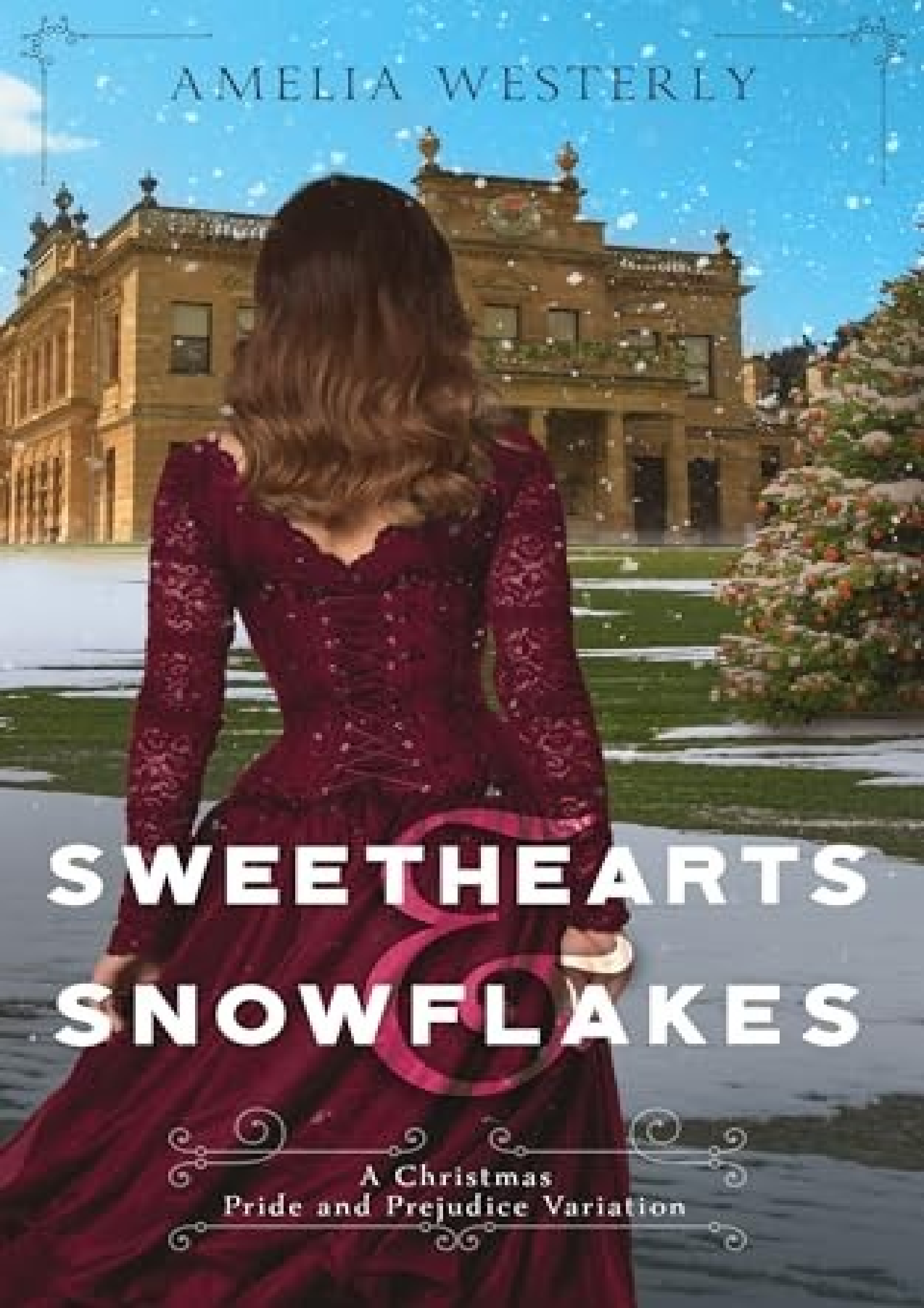
AMELIA WESTERLY
SWEETHEARTS & SNOWFLAKES
A Christmas
Pride and Prejudice Variation

Sweethearts and Snowflakes

A Christmas Pride and Prejudice Variation

Amelia Westerly

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“You are all to come to Pemberley at Christmas.”

Elizabeth Bennet’s letter to Mrs Gardiner, upon becoming engaged to Mr Darcy

Chapter One

The Happiness of Family

Though the wind howled and sent gusts of snow spiralling into the air outside, to be ensconced within Pemberley was to be surrounded by comfort and cheer. Mr Darcy set down the letter he had just finished reading, stood up from his desk, and crossed his study to stand before the fireplace, the better to enjoy the roaring blaze it contained. He glanced out the window at the storm outside, smiling somewhat wryly. It was fine weather for staying indoors and looking out. Much less so for travelling. He would have to hope his eagerly awaited guests — who, according to the letter he had just read, had but lately set out from London — would find their pains worthwhile.

On that thought, Mr Darcy made his way towards the drawing room, or rather towards the pianoforte music that resonated from it. His wife ought to know the news as soon as possible.

Not, however, that it was she who was playing the instrument. There was never any difficulty in identifying whether it was Lizzy or Georgiana who played — not for one who knew both women as well as he did. Georgiana played with precision, Elizabeth with less technical skill but more verve and confidence. It was his sister responsible for the strains of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" that resonated through the halls of Pemberley.

"Hello, brother," Georgiana greeted him as he entered the drawing room. Her fingers found each chord unerringly as she continued to play. "What is our new total?"

"All accepted, I am happy to say," he replied. "I have just received a letter from the Gardiners. They posted the letter from London just before they left, and they will stop in Hertfordshire for Miss Bennet on the way. Indeed, weather permitting, I believe they will arrive in but a few days."

“We will be quite merry,” Georgiana said thoughtfully. “It has been a long time indeed since we had so many at table. There is you, Lizzy, and I…”

“Fitzwilliam will be here. I understand he is quite glad that Pemberley is his destination. Rosings Park is no pleasant place at the moment, not with our aunt in such a temper.”

“Ought not brave Colonel Fitzwilliam to be above fearing Aunt de Bourgh?” Georgiana joked.

Mr Darcy chuckled. He had never expected that Elizabeth’s wit might inspire Georgiana to emulate her, but he found it a most welcome surprise. “No one defies Aunt de Bourgh with impunity, little sister. In any case, we shall also have Miss Mary Bennet —”

“—and Mr Lewis, at least for part of the time. It is a shame he may not stay for Christmas day.”

“I should not have been well pleased with him if he were willing to stay longer,” Mr Darcy observed. “The village of Kympton deserves their parson on Christmas day, much as we might enjoy his company.”

“That is true. And of course we shall have Mr and Mrs Bingley, and Caroline Bingley, too.” Having reached the end of her page, Georgiana shut the piano and stood, carefully stretching her hands. “Have you given Lizzy the good news yet?”

“I have not. Have you any idea where she is to be found? I came in thinking you might.”

“Let us look in the library,” Georgiana said decisively. “She has not been gone long, you know. I think she is looking up something to do with her father’s letter.”

The two siblings set off in perfect accord, chatting about this and that as they made their way towards Pemberley’s library. Mrs Reynolds, bustling down the hallway with several maids in tow, would have passed them with a curtsey, had not Georgiana eagerly addressed her. “Have you seen Mrs Darcy anywhere, Mrs Reynolds? We have just received word that the Gardiners will be here soon.”

“Ah, the mistress will be happy indeed to hear that,” Mrs Reynolds said fondly. She had quickly become nearly as fond of Elizabeth as she was of Mr Darcy and Georgiana, sharing her kind heart and doting care equally among the three. Though Elizabeth had expressed some concern to him that Mrs Reynolds might not view her as worthy to be the wife of Mr Darcy and the lady of Pemberley, Mr Darcy had assured her she need not concern herself. He rather thought — and indeed the event had proven him correct — that Mrs Reynolds would take his Lizzy to her heart as soon as she perceived the great joy their marriage had brought him.

“I saw the mistress in the library not long ago,” one of the maids shyly piped up.

“Ah, good girl, Lisa, I am sure you are right,” Mrs Reynolds commended her. Lisa blushed violently. She was but lately come to Pemberley and was still overawed by her fine surroundings and noble employers.

“Yes, thank you, Lisa,” Mr Darcy echoed, only deepening the poor girl’s blush. With a friendly nod, the Darcy siblings went on towards the library.

Their search was then at an end: Elizabeth was seated at one of the library’s broad tables, intently studying one of the larger folios in the collection. Upon hearing their approaching footsteps, she looked up at once. A warm smile spread over her face.

“Ah, Fitzwilliam, Georgiana,” she said, as she stood up from her seat and hurried over to them. “You have come just in time to rescue me from my father’s scholarship. He greatly enjoyed looking at the Pemberley folios during his last visit. His last letter included a question about this one, but I am afraid I cannot make it out at all.” Her hand stole into his, and Mr Darcy squeezed it in promise of the kisses that would follow at a time of greater privacy.

“May I see your letter, Lizzy? It may well be that I cannot help your father either, but I should be glad to try.”

“Please do,” she replied. “You will find it on the table there.”

Mr Darcy crossed the room and began to read it, but Georgiana was not inclined to wait for his return.

“Oh, Lizzy, what do you think? My brother has heard back from Mr Gardiner, and they are on their way. They may be here in only a few days!”

“I am glad to hear it,” Elizabeth said. “I realise only now how much I counted on their coming, though it was not a certainty before. This will be a merry Christmas, to be sure. I hope you will not feel too overrun with all my relations, Georgiana.”

“Of course not!” she protested with evident sincerity. “I liked Mr and Mrs Gardiner prodigiously on the occasion of our last meeting. And I will be glad to know your sister Mary better. We can talk about the pianoforte together.”

“We will have a musical time indeed, between the two of you. And Caroline Bingley, too. She is quite skilled at the instrument.”

“I shall be as glad to hear you, Lizzy, as any of them,” Darcy announced, having finished the letter and returned to them. “I am a fortunate man, to have my two favourite musicians conveniently so close to hand.”

“You are too good to me, Fitzwilliam,” Georgiana said, though with a pleased smile.

“He is too good to me, rather, for you are by far the more skilled of the two of us,” Lizzy told her lightheartedly. She turned to her husband. “Had you any luck in deciphering my father’s question, my love?”

“Indeed. It is no wonder you could not find the passage he wanted, for it is in another folio entirely. I am afraid he has misremembered the title. But I think I know which he meant.”

“There is nothing like a husband with excellent knowledge of his library,” Elizabeth commended him. “You have saved me from confusion, and my father from disappointment. I wonder if I shall ever know the library as well as you do?”

“I once heard it said that you are a great reader, and take pleasure in nothing else,” Mr Darcy teased her. “Surely you will one day know it even better than I do.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “If you remember that conversation, you ought to also remember that I decried it at once,” she told him. “I do not think I deserve the credit of being called a great reader, much as I enjoy the pastime. And I take pleasure in a good walk, and music and dancing, and indeed more things than I could name.”

“I should like to go on a walk now, if only we could,” Georgiana said, a little forlorn. Looking out of the library windows at the bare and frozen grounds of Pemberley, it was all too easy to believe that the warm days of green leaves and blue sky might never come again.

“As would I,” Elizabeth agreed, “But perhaps it may not be so long until we may go out again, if not to go walking. I was rather wondering — have you a sleigh, Fitzwilliam?”

Mr Darcy looked a little taken aback. “I do indeed, or rather, Pemberley does. It dates to my father’s time, and I have not thought of it in many a long year. But John is conscientious about everything in the stables. He will have kept it in good repair. However, I believe there is not enough snow.”

“No, I should think not,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully. “But if this storm keeps up — mightn’t there be?”

“There might, indeed. We shall have to wait and see.”

Being pleasantly occupied by locating the correct folio and the passage referred to by Mr Bennet, discussing sleigh rides and other winter amusements, and trying to fix on how soon their guests might arrive, the Darcy family soon forgot the inclement weather entirely, and did not leave the library at all until recalled to the time by the sound of the dinner gong. Time had a habit of late, Darcy sometimes thought, of being so enjoyably spent that it went by rather quickly. Before he had met Elizabeth a little more than a year ago, he would have called himself a satisfied and well-amused man. Happy fellow! It was not until he knew the true felicity of a fond and lively

family life and of prosperous love that he realised how much had been lacking before.

In Hertfordshire, one of his relations was engaged in rather less pleasant musings on the subjects of happiness and family. At that time, Miss Mary Bennet was curled up on a sofa, looking out at the storm and hoping desperately that it might not impede her uncle's carriage. Though Mary was fond of her aunt and uncle Gardiner, it must be admitted that her motive was not entirely based on concern for them. She was eager almost to the point of desperation to exchange Longbourn for Pemberley.

Mary's fond mother would have been distraught indeed to learn how heavy a role she played in her daughter's discontent. Only weeks ago, Mary herself had not expected the problem. She had rather thought that Mrs Bennet would be so pleased to have Jane and Elizabeth married well and Lydia married — one certainly could not say well, but Lydia was at least married early — that she would not so much mind that her middle daughter was plain, awkward, and ungainly. For her part, Mary thought it was best to look the truth straight in the face. Each daughter had her place in the family. Jane the acknowledged beauty, Elizabeth the wit and their father's favourite, and Lydia their mother's favourite, a fact unchanged by her disgraceful behaviour. Poor Kitty — well, Kitty had always been rather overshadowed by Lydia's boldness, but she was at least quite pretty. Mary both hoped and believed that she might now have a chance to blossom.

And that just left — her. The one plain one of the family, the one all too easy to overlook. And she had thought it would not be too bad to remain at home with mother and father, with her books. She had neglected to realise that Mrs Bennet, far from being satisfied with three daughters married, would instead turn to her oldest remaining daughter, the family disappointment. No matter how doomed to failure such an attempt might be.

Pemberley would be a blessing in comparison. Though Elizabeth's lively wit was an uneasy match with what Mary knew to be her own over-seriousness, she had no criticisms of the kindness of her older sister's heart. There would be no reproaches for her plainness at Pemberley, no entreaties to stop reading to practise flirting or play a jig instead of a concerto. Mr Darcy, too, was not an awful figure. Mary saw much to admire in his measured words and deep sincerity. While she was not close to her brother-in-law, it was easy to respect him. Add in the gentle kindness of Aunt Gardiner, Uncle Gardiner's encouragement of her scholarship, and the funny antics of the little Gardiners, and Pemberley seemed a veritable paradise.

And paradise would be hers — if only the Gardiner's carriage would arrive in good form and good time, and if only the weather would permit them travelling on to Derbyshire.

Chapter Two

A Merry Party

"Mr Lewis, you will be late!" Mrs Oliver scolded him earnestly. That gentleman, well accustomed to such treatment from his housekeeper, set down his quill at once and began to make himself ready.

"Thank you, Mrs Oliver," he said to her as he packed a few last things into a leather satchel, the better to continue his work while staying at Pemberley. "Whatever would I do without you?"

"You would keep Mr Darcy's carriage waiting, for one," said practical Mrs Oliver.

"That would not be such a bad thing," Martin Lewis pointed out. "There is not a coachman in the neighbourhood that would not relish a chance to stop in the warm kitchen and feast on some of Cook's dried apple scones."

"Be that as it may, it is the better part of courtesy to be on time," Mrs Oliver said firmly.

"I quite agree with you, and indeed I am ready," Martin readily agreed. "I shall return on the 24th, Mrs Oliver, that I may settle back in and better ready myself for the Christmas sermon."

She gave a firm nod. "I shall look forward to hearing it."

It was the work of mere moments to add the leather satchel to the small trunk that had long since been packed and placed in readiness by the door. However disposed to be mindless of the time when composing his sermons, Martin was in fact as eager for his Christmas visit to Pemberley as Mrs Oliver could be on his behalf. No, an amendment — nearly as eager.

Mrs Oliver had served his parents when Martin was a boy and had chosen to leave their home to become his housekeeper when he took ordination and received his first

living; she was as committed a partisan for him as any parent could be. She was doubtless even more alert to the kind condescension of an invitation from that quarter to the new parson than he could be. Mr Lewis thought with gratitude of his housekeeper's fond heart. It had been the saving of him as a boy, caught between two parents whose quick and ill-considered marriage had passed through a period of fiery arguments and hurt feelings before finally settling into an implacable, wintery chill. Mr Lewis had often vowed that he would never, never leave the fate of his heart and all his future years to such a chance.

It had not been long that marriage was even a possibility for him, for until recently, he had no reasonable surety of being able to support a family. The living of Kympton had come to Martin unexpectedly. It had last been granted to a man of middle years and steady temperament, who might easily have been expected to hold it for the rest of his life. Martin was given to understand that he had been popular among his parishioners. That was no surprise, for the Darcys had a reputation of long standing for being careful in the selection of their parsons, and for choosing the man they expected to do most good, rather than the one who might pay them most for it.

Martin himself had paid nothing for the living. He would not have been able to pay nearly what it was worth, his own funds being all but exhausted by the demands of university and with few prospects for replenishing them. The valuable gift of the living had made him comfortable — indeed, by his own standards, had made him prosperous — far sooner than he had any idea of being so.

It was not long before the coach drew up before the door. Though Mr Lewis might have ridden his horse to Pemberley, he could not have taken his trunk with him, making the offered carriage ride a welcome courtesy. For all Mrs Oliver's fretting, Martin was ready before it appeared. He bid a brisk goodbye to his household and set out, pleasantly curious to see the splendour of Pemberley adorned for Christmas. It was splendid enough on ordinary occasions, as he had ascertained on previous visits. Mr Darcy, as a

considerate patron, took it upon himself to introduce Kympton's new parson into society. When Martin had made him some small thanks for it, Mr Darcy had given him a shrug and a smile.

"I would be a poor neighbour indeed if I asked you to come into the neighbourhood and then had no hand in bringing you into the round of our society here," he had said. From that, Martin had augured gratefully that he was not the sort of patron who wished to be thanked, thanked again, fawned over, and then thanked once more, and had happily let the subject drop. Subsequent meetings had been no less pleasant, and Martin soon found himself considering the master of Pemberley not only as an ideal patron but also as a friend. Even so, the invitation to stay at Pemberley had caught him by surprise until he heard it would be a large and merry party. In such a general invitation, one humble parson more or less was not so surprising.

The ride to Pemberley was short and quickly over. The good Mrs Reynolds quickly bustled him indoors and would have taken him directly into the parlour, had he not stopped in astonishment.

"Pemberley is wonderful in every season I have witnessed, Mrs Reynolds, but I have never seen it quite like this," he observed. "It is the essence of Christmas."

To his surprise and private amusement, she blushed at the praise. "It is rather nice, isn't it, sir? The master always has it done up for Christmas, but Mrs Darcy had some very fine ideas this year. I think it looks better than it ever has before."

"It is my first winter here, but I cannot imagine decorations more magnificent than these." They fell silent for a moment, surveying the grand hall around them. Garlands of evergreen boughs hung in graceful curves, accentuated by winter berries. Paper snowflakes had been so intricately cut, they were as lovely as real ones. They hung on almost invisible threads, looking as though they danced through the air. The candles that customarily lit Pemberley's wide halls when darkness fell had multiplied as though by magic, their cheery, twinkling light brighter than ever.

Their silent appreciation was broken when the strains of “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming” began to drift through the halls.

“That will be Miss Darcy, of course,” Mr Lewis said. To his surprise, Mrs Reynolds chuckled.

“There was a time when you would have been right for sure, Mr Lewis, but these days, there is no telling. Miss Darcy loves the pianoforte as much as ever, to be sure, but Mrs Darcy also plays wonderfully well. And now there is Miss Bingley staying here, too, and she is most skilful as well. And I have not yet met Miss Bennet, who is coming to visit also, but Mrs Darcy tells me her sister also plays.”

“We will be well entertained, then,” Mr Lewis said lightly. Mrs Reynolds, perhaps recalled to her duties by the music, proceeded towards the drawing room. He followed behind her, and his breath caught as the music became even more beautiful with the addition of a harp, playing in perfect harmony with the pianoforte.

“Now, that is Miss Darcy,” Mrs Reynolds commented. “Though we have ever so many ladies that know the pianoforte, only she plays the harp as well.”

Her conjecture was proven right a moment later, as they entered the drawing room and saw Elizabeth seated at the piano and Georgiana lightly plucking the strings of a harp so finely polished, it seemed almost to glow.

The pull of the music was too strong to interrupt the song before its course was run. That being quickly accomplished, all rose and made their formal bows. After the first pleasantries had been exchanged, Mr Lewis found himself in a small group with Caroline Bingley and Colonel Fitzwilliam. That lady seemed rather eager for the notice of the gentleman. Mr Lewis, knowing something of what a colonel received from the militia for his services, found this rather surprising until he recollected that Colonel Fitzwilliam was the younger son of an earl. That gentleman, however, did not seem to share the lady’s interest.

“Was that not a fine performance by Mrs Darcy and Miss Darcy?” Colonel Fitzwilliam said heartily. “I have always thought Mrs Darcy a capital performer, ever since I first heard her play at Rosings Park, back when she was Miss Bennet. I am happy to say that time has only increased the charm.”

