

The background of the entire image features two dark purple tulips. One is in sharp focus on the left side, while the other is blurred on the right. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of green and red tones.

*The Second*

*Mr. Darcy*

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

Laraba Kendig

# The Second Mr. Darcy

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

By Laraba Kendig

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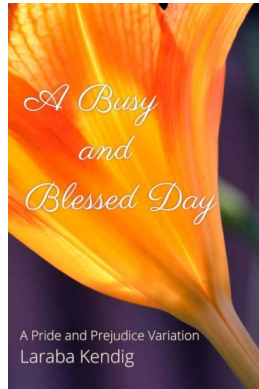
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# Chapter 1

*Assembly Hall*

*Meryton*

*15<sup>th</sup> October, 1811*

Elizabeth Bennet looked around the room as she fanned herself. The ballroom was slightly too hot, heated by the crowd milling around and the plethora of candles in their decorative sconces and the glittering chandelier overhead. She admired the effect of the mirrors set skillfully around the walls and behind the sconces, which only brightened the scene.

And what a bright scene it was! Muslin dresses of vibrant pink and blue and red and green and saffron, bobbing plumes carefully dyed by the local milliner, jewels catching the light and glittering at throat and topknot and cuffs.

At one end of the room, on a low dais, musicians in matching livery sat, plying their instruments in a lively reel. On the floor below them, some half a dozen or so couples wheeled through the familiar steps. Along one wall sat a table covered in a fine white linen cloth. More ladies and gentlemen clustered around it, helping themselves and each other to punch and tea and coffee and ratafia cakes and biscuits.

The rest of the room was a blur of activity, with matrons gossiping in chairs along the walls, gentlemen discussing crops and weather, and the youth of local society milling about as they chattered together.

“Elizabeth!” a voice cried out.

Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five daughters, halted in her steps and turned toward her close friend, Charlotte Lucas.

“Charlotte! I hope you are well?”

“Yes, very well,” her friend declared. “I am glad to see you here; I thought perhaps some emergency had befallen you given that you arrived later than usual.”

Elizabeth grasped Charlotte’s arm and guided her into a quieter corner, away from the musicians, and said, “There was no emergency, except for the need to sew on extra lace on Lydia’s gown tonight. Mamma decided, rather at the last minute, that she needed freshly trimmed lace, so that delayed us.”

“Is Mr. Bennet here?”

“No, Father is spending a quiet evening at home in his library. Now, I do not see any strangers, so am I correct that Mr. Bingley and company have not yet arrived?”

“They have not, and my mother is growing distressed,” Charlotte said with a sigh. “I do not expect to win Mr. Bingley’s favor, but naturally every matron in the neighborhood with a marriageable daughter is hopeful.”

“My mother is the same, of course,” Elizabeth said. “Of course, for all we know, Mr. Bingley is an irritating, arrogant sort of man. Wealth does not necessarily march hand in hand with good sense and humor.”

At this moment, the door into the room opened, and a group of newcomers entered, consisting of three gentlemen and two ladies. Two of the men were young and handsome, while the other man was older and slightly corpulent. Of the two younger men, one was fair and one was dark, and the dark one was noticeably tall as well. Indeed, Elizabeth could not help but admire the gentleman’s good looking features and form.

“The fair one is Mr. Bingley,” Charlotte confided, and then, at a signal from her mother, she cried out, “Oh, Lizzy, I must go.”

She rushed away in a swirl of skirts toward her mother, and Elizabeth watched with some amusement as Sir William Lucas, Charlotte’s father and the unofficial spokesman of local

society, guided Mr. Bingley and his party toward Lady Lucas and her two daughters. The female members of Mr. Bingley's party were handsome and very finely dressed. Elizabeth guessed that the elder of the two was seven and twenty years of age, and the younger a little over twenty. Neither was as beautiful as Jane, Elizabeth's elder sister, but then Jane was, without a doubt, one of the loveliest ladies in all of England.

"Miss Elizabeth?" a familiar male voice inquired.

She turned and smiled at Charlotte's next younger brother, Samuel Lucas, "Yes, Mr. Lucas?"

"Might I have the honor of the next dance?" he asked.

She nodded and took his arm, and accompanied him onto the dance floor. As the musicians struck up their tune, Elizabeth noted that the two handsome newcomers had taken the floor as well, Mr. Bingley with Miss Lucas, and the dark haired gentleman with a female member of his own party. Elizabeth was pleased for Charlotte; her friend was sensible and intelligent, but she was also plain and no longer in the first blush of youth. Too often she was forced to sit out the first dance in favor of younger, fairer ladies.

Samuel Lucas, Elizabeth's partner, was moderately handsome, entirely cheerful, and an adept dancer. Unfortunately, his understanding was not powerful, and at this time of year, his thoughts were entirely focused on grouse hunting and the upcoming season when the hounds would pursue the foxes. Elizabeth, who enjoyed dancing for its own sake and had known young Mr. Lucas since he was in short coats, did not mind that the conversation with her partner was very dull.

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"What a dreadful scene this is," Miss Bingley remarked, far too loudly. "So many bumptious gentlemen and vulgar



ladies. Do you see those girls over there? They are far too young to be out and are shrieking like hoydens!”

Darcy grimaced. The three girls in question were indeed very young and rather too loud for company, but given that he and Miss Bingley were but guests in a new place, it was not for them to be loudly judgmental.

“It is the country, Miss Bingley,” he said in a reproofing tone. “The rules of society are therefore somewhat different, and girls often come out earlier than in London.”

“I suppose you would know,” Miss Bingley remarked, turning a disdainful look on her partner. “Charles has told me more than once that you thoroughly enjoy the country and rather despise Town.”

This was true enough, and Darcy was not ashamed of it, but it was obvious that Miss Bingley thought poorly of him for it.

The rest of their dance was conducted in silence.

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“Charlotte,” Elizabeth said as she left the floor on Samuel Lucas’s arm, “do you have a partner for the next set?”

“I do not.”

“Neither do I! Let us get a drink and sit down. I have longed to visit you this week, but it was too rainy and muddy to walk to Lucas Lodge.”

The two friends made their way to the table where the punch and lemonade were available, collected drinks for themselves, and then drifted off to find two comfortable chairs away from the musicians.

Elizabeth took a sip of punch and said, “Well, Charlotte, can you tell me about Mr. Bingley’s companions? Or did the

topic not come up during your dance with the gentleman in question?"

"I do know who they are, yes. The shorter gentleman is Mr. Hurst, who is married to Mr. Bingley's elder sister. The taller gentleman is Mr. Darcy, a single gentleman with a small estate in Leicestershire. The dark haired lady is Mrs. Hurst, and the one with light brown hair is Miss Bingley, the gentleman's younger sister."

"Mr. Darcy is very handsome," Elizabeth said thoughtfully, gazing at the tall, dark haired man who was currently dancing with Mrs. Hurst. "Though he seems rather dour."

"Perhaps he is shy," Charlotte suggested.

Elizabeth, observing the expression on Mr. Darcy's face, thought it more likely that he was proud, but she supposed she ought to reserve judgment until she actually spoke to the man.

She peered around the dance floor and observed her elder sister dancing with Mr. Bingley; based on Jane's expressions, their conversation was an agreeable one.

"What of Mr. Bingley?" she asked. "Does he seem friendly?"

"Oh yes, very much! He spoke of how pleased he is with Netherfield and the environs, and how grateful he is for our kind welcome to his party. His family hails from Scarborough."

"I see."

The two ladies lapsed into silence, content to drink their punch and watch the dancers. At the end of the set, Mr. Bingley and Jane walked arm in arm over to the two ladies, who both stood up at their approach. To Elizabeth's surprise, Mr. Darcy also made his way to his friend's side, his expression rigid with either pride, discomfort, or perhaps both.

“Charlotte, Elizabeth,” Jane said, “may I please introduce Mr. Bingley? Mr. Bingley, Miss Lucas and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, my next younger sister.”

The ladies and gentleman curtsied and bowed appropriately, and then Bingley turned toward his friend and said, “Ladies, may I please introduce my friend, Mr. Darcy? Darcy, Miss Lucas, Miss Bennet, and Miss Elizabeth.”

After another round of curtsies, accompanied by a very proper bow on the part of the gentleman, Darcy said, “Miss Lucas, might I have the honor of the next dance?”

Charlotte’s eyes lit up with pleasure, and she said, “I would be honored, Mr. Darcy.”

“Miss Elizabeth, might I have the honor of the next set?” Bingley asked.

“I would be delighted,” Elizabeth said.

The subsequent dance was thoroughly enjoyable, as Mr. Bingley was both an excellent dancer and conversationalist. He was not, Elizabeth decided, particularly intellectual, but he was genial and enthusiastic, and she could only be thankful for his decision to lease Netherfield Park, which had been sitting empty for far too long.

At the end of the dance, she was pleased when Mr. Darcy appeared and asked for the honor of the next set. He led her out for a country dance, she took her place across from him, and when the music began to play, and the dancers began moving in elegant figures along the line, she was pleased to discover him a most gifted dancer, even if his expression was far less congenial than Mr. Bingley’s.

When they had made their way to the very end of the line, Elizabeth took the opportunity to exchange a few words with her partner.

“I do hope you are enjoying your time here this evening, Mr. Darcy,” she said.

The gentleman looked slightly startled at being addressed, but said, “Yes, indeed, it is, erm, yes, it is quite a pleasant county.”

“Have you been to Hertfordshire before?” Elizabeth persevered.

“I have ridden through on my way north and south, but I have never lived here. My estate is in Leicestershire.”

“I see. Well, I do hope that your stay at Netherfield is pleasant.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I am confident it will be, as Bingley and I are very good friends.”

Their brief pause in the dance came to an end, and they began twisting and twirling their way toward the other end of the line, which gave Elizabeth time to think. She was now inclined to believe that Charlotte was right, that Mr. Darcy was shy, or awkward, or something of the sort. He did not speak with ease, but there was no indication that he was attempting to be disagreeable.

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### *On the Road to Netherfield*

#### *Two Hours Later*

Darcy glanced out the carriage window at the moon-splashed road outside. The carriage swayed slightly around a turn, and Bingley’s shoulder just brushed his. Across from them sat Miss Caroline Bingley, Mrs. Louisa Hurst, and her husband, Mr. Hurst. Little of the moonlight made its way into the conveyance, leaving the inhabitants sitting in the dark.

“Oh Charles!” Miss Bingley cried out, “I truly wish that you had considered more before leasing Netherfield Park! That so called assembly was dreadful! I have never seen a

collection of people with so little beauty and their sense of fashion was nonexistent. I have not the smallest interest in any of them. I shudder to think how very dull we will be the next months, trapped in a society such as this!”

“I enjoyed myself thoroughly,” her brother retorted, his tone indignant in the darkness. “Everyone was exceptionally welcoming, and some of the girls uncommonly pretty!”

“The eldest Miss Bennet is a beauty, but none of the other ladies were anything to speak of,” Louisa Hurst said disdainfully. “And even she would be far more handsome if she were properly gowned. Did you see her dress, Caroline? A full year out of fashion, I am certain!”

The ladies continued to gossip and complain, while Fitzwilliam Darcy leaned back in his seat and looked forward to the short journey ending. He had not precisely enjoyed the assembly this evening as he was shy amongst strangers, but the local gentry had been welcoming. He had attended the assembly for two reasons. Firstly, he wished to support Bingley, who so graciously had opened his new home to Darcy and his sister Georgiana. Secondly, he hoped that Georgiana would find some new friends in a place where the standards of etiquette were not as rigid as in London.

He was satisfied with his performance regarding the former, and he was hopeful about the latter. He had danced with several of the local ladies, and none of them aped the fashionable manners of the haut ton, which was a great relief as Georgiana was even shyer than he.

“Netherfield is only five and twenty miles from Town, Caroline,” Bingley said, and Darcy realized he had missed several volleys in the argument between sister and brother. “You know how much we all enjoy the metropolis, and it will be no great trouble to visit London for a few days if we like. I am certain Darcy would agree that it is strenuous to journey from Leicestershire to London and back again, especially in autumn and winter.”

“Yes,” Darcy agreed, “though I am far fonder of the country than Town life, so I do not mind living farther away from London.”

In truth, he selfishly wished that Bingley had found an estate even farther away from London. He and Georgiana should be safe enough here; he had been careful to leave no forwarding address to anyone but his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, who was honorable and discreet.

In any case, Lawrence Darcy, master of Pemberley, and Darcy and Georgiana’s elder brother, would soon leave London for Derbyshire. Lawrence, unlike his siblings, thoroughly enjoyed town life, especially gambling dens and, most regrettably, brothels. But Pemberley was famed for her hunting grounds, and Lawrence, George Wickham, and a few other idle gentlemen would soon make their way to Pemberley, where they would spend the next weeks hunting and shooting and carousing.

And once Lawrence was safely in Derbyshire, Darcy could relax a little. Legally, he and Richard were joint guardians of young Georgiana, but Lawrence, as master of Pemberley and the head of his house, could potentially cause trouble for young Miss Darcy, and Darcy was determined that he would not allow it.

In the five years since George Darcy’s death, the condition of Pemberley had declined, saddled as she was with an improvident, reckless, and spendthrift master.

Fitzwilliam could do nothing about that. By law, Lawrence was master of the estate. But he could, and would, protect his dear little sister from being caught up in their elder brother’s schemes.



## Chapter 2

*Drawing Room*

*Longbourn*

*Midnight*

Quiet reigned over the drawing room, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the occasional rustle of a turning page. It was cozy in the small room with candles and fireplace illuminating the entire room with a warm glow, and the curtains drawn against the dark of night.

Mr. Bennet relished the silence and peace. His wife and daughters were at the assembly in Meryton, eager to meet the newcomer from London. Bennet had met Mr. Bingley and knew the man to be single, wealthy, and handsome, which was quite enough to send his neighbors, especially those with marriageable daughters, into a frenzy.

On most evenings, Mr. Bennet sat in his beloved library to read. But he knew well that his wife and daughters would be eager to relate their experiences at the assembly from the moment of entering the house. Mrs. Bennet especially would be overflowing with news and gossip and speculations, and he would not have a moment's peace until he listened patiently to her eager analysis of how likely Mr. Bingley was to offer for one of their daughters.

Out in the hall, the front door opened. Mr. Bennet marked his place carefully and set aside his book, fastening his eyes expectantly on the drawing room door. A moment later, he heard the sound of many feet tripping past, his daughters chattering together as they mounted the stairs to their own rooms to change.

The door to the drawing room opened, and his wife stepped inside, looking very pretty in her assembly dress, her



eyes aglow with excitement.

“Well, Mrs. Bennet, how was your evening?” the master of Longbourn inquired curiously.

“Oh, my dear Mr. Bennet,” his wife cried out, “we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. I wish you had been there. Jane was so admired, nothing could be like it. Everybody said how well she looked, and Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful and danced with her twice. Only think of that, my dear, he actually danced with her twice, and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time! First of all, he asked Miss Lucas. I was so vexed to see him stand up with her, but however, he did not admire her at all – indeed, nobody can, you know – and he seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance. So he inquired after her and was introduced, and he asked her for the two next. He danced with a few others and then, can you imagine, he danced the Boulanger with Jane as well! Oh, if my dear Jane could be installed as mistress of Netherfield, and the others equally well married, I will have nothing to wish for!”

“I thought I heard that Lady Lucas said that Mr. Bingley was to bring a large party from London for the assembly,” Mr. Bennet said. “Were there indeed numerous eligible gentlemen there tonight?”

“There were not!” Mrs. Bennet said indignantly. “There were but two other men in Mr. Bingley’s party, and one is already married, to Bingley’s elder sister! The other young gentleman, a Mr. Darcy, is tall and handsome, but I do not think he is wealthy. Apparently he is master of a small estate in Leicestershire. But he is, at least, not married! Perhaps he will do for Lizzy.”

“Only if the gentleman is intelligent,” her husband said, rising somewhat ponderously to his feet. “Lizzy would not enjoy a foolish husband, and I want her to be happy.”

“Well, I truly do not know why you always give her the preference. Elizabeth is not a bit better than the others, and I

am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humored as Lydia.”

“They are all silly and ignorant, like other girls, but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Bennet. All the same, if she wishes to marry a man of small fortune, I will not quarrel in the least. But Jane must marry Mr. Bingley, of that I am determined!”

She paused, her brow wrinkled, and continued, “Nor can I be entirely certain about Mr. Darcy’s fortune; I must ask Lady Lucas if she knows anything more about the gentleman’s prospects. If he has a private fortune or something of the like, he might do very well for Lydia!”

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### *Elizabeth’s Bedchamber*

Elizabeth slid between the sheets, grateful for the warming pan placed there some half an hour previously. A tap at the door caught her attention, and Jane, clad in nightgown and dressing gown with her blonde head snugly encased in a lacy nightcap, opened the door and hurried inside. Elizabeth flipped one corner of the bedclothes back and said, “Do come lay down, Jane, it is much warmer.”

Jane slid into the bed beside her, grateful for heat. Elizabeth turned her head to look at her sister. “So?” she asked. “What did you think?”

Jane scooted a bit nearer. “I like Mr. Bingley very much,” she admitted, a pink blush spreading across her cheeks. “He is kind and gallant with plenty of good sense and vivacity, but I suppose you think me absurd.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth said warmly, “indeed, I believe you have neglected to list all of his virtues. He is also quite

handsome, in possession of a fortune and estate, and thus the perfect man. And you would make him a lovely wife.”

“Now, Lizzy, you are starting to sound like Mamma,” Jane reproached, trying not to laugh.

“But I am serious!” Elizabeth protested, smiling widely. “After all, he did dance with you twice.”

“I know,” Jane said and sighed dreamily. “I was not expecting him to ask me a second time.”

“Were you not? It seemed certain to me. He could hardly help noticing that you are by far the prettiest woman in Meryton. But what of his sisters? Does your approbation extend thus to them as well?”

“But of course,” Jane said warmly. “I thought them delightful.”

“You would,” Elizabeth returned, “delightful creature that you are yourself! You think everyone else as charming as you are.”

“Did you not like them, Lizzy?” Jane asked in surprise.

“I think that they are very fine,” Elizabeth said slowly, cogitating. “And I think that they know it. But their manners are quite pleasant, and they are very personable when it pleases them to be.”

“And what did you think of Mr. Darcy?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth was not surprised that her elder sister had turned off the subject of Mr. Bingley’s sisters so suddenly; Jane did not relish hearing criticism of those whom she had made up her mind to like.

“I do not dislike him,” she said thoughtfully. “He is not garrulous – even a trifle stiff, I would say. But he was not overtly rude or insulting.”

Jane blew out a breath. “Mr. Bingley mentioned that he and Mr. Darcy are good friends and that Mr. Darcy is generally

very reserved in company. But he does not mean anything by it.”

“That agrees with my observations also,” Elizabeth remarked.

/

*The Breakfast Parlor*

*Netherfield*

*The Next Morning*

Darcy took a sip of hot coffee and turned his attention onto the letter in his hand.

*Hyde Park*

*14<sup>th</sup> October, 1811*

*Cousin,*

*Enclosed are several letters for you; all but one are innocuous, and that one is, not surprisingly, from Lawrence.*

*He visited me yesterday in my quarters and demanded to know where you and Georgiana are currently lodging. I refused to tell him, of course, and he left muttering about setting the Runners on you. Before you give way to anxiety, I beg you not to concern yourself that he actually will do so. It would cause gossip, and your brother despises gossip. Moreover, it would require him to actually do something more than harass me for an hour, and he is far too lazy a man to bestir himself.*

*You asked about his indebtedness. I fear that he continues to visit the moneylenders, fool that he is, and has lost a great deal at the gaming tables. Without a doubt, a judicious alliance with a wealthy member of the haut ton*

*would be helpful to Lawrence, but my father is on your side regarding Georgiana; she is but sixteen and certainly too young to wed. With the two of us legally her guardians, I am confident that Lawrence cannot force her into marriage. However, I also recognize that my dear cousin would be most dismayed at even the smallest degree of attention from Lawrence's dissolute friends, and thus am pleased you have chosen to take her into the country for a time. I hope you will enjoy yourself in Hertfordshire.*

*I will be in England for the foreseeable future, which I confess pleases me. I have spent enough months fighting through the mud against the Tyrant, though of course we may be called to battle at any time. I am not in charge of my own destiny.*

*Keep my charge safe, Cousin!*

*Sincerely,*

*Richard Fitzwilliam, Colonel*

Darcy grimaced but also felt his body relax. It was true enough that his older brother was a thoroughly indolent man and always content to put off the concerns of tomorrow in favor of the pleasures of today. In this, he was much like his father's godson, George Wickham, who was equally inclined to enjoy life as much as possible, indifferent to the needs of the future.

He glanced through the rest of his correspondence – one from his banker, two from his steward in Leicestershire – before unhappily turning his attention to his brother's letter.

*Darcy House*

*London*

*10<sup>th</sup> October, 1811*

*Fitz,*

*I do not know why you dragged Georgiana away from London, but I find it most irritating. I had planned to host a dinner party with a few of the ton's most eligible families in attendance, all of whom would be pleased to marry a Darcy. Really, Brother, I find you most exasperating! It is not fair to Georgiana to cloister her in the country. Moreover, you and I both know she is shy and needs to become more accustomed to company. I realize that, against my better judgment, I allowed you to become our sister's guardian, but...*

“Good morning, Brother.”

Darcy quickly folded the letter and turned to smile up at his sister. Georgiana Darcy was, at age sixteen, already tall and well formed, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was dressed in a blue sprigged muslin dress with a minimum of knots and lace, which suited her well.

“Good morning, Georgiana,” he replied. “I hope you are well this morning.”

“Yes, very well. I am sleeping far better here than I did in London; the air is so much cleaner, and it is far quieter too.”

“Yes, if you do not mind roosters crowing,” he said affectionately.

“You know I do not,” his sister replied, walking over to put eggs and toast on a plate from the breakfast buffet on the sideboard. “I far, far prefer domestic fowl to noisy watchmen!”

Darcy laughed and said, “I do as well.”

Georgiana took her seat across from her brother and nodded at the letters. “I hope all is well in London?”

“Yes. Richard writes that he is well, and he will be settled in England for some time.”

“I am glad. And Lawrence?”

Darcy sighed and took a sip of his coffee, which was now rather cold.

“He is very much what he always is. He seems well enough.”

Georgiana took a bite of eggs, chewed, and swallowed before saying, “I know we both find London entirely too noisy and busy, but perhaps it is good that Lawrence feels differently. As the head of our family, he needs to spend more time in Town than we do dealing with business.”

“That is true,” Darcy agreed with somewhat forced cheer. He was glad that Georgiana did not seem to be aware of their elder brother’s more unpleasant proclivities. On the other hand, he had no intention of actually lying about his brother, and thus was not certain what to say next.

“How was the assembly last night?”

“Oh, it went well,” Darcy remarked, relieved at the change in topic. “I met and danced with a number of the local ladies, and they seemed very pleasant.”

“Pleasant and provincial,” a supercilious voice announced, and both Darceys looked up as Miss Bingley strolled into the room and declared, “I doubt you will particularly like them, Miss Darcy; you are the daughter of a great house, and I am confident that you would find nothing in common with any of the ladies we met last night.”

“Oh, I doubt that is true,” Georgiana replied. “I far prefer small communities to Town. It is difficult for me to remember all the rules and regulations of polite society, and when I meet dozens of people, my head aches trying to remember them all!”

“Well, you are still young,” Miss Bingley said with a condescending smile, as she walked over to collect food from the buffet. When she had taken her seat, armed with a cup of chocolate and two slices of toast with jam, she continued,

“When you are older, perhaps you should consider a husband who is more at ease with society?”

Georgiana and her brother exchanged amused glances. Miss Bingley was openly, exuberantly interested in having her brother marry Miss Darcy, who had a dowry of thirty thousand pounds.

“We will see,” Darcy said casually. “As you say, my sister is still far too young to think of marriage.”

“Of course. Now, I do wonder what you would care to do today, Miss Darcy. Perhaps you would enjoy playing on the pianoforte? I fear it is not quite as good an instrument as you might reasonably expect, but it has been recently tuned.”

“I am certain I will wish to do so,” the younger woman said, “but for now, I hope my brother is willing to go on a walk with me. Hertfordshire seems a lovely county.”

“Oh!” Miss Bingley said, looking startled. “Well, I fear the formal gardens have been rather neglected, but there is, I think, a pleasant walk to a pond behind the stables?”

She sounded uncertain, but Georgiana promptly responded, “Thank you, Miss Bingley. I am certain that we will enjoy a brisk walk regardless of the presence or lack of attractive vegetation.”

“Would you like me to go with you?” her hostess inquired, trying, and failing, to sound genuine.

“Oh, no,” Georgiana replied gravely, “I know you only arrived here recently, and while I have never been in charge of a household, I know it is a great deal of work. Besides, Fitzwilliam and I are inclined to walk very far and very fast.”

“I do have rather a lot of work today,” Miss Bingley agreed quickly.



## Chapter 3

*Thirty minutes later*

The back door of Netherfield opened just wide enough to allow the egress of two people. Mr. Darcy and his sister Georgiana exited the house; he in a heavy wool coat and she in a fur pelisse, both wearing sensible half-boots against the chilly weather and cold ground.

They strode briskly together down the gravel walk, dried leaves crunching beneath their feet. Leafless elm trees drooped over the path, edged by brown grass. Few spots of color enlivened the scene, but here and there patches of white asters clustered like drifts of snow, marigolds brightening otherwise dead beds with their cheerful hue.

The sharp snap in the air did not lend itself to meandering, so the siblings marched briskly along the crushed rock towards the smell of horses. The stables loomed up before them before the path veered around and behind, and the nickers of horses and the voices of stable boys calling one to another filled the air.

The smells without the warmth of the horses were not pleasant, and the brother and sister hurried on. The parkland forest they entered was rather dreary, with very little green to relieve the gray-brown of the bark of the oaks and elms. Birds rustled and hopped among the fallen leaves, searching for the last dry berries and nuts of the year.

A streamlet ran over to burble alongside their path, its swift-running water chuckling over rounded pebbles before slowing sedately into a pond on the other side of the woods. Georgiana broke the comfortable silence with a delighted little cry.

Across the lily-pad covered pond, a charming belvedere looked out over the glassy water. The siblings hurried, arm in

arm, around the edge of the water, frogs plopping off the muddy bank or peering up at them from between bulrushes as they passed.

They reached the belvedere and stepped inside, and Darcy sneezed as their footsteps stirred up dust that had long laid dormant across the bare wooden floor.

“Mr. Bingley might like to have some furniture placed here,” Georgiana commented, looking around appraisingly.

“I quite agree,” Darcy replied, staring out at the pond. It was a lovely scene, placid and glassy-still. The water was a dull blue, reflecting the pale October sky, the cattails and bulrushes around its edge still delightfully green. Ripples spread out slowly from where a frog hopped into the water, and a fish rose briefly to the surface before vanishing again on business of its own.

“Brother?” Georgiana asked.

“Yes?” Darcy replied absently. His own estate of Bellhaven was a good deal smaller than Netherfield, but it did boast an attractive pond. Perhaps, when there were sufficient funds, he would have a small structure built by the water for Georgiana’s pleasure.

“Is there some reason why Father gave you so little in his will?”

Darcy jerked in surprise and turned an amazed look on his sister, who was staring up with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation.

His mouth opened and then shut. He was not quite certain what to say.

“Because it is not fair at all,” Georgiana continued, and now she looked genuinely angry. “Everyone knows that you are far more responsible and diligent than Lawrence!”

Darcy shook his head and said, “It is the way of our class that the eldest son inherits. You know that, dear one.”

“Yes, I do know, but that is true only of Pemberley. Why did Father give you Bellhaven instead of Timbreline?”

“Do you not like Bellhaven?”

The girl huffed and said, “Of course I do. It is lovely. But it is also small, and had been badly neglected before you took charge of it. I know that Timbreline has an income of at least two thousand pounds a year, and Bellhaven is closer to one thousand pounds. It is not fair in the least that Lawrence should receive both Pemberley and Timbreline, and you were bequeathed only Bellhaven!”

Darcy tightened his lips and turned toward the water. He was not entirely certain what to say. The truth might make Georgiana feel guilty, but perhaps she deserved to know the truth?

“I do not remember much about Father, but I did not imagine he could be so cruel!” she declared.

He sighed and, his mind made up, turned and took his sister’s hands in his own. “It is not like that. Father was a good man, whose only mistake was believing that Lawrence was more reliable and diligent a man than he is.”

“But why not give you Timbreline?” she asked doggedly.

“He did,” Darcy said, and compelled by the look of shock on her face, he continued. “The truth is that I was bequeathed Timbreline, and Lawrence inherited Bellhaven along with, of course, Pemberley. After our father died, our older brother and I met and decided to legally trade estates.”

“But why?”

Again, Darcy took a deep breath and pondered. There were two reasons, and one was bound to upset his sister.

“Brother, please tell me.”

“The first reason had to do with location,” he explained. “Lawrence and I have not been on good terms for many years, and Timbreline, as you know, borders Pemberley to the north.

We would have had to work together regarding fencing and flooding and the like, which would certainly have led to quarrels.”

“And the second reason?” Georgiana asked.

He blew out a breath and looked into her eyes, brown meeting blue. “The second reason had to do with you. Father made Lawrence and our cousin Richard Fitzwilliam your joint legal guardians. I have no doubt that Father had good intentions; Lawrence is my elder by three years, and he was engaged to be married at the time of our father’s death. However, Richard and I were both in agreement that I would be a better guardian than Lawrence. I agreed to exchange estates if Lawrence would legally relinquish his position as your guardian.”

Georgiana stared at him, her face white, and abruptly burst into tears. He stared at her in shock and then pulled her close to him. She clung to him and cried out, “Oh Brother, thank you! Thank you so very much!”

