

Cursed

A Pride and Prejudice Nightmare

Elizabeth Adams

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A Curative Touch

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1



Richard Fitzwilliam

Spring, 1806

I have always loved being at Pemberley. Not only is it one of the most beautiful and prosperous estates in England, but I know nowhere more peaceful. I have been spending summers here for as long as I can remember. My own brothers are much older or younger than myself, and when we were children, it was too great a distance to make us playmates.

Thus I became close with my cousin, Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Do not let the name fool you. Though he speaks French well enough, he is English to the core, almost annoyingly so. Pemberley is the seat of his family and his birthright. It is only he and Georgiana, a sister twelve years his junior. They get along perfectly well, but there is not the closeness that exists between siblings of an age with one another.

That is why he has me. His parents saddled him with a pretentious name and an enormous inheritance. It is my job to see he does not become insufferable. And in all fairness, the name was really my grandfather's doing. Bernard Fitzwilliam was enormously proud of his family—chiefly their title and wealth. When his eldest daughter Lady Anne wished to marry Andrew Darcy, a lowly landowner with no title and buckets of money, he insisted her legacy be clear to anyone with even a passing interest. Family lore has it that it was in the marriage articles that Lady Anne's first son be named Fitzwilliam, though having never seen the papers for myself, I could not confirm the veracity of that statement.

However, it does sound like something my grandfather would have done.

That is another thing I love about Pemberley. The lore and the legends. For every bridge there is a tale of elves or faeries, the waterfalls cover hidden caves once used by disgraced nobles, and the gardens are rife with stories of great loves, both won and lost, lilies or rose bushes planted in commemoration.

I will admit the love stories are my favorite. When I was a child, I enjoyed the stories of pirates who hid their treasure on Pemberley land, but when I was old enough to realize how very far we were from the sea, I moved on to truer tales.

It seems that every generation of Darcys had at least one great love amongst them. In 1675, Oliver Darcy famously married the lowly daughter of the local vicar. She had a small

dowry and her only connection was a nearly impoverished uncle passing for a gentleman. One would think such a disparate match would be precipitated by great beauty on the lady's side, but one would be wrong.

Judith Darcy was no great beauty. In truth, she hardly passed for pretty. But she was kind and loving and true. Oliver was famously in love with her and refused to marry anyone else. His parents were the understanding sort—quite shocking when one thinks about it—and supported his choice though everyone advised against the union.

Judith and Oliver were almost obscenely happy. They had eleven children over the course of their forty-year marriage—though thankfully the children stopped coming after their twenty-second anniversary. All the babes survived—another quite shocking fact—and even though she was not the prettiest woman in Derbyshire, Oliver looked at her as if she had hung the moon itself, and all the stars besides.

I have always liked that story. Perhaps because I am a bit like Judith myself. Rather plain, not much money, but an excellent companion nonetheless—at least I like to think of myself as such. I am well connected, but I do not know if it is enough to offset my empty purse.

My cousin Darcy is quite the opposite. He hates company, dislikes talking, and is constantly offending others. But he is handsome and rich, and I will admit he is tall and broad shouldered as well, something the ladies seem to appreciate. I can practically hear their hearts pounding when he walks past

them, his eyes avoiding theirs and his nose just a little too high in the air.

This is where I am of use. I have never met a woman I could not talk to, and most men like me as well. I suppose this means I am amiable. Darcy says I am annoying, but I prefer my word.

I wonder if he will be like the men before him. Married to a woman he is wild about, doting on her as if she were a goddess, feeling as if the sun rose and set beneath her skirts. My Uncle Darcy was one such man. When Lady Anne—my father's sister—was alive, he followed her about like a puppy. My own father was quite disgusted by it and regularly lamented my uncle's behavior. It was true that if he was in a room with his wife, he would track her movements with his eyes. He did not like to travel for more than a week without her, or he would become sulky and restless. They always shared a chamber, even when it was not the fashion, and they had breakfast in their private sitting room together each morning before separating for the day. He often joined her for tea, and he rarely missed dinner.

In short, he was in love with his wife.

I had thought it a nice way to live, and certainly the best way to be married. My own parents were constantly bickering and sniping at one another, and they would spend months apart, one in Town and the other in the country, only sharing the odd letter. I am still a little amazed they produced seven children together. Though my mother is an attractive woman, even after bearing so many babes and being on the far side of fifty.

Perhaps the bickering started later in life. After all, my father had a mistress my mother knew all about. I imagine the day she made that discovery was the same day she had locks installed on all her doors and began spending weeks at a time at her sister's.

I digress.

Pemberley is, and always has been, a place I feel at home. Fitzwilliam—what an awful name for a child!—is like a brother to me, and Uncle Andrew is the father I wish I'd had. I took to calling Fitzwilliam 'Fitz' long ago. Fitzwilliam is too much of a mouthful, and I knew it would become confusing when we got older and people started calling us by our surnames. He doesn't love the name, but I refuse to call him Darcy while my uncle is alive, and Fitz can bloody well deal with it. Mayhap it will keep him humble.



I have been called to Pemberley, but this time it is not because Fitz wants a hunting companion. My uncle is ill. So ill that he is likely dying, and the family has been called to say their final goodbyes.

When I arrived, there was no black ribbon on the door, and I said a quick prayer of thanks before rushing up the stairs to my uncle's chamber. Fitz sat on a chair next to the bed, holding my uncle's hand in his, a vacant expression on his face.

"Fitz," I whispered. "How does he fare?"

“He is sleeping now, but he occasionally wakes and wants to speak to me. I have taken to holding his hand so he knows I am here.”

He squeezed the hand he was holding and I saw the tremble in his fingers.

“I am sorry. He is too young—it is not right.”

“It is never right.” He ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up at odd angles, and said, “He is happy in a way. He misses my mother dreadfully. Maybe this will allow them to be together again.”

I nodded, unsure how I felt about reuniting with a lost love as a reason to leave one’s children parentless. Uncle Darcy stirred, moaning softly, then he dragged his eyes open and looked at his son. He is so proud of my cousin—even on his deathbed, it is plain as day that he is fair to bursting with familial pride. I cannot blame him—Darcy is a good man, and there are certainly worse sons—and even worse fathers.

Is it awful that I wished for a moment that I was the one saying goodbye to my father, and not Fitz?

“Fitzwilliam,” my uncle rasped. “Listen carefully. Must tell you,” he stopped to breathe heavily, his eyes falling shut again.

“Tell me what, Father? I am listening carefully.”

“It is true,” he whispered.

“What is true?” Fitz was leaning so close their faces were practically touching.

“The stories. The legends.” More labored breathing. “All true.”

He closed his eyes and fell against the pillow, his energy spent.

Fitz turned to me with confusion. “Do you know what he is talking about?”

“No. There are so many legends surrounding Pemberley—they cannot possibly all be true.”

“He must be speaking of something specific, but I know not what.”

My cousin wore the scowl he always employed when he was trying to solve a puzzle. We sat in silence for the next half hour, wondering what my uncle meant.

Finally, he woke again, his eyes clear. “Boys, listen. Heed me.”

“We are listening,” we said.

“The legend is true, my son.”

“What legend?” I asked.

“We are cursed.” He turned to look at me. “You are safe, Richard.” His gaze slid back to his son. “My little Fitzzy,” I had not heard that name in over a decade, “find the journals. Behind the Plato.” He swallowed. “In my sitting room.”

Fitz nodded. “I will, Father.”

“You must find her.” Uncle’s eyes were wide now, his voice quiet but vehement. “You must! You will die if you do not.”

Now I was truly intrigued. Was my uncle delusional? I could see the confusion on Fitz's face, and I knew he was wondering the same thing. What was uncle talking about? What legend? What curse? Who did Fitz need to find and what did any of this have to do with his death?

Georgiana came in then with her governess then. Fitz and I left to give her time with her father, and Fitz quickly pulled me into the sitting room his father had shared with Lady Anne.

"What was that?" he cried.

"I do not know. Do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

Fitz paced across the small room. "None at all. The only thing I recognized was Plato."

"It is likely he is not in his right mind. It happens sometimes," I hesitated, "near the end."

Fitz shook his head. "I know it does, but he seemed so sure. And he had been in his right mind before you arrived. If he is suddenly taking a turn for the worse," he could not complete the sentence.

"Well, we are in his sitting room. Perhaps we will find these journals he spoke of."

"He said they were behind the Plato." Fitz moved to the small bookcase in the corner, squatting down to look at the titles on the bottom shelf. He pulled out a leatherbound book and reached behind it.

"Richard, there is something here."

He looked at me in alarm and I joined him on the floor. He was right. The shelf was not as deep as the others, a false back leaving a space for something to be hidden. We quickly removed all the books from the shelf and placed them safely on the table, then felt along the back of the shelf for some sort of latch or release. Fitz found a notch for a finger and pulled the thin wood off. There was what looked like a stack of books wrapped in cloth, a sachet of cedar sitting atop them. An identical bundle was next to it.

Fitz pulled out the larger bundle and unwrapped it gingerly. Inside was a stack of faded leather journals. We looked at each other, matching expressions of surprise on our faces. I took the smaller bundle from the hiding place and opened it. There was a thick letter on top, the name Fitzwilliam Darcy scrawled across it in my uncle's hand.

“This is for you, Fitz.”

He took the letter from my hand, staring at it as if it might bite him.

“Go on. Open it.”

He tore the seal and unfolded the heavy paper, scanning over the contents.

“It is all right if you do not wish to share.” I was being polite, and it was not truly my business, but I was wild to know what was in the letter. Someone had gone to the trouble to build the bookcase, preserve the journals and hide them, and then write a letter for my cousin to find. It was an intrigue if I'd ever seen one.

“It is from my father,” said Fitz, his voice thick. “Shall I read it?”

“If you wish to.”

“It’s dated nearly six years ago.”

I looked at him in surprise and he began.

14 June, 1800

My darling son,

You are fifteen today, and it is time you know the truth of our family. This will be hard for you to believe at first—I know it was for me when my father first told me of it—but it is as true as the blue sky over Pemberley.

There are journals here that tell the story. The oldest one is difficult to read, but it will tell you the most unvarnished truth of how this all began. Do not read it lightly—I was ill for a week the first time I read it.

Fitz looked up at me and quirked a brow, and I felt myself returning the gesture. Curiouser and curiouser.

I will keep you in suspense no longer. In its most straightforward form, the story is this: a long time ago, Philip Darcy, my great grandfather many times over, married a woman called Aoife. She was the most beautiful woman in Ireland, or so they say. She did not wish to marry him, but being the selfish creature he was, he arranged it anyway. Her father was of some importance in the area and the two men

were trying to broker peace, as it could be had. Aoife was the gesture of goodwill that would cement the deal.

Philip treated her terribly. He was unkind, ungenerous, and abusive. It was not long before she tried to run away, but he caught up to her and dragged her back to the manor, locking her inside her chamber for a month with nothing but bread and water as punishment. I would say the story was family legend and likely exaggerated, but the journal I have warned you of tells the tale quite clearly.

Aoife was treated horribly for the five years she was wed to Philip. She lost two babes in the womb from his mistreatment, and finally, she was brought to bed one winter and delivered of twins, a boy and a girl. Sadly, Aoife did not survive the birth.

Her husband, disgusting creature that he was, did not care a fig that his wife had just died, and was only interested in his new son—his heir. The girl child was of no use to him, and he refused to hold her or even name her. This is family lore, but knowing everything else I do, I could believe it to be true. The tale goes that he put the girl babe into a basket and set her outside for the night, as some odd sort of test. If she survived, he would raise her. If she did not, it would prove she was not strong enough for the world and he would have conserved his resources.

Ireland is often cold in the middle of June. In January, a new babe stood no chance of surviving, especially not one as small as she was. Come morning, the babe was dead, and she was buried in the churchyard with her mother, in the same coffin.

Some thought it was a sweet gesture to put them together, but those who knew him thought Philip could not be bothered with two coffins and two headstones.

He treated his son Peter as badly as he had treated his wife, with the added expectation that his son would one day manage all of his holdings.

What Philip did not know was that Aoife had a grandmother who was familiar with the old ways. She had never given up her communion with the earth in exchange for the religion of her oppressors. She came to visit her granddaughter after a long absence and when she heard what had happened to Aoife, she was incandescent with rage, as any decent person would have been.

But she was not just anyone. She was skilled at incantations, and in her righteous anger, she cursed Philip and all of his seed, until the Darcys were no more. Each son of Darcy blood would forever be plagued by a darkness within his mind. Cruelty would dog his every step, and if he gave into its insidious temptation, he would be repaid a hundredfold by punishments you would shudder to imagine.

Since Philip's seed was young Peter, and Peter had her own blood in him, Aoife's grandmother showed some mercy. In addition to the pull of unkindness that lived within him, there would also be an antidote.

In short, it is a woman.

A woman perfectly matched to him in temperament and character. She would not always be easily found, and she

would often be unexpected, but she would be perfect for him in every way; if he could look beyond his own struggles enough to see her. He would love her with every part of his soul. There was nothing he would not do for her, no pain he would not bear for her. She would be his greatest source of joy and winning her would be his proudest achievement.

Earning her love in return would calm the turmoil within him. Though the Curse meant winning her would be a feat akin to the labors of Hercules.

Some would be driven mad by the Curse, others would fall so deeply into low spirits that they became unrecognizable. Some found their lady love but were refused, others never bothered to search.

The lucky ones who found her—or any wife for that matter, though only two Darcys before me have married a woman not their Love—were bound by the curse to treat her better than royalty, or they would be struck down in their primes, mysterious illnesses claiming them and leaving their widows in peace.

But the ones who found their destined one, who took the trouble to woo her and win her, felt soothed by the healing balm of her love. If a Darcy man was lucky enough to find the woman destined for him, and wise enough to treat her well, he would be rewarded with a life filled with good health and prosperity, and joy beyond his wildest imaginings.

I know what you are likely thinking. That this all sounds like a story told to children before bed to scare them into good

behavior. But it is the truth, my son. And soon enough you will know it for yourself.

You will feel a longing in you that you cannot explain. You will find company dull if it is not her company. Activities you once loved will lose their luster over time, until nothing interests you but searching for her.

You will prefer her over all others, and you will know this deep inside, though you may not know who she is. Your heart knows she is there, somewhere, and it longs to find her. It is this ache that drives a man mad—I have seen it, and I do not wish it for you. Keep your eyes open, my son. Keep your mind and heart open to finding her. Your heart will know when she is near.

Every man experiences the curse differently—I suggest you read the journals to gain insight into your situation—but for me, it has been an enormous blessing, a great boon in my life, the opposite of a curse. Meeting your mother was like stepping into a cool stream on a hot day. She was everything I ever needed. She was everything to me. I was never happier than the days I spent at her side.

As I write this, your mother has been gone nearly a year, and I have grieved her thoroughly. I likely always will. But my son, do not think this means you should avoid love, for the opposite is true. Though I am sad to have lost your mother, and her absence in my life leaves a hole in my heart, I would not trade the years I had with her for anything. I would not give up a

moment of our passion, or our joy, for a thousand days of bland contentment with another.

Her love was worth the struggle to win her. Yes, I had to fight for your mother. Her father wanted her to marry Lord Farthing, and she was amenable to the match. Until I visited her home with her brother, that is. She felt it, too. Not as strongly nor as soon as I did, but she felt it just the same.

She defied her father and told him she would marry none but me. He made a great many threats, and had he not softened, he could have changed the course of our fortunes for generations to come.

Remember that, my boy. A good woman is worth more than any land, any house, any fortune. She is a treasure unto herself, and the man who recognizes this will be happy indeed.

Be that man, Fitzwilliam. Search for her. Look with your heart. Hold on to her like the precious treasure she is, and when you convince her to wed you, never let go. She will be the greatest joy of your life; your shared love will be your greatest accomplishment.

There will be nothing you cannot do with her by your side.

If you are reading this, it is likely I am unwell or injured. I would have told you all of this on your twenty-second birthday, as that is when most men begin to feel the pull of the curse. Alas, we may not get to have that conversation. Read the journals; study them. Open your mind and your heart, and remember that great gifts do not always come in the packages we expect. Read Oliver's journal and you will understand.

Good luck my son, and Godspeed.

Your loving father,

Andrew Darcy

2



Fitzwilliam Darcy

My father lingered on after his strange message, slipping in and out of a deep sleep. I spent nearly the entire time at his bedside. As he slept, I read. I began with the journal of Philip Darcy, the originator of this so-called curse. Father was right. He was beastly.

He said things of his wife I could never imagine saying of any woman, let alone one I had been wed to and who had borne me a child. He cursed her name, cursed the day he had met her, cursed the deal he had brokered with her father that ended in her becoming his wife. Most of all, he cursed Aoife's grandmother, the nameless woman who had cursed him.

Philip seemed incapable of kindness. Even when everything in his life depended upon it, he could not bring himself to treat others with respect.

After the death of his first wife and infant daughter, he eventually married another woman who would meet the same fate as her predecessor. But this time, Philip had misjudged his

victim. The second Mrs. Darcy had four brawny brothers, made of rage and hungry for justice.

They took Philip from his own house, his servants doing nothing to protect their master, and dragged him to a far field. They beat him within an inch of his life, knocking out several of his teeth and breaking both his arms. They returned him to his house and dumped him on the front steps.

Philip was incensed. He tried to come after their family, but no one would heed him, and with both his arms broken and his teeth missing, he could not force the issue.

Four months later, his body was found downstream in the river. Everyone supposed it was the brothers, but it could not be proven, and there was no one who cared to investigate even if it could. Even the local Englishmen had despised him.

I could not believe I had that man's blood in me.

I closed the book when I finished, hiding it in a drawer and hoping I would never have to read such things again. I had doubted my father's assertions at first. A curse? Truly? It was a fanciful idea and one any modern, educated man would question. But as I read through the journals, I could no longer deny it. The truth was before me in black ink, and I would be a fool to not heed the advice on the pages before me.

After Philip's death, his son Peter was sent to his uncle in England to live at Pemberley. I knew from family history that young Peter's only male cousin would die in a riding accident and Peter would become the heir. I could not help but wonder if that was the curse at work.

Thankfully, Peter's journal was less horrifying than his father's had been.

He struggled, but he was at heart a kinder man than Philip, and he had a sort of wistful reverence for the memory of his mother and lost sister. He could never be as cruel as his father.

As I sat in the chair beside my father's bed, reading the journals left by my forebears, I wondered what fate held for me, and hoped it was not as bad as the worst of the stories.

One of my favorite journals belonged to Harold Darcy, Harry to his friends. He was young and romantic and filled with dreams. He was an accomplished painter, and to this day, his works hang on the walls at Pemberley.

He could not be more different than myself, but I think that was why I liked him. It was fascinating to have a glimpse into the life of someone so foreign to me. It was a perspective I could not imagine gaining any other way. My favorite passages were those at the beginning of his relationship with his wife.

He met a woman he believed he could love when he was only three and twenty, but she was promised to another. Filled with despair, he set off on a long journey in an attempt to forget her. In his second year of travel, he met his Love.

12 June, 1695

Celia's hair is the color of flames. When she moves in the sunlight, it looks as if faeries are dancing through the strands.

Her skin is like ivory, her eyes like emeralds. Her voice is a song. She is everything perfect.

He was clearly besotted. Then, dated a month later:

13 August, 1695

What am I to do? She does not want me. She prefers another, some milksop who cannot appreciate her like I will. I have written to father and he has suggested I examine my heart. If I am certain she is the one, then I must not give up, for she will be the key to my entire life's happiness.

30 August, 1695

She danced with me! It was the most magical thing I have ever experienced. We spun around one another like spirits in the sky. It was everything wonderful. I felt heat when I touched her hand, and when she danced away from me, it was as if my heart was ripped from my chest. At the end of our dance, she seemed reluctant to part from me. I think she feels it, too.

28 October, 1695

Today I married my sweet Celia. I feel as if my heart will burst, I am so happy.

Harold was married to his love at twenty-five. I hope I am as lucky.



Father has died. When he slipped away, I held one hand and Richard the other. Georgie had said her goodbyes when she

came in to say goodnight a few hours before. I will have to tell her he is gone in the morning. He has been such a central figure in my life, I do not fully comprehend that he is no more. Whatever am I to do without him? Without his advice? His encouragement? His words of comfort?

My father was one of the kindest men I knew, and I have always wished to be like him. Can I live up to such a legacy? Can I be the man he wished me to be without his guidance?



I told Georgiana the news. She climbed into my lap and cried, and I finally gave in and joined her. We clung together, two lost children, now orphans, wondering what we shall do now.



I dragged myself away from the churchyard, my eyes burning and my face wet. It is finished. I have buried my father.

I could not contain my tears and wept like a little boy during the short service. Thankfully no one seemed to mind.

Richard is a rock. He refuses to leave my side unless it is to be with Georgiana, though I know he must feel his own measure of grief. He has always been close to my father and was both my parents' favorite nephew.

I have no idea what is to come. I daresay I have never been more frightened in my life.



I walked into the library and settled across from Father's solicitor. I have known the man most of my life, but he seems a stranger today. He is here to tell us what will happen to father's fortune and property. I know I am the heir to Pemberley, but this is a formality I must endure.

My uncle Nathaniel is here, my father's much younger brother, looking as lost as I feel. He has three children of his own, but they are too young to sit in on such proceedings, as is Georgiana. Father's sister is here as well, constantly dabbing a handkerchief at her eyes. A few of my father's cousins whom I have not seen in some time are present, and Richard, of course. Stalwart as ever.

The reading of the will proceeds as usual—I do not truly know how such things generally progress, but I presume this is usual. Pemberley and all its holdings, accounts, and contents will come to me as my father's eldest and only son. His valet is being retired to a cottage with a pension, and our housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds—father's favorite servant—has been gifted two-hundred pounds. Quite a fortune for someone of her station.

The solicitor droned on. "Mr. Nathaniel Darcy is to receive Mr. Darcy's horse, Goliath, and his shares in the Ewing Mine. His sister Mrs. Downing will receive three-thousand pounds and a selection of jewels." He tapped a box on the table behind him, then turned to my father's cousins. "Mr. Jonathon Darcy,

Mr. Matthew Darcy, and Mr. Joseph Darcy will receive a thousand pounds each, and Mr. Darcy has left each of you a letter.”

This surprised me. I had not known my father was so well prepared. Though I should have—my father was a planner through and through, often telling me what he would do in three years’ time, which roads would need to be rebuilt five years from now, which fields will lie fallow and when over the next two decades.

