Bingley agreed and Darcy laid out his scheme. Mr. Bennet was surprised at the detail his son-in-law had taken in mapping out his strategy and readily agreed to the plan. Darcy then returned to his home to wait for Wickham’s next move.

Returning the next day to Bingley’s house, Darcy was unsurprised that a note had just arrived.

I will be at the Peacock on Gray’s Inn Lane today at one o’clock. I will remain for one hour.
– GW

“He did not give us much time,” Bingley said, glancing at the clock. It read half-past eleven.

“He wanted to ensure his advantage. Do you still wish to come, Bingley?” Darcy asked.

“Yes. I may help divide his attention.”

“We will take my carriage and footmen from both our houses. He will be expecting a show of force. Today, I am more than happy to allow the illusion that we will act rashly. George never appreciated the subtlety of well executed misdirection.”

The Peacock was located in a somewhat reputable part of town. Once inside, it took several moments for their eyes to adjust to the light in the room, the contrast between the bright sunlight and the shadows disorientating at first. Soon enough, Darcy saw the man they had come to see staring at them from a table in the far corner. Darcy told his men to wait by the door while he and Bingley met with Mr. Wickham.

“Darcy, Bingley! What a pleasant surprise to see you here.”

“You knew full well that we would come,” Darcy answered.

“Yes, and somehow I also knew that Mr. Bennet would not be with you.”

“Let us dispense with the preliminaries, Wickham. Has the wedding taken place?”

“Darcy, you were never one to mince words. Therefore, I will answer you in kind. No, it has not.”

“When, then?”

“That is entirely dependent upon you. As soon as I am satisfied with the wedding settlements, I shall be ready to go to the church.”

“You rotten ...” Bingley started to speak, but Darcy stayed him.

“Charles, now is not the time.” Darcy might have sounded harsh and slightly panicked, but inwardly he was pleased with his brother-in-law’s outburst. It would help create the illusion that they were desperate.

“What do you want?”

Wickham smirked as he opened negotiations.

“Fifteen thousand pounds.”

“Fifteen thousand!” Bingley cried.

“Keep your voice down,” Darcy warned before turning his attention back to his adversary. “Impossible.”

“Then we have nothing further to discuss at this time. I will send word to you each day where I might be found. When you are ready, we can continue. Meanwhile, *Miss Lydia* awaits her, uh, most attentive suitor.” Wickham pushed back his chair and started to stand.

“Wait, I was not finished,” Darcy hastily added. Wickham settled back into his former repose. “Mr. Bennet does not have that amount of money to settle on his daughter. Her dowry is one thousand pounds, the same as her sisters.”

“Oh, I was not referring to her dowry. I spoke of the settlement that I want from the two of you. Fifteen thousand and I marry the girl and stop a scandal from blackening your names. Come now Darcy, I know you have the money. I could have asked for twice as much. Georgiana’s dowry was thirty thousand, was it not? I am not so greedy as to ask for it all. I think fifteen thousand is very reasonable under the circumstances. So far, I have done my best to keep the situation hidden. Now it is up to you to see that it remains as such.”

“I want to speak with Bingley in private first.”

“You can do that here.”

“Yes, but I refuse to negotiate in this place any longer.” Darcy made a show of looking at his men. “We could continue elsewhere.”

“I prefer neutral ground.”

“Are you convinced that I do not have the advantage in numbers? Bingley and I outnumber you.”

Wickham smiled. “You assume I came here alone.”

“No, I assumed you would have men at your disposal. However, until Bingley and I have a chance to consider your demands, I have nothing more to say to you.”

The three men stared at each other. Wickham broke the silence.

“Very well. I will send word tomorrow where we will meet. No tricks, or the game is over and I abandon Lydia on a street corner like a common whore.”

Incensed, Darcy stood up, looming menacingly over the seated Wickham. Surprised by Darcy’s sudden move, Wickham flinched, then hastily tried to cover it with a sneer. He was too late; Darcy saw.

“Remember who you are dealing with before you make such threats.” Darcy shot his opponent one final

contemptuous glare, then walked away, Bingley at his side.

Once back in the carriage, Bingley was the first to speak.

“Fifteen thousand pounds!”

“He is a fool to marry her for much less than ten thousand. His first offer was to be expected. He bid high.” Darcy did not seem at all upset.

“Did the encounter meet with your expectations?”

“Exceeded them! His power lies in a threat of scandal. As it stands now, if we get Lydia back, and can get our hands on him away from the prying eyes of the public, he will have lost the gamble; it will be our word against his, and I have the power and the information to damage his credibility beyond all repair. If my man did his job, tomorrow will see Lydia with her family. Then we can deal with the cur.”

“You assume she will leave him.”

“She will have little choice.”

George Wickham waited for Darcy and Bingley to leave, then finished his drink. He looked around him. No one seemed to be giving him any notice, other than the men in his employ. Nonetheless, he would be careful. He paid for another round of drinks for his men, then went outside to hire a cab to take him home.

He did not notice the boy leaning against the wall on the opposite corner, who straightened up and walked across the street, reaching the other side just before a cab turned into the lane and stopped at the tavern. A man climbed out and tossed a coin to the driver. Wickham was delighted to find a conveyance so soon. He would not have climbed into any hackney coach just waiting on the street – that was too much of a risk.

“Where to Gov’ner?”

Still cautious, Wickham replied, “In the direction of Covenant Gardens.”

“Aye, sir. Walk on Berty,” the driver commanded his horse.

The gentleman who had vacated Wickham’s cab went inside the Peacock, sat in an unobtrusive corner, and ordered a pint. An hour later, satisfied that he would remember the faces of the men in the room, he left the building and began walking in the same direction as the boy had wandered earlier. Several streets away, he found the young lookout and slipped him a coin.

“Well done. Has the driver returned yet?”

“No, sir, but give ’em time. ’Arry knows where to find us.”

“Lead the way.”

Twenty minutes later, the cabbie found the two of them at another inn. “He’s staying at The Black Boar.”

The man placed a few more coins on the table and pushed them towards driver.

“Care for a drink?” he said, fingering another coin.

“Do’n mind if I do, but later. Did ya want me to take ya there?”

“Only past the house.”

“Right, I can’ na leave my rig be any longer.”

The man stood and shook the hand of the boy who had remained silent through the exchange, pressing yet another coin in the lad’s hand. “Pleasure doing business with you, Tim. Stay out of trouble and take this to your mum.”

“I will, sir, and thankee.”

Around midnight, a gentleman slipped in the servant’s entrance at the Darcy townhouse. He was immediately shown into the study.

“Good evening, Colonel Hall. Were you successful?”

“Yes, sir. Here is the address. I was also able to take lodgings – the last room available, mind you. I passed Wickham in the hall. He, of course, had no recollection of me. Amazing what a change of clothing can do.”

“Did you see the lady?”

“Not directly, but I did see him enter his room and heard the voice of a young woman. I must assume it was she. The proprietress told me they were the only couple on that floor.”

“Excellent work. If all goes well, her uncle and father will collect her tomorrow when Wickham is away meeting with me. I will send word of the time of our meeting. Until then, return to the inn. Watch to make sure they do not leave.”

“I doubt they are in any position to flee. Wickham obviously had a few pints in him and, well, the walls are thin.”

Darcy grew sombre at that last pronouncement.

The next day, Darcy and Bingley met Wickham at a different tavern in a different quarter of the city. Wickham made a show of ordering drinks for the three of them before he set about the task of securing his fortune. Once the server left, he could barely disguise his avarice.

“I am at your disposal, gentlemen.”

“Bingley and I have discussed your ... offer. You are severely mistaken if you think we would agree to such a sum.”

“Ah, I thought you might think that. I am prepared to be reasonable.” Pleased to be in a position of power, he hesitated for effect. “Twelve thousand pounds.”

Bingley’s jaw dropped, Darcy’s set. Neither bothered to respond.

Darcy was ready with his own offer. “Five thousand pounds.”

“From each of you?”

Bingley snorted.

“No. Total,” Darcy clarified.

“Not good enough,” Wickham countered.

And so began an hour’s worth of give and take. Darcy would in no way come to any agreement. His intent was to draw out the negotiations as long as possible, to promise nothing other than to wait for Wickham to contact him for the location of their next meeting.

At one point, Wickham became so annoyed at his lack of progress with Darcy that he directly addressed Bingley.

“What is your opinion, Mr. Bingley? Do you have a solution?”

“Darcy speaks for Lydia’s family.”

“Then why are you here?”

“For your protection,” Bingley said with meaning. Wickham’s face dropped as he registered the import of the man’s words.

After another fruitless few minutes, Wickham decided to change tactics. He put on a cheery façade and asked, “How about another drink?”

Darcy did not even try to hide the contempt in his voice. “Not today. Bingley, it is time to leave.”

Wickham leaned back in his chair as the gentlemen started to walk away.

“Leaving so soon? I thought we were finally getting somewhere!” he goaded. “Ah well, until tomorrow then. I have a Bennet woman of my own waiting for me. Oh yes, yours are in the country. Pity, they certainly know how to please a man.” Wickham knew he had hit a nerve. He tipped his head when they looked back at him, hatred in both Bingley’s and Darcy’s eyes. “Always a pleasure, gentlemen.”

“It has been many years since I would associate that particular word to my dealings with you. Goodbye.”

Wickham watched his two future brothers leave, taking their lackeys with them. He finished his drink, ordered another, and thought of how he would spend his evening. He had discovered that Lydia possessed

one unexpected charm. She might have come into his bed without sophistication, but she proved to be a willing and eager student, naïve yet passionate. Yes, an unexpected windfall.

Oh, Lydia Bennet was a silly woman, but that would have its uses. It would not take much effort to hide his other activities, not that she would believe him to be anything but honourable. And if she ever did catch him out, he would seduce her again and she would forgive him. She would also gain him access into three estates and two houses in Town. With any luck, he would not have to pay for lodgings most of the year.

Before leaving the pub, Wickham walked over to a man sitting at the far end of the room.

“Same time, same place tomorrow morning,” Wickham said.

The man nodded, and Wickham left to bed his future bride.

Chapter Sixteen

Colonel Hall received a note with his instructions a few minutes after Wickham finally left for his meeting the next day. Hall looked at his timepiece; his visitors would arrive in half an hour. While he waited, he decided to confirm the identity of the other occupant of Wickham's room.

He quickly wrote a note to "Sarah," sealed it, then stepped out into the hall and knocked on his prey's door. The young woman who opened the door matched the description he had been given of Lydia Bennet.

"What is it?"

"I have a message for you, ma'am."

"It must be from George. How romantic! I told him yesterday how much I missed him while he was gone."

"George? The note is from John Halvers. You are Sarah Halvers, are you not?"

"My name is Lydia."

"Beg pardon, ma'am. I must have been given the wrong direction. I will ask downstairs. Sorry to bother you."

She closed the door and Colonel Hall smiled. *That was simple enough. Too bad my regular assignments are not this easy.*

He went down to the public room to await his visitors. Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner were prompt, anxious to see Lydia. Hall took them to the room and knocked on the door.

"Papa!"

Mr. Bennet and his brother walked into the room, but the Colonel did not.

"If you will excuse me, I have other duties. Good day, Miss Bennet."

"You knew who I was! Then why ...?"

"To confirm your identity. Miss Bennet, please, listen carefully to your father." With that, Colonel Hall returned downstairs to await his next guests.

Mr. Gardiner closed the door and stood watch as Mr. Bennet spoke to his daughter.

"Lydia, we must leave at once. I will escort you to your uncle's house in Gracechurch Street."

Lydia folded her arms across her chest. "I will not leave George."

"Nevertheless, I am your father and you are still under my authority. I am taking you away from here. Now."

"No, I will *not* go. George and I are to be married. We were on our way to Gretna Green when he recalled some pressing business, and we turned to London instead. He is nearly finished, and we will depart within days. You see, I will soon be a married woman."

"Foolish girl! Do you have any idea what his business is?"

"Something about some money he is owed. George wanted it resolved so we could have a proper honeymoon."

"Your *George* has spent the last two days with your sisters' husbands negotiating a bribe to marry you!"

"What? I do not believe you. George loves me. He said my lack of dowry meant nothing to him."

"If George Wickham truly loved you, he would have come to me and asked permission to marry you. He would *not* have asked you to elope. But having done so, he most certainly would have taken you directly to Scotland."

"I *told* you. He first had business here in London."

"And I told *you* what that business is. Lydia, daughter, please. Do you not realise the seriousness of your situation? I am sorry to disillusion you, but Wickham has made it quite clear that he is prepared to abandon you and publish your disgrace unless he is paid a substantial amount of money."

"No, he would not ... I do not, I ... 'Tis too much ... I am so confused," Lydia finished in a small voice.

Mr. Bennet put his arm around his youngest daughter and started to lead her out of the room. "There now, child. Let us go to your uncle's, where we can discuss this further. Perhaps your aunt's presence will bring you comfort."

"But George ... we are to be married. He said he loves me."

"The only thing George Wickham loves is money. He is using you, my child. You are just a pawn, a means to secure his fortune. He will not marry you until and unless we meet his price." Mr. Bennet sighed. "At this moment, Lydia, you are nothing more than another of Wickham's mistresses. Yes, *another*, and he married none of *those* women. Has he told you that he has two natural children? By the look on your face, I think not. Wickham is using you for his own pleasure and to secure his material comfort, that is all."

Lydia looked around the filthy room and at last began to understand what her father was trying to tell her.

“My things ...”

“I will send a servant to fetch them. We must go now before *he* returns.”

Mr. Gardiner opened the door and the three went to the waiting coach. Lydia was in a stunned and silent trance until she was safely in her rooms at the Gardiner residence. Once there, she fell on her bed and cried, the full horror of her folly revealing itself before her.

Lydia Bennet might well have been one of the silliest girls in England, but she had enough sense to understand two things: She was no longer a girl, and she was completely and irrevocably ruined.

Bingley was quiet as the two men returned to his house. Darcy noted, but decided to wait for his friend to be ready to speak. His wait was not long.

“Darcy, are you not bothered by these negotiations?”

“How so?”

“Does it not disturb you to be promising to settle money on Wickham for a marriage that you have no intention of ever taking place?”

“Bingley, do not despair. Have you heard me promise that man anything more than to await word on the location of our next meeting?”

Bingley thought long on this before he said hesitantly, “No, but there is an implied agreement.”

“Wickham assumes that we want him to marry Lydia and is acting accordingly. What we want, however, is to remove Lydia from his grasp and marry her to someone else. I have given Wickham no promise that my honour compels me to discharge. I have asked you to remain silent so you would not promise anything that your honour would compel you to keep. As of the conclusion our meeting today, no monies have been agreed upon, nor have we indicated that Mr. Bennet has given his consent to the union. I may not be entirely happy with the situation, but my conscience is appeased.”

Colonel Hall spotted his three fellow soldiers as they walked into the public house. He greeted them with warm handshakes and invited them up to his room, where he changed into his uniform. They waited until Mr. Gardiner advised them that the Bennets were leaving; then it was time for the four of them to take the Bennet party’s place in George Wickham’s room.

Eventually Wickham, after imbibing in a few pints, arrived back at his lodgings. He rapped on the door.

“Lydia, open the door.”

When the door opened, the spirits Wickham had consumed dulled his senses enough that he failed to react quickly, and he was unceremoniously pulled into the room.

“Well, well. Lieutenant Wickham,” Colonel Hall began. “Your commanding officer was *most* concerned about you. Seems you left without permission and in the company of a young woman who was under his protection. The *regular* Army frowns on such behaviour.”

“I was on my way to be married, and I am not in the Regulars!”

“Is that so? Where is your wife?” A slightly inebriated Wickham finally noticed the absence of Lydia. “You left Brighton long enough ago to have gone to Gretna and returned. I would like to offer my congratulations to your bride and escort you back to your regiment.”

“I, er, we have yet to go to Scotland.”

Wickham looked around stupidly for any sign of his intended bride – all her belongings were gone. Hall nodded and the other soldiers grabbed Wickham, pinning his arms behind his back. The Colonel slapped his captive.

“An officer in His Majesty’s Army does not behave in such a dishonourable manner. However, we cannot have you making a scene when we leave.” Another soldier poured a mixture of alcohol and laudanum into Wickham’s mouth. He sputtered as the liquid ran down his throat, the excess flowing over his chin and onto his shirt.

“Drink up, man!” Colonel Hall took the bottle from his assistant and raised it in salute, “God save the King!” before emptying the rest into Wickham.

The earlier pints of ale mixed with something stronger soon caused Wickham to pass out. The men changed him into his uniform, which they had located while they had been waiting; then carried him down the stairs. They hailed a cab and took him to the pre-arranged location. There, Colonel Fitzwilliam and several of Darcy’s men relieved them of their charge.

“He is a disgrace! What will happen to him now?” Hall asked after the other soldiers had left.

“He will serve his country in another way. That is all I can say,” Colonel Fitzwilliam answered. Colonel Hall raised a sceptical eyebrow. “He will not be a discredit to the Army, and it is best we leave it at that.”

“Very well. I will put this out of my mind, like so many other of my duties.”

“Remind me never to volunteer for Intelligence.”

“What makes you believe we would accept you?”

Hall slapped his old university mate on the back. “Glad to be of service, Fitz.”

“I am in your debt.”

“I will remember that.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam grimaced as he stepped into the coach. It was a long ride to Portsmouth. Whenever Wickham showed signs of coming out of his stupor, he was given more laudanum-laced alcohol. It was none too soon when they finally arrived in the port town. They waited in the carriage for daybreak. The Colonel then set about finding the Army garrison and the officer in charge of the attachment assigned to the *HMS Faultless*, another man went in search of lodgings, and the rest kept guard over their guest.

Fitzwilliam was able to locate the officer, a Lt Colonel Stines, without too much trouble and introduced himself.

“I have an officer who will be travelling aboard the *Faultless* en route to his new posting. Ensign Wickham just received his commission in the regular Army. He previously served in the Militia.”

“Oh? Where is he then?” Stines asked.

“He is still feeling the effects of his ... celebrations. I believe you sail tomorrow?”

“That is Captain Hershey’s wish.”

“I want you to keep an eye on Wickham. He has upset some powerful people, and for his own good is being posted to the Caribbean. I am on my way to speak to the captain of the *Faultless* now.”

“I will accompany you. When will the ensign be coming aboard ship?”

“As close as possible to the time you set sail.”

The two men went to the *Faultless* and met with the captain, who was not pleased to be sailing with a less-than-willing passenger, but understood the situation. Colonel Fitzwilliam handed Captain Hershey a large sealed bundle.

“The Army would not be overly upset if the ensign decided to resign his commission at his new post. When you arrive, please give this to the man.” Colonel Fitzwilliam saluted the others. “It has been an honour and a privilege to meet you, gentlemen. I wish it had come under better circumstances.”

The Colonel found his party and settled in for one more night guarding his charge.

The next morning, Wickham was taken, still somewhat drugged and inebriated, to the docks and carried aboard the ship. All his necessary provisions

had been obtained and were sent along with him. Colonel Fitzwilliam stuffed a letter containing a twenty-pound note into Wickham’s pocket.

Finally, their charge safely delivered into the hands of others, Fitzwilliam and Darcy’s men headed back to London. Everyone hoped that they would never hear of George Wickham again.

Several hours later, a rather green-looking Army officer staggered onto the deck of the ship. Spotting a man in a red Army coat, he made his way over him.

“Where am I?”

“Ah, Ensign Wickham, you are aboard the *HMS Faultless* en route to your new post in Antigua. I hope you will have a pleasant voyage. First time at sea?”

“What? Antigua! Ensign?” Wickham finally noticed that his coat was new, different from his Militia garb, and the same as the man he was speaking to. “I am supposed to be getting married!”

