



LONELY IN LONDON

A Pride and Prejudice Christmas Variation

JAE GEORGE

Lonely in London

A Pride and Prejudice Christmas Variation

Jae George

Copyright © 2023 Jae George

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Art Painter

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

I am pleased to dedicate this short and sweet Christmas story to my readers.

You can't know how much I appreciate your interest in what I put on paper (virtually) and how excited I am to read your reviews. Merry Christmas!

*Gratefully,
Jae*

Prologue

I don't mind. Truly, I don't, thought Elizabeth Bennet as she sat by the window in her bedchamber at her aunt and uncle's home in London. The view from her window seat was fading into darkness as the sun slipped behind the houses across Gracechurch Street from the Gardiner townhome. The street lamps were already being lit on the sidewalk below. *My aunt and uncle have always been wonderfully generous to me. They have allowed me to visit here for years - five years, no six years now. Taking me to the theatre, buying me bonnets, and having gowns made for me from the finest fabrics from Uncle's warehouse. Being here to help with the children while Aunt Maddie is increasing and unwell is something that I can finally do to reciprocate their kindness and generosity to Jane and me.*

I don't know why I am feeling so low. I guess I am not accustomed to being confined to the house, unable to be out of doors as I would be at Longbourn. How very selfish of me. Jane would scold me for even allowing myself to think this way. She smiled with the memory of her dearest sister's unfailingly kind heart. Then it occurred to her, ah, that is the problem, I miss my Jane. I am lonely!

She stood, nodded her head, and admonished herself as Jane would have. "Lizzy Bennet, you will stop feeling sorry for yourself this instant."

Chapter One: London, December 1812

Only three days later, Aunt Maddie had finally begun to feel better. “Lizzy dear, it is an absolutely glorious day. You should take Susan or one of the footmen and go for a walk in the park.”

“Thank you, Aunt, but I have walked with Nanny and the boys almost every day. You mustn’t think that I have been missing my exercise. As you well know, Edward, Richard, and Andrew provide me with many opportunities to exert myself,” she replied with a chuckle.

“I know, Lizzy, but you need some time to do something for yourself. I believe that my sickness has finally subsided. I never suffered from sickness for this long with the boys. Perhaps this one will be a daughter,” she spoke wistfully with her hand on her rounded abdomen.

“I do hope so, Aunt Maddie, but if not, I will gladly trade Lydia for a boy .”

Her niece’s joke made the lady laugh until she cried. “Thank you making me laugh and for the offer, Lizzy, but I don’t think I would make that trade. Your youngest sister’s exuberance can be overwhelming.”

“Yes, but just think how she might be if she had received more discipline. Mama has spoiled her because Lydia’s looks and personality match her own. If you and Uncle had raised her, she would likely be much more refined. You have certainly been the person most responsible for teaching Jane and me about proper decorum over the years. And I am eternally grateful.” Elizabeth moved to sit next to her favorite aunt and kissed her cheek.

“Oh, Lizzy, do go out and enjoy yourself today. I will be fine,” she averred but quickly blotted the incipient tears the young lady’s words had caused.

“Very well, Aunt. I will take Susan and walk to Mr. Hammond’s bookstore. It is close enough that you can send

John for me if you begin to feel worse. I will just get my cloak, bonnet, and gloves.”

She didn't want her dear aunt to know how very excited she was to leave the house without the children and be on her way to Hammond's, the bookstore her father had first introduced her to years ago. The proprietor, Mr. Ernest Hammond, specialized in first editions and rare books. Being a bibliophile, Mr. Bennet could spend hours perusing the varied offerings in the shop. And Lizzy was almost as avid a reader as her father.

Her excitement increased as she and the maid walked the half-mile in the clear but chill air to reach the shop. *Maybe Mr. Hammond has a new acquisition I can purchase for Papa's Christmas gift.*

As she walked, Elizabeth's thoughts returned to her beloved older sister Jane. *I totally understand why Mama would not send Jane with me on this visit. After all, Mr. Bingley has only just returned to Netherfield Park to make amends to all of his neighbors for quitting his leased estate without taking proper leave of them many months earlier. But he owed most important of his apologies to Jane, whom he had assiduously courted for the entirety of the two months he had been in residence at the estate.*

Of course, remembering those months since he left and how he had broken Jane's heart with his desertion only brought even more difficult memories to the fore - memories of another man's handsome countenance. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley's friend and houseguest, who had first insulted Lizzy, made her uncomfortable at every subsequent encounter, and then, completely to her shock, had proposed marriage to her in Kent during her visit there the past spring.

She thought, *Confusing, vexing man! I mustn't let myself dwell on what might have been. What might have been had I understood his stares were in admiration instead of criticism.* Her guilt was again aroused concerning her treatment of Mr. Darcy.

And it must have been Mr. Darcy's confession to Charles Bingley about his mistaken impression of Jane's reticence that had roused the younger man to return to Netherfield and again attempt to win Jane's respect and admiration. By the time she and Susan had reached Hammond's, Lizzy had again upbraided herself for her misunderstanding of Mr. Darcy, the man she later understood would have answered her every desire for qualities in a husband: intelligent, respectful of her opinions, diligent in fulfilling his responsibilities – not to mention his intensely blue eyes set in an extremely handsome face.

Ah, but that bridge has been burned. No man, and certainly not one of Mr. Darcy's wealth and consequence, would ever again wish to even be in company with a woman who had so heatedly refused him. I should burn that letter of explanation he put into my hands the day after the proposal. My oft-repeated reading of it only serves to remind me of my abhorrent actions.

As she opened the bookshop's door, she again committed herself to destroying the letter as soon as she returned to the Gardiner residence.

“Lizzy Bennet!” hailed the elderly Mr. Hammond as she entered. “Oh, pardon me. I must begin calling you ‘Miss Elizabeth’ now, must I not?”

Elizabeth laughed at the man she had first met as a precocious seven-year-old. “I don't think such formality is necessary between us, ‘Uncle Hammond.’ Papa always allowed me to run about your store freely, and I remember you telling him that I was like the grandchild you never had. I guess that was when I began to consider you a member of the family. How have you been, sir?”

After listening to his dismissal of his aches and pains and her briefly enlightening Mr. Hammond on the state of his friend Bennet's brood of girls, he asked, “So what are you looking for today, Miss Lizzy? History, philosophy, or perhaps something in the original Latin or Greek?” He smiled proudly at her, thinking of how much he admired the second Bennet daughter for her academic curiosity and her keen intelligence.

She returned his affectionate smile and explained her reason for being in London so near the festive season. "I am looking for something to keep my mind engaged during the long, dark evenings, Mr. Hammond. But I will also peruse your collection of first editions or anything else you think Papa would enjoy. Just keep my meager allowance in mind, if you please," she added with a grin.

"Very well, my dear. You begin your browsing, and I will see if I have anything Bennet would appreciate at a reasonable price."

Lizzy left Susan waiting in a comfortable chair near the coal-burning stove by the window before she began her rounds of the store. "Susan, please don't let me lose track of the time. When the clock sounds eleven, find me so we may be home in time for me to share luncheon with my aunt."

She began a slow perusal of the overfilled shelves, wishing she had the day instead of only an hour to inspect the many volumes. When she had chosen a biography of William the Conqueror for herself, she made her way up a flight of wooden stairs to look for a book that her father might enjoy. She was surprised to find a young lady there staring at the available selections with a perplexed look on her face.

"Oh, excuse me. I hope I am not intruding on you here." Elizabeth curtsied to the obviously well-dressed and probably very wealthy young woman.

"No, you are not," she nodded and shared, "I am looking for something for my brother. He loves these dusty old books, but I don't think I can choose something myself. He collects so many books that I would probably be duplicating a previous purchase."

"Oh, a lover of books then? Just like my father and myself. Perhaps I can help. Does he own any incomplete collections? Does he like books about history or atlases, perhaps?"

"An atlas! That is a brilliant idea," the young lady exclaimed. "He loves maps, and any new, rather *old*, atlas would likely fascinate him. Can you make a recommendation?"

“Yes, I think any lover of maps would like this one I was considering for my father, but I am guessing that its price will be well above my available funds, so you must take it for your brother.”

“Oh, I couldn’t take your selection.”

“Please, as I said, I think it is far above my reach, so you are welcome to it. Speaking of which, since you are taller than me, can you *reach* that green book on the next to the top shelf? I think it would please Papa well as his Christmas gift and will be much easier to send by post than this large atlas.”

Georgiana Darcy easily reached the specified book and handed it to the petite brunette who had been so helpful while wishing that she could be introduced to the stranger. It wasn’t often that she met a truly friendly person in London.

“Thank you so very much. I do hope that your father enjoys his gift.”

“And your brother as well.” Susan looked up from the bottom of the stairs and informed Elizabeth it was eleven o’clock. The two strangers exchanged curtsies and parted ways, each thinking they would never meet again.

When Georgiana completed her shopping and turned to make her way down the stairs, she spotted a small leather-bound book that had must have fallen from one of the shelves. She opened the book to determine where to return it, only to find that it appeared to be a journal of sorts with the initials ERB embossed on the front in gold.

Unable to find a name or address on the opening pages, she decided to take it with her. *It must belong to the helpful ‘friend’ who has just left. If it were my personal journal, I would certainly not want it to be left with the bookstore owner. And maybe someday I will cross her path again while shopping. Protecting the young woman’s privacy is the least I can do to repay her kind assistance.*

She tucked the volume into her reticule, paid for her gift for William, and then joined the footman waiting at the door for their return to Darcy House. She was pleased that she had a

gift for her devoted brother that would be a genuine surprise for him instead of the usual packet of embroidered handkerchiefs he normally received from her.

Chapter Two

Georgiana returned to her luxurious home in the exclusive Mayfair District of London, proudly clutching her prize to her chest. “Georgie,” she heard her brother call from his study as she entered. She quickly handed off the brown-paper-wrapped book to a footman with whispered instructions to take it to her rooms. After peeling off her kidskin gloves and handing them over to Mr. Mason, the butler, along with her bonnet and cloak, she made her way down the marble-tiled corridor to the study.

“Good afternoon, William. It is quite chilly out today, but still a lovely day. How are you, Brother?” she greeted as she entered the open door.

“I am well, Georgie. How much did this shopping trip cost me?” he asked with a smile for his little sister.

“Not too much. I am sure that I will not exceed my clothing allowance this month. We have no plans for the festive season that will require any new items for my wardrobe.” Her answer was delivered in an equally teasing tone.

“I did find something that you might help me with, however.” She pulled the dark blue leather-bound volume from her reticule and placed it on the large desk between them. He lifted the slim journal and flipped it open to reveal pages covered with writing in an elegant feminine hand.

“This appears to be a lady’s personal journal, Georgie.” He examined the gold embossed ERB on the front. “Where did you get it?”

She hesitated to lie to her brother, but telling him about finding it at Hammond’s would spoil her Christmas surprise. “I found it on the floor of the millinery shop. I think it belongs to a charming young lady I spoke to there. She was giving me advice about which bonnet looked best.” Knowing how cautious William was of her speaking to strangers, she added. “We only spoke briefly, William. She simply pointed out a bonnet she thought might look well on me, and then her maid arrived to remind her of the time, and she left. She made no

effort to get to know me better, nor did she ask me any questions about myself or about you.”

Her reply had been delivered a bit defensively, and Fitzwilliam Darcy sought to placate her. “I’m sorry, Georgie; I know that not everyone we meet is seeking to use one of us for gain. I have become too jaded by fortune hunters and those who seek to profit from the Darcy name. I know your discernment can be trusted.” *I do trust her judgment, he thought, but I cannot forget how she was manipulated into agreeing to an elopement by George Wickham and her former companion, Mrs. Younge, last summer. I suppose I will always be slightly overprotective of my baby sister.*

I was obviously not careful enough when I hired Mrs. Younge, who turned out to be that blackguard Wickham’s accomplice. At least I know he is no longer a danger to anyone since he ‘disappeared’ courtesy of our cousin Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, an even more protective co-guardian of our Georgiana. It was he who had through his military connections assisted Wickham into His Majesty’s Royal Navy and onto a ship sailing for the Americas.

William returned his thoughts to the present. “I am sure that you used proper discretion, Georgie. I trust you completely but still have trouble relinquishing my role as your big brother and protector. I will try to do better,” he chuckled and gave her an apologetic smile. “Now, about this,” he tossed the journal back toward her. “It seems to be a lady’s personal journal, and clearly, I cannot be the one to read it. If you feel obliged to return it to its owner, you could take it back to the milliner’s.”

“No, William, I couldn’t leave it at the store,” she stated flatly as if he had spoken foolishness. “I am sure that the young lady would not want strangers reading her private thoughts!”

“I’m sure you are correct, Georgie. Perhaps you could just describe her to the proprietor and see if they might be able to provide you with her name and an address where it could be delivered. Barring that, you might read a little of what she had written to gain enough information to see it returned to its owner. It would certainly be more proper for you to read it than me.”

“Yes, I suppose you are correct,” the girl answered while thinking, *I will not return it to Mr. Hammond. I am sure the lady would not want a strange man to read her private thoughts. I will read just enough to find her. If I can't locate her, I will simply keep it safe. That is the least I can do to repay her help in choosing the perfect gift for William.*

“You are right, Brother. I will see what can be done. Thank you for your advice. I will retire now to rest and see you at dinner.”

That evening after dinner, Miss Darcy had excused herself early and retired to her bedchamber to start her search for the identity of the ‘mystery lady.’ With a candle burning at her bedside, she opened ERB’s journal and began flipping through the pages. About midway through the volume, she found an unsealed letter addressed to Aunt Chatty in care of the London Times. Georgiana recognized the penname as that of an advice columnist whose column was generally referred to as ‘advice for the lovelorn.’ She held the envelope in her hands, trying to determine if reading it would be an invasion of her mysterious friend’s privacy.

Of course, it's an invasion of her privacy. The real question seems to be whether the invasion is warranted. If it were my letter, would I want a stranger to open it? 'No,' she silently answered herself. But what if I never knew the whereabouts of my private journal, never knew if someone was reading it aloud to others for entertainment? Worrying that I would somehow be discovered as its owner after all my secrets had been read and possibly shared for amusement.