He returned the embrace with relief and for a minute, all was silent save for the girl’s sobs, which eventually died away.

Darcy solemnly handed over his handkerchief and waited until Georgiana had recovered her poise, and then guided her over to the steps which led down to a dock on the pond.

“Shall we sit down, my dear?” he invited. “I daresay our clothes will not suffer particularly.”

“No, we wore very practical garments for striding briskly in autumn,” Georgiana agreed, taking her place on a step. Darcy, a moment later, sat down beside her.

For a minute, the two siblings merely gazed out at the rippling waters, which were charmingly ringed by waving rushes and the like.

“Do you dislike Lawrence?” Darcy finally asked.

Georgiana sighed deeply and wrinkled her nose. “I love him as a brother, of course, but no, I do not like him. More than that, I am afraid of him.”

“Afraid?” Fitzwilliam demanded, turning a frowning look on his sister.

“Of his disapproval? His indifference? I have never imagined he cared about me, which is, perhaps, not surprising given that we are so very far apart in age.” Georgiana paused to smooth a wrinkle in her skirt. “He used to call me a little mewling brat in my hearing, that kind of thing. When I was at school and the headmistress told me, very gently, that my father had died, I confess my very first thought was that Lawrence would be my new guardian, and that is what caused me to burst into tears. I know that sounds dreadful, that I did not grieve my father more, but I truly did not know him all that well.”

“You did not,” her brother agreed, pulling her close to him and planting a kiss on her bonnet. “He was already failing in his health by the time you were six years of age, so naturally you saw little of him.”

“When I came home to Pemberley,” Georgiana continued, “and was informed that you and Cousin Richard were to be my guardians, I was so very relieved! Not that I think Lawrence would physically harm me, of course, but I did not think he would care much for my needs and wants. I know he finds me tedious and tiresome. In any case, I am very grateful, though it makes me sad that you lost a better estate on my behalf.”

Darcy had also paid his brother ten thousand of the thirty thousand pounds that were given to him in the senior Darcy’s will, but he did not intend to tell that to his sister.

“I truly am pleased with Bellhaven,” Darcy remarked instead. “It is good land, and even in the five years since our father’s death, I have managed to increase the income substantially. It had been neglected for many years and only needed a diligent master to improve it.”

“I am glad,” Georgiana said, and sighed. A moment later, she continued, “Did our brother say anything about Anne?”

Darcy frowned in an attempt to remember, and then he said, “I confess I did not read the entire letter yet. I hope he did; she should be seven months along now.”

Georgiana hesitated and then said shyly, “I know that such topics are generally not considered suitable for maidens, but Cousin Anne has never carried a pregnancy this long before, yes?”

Darcy sighed. It was true enough that his young sister supposedly ought not to know the details of pregnancy, miscarriage, and childbirth, but then, she was already sixteen years of age. Far better that he tell her about the realities of life than someone else.

“That is correct,” he said. “Anne has always been sickly, and this is her third pregnancy. The other two ended in miscarriage within a few months of conception. To be entirely honest, I am surprised that she agreed to marry Lawrence. They have nothing in common, and I feared she would have difficulty bearing an heir.”

“Given the character of Anne’s mother, I am not surprised in the least,” Georgiana said dryly. “If I were living with Lady Catherine, I would probably leap at the chance of marrying as soon as possible.”

Darcy considered this, and he eventually concluded that Georgiana was in the right of it. Their aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, was overbearing, autocratic, condescending, and rude. Anne, who was a meek, quiet lady, had probably accepted Lawrence Darcy’s offer because she wished to leave Rosings, the de Bourgh’s estate in Kent, in favor of Pemberley.

And the truth was that Anne might well be content at Pemberley, even with Lawrence as master. The current heir was a spendthrift and a gambler, along with being a rake, but he probably ignored his bride when she was carrying his

child. Mrs. Reynolds, who had been housekeeper of that great house for many years, was an excellent woman and could be trusted to cosset and look after Mrs. Darcy.

“We had best return, Brother,” Georgiana remarked and then sighed, “though this is lovely, and I hope we can come again.”

“Of course we can.”

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### *Longbourn*

The chatter in the drawing room almost entirely drowned out the sound of clinking cups in saucers and the crackling of a well-tended fire. Maria Lucas and Kitty and Lydia Bennet sat in a picturesque row on the couch, looking fresh and pretty in their pink and blue muslins as they giggled with their heads together. Jane, Charlotte, and Elizabeth sat demurely in their chairs beneath the window, holding conversation, while over in front of the fire, Lady Lucas and Mrs. Bennet leaned towards each other with teacups held carefully in their laps.

“So, Lady Lucas,” Mrs. Bennet said eagerly, “Have you learned anything further about Mr. Darcy?”

“I have,” her companion said. “He is the second son of a Mr. George Darcy, now deceased, and his elder brother is master of a great estate in Derbyshire worth at least ten thousand pounds a year.”

“Ten thousand pounds a year,” Mrs. Bennet shrieked, clutching her chest with her free hand. “Is the elder brother likely to visit, do you know?”

“I fear it matters not,” Lady Lucas said sadly, “because he is already married.”

Mrs. Bennet deflated noticeably. “Oh, what a pity! So this Mr. Darcy has only a small estate up north?”

“In Leicestershire, yes. He met Mr. Bingley some years ago, and since Mr. Bingley does not have any experience in managing an estate, Mr. Darcy offered to spend some weeks here.”

“I see,” Mrs. Bennet said, frowning. “Well, since he is not rich, I suppose Elizabeth can have him.”



## Chapter 4

*On the Road to Netherfield*

*The Next Morning*

All the inhabitants within the carriage conversed eagerly except for Mary, who sat in silence, engrossed in her own thoughts. Mrs. Bennet and all five of her daughters, each dressed as prettily as she could manage, took up all the seats. Sunlight fell in through the narrow windows to illumine the merry ribbons trailing from their bonnets, and pink and blue and green muslin peeked from necks and sleeves underneath the ladies' outerwear. The air outside was crisp, but snuggled together in the carriage, none of the Bennet ladies felt it.

"Now all of you girls, I do insist that you let Mr. Bingley and Jane speak in peace," Mrs. Bennet said, raising her voice over the chattering of her youngest two daughters.

"Oh, Mamma, why?" Lydia demanded, pouting noticeably. She was, at age fifteen, the youngest and tallest of the Bennet daughters, along with being the most demanding. "It is not fair that Jane is the only one allowed to pursue Mr. Bingley! I know she is the oldest and also the most beautiful of us, but I am second prettiest!"

"I thought you wished to marry an officer in a red coat," Kitty said, obviously confused.

Lydia rolled her eyes and said, "I do, of course! I am merely saying that it is not fair that Jane is set before all of us."

"Lydia," Jane began, looking distressed, but Mrs. Bennet said firmly, "Now Lydia, Jane is the eldest, and thus it is only right that she marries first. I do beg you to not get into a taking, dear one. You have a few years before you need

search for a wealthy husband, and for now, I know you wish to enjoy your time flirting with the militia officers.”

Jane and Elizabeth, sitting across from one another, exchanged unhappy glances. Their youngest two sisters, empty headed and indulged, had been speaking incessantly of officers for the last week, thanks to the news that a regiment was to be quartered in nearby Meryton for the winter. Elizabeth, while she looked forward to having more partners at assemblies, was worried that the younger girls would bring the Bennet family name into disrepute. Lydia, in particular, was loud, brash, and often vulgar, but Mrs. Bennet, who was the daughter of a country attorney, had no notion of true refinement in a lady. Indeed, the matron of Longbourn always encouraged her daughters to be even more forward than they were naturally inclined to be.

The carriage turned onto the drive which led to Netherfield, and the ladies lapsed into silence. None of them had been inside the manor in some years, as the owner had moved to London permanently a decade previously. The most recent occupant of the estate had been an elderly widower, who had died some three years previous. The mansion had been standing empty since then, and everyone was delighted to have it filled, and with an eligible, single gentleman.

The horses came to a halt, whickering and snorting, and Caleb, one of Longbourn’s manservants, leaped down, causing the carriage to shake a little. A moment later the door opened from the outside. Caleb helped Mrs. Bennet out, followed by Lydia, Mary, Kitty, Jane, and finally Elizabeth. The six ladies proceeded to climb up the shallow stone steps to the front door, which opened to reveal the butler, who gestured for them to enter.

They did so and were removing their pelisses when the sound of footsteps caused them all to turn toward the grand staircase, which was situated to the right of the vestibule. A moment later, Mr. Darcy appeared in view with a tall, young lady on his arm, and both were dressed warmly.

For a moment, the Bennet ladies stared in confusion while Darcy looked back with consternation. He did not wish to give up his walk with Georgiana to receive guests, but perhaps he ought to.

“Mr. Darcy,” Jane said, taking the lead. “May I please introduce the rest of my family to you? Mamma, Mary, Kitty, Lydia, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Mr. Darcy, my mother, Mrs. Bennet, Miss Mary, Miss Kitty, and Miss Lydia.”

Darcy sighed inwardly but bowed and said, “Mrs. Bennet and Misses Bennet, may I please introduce my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, to you.”

This was followed by a round of curtsies, and Elizabeth said, “It is an honor to meet you, Miss Darcy, but pray do not let us keep you. It seems you have a prior appointment.”

“We are going for a walk,” Georgiana explained, “but I know that Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, and Mrs. Hurst are in the drawing room.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Bennet said, her eyes lighting up at the knowledge that the wealthy Mr. Bingley was available. “It was very good to meet you, Mr. and Miss Darcy.”

She grasped Jane’s arm and hauled her after the butler, who was waiting with grave patience for the ladies to call on his master.

Elizabeth lingered for a moment to say, “I do not know how far you wish to walk, but there is a lovely pond east of the stables.”

Georgiana, who had been waiting restlessly, turned eager eyes on Elizabeth and said, “Fitzwilliam and I walked there yesterday. It is absolutely delightful!”

“Yes it is!” her new acquaintance returned with a smile. “Is the old belvedere still standing?”

“It is. It is dusty and empty, but the structure seems sound,” Georgiana replied.

Elizabeth smiled, her gaze suddenly faraway. “I am pleased to hear that. When I was a child of ten, Netherfield was home to two sisters close to my age, and we used to go to the belvedere and tell stories and the like. It is a lovely place.”

Georgiana considered the lady with more interest. “Since you roamed this estate as a child, perhaps you have other recommendations of good walks?”

“I suppose that depends on how far you wish to go?” Elizabeth said.

Georgiana looked at her brother, who smiled and said, “We generally walk at least two miles, often more.”

“That is wonderful,” Elizabeth said warmly. “I too relish long walks, but in my family, I am the only enthusiast of such exercise. Well, in that case, I recommend a ramble to the southeastern edge of Netherfield. There is a hill that allows you to look over much of the surrounding countryside, and the colors this time of year are delightful.”

“That sounds charming,” Georgiana said and then added, hesitantly, “if you would care to join us today, or some other time, that would be pleasant.”

Darcy was thoroughly surprised at this; his sister, while comfortable with family and close friends, was usually shy and reserved in the presence of new acquaintances.

“I would greatly enjoy wandering along the paths of Netherfield with you, but I would not wish to interfere if you wish to spend time together alone,” Elizabeth said.

Darcy found himself grinning and said, “On the contrary, your presence would be a great gift, as we do not know our way around yet.”

“In that case,” Elizabeth said, and turned her attention on the butler, who had returned to the vestibule. “Stokes, will you please inform my mother that I am out walking with Mr. and Miss Darcy and that I will walk home when we are done?”

“Certainly, Miss Elizabeth,” the man said. His expression was stoic, but his eyes were approving. He was a local man and distantly related to Mr. Selkirk, who acted as butler at Longbourn.

“Is your home so close?” Miss Darcy asked as Elizabeth wrapped her pelisse around her again.

“My family’s estate of Longbourn is along Netherfield’s east border, and our house lies slightly to the north of this one,” Elizabeth assured her. “I will need to walk only a little more than a mile from the hill, and on a sunny, pleasant day like this one, that is nothing at all!”

“Shall we go, then?” Darcy suggested.

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*Drawing Room*

*Netherfield*

“I do not often go to London,” Mrs. Bennet admitted, “but my daughters, especially the older three, have spent many a week with my brother and his wife, who live in Cheapside. My brother is a well-known tradesman of the finest silks and muslins from India, you know!”

Miss Bingley smirked scornfully at this remark, but Mr. Bingley merely said, “How pleasant for your daughters. I always enjoy my time in the metropolis, with all the plays, parties, museums and even, on occasion, hot air balloon ascensions!”

“I especially like the museums,” Jane remarked. “Have you ever been to the British Museum? I was impressed by the collection that was bequeathed to the museum by Sir Hans Sloane.”

“I have,” Bingley replied and then added ruefully, “I suppose that all those books and manuscripts and coins are interesting, but what I remember most about the museum is that the docent told me that Sir Hans was responsible for the invention of chocolate milk.”

Mary leaned forward and said, “I have heard the same thing, but I believe the truth is that Sir Hans learned of a similar drink while living in Jamaica, and brought it over from there.”

“I do not suppose it matters a great deal,” Jane remarked with a laugh. “The important thing is that it tastes wonderful. My Aunt Gardiner in Cheapside is fond of a small shop where chocolate milk is served, along with other delectable teas and coffees, and has treated me there several times.”

“You will have to tell me the name of the establishment,” Mr. Bingley said jovially. “I am always interested in finding new places to visit in London.”

“Oh, Charles, I do believe there is a significant difference between London and Cheapside,” Mrs. Hurst said, in such a sneering tone that Jane looked surprised, and Mrs. Bennet sat up straighter, her lips tightened with indignation.

“Well, I like chocolate milk,” Lydia said, coming to the rescue quite by chance, “but I am far more interested in the balls, routs, parties, and Venetian breakfasts. Have you attended any such amusements?”

“Of course we have,” Caroline Bingley declared, lifting her handsome nose up a trifle. “Louisa and I both were launched into London society when we were nineteen years of age, and yes, it is great fun. I daresay you will enjoy yourself when you come out.”

“Oh, as to that, we are a country family,” Mrs. Bennet said, eyeing her hostess resentfully, “and all of my daughters are already out.”

“Indeed, Miss Lydia?” Mrs. Hurst said in a lofty tone, “pray, what is your age?”

“I am fifteen, and I have been attending parties and assemblies and balls for a full year now!”

The door opened at this juncture, and servants entered with tea. It was at this moment that Mrs. Bennet realized that one of her daughters was missing.

“Mr. Stokes,” she said to the butler, looking around in alarm, “do you know where Miss Lizzy is?”

“Yes, Madame. She is out walking with Mr. and Miss Darcy, and she will walk home when finished with her ramble.”

“Walk?” Miss Bingley demanded. “Surely your home is several miles away.”

“Indeed it is,” Mrs. Bennet declared, “but that is my Lizzy! She has always been a very active girl, and she still insists on going on long walks every day the weather is good, and sometimes when it is not!”

“I see,” Mrs. Hurst said drily.

## Chapter 5

Darcy watched the backs of his sister and Miss Elizabeth Bennet as they strode up the path ahead of him towards the summit of the hill. Bare branches arched over their heads from the elms and chestnuts planted along either side of the path. Georgiana and Miss Elizabeth were conversing almost as vigorously as they were walking, and he found himself impressed. Few people could keep up with the Darcy siblings, and even fewer were ladies. But petite Miss Elizabeth showed nary a sign of strain as she spoke merrily with Georgiana at her side.

He realized, a moment later, that his eyes were fixed on Miss Elizabeth's light and pleasing form in a way that was not entirely innocent, and he felt his face heat even as he looked resolutely away toward a distant copse of trees. When he had first met Miss Elizabeth, he thought her pretty, but not nearly as beautiful as the blonde, blue eyed eldest Miss Bennet. Now, with the lady walking gracefully up the path, her chestnut curls dancing in the breezes, he found her very attractive indeed.

"I do play the pianoforte," Elizabeth remarked, capturing his attention, "but I am not particularly adept. I believe that to play the instrument very well, one must practice a great deal, and I have so many interests that I do not practice as often as I should."

"What interests do you have?" Georgiana asked, watching appreciatively as a robin landed on a nearby branch and began chirping.

"Oh, I like reading, writing to friends, dancing, and walking. Do you play the pianoforte?"

"I do," Georgiana said, "and everyone seems to think that I play well."

"You do," Darcy said.



Georgiana turned her head and smiled at him and then continued, "I enjoy it a great deal, far more than painting screens or designing tables, though I am moderately adept in those accomplishments as well."

"And I confess that I have never painted a screen in my life," Elizabeth said merrily, just as the two girls attained the top of the hill and came to a halt. Darcy took the last steps to the top and stopped at his sister's side, aware of the sweat trickling down his back. He was not out of breath, exactly, but he was overly warm, though given the cool breeze at the top of the hill, he would feel more comfortable in short order.

"It is beautiful," Georgiana remarked, spinning in a slow circle. "Would you be kind enough to point out features of interest, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Certainly! Over there, to the east, is our home of Longbourn. To the direct north is the little town of Meryton, which you doubtless went through on your way to Netherfield. To the far east, almost out of sight, is Lake Chestnut. It is quite large, and we have occasionally gone there for picnics. To the northeast is Oakham Mount, which you can see rises higher than this hill. It is nominally on Sir William Lucas's land, but it is not arable, and he is pleased to allow anyone who wishes to walk or ride to the top."

"And I presume you do?" Georgiana inquired.

"I do, fairly often," Elizabeth agreed. "I do not know if you feel the same way as I do, but even a familiar walk seems very different depending on the season and even the weather."

"I agree *entirely*," Georgiana replied enthusiastically. "There is a particular walk at our family's estate of Pemberley that I must have made at least two dozen times in my younger years. It takes me past tall stands of oaks and elms, and across the bridge of a trout stream, and near a pond full of goldfish, and it never grows old!"

"This is your family's estate in Leicestershire?" Elizabeth asked curiously. "I would imagine that the

topography is quite different from Hertfordshire.”

“Pemberley is our family’s estate in Derbyshire,” Darcy explained. “My brother, Mr. Lawrence Darcy, is master of Pemberley, while I, as a second son, inherited the smaller estate of Bellhaven in Leicestershire.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said, turning her face toward him sympathetically. “Your father is gone, then?”

“Yes, he passed away five years ago.”

“I am sorry,” the lady replied, shaking her head. “That is difficult, to lose your father at a comparatively young age. And your mother? Is she living?”

“My mother entered through Heaven’s gates when Georgiana was a mere child.”

“That is very sad,” Elizabeth said, and then continued, “My Aunt Gardiner, who lives with my Uncle Gardiner and their family in Cheapside, grew up in Derbyshire. She has often spoken of wishing to return on a holiday, as she has fond memories of both the little town of her childhood and the lovely woods and streams of the area.”

“Which town?” Georgiana asked.

“Lambton, I believe? Or Lampton?”

“Lambton!” Georgiana exclaimed. “That is quite close to Pemberley, perhaps five miles away from the edge of the estate!”

“What a remarkable coincidence,” Elizabeth said.

“Ladies,” Darcy said, looking to the west, “I think perhaps we ought to turn for home. Might that be a series of rain clouds?”

Both women turned their attention to the dark clouds in the far distance, and Elizabeth said, “You are correct, sir, though it will be at least an hour before it arrives. But with your permission, I will leave you here, assuming you have no concerns about finding your way back to Netherfield.”

“None at all,” Georgiana said quickly, “but are you certain you will be well enough alone?”

“Without a doubt, I assure you. That path there leads to a stile, and once I hop over it, I will be on Longbourn land, and within twenty minutes, I will reach my home. Miss Darcy, it was a pleasure meeting you. Good day, Mr. Darcy.”

“The pleasure was mine,” Georgiana said, and Darcy murmured his assent.

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*Drawing Room*

*Longbourn*

“Ah, there you are, Lizzy!” Mrs. Bennet cried out as Elizabeth walked into the dining room. “I wondered if you were back yet, or were still wandering the paths of Netherfield with Mr. and Miss Darcy.”

Elizabeth felt her eyebrows rise in surprise and quickly smoothed them. She was startled that her mother did not sound displeased at her decision to abandon Mr. Bingley in favor of a walk with the Darcys. Mrs. Bennet, who did not truly understand her second daughter, thought that Elizabeth’s penchant for long rambles a peculiar and pointless activity.

“I returned about an hour ago,” she said to her mother, as she poured herself a cup of tea from a carafe on the silver tray. “The weather looked a trifle uncertain, and we decided to hurry home, though I do not think it has actually rained.”

“I think it will soon,” Mary said, peering out the window toward the now dark sky.

“So, what do you think of Mr. Darcy?” Mrs. Bennet inquired, trying and failing to sound casual.

Elizabeth froze for a moment, and then, as understanding dawned, sat down and took a sip of tea in order to hide any amusement.

“I do not really know him in the least,” she said.

“Well, you must know something!” her mother declared. “You walked with him for at least an hour!”

“Yes, but I mostly spoke with his younger sister, Miss Darcy, who is a charming young lady. We have a great deal in common, including a delight in long walks.”

Mrs. Bennet huffed in exasperation and then smiled. “I do believe that Mr. Darcy is Miss Darcy’s guardian; did Mr. Bingley not mention that, Jane?”

“I believe so, yes,” Jane said, whose nose was in a book, though Elizabeth noticed that she was not turning the pages very rapidly.

“Well then, by all means do form a friendship with Miss Darcy; if she likes you, that will be helpful. Most men do not care a great deal whether their wives like their sisters, but Mr. Darcy might be an exception.”

Elizabeth blushed at these bold words and said, “Mamma, I do not imagine that Mr. Darcy has any interest in me except insofar as I am, I hope, an appropriate friend for his young sister. I do not pretend to know much about the Darcys, but Miss Darcy mentioned that one of their uncles is an earl. They are obviously a well-connected family.”

“But Mr. Darcy is a second son,” Mrs. Bennet said triumphantly, “and if Lady Lucas is to be believed, his estate is substantially smaller than Longbourn! He cannot expect to marry some wealthy, tonnish society lady. Do try to win him, Lizzy! If you do, Mr. Bingley might well be interested in marrying the older sister of his best friend’s wife.”

Elizabeth and Jane sighed in mutual exasperation and were grateful when the door opened and the family was called to dinner.

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*Dining Parlor*

*Netherfield*

Caroline Bingley glanced around the table and nodded her approval. While tonight's dinner would consist of only one course, she had ordered a full dozen dishes from the French cook who presided over the vast kitchen. Her brother Charles was not demanding regarding food, and Mr. Darcy, as a mere second son, was not worthy of any special attention, but she intended to marry a man of wealth and position in the world, and thus made certain that every meal was an excellent one, in order to show off her talents as mistress of a great house.

"The eldest Miss Bennet is charming," Louisa Hurst commented, taking a scoop of potatoes and putting it on her plate, "but her mother is dreadfully vulgar, and as for the two youngest – Miss Kitty, is it, and Miss Lydia? Well, they do put themselves forward in a most unbecoming way!"

Charles Bingley took a sip of wine and frowned at his older sister. "They are, admittedly, rather boisterous young ladies, but I believe them to be good at heart."

Mrs. Hurst sniffed audibly at this statement, and Miss Bingley said in a patronizing way, "Oh Charles, you are only saying that because you admire Miss Bennet's angelic features. She *is* a delightful young woman, but I do beg you to be sensible. It is not as if she is at all eligible; she has an uncle in trade who lives in Cheapside, of all places!"

Georgiana Darcy, seated by her brother near the foot of the table, frowned in disapproval but kept silent. She did not much care for Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, both of whom were proud and above their company. But she did not care to bandy words with either lady, as it was unlikely that the sisters would

pay any heed to a girl of sixteen, even if she was related to an earl.

“Miss Elizabeth is delightful as well,” Darcy remarked, cutting a portion of beef and taking a bite. When he had chewed and swallowed, he continued, “Georgiana and I had a pleasant discussion with the lady about local paths and walks of interest.”

“How very charming,” Miss Bingley said superciliously. “I am not at all surprised that Miss Elizabeth is well versed in such things. It appears that the family lives almost exclusively here in the country, except for the occasional foray into Cheapside to stay with Mrs. Bennet’s brother, a tradesman. Moreover, I understand that the estate is entailed away from the female line, and thus the Bennet women will lose their home when Mr. Bennet dies. They are not eligible at all given their poverty and lack of connections.”

Darcy clenched his jaw but did not reply. The Bingleys were a respectable family from the north of England, but their fortune was from trade, and thus Miss Bingley’s disdain was misplaced, to say the least. But she would pay no attention to any words of mild reproof, and he was too much a gentleman to actually argue with his hostess. That was Bingley’s role, but based on the beatific look on that man’s face, his friend currently was dwelling on the beautiful face and form of Miss Jane Bennet.

It was ironic, really, that Miss Bingley, one of the nouveau rich, was largely indifferent to the opinions of her brother’s best friend. The Darcys had been landowners for many generations, and they were well connected. But Miss Bingley, handsome, finely dressed, with a dowry of twenty thousand pounds, and the knowledge that she had graduated from one of the finest seminaries in England, had no use for a comparatively poor second son.

He continued eating his meal in silence, aware of a twinge of disappointment in his heart. It took him a few minutes to realize that he was unhappy that Miss Elizabeth

Bennet was not an heiress. It was unlikely that she would be, of course, with four sisters to share any inheritance, but the entail made her even less attractive as a wife.

Not, of course, that he had any real intention of offering for Miss Elizabeth. They had only met a few days ago! But he did like her, and admire her, and enjoy her company, far more than most ladies in society.

Yes, it was a pity that she was poor.

## Chapter 6

*Jane's Bedchamber*

*Longbourn*

*Midnight*

“Jane?”

“Do come in, Lizzy, and curl up under the covers.”

Elizabeth did so, eagerly enough; Jane's room, while the largest of all the sisters' bedchambers, was a trifle cold due to its position along the southwest corner of the house where it was exposed to the common winds from the west.

Elizabeth jumped into bed and pulled the covers over her body, and then huddled closer to Jane, who wrapped a comforting arm around her and asked, “What brings you here so late?” A moment later, she shuddered dramatically and continued in mock displeasure, “And why are your feet *so* cold?”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I wished to ask you about your visit to Netherfield today,” she explained. “You seemed a little upset when I saw you in the drawing room.”

Jane produced a glare in the soft light of the bedside candles. “You know me too well, dear sister.”

“Is it Mr. Bingley? Do you think he is less pleasant than you previously believed?”

“No,” Jane said, and then sighed. “No, he continues to be congenial, charming, and in every way delightful. I am inclined to agree with you about his sisters though. They were very rude today, so much so that even Mamma noticed.”

“About what?” Elizabeth demanded, sitting up with surprised indignation. Her mother was undeniably vulgar and often tiresome, but it was distressing to think of Mrs. Frances



Bennet, daughter of a solicitor, being hurt by the unkind words of their arrogant new neighbors.

“Oh, about Uncle Gardiner, and Cheapside, and living in the country,” Jane said, and wrinkled her nose. “I do not think Mamma was terribly distressed. She was far too pleased to see me in cheerful conversation with Mr. Bingley. But it worries me; I cannot deny it. If Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley are concealing excessive pride beneath a pleasant exterior, perhaps Mr. Bingley is as well?”

“I do not think that the two ladies in question hid their snobbery at the assembly,” Elizabeth declared. “I saw the way they looked down at our simpler gowns, and Miss Bingley, in particular, kept glaring at Lydia, Kitty, and Maria Lucas. The girls were being overly loud, of course, but it was hardly Miss Bingley’s place to sneer at them, given that she and her party are newly arrived in the area and thus came to the assembly as guests.”

“I did not see that,” Jane lamented.

“Well, you are inclined to see the good in everyone, dear sister. Do not distress yourself; Mr. Bingley seems a genuinely pleasant young man. You are not engaged to be married to him. If he has some hidden faults, you will doubtless discover them in time.”

Jane pondered this and said, “That is true enough. Thank you, Lizzy. Now, how was your walk with Mr. and Miss Darcy?”

“It was wonderful,” Elizabeth said promptly. “Miss Darcy is such a pleasant, vigorous young woman, and in spite of her connections, she does not put on airs like Mr. Bingley’s sisters do! She and her brother are both great walkers, and it was such a pleasure to stride briskly up the hill with them without having to slow my pace.”

“If they could keep up, they are indeed great walkers!” Jane laughed. “What did you speak of?”

“Oh, of this and that. We spoke of accomplishments; Miss Darcy is an adept on the pianoforte. We spoke of Oakham Mount and the geography of Hertfordshire. The Darcy estate of Pemberley, which is owned by the Darcys’ elder brother, is only a few miles from Lambton, where our Aunt Gardiner grew up! Is that not an interesting coincidence?”

“It is,” Jane agreed. “Our aunt has said the area around Lambton is lovely. But come, I know we are both tired and need to sleep. Now off to bed with you *and* your cold feet!”

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*Drawing Room*

*Longbourn*

*A Week Later*

The door to the drawing room flew open, and Mrs. Bennet burst through, waving her hands frantically, “Oh Jane! Jane! A carriage has just arrived, and I see Mr. Bingley in the window! Check the mirror, my dear, and ensure that you are presentable!”

Jane and Elizabeth, who were seated side by side on a near the fire, exchanged amused glances, and Jane obediently rose to her feet and walked over to a mirror on the wall. As usual, she looked thoroughly lovely, even if her dress was merely striped muslin, not silk. She was aware that Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley made a point of dressing finely to show off their wealth, but she found that more irritating than intimidating.

Two minutes later, Mr. Bingley followed the butler in, and Elizabeth was pleased to observe that Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy were with him. She was less pleased to see Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, but both ladies had obviously decided

that Jane was the best companion available here in the country, and they seemed eager to spend time with her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Miss Darcy said as soon as the appropriate greetings and salutations were completed, “I know this is very sudden, and I do beg you to refuse if you have other plans for the day, but I awoke with the sun and have a great desire to walk to Oakham’s Mount. My dear brother has agreed to accompany me, and we hoped, perhaps...”