My uncle, aunt, and cousins took their letters, their eyes suspiciously red and more than one hand shaking. It occurred to me as I watched them that they were Darcy men as well. They would suffer the Curse I had been reading of. It was an odd comfort to me. Even though my father was gone, there were other men in the family I could turn to if need be.

The solicitor confirmed Georgiana’s dowry of thirty-thousand pounds. She was to receive the majority of our mother’s jewels when she came out, and my father had specified some of the Darcy pieces he wished her to have. He had commissioned a pearl set when he first grew ill, hoping it would be ready in time for him to give it to Georgie. It arrived the day of the funeral.

I had promised her she would wear it for her come-out, and the pearl set along with father’s letter to her were set to the side.

There were small gifts to various servants and larger ones to certain charities. My father’s former steward had had a son

nobody had seen in two years, but if he were ever to be found, Mr. Wickham would receive five-hundred pounds in thanks for his father's dedication to Pemberley.

Finally, after what felt like three dozen bequests were gone over, he came to Richard. After giving him a thick letter, the solicitor told us my father had gifted Richard with Elmhurst, a small estate a few miles from Pemberley. It brought in almost fifteen-hundred pounds per annum, and my father had only bought it for its proximity and to keep an unscrupulous neighbor from getting it. Now it would be Richard's, along with three-thousand pounds and a small yearly allowance.

I could not understand why my father had been so generous with my cousin. Did he wish Richard to retire from the army? I will admit I wished he would do so, but Richard's father was a wealthy earl who gave him a generous allowance. He could have left the army had he truly wished it. It would be embarrassing, but it could be done.

As I looked about the room, confusion on my face, I saw my uncle and cousins looking at me with knowing eyes, and I could have sworn Cousin Jonathon's held pity in them.

What did they know that I did not?



Richard refused to let me read his letter. I would not trespass on his privacy so far as to search his room, but my feelings are

wounded. He had read my letter from my father. Why could I not read his?

We rode over to his new estate and noted all the necessary repairs. Richard is pleased to have a home to call his own, and even more happy that it is less than five miles from Pemberley. Elmhurst is on the other side of Lambton and in need of a new barn. Seeing what I did of the estate, I began to understand my father's bequest better. A large portion of the money he left Richard will be needed to improve the house and grounds. My father had done a great deal already to the tenant farms, but the house was untouched, and the gardens are in terrible disarray.

It will be nearly a year before it would be fit for anyone to live in it. But Richard could now sell his commission and marry if he so chooses. And Georgie will be pleased to have him near. They have always been close.



Richard has moved into Pemberley. I gave him a large apartment in the family wing and a private sitting room on the second floor so he might entertain his own guests without being intruded upon. He goes to Elmhurst a few times a week to watch over the progress of the repairs, and the rest of the time he spends with me and Georgiana. He was only gone for a short time to sell his commission and has otherwise been with us.

I thought my uncle, Lord Matlock, would be upset with Richard for retiring, but he has said nothing of it. I cannot help

but think my cousin is keeping things from me. He has been secretive of late, writing letters that he refuses to comment on and suddenly wearing trousers instead of breeches. He said he merely finds them more comfortable, but I have seen a strange bulk along his right ankle that I think may be a dagger.

It is very strange.



My Uncle Nathaniel and father's cousins have each sent me a letter, offering their support should I need it. I cannot pretend to ignorance. My twenty-second birthday is upon me, and Father said that was when I would begin to feel the pull of the Curse. I appreciate their offers of assistance. Two of Nathaniel's children are boys, but they are even younger than Georgiana. Jonathon has only daughters, lucky man, but I suppose he might sire a son yet. His wife is north of forty, but there is some chance. My cousins Matthew and Joseph have one son each, though they are not yet of an age to be aware of the curse.

After the funeral, Uncle Nathaniel spent a few days at Pemberley, making sure I knew what to expect. He encouraged me to continue reading the journals, and that after I was finished, I should look through them again to see if I missed anything. He did tell me that his own time was not very difficult, but he had had his father and mine to lean on.

I would be completely alone.

When I returned from my ride today, a package was waiting for me from my father's cousin, Jonathon Darcy. It was his personal journal. He included a note asking me to keep it private, which of course I would do, and to return it when I no longer had need of it.

Apparently, my father had often commented on the similarities between Jonathon and myself, and he thought his own journal might be helpful. He apologized in advance for any rude awakenings that might ensue.

I unpacked the journal with trepidation and locked it in my desk until I felt equal to reading it.

I feel a great weight settling upon me. It is as if a dark cloud has descended just over my head and I cannot dispel it, no matter what I do. I will not pretend to be unaware of what has caused this feeling. Today is my twenty-second birthday, and I have already awoken with a terrible nightmare.

I cannot remember exactly what occurred, but there was an argument and pain and a great deal of blood. I have never dreamt anything similar.

Is this the Curse at work? Is this what my future holds?

I finally gathered my courage and read Jonathon's journal. It has been exceedingly helpful. My cousin struggled greatly with the curse. He became ungovernable, even to himself, and his temper was almost alarmingly volatile. He snarled at

everyone and was the instigator of multiple tavern brawls. So far under the Curse was he that he was not even looking for his love when he happened upon her in the most unexpected place.

18 January, 1784

One of the carriage horses threw a shoe and could not continue. Frustrated, I leapt out and kicked at the wheel, then announced I would walk to Pemberley. It was six miles away and there was deep snow on the ground, but I did not care. I paid no mind to the fact that I did not have proper boots on nor a thick enough overcoat. I had been piled under warm blankets in the carriage and had a hot brick at my feet, but I did not think about that as I stomped off in a snit.

I had not gotten far before I realized my foolishness, but I was too angry to care and too prideful to turn back. It was then that a carriage pulled up alongside me, asking where I was headed. I told them I was on my way to my uncle's home, Pemberley. They knew the estate and immediately offered me a seat in their carriage for they were headed to a nearby village.

I climbed aboard and sat next to the older gentleman who had been speaking to me. I was still in a rotten mood and it took every ounce of my strength not to snarl at them all, throw them out of their own carriage, and commandeer it for my personal use.

I turned to stare out the window in an effort to maintain my composure and saw that seated in the corner across from me

was a young lady. She is likely a few years younger than me, but I would not care were she twenty years older.

She is The One.

She had light blonde hair tucked neatly under her hat and covered again by the voluminous hood of her cloak. I could not tell the color of her eyes in the dim carriage, but neither did I care. I immediately requested an introduction.

Her name is Amelia Stanford.

I made an effort to befriend her father and I found out that they live in Blalock, ten miles north of Pemberley. I insisted that once we reached my uncle's, they must come in to warm themselves and have a respite from their travels before continuing home.

My uncle is a perceptive man and he immediately realized what had happened. He invited the Stanfords to stay for tea and dinner, and if they did not wish to drive home late, they might stay the night as well. The impromptu guests were very flattered, and they accepted the dinner invitation but did not stay the night.

20 January, 1784

I called on them. It took everything in me to wait two whole days, but my uncle assured me it was the polite thing to do. They would wish to rest and settle in after their journey.

Amelia is as delightful as I remembered. Just being in her presence eases the devil in me. I feel the tight bonds of the

Curse loosening, and suddenly I can breathe again.

3 February, 1784

I have now seen Amelia six times and holding back a proposal requires all of my strength. She does not know me as yet, and though I am my father's heir, our estate is not grand. I must convince her father I am a good prospect so that he will grant me her hand when the time comes. She is not yet of age, and even if she were, I doubt she would escape with me to Gretna Green, though the idea grows in appeal every day.

She is not in love with me, not yet, but she has gifted me with several shy smiles and she blushes frequently. We sat beside one another at whist last evening and when my foot brushed hers under the table, she did not move away. This must be progress.

7 February, 1784

The Curse is not as well regulated as I thought. I have broken my mother's favorite bust in a fit of temper. She looked at me with her wide, sad eyes, too knowing and entirely too forgiving, and I ran away in shame. I am not a small boy. I have long outgrown tantrums. At least I should have.

The cause of my pique is Mr. Stanford. I asked him if I might walk alone with Amelia. He denied me. When I asked why, he said he did not wish to encourage my suit.

I felt a great rage swell up within me, swallowing me in its blackness. I stormed out of the room, past a shocked Amelia and Mrs. Stanford. My behavior likely confirmed that I would

not make a good husband and I don't know when I have ever been angrier with myself. I rode hard all the way home, and when I told my father what had happened, he suggested all would be well in time. I lost my temper and broke the bust.

If only I could explain to Mr. Stanford. It would be impossible for me to ever harm Amelia. She is light and hope and every good thing. Her presence is the only place where the curse calms, lying down at my feet like a docile dog instead of squeezing the life out of me like a snake.

I must find a way. I cannot lose her.

12 February, 1784

My mother has saved the day once again, God bless that woman! She invited the Stanfords for a visit and showed them about the house. Our estate may be smaller than Pemberley and the Stanford family seat, but it is very fine and in excellent repair. She charmed Mrs. Stanford, as I knew she would, and she had the foresight to invite my father's elder brother, the master of Pemberley. Uncle and Aunt came and spoke of me as if I were their favorite person in the world, and I could not be more grateful.

I am almost afraid to hope, but hope I must.

4 April, 1784

It has finally happened! Amelia has accepted me! The courtship has been a struggle. I wished to throw her over my shoulder and take her home with me every time I saw her. Alas, I maintained my control, though it was not easy.

Thankfully Matthew is home from Town and has been willing to spar with me regularly. We are each as strong as the other, though I am angrier, which likely gives me an advantage.

Regardless, he has been a great help and I appreciate it. He does not struggle with the Curse nearly as much as I do, nor does Joseph. I cannot understand it. Perhaps my struggle will lead to a blessing and I will have only daughters. One of my even-tempered brothers' sons can inherit.

The wedding is set for mid-May and I can hardly wait. Amelia will be my wife!

I found myself drawn to these sorts of passages. I read them all, and I understood the others for the cautionary tale they were, but the ones I wished to revisit, the ones that gave me hope, were these stories of success. Feeling the darkness closing in but fighting it back anyway, regardless of circumstance.

I hoped the curse would not be as troublesome for me as it had been for Jonathon, but I had a terrible feeling that I was in for a great amount of difficulty.



I was rereading Jonathon's journal again today and I found something I had not noticed before. Perhaps I came across it one of the many nights I fell asleep reading and did not comprehend it before nodding off.

Regardless, what I found was a passage about his maternal cousin, Meriwether.

Meriwether is with me all the time now. Father does not trust my temper, especially alone with mother, though I cannot blame him. She is his Love, and he would do anything to protect her. I want to say I would never do anything to hurt my mother. I know I would never do so intentionally. But I also know that there are moments when the Curse has me helpless in its grasp and I cannot control myself. I do not even always remember everything that has happened after one of my fits of temper.

Thankfully, Mother herself has never looked at me in fear. If she did, I do not know what I would do with myself. She has always been my champion, loving me even when I was at my most difficult, and having such a generous, strong woman fear me might be more than I could bear.

I presumed Meriwether's presence was due to Father's fears over my behavior. My control is slipping and has been for some time. Before it became too out of hand, my cousin came to stay with us, and before I knew what was happening, he was by my side nearly every moment of the day.

When I asked Father about it, he did not prevaricate. I suppose that is something. He admitted that Meriwether's purpose was to be my guardian of sorts, just until I found my Love. When I complained that I did not need such a person, he said that it was better to be a little annoyed now than to spend a lifetime regretting something I did while angry.

I know he is right, so I have made the best of it, but it chafes nonetheless. I am a man full grown. I should not require a companion like some eighteen-year-old debutante.

So that is why Richard is here. Why my father left him such a large legacy. Why he hardly ever leaves me alone. Why he wears a knife in his boot. And why he will not let me read the letter my father wrote to him.

He is my guardian.

3



Richard Fitzwilliam

February 1807

I am fully settled at Pemberley now. The repairs at my estate are coming along nicely. My estate! I never thought I would say such a thing. Alas, it has come at a great price.

My cousin is already struggling with the weight of the curse. His father thought it would be so, which is why he settled me so near his son. I do not know how he knew it, but the Curse is a dark beast, shadowing my cousin wherever he goes.

Fitz does not know it, but he will need me, and soon. I cannot leave Georgiana alone with him for long—it would be foolhardy. Uncle gave me a thick letter explaining the unexpected nature of the Curse. One might be having a perfectly regular day, happy with his place in the world, when all of a sudden, his mind is filled with darkness and he must

fight the urge to do terrible things. Violence, cruelty, destruction.

This was Darcy's legacy, and as his closest friend and confidant, I have vowed to stand by him through thick and thin, even when he does not think he needs me.

When Elmhurst is ready, I will let it out and remain at Pemberley. Darcy does not know of my plans, but I made a promise to my uncle, and I intend to see it through.

I was walking down the corridor this afternoon when I heard the crash of glass, then what sounded like a woman crying. I rushed into the room and found young Sally, a maid who has been at Pemberley since she was a child, cowering in the corner, her body curled in a tight ball. All around her were shards of blue pottery, bits of flowers scattered among the shattered pieces.

"Sally! Are you well? What has happened?"

"She is perfectly well!"

I turned at the sound of my cousin's voice, pitched in heated tones I had never heard him use before. I stood slowly, watching his red face contort in anger, keeping my limbs loose and my mind alert in case I needed to move quickly.

"Darcy, what are you about?" I asked, attempting to keep my voice smooth and level.

"Nothing," he snarled.

He breathed so heavily I could hear it across the room.

“I simply do not wish to be disturbed. I told Carter this, but the daft man cannot do his job properly, for she,” he pointed to the cowering maid, “interrupted me!”

I caught Sally’s eye and gestured to the door. “Go and change, Sally. I shall handle this from here.”

The girl scampered away, bits of flowers still stuck to her uniform.

“Darcy,” I said gently, “what did Sally interrupt you for?”

He stopped his mumbling and huffing for a moment and looked perplexed. “I do not know.”

“Mayhap she was delivering a message? Or bringing you something?”

“I asked not to be disturbed!” he roared.

“Why did you wish not to be disturbed?” I was edging closer to him, trying to move so slowly he did not notice my encroachment.

He took a deep breath, then said lowly, “I wished to read my book in peace.”

“Ah.” I was a little closer now. “What are you reading?”

“Swift.”

I nodded. “Excellent choice.” I was close enough now to make out the intricate thread patterns on his waistcoat.

“It would be more excellent if I could read it without interruptions.”

He had gone from looking half mad to resembling a petulant child. I could only see it as an improvement.

“Why do you not sit with me and we can read it together? Or we could discuss it if you have lost the desire to read.”

He huffed, then sat on the chair behind him. “Very well. We may discuss it. But intelligent opinions only! I have no desire to hear your ridiculous notions of humor.”

“Of course, Cousin.”

We sat for an hour complete, then he went to his room for a warm bath at my suggestion. He did not seem himself at all. I am not certain he will even remember this episode.



My fears have come true. I met Fitz in his room before dinner and asked him if he remembered breaking the vase in the sitting room. He had no recollection of it whatsoever. I must work on controlling my expressions, for he immediately realized I was hiding something from him and demanded I tell him all.

“Dear God! I did what?”

“You threw the vase at her. I visited her in Mrs. Reynolds’s office earlier and she said she ducked in time to miss it. It hit the wall and shattered, covering her in plant detritus and shards of pottery.”

Fitz paled and staggered back.

“I explained to her you were not yourself. She agreed and said she had never seen you like that before.”

“Sally? I threw a vase at Sally? Sally Smith?”

“I am afraid so.”

He dropped his head in his hands, moaning in dismay. “Her family have worked on Pemberley land for generations! Her father is a sheep farmer. Her mother was a maid in the house before she wed, her sister is an undercook, her brother is a gardener. I used to play cricket with the family when I was a boy! She is beloved by the entire household. I could not have chosen a worse person to lose my temper with.”

He seemed utterly defeated, running his hand through his hair and alternately covering his face with his hands. “I shall apologize.”

“I do not know if that is wise,” I said. “She was very frightened. She may not wish to see you.”

“Then how will she know how sorry I am?”

I got an idea. “Why do you not write her a letter? You may say your piece, and she may keep her distance.”

Fitz groaned and hid his face again. “I cannot believe this. It is the Curse, isn’t it? It is overtaking me already.”

“It is not overtaking you!” I tried to sound reassuring, but even I was alarmed at the speed of the Curse. He had only turned two and twenty eight months ago. It was progressing quickly.

He sighed. “I will write a letter. Thank you, Fitz.”

“You’re welcome, Fitz.”

“Do you not think it time you called me Darcy?”

“I told you, I cannot while your father is alive.”

He looked at me sadly. “My father is no longer alive, Cousin.”

“We shall give him a full year of mourning before taking his name. It is only right.”

He nodded. “Very well. A year it shall be.”



Darcy was so horrified by his behavior that he insisted I speak with Mrs. Reynolds and Carter, the butler. No one was to be near the rooms he was occupying, and no one should come near him when he was alone unless it was an emergency, and then it should be one of the sturdier footmen who could hold his own.

Thankfully, Mrs. Reynolds was aware of the Curse—she had been a maid when Darcy’s father went through the same predicament—and she promised to handle it all. The butler was less understanding, but I managed to convince him that my cousin was lost in the throes of grief and that he would be better with time. That seemed to mollify him, but time will tell.

Sally received Fitz's apology with relief. She had been a childhood playmate of Fitz's—when a hiding game is afoot, no one cares about rank or station—and the incident had been jarring.

Mrs. Reynolds had to help her read the letter as her schooling had only gone so far, but she was pleased by the apology and even more so by the gift. Fitz's guilt was such that he had asked Mrs. Reynolds what Sally would like. Turns out, she had a gardener sweet on her, and the two had been saving so that they might marry in a year or two.

Being the generous man he is, Fitz settled a dowry of a hundred pounds on Sally. It was more than she would have seen in her lifetime, and she was well pleased.

I was grateful to see that my cousin was still the kindhearted man I had known my entire life. The curse may be encroaching, but it has not overtaken him yet. And if anyone could fight its insidious influence, it was Fitzwilliam Darcy.



Some time after the vase incident, I found my cousin in his study, looking morosely out the window.

“We shall have to attend the Season,” he said.

“Yes. I was going to suggest the same.”

“I need to begin my search.”

“I think that is wise.”

“You will help me?”

“Of course, I will! I am your man, Cousin. You know that.”

He nodded, looking disturbingly unsure. My cousin was many things, but unsure had never been one of them.

“I frightened Georgiana,” he said, his voice so quiet I could barely hear it.

“What? When?”

“This morning. She heard about the incident with Sally. Everyone has heard about it by now.” He hung his head in shame, another feeling my cousin rarely showed. Though I suppose that was natural for someone who rarely did anything shameful. “I was opening letters and accidentally sliced my finger. I cursed without thinking, and Georgiana backed away, her face the picture of fright.”

I sighed. “That is unfortunate, but it is not so bad. She has heard worse before, though she might not admit it.”

“She wasn’t afraid of my language, Richard!” he cried. “She was afraid of what it portended.”

“I know, Fitz.” I poured a measure of brandy for each of us and sat in the chairs across from his desk. “Let us make a plan. We shall go to London and accept every invitation. The more ladies you meet, the better. We will attend balls and soirees and salons, anything that might attract ladies. Even if you do not find her this Season, you will surely find her eventually.”

Fitz continued to stare out the window, then finally turned to face me. “Very well, Cousin. To London we will go.”

4



Fitzwilliam Darcy

The Season

London, four years later

The carriage rolled to a stop outside Darcy House and I tiredly climbed out. I trudged up the steps and into the entryway, gave my things to the butler who had waited up for me though I had told him not to, and made my way to my chambers. My valet had me prepared for bed in quick order and I fell onto the mattress, exhaustion seeping into my bones.

Is this what the rest of my life would look like? Going to endless parties and balls, searching for a woman I was unlikely to find?

I had attended the Season in Town every year since my father's passing in June of 1806. I had done as he instructed.

Kept my mind open and my heart alert. But I had had no success.

I accepted every invitation, danced with countless ladies, and was likely thought of as a gad about, though I was anything but. Little did the cream of London know that I would have rather been home by the fire with a good book and my dog than be paraded about in this fashion. I had agreed to this method of searching, for I knew it was the easiest way to meet the most women in the least amount of time. But in five Seasons, I still had not found her, and I was weary.

My cousin Richard Fitzwilliam was one of the few who knew of the Curse, and participating in the Season as I was had been his idea. He was my confidant and the only person who truly understood what I was about. Many others thought I was looking for a wife, but they did not know why.

The Curse.

My father had been right. I had felt its tendrils snaking about me shortly after my twenty-second birthday, the same month my father died.

I had always been an even-tempered man. Even as a child, I was not prone to tantrums or fights with other children. I was logical. Reasonable. Practical. I was not swayed by petty feelings like jealousy or greed, and I relied on my intellect to make decisions.

That all changed in the summer of '06. Suddenly, I was prone to moods I had never before experienced. I could attribute some of it to grief—after all, my father had just died

and left me with the enormous burden of Pemberley as well as the raising of my younger sister. But deep down, I had known it was the Curse at work.

I caught the servants watching me with wary expressions, and even Mrs. Reynolds, the only servant who knew of the Curse, seemed jumpy when I was near.

I had had more than one incident that scared me more than I could admit. In the end, it was the image of Georgiana's frightened face that pulled me from the darkness. I would think of her expression, pale and wide-eyed, and tell myself I could not go mad yet. When she was grown and married and safe, far away from Pemberley, the Curse could do with me what it wanted, but she was an innocent, and it had no right to destroy her.

She does not know it, but she saved me.

As her guardian, I had to do better, *be* better. My father had had the foresight to assign my cousin Richard as Georgiana's co-guardian. Richard never let me read my father's letter to him, but he did tell me that Father had asked him to watch over Georgiana with his life, and if need be, remove her from my care.

I had been offended at the time. I did not require a keeper. But as time marched on, I realized I needed exactly that.

I was no longer the logical man I had been. There was a darkness in me that had not been there before. When my guard was down, when I was tired and lonely, I felt it wrapping its thorny vines around me, trying to make me someone I would

not recognize, let alone respect. Once it had feasted on my soul, it would kill me. Slowly. Torturously. With as little dignity and as much pain as possible.

You see? I have become quite dramatic. That is the curse at work, though Richard says I have always had a touch of dramatic flair. I do not believe him, for I certainly never saw it before.