Decision made, she unfolded the letter and began to read:

Dear Aunt Chatty,

I am visiting here in London with my aunt and uncle, who are kind and generous and very dear to me. My aunt is ill and I am here from my country home to aid with her children's care until she is recovered. I feel quite guilty even bothering to write to you as I truly should not be complaining. But here I am writing whether or not it is justified.

I generally visit my relations here in Town with my older sister, who is also my dearest friend and confidante. She was dealt a tremendous blow last autumn when a suitor who had been courting her assiduously and had captured her heart deserted her without explanation or even a farewell. He has now returned to our country neighborhood and has again been calling on her. I tell you all this to explain why she did not accompany me here to London and why I can't write to her to seek advice when she currently has so much to deal with herself.

I, too, suffered a disappointment of the heart this past spring, which was entirely my own fault. I couldn't bear to share the details with anyone, even my sister, but I have also been somewhat melancholy as a result of my self-inflicted heartache. I reacted in anger to some unfortunate comments and rejected a proposal of marriage from a very honorable gentleman. At the time, I thought him arrogant, conceited, and ungentlemanly. I have since learned that he is the opposite of my perception, but, of course, I can't contact him to enlighten him about my change of heart.

So I am here in the city, away from my closest family and friends as the festive season approaches, unable to even go out for a solitary walk to help clear my mind of my unhappy thoughts. I am without my confidante and feeling guilty about the pain I must have caused the man I so rudely rejected. I hope you can offer me some advice on how to regain my usual cheerful attitude.

In the meantime, I am,

Lonely in London

Georgiana gasped and dropped the letter onto her counterpane as if it had burned her fingers. Oh, the poor dear. No wonder she was so willing to share a few words of advice with a stranger at the bookstore. She was missing her sister and has no one to whom she can pour out her heart. I remember my morose thoughts after William rescued me from Ramsgate last summer. It was months before I regained my good spirits, although I was surrounded by loved ones. Even my new

companion, Mrs. Annesley, served as a sympathetic listener when I needed to deal with my pain and guilt.

How I wish I could locate this kind and selfless young woman and offer her the comfort of a listening ear and an understanding heart. Georgiana resolved to begin on the morrow searching the journal for clues to the lady's name and location. Perhaps I can repay the kindness of my many supporters by offering the same to another.



The following day, as Georgiana had committed herself to the task, she retired to her rooms after breaking her fast to begin perusing her unnamed friend's journal. The first entry was dated *1 January 1812*, leading Georgie to believe that the lady must be in the habit of starting a new journal at the beginning of each year. The entry read:

As much as we have enjoyed the visit from our favorite aunt and uncle and their precious children, I am still pressed down with the knowledge of my sister's broken heart. Mr. B has still not returned to his estate from the 'few days' business' he was required to handle in London. It has now been over a month since he parted after promising J that he would be back in within the week. I grow more convinced by the day that the gentleman's sisters and his friend left the neighborhood immediately after him without his awareness of their plan to convince him to remain in Town - by their estimation, a safe distance from J, whom they don't consider worthy of their brother and friend.

As the new year is upon us, it seems clear that he allowed himself to be separated from my dear, sweet sister. His attentions to her over the two months of his stay at his leased estate here made it apparent to anyone with eyes that he adored her. While her feelings are often more difficult to read, those of us who know her well had no problem recognizing that his affections were fully returned. She does her best to give the impression of being unaffected, but as her closest sister and best friend, I see how truly devastated she is.

Being the dear but naïve person that she is, J continues to excuse Miss B for the farewell note informing her that Mr. B holds affection for Miss D, his friend's much too young sister. 'C only means to let me down gently,' she tells me refusing to believe ill of anyone.

On a brighter note, I have spoken to Aunt Maddie, who has invited J to return to London with their family next week. She plans to visit the B residence with J in the hopes of seeing Mr. B. I personally believe that if she is able to meet him again, he will realize what a mistake he made by leaving my sister behind.



After another three days of being trapped indoors, Elizabeth could finally make her way back to Mr. Hammond's store. "Uncle Hammond, do you have my journal here? It is dark blue leather and has my initials on the cover." She smiled up at the elderly man with every expectation that he had been holding her personal journal in safekeeping, awaiting her return to collect it.

"No, my dear, I haven't seen it. Do you think you left it here?"

With a crestfallen expression, she managed to whisper, "I was sure it must be here. I almost remember placing it on a bookcase upstairs to reach for a book on a higher shelf. I will look there. Perhaps someone thought it belonged on the shelf and placed it there among the other books."

When she later slowly descended the stairs in defeat, she was fighting to keep her tears in check. "I am sorry, Lizzy. I will keep looking in other parts of the store. Come and let us find you a new journal."

"Thank you for the kindness, but Uncle Gardiner has already given me one of his ledgers to use. I must return to Gracechurch Street now." She turned and hurried out of the store before she lost control of her emotions. She walked back to the townhouse with her head down and tears blurring her vision, allowing Susan to be her guide. When she entered the

house, she went directly to her guestroom and had her dinner there on a tray with a headache as her excuse.

Chapter Three

After several days of reading her unknown friend's journal, Georgiana had to deal with two opposing emotions. She felt guilty reading this kind young woman's most personal thoughts and feelings. At the same time, she was coming to appreciate her friend's deep love and regard for her family. Georgie longed to become her friend in reality. What a blessing it would have been to have had a sister like this one as she had struggled to recover from her near ruin at the hands of George Wickham.

She sighed as she committed herself to reaching out to her in the only way she could imagine. She would write to her as Aunt Chatty and send it to the Times to be published as part of her column. If the columnist would not agree to print her letter, she would continue reading the journal in an attempt to find its owner. Georgiana began:

Dear Lonely in London,

Your letter touched me. I hear from so many complaining of ill-use and asking how to avenge their perceived wrongs. Your letter, which showed so much concern for your family and even for a rejected suitor, compelled me to commend you for your extraordinary compassion.

I believe, my dear, that your current loneliness is a temporary situation. It unfortunately comes at the season when being with family and friends is most important to us all. While it is true that you will miss being in your country home this year, I urge you to think of the many happy Christmases to come. I can also picture you among your much-loved family here in Town during this festive season. And I predict that as you are of such a kind disposition, you will soon make new friends here in London.

By the bye, I don't see how such a caring and compassionate young woman could fail to eventually find a match who will help her overcome the loss of a suitor who surely should have given her a second chance.

Wishing you a blessed season, I am,

Aunt Chatty

Georgiana prayed over her missive and then posted the letter she had found in the journal, her own answer to ‘Lonely in London,’ and a note explaining her request to Aunt Chatty. She then became a devotee of the column, searching it daily until a fortnight later when her letter was published just as she had written it. She hoped that her reply would encourage its recipient.



On the other side of London, at the Gardiner residence on Gracechurch Street, an equally devoted reader had been searching her Uncle Gardiner’s newspaper each day, hoping that whoever had found her journal might have posted her letter. When she discovered her letter and its answer one morning, Lizzy was reduced to tears as she read and reread Aunt Chatty’s reply.

This is precisely the kind of encouragement I have needed, she mused. I will think about all the blessings for which I should be grateful. I am here with my loving Gardiner family and can look forward to much happiness in the future – perhaps even a husband whom I can admire and respect - and eventually love.

After she had dried her tears and begun to consider her blessings, a favorite scripture from Psalms came to her mind: *weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.*

By the evening meal, Aunt Gardiner had noticed the improvement in Elizabeth’s outlook. “Lizzy, I am delighted to see that you are feeling better, my dear. You have had me worried. I know you have been doing your best to appear cheerful, but I could tell that you have not been yourself. If you want to tell me what has been troubling you, you know I am always willing to listen.”

“Thank you, Aunt. I do feel better. I admit to having been slightly homesick and have been worried about Jane. But her latest letters mention Mr. Bingley’s frequent visits, so I feel

much relieved on her behalf. Please be assured that I am more than happy to be here with you and Uncle and the children, Aunt Maddie. I am looking forward to sharing the Christmas season with all of you and, most of all, to meeting my new cousin.”

Even if her dear aunt did not believe her niece’s explanation for the recent departure from her customary cheerfulness, she rejoiced in its return. She had felt somewhat guilty about having removed Lizzy from her immediate family during the Christmas season.



Georgiana was also delighted to see both letters in the morning newspaper. *I feel so relieved that my friend may even now be feeling some relief of her own.* She now considered what her subsequent actions should be. *Should I continue to try to find her? I am still uncomfortable with reading her private thoughts, but I am also fascinated by her trials.*

Well, I suppose that I could continue to read her journal just far enough to discover a way to return it to her. With that decision made, she again opened the familiar blue volume and began to read the entry dated the 15 March 1812.

I am to leave for Kent tomorrow with Sir William and Maria and then will spend another five weeks at the parsonage with Cousin Collins and Charlotte after Sir W returns to Hertfordshire. I leave here with mixed emotions. I am glad to have even a very short reunion with J while we three travelers stay overnight with our dear relatives in London. I fear she has yet to make any progress in seeing Mr. B since she arrived in Town in January. Apparently, his sisters barely tolerated her visit when she called on them and only returned the call three weeks later, making it clear that they were so busy with Mr. and Miss D that they had no time to continue a friendship with J. I should be able to judge if her melancholia has improved when I see her face to face. She tries to sound cheerful in her letters, but I recognize her continued despondency.

I also look forward to seeing my dear friend C when we arrive in Kent, but dread being much in company with my sycophantic cousin. How C tolerates him, I will never understand. I thank God that Papa allowed me to reject his proposal. Escaping Mama's continuous chastisement for not accepting the heir to Papa's estate is another good reason to be grateful for this time away from home.

Georgiana's brow furrowed as she asked herself, *Can this cousin be the suitor she so regrets having denied?* She quickly read on while the writer described finding her sister improved though still not herself, then arriving at a parsonage in Kent, finding her friend C handling her husband well and enjoying managing her own home.

She gasped and stopped to reread the next entry which identified Cousin C's 'esteemed patroness' as none other than her own aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park.

What a coincidence! Georgiana thought. *Perhaps I will be able to learn my friend's name from my aunt. No, I couldn't possibly mention the journal or even my conversing with a young woman to whom I had not been properly introduced. I shall just have to read on.*

Surprise turned into absolute amazement when she read that Lady C's two nephews were to make their annual journey to Rosings before Easter. *Oh my, William and Richard must have already met my friend.*

Just as she was about to continue reading this riveting unfolding story, the gong sounded, alerting her that it was time to dress for dinner. Her maid would be arriving soon to assist her in dressing for dinner, and then Mrs. Annesley would be here to escort her down for the meal. Afterward, she would be expected to play the pianoforte until time to retire. *Botheration! I will either have to feign illness or wait until bedtime to continue reading.*

All through dinner and the time in the music room afterward, Georgie wondered if she should simply ask William about whom he might have met at Rosings during his visit in the spring, but remembering how low his spirits had been on his

return, she decided to wait until she learned more about that time in Kent. *Or, I might be able to ask Richard! He is far less reserved than my brother.* Finally, she was able to return to her bedchamber. As soon as Callie had helped her into her nightgown and withdrawn, she rushed to pull the journal out of the drawer in her nightstand. She felt all the anticipation of reading a gothic novel.

25 March

Tonight, the residents of Hunsford Parsonage were invited to Rosings to dine with Lady C, her daughter, and her two nephews. I had the advantage of knowing whom to expect, while Mr. D was obviously taken completely aback by my presence. Lady C was 'quite put out' that she did not have the privilege of introducing me to Mr. D but did introduce us all to his amiable cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, the second son of her brother, the Earl of Matlock.

Once we were seated for dinner, the interrogation about my previous acquaintance with her favorite nephew began. Finally, she huffed and sent me to the pianoforte so that she could continue to harangue Mr. D for his misstep in having already met Mrs. C's young friend, concluding with a reprimand for having stayed in the home of 'that tradesman's son.'

Col. F was the epitome of a gentleman. He kept us entertained through what was otherwise very dull dinner conversation and then turned pages for me while I played. Mr. D did make the effort to join us and seemed to abide my teasing about his haughty behavior in Hertfordshire until her ladyship summoned him back to her side. I am given to understand that he is promised in marriage to his cousin Miss dB. Since they are both taciturn and seem to believe themselves above their company, I suppose they will suit each other well.

Georgiana sat for minutes in stunned silence while all the pieces fell into place in her mind. *ERB has to be the Miss Elizabeth Bennet that William had mentioned in his letters from Hertfordshire last autumn. He had shared several amusing anecdotes about how Miss Elizabeth had turned Miss Bingley's – obviously Miss B – barbs back on her and in such*

a clever way that Miss Bingley didn't realize she had been bested. He had also spoken of enjoying several debates with this intelligent young woman. The more he wrote about the Bingleys' neighbor, the more I had hoped to meet her someday. And now I have. But what do I do with what I now know? Keep reading, she thought with a smile.

It was well after midnight when she stopped reading the journal. Miss Elizabeth Bennet had written about Mr. D's strange habit of encountering her while she walked the lanes and paths of the estate's grounds. To Georgiana, it was evident that her reticent brother was attempting to court Miss Elizabeth, but at least to her it was obvious that the young woman had no idea that he even thought of her with anything other than disdain.

She was sorry to read about his insult at their first meeting. She cried for both of them when she read about his dreadful proposal, her equally dreadful refusal, and then his letter - his attempt to improve her opinion of him.

Oh William, would that I had been there to advise you – or at least to comfort you. But I now know that she regrets that vehement refusal. The thought then occurred to her: but I can bring them together. They are perfect for each other! I will consult with Richard about how it is to be done.

Finally, she was able to close her eyes and sleep, still holding the journal to her chest.

Chapter Four

The following day, Miss Georgiana Darcy awoke with thoughts of uniting her beloved brother with the woman he had been pining over for months and began plotting a *chance* meeting between the two disconsolate lovers. Her cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, was not only a hero of the Peninsula war against the

French tyrant, but was also a brilliant strategist. *If anyone can assist me in my mission to fulfill the longings of two hearts, it is Richard!* As the Colonel was to dine at Darcy House that evening, she determined to speak with him as soon as possible.

After a fine meal at which their cousin entertained them with humorous stories, some part of which was probably true, the three adjourned to the music room where Georgie played a newly accomplished concerto for the two men she loved. Before she retired, she whispered to Richard as she kissed his cheek, "Please come to my sitting room before you leave. It is important."