She trailed off, blushing, and Elizabeth promptly said, “You are correct that it is a delightful day for a long walk. Yes, please let me fetch my pelisse and I will be ready in a few minutes!”

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It *was* a truly fine day, nippy and brisk but with bright sunshine and blue-washed skies. The ground was damp beneath their boots, the dirt still moist and firmly packed from the rains the previous night. Before the three walkers, Oakham Mount rose stately and tall, its summit visible through the scrubby trees.

Darcy trailed behind his sister and Miss Elizabeth, marching briskly ahead of him along the narrow path. He listened vaguely to their conversation, looking approvingly about his surroundings. Most of the wildflowers were gone, but occasionally a patch of pink or purple or white caught his eye beneath some gnarled oak.

He paused to admire a yellowhammer, perched on a branch above his head. It took off with a sharp cry, and he watched it twist in the air, its yellow breast contrasting brightly against the blue of the sky. After it alighted on a nearby branch, he took several rapid steps to catch up to the ladies.

Darcy was both surprised and delighted to find in Miss Elizabeth Bennet a walker as vigorous and enthusiastic about

the outdoors as Georgiana. She was a good deal more outgoing, however, as she easily drew his shy sister out by engaging her in pleasing conversation. He could only be grateful for her generous offer to accompany them up the Mount; the ascent was delightful and the conversation interesting.

He was thankful that he and Georgiana had come to Hertfordshire, since the scenery was charming and the people welcoming. Bingley was an exemplary companion and host, and while Darcy did not much relish the company of Bingley's sisters, they interacted with him and Georgiana very little.

"It is shorter than the *Mysteries of Udolpho*," Miss Elizabeth commented, drawing his wandering attention, "but I do not consider that a terrible thing. I thought *Mysteries of Udolpho* was turgid in many places."

"Oh, Miss Elizabeth, how can you say such a thing?" Georgiana replied, though the amusement in her tone belied any genuine indignation.

Elizabeth turned, rolling her eyes dramatically, and quoted, "'Emily had discovered in her early years uncommon delicacy of mind, warm affections, and ready benevolence, but with these were observable a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace.' Now really, Miss Darcy, does that not seem to say in twenty words what could easily be said in ten? And the whole book is like that!"

"And the *Castles of Athlin and Dunboyne* is better?"

"Yes, it is shorter and less bloated, and thus the story moves more quickly. I will confess that I am not a great enthusiast of Gothic novels, though I have read a few of them to while away a winter's evening."

Silence fell for a minute as the two ladies and accompanying gentleman climbed a steeper part of the path, which took them around a large oak tree which stretched skyward, yellow and orange leaves dancing in the faint breeze above them.

“I suppose that Mrs. Radcliffe’s books are better than *The Monk*, at any rate,” Georgiana remarked once she had recovered her breath. “Not that I have read it, of course, but I understand it to be quite disreputable.”

Darcy was aware of a twinge of surprise and alarm; *The Monk*, by Matthew Graham Lewis, was so scandalous that no maiden should read it. He was not entirely pleased that Georgiana had even *heard* of the novel.

“I have not read it either,” Elizabeth remarked as the threesome found themselves on the flat top of the hill, with a view that spread for miles in all directions. “My father has, and he said that the plot is interesting in some ways, but also foolish, and that some of the characters are nonsensical and ridiculous, and many of the plot elements are extremely unpleasant. He advised me not to read it.”

“Surely he forbade you?” Mr. Darcy said, considerably startled, and Elizabeth turned a rueful smile upon him and said, “My father has a quite unusual character, Mr. Darcy. He never sired a son and has often treated me more as son than daughter where intellectual pursuits are concerned, as I share many of his interests. He has not forbidden me from reading anything for some years, but I certainly listen to his advice and have resolved that books like *The Monk* are not true, noble, right, pure, or lovely, and thus not worthy of my attention.”

“From the fourth chapter of the letter to the Philippians,” Darcy murmured, looking at the lady with admiration.

“Precisely. Now I know that was quite a long walk, but is it not a lovely view?”

“It is,” Georgiana breathed, looking first to the north, then to the east, then to the south, and then to west. “It is even finer than from the hill on Netherfield.”

“Oakham Mount is the highest point for many miles,” Elizabeth said, lifting her hand to shade her eyes as she faced east. “I adore the way that the fields look, like a chessboard!”

“The land seems good here,” Darcy commented, as he admired the attractive pose Elizabeth had taken.

“It is, yes,” Elizabeth remarked, “though I have no doubt that yields would improve if both landowners and farmers were more willing to change with the times. Many of my father’s tenants absolutely refuse to consider the latest methods of crop rotation, for example!”

“I have had similar problems,” Darcy mused, looking on Elizabeth with respect, “and while I could, as master of the estate, *force* them to grow turnips and use marling to improve the soil, it does not truly work well to do such a thing, as an unhappy tenant is likely to work poorly on his land.”

“That has been my father’s experience,” Elizabeth said with an expressive grimace, and then added, more cheerfully, “but as the fathers hand over their farms to their sons, we are seeing some changes in farming methods. I suppose it is the way of things that change is generally gradual, not immediate.”

“That is true enough,” Darcy remarked, though inwardly he was full of wonder. Most ladies of his acquaintance were completely oblivious to the importance of farming, even though the rents from the estate’s tenants provided the funds for fine clothing, excellent food, carriages, and expensive horses.

Miss Elizabeth was, he concluded, a most unusual young lady; clever, well read, vigorous, curious, and kind. She was also, he realized, as his throat tightened oddly, remarkably handsome.

It was a great pity that she was not even moderately wealthy.

## Chapter 7

*12<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Longbourn*

Mr. Bennet had endured as much as he could stand. For the entirety of breakfast, he had been forced to listen to his two youngest daughters giggling, gossiping, chattering, and twittering about officers and their red coats, until he was nearly ready to pack himself off to Bedlam.

When there was a second's pause for breath – the first, he thought, in ten minutes – he remarked caustically, “I do believe this confirms my long-held theory that two of the silliest girls in England reside under my roof.”

Kitty went wide-eyed and silent, closing her mouth with a snap. Mrs. Bennet puffed up in indignation, but Lydia merely tossed her head. “I do not care if it is silly,” she said indifferently. “Captain Carter looks very fine indeed in his red coat, and I hope to see him often.”

Mrs. Bennet huffed irritably and said, “My dear Mr. Bennet, I am certain it is unnatural for a parent to find his own children silly!”

“Then I fear I must be considered an unnatural parent,” Mr. Bennet said unconcernedly, “for I find them very silly. Absurdly silly, even.”

His wife sniffed. “There is nothing wrong with admiring a handsome officer in a red coat. I myself cannot claim to be indifferent to the fine figure they cut!”

“I imagine not, madam,” he said dryly.

Happily the conversation was interrupted at this point by the entrance of a footman, bearing a letter for Jane. A servant had come from Netherfield, he explained, and even now awaited a reply.

Mrs. Bennet leaned forward eagerly. “What does it say, my dear?”

Jane accepted and opened the envelope with her usual serene grace.

*My dear friend,*

*If you are not so compassionate as to dine today with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of quarreling. Come as soon as you can on the receipt of this. My brother and the gentlemen are to dine with the officers.*

*Oh, Miss Darcy just entered the room, and requested the presence of Miss Elizabeth also, if your sister is available.*

*Yours ever,*

*Caroline Bingley*

Jane looked at Elizabeth, who was finishing a cup of chocolate, and lifted her eyebrows. Elizabeth nodded in return; she was not fond of Bingley’s sisters, but Georgiana Darcy was a delight.

Mrs. Bennet had, by now, taken the letter from Jane’s slack hand and was reading it with a disgruntled look on her face. “The gentlemen are dining with the officers? That is very bad luck.”

“Can we have the carriage?” Jane asked, looking at her father.

“No,” Mrs. Bennet declared, “you must go on horseback. It looks dark outside, and if it rains hard, you will have to stay all night.”

“But Lizzy does not ride!”

Her mother shrugged and said, “Then you must go alone. Miss Bingley obviously wishes for you, not Lizzy!”



“I will not go without Elizabeth,” Jane declared mulishly.

Mrs. Bennet looked startled, and then angry. “Nonsense, Jane, nonsense! One of you must marry well, and Mr. Bingley is already half in love with you! If you are required to stay overnight, you will have more opportunity to spend time with your suitor. Lizzy does not matter.”

“Nonetheless, I refuse,” Jane said, lifting her chin with determination.

Blue eyes met blue, and finally Mrs. Bennet relented. “Oh, very well, you two may take the carriage.”

Mr. Bennet, who had been watching this conversation with growing amusement, commented, “I fear that the horses are busy on the farm, my dears, and thus unavailable. I am sorry.”

Jane sighed and said, “Very well, I will send a courteous refusal.”

“Jane, no!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed in dismay.

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*15<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Netherfield*

“Are you quite certain you are feeling well enough for this?” Elizabeth asked as the horses jolted into motion.

“Yes, of course, Lizzy,” Jane replied, patting her sister’s hand reassuringly. “It was but a trifling cold.”

“You were running quite a fever on Wednesday.”

“Yes, and how very thankful I was to be comfortably situated in my own bedchamber rather than falling ill while

visiting the ladies of Netherfield. And of course I would have been thoroughly drenched if I had tried to go on horseback.”

“Indeed.”

The rest of the short journey was a silent one, as Elizabeth considered the following hours. She hoped that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst would not be too annoying. She hoped also that Mr. Bingley would spend time with Jane; for all that the man’s sisters were exasperating, Mr. Bingley himself seemed genuinely sweet tempered and amiable, and Jane was well on her way to being in love with the man.

In any case, they would see Miss Darcy, whom Elizabeth liked and admired. The girl was a trifle shy, but also robustly energetic. The brother, sister, and Elizabeth had walked together three times since the climb to Oakham Mount, and each ramble had been a delightful combination of good exercise and pleasant conversation.

Mr. Darcy was, it was obvious, a clever and well-read gentleman. He and Elizabeth had enjoyed several discussions about books, and traveling, and Napoleon, and the war. More than once, the discussion had shifted into a debate, which obviously invigorated both the lady and the gentleman, though Miss Darcy, who had a gentler nature, had often looked uneasy as her companions fervently defended his or her own position. When the girl seemed too disturbed, Elizabeth had turned the topic gracefully in another direction, and Mr. Darcy had followed her lead without hesitation.

He really was a very fine man, Mr. Darcy of Bellhaven. He was tall, intelligent, of temperate disposition, and an excellent brother. He was even a great walker. He was not rich, of course, but that mattered little to Elizabeth. She wondered whether, perhaps, the gentleman might...

The Longbourn carriage came to a sudden halt, and she shook her head to clear it of hopeful musings. A moment later, a manservant opened the door to the carriage and handed Jane out, followed by Elizabeth. Jane nodded her thanks and said, “Jack, please return at six o’clock.”

“Yes, Miss,” Coachman Jack replied, and after the servant had climbed back onto the vehicle, he set the horses in motion. Jane and Elizabeth climbed the shallow stairs to the front door, which was opened by a liveried footman, with the butler a few feet behind him.

“The ladies are waiting in the drawing room, Misses,” the butler said, and guided the two Bennet ladies into the room in question, where Bingley’s two sisters, along with Georgiana Darcy, were waiting.

“My dear Jane!” Caroline exclaimed, setting aside her needlework and standing up. “I quite despaired of finding a day when you were available to visit. Good morning, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Thank you,” Jane said, in some confusion at this thinly veiled reproach. “I fear that the horses were busy on the farm for several days, and in any case, I fell victim to a cold on Tuesday.”

“Surely you have additional horses for when the carriage is needed!” Louisa cried out.

“We do not,” Elizabeth said, a smile pinned firmly to her lips. “My father required the horses to haul loads of hay and straw for winter, and then of course it rained hard on Tuesday night, which delayed the process somewhat.”

“I am glad you are here now,” Georgiana said in a soft voice, and both Bennets smiled at her.

“My dear Miss Darcy, perhaps you would be willing to perform a song for our visitors?” Miss Bingley suggested coyly.

Georgiana looked alarmed, and Elizabeth said, “I would very much like to listen to your performance, Miss Darcy, but if you would rather not, perhaps I could play and you could turn the pages?”

The younger woman agreed immediately, and Elizabeth, after studying the music available, chose a lively Scottish aria,

which she performed with reasonable skill, though Caroline made a point of huffing every time she missed a note.

Upon completion of the piece, Elizabeth rose from the bench to be replaced by Miss Bingley, who launched into a far more complex piece of music, accompanied by Mrs. Hurst, who sang in what was undoubtedly a charming voice.

A minute after the end of this musical exhibition, the door to the drawing room opened to reveal Bingley, followed a moment later by Darcy. Bingley, who had spent the previous two hours poring over exceptionally dull estate books, almost hopped with excitement at the sight of Miss Bennet's lovely face.

"Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth!" he exclaimed, surging forward into the room. "How delightful to see you today! I had no idea that you had called!"

Jane smiled back and cast an uncertain look at Miss Bingley, who said, "I invited Jane and Miss Eliza a week ago, but it took until today for them to visit. The carriage horses were busy, you see."

"Oh, we could have sent a carriage for you!" Mr. Bingley said, and then added, "though today is a lovely day for a visit, and I am pleased to have you here."

"Thank you, Mr. Bingley," Jane said, blushing a little. "It is indeed very pleasant outside after that terrible rainstorm a few days ago."

"That was torrential!" Bingley remarked. "Is that common for Hertfordshire?"

"I certainly hope not," Caroline remarked.

"It is rather unusual," Jane said, "and of course, it rains in London too."

"Yes, but in London, there are such fascinating places to visit when the weather is poor..."

Georgiana, now released from her task of turning pages, came and sat down next to Elizabeth, who smiled at her and

said, "I do not wish to press you, but I would enjoy hearing you play the pianoforte one day."

"Oh!" Georgiana said, turning pink and looking at her brother, who was standing a few feet away, "thank you. That is, I am rather uncertain about playing to an audience, but you are so very kind that, yes, perhaps I could play for you one day."

"I would be honored," Elizabeth replied warmly, and then turned, along with everyone else, as the butler entered with a letter on a silver tray.

"An express for you, Mr. Darcy," the man said, which provoked Georgiana to gasp in astonished concern.

Darcy, too, found himself staring at the letter as if it were a poisonous snake. An express meant an emergency of some kind. At the very best, it meant an urgent problem at Bellhaven. At the worst, it meant the death among someone he held dear.

He picked up the letter, forcing his hands not to shake, grasped the letter opener from the tray, carefully slit the wax, and opened it.

*13<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Pemberley*

*Fitzwilliam,*

*Lawrence is dead. He accidentally fell down a flight of stairs last night, and when a servant discovered him this morning, he was lifeless.*

*I know that is blunt, and I apologize; I am in such a dither I hardly know what I am writing. Indeed, I hope you are able to read these words, which are penned with shaking hands.*

*Please make your way here as quickly as possible.  
There are obviously numerous details to sort out, and given  
that my child is yet unborn, we do not even know who will be  
heir of Pemberley for some weeks.*

*I am very sorry, Fitzwilliam. Please express my  
condolences to Georgiana as well.*

*With love,*

*Anne Darcy*

Darcy lifted his eyes to see that everyone in the room was staring at him with either curiosity or concern. He swallowed and turned to Georgiana, who had stood up and was gazing at him with a pale face, wide eyes, and parted lips.

“Is it ... is it Richard?” she whispered.

“No,” he said, his voice sounding peculiar in his own ears. “No, it is Lawrence. I ... he is ... he fell down a flight of stairs, my dear. I am afraid he is dead.”

Georgiana stared at her brother and wobbled in place, which prompted Elizabeth to say, “Do sit down, Miss Darcy, and Mr. Darcy, perhaps you ought to ... Miss Bingley, perhaps you could order some tea?”

“Or brandy?” Mr. Bingley asked, hurrying forward. “I am so very sorry, both of you. What an incredible tragedy!”

“It is,” Darcy agreed in a hollow tone, and found himself, to his relief, sitting on a couch next to Georgiana, who was now weeping softly into her handkerchief. Neither sibling was close to Lawrence, but he was their brother, and it was devastating to think of their proud, vibrant sibling dead from a dreadful accident.

Two minutes later, he found himself gulping down a glass of brandy. He coughed twice, wiped his handkerchief

across his eyes, which were streaming from both grief and alcohol, and tried to think logically.

“I will need to ride for Pemberley as soon as possible,” he said huskily. “Bingley, can you call for my valet? I need to speak...”

He stopped and looked down at Georgiana, who was now clutching his arm, tears painting her pale cheeks. “I wish to come with you, Brother. Please, I must return to Pemberley too!”

“Of course you must,” he said gently, reaching out and pulling her close. “But I can ride harder and faster than you can, and given the situation, the sooner I arrive on the estate, the better.”

Georgiana burst into tears at these words, and Elizabeth sat down on the other side of the girl and embraced her. “Miss Darcy, my dear friend, I am so very sorry.”

This provoked more tears, but to Darcy’s relief, Georgiana released the clutch on his coat and turned her attention to Miss Elizabeth, who whispered soothing words into her ears. Darcy stood up, aware that his thought processes were a maelstrom of confusion, but when his valet appeared a few minutes later, he was able to give the man orders, and then he turned to Bingley.

“My friend,” he said, “I have a great favor to ask. Might I leave my sister here in your care until I call for her? I intend to send a message to my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, who is in London, asking that he come and take charge of Georgiana and arrange for the journey north.”

“Of course,” Bingley said immediately, his brow furrowed in distress. “I am so grieved for you, Darcy. It is such a tragedy! But Caroline, Louisa, and I will take excellent care of Miss Darcy.”

Darcy looked over at his sister, who was still weeping into Miss Elizabeth’s shoulder, and felt mildly lightheaded. He knew that Georgiana did not particularly like either Caroline

or Louisa, and neither lady was adept at providing comfort. But he truly needed to be at Pemberley as quickly as possible.

“Mr. Darcy?”

He turned to stare at Miss Bennet, who was standing nearby, her lovely face grave with sympathy. “Yes, Miss Bennet?”

“I do not wish to appear forward, but my sister Elizabeth and I are very fond of Miss Darcy. If you like, we can make a point of spending extra hours here until the colonel arrives.”

“That would be splendid,” Darcy said instantly, and then turned a contrite look on his friend. It was not his house, after all, so he ought not to welcome neighbors for hours on end.

“Better yet,” Bingley said quickly, “perhaps you and Miss Elizabeth would be willing to stay here until the colonel arrives? I know that Miss Darcy and Miss Elizabeth are great walkers, and given the perturbation of your sister’s spirits, she might well appreciate a good friend who can walk with her?”

“That would be splendid,” the other man said, and he felt tears pricking his eyes. “Do you think your mother can spare you for a day or two, Miss Bennet? I do not think it will take long for my cousin to arrive.”

“I am confident that my mother will have no objection,” the lady responded.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said. “Please allow me to take your sister to her room. I am certain she will be more comfortable there.”

“May I see the letter from Anne?” Georgiana whispered.

Darcy hesitated and then handed it over. There was no way to deny what had occurred, and perhaps Anne Darcy’s words would help Georgiana realize how much Darcy was needed at Pemberley.



## Chapter 8

### *An Hour Later*

Georgiana's sitting room was small and cheerful, if not fashionably decorated, with furnishings that had been all the rage a decade ago, and a fireplace a little too heavy for the room's size, though it provided a delicious warmth. The furnishings and curtains were all done up in forget-me-not blue and pale pink, and a still life of some very lovely flowers hung opposite the window.

Georgiana herself, caught up in the shock of her brother's death, found no comfort in her surroundings. She was curled up on the settee near the fire, clutching her knees, her mind whirling with sorrow and dismay.

"Miss Darcy? Please, will you not take some tea?"

"I fear that I am not hungry," Georgiana said miserably, looking up as two maids entered, one with a tea tray and the other with a plate of macaroons and biscuits. Elizabeth dismissed the maids with a smile, poured a cup of tea, added milk and honey, and pressed it into Miss Darcy's hands.

"Do drink something hot," she coaxed. "It truly will make you feel better."

Georgiana sighed but obediently took a few sips, and was forced to admit that she *did* feel better. A minute later, she took a macaroon from the plate and began nibbling on it, while Elizabeth took a poker and aggressively stirred the burning wood in the fireplace, causing the flames to leap and crackle.

"Thank you," Georgiana said a minute later. "I know I am a watering pot at the moment, but I am truly grateful for your comfort and affection, especially since we have not known one another long."

“Oh, my dear Miss Darcy, it is truly a pleasure. I am only sorry that I cannot help more. How agonizing it must be to lose a sibling!”

Georgiana sighed, stared into the fire, and then turned back to gaze at her friend. “To be completely truthful,” she confessed mournfully, “I am grieved, but I never knew my older brother well. He is fifteen years older than I am, and we spent very little time together. I am sad – of course I am – but I think I am more worried as to how this will affect poor Fitzwilliam. Everything is so very complicated, with my cousin Anne pregnant and not due for another month or two, and thus we do not even know who will inherit! And now Fitzwilliam will need to manage both Pemberley and Bellhaven, and perhaps our family’s other estate, Timbreline, and I fear it will be too much!”

Elizabeth lifted her brow in surprise. “So Pemberley is entailed, then?”

“Yes, to the male line,” Georgiana said unhappily. “So if Anne’s child is a son, he will inherit. If a daughter, my brother will inherit.”

“Longbourn is entailed as well,” Elizabeth said with a sigh, “and since I have no brother, the estate will go to a distant cousin when my father dies.”

“Oh, that is dreadful! I am so sorry!”

“So am I,” her companion agreed with a grimace. “I confess I do not care much for entails away from the female line.”

Georgiana wrinkled her nose and said, “In my father’s case, I am confident that he created the entail to protect Pemberley. Not that anyone has explained the matter directly, but my older family members have talked in my presence when they did not think I was paying attention. Lawrence is ... *was* not a good master to Pemberley.”

“Oh! That is very difficult.”

“It is. I do not know everything, of course, but I overheard my brother telling my cousin Richard that if Lawrence had been born a generation earlier, he would have probably been a bosom beau to the Prince Regent.”

Elizabeth shuddered and said, “That is certainly not a positive statement!”

“It is not, and I ought not to have said such a thing to you. I am very sorry. I am usually not a gabster, but today my tongue seems to be running on wheels.”

She paused, and then burst into tears again, saying between sobs, “I do not know what truly happened, but Fitzwilliam showed me Anne’s letter, and she said Lawrence fell down some stairs and was discovered in the morning. I have to wonder – did he lie in pain for hours before expiring? It is a dreadful thought!”

“Oh, my dear!” Elizabeth exclaimed, and she pulled the younger girl into her arms.

Georgiana sobbed for some time and then, when she had recovered herself, pulled back and said, “Miss Elizabeth? Would you be willing to call me Georgiana instead of Miss Darcy?”

“Of course, and please do call me Elizabeth.”

At this moment, there was a tap on the door, and Elizabeth rose to her feet, hurried over, and opened it, to reveal Mr. Darcy, his expression worried.

“How is my sister?” he asked softly.

“She is a little better, though naturally greatly distressed,” Elizabeth replied. “But I am certain you wish to speak to her in private. I will go down and talk to Jane.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth,” he said with real gratitude.

She smiled at him and stepped past him in a swirl of skirts, and he walked over, sat down next to Georgiana, and pulled her close to him.

“My dear,” he murmured. “I am so sorry.”

“It is dreadful,” she cried out, wiping her cheeks with the handkerchief clutched in one hand. “It is worse for you, I know, since you know – knew – Lawrence better than I.”

In truth, Darcy did not like his brother very much, but there still was great sorrow at this loss, not to mention the other problems battling for supremacy in his mind.

“Georgiana,” he said, “I wished to speak to you briefly before starting on my journey north. I feel badly for leaving you here, but I must reach Pemberley as quickly as possible.”

“It is quite all right,” Georgiana said, and added shyly, “Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst are not comforting ladies, but Elizabeth has said she will stay here until Richard arrives, and I like her very much.”

“Good,” Darcy responded in relief.

“She is so real, so vibrant,” Georgiana continued, “and such a great walker! I wonder if perhaps...”

“Yes?”

Georgiana lifted her cornflower blue eyes to his and said timidly, “Is there any chance she could come to Pemberley with me and Richard? I am afraid you will be very busy, and I would like a friend there.”

Darcy stared in surprise and said, “You have only known her a few weeks. Perhaps we could see if a friend from school might be available?”

His sister shook her head decidedly at this. “I do not have any real friends from school, Fitzwilliam. Some of them pretended to like me because I am the niece of an earl and come from a wealthy family, but it was all a pretense. Elizabeth is so different! She does not care in the least about my noble relations, she never boasts about her accomplishments, and she does not gossip or denigrate other ladies.”

They both knew this was in sharp contrast to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst.

“That is true, my dear,” Darcy agreed. “Miss Elizabeth is indeed a charming young lady. It is an excellent idea, though of course Miss Elizabeth may not be able, or indeed willing, to leave her home at this time of year. But we can ask her before I leave.”

“Oh thank you, Brother!”

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*The Stables*

*Netherfield*

*Two hours later*

Bingley watched as a brisk breeze stirred the mane of the handsome bay gelding and lifted Bingley’s hair off his neck. “At least the skies are clear, with no sign of rain?” he said sympathetically. “Your trip should not be too miserable.”

“That is true,” Darcy agreed and lapsed back into silence.

The breeze picked up again, skirling fallen leaves across Bingley’s boots and carrying over the smell of horse. All around them, servants and stable hands moved about their business. Bingley looked up at his friend in silence, waiting patiently and quietly relishing the weak autumn sun on his back.

Darcy stared blankly toward the north, thinking hard. He had spoken to Miss Elizabeth and invited her to accompany Richard and Georgiana to Pemberley. He hoped and prayed that Mr. Bennet would be amenable to sending the lady north with Georgiana, though he could not truly expect it. Darcy had, after all, only met Mr. Bennet once, and it seemed

unlikely that the gentleman would entrust his daughter to a stranger. If permission was denied, he would be very disappointed, though. Miss Elizabeth Bennet was a cheerful, intelligent, vigorous, and charming lady, and Georgiana would benefit greatly from her companionship.

He had sent expresses to both Richard Fitzwilliam and the colonel's father, the Earl of Matlock. He had sent a letter to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, his aunt, who was mother to Mrs. Anne Darcy. He had sent a letter to the family solicitor. He hoped he was not forgetting something vital; it was challenging to think clearly in the midst of so much confusion.

"Are you quite certain you do not wish to leave tomorrow morning?" Bingley asked, drawing his attention. "You will not be able to ride far today."

"A few hours today means I will reach Pemberley a few hours earlier," Darcy replied, swinging up into the saddle of the gray gelding and patting the horse's neck. "It is very kind of you to let me ride Mercury."

"It is no trouble at all. Do you know where you will change horses?"

"I hope to make it to the Midnight Sun on the Barnet road. I will send a message back so that you can send a man to retrieve your horse."

Bingley nodded and said, "I will pray for a safe journey north, and you will write me when you are able?"

"Indeed. Thank you again for watching over my sister."

"It is my pleasure, of course."

Darcy nodded again and touched his heels on the horse's flanks, and he trotted away from Netherfield and from Georgiana.

## *Netherfield*

“How is Miss Darcy?” Mr. Bingley asked as Jane entered the drawing room before dinner.

“She is upset, naturally,” Jane replied, her blue eyes brimming with sympathetic tears. “Elizabeth will stay with her for dinner, and I will go up later. I think she ought not to be left alone.”

“That is very kind of you,” Bingley declared, and Caroline, who was sitting nearby, said, “Very kind indeed. I also intend to spend time with our young guest, so you and Miss Elizabeth will not be required to carry the entire burden.”

Her brother glanced at her in surprise just as the butler entered and announced dinner. Bingley held out his arms to both Jane and Caroline, who took them, and they entered the dining room, with Mr. and Mrs. Hurst walking behind them.

Dinner was, as usual, lavish and exceptionally well cooked. Bingley generally found it easy enough to engage in conversation, especially with the lovely Miss Bennet, but tonight, with the knowledge of Lawrence Darcy’s sudden death, there was a strange pall cast over the table.

The first course was being removed when Miss Bingley said, rather suddenly, “Charles, I do wonder if perhaps you and I ought to travel north with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Darcy.”

Bingley, who had been eating a very fine ragout without even noticing the taste, turned a bewildered look on his sister. “Go to Pemberley? Why?”

Miss Bingley made rather a point of cutting her meat carefully and then lifted brown eyes to meet her brother’s blue ones. “Well, he is your very good friend, Charles. He must be absolutely devastated to have lost his brother, and now he is required to take on all the responsibilities of master of Pemberley while grieving. Surely he would find it a great comfort to have you there!”

Bingley stared, put down his fork, and shook his head. “He is not master of Pemberley, Caroline.”

“Is he not? But he is the second son, and with his older brother dead...”

“Lawrence Darcy is married, and his wife is expecting a child. The child will be the heir or heiress. Darcy may well be legal guardian of the child alongside Mrs. Darcy, but *he* is not the heir.”

“Oh,” Caroline replied, and she turned her attention back to her plate.

Jane, watching sardonically, barely refrained from rolling her eyes. She had observed her hostess’s indifference to her brother’s closest friend; now, with the former heir dead, if Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was now master of a great estate, he was of far more interest to the social climbing Miss Caroline Bingley.

Alas for Miss Bingley, the unborn child of Mr. Lawrence Darcy would inherit. Jane shook her head in sympathy for the poor little tyke, orphaned before birth.