Richard, being the stalwart friend he is, gave up his commission, much to his father's dismay, and resides most of the year with me. He is still welcome in his family home, and he has a generous allowance from his father, but a second son without an occupation is something of an anomaly. This has led to questions about his brother's health. Half the *ton* thinks the viscount is ailing and will die before his fortieth birthday, and Richard is being kept safe at home in waiting for the day the title falls on his shoulders.

We let them believe what they will. The viscount finds it all amusing, and once his wife gives him a son, the speculation will cease. He does not know of the Curse, but he knows how close Richard and I are, and he does not wish his brother to perish in war, like any feeling man.

Thankfully, Richard's estate brings in over fifteen-hundred pounds per annum, but with care and diligence, I believe that number will eventually be doubled. He is comfortable, and should he wish to one day, he could marry, though the lady must not have grand expectations.

Thankfully, Georgie and I are happy to have him with us. It is likely selfish of me, but I would have him with me always if he was willing. He is the brother I always wanted, and Pemberley is large enough for us to have our own pursuits and not get in one another's way. It is an ideal situation—as long as we are both bachelors, that is.

Richard has faith that there is a perfect woman out there for me. He has always believed I would find her and have a blissful marriage as my father before me had. I am less optimistic. I have read the journals of my forebears. I know what lies before me. Finding the lady is always difficult—even my father spent three years searching for my mother much further abroad than I have done. And once the lady is found, I will have to win her.

I cannot simply propose and be accepted. That will earn me a wife, but not a steadfast love. A love that will soothe my temper and counteract the Curse. I must woo her so that she grows to care for me, and nurture that care into love and passion.

In truth, I do not always believe I am capable of such a feat.

My cousin has faith in me, but on nights like this, when I danced with a dozen ladies and none of them have been The One, I doubt it will ever happen.

It has been five years since the Curse settled on me. How much longer must I wait?

5



Richard Fitzwilliam

London, Spring 1811

I worry for my cousin. He is losing heart, and I fear he will fall into a depression. It has happened before. Darcy's great uncle several generations back did not find his lady love. By the time he was five and thirty, he had given in to the Curse entirely. By forty, he was buried in the churchyard from death at his own hand, though that detail is a closely kept family secret.

I do not wish my cousin to suffer the same fate.

I took out the letter from my uncle and read a passage I knew by heart.

...I am putting my faith in you, nephew. Fitzwilliam loves you as a brother, and I ask you to treat him as such. Watch him; protect him. The Curse is such that he will not know he has given in to it until it is too late. You must be his eyes and

ears. You must know him better than he knows himself. The fate of Pemberley depends on it.

If things get out of hand—if my son falls prey to the Curse and he becomes unrecognizable to you—I trust you will protect Georgiana from harm. Those who lose to the Curse often become either deeply disturbed or unimaginably cruel. If such a thing were to happen, I think Fitzwilliam would fall into the former, though there is no way to know for certain. A cruel man with his intelligence and resources would be a terror.

I am trusting you with the most precious things in the world to me—my children. You are a good man, Richard. You will know what to do when the time comes.

I folded the letter and placed it back in the box I kept such things in, turning the key snugly in the lock. It is a great responsibility, but I will not shirk my duty. I have never run from a challenge, and I am not about to start now.



The Season is coming to an end and Darcy is no closer to finding a woman to love. Were it me, I do not think it would be so difficult, but then I am not cursed. Who knows what would have happened had he not been saddled with such a dreadful thing? He might have been married by now and dandling a child on his knee.

The longer this goes on, the more morose he becomes. I must think of something to cheer him. A change of scenery

would be nice. Yes, that is what I shall do.

I will take a cottage at the seaside for a month and convince him to bring Georgiana and join me. The fresh air will brace his spirits, and he could meet ladies entirely new to him there.



Well, that was a colossal waste of time. The sea views and fresh air did nothing to rouse Darcy's spirits, and the ladies were far from impressive. Georgiana enjoyed herself, and a few young men began to sniff around her, forcing Darcy to realize she is not a child any longer.

Otherwise, no good came of it at all.

Perhaps we will attend a few house parties. Bath is another idea we have not yet considered.

Maybe Darcy is right and we will not find her. His opinion is due to his cynicism, while I am beginning to think she is not of the upper classes. Or perhaps her father simply hates Town. She could be in mourning. She could be tending to an ill relation. She could be in Ireland. She could be traveling abroad—in a war.

I sighed. She must be out there. She must!



Pemberley has been quiet this summer. Darcy refused every invitation and confided that he sorely needed a rest. He would

venture out for the Little Season if need be, but he wished to spend the remainder of the summer at Pemberley. I could hardly argue with him.

By the end of August, he was looking much better. There was color in his cheeks and the pinched look he wore about the eyes was lessened. He stood a little straighter, walked a little lighter.

I wondered if it was the effect of a restful summer or Pemberley itself.

The house was quiet as I walked through to Darcy's study. He was seated behind his desk, looking over a letter.

"Bingley has written," he said.

"Oh? What has he to say?"

"He has taken a house in Hertfordshire on a one-year lease. He wishes me to accompany him for a time this autumn and assist him with learning estate management."

"Do you wish to go?"

He looked out the window for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "I believe I do."

I lifted a brow. It was well known that my cousin disliked Bingley's relations. "I am somewhat surprised."

"Bingley is my friend." He rubbed a hand over his heart.

I immediately sharpened my attention. "Do you feel something? Is there a pain?"

“No,” he said hesitantly. “Not a pain. A slight pulling sensation perhaps.”

“Pulling?”

He nodded. “I will write Bingley of my acceptance. Shall you accompany me?”

“Of course, if Bingley will have me. Do you wish to take Georgiana as well?” As if he would go anywhere without me. Of course, my cousin liked to keep up the façade of his independence. It must chafe at a man like him to constantly be dogged by his own cousin. It is a testament to his character that he has never turned his ire on me, when I am likely the most deserving of it, not to mention the most able to counter it.

“I have already promised your mother I would send Georgie to her for the autumn. We can deliver her on our way to Hertfordshire.”

“Excellent plan.”

I left the study with my mind racing. Something was afoot, but I did not know what. Was he feeling a pull on his heart because he was nearing his Love? Or was it a sign of impending doom? Was the Curse growing stronger?

I could not know, but there was an odd light in Darcy’s eyes when he spoke of Hertfordshire. I could not be certain, but I thought it might be hope.

To Hertfordshire we would go. Heaven help us.

6



Fitzwilliam Darcy

There was something in the air at Netherfield. I could not explain it, but I felt it nonetheless. Colors were brighter, sounds were clearer. I felt a crackling on my skin and a sharpness in my mind that I had not felt since my father's death. Richard must have noticed a change, for he watched me carefully, giving me a look that told me he wondered what was afoot but was too afraid of the answer to ask.

I do not know what is happening, but I remember my father's words. I will keep my heart open and my mind alert.



I snapped at Miss Bingley. So much for improved spirits.



I awoke with a vicious headache and decided to hide away in the library. Richard is writing a letter to his mother in his room—I suspect he is actually hiding from Miss Bingley who

showers him with attention when she cannot find me—and Bingley is shooting with Mr. Hurst. I find Bingley's brother insufferable when he is awake—and marginally less so when he is snoring on the sofa—so I declined the invitation. Being annoyed while holding a rifle is not a good idea for a man like me.

Unfortunately, I had not been here half an hour when Miss Bingley came sailing in, a waft of heavy perfume trailing in her wake. After I snapped at her yesterday, it is a miracle she is still willing to speak to me. In my defense, she deserved every word I said to her, but perhaps I should not have called her a “desperate, social-climbing harpy.” It was rude of me.

“Mr. Darcy! Whatever are you doing in here all alone? Will you not join Louisa and me in the drawing room for tea?”

She smiled at me, but I detected a faint tic next to her left eye that told me she was not as pleased by my company as she pretended to be.

“I am happy with my book, Miss Bingley.”

“Nonsense! You must join us! Cook has made the cakes you like.” She tried to cajole me, but her voice just made the vein in my temple pulse.

“As I said, I am happier on my own with my book.”

Unsurprisingly, she ignored me and continued to buzz about me like a horsefly who refuses to be shooed away. I tried to ignore her words, but her constant prattle did nothing for my headache that was growing worse by the minute.

When she reached out and took the book from my hands, I could take no more.

“Miss Bingley! I do not know what you were taught in the second-rate seminary your father sent you to, but gently bred ladies do not pluck books out of the hands of others, especially men they are trying to impress enough to marry them.”

She looked at me in astonishment, her features frozen.

“What? Did you think I did not know about your designs upon me?” I growled. “Let me assure you that you have been the opposite of discreet. I will relieve your suspense. I will never marry you, Miss Bingley. I would never offer for you willingly, and if you orchestrated a compromise, I would leave you to your ruined fate. Can I be clearer?”

She stared at me, her lower lip beginning to tremble. Her mouth closed and reopened, and then one solitary tear ran down her cheek.

With a sharp breath, I turned and raced from the room.



I am a fool. And now I have angered my hostess and humiliated her besides.

When she poked at me, I could not help myself. The Curse whispered in my ear to put her in her place, to hold nothing back, to destroy her with words.

The darkness was pulling at my mind—the reprieve I have felt in the last weeks was over and it was a struggle to not dash

my wine in Hurst's face over dinner, or yank Mrs. Hurst's confounded bracelets off her wrist and throw them out the window so annoyed was I with her for jangling them. And those were the lesser occurrences!

My dreams I could not vouch for, but suffice it to say I did not recognize myself in them, red-faced and screaming as my hosts cowered before me. In the worst of the nightmares, I actually beat poor Bingley until he was a bloody lump lying limp on the ground. I was terrified of myself—not only for the beating but because in my dream, I had enjoyed it. I felt so guilty that I made an extra effort to be kind to Bingley the following day. He did not know what to do with me.

Richard is watching me again, only this time there is an alertness to him that tells me he is ready to restrain me at a moment's notice if it is required.

I am only seven and twenty. If the curse already makes me this volatile, what have I to look forward to in the years to come?



There is an assembly in the nearby town this evening. I have no desire to be around people, but Bingley is excited to go and I feel that I should accompany him, though I cannot say why. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst do not wish to attend, but once it was confirmed that Richard and I were going, they changed their tune. It appears that behaving like a disgruntled dragon has no bearing on Miss Bingley's desire to be Mrs. Darcy.

The carriage trundled down the rutted drive, overfull and stinking of Miss Bingley's perfume. Someone should tell her that reeking of a hot house does not make anyone wish to draw closer to her. After yelling at her in the library a few days ago, I have kept my distance. I was genuinely sorry for wounding her feelings and raising my voice, but I could not sincerely apologize for the words themselves, for they were not untrue, merely unkind. I have been afraid that if I apologize, she will think there is some hope for a wedding, and the truth is that these few days when she has avoided me have been the most peaceful I have ever had in Bingley's home.

Now that she has decided I am a brute to be avoided—and really, she is not wrong—she has turned her attention to Richard. He is not pleased by this development, but Bingley and I both find it terribly amusing.

Richard spoke to me before we left for the assembly to ensure I knew how to behave. I do not know why he thinks I have lost my memory in addition to my temper, but I know how to speak to ladies in a ballroom. After all, that is what I have been doing for the last five years. I thought I would have a reprieve in the carriage, but I was wrong.

“Are you well?” whispered Richard in my ear.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“You were rubbing your heart again.”

“Was I?”

“Yes,” he replied, impatience in his tone. “Does it hurt?”

“No, it is like before. A strange sensation, that is all.”

“Hmm. We were speaking of Hertfordshire when it happened the first time.”

“Were we?” I asked. I had already forgotten.

“Yes. It makes me wonder if there is something afoot here.”

I raised a brow, but before I could answer, Miss Bingley interrupted.

“What are you whispering about so secretively, Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Nothing you ought to hear, Miss Bingley.” He managed to say it in such a way that it sounded flattering instead of dismissive and Miss Bingley preened.

I felt the urge to retch.

Finally, we pulled up in front of the assembly hall. It was a smallish building that already looked crowded. I stepped out of the carriage and immediately was assailed by a great urgency to be inside. It was as if a string were attached to my jacket and pulling me up the stairs. I hurried in, shooting a quick look over my shoulder at Richard. He quickly followed me, leaving Bingley and Hurst to escort the ladies.

I burst into the assembly hall, every sense alert. I did not know what I was looking for precisely, but somehow, I knew it was here. I searched the dancers cavorting about in the center of the floor, the musicians on the small stage, the ladies sitting in chairs along the wall. Where was she?

I had gone from looking for something nameless to looking for a lady. I did not know who I was looking for precisely, but I would know her when I saw her. Every sense told me she was near. But where?

“What are you looking for?” asked Richard.

“I do not know.” I continued to scan the room, searching the face of every woman I saw.

“Is it her?” asked Richard, his voice eager.

I wanted to say yes—something momentous was about to happen, I could feel it. I hoped it was her. But I could not be sure, so I remained silent.

We moved across the room and continued the search, staying out of sight as best we could while also trying to have a good view of the attendees.

“I checked the card room. There are no ladies present,” said Richard.

“Did you think there would be?” I asked absently, my eyes still roaming the room. There were some late arrivals. Perhaps she was one of them.

“I thought it best to leave no stone unturned,” replied Richard. “Any joy out here?”

I huffed in frustration. “None of the women present will do.” It was what we said when we were in public and did not want anyone to know the specifics of our discussion. I expected to hear Richard respond in some way, but instead, I heard an irritated huff directly behind me.

“Well! If we are so unsuitable, you needn’t bother attending our lowly assemblies.”

I whipped around, the back of my neck tingling. I was met with a pair of bright brown eyes, glimmering in anger. My legs nearly buckled, Richard’s arm coming out to grasp my elbow.

“It is you,” I whispered.

She looked at me in confusion, backing away slightly as if I were fit for Bedlam. I heard Richard gasp beside me.

“I know we have not been properly introduced, but I do not see the master of ceremonies about at the moment. May I introduce myself and my cousin?”

Thank heavens for Richard! She nodded warily, her expression cautious.

“I am Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of Elmhurst, and this is Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire.”

I was still staring at her like a milksop. She had a tiny smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose that could only be seen when one looked closely.

“Is there something on my face?” she asked, equal parts teasing and confused.

“Your face is perfection.”

Richard snorted in an attempt to swallow his laughter. I was making a horrible blunder of things.

The lady blushed. “Thank you,” she said with an odd look. “I am Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn. My mother is just

there.” She tilted her head towards a lady across the room who had remarkably good looks for a woman with a grown daughter.

“Do you have any other family here?” asked Richard.

“My father stayed home this evening, but my sisters are here.” She smirked. “All four of them.”

I thought she might have meant to scare me off, but little did she know there was nothing that would stop me from pursuing her.

I was about to say something clumsy when Richard stepped in again. “Are you the eldest?”

“No, that honor belongs to my sister, Jane. She is dancing there.” She scrunched up her face. “Though I do not know her partner.”

I followed her gaze to the dance floor. “That is Bingley, our host.”

“So you are staying at Netherfield?”

“Yes, we will be visiting for the autumn.”

Richard looked at me askance—we had decided no such thing, but now that I knew my Love was here, I would not leave until she left with me.

“And how do you find Hertfordshire?” she asked.

“Delightful.”

The lady likely thought I was half mad with my odd answers and awkward pauses, but I could not give up.

“Do you dance, Miss Elizabeth?” asked Richard.

“I do.” She gave him a charming smile and I had the urge to pull my cousin back by the scruff of his neck and throw him across the room.

“May I have the next dance?” I asked abruptly.

She turned away from my cousin and stared at me for a moment. “You may,” she finally said.

“I would like the following if it is free,” said Richard smoothly. She smiled and agreed, damn him.

7



Elizabeth Bennet

I had known this assembly would be more interesting than the usual simple country entertainment. A new neighbor—and a single man at that—would always cause excitement. I had not expected to return to the main room after repairing a loose hem to find two rather dashing gentlemen blocking the entrance. I had come from a little-used corridor in the hopes of slipping back into the room without anyone noticing my absence, but their location meant I would have to make my presence known in some way.

I was about to politely ask them to move when the blonde one said, “Any joy out here?”

Then the dark one replied in what I can only refer to as a snide tone, “None of the women present will do.”

Well! The nerve! As if all the women in Meryton were somehow obligated to meet some invisible standard he was placing upon us. My tongue got the better of me and I snapped, “Well! If we are so unsuitable, you needn’t bother attending our lowly assemblies.”

They turned to face me and I felt immediately mortified. I should not have spoken so to men I had not even been introduced to, and in such a tone besides! It is only that I was terribly frustrated. Lydia had stolen my slippers—again—and as her feet are larger than mine, she had stretched them to such a degree that I could hardly wear them. I had to resort to using my old ones, which were in horrible condition, and I had spent the better part of the afternoon trying to improve them with ribbons and shoe roses. They looked as ridiculous as I felt wearing them.

Lydia was unrepentant as she always is, and Mother did nothing to punish her, as she always does. On top of all of that, my hair had not cooperated with the pins, no matter how much Jane and Sarah worked it. Sarah was a skilled enough maid, but my hair was thick and had rather a lot of curl to it—and rainy days could make it even more impossible to manage.

Thus I felt like a new duckling. All fuzzy hair and floppy feet. Then to top it all off, Lydia—that girl was quickly becoming my least favorite sister—stepped on my hem as I tried to leave the carriage and ripped the trim clean away on the left side. My gown looking well on me was the only thing holding my thin veneer of civility together, and when I heard the fabric tear, I turned on Lydia with a growl.

“Have you not done enough today?”

She laughed—the donkey—and leapt out of the carriage, skipping after Kitty.

Mary had seen the entire thing and she pressed a small reticule into my hand. “Needle and thread are inside. Would you like assistance repairing your hem?”

It was kind of her to offer, but my temper was too frayed for company. “Thank you, Mary, but I can manage.”

We left the carriage and went inside, my sisters following my mother through the main entrance while I slipped away to a dark staircase, making my way to the retiring room. It had taken some time to make the repair, especially the bits that were difficult to reach while still wearing the garment I was sewing, but it was finally done.

That was how I found myself in this situation. Frustrated and hot, having spent the last twenty minutes in a room that had little in the way of ventilation and even less comfortable seating, sewing—and I hated sewing—while my sisters enjoyed the party.

I would laugh myself out of my pique—I always did—but in this moment, I wished the floor would open and swallow me whole.

It finally dawned on me that the blonde gentleman had requested an introduction, and after that was complete, the dark one was staring at me. Intently. I would have sworn I could feel his stare had I not known better.

I was rude, the dark one was uneasy, and the colonel was gallant. I smiled at him largely out of guilt, but also because he was trying so very hard to make this awkward meeting less awkward.

Mr. Darcy held out his hand for the dance and I took it, wondering what had possessed me to dance with a stranger I was not even properly introduced to. Oh, yes, I remember. It was my own pique and lack of politesse that led me here. I will remember to hold my tongue in future. And perhaps stay home if so many things are going wrong. Mayhap Providence did not wish me to attend the assembly and had tried its best to stop me, but contrary woman that I am, I persisted.

Now here I was, standing in front of a man who would not stop staring at me and wondering what I was to say to him during this interminable dance. Why could it not have been a jig? That at least would have kept us too busy to converse, and the exercise would have been wonderful for my nerves.

“Do you live nearby, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked.

“Yes, my father’s estate is less than two miles away.”

“Ah.”

We were silent again, neither of us knowing what to say.

Then Lydia—decidedly my least favorite sister—came careening by, squealing like a piglet. I flushed in embarrassment. It was bad enough that she behaved so in front of our neighbors and old friends. Did she have to show the new residents of Netherfield how very ill-mannered she was? Less than ten minutes after I had done the same? It was untenable.

Mr. Darcy cringed when Lydia’s squealing overwhelmed the music. Again.

I bristled. She was an embarrassment and annoying and full young to be out, but she was only having fun. She was not harming anyone and meant no insult by her behavior. Unlike this gentleman, who watched the women of Meryton like a judge and found them wanting.

I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin. “You’ll have to excuse my youngest sister. This is her first assembly and she is overcome with excitement.”

“Your sister?” he said, eyes wide and slightly horrified. “That young lady is your sister?”

He nearly choked on the word lady, but I magnanimously pretended not to notice. “Yes, Lydia. She will calm down with age.” *She had better, the little thief.*

He looked at me with a blank expression and I could not help but wonder what he was thinking.

“Are you fond of books, Miss Elizabeth?” he finally said.

“I am actually, though I cannot speak of books in a ballroom. My mind is filled with too many things to do the conversation justice.”

“Oh? What sort of things fill your mind?”

What an odd man. “I do not believe a gentleman has ever asked me that before.”

“Truly? What sort of gentleman would not want to know your thoughts?”

I turned about him, wondering what sort of man he was. He seemed very earnest, though I could not know why. He had only just met me.

“I cannot say what sort they are, but I suppose the usual kind.” I smiled at him—I do not know what possessed me to do so—and turned about.

I faced him again and we joined our hands, one below my waist and the other above my head. The pose brought us significantly closer together and I tilted my head up to see his face.

He was staring at me intently, his eyes steadily trained on mine. He continued to stare at me through the next steps, and by the time he released my hands, I was feeling quite warm.

What could he possibly be about?



The odd dance finally ended and I was quickly swept up by the other gentleman I had met this evening, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Thankfully, the next song was a jig and I enjoyed hopping about my new partner, who was surprisingly light of foot. We laughed and pranced about like fools and by the end of it, I was sure the good colonel would make an excellent friend.

He led me to the refreshment table afterwards and brought me punch, and we had a friendly conversation for the next few minutes. I think I could like him very well if he were within

my grasp. Alas, my small dowry and lack of great beauty were unlikely to attract one so high.

“Shall I escort you to your mother?”

“That will not be necessary, sir. I see my friend just there.” I nodded to where Charlotte was weaving her way through the crush.

“Thank you for the dance, Miss Elizabeth.” He bowed and smiled charmingly. “I have enjoyed making your acquaintance. I trust we will meet again soon.”

He walked away just as Charlotte pushed through the last few feet to reach my side. She was nearly knocked over by one of the younger Goulding boys, but she righted herself just in time.

“Eliza!” she cried.

“Yes, Charlotte?”

“Why are there so many people here? Goodness! It was nothing like this at the summer assembly.”

It was the closest Charlotte had ever come to sounding like Lydia, but I would not upset her by saying so. “Everyone is home for the harvest and flush with new funds. And the weather is very fine for an assembly. It was horribly hot in summer.”