“It is a shame that you will not likely hear her again at Rosings Park for some time,” Caroline Bingley said with every appearance of sympathy. “Did not Lady Catherine de Bourgh all but forbid the house to her, and to poor Mr Darcy, too?”

“I would not exactly put it that way,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said with a wince. “I am sorry to say that she did make herself offensive. Darcy showed me the letter. Our aunt would do better to practise resignation, but that has never been a specialty of hers.”

“Perhaps it is fortunate, then, that she has an excellent opportunity to improve,” Mr Lewis suggested lightly.

Colonel Fitzwilliam chuckled. “I am afraid you offer her a bit too much Christian charity there. My aunt is indomitable. It is both the best and the worst of her character. But what of you, Mr Lewis? I hope your own relations are less difficult.”

“Indeed, I only wish I had more of them,” Mr Lewis agreed. “I have no siblings, and no near relations other than my parents. I would like to have rather more family around me than I do.”

“You may marry, sir, and so increase your family,” Caroline Bingley suggested. Her avid look at Colonel Fitzwilliam made her interest in that gentleman’s opinion of the married state quite evident.

“I shall, when I am lucky enough to form a deep and lasting attachment,” Mr Lewis agreed. “Thanks to the living of Kympton, I am able to support a family, at least if their tastes be as simple as my own. I am truly indebted to Mr Darcy. I did not think I would be so well settled for years to come.”

He was unaware that Mr Darcy had approached during the conversation, and stood almost at his elbow for the last.

“I must disagree with you there,” Mr Darcy said. “I wanted a sensible, dedicated parson for the living of Kympton, and I was fortunate enough to get one. Surely you are not indebted to me for helping me to accomplish my own aims.”

“Mr Darcy!” Mr Lewis said in astonishment. “You must forgive me. I did not see you there. Very well, I will not thank you, if you insist I do not. But I feel myself to be a fortunate man, all the same.”

“What better feeling could there be at Christmas?” Mr Darcy asked rhetorically. “I know I feel myself to be one.”

“Here, here,” Colonel Fitzwilliam agreed. “To being fortunate men. And perhaps Mr Lewis and I will become more fortunate still, Darcy, and find wives as agreeable as yours.”

“I hope it may be so,” Caroline Bingley said with some meaning. For a long moment, the gentlemen did not know quite where to look. Thankfully, the awkward moment was interrupted by the announcement of more visitors.

As the doors of Pemberley closed behind them, Mary shook herself briskly to ward off the chill and cramps of long hours in the carriage, carefully schooled her posture to an elegant uprightness and her expression to polite friendliness, and then forgot all her planned greetings and carefully remembered philosophies in astonishment.

She had looked forward to this trip to Pemberley as an escape from Longbourn. It had not quite occurred to her to anticipate it in its own right. It was only upon seeing the light twinkling from the multitude of candles, smelling the fine, crisp scent of evergreen boughs, and marvelling at the suspended snowflakes that she began to feel it might be a merry time, indeed.

Her young cousins were marvelling open-mouthed at the decorations around them, urging their mother to look at each fresh sight and pulling her this way and that in their urgency to be the first to point out one splendour after another.

“Children, children,” Mr Gardiner rebuked them mildly. “You will have ample time to appreciate our fine surroundings. Let us first go and greet our hosts.” Though their eyes were still wide with wonder, they did as their father said and stood quietly.

“Yes, you must let me take you in to Mr and Mrs Darcy straightaway,” Mrs Reynolds kindly seconded. “Mrs Darcy has been ever so excited to see you all!”

“Then we must not delay,” Mrs Gardiner said, “for I long to see our Lizzy, too.”

In such an overflowing of joy, Mary was not quite sure how she felt or what to say. Thankfully, it seemed that nothing was required of her. She followed meekly after Mrs Reynolds and the Gardiners, hoping that there would not be too many strange people to meet with. At least two of her sisters would be there. Though she had little enough in common with Elizabeth and Jane in terms of interests or personality, they were at least sisters, and loved each other. Mr Darcy, too, was not such an awful figure — she admired his evident good sense, and the way he did not speak when no words were necessary. Lizzy had said that Georgiana was terribly shy, which made her less awe-inspiring. But there was Miss Caroline Bingley, never a calming figure, and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who she had met only at the wedding, and apparently a young parson, who she had never met at all. Mary was all but certain she would make a fool of herself within the first evening, if she could only wait so long.

They entered the drawing room, were announced, and made their formal bows. There followed an outbreak of greetings and embraces, from which Mary shrunk back. The interlude at least bought her time to survey the room. Georgiana was sitting at the harp, evidently as little comfortable with the effusive emotions on display as Mary herself was. Mr Darcy looked on fondly, charmed by the

wittily expressed greetings of his wife to her beloved aunt and uncle. Caroline Bingley and Colonel Fitzwilliam were standing a little apart, near a man Mary had never seen before.

She felt the colour rise in her cheeks and knew herself for a fool. *You know nothing about him, Mary, absolutely nothing,* she told herself sternly. It did not seem to matter. That man, who must be the parson Lizzy had mentioned, had touched something in her with no more than a polite glance. *He must be a good parson indeed, to convey the impression of knowing you, body and soul, before you had even been introduced.*

Stop it, Mary, she told herself firmly.

It was necessary to calm herself at once, because Elizabeth was even then commenting on the necessity of an introduction and leading the strange man to her.

"Mary, this is Mr Lewis. He has lately joined us in Derbyshire to take up the living of Kymptom. Mr Lewis, allow me to present my sister, Miss Mary Bennet."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Bennet," Mr Lewis murmured. Privately, he rather wondered at the odd expression on the lady's face. At a guess, she might be shy, or perhaps in some other way feel herself unequal to her company. But why she might feel so in her own sister's house was a mystery to him.

"I am glad to meet you as well, Mr Lewis," Mary said. Her voice was unexpectedly firm and unwavering, and she gave silent thanks that, at least in this, she might appear composed. Unexpectedly, she found herself going on without the least hesitation. "What a wonderful profession you have, Mr Lewis. Our cousin, Mr Collins, is also a reverend. It is a great privilege to converse with such men on matters of faith and philosophy."

Mr Lewis's face, which had been pleasant enough before, was rendered outright handsome by his look of enthusiasm and interest. "I should be delighted, Miss Bennet. One does not want to bore others when such a topic may be unwelcome. But if you too are interested in matters of

philosophy, I hope we may have many pleasant chats during our visit."

Mary wished desperately to give him some sign of the sincerity of her interest, to cite some philosopher or great mind that might show her own scholarship, but her mind seemed curiously blank. The pause threatened to become awkward before Elizabeth came to her rescue.

"I believe Mary has been reading Locke of late, have not you, Mary?"

"You read my letter," Mary said without thinking, and wished to sink into the floor at her inane reply. Thankfully, neither Mr Lewis nor Elizabeth looked as though they thought the response was as foolish as she did.

"Of course, Mary! You must excuse me for not replying — I thought that there would not be time before you set out for Pemberley."

"Of course," Mary murmured, and knew not how to go on. To say what she was thinking, that she was surprised her letter had occasioned so much attention, as no one had seemed interested in her reading at Longbourn, was obviously impossible.

Thankfully, Mr Lewis took up the conversation. "For my part, I am much taken by the sunniness of Locke's outlook. It is easy to believe that man's nature is moral, there is so much good to be found in everyone we meet."

"Not everyone, surely," Elizabeth said under her breath. Her brilliant eyes looked clouded for a moment, and Mary guessed uneasily that she must be thinking of Wickham and how near he had come to bringing disaster upon their entire family.

"Not everyone, indeed, but even those whose actions are indefensible have still a spark of the divine in them," Mary said. "We are all such a mix of blessings and weaknesses. I believe we must do our best to live up to our potential."

"In that, I am sure we must all agree," Mr Lewis said, and Elizabeth also gave her assent.

Finally released from the eager greetings of the young Gardiners, Jane crossed the room to join them.

“Oh Mary, I am so glad to see you again,” Jane said warmly, and wrapped her younger sister up in a quick embrace. “It is strange not to see my sisters each day, now that I am gone from Longbourn.”

“I have missed you, too,” Mary said, half-shyly. Longbourn was different indeed without Jane and Elizabeth there. Jane had always been the best able of them all to calm Mrs Bennet’s nervousness and render her fancies more reasonable. Not indeed, that Jane could make her quiet or sensible, often as she tried. It was only that Mary’s own poor efforts were still less effective. And Mr Bennet, deprived of his favourite daughter, had gone quieter and more sarcastic than ever.

Mary told herself firmly that being melancholic would solve nothing and turned her mind firmly towards more cheerful matters. In the energetic conversation of the general party, it was easier even than she could have hoped to forget her worries, if only for a time.

Chapter Three

Unsettled Hearts

In the privacy of his guest room at last, Mr Lewis drew in a deep breath and sat down heavily on the bed. His mind was strangely full of a young lady.

Incipient infatuation had not made him blind. Miss Mary Bennet was not a beautiful woman. She might even be called plain. But if she were so, it was only by the most small-minded and uninteresting standards of society. The look of intelligent interest in her eyes was not plain. The quick, engaged mind that so eagerly conversed about Locke and Blake was not plain. Those slender, elegant hands, which as the conversation had grown heated, had gestured eloquently to make their point, could never be called plain. Mr Lewis began to look forward to hearing those hands upon the pianoforte with an interest that amounted almost to passion.

If she married him, she would be a poor woman compared to her sisters. Mrs Bingley and Mrs Darcy had fine country manors, London townhouses, fine jewels and silk dresses in abundance. A Mrs Lewis would never have more than quiet comfort and respectability, unless her own dowry could provide it to her. Mr Lewis, having already heard something of the romantic story of Mr and Mrs Darcy, was well aware that Mary Bennet's dowry could provide none of these luxuries. No man would enrich himself by marrying her.

I would be enriched greatly, for she would enrich my immortal soul. Mr Lewis had never considered himself to be a romantic man, and he had long sworn he would never be an impulsive one in matters of the heart. Had he not had long years of seeing how detrimental his parent's hasty marriage had been to their happiness and even to their characters? At the thought of entering quickly into an attachment, he was repulsed no less by his logic than by his emotions, by memories of furious arguments and long, contemptuous silences. He would be a fool indeed to do anything of the kind.

Yet there it was. He had only the most basic knowledge of her, only that which a little hearsay and one evening of conversation could provide — which was to say, nothing. Her character, her temper, her wishes and ambitions were all still unknown. He was a fool to think of her so ardently as someone he wished to know better. Wished, in fact, to know deeply.

He knew this, and yet it changed nothing. He remained shaken to the core by a feeling of recognition. Mr Lewis felt the strangest sensation, even as he knew it was absurd, that Mary Bennet was going to change his life.

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Alone in her room at last, Mary quickly changed into her nightgown, took down and braided her hair, climbed into bed, and wished herself beautiful.

She knew it was foolishness. It would no more work than the year she had turned twelve and had overheard Lady Lucas turn to Mrs Bennet and say that it was a pity her third daughter was not more handsome. Her mother had not contradicted her. Nor had she said that her daughter's worth lay in the treasures of her mind and her honour. She had blustered, insulted by the comment at the same time she accepted its accuracy without question, and had instead defended family pride by reminding Lady Lucas of Jane's unquestionable beauty.

There were too many such incidents to count, some less painful than others. When other ladies had told Jane that her sister's gown made her skin look sallow or that her hairstyle made her face even more severe, she had contradicted them in so gentle yet so determined a fashion that Mary's heart had been wrung with gratitude. Elizabeth had taken a different tack, distracting anyone who slighted her sister so deftly they did not notice the redirection.

In their way, her father's slights on her intellect and good sense stung worse than any pitying comments on her lack of beauty. Mary had never prided herself on her looks,

after all. But to finish a thick tome and try to speak of it to him, only to have herself classed among the silliest girls in England — well, perhaps he was right. Indeed, he must be right, or she would not have tried again and again, knowing the result would not change.

Impossible as she knew it to be, Mary would still have wished to be beautiful, if she might have thereby caught Mr Lewis's eye. She knew better than to think of it. When her cousin Mr Collins had visited Longbourn, she had been less wise. He had seemed so *possible*. He was not a handsome man, nor a fashionable one, nor a rich one. And he valued happy family connections and moral concerns as much as she could wish. If only Mr Collins could have been persuaded to see her in a like fashion, to value her real virtues as she valued his, to overlook her evident deficiencies as she overlooked his —

But no. It had been over before it began. She had been a fool, in fact, to think it possible. He had chosen Jane and been quickly persuaded to switch to Elizabeth, but to descend therefrom to a Mary would be impossible. He had married Charlotte Lucas in a fit of pique, and if she was not much more beautiful than Mary herself, there was at least the inarguable fact that she did not share a surname with the woman who had rejected him.

Mr Lewis was not possible. That was all too obvious, even on a first meeting. He eclipsed Mr Collins in appearance and intellect as the sun did the moon. To dream foolish dreams of him was utterly useless. She would do better to think of Locke's fine and lofty ideas, that she might at least have something to say the next time she met the man.

Unbidden, glowing images came to her mind's eye. What harm would it do to dream, after all? She might with impunity picture Mr Lewis listening attentively to her playing a concerto, his attention captured equally by musical taste and growing affection. She could imagine his more than polite applause, his intelligent comments and earnest entreaty that she might play again.

And after all, it was pleasant to live for a short time amid dreams. Feeling herself nearly wicked, Mary went on spinning her castles of air. Imagine Mr Lewis giving a sermon, with her seated in the row reserved for the reverend's family. Imagine him looking fondly down at her as his sermon spoke of family duty and how a devoted wife could, by her efforts and faith, promote the happiness and honour of her home and even of her parish.

She might imagine them in a carriage, perhaps travelling to visit the seashore for the first time. He might hold her hand. He might turn to her and say, "My dear, I am so glad you are my wife." He might…

Buoyed by such imaginings, Mary was finally lulled into a sleep full of pleasant dreams.

Chapter Four

A Taste for Music

By the wishes of nearly all, the visitor's first day at Pemberley was a quiet one. Caroline Bingley was the only person who seemed to wish otherwise, but the others disregarded her comments about the dullness of doing nothing and how much more lively London was at this season as quickly as politeness would allow. Most of those who had travelled far were grateful for the chance to recover their strength quietly, and their friends and relations were solicitous that it should be so.

After a fine dinner, the women gathered in the drawing room before a roaring fire. Mary laughed inwardly to see the looks that Jane and Elizabeth both cast toward the billiards room when they thought no one else was looking. To miss one's new husband even during the brief separation before the men rejoined them seemed to her as fine a proof of connubial felicity as ever she had heard of. After a moment's thought, Mary corrected herself. Though years of marriage had rendered Mrs Gardiner less apt to fret over momentary separations, her enjoyment in her husband's company and confidence in his warm and enduring regard were clear to the meanest observer. Love that remained strong and beautiful even after the first flush of infatuation was gone was surely even more beautiful than love that had not yet stood the test of time.

"Well," Elizabeth said at a break in the conversation, "perhaps we might have some music. I should greatly like to hear a little."

"It is hardly worthwhile to begin when half the company is not here to enjoy it," Caroline Bingley protested. From her glance towards the billiards room, it was obvious that she did not choose to play when she had no male audience to perform for.

"They will come quickly, as soon as they hear the music," Elizabeth pointed out laughingly. "In fact, will you not

play us something on the harp, Georgiana? That will bring your brother more quickly than anything."

"I shall, if you wish it," Georgiana said quietly.

"I wish you would," Mary said, almost to her own surprise. "I dearly love to hear the harp."

Elizabeth looked surprised. "I did not know that you were so fond of it, Mary."

Mary nodded. "I should have liked to learn it, but I did not want to ask Father to bear the expense."

"I would gladly teach you a little while you are here," Georgiana volunteered, and looked frightened at her own daring. "Not that I am qualified to teach anyone, of course! But I could show you the things I first learned as a beginner, and you would be welcome to practise on my harp."

"That is a generous offer," Mary said. She looked quickly from Georgiana to Elizabeth, trying to discern what, if any of it, might have arisen from feelings of obligation and ought therefore to be declined. Noticing her indecision, Elizabeth smiled and gave a tiny, approving nod to show that she ought to accept. "Thank you, Miss Darcy. I would be delighted."

"It will be my pleasure, for I dearly love to talk of music," Georgiana said. "Trying to teach anything will be a rather frightening exercise, but I should like to attempt it all the same."

Her companion, a rather motherly lady named Mrs Annesley, leaned forward to pat her hand. "You will do splendidly, my dear. I have had several young charges before, as you know, but never one who practised with as much dedication as you do."

"I thank you, Mrs Annesley," Georgiana managed to say, though she flushed brightly with embarrassment at the praise. "You are kind to say so."

Elizabeth rose and walked to the harp. "Play some of Fitzwilliam's favourites, Georgiana, and he will be here all the faster."

Obligingly, Georgiana rose and went to the harp. She looked through several pieces of music before choosing one, and Elizabeth stood by to turn her pages. After delicately stretching her hands to limber them, Georgiana began to play. Mary felt herself almost enraptured by the delicate, silvery sounds that she drew from the harp. Though Georgiana had no experience as a teacher, it was evident at once that she was a capital performer, one Mary would be glad to emulate. Their party was silent, listening in joyful wonder.

No sooner had the song finished than the drawing room door opened to the gentleman's applause. Almost wondering at his consideration, Mary realised that Mr Darcy had indeed come upon hearing the harp, and had waited until the song was done to enter, that they might not break Georgiana's concentration. It was an elegant courtesy indeed, the more so for having been given silently and unasked-for.

"That was wonderful, Georgie," Colonel Fitzwilliam praised her. "Will not you play again? I should love to hear more."

There was a general murmur of agreement, but Georgiana looked shy and seemed about to leave the instrument. "I should not wish to take up too much time," she said, ducking her head.

"I wish you would play another," Mary said. Suddenly, she smiled. Mr Lewis's breath caught at the change that smile brought to her face. "I think I am receiving valuable instruction even from hearing you play. Please do play again."

At that, Georgiana seemed to take courage, and settled herself to play again. The music was enchanting as before, seeming almost to tug at one's heartstrings and remember things forgotten. At the end of the piece, the company honoured her with great applause. With a quick, shy bow, she left the instrument and hurried to her brother's side.

"That was wonderful, Georgiana," Mr Darcy praised her warmly, and her smile showed how highly she regarded her brother's approbation. He went on. "Miss Bennet, I believe

you mentioned something about instruction. Will you not tell me more?"

Mary felt rather shy with the eyes of all the company on her, but took courage from the knowledge that Georgiana was shyer still. "Your sister has agreed to teach me a little of the harp while I am here, Mr Darcy. I have always wanted to learn."

Mr Darcy looked surprised, though pleased. "I am glad to hear it, Miss Bennet. My sister loves music so dearly, I am sure it will be an enjoyable exercise for her." As more general conversation rose up around them, he turned to Georgiana and spoke in an undertone. "That is well done, Georgiana. You will be a capital teacher."

"I fear I will not," Georgiana confessed. "After all, I have never tried before."

"Among family, I am sure that your best efforts will be all that is expected," Mr Darcy said firmly. "Georgiana, you did well to find the courage to offer. I am proud of you."

"Thank you, brother," Georgiana said softly, and squeezed his hand in appreciation of the praise.

Across the room, Colonel Fitzwilliam was speaking of his desire for more music and wondering who they might next convince to play. Mary was convinced he was on the point of turning to Elizabeth when Caroline Bingley sprang up.

"If you insist, sir, I should be delighted to play something," she said brightly. Whether claiming an invitation meant for another was the best method of endearing oneself to a man, Mary rather doubted, though she had to admit her own ignorance in matters of love and flirtation. Indeed, honesty compelled her to remind herself she had acted little differently in the past, even if her own motivation was the opportunity of playing itself.

"Please do, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth said warmly, by which Mary deduced that while Elizabeth the sister had always taken great delight in laughing at others' foibles, Elizabeth the

lady of a great house placed greater value on smoothing them over and replacing them with tranquillity and good cheer.

"Yes, Caroline, play us something merry," Mr Bingley added.

She did not look entirely pleased at this suggestion, but continued ruffling through the sheet music. At last, she selected one and began to play. Mary had been long used to measuring other women's performance on the pianoforte against her own, and it caused her a moment of surprise when she recollected she had not done so when Georgiana was playing. *But she was playing the harp, not the piano, which doubtless accounts for it,* Mary told herself. Caroline Bingley was accomplished, in any case. Begrudgingly, Mary had to admit that she played more skilfully than anyone in Meryton. Though no doubt having the advantage of years of instruction from Town masters had something to do with that.

The fast-paced, intricate piece ended, and Mary played her part in the largely dutiful applause that followed. Georgiana was entirely genuine in her warm praise, admiringly commenting on Miss Bingley's performance in technical terms. Mary smiled to herself. The praise was high and just, but it was evident that no one but those ladies who played entirely understood it, and equally evident that Miss Bingley had little taste for praise that would not raise her value in the eyes of eligible men.