## Chapter 9

*Guest Bedchamber*

*Midnight*

A pool of tired, red-tinted light spilled out from the fireplace across the floorboards, not reaching the shadow-painted walls or the four-poster standing silent and looming in the dimness. Elizabeth and Jane huddled together under the covers on a bed rendered colorless by the low light, weary from their day. Behind them, the curtains were drawn against the moonless midnight, and further down the hall, Georgiana slept soundly in her own bed, worn out from her weeping.

“So Mr. Darcy asked me to accompany Miss Darcy north with their cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth explained in a soft voice. “Mr. Darcy will be very busy with the needs of the estate after the death of his brother, and the poor girl craves a sympathetic friend.”

“Do you *wish* to go to Pemberley?” Jane asked, staring up into the darkness.

Elizabeth shifted a little closer to her sister. “I would adore it, even if the circumstances are very difficult for the Darcys. To think of seeing the mountains and trees and lakes of Derbyshire, not to mention Pemberley, which is apparently very grand!”

“Even if it is autumn, soon to be winter?”

“Assuredly. You know how much I like winter.”

“Even if you do not know the Darcys well?”

“I know them well enough, Jane. Mr. Darcy is an honorable gentleman, and Miss Darcy – well, Georgiana, as she asked me to call her that – Georgiana is an absolute delight. But I do not know if Father will permit me to go.”

Jane was silent for a moment and then said, “If you really wish to go, tell Mother about it first. She will, without a shadow of a doubt, cajole our father into allowing you to journey to Pemberley so that you can spend time in company with Mr. Darcy. Even if he is not the heir to Pemberley, he is a gentleman in moderately comfortable circumstances.”

Elizabeth blinked in the darkness and raised herself up on one elbow. “Well, he *might* be the heir. It depends on whether his sister-in-law births a son or a daughter.”

Jane jolted in surprise and rolled over to face her sister, not that she could see anything more than a lump on the bed in the soft light of the glowing fireplace. “Pemberley is entailed?”

“Yes, like Longbourn, it is entailed to the male line.”

Jane blew out a breath and said, “Either Mr. Bingley does not know that, or he deliberately deceived his sister, not that I entirely blame him if he *was* being deceptive. Miss Bingley began prattling about how good friends they are to Mr. Darcy, and then she remarked that he must now be master of Pemberley. Mr. Bingley claimed that Mrs. Darcy’s unborn babe will be heir, regardless of the sex.”

“I daresay Mr. Bingley does not know,” Elizabeth said. “It is a most remarkable situation, after all; how often does such a scenario occur, where the master of an estate dies and his wife is pregnant, with no other living children, and the estate is entailed to the male line?”

“Not often, I suppose. I do understand why Miss Darcy wishes you to come, then; her brother will likely be terribly busy managing the estate, and there will doubtless be legal issues and the like.”

“Precisely, and she says that while she esteems her sister-in-law, she does not know her well.”

“You should go, Lizzy.”

“Do you truly think so?”

“I do.”

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*Pemberley*

*The Next Day*

Darcy's eyes landed on the lodge as he turned left from the main road onto the lane which led to the mansion itself. In his youth, old Rodgers had lived in the lodge, but it was very plainly vacant now, with dark windows staring out like the eyes of a skull, and the roof bellying disconsolately downwards. It was a depressing sight, and his frown deepened.

A breeze whispered by, and he shivered a little, grateful for the warmth of his coat. Unease stirred in his belly; he wondered how many tenants were not nearly so warm. All along the way he had seen fallen-down fences and dilapidated cottages, and cotes in desperate need of repair. Lawrence had not been a good master to the land or the tenants, and Darcy feared arriving to hundreds of pounds' worth of necessary repairs.

His horse perked up beneath him, his trot picking up speed. He had left Mercury at a posting-house earlier in the day and sent back a message for Bingley before finishing his rush towards Pemberley. It had been scarcely more than twenty-four hours since he had received the express about his brother's death.

He reined in his horse, staring up at the towering front of Pemberley House, a mixture of emotions roiling in his breast. This was the home of his childhood, of a thousand fond memories, but he had not set foot here for more than four years, ever since his last acrimonious exchange with Lawrence after their father's death.

“Sir!” a voice cried out, and Darcy looked up to see a footman rushing down the shallow steps toward him.

He swung down from his steed and greeted the man, who had served at Pemberley for more than a decade. “Thompson. It is good to see you.”

“It is very good to see you, sir,” the man replied with more enthusiasm than was entirely proper, but Darcy knew that Pemberley must be in chaos and that his arrival was necessary in calming the situation.

“Do you know where Mrs. Darcy is?” he asked, handing the reins of his horse to the man.

“I do not, sir, but Mrs. Reynolds will.”

“Take the horse to the stables and order him well cared for,” Darcy directed, and he hurried up the steps and through the great door, which swung open at his approach.

It was obvious that the news of his arrival was spreading rapidly, because a minute later, the housekeeper of Pemberley approached, her wrinkled face wreathed with smiles. “Oh, Mr. Fitzwilliam, how glad I am to see you!”

“It is wonderful to see you too, Mrs. Reynolds,” he replied genuinely. The woman had served at Pemberley for more than twenty years, and he still remembered the days when he and Lawrence and George Wickham had run through the great halls of the mansion, and the cook had handed out mince pies, and Mrs. Reynolds had scolded them fondly.

And now Lawrence was dead, and Wickham was a dissolute rake.

“Where is Mrs. Darcy?” he asked huskily, forcing himself to remain calm. He could not afford to give way to sad memories now.

“She is lying down, sir; the shock of Mr. Darcy’s death is not good for her, especially with the baby on the way. Do go up and refresh yourself, and I will have one of the servants inform you when she is available to speak to you.”

“That sounds very wise. Thank you, Mrs. Reynolds.”

“Of course. Oh, and I will have a maid bring up tea and biscuits; I daresay you have not eaten well today!”

Darcy smiled gratefully. “I have not, and thank you.”

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### *Netherfield*

Elizabeth gazed absently out the window, watching a handful of lazy snowflakes sift slowly towards the ground, twirling like autumn leaves in a brisk wind. The sky was heavy and lowering, matching the mood in the drawing room better than the bright fire and cheerful furnishings. Georgiana was warm and miserable at her right shoulder, with Jane seated just beyond the younger girl. Caroline Bingley sat at the pianoforte, a slow and solemn piece trickling into the air from her accomplished fingers. Mrs. Hurst sat alone in her chair, staring absently into the fireplace as her fingers traced over and over the stones of her bracelets.

“Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam,” the butler announced.

Georgiana jumped to her feet and hurtled over to embrace her military cousin. “Richard! I am so thankful to see you!”

“I am very sorry I was not able to come yesterday, gosling,” he replied, kissing her gently on the cheek. “I was temporarily away from the barracks when the express arrived, and I only returned this morning.”

“It is quite all right,” Georgiana replied, retreating and wiping her cheeks. “I was not lonely thanks to the presence of my wonderful friends. Ladies, may I please introduce you to my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam? Richard, Mrs. Hurst, Miss Bingley, Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam bowed to all the ladies, and they curtsied in return, and Elizabeth said, "I am certain you wish to speak to your cousin alone, Colonel. Jane and I will be upstairs, Georgiana."

"Now that the colonel is here, I daresay you will be returning to Longbourn soon," Caroline said in a minatory accent.

"Yes, we will send for our carriage, Miss Bingley, thank you," Elizabeth said, and smiled at Georgiana before leaving the room with rapid steps. Miss Bingley, torn between her admiration for the son of an earl, and disdain that the gentleman in question was a mere second son, said, "Colonel, when you are ready, I will have the housekeeper show you to your room."

"Thank you, Miss Bingley," Richard replied with a dramatic bow, and he waited for the two ladies to leave before guiding his young cousin to a warm place near the fire.

"My dear girl, I am so very sorry about Lawrence," he said.

She clung to him, relishing the smell of wood smoke clinging to his red coat and murmured, "Perhaps the most tragic aspect of it is that I do not truly mourn Lawrence; I mourn what could have been. I hardly knew him, you know."

"There was a substantial difference in ages."

"Yes, and Lawrence never had much time for me, and I know it. Fitzwilliam told me a few weeks ago about the trade which allowed him to become my guardian along with you."

"Is that ... pleasing to you?"

"Oh, very much so! I never thought that Lawrence cared a straw about my needs and wants, whereas I always knew that I could depend on you and Fitzwilliam to care for me."

"You are correct," the colonel said. "I realize the coming months will result in changes for everyone, but your

brother's love for you will never diminish and neither will mine."

## Chapter 10

### *Pemberley*

The east sitting room had always been a favorite of Darcy's mother, Lady Anne. It faced out toward the lake and was decorated in blues and greens and aqua, which resembled, to some degree, the colors of the ocean. Darcy had fond memories of his mother sitting in a rocking chair, reading books or sketching. After Georgiana's birth, Lady Anne's health had declined, and she often had no more strength than to sit quietly, but Darcy could still remember that brilliant smile on Lady Anne's face at the sight of her children.

Now the sitting room held another Anne, his cousin by birth, his sister-in-law by marriage, now the widow of Lawrence Darcy. She was seated on a blue wingbacked chair, dressed in the unremitting black of deep mourning, her abdomen swelling large from the presence of new life.

"Anne," Darcy said, "I am so very sorry."

"I am sorry too," Anne replied, lifting her face to reveal red eyes, a white face, and lips so pale as to appear bloodless.

He sat down across from her and regarded her with grave concern. "I wish there was some way to turn back time, but alas I cannot. Is there anything I can do for you, Anne?"

She shuddered at these words and lifted her hands to cover her eyes, her shoulders shaking. After a minute, she lowered her hands into her lap and said, "Indeed, there is much you can do, if you are willing. I cannot ... there are so many business details, and questions about ... about Lawrence's death, and the baby, and the household, and the estate, and the tenants. I simply cannot bear it, I cannot!"

She began sobbing, deep, wracking sobs, and an older maid, who had been lurking near the door, hurried forward and



began clucking and soothing the distraught lady. Darcy waited uncomfortably for three full minutes before the weeping woman calmed, and then he said, “Anne, pray do not concern yourself in the least. Your task is to care for yourself and the child. I will do everything else.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, her head in her hands.  
“Thank you.”

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### *Longbourn*

“I will miss you, Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet said mournfully.

“Oh, come now, Mr. Bennet!” Elizabeth’s mother cried out. “It is not as if Lizzy is disappearing forever into the wilds of Derbyshire! Though of course if Mr. Darcy were to ask for your hand in marriage, you will not say nay to him!”

“Oh, Mamma!” Elizabeth replied, blushing furiously, “I do not think that Mr. Darcy has any such thing in mind. Besides, I suspect that he will be terribly busy with the estate, with the succession in doubt!”

“Entails are such dreadful things!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed, turning an indignant look on her husband. “I do not know why you and Mr. Darcy are so keen on throwing girls out of their homes merely because they are not boys!”

Elizabeth opened her mouth and then shut it with a deep sigh. She and Jane had tried, many a time, to explain entails to their mother, and had always failed. Furthermore, she needed to finish packing her trunk.

She smiled at her father and made her way upstairs, where she found Mary standing outside her room with a black shawl in her hands.

“Lizzy, would you like my shawl? I know, of course, that you need not be in mourning, but you might like to wear black on occasion to show your respects? But if you would rather not...”

“I am most grateful, Mary,” Elizabeth declared, leaning forward to kiss her sister on the cheek and then taking the shawl from her hands. “Do take care, my dear, and if you have time, please write! I have no doubt that I will have an interesting time in Derbyshire, but I will long for news from home.”

“I promise that I will.”

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*Office*

*Pemberley*

Darcy looked around the office with an odd numbness. He had many cherished memories of seeing his father seated at the imposing oak desk, bent over some ledger or account or correspondence. Shelves lined the walls, once neatly-organized and pristine. But now a layer of dust lay over everything, the desk was awash in loose papers and books left untended, and some long-gone spider had spun a web between a cracked leather volume, an unpolished candlestick, and what appeared to be a letter.

He was still sitting limply behind the desk, daunted by the task of cleaning up before he could even begin to tackle the books, when a tap at the door alerted him to the butler, Mr. Pembroke. Darcy had been relieved to discover Pembroke still in his position as butler, as Lawrence was rather inclined to discharge servants as the fancy struck him. Fortunately, both Mrs. Reynolds and Mr. Pembroke had managed to please the master of Pemberley the last five years.

“Pembroke,” Darcy said, standing up. “Please do come in. I need your help.”

“Of course, sir,” the man replied. Pembroke hesitated for a moment and then said, “If I may, sir, I wish to express my condolences on the loss of Mr. Lawrence.”

“Thank you. It is indeed both a shock and a sorrow. I have a great deal to do, of course, concerning the estate, and given that Mrs. Darcy is so distraught, require your assistance in determining what happened during my brother’s last days. When did he arrive from London?”

“He and his friends had only arrived the previous day from London, sir.”

“Did Mrs. Darcy come with them?”

“No, sir, she did not travel to London with Mr. Darcy,” Pembroke explained. The man cleared his throat and said carefully, “Given the lady’s delicate condition, it seemed better for her to remain quietly at home.”

“Indeed,” Darcy agreed, suppressing a frown. Given that Anne had miscarried the previous two pregnancies, he thought that Lawrence should have stayed at Pemberley instead of racketing about Town. On the other hand, given that the marriage between Lawrence and Anne had been one of convenience, and that husband and wife had nothing in common, there was every reason to think that Anne preferred her husband to be as far away from her as possible.

“Mr. Lawrence was in a rather poor temper that day; there was a problem in his bedchamber, a leak in the window that had been hidden by the curtains. He and his guests imbibed rather a lot of drink, including some of your father’s brandy laid down some years ago. The gentlemen went to bed very late. It was no great surprise when Mr. Darcy did not descend to breakfast, but when his valet went into the room at noon with shaving water, the bed was unoccupied.”

“Was my brother in bed when the maid came in early to sweep the fire?” Darcy asked.

Pembroke sighed and said, "I interviewed Mabel on the matter, but she, while a good, willing worker, is not particularly bright. The curtains were drawn closed and it was dark, and she does not know whether the master was there or not. She scurried in, did her required tasks, and scurried out."

"And then what?" Darcy asked.

"Mr. Astley, the master's valet, had put his master to bed the previous night and was thus confused as to his absence, but he assumed that perhaps Mr. Lawrence was visiting one of his friends in the guest wing. When he could not find him in the next thirty minutes, he sent word to the stables, wondering if perhaps the master had decided on an early morning ride, though that seemed unlikely."

"Indeed," Darcy said again. His brother had always been a late riser, and not inclined to rush off to the stable for a ride to invigorate himself. For that matter, neither had Lawrence been inclined to ride out to assist a tenant farmer in the midst of an emergency. The man had been an idle and extravagant master of Pemberley.

"When the stable master sent back word that he had not seen Mr. Darcy that day, Astley grew alarmed. He spoke to me, and I ordered the servants to begin searching the mansion. One of the footmen found Mr. Darcy in the wine cellar. He was lying at the bottom of the stairs, with a, well, a serious contusion on his head, sir. Naturally the footman, who was quite shaken, checked for signs of life, but it was obvious that he had passed on some hours previously."

"Did my brother often go down to the cellars in search of wine?"

Pembroke shook his head, his forehead crinkled with bewilderment. "No, sir, never. It was most peculiar for Mr. Darcy to seek stimulant on his own. He has always called for me or the under butler in the past when needing wine or brandy or anything of the sort."

Darcy sighed, then asked, “Which friends accompanied Mr. Darcy to Pemberley?”

“There were four, sir; Mr. Stewart, the younger son of the Earl of Rigsby; Mr. Plumper, heir to a small estate in Essex; Sir Peter Rathsby; and Mr. Wickham.”

Darcy felt his jaw tighten at this last name, but he merely nodded. It was no surprise to find Wickham here at Pemberley. The man, son of a former steward of Pemberley, godson of Darcy’s father, was as dissolute and extravagant as Darcy’s brother but without the wealth to sustain such a lifestyle. Wickham, no fool, had latched onto Lawrence Darcy a decade previous, and in the subsequent years had enjoyed living lavishly on Pemberley money.

Lawrence, in turn, had presumably enjoyed the pleasures of a good looking companion who toadied him relentlessly. Darcy suspected that Wickham had also provided other services, such as finding wenches for his brother’s enjoyment, but he preferred not to think of such things.

Darcy thoroughly disliked Wickham, and he was not looking forward to dealing with the man.

“All four gentlemen are still staying in the guest quarters, then?” he asked.

“No, sir. Within hours of the discovery of your brother’s death, Mrs. Darcy requested that all four men remove to the inn in Lambton or depart for their homes. She felt herself incapable of managing her husband’s friends in the midst of her sorrow, nor did she think it appropriate to have them here as the household went into deep mourning.”

“That was sensible,” Darcy said in approval. He blew out a breath and said, “So when my brother was found, I assume Dr. Graham was summoned?”

“No, sir. Most regrettably, Dr. Graham was some twenty miles away, caring for Lord Seymour’s younger son, who fell off of a horse and badly hurt his leg. But Mr. Tilbury, the

apothecary from Lambton, was available and came in haste. It was he who spoke at the inquest.”

Darcy jolted noticeably at these words. “The inquest?”

“Yes, sir,” Pembroke said, his lips tight with disapproval. “Lord Keyton, the local justice of the peace, and Mr. Whipple, the coroner, insisted that there be an inquest.”

His new master rubbed his forehead and said, “I confess to being surprised given that it was obviously an accident.”

“Yes, sir, and indeed it took the jury only a few minutes to rule it an accidental death.”

The butler cleared his throat and added, delicately, “I do not wish to pass on gossip, sir, but one of the upper servants heard from her sister, who is in service in Lord Keyton’s household, that given Mr. Lawrence Darcy’s standing in the community, it seemed wise for there to be an inquest to silence any foolish whispers on the matter.”

“I suppose that makes sense. I confess that I do not regret that the inquest took place before I arrived in Derbyshire. It would have been most uncomfortable.”

“I understand, sir. Indeed, there were a few mutterings at the inquest that you *ought* to be present, but such proceedings are generally held within forty eight hours of death, for obvious reasons.”

Darcy, considering the result of waiting long to bury a corpse, could only shudder. “Quite. So we are free to bury my brother tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

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*On the Road to Pemberley*

Richard swayed with the carriage around a turn, unspeakably grateful for a well-sprung and well-tended carriage. The conveyances on the Peninsula had been jarring, rattling things that disgorged their travelers with an interesting array of new bruises. It was lovely to be sitting beside a window, sunlight peeping in, rather than enclosed in a gloomy smelly box.

Thankfully, he would not be across the Channel for some time, because his commanding officer had given him open ended leave to help the Darcys sort out their problems. His boots would be firmly planted on good English ground for a considerable while, and it was a prospect he relished.

Across from him, Georgiana and Miss Elizabeth were chattering together merrily without any need for his input. Mile after mile had passed in this manner, and he now knew the answer to an earlier question. Why would Darcy invite country miss Elizabeth Bennet along to Pemberley?

Miss Elizabeth was not merely pleasing to the eye. She was also a vivacious, outgoing, and cheerful companion for shy, uncertain Georgiana. She would be a steadfast friend to his cousin in the midst of upheaval; tactful, steady, and comforting.

His mind drifted to Lawrence. He was sorry, of course, that his cousin had passed. But war on the Continent lent a certain pragmatism of mind that continued no matter the situation, and this pragmatism had him acknowledging that it was better for Pemberley and her tenants for Lawrence to be dead. The man had been selfish and dissolute, caring for little save himself and some passing fondness for his cronies. He had been a terrible master to the estate and a poor husband to Anne.

Pemberley would flourish under Fitzwilliam Darcy's care. Even if Anne's child turned out to be a boy, the lad would grow up under wise tutelage and loving adults. Even if Lady Catherine de Bourgh sailed in to take over – which was

quite likely – though she might be autocratic and dictatorial, at least she would not lead the boy into a hedonistic lifestyle.

“I have lived with Fitzwilliam for the last four years,” Georgiana commented to her friend, drawing the colonel’s attention, “and we have not visited Pemberley in that time. We met Lawrence in London several times, but Fitzwilliam has been working hard at Bellhaven and never found the time to travel north to Pemberley.”

This was, Richard knew, a tactful representation of the truth. The reality was that the two Darcy brothers had been on very poor terms for many years, and the younger brother had made a point of avoiding Lawrence as much as he could. On those rare occasions when they had met in Town, the presence of older relations had provided a buffer between the two men who, regardless of their shared parentage, were incredibly different from one another.

“I am looking forward to seeing your family’s estate,” Elizabeth said, “though I am certain it will be painful for both of you to be staying in the place where your elder brother met such a sad end.”

Georgiana blew out a slow breath and said, “I am most sorry for my sister-in-law, Mrs. Darcy, and her unborn child. To lose a husband at such a young age! And the poor child is already an orphan!”

“It is very sad,” Elizabeth agreed, sympathetic tears clinging to her eyelashes, “but I am certain that Mrs. Darcy will find great comfort in the support of her relations.”

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### *Pemberley*

“I will have the other accounts available to you tomorrow, sir,” Mrs. Reynolds declared.



“Thank you,” Darcy said, glancing at the book his housekeeper had just given him. He was frankly afraid to look at the sums within, fearful of just how much Lawrence had been spending on wines and brandies and exotic furniture, but he also knew that before he could fix Pemberley’s problems, he needed to understand the situation.

“If I may say so, sir, you ought to go to bed,” Mrs. Reynolds said kindly. “You have had a long and hard day.”

Darcy stared at her and realized that his eyes were unfocused due to fatigue. “You are correct, Mrs. Reynolds. Thank you, and thank you for being here. I ... well, I am enormously relieved that both you and Mr. Pembroke are still here at Pemberley.”

“I am glad to be here too. Now do go on, Mr. Fitzwilliam, and rest.”

Darcy ascended the stairs slowly, distantly glad that they at least did not creak. His hand rested heavy on the rail in his weariness, and he paused at the top of the stairs to let his eyes adjust to the gloom; there were few candles lighting the upstairs corridor in a bid to save a few pounds.

Acclimated after a few seconds, he proceeded down the hall to the room that had been his since boyhood. The hinges to this door creaked loudly, he noticed wryly; likely it had not been opened in the few years since his departure until the urgent express had been sent to him upon his brother’s death.

His heart lifted slightly at the sight of his valet Percy already laying his nighttime garments out upon the freshly-aired quilt on the bed. Percy turned towards him, his face the mask of consummate professional but his eyes warm. Darcy gratefully accepted the assistance in shrugging out of his coat and changing into his night garments. “Thank you, Percy, that will be all,” he said, tying the sash of a wine-colored dressing gown.

“Very good, sir,” Percy replied and promptly vanished silently out the door to seek his own bed in his quarters.

Darcy cast a long thoughtful look at the coverpane turned back awaiting him, then sighed and wandered away from the inviting four-poster. A decanter of his favorite brandy – one of the few tastes he had shared with his elder brother – was sitting on the table beside the familiar old armchair, and he poured himself a measure before sinking down onto the plush velvet chair, the fire close at hand a warm comfort.

He let his gaze wander across his chamber, feeling surreal. The room had not been changed at all in his absence, though Mrs. Reynolds had clearly ordered it well-dusted and aired before his arrival. He could almost believe, as his eyes drifted across the old ormolu clock on the mantelpiece, the heavy brown brocade curtains, and the red leather-bound volumes on the bookshelf that had been a gift from his father, that nothing at all had changed since his boyhood.

Absurd, of course; so very much had changed. His self-exile from Pemberley to save the budding Georgiana, the estate run into the ground by his dissolute older brother who was now dead. There was no returning to those halcyon days he held in such fond memory.

Darcy shook his head, scolding himself for his melancholy. It did little good, of course. His soul could not recover so easily from the loss of his brother and the sudden weight of responsibility that had landed so abruptly and heavily upon his shoulders. His mind filled with memories of running the halls of Pemberley with Lawrence when they had been boys, back when they were still friends. In the latter years Georgiana would dash after them, so desperately wanting to be included...

He missed his sister dearly. He would be glad when Georgiana and her companions arrived at Pemberley. It would be lovely to be reunited with his dear sister, but it was also true that Richard's steady head and good sense would be a boon in navigating the business of Pemberley, and Miss Elizabeth would brighten any room she was in.

She would enjoy the parklands, he thought. Doubtless she and Georgiana would wander the grounds as often as the weather permitted. He hoped he would be able to take some time away from business to join them on occasion. Darcy was grateful indeed that Mr. Bennet had given permission for her to journey north to Derbyshire.

Darcy went to sip his brandy and discovered, to his surprise, that he had finished it while lost in his thoughts. He looked into the glass wryly, set it aside, and stood, moving over to the bed. He paused, blowing out the candles, and laid his dressing gown aside.

A maid had placed a warming pan earlier in the evening, and he stretched luxuriously down to the warmth. He did not expect to be able to sleep anytime soon, his mind still teeming with thoughts, but slowly the sight of the dancing fire across the room slid into troubled dreams.

# Chapter 11

*The Chapel*

*Pemberley*

*The Next Day*

Darcy paused briefly outside the chapel door, the half-mile path back to the house stretching behind him. He took a moment to brace himself, head down, before pushing the door open with a sad creak.

The air of the chapel, cold as a crypt, washed out and over him, and he shivered a little as he stepped inside. The walls danced with wildly leaping shadows, as numerous wax candles flickered madly in the sudden draft. The two maids seated stiffly upright on the front pews turned to look, the black ribbons on their caps fluttering slightly, and he nodded to them as he moved down the aisle.

“I shall stay with the body for a time,” he said, and they both gathered themselves and left.

Anne, he knew, should have been the one sitting vigil over the body, but in her delicate condition, it was considered inadvisable. He had no doubt that she had, however, chosen the mourning drapes which hung over the stained glassed windows and covered the rearmost pews.

He paused at the end of the nave and took a deep breath before stepping forward to look down into the coffin. Lawrence looked peaceful, far more peaceful than he ever had in life, his eyes closed and face relaxed in what could almost be repose. Darcy had rarely seen him so calm, as the two brothers had been at odds for many years.

Darcy’s breath hitched, his throat tightening shut. Darcy had disapproved of almost all his elder brother’s habits; the strong drinking and gluttonous eating, the gambling and lightness with women, the disdain for the care of Pemberley

and her tenants. But still, brothers they had been, and now he would never have the opportunity to try and set things right between them.

The deceased had been dressed in his best coat, and some part of Darcy's mind noted that Lawrence had gained some not inconsiderable weight since last they met. He wondered distantly if an apoplexy, or perhaps a stroke, had contributed to his brother's fall and demise. Not, he supposed, that it mattered much now. However Lawrence Darcy had come to fall, he was dead, at scarcely more than thirty years of age.

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### *Pemberley*

Darcy was consulting with Mrs. Reynolds in the main hall when a footman leaped forward to open the door, and a man, dressed neatly in a black frock coat and hat, stepped into the large vestibule.

"Doctor Graham?" Darcy exclaimed, walking over to the man. "How good to see you!"

The doctor looked briefly confused, and then his eyes lit up. "Mr. Fitzwilliam! I am glad to see you, though I grieve the reason for your arrival here. My condolences over the loss of your brother."

"Thank you, sir. May I inquire as to why you are here?"

"I am attending to Mrs. Darcy," the doctor replied, glancing toward the staircase which led to the upper floor. "I am responsible for her care."

"Of course," Darcy said and then added impulsively, "Dr. Graham, I would like to see you after your examine my sister-in-law. Do you have time?"

A shade of unease crossed the physician's face, but he merely said, "Of course, sir."

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*The Office*

*One Hour Later*

Darcy was toiling over the estate books when a footman opened the door and gestured for Doctor Graham to enter.

"Dr. Graham, thank you for seeing me," Darcy said, standing up and holding out his hand. "Please, will you not sit down?"

"Thank you, sir," the man replied.

"Is Mrs. Darcy well?" Darcy asked hesitantly. On the one hand, he felt awkward inquiring about Anne's health; she was his sister-in-law, not his bride. On the other, as the de facto master of Pemberley, for the moment anyway, he wished to know whether there was anything he could do to assist and succor the lady.

"She is well enough," the doctor said. "I am pleased with the progression of her pregnancy, and do not think her husband's death has caused any substantial diminution in her health."

Darcy relaxed and smiled, "That is very good news."

"It is."

Darcy looked out the window toward the lake which was glistening placidly in the sunlight, and then turned back toward his guest. "Dr. Graham?"

"Yes?"

Darcy sighed and said, "I do not wish to be intrusive, but I wondered if perhaps my brother Lawrence had any

specific health problems that you were aware of? Heart problems? Gout? I confess to being rather bewildered at his fall down the stairs. He was, in his youth, rather light on his feet, though I noticed that he had, erm, gained some weight.”

The doctor turned to stare into the flames of the fireplace for a minute and then turned back. “Mr. Darcy, with all due respect, I think that it would be best for you not to concern yourself with such things. Your brother’s death was a great tragedy, but life ... unfortunately, life must go on.”

Darcy stared at the doctor, and felt his breath catch in his throat. He had known Graham for many years, and there was something in the man’s tone...

“Dr. Graham, what are you saying?”

Graham cleared his throat, bit his lip, and then said, “I am saying that an inquest was held, and the jury ruled it an accidental death. Nothing more can be done.”

Now Darcy felt sick. He shook his head and gazed at his guest. “Doctor, please, are you suggesting that perhaps ... are you saying that my brother’s death was not accidental?”

The older man grimaced and turned an intent look on the taller man. “Sir, do you truly wish to know my thinking on this matter of your brother’s death? Because once I have said what I think, it cannot be unsaid.”

Darcy felt a sudden lurching feeling in his stomach, as if he was on the top of a cliff and close to falling, but he had never backed away from uncomfortable truths, and he would not do so now.

“Doctor, if you have any concerns about Lawrence’s death, I beg you will tell me at once.”