“I thought as much. You had better pray that your bride is willing to wait for you. It will be some time before you are able to return to England.”

“Damn him!”

“Excuse me?”

“He tricked me! He never intended that I marry Lydia.”

“Wickham, let me give you some advice. You have obviously angered some very powerful people. It would be wise to keep that to yourself. Act like a soldier, and you might survive. Act like a fool, and any respect your uniform might gain you will be lost. Do you understand me, Ensign?”

“Yes, sir, but if Dar ... if he thinks he has bested me, he is in for a surprise. We shall see who laughs last.”

Upon Darcy’s departure after his surprise visit on that man’s first night in Town, Michael Arnold had immediately penned letters to several of his friends, men he knew he could trust with such a delicate matter as this. He had briefly outlined the situation of “a friend” and asked if they knew of any man in need of a wife, who might be willing to marry even if it happened that the woman was with child.

Two of the men were in Town at the time, and one of them called the day he received Michael Arnold’s letter. Mr. Jones owned property in Devon and knew of a farmer who had recently lost his wife. The widower had two small sons, so any child Lydia might be carrying would not be his heir. Arnold asked Mr. Jones to determine if the man was interested in pursuing the match. If so, funds would be provided for him to come to London.

Less than a week later, the farmer, a Mr. Pritchford, was in the drawing room of the Gardiner house preparing to meet Lydia. He had already met Arnold, then Darcy, and finally Mr. Bennet, and gained each man's blessing to court Lydia.

Frank Pritchford had loved his late wife and was not looking to replace her in his heart. However, he had two sons in need of a mother, and he was in need of a woman to maintain his house. If Lydia Bennet suited his needs and did not remind him of his beloved first wife, he would offer her marriage.

When Lydia first came to Gracechurch Street, she was told in very simple terms of the damage her elopement had caused and the plan to find her a respectable husband. Mr. Bennet also informed her that she would not be allowed to return to Longbourn. Any hope that the incident could simply be hushed up was gone; gossip was already rife in Meryton, sparked, Mr. Bennet had no doubt, by Mrs. Bennet's inability to control her hysterics in front of the servants. Mrs. Gardiner also gently explained to Lydia the signs that would indicate she was with child. Since then, the young girl had been unusually quiet.

Lydia had by no means suddenly matured into a demure woman, but she did understand that her recklessness had left her with few options for a respectable future. If Mr. Pritchford was a kind man and did not repulse her, she would accept an offer if he made one.

When Lydia finally met her prospective husband, she was surprised by how sombre and serious the man was. He seemed unaffected by her attempts at flirtation, intent instead on learning of her life in Hertfordshire. He desired to know what kind of upbringing and education she had. While none of the Bennet girls had had a governess, each was taught to read and write and rudimentary arithmetic. Of much wider knowledge, Lydia was both ignorant and uninterested, but her mother had insisted that all the girls understand the basics of being mistress of their own households. Mr. Pritchford was pleased; Lydia was much better educated than his first wife. He was inclined to pursue the courtship.

Their next meeting was highlighted by Lydia's winning a smile from her suitor. He had asked her to expound on her favourite pursuits, and Lydia was quite eloquent on the subject of trimming bonnets. Such enthusiasm reminded Mr. Pritchford of the actual age of the young woman before him, and he found humour in her youthful exuberance, reminded of his own sisters' laughter when discussing bonnets. He then reflected on how they had grown and matured when they married and started their own families, and

he began to see in Lydia the potential woman waiting to bloom in her own time.

Lydia saw his smile, wondered at what she had said to bring it about, and fearlessly asked him.

"Miss Bennet, I was recollecting the days when my sisters were always discussing bonnets. Those are good memories."

"How many sisters do you have, sir?"

"I am blessed with three sisters. All are married now and have families of their own."

"How many nieces and nephews do you have?"

"Six nephews, three nieces. My eldest sister is with child, and we are praying for a safe delivery by October."

"Your sons must love their male cousins."

"Aye, that they do. They have spent much of the past year in the households of my sisters. I cannot care for them myself without help."

"At least they do not have sisters to plague them about bonnets!"

"That would be their cousins' prerogative."

The two continued on in further conversation. Since she had come to her uncle's house, no one else had bestowed attention on her, and she was quite willing to listen to Mr. Pritchford. He was enjoying her liveliness; it had been a long time since he could laugh with a woman. She was not perfect, but then, neither was he.

The third time they met, Mr. Pritchford was ready for a serious discussion with Lydia. If they were to marry, he said, there were certain issues that must be considered. They spoke about his two sons, Thomas and Phillip, and Lydia's willingness to become the mother they never had. He was insistent that she learn to control herself in public. Lydia at first denied any impropriety, until he gently reminded her of their very first meeting and her shameless flirting, as well as the fact that they would not even be discussing marriage had she acted as she ought. They discussed Devon and its similarities to Hertfordshire – the limited society and lack of London sophistication. Finally, he broached the subject of class and money. He was farmer, not a gentleman of leisure. He lived comfortably, but there was no money to be wasted on frivolous nothings. He could provide for her comfort, but not for her vanity. When they finished talking, he left her to think on all they had discussed until they met again.

Pritchford himself needed to consider the meeting. Lydia Bennet was a pretty girl of pleasing shape, but she was very young and far from the ideal bride. She was vain and immature – much as was to be expected of a girl of sixteen. There was the real

possibility she was carrying another man's child. Her dowry was two thousand five hundred pounds, although one thousand of those pounds would not come to her until both her parents were deceased. She would be granted two hundred pounds per annum in addition to her dowry, as long as her father remained alive.

Although such a supplement to his income would be welcome, the material question was, could he entrust her with raising his two sons? He had missed Thomas and Phillip. Since their mother died, they had been living with their aunts and cousins; Pritchford could not care for them properly and also work the farm. If he wanted them back with him, he needed to find a new mother for them, and he needed to know if Lydia Bennet would be an appropriate choice. Tomorrow, he hoped to have his answer.

He had not told Lydia, but the boys would be in London the next day. He had sent for them and would use their meeting with Lydia as his final test. If she demonstrated a genuine affection for the children, he would make his offer. If, however, he detected a distaste on her part, he would walk away from the abbreviated courtship, as he had been assured was his prerogative.

The fourth meeting of the couple was occasioned by the surprise appearance of two small Pritchford boys in the Gardiners' parlour. Lydia was understandably taken aback, but bravely set about meeting her suitor's children. She found herself charmed when little Phillip climbed into her lap and stuck his thumb in his mouth. He showed a fearlessness that was familiar to Lydia, and she laughed at the similarity of their dispositions. Thomas shyly hid behind his father, content to peek out every now and then to confirm his presence to the new lady. Lydia did her best to coax the older boy to come to her, but he refused to leave the safety of his father's side.

Mrs. Gardiner soon rescued the boys and took them to the nursery to play with her children. Mr. Pritchford asked to speak privately with Lydia.

When they were alone, he began, "Miss Bennet, I apologise for not informing you of my sons' arrival in Town. Frankly, I wished to surprise you so that I could judge how well you would get on with Thomas and Phillip."

"They are delightful boys. You must be proud."

"I have barely seen them this past year. I am afraid much of the credit for their behaviour goes to my sisters. They have raised them as they have their own sons. But they are my sons, and if I am to raise them as I see fit, they need a mother. Miss Bennet,

would you be willing to become their mother, to have them become your own children? Are you willing to marry me?"

"Yes, I will marry you, Mr. Pritchford."

"Then I will go and speak to your father."

Mr. Bennet was all too happy to grant his consent to the match and most desirous of a speedy wedding. It was decided that he would take Lydia to Devon, where they would purchase a licence from a local clergyman that would allow them to be married almost immediately. Neither Mrs. Bennet nor any of Lydia's sisters would travel with them. Darcy asked to attend; he wanted to witness the ceremony himself. Until Lydia was safely married, the threat of scandal still existed.

They arranged to leave the next morning. Because Mr. Pritchford's young sons were travelling with the party, the journey would take three full days. Lydia was disappointed to be leaving Town without any wedding clothes, but Mr. Bennet promised her a sum of money to have new things made in Devon. It was the best that could be made of the situation.

Elizabeth continued to increase as she waited at Pemberley. Darcy had written to inform her of his arrival in Town, and later of Lydia's recovery from Wickham and the search for a suitable husband. The last letter told of Lydia's betrothal and Darcy's and Mr. Bennet's journey to witness the nuptials. Elizabeth was relieved. Lydia would be married and the disgrace that threatened them averted once Lydia had an acceptable husband.

She missed *her* husband. The man who, despite his many faults, had become as dear to her as any man could ever be. There were times when the love she felt for him threatened to overwhelm her, worry for his wellbeing consumed her, the ache for his touch tortured her.

Oh, how she wished that he could love her in return! But he did not. Not even her aunt's suppositions could convince her of that. She had always sensed that a barrier existed between them. He was willing to be her friend, and he certainly relished his role as her lover. Beneath a reserved exterior lay a man of great passion, who delighted in giving as much as receiving. He had encouraged, nay demanded, that she loose her passion for him. Into that passion she had poured her most tender feelings for her husband. Yet through all this, he seemed unwilling to lose his heart the way she had lost hers.

This saddened Elizabeth, and made her feel somewhat guilty. He had given her so much of himself, and still she desired the one thing he would

not, or could not, give. Why could she not be content with what she had? Why must she covet more?

The carriages carrying the Bennets, Darcy, and the Pritchfords rolled into the village of Hennock on the third evening after leaving London. Little Phillip did not even recognise his house when they pulled in front; it had been so long since he had seen it. Thomas recognised it and was excited. His father had told him he would soon have a new mother, and he could not wait to laugh and play and sing as he had with his first mama.

Mr. Bennet had great hopes that in two days' time his daughter would finally be married to the quiet farmer who had quickly earned his respect. Mr. Darcy was grateful that he would need to spend only a couple of nights in such a place as this. The inn was far below his usual exacting standards.

Mercifully for all involved, the licence was secured the next day, and on the day after that, Lydia Bennet became Lydia Pritchford of Hennock, Devon.

The wedding accomplished, Darcy and Mr. Bennet began the long trip back to London.

John Jacobs had come to the same place for the past two weeks; Wickham had failed to show every day since the second meeting with Lydia Bennet's family representatives. Jacobs had his instructions. If Wickham did not appear or send word to him for a fortnight, and if there was no wedding or engagement announcement in *The Times* during that time, he was to post the three letters that Wickham had left in his care. This was the last day of the agreed period, and still nothing. It was time to discharge his final assignment and be done with it. He looked at the directions on the letters: Lord Fitzwilliam, Earl of Perryton; Lady Catherine de Bourgh; and a notorious London scandal sheet. *Brave man or fool?*

When Darcy returned to London from Devon, he found an enraged relation awaiting him.

"Uncle! To what do I owe this visit?" Darcy asked, wary of the man before him. The Earl slammed down a folded newspaper in front of his nephew.

"Read it!"

Darcy read the item circled in ink. His agitation turned to dismay.

"But how?" he asked weakly.

The Earl pushed a letter into Darcy's hands.

"It seems that your dear old friend did not fully trust you and put in place a little contingency plan. He wrote to tell me what had happened, and that he was

also sending letters to Lady Catherine ... and to this ... this ... rag.

"I warned you that your wife would bring shame to our family. By now, most of the *ton* has figured out that my nephew has the disgrace of a fallen woman for a sister-in-law."

"Lydia is married."

"To Wickham?"

"No, to a man in Devon."

"You bought her a husband as far away as you could, eh? You are still dishonoured. Are you happy with your choice *now*?"

"Do not insult my wife."

"Everyone else will. Go back to Derbyshire. Perhaps in a few years, after the scandal has faded from memory, you may return to Town. Perhaps when your child is old enough to be introduced into society, people will have forgotten. Then again ..."

"Enough! You have crowed over me long enough! I will be returning to Pemberley in a few days to await the birth of my heir. I doubt we have anything else to discuss, so I beg you to excuse me." Darcy started to walk out of the room.

"Darcy."

"Yes?" he answered through clenched teeth.

"Expect to hear from your Aunt Catherine on this matter."

Darcy glared at his uncle for a moment, then stormed out of the room, not stopping until he was safely in his study. Numb with shock, he poured himself a finger of brandy, and then another, and then another, until he lost count.

Later, Michael Arnold came to ask about the wedding. Having seen the paper, he was not surprised to find his cousin well into his cups.

"Darcy, old man."

"Michael, my God, I feel terrible."

"You look terrible."

"Did you see the bloody newspaper? How did this happen? I had everything planned so well."

"No one can anticipate every move of his opponent."

"I should have." Darcy tried unsuccessfully to pour another drink. Arnold stopped his hand.

"You have had enough for one night. Let me call your man, and he can get you to bed. I will come again tomorrow afternoon, after you have had a chance recuperate."

"You are a good man, Michael Arnold," Darcy slurred.

"You can thank me later."

Darcy awoke the next morning much the worse for wear. Eventually, the powders Mrs. Thomas provided did their job, and he reasoned that, after his display the day before, he had better go see his cousin.

“You look much better today, Darcy.”

“Michael, I must apologise for yesterday.”

“No need. I was not surprised to see you like that. I saw the paper, too. For your information, Mother is furious.”

“She and all her siblings. I hope she has not learned of your involvement.”

“I told her, and she is livid with me, as well. That will pass soon enough. It is not the first time I have garnered her wrath.”

“I am truly sorry.”

“What will you do?”

“I will go to Pemberley to be with Elizabeth during the rest of her confinement. There is nothing else I can do here.”

“What about her family?”

Darcy sat silently for a few moments. “Only Mrs. Bingley will be acknowledged.”

Arnold sighed. He had expected that Darcy would disavow Elizabeth’s family. Frankly, he too saw little alternative.

“Your wife will be distressed,” Arnold finally declared.

“She will obey me.”

“But will she forgive you?”

“I am the injured party.”

“I suppose.”

“What do you mean?” Darcy said sharply.

“Time will tell.” Arnold stared at Darcy, unwilling to say more, knowing that his cousin would have to learn his meaning the hard way.

Elizabeth sat alone in the breakfast room stunned, a letter and section of newspaper next to her place. There was no note in her letter, only the enclosed bit of a scandal sheet. Elizabeth had no idea who had sent it, but guessed it must be someone who was jealous of her marriage to Darcy. The cutting was several days old, of course, and not from one of the papers she had faithfully read since her husband had raced away to Town with her uncle. The unease she had felt each time she perused the pages of the newspapers that were delivered each day had subsided. Surely, Darcy’s letter – reporting that Wickham was gone, Lydia was married, and he would return to her soon – meant that they were safe from scandal. Surely.

Her relative calm lasted until she spied the initials *FD* and the word *Derbyshire* in the cutting that had been sent to her. Unease turned to dread, and

Elizabeth felt physically ill. A dozen scenarios crossed through her mind, each worse than before, each encapsulated by a single thought:

How will I ever face him?

It was nearly evening when Darcy arrived at Pemberley. The growing darkness reflected his mood. Every moment, every thought, every action since that fateful letter arrived had deepened a dark bitterness. He was humiliated because of the family of the woman he had chosen to be his wife.

The disaster dredged up memories long repressed, memories of when he was a boy with two parents who doted on him and his beautiful baby sister. His best friend, George, filled his days with laughter and adventure. Then things changed. His body began to transform, and he struggled; no longer a boy, yet not quite a man. George changed, too. He scoffed at Darcy’s adherence to the demands of duty and propriety. Jealousy soon followed. George, embittered that an accident of birth placed the two in different stations, began to act upon his basest desires and propensities. For the sake of what once had been, the esteem in which he held old Mr. Wickham, and for the love of his own father, Darcy hid his childhood companion’s indiscretions from both their fathers.

It was not long after he lost his good opinion of George Wickham that Darcy lost his mother. Lady Anne Darcy was a woman of grace and beauty, who filled Pemberley with her personality. Her passing marked a new era, one punctuated by silence instead of sounds of mirth, of dancing, of life.

All the affection once given to his mother was now heaped upon his sister. Georgiana was the mirror of Lady Anne, and whenever Darcy looked upon her, he remembered their beloved parent. A precious fondness was never absent between the siblings.

When he left for university, he missed Georgiana as much as he missed his father and his home. At least he was able to avoid Wickham. That man’s education, though generously provided by Darcy’s father, did not place them in the same circles; differences in ages, abilities, wealth, and colleges ensured that. Still, there were occasions, all too frequent, when Wickham needed money, and he always knew who would supply him – Darcy.

Then came the terrible day when Darcy was summoned to his father’s chambers. The great man had passed on sometime during the night. Darcy felt the difference in his life immediately; even the servants treated him with increased deference. He was the master now. It was a lonely position.

To Georgiana, he was still her Fitzwilliam, but that too would change. He was now her guardian and responsible for her welfare. They remained close, and they still loved each other, but he was now more father than brother.

Georgiana's death completed his isolation. All those who truly loved him were gone. There was no one left. The pain of his loss compelled Darcy to build walls around his heart. No one would hurt him again, for none would be let inside his defences.

He deliberately married a woman he did not love, to protect himself and to hurt those of his family who had failed to understand or love him. He reasoned that Elizabeth's companionship in his life and her passion in his bed would be enough to satisfy him. Her low connections would mortify his aunt and uncle; his revenge for their officious insistence on arranging his personal affairs would be complete.

Who was triumphing now? Lady Catherine's prophecies had come true. Elizabeth's thoughtless sister had nearly ruined his good reputation and brought shame to the family. He had been forced to use cunning, to use disguise and deceit to recover Lydia, to separate her from Wickham, to buy her a husband in a far-off corner of England, and to condemn his former friend to a life of exile in the West Indies. He was at least as disgusted by his own actions as he was by the reasons for them.

He now regretted the day he had met Elizabeth Bennet. And he hated himself for it. She had done nothing to earn such condemnation. She had been his lover and his dear friend. She carried within her the next generation of his ancient family, a generation he must do – would do – everything to protect.

There was only one thing he could do.

The carriage pulled up in front of the house, and Darcy saw that his wife awaited him. He set his jaw and walked to her, kissed her hand, and asked to meet with her once he had refreshed himself. He saw the concern on Elizabeth's face, and had to escape before his resolve faltered. Darcy beat a hasty retreat to his chambers. After washing, and changing his clothes, he fortified himself with a drink and went to meet with his wife.

He found Elizabeth in the library standing at a window, staring at the last remnant of the sunset, a hand laid protectively over the child inside her. She did not turn to face him when he came to her.

"It is done?" she quietly asked.

"Lydia is married and the rogue will trouble us no more."

"Thank you."

"I did what was necessary. You need not thank me for it." Darcy poured himself another drink. "Elizabeth, this is the last time I will tolerate mention of the affair. This is the last time I will tolerate mention of your sister. From this point further, I will have nothing to do with her," Darcy paused, knowing the import of what he must say next, "*or her family.*"

The words hung in the air.

Elizabeth began to shake. Her left hand came to cover her face, her right remained guard over the unborn child in her womb.

"What of Jane?" she choked through her silent sobs.

"Mrs. Bingley will be accepted for her husband's sake."

After watching her silent grief, he slipped out of the room, a soft click announcing to Elizabeth that he had left her.

As dawn broke, Elizabeth sat on the window seat in her darkened room. Darcy had not come to her that night, and she had not slept. Absently, she twisted the wedding band on her finger.

Eight months previously, she had vowed to love, honour, and obey her husband. She never doubted her ability to honour, and she had been surprised by her capacity to love. Now she knew the sacrifice that was required of her to obey.

Must love always result in pain and despair?