"Will not you play, Miss Bennet?" Georgiana asked. Mary, who had become rather lost in her thoughts, almost jumped. "Please do. I dearly love to hear a new performer."

Being accustomed to looking for opportunities to perform rather than having them come to her, Mary was almost lost for a reply for the first moment. Mrs Gardiner quickly seconded the request.

"Please play for us, Mary. Indeed, you must. It is too long since I last heard you."

Others in the party added their polite requests, and Mary rose and made her way to the piano.

“It is kind of you all to ask,” she remarked, “because I would be delighted to have the opportunity of playing this pianoforte. It is remarkably fine.”

Georgiana smiled. “My brother brought it for me from town only last year. I think you will be pleased with it. It has a lovely tone.”

“As we heard in Miss Bingley’s performance,” Mary agreed. Having spoken no more than the truth, she realised only upon hearing the general murmurs of assent that she had accidentally given a graceful compliment. Growing thoughtful, she turned to her music and the necessarily quick work of deciding what to play for them. Perhaps she ought to choose something simple. Her own performance would suffer from comparison with Miss Bingley’s if she chose something too complex. Yet she could hardly bear not to try one of the more difficult pieces in her repertoire, than she might be given the praise for learning it.

That decided the matter, and after arranging her music and stretching her hands with perhaps somewhat more showiness than necessary, Mary played Bach’s Goldberg Variations as quickly and precisely as she was able, adding a certain emphasis to the difficult passages to be sure the company observed the crisp precision of the notes. She finished to general applause, although a tiny, starved corner of Mary’s heart could not help but notice it was not nearly as fervent as the applause Georgiana had received.

Georgiana herself looked sincerely enthusiastic. “Oh, I adore the Goldberg Variations!” she said breathlessly. “Indeed, it is one of my favourite pieces by Bach.”

“I…like the piece very much as well,” Mary said weakly, feeling that she had made herself ridiculous. To have settled on a piece often played by Georgiana, who was so clearly her superior! Many of those present must have been accustomed to hearing Bach’s masterpiece by far more skilful hands. They had likely listened to her with more patience than pleasure.

Almost wishing that she might sink into the floor and disappear, Mary did not at first notice that Mr Lewis was approaching the piano.

"You are a skilled performer, Miss Bennet," he said warmly.

She blinked in surprise. "I—I thank you, Mr Lewis. You are kind to say so."

He shook his head. "It is only the truth. You are indeed accomplished. But if you do not mind, I should like to ask you something."

"What is it, Mr Lewis?"

"Is Bach a particular favourite of yours, Miss Bennet?"

"Indeed," Mary said unhesitatingly. "I think he must be a favourite of nearly everyone who plays. His music is so calm and fine, so noble. And one is so familiar with his works. For all he was a German, I think his music belongs to England now as well."

"Do you know "Sleepers, Awake"? It is a favourite of mine."

"Indeed, I do," Mary said. It was a rather simple piece, one she had long since mastered.

"It calls up such pictures in my mind," Mr Lewis murmured. "What Bach must have felt in writing it? What do you think, Miss Bennet?"

"I can hardly imagine," she said. All the same, she could not help but call up the music in her mind, as she had so often played it on the pianoforte in the drawing room of Longbourn.

"There is a sway and bounce to the music, a happiness," Mary said haltingly, picturing how her hands would span the chords, the rhythm of it. "The music draws you along, like — like following a good friend on a walk on a fine, clear day. Or like walking behind my sisters on our way into church, thinking of how much I will enjoy listening to the dear reverend."

“Think of it, and play, Miss Bennet. Please,” Mr Lewis said gently, and almost unthinking, she obeyed. The images came easily now, followed by others. A man with gentle eyes writing music, leaning forward to cross out a line and write it again, wishing so earnestly that his work might bring listeners closer to God. The joy of bringing baskets of good things to the tenants around Longbourn, and feeling their kind thanks to be her ample reward. The satisfaction of reading beautiful things and seeing in them a pattern that would allow her to live her life honourably and well.

Too soon, Mary reached the final chords. She lifted her hands from the keys and was taken aback by the loud wave of applause that swept over the room, started by Elizabeth but soon earnestly joined by all present.

“That was wonderful, Mary,” Elizabeth said. “It is a joy to hear.” Her praise was warmly echoed and was followed by a general wish that she might play another.

“Do you know ‘Sheep May Safely Graze,’ Miss Bennet?” was Mr Lewis’s particular request.

“I do,” Mary said. Feeling a sudden boldness, she asked him, “Have you pictures in your mind for this song, Mr Lewis? Will you tell me about them?”

“Gladly,” Mr Lewis replied. “I think of the good old man who was parson of our village church when I was a lad. He was mild, and rather quiet, but he knew every family within his living, and he did all within his power to see them safe, happy, and secure in their love for each other and for God. In fine weather, he would walk to see the families nearest him, though he had a horse, and one would see him striding over the hills, smiling out over all he surveyed. I pray I may one day do half so much for those around me as he did.”

“When you speak so of duty, and of the joy of doing one’s duty, I feel sure that you will,” Mary replied softly, and began to play, holding in her mind the strangely clear image of an old man, pure of heart and strong of will, walking under the good sunlight for the benefit of those within his care.

The applause at the end of the piece was no less heartfelt, but Mary was still more surprised to look up and catch a tear glinting in her aunt's eye. It was clear that she was deeply moved, and Mary felt the honour of such a compliment even more than the applause.

"Lizzy, we have not yet heard you," Mary said, walking away from the instrument. "You really must, for all the rest of us have gone."

"Perhaps I had better not, for I am sure I am the least skilled of the lot of you," Elizabeth said laughingly.

"I beg you would indulge me," Mr Darcy said suddenly, "and you, too, Georgiana. Will you not give us 'Tell Me What Love Is'? You know well I never tire of hearing it."

"That is well chosen," Elizabeth said agreeably, "for you have requested it so often, we are now quite well practised. Are you willing, Georgiana?"

Georgiana quickly assented, and they made their way to the instrument. As she sang of love's spell, Elizabeth's clear voice was more beautiful than ever, and the expression in her eyes as they rested on Mr Darcy showed that the song had a particular meaning for them. Mary felt certain that all the rest of the company had become invisible to them, lost in a world entirely their own. And as for Mr Darcy's expression as he looked at his wife —

I hope that a man may look at me like that one day, Mary thought suddenly. *I hope I may give so much happiness.*

Looking away, she happened to catch Mr Lewis's eye. He gave her a small private smile, as though to say that he, too, had noticed the unspoken exchange of love-vows occurring across the room.

Chapter Five

Her First Lesson

After breakfast the next day, Mary asked Georgiana about harp lessons in such general and uncertain terms, it took some time before Georgiana understood the request. Mary herself thought that even such a diffident inquiry was almost more than politeness would bear, but as soon as Georgiana understood her meaning, she took up the idea with enthusiasm, proving that it was not at all an unwelcome one.

Though at first speaking too low to be heard, and correcting herself once in every two sentences, Georgiana was too dedicated an enthusiast to remain self-conscious. She was quickly swept up in the enjoyment of showing another musician what she herself had recently learned. Once her shyness was forgotten, she proved a superior teacher.

"Your hand position is good," Georgiana approved as Mary plucked a few notes. Already, she could hear the improvement in tone from her first attempts. "I think you ought to try a glissando next."

Mary looked at her, surprised and pleased. "So soon?"

Georgiana nodded. "You are ready." Carefully, she demonstrated the technique, her hands gliding over the strings so that each was plucked in turn, the notes cascading into a waterfall of sound.

Mary sighed at its loveliness. "Show me again, please."

Carefully, Georgiana did so. As the sound died away, she stood up and gestured Mary to the harp. Mary took a deep breath and took her place. She closed her eyes for a moment, picturing how Georgiana had held her hands, the graceful movement she had made.

Mary opened her eyes and firmly stroked over the harp strings. The sound was not quite right. It was not as even or smooth as she would have it. Yet imperfect as it was, it was lovely.

“That is better than when I first tried,” Georgiana said. Mary smiled at the praise — coming from such an accomplished player, it was no small thing.

Mary tried again and listened to the notes as they died away. “It is wonderful.”

“It is,” Georgiana agreed. “I did not think I could love anything so much as the pianoforte, but the harp has a magic all its own.” She smiled.

“Indeed, it does.”

As the lesson went on, Georgiana grew less and less reserved. Mary really thought her as amiable as any of her sisters, if somewhat quieter. She could hardly believe Georgiana was younger than Kitty, for her quietness lent her a kind of dignity that made her appear no younger than Mary herself.

“I wish you might stay longer,” Georgiana said quietly. “I have greatly enjoyed your company already.”

“And I yours,” Mary said readily, a little surprised at the compliment. “I wish I might as well. But my uncle must return to London for his business, and I am to go with him.”

Georgiana nodded. “Perhaps you may come again, if your father would let you.”

Mary nearly sighed, although she repressed the impulse as disloyal. “I do not think he would mind my being from home, but he would not wish to take the trouble of bringing me.”

Georgiana looked at her in surprise. “The trouble? Would not your father wish for your company?”

Mary coloured slightly and sought for a reply that balanced truth with discretion. “My father…well, he is a very intelligent man, and I am afraid I am rather too silly for him. I am sure he loves me as he loves all his daughters, but I think he finds my society rather tiresome, if the truth were to be told.”

Georgiana's shocked expression was quickly becoming appalled. "I am very sorry to hear it," was all she said, in respect for her friend's obvious wish to drop the subject. Mary silently blessed her for her sensitivity, for she could imagine how much more Lydia or Mrs Bennet might have had to say about the subject.

It was a shame indeed that she could not stay longer. Pemberley had not only its own graces to draw her but also those of good society and good humour. One so rarely heard a cross word in Pemberley that she found the thought of returning to her mother's complaints and her father's barbed wit rather trying. The trip back to Longbourn would mean leaving behind the lovely piano and her harp lessons, the laughter that had surprised her with how often it bubbled up in such pleasant company.

It would mean leaving Mr Lewis after an acquaintance that even then, at its completion, would be little more than a fortnight. Yet if only she were the kind of woman with whom men fell in love, it might have been enough. Mr Collins had proposed to Charlotte Lucas (and to Elizabeth, though perhaps it was better not to think of that) in less. Mary King had married a man she met in London on no more than an acquaintance, and according to the last letter she had sent back to Meryton, they were now happily settled. Yes, it was possible — if only it were possible that he might fall in love with her at all.

You are one of the silliest girls in all of England, Mary reminded herself grimly, *but you are not as silly as all that.*

And so, resolving to put foolish fantasies away, she turned her concentration back to the lesson.

Chapter Six

A Variety of Letters

The arrival of the post, Mary reflected, seemed to take on a special significance near Christmastime. However enjoyable news from one's family and friends was during the rest of the year, there was a special relish to a letter that contained the best wishes for the season.

The post at Pemberley seemed particularly abundant that day. Georgiana, who received few letters as a rule, had two from school friends wishing her all the joy of the season. One had sent her a charming little parcel with a tiny watercolour. Georgiana exclaimed over its cleverness, pronouncing that she would ask her brother to have it framed for her.

Caroline Bingley had a letter from Mrs Hurst, equally full of praise for the London season and hints for an invitation to Pemberley. Having many other letters from society friends, Caroline quickly put it aside, saying that she would certainly remember to reply when she had the time.

Mrs Bennet's letter to Mary was rather a trial. Guilty as Mary felt at the thought, she could not deny it.

Longbourn, December 18, 1812

My dear daughter,

Be assured that Kitty and your father and I are all well enough, though I suffer a great deal from my nerves. But I shall write nothing of that, for as you know, I never complain. No one knows what I suffer.

I hope that all at Pemberley are well, and that you are being a good girl. Your aunt Gardiner wrote me a little something of the company upon her arrival. Why did you not tell me that there are two single men in attendance? Colonel

Fitzwilliam would be a catch indeed, for he is the younger son of an earl, you know. It is not likely, for I am sure he is accustomed to seeing the finest beauties in town, but you must make what you can of it. Perhaps he likes serious young ladies.

As for this Mr Lewis, if his living be a good one, that would not be such a bad thing, either. I am sure you do not want to remain at home with your father and I forever, and a reverend, even if not a rich one, may be the best that you can do. Listen to your eldest sister, for she knows the best ways of arranging your hair to catch a man's fancy. After all, she caught Mr Bingley, did not she? (At this, Mary blanched and swore inwardly to burn the letter at the first opportunity. She had grown inured to Mrs Bennet's impropriety as directed towards herself, but in reference to others, it still had the power to mortify her.)

In any case, you must enjoy your visit as best you are able, and make a good thing of it. I hope you shall have a Merry Christmas, and give all the company my good wishes.

Your loving mother,

Mrs Bennet

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"Are mother and father in good health?" Elizabeth inquired mildly across the room. Mary instinctively clutched the letter to her bosom, horrified lest Elizabeth ask her to read it aloud.

"Indeed — indeed they are," she stammered. "Mother writes of her nerves, but there is nothing particular there. She writes that she does not complain."

Elizabeth gave her a long glance. Mary was very much afraid that she saw too much. "I am glad they are well," she said at last, and turned to her own letters. The first was addressed from Charlotte Collins, and Elizabeth read passages of it aloud to all of them. Jane exclaimed in happiness over

Charlotte's expressed satisfaction with her life, and not least over the news that she was to bear a child.

"Charlotte will be a capital mother," Elizabeth said fondly. Knowing how concerned she had been at the time of her friend's marriage to their cousin, Mary was glad to see Elizabeth so well disposed to it. For her own part, Mary had never thought Mr Collins so unworthy as her sister had.

The next letter in Elizabeth's pile seemed to surprise her, for she raised an eyebrow upon reading the address. Her expression as she began reading was so curious that Mary could hardly interpret it, though incredulity seemed to make up the better part of it.

Mr Darcy seemed to have noticed as well. "You are making the most curious faces, Lizzy," he murmured quietly to his wife. "I hope you will satisfy my curiosity — at least insofar as the privacy of your correspondent allows."

"As to that, there is no difficulty, for the letter is from your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and I am confident she wished the letter to be read by as large an audience as possible," Elizabeth said, and handed him the letter. Mr Darcy had not read more than the first lines before his eyebrows had shot up so high, they nearly reached his hairline.

"This is intolerable," he breathed. "My dear, I am so sorry that you should be subjected to my insulting, ridiculous aunt. I did not think even she would be so unreasonable as this."

Elizabeth merely shrugged. "You need not worry, my love. Your opinion means the world to me, but I do not care one farthing for Lady Catherine's. Perhaps one day, she will think better of her behaviour, and we may visit each other once more. Until such a time, I am perfectly happy to forget her."

"You are more generous than she deserves," Mr Darcy said grimly. His disappointment in his relation was obvious. Yet at Elizabeth's loving smile and obvious unconcern, his good humour returned, and he too seemed to find it possible to forget Lady Catherine until she proved herself better worth the remembering.

“Was it terribly bad?” Mary asked, though reproaching herself for unladylike curiosity.

“To own the truth, it is rather funny,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully, “though Lady Catherine certainly did not intend it to be. You may read it, if you like, since I am sure Lady Catherine did not intend it to remain confidential.”

With that, Elizabeth handed the letter to her sister, and Mary eagerly accepted the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity. After all Mr Collins had said in praise of his patron, she was particularly interested to know how the lady would compose a letter of such delicacy.

If Mary had imagined that a noble lady would prove a particularly elegant and able correspondent, she was doomed to disappointment. She had not read more than a few words before she felt the same astonishment as her sister and Mr Darcy.

Rosings Park, December 17, 1812

To the presumptive Mrs Darcy, nee Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

As I am sure you have triumphed over convincing my dutiful and loving nephew to send no reply to my previous letters, (here, Mary’s eyebrows were already rising in bewilderment, as she couldn’t imagine anything less likely than Elizabeth persuading Mr Darcy not to answer a letter) *I have lowered myself in writing to you, that you may directly feel my displeasure.*

I thought, after our conversation at Longbourn, that I had resigned myself to the depths of your depravity and ingratitude, but to interfere with the correspondence between a loving nephew and aunt is a crime such as I know not how to decry. Was it not bad enough that you lowered him in the eyes of all the world by enticing him into a marriage when you had neither connexions, money, or beauty to recommend you? I had thought you venial, but not absolutely wicked.

Though the connexion cannot now be severed, all is not lost. If my nephew comes to me at Rosings Park and begs my forgiveness, I shall consider granting it. You may tell him so. I am sure the association with Rosings Park is an advantage you would not wish to forego.

Sincerely,

Lady Catherine de Bourgh

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"Oh, my," Mary murmured. It was a curious letter, to be sure. Elizabeth seemed able to dismiss its smarting insults and focus merely on its absurdity. It was more than Mary herself could have done. She felt certain that had she received such a letter, however misguided it might be, she would have all but sunk through the floor in her shame. "However will you answer it?"

"That is a question," Elizabeth admitted. She looked into the distance for a long moment, clearly lost in thought. Finally, her face brightened, and she chuckled. "Mary, I have it. I know what I shall do."

"What?" Mary inquired anxiously, hoping that Elizabeth did not intend to answer it with an insulting letter of her own. Though she had no concerns about her sister's propriety or good sense at most times, such insults might make anyone prone to lose their head.

"I shall send her the prettiest Christmas card I can find and write a general greeting for the health and happiness of all her family."

Mary blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, that will do nicely. It has two advantages. First, it is the right thing to do for one's relations, and while Lady Catherine may wish to feud with me, I have no particular interest in doing so with her."

"That is certainly true," Mary said slowly. "What is the second advantage?"

Elizabeth grinned wickedly. “I suspect she will find it highly frustrating.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam let out a bark of laughter. “My goodness, how right you are! You are a capital strategist, Mrs Darcy. We could use you in the army.” Across the room, Caroline Bingley was looking at Elizabeth with mingled surprise and amusement. Evidently, she had not thought her onetime rival capable of it.

Elizabeth, however, had eyes for no one but Mr Darcy. “What do you think, Fitzwilliam?” she murmured to him. “I could be more conciliatory, it is true. Ought I to send her some little apology?”

“No, certainly not,” Mr Darcy said. “I only wish Lady Catherine understood it is due to you and you alone that I have not severed the relationship entirely. You are far more patient with her insults than I would be on your behalf.”

“Do not worry, my love,” Elizabeth urged him. “I am entirely content to ignore her rude behaviour until it improves. When I have thrown out this letter and replied to it, I shall not give it another moment’s thought.”

He kissed her hand. “It is a promise, then.”

“A promise,” she agreed, and evidently putting Lady Catherine from her mind with all the ease she had boasted, she went on to her other letters.

Chapter Seven

A Sleigh Ride

When Mr Darcy brought the company the happy report that Pemberley's sleigh was in perfect working order, the next question was, of course, when there might be snow enough for the runners to glide, and weather fine enough that they would wish to venture out. A short succession of grey and snowless days made them fear that there might be no opportunity, after all. Thankfully, such fears proved groundless when heavy snow fell overnight, only to be followed by a bright and cloudless morning.

After breakfast, the coachman brought the sleigh from the stables, pulled by a magnificent pair of greys. The animals tossed their manes and snorted, invigorated by the crisp December air and eager for an outing after days of resting in the comfort of their warm, snug stables. With two banks of seats, each capable of holding two passengers, the party could not all ride at once. Though good manners and careful training kept the Gardiner children from clamouring for the privilege of the first ride, their wide eyes and rapt attention clearly showed how ardently they wished for it. Ever the fond aunt, Elizabeth took pity on the two eldest and suggested that they, accompanied by their parents, might be the first to venture out. With real though unspoken gratitude, Mr and Mrs Gardiner accepted the invitation and set out with their offspring.

"I am honoured to be trusted with the horses, sir, for they are truly magnificent," Mr Gardiner observed to Mr Darcy, who smiled.

"You have entrusted me with your niece, sir. Surely a pair of greys are nothing in comparison. In any case, Elizabeth mentioned to me that you are a most capable driver."

"Why, thank you, Lizzy," Mr Gardiner remarked. "I shall do my best to live up to the praise."

With no more ado, they were off, waving merrily as the children shouted for joy. The others returned to the drawing

room, to await their return and settle the business of who ought to ride with whom. Though saying little, it was evident that Mr Darcy wished to drive his wife or no one, and even Colonel Fitzwilliam, who sometimes enjoyed teasing his cousin a little, forbear to do it in view of his pleasing devotion.

"Perhaps you might drive the sleigh next, Colonel Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth suggested, "for it is a daring, active sort of activity, and thus entirely suited to your career."

"I should be delighted," he said gallantly. "And I know precisely the lady who ought to ride with me."

Caroline Bingley smiled smugly at his words, and seemed almost at the point of speech, when he continued cheerfully, "Georgiana! What do you think, Georgie, will you ride with me?"