Covering his surprise, he feigned nonchalance. "Yes, sweet girl, I look forward to spending the holidays with you as well."

After only a single glass of brandy with Darcy, he excused himself, claiming an early morning appointment at his headquarters. He slipped up the stairs and knocked gently on the door to Georgiana's sitting room. She peeked out to ascertain that it was Richard, then grabbed his arm and dragged him into the room, almost causing him to stumble.

"Good heavens, Georgie, what has you so agitated?"

"Sit down, Richard," she commanded, "we have to make a plan to rescue William from a broken heart."

Blinking in confusion at his young cousin, the Colonel asked, "A broken heart, Georgie? I didn't know that he was about to have his heart broken." He disguised his urge to chuckle at her sense of urgency.

“No, Richard, not ‘about to be’ broken, already broken. Haven’t you noticed how sad he has been since his return from Rosings at Easter?”

“Well, yes, I did notice, but he told me he was simply disconcerted by Aunt Catherine’s continued insistence that he marry Anne. I know that neither of them wishes for that union and that your brother had a rather heated exchange with our aunt on that last visit.”

“No, Richard, I know why he returned in such a morose state, and it has nothing to do with Anne or Aunt Catherine. But I have to swear you to secrecy.”

Now concerned instead of amused, Richard Fitzwilliam gave his undivided attention to Georgiana. “Yes, Georgie, I swear. Now tell me.”

She began laying out the story for Richard, step by step, from her unlikely meeting with the young woman in the bookstore to the revelation of that lady’s regret of her refusal of William’s proposal.

As she spoke, various anomalies of Darcy’s behavior congealed in Richard’s sharp mind: Darcy’s obsessive stares at Miss Bennet, his many ‘accidental’ meetings with her on the grounds of Rosings Park, his absence from dinner one evening and then his unexplained agitation on his return, followed by their sudden and hasty departure from Kent the following morning.

So that is what happened that evening. I have never seen my staid cousin as distressed as he was that night. He had entered the manor and quickly fled to his chambers, ignoring Lady Catherine’s calls. Later, he informed me that we would be leaving early the following day and then was silent the entire journey back to London.

“So, Georgie, you know that she regrets refusing his proposal because you have read her private journal?” he asked with his brows lifted at her questionable action.

“It isn’t like I was reading it to pry, Richard. I was simply trying to discover her identity and address in order to return

the journal to her. But when I read the letter she had written to Aunt Chatty...”

“Wait, she wrote to the advice columnist, and you opened and read her letter?”

“Well, no. It was in the journal but wasn’t sealed, and I was hoping to find at least her name and possibly her address. That is how I learned that she had suffered a ‘disappointment of the heart’ earlier this year. And she signed the letter ‘Lonely in London.’ It broke my heart, Richard. When I read more of her journal, I discovered she was the Miss Bennet that William had written to me about from Hertfordshire.

“She is staying in Town with her aunt and uncle because her aunt is unwell, helping care for her young cousins. Can you help me find her and then help me arrange a meeting between her and William? I am sure all they need to reconcile is to see each other again.”

Richard sighed, “Georgie, it may not be as simple as that. Think about it, dearest. Each of them was hurt by their last encounter and will be embarrassed by seeing the other again. Also, even though we know who ‘Miss Lonely’ is, we still don’t know where she is in London or how to reach her. Let me think about it.”

“Oh, I will. And I will keep reading in hopes of finding where she is staying in Town.” Ever the romantic, Georgiana could not countenance failing to bring William and Miss Bennet back together.

It was the following evening before Georgiana could continue searching for clues in Miss Bennet’s journal. She couldn’t put it down until she had read to the end. The entries went through Elizabeth’s concern for her sister, hoping that Mr. B., now recognized as being Mr. Bingley, would not again devastate that lady’s delicate sensibilities. Elizabeth wrote about her concern and prayers for her ‘dear Aunt’ as she suffered through an unusually difficult pregnancy.

The journal ended with Elizabeth’s thoughts the day before meeting Georgiana at the bookshop, with her again chastising herself for her selfishness in feeling sorry for herself and then

with her decision to write to Aunt Chatty for advice. Georgie was somewhat disheartened that she now had no other source of information to locate her friend.



Less than a week later, Richard called on his cousin Georgiana with a possible plan. “Georgie, I have been trying to remember all of the things that Miss Bennet and I discussed while we were both in Kent. I seem to remember her mentioning that her sister was staying with her aunt and uncle near her uncle’s warehouses in Cheapside. Does she mention in her journal what type of business her uncle is in? Does he sell furniture or naval supplies? Anything that might help us find the family’s name.”

Georgie shook her head. “I don’t know anything that would help narrow the search. But maybe a drive in the Cheapside District would jog your memory. I wish we could just ask William.”

“Yes, that would certainly simplify our search, wouldn’t it? Hmm, perhaps I can get information from him without him realizing why I am asking. You did say that Bingley is in Hertfordshire right now, did you not?”

“Yes, Richard, that is a brilliant idea. He may reveal something about Elizabeth’s sister and where she stayed in town while Elizabeth was in Kent.” Georgie’s smile encouraged Richard to keep investigating until he had located Miss Elizabeth.

That same evening, Richard was seated in the family sitting room when Darcy returned from a meeting with his solicitor. “Richard, good to see you again. I trust this is merely a social call, and nothing is amiss.”

“That is correct, Darce. The call is entirely social, although I do have an ulterior motive for the visit. Mater is hosting a dinner party tonight, mostly for Pater’s political cronies. Georgiana was kind enough to invite me to join you for the evening meal.” Richard grinned at his cousin, who only smiled

and shook his head at his cousin and best friend's subterfuge to escape her ladyship's party.

"You know you are always welcome here, Fitz. I am sure that Georgie will have some new composition to play for us, and we might even manage a few games of billiards. Make yourself at home while I change for dinner."

After dinner and a brief recital by their charge, the men retired to the billiards room to enjoy cigars and brandy as well as a few games between well-matched opponents. While relaxing in their shirtsleeves and loosened cravats, the Colonel began his subtle questioning.

"I haven't seen you with Bingley lately, Darce. Did you two have a falling out?"

"No, well, I guess we did somewhat. I owed him an explanation and an apology. Do you remember that I stayed with him and his sister and Hurst at his leased estate in Hertfordshire last autumn?"

"Yes, that was where you met Miss Bennet, was it not?"

"Indeed," Darcy replied forlornly. "While we were there, Bingley found a new 'angel' in Miss Elizabeth's older sister, Miss Jane Bennet. Without realizing that his attraction to her was more than his usual infatuation, I helped his sisters convince him that she didn't truly care for him and was only interested in him for his fortune." Darcy put down his cue and turned to speak directly to his cousin.

"It turns out that I was completely wrong, Richard. Miss Bennet, an exceptionally beautiful woman, was sincerely attached to Bingley and was deeply hurt when he didn't return to Hertfordshire after what was supposed to be a brief business trip to Town.

"To make matters worse, Miss Bennet, Miss Jane Bennet that is, accompanied her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner back to London after their visit with the Bennet family in the country for Christmas last year. When she called on Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley at their townhouse in January, they made it clear to her that they had no wish to continue the friendship they had

held with her during their stay in the country. I again aided them by keeping the lady's stay in Town from Bingley."

"I don't understand, Darce. Why would you do that?"

"I believed that she didn't reciprocate Bingley's feelings and was only following orders from her matchmaking mother to secure him for his fortune. I later learned that she cared for him deeply and had been quite melancholy after his desertion."

Richard closed his eyes as if in pain. "Oh no, Darce! Miss Elizabeth's sister is the woman from whom you 'rescued' Bingley?"

"Yes," William responded with a question. "Why do you ask in that tone?"

"I am so sorry, Darce. I wanted to give Miss Elizabeth a good report about you when we were at Rosings. While I was taking my annual tour of the estate, I came across her on one of her walks and escorted her back to the parsonage. During our walk, I told her how you had saved a friend from an unfortunate alliance by separating him from an 'undesirable woman.' Dear lord, Darce, can you ever forgive me?"

Darcy collapsed into the nearest chair. He put his chin in his hands and leaned over with his elbows on his knees. "It is fine, Richard. It turns out that I didn't need any help with insulting Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Your *faux pas* didn't change anything."

"But you must have corrected your mistaken impression, as Bingley is currently in Hertfordshire, correct?"

"Yes, I have, and I wish both Bingley and Miss Bennet every happiness. I also hope they can eventually forgive me for my part in their separation."

Richard sat in the chair beside his cousin and friend, offering him another brandy. "No, thank you, Richard. I think I will retire for the night. Stay here and have another if you wish." He left the room feeling even more remorseful than he had for some time.

Chapter Five

The following day, Richard Fitzwilliam, even more motivated since becoming aware of his contribution to his cousin's unfortunate situation, mounted his horse and rode to London's Cheapside District near the docks. He started by looking for a group of warehouses belonging to the same business. When he left one block and approached another, his heart lifted, seeing almost an entire block of warehouses, each bearing the sign 'Gardiner Imports.' *Yes, he thought, this has to be Miss Bennet's uncle's business. Should I try to meet with Mr. Gardiner? Perhaps I should share my findings with Georgie first.* He returned to the Mayfair District with a smile on his face. *One step closer,* he thought contently.

After an hour's secret interview with Georgiana, the two conspirators had a plan. Richard would call on Mr. Gardiner at his office the next day and share a little of the history between his niece and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley - only that a misunderstanding had come between them. If he was successful, he would ask Mr. Gardiner to help arrange an 'accidental' meeting between the two.

Georgie suggested that Mr. Gardiner escort Elizabeth to the theatre on the upcoming Thursday. Of course, when they arrived at Darcy's private box, they would find Georgiana and William waiting there. Then, hopefully, after some time together, the two of them would be able to get past their equally unpleasant behavior toward each other in Kent and begin anew. *At least it is a plan,* the two cousins agreed.



Two days later, at the Gardiner's townhome on Gracechurch Street, Miss Elizabeth was comfortably seated on the settee in the sitting room, sharing a tea tray with her aunt Madeline Gardiner. "You seem to be doing better today, Aunt. Do you feel as much better as you look?" Elizabeth's smile and her question made her aunt laugh.

“Indeed, Lizzy. I am feeling much better – finally. Don’t you want to take some time to do something for yourself now? Perhaps even return to Longbourn?”

“Certainly not, Aunt Maddie. We have less than a month until the new little Gardiner arrives. I wouldn’t dream of leaving you now.”

“You are a dear, Lizzy. In all honesty, I am delighted that you will be here for the children when my time comes. Edward will not want to be away from the house, and the children will need the kind of distraction that only their Cousin Lizzy can provide. I can’t thank you enough for being here for us.”

Elizabeth squeezed her aunt’s hand. “No thanks are necessary. It is my pleasure to be of service to the best aunt and uncle any young woman has ever had.” The two ladies were wrapped in an embrace when Mr. Gardiner entered the room.

“What a touching display,” he chuckled at the two women, who both looked up at him with tears in their eyes.

“Oh, go away, Edward. You have interrupted a female bonding ritual,” Mrs. Gardiner jested as she blotted her tears with her fine linen handkerchief.

“And here I thought I would be giving you both a treat by arriving home early. Lizzy, you could take a walk if you like since I am here with Madeline.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I had a nice walk with Nanny and the boys this morning, but I would enjoy a few minutes in the garden while the sun is still out. It has been a most *unwinter-like* day.”

Exiting the room, Elizabeth mused that Mr. Gardiner was likely home because he had been worrying about his wife. *He will be delighted to learn that she is at last feeling much better.*

While Lizzy enjoyed a walk in the garden, Mr. Gardiner shared the unusual visit he had received at his business earlier that day. “Really, Edward? Colonel Fitzwilliam, the second son of the Earl of Matlock?” Mrs. Gardiner questioned her husband. “And he says that our Lizzy and Mr. Darcy of Pemberley need to work through ‘a misunderstanding?’ This is very strange.”

“I quite agree with you, my dear, but I really can’t see any harm in the plan to allow them to meet at the theatre with me there as her chaperon, can you?”

“No, I suppose not. And you don’t know the whole story? It sounds like a lover’s quarrel, does it not? But Lizzy has never mentioned Mr. Darcy except to tell us about his insult at their first meeting at the assembly in Hertfordshire over a year ago.”

They agreed to present Elizabeth with the offer of a trip to the theatre and see how things progressed from there. When she reentered the house, Mr. Gardiner presented his part of the plan. “Lizzy, I have just been telling Madeline about an opportunity that I have been given. An associate of mine has offered me two seats in a private box at the theatre for Thursday night. Since your aunt is feeling well enough for us to leave her for the evening, she has suggested that you and I attend. What say you?”

“Really, Uncle? This Thursday?” She turned to her aunt, “What would I wear?”

Her aunt replied with a chuckle over Lizzy’s immediate enthusiasm at the prospect of seeing a play from a private box. “I dare say that my maid can hem one of my ball gowns for you, Lizzy. We are of a size other than height – at least when I am not with child,” she laughed. “I have a lovely lilac gown that will look better with your complexion than it does with mine. And, of course, you must also borrow my amethyst pendant and earrings.”

Already smiling at the thought, she asked, “Are you sure you will be all right without either of us for the evening, Aunt Maddie?”

“Certainly I will. I will send a footman for you if needs must. Now, go to my wardrobe and see if you like the gown. Then we will have Sybil begin altering it for you.”

As soon as the young woman had left the room, her aunt and uncle shared a smile over her obvious excitement. “Bless her, Edward. She has not complained once about being tied to the house this entire visit. I hope she will enjoy this excursion and

that the encounter with Mr. Darcy, his sister, and his cousin goes well.”



Thursday evening found both Georgiana Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet in their respective homes fidgeting as they prepared for the evening, the former with hopeful anxiety and the latter with expectant delight. The two sets of patrons arrived separately at the theatre, the Darcys and their cousin first. They immediately climbed the grand staircase to their box where Richard excused himself ‘to speak to some friends.’ Mr. Gardiner and his niece arrived soon after them to find the Colonel waiting for them in the lobby.