She had known that her family would always be an issue between them. Darcy's pride and propriety were continually taxed by the improper behaviour of her mother and youngest sisters, and even occasionally by her father. She had hoped that time, distance, and eventual maturity in her siblings would lessen this weakness in the eyes of her husband. Lydia's disgrace made all her hopes for naught. Her family had failed her, and she had failed him.

Now they were as good as dead to her. Only Jane would be allowed to remain as a link to her past. Her life, her existence, her value in society were inextricably bound to the name she now bore, Elizabeth Darcy. All that had been Elizabeth Bennet must now be denied, erased from existence, as if consumed by fire.

Darcy had no choice. She understood his position; she understood his reasoning.

She had no choice. But she mourned all that she had lost, even as the mortification of her family's infamy rolled over and over her in cold waves of shame. The tears that had been her only companion throughout the night came again.

Many months before, she had defined her greatest fear, one she hoped would never intrude on her marriage. Now it was before Elizabeth, bowing mockingly as it confronted her, and she was defenceless against it. Its name?

Regret.

Chapter Seventeen

The door that separated Darcy's room from his wife's was solid, but it was not soundproof; he heard Elizabeth's sobs as he prepared for bed. Part of him wanted to rush to her side and tell her that all would be well, but a greater part told him that his withdrawal was for the best. He and Elizabeth had become too close. It was better that he distance himself now, to protect against the inevitable heartbreak that lurked ahead. The child was coming soon. Would Elizabeth survive the babe's entrance into the world? He believed that he had done all he could to ensure that she would. But until the child was born, he had to stay away.

If ... *if* she safely delivered, he would go to her again. He needed heirs, and he needed a woman in his bed, and he would rather that woman be Elizabeth. He knew that she would miss her family terribly. Had he not missed his own, as one by one they had died? He had eventually overcome his grief; so would she. Then all would be as it was – with the notable absence of the accursed Bennets. Those disgraceful people would never again shame him or his family; they would never again be allowed to darken the door of any of his homes. He and Elizabeth would avoid Hertfordshire altogether. He would also talk to Bingley about finding a more suitable estate where the name of Bennet was unknown. But until the child was born, he had to stay away.

The next morning, husband and wife met at breakfast. Elizabeth would rather have remained in her chambers, but was concerned that a failure to appear downstairs would be misinterpreted as an act of rebellion. Darcy's temper was still unpredictable; she did not yet know to what extent his disavowal of her family would affect his behaviour towards her, and she did not have the wherewithal to confront an angry husband. He, however, seemed pleasantly surprised to see her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth nodded her head, "Sir."

"You look fatigued. Did you not sleep well?"

"No, I did not, but I shall rest later." After a pause, she meekly added, "Does this meet with your approval?" Elizabeth could feel his eyes on her, but she could not raise hers to meet his.

"You know what is best for yourself and the child. If you need me, I will be with my steward. After my prolonged absence, we have many things to discuss."

Elizabeth again nodded, unwilling to look at him, too disheartened should she again see censure in her husband's gaze, and unable to think of anything to say. Nothing, at least, that would not cause more pain. They ate in silence, the only sounds cutlery scraping against plates, and cups rattling against saucers.

When Darcy excused himself, Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. They had managed a civil discourse in this first meeting after his disapprobation of her family. She finished the food on her plate although she had no appetite. She knew she must keep up her strength, and forced herself to take bite after bite for the sake of the child. When she finished, she decided to speak to the housekeeper and the cook. Her life might be in shambles, but Pemberley went on. She had her responsibilities – first and foremost to see to the needs of her husband and unborn child. Having failed so spectacularly as Darcy's wife, she would do everything in her power to maintain a well-run household. There was little else she could do for him, or for herself.

Elizabeth felt rather than knew that she would see little of her husband in the coming weeks. Yesterday and this morning, he had met her with the same mask of indifference that she had seen when he greeted those whom he felt beneath him. But never her, until now. That he might forevermore act thus around her gave her pause; it was more than she could bear, and her despair poured forth in free-flowing tears.

Elizabeth was correct; she did not see Darcy again until dinner. There remained an awkward silence between them; she wanted to talk, but there was an embargo on the one subject foremost on her mind and heaviest on her heart. Elizabeth was at a loss until she recalled that Darcy had spent the day with his steward.

"I take it that Mr. Wright kept you occupied all day?"

"Yes, and we rode out to meet with a few of the tenants."

"Nothing significant, I hope."

"Not at all, but there is always something that needs my attention, or better said, *someone* in want of my attention."

"I thought that I would visit a few tenants later this week. Even here at Pemberley, there is always some need that I can relieve."

"Do you think it wise to journey so far from the house?"

“They expect and deserve no less from the mistress of Pemberley.”

“Surely a servant dispatched with a basket and note would suffice. I do not want you to take any risks.”

“I am a healthy, country-bred woman. I see no great risk in paying calls of charity on people you have known all your life.”

“Elizabeth, consider my position. I am responsible for your care as well as that of the staff and tenants. I must ask you to yield to my wishes in this matter. The babe will be here in a month, if not sooner. After you recover, you may resume your visits.”

Elizabeth deliberately chewed her food before replying. “It will be as you wish.” Seeking to change the subject, she asked, “Tell me more about the people you visited today.”

“Nothing exciting, I daresay.”

“I would still like to hear of it.”

Until the conclusion of the meal, Darcy spoke of the people and situations that had occupied his day. Elizabeth had met but a few of the families involved in her visits about the estate and could contribute little to the conversation. Afterwards, Darcy escorted Elizabeth to the library, so she could find a new book to read. He stayed with her, though they did not talk much, until Elizabeth decided to retire. Darcy walked with her to her bedroom, where he bowed and left before her door had closed. He did not come to her that night, or any night thereafter.

The days fell into the same pattern. They saw each other only at meals and in the evening after dinner. Elizabeth grew more and more despondent, greatly missing her loved ones and, though she was daily in his presence, missing her husband even more.

One evening, about a week after Darcy had returned to Pemberley, he and his wife sat together in the great library. Darcy noticed Elizabeth absentmindedly fingering a ribbon.

“What do you have in your hands, Elizabeth?”

She tensed. “A bookmark.”

“Did you make it?”

“It is only a piece of ribbon. I was reading in my rooms the other day and was in need of something to mark my place. My sewing basket was nearby, and I simply took this,” she said, indicating the piece of fabric. She put it back in the book and averted her eyes.

Darcy looked intently at the seemingly innocuous object before Elizabeth spirited it away into her book. It was when he realised she would not look him in the

eye that he was struck by the colour of the ribbon. It was black, the colour of mourning. He looked again at his wife. He could see that she was valiantly trying to concentrate on her book, but she also was biting her lower lip.

Darcy’s first thought was one of anger. She was defying him! In this small way, she obviously meant to honour the memory of her disgraced family. *They*, who had brought this separation upon themselves. *They*, who had left him with no choice but to do what he had done. He took a deep breath, contemplating his reprimand. Elizabeth needed to understand that defiance of his authority would not be tolerated. But then he saw her glance at him before immediately returning to her book. The look in her eyes was not defiance, but what was it? Fear? Sadness? Longing? Regret? A mixture of all these?

Darcy’s heart unexpectedly softened. He knew that his wife struggled with a great sadness, yet she made a great effort to put a pleasant look on her face when she was with him. If a small black piece of ribbon helped her mourn, he would turn a blind eye. They were better off without her unfortunate relations, and the sooner she accepted this the better. Still, her lack of spirit and vibrancy troubled him, but he would not listen as his conscience whispered that he was partially to blame. Nevertheless, he held his tongue.

The Reverend John Mitchell walked into the small church that served the people of Pemberley. When he had brought his wife and young daughter to Derbyshire to take the living old Mr. Darcy offered, no one could have foreseen that he would still be occupying it five and twenty years later, long after most of his original parishioners had died or moved away.

Mr. Mitchell had found his true calling in the hills and valleys of the north. The Darcys were good to those under their care, if a little too proud of their rank. The rest of the people he served were kind, honest folks. He recorded countless births, baptizing those who lived, married many a blushing bride, and buried too many dear friends to recall. In short, he was a shepherd who loved, and was loved by, his flock. When word of his success spread, and the inevitable offers of other livings came his way, he politely declined. Thankful for the gift that was his congregation, he continued his own quiet existence. He had never told anyone but his wife, but he felt like the man in the First Psalm; deep roots firmly planted, nourished by the clear waters of Derbyshire, ageing well, and prosperous in all the things that mattered to him. John Mitchell was truly blessed.

The minister was not shocked to find that he was not alone in the small house of worship. He often encountered people seeking solitude or comfort in their faith. He was, however, a little taken aback when he discerned the identity of the individual in the chapel.

Mr. Darcy's bride had impressed him when she came to Pemberley. Actually, she had more than impressed him; she had surprised him. Mr. Mitchell saw a young woman struggling to fulfill her obligations, not afraid to seek assistance, not too proud to admit when she made a mistake. He was pleased with her willingness to embrace her role in the lives of her servants and tenants with a humility of spirit and genuine concern for their welfare. He had hoped that such a woman would eventually soften her husband's arrogance and transform him into a truly great man. For all that, he did not expect to see her in his chapel in obvious anguish.

He knew that something had gone terribly wrong. It had begun when Mr. Darcy and his guests suddenly departed those few weeks ago. Whatever had taken them away must not have been good, because everyone knew of the melancholy that now surrounded the couple. What made it doubly perplexing was that the long-awaited heir of Pemberley obviously would soon be born, which surely must be a source of joy. They were not in mourning, so Mr. Mitchell had ruled out a bereavement, and as far as he could ascertain, the couple was not quarrelling, or at least not doing so in front of the servants. The reverend suspected that some unknown misfortune must be the reason for the young woman's solitary presence in the chapel.

The man silently walked to Elizabeth, sat down next to her, and waited. Evidently she was too caught up in her distress to notice him at first but eventually acknowledged his presence.

"Mrs. Darcy, I find myself identifying with Eli, the priest, when in the first Book of Samuel, he encountered Hannah at the Tabernacle."

"I am not praying for a child as she did, and you are a better father than Eli."

"Thank you. And your womb is not barren, yet here you are seeking consolation as she was."

"No, it is not." Elizabeth placed her hand on her swollen abdomen.

"Will you tell me then what troubles you? I give you my word that I will not reveal what you say."

"My husband has the greatest respect for you, sir. I believe you would not betray my trust, but I cannot tell you what burdens me."

"Then I shall leave you alone. I suggest that you talk to a Higher Authority." Mr. Mitchell stood.

"Please wait. I do have one question that you might be able to answer." The cleric sat down again. "I have come for guidance, yet I know not what to ask."

"Scripture says that when we are unable to pray, the Holy Ghost intercedes on our behalf. When I do not know what to pray, I pray as the Lord taught His disciples. 'Our Father ...'"

"... 'Who art in heaven' ..."

"Yes."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment, then gave him a small smile of gratitude. "Thank you, Mr. Mitchell."

He smiled in return and stood again to take his leave. "May you find the answers you are seeking, Mrs. Darcy, and may they bring you peace."

The reverend said a short, silent prayer of supplication for the mistress of Pemberley before continuing on with his duties.

Elizabeth did as had been suggested and recited the Lord's Prayer, surprised by the degree of comfort that the familiar words brought her. As she reflected on why that should be, her eye was caught by the rays of sunlight streaming through the sanctuary windows. Elizabeth looked more closely at one particularly beautiful stained glass scene depicting the crucifixion. She had seen this panel many times, but today its subject struck her as most appropriate.

"He has borne our struggles," she murmured.

After meditating on that thought for many minutes, a modicum of peace descended upon her. She had no great revelation from God, only an assurance in her soul that the trial she now endured was nothing compared to Christ's sacrifice.

Darcy and Elizabeth maintained their strained existence. Not once since his return had he come to her at night, not once had he sought her out during the day. They continued to take their meals together as before. Each played their role as master and mistress of Pemberley for the benefit of the servants. They entertained no one except the few callers who came during the day. The only time the couple spent alone in each other's company was after dinner. Often she played for him; rarely did they speak of anything other than matters concerning the estate. Elizabeth struggled to display the unaffected façade of a contented wife, but she felt every bit of the hideous incongruity of her situation as she watched her husband slip further and further away.

Darcy betrayed none of his emotions to her. She knew he was not pleased with the situation in which they found themselves, but he refused to talk about it – as if avoidance produced its own resolution. As much as she wanted to break down the barrier between them, Elizabeth feared that in trying to do so, she would say something she would later regret and only make matters worse between them. Her condition had loosened her control over her emotions, and tears were always imminent. She felt so much, yet she could speak about so little. She longed for the easy companionship they had always enjoyed but had little hope that it would soon return. Each night, alone in her bed, Elizabeth cried herself to sleep. Only the comfort she received in the little church near the house kept her from completely breaking down in unrestrained grief.

After a week of watching Mrs. Darcy's daily sojourn to the family pew, John Mitchell decided he needed more information to prepare himself to be of use when she needed his counsel. He rose early and rode out to visit one of his neighbouring clergymen. If any person could give him insight, Bartholomew Arnold was that man.

Mr. Arnold was surprised, but pleased, to greet his guest, a man he greatly admired. He invited the gentleman to his study, and set about discovering why the elder clergyman had called. Mr. Mitchell cautiously broached the reason for his journey.

To say that Mr. Arnold was caught off guard would be an understatement. He had no idea that the situation at Pemberley was so grave. Amelia had not felt up to making a visit, but that was no excuse for Mr. Arnold to have neglected his cousin. For all the strength of purpose that he admired in Darcy, Mr. Arnold had not considered how difficult it would be for Elizabeth if her husband decided to exert his will. He must have demanded they cut off her family – what else could dispirit so lively a woman as Elizabeth Darcy?

Bartholomew Arnold knew that the older cleric would not have asked him to divulge intimate knowledge about the family unless he felt it critical to meeting the needs of the congregants placed under his care. Feeling guilty that his failure to call at Pemberley had contributed to the necessity of Mr. Mitchell's visit, Mr. Arnold made his decision.

"I cannot tell you all that I know, but I can share what has become public knowledge in the scandal sheets." Mr. Mitchell paled at the mention of the gossip mills of London. "Mrs. Darcy's youngest sister eloped with a soldier. However, instead of travelling

to Greta Green, they went only as far as Town. Society does not know what has become of them."

"Have they not married?"

"They have not, but I can tell you that Mrs. Darcy's sister *has* married. I know of her husband, he is a good man, but well below the station of Mrs. Darcy's father. I know not what has happened to the soldier."

"Can you tell me anything else?" Mr. Mitchell pleaded.

"No, I am sorry, I am not at liberty to divulge more. In fact, the marriage of Mrs. Darcy's youngest sister is not publicly known except to her family and the inhabitants around her new abode."

"Thank you for your help. I hope I will know how to use this to help Mr. and Mrs. Darcy."

"You are a good man, John Mitchell. I have every confidence that the Good Lord will give you the words to say to them. I must confess that I feel I have failed my cousins. I did not know the extent of Mrs. Darcy's distress until now."

"Would you prefer that I not say anything? I do not wish to interfere in a family matter."

"They are your parishioners and I do not know when I will be able to bring Amelia to visit Mrs. Darcy. No, you must act without concern for offending me. We serve a higher purpose than subjecting ourselves to the vanity of men."

During his return to Pemberley, Mr. Mitchell considered all that he had observed and learned, as well as what he knew of Mr. Darcy's character. He could well see that gentleman reacting badly to the folly of Mrs. Darcy's sister. Mr. Darcy was a proud man. Even the hint of a scandal that could impugn his name would drive him to action. He must have tried to keep the elopement quiet and had somehow failed, if it was known to the scandal sheets. That would explain much of the dejected mood that had settled over Pemberley, for the master's disposition affected his servants. Mr. Mitchell also now had a suspicion as to what was troubling Mrs. Darcy. Tomorrow, if she came again to the chapel, he would ask a few delicate questions. Until then, he needed to formulate what he could say to help her. He thought about how she had looked up at the windows in the front of the church, seeking answers in the coloured glass. He remembered what those windows portrayed, and he suddenly knew what he should say.

Elizabeth did indeed come to the church the next afternoon. This time, after allowing her several minutes of solitude, Mr. Mitchell greeted her, then sat in the pew behind her.

He had decided to begin by being direct. “Mrs. Darcy, have you found the answers you seek?”

“Not yet, but I now feel that I am able to listen if God chooses to speak.”

“That is an improvement over not even knowing the words to pray. Otherwise, are you feeling in good health? Is all well with your child?”

“I am tired, but it is not much longer before my time comes.”

“Will any of your family be coming to help with the birth?”

“Lady Victoria may yet come, but it is by no means certain that she will.”

“And what of your sisters or your mother?”

“Mrs. Bingley is unable to travel at present.”

Mr. Mitchell noticed that she had said nothing about the rest of her family. He saw her wrap and unwrap a small black ribbon around her finger. Instantly he comprehended what it symbolized, and realised that he had been right. Darcy must have thrown off her family in the wake of the scandal. Seeking re-assurance for the words he planned, he looked up at the light streaming through the picture in stained glass of the crucifixion.

He began to speak on a seemingly unrelated vein. “I was preparing for this week’s sermon this morning and came across a familiar passage that I suddenly saw in a new light.” Elizabeth raised her head and she too gazed at the image in stained glass. “I was reading the account of the last week of Jesus’ life in the gospel of Luke. Before He entered the city, Jesus looked out over Jerusalem and wept, knowing the people would reject Him. Yet, He still went into the City of David to embrace His destiny. I was struck by His willingness to do his duty and by His great love in fulfilling it at the ultimate cost of His life. I do not know if I could do the same. Has any man ever known such betrayal, such heartache?”

“I know not,” Elizabeth answered softly, “but I look forward to your sermon on Sunday.”

The reverend left her to her musings, satisfied that he had planted a tiny seed of truth that he hoped might sprout into the emotional reprieve she was seeking.

Elizabeth returned to the house, deep in thought. When the heartache of her shame had become nearly unbearable, Elizabeth had fled to the only refuge available. She was physically and emotionally isolated from almost every person she had ever confided in – she could not bring herself to burden Jane with her sorrow – and had blindly stumbled to the one

remaining source of consolation – her faith. It had been her only solace; now it was her beacon of hope.

She knew that Mr. Mitchell had not mentioned that particular passage without reason. She suspected he had heard of their misfortunes, and in an act of kindness was trying to give her a key to overcoming her sorrow and grief. She had never voiced it aloud, but from the moment Darcy returned and informed her of Lydia’s new situation and their shame, she had been grieving the loss of her family. Emotions ranging from anger to sorrow to loneliness and despair had nearly swept her away. Yet, even worse than the loss of her family, was the loss of intimacy with her husband. Before Lydia’s folly, she had felt closer to him than she had ever imagined was possible with another human being. Since his return, he had barely acknowledged her, other than during the public duties a husband was required to perform with his wife. He could not even look her in the eye. Then again, neither could she look into his. Each of them was afraid what they would see – and reveal – to the other. What she had believed was an ever-growing understanding between them, a marriage of two minds as well as two bodies, was now little more than the cold shell of a marriage only in name.

She considered again the passage that Mr. Mitchell had quoted. Countless times she had heard it said that it was her Christian duty to act with charity toward her fellow man. What people had suggested was “charity” was in reality not much more than politeness and courtesy. That which she now contemplated was truly an act of love. To willingly face scorn and death because of a great abiding love, that was the example Christ set for His church. It was also a powerful demonstration of forgiveness.

In that moment Elizabeth Darcy finally comprehended that to love meant to accept the potential, nay the certainty, that one would be hurt by those one chose to love; but it also meant that they must then be forgiven for the heartache they had caused. She loved her husband deeply, more deeply than any hurt he could cause her. When he proclaimed her family as dead to them, the pain she felt was not something that he had maliciously inflicted. She understood his motives; she understood *him* and knew he felt that he had had no other choice.