"I should like that," Georgiana said quietly. She looked at Mary, though she did not quite meet her eyes. "Will you come too, Miss Bennet? I think it would be twice as fun with a companion near my own age."

"Ha! 'Tis true, I am a boring old man," Colonel Fitzwilliam said laughingly. "Come, Miss Bennet, you must ride with us, or I will bore poor Georgiana half to tears."

Mary could not help but laugh. "You know perfectly well that Miss Darcy did not intend any such slur on you, Colonel Fitzwilliam, but I should be delighted to join you all the same." Though she felt obscurely that she ought to turn to Caroline Bingley in repayment of the near-slight she had received from Colonel Fitzwilliam, the temptation to issue a different invitation was irresistible. "Will you not make up the foursome, Mr Lewis? Perhaps we may even go toward Kympton, and you might tell us a little of the countryside."

"Gladly," said Mr Lewis, flattered at her evident desire for his company. Remembering himself, he made a slight bow towards Miss Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. "However, I must admit that Miss Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam must in all probability know the countryside far better than I do. I have not had the living of Kympton for a twelvemonth."

“That may be so,” Colonel Fitzwilliam agreed with a grin. “But there is countryside enough and beauty enough for all of us to remark on.”

Their conversation was so pleasant that it seemed mere moments until the Gardiners returned and the sleigh was made over to them. Mary had imagined that she and Georgiana would share the rear seat of the sleigh, and was rather taken aback when Colonel Fitzwilliam assisted Georgiana into the front seat, and Mr Lewis offered his hand that she might more readily step up into the rear seat. Mary thought with a sudden rush of alarm that this would place them on the seat together, so close that the edges of their sleeves and the hems of their garments would surely brush together. But after all, it would be absurd to demur. There was nothing improper in it, under the eyes of Colonel Fitzwilliam and Georgiana, and nothing unpleasant, either. On the contrary. Mary was rather afraid she wanted it too much.

With a silent nod of thanks, she took his hand and settled into her place. Mr Lewis followed her promptly, settling into the narrow seat with grace. Though he took care to give her space, Mary could not but notice that the edge of her skirts did indeed drape over his long coat.

“Well, then,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said. “Are we all ready?” At their assents, he gave the reins a gentle snap. The horses set off with a good will, drawing the sleigh smoothly over the snow.

“How much one sees with no walls or roof! It is remarkably refreshing,” Mary remarked.

“Much better than a stuffy old carriage!” Georgiana said, making the whole party chuckle. The air was fresh and cool. In the warm sunlight, its bite was refreshing rather than bitter. The ground flew past under the sleek runners of the sleigh, sending the countryside flashing by.

“That meadow is wonderful in the spring,” Mr Lewis remarked, gesturing to Mary’s side of the carriage. Her eyes were caught by his gloved hand, so much broader than her own, and yet so graceful. “It is full of flowers. I believe I have

sometimes seen half a dozen colours in bloom — white, yellow, pink, blue, and I know not what. Have you ever happened to see it, Miss Darcy?"

She laughingly assented, adding a wish that Miss Bennet might one day be at Pemberley in time to see it, too.

"I should like that very much, though I would not want to impose," Mary remarked, thinking anxiously of the need to balance polite assent without being demanding. She thought at one moment that she had managed tolerably well and was at the next certain that she had sounded unutterably rude.

Mr Lewis seemed to perceive her distress, for he turned to her and said brightly, "Have you finished Locke, Miss Bennet? I should like to know what you think of the *tabula rasa* once you have read his argument in its entirety."

"Indeed, I did," Mary replied, grateful for a topic which held few pitfalls. "However, I do not believe my opinion is much altered. I think much as I ever did — that his argument is a moral one."

"I have considered using something of the kind in my Christmas sermon — using the idea that we are naturally good, I mean. I feel it might work as encouragement."

"Encouragement?" Mary inquired. "I do not quite follow you."

"I mean we may find it easier to be kind and true if we are reminded that it is our birthright, something that, so to speak, comes naturally. But I have not yet been able to write it out. I am not at all satisfied."

"I should like to see it," Mary said without thinking. Alarmed, she hastily corrected herself. "You must excuse me, Mr Lewis! Naturally, you would not wish to show a piece you are presently engaged in writing, still less to someone who has not the least idea of how a sermon ought to be written. It is only that I find the topic interesting."

"I shall not excuse you, Miss Bennet, for I would be grateful if you would do me the honour of looking at my sermon, poor, half-finished thing that it is. From our

conversations so far, I am convinced that you could be of material assistance to me."

Mary blushed rosily. Mr Lewis smiled, thinking how well the colour became her. As some women might treasure a compliment on a new bonnet, Miss Bennet was avid for even the smallest recognition towards the treasures of her mind. His smile faded for a moment, thinking that it ought not to be so. She ought to be accustomed to be well-listened to and praised, for her care regarding all matters of scholarship and morality readily deserved such recognition. Mere acquaintance that he was, he instantly vowed to do what he could to make up for the omission.

"Whether I can truly help, I cannot say," Mary remarked, "but I am certain that I will enjoy the exercise."

"It is settled, then," Mr Lewis said lightly, and the party conversed more generally as Colonel Fitzwilliam guided the sleigh over the snowy roads. It seemed all too short a time before they were returning to the house, mindful that others were waiting to take their turn and that daylight was short.

Mary was torn between wishing that the sleigh ride might never end, and desiring to be back at Pemberley without delay. It was so pleasant to laugh lightly with the others and to be seated next to Mr Lewis that she was afraid she enjoyed it too much, and imagined intentions that were not there. Was it anything more than courtesy that made Mr Lewis assist her into the carriage and turn eagerly to her in conversation, attentive to each word she said? He had been very generous to so willingly take up her awkward suggestion. To imagine that such a man might benefit from her threadbare scholarship! Yet Mary could not help but be glad he had agreed to it. Each moment with him was growing dear to her, even as she knew it was dangerous to imagine he might feel the same. To read the words he had written and even strive to improve them was an opportunity too precious to be given up, even if she earnestly doubted her fitness for the endeavour. Daydreams of such a thing came all too easily. To be married to such a man, to read his sermons each week and discuss them with him,

perhaps even to hear a phrase she had written read aloud in his smooth, resonant voice —

Mary drew on all her self-discipline to forget her daydreams. She even convinced herself she had succeeded.

Chapter Eight

A Goodly Sermon

After an elegant and delicious supper, the women withdrew to the drawing room to await the arrival of the men. Even Caroline Bingley seemed tolerably well pleased with the amusement of sleigh rides, much as she might have preferred an eligible single man as her riding partner. In the end, she had ridden with Jane and Mr Bingley. Mary had been half amused and half affronted to overhear her manoeuvring to take the front seat with her brother in place of his wife. For her part, Jane seemed not to have noticed, and had earnestly approved the plan before crowding into the back seat with her beloved niece and nephew. Gales of laughter had erupted from them, demonstrating how well pleased all three were with the arrangement.

"I have lately finished a book you might enjoy, Mary. Would you like to see it?" Elizabeth inquired. Mary readily assented, though with some surprise at the suggestion. Often as they had heard the same books read aloud at home, Elizabeth rarely suggested her books to her younger sister.

The book in question was a novel, and everything proclaimed it to be from a lending library. "It is not a simple story of Gothic thrills, Mary," Elizabeth reassured her. "I hardly know how to describe it. But the story is beautiful, and so real. I should like to go on and on reading it forever. Fitzwilliam has ordered a copy to add to Pemberley's library, but it has not yet arrived."

Mary turned the volume over in her hands. "That is high praise indeed," she mused, "for I have not seen a single volume there that was not a treasure." Even the coloured leather of the cover and its delicate illustrations of wisteria invited one to start reading at once.

Elizabeth grinned. "I do not know what our father would think of my adding modern novels to such a library, but I think it ought to have the value of amusement and of instruction."

“And a moral tale such as you describe may well provide both,” Mary pointed out. “Thank you, Elizabeth. I shall be delighted to read it.”

“I am glad to hear you say so, for then I will have someone to speak to about it. I was not sure you would wish to do it.”

“Why so?” Mary asked curiously.

“I thought it might not be serious enough for you. It is a long way down from Locke, to be sure. And I have heard you say you preferred contemplation and reflection to gaiety and amusement.”

“I think I remember the occasion,” Mary said. “But I believe I spoke with too much thought of being heard to say so. I cannot deny that I dearly love a good novel.”

“I am glad to hear it,” her sister said lightly, and their conversation was then interrupted by the arrival of the menfolk. A general conversation and bustle was then in evidence.

After some time, Mr Lewis made his way over to Mary. He carried a sheaf of several papers in his hands.

“Have you selected an amusement yet this evening, Miss Bennet?” he inquired.

“No indeed, I have not. Though my sister Elizabeth has recommended this book to me,” she said, showing it to him. “It is now a necessity that I read it while I am here. Firstly, because she has praised it so highly to me that I am eager to do so.”

“Firstly?” Mr Lewis inquired. “Is there then a second reason?”

“Yes, indeed. Secondly, because she has informed me she longs to talk about it with someone. And that would be a small favour to oblige my sister.”

“You are too good,” Mr Lewis said, amused. “Perhaps you might do me a favour as well and inform me of how well you like it. I am fond of a good story. If this one finds your

approval, I shall borrow it from the lending library when Mrs Darcy has returned it."

"Or perhaps you may borrow a copy from Pemberley itself, for my sister tells me that my brother-in-law has ordered a copy on her behalf."

"That is high praise," was Mr Lewis's comment. "Considering this agreeable occupation, I almost am loath to inquire, and yet I cannot bring myself to forebear. Might you consider reading over my poor sermon, Miss Bennet — what there is of it, I mean? After our conversation earlier, I am convinced it would be of valuable assistance to me."

"I shall — I mean, I should be glad to," Mary stammered. "Only I hope I have not misled you in the matter of how much help I might be, or rather, might not be. Your experience in the matter must surely dwarf my own."

"Perhaps, but it does not follow that your opinions are not to be valued. I would be obliged if you were to do me the honour of sharing them."

"I shall, provided you promise not to put too much weight upon them," Mary murmured, and accepted the sheaf of papers. Leaning into the corner of the sofa, she began to read.

Mr Lewis watched her with interest, and with more trepidation than he had expected to feel. Before she was actually reading his work, he had thought of the help her obviously intelligent opinions might provide, and the enjoyment of talking over the subject dearest to his heart with an interested conversationalist. But now that she was actually reading, an unexpected nervousness came to the fore. It was unlike him. Self-consciousness and excessive concern for the opinions of others were not qualities conducive to doing good in one's parish. Rather, it was a clergyman's part to guide others by example and to make each sermon as little about his own cleverness as possible, and as much about helping others towards finding the right way. It was odd indeed that he found himself watching each twitch of Miss Bennet's eyebrows, each

expression that crossed her face as she read, trying to interpret it for clues as to her incipient opinion.

When she had once read through each page, she looked up at him with a diffident expression. “I think better when I write,” she confessed. “Would you be angry if I were to add some notes? Perhaps I had better not. I should not wish to spoil what you have written.”

“I wish you would,” Mr Lewis replied with alacrity, though also with some surprise. “Please write down any thoughts you may have, Miss Bennet. I shall copy the sermon over afresh in any case, so you need have no fear of spoiling it.”

“Thank you,” she said, rather absentmindedly. Mr Lewis saw with a kind of thrill that she was already abstracted, thinking perhaps about the suggestions she intended to make.

“Take this desk, Mary,” Elizabeth suggested from across the room. “There is ink and paper ready, and I have no intention of writing.”

The desk in question was a lady-like piece, made of delicately carved oak by a master craftsman. Without a word, Mary rose and went to it. Far from seeming offended by her sister’s lack of the social graces, Elizabeth gave Mr Lewis a sparkling smile in wordless approbation. As Mary’s quill danced over the pages, making notes here and there and writing extensively on a fresh page found at the desk, Elizabeth went to him and began speaking in a low tone.

“You have given my sister the best amusement she has had all day,” she said.

Smilingly, he shook his head. “Not so, for I am sure Miss Bennet greatly enjoyed the sleigh ride. But she is very good to look over my Christmas sermon, for I badly need the help.”

“I wonder how you came to think of it. Mary has never done such a thing before.”

“And yet her interest in philosophy makes her so perfectly suited to the activity. I am grateful that she has taken

an interest."

"I wish we might hear it read," Elizabeth mused. "But of course, we must not be away from the Lambton church for Christmas."

"No, indeed not," Mr Lewis agreed. "If it comes out well, however, I might read it for you another time, if you wish. It certainly will not bear company with the great works of literature which you are accustomed to hearing, but it will at least have the interest of having been written by your friend and edited by your sister."

"That is more than enough for me," Elizabeth commented. She paused a moment. "Really, I must thank you, Mr Lewis."

"Thank me?" he said, astonished. "Whatever for? As far as I am aware, there is rather more for which I ought to thank you."

"I must thank you for showing me another side of my sister," Elizabeth said quietly. "I have not paid her nearly enough mind in the past. There were five of us at home, you know, and Mary is the middle sister. Jane and I have always been close, as are Lydia and Kitty, my two youngest sisters."

"I always wanted siblings," Mr Lewis commented.

"There is much to recommend it, but there are difficulties, too. You have doubtless observed that Mary and I are very different. She is far more serious, and I am afraid I gave these surface differences much more weight than they ever ought to have had."

"It is difficult to judge others by their merits, and not by how like or unlike ourself they are," Mr Lewis said gently. "That failing is a common one, and to recognise it and do better is sadly uncommon."

"That is generous. I only hope that Mary will be as generous with me when I say as much to her."

"Of that, I have no doubt. I have known your sister for such a short time, and yet I feel certain that generosity of spirit is no small part of her nature."

Elizabeth observed him narrowly. “It is a short time since you have met,” she observed slowly. “Yet you see her clearly.”

Mr Lewis shifted uneasily. It was clear that his hostess was leaving much unsaid. But whether he ought to be grateful for her forbearance or uneasy over her obvious perception was a question sadly in doubt.

Chapter Nine

Two Sisterly Confessions

It was not until the next afternoon that Mary finished with Mr Lewis's sermon. She was only belatedly conscious of her own incivility. And what incivility it was! She had actually taken the sermon away with her when the party broke up and went to bed that evening without so much as asking his permission, had been wholly insensible of the conversation going on around her at breakfast and lunch, and had barely contributed the most necessary comments and responses to what was going on around her. Even Georgiana's offer of a lesson on the harp had received nothing more than "Oh! I should very much like to, but may we defer it to another time? I should so much like to return this to Mr Lewis." Georgiana, thankfully, had taken this without offence, quickly agreeing with her that Mr Lewis should receive his sermon back with as little delay as possible.

Now the moment of sharing her thoughts with him had come, and Mary was almost — though not quite — too excited to be nervous. Having finished writing in her bedchamber, Mary briefly looked into the mirror and straightened up her hair, thought not without chastising herself for her vanity, and went about the business of finding him.

Mr Lewis was not in the drawing room, but Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was, thought he was likely in the library. Upon receiving Mary's thanks for the information, he offered to join her search. Though Mary attempted to demur, he would have none of it, and when Mary saw how avidly Caroline Bingley was watching him and how evidently he desired to leave her behind, she could not do otherwise than accept the help, however unnecessary it seemed.

The library was a cheerful place in the inclement December weather, warm thanks to a good fire in the hearth and bright with the colourful spines of the many books.

"Ah, Mr Lewis!" Colonel Fitzwilliam said upon entering the room and seeing that gentleman. "You are just the

man we have been looking for."

He closed the book in his hands and came towards them. Mary told himself that his warm smile was intended equally for both of them, though in her heart of hearts, she felt it to belong solely to herself. "That is pleasant indeed. To what do I owe the honour?"

"I have finished looking over your sermon," Mary said shyly. "It is very fine indeed, and I have made several suggestions. I hope not too many! Only your writing inspired me, and it made me think of any number of things I have read."

"I am obliged to you," he said, taking the papers from her. "Will you not wait while I look over them? There may be material benefit in talking the changes over together."

"Oh — gladly," Mary replied.

"I shall leave you then, for I would be entirely in the way," Colonel Fitzwilliam said with a chuckle. "I am better suited for listening to sermons than for writing them." With a friendly wave, he was off, and Mr Lewis and Mary sat in two handsomely upholstered chairs, the one reading and the other waiting anxiously.

Mary hardly knew what she was expecting. She was flattered at the care Mr Lewis took in reading her notes, nodding here and there, sometimes muttering under his breath, and once saying aloud, "Ha! Yes, that is good. That is exactly right." It was at least obvious that he did not find her suggestions foolish or offensive.

Finally, he had read through the pages twice over. Slowly, he put them down on a low table next to his chair, and looked her full in the face.

"You are an astonishing young woman, Miss Bennet," he murmured. "You have taken a poor, unfinished thing, and made it into the best sermon I have given yet."

"Oh! It is not much," she said hurriedly. "I have only taken what you wrote yourself and changed a phrase here and there."

“I think you do not give yourself enough credit,” he replied. “I wish you would. To see what I intended to say and where I fell short, to guess where my listeners would fail to follow me and fix the issue, to make everything much better and more beautiful — this is no common talent. Indeed, you astound me.”

Mary was afraid she was blushing violently. “I — I do not know what to say. I still think it is too much. But I am obliged to you for saying so.”

“I assure you, it is not too much. I only wish that you might look over every sermon that I write and improve them as you have improved this one.”

Mary hardly knew what she was saying, so bewildered was she by the evident sincerity of his compliments. She was half agonised, half grateful when the tête-à-tête was interrupted by Mrs Reynolds.

“I beg your pardon, miss,” the good lady said. “Mrs Darcy asks that you come to her room and have a word. When you have a moment, like. The mistress said there was no hurry to it.”

All the same, Mary thought she had better go. “Thank you, Mrs Reynolds. I shall come directly.” She took a deep breath. “Thank you for the compliments, Mr Lewis,” she said to him. It took some courage. “You give me too much credit. But I was delighted to hear it, all the same.”

“I shall not attempt to argue with you,” he replied. “But if you could only be in Kympton church on Christmas morning and see how well my parishioners receive the sermon, you would know that my praise is not exaggerated.”

She left him with an exchange of bows and set off towards Elizabeth’s rooms. Mary was glad not to meet anyone in the corridors, for she needed the time to think. She was sensible of the danger Mr Lewis posed to her. Mary did not for a moment believe him guilty of impropriety to her or to any other young lady. No. It was her own too-great interest that posed a danger to her happiness and peace of mind. She liked

him far too much for a mere acquaintance, and on far too little hope that he might ever think of her as anything more.

She reached her sister's room rather soon than she would have liked. Mary knocked softly and entered, quietly closing the door behind her. Elizabeth's bedroom was much as she might have guessed — fine, large, and with a capital sitting area near the large window, just right for sitting down with a book.

"You wanted to talk with me privately, Elizabeth?" she began.

"I do," Elizabeth replied. "I want to apologise to you."

Mary stood speechless for a moment, half dumbfounded. "To me? Whatever for?"

"For not being more of a sister to you," Elizabeth said, her voice low. *Low with shame,* Mary realised with growing surprise. "For understanding you better this visit than I ever did all our lives before."

Mary hardly knew what to say in reply. "Tell me more," she requested. "I do not think I quite understand you yet. But I would like to."

Elizabeth paced restlessly between the bed and chairs. "I have always treasured our father's wit and his encouragement of myself. But I have only lately realised how wrong he is in some matters. How unfair he is to our mother, for all her faults. And how unfair he is to you."

"I have not your wit," Mary protested numbly. "That has always been a disappointment to him. But he is a good father for all that."

Elizabeth's smile was crooked, and her eyes bright with tears. "I do not mean to say he is not. I love him dearly, and I treasure his approval as much as I ever did. But I have come to believe that he is wrong to put so much weight on wit, and so little emphasis on kindness. Never mind though, never mind — I asked you here to criticise my own actions, not his."

"I still think you needn't," Mary said. "How have you ever done me wrong? Even this Christmas holiday, one of the

happiest of my memory, is because of your kindness."

"I think I owe you rather more than this. Mary, you were left so alone at Longbourn. Jane and I had each other, as did Kitty and Lydia. Mother had Jane for her pride and Lydia for her darling, and Father had me as his wit. Where were you in all of this? Who has ever properly valued your hard work, your scholarship, your integrity? Our family has never properly appreciated you. And I am ashamed to say I never saw it before now."

"You should not be ashamed," Mary said. The firmness of her own voice surprised her. The words issued forth, unhesitatingly, as though proceeding from a well of truth deep within her. It was a secret thrill to watch her own certainty. "I never saw it myself. I have not been comfortable at Longbourn since you and Jane went away. Perhaps I never was. But I did not know myself until now."

"I would like to know you better," Elizabeth said. "I am afraid I never properly attended to my Mary before now. But it seems she is becoming more and more interesting all the time."

"I wish that Mr Lewis might think so," Mary blurted out, and instantly regretted her candour. But Elizabeth did not look at all shocked.