Graham sighed deeply and leaned back in his chair. “The truth is that I have concerns, but no proof, which is why I am telling you this with the greatest reluctance. I do not know if you are aware that last week, I was called urgently to Lord Seymour’s estate of Gray Valleys in order to treat my lord’s younger son, who was thrown from a horse.”

“I did hear that, yes. I hope the lad will recover?”

“He was quite badly injured but he will, at least, survive. In any case, I spent several nights at Gray Valleys and did not learn of Mr. Lawrence Darcy’s death until I returned to Lambton. By that time the inquest was completed, with my fellow medical man, Mr. Tilbury, giving evidence.”

“And?”

The older man grimaced and said, “I called on Mrs. Darcy within hours of the inquest, as I was concerned about her health after the shocking death of her husband. Then I confess that I gave into professional curiosity. The body of your brother had been released for burial, and I decided to see if I could determine what had truly happened. What I found was disturbing, but by no means definite. Given that the inquest was over, and the ruling of accidental death made, and that I am not certain – truly, Mr. Darcy, I am not – that there was foul play, I chose to keep quiet about my suspicions.”

Darcy rubbed his forehead and asked, “What concerns you about my brother’s body?”

“There are on some strange scratches on both of his upper arms which appear to have been caused, perhaps, by fingernails, and additional bruising on his abdomen which seemed odd given that when someone falls, they usually curl up to protect their internal organs. Moreover, the injuries to your brother were strangely grievous given that he was said to have fallen only a half flight of stairs in the cellar. Bluntly, given that the stairwell to the cellar includes a turn, I do not see how he could have fallen so hard as to break his neck, which he undoubtedly did.”

Darcy groaned aloud and kneaded his forehead with his fingers. “Have you told anyone else about your conjectures?”

“Certainly not. It is not my place to do so, especially with the inquest completed. Indeed, I still believe that you had best forget all about it.”

“Forget that my brother might have been murdered?”



The doctor cringed at this blunt statement, and he said, “Given that I am not certain that there was foul play, yes. It would cause a great deal of talk and whispering in the community if anyone raised doubts about the verdict at the inquest. I am confident that you have no wish for scandal attached to your name.”

Darcy moaned and said, “That is true enough. I understand your perspective, Doctor.”

“In any case, I have shared my thoughts, and I will henceforth keep quiet unless you wish me to speak of my observations. I trust you to do what is right, Mr. Darcy.”

“Thank you,” his host said, wondering what was, in fact, the right thing to do.

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### *The Golden Daffodil Inn*

#### *Derbyshire*

Elizabeth settled gratefully onto the plush brown chair in the sitting room which was between her bedchamber and Georgiana’s chamber, while Colonel Fitzwilliam’s room sat across the hall.

Adjacent to her, the colonel was moving a frilly yellow cushion to take his own seat, a glass of brandy in his hand. A modest table, covered by a fresh yellow tablecloth, held a cut glass decanter of spirits along with an elegant tea service. Elizabeth leaned forward to pour the tea.

“I do wish we could have journeyed the rest of the way tonight,” Georgiana fretted, wandering over to lift the heavy curtain in order to stare out into the darkness.

Elizabeth, who was seated near the fire across from Richard Fitzwilliam, said, “I am certain you do, but the days

are so short in November that it would have been dangerous to continue. We do not wish for a carriage accident, after all.”

“I wish the moon was full,” the girl complained.

Richard and Elizabeth exchanged amused glances, and the colonel stood up and wandered over to embrace his young cousin. “It is very rude of the moon to be so inconveniently dark tonight.”

Georgiana laughed reluctantly. “I know I am being silly, but I am so worried about Fitzwilliam!”

“Your brother is a capable man, my dear,” Richard replied, guiding her back to the fire and pushing her gently into a seat next to Elizabeth. “The most important thing is that we arrive safely at Pemberley. In the express he sent me, he requested that I take good care of you and Miss Elizabeth, and I assure you that I mean to fulfill my task appropriately!”

Georgiana giggled and said, “It is not that I can truly do much at Pemberley, of course. But perhaps I can provide some comfort as Fitzwilliam struggles to manage all the burdens now on his shoulders. Moreover, you can help with any details concerning the ... the burial and the like.”

“True,” Richard agreed and walked over to pull open a window, which let in a blast of cool air. The man sniffed the air solemnly and then pushed the window shut again.

“I am held to be quite a prognosticator of the weather, ladies,” Richard said, “and I do believe tomorrow will be fair. We will arrive at Pemberley by noon.”

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*Graveyard*

*Pemberley Chapel*

*The Next morning*

Darcy shivered in the hollow wind, which was whistling around the chapel walls and sticking icy searching fingers straight through the wool of his greatcoat. He thanked God that the sun was out rather than a drizzle or hard rain to add to the chill. At his feet an open grave gaped, ready to receive Lawrence Darcy into the family plot. The gravediggers loitered not far away, leaning on their shovels and yawning as they waited for the next part of their work.

Behind Darcy, the steward and the butler waited in silence, respectfully bareheaded. No other mourners were present as Darcy had thought it inadvisable to wait indefinitely until Lord Matlock and Richard Fitzwilliam could arrive. He would have much to discuss with them once they did, but there was no reason to leave the body decomposing in the chapel in the meantime.

When he had sent a servant into Lambton, Darcy had discovered that all of his brother's friends had departed to their own homes the previous day. George Wickham was the only exception – likely because he did not have a home of his own to whence he could return. Darcy had not been inclined to invite George Wickham, whom he thoroughly disliked, to the funeral.

The back door of the church opened with a discordant screech of rusty hinges, and Darcy looked over. He watched as half a dozen footmen – for he had not been able to bring himself to ask such a task of the long-neglected tenants – bore the coffin upon their shoulders.

The casket was lowered into the ground with due gravity, and then the footmen stepped back. Darcy knelt to take a handful of dirt and toss onto the coffin lid, feeling his eyes welling with tears. It hit him anew as he stood there now, he would never have chance to make peace with his brother. Lawrence would never have a chance to meet his child or to see Georgiana blossoming into the young lady she was so rapidly becoming.

Darcy feared that his elder brother had not taken time to make his peace with God, either, and that thought was even worse than the rest. But there was no more he could do for Lawrence. Now he must attend to the estate and the business matters that had outlived his brother.

## Chapter 12

*On the Road to Pemberley*

*The Next Day*

“We will make the turn onto the lane in a few minutes,” Georgiana said, peeking eagerly through the window of the carriage. “Then we will drive for a full mile before reaching the house itself.”

Elizabeth leaned over to peer past her companion’s blonde head. They were passing a broken-down old lodge, which imagination easily painted into a charming house with trimmed shrubs surrounding it.

A vast forest spread out to either side of them, the path lined by horse-chestnuts and sweet-chestnuts and lime trees, followed by a section composed of oaks and sycamores and beeches. The road wound slowly upwards, a leisurely ribbon up the incline, the woodland falling away behind them.

They crested the hill into a nearly shadowless sunshine, with the sun teetering at its peak in the sky, and Georgiana made a happy little sound. Pemberley House stood right across the valley from them, a handsome edifice that drew the eye to its perch atop the ridge. Symmetrical wooded hills marched up behind it like a well-formed company headed by their general.

A stream ran down before it, burgeoning into a laughing burbling rush before flowing off out of sight into the valley. Its banks had been left untended for too long, overgrown into a wilderness, but it was nonetheless charming.

The carriage started down the zigzagging road, hiding the entirety of the view from sight. Elizabeth sat back against the cushions, mind full of the wild beauty she had just seen.

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*The Office*

*Pemberley*

“A carriage has arrived, sir.”

Darcy, who had succeeded in organizing the desk in the office to his liking, though the various shelves remained in a disheveled state, pushed his chair back, hopped to his feet, and hurried past his butler, down the long front corridor of Pemberley, through the front door, and down the stone steps, in just enough time to reach in and hand out his sister.

“Georgiana!” he cried out, saluting her on the cheek. “I am so glad you are here!”

“I am glad too,” she said, smiling shyly and stepping out of the way. Darcy’s eyes lit up as Miss Elizabeth descended with the help of a footman, followed, a moment later, by his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.

Darcy felt his heartbeat quicken at the sight of his guest’s cheerful countenance and pleasing form, though he managed to say calmly, “Miss Bennet, I am delighted to see you as well. I hope your journey was pleasant, as well as quick?”

“It was a very good one, sir,” Elizabeth replied, looking around with interest. “Pemberley is absolutely marvelous, Mr. Darcy. I have rarely seen such fine parkland, and the forests are magnificent!”

“Thank you,” he said, aware of an odd stirring in his heart, one of pride, and yes, bittersweet gladness. He had, by necessity, forced himself not to think overmuch of Pemberley; it had been Lawrence’s domain for five years, and Darcy had not expected he would ever again spend much time in the home of his birth given the dislike between the two brothers.

Now he might be the heir, or perhaps he was not, but Lawrence was dead, and he was still very much alive. He was pleased that he had, at last, returned home.

“You will all wish to refresh yourselves,” Darcy said, pulling himself together. “Mrs. Reynolds has prepared your rooms. Miss Elizabeth, I hope you will not mind being settled in the family wing near Georgiana? We might have some other visitors coming soon, and I prefer to leave the guest wing available for them.”

Georgiana, who had brightened at the news that Elizabeth would be settled near her, now wrinkled her nose in some perturbation, though she obediently began climbing the steps with her hand on her brother’s arm, while Elizabeth accepted Colonel Fitzwilliam’s arm.

“Which relatives?” the girl asked in an uneasy tone.

“Well, Lord Matlock will be here as soon as he can, I am certain.”

“Yes, indeed,” Colonel Fitzwilliam commented from behind the siblings. “My father may well require a day or two to complete necessary business in London, but he will come north as soon as possible.”

“I am certain he will be very helpful,” Georgiana said, and continued, “who else?”

“I am quite certain that Lady Catherine will arrive here as well in the next few days, though she has farther to travel of course.”

“Oh Brother!” Georgiana cried out in dismay and then blushed deeply just as a liveried footman, with black bands on his sleeves and black gloves on his hands, opened the door.

There was no time to respond to this utterance; as soon as the foursome entered the vestibule, Mrs. Reynolds, dressed in a black gown with a white mob cap decorated with black ribbons, hurried forward to greet them all. “Miss Darcy, oh, how good it is to see you again! And Mr. Fitzwilliam – but it is

Colonel Fitzwilliam now, is it not? It is wonderful to see you too!”

“Mrs. Reynolds,” Richard said, stepping forward to smile down at the housekeeper. “It is marvelous to see you as well; it has been far too long.”

“It has, sir. And this must be Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the young lady who agreed to accompany our dear Miss Darcy north? Colonel, Pembroke will show you to your room. Miss Darcy, Miss Elizabeth, will you not accompany me to your bedchambers?”

Darcy watched as the ladies followed Mrs. Reynolds up the stairs, and then turned to his cousin. “Richard, I am in great need of your listening ear. Will you join me in the office as soon as possible?”

“Of course.”

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Elizabeth looked around with delight as Mrs. Reynolds departed from the guest bedchamber. The room was all done up in a delicate cornflower blue with hints of mauve, with blue window drapes and bed curtains and mauve cushions upon the chair and the loveseat adjacent to the fireplace. A silver pitcher and washing-bowl sat neatly on a white lace doily on the dresser.

The furniture was all heavy and old-fashioned, at least a decade out of date and perhaps more than that. It was utterly quaint, Elizabeth thought as she looked around, even as she untied and set aside her bonnet.

A brisk knock at the door had her turning, and a footman carried her trunk inside. “Where would you like it, miss?” he asked respectfully, glancing around.

There was a nook beside the imposing wardrobe, and Elizabeth gestured. “Set it there – yes, that will work



splendidly.”

The man bowed himself out, and a maid entering as he exited. “Mrs. Reynolds sent me to help Miss change,” the girl said softly, dropping a curtsy. “I am Grace.”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth said briskly, moving to unlock and open her trunk. She had packed all her darkest clothes closest to the top, and now she lifted out a navy wool morning dress. “This will do, I think.”

Grace moved forward and assisted her charge in dressing and then said, “Do you need any assistance with your hair, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth looked into the mirror and observed that her hair was indeed rather untidy, but she was not used to having a maid assist her except when she was going to a ball.

“Thank you, but no, I can arrange it,” she said, smiling at the girl. “You may go now.”

“Very well, Miss,” the girl replied with a bob of her capped head. “I am currently sleeping in a small room directly beyond Mrs. Darcy’s bedchamber so that I can assist her at night if needed. If you require any assistance, please do summon me.”

“I will, thank you,” Elizabeth returned.

The girl left with a swirl of skirts, and Elizabeth crossed to the window, lifting aside a fold of the curtain to look out. Pemberley was, she thought blissfully, a perfect wilderness. The land rose in hills upon hills, rolling and mounding slowly each higher than the next. Nestled in a basin on the other side of a swathe of woodland, a glittering pond flung back the noonday sun in a thousand gilded sparkles.

There was a soft tap on the door, and she turned and called, “Come in!”

The door slid open, and Georgiana appeared. She also had changed from traveling clothes into a dark green morning gown, and she was pink with embarrassment. “I know this is

not appropriate attire, Elizabeth,” she said rapidly, “but I do not have any black clothing. Mrs. Reynolds said that she would have one of the maids dye some gowns black, and there is a good dressmaker in Lambton who can...”

“Please, do not worry about it, Georgiana,” Elizabeth interrupted with a cheerful smile. “All of this has come upon you very quickly, and there has been little time to think of mourning clothes.”

“That is true,” the girl replied, and she blew out a slow sigh as she took her place next to Elizabeth. “Is it not beautiful?”

“It is incredible,” Elizabeth agreed, her eyes shifting again to the east, where a confluence of hills painted the horizon blue.

“I had not realized how much I have missed Pemberley,” Georgiana mused. A moment later, she turned to face her friend and said, “I had not realized when I invited you to come, when I begged you to come, really, that my relatives would also be journeying here, and I confess to feeling extremely guilty now.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows flew up comically, and she said, “My dear friend, are you speaking of the mysterious Lady Catherine?”

“I am,” Georgiana said and wandered over to warm herself by the fire. “Lady Catherine de Bourgh is my aunt on the maternal side, and my sister-in-law Anne’s mother. She is arrogant, overbearing, and condescending, and I confess to being a little afraid of her. Moreover, she is very proud that she is a member of the nobility, and I fear may not treat you with appropriate courtesy.”

“Well, you need not worry about me, I assure you. I do not intimidate easily, nor do I care if your aunt disdains me. In any case, I would imagine her to be far too concerned about her daughter to bother with me in any case.”

Georgiana sighed. “Perhaps.”

“What of Lord Matlock?”

“Oh, he is Richard’s father, you know, and an earl. I do not know him well, but he is not as challenging a person as Lady Catherine. I know that my brother admires him. He is, perhaps, a little stiff, but he is not as arrogant as my aunt.”

“It sounds like it will be an interesting group of people,” Elizabeth remarked.

“Yes,” Georgiana agreed and shuddered.

## Chapter 13

*The Office*

*Pemberley*

Richard poured the rest of the brandy down his throat and set the empty glass down hard on a nearby table. He coughed twice and then groaned.

“Yes, that was quite my response as well,” Darcy said grimly.

“Foul play!” Richard declared, shaking his head. “It seems thoroughly unlikely!”

“It does, I absolutely agree. But Doctor Graham is an intelligent and experienced man.”

“Who said, very directly, that you ought not concern yourself about it, Darcy. The inquest is complete, the ruling was accidental death, and Graham is correct that to start asking questions would result in most dangerous rumors and gossip about our family!”

Darcy rubbed his temples and said, “I know, and I understand that. But if someone actually harmed my brother, *killed* my brother, how can I ignore that?”

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, sayeth the Lord,” Richard quoted.

Darcy blew out a breath. “Yes, that is true. In any case, I will at least take my time in pondering and praying over whether I should do anything about the matter.”

“What of Lawrence’s will?” Richard asked, deliberately changing the subject. “Has it been read?”

“It has not because my brother’s man of business has not yet arrived from London. He will bring the will with him.”

“Do you anticipate any surprises?” Richard asked, regarding his cousin keenly.

Darcy pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "I think there will be surprises, but I refuse to speculate on any details. Pemberley is entailed to the male line, so either Anne's son or I will inherit. But Timbreline is not entailed, and Lawrence had the legal right to do as he pleased with it."

"If your brother had any sense, he bequeathed it to his child. If Anne births a daughter, both mother and child can live off of the income of that estate."

"Ah, but you forget that Anne, as a widow, is now sole owner of Rosings. Lady Catherine managed to maintain her position as de facto mistress during Anne's marriage, but the estate belongs to Anne and her child, regardless of the sex, is heir."

"That is if Rosings is tied up properly in the legal sense," the colonel said cynically. "Given how dissolute Lawrence was, I fear he may have been using Rosings as collateral on loans."

"Sir Lewis de Bourgh was far too canny a man to leave the property vulnerable to a man like Lawrence," Darcy said drily. "The estate is safe enough."

"For Anne's sake, I am thankful. Now, Darcy, please do tell me about Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

Darcy stared at his cousin in some confusion. "Miss Bennet? What about her?"

"She is a most charming young woman, intelligent, kind, cheerful, and remarkably handsome. I merely wondered if you were, perhaps, interested in her as more than a delightful friend to Georgiana."

Darcy's eyebrows lifted, and he stared at his cousin in surprise. "Miss Bennet? I do admire her very much, but I had not genuinely considered marrying her."

"Why not?"

Darcy grimaced and said, "To be entirely truthful, because she is poor. Her father is a country gentleman with a

fine estate, which I understand provides an income of some two thousand pounds per annum. However, the estate is entailed away from the female line, and Miss Elizabeth has four sister and no brothers.”

“That is a pity,” Richard remarked. “I assume that the ladies’ dowries are not impressive?”

“I fear not,” Darcy mused and then sighed deeply. “I have long intended to spend a Season in London in the hopes of finding a wealthy wife, little though that appeals to me. Now, I suppose there is a possibility that I will be master of Pemberley, and I will no longer have to be concerned so much with money.”

“A possibility?” Richard demanded. “More like a probability!”

“Why do you say that?” Darcy asked, rising to his feet and wandering over to pour more brandy into his glass. “The odds of Anne bearing a son are exactly one to one.”

“But Anne has never been strong,” Richard said grimly, “and thus there is a reasonable chance that neither mother nor child will survive the birth.”

Darcy shuddered and said, “I prefer not to think of such a thing!”

“I speak only the truth, and you know it,” Fitzwilliam said sternly, and then his voice softened and he continued, “Of course I pray for a healthy delivery for both mother and child, but given the dangers of childbirth, such a horrific possibility must be considered.”

Darcy sat down again, stared into the fire, and for one moment, imagined the fine eyes of Elizabeth Bennet staring back at him.

“I do admire Miss Bennet very much,” he murmured. “Very much indeed. But with so much uncertainty at the moment regarding the future of Pemberley, while I am in mourning over my brother, I have no thought of taking a wife.”

“I understand.”

Darcy nodded and threw down the rest of his brandy, even as his heart lurched within him. He had not thought yet seriously about marriage, though he was eight and twenty years of age. After his father’s death, he had devoted himself to Georgiana and Bellhaven. There was always so much to do with the estate that he had used that as an excuse to stay well away from matchmaking mammas.

Now he realized that he loathed the very idea of marrying a woman merely for money. He wanted a clever, intelligent, cheerful, kindly woman; a woman like Elizabeth Bennet.

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*Drawing Room*

*Pemberley*

*A few hours later*

The door opened silently – the oiling of hinges had been one of Lawrence’s few maintenance priorities – and Darcy looked up from his letter with a deep frown that quickly smoothed away into a smile. He stood, setting the correspondence aside, heart and mien lightening as his dear sister walked in arm in arm with Miss Elizabeth Bennet who exuded cheer and brightness and joy, blazing like a bonfire in the dreary atmosphere of Pemberley. Her dark blue dress, black shawl, and simple bun did nothing to veil the lightness of her spirit, nor the loveliness of her face and figure.

Georgiana, at her side, plainly needed some of that cheer. Her maroon dress deepened the pallor of her cheeks and the weariness painted around her eyes, but she smiled a little at the sight of her brother.

“Georgiana, Miss Elizabeth, please do come here and warm yourself by the fire,” Darcy said. “I apologize for not spending more time with you since your arrival.”

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth said, beaming up at him. “I am confident that you are overwhelmed with responsibilities at the moment, and Georgiana and I had a pleasant afternoon together.”

“We did,” Georgiana agreed, looking fondly at her friend. “We went for a short walk and visited the east pasture. Do you remember the bay mare named Goldie?”

“I do,” her brother remarked.

“She has a foal, a beautiful chestnut filly with white stockings, which is about four months of age. Such a charming creature! Do you not think so, Elizabeth?”

“Absolutely,” the lady answered merrily, “though I confess to being somewhat intimidated by the filly’s mother. She seemed very protective of her baby.”

“It is wise to be cautious with any animal with young,” Darcy agreed and bent a severe look on his sister, “and I am certain you agree, my dear.”

Elizabeth’s eyes danced, and she cast a teasing look on her friend. “Do I sense a story?”

Georgiana blushed and explained, “When I was about nine years old, I was enchanted with a little calf which had the most extraordinary markings. It was red on its head, neck, withers, and legs, but had a white band around its belly. One day I crept into the pasture to pet it, and the mother, who was nearby, began chasing me. Fortunately I was sufficiently fleet of foot that I managed to run to a tall elm tree in the middle of the pasture, which I climbed in haste. The cow was furious and kept stalking around and around the tree until Fitzwilliam came to rescue me.”

Elizabeth laughed heartily at this remembrance and said, “Oh, my friend, I so wish you had lived nearby when we were younger! My mother used to find me entirely



exasperating because my sisters delighted in staying indoors, while I always longed to spend time every day outside, usually regardless of the temperature, though I confess I do not especially enjoy walking in the rain.”

“Did you perchance climb trees, Miss Bennet?” Colonel Fitzwilliam asked, stepping into the room with an amused look on his face.

“I did, and the taller the better! Your cousins can tell you of the great oak trees on Oakham Mount, and in my younger years, I could often be found climbing them along with our neighbors’ sons. But I do beg you not to tell my mother, all of you! Even now, I am certain she would be distressed by my antics of a decade ago!”

“Your secret is safe with us,” the colonel replied and bowed gallantly. Elizabeth chuckled, her face alight with mirth, and Darcy was startled by the sudden stab of some entirely unfamiliar emotion, which he realized a moment later, was jealousy.

Jealousy? For Elizabeth’s obvious pleasure in Richard’s company? He had no real intentions towards her, did he? Unless he did? He liked her very much, and so did Georgiana. Perhaps, in time...? But given the confusion of the moment, with the loss of Lawrence, with the uncertainty about the inheritance, he could not think of such things now, anyway.

“Dinner is served,” the butler said as he stepped into the room.

“Is Anne coming down?” Richard asked looking at Darcy, who replied, “No, she is still so shaken and distressed that she is keeping to her rooms, with her loyal maids in attendance.”

The colonel nodded, though his expression was one of concern, and he held out his arm to Georgiana, who took it.

Darcy, naturally enough, held out his arm to Elizabeth, and was delighted at the feeling of that slim hand, encased in a simple cotton glove, on his arm.

He glanced quickly at the lady and discovered her blushing just a little. Was it possible that she felt the same magnetic pull toward him?

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*Music Room*

*Pemberley*

*After Dinner*

Darcy relaxed back into the leather-upholstered wingback chair, hands resting lightly on the ends of the armrests. Richard sat adjacent to him, one foot tapping very slightly in time to the music. At the pianoforte, Georgiana and Miss Bennet sat side by side playing a duet together. Miss Bennet was singing, her voice untrained but sweet and pleasing.

Darcy watched intently, not only in enjoyment of the music, but also in some awe that his terribly shy sister sat so comfortably beside her friend, playing without a hint of self-consciousness. He wondered idly what it would be like to have Miss Bennet present all the time, playing the pianoforte with Georgiana and walking the halls of Pemberley, speaking with Mrs. Reynolds regarding household tasks and striding through the gardens. To have her bear his child.

He had not failed to note the unceasing kindness and graciousness with which Miss Bennet treated the servants around her. There was no affectation to it; she was genuinely good-willed towards those that so many of the gentry saw as lesser. Mrs. Reynolds seemed to respect her and he valued the old housekeeper's opinion.

For all his life, Darcy had assumed that he would marry at least partially for money. Now the idea sat heavy and unappealing in his mind. He could, he thought, have borne it,

marrying a woman he could tolerate, before he met a woman whom he truly *admired*. The lady's person was pleasing, but it was her character – kind and loving and honest – and her personality – cheerful and bright and vivacious and energetic – that had captured him.

A thousand pounds a year had never seemed much in his mind. But now his imagination turned to new channels; living modestly on his own estate of Bellhaven, a woman whom he loved and respected at his side.

“I am amazed at how comfortable Georgiana is with Miss Bennet,” Richard said, softly echoing his own thoughts, as the two ladies, after rustling through some other sheet music, chose a rollicking Irish air which caused both ladies to giggle happily as they played.

“I quite agree,” Darcy said. “I am thankful that Bingley happened upon an estate in Hertfordshire with such charming neighbors.”

“Are the other daughters as lovely as Miss Bennet?”

“Her elder sister is conventionally even more handsome. She is blonde and blue eyed, and my friend Bingley was immediately enchanted.”

“Is she as charming as her younger sister?”

“The eldest Miss Bennet is quieter than Miss Elizabeth, but she is a graceful and kind lady. The two youngest sisters, who are about Georgiana's age, are rowdier than is desirable, but they are harmless enough.”

Richard sighed deeply and said, “Miss Elizabeth Bennet is quite unlike the usual ladies of the haut ton. If she was an heiress, I would be tempted to pursue her myself!”

Again, the strange, unaccustomed surge of jealousy rose to the fore of Darcy's mind, and just as quickly receded, to be replaced by an ache of sympathy for his cousin. For all that Richard Fitzwilliam was the second son of an earl, the Matlock family's fortunes were less robust than those of the Darcy family. There was no second estate for Richard, though

his father had been easily able to purchase a commission for his second son in a cavalry regiment. Richard would never starve, or wear threadbare clothing, but his allowance was a relatively small one for his position in life, and that, combined with the dangerous nature of his profession, meant that he longed for a wealthy bride whose dowry would allow him to live in comfort after leaving the military.

## Chapter 14

*Breakfast Room*

*Pemberley*

*The Next Morning*

Elizabeth had been pleased to learn that breakfast at Pemberley was a casual affair. The servants kept a buffet of food well stocked, but other than that, the guests were free to come and go as they pleased. Elizabeth had woken surprisingly late this morning, worn out by the last few days, and then had enjoyed a warm bath before descending to the breakfast room.

*Finding* the breakfast room had been challenging. Pemberley was magnificent, to be sure, but it was also enormous. She was thankful that she had asked directions from the young maid attending her. Grace had shyly offered to show Elizabeth the way, which proved a wise decision as there were so many corridors, and so many wainscoted rooms, that Elizabeth was quite confused by the time they arrived safely at the small, cozy dining parlor.

The room had been empty except for a servant girl, but a minute after Elizabeth sat down with her plate of food, the butler entered with a silver tray in his hand, upon which reposed a surprising number of letters.

“Your mail, Miss Bennet,” the man said, and Elizabeth felt a flare of shock and concern as she reached out to take the letters. She had only just arrived at Pemberley, and for so much correspondence to arrive at once meant that something drastic must have happened at Longbourn.

She murmured her thanks and hastily broke the seal of the letter from Jane, since her elder sister could be trusted to write rationally.

19<sup>th</sup> November, 1811

Longbourn

Dear Lizzy,

*Since your departure from Longbourn, something has occurred of a most unexpected nature, but I am afraid of alarming you; be assured that we are all well. The carriage carrying you northward had barely disappeared out of sight when our father announced the arrival of a guest; namely our cousin, Mr. Collins, who will inherit Longbourn. Our cousin wrote some weeks ago asking to visit, and Father invited him, and then chose to wait until the very day of Mr. Collins's visit to inform us of the man's imminent arrival. On the one hand, it was exasperating to be informed of our guest's arrival on such short notice; on the other, given our mother's distress on learning of Mr. Collins's visit, perhaps it was wise to delay the announcement until the last possible moment.*

*In any case, he did arrive, and has been staying with us for about a day now. He is a clergyman, which means that both Kitty and Lydia find him exceptionally dull, enamored as they are with red-coated officers. He is tall, rather heavy, and not conventionally handsome, though he is very civil.*

*You are probably wondering why I am writing in such haste; the truth is that Mr. Collins has said, very directly, that he wishes to marry one of us girls so that we will not lose Longbourn as our home when Father dies.*

*That is a very kind intention on his part – of course it is – but you would not be happy as Mr. Collins's wife. He is not a clever man, and he is obsequious. He spent much of last night describing, at great length, the glories of his patroness, a Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who recently awarded him a good living in Hunsford, Kent. The lady is, according to Mr. Collins, an exceptionally remarkable woman who is in every way wise, sensible, gracious, and condescending.*

*Mamma quickly discouraged Mr. Collins from offering for me, because she hopes I will marry Mr. Bingley. You would be the obvious next choice, from our mother's perspective anyway, except that you are in Derbyshire.*

*I would not be surprised if our mother writes and encourages you to hurry home as quickly as possible to marry Mr. Collins. I beg you not to return, Lizzy. I think perhaps Mary might be happy as Mr. Collin's wife. You would be very, very unhappy.*

*Mother is calling me, and I must go.*

*With much love, and I do hope you are enjoying yourself in Derbyshire.*

*Jane*

Elizabeth finished the letter and smiled to herself, aware of the flood of relief coursing through her body. This Mr. Collins must be tedious indeed if Jane was so open in her disapprobation toward the gentleman. She was very glad that she was at Pemberley!

She opened her father's note next, which was very much as might be expected.