Elizabeth understood, but she also believed that he *did* have another choice, a choice, however, that he could not see through the blinders of his pride. Pride was his great fault, a fault she had accepted in her love for him. She knew herself well enough to know that she was not made for unhappiness; she held within her the power to walk the difficult path towards

reconciliation: to forgive him his hubris, love him even more in spite of his imperfections, and create a family in which they could both find healing.

She realised that the same need be said of her family – she must forgive them as well. Her parents had loosed their daughters into an unforgiving world without proper guidance, guidance which, were she completely honest, her mother, at least, was ill-equipped to provide. That it had led to one sister's headlong rush into infamy and the ruin of the family's reputation might almost, *almost*, have been predicted had anyone given it a moment's thought. That she and Jane had escaped both the foolishness of character and unseemliness of manner that marked their mother and younger sisters was near miraculous.

She had never felt so strongly, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from the impropriety of Mr. Bennet's behaviour as a husband and father. He had been content to find amusement in his wife's ignorance and folly, and although grateful for his two eldests' good qualities, had not troubled himself to improve the dispositions or correct the imprudence of his three younger. He had consented to Lydia's trip to Brighton in company with a wholly unsuitable chaperone merely to spare himself the unpleasantness of her wrath – and her mother's – had he refused.

But despite it all, despite their individual and collective failings, they were her parents, and the babe she carried within her was their grandchild. They were tied by blood, if not by temperament; they had given her life and she owed them respect – and, yes – unconditional love. It was much the same with Lydia, who was but a child charmed by an unscrupulous man. She might not soon forget the pain and trouble that her sister had caused, but she understood that Lydia was neither more nor less than she had been brought up to be – wild, selfish, headstrong, vain.

Lastly, in the light of her new understanding, she turned her thoughts inward. She knew she was not without fault, far from it! Had she done all she could to curb her sisters' less appropriate behaviour? Yes, certainly, her father had more responsibility than she to guide the characters of his children. But how harshly could she judge him if she had chosen to ignore her own duty as an older sibling, especially after it became clear that neither of her parents were providing the guidance the younger ones needed? There was a time when she had the respect of her younger sisters. They would listen to her and to Jane. But as they grew older, and she became closer to her elder sister, Elizabeth had to admit that she had lost interest in her younger ones.

She had abandoned Mary to her books and religious tracts; now Mary could quote extensively from men like Fordyce, but had no understanding of the concepts or basic truths that those men wrote about. She had not really tried to convince her sister to be more widely read or encourage thoughtful discourse about what Mary did read. She thought of Kitty, so eager to be noticed that she allowed Lydia to dominate her in exchange for her youngest sister's companionship. Elizabeth was ashamed to acknowledge that she thought Kitty too immature to pay her much heed. Then there was Lydia, fearless and foolish Lydia. She had paid for being both. Elizabeth was not certain what she could have done to temper Lydia's character, but she had barely tried to do anything at all. She had not wanted to risk her mother's ire, but neither had she spoken to her father or urged him to intervene when Lydia was allowed out into society much, much too early. He might have listened to her, about this and so many other things, but she had remained silent.

When it came to Mr. Wickham, she gave a hollow laugh. She had allowed that gentleman to impose on her. She had been wary of the man, but in the end she had believed his lies. She had always congratulated herself as more discerning of character than this had proved. Clearly she had over-estimated her ability to judge people. Her own pride had blinded her.

Then there was her relationship with Fitzwilliam. She did not regret marrying him, and she certainly did not regret loving him. But did she resent him for making her become a woman she no longer recognised? Had her desire to please him, to obey him, cost her honour and her dignity? Should she have questioned his decision to cast off her family?

"Honour thy father and mother ... it is the first commandment with a promise."

Her husband had never *truly* honoured her parents and she had said ... *nothing*. If he *had* honoured them, he would have stood by them all in their predicament; but he had not. She had pledged to be his helpmeet, his conscience. Yet on this fundamental issue, her silent acquiescence with his failure to protect her and her family meant that she had failed *all* those she loved.

In the end, she knew it would be less a matter of whether she could forgive her husband and family, but whether she could forgive herself.

Elizabeth's stomach rumbled, reminding her that she had been long away from the house. It was time to

begin anew, a little wiser and much more humble for the experiences of the past month. She knew that she had a choice: resentment or acceptance, blame or understanding. She could not change the past, but she could modulate the future. This time, she hoped, she would prove to be both a more worthy mistress of Pemberley and a more worthy wife to its master.

Her patient footman was waiting as she emerged. As they approached a bend in the path, she looked back at the little church before it was lost from view. She saw its windows, dark and apparently silent. She knew better. It was only when one was inside that the true beauty of the glass could be seen. How fitting.

Darcy noticed the change in Elizabeth's demeanour the very next morning. She greeted him with the first real smile that he had seen from her since before he had gone to rescue Lydia. He was so surprised that he did not hear her question.

"I said, would you join me in a walk after breakfast? I would hope that Mr. Wright does not need you for an hour or so first thing this morning."

"I did not know you still were taking walks."

"I may seem as big as Pemberley, but I still manage short treks. Never fear, I always take Marie and a footman. I suspect that Mrs. Reynolds also sends other servants to keep watch over me. This morning, I would like the support of *your* arm."

"Let me dispatch a note to Wright delaying our meeting."

Elizabeth, now great with child, moved slowly as they left the house. Darcy felt her lean heavily on him, a rather novel sensation. She was always so strong.

"It has been too long since we walked this way together. Thank you for joining me." They walked towards a nearby path. "Fitzwilliam, we have some matters left undecided that we need to discuss without delay." Darcy stiffened, afraid that she would speak of the situation with her family. "We have not decided on our child's godparents."

"No, we have not. What are your thoughts?"

"I would wish to ask Lady Victoria, but I am afraid she is too old. Please do not tell her I said that."

He laughed. It had been so long since he had heard such an impertinent comment from her. It had been so long since either of them had laughed.

"If my aunt, being of advanced age, is not a candidate, then who would you have take her place? And who should be the godfather?"

"I had thought the choice was obvious. One of her sons and his wife?"

"Michael and Helen or Bartholomew and Amelia?"

"Michael is the eldest, and Helen is a wonderful woman, but Bartholomew and Amelia live close to Pemberley and would be more a part of our child's life."

"You are fond of Amelia."

"Oh, yes. She called several times while you were away. She is becoming a dear friend."

"I see no reason to argue with your choice. Let it be my younger cousins, if they agree."

"Do you doubt they would?"

"No, not at all."

Their ramble brought them to a bench. "May we stop and rest for a while?"

"Certainly! When you are ready, I will return you to the house. You look uncomfortable."

"I am never comfortable!" Elizabeth laughed. "I believe that is what happens near the end of a confinement!"

Darcy was mesmerized by the joy in Elizabeth's eyes. It had returned so unexpectedly. He could not stop himself, and he leaned over and kissed her. She responded to his sudden display of affection with the same hesitancy with which he offered it. The kiss had surprised them both.

Wordlessly, Darcy stood and helped Elizabeth to her feet. This time, as she took his arm, she not only leaned heavily on it for support, but there was a tenderness that had been absent earlier.

"Shall we send a note to the Arnolds asking them to join us for dinner tomorrow? It has been too long since we have had company for an evening. We could ask them to be the godparents then."

"Do you feel up to receiving guests?"

"They are not guests; they are family," Elizabeth said with a conviction that caught Darcy off guard.

"As you wish. Send a note – but only after you rest."

Elizabeth hoped that her innocent advances would bring her husband back to her bed that night. She yearned to be in his arms, to fall asleep with his breath on her neck. They need not be intimate; indeed, it was so close to her time that she had been told they should not be, but she missed him. She missed seeing him in her rooms. Only in the privacy of their chambers was he just a man and not the master of Pemberley.

Her hopes were in vain, for her husband did not come to her that night. But from that day on, he was no longer cold and distant to her. It was a start, and that was significant in and of itself. The dark spell had been broken, and the pall that had settled over them, and over all of Pemberley, was at long last beginning to lift.

The Arnolds were only too happy to accept the Darcys' invitation. They had worried about their cousins, all the more so since Mr. Mitchell's call, not having seen them in weeks. Amelia Arnold had begun to suspect that she was herself with child and suffered through what she believed to be morning sickness. Her husband refused to leave her for long, and Amelia found herself unable to travel when she was feeling so poorly.

Thus, it was serendipitous that Amelia felt well enough to make the journey when the invitation to dine at Pemberley arrived. They found Elizabeth contented and serene, which engendered surprise and confusion in both Arnolds, but also profound relief. Amelia resolved to have a private conference with her friend as soon as possible. She did not have long to wait. Darcy was of the same mind with regards to his cousin, and spirited Mr. Arnold away soon after the couple arrived.

Amelia had called on Elizabeth in Darcy's absence and knew the reason for his flight to Town. She did not know about Darcy's edict against the Bennets; however, she was not ignorant for long. As soon as the ladies were alone, Amelia begged Elizabeth to tell her what had occurred since they last had met. Elizabeth had implicit trust in her friend and imparted all that had transpired. Amelia sat in rapt attention as Elizabeth recited her tale and spoke of her heartache and despair. She could see the transformation on the young woman's face as Elizabeth confessed how, with the prodding of her faithful clergyman, she had come to understand her responsibility to grant forgiveness and acceptance to her husband and her family.

"Oh, my dear, I do not know what to say."

"You need say nothing but that you will be the godmother of my child."

"Of course I will, but I spoke of the events of the past few weeks. I am astonished that you could so quickly overcome such deep despair. I see again the woman I knew before this calamity befell you, yet you said that you were unhappy until just a few days ago."

"I was miserable." Elizabeth's gaze momentarily dropped to her hands folded on top of her lap. When she looked up at her friend with a determined look on her face, Amelia knew Elizabeth was ready to confess something deeply personal. "I decided that it was in my power to choose to be content, and I will do everything I can to overcome the self pity I wallowed in for far too long. I cannot change the past, but I can love and forgive those who have disappointed me – and try very hard to forgive myself for my own

mistakes. I will not deceive myself; I know that the despair can return at anytime. However, I have been given too much, and I would be ungrateful to allow the gloom to affect me for an extended period of time. I still have my husband, I still have Pemberley, and soon I will have a child to love and care for." The two women smiled at each other through their tears, though one smile was more brittle than the other. "I have one more request. When the time arrives, will you come and help me through the birth? I would very much like a friend by my side."

"Elizabeth, I will come. Send word day or night, and I will come, with or without my husband."

"You *must* bring him!" Elizabeth sniffed and wiped her tears from her cheeks. "Someone has to stay with my husband. I fear that the birthing will be, in its own way, just as difficult for him as it will be for me."

In another part of the house, Darcy was asking Arnold much the same thing.

"You consent?"

"Of course, you old fool! I would be honoured to be godfather, and I promise to bring my wife when your Elizabeth is ready to give birth. I intend to get you good and drunk so you survive the ordeal."

"I am counting on it," Darcy replied, surprisingly pleased and grateful that he would not be alone when the time came for his heir to be born. Then his expression sobered. "You can guess what I was forced to do in regards to Elizabeth's family."

"I can guess."

"I have forbidden further association with all other than Charles Bingley's wife."

"Her older sister."

"Aye."

"Why?"

"I had no choice!" Arnold did not respond. "I did what I did to protect my family, *including* my wife."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing. She too realises that it was the proper thing to do."

"Hmmm. Now your wife has no sisters to attend her, your child has no grandparents, and you have denied Elizabeth the joy of introducing her firstborn to her family. And let us not forget that with the exception of *my* family, the rest of yours has repudiated *her*."

"I did not tell you to hear you judge me."

"Heaven forbid that I judge anyone, after you have already done so."

"Arnold," Darcy said, in a voice full of warning.

Arnold sighed. "Darcy, you acted according to *your* principles. Let us not argue the matter. We came

for happier conversation and to partake of the famous Darcy hospitality. Let us rejoin the ladies.”

The rest of the evening was a happy affair. The couples laughed together and enjoyed a new camaraderie. When the Arnolds left for home, both promised to come to Pemberley when they received word of the baby’s imminent birth.

It came a fortnight later.

Chapter Eighteen

Each morning since Elizabeth invited Darcy to walk with her, the couple repeated the exercise, although for the past two days, they had not strayed from the paths adjacent to the house. Elizabeth was a fit and healthy young woman, but her unborn child demanded so much from her body that she no longer had the energy for anything more than a short constitutional. Her back hurt, her feet hurt, her knees hurt, her ankles were swollen, and her legs cramped at night. She was both ready and eager for the child to be born.

While they walked, Darcy was greatly amused by his wife's gait, which he found difficult to describe as anything other than a waddle. Then Elizabeth winced as if in pain, and her steps faltered.

"Elizabeth?" Darcy asked in a worried voice.

"Tis nothing. I am simply not as light of foot as I have been in the past. I doubt that I could perform even the simplest of dance steps now."

Darcy looked at her with concern. "Would you like to return to the house?"

"Aye, and then I will go to my rooms and rest."

They slowly made their way inside. Darcy immediately guided Elizabeth to her chambers. She needed Marie and Mrs. Reynolds immediately, but did not want to alarm her husband. Fitzwilliam Darcy was not a man accustomed to feeling powerless and powerless he would most certainly be if she understood what was happening to her.

"There is no need for concern. I will rest now. Would you please summon my maid before you go?"

Darcy pulled the cord and then sat down next to Elizabeth until Marie entered the room. "You will send for me if ... if you need me?"

Elizabeth laughed and touched his cheek. "Marie can see to my immediate needs. Mr. Wright is waiting for you."

"I ... well ... Yes, he is. Please rest."

"I shall."

He finally turned to leave and closed the door just as another pain nearly overwhelmed Elizabeth, stronger than any so far. Once it subsided, Elizabeth asked Marie, who had immediately rushed to her mistress' side, to fetch Mrs. Reynolds. The housekeeper came into Elizabeth's chambers a few minutes later.

"Mrs. Darcy?"

"I think it is time to summon the midwife."

"Tell me what you are experiencing. Have you had any pains?"

"I awoke to a slight discomfort. As the morning progressed, the discomfort has become more intense and is now quite painful when it occurs."

"Your waters?"

"They have not come."

Mrs. Reynolds watched her mistress for several minutes as another contraction came and passed. "I will send for Mrs. Rowe now, and inform the young woman who is to act as wet nurse. Marie, stay with your mistress. Mrs. Darcy, you would do well to keep walking if you can. Do you want Mr. Darcy to be informed?"

"Not as yet, but please send word to Kympton, to the Arnolds, and ask them to come directly. Do not give them cause for alarm."

"Very good, madam."

"Marie, do not leave me," Elizabeth pleaded after Mrs. Reynolds left to ready the household for the birthing.

"I will stay by you until the child is born," Marie vowed.

"Thank you. Now help me walk, as Mrs. Reynolds suggested."

After the midwife arrived and examined Elizabeth, she declared that the child indeed was on the way. Elizabeth sent word to her husband, asking him to come to her. Darcy was surprised to find his housekeeper and the midwife with his wife.

"Would you give us a moment, please?" Elizabeth asked, and the women filed out of the room.

Elizabeth took Darcy's hand and placed it on her swollen stomach. "Our child has determined that it is time to enter this world." Darcy gasped, his worries confirmed. "We knew this day was coming, and now it is here. I have already sent word to the Arnolds, and I expect that they will arrive shortly."

Darcy tried to interrupt.

"Shhh. Let me speak. I know that you are concerned. I cannot tell you not to be." Elizabeth stopped as another pain descended upon her.

"You are in pain."

"It must be so," she said when it subsided. "Fitzwilliam, look at me. It is a woman's lot to bear children. I am doing only what your mother did to give you life. The discomfort will soon pass. What will remain is my love for you and for our child." Elizabeth put her hands around his face. "I do this joyfully, for you, for us. Promise me that you will not abuse the servants or Bartholomew while you wait."

"I promise."

"My love, do not be afraid. I will not die today."

“How can you be so certain? What would I do if you left me?” Darcy’s voice shook.

“Oh, my husband!” Even in her distracted state, Elizabeth realised this was the closest he had ever come to sharing what he felt for her. It gave her hope, and she knew she must give him hope in return, as much as she was able in a way he would accept.

“I cannot be certain that I shall live, nor can you that I shall not. That is in God’s hands. However, I have no intention of leaving you for many, many years. You are well and truly stuck with me, Mr. Darcy. Go now, before Mrs. Rowe orders you from this room.” She pulled his face to hers for one last kiss before she pushed him away. He walked to the door, turned, and stared into his wife’s eyes.

“Elizabeth,” he whispered. And then he was gone.

The Arnolds arrived just as Darcy was leaving his wife’s chambers. He met Amelia ascending the stairs as he was descending.

“How is Elizabeth?”

“She seems to be doing well. I know nothing of these matters.”

“I will go to her.”

“Amelia, take care of her. I do not ...” His voice broke.

Amelia Arnold had known Fitzwilliam Darcy for almost her entire life. She saw how frightened he was and was filled with compassion. If ever a man loved a woman, Fitzwilliam loved Elizabeth. She did what she could to comfort him.

“Nothing will happen to her, other than that she will become a mother. Have faith, Fitzwilliam.” She gave him an encouraging pat on the arm. “My husband is looking for you. Go and keep him company.”

Darcy found his cousin in the library.

“Do you think you have read even a quarter of the books in this room?” asked Mr. Arnold as he greeted Darcy.

“Perhaps that much. It would take a lifetime to come close to reading them all.”

“I doubt that you are much inclined to read now. What do you say to a ride?”

“I do not wish to be away, should I be needed.”

“From the level of activity that I have witnessed, the babe is unlikely to come anytime soon. The house staff is far too serene.”

“Still ...”

“Darcy, I asked your housekeeper, whom I was surprised to see ...”

“Elizabeth asked for a few minutes alone with me.”

“Ah, that explains why she was not with her mistress. As I was saying, I spoke with Mrs. Reynolds and she is of the opinion that it is very early. Let us escape outdoors for a while. I promise not to take you too far from the house.”

“If you insist,” Darcy replied ungraciously.

“I do, and I have already ordered our horses be made ready. Come, Cousin.”

Seeing that resistance would prove futile, Darcy followed Mr. Arnold to the stables where his horse was, in fact, ready for him.

The two men rode across the valley in front of the house and up the hill opposite. The view of Pemberley from that vantage was unsurpassed. Neither man could fail to be impressed by it.

“I am not a covetous man, but this view always makes me at least *slightly* envious of you.”

The quip at last brought a smile to Darcy’s face.

“The first time my father brought me here, I could not believe that all this would be mine one day. I hope to bring my own son here some day.”

“There is a distinct possibility that your heir will be born today.”

“Yes, so he could.” Darcy again grew serious.

“Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth will be fine. Women have given birth for countless millennia.”

“I cannot help but worry.”

“That is only natural. When it is Amelia’s time, I expect that I shall have the same fears and concerns as you do. It is difficult to know that the one we love is at risk. Do you not agree?”

“I would not know.”

“What do you mean you would not know? You love Elizabeth.”

“You assume too much.” Darcy urged his horse forward.

“Darcy, stop! You cannot run away from me. It is obvious to anyone who knows you how much you love your wife, even if you deny it.”

“I do deny it! I admit that I am fond of her, and that I am content to be married to her, but I categorically deny that I love her.”

“Your actions betray you! I have seen how you look at her, how you care for her, and it is not as a man indifferent. You are a man so in love with a woman that you instinctively know you cannot live without her. Deny that!”

Darcy said nothing.