"I confessed, I wondered if you might be forming an attachment there. It would be quite a good match, I think. I like him, for he is as kind as he is intelligent. And you need not have any doubts about his steadiness or character, for Fitzwilliam is always exquisitely careful in the granting of a living."

"Surely that is not the difficult point," Mary said quietly. "I cannot imagine anyone privileged to know Mr Lewis who would still doubt his honour or his character. The difficult point is rather, is there any chance at all that he might come to care for me?"

"You make it sound like such an impossible thing," Elizabeth said wonderingly. Looking at the pain in her eyes and knowing it meant for her, Mary had to look away.

“I am plain. You cannot deny it,” she replied simply. “My dowry is small. And as our father would say, my sole distinction is that of being one of the silliest girls in England. What is there in all this to attract a man of such sense and judgement as Mr Lewis?”

“Our father was wrong to speak of his daughters in such a way,” Elizabeth said fiercely. “He was wrong even to say so of Lydia, for what could such language do to better her, and who allowed her to be so silly and thoughtless? And he was doubly wrong in speaking so of you, Mary, because he judged only on the sarcastic humour that he himself favoured, without placing the proper value on the care for scholarship and morality which ought to have distinguished you. My love for our father is not lessened by greater knowledge of the world, but my concern over his actions and choices is considerably increased. Mary, you must not judge your own value by his ill-judged wit.”

Mary, who was almost blank with astonishment by the end of this speech, knew not what to say.

“As for your dowry,” Elizabeth went on more calmly, “I do not believe it to be an insurmountable obstacle. In our conversations, I have not noticed Mr Lewis to desire greater distinction or luxury. I believe he wants the comfortable, respectable life of a gentleman, and this he has. If you are content to live simply, I think there is no obstacle there.”

“I would be content indeed, if I might share my life with such a man,” Mary replied softly. “I have never wanted silk gowns or fine jewels.” She thought for a moment. “Not to have a pianoforte, however — that would be a sacrifice, but it is one I would be willing to make.”

“He is not poor, and you are not friendless, Mary!” Elizabeth cried out in astonishment. “I have visited the parson’s house at Kympton. It is a comfortable home, with ample room in the parlour for a pianoforte. And if you do marry him, I shall give you a pianoforte myself as a wedding present.”

Mary turned rather red at the thought, both pleased and half-ashamed at how possible Elizabeth seemed to consider it. “Are we not getting rather ahead of ourselves? If our mother was here, surely even she would not consider him about to propose to me, simply because he has been polite to his hostess’s sister.”

Elizabeth gave her a look that she could only classify as older-sisterly. “We have not planned half so much as our mother would have.” A sudden thought made her chuckle, and she dryly added, “Though if you like, Mary, I shall send you on an errand to Kympton in poor weather, that you may be forced to stay longer.”

“No, thank you,” Mary said dryly. “But please, Elizabeth, answer me seriously. You do not think it is impossible?”

“I do not think it is even improbable,” Elizabeth said firmly. “You have tastes, interests, and values in common. You are neither of you rich, but he is able to keep a family in respectable comfort. Many a good marriage has been made on less than this.”

“Then I shall hope,” Mary whispered.

“You must do more than this. You must continue getting to know him, to truly learn how much your happiness ought to depend upon each other. Do not simply wait to be chosen and say yes, Mary. Your situation is not desperate. Your marriage ought to be a choice.”

Mary was growing more astonished every minute at the idea that she not only might be a man’s choice in marriage, but that she herself might then not choose him.

“You bring up such ideas in my mind,” she murmured. “I feel almost that I can fly.”

“If I have done that much,” Elizabeth replied, “I will begin to consider forgiving myself.”

Mary’s face lit with a sudden smile. “I believe I have already told you once, sister. There is nothing to forgive.”

Chapter Ten

A Brotherly Inquiry

Engrossed in the many shelves of Pemberley's library, Mr Lewis did not at first hear someone enter the room. It was not until Mr Darcy's polite request to interrupt him that he realised he was no longer alone.

"Good afternoon, Mr Lewis. I hope you will forgive me for interrupting you."

"Mr Darcy! Yes, of course. It is good you have come, or I might never have brought myself to the point of choosing a book. You have such riches here." Mr Lewis greeted his patron with real eagerness. Quite aside from the general pleasure of Mr Darcy's company, Pemberley's library was in truth so large that it was better enjoyed with the help of some expert knowledge. In addition to being overwhelmed by the sheer number of books, there were many precious folios and antique volumes that Mr Lewis would hardly dare to examine without the presence of their owner, however much he might like to gain a better knowledge of them.

"Perhaps we might look over the library together," Mr Darcy offered. "It has been the work of many generations, but I am tolerably familiar with it by now. I might show you some of our particular treasures."

"I should like nothing better," Mr Lewis said, as it was precisely what he himself had wished. Given the great interest of looking over Pemberley's magnificent library and speaking of the volumes with his host, it was some time before he noticed a certain hesitancy about Mr Darcy, as though there were something he wished to say, but knew not how. Over the past months of gradually coming to know his patron, Mr Lewis had come to a startling realisation: the rich, powerful Mr Darcy, who had so much influence over so large a portion of Derbyshire, was in fact rather shy. His reserve, which was so apt to make others consider him stern and proud, was in fact only that of a quiet man who spoke with great care, and did not choose to speak when no one could be benefited by it.

“This has been a very pleasant visit,” Mr Darcy said at last. “I have always greatly enjoyed the company of the Gardiners and Mrs Bingley, but I had not previously had the opportunity of being well acquainted with Miss Mary Bennet.”

Mr Lewis’s consciousness of his own feelings readily explained the slight oddity of the remark. “I have greatly enjoyed making Miss Bennet’s acquaintance,” he said, with truth if perhaps somewhat less emphasis than would be strictly accurate. With a moment’s unease, he wondered if his patron might be engaging in the unpleasant office of warning him off the lady. While even the strictest judge of propriety could not have objected to the least word or action he had shared with Miss Bennet, it would not be surprising if Mr Darcy wished a very different suitor for his sister-in-law. Someone, perhaps, who had so much as a farthing beyond the living Mr Darcy himself had granted him.

Mr Darcy cleared his throat. “I wondered if you might.” Then, handing Mr Lewis an old and rather rare folio, he spent some minutes in explaining its importance to the collection, until both men had a chance to collect their wits. Though grateful for the change to regain his equanimity, Mr Lewis could not but regret that his introduction to such an interesting work was occurring at a time when he would not remember a word of it.

As though there had been no interruption, Mr Darcy at last said obliquely, “It is always delightful to a host when some of those one brings together strike up friendships of their own.” After this simple remark, he looked at Mr Lewis with great intensity, as though willing him to understand more than the words themselves could convey. Though his wife might have told him that the clarity of his meaning would have been better achieved with considerably more explanation, Mr Darcy was in luck on this occasion.

With sudden warmth, Mr Lewis realised that his patron was by no means trying to warn him off from his sister by marriage. On the contrary, he seemed to be giving as much encouragement as the early stage of their acquaintance could justify.

“I should certainly like to know Miss Bennet better,” Mr Lewis declared boldly. “Indeed — I should not wish to say too much — yet I must say I feel an interest in her unlike what I have ever felt for a lady before. We have known each other only a very short time, yet I should feel the deepest regret if it were not possible to continue the acquaintance.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Mr Darcy replied, “for while I am not perfectly acquainted with Miss Bennet’s wishes on the matter, what I have observed made me feel that, being a kind of brother to her, it might be well for me to gain a better knowledge of yours.”

“I understand you perfectly,” Mr Lewis replied, “yet I hardly know what to say. Perhaps it is best to say simply that I admire Miss Bennet very much already, and I wish to know her better.”

Mr Darcy nodded and went on. “You must forgive me, Mr Lewis, for doing this in a most stupid and awkward way. The cause is not displeasure with you or your actions, but simply my own lack of experience. I have not yet had to speak to any gentlemen for Georgiana, and while I am indeed attempting to speak to you for Miss Mary Bennet as her brother, it is not to discourage you. I am not her father, of course, but I feel a certain responsibility for her.”

Mr Lewis smiled at him, much relieved. “We are in the same boat then, Mr Darcy, for I too have never had reason to discuss a lady’s interests before, and I too very much wish great happiness for Miss Bennet. However much or little that may come to depend on me, in the end.” He paused a moment, then spoke rather shyly. “One does not like to trust too easily to what one would like to be true. Do you really think she might care for me, Mr Darcy?”

A rare, broad smile broke out across Mr Darcy’s stern face. “To hear you speak of her with such hope is all that a brother-in-law might hope for,” he said. “I do indeed. She is a reserved lady, not one to put herself forward or show her affections too readily. But I believe both on my own observations and—” he coughed in dry humour “—and on the

basis of some hints given me by my wife that she may feel the beginnings of an attachment for you."

Mr Lewis's heart was singing in his chest. For a moment, he nearly forgot where he was. "She has such beautiful hands," he murmured. "I have seldom seen hands more elegant, or more expressive." He laughed, a little self-consciously. "Is it not strange of me to become infatuated with a pair of hands?"

"It was eyes for me," Mr Darcy said. "Who are we to say in what form love ought to arrive?"

"Who are we, indeed," Mr Lewis echoed thoughtfully. Each lost in his own thoughts, the two gentlemen were quiet for long minutes. It was well that they had a stack of books before them, for they provided an ideal excuse for inattention without any accusations of incivility. Without such an excuse, any observer might have wondered at them for spending so long without speaking so much as a word. Yet the gentleman's expressions might have provided some explanation, for each bore the traces of great happiness. On Mr Darcy's countenance was etched the joy of love freely given and fully returned, and on Mr Lewis's was the hope of a love that might yet come to be.

Chapter Eleven

A Foolish Messenger

The party was gathered together after breakfast, speaking idly of favourite winter pastimes and Christmases gone by, when a servant entered and informed Mr Darcy that a carriage was arriving.

"That is a surprise," Elizabeth observed. "I did not know we were expecting anyone else."

"Nor indeed did I," Mr Darcy commented. He crossed to the window and looked down at the gravel drive, where a large carriage was indeed approaching. He drew in a quick breath. "That is a surprise indeed. It is my Aunt de Bourgh's carriage."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "It is Christmas, after all. Perhaps she has thought better of the estrangement and wishes to make amends."

"That is a rather optimistic surmise, but I hope it may be the correct one," Mr Darcy replied. From the ironic twist to his smile, it was clear he thought there was little chance of it. "I only hope she is not coming to air her displeasure yet again. I am willing to forget past insults, but not if they are forever being repeated."

"We will weather it together, whatever comes," Elizabeth promised him, with a light squeeze of his hand. "Your cousin Anne was not so discomfited as Lady de Bourgh, I think. She may have been able to influence her mother into better ways of thinking."

"Your aunt sounds rather formidable, Mr Darcy," Mr Gardiner remarked.

"Indeed, sir, that is the least of it," he replied grimly. "She is not the guest I would have chosen to add to our party. Unfortunately, I think it is likely that she has not improved in civility or sense in the days since sending her absurd letter. My aunt felt she ought to have the power to dispose of me in

marriage as she wished, and she was not best pleased that I married to please myself rather than my family.

"Not so, Fitzwilliam, for I was well pleased by your marriage," Georgiana piped up bravely.

"That is well said, Georgie," Fitzwilliam commended her, adding, "And so was I. So, Darcy, say rather that you married to please most of your family and yourself, but not to please one quite judgmental, prejudiced, and rather tiresome aunt."

"I thank you all for your support," Elizabeth said thoughtfully, "but really, you are too hard on the poor woman. I of all people can understand Lady Catherine wishing that Fitzwilliam might marry her daughter, however unreasonable her expectation that it would be so simply because she wished it. Let us give her time and understanding, and she may yet come to her senses and end the estrangement. It is not impossible that this is her present errand."

"Not impossible, no. But perhaps improbable," Mr Darcy said. With a small smile and an inclination of her head, Elizabeth acknowledged the justice of his surmise. The party waited in some suspense for the unexpected visitor to be announced.

Their first surprise was to come as soon as the drawing room door opened and the visitor appeared. It was a rather stout young man in travelling clothes who moved with an air of extreme dignity and self-importance rendered still more absurd by its contrast with the foolish expression on his face.

"Mr Collins!" Elizabeth cried in surprise. "What on earth is the matter? Is Charlotte well? Has something happened to Lady Catherine for you to come all this way in her carriage?"

He gave her a superior smile. "Your concern is laudable, cousin, but we must not forget the proper observances and forms of decorum." With that, he made his greetings to each person present, pleasantly unconscious of the tepid responses he received and the bemused looks that

accompanied them. His manner to Mr Darcy was obsequious in the extreme.

"Mr Darcy," Mr Collins proclaimed, as though addressing a prince of the realm. "You will be glad, I am sure, to hear that your aunt was in good health when I left her to begin my travels. You need not have any fears on *that* account."

"I thank you for the reassurance," Mr Darcy said with an irony entirely missed by him to whom the remark was addressed.

Undaunted, Mr Collins continued. "No, it is not because of any indisposition on Lady Catherine de Bourgh's part that I have come, for she is the strongest lady I have ever encountered. I often tell her ladyship that it must be due to her strong character that illness does not touch her, for indeed it would not dare."

This appeared to be a startling idea to several of his listeners. Colonel Fitzwilliam made a rather odd and quickly stifled noise, and quickly apologised for his cough.

"I am sure we are all pleased to hear that Lady Catherine de Bourgh is well, cousin," Elizabeth said soothingly, "but perhaps you might be so good as to share with us the reason for your coming. I am sure it must have been something particular."

Mr Collins drew himself up with haughty self-importance. "I have come on no less a charge than to convey a message from Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself."

"I wonder that she did not send an express," Mr Darcy remarked.

"*That* would hardly have fit the occasion," Mr Collins said loftily.

"Oh? Has my aunt decided to request a rapprochement? I am willing enough to listen, though I think she might as well have written a letter."

"My patroness would not lower herself to request anything of the kind," Mr Collins cried out angrily. "I beg you

would listen to me."

Silently, Mr Darcy made a gesture of invitation for him to continue.

"My message is this." Mr Collins drew himself up even straighter and looked up to the ceiling, as though calling to mind a memorised speech. "Your aunt, the honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, desires that I inform you that she does not forgive you, and that she remains shocked, offended, and appalled that you have not once sent her your apologies for the hideous embarrassment you have brought to the family through your marriage to this…" this with a look half of apology and half of triumph to Elizabeth — "to this *lady*. Furthermore, she does not send you her compliments, she desires that I convey no fond sentiments, and by no means does she wish anyone in the house a merry Christmas!"

For a long moment, silence reigned at Pemberley. Mr Darcy looked so dark with fury that Mary was rather afraid for Mr Collin's continued good health. For her part, she was not sure what she found more mortifying — the idea that she was a cousin to such a man, or that she had once contemplated marrying him, if only *he* could be persuaded to find *her* worthy. Finally, Elizabeth broke the silence.

"You have come here in this weather, and have left Charlotte alone so near Christmas, simply to please Lady Catherine by delivering such a message?" she cried out, her tongue loosened by fury. "What could you be about? Her concerns are nothing at all compared to those of your wife and coming child! Leave this place now and go back to them at once."

"I — I did not think —" Mr Collins stammered.

"That you did not think is more than apparent," Elizabeth upbraided him. "Go!" And with that, she pointed towards the door with such a queenly demeanour that at last, with a backwards look that called to mind a whipped dog, he went, shutting the door carefully behind him.

Immediately after he left the room, Elizabeth began making a rather odd noise. For one hideous moment, Mary

was afraid she was crying. Then her laughter rang out in earnest, uncontrollable, and suddenly the entire party was laughing until their sides ached.

"I have never laughed so in my life!" Elizabeth gasped some time later. "Poor Charlotte!"

"Perhaps this has taught him a lesson, and he may be more attentive to his own concerns in the future," Mary said hopefully. "He is not a wicked man, after all. Merely a foolish one."

"I hope it may be so," Mrs Gardiner agreed, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. At last, the party calmed themselves.

Elizabeth turned to her husband with a rueful smile. "You must excuse me, Fitzwilliam," she said. "I ought not to dismiss anyone from your hall. Still less when it is a man under the patronage of your aunt."

"You are as much the mistress here as I am the master, Lizzy," Mr Darcy returned. His pride in his wife's good sense and strong will was clear in his tone. "And I should be a fool indeed if I wished my wife to be less attentive to matters of familiar duty. I hope he will think more of what he owes to his family and less of my aunt's wishes in the future."

"May it be so," she agreed. Mr Darcy draped his arm around her shoulder, and she leaned her head against him.

From the gravel drive outside, they could faintly hear the sounds of a carriage departing.

Chapter Twelve

A Change of Mind

Even among such pleasant company, a succession of rainy days could not help but make them all rather dull. The young Gardiners seemed to feel it most, growing quarrelsome with each other and less respectful to their parents, but few among the party could count themselves entirely unaffected. By general agreement, they scattered after breakfast. Mary accepted Georgiana's shy invitation that they might have a harp lesson and quickly forgot the grey and dirty weather upon touching the beautiful instrument.

Georgiana combined great gentleness of manner with a passion for perfectionism in music. It made her an exacting teacher, but one who conveyed her instructions and corrections so softly, it did not occur to Mary to feel any shame or embarrassment at her mistakes. With a moment's longing, she thought of what a gift it would be to have instruction often, and how much her playing would improve if only she could have the advantage of consistent lessons. Mary took a quick breath and resolved to think no more of it. She would do better to be grateful for the lessons she was having now.

"Bring your fingers into your hand a little more closely after each note," Georgiana instructed her carefully. "Try again."

Mary did so, marvelling at the improvement this caused in clarity of tone.

"Very good," Georgiana praised her. "I think you have mastered it."

Mary beamed at her, almost giddy at the praise. "Well, then. What is next?"

Georgiana looked thoughtful. "I must think a moment about which technique I ought to show you next — and then, yes, I think you are ready to begin following sheet music." Her face fell. "Which, foolishly, I have left in the library."

“Let me get it, as you will be busy thinking of how to proceed,” Mary suggested eagerly. Without waiting for an answer, she began moving towards the door.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” Georgiana replied. Her eyes were looking distractedly off into the distance, no doubt trying to plan out the next stage of their lesson. For a novice instruction, Georgiana seemed to take the exercise seriously indeed. “I believe the sheets are on the small table next to the sofa.”

With a nod, Mary was off. She walked quickly, eager to return to the lesson. Though, she reminded herself, she ought to be careful not to importune Miss Darcy for more instruction than she was comfortable in giving. It was a great favour that she had offered at all, and she must not be greedy and ask for more.

About to draw open the door to the library, Mary suddenly stopped short. Voices could be clearly heard from inside. She ought to have announced her presence and marched inside, but she did not.

“May I give you a little hint, Mrs Darcy?” Caroline Bingley said from inside, her voice sickly sweet. Mary froze, aware that she ought to go away, yet somehow unmoving.

“I suspect you are about to, whatever I may think about it,” Elizabeth replied lightly.

“I would not wish to offend you.”

“Oh no, indeed,” Elizabeth agreed with evident disbelief.

“It is about poor Mr Darcy and poor Colonel Fitzwilliam. You really ought not to flirt with the colonel the way you do. It is most shocking in a married woman, and whatever must your husband think of it?”

Mary quickly stifled a gasp, blushing red with fury. The accusation was entirely unjust. Mary knew her own standards of propriety to be rather stringent, and she had not the slightest stricture against her sister’s behaviour to Colonel Fitzwilliam over the course of her visit. On the contrary,

Elizabeth acted towards him with the ease and friendliness she displayed towards nearly everybody, even Caroline Bingley herself. Though half-tempted to march in and defend her sister, Mary waited to hear what she would say, in what form she would defend herself. She only hoped Elizabeth could do so. If Mary herself faced such a charge, she feared she would be incapable of calm in her anger and mortification.

"Oh, come now, Miss Bingley, you can do better than that," Elizabeth said laughingly. "To make such a trumped-up accusation as this? The colonel is my cousin now. Indeed, as Georgiana's other guardian, he is nearly a brother to me. I do not believe that either he or Fitzwilliam suffer the slightest confusion or concern about our relations. What is more, in your heart, I do not believe that you do either."

Mary heard Caroline Bingley draw in a quick, affronted breath. For a long moment, she did not speak.

"You are quick to answer," she said at last.

"There is no difficulty in answering quickly, when the answer itself is unmistakable. But I think you would do well to consider your own motivations in making this 'hint'. If I am honest, Miss Bingley, it has rather a tinge of jealousy."

"Jealousy!" Caroline Bingley gasped furiously. "How dare you?"

"I dare say many things when I believe them to be both useful and true."

"That, I believe," Caroline Bingley sniffed, with rather an air of attempting to regain her customary equanimity. Mary remembered herself and was about to leave when Caroline Bingley spoke again.