*Dear Lizzy,*

*Your cousin Mr. Collins who will be allowed to throw you out of Longbourn when I die, has arrived for a visit. That is a surprise no doubt – he wrote me some weeks ago extending an olive branch in the hopes of healing the breach between his family and ours. He is a clergyman, you see, and seeks for peace and unity in the family. That is all very well, but as part of his attempt to apologize for being the heir of the estate, he intends to marry one of my daughters. Jane, of course, is meant for Mr. Bingley, or at least your mother thinks*

*so. Mrs. Bennet therefore wishes very much that you were here, since you are both beautiful and the second eldest.*

*Mr. Collins is a completely absurd man, who goes on and on in pompous nothings about his parsonage, his patroness, and his hopes for a sensible wife who can make a small income go a long way. You would despise being married to him. Indeed, if it actually came to the sticking point wherein you asked me to bless your marriage to the man, I would refuse.*

*So stay at Pemberley, my dear, regardless of what your mother says.*

*Hastily,*

*Thomas Bennet*

Elizabeth chuckled in amusement and opened the letter from her mother.

*Dear Lizzy,*

*You must rush back from Derbyshire at once, do you hear? Mr. Collins has arrived! He is the heir to Longbourn, you know, and has made it obvious that he wishes to marry one of you girls! Is that not kind of him?*

*Jane is meant for Mr. Bingley, but you are second in both birth and beauty, and I declare you are meant to be Mrs. Collins! Oh Lizzy, to think that your son could inherit Longbourn!*

*I know you arrived at Pemberley only very recently, but I beg you to find a way to return. I expect that Mr. Darcy has a carriage or something of the sort and can send you home. Oh, but you must have a maid, of course and...*



The door opened at this juncture, drawing her attention away from the letter, and she looked up as Georgiana entered, now dressed in a black crepe gown which befitted her status as sister to the recently deceased.

“Good morning, Georgiana,” Elizabeth said, folding the letter back up and setting it down.

“Good morning, Elizabeth. But please do continue reading your letter; I did not mean to interrupt!”

“It is no problem at all, I assure you. I received quite a host of letters this morning and was anxious at first that something had happened at home. Something *has* happened, but it is nothing disturbing.”

“Oh?”

“The very day that we left for Pemberley, my father’s distant cousin, who is heir to Longbourn, arrived for a visit.”

Georgiana paused in the act of putting toast on her plate and stared at her friend in disbelief. “Without any kind of invitation?”

“He was invited, yes. My father invited him and did not choose to tell my mother until the very day that Mr. Collins arrived. My mother, you see, is quite upset that Longbourn is entailed away to a distant cousin.”

“Well, I can understand that,” her friend remarked, taking her place next to Elizabeth. “I am thankful that if Anne bears a daughter, Pemberley will go to my brother, not some distant relation. So this Mr. Collins – do you know him well?”

“None of us have ever met him, including my father. The elder Mr. Collins and my father quarreled at some point, and thus there has been a long estrangement. My cousin is a clergyman and wishes to make peace.”

“Well, that sounds kind,” Georgiana remarked, eyeing her friend with interest.

“Yes, very kind, but apparently part of his purpose in attending my family is to choose one of us daughters to

become the mistress of the parsonage at Hunsford, where my cousin serves as clergyman.”

Georgiana froze and turned a startled look on Elizabeth. “Hunsford in Kent?”

“Yes, and both my father and Jane tell me that Mr. Collins speaks often of his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. I assume that must be your aunt?”

“It *is* my aunt! What a remarkable coincidence!”

“Indeed it is. Both Jane and my father tell me that I would not appreciate Mr. Collins as a husband as we are not well suited, and I trust them more than my mother, who wishes for me to return to Longbourn post haste in the hopes of provoking Mr. Collins into offering for me.”

“Oh Elizabeth, you will not be leaving, will you?” the girl asked breathlessly, and then blushed scarlet and said, “I do apologize...”

“No, I will not be leaving, I assure you,” Elizabeth replied, placing a reassuring hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Indeed, with your brother’s permission, I will hide here at Pemberley until Mr. Collins has returned to his parsonage. If Jane, who is the gentlest of creatures, as well as the kindest, declares I would despise being married to the man, I am certain that I would.”

Georgiana, relieved, took a sip of tea, followed by a bite of toast, chewed, and swallowed before saying, very hesitantly, “I do not know this Mr. Collins, but I do know the kind of man my aunt prefers to be in her orbit. You are a very lively, intelligent, clever, and occasionally a little...”

She trailed off and Elizabeth finished, “Impertinent? Cheeky? Audacious? I have been accused of all those things.”

Georgiana chuckled and said, “Yes, but in the most delightful of ways. But Lady Catherine would not appreciate such characteristics in the wife of her meek, no doubt sycophantic, clergyman.”

The door opened again, and Mr. Darcy stepped in, dressed severely in black. “Miss Bennet, Georgiana, I hope you are both well?”

“We are,” Elizabeth said, and Georgiana murmured her assent.

“The family solicitor has just arrived from London, and I will be busy with him much of the day. I apologize for neglecting you.”

“That is entirely all right,” Elizabeth assured him. “If the weather clears, we can go for a walk. If not, we can also go for a walk, but I expect we will merely stay indoors. That, of course, assumes that Georgiana knows her way around; I would not wish to be lost forever in the house!”

Georgiana chuckled and said, “I do know my way around.”

She then wrinkled her brow and remarked, “Well, so long as we do not find our way into the attics. I remember once running away from my nurse and finding myself in a maze of rooms and corridors on the top floor and getting quite turned around. I remember sobbing until one of the maids found me. But I was but a child then, and now I would manage such an occurrence with far more dignity.”

“We can always send out the bloodhounds if you go missing,” Darcy said with a smile, “but I will recommend, Miss Bennet, that you visit the library today. I know you enjoy a good book.”

“Indeed I do! Thank you!”

## Chapter 15

*The Office*

*Pemberley*

“Mr. Harris,” Darcy said, stepping forward to shake the solicitor by the hand. “Thank you for hurrying to Pemberley on such short notice. I hope your journey was a good one.”

The Darcys’ solicitor, Mr. Harris, was tall, robust, and distinguished, with blue eyes, silver hair, an aquiline nose, and a mellifluous voice. He would, Darcy thought, have been an outstanding barrister, but he had chosen to use his considerable talents in the writing of wills, marriage contracts, and the like.

“It was a pleasant journey, Mr. Darcy,” Harris replied. “I am thankful, since one cannot depend on easy travel this time of year. But please, may I offer my condolences on the loss of your brother?”

“Thank you, sir.”

The door opened again, and Richard Fitzwilliam entered with Mrs. Anne Darcy, dressed from head to toe in black crepe, with a black veil cascading from her dark bonnet, clutching his arm. Harris turned and greeted the newcomers with his usual grace, and made a point of leaning over to kiss the widow’s hand.

“Mrs. Darcy, I am so very grieved at your loss,” he said gently. Anne, whose eyes were red and her face pale, nodded without speaking, and Richard guided her over to a wingbacked chair near the fire.

Harris, who was carrying a black valise in his left hand, made his way over to the desk. He put down the case, opened it, and removed a series of documents. Darcy silently took a seat next to Anne, and Richard took the seat next to him.

Harris glanced over the documents briefly and then turned his attention on his small audience.

“Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam, I have in my hand the last will and testament of Mr. Lawrence Darcy of Pemberley. It is not a long document given the importance and wealth of my former client. I do not intend to read the entire will, as there are some small bequests to friends and servants which will not have any serious effect on the future health and holdings of the estate. However, I will read aloud the main points. This document is dated on the first day of February, in the year of our Lord, 1811.”

Darcy stirred at this statement; the will was nine months old, which was surprising. In February, Anne had fallen pregnant with the child she currently carried, and thus, presumably, the document did not consider the disposition of the estate with specific regard to Lawrence’s unborn babe.

Mr. Harris began reading the document, his soothing voice at odds with the startling contents.

*“I, Lawrence George Darcy, being of sound mind and body, do hereby declare and bequeath the following:*

*To my wife, Mrs. Anne Darcy, one pound. As heiress to Rosings, Mrs. Darcy does not require an additional inheritance from Pemberley. Furthermore, should she choose to remarry in time, I have no interest in allowing Darcy possessions to pass on to another family.*

*To my brother, Fitzwilliam Darcy, one pound. It is a great sorrow when brothers become enemies, and I do not intend to reward Fitzwilliam for his decision to trick me into giving up the guardianship of our mutual sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy.*

*To my sister, Georgiana Darcy, ten thousand pounds, to be awarded immediately upon the reading of the will. May she find freedom and pleasure in life apart from our mutual brother.*

*To my Fitzwilliam relations: Lord Matlock, Lady Matlock, Viscount Castlebury, Mr. Richard Fitzwilliam, Miss Rebekah Fitzwilliam and Miss Sarah Fitzwilliam: one pound each.*

*To Lady Catherine de Bourgh: five shillings, one for each year of my marriage, in thanksgiving for staying well away from Pemberley during my marriage to your daughter.*

*To my close companion and bosom friend of many years, Mr. George Wickham, I bestow and bequeath ownership of the estate of Timbreline in Derbyshire, including all the land, houses, possessions, and income, which I hope you will treasure and enjoy the rest of your days.”*

The solicitor looked up at the three shocked faces in front of him and said, with just a hint of apology, “As I stated earlier, the rest of the will is concerned with minor bequests to friends and servants.”

Darcy gazed at Harris, then looked at Anne, and then back at Richard, who demanded, “George Wickham inherits Timbreline? What was Lawrence thinking?”

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*The Library*

*Pemberley*

The library was nothing short of *glorious*. Elizabeth stared about in sheer delight at the shelves upon shelves upon shelves of books lining every wall, with ladders climbing the walls to reach the very highest shelves, which were far out of reach without some sort of assistance. At either end of the great room were two massive fireplaces with generous hearths, each with clusters of deep comfortable chairs huddled nearby.

“*Oh,*” she gasped when she got her breath back.

“Is it not magnificent?” Georgiana asked happily, crossing to the window to pull back the heavy drapes. Milky light filtered in, the overcast day weakening the sunlight.

“Utterly,” Elizabeth agreed fervently, drifting along the shelves, one hand running lightly along the dust-furred surface. The visible wood was easily identifiable as a lovely dark oak, heavy and strong. It was a shame, she thought, that the room had been so sadly neglected. It would seem that Mr. Lawrence Darcy had not been a great reader, and therefore the servants had not given the abandoned library a high priority in upkeep.

The light coming in the window, while not strong, was sufficient to read the titles upon the spines and covers of the books. Elizabeth and Georgiana wandered up and down the shelves, clambering up and down the ladders and calling merrily to one another at the discovery of new literary treasures.

At last Elizabeth paused, her attention caught by the volume in her hands. The gilt engraved title was *The Fall of Robespierre*, and a cursory look at the first pages piqued her curiosity. Georgiana wandered over to peer over her shoulder at it.

“Robert Southey,” she mused, and turned to look at the shelf, before selecting a slim book of poems. The two young ladies moved down to one end of the library, claiming a dusty chair each and curling up with their books to read.

Some time later the door opened, and Darcy stepped inside. The oaken floor was glowing now with sunlight, the hovering clouds having dissipated. Both the occupants of the library turned their heads towards the door at his entrance, faces bright and cheerful, and Darcy felt his own heart ease a little.

“Brother, are you well?” Georgiana asked, looking up and gazing at Fitzwilliam with a wrinkled brow and concerned

eyes.

“Yes,” he replied quickly, forcing himself to smile. “Yes, I am well. I hope you are enjoying the library, Miss Bennet?”

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, it is heaven on Earth!” Elizabeth cried out impulsively, leaping to her feet. “If my father ever visited Pemberley, I fear you would never dislodge him from this place. He is legitimately proud of the library at Longbourn, but it is nothing compared to this magnificent collection!”

Now Darcy’s smile was genuine. “Thank you very much for your kind words. This library was my favorite room once I was old enough to read. It has been the work of many generations.”

“But I do not think our older brother was fond of reading,” Miss Darcy said, wrinkling her nose. “This room, and the books within, are not well dusted at all!”

“I will ensure that the library is cleaned from top to bottom. Now Miss Bennet, I hope you do not mind if I speak privately to my sister?”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth said promptly, and she put her book down, before picking it back up. “Do you have rules about books? Might I take this off to my bedchamber, or do you wish for books to stay here so they do not wander off and hide in corners?”

“You can take it with you,” her host said. “I know that you are a great lover of the written word, and thus will take good care of ... *The Fall of Robespierre*?”

“I was curious,” Elizabeth remarked. “I know that it was written in great haste by Southey and Coleridge. My father does not own a copy, but he read it in the past and said it was interesting.”

“And is it?” Georgiana asked.

“So far, yes. It is, from a creative perspective, interesting poetry. The thoughts behind it are revolutionary in



scope.”

“Southey has altered his views substantially in the intervening years,” Darcy said, “Indeed...”

He trailed off and shook his head apologetically. “I could speak for hours on the subject, and perhaps we can do so later. But for now, I really must speak with Georgiana.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said, and quickly exited the room.

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“Lawrence left you nothing, and he left me ten thousand pounds?” Georgiana demanded.

Darcy nodded, his lips compressed, and his sister said, “I ... I will give it to you, Brother! It is ridiculous that our brother would give you so little and me so much!”

“It is not merely that he gave you ten thousand pounds, my darling sister. He also ordered that it be disbursed immediately, which may prove difficult.”

“Because?”

“Because,” Darcy said, his forehead creased with frustration, “our brother was a gamester and a spendthrift, and doubtless he died deeply in debt. I do not know the full situation, of course, but to give you ten thousand pounds immediately – well, it may prove difficult. If Anne’s child is a son, it will be even more complex, as there will be another layer of complication associated with the guardianship of the child and the disbursement of estate funds.”

“Of course, I do not need the money immediately,” Georgiana said, reaching out to take his hands in hers. “Indeed, I do not need it at all! I trust you to take care of me, always.”

“Always,” her brother agreed, and he planted a kiss on her head. “Always.”

“What about Timbreline?” she asked. “Does that go to our unborn niece or nephew?”

Darcy heaved a long, deep sigh and said, “No. Timbreline was bequeathed to our father’s godson, Mr. George Wickham.”

Georgian’s jaw dropped inelegantly, and she whispered, “Mr. *Wickham*?”

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“Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth, who was just opening the door to her own bedchamber, turned toward the elderly maid standing nearby. “Yes?”

“My mistress, Mrs. Anne Darcy, asked whether perhaps you would be willing to meet her for tea this afternoon?”

“Oh!” Elizabeth replied, “I would be delighted. Thank you!”

“She is currently resting, but perhaps we can plan for two o’clock?”

“Certainly.”

## Chapter 16

*The Office*

*Pemberley*

*An hour later*

Darcy carefully placed a bill on a pile in the corner of his desk, entered the sum onto an account ledger, and did the sum twice for accuracy. The result was not a happy one, and he groaned and said, “Of course, I have no idea what additional debts remain outstanding in London, or in Lambton for that matter, but even without that knowledge, Pemberley is not capable of paying out Georgiana’s inheritance at this moment.”

“Surely Georgiana has no intention of taking the money from the estate?” Richard asked in concern.

Darcy shook his head. “No, she does not, most fortunately. I know that one is not supposed to speak ill of the dead, but I confess to being enraged with Lawrence. How could he take a thriving estate, and in five short years, bury it in debts?”

Richard grimaced and remarked, “He is certainly not the first man to do such a thing. One must merely look to our Regent to observe how much havoc can be wreaked by a spoiled, spendthrift man.”

“True enough,” Darcy murmured, rubbing his forehead. “It is such a difficult situation, Richard. If I knew I was the heir, I could sell Bellhaven to pay off any debts, but if Anne births a son, the child will be heir.”

“And if Lawrence had not been such a fool about Timbreline, neither you nor our prospective nephew would be in this situation. That estate is not entailed, and it could be sold off to solve Pemberley’s current financial troubles.”

“Yes, quite,” Darcy said and made rather a point of shifting the pile of bills to the very corner of his desk.

“Oh come, Cousin, I know you are thinking what I am thinking.”

Darcy sighed and lifted his head to stare at his cousin. “What am I thinking?”

“You are thinking that George Wickham is a knave, and if he knew that he would inherit Timbreline upon your brother’s death, he might have helped Lawrence to fall down the stairs, thus preventing your brother from removing Wickham’s legacy in a future will.”

Darcy had been thinking exactly that ever since the will had been read, but he nonetheless found himself shaking his head. “I do not like Wickham, but I am not certain that he would resort to murder.”

“But you are not certain that he would not, either.”

“No,” Darcy admitted. “I did not like him in the least once he took up with Lawrence. That was some ten years ago, I think.”

“Oh, longer, I think. If memory serves, Lawrence was about eighteen years old and Wickham fifteen when the two became thick as thieves. I never quite understood why your brother, who was a proud man, took up with the son of a steward.”

“I daresay it was because Wickham was both handsome and charming and thus easily enchanted the local beauties. Lawrence did not inherit our father’s good looks, you know, and that, combined with his arrogance, made it difficult for him to attract the attention of the sort of woman who would welcome him into her bed. I tried not to know details, but I heard enough to know that Wickham was quite helpful in arranging Lawrence’s life to maximize my brother’s pleasure in a variety of arenas.”

He swallowed hard and said, “He really was a repulsive man, my brother.”

Richard snorted at these words and said, "I cannot entirely argue with you, though he certainly was no worse than many a man."

"I am quite confident he was not faithful to Anne," Darcy said coldly, "and that is unforgivable. I do not care how common it is to commit adultery. It is wrong."

"I entirely agree. But let us return to Wickham. If he did learn of the bequest of an estate, perhaps he decided that he should hurry his friend toward his eternal home?"

Darcy clenched his jaw and said, "Even if he did, how could we ever prove such a thing?"

"I am not at all certain that we can. Nonetheless, I would like to speak with the reprobate. Do you, perchance, know where he is staying in Lambton?"

"I heard that he was settled at The Dove, but there is no reason to believe that he is still in town now."

"He is," Richard said cynically. "The man could never keep two coins to rub together, and if he knew of this bequest, he will certainly not leave the area."

"For that matter, even if he did not know that he was to inherit Timbreline, he doubtless hoped for some mark of affection from my brother in his will."

"True," Richard mused, and he turned his attention on the outdoors. The rain of the morning had been swept away, and now the skies were a bleached blue, interrupted by the occasional cloud.

"Shall we visit our old friend, Darcy?"

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*Anne Darcy's Sitting Room*

Elizabeth glanced briefly around Mrs. Darcy's sitting room as she was led within. The furniture was all out of date, overflowing with assorted cushions in a variety of colors, blankets draped over the backs and arms of the chairs and couches. A large fire had been built and then banked, every window thrown open to admit a fresh breeze that wafted the lighter curtains beneath the heavy drapes.

Anne Darcy herself was half-reclined across a couch, looking wan and pallid in a heavy black mourning day dress. Her face was drawn with weariness, shadows painted dark under her eyes, and she clutched a crumpled handkerchief in one hand.

"Mrs. Darcy?" Elizabeth asked politely.

"Miss Bennet," the woman replied, looking up at her guest. Mrs. Darcy did not exactly smile, but she did look pleased to see Elizabeth, which was reassuring.

"I hope you do not mind if I stay seated," the lady continued, and Elizabeth quickly said, "Of course not, Madam. Please, may I express my heartfelt condolences on the loss of your husband?"

"Thank you," Mrs. Darcy replied, and she gestured to the seat across from her with her left hand. "Will you not sit down?"

Elizabeth did so, taking the seat near her hostess. She observed, to her surprise, that Mrs. Darcy's right arm was bound up in a black sling.

"Bring us tea, Matilda," Mrs. Darcy said, and the maid nodded and retreated.

The door swung shut behind her, leaving Anne and Elizabeth alone.

"Miss Bennet," Anne said, "I do apologize for not greeting you when you arrived yesterday."

"On the contrary, I confess to feeling uneasy about coming here without a specific invitation from you, the

mistress of the estate.”

“Nonsense. You came as a friend to my young cousin, and I am certain Georgiana needs someone to bear her company during this difficult time. Moreover, I am no longer mistress of the estate. My brother-in-law Fitzwilliam may be heir, or the child I carry may inherit, but I am merely the widow of the former master and possibly the mother of the new one.”

“I am sorry.”

“I will be well enough. I own my own estate, you know.”

“I did not know that.”

“Yes. Rosings passed legally to me upon my marriage to Lawrence, though of course he, as my husband, had power over the income. My mother has ruled there during my marriage because both she and Lawrence wanted me here at Pemberley, but legally, I can force Lady Catherine to move to the Dower House whenever I wish.”

“I was not aware of that, though I know a little about Rosings. By a startling coincidence, the heir to my father’s estate of Longbourn is a parson named Mr. Collins, who serves as rector at Hunsford. Georgiana tells me that Hunsford is under the purview of your mother, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Mrs. Darcy looked startled, and then she smirked.  
“What kind of man is Mr. Collins?”

“I have never met my cousin, as he arrived for a visit at Longbourn shortly after I departed with Mr. and Miss Darcy for Derbyshire. My father and eldest sister have written to say that he is a very civil man who venerates your mother.”

This provoked a genuine crowd of laughter from Mrs. Darcy, who, after her mirth subsided, said, “I am certain he does. My mother would not choose a clergyman who did not regard her with the greatest of awe and reverence. Lady

Catherine is the sort of woman who wishes for the distinction of rank to be very well preserved.”

“I gathered that from the letters my family sent.”

The door opened and Matilda entered with tea, which she placed on a small table between the two ladies. Mrs. Darcy made an abortive movement with her right hand, and then winced in pain, which provoked Elizabeth to ask, “May I pour, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Yes, thank you. That would be very kind.”

Elizabeth prepared a cup of tea for the widow and passed it to her carefully, ensuring that the woman had a careful grip with her left hand before releasing the mug.

“Did you hurt your arm, Madam?”

“Yes,” the lady responded, taking a sip of tea and carefully setting it down on the end table at her left. “My child is due in a few weeks, and I have grown increasingly ungainly and clumsy. I fell and hurt my arm a few days ago.”

“I hope it is not broken?”

“Doctor Graham says no, thankfully. It is merely seriously bruised, with a mild sprain. I keep it in the sling to remind myself not to use it, but it is not always successful!”

Elizabeth smiled and took a sip of her own tea, and then, casting around for something to say, remarked, “Pemberley is a lovely place, Mrs. Darcy. I very much admired the park as we drove through it, and of course the mansion itself is magnificent.”

“It is, yes,” her hostess agreed, looking around thoughtfully. “Undoubtedly, my husband will have left numerous debts, but Fitzwilliam is intelligent and honorable, and he will competently deal with the disaster that Lawrence left us.”

Elizabeth could not hide her surprise at this statement, and Mrs. Darcy sighed and said, “My apologies, that was brusque. The truth is that Lawrence and I were united entirely



in a marriage of convenience, and he was both a bad husband and a bad master of Pemberley. If I had not wished..."

She stopped, shook her head, and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, her eyelids were drooping with weariness. "I apologize, but I am very tired and need to rest."

"Of course, Madame!" Elizabeth exclaimed, standing up. "Might I call your maid?"

"Yes, thank you, that would be very kind."

## Chapter 17

*The Dove Inn*

*Lambton*

“Does Mr. Wickham have any companions staying in the inn with him?” Darcy asked the servant girl leading them down a corridor.

“No, sir. The other gentlemen in his party left for London yesterday,” the girl answered, coming to halt in front of a door. She tapped gently on the wood and called out, “Visitors for you, Mr. Wickham!”

The door opened a minute later, and George Wickham, medium height, with dark blond hair, blue eyes, and a handsome countenance, dressed casually in buckskin breeches and a tan shirt, looked out with a smile, which quickly transformed into a look of amazement.

“Darcy! Fitzwilliam!” he exclaimed, “This is quite a surprise.”

“I am certain it is,” Darcy answered coldly. “We have a matter of importance to discuss. Otherwise, we would not be here.”

Wickham’s eyes lit up noticeably, and he grinned and opened the door further. “Please, do enter my humble abode. Sally, might you bring us some brandy?”

“I have no interest in drinking with you,” Darcy said.

“Ah, but I am hopeful that I will soon have reason to celebrate,” the other man responded insouciantly. “Run along, my dear!”

The servant girl giggled and tossed her white capped head. “As you wish, sir!”

She disappeared, and Wickham shut the door behind her, then turned to gaze at his two guests, who were standing in the room, looking around.

It was impersonal but cozy. There were no indications of its inhabitant's taste and touch, and it was furnished in sturdy elegant wood with sensible brown upholstery. A door stood open through which could be glimpsed a bed, the sheets and wool blanket neatly made up. There was no dust on the mantle or the windowsill, the curtains were clean and fresh, the wooden floor swept and polished until it shone and the window-glass spotless. A tree swayed on the other side of the panes, and the main road of Lambton could be seen through its branches.

“Shall we sit down?” Wickham inquired. “I will not pretend that the chairs are particularly comfortable, but the fire is pleasant on a cold day.”

Darcy felt like refusing to sit, just to make a point, but that might, perhaps, be overly aggressive.

“Thank you,” he grated out, and sat down on a hard settee near the fire. Richard, who had thus far been silent, took a seat next to him, while Wickham settled on a chair and regarded them with unconcealed enthusiasm.

“I know that neither of you particularly likes me,” he remarked. “Therefore, I can only hope that your visit means that Lawrence – may he rest in peace – was generous enough to bestow something to me in his will.”

Darcy's lips tightened, and he asked, “You are expecting something, then?”

“Well, yes, I am,” Wickham said with a rueful smile. “Your brother was a loyal companion, and he assured me that I would be well taken care of after his death, not, of course, that we had any idea that he would meet his Maker so soon!”

“No, it was quite a surprise,” Richard said drily.

“You have inherited Timbreline,” Darcy said bluntly, watching Wickham closely.

The man stared and then beamed, displaying gleaming white teeth. “Well, thank God for that! Lawrence told me that he intended to give me Timbreline, but with the child on the way, I was not entirely certain whether he might change his mind on the matter.”

“So he told you that he intended to give you the estate?” Richard demanded, leaning forward to glare suspiciously.

“Yes, he did,” Wickham replied and then wrinkled his brow. “Why should he not? I did give up the Kympton living, you know.”

Richard shot a glance at Darcy, who said, “My father intended Wickham for the church and set aside a valuable living if Wickham chose to take orders. He did not, and thus could not become a clergyman.”

“Ah, but I agreed to give up the living in return for Lawrence’s assurance that I would be well cared for both during his life and after death.”

“Yes, and he has done so, very thoroughly,” Richard commented. “Timbreline brings in a full two thousand pounds a year.”

George laughed aloud, his eyes dancing, and he said, “Yes, to think that I am now master of an estate, and one even greater than yours, Darcy! That is, of course, assuming that Mrs. Darcy bears a son to inherit Pemberley. I certainly hope she does, though I daresay that you are praying daily that Lawrence sired a daughter.”

Darcy briefly considered the peculiarity of this statement; the child was already either a male or a female, and no prayer would change that.

“My prayer is that the child is born healthy and Mrs. Darcy comes through unscathed as well,” he declared, standing up. “In any case, Mr. Harris, the family solicitor, is currently staying at Pemberley, and he would be pleased to call upon you at your convenience to discuss any details of the

estate. He has already sent word to the butler and housekeeper at Timbreline that you are now master.”

“Such beautiful news,” Wickham responded, just as the door opened to reveal the maid Sally, who was standing with a tray in her hands, on which reposed a bottle of amber liquid and three glasses. “Will you not drink to my good fortune, both of you?”

“We will not,” the colonel said concisely.

“Are you quite certain?” Wickham asked, casting a winsome look toward his guests. “Regardless of who inherits Pemberley, I daresay we will find ourselves needing to discuss matters regarding the border between Timbreline and Pemberley. If Mrs. Darcy bears a son, it will be many years before the child can take control of his estate, and I presume you are the child’s guardian, Darcy.”

Given that Darcy was the eldest male of his family, this was not an unreasonable assumption, but Darcy was in no mood to discuss the matter with his brother’s dissolute friend.

“We have business elsewhere,” he said curtly, turning to walk toward the door.

“Until we meet again, then,” Wickham replied cheerfully.

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“So he obviously knew about the bequest,” Richard remarked as he and Darcy rode back toward Pemberley.

Darcy pulled his scarf over his mouth, the better to protect himself from the now biting wind, and said, “Yes, he did. In a way, that makes me think he had no hand in my brother’s death. Surely if he had pushed Lawrence down the stairs, he would have acted more surprised to learn of his lavish inheritance?”

Richard sighed. "Perhaps."

The two gentlemen entered the lane near the old lodge, and Darcy said, "I must send someone to inspect the lodge to see whether it is habitable."

Richard nodded absently and remarked, "I see a carriage up ahead, one I do not recognize."

The two men tapped their heels on their horses' flanks, causing both geldings to increase their speed. Within a minute, the two men had drawn up close enough to recognize the livery of the leaders, whereupon they joined in a communal sigh.

"Lady Catherine," Richard stated.

"Indeed," said his cousin.

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*Drawing Room*

*Pemberley*

*An Hour Later*

"You need not to be alarmed, Georgiana," Darcy said. "Lady Catherine will not bite you."

"I know, but she will doubtless harangue me about practicing on the pianoforte."

"I promise you that I will protect you," Elizabeth declared affectionately.

At this moment, the door to the drawing room swung open, and a tall, gray-haired woman, dressed ostentatiously in black silk, with a black turban on her head, marched into the room.

Georgiana took a small step backwards at the arrival of her formidable aunt, and Elizabeth took a step forward and slightly in front of her young friend.

Lady Catherine looked around quickly before turning a gimlet eye on Elizabeth.

“Who is this, Darcy?” she demanded.