“Good evening, Miss Bennet. I must say that you are looking exceptionally well this evening. May I?” he asked as he extended his elbow to the lovely lady.

With her brow creased in confusion, she accepted his arm and allowed the Colonel to guide her up the stairs while her uncle followed. Over her shoulder, she gave her smiling uncle an accusing look that said, *Really, Uncle, this is your mysterious business associate?* The Colonel continued to make light conversation about the weather and the play as they ascended to the boxes, “I hope you will enjoy *As You Like It*, Miss Bennet. I remember you once saying that you preferred Shakespeare’s comedies to his tragedies.”

She muttered an affirmative reply while wondering how the Colonel was connected to her Uncle Edward. When they reached the Darcy box, the door opened, and the lovely blonde from the bookstore appeared, further confusing Elizabeth.

Richard stopped and bowed. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, may I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Georgiana Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire? Georgiana, this charming lady is Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire, and this is her uncle, Mr. Edward Gardiner of London.”

Elizabeth stared in stunned silence. *Miss Darcy of Pemberley is the mysterious young woman from Hammond’s? How could*

this be?

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Bennet. I have hoped to have the pleasure of an introduction to you for some weeks now.”

When Miss Darcy gave her a perfect curtsy, Elizabeth roused from her stupor and returned the gesture. “And I am delighted to meet you as well, Miss Darcy.”

Without either lady being able to think of another polite comment, Mr. Gardiner suggested they enter the box and find their seats. Mr. Darcy sprang to his feet as she entered. “Elizabeth! I mean, Miss Bennet.” Now, it was Mr. Darcy who stared in stunned silence. He bowed and then recovered enough to say, “How nice to see you again.”

A familiar look now graced his handsome face. It was the look that Elizabeth had formerly mistaken for disdain, but after his failed proposal, she now understood it to be something more. *Is it admiration? Or is it perhaps...love? Could he still care for me after I flung those hurtful words at him?*

Darcy recovered enough to whisper, “You look absolutely stunning this evening, Miss Bennet. Would you sit here between my sister and me? It will give you the best view of the performance.”

Elizabeth’s eyes softened as she began to believe that he might actually still admire her. “Yes, thank you, Mr. Darcy. I would like that.”

All of the participants in the scheme seemed to be holding their breath as they waited to see how the two principal players in the box would react as they came to realize that they had been manipulated into this meeting. Darcy and Elizabeth mostly stared straight ahead while their thoughts and emotions raged tumultuously.

Finally, William began to smile. He leaned over and spoke so that only she could hear him. “Miss Elizabeth, I have no idea how these three unlikely allies have managed to arrange our meeting tonight, but I intend to enjoy it if you are willing to

spend the evening in my company.” He searched her eyes for the answer.

Slowly, her countenance relaxed into a smile. “Yes, sir, I do believe that I can tolerate your company for the evening.”

When she turned to face him, he wore a dimpled grin. “*Touché*, Miss Elizabeth, I thoroughly deserved that. Perhaps we could just enjoy the play tonight, and then might I call on you tomorrow?”

She nodded. “Yes, that is a very acceptable plan, sir.”

“And where should I call?”

“Oh,” she laughed quietly, “Number twenty-seven Gracechurch Street. I will look forward to it.” Just then, the lights dimmed, and the curtain began to rise. She sat very still as if to her efforts might keep this dream from evaporating. As much as she loved this play, she had great difficulty concentrating on the stage instead of the man at her side.

At the first break, while the gentlemen were gone to retrieve refreshments, Miss Darcy began to explain. “Miss Elizabeth, I do hope that you will forgive me for arranging this meeting. You see, I have your journal.” She stopped speaking to let her friend absorb the ramifications of her statement.

Elizabeth’s breath caught, then released as she whispered, “You read it.” It was not a question.

Georgiana was nearly in tears as she replied. “I did. I am so very sorry, but it was the only way to find you so that I could return the journal. Then, when I realized that you are *the* Miss Bennet that William had written to me about from Hertfordshire, I asked Richard to help me find you. Are you *very* angry?”

Elizabeth drew a few deep breaths before she answered. “No, I don’t believe I am at all angry. Confused, disconcerted, uncertain...all of those. I will need to give some serious thought to how I feel, but as your brother suggested, for tonight, I will simply enjoy the evening.” She smiled at the anxious younger woman. “You may relax, Miss Darcy; I shan’t scream or cry.” She laughed as she watched her

young *friend's* tension ebb. Patting her hand as she said, "We will work this out."

After the play had ended, and Mr. Gardiner took Elizabeth's arm to lead her out to their carriage, Mr. Darcy approached him. "Sir, may I call on Miss Bennet at your home tomorrow morning? I believe that she and I are overdue for some conversation." He looked to her for confirmation and saw her nod to her uncle.

"Yes, sir, you may call at our home. My wife is in a delicate condition, but I can have a maid or a footman available to accompany the two of you on a walk in the park near our home. Thank you for the hospitality of your box this evening." The two shook hands before Uncle Gardiner escorted her out of the theatre.

"How did this happen, Uncle? I mean, how did you come to be escorting me to meeting with Mr. and Miss Darcy and their cousin?"

Mr. Gardiner shared what little the Colonel had told him as their carriage made its way through the dark streets to Gracechurch Street. "Perhaps you can discover the rest of the story tomorrow and then enlighten me as to how this all came to pass, Lizzy. For tonight, let us sleep on it and speak tomorrow after you have met with Mr. Darcy."

Chapter Six

In the Darcy carriage *en route* back to his home in the Mayfair District, Darcy was being given sheepish and guilty looks by his sister and cousin. “Well,” he started seriously, “I believe you two have some explaining to do.”

“William, I could claim to be sorry, but I truly am not. I admit that I handled the situation with some deception, but I think that the result of my efforts justifies the ruse, don’t you?” Georgiana looked pleadingly at her brother as she confessed.

Richard spoke next, “It was not all Georgie’s doing, Darce. She shared the incredible coincidence of meeting Miss Bennet recently and discovering that she was the same woman you had written to her about from Hertfordshire.”

Georgiana again jumped into the fray. “William, when I read those letters over a year ago, I thought that this woman seemed to be your perfect match. She was intelligent, kind, compassionate, and didn’t attempt to entrap you or even to attract your notice. I have been praying for you to find a good match, a lady who would be a sister to me as well as a helpmate to you.

“You advised me to read the journal to find its owner. The more I read, the more convinced I became that you two were meant to be together. Can you forgive me for my interference in your life? And for involving Richard?”

Darcy took a deep breath as he considered what his family had done and then why they had done it. “I can appreciate that you were thinking of me, Georgie, but tonight could have been a disaster. I am delighted that even though Miss Elizabeth was obviously as surprised as I was, she did not seem to be distressed by my presence.”

“Oh, but William, when we arrive at home, I will be able to show you why I was comfortable with arranging your meeting.”

When they had reached Darcy House, his sister hastily removed her cloak and gloves and shoved them into the

butler's waiting arms. She hurried up the staircase and back down to the family sitting room in less than five minutes. "Do you remember the unsealed letter that I found inside the journal? You told me to read it to see if I could discover who had written it." When he had nodded that he remembered the letter, Georgiana continued, "I sent it to Aunt Chatty. Here is the letter and the reply." She thrust the folded page of newsprint into his hand. "You will see why I was convinced that I simply had to find a way to bring you two together."

Darcy's face darkened as he read. *All this time, Elizabeth has been regretting her refusal? If only I had waited another day before leaving Rosings, we might have neither have been suffering all these months.*

He was so discomposed by what he had read that when he spoke again, it was barely above a whisper. "Yes, Georgie, I can see why you felt the need to orchestrate our meeting." Clearing his throat he informed her, "I am planning to call on Miss Elizabeth tomorrow morning. I will apologize for my truly insulting attempt at a proposal. Hopefully, she will forgive me, and we can begin again. At least we may be able to share a friendship."

He embraced his sister, turned to Richard, and nodded his 'good evening' to him before escaping to his bedchamber. After Rogers had helped him undress and prepare to retire for the night, he sat on his bed with his back against a stack of pillows and reread the letter to Aunt Chatty. *She considers me 'an honorable gentleman' and regrets our argument. I wonder if she also regrets refusing me. Perhaps I will be able to learn the answer to that question tomorrow.*

When he finally fell into a fitful slumber, he dreamed of Elizabeth as mistress of Pemberley.



Early the following day, Elizabeth made her way down the stairs to break her fast and found both her aunt and uncle waiting for her. Her cheeks pinked under their scrutiny as she

sat down with her cup of chocolate. “Well, Lizzy,” Mr. Gardiner asked with a big smile, “how did you enjoy our trip to the theatre last evening?”

She looked up and gave her dear aunt and uncle a sly smile of her own. “I thought the play was very well-acted, Uncle. Don’t you agree?”

He chuckled while his wife scolded, “All right, Miss Lizzy. You know perfectly well that what we really want to know is how you feel about seeing Mr. Darcy again.”

Elizabeth took a sip of her chocolate before she began. “Aunt, I have spent a mostly sleepless night trying to answer that question for myself. I guess I would have to say that I am ambivalent. I was shocked to see him and to officially meet Miss Darcy. Mr. Darcy was obviously just as surprised by seeing me as I was by seeing him. I am unsure how he feels about our encounter last night and am somewhat apprehensive about meeting him again today.”

She looked up again to find two kind and sympathetic faces smiling at her. Mr. Gardiner grinned. “Lizzy, please take the word of another man that while Mr. Darcy was surprised and nervous, he was also very pleased to see you, my dear.”

She blushed again as her aunt offered more advice. “Lizzy, first let me say that I am sorry that you didn’t feel comfortable sharing your feelings with me.” She raised her hand to stop her from responding. “I know, I know. You were trying to take care of me and didn’t want to add to my discomfort, but you must know that I am *always* here for you.

“Now, as for today’s meeting with Mr. Darcy, you need only let him speak and then decide how the two of you might proceed from there. He is the one who asked to call on you, so he must wish to at least clear any misunderstandings between you. Until then, would you tell us about your history with the man?”

For the next half-hour, Elizabeth shared about their previous acquaintance - how he had insulted her at their first meeting and then helped separate Mr. Bingley from Jane. She also

confessed to her irrational and vicious refusal of what was an admittedly rude proposal.

“Oh my, Lizzy. That is quite a story. I can see why you are concerned about seeing him again. We will send you to the park with Susan so that you can speak in privacy. I suggest listening to what he wants to say and then responding with *kindness and civility*.”

Lizzy nodded at her aunt’s sage advice. “I agree, Aunt Maddie. And I thank you both for your support and encouragement.” She gave them each a hug and returned to her chamber to prepare for her caller.



Less than an hour later, with Mrs. Gardiner and Lizzy waiting in the parlor, Mr. Darcy was announced and then entered when the maid stepped away. “Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Bennet, thank you for allowing me to call today.”

“You are most welcome, Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Gardiner offered after being introduced by her niece. “While I would love to detain you long enough to reminisce about growing up in Derbyshire, I am sure you would like to take my niece on the chaperoned walk in the park my husband promised you. Might I take that lovely bouquet and have it put into water?”

“Oh, yes,” he said as he managed to pull his gaze from Elizabeth long enough to release the floral offering to her aunt. His ears had turned pink when he realized that he had forgotten to present them to Elizabeth.

“They are beautiful, Mr. Darcy,” she whispered as she blushed. “Thank you.”

His lips turned up into a slight smile. “You are more than welcome, Miss Bennet. Shall we begin our walk?” She accepted his proffered arm as they returned to the foyer, where Susan waited to follow them.

Just being back outside in the cool air helped each of them to relax and breathe more freely. “It is a truly lovely day, is it

not?" Elizabeth started their discourse.

"Indeed." Darcy turned to face the lady on his arm. "I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you, Miss Elizabeth. I was so shocked last night that I was unable to put together a sensible sentence. Shocked, but delighted to be in your company again."

This statement brought comfort to Elizabeth's heart and another blush to her cheeks. "I believe I was equally speechless, Mr. Darcy. And you know how rare that is for me," she jested.

When they had walked the two blocks to the park's entrance, Elizabeth gave Susan a slight nod to let her know that she was comfortable in this man's company, signaling the maid that she could allow some distance between the couple and herself. As they drew out of the range of being overheard, Elizabeth began to make her apology for her vehement and unkind refusal of his proposal.

"Mr. Darcy, I am delighted to have this opportunity to tell you how sorry I am for the abuse that I threw at you in Kent. I allowed my temper to control my tongue, a serious flaw in my character," she smiled up at him. "I hope that you will accept my sincere apology, sir."

"No, Elizabeth," he averred without realizing his slip in propriety, "*I* am the one who must apologize. I can't think of the manner in which I offered for you without mortification. Considering my haughty behavior, your response was completely justified."

"No sir," she shook her head. "My words were deliberately hurtful. I spoke with the desire to wound you."

"And why would you not wish to repay my deplorable words against your family, not to mention my part in helping Bingley's sisters to separate my friend from your sister? I can only think of my actions and words with abhorrence, Miss Elizabeth. Your words may have been injurious, but they were also true. I hope you can forgive me."

His imploring look almost brought Elizabeth to tears, but she managed to offer him a smile instead. “What do you say, Mr. Darcy? Can we agree that neither of us were well-behaved and forgive each other? I would like to begin again as friends.”

He stopped and turned to face her directly, taking both of her gloved hands in his, imparting warmth to hers. “Miss Elizabeth, you have long been forgiven. I would like nothing more than to begin again, but I hope we may become more than friends.”

The longing look in his deep blue eyes seemed to pierce her heart. *How could I not agree to his offer of more than friendship? For months my heart has been hoping for the same.*

After what seemed an eternity, her smile brought him instant relief. “Yes, Mr. Darcy, I would like that as well.”

Elizabeth caught a glimpse of his dimples as he visibly relaxed and released the breath he had been holding. He kissed her gloved fingers, replaced her hand on his arm, and turned to recommence their stroll around the perimeter of the park.

“Well, I am delighted. Or is there not a better word? Perhaps hopeful or excited. No *ecstatic*,” he stated enthusiastically.