Charlotte made an eloquent expression. “Hmm. Who have you been dancing with? I have never seen either of them before.”

I sighed. I quickly told her the story of my ripped hem and intemperate words to the gentlemen. She laughed and tsked as I had known she would, and then looked calculatingly at the gentlemen.

“The colonel is dancing with Miss Bingley. Have you met her yet?”

“No, I have not had the chance. She seems a trifle...” I did not want to call her high and mighty based off nothing but her facial expressions during one dance and her ornate attire. But that did not stop me from thinking it.

“I agree,” she said with a look. This synchronicity of mind was one of the many reasons we were friends. “Her sister seems more approachable, though how she wears so much lace without constantly itching I do not understand.”

I looked to where Charlotte gestured. Lord, but that was a lot of lace! I could only pray my mother would not get any ideas and have us all sewing new lace onto our gowns come morning.

“The man next to her is her husband, Mr. Hurst. Miss Bingley shall keep house for her brother, though I do not know why he did not ask the elder sister. She surely has more experience.”

I looked at Miss Bingley as she simpered at something the colonel had said and he tried to discreetly roll his eyes. “Miss Bingley likely wished for the role so she might impress the single gentlemen in the house.”

Charlotte shook her head. “If only men were attracted to women because of their skills at hosting.”

I nearly snorted my punch. “Charlotte! Have a care! I nearly spat punch down my gown.”

Charlotte smiled insincerely. “Forgive me, friend. I will wait for you to swallow next time.”

“I thank you.”



“Well Jane, what did you think of our new neighbors?” I asked as I plaited her hair before bed.

“I found them agreeable.”

“Even the ladies?” I asked, though I knew what she would say. Jane thought everyone agreeable, even when they were anything but.

“I have no reason not to believe so. They are terribly elegant, are they not?”

“If one calls half a stone of lace elegant, then yes.”

“Lizzy!”

I laughed. “Forgive me, Jane. I could not help myself.”

“I saw you dancing with the gentlemen from Netherfield. How did you find them?”

“I found them agreeable,” I said, imitating Jane’s graceful voice.

She swatted at me with the hairbrush.

“Very well, I shall tell you. I found Mr. Bingley friendly and amiable, and certainly taken with you.”

Jane blushed and looked down. “He was very kind to dance with me twice.”

“Hmm. I’m sure it was kindness that led him to it.”

I knew she was lost in thought for she did not react.

“Mr. Darcy was entirely too serious for a country assembly. He watched me so intently...” I shuddered at the memory. “I could not imagine living with such a personality every day.”

“And what of the colonel?”

I felt my cheeks staining slightly. “I liked him very well. He is amiable, and I think a kind man, though I do not know him well as yet.”

“Ah. Perhaps he is at Netherfield having a similar conversation with his cousin, saying he likes you very well, too.”

“I doubt it. I thought he was wealthy by his clothes, but then Charlotte told me he is the son of the Earl of Matlock. One so high would never consider a daughter of Longbourn.”

Jane tilted her head prettily. “Perhaps, but love can make a person do strange things.”

I shook my head. “I do not like it when you tease, Jane. It is so unlike you that it makes me worry.”

She smiled at our old game. Jane could be just as mischievous as the rest of us, she simply behaved better much of the time. That did not mean she did not know how to tease and taunt—she simply chose not to.

“Perhaps we will see the party from Netherfield soon,” she said.

“You mean the gentlemen from Netherfield. I do not care a whit if I see the ladies.”

Jane sighed and looked heavenward, likely asking for guidance about what to do with such an impertinent sister.

8



Richard Fitzwilliam

We were not inside Netherfield more than a minute when Darcy grabbed the back of my jacket and propelled me into the library. The ladies watched in astonishment as he towed me away, and I smiled and said goodnight, acting as if I was not being force-marched by my rage-filled cousin.

I would try not to break any of Bingley's furnishings, but the look on Darcy's face told me we would come to blows this night.

He slammed the door behind us and threw me on the ground before the fireplace. Lord, but he was strong when he was in a lather!

“What were you thinking!” he bellowed. “You could have ruined everything!”

I raised my hands in surrender. “All is—”

“Do not placate me!” he interrupted. He stomped across the room, pacing in long, great steps.

I took advantage of his distraction and rose from the floor, moving behind a large wingback chair where I removed the knife I always kept on my person. Hopefully I would not need it to defend myself, but it was best to be prepared.

He paced for several minutes, his breath coming in loud huffs that could be heard from the drawing room. He reminded me of a stallion, stamping about the paddock in a show of irritation, only much, much worse.

I would have to think quickly on how to calm him.

Darcy stopped and looked at me, a wild light in his eyes. “You cannot take her from me, Richard. I need her.”

I stumbled back, I was so surprised. “Darcy, I would never, could never, take her from you. I was only trying to be friendly. She is yours. I have no desire to compete for the lady.”

He stared at me again for a while, then nodded once and stomped out of the room.

I sank into the chair I had been hiding behind, my breath leaving in a rush. That had been entirely too close. I had not seen Darcy so enraged since the Curse first took hold of him.



I was more than a little impressed with my cousin's control. I had been certain he would thrash me until his ire was spent. We have had a few tussles in the past few years. He has never done any real harm, and he is always apologetic afterwards,

but it is frightening to behold. My cousin was always steadfast and reliable before the Curse. To see him losing his control so easily is still jarring, even after all this time.

As I made my way to my room, I knew what I had to do. I had to help Fitz win fair lady, or he would be doomed. Miss Elizabeth seemed a nice enough girl. Surely it would not prove too difficult.



I walked into Darcy's room the next morning with purpose.

“Cousin, I have a plan.”

He looked at me blearily, still half buried beneath the bedcovers. “What are you doing here so early? The sun is barely rising.”

I ignored his complaints. “I have been thinking. In order for Miss Elizabeth to fall in love with you, we must show her your best attributes.”

He looked at me oddly. “And what are those, pray tell? My uncertain temper or my tainted lineage?”

“Tsk tsk, Cousin. No need to be negative. I have made a list!” I held it aloft and walked next to the bed. He snatched it out of my hand as I had known he would.

Writ across the top in bold letters were the words: **Make Miss E Fall in Love with FD**

“Are you serious? How is this going to work?” he asked, his expression doubtful.

“It will. We will show her your good side. You will be all the best parts of yourself. She cannot help but fall in love with you.”

“So you say. What do you suppose are the best parts of myself? My grumpiness?”

I would have liked to throw something at him—nothing that would injure. Perhaps a pillow—but that would defeat my purpose here today.

“I would not begin with the grumpiness. It is likely to turn a lady away. However, I have listed some of your better traits, if you would care to read the list.”

He sighed, then turned the paper to the light and read aloud. “Good landlord, excellent horseman—I do not think a lady cares how good a rider a man is. What does that have to do with his skills as a husband?”

“If a man is cruel to animals, so will he be to his wife. We are showing her that you will be a good caretaker.”

“She is not a piece of property to be watched over!”

“That is another thing!” I said with a snap. “Progressive views of the rights of women. Tell me, Cousin, if you had the power to make women equal to men in some ways, say with admission to university and the rights to hold property, would you give it to them?”

He thought for a moment. "I do not see why not. Lord knows there are enough idiotic fops at Cambridge. Mayhap the presence of women would improve them."

"There you have it. You are a champion of women." I snatched the list from his hands and pulled out my pencil.

"Really, Fitz, do you honestly think this is going to work?"

"It cannot hurt. And who knows, maybe she will be impressed by your devotion. Many women dream of a good husband and precious few actually get one. It could not hurt to show her how steadfast you are in your affections."

"I only met the lady last night! She will think me fit for Bedlam if I declare my unending love for her immediately after meeting. This is not a fairy tale!"

"I did not mean right away, you dunce! After she has come to know you, and you her. Besides, you do love her already, do you not?"

He rubbed his chest just over his heart, as he had done when we spoke of Hertfordshire before.

"I cannot explain it. There is a tether connecting me to her. I feel it, pulling at me. I cannot say that I love her for herself just yet, but I know that I *will* love her. It is a certainty I cannot escape."

"That is exactly the sort of thing ladies like to hear."

His expression said he did not believe me, but his eyes held hope.

9



Fitzwilliam Darcy

Richard was likely half mad, but there was a chance he was right, so I set myself to achieving my goal. Winning the heart of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

I had always felt winning my Love would not be easy, and after her response to what she overheard last night, I thought I was right. She was no docile lamb, waiting to be plucked from the flock. She would put me through my paces and not think twice about it. I had to admit, I admired her spirit. I was worried though that such a gregarious person as she would find me rather dull. I was more silent than talkative, and I thought too long before I spoke. More than one acquaintance had told me it was an irksome habit.

Would such a vibrant woman find anything appealing in a man like me? I confess I had my doubts. But I had to try.

I had to believe that she could be won. It was predestined, after all. The Curse was not entirely cruel. My parents had been wildly happy together, as had my grandparents. All my

cousins and uncles had found their Loves and wooed them successfully.

I could not be the only Darcy in three generations who could not successfully wed his Love. I simply could not.



Being the military man he was, Richard suggested we begin with reconnaissance. To that end, we called at Lucas Lodge, the home of Sir William Lucas. He was a loquacious man who knew what everyone in the neighborhood was about. I was confident Richard could get him talking about the Bennets. His eldest daughter was an intimate friend of Miss Elizabeth's. With any luck, we could find out more from her as well.

We were welcomed into Lucas Lodge with surprise and smiles. We had asked Bingley to join us, though he did not take much convincing. He enjoyed being around people and he was anxious to establish himself in the neighborhood.

“Come in, come in!” cried Sir William, having greeted us in the entrance hall. “I will call for tea.”

We followed him into a drawing room that was caught somewhere between trying to be impressive and needing to be comfortable. We sat on three separate chairs facing a small sofa where Sir William sat. Bingley carried the conversation, as I had hoped he would. Thankfully, he was also interested in a Bennet daughter and he wasted no time in asking of the family.

“Oh, the Bennets have been here for years,” our host told us. “Seven generations I think, though it could be six, or even eight. Nine would not be out of the question.”

“Have you known Mr. Bennet since childhood then?” asked Richard.

Thank heavens! Sir William was the sort of man who could wax long on the most mundane subject. My companions were adept at conversing, and Richard especially knew how to move a conversation along at a good clip.

“No, no, I did not move here until I married Lady Lucas. Our Charlotte was just a wee babe then.” There was movement at the door and he looked up. “Ah, there she is. My eldest daughter, Charlotte. The gentlemen have come to call, dear.”

He was a master of stating the obvious. Miss Lucas was polite and said all that was proper. Her mother bustled in behind her and sat next to Sir William. I tried to look welcoming so Miss Lucas would sit near me. I wished to ask her about Miss Elizabeth if I could. I must have achieved my goal for she settled in the chair adjacent to mine.

I had hoped to hear from Miss Lucas, but her parents, in combination with my talkative companions, would not let her get a word in edgewise.

What followed was the most inane conversation of my life. When I found myself in such situations, I usually let my mind wander and thought of other things. Letters I needed to write, things I wished to discuss with my steward. Since the Bennets were peppered throughout the conversation—though not half

as much as I would like—I had to pay attention. Unfortunately.

“And then she fell right into the back of the wagon!” cried Sir William, slapping his knee as he laughed.

“I’m afraid my mind wandered,” I whispered to Miss Lucas. “What is your father speaking of?”

“The time Miss Elizabeth snuck into the hayloft and fell asleep.”

“Oh?”

She nodded and smiled fondly. “She thought it would be a sweet spot for a nap. She woke as the farm hands were pitching the hay into a wagon below and rolled right over the ledge into the wagon herself. Mrs. Bennet was terribly put out.”

“But Miss Elizabeth was not?”

“No, she thought it all a grand adventure. Other than being a little sore, she was uninjured. She had landed in a pile of hay, after all.”

“Yes, it could have been much worse.”

She nodded. “She got into a great many other scrapes, but I will let her tell you those herself.”

She had a look that made me think she knew what I was about, though she could hardly know the entirety.

“Very well,” I said, “I will ask her to tell me herself.”

Miss Lucas smiled in satisfaction and I returned my attention to her parents.



The next day, we called at Longbourn. We were ushered into a room that had been hastily tidied. Miss Mary had a bit of thread stuck to the side of her skirts, and Miss Kitty was holding a bonnet behind her back. I imagined she was remaking it, and that was the cause of the ribbons that peeked out from beneath the cushion of her chair.

“We thought we might convince the ladies to take a stroll,” said Bingley. “It is a beautiful autumn day.”

It was indeed a lovely day. The sun was shining, the leaves were golden, and the air was crisp without being too cold.

“I have heard there is a wonderful walk to a mount nearby. We thought your daughters might be kind enough to show us,” I said.

Richard looked at me in surprise, though I did not know why. It was not as if I did not know how to speak. Though to be fair, I had been increasingly taciturn lately.

“I know the best path,” said Miss Elizabeth. She looked to her mother who nodded her head.

“Wrap up warm, girls,” said Mrs. Bennet. “You don’t want to catch a chill.”

Miss Kitty coughed and her mother glared at her. “Kitty, I have need of you here.”

Miss Kitty deflated, but I thought she might also be a little relieved. She did not strike me as the active sort, though she likely did not want to be left behind.

“Lydia, you may walk with the colonel,” Mrs. Bennet declared.

Miss Lydia beamed and my cousin looked mildly horrified. Lydia Bennet could not be more than sixteen years of age, and my cousin had recently turned thirty. What was Mrs. Bennet thinking? If anything, a younger lady should have been paired with Bingley. He was the youngest gentleman present and the least jaded.

The ladies scampered off to collect their cloaks and bonnets while we waited with Mrs. Bennet and Miss Kitty. Miss Mary had retreated to the connecting room without a word. It was a short interaction, but I thought I had gained a glimpse of what life was like at Longbourn.

Miss Kitty was put upon, Miss Mary was ignored, Miss Lydia was favored and likely spoiled, Miss Bennet was genteel and put first—her right as the eldest and best-mannered—and Miss Elizabeth, ah, Miss Elizabeth! I did not know yet how she fit into her family’s inner workings.

Soon we were all in the entrance hall, pulling on our gloves and preparing to walk out the door when a masculine voice said, “Where are you off to, girls?”

“We are walking to the mount, sir,” said Miss Bennet. “May I introduce Mr. Darcy and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

She performed the introductions and we all bowed and said how nice it was to meet one another, etcetera. I wished to get on with my walk with Miss Elizabeth, but I also knew that Mr. Bennet could very well be the key to attaining my heart's desire, so I could not afford to be rude to him.

Mr. Bennet asked if any of us played chess, and upon my cousin claiming I excelled at the game, an appointment was set for the next day. Miss Elizabeth smiled indulgently at her father and he returned it with a gleam in his eye. Now I knew her place in the family. She was her father's favorite.

That meant I would have to be more than polite tomorrow at our game. I would have to be friendly and agreeable. Dammit.



Bingley quickly fell to the back of the group with Miss Bennet, his eyes glowing as he spoke to her. He had found his next angel. I would have to speak to him to ensure he did not break Miss Elizabeth's sister's heart. The ladies would not look kindly on the residents of Netherfield if one of the gentlemen behaved callously. We already had Miss Bingley and the insipid Mrs. Hurst to contend with. We did not need any more obstacles.

My cousin walked with Miss Lydia. He held her back so I could walk ahead with Miss Elizabeth, but the girl was so loud I could hear her perfectly from forty paces. I quickened my pace in an attempt to outstrip them.

“I am a good walker sir, but I can not change the length of my legs.”

I looked at my companion in horror when I saw she was nearly running to keep up with my long strides.

“Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. It was unforgivably rude of me.”

“It was hardly unforgiveable, Mr. Darcy. We may walk swiftly. But reasonable strides, please.”

Her smile put me at ease and I took a deep breath, quieting the voice in my mind that said I was already making a dreadful hash of things. I shortened my steps and looked at the landscape surrounding me.

“Hertfordshire is beautiful countryside. I can imagine it is even brighter in spring.”

“You imagine correctly, though autumn has always been my favorite season.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

She looked thoughtful. “I do not know exactly. The air is crisp and filled with the scent of bonfires. The leaves are colorful and crunch beneath my feet. The wind is light but bracing.” She shrugged. “It is a feast for the senses.”

“I had no idea you were such a poet.”

She laughed. “I am no poet. Far from it. I simply enjoy nature.”

She smiled at me then, the light making her eyes look luminous.

“Your eyes look almost green in this light,” I said without thinking.

She flushed. “Yes, they are changeable like that. They usually look brown, but in certain lights, more golden, and occasionally green. You must be lucky, Mr. Darcy, for it rarely happens.”

I nearly snorted at the thought of me—a Cursed Darcy—being lucky. I lightly chuckled instead.

“I am not lucky, I assure you. But it is nice that you think so.”

She looked confused, but I pressed on. “Do you often walk to the mount?”

“Yes, I do. My temper suffers if I do not have enough exercise.” She gave me a look and I could not help but smile at her.

“I am the same. When it rains for days on end, and I am confined to the house, my cousin always insists we fence in the ballroom. It is the only way to keep me pleasant, I fear.”

“What do you do when your cousin is not in residence?”

“I pace the gallery. Incessantly.”

She smiled and shook her head. “You are lucky you are a man and not beholden to your mother.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I were to pace incessantly, as I sometimes wish to do, my mother would say I was driving her mad and tell me to sit down.”

“So what do you do when you are confined indoors and cannot pace?”

“I play the pianoforte very ill.”

I smiled again—I was turning into Bingley. “How ill?”

She barked a surprised laugh and looked at me with a new interest in her eyes. “You have likely heard worse, but I can guarantee you’ve heard better.”

“I look forward to hearing you sometime.”

She looked at me suspiciously.

“To confirm your suspicions, of course. Mayhap I have been listening to inferior players my entire life and you will be the best I’ve heard.”

She brought her hand to her mouth and I heard what might have been the start of a snort. She cleared her throat. “Very well, Mr. Darcy. I am certain my mother will end today’s visit with a dinner invitation, and I shall play for you then. But do not say I didn’t warn you.”

“The warning is duly noted.”

We continued on in the same fashion till we reached the top of the mount and traipsed back down it again. I marveled at my own ability to converse. I had not spoken so much in one hour since my years at Cambridge. Surprisingly, I did not feel

the fatigue conversing often caused in me. I had an odd energy coursing through me and felt the need to ride across the fields, the wind in my hair and the autumn sunshine on my back. It would be even better if Miss Elizabeth were on a horse beside me...

As we left Longbourn—a dinner invitation for the next day given and accepted—I mounted my horse and rode sedately to the drive and into the field that would connect us to Netherfield's lands.

“Anyone care for a race?” I asked.

“Always!” cried Bingley.

“Ridiculous question!” said Richard.

Then we were off, tearing across the fields, the wind billowing our coats behind our backs.



Richard came in my room that night as I was writing in my journal.

“You seemed to get on well with Miss Elizabeth today,” he said.

I could not stop the smile that spread across my face. “She is delightful. I could not have chosen a better woman for myself.”

“Good, I am glad to hear it.”

He settled into the chair by the fire as I continued scratching away in my book. It wasn't until I put my quill down that he spoke again.

“Nightmare caused more trouble in the stables today.”

I sighed. “What is it now?”

“He kicked at the boy who tried to put fresh water in his box.”

“Was he hurt? Why was he not told to leave him alone?”

“I gathered he was not present when the head groom told everyone to leave him be. And no, he is not hurt. Your hellion of a horse did not make purchase, though he scared the wits out of the boy.”

“Do you know the boy's name?”

“Young Simon, they call him.”

“Thank you, Fitz.”

I rose and made my way out the door and to the stables to visit my recalcitrant horse. My father had gifted me a black Thoroughbred when I finished at Cambridge. I had not known it would be the last gift from my father, but it had been, and I could not bear to part with the beast. He was called Night on account of his deep black coloring, but his temperamental attitude had earned him the moniker Nightmare.

Of course, only Richard and I knew what had truly happened. Prior to the Curse, Night had been a perfectly normal horse. Spirited and wild, yes, but he had been coming

along and was on his way to being the perfect mount. Then the Curse came and Night began to shift as well.

The angrier I was, the angrier he became. His black moods began to follow my own, and it did not take long to realize that the horse was following my lead. It would not be the first time such a thing had happened, and I could hardly abandon the animal when I was the one who had ruined him for anyone else. Besides, we understood one another.

I entered the stables with quiet steps so as not to disturb the animals within.

“Good evenin’, sir.” The groom tipped his hat at me and I nodded.

“Where is the boy who was frightened by Night. Young Simon I think he is called?”

The groom stood a little taller, his eyes wary. “Now he didn’t mean no harm. He hadn’t heard we wasn’t supposed to tend to the stallion. T’were just an accident.”

“I am not angry with him.” I tried to keep my voice level so he would know I spoke the truth and to keep the animals calm. A Cursed Darcy, in a mood, and in a stable full of horses was a terrible idea. “I wanted to ensure he was all right.”

“Course, sir.” He turned and slipped up the narrow stairs, still suspicious of my motives.

A few minutes later, a tow-headed boy in a threadbare cap stepped gingerly out, his eyes on the ground.

“Are you Simon?” I asked.

“Yessir.” His voice was so quiet I could hardly hear it.

“I hear you had a little trouble with Night today.”

He nodded.

“In future, if you see he is in need of water or grain, please alert my coachman, James. He is one of the few people Night will tolerate.”

The boy nodded, still not looking at me.

“You know, he is so ornery my cousin calls him Nightmare.”

The boy looked up, a crooked smile on his face.

“If a colonel in His Majesty’s army cannot handle the horse, you should not feel bad that you could not.”

He nodded, looking at me this time. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crown. “Here. For your trouble. Mind you don’t lose it.”

His eyes widened and he stared at the coin in wonder. “Thank ye, sir!”

I smiled. Oh, to be young and innocent again! “You are very welcome, young man. You know, I could use some assistance while I am here at Netherfield.”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye for a moment, and I saw the old groom listening just inside the stairwell. Good. I was glad the boy had someone to look out for him.

“Night is very fond of apples, but he prefers them to be a little on the dry side. There is an orchard on the east side of the property.”

“I know it, sir.”

“Good. I would like you to gather apples and set them on a windowsill for a day, just so they begin to dry, and then put them in a bag outside the box for me to give to Night. If there are none to be found there, you could ask Cook if she can spare any. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yessir!”