"I do wish you would answer me one thing, since you know so much," she said bitterly. "What is it in me that is so utterly unlovable?" Caroline's voice was ragged. Mary quietly drew in a shocked breath. She sounded utterly unlike her familiar, elegant, controlled self. "Why am I so completely unfit to attract a man, to be loved by a man?"

Elizabeth was silent for a long moment. At last, she spoke. “Did you know that my sister Mary has lately improved in her performance on the pianoforte?”

“What on earth—” Caroline interrupted.

“Listen, please. You will soon see what I mean. As I was saying, Mary has lately begun to play much better. Her technical skills are good, as they ever were, but she is now much better worth the hearing. In the past, she thought too much about her audience, and whether she might impress them, and what someone might say about her concerto afterwards. And that made her performance sound conceited and stiff, which is to say boring. But lately — and I know not how it happened — she has begun to play for the music itself. Because she likes to play, because she loves the art of it. And when she did that, her listeners began to want to hear more. Do you understand what I mean?”

Mary stumbled back, dazed with shock. Her mind seemed to go a hundred miles a minute, fitting in pieces to a puzzle she had not known existed. In the other room, Caroline was answering, sounding begrudgingly amused and respectful, if rather more begrudging than either.

“You mean, I think, that I have been playing the game of love and marriage in order to win the game. But how else ought I to do it?”

“It is much the same as the pianoforte. You must not try to win — you must only play. After all, against whom are you winning? If you defeat the man, all you have accomplished is a defeated husband.”

“One plays the game against women too, you know. I should have rather liked to win the game, playing against you.”

Mary could almost hear the smile in Elizabeth’s voice. “That was never in either of our hands, you know. I did not win over you, any more than I won over Ann de Bourgh. Fitzwilliam and I both won, in the game of finding out if we enjoyed each other’s company, if we were meant to be friends. And that is a game that you and I have not yet played.”

“Do you want a friend like me, truly?” Caroline said with some bitterness. “I have not been a good friend to your sister, you know.”

“I do know, and there was a time I despised you for it. But what would be the point of that? You are Jane’s sister-in-law, and the sister of Fitzwilliam’s best friend. Only the deepest of estrangements would keep you and I from meeting all the years of our lives. If we are to know each other for so long, would not it be better for us to be friends?”

There was a long pause. “You must take care, Elizabeth, or with strategy like that, I will begin to like you.”

“I am not in any danger of the same, not yet. But if you ever decide to play the game with other people, instead of against them, I believe I will be.”

Mary shook her head, which seemed full to bursting. Recalling the dishonour of listening to other people’s conversations once it was far too late to do any good, she walked away on silent feet.

I will never understand people the way Elizabeth does, never, not if I live to be a hundred years old.

To play for the music, not for the audience…

How could she see that when I didn’t know myself?

As she reached the stair at the end of the corridor, Mary could hear the library door open and close again. Given a few moments, she could try again to retrieve the music. Indeed, with Georgiana waiting for her, she must. First, however, she would sit in the privacy of her own room, if only briefly, and try to understand what she had overheard.

Chapter Thirteen

Two Surprises

The next day had something of an air of secrecy about it, as Mr Darcy was frequently to be found in conference with the housekeeper, and Georgiana had a marked tendency to giggle without explanation, while Colonel Fitzwilliam confined himself to a wry, slightly superior smile. Elizabeth's air of amused patience showed that she would be among those for whom the surprise was intended. After supper, Mary made so bold as to join a conversation between Jane and Elizabeth and press for something of an explanation.

Jane's description of what she and Mr Bingley were looking for in a house seemed to go on forever. Mary had not thought that her easy-tempered older sister would have half so much to say, but it seemed that when Jane was once given the power of choice, she exercised it with some energy.

When the opportunity was at last afforded to her, Mary seized it eagerly. "Something seems about to happen, Elizabeth," Mary commented in an undertone. "Do you know what it is?"

"I do not know, although I have something of a guess," Elizabeth replied. "In any case, we have not long to wait now, for the day is nearly done. We must not spoil the surprise."

Jane smiled at her. "You have grown more patient than you used to be, I think."

"I am glad to hear that you think me improved," Elizabeth replied laughingly, "and I hope you never happen to see me on the last days before a new book by one of my favourite authors is to arrive, or just before we leave to travel the countryside, or the impression will be entirely done away."

"That, I do well believe," Jane said with a laugh.

"As do I," Mary commented, remembering how well Elizabeth had always enjoyed the little travel that had been afforded her. Now, as the wife of a wealthy man of

consequence, her sister would doubtless be able to see much more of England.

Suddenly, they heard something of a commotion outside. There was a sound of many feet crunching across Pemberley's gravel drive, and a hum of merry voices. Mrs Reynolds hurried into the room.

"It is time! Oh, they are coming, it is time!" The good lady cried out happily.

A smile warmed Mr Darcy's austere face. "Well, everyone, let us go out to the front hall," he commanded pleasantly. With some murmurs of surprise by everyone but Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam, the company obeyed.

The door opened, revealing a crowd of Pemberley's tenants and neighbours, all clad in their warmest coats and hats against the chill of the winter night. A selection of coaches and carts on the far side of the drive bore witness to how they had arrived.

Almost as one, their visitors drew in a deep breath and broke out into the glorious notes of "Joy to the World." Their breath fogged in the air, but their song was crisp and full of heart. Upon its conclusion, their audience applauded them heartily. After the group accepted their praise with bows and enormous smiles, their director, a dignified older man with brass-rimmed spectacles, gestured for quiet.

A young woman stepped forward and began to sing "The Holy and the Ivy." Her glorious, fluting voice rang out into the night, reminding Mary of the clear tones of the harp. The rest of the chorus chimed in, giving the song depth that took one unexpectedly by the heart.

Mary had heard far more accomplished choirs. Probably none of the carollers had any instruction and not much practice. If she listened with a critical ear, it was possible to find fault with any number of minor errors and slightly sour notes.

Yet the overall effect was glorious. The obvious goodwill of Pemberley's neighbours, their shared joy in the

Christmas season, was so infectious that she almost laughed with happiness.

After a still greater round of applause, the carollers began to sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” A great desire to join in the music seized Mary. Yet she shrank back, not wishing to spoil it. The words and tune were so well known to her, she might have sung them in her sleep. Yet was this not more of her old bad habit, of wishing to gain praise and recognition when she ought not to think of any such thing?

Cool certainty poured over her in the knowledge that she did not wish to be praised. She wanted to be part of the glorious song. In the next moment, still rather afraid, she began to sing.

“O come, all ye faithful,” Mary sang sweetly to the night sky. Next to her, Elizabeth started slightly and looked a little surprised. Then a broad smile broke out over her face.

“O come, all ye faithful,” they sang together. Then all the rest of the party sang with them, joining into the song all carollers together, until the last triumphant notes seemed as though they might reach all the way to London.

“Come in, come in!” Mr Darcy invited them after the last notes died away and all the company had given themselves yet another round of applause. They found the rest of the surprise revealed in the form of mulled wine and a tray of sweet things made ready for the carollers, and they laughed and chatted pleasantly together until the visit was concluded.

After they had seen the carollers depart for their homes and thanked them for another year’s Christmas songs, Mr Darcy turned to his wife.

“Well, Elizabeth?” Mr Darcy asked with an arched eyebrow. “What do you think of our Pemberley tradition?”

“It is delightful,” she declared. “They are very good neighbours indeed.”

Mr Darcy glanced at Mary. “That was an excellent addition of yours, Miss Bennet. We typically leave all the singing to them, but I hope we shall join in each year in the

future. Provided, of course, that there is anyone among us brave enough to begin it."

"I hope I did not do wrong," Mary confessed. "Their singing was so beautiful, it would be hateful to spoil it."

"I think I may speak for all the company in calling it a delightful addition," Colonel Fitzwilliam declared. "I have attended many Christmas carolling evenings at Pemberley before now, and always heartily enjoyed them, but this was the most delightful yet."

"Indeed, it was precisely what the evening needed," Mr Lewis agreed. His eyes rested warmly on Mary's face, his lips curved in a soft smile. "I commend you, Miss Bennet. I would not have missed it for anything."

Mary smiled at him in return.

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Mr Lewis looked about the room, feeling mellow under the influence of song and good company. He sipped his mulled wine, relishing the delicious flavour of its rich spices and floral notes of orange from Pemberley's glasshouse. Mr Darcy crossed the room to him and refilled his own cup.

"This has been a wonderful evening, sir," Mr Lewis observed to his host.

"We are very fortunate in our neighbours," Mr Darcy replied. "They have come carolling each Christmas these past twenty years or more. It began when I was a small boy, and our pastor was a particularly musical man. I am very glad indeed it has continued ever since, for it would hardly seem Christmas to me without them." He smiled. "Miss Bennet provided a very pleasing addition this year."

"You do not typically join in the singing, then?"

"I must count myself as a rather reserved man, and Georgiana would never dare to sing in front of so many others unless she could lose herself in a crowd. But I rather suspect

that my wife will continue what her sister began. I think it is a very good addition to the tradition."

"I should like to see carollers throughout all of England," Mr Lewis remarked. "It would be a delightful addition to the season if the custom were to be more generally practised."

"I hope it may be so."

The two men stood together in a comfortable silence for some moments, each thinking their own thoughts. Mr Darcy's gaze was fixed on his wife, who was speaking to her aunt on the other side of the room. His thoughts must have been pleasant ones, for there was a small, fond smile curving his mouth as he watching her laughing animation of spirits and the sparkling beauty of her dark eyes. Mr Lewis, too, was watching a young lady, though with hope rather than certainty of happiness. At last, Mr Darcy seemed to notice his guest's object of interest.

"We have been a merry party," he remarked. "It has been a pleasure to observe your acquaintance with Miss Bennet."

"I am fortunate indeed that we came to Pemberley at the same time," Mr Lewis said. "It is a shame that I must leave so soon, but I hope we will meet at the assemblies, and perhaps you would be so good as to allow me to call on her here."

To his surprise, Mr Darcy blanched. "You did not know, then."

Mr Lewis felt a sudden chill. "Please do not leave me in suspense, Mr Darcy. I do not know — what?"

"Miss Bennet is leaving not long after your return to Kympton," Mr Darcy said. "Mr Gardiner is called back to London by the needs of his business, and Miss Bennet travels with them. They cannot even remain so long as Twelfth Night. The new year will see her back in Hertfordshire."

"I see," Mr Lewis said hollowly. "Do you expect her on another visit soon?"

“There is no visit planned, although I would welcome her here. But I do not think it may be so. I understand that she rarely leaves Longbourn.”

“There is so little time,” Mr Lewis said under his breath. It ought to have made matters easier. Two weeks was simply too little. There was not a second opinion to be had on the point. That being established, he could cease to think of Miss Mary Bennet seriously, and enjoy her society for the time that remained to them without attempting to decide on how much his happiness ought to depend on her. Surely there would be no harm to the lady in it. Two weeks simply was not enough to dangerously engage anyone’s affections.

Yet it was not easier at all, for Mr Lewis knew he was lying to himself. There was something there. His course of action was clear, for it would be utter madness to speak to a lady of love and engagement after knowing her for only two weeks. He would do as duty, honour, and logic dictated, and remain merely a friend to her.

It would not, however, be easy. He would think of her in Hertfordshire and wish her well and happy. But to think of her far away, happily unconscious of him, perhaps meeting another man who had all the proper leisure to court her as she ought to be courted —

Well, to know a thing must be done never did make it easy.

Chapter Fourteen

Her Confidence Lost

Mary woke the next morning in unusually good spirits. Though the warm light and fresh air of morning had always held a special charm for her, she was accustomed to facing each day at Longbourn knowing that it would bring fresh trials. Though the piano and her books would have their charms, she would be sure of going unheard at one time and saying the wrong thing at another. If her mother did not attempt to poke and prod her into better looks and more ladylike charm, her father was sure to mock her latest attempts to better her mind and engage his conversation.

Her time at Pemberley had been a most refreshing change. All were so politely disposed to listen that even the little Gardiners could be sure of being heard when they were with the company. And though Mary did not at all suppose she had become better spoken, it seemed easier to speak well when all were so eager to understand her. Though a few days certainly could not have worked a change in her level of understanding or scholarship, it made a world of difference to have an interested conversant who seemed intent on seeing the good in what she said and helping her to do still better, rather than pointing out her deficiencies.

As she left her bed and readied herself for the day, even the mirror seemed a party to her improvement. There was no material change in her appearance. She was greeted by the same too-low cheekbones and too-broad forehead as ever. Yet the easy happiness of her smile seemed to make all the difference in the world. Mary had often seen the sour stiffness of her own expression in the glass and known it to be deeply unappealing. But to know a thing did not grant one the power to change it. Not, at least, when it was all too accurate a reflection of her feelings.

Her feelings had lately undergone so material a change, she hardly recognised herself. Though nothing particular was planned for their amusement that day, it held much to look

forward to for her. There was the opportunity to converse with Mr Lewis, and Georgiana had promised her another lesson on the harp.

Breakfast was a cheerful affair, and upon seeing Georgiana's smiling face across the table, Mary was happy to discover that she was no less eager for their lesson.

"What do you think, Miss Bennet?" Georgiana soon inquired, setting down her teacup. "Shall we begin directly after breakfast? You must not let me hurry you, you know. I am a great deal too apt to think only of the chance to play music and think about music and talk about music, and forget everything else."

"You need not worry, for I feel just the same myself," Mary replied. "It would suit me wonderfully well to begin straight away."

"Would you like privacy for your lesson?" Elizabeth inquired. "We might easily sit in one of the other rooms, if you wished it."

Georgiana extended her hand to Mary to show that she, as the student, ought to be the one judging her own comfort. Mary shook her head.

"I thank you, but I would not wish to chase you out of your own drawing room. As long as the sound of my poor playing is not too much of a nuisance, I am sure we may all sit there comfortably."

"Then so we shall," Elizabeth said. "We ladies, at least. I believe the gentlemen are off on some pastime of their own this morning."

"Smoking cigars and drinking smuggled French brandy, no doubt," Caroline Bingley commented archly, with a glance at the two recently married ladies to see if her barb had landed.

Elizabeth merely smiled at her, and Caroline blanched a little, as though remembering their recent conversation. It was comical to see the play of emotions passing over her face, and the moment when a little shame won out over the others.

However dishonourable it was to listen to others' conversations, Mary could not bring herself to be entirely sorry that she had. The insights she had gained were simply too valuable.

As promised, Georgiana bustled her over to the harp as soon as they had left the table.

"There is something I have been wishing to ask you," Georgiana said, a little shyly. "I have so enjoyed our lessons together, and we are almost sisters now, after all. May I call you Mary?"

"I wish you would," Mary said promptly. Upon reflection, she was not surprised. For all her shyness, Georgiana was so clearly one who took those close to her deeply to her heart. Elizabeth's letters to Longbourn had shown how clearly she had become a sister to Georgiana in truth as well as by law. Mary was glad to share the honour. "I shall be delighted to call you Georgiana."

Georgiana wrinkled her nose humorously. "As long as you do not call me Georgie, as the Colonel does to tease me, I shall be well pleased." Then, becoming businesslike, she went on. "First, let me show you what I have been working on myself," Georgiana said. "Mr Fiore, my instructor in Town, told me I ought to work particularly on the clarity of the notes until we can meet again. Let me show you what he showed me…"

Though an obviously unpracticed instructor, Georgiana took such joy in the music and had listened to her own teachers so carefully that she was well worth listening to. At the end of an hour's time, Mary's efforts had improved considerably.

"That is well done," Georgiana praised her. Mary smiled happily. "However, you must rest now, or you might do your hands an injury. Mr Fiore is very strict that one must never play too long at a time, especially before the muscles are developed."

"It is just so with the piano," Mary agreed, and stood up from the harp, giving its lovely smooth finish a last caress

on her way. “Though I am loath to stop, I can feel the soreness beginning in my hands. Perhaps we might have another lesson later, if you are agreeable.”

“Yes, indeed,” Georgiana said immediately. “You are an excellent student, Mary, for you make teaching perfectly easy. I was frightened to try, you know, but you listen and copy so well that there is nothing to be afraid of at all.”

Mary laughed a little. “I think it is just the reverse, and it is easy for me to be a good student because you are a wonderful teacher. But I thank you for the compliment, all the same.”

With that, they joined the other ladies in the seats nearest the windows. They were greeted with kind smiles and a few words of welcome, though all were already occupied. Elizabeth was absorbed in a thick book. Upon observing it more closely, Mary was surprised to notice it was not a novel, but a volume of history she herself had read. Eagerly looking forward to the chance to discuss it with her sister, she silently thanked Mr Darcy for his belief that women ought to improve their minds with extensive reading, and the incentive Elizabeth had thereby gained to read even more than before, that her husband might be as proud of her as possible.

Jane was working on a piece of embroidery, stitching snowflakes as delicate and beautiful as the ones falling outside. Mrs Gardiner was tatting a bit of fine lace that seemed likely destined to adorn her young daughter’s collar. Caroline Bingley was also reading, though from the frequency with which she glanced up at the others, it did not seem to have fully caught her attention. On the contrary, she seemed entirely disposed for conversation.

“You seem to learn quite quickly, Miss Bennet,” she remarked.

Mary flushed a little, discomfited at the praise. “You are kind to say so. I feel myself to be clumsy, but thanks to Georgiana’s capable instruction, one could not help but improve.”

Caroline laughed. “That is too modest by half, I am sure. But then, perhaps it is better so. You are certainly doing wonderfully well with catching Mr Lewis.”

“With Mr Lewis — I beg your pardon?” Mary sputtered.

Caroline nodded decisively. “Yes, I fancy you have taken entirely the right tack there, if you like the man. You have interests in common — good. He seems the type to like a modest and rather serious wife, so you are acting entirely right there.”

At that, even Mary’s embarrassment had to give way before the absolute necessity of interrupting her. “Miss Bingley, I do not think you understand me rightly. I am not attempting to ‘catch’ Mr Lewis. I am sure I could not if I tried.”

Though Elizabeth sat up and gave Miss Bingley a look of warning, she did not heed it.

“Oh, certainly you could!” Caroline said brightly. “Perhaps you do not wish to, of course — I understand he has nothing more than what the living brings him.”

“I esteem Mr Lewis greatly,” Mary said quietly. “If I do not know how much my happiness ought to depend on him, or whether he might come to feel an incipient attachment towards me, those are higher matters, and have nothing to do with his lack of wealth — or one might just as well say, with the smallness of my dowry.”

“Then there is no difficulty, and if you like him, there is much you may do about it.” Caroline looked about for a moment, as though finally noticing the lack of enthusiasm shared among her audience for entering into the conversation. “Is it because you are plain?”

Though Caroline was doing no more than repeating what Mary knew to be a generally held opinion, it still stung to hear the matter so baldly stated. The more so because Mrs Gardiner, Jane, and Elizabeth all bristled to hear it said of her, no matter how unable they might be to refute its truth.

Georgiana seemed shocked into speechlessness, glancing worriedly at Mary with tears in her eyes. Mary knew it was foolish to be upset. Caroline Bingley had not even intended to hurt her, and the knowledge that she was plain, that it was a self-evident fact anyone might remark on, was made less terrible by long familiarity. Only she had hoped for a few days for better things. She had thought even that it might disappear among her other, better qualities. Now, in an instant, she knew she had been a fool.

"I am plain. It is true," Mary said quietly. Her heart felt heavy in her chest. She had dreamed for a time of being able to attract a man of real worth, of sense and compassion and everything of deepest value. On such a simple, plainly stated reminder, it was obvious she had been dreaming of castles in the air and imagining they might come true. What need would a Mr Lewis ever have to descend to the likes of her, a woman that even Mr Collins considered far below him?

Unseeing, Caroline was going on. "He already likes your playing, that is good. Now, if you were to have some dresses made in more flattering colours, I believe it would be a material benefit—"

"I am afraid you must excuse me," Mary said, and hurried from the room before the first tears might begin to fall.

"Really, Miss Bingley?" Elizabeth was saying acidly behind her.

"I was only trying to help," the lady said sulkily, though with surprising sincerity.

"Kindly do not attempt to help my sister in the future, if this is the job you make of it," Elizabeth returned as the doors swung closed.

Mary was fiercely glad that she met no one in the halls as she dashed to her room. Curling into herself on the soft bed, she closed her eyes and waited for the sting of it to fade. No doubt she would soon begin to feel that she had made herself ridiculous in darting from the room, that it would have been far better to stay and talk it over rationally, or at least to disabuse Caroline Bingley of the notion that others viewed

courtship with the same scheming, designing eye as herself. But embarrassment could not yet play any part in her feelings. She was too deeply consumed by the conviction that all her tender, slowly growing hopes were entirely impossible. For once, Caroline Bingley had not intended malice, but she had popped the fragile soap-bubble of Mary's dreams all the same. For at least these few moments of loss, she could have hated her for it.

There was a knock at the door, and without waiting for an answer, someone came in.

"Oh, Mary," Jane said sorrowfully. "You must not listen to Caroline Bingley. Elizabeth is giving her such a dressing-down even now."