Her laughter caused him to grin again. *Those dimples are unfairly attractive*, she thought as they continued to walk in companionable silence. *I will, no doubt, be thinking of them instead of sleeping tonight.*

They eventually completed the circuit of the park and began the walk back to Gracechurch Street with smiles on their faces and his hand pressed over hers on his arm. “Miss Elizabeth, I realize that your aunt is past the point of attending social engagements, but I would love for you and Mr. Gardiner to dine with us at Darcy House tomorrow evening.”

“I will speak to my aunt and uncle, Mr. Darcy, but I am relatively sure that Mr. Gardiner will not want to leave my aunt again. Last night was an exception to his usual desire to stay by her side. Unlike with their previous three children, she has had a difficult time with this child, having been very ill the

entire time of her increasing. We have all been genuinely concerned for her.”

“Then perhaps if I sent my carriage for you with a maid and two footmen, they would allow you to attend us at our home. Of course, my sister and her companion, Mrs. Annesley, will be present.”

“I imagine they would be agreeable to that plan, sir.”



When he had asked Mrs. Gardiner about the possibility of Elizabeth and Mr. Gardiner joining him and his sister for dinner the following evening, Mrs. Gardiner had been happy to agree to the plan. “I will discuss the invitation with Edward this evening, Mr. Darcy, and send our answer as to whether he will accompany her or will allow her to attend with the chaperonage of Miss Darcy and her companion. Thank you for the invitation. I have felt guilty about keeping Lizzy so much here at home and am delighted to be well enough now that she might begin to enjoy some of London’s pleasures.”

As soon as Mr. Darcy had bowed and left the ladies, Aunt Maddie patted the spot on the settee next to her, inviting Lizzy to join her. She pulled a book from behind her and grinned at her niece. “Look, my dear,” she opened the beautifully illustrated book to the place marked with a ribbon. “This is my book on the language of flowers.” She indicated the lovely bouquet arranged in a crystal vase on the mantle. “Lizzy, the lilies mean devotion and humility, while the gladiolus means remembrance, faithfulness, and sincerity.”

Elizabeth blushed under her dear aunt’s examination. “I...he... oh, Aunt, do you think he still loves me? That he would like to court me?”

“If these flowers carry their assigned meanings, I would have to say ‘yes.’ Sincerity, faithfulness, devotion. Lizzy, what else could he mean? Did you enjoy your walk together?”

“Oh, yes. I enjoyed it very much. We each apologized and agreed to start over. I am overwhelmed and slightly apprehensive but will admit that I am also excited about the possibilities. I have been lamenting my angry refusal at Rosings in the spring. Now, I am at least hopeful of what might be, but also cautious of expecting too much.”

“You are being very wise, Lizzy. Just try to relax and enjoy his attentions. After the two of you have spent more time together and know each other better, you will be able to discern how you both want for the future.”

Chapter Seven

When the carriage arrived at the entrance to Darcy House the next evening, Elizabeth tried to hide her awe of the impressive three-story building of pale grey stone situated on a corner lot in the prestigious Mayfair District. As soon as the carriage came to a stop, two footmen rushed out to assist Elizabeth and the maid from the coach. Even before they had reached the top step, an appropriately solemn butler had opened the door, and two maids appeared to take Lizzy's cloak, gloves, and bonnet.

Elizabeth forced herself not to crane her neck to stare at the celestial figures depicted on the vaulted ceiling of the foyer. The door to her right opened, and Mr. and Miss Darcy and Richard Fitzwilliam stepped out to greet her. "Miss Elizabeth," her hostess spoke, "Welcome to Darcy House. I believe you know everyone but my companion, Mrs. Annesley. Mrs. Annesley, this is my friend Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire. Please come in and make yourself comfortable, Miss Elizabeth. Do you care for an *aperitif*?"

"No, thank you, Miss Darcy. I am honored by your hospitality this evening. You have a truly beautiful home."

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. It has been in our family for many generations. Our mother last redecorated it over a decade ago, but we have chosen not to make many changes."

"I certainly understand your decision, Miss Darcy. The style is classic and requires no updates."

Mr. Darcy stood patiently waiting for his dear sister to complete her duties as hostess before moving forward to greet Elizabeth more intimately. "You look lovely this evening, Miss Elizabeth."

She flushed under his ardent gaze. "I thank you, sir."

Richard stepped forward to add his compliments before they all took their seats. Darcy led her to a set of matching chairs across from a sofa where Richard sat with Georgiana. Elizabeth managed not to gawk at the elaborate furnishings

and decorative items but surreptitiously observed as much as possible as she settled into her chair.

After the usual civil queries about the health of her family both in London and in Hertfordshire, Darcy offered that he had received and deciphered a poorly executed letter from his friend Mr. Bingley. "I managed to glean that he is as enamored as ever with your eldest sister, Miss Elizabeth, and hopes to soon secure her agreement for a formal courtship. I have deduced that your sister is probably making him proceed slowly." He chuckled, "Not that anyone can blame her. But I do believe that he has now learned not to listen to false assertions." He gave Lizzy a sly smile.

"And I believe that she has learned not to accept any words from his younger sister as absolute truth. I am delighted that they both have gained in wisdom." To his relief, her smile communicated no reproach for his part in the couple's separation.

Soon, dinner was announced, and Darcy offered his arm to his guest while Richard escorted Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley into the small family dining room. Again, Elizabeth had to make an effort not to openly stare at the lovely décor, the exquisite china and crystal, the elaborate chandelier, and the many lovely paintings that lined the pale yellow walls. Her thoughts kept returning to her refusal to be mistress of all of this grandeur. *No wonder Mr. Darcy had been so prideful in his proposal. He has much of which to be proud.*

"Miss Darcy, Mr. Darcy, this is another lovely room. Again, your mother's taste displayed here is classic and elegant."

"Thank you again, Miss Elizabeth. We have done little to update it. After dinner, I would gladly give you a short tour of the public rooms." Darcy watched to determine if she was interested.

"I would love that, Mr. Darcy, as long as the tour will include the library. You know how I love a good library." Her smile in his direction was so beguiling that he nearly forgot to respond.

"Splendid. After dinner and before dessert? He looked to their hostess for approval. Georgie nodded, smiled, and looked at

Richard. *Perfect, a tour will give them some time alone.* The Colonel gave his young cousin the slightest of nods in agreement and began to regale them with tales of his military exploits, though they were mostly exaggerated.

Finally, Darcy told the rest of the party that he would forgo the separation of the sexes in order to show Elizabeth around Darcy House and then led her away down the hall to view two sitting rooms, the music room, the formal dining room, and the ballroom. He ended their brief tour in the library, which contained more books than she had ever seen in one room outside of Hatchards. This time, she allowed herself to crane her neck to examine all of the two-story room with its ladders and a spiral staircase to access books on the second level.

She made no effort to disguise her awe. “Mr. Darcy, this room is magnificent! I think I could live in here if someone would occasionally bring me food. There are, of course, more volumes than I could ever read, but I would love to try to read them all.”

He laughed at her delight. “I would happily bring you a sandwich and a cup of tea occasionally, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I have let myself get carried away,” she said with a blush. “Thank you for sharing this room with me. I wager that you spend a great deal of time here, Mr. Darcy.”

“I do. Probably more waking hours than in any room but my study. You are welcome to borrow from these books, Elizabeth.”

The use of her Christian name without the ‘Miss’ brought her eyes to his. “I...that is...” She stumbled. He drew closer, and her heart began to race. Taking her ungloved hands into his, her eyes were drawn upward to the deep blue pools of eyes.

“That is’ Miss Elizabeth? I hope you know that my feelings for you have not lessened since we last met. I was angry and resentful at first, but then I began to examine my behavior and came to the realization that your accusations of my conceit and lack of concern for others were all too true. I hope that my attempts to change my behavior into something more

gentlemanly might be rewarded by your improved impression of me.”

All the while he spoke, Darcy was caressing the hands he held. Elizabeth felt his warmth flowing from his hands up her arms to her neck and cheeks and began to feel slightly dizzy. “Elizabeth, would you consider a courtship with me? I would offer my hand again if I didn’t think you would probably want more time to be assured that I have truly changed.”

She nodded her head. “Yes?” he asked. “Yes to a courtship?”

She nodded again, too overwhelmed with emotion to speak. “This is marvelous, Elizabeth. And may I kiss you?”

She nodded a third time, this action causing his devastating dimpled smile to appear. His eyes grew even darker as he leaned in to gently brush his lips over hers. When he pulled his head back, her eyes were still closed, tempting him to kiss her more deeply. He reined in his passion, thinking, *too soon, ole man. Don’t frighten this lovely and innocent young woman.* “Thank you, Elizabeth. Shall we share our news with Georgie and Richard?”

This time, she was able to give him a verbal response. “Yes, but let’s ask them not to share the news of our courtship until we have approval from Uncle Gardiner.”

“I agree and will enjoy sharing a secret with you.” He kissed her hand and placed it back on his arm, leading her to the music room from which Georgiana’s melodious sonata floated.

As they entered, none of the three occupants could doubt that the couple had come to some resolution and understanding. When they announced their courtship, both Richard and Georgiana rushed forward. Georgie embraced her soon-to-be sister while Richard clapped Darcy on the back. They were instructed to not share the news until after they had received permission from Lizzy’s guardian, and all agreed to the temporary restriction.

After celebrating with champagne and dessert, Darcy decided to join Elizabeth and the maid on her return to Gracechurch

Street.



The couple arrived at the Gardiner residence prepared to share their happy news and seek Mr. Gardiner's approval as her guardian while she resided in his home. However, when they entered, they found the house in chaos. Mr. Gardiner was shouting at the footman to fetch the midwife and to the maid to see if their neighbor, Mrs. Kaufman, could come and assist. When Mr. Gardiner looked up to find Elizabeth and Darcy standing in the foyer, he sighed. "Thank God you are back, Lizzy. I will need you to take care of the boys."

Before she could respond and offer to help in whatever way she could, they all heard a moan from the mistress' chamber. "Oh dear, I would prefer for the children not to hear their mother's suffering," Mr. Gardiner muttered to himself in nervous frustration. "She didn't have any warning; she was just suddenly in great pain." His worried expression touched both Elizabeth and Darcy.

Darcy spoke with an immediate offer. "Mr. Gardiner, would you like us to take your boys to Darcy House for the night? I have a housekeeper who is very motherly and several maids who can help with their care."

"Yes," he almost shouted in relief. "And since Lizzy can't help here, please take her as well. And the boy's nanny. Thank you, Mr. Darcy." Mr. Gardiner then bounded up the stairs to offer comfort to his wife.

"He is very worried about Mrs. Gardiner," Darcy stated the obvious.

"Yes. These months have been hard on my aunt and, therefore, also on my uncle. She has been very ill for the entire time and has lost weight and much of her usual vigor. I am also worried about her.

"Let me go speak with Nanny. We will pack a bag for an overnight stay and take the boys back to your home. Thank

you so much, William, for offering to do this.” Her eyes bespoke her gratitude before she rushed up the stairs to speak to the nanny and pack her own bag. He stared after her relishing the first time she had called him by his Christian name.

He stepped out of the townhouse to inform the maid waiting in the carriage of the change of plans. Elizabeth soon descended the stairs carrying a portmanteau and a small sleeping boy wrapped in a blanket. The nanny was right behind her with her own burden of a bag and a blanket-wrapped boy. Knowing there were three little boys, Darcy asked where to find the last one. Lizzy quickly handed the youngest child to the waiting maid and turned back to escort Darcy to the nursery, where he easily lifted the eldest child to his shoulder and hurried back down the stairs.

His heart sank when he heard another weak moan from the mistress’ room as he passed. He whispered, “Please, Lord, don’t let these boys lose their mother. Keep her and the child safe, I ask as You instructed us, ‘in the name of Jesus.’ Amen.”

Once he had climbed into the carriage, now crowded with four adults and three sleeping children, he felt the strong urge to take Elizabeth into his arms and comfort her. Since they were anything but alone, not married or even engaged, and were each holding a small sleeping child, he was able to resist that urge, but seeing her in need of comfort without being able to provide it was torture to him.

As they made their way back across London, he began to outline in his mind all that would need to be done when they arrived. The nursery at Darcy House hadn’t been used since Georgiana was a child. It would have to be prepared as quickly as possible, or the boys would all need to sleep in the largest guest room. Mrs. Willingham, his housekeeper, would know best what to do.

He supposed that Elizabeth and the nanny would stay in the same room with the sleeping children so they could comfort them if they woke during the night. He would speak to Elizabeth about what foods should be prepared for the

children's breakfast. When they arrived at his home, he was issuing orders to his staff as soon as the carriage door opened.

Lizzy watched in awe as he took charge of the needs of his guests. By midnight, he was able to give Elizabeth a brief hug and another gentle kiss before she retreated to her bedchamber. He went to the library to sip on a glass of brandy and unwind from the crisis they had weathered.

In her chamber next to the hastily prepared nursery, Lizzy was on her knees praying for her beloved aunt. Her vigil lasted until the early morning hours when she awoke on the floor and climbed into the bed, knowing she would need to be up early to watch over her young cousins.

Chapter Eight

The sunlight filtering through the curtains into her chamber the following morning momentarily disoriented Elizabeth. As soon as she realized where she was and why, she leapt out of the comfortable bed and rang for a maid to help her dress. *The boys will need me, and I must send a message to Uncle to learn how Aunt Maddie and the baby are doing. I pray that they have fared well.*

A maid entered the room more quickly than she had thought possible. “Yes, Miss? Are you ready to dress for the day? Would you like me to send for tea and pastries to break your fast?”

Elizabeth contemplated but a moment. “Yes, tea and a roll would be lovely, thank you. Has Mr. Darcy broken his fast?”

“Yes, Miss, but he asked that you be directed to his study whenever you are available.”

“Thank you. Now, please tell me your name.”

“I am Marie, Miss,” she responded with a curtsy. “Which dress do you wish to wear this morning? Both of the ones you brought with you have been pressed and are here in the wardrobe.”

Surprised by the efficiency and eagerness of the staff of Darcy House, she hesitated until Marie suggested, “I think the pale yellow one would be most becoming, Miss.”

“Yes, thank you again, Marie. I will wear the yellow.”

Before they could begin the task of getting her dressed, Marie answered the knock on the door and a tray with tea and two buttered rolls was brought in. The fragrance of the still warm bread was heavenly and made Lizzy’s stomach grumble.