“Good. I will be happy to pay for your services, of course. Now off you run. A child your age needs adequate sleep or you shan’t grow as you should.”

His eyes widened and he stared at me for a moment, then raced up the stairs.

The old groom stepped out of the doorway and settled an assessing gaze on me.

“That were kind of ye, sir.”

I shrugged. “It is good to reward hard work. Bingley said there was an orphan working in the stables. I assume that is young Simon?”

“Aye. His parents died when he were a babe. He lived with his uncle for a bit on Mulberry Farm, but he died, too, poor lad. Now he’s all alone in the world. The owners said he could stay on in the stables if he made himself useful.”

I nodded. I did not know why I cared about a child not under my care or protection, but I could not see his plight and do nothing. Besides, he had been kind to my horse.

“Can the child read?”

“I don’t rightly know, but I doubt it. Nothin’ more than basic letters if he can.”

“I see. Thank you—I’m sorry, I just realized I do not know your name.”

“I’m Josiah, sir. Pleased to meet ye.”

“You as well. I thank you for your assistance.”

I walked back to the house, wondering what could be done for the boy. But my father had always taught me that you never knew what lay beneath someone’s exterior. Wealth and a title might hide a black heart, and a humble farmer might be the soul of kindness. It did not do to judge without knowing more.

The Curse had taught me the truth of that. I was everything genteel on the outside—the picture of a wealthy gentleman. But I knew the depths I could sink to. I knew I was one bad temper away from doing unthinkable things. I had nearly come to blows with my own cousin two nights ago for daring to smile at the lady I wanted!

No, position did not make the man. That I was certain of.

10



Elizabeth Bennet

“**Y**ou seemed very cozy on your walk with Mr. Darcy,”
said Jane.

We were in the still room hanging herbs to dry. It was just the two of us, thankfully, and she had a teasing note to her voice that I could not like.

“I would not use that word, but I did enjoy the walk. What of you? I have seen molasses move faster than you and Mr. Bingley. Did you enjoy your privacy?” There. Now she could answer questions.

“Yes, I did. We talked on so many subjects! He is everything a young man ought to be.”

“And conveniently rich. We mustn’t overlook that.”

“Lizzy! You know that will not overly influence my decision.”

“I know, but it is helpful, is it not?”

Jane chuckled and shook her head at me. “You say the most ridiculous things.”

“If there were two men to choose between, and all else were equal, would you prefer the rich one or the poor one?”

“But all else is never equal. There must be one I liked more than the other. That would be the one I would choose.”

I rolled my eyes. Even in a hypothetical, Jane must play the peacemaker.

“Well, I would prefer having money to not having it,” I said, “but I must agree that I would choose the man I liked more. Though people change so much throughout their lives. Having something solid like a good income might be a comfort.”

“You sound more like Charlotte Lucas than my sister. What have you done with Lizzy?”

I laughed awkwardly and looked down. “I have been thinking lately, about mother and father and how they ended up in the marriage they have.”

“What made you think of that?” she asked.

“Aunt Phillips said something when I stopped by her house a few days ago, about how in love our parents had been when they were first wed, and it made me think. If Mamma had not spent the last twenty years worrying about the entail, would she be a different person? Some parts of her personality must necessarily be fixed, but it is not hard to imagine she would be calmer and less anxious. We might not have all been put out at fifteen, we might have had a governess.”

“Having a brother would have created a great many changes.” Jane looked at me thoughtfully and I knew she would begin asking questions I did not want to answer. “Are you thinking of these things because you are wondering about the married state for yourself, and you do not want a marriage like our parents’?”

I was quiet as I hung up the last of the lavender. “I am not certain, but it has been on my mind. With all the talk of Netherfield and the eligible men occupying it, how could I not think of marriage?”

Jane sighed. “Mama has enjoyed speculating. It has been on my mind as well.”

“Do you truly like Mr. Bingley, Jane? I know you only met him a few days ago, but you spent over an hour walking with him today. Surely that gave you some insight into his character.”

“I think him a good man, though he is young. But perhaps that is a good thing.”

“How so?”

“I have heard the married women complaining that older men are more set in their ways and do not allow their younger wives as much control in the household or with invitations. It sounds...difficult.”

“It does. I have heard similar complaints. It does make one wonder...At what age does a man become stuck in his ways? Thirty? Five and thirty? Forty?”

“Lizzy! Do be serious!”

“I am perfectly serious, Jane. It would be useful to know!”

Jane smiled and tied the final bunch of herbs and wiped her hands. “That is the last of it. Shall we go in?”

“Let’s. I promised Mr. Darcy I would play for him tomorrow evening and I need to practice so I do not embarrass myself too badly.”

“Now that is a promising prospect. Mr. Darcy danced with you at the assembly, and he was very quick to lead you away from the group today. He seems taken with you, sister.”

I sighed. My sister was likely right, but I did not know whether I wanted her to be. “Mr. Darcy does display certain signs of attraction, but does that mean he is interested in anything other than a flirtation in the country?”

“Lizzy! He cannot be after anything dishonorable.”

“I was not suggesting *that*, Jane. Merely saying that Mr. Darcy is a wealthy man and may see himself as too high to consider me. That is all.”

“I do not know. You did not see the way he was looking at you. His eyes were on you every time I looked his way.”

“That does not necessarily mean anything.” I said the words, but my heart whispered that they were a lie—that Mr. Darcy meant a great deal by his actions, but I silenced the notion. We barely knew one another. There could be nothing between us.

“Do you enjoy his company?” asked Jane.

“I did today. Though at the assembly he was entirely different.”

“Perhaps he is better in a small group than in an overcrowded ballroom.”

“Perhaps.”

“What of the Colonel? You had liked him after the assembly, but now his cousin seems to have laid claim to you.”

“No one has laid claim to me,” I said. “I enjoyed the colonel’s conversation when we danced, but I barely spoke two words to him today. I cannot decide which of them I like better with so little information.”

“I will repeat your own words. You walked with him for over an hour today. Surely you have some idea of your interest?”

“Jane! It is cruel of you to use my words against me in so logical a manner. How am I to argue your point?”

Jane laughed. “It is simple, sister. If you like him, continue to get to know him. If you do not, avoid being alone with him.”

“Your advice is sound.” I knew what my sister said was correct, but when I thought of walking with Mr. Darcy, my skin felt flushed and my heart sped up. When I thought of avoiding him in future, I felt a sadness that made no sense settling over me.

Who was Mr. Darcy? And why was I reacting to him in such a way?



The following day, the Netherfield party was to join us for dinner. Mother had not had time to prepare a proper dinner party with more of our neighbors present, so it would be a small number.

My mother was all aflutter at the thought of three eligible gentlemen in her home. She was certain she could convince at least one of them to marry one of us, likely Jane, and she went round and round about which man would be best suited for her most beautiful daughter. Father enjoyed teasing her about it far longer than was humorous.

“You should seat Mr. Darcy next to Jane, dear. He has the best income.”

Mother was all atwitter.

“Though the colonel is the son of an earl. It would be something to have noble relations.”

She fanned her face and produced her salts at that.

“Mr. Bingley is also a good choice, and he is young, so Jane will have no trouble training him up as she likes. And his lower status may make him more likely to propose.”

Poor mama nearly had apoplexy.

I glared at Papa and he finally left my mother alone. It took Jane more than half an hour to get her calm again. That was when I decided to slip into my father’s book room.

“Papa?”

“Yes, Lizzy?”

“I wish to make a request.”

“Yes?”

“Please keep Lydia above stairs for dinner this evening.”

His brows raised comically, but I could not find it in me to laugh.

“Why would I do that?”

He acted confused, but I saw his eyes dancing from across the room.

I took a deep breath and moved to stand just across from his desk. “She is full young to be out, and if Mama were not so anxious about the entail, she would still be in the schoolroom. Mama cannot see the wrong in Lydia’s behavior, but you can. I know you can.” I would not take my own father to task, but I would make my point. “She was obnoxious at the assembly and more than one neighbor commented on her behavior. She is the same at our Aunt Phillips’. She will be even more at ease in her own home.”

He sighed. I knew what he would say. That there was no harm in a little silliness. That we could laugh at our neighbors and be laughed at in turn. I closed my eyes in preparation for the dismissal.

“She will be impossible if she is excluded,” he said.

“She will humiliate us if she is included.”

He gave me the look he had been levelling at me since I was a small child getting into scrapes. “You were fifteen once, too, you know.”

“Yes, and I was not prepared to be out. Neither was Jane. We both would have preferred to wait.”

That seemed to surprise him. “Truly? Were you not anxious to be in company?”

I stopped myself before I snorted, but an unladylike sound made its way out. “Not at all! I was nervous and unprepared. I would have much preferred more time to study. Had I met an eligible gentleman then, I would not have wished to marry. Look at Lydia! Can you imagine her being a wife and mother? She spends her days remaking bonnets and looking through ladies’ journals. She is not ready to be out, and neither were the rest of us.”

My father sat back in his chair and rested his hands on his abdomen. “I had no idea,” he said quietly. “Perhaps I should have stopped your mother.”

It was as close to an apology as my father ever came. Not that I needed one—I would take change over apologies any day. “Thank you, sir. Lydia is not ready to be out, and I cannot help but think she does not truly wish to be, she simply does not want to be left behind.”

“I have heard your sister speak of the officers she saw in Stoke often enough to think she *does* wish to be out.”

“Dreaming and imagining are very different from experiencing,” I said softly. “There would be no harm in telling Kitty and Lydia they have had a soft come out, and that they might attend events with close friends and family, but not larger gatherings where strangers are present. It would be a fair compromise.”

“It would be a lower bill from the dressmakers,” he mumbled.

I thought he was considering my idea, so I said nothing and let him ruminate.

“What has brought all this on?” he finally asked.

“What do you mean? I have always thought Lydia was not ready to be out. I have said as much before.”

He looked thoughtful. “Yes, but why today? Is it the gentlemen coming to dine this evening? Are you afraid your sister shall frighten them off? If a little silliness is too much for him, he does not have the mettle for marriage.” He smiled sardonically, his lip curling in that way it did when he was impressed with his own wit.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Papa,” I said seriously. “You dislike Town and Uncle Gardiner cannot introduce us to many gentlemen when we visit him. How are we supposed to find husbands? Men are scarce as it is, and we are five sisters with small portions. At least one of us needs to marry well. How many eligible men come to Meryton? Netherfield was vacant for two years before

Mr. Bingley took it. He is showing an interest in Jane, and she likes him. How will they know if there could be more if Lydia is loudly demanding everyone dance all evening?”

He looked at me with something approaching sympathy. “I know your mother goes on about the hedgerows, but her dowry is intact, and I have a little put by. Not much, but it will help. With a little assistance from your uncles, you will live quite comfortably.”

I reeled back, shocked at how cavalier he was being. Is that truly what he thought? That we would all be content to live out our days in a cramped cottage, with few comforts and no carriage, our station in society declining with our years?

I swallowed and tried to think of something to say. My own father! Refusing to do the most simple things to ensure his daughters’ security. Essentially telling me that the desired security, and therefore his action, was not necessary! How could he?

“I must dress for dinner,” I said, stumbling to the door.

He said something, but there was a rushing sound in my ears that prevented me from hearing him. I ran to the garden and made my way to my favorite tree, throwing myself against the trunk like a heroine in a gothic novel. I could not care that I was being ridiculous. I was overwhelmed and my feelings would find their way out. I sobbed pathetically, wondering why I had even bothered with my father. I had always ignored my family’s bad behavior before. Why could I not now?

“Here,” said a warm voice on my left.

I jumped, shocked to see Mr. Darcy standing not three feet from me, a handkerchief in his outstretched hand. I took it with numb fingers, wiping my wet cheeks and turning away to blow my nose. I stuffed it into my pocket, then turned back to face him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Your father invited me to come before dinner for a game of chess.”

The chess game! How could I have forgotten? The day before rushed back to me, and how my father had come out of the book room not to see who was spending the afternoon with his daughters. No! He wished to see if there was any entertainment for himself. How had I not seen his selfishness before now?

“Is there anything I may bring you? Shall I fetch your sister?”

I shook my head. “No, Mr. Darcy. I thank you. I was upset by my feelings, but I am well enough.”

“May I ask what troubles you? I am a good listener,” he said.

His awkwardness from our first meeting had returned and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. But he was also friendly like he had been yesterday. Did I make him nervous? It would be odd if I did, but perhaps it was so.

I took his arm—quite presumptuous of me—and began walking slowly away from the house. “There is a wilderness just there if you would like to walk with me.”

His eyes brightened and he pressed his hand over mine on his arm. "I would be happy to escort you."

As we moved through the garden gate, he pulled me closer to him. "You are cold!" he said, noticing my shivers. "Here, take my greatcoat."

He quickly shrugged out of a large caped coat and draped it over my shoulders before I could protest. I was going to give it back, but it was so warm and soft I could not bear to.

"Thank you, sir." I sank into the soft lining, pushing my arms through the sleeves and pulling the front about my waist. "I must get a similar one for myself the next time I am in Town. I do not care if it is not the fashion for ladies. Freezing in a thin pelisse is ridiculous."

"I could not agree more. I've always made sure my sister has fur-lined cloaks for winter. Freezing for fashion is the height of stupidity."

"Then we are in agreement." I smiled as much as I could muster with my feelings still twisted up and snuggled deeper into the luxurious coat.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, his voice gentle.

If I had doubted Mr. Darcy was attracted to me, his behavior now made his feelings quite clear. He was all solicitousness, patient and gentle and caring. What he planned to do about that attraction, I could not know.

"Somewhat, thank you."

I stopped walking suddenly. “Are you not supposed to be in with my father right now?”

“My cousin took my place. He had intended to watch our game, and when I saw you run out of the house, he offered to play in my stead.”

I nodded, liking that he had seen my distress and chosen to follow me. Having had the father I did for twenty years, it was no wonder I was impressed by the simplest of actions! I shook my head to clear away my thoughts. I should not be thinking of my father. I should think of Mr. Darcy.

“Dare I ask what you are thinking of? A dozen expressions have crossed your face in the last minutes.”

“Forgive me. My mind wandered.” We walked a few more steps as I chose my words. “Have you ever known someone your whole life, and thought you understood them, and then one day realized you had sketched them all wrong?”

He was silent for a moment, then said, “Yes. With a childhood playmate who showed some unsavory tendencies when we got older, and even with my own father.”

“Your father? Really?” I was too eager, but I could not worry about that now.

“Yes. He was a good man, kind and generous, but I did not truly know him, as a man knows another, until after he died. He left me a letter and a box of journals. Reading them has introduced me to my father in a way I never could have imagined.”

“That sounds like you learned good things about him.”

“Mostly. Have you experienced the opposite?”

I sighed. In for a penny... “Mr. Darcy, I must ask you to keep a confidence. If you would rather not, I understand.”

“I would never betray your trust,” he said gravely.

I swallowed. “Very well. I had a conversation with my father just before you arrived. I was speaking to him about my youngest sister being out. I thought she was too young and ought to be restricted to family parties and close friends.”

“That sounds a reasonable solution.”

I sighed. “He essentially told me that while we will not have Longbourn after he dies, we will not be destitute either, and that my mother and sisters and I might be quite comfortable.”

His brow furrowed. “I’m afraid I do not see the connection.”

“I was telling my father that having all five of us out at once, and my youngest sisters ill-prepared for company, might deter eligible suitors from seriously considering us. A sensible man cannot be blind to his intended’s circumstances.”

“You wished to make those circumstances less objectionable.”

“Yes, exactly.” I turned my head away. “I should not speak to you of such things. I barely know you!” I laughed nervously and tugged at the cuff of the coat still wrapped snugly about me.

“You may tell me anything, Miss Elizabeth.”

Something in his tone made me stop walking and look up at him. His expression was intent and earnest. I felt heat rush to my cheeks.

“I wish to be your friend,” he said. “You should not be embarrassed to tell a friend of your concerns. Besides, we all have relatives we blush over.”

I raised a brow at him. “Very well, Mr. Darcy. We are friends. But we shall have to disagree on what requires blushing.”

“I see you do not believe me.” He took a deep breath, as if he were preparing for a speech in Parliament. “I have an aunt in Kent, my mother’s sister, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She is loud, demanding, and officious. She meddles in the lives of her tenants and neighbors alike, and her house is decorated like a museum—all pomp and no comfort. She is constantly telling people that she would be a great proficient at something if she had ever learned it. As if an earl’s daughter had no access to masters.”

I chuckled. “You paint a vivid picture. She is your favorite aunt, then?”

He scoffed. “My mother excelled at music. She played the harp and the pianoforte, as well as any other instrument she could find. My grandfather encouraged her and filled the house with masters. Lady Catherine did not lack opportunity; she did not learn because she would not take the trouble.” He looked mischievous for a moment. “And I suspect she is tone deaf.”

I laughed and leaned into his arm for a moment. I heard Mr. Darcy's breath catch. I smiled up at him, feeling heartily cheered, and turned us towards the house.

“We should return. I need to dress for dinner.”

“Of course.”

We were silent until we reached the garden gate. I shrugged out of his greatcoat and handed it back to him. “I thank you for the use of your coat, sir. It kept me warm admirably.”

“You are welcome to it any time, Miss Elizabeth.”

I turned to walk to the house and out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw Mr. Darcy smell the coat and close his eyes. What could he mean by it?



I pondered Mr. Darcy's solicitous behavior as I prepared for dinner. He had continually surprised me. If he was always as kind as he had been today, I might feel myself in some danger of falling in love with him.

I could not know what he meant by his actions, but I felt in my heart that he was an honorable man. He had never said or done anything untoward in my presence—well, apart from his blunder the night we met, but that was not so very bad.

I enjoyed his company, though I knew I should be smart and not raise my expectations. My aunt Phillips said he had an income of ten-thousand pounds a year. Such a man would not offer for a lady without notable connections and a dowry of a

thousand pounds. I should keep my distance lest I develop deeper feelings that could not be acted upon.



Fitzwilliam Darcy

Dinner at Longbourn had been an experience. After I left my Love in the garden, I joined my cousin and Mr. Bennet in the bookroom. Fitz was losing, likely by design, and Mr. Bennet seemed to be enjoying himself. I struggled with anger at the gentleman. Here were viable suitors interested in his daughters, and yet he made no effort to know us better or present his family in a favorable light. I stood in the room for over five minutes before he even acknowledged my presence!

We joined the ladies in the drawing room shortly before dinner was served. My Love was very pretty in a pale pink gown with tiny flowers embroidered along the neckline. It drew my attention to her bosom, as it was likely designed to do, and I wanted to run my fingers over the silken threads and see if she would blush to match them. She wore a delicate necklace that had a single pearl drop at the end of it and I found myself drawn to her feminine beauty like a green boy. I could not tear my eyes away from her décolletage—her gown, the pendant, her creamy skin, and the rise and fall of her breast

tempting me to come closer and discover for myself if her skin was as silky as it appeared.

She caught me staring and I smiled sheepishly, hoping I had not offended her, and she blushed and looked away.

I was seated next to Mrs. Bennet at dinner, my Love at the other end of the table near her father. She was quiet and withdrawn, and I could not help but think she was still upset over their earlier disagreement. I wished I had the right to cheer her. I would hold her in my arms and stroke her hair until she knew all would be well, and then I would take her away from her father who could not appreciate what was right in front of him. And send her youngest sister to school. A strict one, preferably far away.

After dinner, my cousin asked Miss Elizabeth to play for us. She seemed relieved to have an excuse to be away from company. I swiftly followed her and offered to turn her pages. She smiled wanly and I positioned myself between her and her father, who had turned a gimlet eye on us.

“What shall you play?” I asked quietly.

“I had not decided.” She shuffled through the music, finally placing a piece on the stand.

She warmed up the keys, then began a slow, melodic piece that felt forlorn and beautiful at the same time. I had a feeling Miss Elizabeth could make the most miserable things beautiful.

We did not speak much beyond a word or two, and she stayed at the instrument until Bingley declared it was time to return to Netherfield. Mr. Hurst and Miss Bingley had accompanied us—Mrs. Hurst had remained home with a headache, likely brought on by the noise of her jangling bracelets—but Mr. Hurst had heard that Mrs. Bennet set the finest table in the area and he did not want to miss it. I was so attuned to Miss Elizabeth I did not even notice Miss Bingley other than a vague buzzing sound in my left ear. If she was speaking to me, I did not respond. She already thought me an abominable beast. What was a little rudeness added to that?

Miss Bennet and my Love walked us to the door. My cousin helped Miss Bingley into the carriage and gave Bingley and me a moment with the ladies.

I took Miss Elizabeth's hand and bowed over it. "May I call on you tomorrow?"

Her eyes widened. "Call on me?"

"Yes."

"On me?"

"Yes."

"Here? At Longbourn? With my family?"

I could not help my smile. "Yes. I wish to call on you. Here, in front of whoever happens to be about."

She flushed and looked bewildered for a moment, then a bright smile broke over her face, the effect brightening her demeanor and inducing a similar reaction in myself.

“I would be pleased to receive you, sir,” she said softly.

I pressed her hand, not wishing to be more demonstrative in front of her sister and my friend. “I will see you tomorrow.”



I called on Miss Elizabeth every day for the next week. The weather was still mild enough to walk outside, though it grew colder every day. Generally, we spoke for a time in the parlor with her mother and sisters present, then Bingley or I would suggest a walk. Mrs. Bennet always paired one of her younger daughters with my cousin. It was Miss Lydia at first, but after Richard said something about her being too young to even contemplate, she more often sent Miss Kitty, and for one silent but memorable walk, Miss Mary.

On the way back to Netherfield, Richard would grumble about the great debt I owed him for keeping Elizabeth’s sisters at bay. “Does Mrs. Bennet even realize you are calling on her second daughter specifically?”

“I do not know. I had thought it was obvious, or that Miss Elizabeth would have said something to her parents, but Mrs. Bennet seems to think we are only accompanying Bingley.”

“Bingley!” cried Richard, leading his horse to my friend’s side. “How goes the quest for Miss Bennet’s heart?”

Bingley smiled broadly. “It progresses apace. She is everything perfect.”

I rolled my eyes. No one was perfect. Thinking someone was only led to disappointment.

“Good for you! Shall you make your proposals?” asked Richard.

“It has only been a fortnight!” I responded.

“A fortnight of near daily meetings, countless conversations, and hours spent in close company. It is akin to months of stilted drawing room conversation and the odd dance where speaking in depth is nearly impossible.”