“I know that most alliances in your circle are marriages of convenience. I doubt that you entered into yours with any other thought in mind. But I am

not spouting ridiculous romantic idealism when I say that something remarkable happened to you. You fell in love with your wife, and she with you. Amelia and I have spoken about how much Elizabeth adores you. My mother was won over by your wife's devotion to you. How can you not see what your closest family sees?"

Darcy looked away and said simply, "I vowed to protect her."

"Yes, of course you vowed to protect her."

"You do not understand. I can only protect her by *not* loving her."

Mr. Arnold looked at Darcy in amazement. "No, I do *not* understand. How does not loving your wife protect her? And protect her from what, exactly?"

"You do not understand!" Darcy nearly shouted. "Only *once* have you lost someone close to you – your father. *Every* person I have ever loved has been taken from me. First my mother, then my father, then Georgiana. I determined that it was better never to love anyone like that again than to open my heart and have it crushed when I lost them."

"And so you vowed not to love Elizabeth, because you could not bear the heartache if you lost her, too."

"Yes."

"What about the child? Do you think you can keep from loving your own flesh and blood? Is your son or daughter to be nothing more to you than some prized foal? My dear cousin, for much of my life I have looked up to you because I could see that you took your responsibilities seriously. You have always looked after the welfare of your servants and your tenants. You have proved to be a dependable husband. But never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that you would take your obligations so seriously that you thought to impersonate God Almighty."

That gained Darcy's attention. He snapped his head around to look at his cousin. "I never presumed ..."

"Yes, you did. You thought you could control your wife's destiny by denying her your affections. Aside from being the most convoluted piece of reasoning I have ever heard, no man knows the exact number of days he is given on this earth by his Maker. When it is a person's time to die, there is nothing anyone can do to change that. *Nothing* you do will add one more day to Elizabeth's life or your own. Not unless our Lord allows it.

"What makes this all the more tragic is that you are breaking the vows you made to your wife before God and the witnesses at your wedding. You promised to love her. From what you just told me, you have

withheld the love she has earned. I sincerely doubt that she has done the same."

"No, she has not."

"How do you know? Has she told you that she loves you?"

"Yes." Darcy hung his head in shame.

"What, pray tell, did you say to her when she confessed *that*?"

"I told her that she must never expect me to return her feelings."

"You said that, yet she loves you enough to accept it? Remarkable. Do you have any idea of the precious gift you have in Elizabeth? She must love you as unreservedly as anyone has ever loved another, and I do not only mean a husband and wife. I sincerely hope you think hard on what I have said and mend your ways before you destroy the both of you."

Darcy flinched as Mr. Arnold's salvo hit its intended target. He tried to cover his agitation and said in as neutral a voice as he could muster, "Do you say this as a clergyman or my cousin?"

"Both, and also as an old friend. Be careful, Darcy. Elizabeth needs you now more than ever. You are the only close family she has left – thanks to your edict. The baby will help dispel her feelings of loss, but if you continue to deny her what she is due as your wife, the love you so willfully repress, you risk making her regret your marriage. I do not believe you could live with yourself if that happened. And if you cannot think of your wife, think of your child."

With those words, Bartholomew Arnold urged his horse down the path that led back to Pemberley. Darcy had heard the words of his cousin, and they weighed heavily upon him. Without knowing what he was doing, he turned his horse to follow. Thankfully, Darcy's mount was well-trained and followed the lead of the animal ahead, as his master was too lost in thought to heed where he was going.

A servant knocked on the door of the birthing room with a note for Mrs. Reynolds. The missive bore disturbing news. The young woman who was to be wet nurse had contracted a fever and lay ill in her bed. There was no possibility that she would be well enough to come to the great house for at least another day. More troubling was that there was no one else in the immediate area who could fill her role. If the mistress should be unable or unwilling to nurse the babe herself for at least a few days, the consequences could be dire. Mrs. Reynolds excused the servant and went back to Mrs. Darcy. She would need to speak to Mr. Darcy soon, but for now, she would assist the midwife.

There was little other concern inside Elizabeth's chambers. Elizabeth was doing well and Mrs. Rowe was confident that before too many hours passed, Mrs. Darcy would successfully deliver her child. There was nothing so far to give the midwife cause for alarm, and the fact that the young woman's mother had little difficulty birthing five children gave reason to hope that Mrs. Darcy's labours would be equally without complications. If no unforeseen events transpired, the Pemberley heir would be born before the sun rose on a new day.

The two cousins arrived safely back at the Pemberley stables. They were quickly informed that no word had been received about Elizabeth's progress. Hoping that no news was good news, and wanting to put the unpleasantness of their last conversation behind them, Mr. Arnold led his friend back to the library where he poured each of them a drink.

"To our wives! May we somehow deserve them." They took a small sip. "I hope Amelia brings us news soon. I think it would do you some good."

Only a few minutes later, that lady appeared.

"Elizabeth? The child?" Darcy asked anxiously

"Has yet to be born. Do not be concerned. Elizabeth is well and the midwife assures us that she is pleased with how the confinement is progressing. However, she believes it will be several hours before Elizabeth is ready to deliver. I suggest that you both get something to eat while you wait. I will come with news as soon as I can. Will you continue to stay in here?"

"Yes, my dear. I've already taken the father-to-be out for a ride. I doubt he would consent to leave the house again."

After his wife left, Mr. Arnold attempted to engage Darcy in more conversation. "Have you decided on names?"

"If it is a girl, she will be called Anne Amelia after her grandmother and godmother."

"And a boy?"

"Robert George Bartholomew, after me, my father and you. Robert is one of my given names."

"I never could keep track of all my cousins' names."

"We have too many of them. I have three. Fitzwilliam Robert George Darcy."

"Quite a mouthful."

Time passed slowly. At some point, the men decided to adjourn to the billiards room. Unfortunately, as they walked out of the library, Amelia walked out of Elizabeth's chambers – just as Elizabeth let out a scream.

"Elizabeth!" Darcy cried out in fear and began to climb the staircase. Bartholomew grabbed his cousin's arm to stop him from charging into a place where he was not welcome. Amelia saw what had happened and hastened to meet them.

"Darcy, you must not go in there. Elizabeth is fine."

"No! I heard her scream."

"She is nearing the time when the babe will be born. It is all as it should be. Pain in childbirth is normal."

"I must do something. Please!"

"You can best help your wife by staying calm. You will only distract her if you try to see her now. I was coming to tell you that it will soon be over. If I had waited a minute longer, you would not have heard her."

"Come, Darcy. Perhaps a game of billiards now is a bad idea. Amelia, we will be in the library."

Darcy sat alone with his thoughts ... again. He could not remove the sound of Elizabeth's cry from his memory. That, and the words of his cousin, troubled him greatly. Had he wronged his wife? Was she suffering more than she ought because of him? He had locked his heart away, wilfully refusing to allow it to be touched by the one person who loved him most in the world. He had treated her abominably. Would she live so he could tell her what he only just today had acknowledged and accepted – that he loved her?

The room was silent except for the ticking of the clock. It was now seven in the evening. The sun had set, and the sky was growing ever darker. *How much longer must Elizabeth suffer?* Conversation had been abandoned.

The clock had struck the half-hour when the men heard footsteps approaching the door. They both stood as it opened, hoping for news of Elizabeth and her child.

A tired but happy Amelia Arnold walked over to Darcy and took his hand.

"You have a daughter, and she is beautiful."

"And Elizabeth? Both she and the child are well?"

"Yes, very well. Elizabeth is resting. She is understandably exhausted."

"May I see her now?"

"In a few minutes. Mrs. Reynolds asked to see you first."

"Thank you for everything, Amelia."

"My pleasure. If you do not mind, I would also like to rest now."

"I will join you," her husband said, and shook Darcy's hand, then both left the dazed new father to await the conference with his housekeeper.

Mrs. Reynolds entered the room as the others left.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing with your wife and child, but I did receive news that the woman hired to be wet nurse has taken ill. Unfortunately, I know of no one who can take her place. Mrs. Darcy is the only one who can nurse the baby at this time. I know this is not what you wanted, but I see no alternative for the time being."

"Have you spoken to my wife?"

"Yes, sir. She is in agreement. The midwife is showing her how to nurse the child even now."

"There is nothing for it. What must be done will be done. However, please make additional enquiries in the event that a different wet nurse needs to be secured."

The walk up the stairs to their bedchambers had never before seemed so long or so cumbersome. Darcy was weary from the accumulated events of the day, and each step seemed to require enormous effort. As eager as he was to see for himself that Elizabeth and the baby were alive and well, he was unsure that he was ready to face his wife. His emotions were in turmoil, and he did not know if he could maintain his composure before her.

He entered her chambers through his own. Elizabeth was resting on her bed, her faithful maid in a chair by her side. He saw that his wife was asleep, with their child nestled beside her in a protective embrace. Marie smiled and stood, carefully extracted the slumbering babe from the arms of her mother, and handed the child to her father.

She left the three of them alone, her vigil over, her promise fulfilled.

Darcy stood rooted to the spot, his eyes transfixed on the new life he held in his strong arms. This was *his child*, created by his joining with Elizabeth. She was a part of him in a way no other human being could be.

My Anne.

He pushed the blanket away from the infant's face. Her head was covered with fine curls the colour of her mother's auburn tresses, her skin smooth and unblemished.

He opened the blankets further to examine her arms and hands. He counted ten fingers. On her feet, ten tiny toes.

She was perfect in every way. His precious daughter. Love for her swelled within him, and he

could not contain emotions he was helpless to control. He was a fool to think he ever could. Darcy trembled as he re-covered his daughter in her blankets and then brought her small body up against his own; his hands nearly engulfing her as he then gently held and caressed her.

"My beautiful little girl," he whispered as the tears fell down his cheeks. He had a family again, someone to love and be loved by. It had been so long. He had forgotten how wonderful it felt to know that there was one person alive in the world who would always love him.

Darcy turned to look at Elizabeth and realised his foolishness – for since his marriage, he already had such a person in his life. What an arrogant, heartless, ungrateful idiot he had been! Obstinate, he had not allowed her to express her love for him in the way she would have preferred. Instead he had forced her, by his callous disregard for her feelings, to resort to looks and touches and actions. He also comprehended that her actions spoke more eloquently than the words he now knew he must say could ever hope to do. Day after day, Elizabeth had demonstrated her love for him, despite knowing that he might never reciprocate that love. Even more so since the humiliation that Lydia had brought to the family. He knew he had wounded his wife, yet Elizabeth had somehow initiated their reconciliation. His tears of joy for the miracle of his daughter turned to sobs of deserved self-recrimination.

Little Anne stirred against his breast, and his thoughts were instantly pulled back to her. She was so small, so vulnerable. He would take care of her. He would see that she lacked nothing. He would be a more attentive father than his own had been. Anne's life would be different from his. She had two living parents who adored her. She was not the orphan that he was.

The orphan that he had made of her mother.

Oh merciful God! Is that what he had done?

Yes, but what choice did I have?

For the first time, he finally understood what Michael and then Bartholomew had been trying to tell him. He did have a choice. He had made the one that society required as prudent, but it was one that had cost his wife *everything*. In his selfish desire to protect *his* good name, he had demanded that all the sacrifice be hers, that she sacrifice *her* family.

What is done is done.

He knew that was not true. It was not too late. The Bennets were still alive and well at Longbourn. They were not lost to Elizabeth, as his own parents were forever lost to him.

As he thought about his behaviour in the last months he had no illusions about the torment his wife must have felt. He was all too acquainted with the singular pain of bereavement. How she had withstood it he could not imagine, but his role in it brought him despair in its acutest form. What sort of husband had he been to her? He had abandoned her, even as they lived in the same house. How could she not despise him?

Darcy looked at Elizabeth, so serene in her sleep. The feelings he had long hidden away, fearing to expose, had not lain dormant at all. It was just his mind refusing to see them, acknowledge them. He counted the number of people made miserable by the decisions he had made, directions he had chosen, and winced at his own arrogance in believing that he knew what was best for them.

You proved your love by loving me, even after I did everything in my power to be undeserving of it. I will validate mine by relinquishing my pride and laying it at your feet. Soon, Elizabeth, soon I will show you, and then I will tell you, how much I have come to love you.

He dried his tear-stained cheeks and sat down on the bed beside his wife, his daughter still cradled in his arms.

“Elizabeth,” he said softly.

Her eyelids fluttered open. “Fitzwilliam.” Her voice was tired but tender. “I see you have met our little Miss Darcy.”

“Anne. That is, if you are still in agreement?”

“I have never thought of her as anything but Anne.” Elizabeth saw that he had been crying. “What is wrong? Why are you distressed?”

“Nothing is wrong. As I stood beholding our beautiful daughter, I could not help ...” Darcy’s voice broke as he fought back sobs.

“Darling, it must have been so hard for you to wait.”

“What of you? I did not endure what you did.”

“True, but neither was I sequestered away, waiting for bits of news to trickle to me.”

“Let us not squabble over such a trifling thing. What is important is that you are safe and our baby is healthy.”

“You wanted a son.”

“I am overjoyed with a daughter.”

The trial of childbirth had left Elizabeth defenceless to conceal her emotions. She had no strength for anything other than the complete truth.

“I prayed for a girl,” Elizabeth confessed. She looked at him. “You are surprised.”

“Yes, I had thought ...”

“That I was like every other woman, wanting to boast of providing an heir?”

“You are not like other women.”

“No, I am not. I could not bring what you wanted into this marriage, and instead brought disgrace and infamy. I have given you a daughter, and I am glad. Do you know why?” He sat motionless waiting for her to continue. “I began to pray for a girl soon after you left so suddenly for London. Somehow I knew that Lydia’s recklessness would come between us, and I feared the loss of what we had built together. I was right. When you returned, I despaired of ever being allowed to see the man behind the mask. I knew that if I had a girl, you would be forced to come to me again and again until I conceived a son. I hoped that in the pursuit of a male heir, I would be enough in your presence that I could regain your good opinion.”

“You never lost it. I admit that I was hurt and angry after my uncle confronted me, and I wondered if I had made a mistake. I was a fool. Look at Anne. She is our flesh and blood. Could we ever consider her a mistake, an error of judgement? No! Elizabeth, I ... I care for you, very much. I thank God I took you as my wife. I want none other but you.”

Elizabeth wept with joy and relief. She would be his again. Darcy took her in his arms, Anne snugly between them, and comforted her. And unknown to her, receiving comfort himself.

After several minutes in such an intimate familial embrace, baby Anne began to wake, squirming and fussing.

“I think she might finally be hungry. I tried to nurse her earlier, but she was more interested in sleeping than eating.”

“Elizabeth, I am sorry you must do this. It is not a duty that the Mistress of Pemberley should need perform.”

“Fitzwilliam, really, I do not mind. Many ladies in Hertfordshire could not afford a wet nurse, and they did what needed to be done. My own mother ...” She stopped.

Darcy did not hesitate, determined to follow through on his resolutions. “Your mother nursed you?”

“Yes. Money was always an issue at Longbourn.”

“With five daughters born so closely together, I do not doubt it.”

Elizabeth had coaxed the baby to begin to nurse. Darcy watched in fascination as Elizabeth concentrated intently on her task.

“What does it feel like? Are you uncomfortable?”

“No, not at all. There is a pulling sensation. It is like nothing I have felt before, not at all like when you put your lips on me when we, well, when you take me to bed. It is quite different.”

Darcy made to leave but she would not yet release him. “Stay with me tonight, Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth asked with great earnestness. “I do not wish to sleep alone. I want only to sleep next to you again. Please.”

“Of course I will stay with you.” He leaned over and kissed her before continuing in a tender voice, “But first I have many letters to write. I fear I will be unable to fall asleep until I have finished them. Then my mind will be at ease. If I go now, I can return all the sooner.”

Clearly pleased that he had so quickly acceded to her request, Elizabeth said, “Then go and return when you can. And Fitzwilliam, would you call for the nursery maid before you depart? Anne will need to be changed soon.”

“As you wish.” Darcy kissed Elizabeth again, took one more long look at his daughter, then made his way to his study.

There *were* many letters to write, including the three most difficult letters he had ever composed in his life. Dipping his pen in the ink, he began.

Late in the afternoon two days later, an express rider arrived at Netherfield. Charles Bingley saw that the thick packet was from Darcy. He hoped for Jane’s sake that it contained news of Elizabeth and the baby. Opening the letter, he was surprised to find another tucked inside, with the request that he deliver it personally to Longbourn. He was dumbfounded when he finished reading his portion. He quickly called for his horse and rode to his father-in-law’s, certain that Mr. Bennet’s letter would be as astounding as his own.

George Bennet was always pleased to see the affable young man who had married his eldest daughter. He could see, however, that Bingley was agitated and wondered at its source. He did not wait long.

“I received an express from Pemberley that contained this letter for you. I brought it over directly.”

Bingley sat down to wait while Mr. Bennet read. Several times, the older man paused to look at his guest, only to return his attention to the words on the page. When he had finished, he looked at Bingley in amazement. Bingley pulled out his own letter, and without a word, they exchanged correspondences. Mr.

Bennet’s letter was very similar to the one Bingley had received.

*1 October 1812
Pemberley, Derbyshire*

To Mr. George Bennet, Esq.

Sir, it is my honour and pleasure to inform you that this evening Elizabeth was safely delivered of a daughter. Both mother and child are well, and I left them only minutes ago to write to you. Holding my child for the first time, I found myself wondering if all fathers were as in awe as I was. Then I lamented that I could not ask my own father that question, as he has been in the grave these five years and more. Finally, I realised that if you were here, I could have asked you. It is only because of my own folly and mistaken pride that you are not. It is my sincere and earnest desire to mend the breach caused by my callous desertion of you in your time of greatest need. I humbly request that you, Mrs. Bennet, and your daughters come to Pemberley directly. I am also writing to the Bingleys and the Pritchfords, asking them to come, and have offered to pay the Pritchfords’ travelling expenses. I pray that all will be able to make the journey.

Elizabeth knows nothing of this request, and I would like to surprise her with all her family arriving together. I therefore ask that you delay your departure so that the Pritchfords might journey from Hertfordshire with you, and God willing, the Bingleys.

Please send word as soon as you can. If all goes as I hope, we shall see you at Pemberley in about eight days’ time.

Your repentant servant,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Chapter Nineteen

Darcy returned to Elizabeth's room as soon as he finished his correspondence. Although it was late, he had dispatched the three express letters that evening. The rest of the birth announcements could wait until morning.

The one thing that could *not* wait was Elizabeth. He could not stay away from her, not now that he finally understood – and accepted – what was in his heart.

She was asleep when he slipped into bed beside her. She was so beautiful; if only he could gaze into her fine eyes, then all would be perfect. He wanted to run his finger down her cheek, cup her face in his hands, and kiss away the memory of all the tears that Elizabeth had shed because of his misplaced pride. But she needed rest more than he needed such gratification, and he was unwilling to wake her. Instead, he relived their earlier conversation.

Darcy was humbled by Elizabeth's apparent eagerness to put the past few months behind them. He knew that he had wronged her greatly, so much so that she believed she had lost his good opinion.

Have I been that resentful? Have been that blind to her pain?

Yes, he had. His behaviour towards everyone since he had returned from Lydia's wedding could not be described as anything other than uniformly uncivil. It was a wonder Bartholomew and Amelia would still talk to him, though he began to suspect that they received him more for his wife's sake than his own.

Poor Elizabeth! To know that she had prayed for a daughter so that she would have the chance to become close to him again felt like a blow to the stomach. Darcy was devastated by her admission, all the more so because he understood that she had legitimate reasons to doubt his desire to recover the camaraderie they had shared following their marriage. He was ashamed, awed, and thankful. Ashamed at his misplaced resentment – Elizabeth had nothing to do with Wickham's schemes or his own actions when events had not gone as he had arrogantly directed. Awed that, despite his actions and his near-abandonment of her, his wife still loved him. Thankful that he would have the chance to repair the damage he had done to his relationships with his wife, his closest friends, and his family in Hertfordshire.