She laughed at herself and then agreed with Marie’s suggestion that she could eat and drink after she was dressed while Marie styled her hair. *My goodness, this is more pampering than I have ever experienced. Jane and I have*

always assisted each other with our hair and dressing at Longbourn.

As soon as she was prepared, she rushed to the nursery to check on her cousins. She found the three little boys sitting on the floor with Nanny and a maid while playing with toy soldiers. Andrew, the youngest of the boys at the age of three, looked up at her entrance, ran to her, and hugged her around her knees. "Look, Lizzy, we have lots of soldiers. And blocks and books with pictures. This is a nice place to visit."

"Yes, it most certainly is, Andrew. Did you and your brothers sleep well? And have you had some breakfast?"

Nanny stood to join her as Andrew rushed back to his brothers, Eddie and Richard, and their ongoing battle. "They did seem to sleep well, Miss Bennet. When they awoke this morning, they saw each other and me and didn't seem at all upset to be in a strange room." She laughed, "And once they had eaten and found the toys, they haven't had a moment of unease."

"That is a great relief. I am going to find Mr. Darcy and have a message sent to Gracechurch Street. I am anxious for my aunt and the babe."

Nanny nodded, "I would love to hear the news as soon as you know something. By the way, Miss Bennet, all the staff here sing Mr. Darcy's praises. He is apparently 'the best master in the kingdom.'" She smiled and turned back to her charges.

Elizabeth made her way down the stairs and asked the first servant she saw for directions to Mr. Darcy's study. The footman led her to the door, knocked, and opened it for her when Mr. Darcy called out, 'Come in.'

He was on his feet and coming around his desk to meet her before she had taken four steps into the room. "Elizabeth," he took her hands. "How are you this morning? Did you sleep well?"

"I am well, William. Thank you. Your servants have been extremely attentive, and my chamber is quite comfortable."

“But you did not sleep well, did you?” His eyes bore into hers with concern.

“No, I spent much of the night in prayer. Would you please send a note to my uncle’s house to inquire about Aunt Maddie and her child? I am very concerned about them both,” she said quietly as her brow furrowed.

His smile made her feel like the sun had come out from behind the clouds. “I sent a footman first thing this morning. Your uncle sent you a note, but the report from Gracechurch Street is positive.” He turned, picked up a sealed envelope from his desk, and escorted her to a chair to read it. “Would you like a tray with tea or chocolate and something to eat?”

She looked up at his concerned expression and drew strength from his support. “I had something while Marie helped me dress this morning, but a cup of chocolate would be divine.”

The way he smiled at her made it clear that he took pleasure in being able to give her whatever she might want. He rang the bell, ordered the chocolate, and then sat next to her while she read her missive.

Dearest Lizzy,

We suffered through an anxious night here, but morning finds us with a beautiful little girl and an exhausted mother. I called our physician to see Madeline this morning. He urges her to stay abed to recover her strength, so I have hired a nurse to care for our precious daughter, who by all accounts, is perfectly healthy.

Madeline has been weakened due to her long period of sickness. She is instructed to eat as much as she can tolerate in several small meals each day and to otherwise only rest and heal.

Although she is physically weak, she is thrilled with our dear little girl. I hope you will come to see us today and meet your new cousin. If it will not be too much trouble to Mr. and Miss Darcy, I hope that the boys may be kept there with you and Nanny until at least this afternoon. We miss them, of course,

but you know they can be rather boisterous, and I am concerned they might not be gentle enough to visit just yet.

Looking forward to your return,

Uncle Edward

When Lizzy looked up from her letter with tears in her brilliantly green eyes, Mr. Darcy again took one of her hands. “Elizabeth, is the news not as positive as I was led to believe?”

“No, William, everyone is well. These are tears of joy. Here, read the letter yourself.” She wiped her eyes on her sleeve as she had not thought to pack a handkerchief. Darcy pressed his neatly folded linen into her hand as he accepted the letter from hers.

When he finished reading the note, he slid his arm around her shoulders. “Dearest Elizabeth, as soon as you have finished your chocolate, let us go to the Gardiners. You need to see your aunt for yourself to be assured that she is well. And I will offer to host you and the boys here for as long as needed. It is not a totally unselfish offer, you know. I love having you here.” His grin and his plan did wonders for her mood.

“Yes, that is a perfect plan, William,” she announced as she stood and took another swallow of her cooling chocolate. “I will just check on the boys and get my bonnet.” She was out of the door before he could stand, taking Mr. Gardiner’s note with her to share with the nanny.

When she had closed the door, he smiled at her determination. *She will be a fine mistress of our homes and an excellent mother.*



Darcy left the study to inform Georgiana of his intention to accompany Elizabeth to visit her aunt and see her new cousin. “Oh, may I go with you, William? I will not be any trouble, and since you won’t be allowed into Mrs. Gardiner’s chamber, I can keep you company while Elizabeth sits with her aunt.”

“I am sure that will be agreeable to Elizabeth and the Gardiners. And if you come, you can be our chaperone for the carriage ride. There will be no need to have a maid join us. Get your bonnet and cloak, Georgie, and meet us in the foyer.”

The three met at the front entrance within moments of each other. On the ride across town, William opened the subject of their courtship.

“Elizabeth, when we arrived at Gracechurch Street yesterday and found Mrs. Gardiner already in her bed, we didn’t broach the subject of our courtship with your uncle. Should I speak to him today or wait until you return there with the boys?”

“That is an excellent question, William. I have been so consumed with thinking about my aunt and the baby that the issue of gaining my uncle’s approval had completely fled my mind. It seems much longer than less than four and twenty hours ago, does it not?”

He nodded his agreement and waited patiently for her to decide how to proceed. “I think we should wait and see whether or not Uncle Edward is lost in thoughts of his wife and new daughter or if he has returned to his usual practical, composed, and organized nature. If you find yourself in a position to speak to him alone, feel free to ask him. I am sure that he will be happy for us and agree to the courtship, although we must still travel to see Papa. Or perhaps I might simply write to him,” she mused. “I think that I will be needed to help with the boys for at least a week or two before I could in good conscience leave them. Wait and see how you perceive the atmosphere when we arrive, and then speak to Uncle if you think he isn’t too distracted.”

They soon arrived at their destination. Elizabeth could barely wait to be handed out of the carriage and immediately hurried up the steps and into the townhouse. A beaming Mr. Gardiner stepped out of the master suite onto the landing on the stairs and called, “Lizzy, do come up and meet our little girl. She is just as beautiful as her mother.”

Lizzy obliged her uncle without a thought for the Darcys, who were coming into the house behind her. Georgiana and

William smiled at each other, shrugged, and made their way into the sitting room. The housekeeper soon attended them there and ordered tea and cakes. "Please pardon us for the lack of a proper greeting as you entered, Miss, Sir. We are all so busy and full of excitement about the baby today that we are at sixes and sevens. Please make yourselves at home. Your tea tray will be here shortly." She curtsied and then whirled around and left the room.

"Well, I guess that tells us that today will not be the right time to discuss our courtship with Mr. Gardiner," William said to his sister with a grin. While they drank tea and nibbled on gingerbread and shortbread biscuits, Elizabeth was sharing a heartfelt conversation with her aunt.

Elizabeth had tiptoed into the warm room to avoid the possibility of waking mother or baby. She found Mrs. Gardiner sitting with her back propped against several pillows and holding a tiny sleeping babe. "Oh, Aunt Maddie, she is indeed as beautiful as Uncle Edward claimed."

"Come closer, my dear, and meet your new cousin." Elizabeth carefully sat on the side of the bed.

"Aunt Maddie, I know you are still exhausted. I will not stay long, but I had to see for myself that you are well. You were in my most ardent prayers most of the night."

"I won't lie to you, Lizzy, it was a difficult night. I am afraid that the almost constant sickness had taken a toll on me, leaving me seriously weakened. But," she added cheerfully while gazing at the babe in her arms, "as you can see, she is worth it all."

"Aunt, when I got Uncle's letter this morning, I was reminded of one of my favorite scriptures: *weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.*"

"Yes, Lizzy, that is exactly how I feel today. I am truly blessed to finally have the little girl I have wanted for years. And," she paused with a grin as she waved her husband over, "we have decided to name her after you. Edward, what do you think of Joy for her middle name? Elizabeth Joy Gardiner. Doesn't that

sound perfect for this little *joy* in our lives?" She was staring at the bundle in her arms with a beatific smile.

"Yes, my dear, perfect. Lizzy, would you like to hold your namesake?"

"I would love that," she whispered as she accepted the swaddled baby from her aunt. "I am honored that you would name her after me. I would have spoiled her on any account, but now I will be outrageously indulgent." Elizabeth laughed and asked, "So, will she be Elizabeth, Lizzy, or some other sobriquet?"

"We have decided to call her Beth."

"Oh, I love that version of our name. I must say, it is much more dignified than Lizzy. Hello, Beth," she crooned over her tiny cousin. "Aunt, might I take her downstairs to show her to Mr. and Miss Darcy? They accompanied me here this morning."

"Yes, dear. And then you should return to Darcy House and perhaps have a nap since you did not sleep much last night."

Elizabeth carefully descended the stairs and entered the sitting room wearing a wide smile. Georgiana rushed to get a closer look and oohed and aahed over the babe. Darcy swallowed hard to overcome his rising emotion at the thought of Elizabeth one day presenting him with their child. He cleared his throat and declared the child to be 'perfect' and 'lovely.'

"Aunt and Uncle have named her after me! She is to be Elizabeth Joy and shall be called Beth. I am honored," she added.

When Mr. Gardiner joined them, William glanced at Elizabeth, who gave him the slightest shake of her head. He understood her message that today was not the day to bring up their courtship. "Mr. Gardiner, I want you to know that Elizabeth, Miss Sims, and your sons are most welcome to stay at Darcy House for as long as you wish."

Elizabeth added, "I can assure you, Uncle, that the boys are quite happy there. Mr. Darcy's nursery includes an impressive

collection of toy soldiers. I left them in an intense battle against the French.”

“I thank you for your hospitality, Miss Darcy, Mr. Darcy. We would be grateful for another day or two of relative quiet here – just until Madeline is feeling stronger.” He offered his hand to Darcy in appreciation before the three left to return to Mayfair.

Chapter Nine

After two more days at Darcy House, in which Nanny, Elizabeth, Darcy, and Georgiana kept the Gardiner boys entertained, they all boarded the Darcy carriage for the drive to Gracechurch Street with the children asking myriad questions about the horses and every point of interest along the route. They found Mr. Gardiner waiting at the door to greet them. “Welcome home, Edward, Richard, Andrew! Did you have a good time at Darcy House?”

All three young boys began to reply at once, making all the adults laugh, and Nanny begin to remind them to speak one at a time and to use their quiet voices. “We did,” Eddie began again, claiming the right as the eldest to speak first. “We took walks in the big park and even rode with Mr. Darcy on his giant horse.”

Six-year-old Richard interjected, “And once a real army colonel rode with us. His name is Richard too, Papa.”

Finally, young Andrew was allowed to add his fondest recollections of the stay, “Mr. Darcy has a *thousand* toy soldiers, Papa, and the Colonel showed us how to line them up for a real battle!”

“Well, that is truly splendid, my sons. Now, your Mama is waiting to see you in her chamber and has a surprise for you. Go with Nanny and be very quiet and gentle when you give your Mama hugs as she is still getting over being ill.”

Mr. Gardiner at last addressed the adults. “I guess you can see why Madeline needed this brief respite from the boys’ enthusiasm. I can’t thank you enough for hosting my three rapsallions, Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy.” Although smiling, his eyes revealed his profound feelings of genuine gratitude.

The Darcys both insisted they enjoyed having the boys as their guests. Mr. Darcy’s look at Elizabeth told her guardian that *her* company had been especially enjoyable. Gardiner smiled and raised his brows. “Well, please come into the sitting room. Mrs. Banbridge, our housekeeper, will soon arrive with tea and sandwiches. In the meantime, I must go up

and offer my protection to my wife and then introduce the boys to their new sister. Please excuse me for a few minutes.”

The tea tray arrived soon after he had exited. While Elizabeth acted as hostess, William opined, “Elizabeth, I think I should speak to your uncle today. Any longer will seem as if we have been keeping our courtship a secret.”

“I am in perfect agreement, William. I am glad to have Georgie here to keep me company while you speak to Uncle. Afterward, might we walk in the ‘little park,’ as Andrew calls it?”

He lifted her hand for a warm kiss, which brought a blush to her face, “As you wish, my lady,” his grin suggesting that he was enjoying being the cause of her heightened color.

When Mr. Gardiner returned, Lizzy poured his cup of tea and served it to him with a plate of sandwiches. “Thank you, my dear. I feel as if I have been on a carousel for days, trying to balance my time between being with Beth and Madeline and taking care of my business concerns. I am delighted to have you back, Lizzy.”

“Thank you, Uncle. I believe that Mr. Darcy would like to speak to you before he leaves, and then, if you agree, he, Miss Darcy, and I will take a stroll around the park.”

Mr. Gardiner’s smile broadened as he nodded his acquiescence, his suspicions confirmed about the existence of some type of understanding between Darcy and his niece. “Then come into my study, Darcy. Let’s hear what you have to say, sir.”

Elizabeth gave him a reassuring smile as he followed her uncle from the room. She knew that the conversation was a mere formality as her uncle thought very highly of her suitor. She turned to Georgiana and shared, “I know Uncle will readily agree to our courtship, but this interview will be good practice for his call to my father. Papa will undoubtedly tease and torment poor William, but he too will eventually agree.”

The two men soon exited the study with smiles on their faces. “Congratulations, Lizzy. Shall I share your good news with

Madeline? You might prefer to tell her yourself, but she is resting again at the moment.”

“Perhaps I will see if she is awake when we return from the park. But if she awakes before I then and you wish to share our happy news, feel free to do so.”

The three left for the brief walk to the park and then began their stroll around its perimeter. When they had arrived at the most secluded area, Georgiana feigned interest in a particular plant on the far side of a large oak tree. The couple smiled at each other and made use of the privacy she had provided to exchange a short kiss. When they emerged from behind the tree with pink cheeks, Georgie smiled at her success.