"She should not," Mary said bleakly. "I am convinced that she was not being intentionally cruel."

"It hardly matters, for it was cruel all the same," Jane said with surprising sharpness for one so mild. She sat on the edge of the bed and gently covered one of Mary's hands with hers.

"Cruel or not, it is true," Mary whispered. She could easily imagine what she looked like at the moment — her face less handsome than ever with her nose and eyes reddened by tears, her mouth compressed into a thin line as she tried not to sob again. She gave silent thanks that Mr Lewis could not see her. At least there might be some limits to her humiliation.

Jane was silent for a moment. At last, she said firmly, "Mr Lewis does not believe it to be true."

"He is not blind," Mary replied. "And I do not believe that there are any two opinions on the subject. How many years have I heard our mother lament of it? And even you, Jane, who has not a bad word to say about anyone, cannot honestly claim that I am pretty."

Jane did not answer at once. Mary was torn between hope that she might reply with reassurance and the knowledge that she would not believe her if she did. The silence stretched on.

“Did you know our mother has never once complimented me on anything but my appearance?” Jane said at last. Her tone was even, though it was clear it took an effort to make it so. “I have been told all my life that I am beautiful. I daresay I have been given many chances that others did not have because of it. But Mary, one day, I will grow old. I will not be beautiful then, and I hope my friends and family will still find something to admire in me.”

Mary sat up, distracted momentarily from her own woes. “Your kindness is far more beautiful even than your lovely face, Jane,” she said. “All who love you know that.”

“Let me tell you what I know about you, then,” Jane returned. “I know you care deeply about doing what is right, and about learning. You have great application in your studies, in learning the piano, and now in learning the harp as well. Is this not a great deal that might appeal to a sensible man?”

“A man might be sensible, and still want a wife who was at least pretty,” Mary whispered.

Jane shook her head. “I do not think it does much good to argue with anybody about their own appearance, and so I shall not. But I will say that I do not think happiness in marriage depends on the beauty and handsomeness of the participants. Our own mother was beautiful —” (here Jane winced at her own disloyalty in speaking so of her parents, but went on) “— and I do not think either of us would wish to emulate our parent’s marriage.”

Mary shook her head. “I thank you for trying to comfort me, Jane, but I wish to be alone. I must think this out myself somehow.”

“If you wish,” Jane said softly. She gently stroked Mary’s hair, then left the room, closing the door behind her. She had hardly left before Mary wished her back again, wished desperately not to be left entirely to her own bleak thoughts, but after all, it was better so. It was necessary that she accustomed herself to being alone.

Chapter Fifteen

An Uneasy Farewell

On the morning Mr Lewis was to return to Kympton, Mary woke to see glorious sunshine illuminating a vivid blue sky and sparkling over the snowy ground. She felt obscurely cheated. Not, of course, that she wanted his journey to be difficult or dangerous. She knew she ought to be grateful that the last day of their acquaintance would be such a fine one. They might even stand out on the terrace and enjoy the faint warmth of the pale winter sun. Yet it did not seem quite right that a day that wrung her heart ought to look so beautiful.

With a quiet sigh, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and prepared for the day. If this was to be the last Mr Lewis would see of her, she wished to look her best, however unimpressive that best might be. The face in the glass before her was not promising. Her eyes looked strained, and the tears she had shed the night before had left their mark. Recent misery had left her mouth a compressed, narrow line and her skin sallow and dull. Her cheekbones were not high enough for beauty, and her forehead looked over-broad. It was only Mary Bennet, after all, scholarly because she could be nothing else. She had been a fool to think of trying to make herself look well for him.

A sudden memory of his earnest eyes looking into hers as she played the piano made her look away from the mirror and smile. Though he was a handsome man, it was the thoughtfulness, the insight of his expressions that was the best of him. One truly felt that he had not only heard, but understood.

It was a shame Mary was no longer thinking of her appearance, for the sweet thoughts had brought a most welcome alteration to it. Her forehead was as broad as ever, and her cheekbones were no higher. But to have a strained and anxious expression replaced by one of fondness and contentment was such an alteration that it made her almost beautiful.

Though Mr Lewis's room was on another floor, its window also faced east to admit the morning sun. He too looked on the lovely morning with an unfriendly eye. If there must be a parting, it would be best for it to occur without delay. He knew this. Yet knowledge remained a strangely weak prop to his feeble resolve. Duty to the people of Kympton was inviolable. He must and would leave that day. After such a little time, it was absurd to feel that he was leaving a part of his heart behind him.

With such a friendly company, breakfast was never a quiet affair at Pemberley. Mr Lewis was grateful that he might, therefore, say rather little without obvious discourtesy. Lost in his thoughts, he was almost unhearing for much of the meal. Mr Darcy had to hail him more than once to catch his attention.

"When would you like the carriage brought round, Mr Lewis?" he inquired mildly. "I had thought perhaps at eleven, but the choice is entirely yours."

"That will suit me well," Mr Lewis agreed. "I should like to return home well before dark, and yet I can hardly bring myself to say farewell to Pemberley, my time here has been so pleasant."

"We must look forward to having the visit often repeated," Elizabeth observed with a smile.

"I should be much obliged," Mr Lewis replied. Unwillingly, his eyes sought out Mary. Much as there was to draw him back to Pemberley, he would be loath to return when she was not there. To look at the pianoforte and know that she would not rise to play it, to cast his eyes over the library desk where she had read his Christmas sermon…

As though she felt him watching her, Mary finally raised her eyes from her plate and met his gaze. She looked away too quickly. With a tight, aching feeling about his heart, Mr Lewis knew that she was no more untouched by their short time together than he was. If he spoke, she would at least listen. But there was the danger. Mary was only nineteen years of age and would understandably place romance above all. He,

who had all the bitter knowledge of what misery a hasty marriage could bring, must protect them both from such a fate. With a shudder, he pictured the clear honesty of Mary's gaze polluted by the sullen resentment that he had so often seen on his mother's face. He hoped that his own temper was more even than his father's, but knew only too well that neither of his parents were solely to blame for their misery. It was an ill-judged chance that had led them to be bitterly unhappy together when, had each married more carefully and wisely, their tempers and personalities might have found happiness with spouses better suited to their natures.

After breakfast, they removed to the drawing room. Mr Lewis looked about the company that he was so soon to leave. The Darcys would be his neighbours forever, and Mr and Mrs Bingley, he knew, visited often. But he would be sorry not to see the sensible and kindly Mr and Mrs Gardiner for a twelvemonth. New acquaintances as they were, their society was particularly agreeable.

And Miss Mary Bennet…but, perhaps, it was better to think no more of that. He knew himself to be doing the right thing, and remorse would make it no easier.

"Perhaps we might have some music," Mr Lewis proposed. A distraction would be most welcome. "In my time at Pemberley, I have become so accustomed to four capital musicians that I will find my home silent indeed. It will be quite the loss."

"Then, by all means, we must play for you," Caroline Bingley remarked brightly. With surprise, Mr Lewis saw she was looking straight at Miss Bennet, as though about to bring her forward to the instrument. Miss Bennet had a rather odd expression, one Mr Lewis could not make out in the least, and Caroline Bingley quickly said instead, "Elizabeth! Perhaps you will begin?"

"Thank you, Caroline. I should be delighted," Elizabeth said. She rose and went to the piano, though she did not sit down at once. Instead, she stood looking over the room, as though trying to think of what she ought to do. At last, she selected a piece and played, and her delay was quickly

forgotten in the easy enjoyment of the music. Upon reaching the end of the piece, her listeners earnestly requested another. After a slight demurral for propriety's sake, she obliged them. Enchanting as the music was, Mr Lewis found his attention drawn to Mr Darcy. His attention was totally focused on his wife, as though the room held no one but the two of them, and his expression was one of such fondness that it seemed almost out of place on so taciturn a man. They were fortunate indeed, Mr Lewis thought, to have found each other, and to have achieved an understanding tested by time and circumstance. Any man would count himself lucky to have such a love.

Upon leaving the piano, Elizabeth invited Caroline Bingley to follow her, and after a polite hesitation, she agreed. Her playing was more agreeable than it had been before. Instead of fixing her gaze with unnerving intensity on Colonel Fitzwilliam, she kept up a laughing conversation with Elizabeth. It seemed the piece was one both ladies played, and she was laughingly competitive with her hostess over who was more skilled, though for once, her wit seemed pleasant rather than biting. It rather surprised Mr Lewis to notice that Colonel Fitzwilliam did not seem entirely relieved by the change. He seemed confused and perhaps even a little affronted to be ignored. As the younger son of an earl and a fine military man, the experience might be an unusual one for him.

Caroline Bingley left the pianoforte promptly, before anyone had time to request an encore, and eagerly called on Georgiana to follow her. At that, Mary spoke up.

"Would you play the harp, Georgiana, if you would not mislike it? There are so few days left of my visit, and I shall miss hearing you when I am gone."

Georgiana smiled warmly at her. "I shall, if you wish it," she said softly. "Is there anything in particular you would like?"

Mary thought for a moment. "Perhaps you might play 'Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming'," she requested. "With Christmas day itself so close at hand, it seems more fitting than ever."

With a few polite words of assent, Georgiana found the piece among her sheet music and began to play. For Mary, there were now two levels of enjoyment to be had in Georgiana's playing. There was the music itself, as magical as ever, but to carefully watch her hands and store up all the knowledge she was able was no less a pleasure. A little wryly, Mary reminded herself that the exercise was not so sensible after all. She had no harp at Longbourn, and no teacher, and no hope of acquiring either. There was not even anybody in the neighbourhood who played. Yet she could not stop watching all the same. There was a joy in the knowledge for its own sake, whatever might come of it.

Georgiana, who was a rule courteous to the point of diffidence in sharing performance time with others, played a second song immediately after the first, and then a third. In the short time she had been staying at Pemberley, Mary had often thought Georgiana seemed to disguise her own skill, as though it would be churlish to be openly more skilled than the other ladies. Much as she loved to play, she did not normally do so before company until she had been earnestly requested to do so, and more than once at that. It was true generosity of spirit that had her now playing all the pieces they had most discussed in their lessons or that Mary had ever expressed to be her favourite, one after another.

I have made a true friend of my sister-in-law, and gained a new understanding with Elizabeth, Mary thought suddenly. *This is more than enough to be glad of, even if love could not be mine as well. I shall always be glad of my Christmas at Pemberley.*

Slowly, the last notes of the harp faded from the room.

"It is your turn, Mary," Georgiana said firmly.

"Yes, indeed, you must play for us," Elizabeth seconded. The Gardiners added their warm requests, politely seconded by Colonel Fitzwilliam and Caroline Bingley.

Though Mr Lewis felt he ought to speak to her as little as possible, for safety's sake, he could not help himself. "I

wish you would, Miss Bennet. I should dearly like to hear you again, before I go."

"It would be my pleasure," Mary said, surprised and pleased by the evenness of her voice. She had feared it might shake.

In the next moment, Georgiana was hurrying towards her. Her face alight with eagerness, she whispered in Mary's ear.

"What would you think of playing the harp? Could you be brave enough? I am sure that your first piece is well worth hearing, and I should so like my brother to hear what we have accomplished together."

Though she would not have considered it on her own account for the world, Mary found she had not the heart to oppose Georgiana's sisterly devotion and sweet wish for her brother's approbation, and still less the touching faith her friend and teacher was expressing in her.

"I shall, if you wish it. But you must not be too disappointed if I am awkward and slow."

"I shall not be," Georgiana vowed, a promise that seemed to speak of belief in her ability rather than anything else.

With sudden decision, Mary moved to the harp. They had only practised one song worthy of the name in the short time they had for lessons, all the rest being mere snippets suitable only for study and practice. Mary lightly caressed the wood of the harp as she sat down, thinking. The notes were already embedded in her fingertips, and any need to remember them consciously had fallen away. She must allow the clarity of the notes to be expressed. Not a single tone of the harp's voice must fall sallow and off-key.

What does the song say to you, though? What images does it call forth?

Mary faltered an instant before her fingers would have touched the strings. The words had sounded as clearly in her

mind as though Mr Lewis had just spoken them. Suddenly, her mind flooded with images.

Georgiana by her side, her smile alight with pleasure in music. Elizabeth, her eyes as sparkling as every, having grown wiser but no less witty with her marriage. Her aunt and uncle and the little Gardiners, laughing as the sleigh set off, and Colonel Fitzwilliam cracking jokes. Mr Darcy watching his wife with such pride, and Jane and Mr Bingley lost in one another's gaze. Even Caroline Bingley, finding a wish to help others, however misguided it might be.

And Mr Lewis. Mr Lewis watching her play with such interest, and teaching her a new way to think of music. Mr Lewis in the sleigh beside her, speaking so earnestly of the beauty of nature. Mr Lewis offering his work up for her judgement and finding real value in her mind. Mr Lewis, wise, gentle and — perfect.

Mary thought of love, and began to play. She heard the imperfections in notes that marked her as a new performer, and yet somehow, it did not matter. The joy in music was there, alive in her, whatever anyone else might say about it.

She reached the last note, and folded her hands in her lap as it hung, jewel-like, in the air. There was a long moment of silence.

Then the applause began, almost raucous in its fervour.

"Oh, brava, Mary, brava," Elizabeth murmured. With shock, Mary realised it was an unshed tear she saw glinting in her eye. The praise came thick and fast, and Mary was glad to see that Mr Darcy was congratulating Georgiana for her skill as a teacher with as much enthusiasm as she could have desired.

For her own part, the praise felt different than she was accustomed to. Pleasant as it was, Mary slowly realised she did not need it. The music itself had been all she wished.

That thought gave her the courage to look at Mr Lewis. He had clapped harder than anyone, and his expression still

showed him to be deeply moved. It was a species of consolation for her disappointment. He evidently did not feel deeply for her, or at least not enough to speak up before they were parted. Yet with resolution, Mary decided to take comfort in what she had, whatever more she might have wished. His respect for her mind was sincere. His enjoyment in her playing evidently was as well. If he did not feel the same deep, abiding interest and respect that she did for him, that was a shame, but she would not allow it to spoil her peace of mind or her enjoyment of her last days at Pemberley.

Mrs Reynolds entered the room and spoke quietly to Mr Darcy. Mr Lewis seemed recalled to himself and looked at his watch. “Ah! It is already eleven,” he said reluctantly. “Though I hate to leave you all, I must return to Kympton and prepare for the Christmas services.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “The carriage is ready, though of course you need not hurry.”

Mr Lewis shook his head. “I should not want the horses to wait in the cold for me.” His things standing ready in the hall, they were soon packed into the coach, and nothing remained but the farewells. Somewhat to her own surprise, Mary found herself standing next to her sister and Mr Darcy in the crisp winter air, waiting to send Mr Lewis on his way. Perhaps she ought to have gone back in with the others, but in truth, she was not sorry to seize even the last moment of being in his company before a parting that might last forever. Mr Lewis’s thanks to Mr and Mrs Darcy for their hospitality were graceful and sincere, as were their wishes that he would come to visit them again before much time had passed. Mary drew on all her strength of will to receive his parting handshake with composure.

“It has been a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Bennet. I have greatly enjoyed our conversations.”

“As have I,” Mary murmured. “The village of Kympton is fortunate in their parson indeed.”

He seemed to find her simple compliment touching.

“I thank you,“ he said earnestly. “Goodbye, everyone, and a Merry Christmas to you all!”

These good wishes being cheerfully returned, he entered the coach and was quickly driven away. Following the others into the house, Mary did not turn back, and so it was that she did not see Mr Lewis looking after her, his hand pressed against the coach window as though he would call her back, until even the last faint hope of seeing her was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Christmas Day

Christmas day dawned grey and cold in Derbyshire, but that was of little matter to the merry party that awoke in Pemberley. On Christmas day, all the splendour of Pemberley seemed more beautiful than ever, the decorations more festive, and the anticipation of presents and the Christmas feast more glowing.

Seated comfortably in the tidy little church at Lambton, Mary found it unusually difficult to concentrate on the sermon. The parson was a talented speaker, and the message was one of love and cheer, but it took all her will to give it the attention it deserved. Try as she might, thoughts of another parson and another sermon would intrude.

Upon their return to Pemberley, Mr and Mrs Gardiner took pity on their children's growing impatience and suggested that they begin opening gifts. This being quickly seconded by the rest of the party, it was not long before all returned from their rooms with the gifts they had hidden. The little Gardiners were almost hidden behind their pile of gifts, so many of the others had indulged themselves in the joy of giving presents to such dear children. Even Colonel Fitzwilliam and Caroline Bingley, who had not so much as met them before, had brought trinkets from London.

In the general noise and bustle, it was possible for the older members of the party to exchange gifts with less publicity. Though Mary thought it likely that Elizabeth and Jane would give her some small token of sisterhood, each of her older sisters surprised her with a richly bound leather volume of philosophy.

Mary could hardly bring herself to look away from them long enough to offer proper thanks. "I hardly know what to say," she remarked, stroking the fine leather covers with her hands. "Thank you does not seem quite adequate. They are too precious. But I do thank you, from my heart."

After receiving such a gift, the sheet music of a new song she had procured for Elizabeth did not seem nearly an equal exchange. But her sister received it with such pleasure that it was clear the gift was well-appreciated. For Jane, Mary had purchased some new ribbons, and anyone watching the happy gratitude of her manner upon receiving them would not have believed that the eldest of the sisters had the advantage of shopping for her clothes in London whenever she wished, and on a far less restrictive budget.

Mary watched the exchanges of presents between the married couples with a curious eye, wondering whether she might, after all, have cause to do the same herself one day, and trying not to imagine what she would have bought for Mr Lewis in such a case. Mr Gardiner gave his wife a finely inlaid wooden box fit to hold trinkets or jewellery. She exclaimed over its usefulness and beauty and gently stroked its glass-smooth finish. Mr Gardiner seemed no less appreciative of the handkerchiefs of fine linen she had sewn for him, tucking one into his pocket straightaway after admiring the skilfulness of his wife's work. It was not long before the handkerchiefs were tucked into the wooden box and both laid carefully aside, that the Gardiners might better appreciate their children's joy in opening their presents and playing with the treasures inside.

Jane's eyes glowed upon opening Mr Bingley's present to her. It was a necklace, deceptively simple, of gold and sapphires, meant to sit close to her slender neck and draw attention to her blue-grey eyes.

"I have never dreamed of having anything so exquisite," Jane whispered. "Indeed, I have always thought that paste jewels were very pretty, but they are nothing like this." Her husband grinned in pleasure at the success of his gift and took up the necklace himself to enjoy settling it around his wife's lovely neck.

"There!" Mr Bingley said proudly. "Nothing could make you more beautiful than you were already, my love, but I think it does justice to you."

Jane was too speechless with delight to thank him in many words, but the kiss she bestowed on his cheek and the

clasp of his hand eloquently showed what she thought of the present. As Mr Bingley began to open her gift to him, she looked a little nervous.

"I hope you will like it," she murmured. "I had the greatest difficulty in choosing."

Mr Bingley eagerly ripped off the last of the wrapping to reveal a portrait of Jane herself. The artist must have been marvellously skilled, for it was a very good likeness indeed. Done on a delicate oval of porcelain, it was so small that Mr Bingley might easily slip it into his pocket and keep it with him always.

"Please do not think me prideful in my choice," Jane said hurriedly. "I asked for advice as to what you might like —" this with a glance towards Mr Darcy — "— and this was the result."

"It is perfect," Mr Bingley said in a hushed voice. "I hope the times when we are parted will be few and short, but no doubt they will come from time to time. And when they do, I shall look at the second prettiest sight I have seen to comfort me."

By his glance from the portrait to his wife, no one was left in any doubt about what he considered the prettiest sight. Jane blushed becomingly, and Mr Bingley quickly kissed her cheek. Then, as though he could not resist, he kissed her cheek a second time and quickly walked a little away, as though mindful that they were not alone.

Across the room, Mr Darcy carefully unwrapped his present from Elizabeth. Though its shape and size had clearly proclaimed it to be a book, his face was alight with surprise and pleasure upon opening it. The slim leather volume bore no title on its cover. As Mr Darcy opened it, Mary noticed it was written in quill and ink. The hand was familiar to her — it was Elizabeth's own.

"I have written down some small moment or thought, each day of our marriage," she murmured to him. "It is a little record of a time that has been precious to me, and I hope that

whenever you are vexed with me, you will read it and be reminded of how much I love you."

Mr Darcy was looking at the pages with a strange expression, slowly turning each one as though it were infinitely precious. With shock, Mary saw a tear glinting in Mr Darcy's eye.

"I shall read this again and again, and not because I am vexed with you," Mr Darcy murmured to his wife. "To look over this time again through your eyes will be the most exquisite enjoyment to me." Slowly, he took up her hand and kissed, lingering slightly. Elizabeth was silent and almost grave, were it not for the smile playing about her lips.