Later, a gentle knock on the door preceded the entrance of the new nursery maid, carrying a whimpering, hungry infant. The girl was startled to find the master awake and in bed with the mistress. Mrs. Reynolds had evidently neglected to mention that possibility to her.

"I beg pardon sir, but Miss Darcy is fussing, and will not quiet. She needs to be fed, I reckon."

Darcy nodded and nudged Elizabeth. "Mrs. Darcy, our daughter is in need of attention, and I am afraid that you are the only one who can bestow it upon her."

Elizabeth, slowly wakening, was very happy to see her husband beside her.

A small cry from her baby pulled her attention away from her spouse. She sat up and held out her arms. "Please bring her to me."

The maid complied, then bid a hasty retreat.

Elizabeth smiled. "I think your presence here upset the poor girl."

Darcy responded to her teasing in kind. "I am here at your express invitation."

"True. I suppose that I should have warned her, but I did not think to do so."

"What is the girl's name?"

"Alice. Her name is Alice McBride."

"Alice. Thank you. I will not forget."

Darcy watched with interest as his wife opened her gown to expose her breast to their child. The little one eagerly nursed; her father laughed softly.

"Our daughter was hungry."

"From the feel of it, famished might be a more accurate choice of word. Ouch! Slow down little one," she said as she caressed the baby's tiny head.

"Does it hurt you?"

"Not at all. She was suckling a little more vigorously than before. She has slowed now."

"I still feel guilty that you must do it, but I readily admit that it is a wondrous thing to watch. To know that all children are nourished in this way, I had never given the matter a thought before now."

"Tis how God intended it to be."

"And it is very good."

When Anne was finished feeding, Darcy called for the nursery maid.

"I am told that your name is Alice," he said to the nervous young woman.

"Aye, sir, Alice McBride."

"Well then, Alice, when did you arrive?"

"But a few days ago, sir."

"Welcome. I hope you will be happy at Pemberley."

"Thank you, sir."

"Before you leave, I would like to explain several things to you. First, I am very aware that you did not expect to see me here tonight. From this day, expect it."

"Yes, sir."

"If the baby needs Mrs. Darcy in the night, knock on the door and wait for an answer. If you are not directly given leave to enter, wait a few moments, then knock again. Only after you have knocked twice and received no answer may you open the door. Once the wet nurse arrives, there should be no need to disturb your mistress during the night. Do you understand these instructions?"

"Perfectly."

"Good. Good night, Alice."

"Goodnight, Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Darcy."

Elizabeth gently chided her husband after Alice left. "You frightened the poor girl."

"She will not enter hastily again. I would not want to scandalize our newest servant."

"Fitzwilliam!"

"Come here," he commanded. Elizabeth allowed Darcy to tuck her body against his.

"Gently, dearest, I am very sore in many places."

"I will be gentle. Now go to sleep."

Within minutes, Darcy felt Elizabeth's body relax, her breathing deep and regular. She was fast asleep.

"I promise never to hurt you again, my love," he whispered into her hair. Finally, his mind calmed, Darcy joined Elizabeth in the world of dreams.

The next several days passed with Elizabeth confined to her chambers. Darcy insisted that she stay in bed to rest and heal. At first, she was inclined to acquiesce to his demands, but as the days went on, Elizabeth grew restive and less compliant.

"I cannot stay in these rooms any longer. At least let me walk in the hall."

Darcy was pleased to see her spirit returning, even if she did direct her challenge toward him. He laughed to himself, realizing that she would not desist until she got her way, and agreed to walk with her. Donning a robe before he could change his mind, she walked to the door and waited.

"You mean to walk now?" Darcy asked with an upturned brow.

"Yes, now," came the exasperated reply.

Gallantly he joined her, tucking her arm into the crook of his. "Who am I to disappoint my lady wife?"

Darcy was careful to stay clear of the wing where rooms were being prepared to receive Elizabeth's family. Mr. Bennet had answered his letter

immediately, strongly hinting that the invitation to Pemberley be extended to the Gardiners. No sooner had Darcy read those words than he dispatched an express asking the Gardiners to come. He had also received a reply from Bingley, but no one else, and he could do nothing but order enough rooms be made ready in the event that all his guests arrived.

He watched each night as Elizabeth fed baby Anne. In her tired state, Elizabeth's emotions were not hidden from him. Darcy could see the joy she derived from nursing their child. He had instructed Mrs. Reynolds not to bring the wet nurse to Pemberley until it was certain that the woman was completely healthy. The fever had lingered, and it was feared that her ability to fulfill her function would disappear, and indeed, so it proved to be. Mrs. Reynolds conveyed the bad news to her master.

"The girl is unable to nurse?" he asked.

"That is correct. I have continued to search for a replacement but have yet to secure anyone suitable."

"Continue on then. I will speak to Mrs. Darcy."

If Mrs. Reynolds was surprised with her master's calm acceptance of the situation, she was too well-trained to show it.

Darcy immediately went to speak with Elizabeth.

"Your wet nurse is recovered from her fever, but it has robbed her of the ability to discharge her duties."

"I can continue on until another is found."

"Do you wish for another to be found?"

"I ... I would be willing to continue without one, but you can not be happy with such an arrangement." Elizabeth's voice betrayed the confusion of her feelings. Darcy winced. The Elizabeth of the first months of their marriage would have told him her opinion unreservedly. *This* Elizabeth was still circumspect in regard to his pride. He had much to make right.

"I asked you if you wished for another wet nurse to be found. Please, I want to know what *you* want. Do you wish for one, or would you rather not?"

"A woman of my station does not nurse her own child. I will not expose you to further reproach or ridicule."

Darcy's expression softened. "Elizabeth, all I want is for you to be happy. I have watched you feeding Anne. I can tell that it pleases you to do this."

"It does fill me with joy when she is at my breast, I will not deny that. But neither will I allow you to be looked down upon in any way. The Darcy name is too important to you and to me."

The old Darcy's pride was assuaged by her commitment; the new Darcy knew he must allow her

to decide without worrying about what society dictated she should do.

“Elizabeth, tell me this. If you believed that no one would pass judgment one way or the other, would you continue to nurse our daughter?”

“Yes, I would, and happily.”

“Then it is settled. I will tell Mrs. Reynolds that there is no need to find a new wet nurse.”

“Fitzwilliam, I cannot allow this if you are in the least uncomfortable with it.”

“I would only be uncomfortable were I to see you gaze wistfully and enviously at our daughter being nursed by another. You shall perform that duty for Anne for as long as you choose to do so.”

He finished his speech then kissed her before leaving the room.

Elizabeth sat astounded. Her heart leapt with hope as she considered the import of his words.

A coach pulled into Longbourn late in the afternoon. Mrs. Bennet did not recognise it and wondered who was coming to call at this strange hour. She shrieked with joy as her darling Lydia was handed out of the equipage by a plainly dressed stranger. Mr. Bennet walked up to the couple and shook the man’s hand.

“Mr. Pritchford, welcome to Longbourn. This is my wife, Mrs. Bennet.”

“We came as soon as we could.”

“You are most welcome, sir! Oh, Lydia, I think you have grown since you went away.”

“Oh, Mama, I have missed you. But the boys are asleep in the carriage. The poor dears are exhausted.”

“You brought your sons as well! Let me see the darlings.”

Mr. Pritchford reached in and picked up the larger of the two boys, who stirred briefly when he was handed to a servant. The second made even less movement as his father carried him into the house.

“I think you might need to wait a little longer, Mama.”

“We have time enough. Your father said not a word of your coming. What a wonderful surprise! How long will you be in Hertfordshire?”

Mr. Bennet answered for his daughter. “They leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? They must stay longer.”

“I am afraid their plans are fixed, but so are ours. We will all be leaving in the morning. For Pemberley.”

“*Pemberley?*” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed.

“I received an express four days ago. Elizabeth has been delivered of a daughter, and Mr. Darcy has

summoned all of her family to Pemberley. That is why Lydia and her husband have come. Jane and Bingley will be travelling with us as well.”

“I have a granddaughter! Oh, my! I am a grandmother! Elizabeth! Oh, is she well? And the child?”

“Both mother and child are well.”

“Thank goodness.” After a moment of revelling in the idea of finally having a grandchild, she remembered the rest of her husband’s proclamation. “Mr. Darcy invited us to Pemberley? He wrote to you? I thought he forbade Elizabeth from even writing to us?”

“Yes he did. He has changed his mind and wrote himself, and I, for one, am overjoyed to be seeing my Elizabeth again.”

It then occurred to Mrs. Bennet that they would be leaving in the morning. “You should have told me four days ago! I must see Hill!”

Harriet Bennet might have been silly, vain, and ignorant, but faced with the task of entertaining four unexpected visitors for the night and packing for a long trip to commence the next morning, she forgot her nerves and set about organizing everything with an easy precision that surprised everyone except her husband.

The next evening found the Bennets, Bingleys, and Pritchfords settling into their rooms at an inn on the road to Derbyshire. They were surprised when familiar voices greeted them.

“You have caught us,” Mr. Bennet said as he offered his hand to his brother Gardiner.

“We left at first light, hoping to find you tonight. Fortunately, we made excellent time.”

“We would have waited, had you sent word.”

“That was unnecessary, and we did not have much time to prepare. All is well, and we can travel together the rest of the way.”

The large party steadily made its way north, the pace an easy one out of consideration for the young Pritchford and Gardiner children.

The Darcys were advised that four coaches were approaching Pemberley. Elizabeth was at a loss to know who could be coming in such vast numbers. Darcy had not mentioned that either the Arnolds, or the Fitzwilliam clan, or any other large party was expected. She went with Darcy to the front of the house to greet the mysterious visitors. But as soon as she saw the coaches, her mood changed from curiosity to apprehension.

“Fitzwilliam, that is my family! I swear to you that I did not invite them. Please do not be angry with me.”

“Elizabeth,” he said calmly, “they are here at *my* invitation.”

She looked at the man next to her as though she did not recognise him. She would have stood rooted to the spot had not the first carriage come to a stop. Her father stepped out of the compartment.

“Go,” Darcy whispered as he nudged her forward. Elizabeth did not stop to think; she flew into the waiting arms of her beloved father. Darcy went to the open door of the coach and helped out Mrs. Bennet, Mary, and Kitty.

Elizabeth moved from her father to her mother and then to her sisters. She looked at the next carriage and saw Bingley helping Jane. She nearly stumbled as she ran to embrace her dearest sister. Through tears of joy, she saw the Gardiners coming out of the third vehicle and moved to greet them as well. She had nearly forgotten that a fourth coach also had arrived until she looked up and saw Lydia, standing with her husband and his two boys, afraid to approach. Darcy appeared at Elizabeth’s side, and escorted her to her youngest sibling. He took it upon himself to make the introductions.

“Mrs. Darcy, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Pritchford and their sons, Thomas and Phillip? I believe you know Mrs. Pritchford.” Again Darcy urged Elizabeth forward and the two sisters fell upon each other with unrestrained affection.

Eventually all made their way inside the house. Darcy decided it was best if his guests were taken directly to their rooms and Elizabeth was allowed a little time to recover from the emotional upheaval.

An hour later, the entire party reconvened in one of the larger drawing rooms. Darcy had rarely seen his wife so happy. Elizabeth had Anne brought in to introduce her daughter to her family. All eyes were fixed upon the infant as Alice handed her to her mother. Before Elizabeth could speak, Darcy walked to her side, put his hand on the small of her back, and addressed the group.

“It is my great honour and pleasure to present our daughter, Anne Harriet Amelia Darcy.”

For the second time that day, Elizabeth’s husband had managed to both delight and amaze her. Her head was spinning, and she did not know what to think. She gave Darcy a dazzling, if somewhat teary smile, then turned as her mother came to her and asked to hold the child.

Baby Anne calmly suffered the admiration of all, including many comments on how much she looked

like her mother. Mr. Bennet allowed a tear or two to escape down his cheek as he gazed at his first grandchild. Even Darcy smiled when Mrs. Bennet proclaimed the child beautiful, then almost in the same breath ordered Elizabeth to next bear a son.

When Anne started to fuss, Elizabeth laughingly told those not so fortunate to as yet hold her daughter that they would have plenty of opportunities in the days to come.

Marie’s eyes twinkled while she worked on her mistress’ toilette before dinner. Elizabeth had chosen to wear an elegant deep blue gown to complement the diamond and sapphire necklace that Darcy had given her a few days before to commemorate Anne’s birth.

Elizabeth recognised the knowing smile on her maid’s face; it was the same as she had spied on most of the servants since her family had arrived at Pemberley.

“Am I the only person on this estate who did not know that my family was arriving today?”

“Oui, Madame.” Marie laughed. “The master was most specific in his instructions. Everything was to be made ready so you would suspect nothing.”

“You all certainly succeeded. I do not think I have ever been as completely surprised in my life.”

Marie said nothing.

“Hmmm ... Yes, well, my husband has often extolled the discretion and efficiency of his staff, and today has done nothing to discredit his praise. I must remember to give my compliments to Mrs. Reynolds.”

But her pleasure tonight mirrored that of the rest of the staff. They were satisfied with a job well done. Their mistress was proud of them and astonished at their assignment.

Supper at Pemberley was unlike any Elizabeth had ever hosted. Although she had entertained a large party when Amelia and Bartholomew married, this was decidedly different. The guests at her table were people, other than Bingley and Jane, she believed she would never see again. Elizabeth was full of joy, but she was subdued in its expression. Her husband was seated opposite her at the other end of the table, and though he spoke with the Pritchfords who were seated on either side of him, she could tell he was uncomfortable. However, she could also see that his discomfort was not from disgust over the manners of his companions. Gone was the mask of hauteur he had always worn before in the presence of her younger sisters. In its place was a man taking pains to become better acquainted with his family.

As endearing as her husband’s efforts were, her youngest sister’s behaviour was a revelation. Lydia

was ... subdued! More than once, Elizabeth found herself staring at Lydia. The Lydia she remembered would not have been content to eat in relative silence. She would have loudly dominated the discussion around her and never deferred to others. She would have been flirting outrageously with any male seated nearby. Yet there sat Lydia Pritchford, listening politely to the discourse between her husband and Darcy. She even had a small, shy smile on her face when she looked at Mr. Pritchford.

After the meal, Darcy invited the men to share in port and cigars. Considering the events of the day, Elizabeth had hoped that he would not insist on this ritual, on this of all evenings. She did not know that he had a particular purpose in mind, one that could not be fulfilled if he did not separate the men from the women.

Bingley, Mr. Pritchford, Mr. Gardiner, and Mr. Bennet made their selections and waited on their host. No one had said much to him other than a perfunctory greeting since they had arrived. Darcy nervously cleared his throat.

"I want to start by thanking all of you for coming to us. I know I gave you little time to prepare for travel, especially Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Pritchford. With that said, I believe you are all entitled to an explanation.

"I will begin with the events of last August. When we received word of Lydia's flight with Wickham, my intent was to travel to London, discover her whereabouts, and separate her from the knave, then quietly send her away. As soon as I arrived in Town and learned that they had not married, I knew what game Wickham was playing. I was confident that I could defeat him. I sought a man such as you, Mr. Pritchford, and arranged for you to meet and, if you were agreeable, to marry Lydia. Everything went according to plan, and I believed the matter behind us and that, minus Lydia's presence, we would go on as we were before. Frankly, I expected never to see Lydia again after I left Devon. Wickham was sent from England; the danger had passed."

The men shifted in their seats, looking at each other to see who would be the first to speak. Darcy raised his hand to forestall them. "Yes, I know, I was an arrogant ass, but please let me finish.

"Unfortunately, my former boyhood companion had a trump card up his sleeve, and the news of what he had done with my sister-in-law became the fodder of the scandal sheets. My uncle, the Earl of Perryton, brought that news to my attention. He had received a letter from Wickham. I can only guess that someone posted letters for him by previous arrangement, for he

had no opportunity to do such before his ship set sail. It was at that point that I did the most selfish and foolish thing of my life. I ordered Elizabeth to cease all contact with her family, save your wife, Bingley. I only allowed that because of our long friendship. I am ashamed to admit that I thought only of my own position when I decided on this course. I wanted to mitigate the effects of the scandal on the Darcy name."

Darcy took a breath and continued. "I was completely wrong in my actions. I recognise that I have offended you all and deeply injured my wife. I stand before you now to ask you to accept my apology and to beg your forgiveness. Your presence here gives me hope that you are willing to at least consider healing the breach that I have caused. If you cannot bring yourself to forgive me, then I ask that you absolve Elizabeth from any blame. She was neither consulted nor in any way involved in my decision. Her only fault might be that she kept to her marital vows too assiduously and obeyed my commands completely."

The men all looked to Mr. Bennet, who finally broke the silence. "Have you told all this to Elizabeth?"

"No, sir, not all of it. I will tell her tonight."

Mr. Bennet took a sip of his drink, put down his glass, then fixed his gaze on his son-in-law.

"Darcy, your actions wounded me in ways that I never thought possible. For many months, I have grieved for a daughter whom I believed was lost to me forever. You caused all my family great distress. Yes, the scandal reached Hertfordshire, but it was made infinitely worse by your severing all connection to us. Yes, Lydia's folly shamed us, but that was *nothing* compared to the grief of losing Elizabeth and the threat of never knowing the grandchild she then carried.

"You placed a higher value on the approval of the very society *you said* that you despised for its hypocrisy than on the pain you would cause your wife and her family. You put the Darcy name before ties of blood and marriage. Perhaps I should have expected that. You have *never* held my family in high esteem." Mr. Bennet raised his hand in dismissal as Darcy looked as if he were about to protest. "You made no secret of it. Must I remind you of a certain conversation we had in my library last spring?

"Make no mistake. My family and I are here now for my daughter and her child, not for you. I know Elizabeth, and I know that she feels things deeply. I can only imagine, because you *decreed* that she could not correspond with us, how she must have suffered

these last months. Elizabeth, a completely innocent party, isolated, alone, and with child. I have no doubt that you withdrew your good opinion even of her, because she formerly carried the cursed name of *Bennet*.

“But may I also remind you that *your* past history with Wickham and your alliance with my family very likely influenced that man’s decision to abscond with my youngest daughter. I make no excuse for Lydia’s lack of judgment, but when all was said and done, you, sir, *you* went too far.”

Mr. Bennet paused in an obvious attempt to regain control of his emotions. He gave his daughter’s husband, the father of his first grandchild, a piercing look as he spoke again. “You disappoint me, Darcy. Had I suspected that your pride and arrogance would manifest themselves so cruelly, I would never have consented to your marriage. I wish to God that I had not.”

A shocked silence permeated the room. Mr. Bennet’s words had shaken Darcy to his core. For several moments, he could do nothing more than stare at the carpet. His emotions were barely in check: first, anger that Mr. Bennet dared speak to him in this manner; then remorse, as he silently acknowledged the truth of the man’s accusations; and, finally, horror, true horror, not only at his own actions, but at the thought of a life without Elizabeth.

“Mr. Bennet, Mr. Gardiner, Mr. Pritchford, Bingly” Darcy said, as he looked in turn at each man, “I do not know how I can express to you how deeply sorry I am. I deserve your censure and your scorn. I was completely wrong. My actions harmed each of you and your families, not the least of all my own wife.” He saw no signs of acceptance and continued in a more agitated tone.

“What can I say to convince you that I am sincere in my remorse? I have done little more this past week but review the errors I made. I know my failures. Shall I name them?”