Their return to Gracechurch Street was bittersweet for the couple, knowing how much they would miss spending their days together. Both Darcys promised to call on Elizabeth often before departing for their home, and Elizabeth climbed the stairs hurriedly to see her aunt.

Finding she was still sleeping, she checked to find baby Beth also sleeping in her cradle as the nurse sat nearby. She then stopped by the nursery to find Beth’s older brothers occupied with their usual boyish distractions. She mused, *I hope they will be as excellent at being brothers to Beth as William is to Georgiana.*



That evening, after dinner, Elizabeth retired to the desk in her bedchamber to write to her father.

Dear Papa,

We have had an exciting and busy week here in London. I don't know if Uncle has sent you an express, but four days ago now, Aunt Maddie was delivered of a precious baby girl. She and Uncle Edward have honored me by naming her Elizabeth Joy. She is, of course, the prettiest baby ever born and will grow up to be as lovely as Jane and as impertinent as her Cousin Lizzy. By the bye, she will be called Beth.

Both mother and daughter are well, although due to her extended period of illness while she was increasing, Aunt Maddie must remain abed for now; therefore, I will remain here for now to assist with the boys.

Papa, the new Gardiner's arrival is only part of my news. Just before Aunt Gardiner took to her bed, I accepted the offer of a courtship with Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. I know I had previously claimed to heartily dislike him, but I met him again last spring in Kent when I visited Charlotte and Cousin Collins.

What I learned about him there began to change my opinion of him. Since meeting him again here in Town along with his younger sister, my opinion of him has become quite the opposite of my original one.

I will explain all when I next see you, but he will travel there to visit you soon to ask for your permission for our courtship. Papa, I know you well, and I ask you as a courtesy to your favorite daughter not to harass him during that interview. He is prone to seriousness and probably would not understand your humor. For my sake, please be kind.

I am sorry that I will miss Christmastide with you and the family in Hertfordshire, but I will be remembering you all with love while sharing the festive days with our family here. Give my love to Mama and all of my sisters, but I ask that you please not tell them – especially Mama – about my courtship. When the relationship has progressed to an engagement will be soon enough for us all to endure her histrionics.

Your loving daughter,

Lizzy

Elizabeth folded and addressed her letter, wondering if she should hold it until she had asked William if he would prefer to instead deliver it to her father when he traveled to Hertfordshire. *I am sure that he will stay with Mr. Bingley at Netherfield. Mayhap he will be a positive influence on his friend and encourage him to ask for Jane's hand. Then again, Jane may not yet be entirely sure of Mr. Bingley's constancy.*

Tired after such a full day, she retired to her bed to dream of William.



The afternoon of the third day after her return to the Gardiners' home, Elizabeth paced in the parlor at number twenty-seven Gracechurch Street. That room happened to have the best view of the street, and she was waiting for William to return from his trip to Longbourn, where he was to deliver her letter to her father and then ask for his permission to enter a formal courtship with the gentleman's second daughter.

At last, she recognized William's stallion, Hector, as he rounded the corner of the block. *Is he smiling? I can't tell from here.* She rushed to the door and then down the steps to greet him. He was indeed smiling.

"William, I am delighted to have you back from Hertfordshire. Come inside and tell me all about the trip. Aunt is letting us use the parlor as long as we leave the door ajar." By the time he had dismounted and handed his horse over to his groom, she was dragging him by the arm up the steps and into the parlor.

"So we are allowed to be alone?" he waggled his dark brows at her.

"Yes, now don't keep me in suspense. Tell me how your interview with Papa went. "

"I will only tell you after you have given me a kiss, Elizabeth." He stood perfectly still, waiting for his 'payment.'

She didn't hesitate to pay for the information with a kiss, but as she gave him a quick kiss like those few they had previously shared, he circled her waist with his arms and drew her closer, deepening the kiss.

When he released her, she was slightly dazed but also smiling. "Well, that was unexpected, William. But quite pleasant. I would like to do that again." She moved closer and put her

hands on his chest. He chuckled and kissed her again, this time quite thoroughly.

“Oh,” she whispered, blinking her eyes but not moving away from him. “Well, I suppose we ought to behave better now and not take advantage of Aunt’s magnanimity,” she said with her head against his chest, listening to his thundering heartbeat.

“Yes, my love, you are absolutely correct. I was overcome by finding you waiting for me alone, but I will now be better behaved.” He took her hand and led her to the settee, where they sat close to one another and continued to hold hands.

“Now, please tell me about the trip. Was Papa dreadful? I asked him not to harass you in the letter you delivered to him. Did he even read it?”

“He did, but then tried his best to convince me that we would not suit, reminding me of the differences in our status and connections. He professed that you were only accepting me for my wealth and property. But I explained that I knew for a fact that was not the case as you had rejected a proposal from me at Easter. That appeared to please him, and he then became more cordial.

“He is obviously a very intelligent man, dearest. I do believe that we might someday have a relationship of mutual admiration. He did, at last, give us his approval. He also asked many questions about how you are faring.”

“And did you deliver my Christmas gifts to him for the family?”

“Of course. And I have something for you from Jane. I had a chance to visit in the sitting room with her and Bingley and your mother and sisters. The youngest were anxious to receive their gifts, but your father made them wait for Christmas Day.

“So tell me how your aunt is doing and baby Beth – and the boys and Mr. Gardiner.”

She laughed. “Everyone is fine. The boys are excited about the gifts they might receive. You and Georgie are invited to share Christmas Day with us here if you are not obligated to your Fitzwilliam family.”

“We are not and would love to join you. However, I want you and any of your family who would like to accompany you to join us at Darcy House tomorrow for dinner.”

“I will, of course, accept, though Aunt will not be able to attend yet, and I am sure Uncle will choose to stay here with her. Could you send a coach for me? We don’t have any staff to spare at the moment with the mistress of the house still abed.”

“It will be my pleasure to send a carriage for you with a maid. I suppose I should warn you that I am also inviting my aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Matlock, to meet you, my dear. Richard will be there as well, and my cousin Robert, who is Viscount Waverley, the heir to the title.” He saw the look of panic on her face and added, “You mustn’t worry, Elizabeth. They will love you. And if they don’t, it will not change my commitment to you.” He sealed his declaration with a lingering kiss on her palm.

“I should leave now. I came here directly from Hertfordshire, and I need to let Georgie know that I have safely returned.” Reaching into the inside pocket of his coat, he produced a thin package and a letter. “Will you walk me out?”

“Certainly, but do you think we might share one more kiss before you go?”

He answered her with actions instead of words and left her at the window to watch him depart.

Chapter Ten

Dinner at Darcy House with William's noble relatives. The very thought made Elizabeth want to feign illness. But her aunt had insisted that Uncle Gardiner join her for support, making her escape impossible. Uncle Edward offered his arm to escort her to the waiting carriage. In an attempt to lighten her mood, he said. "Come now, Lizzy, where is your famous courage in the face of intimidation?"

Elizabeth looked at her favorite uncle and smiled, "You are right, Uncle. After all, William has promised that his relations' lack of acceptance will not change his commitment to me, so what do I have to worry about? I will choose instead to see humor in their disdain." She finished with her chin lifted.

Chuckling, Gardiner added, "Good job, Lizzy. But let me counsel you not to judge Lord and Lady Matlock before you even meet them. I know the Earl through business connections, although he may be like some of his peers who do not wish to have their investments in trade known. He appears to be a reasonable man, and has never seemed to judge me for my lack of an impressive heritage.

"And remember, too, that Madeline is an acquaintance of her ladyship through their sponsorships of the women's shelter where you and Jane have sometimes volunteered. I truly don't believe that they will be difficult tonight. They may later question your suitor, but I think they will be at least polite to you this evening."

Elizabeth continued the ride in silence, doing her best to bolster her confidence.

When they arrived at Darcy House, the coach was met by two liveried footmen, one of whom helped Elizabeth to step out. As soon as they entered the foyer, Mr. Darcy and Georgiana appeared from the drawing room to greet them. Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm and whispered, "You look especially fetching this evening, Miss Elizabeth," his brows lifted in a tease.

She gave him a sly smile and whispered in return, "I know you are attempting to boost my confidence, William. And It has helped, thank you."

She was able to enter the room full of unknown faces with a bright smile.

William began the introductions. "Uncle Henry, may I introduce you and Aunt Helen to Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire."

Elizabeth curtsied to the Earl and Countess. "Elizabeth, my aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Matlock of London and Matlock Manor in Derbyshire." The Earl gave her a short bow while her ladyship only nodded.

Before Darcy could introduce Mr. Gardiner, the Earl stepped forward and offered his hand to Lizzy's uncle. "Gardiner, so good to see you again. So this pretty young woman is your niece? Small world, eh?" Turning to his wife, he continued, "Helen, this is the niece of Madeline Gardiner. I believe you know her aunt from one of your charities, don't you, my dear?"

"Indeed, and I have even met Miss Bennet and her older sister Jane at the women's shelter. They both volunteer there when they spend time in Town with the Gardiners. I believe you usually work with the choir at the shelter, do you not, Miss Bennet?"

"That is correct, your ladyship. I didn't think you would remember me from our one brief meeting. It is a pleasure to see you again, my lady."

Helen Fitzwilliam took over the introductions. "I understand you have met my son Richard, but let me introduce you to our elder son. This is Robert Fitzwilliam, Viscount Waverley."

The handsome young viscount bowed and left a kiss on Elizabeth's gloved hand with a smirk at his Cousin Darcy. "Charmed, Miss Bennet."

Georgiana urged everyone to be seated and offered wine or sherry. Unlike her usual wont, Elizabeth accepted a sherry. The group began with polite conversation on the weather, and then

the men moved to politics while Lady Matlock asked Elizabeth about her home in Hertfordshire.

“Longbourn is a medium sized estate near the market town of Meryton, which is slightly east of the Great Northern Road. My Bennet ancestors have lived at Longbourn for more than two hundred years, my lady, but unfortunately, when my father passes, so will the end of the Bennet line there, as I am one of five sisters with no brothers.”

She smiled at the Countess, expecting the usual gasp at the number of daughters. However, her ladyship maintained her serene demeanor and only asked if Elizabeth played the pianoforte. “I do, but not nearly as well as Georgiana. She and I have practiced a few duets together when I have visited her here. Perhaps she might be persuaded to share one of them with you after dinner.”

Since Lady Matlock always insisted that Georgie exhibit her talent after family dinners, the younger woman was happy to agree, as having Lizzy by her side would promote her confidence. “And Elizabeth has a truly lovely voice. I will be glad to accompany her as well as play a duet with her.” Georgie raised her brow at Lizzy as if to say, *You volunteered me, so I volunteered you, my friend. Touché.*

Elizabeth smiled at Georgie and nodded. “Of course, I will be happy to ‘sing for my supper,’ Miss Darcy.” Adding to the lightness of the moment, Mr. Mason entered the room and announced that dinner was served.

Elizabeth was seated to Darcy’s right, with the Earl directly across from her and Mr. Gardiner to her right. The Countess sat at Georgiana’s right with Lord Waverley to her left. Colonel Fitzwilliam was seated next to his mother. The table was small enough to allow conversation among the entire party.

As soon as the soup had been served, his lordship asked, “So, Miss Bennet, how did you and my nephew meet?” With a look to William, she smiled and said, “We met more than a year ago when Mr. Darcy stayed with his friend Mr. Bingley at his

leased estate. Netherfield Park borders my father's estate, your lordship."

"Well, that was a long time ago. Surely you have you seen each other since then?" He looked to Darcy now. "Yes, Uncle Henry, we met again quite coincidentally in Kent this past spring when Miss Bennet was visiting there. Her lifelong friend Miss Lucas married Elizabeth's cousin, Mr. Collins, who happens to be Aunt Catherine's rector."

"That was a coincidence indeed. And have you stayed in touch since then?"

Darcy chuckled, "No, sir. We had not seen each other since I left Rosings until recently, but I must admit that I was impressed by her beauty and wit from our first meeting in Hertfordshire and had never forgotten her very fine eyes." His own eyes twinkled as his fiancée blushed. "Our recent meeting was again quite by accident. Actually, Georgie happened upon her at the milliner's shop."

"It would seem that fate or Providence has had a hand in bringing you together, then," the Earl said with a chuckle.

After looking at Elizabeth to determine how to answer, William replied more seriously, "Yes, Uncle, I believe that both of us have come to that same conclusion."

At the other end of the table, Georgiana was telling her aunt about the newest Gardiner. "Aunt, since you know Mrs. Gardiner, I am sure you would be interested to learn that she had a beautiful little girl only eight days ago." Mr. Gardiner heard the conversation and nodded his agreement to his daughter's reputed beauty.

"Congratulations, Mr. Gardiner. Are both mother and daughter doing well?"

"Indeed, your ladyship. Elizabeth and I will not be staying late this evening as I wish to return to them early enough to wish them goodnight. Madeline and I are delighted to add a little girl to the family. She joins three brothers."

"That is marvelous, Mr. Gardiner. I have always wanted a daughter myself." She gave accusing looks to her two

unmarried sons, who both rolled their eyes at her oft-expressed desire for daughters and grandchildren.

As soon as dinner ended, and since Elizabeth and her uncle could not stay overlong, the men agreed to forego cigars and drink their brandy in the music room. Georgiana and Elizabeth quickly reviewed the music sheets and made their selections. They played two duets followed by a perfectly executed sonata from Georgiana. Finally, Elizabeth sang an Italian love song with several glances in the direction of William. The Fitzwilliams were enchanted by her lovely voice and pleased that, for once, their niece did not have to be coerced into exhibiting.

When Mr. Gardiner's carriage was called for, Lady Matlock followed Elizabeth to the drawing room door and took her hand. "Miss Bennet, it has been a delight to meet you again, my dear. It is obvious to anyone with eyes that William is quite smitten with you," she whispered, "and I am personally thrilled to see how much confidence you instill in our reticent Georgiana. I look forward to getting to know you better. Perhaps you could join me for tea one day soon."

"I would be delighted, your ladyship. Thank you."

Darcy ushered Elizabeth to her uncle's carriage. "They love you, Elizabeth. I do believe my conceited Cousin Robert is actually jealous of my good fortune in finding you. I will call on you tomorrow, my love." With a kiss to her hand, he handed her in, and the carriage departed for Gracechurch Street.