I glared at my cousin. Bingley did not need encouragement to fall in love with yet another angel. Miss Bennet would make an admirable wife, but I was less certain that Bingley was ready to be a husband.

“Take your time, Bingley. There is no rush,” I said. I had heard a great deal about Jane Bennet from Elizabeth and I did not want her toyed with. “Know your heart and mind before you take steps you cannot undo.”

“I cannot argue with my cousin’s advice,” said Richard. “But I will add this. Jane Bennet is a gem of the first order. If you let her go, you are a fool.”

He sped his horse up and rode a little ahead, leaving me to wonder if he carried a torch for the lovely Miss Bennet.



More than a week later, I woke to a loud pounding on my door.

“What is it?” I cried, fearing there was a fire in the house.

“It is Nightmare!” Richard’s panicked voice filtered into the room.

I rushed to the door and unlocked it, hastily tying a banyan over my bare skin. “What has happened?”

Richard stormed into the room, dressed for riding though the sun was not fully risen. “He broke out of his box. He raced off into the pasture and jumped the fence. The grooms have not been able to find him and he is in fine form. I fear he will trample whoever he meets.”

I grumbled as I hastily threw on my clothes. He had been doing so much better lately! Nightmare had done this before—more than once. The first time, he destroyed a fence belonging to one of Pemberley’s tenants. The tenant had been understanding and I had it repaired in good time, but it was still troublesome. He had ruined gardens, kicked out planks in his box, and gotten into a standoff with a ram. The worst was when a groom had attempted to catch him. Nightmare had dislocated his shoulder. When he was in such a mood, no one but me could handle him.

“I am ready.”

We raced out of the house and to the stables. Two of the grooms were already leaving to search and the others were saddling up. Young Simon would stay behind to watch the stables with strict instructions to run upstairs if Night returned. He was not to pass through the stables; instead he should hang a white towel out of the window as a signal. I was frustrated

that all this trouble must be gone to for my recalcitrant horse, but I could not give the beast up. I loved him too much.

Bingley was still abed, so I saddled his horse myself and sped out of the paddock. We branched out in different directions, each person with instructions to alert the neighbors not to approach the horse if they found him.

We searched for hours, long after breakfast was served and removed, but Night was nowhere to be found.

“Do not despair, Darcy. He will turn up somewhere.”

“What if he caught his bridle in a branch and is trapped somewhere?”

“That is unlikely. Was he even wearing a bridle?”

I ran a hand down my face. “I do not know.” A horrifying thought crossed my mind. “What if he charged someone and they shot him?”

“Darcy, you are run wild with visions in your mind. You must breathe. Be calm and think clearly. He will eventually want his oats and come back. Has he not always returned before?”

I wished Richard’s reasonable tone did not irk me so much. “Usually I found him, but he has returned before.” I looked up at the sky. “What time is it now?”

“Gone noon,” he answered. “It shan’t be long, cousin. Trust in Nightmare to know where he is going.”

That was just it. We were in a strange place. I had taken him for several rides, but I did not know if it was enough for him to have learned his way about. He was an unusual horse, everyone agreed on that. Who knew how long it would take him to get his bearings.

“Let us eat something, then we shall continue the search. Perhaps Bingley has an idea.”

“Very well.” I sighed and followed my cousin into the house.

Miss Bingley had asked Cook to keep food warm for us—very kind of her given my wretched treatment of her—and we sat down in the breakfast parlor to eat a quick repast. We both placed our napkins on our chairs before sitting to protect the upholstery from horsehair. A footman looked at us askance as we did so, but Richard just laughed and dismissed him.

Our bellies were nearly full and I was thinking of where we should look next when I heard a commotion outside. I pricked my ears and Richard and I locked eyes across the table. We both rose and ran to the front door where the noise seemed to be coming from.

“Whoa, miss! Stop there! Do not come any closer!” called Josiah, the old groom.

I finally pushed past the crowd of servants and grooms, only to stop cold. There, walking up the drive as if she did not have a care in the world, was Elizabeth Bennet. Holding my horse by his mane.

“Elizabeth!” I cried, rushing to her. She smiled brightly when she saw me.

“I have returned your horse, Mr. Darcy,” she said, all cheer and delight. “I found him drinking from the stream by Mrs. Clapton’s cottage.”

She turned to face Night and ran a hand lovingly down the side of his muzzle. I winced and reached for her, thinking of all the people he had bitten, but to my surprise, he leaned into her touch and closed his eyes.

“There now, you are home, sweet boy,” she cooed. “All is well. Would you like another apple?”

He knickered softly and she produced a small, wizened apple from the pocket of her cloak. She presented it to him on a flat palm and he ate it gently from her hand. I watched in amazement, my mouth hanging open.

Night never let anyone feed him. Not my sister, not Richard, not any of Pemberley’s grooms. My coachman was the only one he would accept a feed bag from, and that was clearly against his inclination and only to be accepted when he was very hungry and I was not about.

Now, he whinnied softly and lifted his head as if he were trying to convey a message. Elizabeth reached out and ran a hand down his neck, and Night leaned down until his head was resting on her shoulder.

“There, there. It is all right, darling. You are safe now.” She continued to coo and caress him, and Night stood there

accepting her affection, his eyes closed peacefully, his muscles relaxed instead of strained with tension like they usually were.

“I’ll be damned,” said Richard. “Look at that.”

I had no words. I could only stare at Elizabeth in wonder.

“If you ever doubted she was the one for you,” whispered Richard, “this should clear things up.”

I looked at him askance and he laughed quietly, slapping me on the back. Then he turned and said to the grooms, “Back to your work, men. Darcy can take the horse from here.”

I waited until everyone had gone, then I approached them slowly.

“Miss Elizabeth,” I said quietly. “Are you well?”

She pulled herself away from my horse, who did not seem happy about her decision, and faced me with a smile. “Of course! Why would I not be?”

Night edged up closer to her, pressing his side into hers. She absently continued stroking him as she faced me, a quizzical expression on her face.

“What is going on? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I, I, he is,” I stammered. “Night is not usually good with strangers,” I finally managed.

“Oh, well we are not complete strangers.” She turned to face the horse and spoke in a soft voice, “Are we boy? No, we are not.”

He knickered softly again and a curl hanging over her neck took flight.

“I have met him often enough when you rode to Longbourn,” she said when she faced me again. “That was how I recognized he was yours. There are not many thoroughbred black stallions nearby.”

“Let us lead him to the paddock,” I said.

She turned and began walking around the east side of the house. I moved to Night’s other side, prepared to grab him if it was needed. Though I had never seen him as docile as he was today.

Soon we reached the gate and I opened the latch, guiding Night in, and closed it swiftly behind him. He immediately turned around and glared at me—I swear he did—and faced Miss Elizabeth.

“You are a greedy boy, aren’t you? Very well. One last treat, then I must be off.”

She produced a bit of carrot from her pocket and he gobbled it up, looking at Miss Elizabeth like she were his Love instead of mine.

“May I escort you back to Longbourn?” I asked.

“It is nearly three miles through the fields.”

“That is no trouble.”

“Very well.” She said goodbye to my horse and we set off. I saw my cousin watching from near the house and gave him a

wave, ignoring the way he laughed and shook his head. His time would come.

“Why was everyone so frightened when they saw me?” she asked.

“Night escaped early this morning and we had been looking for him for several hours when you appeared. He is not even-tempered, and there was concern that he would hurt anyone who tried to bring him in.”

She pursed her lips and her brow dropped over her eyes. “That is odd. He seems like a perfectly fine-tempered horse to me.”

“I can assure you that he has never behaved so with anyone else. You are an anomaly.”

She laughed and skipped ahead a few steps, then turned to face me. “An anomaly! I quite like the sound of that!”

She was walking backward, a teasing expression on her face. Her cheeks were flushed from exercise, her hair glinting in the sunlight. I could not resist. I closed the distance between us and gathered her to me. She gasped, turning her face up to mine, her eyes wide. I stared at her, my breath coming harder, and watched as her eyes darkened and her tongue peeked out to wet her lips. My fingers stroked lightly down her face then rested on her cheek, my thumb stroking across her jaw.

“Do you have any idea how you have bewitched me?”

Her mouth opened in surprise, then her teasing look was back once more. “You could tell me.”

I chuckled, pulling her tighter. "I would prefer to show you."

I traced my thumb over her pink lips, then leaned down and met them with my own. Gently, slowly. I pulled back to see her eyes were closed and a sweet smile graced her face. "Elizabeth," I whispered.

"Fitzwilliam," she breathed, opening her eyes to reveal something I had never seen there before. "Kiss me again."

I smiled and did as she asked, only to be surprised by the very great pleasure of feeling Elizabeth's arms steal about my waist. I could not resist pulling her closer, wishing she were not wearing such a heavy cloak. I spent a sweet eternity in her arms before pulling back and stepping away. I took a deep breath and looked at my Love, her lips swollen from my kisses, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright.

"I would like to ask you a question," I said, surprised at how deep my voice sounded.

"You would?"

"I would, but I fear it is too soon. You have not known me a month complete."

She looked thoughtful. "You are correct. A month complete is just the right amount of time. I think you should ask me your question then."

"That is next week."

"So it is."

"Very well. Next week it is."

We smiled at each like fools and continued on to Longbourn.

We were more than halfway there when I thought to speak of the morning's events. "I had not known you were so familiar with horses. Would you like to go for a ride one morning?"

"Oh, I am no horsewoman," she said, looking into the woods to her right.

"Anyone who saw you this morning would disagree."

"I have always been good with horses, I simply do not ride them often."

I furrowed my brow. She was talking strangely and I got the feeling she was hiding something from me. "Where did you learn how to handle a stallion?"

"My great uncle taught me. My grandmother's brother has a passion for horses, and I used to spend summers at his estate when I was a little girl. He taught me a great deal."

"I see. Where is his estate?"

"Wiltshire, near the chalk hills."

"Do you still visit?"

"I spent last summer there."

She quickened her pace and walked in front of me where the path narrowed. My sense that she was hiding something intensified. I felt my temper shifting, the sensation of being lied to making me fractious and irritable. I could not let Elizabeth see me lose my temper. It would ruin everything. I

took a deep breath, then reached out for her arm, gently turning her to face me.

“Elizabeth, I feel you are hiding something from me and it makes me uneasy.”

She shifted her weight, something clearly on her mind.

“You may trust me, dearest.” I could feel my control slipping. My hand began to shake where it was clenched by my side. I took another deep breath, praying for calm.

“Very well. But you must not berate me,” she said, wearing a stern look I found adorable.

“I cannot imagine myself berating you for anything.” That was a lie. I could of course, but I would not *mean* to.

She sighed. “I cannot ride sidesaddle.”

I waited for more, but she was silent. “Is that all?” Why had she felt the need to keep that secret?

“Because I never had success riding sidesaddle, my uncle taught me to ride astride.” Her cheeks were flushed and she looked at the trees again.

“Astride?” Now I could see why she did not wish to tell me. It was not the done thing and would be considered terribly unladylike by most. I was not sure how I felt about it at first. But as I thought it over, it did make sense. I could not imagine riding as a lady did, and were not most women smaller than men? Would they not need every advantage in controlling their mounts? “I suppose that makes sense,” I said slowly.

She looked at me warily. “You are not disgusted?”

“That seems a strong word.”

She sighed. “I made the mistake of telling my mother after I did it the first time. She did not let me ride again for a month as punishment.”

“But you have continued to do so?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes. My aunt helped me to make split skirts just for riding.”

“Split skirts?” I asked as we continued walking.

“It is like one over-large skirt split into two. There is another piece of fabric down the front to cover the modification. If you did not know what it was, you would think it a normal riding habit.”

“Hmm. Interesting thought. It sounds an ingenious invention.”

“It is terribly comfortable. I practically live in them when I am visiting my family.”

“I should like to see these skirts. Perhaps I should have one made for Georgiana. She is a more daring rider every year, but she does not have as much control in a sidesaddle. I worry for her safety.”

Elizabeth smiled brightly. “I would be happy to show her how they are done.”

We soon reached Longbourn and I left Elizabeth at home, thinking next week could not come soon enough. I only hoped

she would not wish for a long engagement.

12



Richard Fitzwilliam

Darcy has finally figured out how to speak to a lady, thank heavens! Miss Elizabeth is perfect for him and I believe they will do well together.

The Curse has been slumbering these last weeks, and I cannot shake the feeling that something foul is coming. It could not be so easy. Nearly every other Darcy man had faced hardship and difficulty in his courtships. They had nearly all had a moment where they feared they would lose their Loves. Her father would not consent to marriage, or she was enamored of another, something! But this had gone along swimmingly for nearly a month now. I could not help my suspicion that trouble would come our way.



We were at breakfast at Netherfield, nearly a month into our stay in Hertfordshire, when Darcy cursed and stood abruptly

from the table. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst looked on in surprise as he stomped from the room, a letter in his hand.

I found him in the library, pacing before the window.

“What is it, Cousin? Is Georgiana well?” I asked.

“Yes, it is not about Georgie. I have had a letter from my Uncle Darcy.”

“Nathaniel Darcy?”

“The very one.” He handed me the letter. “He bears ill tidings.”

I skimmed the letter, looking for bad news. Finally, a name stood out.

...I'm sure you remember young George Wickham from your boyhood. The boy was a lying, cheating, ungrateful ingrate, but you may have fond memories of him. Learning his true nature was devastating for your father. He was very close to Wickham Sr. and owed him a debt of gratitude. Your father struggled with the Curse at first and he leaned greatly on Wickham.

Unsurprisingly, my brother wished to do something meaningful to repay his friend's kindness. He educated Wickham's cur of a son, but the boy grew up mean and hateful. I do not know how much your father told you at the time, but I am sure you noticed that Wickham disappeared when you were twenty. The official story is that he left to study the law, but if you knew him at all, you knew that for the lie it was.

I threw him off Pemberley lands myself. It would have broken my brother to do it, but it had to be done. He had ruined Mary Haggerty and abandoned her high in the belly. She was the daughter of a tenant whose family had been at Pemberley for four generations. It would have been a perfectly decent match for him—the Haggertys were successful sheep farmers—but he refused to wed her. The poor girl was desperate to get rid of the babe in the hopes no one would find out what had happened. She threw herself down a hill and hit a large stone near the bottom. She broke her neck.

Mr. Haggerty demanded justice for his daughter, and I could not disagree that it was Wickham's actions that had driven her to such a desperate act. So one night, Mr. Haggerty, his two eldest sons, and I took Wickham from his room, threw his belongings in a trunk, and sent him on his way. I will not tell you details, but I will say that it was the only time I allowed the Curse free reign and was grateful for it. Wickham was frightened enough he never returned.

“So this is why Wickham never came to claim his legacy?” I asked.

“I imagine so. Keep reading.”

Darcy's face was solemn as I returned to the letter.

I have kept up with Wickham over the years through an investigator. I recently received a report stating that Wickham is joining his friend Denny in the Lincolnshire militia,

currently stationed in Meryton, Hertfordshire. I recognized the name when I saw it and immediately thought to warn you.

I do not know how Wickham will react when he sees you. I do not even know if you have seen him since his removal from Pemberley seven years ago. Regardless, you should be on your guard. He may pretend to a friendship and try to get money from you—he is notorious for bleeding his so-called friends dry. He may be violent, he may ignore you, I cannot say. But do not let him anywhere near Georgiana! If you feel the need, you may send her to us. Wickham is afraid enough of me that he would not dare come near Briarwood, and Maryann would love to have her cousin for a visit.

Be watchful, Nephew, and take care.

Nathaniel Darcy

“George Wickham! There is a name I never thought to hear again.” I sank into a chair and tapped my knee with the letter. “What do you wish to do?”

“I do not know. I had known he was reckless and unfeeling, even immoral at times, but I had not known he was as cruel as that. Poor Mary Haggerty. I was at her funeral. Her father was nearly destroyed. It took him years to recover.”

“Now we know why. It was no accident after all. She died of the shame of it all.”

“It is a cruel world we live in, Fitz,” said Darcy, sinking into the chair across from mine. “It makes me fear for Georgiana,

and every woman I have a passing acquaintance with.”

“It is not right. I remember Mary Haggerty. She was a sweet girl. We used to race to the horse chestnut tree with her brothers, remember?”

“Yes. She would run along after us on her short little legs.” Darcy chuckled sadly. “Her brother Michael would stop and put her on his back.” His voice thickened. “It was not right what Wickham did to her.”

“No, it was not. And you know it was all his idea! He would have pressed her for liberties, promising her the world, then run off without a second glance.”

“The blackguard.”

“Old Wickham would roll over in his grave if he knew what his son had done.”

“And you know if he did it once...” Darcy trailed off, leaning back in the chair and closing his eyes. “And I have to give the cur five-hundred pounds.”

“What? The legacy? Can you not just ignore it?”

“You know I cannot, Fitz. It is legally his. I will simply write him a bank draft and be done with it. I have no desire to speak to him any more than necessary.”

“Of course. Do we know when he will arrive in Hertfordshire?”

“The letter does not say. But if he is desperate enough to join the militia, he is out of blunt. He always did spend money like

a viscount though he was the steward's son.”

“His legacy will be gone within a year,” I added.

“He was terrible at cards. If he has not learned to be careful, it won't even last that long.”

I shook my head. “Wickham never learned from his mistakes when we were young. He always blamed someone else and then moved on to something new.”

“Let us hope he has learned something.”

“I will not hold my breath.”



I had given my former batman the job of my valet, and today, I had a special task for him.

“Jones, I want you to go into Meryton and see what you can find out about an officer in the militia called Denny. He is supposed to be bringing in a friend called Wickham to join him. I want to know everything there is to know about the pair of them.”

“Understood, sir.”

I would not be caught unawares. If Wickham planned to cause trouble, he would have a lot more than the Curse to contend with.



We called at Longbourn as we always did, I tried to hold down my breakfast as Bingley and my cousin mooned over their lady loves while I squired about one of the younger Bennet sisters, and we accepted an invitation to dine the next day. The ladies would walk into Meryton to do a little shopping on the morrow, so the gentlemen would have to survive without them until dinner time.

I had a feeling we would be riding into Meryton before tea.

My valet returned from his quest and the news was not good.

“Denny is a right bounder, sir. I wouldn’t want him near my sister, or any lady for that matter. Decent hand at cards, though he plays too often and too high.”

“I see why he keeps the company he does,” I said wryly. “Any news of Wickham?”

“Denny is arriving tonight with a friend from London to join the militia. The man I spoke to wasn’t sure of the friend’s name, but it sounds like this Wickham fellow.”

“Thank you, Jones. You’ve been a great help.”

I thought of how best to deal with Wickham. He would importune Darcy, I was sure of it. And given my cousin’s temperament, the meeting would not end well. Wickham would be bloody and I would be sore from holding back my cousin. He was a large man on a normal day. When the Curse had him in its grasp, he was as strong as an ox.

Perhaps Nathaniel Darcy had some of Wickham’s vowels and we could have him thrown into debtor’s prison. It would

take some time to put together, but it could likely be done. I would write Nathaniel in the morning.



In the morning, Darcy received another letter from his uncle—the forwarded investigator’s report. Wickham had not gotten better with age, though it seemed he had gotten more practiced. The investigator noted ruined women, unpaid debts, and more debts of honor than Wickham would ever be able to pay. Two years ago, he had left a woman with child and she had died in the birth. The babe ended up in an orphanage; Wickham did not seem to care. He had another by-blow on a farm in Lincolnshire.

Lord, but he would never learn!

The list went on, each line worse than the last. We had made friends in this out of the way corner of Hertfordshire. It would not do to leave a wolf among the sheep. We must find a way to deal with Wickham before he caused irreparable harm.

13



Elizabeth Bennet

I walked into Meryton with my sisters, the weather perfect for a stroll. The sun was shining, the air was crisp, and the road was not too wet. I knew my sisters did not agree. Lydia had mud on her shoes and Kitty kept complaining she was cold when the slightest breeze blew by.

Perhaps the weather was not perfect, and the road was not as dry as it could be, but I could not care about such mundane things. I was in love.

In love like a sonnet. In love like a song. In love with the most perfect gentleman I could ever imagine marrying. Tomorrow, we will have known one another a month. He reminded me of that fact when he called yesterday. I blushed like a fool and told him I was well aware of exactly how long we had known one another.

Perhaps I was being foolhardy for wanting to marry a man I had known so little time, but I was certain of Fitzwilliam. Certain he would love me and cherish me all my days. Certain

I would never find anyone better suited to me. Certain there would never be another face more dear to me than his.

And he was so very handsome! I could not wait to run my fingers through his hair. He had kissed me on two different occasions now, but I had not been bold enough to reach up and touch his wavy locks.

Now I had decided. Once we were engaged—and he kissed me as I was sure he would—I would stretch my arms up and find out if his hair was as soft as it looked.

“Lizzy! Lend me some money!”

I was jolted out of my pleasant daydream by Lydia, begging for money to buy ribbons she did not need. She already had a basket full of her own and had stolen more than one from each of her sisters.

“You have your own money, Lydia. I shan’t give you mine.”

She pouted and moved to badger Jane.

“Look! It’s Denny!” Kitty cried.

She was pointing out the window and bouncing like a child. Why my father could not agree that they were not ready to be out, I would never know.

She and Lydia abandoned their hunt for ribbons and rushed outside, nearly careening into the officers. Jane and I shared a look—the one that said we must do this even though we would really rather not—and followed our sisters outside.

“Kitty, Lydia,” Jane said lowly. She was quiet, but there was reproach in her voice.

Our sisters moved to stand beside us and were almost demure for a moment, but it did not last.

“Denny has brought a friend back from London!” cried Lydia.

I imagined that friend was the well-dressed man beside Denny. He looked as if he used to be handsome, but had clearly been in one too many brawls. His nose had been broken and not set properly, and he always smiled with a closed mouth, I suspected because he was missing teeth.

“This is Mr. Wickham, an old friend,” said Denny. “Wickham, may I present the lovely Bennet sisters of Longbourn?”

I could not like Denny’s method of introduction. We were not a troupe of traveling performers. I curtsied when he said my name and tried to think of how I could entice my sisters away from the officers without them protesting overmuch—and get away from the overly familiar Mr. Wickham who spent entirely too much time looking at my bosom. I was about to suggest we call on our aunt when I heard a horse coming close and someone calling out.

I looked up to see Mr. Bingley smiling broadly and hailing us from atop his mare. He stopped next to us and leapt down, immediately greeting Jane and ignoring the rest of the party. I did not mind. Was not general incivility a sign of love?