“Lady Catherine,” Darcy replied with rigid courtesy, “may I introduce you to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, a friend who kindly accompanied us to Pemberley to keep Georgiana company during this difficult time. Miss Bennet, my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Elizabeth curtsied appropriately, and was amused, rather than offended, when the lady looked down her narrow nose and said, “Miss Bennet? You are companion to my niece? You seem rather young to be a companion.”

“I am a friend, your ladyship, not a paid companion. My father is master of an estate in Hertfordshire, and I met Mr. and Miss Darcy some weeks ago while they were staying with Mr. Bingley of Netherfield Hall. They were kind enough to invite me to come north with them.”

“I see,” the lady responded, and she turned her attention on her niece. “Georgiana, my dear, do come forward and let me look at you. I have not seen you in years. You have grown a great deal!”

“Yes, Lady Catherine,” Georgiana agreed meekly.

“You are, I fear, rather too tall, but that cannot be helped now, I suppose.”

Elizabeth blinked at this remarkable statement, and Georgiana’s eyes shifted downward. “I think perhaps I am finished growing,” she said softly.

“It is a great pity that no one thought to put a brick on your head a few years ago, Georgiana,” Elizabeth said in an amused tone, which had the desired effect of drawing Lady Catherine’s attention instantly.

“Surely that is Miss Darcy to you, Miss Bennet?” the woman demanded indignantly.

“On the contrary, Georgiana and I have been good friends for some time now, and call one another by our Christian names,” she responded cheerfully.

Lady Catherine opened her mouth to express her displeasure, but at this moment, the butler came in and announced dinner. The older woman reached out to take Darcy’s arm, and marched out of the room, leaving Richard to escort Elizabeth and Georgiana into the dining room.

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The second dining room, where the family had been taking their meals of late, was small and shabby, the furniture unfashionable, the tablecloth thin and worn, the drapes faded and in desperate need of replacing. Richard, Georgiana and Elizabeth did not bat an eye, well-used to the room, but Lady Catherine looked around in unconcealed indignation, affronted. “Darcy! Why are we eating here? This is hardly appropriate for people of our station. Why are we not eating in the main dining room?”

“It is more convenient to the kitchen,” Darcy answered, meeting his aunt’s gaze calmly. “Did you know Lawrence left Pemberley insolvent and rarely replaced any of the servants who retired or left? I am certain that you understand the need to return the estate to profitability.”

Lady Catherine sniffed. “Lawrence was always a foolish, dissolute man. It does not surprise me to hear he ran Pemberley into the ground,” she said caustically. She allowed Darcy to lead her to the table, casting a fulminating look over the sparse dishes spread there. “I suppose that is also why this dinner is barely fit for a peasant?” she asked with withering scorn.



“It is perhaps not what Pemberley usually serves, but we find it quite adequate,” Darcy said evenly.

The conversation continued in much the same vein, Lady Catherine leveling discontented criticisms at all that caught her attention, and Darcy returning calm, unruffled answers to all of it. Elizabeth worked her way through her meal in silence, listening with dancing eyes and a faint smile.

“Miss Bennet,” Lady Catherine said, turning her attention on the young woman at her side, “pray, tell me about your family. I assume that since you are on a Christian name basis with my niece, your father is a gentleman?”

“Yes, Madam,” Elizabeth replied, casting a reassuring glance toward Georgiana, though the girl’s eyes were fixed on her plate.

“What is your father’s income?”

Elizabeth blinked and said, “Why do you ask?”

“I should have thought that was obvious,” Lady Catherine sniffed. “If you are to be a suitable companion to Georgiana, you must be at a certain level of society.”

“Miss Bennet is not Georgiana’s *companion*,” Darcy interpolated, his brow furrowed with disapproval. “She is a *friend*, and there is no need to interrogate her.”

“It is my role as your aunt to look after you,” the older lady replied with a huff. “There are many who would seek to ingratiate themselves with the Darcys, the de Bourghs, and the Matlocks for their own societal designs!”

Elizabeth, noting the anger on the faces of both gentlemen, said quickly, “My family’s home of Longbourn is actually entailed away to a Mr. Collins, who is, I understand, the rector at Hunsford. A remarkable coincidence, is it not?”

Catherine de Bourgh, who had been purplish with indignation, deflated immediately and turned a beady eye on Elizabeth. “Mr. Collins is your father’s heir? That is indeed a

remarkable coincidence. He has told me of his inheritance; I believe it is worth some two thousand pounds a year?"

"I believe that is correct, Madam. My father, of course, is master of the estate and knows the particulars."

"Longbourn is entailed away from the female line, I know, as is Pemberley. I disapprove. It is entirely foolish and unnecessary."

"My mother is inclined to agree with you. But please, I know very little about Rosings. Is it an extensive estate?"

This was, of course, the perfect thing to ask. Lady Catherine proceeded to dominate the rest of the meal with a long monologue about the many wonders of Rosings, with the occasional aside as to the inferiority of Pemberley, which allowed the rest of those at dinner to finish their meal in relative peace.

## Chapter 18

“Do not linger over your brandy,” Lady Catherine ordered, rising from the table after dinner. “I need to speak to you privately tonight, Darcy.”

Darcy cast a reassuring look at Georgiana, who looked unhappy, and a grateful one at Elizabeth, who calmly took the younger girl’s arm and followed the older lady out of the room.

“We ought not to stay long,” Darcy said, pouring Richard a glass of Madeira and himself a glass of port wine. “Georgiana is uncomfortable with our aunt.”

“We are *all* uncomfortable with our aunt,” Richard said sourly. “I had forgotten how intrusive, how domineering, and how very tiresome she can be.”

Darcy grimaced and said, “Well, I have no intention of allowing her to distress Georgiana or lambast Miss Bennet.”

“Nor do I, though I do not think that Miss Bennet requires protecting. For a young woman, she is remarkably self-assured.”

“She is,” Darcy agreed. “She is an exceptional woman, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She managed our autocratic aunt with striking aplomb. I am very thankful that she is here as a friend to Georgiana.”

“Yes, as a friend to Georgiana, of course!” Richard remarked, his eyes glinting with amusement.

Darcy rolled his eyes at his cousin’s insinuation and lifted his glass. “To Miss Bennet.”

“To Miss Bennet.”

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*Music Room*

*Pemberley*

Soft notes rolled out from the pianoforte in a simple dainty tune which was only occasionally audible over the sounds of the fire and Lady Catherine's powerful voice. Georgiana, seated at the instrument, cast occasional nervous glances towards the two women over by the fireplace, her fingers moving with ease through the chords of a song she had known for years.

Elizabeth sat, feet together and hands folded decorously in her lap, attention trained on Lady Catherine. She wore a faint half-smile and her eyes danced as they had since entering the room when Lady Catherine had sailed over to the chair nearest the fireplace and requisitioned the footstool.

"My Anne would have been a marvelous performer on the pianoforte," Lady Catherine remarked. "Her health, of course, did not permit her to learn how to play. Do you play, Miss Bennet?"

"I do, though not particularly well. I do not practice enough, as I am often distracted by other interests."

"Has your governess left you?"

"We never had a governess."

"No governess! How was that possible? I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education."

Elizabeth chuckled at this. "No, she was not. But we were always encouraged to read, and we had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle certainly might."

"I have no doubt that is true, but that is what a governess will prevent, and if I had known your mother, I should have advised her most strenuously to engage one. I always say that nothing is to be done in education without

steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it. But you mention ‘all’ – how many sisters do you have?”

“There are five of us, Madam.”

“Five daughters and no sons? Your mother ought to have had a son.”

“She would agree with you about that, Lady Catherine.”

“I suppose it was not entirely her fault, though,” the lady said charitably. “There are some families which produce mostly daughters; my own, for example. I have but one brother and had two sisters, though both are gone now.”

“I am sorry to hear of your losses.”

“Yes, so I am,” the woman replied, and for a moment, her expression softened. “One of my sisters died when she was but a child, and my other sister, Lady Anne Darcy, was never particularly strong. My own Anne is much like her.”

“She did look pale when I met her, but then she had just lost her husband, which is a tragic thing.”

The soft look passed, to be replaced by a look of surprise. “You have met Mrs. Darcy?”

“I have, earlier today. She invited me to her sitting room for tea. She is a charming woman.”

Lady Catherine seemed caught between disapproval and pride. “She ought not to be visiting given her poor health, but she is my daughter and mistress of Pemberley, and I have raised her well.”

The door opened at this juncture, and the two gentlemen entered. Georgiana, who was still playing, stopped and turned a relieved look on her two guardians, while Lady Catherine stood up and said, “It is about time you arrived, gentlemen. I am fatigued, which is somewhat surprising given that I have always been a vigorous woman, but then I did travel a long way in the last few days. Come along to the office, Darcy!”

Darcy bowed and held out his arm, and the two departed, leaving an amused Elizabeth and thoroughly relieved Georgiana.

The colonel waited a minute and then asked, "I do hope that you did not find our aunt excessively difficult?"

"Not at all," Elizabeth said with a laugh. "Lady Catherine is very certain of herself, along with being *exceptionally* curious about the lives of my family, but I was not distressed in the least."

"I could not hear everything she said, but I know that she was rudely inquisitive," Georgiana said unhappily.

"Do not concern yourself, my friend. As I said before, I do not intimidate easily."

The door opened, and Matilda, the elderly maid who attended to Mrs. Darcy, entered and said, "Miss Darcy, Miss Bennet, my mistress hopes that you can attend to her for a few minutes."

The two ladies exchanged surprised glances and quickly rose.

"It would be our pleasure," Elizabeth said. "Colonel, will you excuse us?"

"Certainly."

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*The Office*

*Pemberley*

"Darcy," Lady Catherine said, striding over to the fire and taking the warmest seat, "I know you have only been here for a few days, but I confess to being appalled at the state of Pemberley. The mantle in my bedchamber is not well dusted,

and the furniture throughout the house is sadly shabby! Anne is far too sickly to manage the estate properly, and your elder brother was obviously too lazy. I expect better from you.”

“I assure you that we are in the process of determining the greatest needs at Pemberley,” Darcy said. “Now, I know your trip was an arduous one, and you wish for your bed, so why do you wish to speak to me?”

“My trip was not arduous, precisely, but it was long,” Lady Catherine said sourly. “I do not enjoy traveling at any time of year, but November is quite my least favorite, after February, of course. But I know my duty, and when it calls, I always accomplish everything in a completely appropriate manner. As to my purpose tonight, well, we must discuss your marriage to Anne.”

Darcy’s eyes flared wide, and he gaped at her for a moment before demanding, “*What?*”

“Oh come now,” the lady replied impatiently, “surely it is obvious that if Anne bears a daughter, you must marry Anne. The entire purpose of your brother’s marriage to my daughter was so that Pemberley and Rosings would be united in the same family, and since your father was fool enough to entail Pemberley, if Anne births a daughter, you must marry her so that you can sire a son!”

Darcy stared for another minute and then sank down into a seat across from his aunt.

“My cousin Anne is recently widowed,” he said. “She is hardly considering remarriage at this point.”

“Perhaps she is not, but I am,” Lady Catherine stated. “She has always been a weak woman, my Anne. If not for me, she would never have married Lawrence in the first place!”

Darcy clenched his teeth, swallowed, and said, with steely calm, “Given that you described my elder brother as both foolish and dissolute, I wonder that you regard his union with Anne positively.”

Lady Catherine huffed and rolled her eyes. “Darcy, you are not a child; do not act like one! Regardless of Lawrence’s character and inclinations, he was master of Pemberley! It was long your mother’s wish, and mine, that Pemberley and Rosings would be united by the marriage of my daughter and Lady Anne’s son.”

“And if Anne gives birth to a son, your wishes will be fulfilled.”

“That is true, but the child will doubtless be a daughter.”

Darcy blinked. “Why do you say that?”

“Because my mother birthed one son and three daughters, and I birthed a daughter, and your mother birthed...”

“Two sons and a daughter.”

“Two sons and *three* daughters,” Lady Catherine corrected. “She lost twin daughters within a day of their births while you were still a small child.”

Darcy felt as if someone had punched him in the chest. “She did?”

“Yes,” his aunt said, and her expression grew sympathetic. “My poor sister was devastated by it, though given that the babes were born early, their deaths were not a great surprise. She was so very happy when Georgiana was born energetic and vigorous, though her own health never fully recovered.”

Darcy considered this for a moment, and then resolutely put it aside. He would contemplate this news in privacy at some later time.

“I have no intention of discussing a marriage with Anne. We are both mourning Lawrence, and the child is not yet born.”

“There is *every* reason to discuss it. Even if she does birth a son, the son might be sickly and die before he is of age, which would force us back into this position. No, the safest



thing for you to do is to marry Anne in a year so that she can bear more children, one of whom will, we hope, be a healthy male.”

Darcy opened his mouth to argue, and then closed it. He was not afraid of Lady Catherine, and he had no hesitation in refusing to do as she wished, but if he disagreed with her openly, she would harangue him, which would distress Georgiana. His little sister was upset by open dissension.

“We will discuss this later,” he stated and then stood up. “I have far too much on my mind to think of marriage.”

“I hope that is true,” the older woman responded, her eyes narrowing. “This Miss Bennet, I trust that she is not here as a prospective bride to either you or Colonel Fitzwilliam? You can both do far better than a penniless country girl.”

Again, he was tempted to say something very rude, and again, he held his tongue. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a charming friend to Georgiana. Given that Lawrence is dead and the estate in a state of disorder and disarray, Richard and I both thought it wise for Georgiana to have a cheerful friend here. That is all.”

“That is permissible,” his aunt remarked. “Now, Nephew, I wish to know everything about the will, about Lawrence’s death, and about the current state of Pemberley.”

## Chapter 19

### *Anne Darcy's Sitting Room*

“I do apologize for summoning you both here so late in the day,” Anne said. Elizabeth, watching her carefully, was alarmed at both the pallor in the lady’s face, and the contrasting bright spots of red on her cheekbones.

“Are you unwell, Mrs. Darcy?” she asked worriedly.

Anne managed a trembling smile and said, “I am always more or less unwell, Miss Bennet. I am finding pregnancy quite difficult. But please, do sit down, both of you. Georgiana, I have not seen you in years. You have grown so tall.”

Elizabeth sat down, gently pulled Georgiana into the place next to her, and said, “Your mother said that she was too tall, and I told her that someone ought to have put a brick on Georgiana’s head some years ago.”

Anne laughed, though rather feebly, and said, “That is exactly why I called for you, Miss Bennet. I do not know you well, but you seem a confident lady in spite of your relative youth, and not likely to be intimidated by my mother’s formidable nature.”

“Elizabeth is not afraid of Lady Catherine at all,” Georgiana piped up, and then blushed scarlet.

“That is wonderful,” Anne said, reaching out a black gloved hand to pat Georgiana’s arm. “Indeed, I am hoping that...”

She trailed off, and her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, it is too much to ask, I fear.”

“Please, Mrs. Darcy, if we can serve you in any way, we would be pleased to do so,” Elizabeth assured her.

Anne smiled gratefully and said, "My mother is, as you have probably gathered, a difficult person with whom to live. My father died when I was a child of ten, and my mother's only other pregnancy ended in miscarriage. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Lady Catherine has long hovered over me, especially since I was sickly as a child."

"I expect that was frustrating," Elizabeth remarked.

"It was *very* frustrating, to be kept indoors, wrapped well in shawls all the time, and bullied to eat and drink when I was not hungry or thirsty. By the time I was twenty, I was desperate to leave Rosings. I did not know my cousin Lawrence well; he was more than five years older than me, and we met only a handful of times. He was away at school, and then he was either at Pemberley or in London. Life at Rosings seemed insupportable with my mother dominating everything I did..."

She stopped at the sight of Georgiana's face, which was full of distress, and said, "I am not as weak as you have heard, Cousin. I would have been healthier and more robust if I had been permitted to walk and ride and enjoy the sunshine and fresh air, but I was always kept well wrapped in cotton wool."

She blew out a breath and continued, "In any case, I leaped at the chance to marry Lawrence and escape my mother. Life here has been better since I had the opportunity to be free, but Georgiana, your brother and I had almost nothing in common. Ours was not a happy marriage."

"I am sorry," Georgiana said, and then she added bravely, "though I confess to not being surprised. Lawrence always seemed a thoroughly selfish creature with no interest at all in the needs and wants of those around him."

This provoked a harsh crack of laughter from Mrs. Darcy, who said, "That describes him perfectly. In any case, I admit that I am very anxious because Lady Catherine is now here at Pemberley. I am so close to delivering, and my mother will wish to control everything about the birth, and I am already afraid of the delivery!"

She broke down, weeping, and Elizabeth hurried over to sit down next to the widow.

“My dear Mrs. Darcy,” she murmured, patting the woman’s right arm. This provoked a cry of pain, and Elizabeth immediately stopped.

“I am so sorry!” she exclaimed. “I had forgotten you were hurt. Are you all right?”

“I am,” Anne assured her, accepting the handkerchief that Georgiana was holding out for her.

“I truly do not know what to do,” the lady continued drearily. “On the one hand, surely I owe my mother respect and honor, and in her own way, she genuinely cares for me and my child. On the other, she will not listen to me, and I cannot bear her demands, and her interference. I do not know what to do!”

“Do you wish for Fitzwilliam to insist that she leave Pemberley?” Georgiana asked, her eyes wide.

“No, no, that would not ... no, it would be such a scandal, and my mother would never forgive me or your brother! No, I merely hoped that perhaps you could, I do not know, distract her in some way? My mother is a very vigorous woman, and if she could be directed toward some project, that would be helpful.”

Elizabeth leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief, and said, “Please, do tell me about your mother and her interests. I am certain that Georgiana and I can think of some way to entertain and divert Lady Catherine.”

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*Breakfast Parlor*

*Pemberley*

*The Next Morning*

Elizabeth took a sip of tea and frowned down at the letter, which had just arrived from Longbourn.

*20<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Longbourn*

*Dear Lizzy,*

*I hope you are having a pleasant time at Pemberley, dear sister. Jane told me that she wrote to you yesterday about the arrival of our cousin, Mr. Collins, who wishes to marry one of us. Mother also mentioned that she wrote to you, urging that you return to Longbourn.*

*I do not think you would be happy as the wife of Mr. Collins. He is not particularly clever, and he is, perhaps, a little too devoted to his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings.*

*I assure you that I have no wish to stand in your way if you are interested in becoming Mrs. Collins; you are the second born, and given that Mr. Bingley seems well on his way to being in love with Jane, have the right of first refusal.*

*However, if you are not interested, please send me a letter to that effect, because I hope that Mr. Collins will choose me to be his bride. I daresay that sounds odd given that he is not a prepossessing man, but I greatly desire to leave Longbourn, to be mistress of my home, and to have children.*

*But I feel I am asking too much. Indeed, I would be tempted to throw this letter away except that unlike Jane, you are able to refuse a request without hesitation. I trust that if you wish to return to Longbourn and claim Mr. Collins as a husband, you will do so.*

*Your loving sister,*

*Mary*

Elizabeth blew out a breath and closed her eyes in contemplation. Based on her father's letter, and Jane's, Mr. Collins was a silly, tedious man who would be an annoying husband. But Mary, as the only plain daughter of Mrs. Fanny Bennet, was often ignored and even denigrated at Longbourn. Was it better for Mary to be married to a fool, or to live on as a spinster daughter?

For that matter, was it Elizabeth's business whether her younger sister chose a tiresome husband? Assuredly, it was not. Mary was old enough to know her own mind, and Elizabeth's only business was to send a letter today assuring Mary that she had no interest in returning to Hertfordshire in the hopes of garnering a marriage proposal from their father's heir.

She was reminded, unpleasantly, of the story she had heard only last night from Mrs. Darcy's lips, of how the former Anne de Bourgh had leaped into marriage in order to escape a difficult situation at home. But even there, well, Mrs. Darcy's marriage had not been a remarkable success, but it was probable, given what little Elizabeth knew, that the Darcys had not spent much time together. Mrs. Darcy had, at least, enjoyed privacy and a few years away from her mother.

She lifted her head as Georgiana and her brother entered the room arm in arm, whereupon Mr. Darcy smiled and said, "Miss Bennet, I hope you slept well?"

"I did," she replied, dabbing a spot of jam off of her mouth with a napkin. "It reminded me very much of home, complete with a few enthusiastic roosters crowing at dawn!"

"Those birds ought to have their necks rung and prepared for our evening meal!" Lady Catherine announced, stalking angrily into the room and glowering at the assembled company. "At Rosings, we do not permit roosters to wake up the inhabitants of the estate in such a rude fashion. I was awoken at four o'clock this morning by the roosters' raucous sounds!"

“Lady Catherine,” Georgiana piped up, “perhaps you would like to move into the empty bedchamber next to my own? That section is farther away from the Home Farm, and you would probably sleep better.”

Lady Catherine looked surprised and said, “That is a good idea, my dear niece. I will inspect the chamber to ensure that it is to my liking.”

“If it is displeasing to you in any way, perhaps adjustments regarding the furniture can be made?” Georgiana continued shyly, drawing a surprised look from Darcy.

“Perhaps,” her aunt replied and then turned her attention on her nephew. “Darcy, what are your plans for today?”

“I intend to meet with Mr. Harris to arrange for the last disbursements of the minor bequests of my brother’s will, and then Richard and I need to visit some tenants who are at war over a disputed field.”

“I see. And what of you, Georgiana? I hope you plan on practicing the pianoforte?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“I believe that there is more than one pianoforte in the house, Miss Bennet. Given your lack of perfection, you ought to practice as well.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said, “perhaps I will do exactly that later in the day. For now, though, I plan to spend some time in the stillroom. Mrs. Darcy mentioned that she has been suffering from quite severe headaches, and my grandmother passed down an old remedy, made from lavender water and rose petals, which I hope might be of assistance.”

Lady Catherine prickled up like a porcupine at this statement, and she said, “I am certain that the still room here at Pemberley already has everything that my daughter might require to remedy her headache.”

Elizabeth took a sip of tea before raising a limpid gaze toward the lady. “When I met with Mrs. Darcy, she mentioned

that she has not been well enough to go to the still room for many months, and that Mr. Lawrence Darcy did not consider maintaining the making of ointments and unguents a necessity. She said that unfortunately the stillroom has thus been quite neglected.”

The mistress of Rosings straightened her back even further and scowled hideously. “Lawrence did not ... how dare he? The still room is a most vital part of any functioning house!”

“I quite agree, Lady Catherine,” Elizabeth said. “My dear grandmother used to say...”

“This must be dealt with, at once,” the woman interrupted. “Georgiana, have you ever worked in the stillroom?”

“No, Aunt, I have not,” the girl said meekly.

“Then you and Miss Bennet must accompany me there after you finish practicing on the pianoforte. Every lady should know how to make remedies for stomach aches and headaches, not to mention cordials for the improving of one’s complexion.”

Darcy, frowning, opened his mouth in protest, only to encounter Elizabeth’s gaze. The girl shook her head decidedly before turning to the other women and saying, “That does sound delightful, does it not, Georgiana? I am certain your aunt will be able to give us both excellent advice!”

“I look forward to it,” Georgiana said.

Darcy, looked first at his sister, and then at his guest, and wrinkled his brow. What was going on?

/

*An Hour Later*



“Miss Bennet and Georgiana have entered a pact to keep Lady Catherine busy,” Richard explained as the two men walked toward the stables. “I spoke to both ladies last night while you were closeted with Lady Catherine for – what was it, a full two hours?”

“Our aunt wished to know every detail of the will and of Lawrence’s death,” Darcy said.

“Surely you did not tell her of our suspicions?”

“Of course I did not, but I chose to speak at some length so that she is not inspired to interrogate anyone else in the house. But what do you mean, a pact?”

“I am being somewhat humorous in my wording. Directly after you left with Lady Catherine last night, a maid came and summoned Georgiana and Miss Bennet to Anne’s rooms. Apparently Anne is unhappy about her mother’s presence here at Pemberley, because Lady Catherine is often ...”

He trailed off, and Darcy continued, “Domineering? High handed? Dictatorial? Yes, all those and more. But why go to my sister and Miss Bennet for assistance?”

“They are more able to manage Lady Catherine than you are, Cousin.”

“Nonsense. I am, at the moment, the only person who can force my aunt to leave the estate.”

“Yes, but Anne does not truly want that. In her own way, Lady Catherine cares for her daughter. To force her to leave would cause a breach within the family which would, I fear, be nearly irreparable. Nor would my father be at all pleased to have branches of the family warring with one another.”

“I do not care what Lord Matlock wishes,” Darcy said, stopping to glower at his military cousin. “For now, Pemberley is under my purview, and I will not allow our aunt to torment Anne when she is in such a delicate state!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam stared at Darcy in surprise, not unmixed with respect, and he clapped a hand on the taller man's shoulder. "Perhaps you ought to have gone into the army, not me," he remarked. "You are fiercely protective of those under your care. In any case, I am confident that Anne will, if necessary, ask you to dislodge her mother from Pemberley, but for now, the young ladies intend to keep your mother engaged by giving Lady Catherine what she wants the most."

"Which is?"

"The opportunity to instruct from her great knowledge, of course, and to condescend to be helpful!"

Darcy stared at his cousin and then began laughing, which provoked an answering chortle from the colonel.

"Shall we?" Darcy finally asked, gesturing toward the stables.

"Yes," Richard agreed, resuming his stride. "We had best hurry to visit those tenants in the disputed field. My weather sense tells me that a storm is brewing."

## Chapter 20

*Kennels*

*Pemberley*

*Three Hours Later*

Elizabeth leaned over the barrier and smiled down at the scene before her.

A section of the kennels had been fenced off and lined with straw to serve as an oversized whelping box, and a lovely mother cocker spaniel sprawled against the wall. Three of her pups nuzzled at her belly, nursing enthusiastically and kicking each other while she watched the fourth, a handsome reddish fellow with white stockings, stumble along the perimeter of the box. She seemed content, her feathery tail thumping occasionally, her offspring joining the kennel chorus with tiny yips and whines and snufflings.

“They are precious,” Elizabeth remarked, chuckling as two of the pups turned away from their mother at the same time, collided nose-first, and tumbled over onto their sides with startled whines, their large ears and paws flailing.

“They are,” Georgiana agreed, “although they are rather small given that it is so late in the year. I think these puppies must be under six weeks old. My brother raises bloodhounds at Bellhaven, and he always arranges for the litters to arrive during spring and summer. It is easier to keep puppies alive in the warmer months.”

“That is sensible,” Elizabeth remarked. “My father is a scholar and not particularly interested in hunting or shooting, so we do not have many dogs around Longbourn. I know very little about puppies.”

Georgiana sighed and slumped. “You may not know much about dogs, but you know a great deal about the

stillroom, whereas I do not.”

Elizabeth chuckled and said, “Truthfully, I was surprised at Lady Catherine’s knowledge today. She genuinely has learned a great deal about unguents, perfumes, lotions and even teas!”

“Well, I was glad that you were there with me, Elizabeth. I presume your mother spent many hours with you making up such things.”

Elizabeth sighed and said, “No, not at all. My mother is the daughter of a solicitor, you see; she was not raised to be mistress to an estate and thus was not trained to manage a still room. I learned about such thing from my grandmother Bennet, who passed on some eight years ago. My sister Jane and I relished spending time with her learning about the medicinal uses of herbs and teas and the like. After her passing, we both read books and have spent many hours together pursuing our united interest.”

“It sounds lovely,” Georgiana said, and sighed wistfully. “I wish that I had a sister.”

“Misses,” a young voice suddenly piped from the entrance of the shed, “the snow is starting to fall fast. Perhaps you ought to return to the mansion.”

Elizabeth turned toward the stable boy, a young man of some fourteen years dressed in homespun clothing, his hat covered in snowflakes.

“Yes, that seems wise,” Elizabeth agreed, taking Georgiana’s arm in her own.

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*Drawing Room*

*Pemberley*

*An Hour Later*

The curtains in the drawing room had been drawn back, allowing three of the four inhabitants of the room to look out. The wind howled around the corners and eaves of the house, flinging flurries wildly into the air and bending trees like strips of whalebone. Drifts sifted higher and higher like mounds of windblown flour, piling up against tree trunks and outbuildings and the house corners. Evergreens tossed their heads and shook their needles and stood upright only to bend over again, bowing to the mastery of another snow-laden gust.

“Look at all those flakes coming down,” Elizabeth marveled, staring out of the windows of the drawing room. “It is magnificent!”

“It is,” Georgiana agreed. “Although I am thankful to be indoors. This looks to be an intense storm.”

“We cut it rather close returning from that southwest field,” Richard remarked, wandering into the room and over to a sideboard, where he poured himself a glass of brandy. “I am thankful both our horses are fast, as we were running in front of the snow.”

Georgiana looked startled and rather distressed, and Darcy said hastily, “We were safe enough, my dear. All the same, I did order the outdoors servants to close up the barns and kennels and to stay inside until the storm is over. A blizzard is a dangerous time to be out and about.”

“This is why I much prefer Kent,” Lady Catherine declared, marching into the room. “We do not have snowstorms in late November in Kent. I shudder to think what it must be like here in January!”

“This is an early snowstorm for Derbyshire, Lady Catherine,” Darcy replied calmly. “Now, I hope you had a pleasant day?”

“I am not certain whether I would call it pleasant, but it was useful. My poor Anne, to be living in a house with the still room in such shambles! I intend to repair that, and in short

order. Miss Bennet, I expect you to attend to me tomorrow. You proved quite useful this morning!”

“Thank you, Lady Catherine. I would be honored.”

At this moment, the butler entered and walked over to whisper in Darcy’s ear, who first looked startled and then angry.

“Where is he?” the current master of Pemberley demanded.

“In the east sitting room, sir,” the butler explained and glanced out the window. “We can send him away, but the weather is quite fearsome.”

Darcy sighed and shook his head. “We cannot send him away, of course. It is not safe. I assume he came on horseback?”