“When I first heard that Lydia had gone to Brighton, I meant to send someone to watch over her – I did not follow through with my resolution. Then, after word of the elopement arrived and I traveled to London, I should have told you the entirety of my plan to recover Lydia and asked for your advice. I would have fought just as hard against Lydia marrying Wickham; she would have been condemned to a life of misery shackled to that profligate. But I should have sought your agreement before implementing my schemes. And if I were the man I thought I was, I should have shown my support of you publicly after the scandal became known, even if I could not allow

Elizabeth to travel to Longbourn in her expectant condition.

“Mr. Bennet, you are correct; I never held your family in any esteem. I wanted Elizabeth, and only Elizabeth. I used the scandal to remove her from your sphere.” Darcy made sure to look his father-in-law in the eye. “But sir, in one thing you are completely mistaken. Elizabeth *never* lost my good opinion. *That* ... is not possible.”

Silence descended. Every man knew that they were at a volatile point. Pritchford spoke next.

“Please, gentlemen. Today is the first time I have met my sister, Mrs. Darcy. She does not appear unhappy.”

“Elizabeth was not made for unhappiness,” Mr. Bennet admitted. He sighed, seeming ready to relent, but then appeared to change his mind. “Tell me, Darcy, how can we be sure that this reunion you have arranged is not just some attempt to placate your wife? Perhaps Kitty will run away and you will cast us aside once again. After all, you had no qualms about coming into my house and inferring that I was a negligent father.”

“Actions have repercussions, even yours, Mr. Bennet. When I asked you to come to Pemberley, I was prepared to apologise and to begin to atone for my wrongs. Please, if only for Elizabeth’s sake, judge the sincerity of my repentance by my future conduct. To begin, with your permission, I will offer my apologies to Mrs. Bennet, Mary, and Catherine. And to Mrs. Bingley, Mrs. Gardiner, and Mrs. Pritchford.

“Mr. Darcy,” Frank Pritchford began, “I can speak for my wife when I say that she does not expect an apology. Lydia has matured since we married. Mrs. Bennet wrote and told us what you had done. My wife understands why you separated yourself from us, and accepts her own responsibility in the matter. She wanted to write to her mother defending you, but I would not allow it. You owe neither Mrs. Pritchford nor me an apology.”

“Pritchford, I thank you, but I must apologise for a completely different reason. I was prepared to shun Lydia not only because I blamed her for all that happened, but because I believed that a man of my station does not claim connections to a farmer. I now see how wrong I was. A man’s worth is not determined by his place in society. You are a good man. You took Lydia as your wife under less than desirable circumstances. You did not have to do that, sir.”

“You made it to my advantage to do so, and my boys needed a mother.”

“We both know that your decision was based on your estimation of Lydia’s suitability to raise your sons, not financial gain. It was an honourable decision.”

“Be that as it may, I understand why you did what you did, Mr. Darcy. If you insist on offering an apology, I can do nothing but accept it for myself and my family.”

“Thank you. Will you allow me to belatedly welcome you, your wife, and your sons to *my* family?” Darcy extended his hand to Mr. Pritchford, who shyly but firmly grasped it in his own.

“I would like to discuss some other matters at another time, if you are willing to listen to me,” Darcy said to him.

“My pleasure, sir.”

Darcy waited for the other men to speak.

“As a Christian, I am required to forgive you, Darcy,” Bingley said at last, albeit tersely. “We have known each other too long to allow this to be between us. Still, I must tell you that you have greatly disappointed me.”

“I have greatly disappointed many people.”

“Yes, you have. And Mr. Bennet is correct; you owe the women of our family an apology.”

“I will give it to them, but I must speak to Elizabeth first. Will you grant me until tomorrow?”

Mr. Gardiner answered for Bingley. “Yes, Mr. Darcy. In this matter, your wife comes first.”

“Thank you.” He bowed, relieved that the first steps toward reconciliation had begun, and was about to suggest that they return to the ladies when Mr. Bennet spoke.

“I have one more question.” Mr. Bennet was not ready to relent. “For whom is the child named?”

“Her grandmothers and her godmother.”

“Elizabeth was surprised. Did you not discuss it with her?”

“No, sir. Only the child’s first name, Anne, after my late mother.”

“When did you decide to include *my* wife’s name?”

Darcy again looked his father-in-law in the eye. “The first time that I held my daughter in my arms.”

Chapter Twenty

After all their guests had retired, Darcy and Elizabeth settled under the covers of her bed. Elizabeth was overjoyed that all her family was with her – and at Pemberley! She was intensely curious as to how it came about, but exhausted enough to wait until the morrow for an explanation.

Darcy wished he could just let her sleep, but he had given his word, and he did not want to wait.

“Elizabeth, I know you are tired, but we need to talk.”

“About our guests?”

“Among many things, yes.”

Elizabeth turned and looked at her husband. “I was surprised and worried when they arrived. I thought you would believe that I had asked them to come. I would never disobey you like that.”

“I know you would not. It grieves me that you even need say that to me. I should never have put you in a position to fear my reaction about anything. I wanted to surprise you, not frighten you. I am sorry. I assumed that you would comprehend that I had sent for them.”

“Why would I? You were very clear when you returned from Lydia’s wedding that all discourse with my family was at an end.”

A look of pain crossed Darcy’s face. “Elizabeth, I give you my word that when I went to London to find Lydia, my only purpose was to rescue her from Wickham and find a husband for her somewhere far from London and Derbyshire. I had no thought then of breaking with your family. It was not until the scandal became public that I made the only choice I believed possible at that time.”

“I know you did. I understood your reasoning and never doubted your belief in the rightness of your actions.”

“My dear wife, you are far too generous.” Darcy briefly smiled before his demeanour again grew serious. “We both know that I *did* have a choice. I made an unconscionable decision, then compounded my blunder by demanding that you fulfill your marital vows and obey me without question. I commanded that you repudiate nearly your entire family, and in doing so, caused you and them untold anguish. I cannot think of it without abhorrence.”

Neither spoke for several moments.

“Is this why you invited my family to Pemberley?” asked Elizabeth softly.

“Yes. I ... I have much to atone for. I know I have hurt you deeply.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “You have been honest with me. I shall be honest with you. Though I understood why you did what you did, that did not make it easier for me to accept.” Here she paused; Darcy waited for her to continue. Whatever she said, he knew he deserved no mercy. “My heart *ached* with the loss of my family. It ached even more with the loss of *you*. It was as if, when you cast them away, you cast me away too.”

Oh, God, help me answer her truthfully, yet not make her hate me.

“I was angry and I took some of my anger out on you. I know it was wrong of me. I blamed you for something beyond your control.” Darcy rolled onto his back. Suddenly he was aware of how very tired he was. He rubbed his face with both his hands, then ran them through his hair. “How I have wronged you.” He sighed and rolled over to face her again. She deserved to see him say what he must say. He shook his head.

“I am no gentleman. Callously, I all but abandoned you when you needed me most. Yes, Elizabeth, although I refused to acknowledge it for an incredibly long time, I am very aware of how alone I left you. You were confined to Pemberley, with no women of the family in the area but Amelia – and she was unavailable for most of that time. Worst of all, I knew you were unhappy. I ... I heard you cry the night I returned, and I willfully refused to comfort you. What a husband I have been to you!

“And all the more distressing, I blamed your family, especially your father, for disgracing the Darcy name when it is I who should be ashamed. I spoke of honour and duty, yet when it came to doing my duty to my wife, I failed you completely. I did not honour you.”

He was mortified, but he would not look away. His wife saw the anguish on his face. It was she who could not look him in the eye and dropped her gaze.

“Fitzwilliam, I appreciate your taking responsibility for your actions, but you cannot absolve my family for theirs, nor me for mine. I am fully aware of my parents’ failures when it comes to their children. Lydia should have known better than to run off, unmarried, with any man. She did know better but refused to do what was right! My father should not have let her go to Brighton. You and I both know that she was too young to be out, much less away from her family with a woman as young as Mrs. Forster for a chaperone. My father was wrong to let her go, and my mother even more so for encouraging the decision.”

Darcy was unwilling to allow Elizabeth to shift the conversation away from *his* misdeeds; he was in need of confession, not excuses for his behaviour. “Elizabeth, how can you blame yourself for your parents’ and sister’s actions?”

“I do not blame myself for that. I blame myself for my silent acquiescence to the situation. I said that I understood why you made your choices, but that does not mean I approved of those choices. If I loved you as I claimed, I should have challenged you and I did not. If you believe that you misused my marriage vows you, I am just as guilty of hiding behind those same vows to avoid conflict.”

“If you *had* said something to me, I would not have listened. I was too convinced that I was right. I would not have allowed that I could have been wrong. I gave you little choice to behave differently. This is another of my sins against you. I was willing to dwell on the faults of others, but unwilling to admit my own. I do see them now, clearly. I want to be a man worthy to be your husband, my dear wife. To that end I have set about correcting my mistakes, as much as I am able.”

“Starting with reuniting me with my family?”

“There was no better place to begin.”

“What wrought such a change?” Elizabeth asked.

“Anne,” Darcy said simply, and then explained further at the uncomprehending look on Elizabeth’s face. “I should say the circumstances surrounding her birth. You were asleep when I came into your chambers after she was born. When ... when I held our beautiful little girl something ... broke inside me. I ... I finally saw my folly and understood what I had done to you and what I had denied you – what I would be denying our daughter unless I could heal the breach with your family and regain your good opinion. I knew what I must do to show you that I had repented from my wretched conduct.”

Darcy took a deep breath; it was time. He had confessed his transgressions. Now he must beg for her mercy.

“Elizabeth, I have been supremely arrogant and selfish, and I most humbly importune you to accept my apology. I am not yet deserving of your forgiveness.”

She raised her hand to caress his face and smiled, though there was a hint of sadness in her expression. “Darling, do you not know that I have already forgiven you?”

“How?” he said in wonder.

“I came to understand that I must forgive if I was to find peace – and I have.” At this pronouncement,

her countenance changed and the full intensity of her love poured forth as she beheld him.

Tears threatened to spill from his eyes as Darcy was nearly overwhelmed with emotion. She still loved him. Despite everything that he had done, she still loved him. He could not speak for want of words. “Elizabeth, I do not deserve you,” he said softly.

She smiled again, this time without any sign of regret. The look she gave him was one of compassion.

“It could not have been easy to bring my family here.”

“You are mistaken; there was nothing easier in the world,” he said passionately, willing Elizabeth to understand he would move heaven and earth for her. “The difficulty lay in facing them. They are justifiably angry with me and I expect they will remain so for some time. I apologised to the men tonight, and I will apologise to your sisters, your mother, and your aunt tomorrow, but I do not expect them to welcome me back with open arms. It will take time to earn their absolution.”

“Was it so very awful?” she asked quietly.

Darcy laughed mirthlessly. “It was nothing more than I deserved. I had not fully considered the ramifications of my actions upon them. Your father was exceedingly explicit. I hope never to earn such warranted hostility again.”

“I did notice a certain coolness towards you when the gentlemen rejoined us after dinner this evening. I rather guessed that words had been exchanged. I am surprised that you did not make a clean breast of it tonight and speak to my mother, sisters, and Aunt Gardiner.”

“I would have, but after I was thoroughly berated by the gentlemen, I believed that I needed to apologise to you first. I asked for and was granted the delay in approaching the women. Your father agreed that you deserved to hear my admission of guilt.

“Elizabeth, you may wonder why I have not confessed all this to you before, why I waited so long after I realised my failures. I considered telling you on the night that Anne was born. But I comprehended that I needed to first demonstrate to you that I am willing to change. And so I wrote to your family and requested they come to Pemberley. I am sure they thought I was rather imperious in my entreaties, but it could not be helped. There were more people involved in this than you and me. Thus, I brought those others involved, your family, here, so that I could apologise to each of them and to tell them how very much I regret the pain that I have caused. I wronged all of you.”

Darcy took her hand in his. The next part would be painful to admit. “Elizabeth, I also know that you have carried a black ribbon on your person to mourn the loss of your family.” Elizabeth gasped. “I am ashamed that such should have been necessary. It was only after reuniting your family here at Pemberley that we could begin to heal the desolation that I inflicted upon us. We shared something remarkable before this ... this *hell* I put us through. I long for its complete return.”

“Dearest, so do I. So do I!” Darcy brushed a tear off Elizabeth’s cheek. She took his hand and placed a kiss on his palm. “And I thank you, with all my being, for restoring my family to me, and to Anne.”

He shook his head. “Do not thank me for righting a wrong, a wrong of my own doing.”

“But I must, for my heart is overflowing with gratitude.”

“Ask of me anything, *anything*, and it shall be done.”

Elizabeth appeared lost in thought. He waited, and when she spoke, her question surprised him.

“Why did you change the name we agreed upon for Anne?”

“Anne’s name is another way for me to atone for the discord I caused. I hope you approve? You were not expecting it.”

“No, I did not. But I was very happy.”

“I was persuaded of what it *should be* on the night our daughter was born. As I told you, that was when I realised that I had been utterly and completely wrong, and that I had taken from you what I had no right to take. Do you know what else I realised that night?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“I finally understood how much you love me. You told me, all those many months ago, but I never appreciated the depth of your commitment. I was able to look back and recognise how, in even the smallest things, you proved your affections. I was not able to accept it for what it was until I looked into the face of our newborn child and saw our family and our future reflected in her features, your features. In you, my family has been reborn.” He stopped to compose himself.

“My precious Elizabeth, the day you told me that you loved me, I stupidly told you not to expect a return of those feelings. Darling, even then I denied the true condition of my heart. It belongs fully, completely, irrevocably to you alone.”

He paused only a moment. “I love you.”

Elizabeth felt a gentle nudge on her shoulder. “Mistress,” Marie whispered. “Mrs. Darcy, the baby is fussing and will not quiet. I believe that she wants to be fed.”

Darcy was sound asleep next to her and Elizabeth did not wish to wake him. She slipped out of bed and donned the robe that her maid held out for her before she ambled through the door that led to the nursery. Alice was walking about with Anne in her arms, trying to calm the babe. Tired though she was, Elizabeth smiled as she settled into a chair and was handed her daughter. Soon all that was heard were the tiny sounds of a suckling child.

Elizabeth closed her eyes in contentment, and allowed herself to rejoice in the events of the previous hours.

He loves me!

She knew that she would always remember how she felt at the moment that her husband declared what was in his heart.

“I love you.”

Three words she had feared she would never hear him speak. Three words with the power to fill her with complete and utter joy.

They had been lying on her bed facing each other when he told her. At first Elizabeth was unable to move, unable to think. Throughout his speech, her hopes had risen, but she hardly dared believe that her greatest wish would finally be fulfilled. When the reality of his declaration registered, she flew into his arms – sobbing.

“How I have *longed* to hear you say those words to me. I love you so very much.”

“No more tears, my dearest love. You have already spilt too many because of me.” There was true contrition in his voice. “I am sorry for the pain I have brought you.”

Darcy held his wife to him, deeply unsettled by the knowledge that he was the cause of her distress. “Please do not cry,” and with a catch in his voice he vowed, “I promise to be a better man for your sake.”

These last words caused Elizabeth to lift her head and look at his face. She could see, in the dim light, the unshed tears in his eyes.

“Oh, beloved, these are tears of joy and relief. They are a gentle waterfall washing away the sadness. You *love* me, Fitzwilliam! You love me and have done everything in your power to repair your mistakes because of it. I want for *nothing!*”

Elizabeth Darcy watched as her declaration unleashed her husband’s tears. She pulled him to her and simply held him until his sobbing stopped.

Slowly he drew away. "Better?" she asked. He would not look at her. "Do you feel better now?" she asked again, wondering why he would not look at her after all they had shared.

"I am sorry, I should never have ..."

Comprehension dawned. "Fitzwilliam, look at me!" Elizabeth demanded. Darcy reluctantly obeyed and she saw shame on his face. Instinctively, she put her hands on his cheeks, his beard scratching against her palms. "You are a proud man, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and I know that you think tears from a man are a sign of weakness. They are not. There is no more intimate way that you could show that you love me than to allow me to see you in your distress. I do not think less of you as a man; I respect you all the more. You have given me your love – give me your sorrows and concerns, as well as your hopes and your dreams. Let me be your mate in every way."

He looked at her, his eyes a window to the turmoil within him. She waited, and was rewarded when she saw the storm receding. A tremulous smile pulled at his lips.

"I do not deserve you," he whispered again.

"Perhaps not, but I am yours anyway." Elizabeth pulled his face to hers and kissed him with all the tenderness and assurance that was within her.

They were both exhausted when he tucked her body next to his. They slept.

Elizabeth finished feeding Anne, left her in the care of her nurse, and returned to her husband. She slipped back under the covers and immediately moved to lie next to Darcy. Without waking, he pulled her back into his arms. She was asleep again in minutes.

The next morning, Darcy fulfilled his pledge to apologise to the other women. Elizabeth stood by his side throughout, demonstrating that they had reconciled their differences. Mr. Bennet explained that Darcy had already spoken to the gentlemen and that they had accepted Darcy's apologies. For Elizabeth's sake, and as the first step toward familial reconciliation, he urged the ladies to do the same, no matter how unwilling they might be to do so.

Jane, Lydia, and Mrs. Gardiner had already been told by their spouses of the encounter in the library the evening before and were thus more prepared to act. Lydia Pritchford, very much aware of her role in causing the breach, was the first to speak. She surprised everyone but her husband by asking Darcy's forgiveness in return, with an eloquence and humility that touched everyone's heart. One by one, the remaining ladies addressed Darcy, and one by one extended tentative absolution.

Although these first steps held the promise of a happy resolution of months of discord, it was many days before awkwardness gave way to the beginning of acceptance. Lingering acrimony initially threatened the fragile peace, but in the end, the unspoilt innocence of a newborn babe and a genuine desire by the principals to start anew prevailed. Harmony was at last restored.

Frank Pritchford was obliged to return to Devon only a week after his arrival at Pemberley. Mr. Bennet and Bingley offered to escort Lydia and the boys back to their home, if he consented to allow them to stay behind. Pritchford was willing to give his wife the extra time with her family, and he acknowledged how much his children enjoyed the attentions lavished upon them by her family, especially Mr. Darcy.

Darcy asked him into a private conference a few days before he left.

"Pritchford, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I have asked you here today because I want to help you and my sister."

"Sir, you have already been more than generous."

"Let me be the judge of that. I have been considering how I might best be able to help your family in a lasting way. I have thought about the differences in our stations that are but an accident of birth. I am well aware that I had many advantages as the child of a gentleman that you have not, nor will your children. However, I have it within my power to bestow upon your sons a gift, as my father once did for the son of his steward."

"What might that be?"

"An education, Pritchford. I am willing to sponsor both of your sons, and any more your wife might bear you. Obviously, this will require both books and tutors. When Thomas is old enough, I will arrange for his studies with the ultimate goal of attending University, or, if he prefers, an apprenticeship or commission. Perhaps a governess might be in order now? That would certainly be a help with any daughters that might come as well."

"I cannot provide an appropriate room for a proper governess."

Darcy did not hesitate. "I will send my man to see what needs to be done to rectify that. You shall have a governess if that is your wish."

"I ... I do not know what to say. A proper education for my boys? It is more than I could ever have dreamt! Thank you, sir! I will see that you never regret this. I swear it!"

"My only stipulation is that you impress upon your sons that this is an opportunity, not a birthright."

The boy my father sponsored was the man who seduced your wife, Pritchford. He became an ungovernable, ungracious scoundrel who expected to be given all that he wanted in life, not earn it by honest means. His father was a good man, but he was blind to his son's lack of character. Fortunately, he did not live to see what a rogue his son became. I do not want your children to repeat the mistakes of the last beneficiary of Darcy patronage."