I looked down the street to see if Mr. Darcy had accompanied his friend and smiled when I saw a great black stallion coming our way, his rider sitting tall and proud.

“Ooh, Lizzy’s beau is here!” cried Lydia. “Over here, Mr. Darcy!”

That girl! She would embarrass me every time she had the opportunity.

By now, Mr. Darcy was near enough that I could see him wince at Lydia’s words. I could not even be angry at him for it. She was impossible. I smiled at him to let him know we did not have to invite Lydia to stay with us, ever, and was hoping he would accompany me to the bookstore. Before I could greet him, several things happened at once.

Lydia continued to prance about like a new colt, making all of us blush for her and our own misfortune at being her sister. Mr. Bingley finally realized he had not been introduced to a member of our party and turned to greet Mr. Wickham. Jane began to perform the introductions, but Mr. Wickham had turned deathly pale when he heard Mr. Darcy’s name. He ignored Bingley’s greeting and looked over his shoulder very slowly, as if he were trying to hide behind himself. It was decidedly odd.

That was when Colonel Fitzwilliam rode up beside his cousin and Mr. Darcy leapt out of the saddle. His face was red and filled with rage as he closed the distance to Mr. Wickham. His eyes were so wide I could see all the way around his irises. The vein in his forehead bulged and his entire body was taut

and ready. He did not even seem to see me as he strode past and grabbed Mr. Wickham by the throat, shoving him into the small alley beside the haberdashers.

I was frozen. I watched in horror as the man I loved, the man who was supposed to propose to me tomorrow, slammed Mr. Wickham against the stone wall, then pulled back his fist and smashed it into the other man's face. Blood spurted from his nose like a fountain and Mr. Wickham cried out.

Sound erupted around me. Someone yelled for Darcy to stop, Captain Denny ran off to gather help, my sister screamed.

I stared.

I stared at the hands that had held me so tenderly, now covered in another man's blood. I stared at the distorted visage of my beloved, nearly unrecognizable as he fought off his cousin and friend who were trying to hold him back as he kicked and snarled, desperate to rip Mr. Wickham to pieces. Blood dripped from his nose and jaw, the hair I had longed to run my fingers through now wild and spattered.

I could not move. I could only stare.

My sweet Fitzwilliam's eyes met mine, and I saw a stranger there.

Then I was running. As fast as my feet could carry me, through the streets of Meryton, onto the road out of town, all the way back to Longbourn. I did not stop or catch my breath. I simply ran until I collapsed against my tree, wondering who

on earth that man was, and what had he done with my beloved?

14



Fitzwilliam Darcy

“Tell me the truth, Fitz,” I demanded.
“I already have.”

“You have left out details.”

“Stop moving! You must keep your hand in the water,” said Bingley. My hand was currently soaking in a bowl of lavender water, supposedly to help with the bruising.

“Careful!” I snapped.

“Hold still!” cried my cousin.

He was attempting to place a plaster on the cut on my brow and I was not making it easy, but I did not care. I had bigger problems.

“Bingley,” I said.

He looked me in the eye. “Darcy.”

“What did Miss Bennet say?”

He sighed. “We have been through this. Miss Elizabeth said nothing to her sisters. She watched you in silence for a time, then she ran home.”

“And you have not spoken to Miss Bennet since?”

“How would I have? I’ve been with you!”

“Of course.” I took a deep breath. “I must fix this. How do I fix this, Fitz?”

The pity in his eyes confirmed for me what I had been thinking all afternoon. I had frightened away my Love, and none of us knew how to get her back.



Bingley and Fitz had finally gone to their own rooms and I was blessedly alone. I ran the events of the day over and over again in my mind, hoping to find something new with each retelling. I had received my uncle’s letter yesterday. Fitz’s valet had gone into Meryton and come back with stories of this Captain Denny. Suffice it to say he was not someone I wanted around Elizabeth or her sisters. No wonder he was friends with Wickham.

I had been a little distracted on my call to Elizabeth yesterday, but she had not minded, and when I had told her I had gotten unpleasant news that I could not share, she had cheered me with a funny story of her childhood horse, and hugged my arm close as we walked, and kissed my cheek.

In return, I had reminded her that in two days' time, I would have known her a month. And what a month it had been! Elizabeth was pure delight. Even if I was not cursed and she was not my destined Love, I would have fallen in love with her. She is everything I never knew I needed in a wife and companion, and I am utterly besotted.

I had ridden into town with Bingley and Fitz, knowing Elizabeth would be shopping. I was supposed to join the Bennets for dinner, but I wished to see her, so I went into Meryton with the express hope of running into her. And I had found her—talking to Wickham.

As soon as I saw him, all the horrible things I had read ran screaming into my mind. Suddenly it was Elizabeth falling down a hillside, Elizabeth left ruined and penniless, Elizabeth seduced and abandoned.

My vision narrowed to a tiny point. I could see nothing but Wickham, pale and shaking as he watched me, wondering what I would do. The next thing I remembered was Elizabeth's horrified face before she ran away from me.

My cousin and Bingley said I attacked Wickham in front of half of Meryton. It could not have been that many people. We were in a narrow alley next to the haberdashers, so I had at least not accosted him on the high street.

But I had beaten a man in front of Elizabeth, and I could not even remember it. My cousin has told me what I look like during those memory-stealing events. Deranged. Monstrous. Inhuman. And now Elizabeth has seen me in such a state.

How shall I ever win her now?



I would have to tell her everything. I would ask Richard to help me. There was no other way.



After the most sleepless night of my life, I stood in the entrance hall waiting for Elizabeth. I had enlisted Richard's assistance and he had brought in Bingley. My friend was not aware of the Curse in its entirety, but he knew something was not quite right with the Darcys of Derbyshire. It was a testament to his good nature that he put up with my moods as he did.

Bingley had convinced his sisters to invite Miss Bennet and Elizabeth to dine. He had sent his carriage, and now it was lumbering up the drive, carrying the fate of my life inside. If Elizabeth wished to break with me—if it was all too much for her—I would not stand in her way. I could not place this burden upon her if she did not accept it willingly.

I loved her too much to do anything less.

The carriage stopped in front of the house. Bingley and I stepped outside to greet the ladies. He helped them each down from the carriage as I stood to the side, desperate to see Elizabeth but terrified I would see rejection on her lovely face. I mumbled a greeting and we moved inside, Bingley leading

Miss Bennet off to the drawing room to join his sisters and leaving me alone with Elizabeth.

“Would you follow me, Miss Elizabeth?” I did not offer her my arm. I simply turned and walked towards the library, breathing a sigh of relief when I heard her steps behind me.

She had said nothing since she arrived. She only nodded, and she kept her eyes on the floor. She was pale, the color in her cheeks completely drained, and her eyes had dark circles beneath them. I was not the only one who had passed a sleepless night.

I opened the door to the library and entered before her, stopping on the other side to hold the door open. “We will have privacy here and not be disturbed, but you may leave whenever you wish.”

She finally raised her eyes to mine, and the suspicion I saw there was like a knife in my gut. She did not trust me. Not anymore.

“Very well,” she said, moving into the room.

Richard stood near the fire, a small box and a stack of journals on the table beside him.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth was clearly surprised by my cousin’s presence, and her small smile sent a wave of jealousy coursing through me. I could not help but remember the night we’d met, when she had preferred Fitz over me. If he had pursued her, would she have chosen him? Was I simply the one who had made my preference clear? Had she gone

with a bird in the hand over two in the proverbial bush? Did she care for me at all?

“Darcy,” said my cousin, his voice pitched low.

It was the tone he always used when I began to spiral out of control, my imagination taking me for a wild ride. I schooled my features and brought my thoughts under regulation.

“Miss Elizabeth, please have a seat. There is something we would like to explain to you.”

She looked about the room, then sat in an armchair near the fire. I should not have been surprised, but it stung that she had not taken the sofa so that I might sit beside her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” began Richard, “what we are about to tell you is very strange, and you will likely find it hard to believe, but every bit of it is true.”

She watched us warily, then nodded. “All right. I am listening.”

“Before we begin,” said Richard, “please read this report from Darcy’s uncle. He knows of Wickham’s proclivities and has kept an eye on him for several years now. He wished to warn Darcy of his presence nearby.”

She took the report hesitantly.

“I would not have you think Darcy attacked a total stranger on the street,” he said.

She nodded, reading silently. When she was finished, she looked up with round eyes.

“Good heavens! He is a fox among the pigeons!”

“He is. I will speak with the colonel of the regiment this evening to ensure he causes no further harm in Meryton.”

She nodded.

“Now, to what we wished to tell you.”

She looked at my cousin earnestly, curiosity on her face.

“I have been intimate with the Darcy family my entire life. Darcy is more like a brother to me than my own brothers, who are significantly older and younger than myself.”

“Fitz,” I whispered. This was not the time for the Fitzwilliam family tree.

“Anyhow, when my Uncle Darcy was dying, he told us something. The Darcy family is cursed.”

She stared at Richard, likely waiting for him to elaborate or say he had been making a joke. He did not.

“Are you in earnest?”

“Yes.”

“A curse?”

“Yes, a curse. It affects the males of every generation.”

She looked like she was trying to choose her words carefully, but I could tell by her expression that she did not believe us.

“And how does this curse work?” she asked. She had scooted to the edge of her chair, prepared to run away quickly, and she surreptitiously looked to all the doors.

Richard began to tell her the story, then finally handed her the letter my father had written to me. She took it, her expression still disbelieving, but she read it without protest. She gasped and shook her head as she read, and by the end, she seemed to think we were not quite fit for Bedlam.

“Did this man, Phillip, did he truly do all these things?” She held the letter up. “Is this real?”

“It is,” I said gravely. “Unfortunately. Every Darcy male of his line has had to deal with the Curse.”

She blinked at me, clearly disturbed.

“We have journals,” said Richard. He slid one across the table towards her. “I have marked the places I thought would be helpful.”

She still looked wary, but she settled back in the chair and began to read.

We continued on in this fashion for the next two hours. Richard would give her a journal, she would read and ask a question or two, then Richard would give her another. I stood by watching it all in silence, my heart in my throat.

Finally, after two pots of tea and countless journals, Elizabeth turned to face me.

“This is your heritage?” she asked softly.

I nodded.

“You are cursed?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“And any sons that you have will be cursed as well?”

My heart leapt. If she was thinking of having sons with me, she was not throwing me off—not yet anyhow. But wait—she had said *your* sons. Not *our*.

“Yes, they would. Though some have only daughters. It is considered a great boon when that happens.”

“Is that common? To have only daughters?” she asked, curious.

I could imagine what she was thinking. Her family ran more to girls than boys.

“Not overly so. One cousin several generations back had no children at all. No one knows why. My father’s cousin Jonathon has only daughters. He struggled greatly with the Curse before he met his Love. Many in the family think that is why he received such a boon.”

She nodded, worrying her lip the way she did when she was thinking.

“And for you, how has it been?” she asked, her expression curious and sympathetic. “Have you struggled greatly?”

I looked to Richard, unsure how to answer the question. “I have at times. Other times, it has not been so bad.”

She looked to my cousin, and his expression told her how delusional I was.

“Darcy has struggled,” he said. “But he has never done anything irreparable.”

I thought of Sally Smith, the maid I had thrown a vase at when the Curse was first sinking its teeth into me. Had she not ducked, I might have killed her. Or at least injured her severely. It had not been a small vase.

I raised my head to look at Elizabeth. “You soothe me,” I said, my voice hoarse. “When I am with you, everything becomes quiet.”

She met my eyes, hers round and filled with questions, but also a little hope. Or so I thought.

“Before I met you, it was as if I was on a crowded street, nearly all the time. The Curse was a loud, demanding presence. It was always urging me to do something, say something. I learned to tune it out much of the time, but if I was tired, if I let my guard down for a moment...”

“It has been a great burden to you,” she said.

Something in the tone of her voice pulled me closer and before I knew what I was about, I was on my knees in front of her chair, her hands in mine.

“You have been the light to me, Elizabeth. You have been the balm to my aching heart. The comfort to my soul.”

She pulled one hand from mine and touched my hair, pushing it off my forehead with a sad smile. “My poor Fitzwilliam. What a time you have had.”

I could not help myself. I rested my head in her lap, feeling the anxiety of the last day leach out of me. She had called me hers. There was hope.

“Have you more questions for me?” asked Richard softly. I had forgotten he was even there.

“I do, but I do not wish to offend you.”

I could feel her looking at me, but I was too content in my position to move. Instead, I kissed her hand and said, “Ask what you will, my Love. We are not offended.”

I heard Richard chuckle behind me—I was sure I made a sight, sitting on the floor with my head in Elizabeth’s lap, her hands running through my hair—but I could not care. My beloved was soothing the beast within me, and I needed her touch too much to move.

“Have they ever,” she asked hesitantly, “the men, have they ever turned their ire on their wives? Have they ever become violent?”

That made me raise my head. “Elizabeth,” I whispered, wondering how I could have been so stupid to not think she would be worried about that. “Forgive me, my Love. I did not think to tell you—it has always been understood within the family. I cannot harm you. I am incapable of it. You are the safest person in the world from me. And I would tear to shreds anyone who tried.”

Richard spoke up with a more coherent reply. “There have been no reports of Darcy men harming their wives—not physically, and never with those who married their Loves. There were two who married without thought to the Curse, choosing a well-dowered bride and treating her as they wished. They did not physically harm them, but they were not

kind. One especially could be cruel with his words. He died a very painful death when he was two and thirty.”

Elizabeth gasped. “What happened to him? And to her? Did she remarry?”

“He had a terrible fever that drove him half mad and pox that covered his entire body before the disease killed him. She had an excellent settlement and lived on at Pemberley until her son married many years later. She never remarried, and by all accounts, she was happier for it.”

“The Curse does not take being cruel to one’s wife lightly,” I added.

She nodded, her expression thoughtful.

“Every Darcy who has won his Love’s heart has been wildly happy and lived to a good age,” said Richard. “Any more questions?”

“Yes, one, but...would you leave me and Mr. Darcy alone for a few minutes, Colonel?”

“Of course.” He swiftly left the room.

I was surprised Elizabeth was willing to be alone with me after recent events, but I would not question it. I rose onto my knees and faced her, her hands gathered in mine and my stomach pressed against her legs. She did not seem disturbed by the proximity. That had to be a good sign.

“Fitzwilliam,” she began.

Calling me by my given name was another good sign.

“I must ask you to tell me the absolute truth.”

“Of course, my Love,” I kissed her hand, “I will tell you whatever you wish to know.”

She swallowed, sat a little straighter, then looked me in the eyes. “Do you truly love me? Or is it just the Curse?”

I stared at her in silence.

“Would you have even looked at me twice without it?”

I knew it was a serious question, and she was more than a little concerned about my answer, but I could not stop the laugh that bubbled up my chest and leapt out of my mouth. She sat back, offended, and opened her mouth to deliver what I was certain would be a splendid set down, but I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers before she could speak. The kiss was quick, but it surprised her enough to give me a moment to gather myself.

“My sweet Elizabeth, you are perfect for me in every way. I could not help loving you even if I tried. If there were no Curse, I would have loved you just the same. I would have carried you off to Derbyshire so I might have you all to myself, and showered you with affection until you felt the same for me.”

She smiled then, slowly, and her eyes brightened. “Truly? It is not just the Curse?”

I kissed each of her hands and held them to my chest. “Truly. You may read for yourself if you like.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is one journal that was left out. My own.”

Her mouth formed an ‘O’ and I wished to kiss her again, but I restrained myself. I stretched my arm out to the table and took up the box that sat there. Inside was my most recent journal, a small, brown leather book that had seen a great deal of wear. I opened to the page that depicted the day I met her and handed it to her.

“Here. Read for yourself.”

She took it gingerly and looked at the page, her eyes darting to mine and back to the book as if she thought I would snatch it from her.

“Are you certain?” she said.

“Shall I read it to you?”

She brightened. “I should like that. I love your voice.” She handed the book to me with a smile and settled back into her chair.

I chuckled, having committed myself to something I could not now get out of, and turned so I was leaning back against her chair, my shoulder pressed against her leg. I opened the book, then before I read, I grabbed her hand and placed it on my head. She laughed but began stroking my hair as I had wished her to do.

“I shall skip over the dull parts,” I said.

“As you wish, Fitzwilliam.”

I shook my head. What had I gotten myself into? I cleared my throat and began to read.

“Tonight I met my Love. I felt a great urgency to be inside the Assembly Hall. I had also felt that I needed to come to Hertfordshire, and that I should attend the assembly, but nothing compared to the tug I felt on my heart as we neared the building.

She is stunning. Sparkling brown eyes in the face of an angel. She has a dimple in one cheek, and her smile is like the sun breaking through a cloudy day. Her hair is a mass of curls and she dances like a sprite, all grace and lightness.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth. I could say it a thousand times and never tire of the name.”

“Shall I read more?” I asked, my face flaming red.

“Oh, yes. This is quite enlightening.” I could hear the laughter in her voice, but she continued to stroke my hair sweetly, so I said nothing and continued on.

“I walked with my Love today. She is everything delightful.”

I skipped ahead to the next day’s passage.

“I found Elizabeth in distress when I arrived at Longbourn. I do not know why her father is being so obtuse, but I was glad I was able to make her feel a little better. I cannot wait until I have the privilege of hearing all her troubles, and the right to

do something about them. I wished to hold her in my arms and comfort her, but that privilege is not yet mine.

I understand what my cousin meant when he wrote that he wished to throw his Love over his shoulder and run away with her. I had to fight the urge to do just that with Elizabeth. It is so clear to me that she belongs with me, and I know I could make her happy. I would never send her crying to the garden.”

“Did you truly have to fight the urge to pick me up and run away with me?” she asked, amusement in her voice.

I looked over my shoulder at her. “I did. I still do.”

That surprised her. “Still?”

“Every time I see you.”

Her eyes roved about. “Even now?” she asked quietly.

“Not at this exact moment, but I thought about it when you first arrived.”

Her eyes widened. “Why not still now? What has changed?”

“You.” I took her hand and kissed it. “You are here with me, being affectionate with me. It focuses me. You soothe my more dramatic tendencies.”

She chuckled lightly. “I never would have thought of you as dramatic before.”

I rolled my eyes to her delight. “Fitz says I had a tendency towards dramatics even as a child, but I do not believe him.”

She smiled happily. “Read more.”

I sighed, but it was no chore. It was making Elizabeth more sure of me, I could feel it. I would lay my entire soul bare if it meant she would accept me—all of me.

“I kissed Elizabeth today. She is the sweetest ambrosia, and I know I will never have my fill of her. She fit perfectly against me as I held her, and I wished to remove her cloak so I might feel her better, but I did not want to frighten her. She is intrepid, my Love, and I greatly anticipate a time when there will be nothing between us. We may lie together in my bed, skin on skin, and discover all the ways we fit perfectly together.”

I stopped reading and closed the journal, wondering if I had gone too far. Elizabeth was still and silent behind me. I turned around slowly, watching for any movement from her. Her cheeks were flushed, but she was looking at me without fear. Perhaps I had not gone too far awry.

“Is that truly what you thought about?” she asked.

I ran my hand over her foot, glad I was sitting lower than her for this conversation. It was already an intimidating topic—best to put myself in an unintimidating position. “Yes, I thought about it often.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. Her face blushed darker, the color drifting down her neck and over her décolletage.

“I think of a great many things involving you. I have done for the last month now.”

Her gaze snapped to mine. “It has been a month now, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied, my voice heavy. “A month complete.”

She nodded, her eyes on her lap and her teeth worrying her lower lip. I wished to know what she was thinking, if she was still unsure of me, but I had no idea how to begin.

“Elizabeth,” I began, “how are you feeling?”

“A little overwhelmed, but I am well.”

I nodded.

“Fitzwilliam, I am sorry I ran away yesterday.” She hung her head and plucked at her skirt. “I realize now I might have been able to calm you, but I was too shocked to think what I should do.”

I rose and leaned towards her, my hands taking up hers again. “No, my Love. That was not your fault. It is not your responsibility to tend to me.”

“But I am your Love, am I not? Does that not make it at least somewhat my responsibility?”

I kissed her hand. “If you wished to help me in this way, I would be nothing but grateful. But I do not expect it of you, my heart. I understand it is frightening. I would rather die than have you be afraid of me. I could not bear it.”

Her hands clasped my face. “I am not afraid of you, my love. I was for a moment yesterday, but more than that, I was shocked by what I was seeing, and a little afraid of what it

meant. I was afraid I did not truly know you. But now that I understand, I am not afraid, truly.”

I closed my eyes in relief. In another moment, I realized what she had said. “Wait. Did you call me your love?”

She smiled shyly. “I did.”

“Elizabeth. Do you love me?” My heart stopped as I waited for her answer.

“Yes, Mr. Darcy. I love you. How could I not? You have courted me quite thoroughly.”

I stared at her in stupefied silence. She loved me! Elizabeth Bennet loved me! Even though my temper was uncertain and my lineage was cursed, she still loved me! What a wondrous thing!

She leaned forward and kissed me, pressing her lips to mine for a few precious moments.

“Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, my darling?”

“Do you not wish to ask me a question?”

I smiled at the lilt in her voice and pulled back from her enough to see her face clearly. “My darling Elizabeth, my Love,” I kissed the inside of her wrist. “Would you do me the very great honor of marrying me? I will make you so happy, my heart. I promise.”

She smiled tremulously, and a tear tracked down one cheek and then the other. “Yes, my love. I will marry you.”

I pulled her into my arms at the same time she leaned forward to do the same, and the motion overbalanced me until I tumbled backwards onto the floor, Elizabeth held tightly to my chest.

Her laughter rang out like a bell, clearing away the cobwebs of doubt and gloom in my soul. I joined her, laughing like a fool, on the floor in Bingley's library.

“Well, you two look ridiculous.”

I turned my head to see Richard watching us with his arms crossed and a smile on his face.

“Shut up, Richard, and help my betrothed up.”

Elizabeth was still chuckling quietly, though she was flushed from embarrassment. “Pardon us, Colonel. Your cousin has terrible depth perception.”

“Does he now?” He smiled mischievously as he pulled her up from the floor, then offered his hand to me. “Did you say betrothed?”

“Yes!” I cried, jubilation filling me. “Elizabeth has agreed to be my wife. Congratulations are in order!”

“Not just yet,” she said quietly. “You have yet to speak to my father.”

Drat. I had forgotten that. “Quite. I will call on him tomorrow. Just out of curiosity, how old are you?”