"Now, Lizzy, you must open my present to you," Mr Darcy instructed her. He handed her a small, flat package. Mary noticed the slight air of nervousness in his manner with surprise. Elizabeth opened the package with care. It too was a book, though one of the flat-laying type typically used by artists. Upon opening it to the first page, she looked up at him in surprise.

"Property of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, Pemberley," she read. "Fitzwilliam, I did not know you sketched!"

"He is ashamed of it," Georgiana murmured, half unconsciously.

"No, not ashamed," Mr Darcy corrected her, "but embarrassed, I suppose. I have always felt that it revealed too much of me." Elizabeth met his eyes with a small, private smile that seemed to speak of her appreciation that he would share so much of himself. Quickly, she looked through the drawings, noting their dates. Upon reaching the previous fall, she stopped short in astonishment.

It was a sketch of Elizabeth herself, recognisable even viewed from a distance. The likeness was remarkable and the artist's admiration obvious.

"There are a great deal more of you, for you have occupied my thoughts almost exclusively over the past year," Mr Darcy said in a low tone. Fascinated, Elizabeth continued

turning the pages. There were many of Georgiana, showing her in turns looking sad, shy, and laughing. Mr Bingley was sketched more than once, his expression showing all its friendly openness, as was Colonel Fitzwilliam. The dear, familiar lines of Pemberley were shown there alongside the beautiful nature of Derbyshire. But again and again, more than all, there was Elizabeth.

Some drawings had a frustrated air, though whether the artist was frustrated with himself or his subject was hard to guess. Many showed her playful and laughing, and not a few thoughtful, with something of a secret smile. The sketches seemed to be trying to capture some essential truth about her, and perhaps to understand her.

At last, Elizabeth stopped at the last piece in the book. It was another portrait of her, and a very simple one. She was merely seated in one of the drawing room chairs, wearing a simple day dress and holding a book. Yet her expression spoke vividly of love, love given and received back again.

“I hardly know what to say,” Elizabeth said softly. “Only I love you and I will treasure this — always.”

With featherlight delicacy, he touched her hand. “That is all that I could wish.”

Mary looked away, torn between joy at their happiness and a painful, unworthy envy. She would choose joy, she silently resolved. Come what may, she would choose joy.

In the little village of Kympton, the missing member of their party was not in good spirits. Waking up in his warm, snug house, Mr Lewis slowly realised that the customary cheer of the day was absent. He was not so wholly absorbed in his own feelings and concerns as to be untouched by the joy and gratitude of Christmas Day. There was the anticipation of looking out into the church and seeing the blessed light of thankfulness come into the faces of his friends and neighbours, the clasp of a hand and friendly word that would come from

all sides after the service. There was the Christmas dinner to be enjoyed, and if neither the setting nor the meal would be as fine as those he had lately enjoyed at Pemberley, they were still more than worthy of relish.

The only absent blessing of any weight was that of company, and the knowledge that soon, Miss Mary Bennet would climb up into a carriage bound for Hertfordshire, not to return for a year or more. He might see her next as common and indifferent acquaintances. He might see her with another man's ring on those elegant hands, and would converse with that sharp, keen mind with as much pleasure as ever, and no hope of ever being more to her than a distant friend.

But that was enough of melancholy and delay. He had a duty, and he would do it to the best of his ability. Mr Lewis left his bed and dressed with some care, eager that his appearance might be equal to the day.

"Merry Christmas, Mr Lewis," Mrs Oliver wished him cheerfully as he entered the dining room. "It is good to have you back, sir. The house is too quiet when you are gone."

"Merry Christmas, Mrs Oliver. I am glad to be back," Mr Lewis replied. Though a clergyman ought not to lie, a small social untruth was necessary at times. And in any case, while he might miss some of the society left behind him at Pemberley, he was truly glad to see dear old Mrs Oliver again. She bustled about merrily, bringing in his breakfast at once, and was then gone to see about the housemaid.

The good bread and perfectly cooked eggs were ashen in Mr Lewis's mouth. Regret seemed to colour all. And yet he had surely acted correctly. To speak to Miss Bennet when he had known her but two weeks would be rash to the point of madness. In him, of all people, he who had known the misery a hastily arranged marriage could produce, it would be inexcusable. With a deep breath, he sat up straight and set about the business of eating his breakfast properly. His people deserved the best of his care and attention on this of all days. He would ensure that they had it.

As the Kympton church was less than half a mile down the lane, it was Mr Lewis's custom to walk there. It was a welcome time to think over the coming sermon, the passages he ought to emphasise, the places he should pause for a moment, to let his listeners have the time to think and reflect. On most days, the quiet walk to church was a peaceful interval that was among the most pleasant times in a deeply blessed life. Yet the sky seemed oppressive above him, the grey clouds as though they might crush him to the ground with their weight. All willpower and determination could do did not give him his customary good cheer. Even the appearance of the little church itself failed to do so. Its pale sandstone called to mind too readily the walls of Pemberley, and upon reading through his sermon once again, as was his weekly custom, Mr Lewis found he had gone over the same page several times without seeing a word.

The bustle of arriving churchgoers came as a relief, and Mr Lewis was ashamed to realise he was looking forward to the end of the service almost as though it were an ordeal to be endured. *That* was a shameful lapse indeed, and he ruled himself to think only of the beauty and purpose of the day, the kind hearts of those around him and the deep meaning and joy of the Good Book, until Christmas Day at last felt something like itself again.

Almost from the first words, Mr Lewis knew the sermon was a good one, and was succeeding at touching his listeners' hearts. It was there in the upturned faces from every pew, the looks of open joy and fellowship that grew and grew until the church itself seemed to glow. As he spoke, each word seemed to have something of Mary in it, until the sermon itself seemed almost to bring her before him.

And as Mr Lewis spoke the words she had most particularly suggested, of the good nature and potential goodness of humankind, he knew himself for a fool.

How could he, who had built his whole life on faith, have so little in himself? Still worse, how could he have so little in *her*?

In that moment, he made his decision, and his heart was at last at peace. He would go to her as soon as his duty was done, wasting not a moment in delay. He would speak his heart, and be her response what it may, he would at least have honestly spoken his truth into the world, instead of taking refuge in cowardice.

Once he was no longer at war with himself, each moment of his vocation seemed a joy, and yet to be over in a flash. He spoke with each parishioner that approached him, inwardly almost startled at the effortlessness of his patience. He walked home quickly, yet without undue haste.

And as soon as he had entered his own courtyard, he saddled his horse, gave a startled Mrs Oliver only the quickest notification of his leaving, and rode off for Pemberley.

To gallop would have been to foolishly endanger his own life and the life of his horse, and so he did not gallop, much as it might have relieved his feelings. A quick, steady trot did justice to the icy condition of the ground and quickly covered the distance, which was not long, for all his anticipation made it feel otherwise.

As a result of his prudence, he reached Pemberley in perfect safety and good time. Mr Lewis had never been more glad for the servants of Pemberley than when a stableboy took his horse upon his entering the yard, allowing him to approach the front door at once.

Mrs Reynolds looked rather surprised upon perceiving him. “Mr Lewis! It is a pleasure, sir, but to be sure, we did not expect you. Is aught amiss, sir? Have you forgotten something important?”

“In a way of speaking, I have, Mrs Reynold. Will you take me to the family? I have something particular to say to Miss Bennet.”

Mrs Reynolds, whom Mr Lewis had long known to be a treasure among housekeepers, understood at once. Her eyes lit up with shared joy. “The ladies are in the drawing room, sir. Please follow me.”

Surprise was clear on every face when Mr Lewis entered the room, though clearest perhaps on Miss Bennet's. With so many curious eyes on him, it took all Mr Lewis courage to turn to Mary after the formal greetings were done and request the honour of a private audience with her.

Elizabeth, who did not seem so wholly shocked as he might have imagined, did not need to gauge her younger sister's willingness before offering the use of the Rose Room, which, when Elizabeth herself was ensconced in the room next door and the door left ajar, would offer a suitable mix of privacy and respectability. Mary looked almost fearful with hope as she shyly glanced at him.

Chapter Seventeen

Two Proposals

When Elizabeth had withdrawn to the other room and left the door almost closed, Mr Lewis wasted no more time before turning to Mary. The light in her face was enough to give him courage.

"Miss Bennet, I have greatly enjoyed our acquaintance, short as it has been. I have never known a young lady with whom I could converse so easily, or who shared such a deep interest in my work. When I left Pemberley without speaking to you, I had convinced myself that it would be foolhardy for either of us to entertain serious designs on so short an acquaintance. I believed — and indeed I have painful personal experience that causes me to believe — that to marry upon too short an acquaintance can be deeply injurious to one's happiness. But I cannot stay silent, knowing that you are about to leave and that we might never meet again. I think I could hardly bear that. Miss Bennet, I must ask. I have come to feel for you the sort of affection I had previously believed could be created only after many months. Do you think you might care for me? Would you even, knowing that we would otherwise soon be separated, enter into an engagement with me?"

Mary felt cheeks flushing deeply red as he spoke. It took her a long moment before she could master herself enough to reply. "Sir. I — I had not thought myself worthy of attracting your attention. To hear you say otherwise gives me courage enough for anything."

Gently, he took her hand in his. "I think you have not been enough used to hearing the praise you richly deserve. If we are wed, I shall do my best to remedy this. Once I have begun, I will not soon end my praises of your fine mind and deep care for honour. Still less your compassion for others. And — even a clergyman man be forgiven some worldly interests, I hope —your beautifully clear, honest eyes and the elegance of your hands. I think I first thought seriously of you when I saw their beauty on the pianoforte."

“Mr Lewis, it is too much, it is far too much,” Mary said, half laughing. “It is too much, and I wish you would never stop. You will have to forgive me for giving compliments so much clumsier than yours. I can only say that I think you are one of the finest men I have ever known.”

“That is not clumsy at all,” Mr Lewis whispered. “But Miss Bennet, you have not yet answered my question. We have been acquainted such a short time, but I find I would risk anything rather than part from you with no assurance of when I might see you again. Will you marry me?”

Mary took a deep breath. Looking at his handsome face, at the features she could have traced with her eyes closed despite having no knowledge of them a month ago, she found her answer was not what she would have supposed.

“I will not,” she said steadily. As his face fell, she quickly went on. “Do not mistake me, Mr Lewis! I already feel as much affection for you as anybody could after only a fortnight’s acquaintance, and I hope and believe that we shall marry in the end. But let us not make haste, especially when you have such a rational desire to take all due care. Rather than becoming engaged at once, I think it would be much better for me to ask the Darcys and my father if I may extend my stay at Pemberley. I am sure that neither will have any objection. And then you and I may find out at leisure if we are truly as well suited as I feel us to be at this moment.”

“My dear practical girl,” Mr Lewis breathed. “I have found a compromise, and you have done what is much better, and found how we may not need it, after all. You need not, you know. When I spoke my interest, I was wholly and entirely ready to enter into an engagement, if you would have me.”

“I have long thought that I would never marry, or that I would have to accept any man who offered, as soon as the chance was afforded me,” Mary said thoughtfully. “Indeed, my mother gave me to understand it was a certainty. But here at Pemberley, I believe it no longer. In my heart of hearts, Mr Lewis, I truly and sincerely believe that you and I shall wed, and that we shall be happy all our days. But let us take the time to decide at leisure. It shall be my first present to you, and

my declaration that I, too, deserve to choose my partner in life."

"Then we shall do so," Mr Lewis said. With a final, gentle squeeze of her hand, he released it. "Shall we go to Mrs Darcy?"

"Let us do so," Mary said in perfect agreement. With an uncharacteristic flash of mischief, she gave a little laugh. "Oh, it will surprise my sister to hear that I have joyous news, but not quite the news she was prepared to expect!"

Chapter Eighteen

A Marriage of True Minds

Pemberley, December 26, 1812

My honourable Father,

Be assured that we are all well at Pemberley. Elizabeth is as lively and witty as ever, but to be mistress of Pemberley has, I think, given her something more of elegance and calm. I am happy for her. Mr Darcy looks at her with such love in his eyes, it makes me like him more than ever. Jane and Mr Bingley are just another such pair, never happier than in each other's company. My aunt and uncle are also well, as are all the children. I hope you and Kitty are well, and that Mother does not suffer too much from her nerves.

I am writing to ask your permission that I may stay longer at Pemberley. Naturally, I have first asked Elizabeth to be sure that I would not inconvenience her or Mr Darcy. They are perfectly happy to have me remain here and have no intention of leaving Pemberley for some months.

I most earnestly beg that you grant me your blessing, Father, for I feel it is essential to my future happiness. Please do not deny me this, and if you have any objection, let me know what I must do to remove it.

Sincere regards from your dutiful daughter,

Mary Bennet

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Pemberley, December 26, 1812

Dear Father,

I send this with Mary's letter, that I may assure you Mr Darcy and I would be heartily glad to have her continue with us. Indeed, I wish you may allow it for my sake as well as hers, for I feel I am coming to understand and even love my

sister better than I ever did before. Is it not strange how much we may learn of those closest to us even after many years?

Let me also tell you something of why Mary wishes to stay, that you may make your decision with all the necessary information. Mary has formed the beginnings of an attachment with the parson of Kympton, a connexion which I feel is decidedly to be desired. Fitzwilliam fills each living within his gift with the utmost care, so you may be assured that Mr Lewis is a most conscientious, sensible, and honourable man. He has been staying with us at Pemberley these past two weeks, and I like him as much for his wit and conversation as for his deeper qualities. Better still, he has been the means of showing us all so much in Mary that we were blind to before. Under his honourable attentions, she has blossomed like a flower. Knowing her to be on the point of leaving for Hertfordshire, he made his intentions known and would even now be applying to you for her hand, if she had not instead proposed that she might remain here longer, that they may test the attachment with all due prudence and care.

Father, would it not be a good plan for you to permit Mary to stay, and plan on coming yourself before long? You might then divide your time between furthering your acquaintance with Pemberley's library and Mr Lewis. I wish you may do so.

Best regards from your loving daughter,

Elizabeth Darcy

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At Longbourn, Mr Bennet read these letters with considerable astonishment. He read them both through a second time, seeming to find them no less surprising, and then a third. It had not been a year since he had suffered a surprise that left him heartily ashamed of himself, and though this was of a lesser and far happier nature, he felt that the sense of having been wrong, utterly wrong, was uncomfortably similar. His Elizabeth, his cleverest daughter, clearly felt that she had

been unjust to her sister. And if that were so, was it not much more a reproach to himself, the father who ought to have been first to promote all his children's gifts?

The two communications must have begun a considerable revolution in his mind, for he did not keep them to himself and delay a fortnight in replying, as was all too often his custom. Instead, taking up both letters, he left his study and went to find his wife.

Mrs Bennet was in the drawing room with Kitty, chatting with her about the next assembly as Kitty nodded and worked on her watercolours.

"My dear, I am convinced you must have a new gown for it, one with long sleeves, and you shall look vastly well in it. Who knows what new gentlemen may attend, after all!"

"I should like to have a new gown, Mama," Kitty remarked pleasantly, adding several leaves to her composition. "Perhaps in pink?" It startled Mr Bennet to realise that he could identify it not merely as a rose, but as the species of roses that grew on a trellis to the west of the house. While he had known that Kitty dabbled in painting, and had purchased paints and paper for her as he purchased sheet music for Elizabeth and Mary, he had not realised that she had any skill at it.

Mr Bennet had an uncomfortable feeling that there was much he did not know about his daughters, and ought to. Even his darling Elizabeth — had he not been blind to her growing attachment, even to the point of being asked for her hand while still believing she hated the gentleman in question?

He cleared his throat to attract their attention. "I have received two letters from Elizabeth and Mary."

"Oh, tell us the latest news!" Mrs Bennet responded with enthusiasm. "Are they all well at Pemberley? How are darling Jane and Mr Bingley? Does Elizabeth deal well with the servants? Does she know how many removes the Christmas feast ought to have? Does she ask for my advice? I realised only after it was too late how much I did not teach my daughters!"

“You could teach *me* how to deal with servants and how many courses a feast ought to have, Mama,” Kitty remarked calmly. She had washed her brush and was adding shadow to the rose’s petals, giving it an even more lifelike appearance. Mr Bennet had seen illustrations in his botanical manuscripts that were less accurate.

Mrs Bennet ignored her daughter. “What is it, Mr Bennet, what is it? You must tell me quickly and not leave me in such suspense. My poor nerves will not stand the strain!”

“I will not delay, then,” he said. “All are well, although I am afraid I cannot answer any of your other questions. Mary has written to ask that she may extend her stay, and Elizabeth writes to assure us she is welcome.” Mr Bennet paused a moment, weighing whether he ought to tell his wife and Kitty of what Elizabeth had included in her letter, and Mary had omitted. But, deciding it to be the better part of respect for both his daughters’ privacy, he said no more.

“Well!” Mrs Bennet said in surprise. “I am sure I have no objection to it, for she will do perfectly well there, and one never knows when she might meet an agreeable man. Lizzy and Mr Darcy will look after her perfectly well.”

“I think much the same, my dear,” Mr Bennet replied, relieved that he had not informed his wife that Mary had, indeed, already met a most agreeable man. Her mind was so quick to jump to matrimony that she would never have agreed to let their daughter court in peace, without the interference she would have thought necessary.

Besides this, even painful insight cannot change a man in a moment, and though Mr Bennet had learned his duty towards his daughters a little better, he still dearly loved to tease his wife.

“I should like to visit Pemberley, if Lizzy were to ask me,” Kitty remarked, though her tone was quite contented. With the tiniest of her brushes, she signed her painting in elegant, looping letters. “It seems a most delightful place.”

Thinking of the happiness it had brought two of his daughters and no less, it must be admitted, of its library, Mr

Bennet agreed. With the next post, he sent out a letter that was certain to please his daughter and to surprise her in the evidence it provided that his sentiments had undergone a most welcome alteration.

Longbourn, December 31, 1812

My dear Mary,

You may continue at Longbourn with my good will. I have your sister's assurances that the Darcys welcome you, and how can your old Father say no, in the face of such an invitation? So stay in Derbyshire, my child, and I expect I shall visit before many weeks. You may come home with me then if you like, or stay as long as your own fancy and your sister's welcome extends.

You are much missed at Longbourn, for I now have no one with whom to talk of serious matters, and poor Kitty is quite fatigued with my suggesting books other than novels to her. She has no patience with them, unless they contain pictures that might inspire her watercolours. But do not let that concern you — we shall all keep well until we may have our Mary back with us.

Sincerest regards,

Your loving father

An excerpt from *The Courier* and *The London Times*, June 2, 1813

At Lambton Church, Mr Martin Lewis, reverend of Kympton, to Miss Mary Bennet, spinster of the town of M— in Hertfordshire and daughter to Mr Bennet of Longbourn. The bride was attended by two of her sisters, Mrs Bingley, lately settled in Derbyshire, and Mrs Darcy of Pemberley.

Though the groom's family was unable to attend, the church was crowded near to bursting with his parishioners.

Alone at last after all the hustle and bustle of Mary's wedding day, Elizabeth turned to her husband and tumbled wordlessly into his arms. Mr Darcy folded them around her and cuddled his wife close to his side with a good will.

"My darling Elizabeth," he murmured softly into her hair. "Is it not strange to think what may come to pass through the simplest of actions? I had not the least idea of making our friend and your sister a match by our Christmas invitation. Who would have thought it?"

With a deep, sighing breath, Elizabeth uncurled herself from him just enough to look up into his face. "Not I, to be sure. I did not even know that it was to be desired. Fitzwilliam, I am so glad for them. He has already made Mary so happy, I feel I never knew her before. And one has only to look at his face to see how much he cares for her."

"They are a match, indeed," Mr Darcy agreed. "You will have a second sister with you in Derbyshire, my love. Our family seems to grow and grow."

At that, Elizabeth blushed, giving fuel to a suspicion that had recently taken root in his heart. It took all of Mr Darcy's considerable patience and will not to ask any questions that might preempt what his wife should choose to reveal in her own way and her own time. He said nothing more. Yet his thoughts were full of joyful anticipation.

After a moment's silence, Elizabeth gave him a tiny smile, remarkable in its brilliancy. Her dark eyes sparkled beautifully with her excitement.

"As to that, my love," she said at last, "our family grows indeed. I wanted to speak with my aunt Gardiner to be sure, but her last letter confirmed everything I believed myself. I am with child."

Wordless at first with joy, he caught up her hand and kissed it, again and again. “Oh, Elizabeth,” he at last managed to say. “It is wonderful. A daughter with eyes as beautiful as yours, or a son that I may teach to look after Pemberley better than I do myself. My love, you give me great joy.”

Smiling, she shook her head. “Oh, Fitzwilliam. That is exactly what I had intended to say to you.”

THE END

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"A Letter for Mr Darcy" is a short story inspired by Captain Wentworth's letter to Anne Elliot in Persuasion.

About the Author

Amelia Westerly lives in the Pacific Northwest with her two lordly cats, Edmond and Wentworth. She likes walking on rocky beaches and thinking about times gone by. Her other passions include tea, music of all kinds, and Jane Austen's wonderful novels.

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