Pritchford extended his hand. "On my honour, sir, I will see to it that they understand that what they have been given is a means and not an end. I will do my utmost to raise them as men of character and honour, sir, as you are."

Darcy's determination to help improve the lot of his Bennet family did not end with his offer to educate the Pritchford children. He had two unmarried sisters at Longbourn, but he was wary of approaching Mr. Bennet with any offer of help, no matter how benign his intentions. His father-in-law had been thoroughly disgusted the last time Darcy had spoken to him about the behaviour of his family, and he was at a loss at how to raise the subject again. Fortunately, he was becoming more open with his wife, and it was Elizabeth who suggested a solution.

"I think my father would accept an offer if it came from me."

"I mean to do more than just invite Mary and Catherine to stay with us, Elizabeth. I am more than willing to employ the appropriate masters for them and provide the funds needed to send them to school, if that would appeal to your father."

"It would, I believe, under the right circumstances. However, I want you present when I speak to him. He must see us united in our purpose to understand that the offer is kindly meant and that he is the one who will determine how far our patronage will extend."

"Tomorrow we will seek him out. I believe we will need look no further than the library?"

Elizabeth laughed. Her husband was becoming more adept at teasing her and she enjoyed this more playful side of the man she loved.

The next morning after breakfast, Elizabeth and Darcy, to neither's surprise, found her father alone in the library.

"I would never have guessed that I would find you here, Papa."

Mr. Bennet smiled at his second daughter. She was a beautiful woman, married and a mother herself, but she would always be his little Lizzy. He saw that her husband was with her, and his smile instantly

faded. He acknowledged Darcy with a curt nod of his head.

"Papa, Fitzwilliam and I would like to invite Mary to stay with us when it is time for everyone to leave. We plan to remain at Pemberley until spring and will be happy to bring Mary back to Longbourn at that time, or arrange to return her sooner if you desire her at home."

Mr. Bennet pursed his lips and looked back and forth between Elizabeth and Darcy. "Have you spoken to your sister about this?"

"No, sir, we wished to receive your blessing first. I have not forgotten your censure for my approaching Elizabeth with an offer of marriage without seeking your permission before hand," Darcy answered.

"Touché, Mr. Darcy. We both have long memories. However, I see no reason why Mary cannot stay, though Kitty might be disappointed to be the sister who remains at home once again. She was most disappointed when I allowed Lydia to go to Brighton as Mrs. Forster's particular friend." Mr. Bennet frowned at the thought. He knew that his behaviour had not been above reproach. It was time to confess his culpability.

"I am quite aware that I made a terrible mistake letting Lydia go to Brighton. She had neither the sense nor the experience to be off on her own."

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged startled looks but remained silent at this unexpected turn in the conversation.

"Mr. Darcy, I know I was rather severe on you that first night here at Pemberley, and you probably wanted to rant and storm that you were not the only guilty party. I gave you no quarter to do so, though you could have made a strong case against me. The actions you took were the result of a situation of my making. I acknowledge that. Nevertheless, it neither absolves you for the choices you made, nor does it absolve me from the years of neglect that led to Lydia's running off with Wickham." Mr. Bennet paused and shook his head. "I suppose that I just wanted to hold on a little longer to my resentment for what you did to Elizabeth and all my family. Your subsequent restoration of my daughter to us and your willingness to humble yourself to each of us were proof that you are the better man. I know myself well enough to realise that I could never have done what you did. I would have hid myself among my books and tried to ignore what happened."

Mr. Bennet walked over to Darcy. He extended his hand towards the younger man. Darcy grasped it immediately. "I would be honoured to leave Mary under your protection and care."

“Thank you, sir.”

“Can you forgive me?” Mr. Bennet made certain to hold Darcy’s gaze.

“If you can forgive me.”

“Then it is done.”

Darcy nodded and they broke their handshake. Elizabeth looked relieved at the sight of the two most important men in her life making peace and, with tears in her eyes, hugged her father. After they had all sat down, Darcy continued the conversation about Mary’s stay.

“Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth has requested that a piano master come to Pemberley to help her. I do not know if you are aware of the amount of time your daughter has spent practicing since we married. Her playing, while always delightful, has improved greatly. However, she tells me that she is in need of instruction if she is to progress. And because I have come to know that my wife is never wrong, I have engaged a master as per her wishes. If it is agreeable to you, I would like Mary to avail herself of the piano master while she is with us. That is, if Mary wishes it as well.”

Mr. Bennet was pleased with Darcy’s playful verbiage. Elizabeth deserved a husband who matched her wit and intelligence. He could tell the couple were trying very hard to not appear overbearing in their requests.

“I think it is a sensible idea, Mr. Darcy.”

“Just Darcy, sir.”

“Darcy then. You may call me Bennet.”

“With all due respect, you are my wife’s father. I would feel discourteous to be more familiar in address.”

The corners of Mr. Bennet’s mouth twitched. Darcy might have been more tolerant of his family’s foibles, but the young man still held fast to his ideals about propriety. As well he should. Mr. Bennet was not offended, only amused at the staidness of his son-in-law’s character.

“As long as we are on the subject of masters, Mr. Bennet, and at the risk of once again offending you, I would like to offer my assistance in employing any masters as might be appropriate for my two unmarried sisters. You should know that I have spoken to Pritchford and arranged to become patron to his sons in their education, as well as provide for a governess for the children. I take my responsibility to my family seriously and I am ready to assist as you deem fit.”

“That is a very generous offer. I have always made whatever masters my daughters desired available to them.”

“I have conveyed that to Fitzwilliam, but he insists, and I am in agreement, that while my sisters dwell with us, we should bear the burden of the expense. One that we hope you will accept, Father,” Elizabeth interjected. “I assure you that my husband’s motives are sincere; he only wishes to be of use to his sisters. He has also told me that he would even pay for them to go to school, but felt you might not be ready to hear that.”

“Elizabeth . . .” Darcy started to interrupt.

“Fitzwilliam, I am the one offering, not you. Well, I am offering your money,” Elizabeth said gaily. “Papa, think about it, please?”

“I shall. Perhaps Kitty would like to go away to school. Do you have any place in mind?”

“None at all,” Darcy replied. “I leave it to you to decide if and where. My sister Georgiana was in an educational establishment for girls for a time, but that was a few years ago and she was much younger than either Mary or Catherine.”

“And Kitty is just as welcome as Mary to stay with us, either in Town or here at Pemberley,” Elizabeth added as Darcy nodded his agreement.

“I believe that one of your sisters at a time is more than enough, Elizabeth. Just wait until your mother hears of this. You know she will be disappointed if either one returns to Longbourn without at least one offer of marriage from a rich gentleman.”

The day dawned clear and brisk when Anne Harriet Amelia Darcy was officially christened in the Pemberley church. The Bennet clan had arrived three weeks before, and after Darcy apologized to all the members of his family, a happy chaos descended on the once quiet mansion. Darcy’s confession to Elizabeth of his undying love had brought the couple close again. Their friendship deepened as their love blossomed and bloomed in the crisp Derbyshire autumn. It seemed serendipitous to celebrate the renewal of the Darcy family with the baptism of the firstborn of the next generation of Darcy descendants.

The Reverend John Mitchell officiated as the youngest Darcy was brought to the ancient stone font to receive the sacrament. Darcy’s cousin, Bartholomew, and his wife, Amelia, Darcy’s lifelong friend, stood as the child’s godparents. The small building was full of joy and the presence of family, friends, and a few fortunate servants.

Elizabeth stood next to her husband, watching the wise old parson say his blessing over her daughter. Her attention was caught by the light flooding through windows, and she recalled her desperate search for

solace in this holy place. So much had changed. In the quiet of this sanctuary, she had discovered the meaning of forgiveness, acceptance, and selflessness. She would not wish to enter such a valley of shadows again, but she was grateful that she had come through to see the view from the other side. There would always be trials. She knew enough about life to appreciate that now.

Walking back to Pemberley, Darcy turned to look again at the building they had just left.

"I have always considered the church a plain, quaint building in comparison to the style of the house. Perhaps it is time to see to its ornamentation."

"Darling, I would rather you leave it as it is."

"Elizabeth, I feel a bit ashamed that nothing has been done to improve it in my lifetime."

"Have you looked at the windows? Your ancestors have given many to the church."

"Yes, they have. As a boy, I was always more entranced by them than by the sermons, I am afraid."

"Do you not see, then, that the beauty of the building is a matter of perspective? One can only appreciate it from inside. Is that not the goal of the building, to bring the people of Pemberley within its walls to worship? What you perceive as a flaw in its character is only a hindrance if you do not seek the beauty within."

"Your point is?"

"It reminds me of you."

At last, all of the guests with the exception of Mary departed, and the small family party settled into a comfortable regime. The days grew shorter, but the pleasure Elizabeth felt with her younger sister's company did not diminish. Mary grew less rigidly moralistic as she was exposed to the contents of Pemberley's magnificent library. She still favoured religious works, but now she could avail herself of the writings of men with a more compassionate view of humanity and the God who had created them.

Elizabeth's days included her sister and her daughter, but once she retired for the evening, only her husband held her attention. Now healed from the birthing, Elizabeth was eager to resume her most intimate marital duties. Darcy was equally eager, but he had waited for Elizabeth to fully regain her health. He also wished for privacy to begin anew; he had something special in mind to mark the occasion of the consummation of their love. Mary's presence in the household was no impediment; the girl was content to let the married couple retire early as often as they wished.

After dinner one evening, Darcy escorted Elizabeth to her room, but before they entered, he swept his wife off her feet and into his arms. She tucked her head into his chest and giggled but was surprised when Darcy turned and began walking away from their chambers.

"Fitzwilliam, where are we going?"

"Have you no guesses, my love?"

She was unsure until he took a turn to a certain wing of the house. She gasped.

Darcy strode through the entry into the Wales Bedroom and set Elizabeth back down on her feet. He closed and leaned against the massive door. A fire crackled in the grate.

"I know that I brought you here before, but we really should *not* be here," Elizabeth whispered.

"There is no better place be, my Elizabeth, for you alone reign over my heart."

Darcy knelt before his wife. In an action meant to seal their vows forever in their hearts, he took her left hand in his own and brought his lips to the wedding ring that she wore.

"With my body, I thee worship."

Then did he worship her, enveloped in their love, as he had never done before.

When Lady Victoria came to Pemberley for the christening of little Anne, she had a private interview with her nephew and Elizabeth. The couple told her of the events of the past months and asked for her advice. Lady Victoria knew that Darcy would prefer to remain outside the critical eyes of the *ton*, but she also knew that such a course would be a mistake. To stay away would be to admit they deserved to be ostracized by society, and only increase the whispers whenever they did return to Town in the future. She advised them to remain in Derbyshire until the spring, then return to London for the season. Their absence during the winter months could easily be attributed to the newborn, but as soon as the weather improved, Lady Victoria said, they should journey south. The sooner that the couple re-entered society, the better. Thus, with the sunny days of March, Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, accompanied by their young daughter and Mary, returned to their townhouse by way of Meryton.

Word of the journey of the Darcys to Hertfordshire spread like lightning, and the Bennets were once more declared the most fortunate of families. Talk about Lydia's failed elopement receded, replaced by such things as the speculation on the cost of the lace on Mrs. Darcy's gowns and whether Mrs. Bingley might be in the family way – and

astonishment over how much Mary Bennet's pianoforte skills had improved.

The Darcys gradually eased back into London society, dining with friends and entertaining at home. Next, they ventured out to several balls and a few nights at the theatre. They noticed the whispers when they first entered a room, but the novelty of their presence in Town soon wore off. They saw the proof of Lady Victoria's wisdom when some other subject of gossip inevitably usurped their place of attention.

A few weeks later, the Bennets and Bingleys followed the Darcys to Town. Not long after, Darcy suggested that they all, plus the Gardiners, make use of the Darcy box at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden for an evening of opera.

In a box on the other side of the auditorium, the Earl of Perryton frowned when he saw his wayward nephew arrive. The countess noticed as well and began to bemoan the event to the woman at her side. The earl was still furious with Darcy and could not believe that his nephew had the presumption to be there that evening. Disgraced relatives had a duty to remain unseen, in his opinion. He thought he recognised Darcy's guests from the previous season and Mrs. Darcy's ball, but could not be sure; he assumed that they must be Darcy's wife's relations. He saw that others also had noticed the Darcy party, and he could see society women, ladies whose opinion the earl knew mattered, watching them, furiously whispering behind their fans. Fuming over this perceived slight to his standing, the earl failed to note the entrance of an infamous courtesan, or of the man escorting her. His wife did not. A few minutes later, he was surprised to hear his wife abusing someone other than his nephew. That was when he realised that he was the only one paying the Darcys any attention; there was a much more deliciously scandalous party in attendance now.

The warning bell rang and five minutes later the orchestra began the overture. The audience's attention was drawn to the stage as the curtains parted. The earl could not concentrate on the performance; his eyes kept returning to the Darcys. Unable to stop himself, he raised his opera glasses and looked more closely at his prey. The light was sufficient for him to make them out across the auditorium. His gaze was suddenly arrested when his nephew leaned over to whisper something to his wife. Before sitting back in his seat, Darcy gently kissed Elizabeth's ear. She turned and smiled, bringing his fingers up to her lips for a kiss of her own. She had obviously been holding her husband's hand.

The earl felt as though he was intruding on a very private moment, but he could not bring himself to look away. He saw the look of passion and adoration that passed between husband and wife, as if no one else were in the building except the two of them, before they turned their attention back to the performance.

"Harold, stop looking at *them*. People will notice!" Alice Fitzwilliam hissed. Harold Fitzwilliam, Earl of Perryton, looked at his wife in annoyance. He hated it when the witless woman was right.

Yet he could not forget the look that Darcy had exchanged with his Elizabeth, and for the first time, faltered in his opinion that his nephew's marriage had been a grievous mistake. From the look on his face, Darcy would disagree with anyone who said that he was not the most fortunate man in England in his choice of wife. The same could not be said of the earl.

George Wickham stood in the Chapel of St John's Cathedral waiting for his bride. When he arrived in Antigua, he had been presented with a letter in which Darcy offered one thousand pounds in exchange for his pledge never to return to England. Wickham sent his acceptance, even though he knew that Darcy would be furious when he learned about the missives that had been left with his accomplice and doubted that he would ever see the money. He was quite amused when, little more than a year later, he received a second letter from Darcy. It was short and to the point.

You may not be a man of honour, but I am.

FD

Enclosed were the promised funds.

Wickham could not believe his good fortune. His old playmate carried duty and honour to the extreme. *The fool*, he thought. Considering the windfall a sign from providence, Wickham took the money and entered a high stakes card game. Luck was with him, and he left that night with five times what he had brought to the tables. With a considerable sum now in his possession, he embarked upon a new quest to achieve what he had previously tried to accomplish – to woo and wed a woman of means.

Today marked the culmination of his schemes. He was marrying the only child of the wealthy and aging owner of a large plantation on the island. The girl had just come into society, and her naïveté was no match for the charm of the army officer. Wickham had taken great pains to be seen as a suitable match;

he had at last learned the importance of a certain amount of discretion in the conduct of his affairs, and the girl's father was too ill and too proud to give credence to the gossip that might have spared his daughter such a husband.

George Wickham would never want for money again.

Epilogue

Christmas Day, 1814

Elizabeth finished nursing her infant son. Robert George Charles Darcy was a healthy five-month-old baby, his older sister now a very precocious two-year-old. Darcy sat at a nearby desk writing a letter. Elizabeth could not imagine being any happier or more content. She wanted for no material possession, her husband adored her, her children were her pride and joy.

“Have you finished?”

“I am closing it now,” Darcy replied. “Would you like to read it before I seal it?”

“If you do not mind, I would.”

Darcy sanded the page, then handed it to Elizabeth. She read this, his annual missive, eager to see what he had written.

Christmas Morning, 1814

Dear Father,

Another Christmas has arrived, and I sit down yet again to write to you. It is difficult for me to believe that this is the eighth Yuletide since your passing. I remember the feelings of despair that your absence so regularly engendered. I still miss you, but my life has become so filled with my own family now that I must confess that those times have become less frequent. Those I hold dear could never replace you, but they have enriched my life in ways that, as a father, you would easily understand. I never anticipated the deep emotions that I felt the first time I held my daughter and then my son. You are a grandfather again. Elizabeth was safely delivered of a boy on the 20th of July.

Pemberley rings with the laughter of children. I hope and pray that even more will come as the years go by.

I am content and happy. The only thing I lack is the presence of loved ones, such as you, Mother and Georgiana, who no longer walk this earth.

Three Christmases ago, I wrote to tell you that I would marry in a few days and that you would not be pleased with my choice of wife. Two Christmases ago, I told you that I had hurt my wife deeply, but by the grace of God she had forgiven me. Last Christmas, I revealed how I had spent many months atoning for my failures of the previous years, and how confident I was that the life I share with my wife would grow in meaning and purpose. This Christmas, I wish you could be here to see how happy she has made me. Pemberley and its people are thriving, most especially its master and mistress. Elizabeth loves me completely, as I have learned to love her. Because of her devotion, I have become a better man.

Some might call me a romantic fool. So be it. Such as they can never know the ecstasy of unconditional love. I pity them.

Until next time, your besotted, content son,

Fitzwilliam

With a tear in her eye and love in her heart, Elizabeth returned the letter to her husband. Together they walked to the fireplace, a sleeping Robert in his mother's arms. Smiling, Darcy consigned the missive to the flames. Husband and wife watched the parchment catch fire and be consumed, knowing full well that it was only through their willingness to embrace love that their marriage and their lives had been spared a similar fate.

~Finis~

Acknowledgements

The odyssey that became No More Tears began on April 15, 2006 at eight o'clock in the evening when I opened the new document that would become chapter one. At the same, I had started to work on a short story written exclusively from Darcy's point of view, but I lost momentum and set it aside, turning my attention to writing yet a third yarn with a group of friends. Even so, the plot of NMT continued to percolate in my creative spaces. Once the group project was complete I was ready to concentrate fully on the story.

I asked quite a few people to work with me on the project. Sue and Diana were my historical consultants. If I couldn't find information, they almost always could. I don't claim that everything I've written is absolutely accurate, but I've made a concerted effort to make it as historically true as possible. Susan, Abigail and Bonnie joined me to review plot and character development. Debbie was there from the beginning as well to catch basic grammar errors to make Charlene's job as editor-in-chief a bit easier. First Elsa and later Mihaela formed my cheerleading squad, reading the chapters and sharing their enthusiasm for the story as it unfolded. A special nod to Jan and Kara Lou for looking at particular chapters to make sure I was representing certain things in a faithful manner. (They know what I mean.) Thanks too to Mary Anne for being a cold reader identifying lingering errors and to Linda for her publishing advice. Aimée applied her amazing talent to create the lovely cover. Heather gave it one more review to make sure my British audience would not be appalled by anything written by this Yank. And last, but certainly not least, Pat marked up my proof as only an English professor can. (All together, I *think* we got everything. If not, it certainly is not for a lack of trying.)

That's a lot of people for a Jane Austen fanfiction story, but they each played an important part in the creation of No More Tears.

As you can see, it's taken a little over three years to put this story into book form. I've grown a lot as a writer, and I owe much of that growth to the patience of the women who worked with me on this project. I still have a long way to go, but they helped to make

the road there shorter. I would be remiss not to mention the faithful commenters who encouraged me as I posted No More Tears online. It's hard to single out anyone, but Pat and Sybil are two who come to mind for their consistent support. Thank you to all who left feedback on my story.

And as always, I am grateful to my husband and son who have put up with me through my frustrations and moods during the course of my writing. Truly, they inspire me, and I am thankful for their daily presence in my life.

L. E. Smith