She grimaced. “Twenty. I will not reach my majority until July.”

“I see.”

Fitz slapped my back loudly. “Cheer up, Darcy! The hardest part is behind you. If Mr. Bennet does not consent, you have only to wait until July. That is not so very bad.”

Elizabeth got that teasing look again. “Or you could speak to my mother. I’m certain she could wear my father down.”

“You are devious,” I said fondly.

“I am certain.”

15



Richard Fitzwilliam

After my cousin beat the tar out of George Wickham, there was much to be done. Once Darcy was safely at Netherfield and cleaned up—there had been a prodigious amount of blood—I paid a visit to the leader of the militia, a Colonel Forster. I had never met the man, but as I had been a colonel in the regulars and was the son of an earl, I felt confident in speaking to him. After I told him of Wickham’s personal vices and his history with the Darcy family, he was willing to let the whole thing go, as long as it did not happen again. I could only be grateful Wickham had signed on to the militia that very morning, for if he had not, the incident would have fallen under the purview of the magistrate, and there was no telling how that would have proceeded.

The local townspeople were another matter. I had my valet begin speaking with other servants, telling them of Wickham’s history, in the hopes of making it look like my cousin was avenging a friend and less like he was a deranged maniac with a lust for blood. It has only been two days, but I think we have

been moderately successful. Bingley told me he had heard from Sir William Lucas how dangerous the officers were, and that he ought to keep his sister far away from them.

Turns out you can take the man out of the army, but you cannot take the army out of the man. I was glad I retained something from my training. It would have been a waste to have spent all that time on the peninsula and come away with nothing but a useless title and an ugly scar.



Darcy rode to Longbourn the morning after he was accepted. Mr. Bennet asked a number of questions about the incident in Meryton two days before, and he had his fun with my cousin, as we had all known he would, but he eventually relented. Thankfully, Darcy was too happy to be truly annoyed. Miss Elizabeth might have overlooked him losing his temper with a stranger in Meryton, but she would not be so forgiving were he to do so with her father. He presented Mr. Bennet with the marriage articles—a ridiculous settlement that read more like a love letter than a legal document—and after a short review, Mr. Bennet signed it.

Darcy was now officially engaged. All has moved along faster than I had hoped. I was certain Miss Elizabeth would be stubborn and take her time accepting my cousin, but she has surprised me and proven more stalwart than I imagined. I should know by now that a gregarious personality does not equate to a capricious character.

Bingley, Darcy, and I were in the library late that night, toasting Darcy's engagement, when the butler came to the door. His expression was grave and given the hour, I knew something must have happened.

"There has been an incident in the stables, sir," he said.

"Has Night escaped again?" asked Darcy.

The butler winced. "I am not sure of the details. Best you see for yourselves, sir."

Bingley dismissed him and we made our way outside, speculating on what could have happened.

"Surely he would have told us if someone was hurt!" argued Bingley.

"He was very grave," I said. "I think it is serious."

"He is always grave," replied Bingley.

We arrived at the stables to see a small crowd of men gathered just outside the main entrance, lanterns in their hands.

"Sir," the head groom addressed Bingley. "Someone tried to break into the stables."

"What! Were they trying to steal the horses?"

He looked down for a moment, then glanced at my cousin. "We think he was trying to steal Mr. Darcy's stallion."

The three of us stared at him in silence, then Darcy rushed into the stables.

I turned back to the groom. "What do you mean you 'think'? Did you not question the man after he was caught?"

He shifted his weight. "Wouldn't have done much good, sir."

There was a noise from the stables and I quickly marched off to join my cousin, Bingley two steps ahead of me. Darcy was standing at the entrance to Nightmare's box, his head leaned against the horse's neck, Nightmare leaning back into his rider. The two were clearly having some sort of communion between haunted souls, but there was no time for that now.

"Darcy," I said. "What has happened?"

My cousin looked pained for a moment, then turned to face us, tilting his head in the direction of the box next to Nightmare's.

Bingley quickly followed his gaze and said, "Good God! Did he kill him?"

There was a blanket thrown over what looked to be a body on the floor of the stables.

Bingley stepped towards the cover and pulled up the corner, then dropped it and leapt back. "Darcy," he said, his voice unsteady, "your horse has killed Mr. Wickham."

"Wickham!" Darcy and I cried together.

"I had not realized who it was," said Darcy. "I thought I would have to put him down." His voice cracked with relief.

"Wickham probably broke in as revenge, not knowing Nightmare's reputation," I said. "Colonel Forster said he would speak with him and promised to keep an eye on him while he was in Meryton. Wickham can't have liked that."

“Obviously,” said Bingley.

His tone was so acerbic and un-Bingley-like that I could not stop the snort that escaped me.

“Let us go inside,” I managed. “I’ll ask the grooms to put him somewhere safe until the militia can collect him in the morning.”

Bingley and I made our way back to the house, stopping to give instructions on the way, but Darcy said he would stay with Night. His horse’s hooves needed to be cleaned, and Darcy didn’t trust anyone else to do it. It was more likely he was afraid Nightmare would stomp on anyone who wasn’t him, but it was not the time for such pronouncements.



The militia came and took Wickham’s body away. Since he had been in the act of a crime when his skull had met with a hoof the size of a plate, no investigation was launched. Wickham had no family to make a fuss, so nobody demanded the horse be destroyed.

Darcy was relieved his horse would be spared, but he had mixed feelings about Wickham. Though the other man had been a reprobate of the first order, they had been childhood friends, and that was not something a man forgot in a moment.

Thankfully, the Miss Bennets came to call on Bingley’s sisters and Miss Elizabeth had Darcy cheered in short order.

He wrote a letter to the Haggerty family, telling them young Mary was finally avenged. It was not an uplifting activity, but there was some satisfaction in knowing that justice had finally been done.

Personally, I felt rather cheered by the knowledge that there was one less monster walking among us.



The wedding will take place in six weeks, just before the festive season, and I cannot wait. I shall return to Elmhurst in the new year and begin my life as a landowner in truth. Though I will confess I do not know what I shall do with myself. I went from my father's house to school, from school to the army, from the army to Pemberley. If I was not watching recruits, I was watching over my cousins.

If I am beholden to no one but myself, how will I fill my days?



Thank God the day of the wedding finally arrived. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth have been insufferable! If he was not staring at her with moon eyes, he was talking about her. And if Darcy was not talking about the perfection of Miss Elizabeth, Bingley was talking about his angel, Miss Bennet. Between the two of them, a man could hardly hold down his breakfast! They spent nearly the whole of every day at Longbourn.

Bingley finally worked up the nerve to ask Miss Bennet to marry him and they will wed a fortnight after my cousin.

Mrs. Bennet wished to have a large affair, but Darcy was adamant the entire thing be simple and small. She was quite put out until Darcy told her he had a cottage near the seaside that she could stay in the whole of next summer, and she spent a week speaking of how wonderful a son he would be and how the seaside would set her up forever. If only it shut her up, I would be grateful.

I waved my cousin and Elizabeth off as they departed Longbourn and made for Town. They would spend a week in London, then return to Netherfield for the festive season and Bingley's wedding before journeying on to Pemberley.

After I escorted Georgiana back to my mother's, I would have no calls on my time. Now that Darcy had Elizabeth, he had no need of me. At least not in the capacity of his guardian. I will confess to being pleased that we may simply be cousins and friends again, but I also do not know what I will do with myself.

I have been in this role so long, it has become a part of me.

Perhaps I shall find a kind lady to wed and set up my nursery. Before, I barely paid attention to ladies. I was not in a position to wed, so even if one caught my eye with her beauty and kind nature—as Miss Jane Bennet had done—I could not act on it. I had given my cousin my word, and I would not recant.

But now? Now I was a free man. Who knows what the future will hold?



Three Years Later

I walked along the park path with Lady Alice on my arm, wondering if this would be a good time to make my proposals. I believed she was expecting them—I had been courting her steadily for some time now—and her parents approved the match. She was the fourth of six daughters, and her father was more than willing to marry her to the second son of an earl even though my estate was small. The fact that she was six and twenty likely also played into his agreement.

Darcy and Elizabeth loved her. It was Elizabeth who had introduced us last winter at a party at Pemberley. She had thought we might get on, and she had been proven almost frighteningly correct. Darcy was worried she would become a matchmaker, but with a daughter in the nursery and another babe on the way, I doubted that would happen any time soon. Darcy had threatened to make me the godfather to each of his children, but I had demurred and said I would be happy with one or two. No need to make his Darcy cousins jealous. They are mean when they're angry.

I turned my attention back to Lady Alice. She was perfect for me; all I needed to do was summon the words to ask her to marry me.

“Lady Alice?”

“Yes?”

“There is something I wish to ask you.”

She looked at me with anticipation. “You may ask me anything.”

I swallowed and cleared my throat. Why was it that tackling my cousin when he was in a rage was less terrifying than asking this tiny woman to be my bride?

“Lady Alice, I am not one for flowery speeches or dramatic proclamations. I care for you, very deeply, I’m quite in love with you, actually, and if you could see yourself to caring for me, I would very much like for us to be married.”

There. I had done it.

She smiled and squeezed my hand. “I care for you, too, Colonel. I might even call it love,” she said shyly, looking up at me from beneath her lashes.

I was filled with joy and ready to proclaim my happiness to the whole of Hyde Park when she said, “Before I accept you, I must tell you something of great importance.”

“What is it?” She had gone silent and still, and I was suddenly worried. Had her father lost all their money? Was that what she was worried about? I did not need her dowry. I

would happily take her with nothing but the clothes on her back.

“I must ask you to keep this in the strictest confidence.”

“Of course. You have my word.”

She nodded and we walked on, nerves making her clench her fists and pull at her gloves. “My family, we are not as benign as everyone thinks.”

“Oh?” That was not what I had expected her to say.

“Yes. You see, many years ago, my father angered a fortune teller and, oh, there is no good way to say this!” she cried, walking ahead and pacing away before she returned and stopped in front of me, a look of resolution on her face. “We are cursed.”

“Oh, not again!”

The End

To read more about Darcy, Elizabeth, and Richard Fitzwilliam (and find out Lady Alice’s curse), sign up for my newsletter and get a Bonus Epilogue! Click here <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/56di5otrb0> or copy and paste into your browser. Happy reading!

A Curative Touch

If you liked *Cursed*, you might also like *A Curative Touch*, another book by Elizabeth Adams in this Collection of Unusual Tales. It's available on Kindle and Kindle Unlimited.

Check out the first chapter!

Elizabeth

I was six years old when I realized I was not like the other children.

My sisters came down with a pox, from Jane down to baby Lydia. So did Joseph the stable boy and nearly all the tenants' children. I was the only one not covered in itchy, painful sores. Jane's fever was dangerously high, and Lydia was so bad, the apothecary told my parents to prepare themselves, for she likely would not live more than a day or two. My mother wept

and wept, sobbing so loudly she could be heard in every room of the house.

My father was also ill—only my mother had had the pox as a child and remained untouched—so I offered to hold the baby that she might rest. As the only healthy child, I had been rigorously quarantined for a week. I had overheard the apothecary say they should keep me far from my sisters, so that if the worst happened, they would not be entirely childless. My mother had gasped and my father had looked very grave. When he saw me lurking in the doorway, he sent me away with a stern look.

After I snuck into my mother's room, I convinced her to let me hold my sister and settled into the chair by the fire. It was proof of her exhaustion that she allowed me to do so. She handed me the squalling baby and watched us carefully as Lydia settled down and quietened.

That was the other strange thing about me. Babies stopped crying when I held them, or played with them, or stroked their downy hair. At first we had thought it was only Kitty, but it was the same with two different tenants' babies, young Maria Lucas, and now Lydia.

I promised to wake my mother if the babe fussed even a little as she wearily lay down on her bed; she was asleep within moments. A few hours later, after I had hummed every song I knew to my youngest sister, my mother woke with a start.

“Lizzy, how is the baby?”

“She is well, Mama. You may go back to sleep.”

My mother looked at me suspiciously and rose from her bed to investigate my assertion. She gasped when she saw Lydia.

“See. I told you she was well.”

My mother’s face was pale and her eyes wide. “Give me the baby, Elizabeth,” she said, her voice shaking.

I did not understand what she was so upset about. Lydia was sleeping peacefully. She had not cried in nearly three hours, and her skin was no longer the angry red it had been before.

As my mother took the babe from my arms, she had a pained look on her face. I could not understand it. Was she not happy Lydia was no longer suffering? Her expression changed to shock when she brought the babe closer to her face. Then she placed a hand on her chest.

“She breathes!”

“Of course she does. I told you she was well.” My mother did not always speak sensibly.

“But she is so pale...”

I could not understand what she was going on about. “She only looks pale because she was so dreadfully red before. She is a normal color now.”

My mother looked at me strangely then, as if she were trying to understand me, and began to examine the baby. She checked her arms and legs, her torso, her neck. She changed the napkin and continued to exclaim her wonder.

“It is extraordinary!”

“What is, Mama?”

“Lydia. Her spots are completely gone. As if she never had them! I have never seen the like.”

“It has been like that for a while.”

She looked up at me quickly. “It has?”

I nodded.

“When did her spots begin to fade?”

“I do not know, but you had not been asleep long. You had not begun snoring yet.”

“I do not snore.”

I wisely remained silent.

“Well.” My mother took a deep breath and stared harder at my sister. “So curious.”

She finally looked back at me and said, “Go on to bed, Lizzy. You have been a great help, dear.”

I left my mother’s chamber and stopped by the nursery. My father had insisted I be kept from my sisters lest I fall ill, but I wanted to check on Janie. I slipped into the dark room and crept over to my sister’s bed.

“Feel better, Janie,” I whispered. She thrashed about in the bed, her face covered in a light sheen of sweat and itchy, red spots. I placed my arm on hers to quieten her. “Shh. All will be well. Lydia is already feeling much better. I am certain you will soon be better, too.”

Jane stilled under my touch and I slipped out of the nursery before nanny caught me.

The next morning, I tapped on my mother's door to say good morning and ask how the baby fared.

"Good morning, Lizzy. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you. How is Lydia?"

"She is doing very well indeed. Are you still feeling well yourself?"

I nodded vigorously. I felt the same as I always felt, though rather bored.

"I have good news from the nursery. Jane seems to be recovering."

I smiled so broadly I my cheeks ached. "Truly?"

"Truly. Nanny says her fever has broken and more than half her pox are completely gone, and the remainder look to be fading."

I returned my mother's happy smile. "That is wonderful! May I see her?"

"I do not think it wise. You have still not had the disease and I do not wish you to become ill."

I must have looked guilty for my mother immediately became suspicious and squinted at me. "Elizabeth? Did you sneak into the nursery to see your sisters?"

I stared at the floor.

"Elizabeth."

“Only for a minute! And I only saw Janie. She was hot and sweaty and moving about. I only spoke to her for a second to calm her. Then I left. I promise!”

My mother looked at me sternly. “You were only there a minute?”

I nodded.

She exhaled heavily. “It seems you are safe this time, but I insist you stay out of the nursery.”

I said I would and made my way to the chamber I was temporarily imprisoned in. As I passed by my father’s door, I heard him speaking to his man, Simms. I tapped on the door tentatively.

“Come in, Elizabeth.”

“How did you know it was me?” I asked as I peeked my head around the door.

“You think I do not know the steps and knock of my own child?” asked my father with a glint in his eye.

“How are you feeling?”

Simms left through the servants’ door and my father bade me closer. “I am doing better, my child. Are you still well?”

I nodded. Why did everyone continue to be surprised by that fact?

“Might you sing me a song? I have not heard any music since this wretched business began.”

I smiled and scampered onto the bed beside him. He patted my hand and I began the song he had taught me that summer. He and my mother often sang together in the evenings. No one knew it, but my father could play the pianoforte better than most and my mother had a lovely singing voice. Father often said I sounded like her when I sang. His eyes drooped and I lowered my voice until he drifted off with my hand still in his. I slid off the bed and tiptoed to the door, sneaking back to my room before my mother caught me.



My father was up and about the next morning, but Kitty and Mary remained ill for several more days and I was banned from the nursery. Kitty had always been small for her age and had been sick several times already in her two and a half years of life, and my parents were most worried about her.

Mary was of a stouter constitution, but my mother worried the scars would mar her beauty. Mary and Jane were both possessed of large blue eyes, rosebud mouths, and dainty little noses. I had heard my mother say several times that Jane and Mary had gotten their looks from her and she hoped Lydia would have them as well. I took that to mean Kitty and I did not look like our mother, but I could see no great difference between me and my sisters.

By the end of another week, Kitty and Mary had recovered, but my mother's fears had come true. Mary appeared very scarred indeed. The apothecary said the scars would likely

fade in time, and promised she was still a lovely girl—he was kind like that—but my mother bemoaned the loss of Mary’s perfection like it was her death.

Mary herself did not seem to fully understand, but my mother’s tears upset her.

Two months later, I was playing in the garden with Millie, one of the wealthier tenants’ children. She fell and hit her head and it bled horribly, all down her face and over the front of her clothes. I instinctively grabbed the handkerchief from my pocket and covered the wound, and my mother came running over. She had been having tea on the terrace with Mrs. Goulding and had seen the entire thing.

Mother pushed me out of the way and gently lifted the handkerchief, apologizing to Millie for any pain she might cause. Millie screwed her eyes tight and my mother used the cloth to gently wipe away the blood to see the wound.

“Was she bleeding from her hair, Lizzy?”

“No Mama, it was her forehead.”

“Hmm.”

I looked over her shoulder and saw what she was staring at. The place where Millie’s skin had split open, where blood had been flowing from quite readily, was a thin pink line, like a faded scar.

“That is odd,” said my mother.

It was odd. I had seen the cut myself. I had seen the blood. Even now, wet, red spots covered the side of Millie’s face and

splattered across her frock.

My mother sent her to Hill and had her wrap a bandage around her head, then had the stableboy walk her home. I did not understand why she wrapped a bandage around a wound that was already closed, but that evening, my mother came to my room.

“Elizabeth,” she said strangely.

“Yes, Mama?”

“Did you say anything in particular to Millie today? When she hit her head?”

I looked at her in confusion. “I asked her if she was all right.”

“Yes, but did you say anything else? Perhaps a prayer? Or did you wish she might heal quickly?”

“No.”

“Hmm.” She looked at me strangely and continued to watch me until I felt like one of the bugs on a pin in my father’s bookroom.

“What is it, Mama?”

She shook her head. “I do not know. When you held Lydia when she was ill, did you pray for her?”

“Of course!”

She smiled conciliatorily. “Yes, but did you say anything specific?”

Why was she talking in riddles? “I only sang her a few songs. The ones Nanny sings to us.”

She nodded. “And when you went to see Jane, did you sing to her?”

“No, there was no time. I was only there a minute.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

I shrugged. “I snuck into the nursery and Janie was rolling about in her bed. I stroked her arm and shushed her, told her to get well soon, and I left. Why?”

Her eyes took on a strange light. “You touched her?”

“Only her arm.”

She nodded. “And you visited with your father? I heard you singing.”

I looked at the floor. “Only for a little while.”

“It is all right, Lizzy. I am only trying to understand.”

I swung my feet where they hung off the bed. “I sat by him on the bed and sang him the song he taught me, then I left when he fell asleep.”

“Did you touch him?”

“Only his hand!”

“It is all right, my dear. I am only asking. You are not in trouble.”

I sighed and nodded.

“But you did touch him?”

I nodded again.

My mother pursed her lips and looked at me in a way I had never seen before. “I want you to promise me you will never speak of this to anyone, Elizabeth. Do you understand?”

I did not know what I was not supposed to speak of, but I promised never to repeat the conversation.

“Might you do something for me?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered, wondering what she would ask.

“I have a sore tummy, right here.” She placed a hand on her lower belly. “Might you hold my hand and sing me a song like you did for your father? Perhaps it will help me to feel better.”

I agreed readily. I did not know what illness my mother had, or what she thought a song could do, but she had been sad ever since Lydia was born seven months ago and I was glad for the opportunity to make her happy.

She settled next to me on the bed and wrapped her arm about me, and I snuggled into her side. We had not sat thus in a very long time and I was so happy I squeezed her tightly to me. She laughed lightly and said, “Shall we sing, my Lizzy?”

She began to hum and I joined her, our fingers locking together. We sang three songs and it was not until the fourth that I realized our joined hands were resting over my mother’s belly, where she had said she was sore.

When the song was finished, I whispered, “What is wrong with your belly, Mama?”

She took a shaky breath, then said just as quietly, “Life is very hard for women, my dear. The bearing of children is rewarding, but it is not without consequences.”

I scrunched my face up in confusion, not understanding her at all, but she held me a little tighter and I felt tears on my head. I said a silent prayer that whatever was wrong with my mother’s body would be made well.



Over the next month, my mother would repeat this strange occurrence thrice more. She would invite me to sit next to her on her bed, or on the settee in her favorite parlor. Once, she invited me for tea and Cook made the little cakes that we only had on special occasions.

“Are you well, mummy?”

“Yes, child, perfectly well. Why do you ask?”

“We are having special cakes,” I trailed off, not wanting to ask if there was terrible news and she was trying to soften the blow. “Is it Granny?” I asked, suddenly worried.

“She is perfectly well as far as I know.”

I continued to squirm and finally my mother said, “Would you like to sing with me?”

I agreed and we went to the pianoforte and squeezed onto the bench together. My mother could not play properly or well, or so she said, but she could pluck out a melody easily enough. She tinkered at the keys as we sang together for the next

quarter hour and for years it remained one of my happiest memories of my mother.

Until I understood what she was truly about, that is.

Books By This Author

Historical Fiction

How to Fall in Love with a Man You Thought You Hated

A Collection of Unusual Tales, Books 1-5

The Elopement Project, Books 1-3

Sons of Pemberley

Unwilling

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The Houseguest

The 26th of November

Meryton Vignettes, Tales of Pride and Prejudice

Contributing Author

Rational Creatures

Yuletide

Elizabeth: Obstinate Headstrong Girl

Modern Fiction by E. Adams

Green Card

Ship to Shore

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Adams is a book-loving, tango-dancing, Austen enthusiast. She loves old houses and thinks birthdays should be celebrated with trips—as should most occasions. She can often be found by a sunny window with a cup of hot tea and a book in her hand. She writes romantic comedy and comedic tragedy in historic settings as Elizabeth Adams and in modern settings as E. Adams. You can find more information, short stories, and outtakes at www.eadamswrites.com.