Chapter Eleven

True to his word, Darcy arrived the following day while Elizabeth and her aunt were still breaking their fast. “Do come join us, Mr. Darcy,” Aunt Maddie offered. We have tea and chocolate, but I would bet that coffee is your morning beverage of choice.”

He returned her smile. “I have eaten, Mrs. Gardiner, but I would not say ‘no’ to a cup of coffee. Thank you.” While waiting for the coffee to arrive, he said, “It is nice to see you below stairs this morning. I assume you must be feeling stronger.”

“Yes, I feel better each day. Lizzy can tell you that I had eaten but little for some time, so I am trying to make up for it now.” She laughed as she waved a hand to her full plate.

Before the coffee arrived, William presented a bouquet to each of the ladies. “This one is for you, Mrs. Gardiner, with congratulations on your new daughter.” He then presented a larger bouquet filled with red roses and pink camellias to Elizabeth. “For you, my dear.”

When the coffee tray arrived and was placed on the table, Mrs. Gardiner sent the flowers with the maid to be put into vases. Elizabeth proceeded to prepare Darcy’s cup exactly to his preference. They allowed their hands to touch as she presented the cup to him. Breaking their private moment, Aunt Gardiner cleared her throat. “I notice that you didn’t bring Miss Darcy today. I hope she is well.”

“She is very well, ma’am. She simply enjoys sleeping in and taking her breakfast in bed.”

“Ah, the luxury of a young woman before marrying and having children. Enjoy it while you can, Lizzy.” Elizabeth blushed at the implication that her present state would soon change.

“Mrs. Gardiner,” William began, “I wonder if I might have a private interview with Miss Elizabeth.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth’s aunt realized what this request likely signified. “Yes, you may, Mr. Darcy. Please feel free to use the small parlor. Just leave the door ajar.”

Elizabeth blushed, remembering the kisses they had previously shared in that room, but stood as Darcy did and took his arm to be conducted to the parlor. His grin told her that he, too, was remembering their last encounter in the there.

Once she was seated on the settee, William sank to one knee and began his appeal. “Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, I hope that seeing how well you have been accepted by my family, you will now agree to be my wife. You are the reason that I arise with a smile each morning and walk around with it on my face all day. I simply adore you and can’t even contemplate not sharing the rest of my life with you by my side. Elizabeth Rose Bennet, would you accept my hand in marriage and make me the happiest man in the kingdom?”

She looked into his blue eyes, *like two deep pools*, she thought. Then she smiled at her beloved and answered in a whisper, “Yes, William. I will be the happiest *woman* in the kingdom to become your wife.”

He stood and pulled her up and into her arms. He caressed her cheek and then lowered his lips to hers in a gentle kiss that evolved into a deeper, more passionate one. When he lifted his head, he pressed her head to his chest and continued to hold her. “My Elizabeth, I simply could not love you more. Thank you for allowing me to show you who I truly am.”

Looking up at him, she whispered, “And thank you for forgiving me for misjudging you so severely, William. We have been blessed with many chances to get our relationship right, have we not?”

“Most blessed. Now, I think I should return you to your aunt before I succumb to temptation, my love,” he teased. “And I must go to your uncle’s warehouse to seek his approval, much as I hate to leave you.”

After he had departed, Elizabeth returned to her aunt, who was smiling knowingly. “Well, Lizzy?”

She nodded, “Yes, Aunt, he asked me to marry him, and, of course, I accepted.” Her smile was brilliant. “I am so happy, I feel like I might burst,” she exclaimed.

Aunt Maddie’s smile was nearly as wide as Lizzy’s. “Well, my dear, I knew it had to be. You see, while you and Mr. Darcy were in the parlor, I looked up the meaning of your flowers.” She paused to nod at the beautiful arrangement before sharing their significance with her niece.

“You probably know that red roses mean ‘I love you.’ But, Lizzy, the camellias mean, ‘My destiny is in your hands.’”

Somehow, Elizabeth’s smile grew brighter as tears of joy slipped down her pink cheeks.



Darcy returned in about an hour with a big smile of his own. “Elizabeth,” he called as he entered the empty sitting room. Mrs. Banbridge stepped in and spoke just above a whisper.

“Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Gardiner is taking a nap, but Miss Bennet is in the garden.” She waved to the window where he could see his fiancée walking, *well, actually pacing*, he thought, around the drab winter rosebushes. He retrieved his coat, hat, and gloves from the entrance hall and hurried to join her.

“Elizabeth,” he called again. Her face lit up as he approached.

“William, what took you so long? I was concerned that my uncle had refused his permission.”

Taking her hands in his, he consoled her, “No, my love. He has so many warehouses, his staff and I had to search for him. It did take a while, but not only did he approve our engagement, he told me that Mr. Bennet had told him that he could speak for him as well. It seems that after my visit to Longbourn, your father had decided that this next step was imminent. This means that we don’t have to rush to Longbourn for his permission. We can wait until after Christmas, perhaps even stay here through Twelfth Night. What do you say?”

“I say that is a wonderful idea, William.” With a quick glance at the window to ensure no one was watching, she pulled his face down to hers by his lapels for another ardent kiss.

Thinking that he must not allow himself too much freedom in light of their engagement having just begun, he separated himself from her by holding her upper arms and stepping back.

“My darling, as much as I would love to spend the rest of the day enjoying your kisses, I must exercise some restraint. I don’t think you understand just how great a temptation you are to me.”

She released him and smiled, “So I am now handsome enough to tempt you, am I, Mr. Darcy?”

“Indeed you are, my lovely Elizabeth.” He reached into his coat and produced a small velvet box. He opened it to reveal a gleaming emerald ring. Smaller emeralds surrounded the large center stone of the same gem. “Elizabeth, my father gave this to my mother on the day I was born, and she gave it to me for my bride. It will be an exquisite enhancement to your beautiful green eyes.”

“William, this the most gorgeous ring I have ever seen.” She held out her trembling left hand for him to place it on her ring finger. Of course, the ring required another kiss – or two.

When they returned to the warm house, they sat close together in the sitting room, holding hands and making plans. He began to share, “We can return to Longbourn whenever you wish, but since the Gardiners have been such a big part of our reconnecting with each other, I would like to share Christmas Day with them. We could then return to Hertfordshire for a few days and then come back to Town for you to purchase your trousseau. What is your preference?”

“I would definitely like to stay here until after Twelfth Night, as you suggested, William. When I come back to buy my wedding clothes, I hope that I will be able to bring Jane with me. I know Aunt will not be able to accompany me shopping.”

“Elizabeth, I know Georgie would love to join you in shopping and will introduce you to her modiste. You must buy whatever you like and put it on Georgie’s account. And when you visit my Aunt Helen, you should mention to her that your mother will not be coming to London to shop with you. I wager she will leap at the opportunity to join you and Georgie. As she said, she has always wished for a daughter.”

“I am certainly willing if she is, William. It seems like an excellent way to get to know one another better. And I can most assuredly use her guidance.”

With those matters settled, William returned to Darcy House to share his good news with his sister and probably Richard, as the Colonel spent much of his free time in the Darcy home. One final kiss saw an ecstatic Fitzwilliam Darcy on his way.



Two days later, on Christmas morning, William and Georgiana arrived early at the Gardiners’ townhome bearing gifts. They were greeted at the door by Elizabeth, who had risen especially early to welcome them and allow her aunt and uncle to sleep a bit longer. The house was full of heavenly scents – freshly baked bread, ginger cakes, bacon, and sausages. “Come in. Come in and warm yourselves. Our hosts are still asleep, but we can break our fasts whenever you are ready. “Here, let me help you with your packages. Good heavens! Did you buy out Bond Street?”

Darcy chuckled but acknowledged that he and his sister had probably gotten slightly carried away with purchasing gifts for the children. “We found that we truly enjoyed shopping for the boys and little Beth, Elizabeth. With Georgie being the baby of the Darcy family, we haven’t had children to spoil in some time.” He looked at Elizabeth significantly, causing her to blush.

Once the gifts had been stacked in the family sitting room, they left it to break their fasts. After they had prepared their plates and sat down at the table, Darcy said, “Elizabeth, we

each have something for you that we would like to give you in private. Georgie, you first.”

She pulled a small flat paper-wrapped package from her reticule and handed it to Elizabeth. Confused but willing to accommodate their wishes, she untied the red ribbon and unfolded the paper to reveal her lost journal. Georgiana looked at her anxiously, “I am sorry to have kept it so long, Lizzy. I could say that I am sorry to have read it, but that would not be true. Had I not read about your misunderstandings with William and then about how much you regretted your vehement refusal of his proposal, I would not have colluded with Richard and your uncle to bring you two together again. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course I do, Georgie,” she responded, leaning over to hug her almost-sister.

“Now it is my turn, Elizabeth.” He presented her with another package of the same size and shape, tied with a green ribbon. Opening it, she found an identical but new journal with the initials EBD embossed into the dark blue leather.

She laughed as her eyes found his. “You must have been very sure of my answer, William. You had to have ordered this before you proposed.”

“Let us just say that I was very optimistic. Now Georgie, turn your head so I may kiss my intended.” And he did.

The entire Gardiner family descended the stairs minutes later, the three boys sounding like a thundering herd, followed by Mr. Gardiner trying to keep them reasonably subdued, and finally by Mrs. Gardiner carrying Beth in her arms.

The breakfast room turned into a tumult of noise and excitement, with everyone speaking at once. Elizabeth thought that William and Georgiana might be overwhelmed but noticed they were smiling and adding their own voices to the din.

Immediately after their meal the group gathered in the sitting room to exchange their gifts. For the boys, the Darceys had bought a collection of toy soldiers, each in a different color,

along with some books and puzzles. Baby Beth received a handmade cap trimmed in the finest lace and a beautifully crafted soft doll. Mr. Gardiner received a bottle of fine wine from Pemberley's cellars, and Mrs. Gardiner was presented with a warm shawl.

As Elizabeth had not been able to shop for gifts, she gave Georgiana three hand-embroidered linen handkerchiefs which her young friend assured her were most appreciated as she was usually the one doing the embroidery. She returned the offering with two linen squares that she had embroidered for Lizzy with pink roses surrounding her new initials.

Elizabeth then presented William with two gifts. The first package contained the larger handkerchiefs she had made for him with an ornate D wreathed with Sweet Williams. His next gift was her recently purchased copy of the biography of William the Conqueror. She smiled and shared that she had bought the volume on the day that she first encountered Georgiana. "Considering the subject of the book, I thought it would make a most appropriate gift for you, William."

The last gift between them was presented to Elizabeth with a broad smile from William. Inside a large box was a fur-lined cloak. "For Derbyshire winters, my Elizabeth."

What a perfect way to spend Christmas, she thought, even as she remembered her complaints from just a few weeks earlier. Yes, she reminded herself, joy does come in the morning.

Epilogue

Christmas Day 1813

Watching the snow gently drifting down onto the grounds of her beloved home, Elizabeth Darcy sipped her chocolate and enjoyed a few minutes of peace before ringing for her maid to help her dress for the day.

She had ended the long day yesterday by making a lengthy entry into her nearly filled journal. She knew that one of her gifts from William today would be a new journal for the upcoming year.

She had reminisced about the events of the extraordinary year of 1812, from Jane's devastation at Mr. Bingley's failure to return to Netherfield, the treacherous actions of his sisters, Mr. Darcy's failed proposal at Hunsford in the spring, and then their fateful reunion in December.

The year 1813 had been just as eventful but with far more happy occurrences and fewer negative ones. She relived in her mind the shared wedding of William and herself with Jane and Bingley in February. She remembered with pleasure the month-long honeymoon at Darcy's estate in Scotland and her nearly full year as mistress of Pemberley, the place she now loved above all others.

Today, I will give William the gift of my news of our future blessing, she decided. Only a few days ago, I experienced the quickening of our first child, who should be born sometime in May. William will be ecstatic.

I will ask him to wait until the evening meal to share the good news with our assembled families. The Bennets, Fitzwilliams, and Gardiners will all be returning to their homes by the week's end, and I can abide Mama's excitement only for that short length of time.

Yes, she smiled to herself, the coming year will be another remarkable one.

The End

Acknowledgement

Once again I thank my beta and proof reader, Beth. What a great friend you are! I will always be grateful for the day that we bonded over French fries and our love of JAFF.

I also thank Emilee, my additional beta and proof reader, my editor, and my publisher (in the sense of putting my stories into Kindle Publishing for me.) As always, I literally couldn't do it without. And I would love you even if you weren't my daughter.

My love and gratitude to the pair of you. You are the very best!

Jae

About The Author

Jae George

Jae George first began reading Jane Austen when her English major daughter introduced her to Miss Austen's works. Jae was completely captivated but also slightly irritated that she had missed years of knowing her favorite author. A few years later this same daughter introduced her to Jane Austen fan fiction and Jae was hooked. After reading hundreds of Pride and Prejudice variations, during the pandemic she began to write her own. And, it seems, she can't stop.

Dear Readers

First, thank you so much for reading my latest offering. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you choosing to read what I write, and I especially appreciate when you take the extra time to leave a review. I read each one that is posted and try to use both the positive and negative comments to improve my future efforts.

I include the length of each novel or novella in the description and tag each one as low-angst. I have started adding that my villains are never 'super-villainous'. As you have probably guessed, I write what I like to read – sweet and clean, with Christian values. Some of you may have also now guessed that the fandom version of Colonel Fitzwilliam is a favorite of mine. (He reminds me of my charming and incorrigible late husband.)

I hope that you have enjoyed what the characters decided to do, as they often take an unexpected turn from what I had planned.

Jae

Books by Jae George

If you are interested in sweet and clean, low-angst Regency romance about our favorite couple, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, then a selection from Jae George might be what you are looking for. Her works range from short stories to short novels and are all written from a Christian perspective.

Of Love and Loss

Of Renewal and Redemption

Of Duty and Delay

Of Friendship and Forgiveness

Of Crisis and Compassion

Of Kindness and Kisses

Of Permission and Providence

Of Vengeance and Veracity

Of Uncertainty and Understanding

Of Hearts and Highlands

Of Memories and Men

Of Whispers and Wisdom

Of Adoption and Acceptance

Of Youth and Yearning

Lonely in London: A Pride and Prejudice Christmas Story