“Yes, sir, and his horse is stabled safely.”

“What is it, Darcy?” Lady Catherine demanded. “Who has arrived so unexpectedly?”

Darcy narrowed his eyes and said, “George Wickham, now master of Timbreline.”

Georgiana gasped and Richard’s brow creased in anger.

“Wickham?” he demanded. “What is he doing here?”

“I do not know,” Darcy said, “but I intend to find out. Richard, would you be kind enough to escort the ladies to dinner?”

“Are you certain I should not accompany you?”

Darcy shook his head. “There is no need. I will join you as soon as possible.”

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*East Sitting Room*

Darcy entered the room to find his father's godson standing at the largest window in the room, staring out into the storm. A moment later, Wickham turned to face him, and Darcy noted that the man's hair and breeches were noticeably damp.

"Darcy," Wickham said, and bowed slightly.

"Wickham," Darcy replied with an equally small bow. "May I inquire as to what brings you to Pemberley today?"

"I have no doubt you are wishing me in Jericho now. I daresay you will not believe me, but I truly did not intend to arrive here at Pemberley with a snowstorm on my heels. It blew up very suddenly."

Darcy could not deny this, but was nonetheless suspicious. "That does not explain why you were on Pemberley lands."

"No, it does not; I was inspecting the southern border of Timbreline today and realized that I had a question for Mr. Harris regarding my estate. I decided, on an impulse, to see if he was available for a short conversation. By the time I noticed the storm, I was far enough away from Timbreline that I felt it was unsafe to turn about."

Darcy glanced out the window, which was being blasted by snowflakes and wind, and nodded. "I doubt that you could have found your way home. Well, you are here now, and may stay until it is safe to depart. Mr. Harris can probably attend to you tomorrow. You are not invited to join the family at dinner, though."

"I have no wish to do so," Wickham remarked, "given that Lady Catherine is here. She neither likes nor approves of me."

Darcy compressed his lips, determined not to say anything, and Wickham laughed and said, "I know you dislike me very much too, and Colonel Fitzwilliam as well. But Lady Catherine is more open with her disapprobation. If you would

permit me to retreat to one of the guest bedrooms, I will be most pleased, though I do beg you for some dinner. I hope that by tomorrow, it will be possible for me to leave.”

Darcy eyed the other man thoughtfully and then nodded. “That is permissible. But Wickham, before I have one of the manservants escort you to your room, let me make one thing clear. You will leave the female servants in this house alone, or I will have you thrown into the nearest snowbank.”

Wickham cast his eyes heavenward and said, “You need not concern yourself about that, either. Lawrence was the one interested in maidservants, not me.”

Darcy took a step closer, his eyes narrowed. “What do you mean by that?”

The other man looked startled and said, “I rather thought you knew that your brother was ... erm ... inclined to ... well, the man is dead, Darcy. I do not know that you need to be aware of the details of his ... erm ... conquests.”

“If he left bastard children, I do.”

Wickham grimaced at these words and said, “You were always too responsible for your own good. It is part of what makes you so tiresome. Yes, Lawrence left two sons that I am aware of in London.”

“I need to know where they are so that the children and their mothers can be appropriately supported.”

“Very well. I will provide those details before I leave.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said, the words like ash in his mouth. “Now, a servant will be along shortly to escort you to your bedchamber.”

“Thank you,” Wickham replied, bowing sardonically. “I am honored by your hospitality.”

“Do you need dry clothing?” Darcy asked, eyeing again the man’s sodden appearance.



“Thank you, but no. I spent sufficient time here at Pemberley that I have garments waiting in the guest bedchamber I usually inhabited. After your brother’s death, Mrs. Darcy swept us out of the house in great haste, and I left that clothing behind.”

“I see,” Darcy said and turned on his heel and took a step toward the door, stopped. He then wheeled around to face his unwanted guest again.

“What do you mean that you are not interested in maidservants?” he demanded. “I always thought that you and Lawrence were cut from the same cloth regarding your more carnal proclivities.”

Wickham huffed and said, “And that is another thing – you are such a puritan. The truth of the matter is that to entice a maidservant into one’s bed is rather a simple matter when one is the master of the estate, or the master’s close friend. I never wished for there to be any undue pressure regarding a girl’s ... position ... in a household to affect her choice as to whether she and I ... well, I think you understand my meaning. I confess that part of the pleasure in pursuing a woman is the hunt, and I never wished to have an unfair advantage.”

Now Darcy felt genuinely ill.

“But my brother had no such hesitation?” he demanded harshly.

“Poor Lawrence,” Wickham said with spurious sympathy. “He was, in appearance, a throwback to an earlier Darcy. He was short, and his features, unlike yours, were neither regular nor handsome. He was also sufficiently enthusiastic about food to be rather corpulent by the time he was twenty. He was, bluntly, not a charming man, and found it difficult to attract women based on his form, figure, and manners. Now I, being good looking and charming, have no such difficulties in attracting the attention of the fairer sex.”

Darcy swallowed hard. “Are you aware of any woman here at Pemberley who was subject to my brother’s advances?”

Wickham tilted his head, frowned thoughtfully, and said, “No, I am not. I think that perhaps your brother was a little afraid of your housekeeper. I can well understand that. Mrs. Reynolds is a formidable woman. Moreover, Mrs. Darcy has lived here at Pemberley much of the time since her marriage, and Lawrence was more inclined to behave himself when he was in the same house as his wife. You might want to ensure that none of the comely maidservants at Darcy House in London found themselves with child in the last years.”

Darcy blew out a slow breath and nodded. “I will do exactly that as soon as possible.”

## Chapter 21

*Drawing Room*

*Later*

“Wickham is installed in the guest wing tonight, and I hope he will leave tomorrow,” Darcy remarked.

Georgiana’s blue eyes were wide with confusion. “He did not wish to eat with us, Brother?”

“It matters not whether he wishes to or not,” Lady Catherine stated. “The man is a mere steward’s son, and your brother should never have made him a bosom friend.”

“The man’s antecedents are of far less important than his character,” Darcy said. “Lawrence and his cronies were engaged in a variety of ungodly activities, and I will not welcome Wickham into my life or to my table.”

“Except that thanks to Lawrence, Wickham is now master of Timbreline, which makes him a neighbor,” Colonel Fitzwilliam pointed out.

Lady Catherine shook her head and said, “He really was fool, my eldest nephew. To give away a good estate to a steward’s son, ignoring his own child’s rights! It is insupportable!”

“I agree that it was poorly done, but it is too late to do anything about it,” Darcy said repressively, glancing at Elizabeth. He trusted Miss Bennet to the ends of the earth, but it was not acceptable to discuss private family business in front of a guest.

Elizabeth stood up immediately and remarked, “I am fatigued and wish to retire now. Georgiana, would you like to come with me?”

“Yes,” the girl replied, standing up with alacrity. “Good evening, Lady Catherine, Richard, Brother.”

“Good evening,” both gentlemen chorused, and Lady Catherine waved an absent hand at the two younger women before returning to her tea.

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### *Elizabeth's Bedchamber*

#### *Two Hours after Midnight*

“Miss Bennet? Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth jolted awake, turned over in bed, lifted herself up on one elbow, and squinted into the dazzling light of the candle held by a feminine hand. “Yes, what is it?”

“I apologize for waking you, Miss,” the voice continued, and Elizabeth, whose eyes had now focused, recognized the intruder as Mrs. Darcy's personal maid, Matilda. “Mrs. Darcy is, well, she has started her pains, Miss, and she is quite distressed. She wondered if you would be willing to come to her.”

Elizabeth gaped in bewilderment. “Mrs. Darcy wishes for me? I ... do not know anything about, erm...”

“She knows, Miss,” Matilda replied, and now she sounded frantic. “She knows that, but the snowstorm means that the doctor cannot get here, and Mrs. Darcy does not wish for Lady Catherine to be in the chamber with her, and oh, please do come along, Miss Bennet. I beg you!”

“Of course I will,” Elizabeth said, rolling out of bed. “Do let me change into a dress and I will be there shortly.”

“Grace will be along in a minute to help you, Miss. And thank you!”

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A few minutes later, Elizabeth, now clad appropriately, followed Grace into a room in the far corner of the family wing. Elizabeth gave her a tight smile of thanks and passed inside, noting with surprise the flurry of activity throughout the room. The dark curtains had been drawn shut against the snowstorm outside and the fire built up hot to counter the cold, but still the wind moaned against the house – or perhaps that was the expectant mother, doubled over and panting against a contraction, her dark robe shifting about her full figure. Her hair had been pulled back tightly into an unfashionable but highly practical knot at the nape of her neck, and her face shone in the firelight, slick with sweat.

Elizabeth felt herself blanching a little. It took a great deal to shake her confidence, but she knew nothing at all about childbirth. It would have assuaged her worries a great deal had an accoucheur, a midwife, even a month nurse or wet nurse, been present. Alas, the storm prevented such a thing, and Mrs. Darcy must make do with those at her disposal.

There were, however, a great many maids rushing about. One strong young woman was carrying in more and more logs for the fire, stacking them up beside the hearth, while others battened the windows and plugged every hole they could find. Three stood over a simple cot, hurriedly making it up, while a fourth stood by with a white frightened face and linens in her arms.

Elizabeth ran a hand down her simple wool dress and forced a reassuring smile onto her face and stepped forward.

The contraction passed, Anne straightened with a moan, and then her weary face brightened. “Miss Bennet, thank you for coming. I am so sorry for having you woken...”

“Nonsense, Mrs. Darcy,” Elizabeth replied in a kind voice, hurrying forward. “I confess to having no experience at

all in the act of childbearing, but I hope I can be a support to you.”

Mrs. Darcy stared at her, wild eyed, and then suddenly began sobbing. “I am so afraid! I did not expect to deliver for several more weeks and then this dreadful snowstorm! My doctor is not here, nor are my nurses. Oh Miss Bennet!”

Elizabeth felt a stab of genuine panic but forced herself to speak calmly. “Mrs. Darcy, please do not give way to fear. Many a woman has birthed successfully without the assistance of a doctor.”

“My mother has often said that doctors are more trouble than they are worth,” a female voice declared. Elizabeth and Anne turned toward the door to discover a woman of some twenty summers standing in the entrance, dressed in a maid’s outfit, with Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper of Pemberley, at her side.

“Mrs. Darcy,” the housekeeper said in a soothing tone. “This is Molly Smythe, who entered service here at Pemberley a few weeks ago. Her mother is Alison Smythe, who serves as midwife to many of the women in Lambton. Molly worked with her mother on many an occasion, and she has much experience with birthing.”

“Oh, thank God,” Anne cried out, and then she groaned as another contraction struck her. Elizabeth, who was still holding Mrs. Darcy’s hands, suppressed her own moan as the lady dug her fingernails into Elizabeth’s fortunately mittened palms.

Molly hurried forward and said, “Do feel free to walk around and move as gives you relief, Madame. My mum always said that the best thing to do in the early stages of labor is to move around.”

“I do not ... I cannot do this if it is much worse,” Anne moaned. “I cannot!”

The maid bent down and moved Mrs. Darcy’s robe, and Elizabeth looked away, aware that something of an intimate

nature was occurring. Molly stood up a minute later and said, “You are farther along than I imagined, Madame. How long have you been feeling the pains?”

Anne cast a wild eyed look at the clock and panted out, “The first pains were some ... about ten hours ago, the first ones that really hurt, but I did not think that ... it is too early ... I did not expect ... oh!”

Again, the lady cried out in agony, and Elizabeth readily accepted the pain of the lady’s clutching fingers, confident that it was helpful for the laboring woman.

The next hours were a blur, as the contractions grew closer and closer together, and Anne Darcy, while obviously in agony, managed to stay alert while the young maid ordered her superiors about in managing the birthing room. Eventually, Molly guided her mistress to the birthing cot, and declared that the child was ready to be born. Elizabeth found herself at Anne’s side, holding her right hand, murmuring encouragement, along with the Lord’s Prayer, into the lady’s ear.

The sun was painting the eastern sky orange when, with a last push, Molly guided a pink infant into the world, and Anne Darcy, spent but happy, croaked, “What is it?”

“You have a healthy daughter, Mrs. Darcy,” the maid said sympathetically.

Anne leaned back into her pillow, her eyes wet with tears, her eyes fixed on the ceiling above, as the baby, now being wrapped warmly by the servants, squalled indignantly.

“Thank God for that!” Anne cried out. “Thank God!”

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*Darcy’s Bedchamber*

“I have your shaving water, sir.”

Darcy opened his eyes and peered first at his valet, who was standing next to the bed with a lit candle in his hand, and then at the window, which was almost completely dark.

“What time is it, Percy?” he asked, sitting up and rubbing his hand over his face. He had not slept well, disturbed by unquiet dreams, and given the lack of light, it must be very early indeed.

“It is eight o’clock, sir, but still dark because of the storm.”

Darcy turned a frowning look on the window again. Now that he was paying attention, he could hear the whistling of the wind. He shook his head and pushed back the covers. “It is still snowing?”

“Yes, sir,” Percy replied, walking over to the wardrobe and removing a dressing gown, which he carried over to his master. “It stopped for a few hours last night, but is snowing again. Worse than that is the wind, which is whipping the flakes here and there, forming great mounds. It would be dangerous to venture outside today, sir.”

Darcy stood up and turned to allow the man to help him into his thick robe. It felt good; the room was cold even with the fire, as the wind penetrated the glass windows and pushed through the smallest gaps.

“We will need to inspect the house today,” he mused aloud. “I hope that the roof is still intact throughout the attics.”

“Yes, sir,” his valet agreed, and then continued, “Mrs. Darcy safely delivered a healthy daughter an hour ago.”

Darcy jolted in shock and turned to face his valet, who allowed himself a slight smile. “You are now master of Pemberley, sir.”

“I see,” Darcy replied, sinking down on the bed. “You say that Mrs. Darcy is well?”

“Very well, yes, sir, and the child also.”



“Praise God for that,” he murmured, and he turned a bewildered face toward the window. “Did Dr. Graham manage to come through the storm?”

“No, sir, nor the midwife, nor the nurses. Mrs. Darcy delivered earlier than expected, and the storm was too severe to allow for anyone to ride for medical help. Fortunately, one of the lower servants is daughter to the local midwife in Meryton, and was able to assist in the delivery. Miss Bennet was present as well.”

“Miss Bennet?”

“Yes, sir,” Percy declared, moving around to neaten the already neat room. “I understand that Mrs. Darcy found her most comforting during her ordeal.”

“I see,” Darcy said blankly.

“She is a very nice young lady, Miss Bennet,” Percy said in as airy a tone as he could manage given that he was an extremely proper manservant. “Very courteous to the servants, but obviously Quality.”

Darcy turned an amazed look on his valet. Percy had served him for eight years, and had never pushed him, even slightly, in the direction of a particular female.

“I am glad that you approve of Miss Bennet,” he remarked.

“Yes, sir. Are you ready to be shaved?”

## Chapter 22

### *The Birthing Room*

Elizabeth sank into a chair not far from the bed, limbs suddenly leaden. Molly had declared Mrs. Darcy perfectly sound and the babe as well. The newborn had been whisked away by another maid to be washed and swaddled, a clout and pilcher hastily located for the infant.

Now Matilda was returning with the baby, thoroughly bundled. Elizabeth studied the tiny person with curiosity. The candles which had been moved closer to the bed provided enough light to see the flushed red skin and squinting gray-blue eyes.

Anne's eyes were soft as her daughter was laid on her chest, and one thin hand came up instinctively to rest on the tiny back.

"Are you willing to try to nurse the baby?" Molly asked hesitantly, approaching her mistress with a concerned look on her face. "The wet nurse is not here, and the child really needs to eat."

"Yes, of course," Anne replied instantly. "Indeed, I wish to suckle my child, though I do not know how."

Molly moved forward at once, shifting the infant to lay along her mother's arm and murmuring gentle instruction. Anne's face spasmed with pain, and she gave a choked cry. Elizabeth winced slightly and averted her eyes and Molly flinched. "I'm so sorry, mum..."

"You are quite alright," Anne hastened to assure her, voice heavy with weariness. "It is only that my arm is still sore when moved. But I am well now."

Elizabeth looked back toward the bed. In the dim light, she could see a swathe of bruising across Mrs. Darcy's right

bicep; brown and faded, with tinges of yellow and green at the edges. The baby's slight weight rested most heavily on her right arm, the tiny head nudging the vestigial bruising.

"Are you certain you are well?" Elizabeth asked worriedly as the infant began to suck.

"I am," Anne said, and she smiled beatifically down on her baby. "I am sore, of course, but so thankful, Miss Bennet. Oh, this formality is absurd. Will you call me Anne?"

"Yes, and of course you must call me Elizabeth."

Anne lifted her head and said, "I cannot thank you enough for being willing to spend these last hours with me. It was a great help."

"I am glad," Elizabeth said sincerely. "I feel that I did very little; you did the hard work, along with Molly's knowledgeable help."

"Madam," Molly said hesitantly, "I must go downstairs to start my dusting, but if you need me I hope you will..."

"Nonsense, Molly!" Anne interrupted. "You likely saved my life and the baby's as well with your skilled assistance. You must go to bed!"

"Oh, but..."

"Mrs. Darcy is correct," Elizabeth interposed, smiling at the girl. "You were enormously helpful and, with Mrs. Darcy's permission, I will have a word with Mrs. Reynolds so that someone else can manage your duties for the next few days, given that you know more about infants than we do. Anne, perhaps Molly could go next door to the sitting room and eat a meal, and then sleep on a couch? That way, if you need to ask her any questions, you can reach her easily, and I daresay it will be quieter than the servant's quarters."

"That is an excellent idea," Anne replied, catching the eye of Matilda, who was standing nearby; she promptly guided the young servant girl toward the door which led to the adjacent sitting room.

“What will you name her?” Elizabeth asked, looking at the infant.

“I intend to ask my mother to name her.”

Elizabeth turned a startled look on Anne, who smiled and said, “Lady Catherine will be unhappy that she was not present during the birth, but I think her distress will be mitigated if she can name my baby girl.”

“She is a precious gift,” Elizabeth murmured, reaching out impetuously to stroke the soft, downy head of the infant, who had stopped eating and was now asleep, her fine lashes dark against her pink cheek.

“She is,” Anne agreed, and leaned back. “I am so tired.”

“I am certain you are, and given that the baby is now asleep, perhaps you should rest as well.”

A maid came forward, gathered the infant into her arms and said, “We will take good care of her, Mrs. Darcy. Please go to sleep, Madam.”

“I will,” Anne promised sleepily, rolling onto her left side and closing her eyes. Another maid hurried forward to tuck blankets around her mistress, and Elizabeth quietly left the room. Once she was in the corridor, she paused, trying to decide what to do. On the one hand, she had only slept for three hours last night, and she was extremely fatigued. On the other hand, her blood was humming with the excitement of the last hours, and her mind was full of wonder at the experiences of the night. The new little Darcy was so small, so precious, so perfect.

She would, she decided, tidy her hair and dress, and then make her way downstairs for breakfast. She could nap later in the day.

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## *Breakfast Parlor*

Darcy looked up from his ham and eggs and smiled at Georgiana and Richard as they entered the room together.

“Good morning,” he said.

Georgiana smiled back at him before wandering over to the window to stare out. The world had been frosted white, the trees entirely covered and skirted around with mounding drifts. Only a few large lazy flakes were still falling, carried along on skirls of wind that rearranged the top of the snow and piled drifts still higher. The surface remained unmarred by footsteps, no sign of bird or beast or man afoot in the frigid aftermath of the tempest.

“What a terrible snowstorm!” Georgiana marveled.

“It was,” Colonel Fitzwilliam agreed, filling his own place at the buffet.

“I have never seen such a severe storm so early in the winter,” Elizabeth commented, stepping into the room. “It is remarkable and, I confess, a little intimidating.”

Darcy had risen to his feet at Elizabeth’s arrival, and he said quickly, “Miss Bennet, I had not thought to see you up at this hour! Surely you must be very tired!”

“I am,” she responded with a chuckle, “but I am not very sleepy, and I am hungry. I hope to take a nap later today.”

“Why are you tired, Elizabeth?” Georgiana asked, her eyes shifting from her friend to her brother and back again.

Darcy cleared his throat and said, “I had intended to wait until ... ah, Lady Catherine, good morning.”

“Good morning, Nephew,” the woman replied, striding into the room. “I see the snow has stopped falling, at least, but with the winds still howling, my bedchamber is quite cold. I hope there is sufficient firewood to keep the mansion warm!”

“We will probably need to haul a substantial amount of wood indoors if the temperatures do not rise soon,” Darcy said, “but please, I need to make an announcement to you all. I was informed a short time ago that Anne was safely delivered of a healthy baby daughter at dawn.”

Silence fell for a moment, and then Lady Catherine cried out, “Anne birthed her child? And both mother and baby are well?”

“Yes, Madame,” Darcy replied, smiling down at his aunt. “Congratulations, Lady Catherine, you are now a grandmother.”

“Oh, thank God!” the lady exclaimed, and tears formed in her eyes, which she hastily wiped away with a handkerchief. She turned a trembling smile on the others and said, “I was so worried, you know, with Anne’s health being so poorly. But how did the doctor manage to come through the storm?”

“He did not,” Elizabeth said, “and the month nurse and wet nurse were also not present. By God’s grace, one of the lower servants is the daughter of a local midwife and was able to assist Mrs. Darcy with the delivery.”

“How do you know that?” Lady Catherine demanded.

“I was summoned to Mrs. Darcy’s birthing room a few hours after midnight, Madame,” Elizabeth replied. “I daresay that your daughter did not wish for you to be woken up in the middle of the night, as your rest is important.”

Lady Catherine stared at her, and then emitted a sharp bark of laughter. “It is more that she was afraid I would drive her mad,” she remarked, “and I suppose I would have. I was terrified for Anne, and I confess that I was dreading her labor. And now I learn that she is well, and the baby too! Did she tell you the child’s name?”

Elizabeth relaxed, relieved at the lady’s good humor, and said, “Mrs. Darcy mentioned to me that she wishes to consult you before naming the child.”

“As well she should!” the lady declared. “Well, I will eat a little and then go upstairs to see my new granddaughter. It was a girl, as I knew it would be, Darcy!”

Darcy grinned and said, “You were indeed correct, Aunt.”

“Of course I was. Oh, I am too excited to eat, though it takes a great deal to rob me of my hunger. I have long been known for my robust appetite. Oh, thank God that Anne is well!”

With this, the new grandmother hurried out of the room, leaving the rest of the company filled with a bemused mix of surprise and happiness. Georgiana, in particular, was so excited that she had trouble eating, while Elizabeth, hungry from her long night, tucked into her food with enthusiasm. The two gentlemen were also silent; both happy, both aware that since Anne had birthed a daughter, much of what had been uncertain was now settled.

“Oh, it is so wonderful!” Georgiana suddenly cried out. “I am so pleased! I am the youngest of my generation, Elizabeth, and I am excited to have a new baby niece! Is she very cute?”

“To be entirely truthful, the new little Darcy is crumpled and red,” Elizabeth remarked, “but I know that newborns are often not prepossessing. More than once, I have accompanied my elder sister to visit a tenant wife after she birthed a child, and am always astonished at how odd they look directly after birth, and how charming and adorable they are after a few weeks!”

Georgiana laughed and asked, “Do you visit the tenant farmers’ wives often, then?”

“Not often, exactly, but when they have babies, or when there is an illness, or an injury, and they need a basket of food or some extra clothing, we ensure that they receive the assistance they need. Longbourn is not a large estate, of

course, and my parents were blessed with many daughters, so Jane, Mary, and I all take turns visiting as needed.”

“That is kind of you,” the girl replied. “I have occasionally accompanied my brother on visits to the tenants, but I am rather shy and do not always know what to say to them.”

“They live very different lives,” Elizabeth agreed. “Much harder lives, of course, especially the wives and mothers who find themselves managing homes and children without much help. The washing and cooking alone must take hours every day!”

“As soon as the roads are clearer, we will need to begin visiting the tenants to determine their needs,” Darcy said, staring out as a gust of wind threw snow against the window with a violent lurch.

“Brother, you are now officially master of Pemberley!” Georgiana said, her eyes suddenly flaring wide. “I was so excited about the birth that it did not even occur to me!”

Elizabeth, watching her, was startled to observe tears filling the girl’s eyes, and she reached a hand to touch her friend’s arm. “My dear Georgiana, whatever is wrong?”

“Oh, I am sorry,” the girl replied, forcing herself to smile at her brother and cousin, though salty droplets still filmed her blue orbs. “It is just that I have been so happy at Bellhaven these last years. I confess that I was hoping that perhaps we could return to Leicestershire and settle there without managing ... well, I do not know everything, but I know that Lawrence died with debts, and Pemberley is not in good condition, and now all those problems will be on your shoulders.”

“That is true enough,” Darcy replied, “but even if Anne had birthed a son, I would probably have been forced to take on the responsibility of managing Pemberley for some years. Richard is capable enough...”



“No, I am not!” his cousin interrupted, looking indignant.

Darcy rolled his eyes. “Do not be absurd, Richard; you have led men into battle. You are entirely capable of being master of an estate.”

“I would argue that the skills involved are quite different,” Richard asserted, “but enough of that for now. If Anne had birthed a son, you would have doubtless found yourself as the child’s guardian since you are the baby’s only uncle.”

“Yes, and I suppose that it is easier for you to make necessary decisions as legal owner of Pemberley,” Georgiana remarked thoughtfully.

“Indeed,” Darcy agreed. “You are correct, of course, that it will be hard work, but it is my duty, and I intend to work diligently to renew and repair what has been neglected these last years.”

Elizabeth, watching from across the table, found herself full of both admiration and sympathy. There was no doubt that Lawrence Darcy had left turmoil and confusion, and it was to the benefit of Pemberley and her people that Fitzwilliam Darcy was a far more honorable and diligent man than his selfish, dissolute brother. He was also remarkably good looking, along with being intelligent and clever. He was the sort of man whom Elizabeth had dreamed of marrying someday.

But the Darcys were in deep mourning, and everything was topsy-turvy.

For now, she would be a devoted friend to Georgiana and try not to think about her friend’s remarkable brother.

## Chapter 23

*The Office*

*Pemberley*

“Mr. Wickham, sir,” a manservant announced, and Darcy, who had been frowning over a list of debts, gestured for his former friend to enter the room.

“Would you care to sit down?” he asked with studied courtesy.

“Thank you,” Wickham replied, taking a seat and crossing one booted leg over the other.

Darcy finished checking a sum, set the pen aside, and closed his notebook before turning his attention on the other man. “I trust that Mr. Harris was able to answer all your questions?”

“Yes, and very competently, thank you,” Wickham said. “I believe congratulations are in order? I hear that Mrs. Darcy delivered a daughter this morning.”

“Congratulations are in order, yes, because my sister-in-law and niece are both healthy and well.”

“Of course,” Wickham said drily and then glanced toward the window. “I have not had a chance to look outside; do you think it is safe for me to return to Timbreline now?”

Darcy wished for nothing more than to rid Pemberley of her unwelcome visitor, but honesty compelled him to say, “I fear it is not safe yet. The snow is no longer falling, but the wind continues to blow. We received a great deal of snow, at least ten inches, and many of the drifts are enormous.”

Wickham frowned and said, “That is bad news for the tenants of both Pemberley and Timbreline. I know that many of the cottages are not in the best of condition, and this much

snow likely means some of the tenants are cold and wet. I also believe that the harvests were not the best this year, partly because of drainage problems.”

Darcy froze in astonishment at these words, which provoked Wickham to say, “Come now, I know you do not like me, but I am no fool. I am well aware that Lawrence was neglecting fences and ditches and yes, tenant cottages.”

“I never thought you a fool, but nor did I imagine that you particularly care about the potential suffering of the farmers and their families,” Darcy said drily.

“Even if I care not a whit about their suffering, I do care about my income,” Wickham remarked, turning to stretch out his legs towards the fire. “I am now master of Timbreline, and it is in my best interests to ensure that the farms thrive. It is hard to imagine that the tenants can produce good crops if they are sick from the cold or suffering from hunger – I expect that happy tenants make for a happy income!”

Darcy stared for a long moment and then nodded slowly. “You are correct, of course. That is a cold blooded way of looking at it, but it is correct.”

Wickham narrowed his eyes and then sighed. “It seems you are determined to dislike me,” he remarked.

“Why should I not, when I know you have spent the last decade sponging off of my brother? And now you are master of Timbreline, which by all rights should have gone to Lawrence’s child.”

“Lawrence’s daughter is the direct heiress to Rosings after her mother. She is hardly in want. But perhaps you are angry that you are not the heir to Timbreline? I am aware that you traded Timbreline for Bellhaven, which was noble and praiseworthy, but it must goad you that your brother did not bequeath Timbreline to a family member.”

“Why do you think it was praiseworthy?” Darcy asked, genuinely curious.

Wickham blew out a breath and said, “Lawrence had many gambling debts, and wanted to sell your sister off to the highest bidder in exchange for substantial remuneration. I do not pretend to know Miss Darcy well, but I know that she is a kind and gentle soul who would have struggled to withstand your elder brother’s pressure to wed as he directed. I have no doubt she has been far happier with you and the colonel as her guardians.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said, tilting his head and regarding the other man suspiciously. “If you will forgive me for being blunt, it seems that you rather disapproved of my brother, which seems unlikely given that you were his bosom friend for many years.”

Wickham rolled his eyes and said, “The truth is that I have disliked him for many years, but yes, as you said, I was sponging off of him. I have always enjoyed the finer things in life, and given that I am a mere steward’s son and have no turn for scholarship, I realized years ago that I would be best served by either marrying an heiress or latching onto a rich man. Obviously I never succeeded in enchanting an heiress, but Lawrence was always pleased to have me at his beck and call.”

There was a hint of bitterness in Wickham’s tone, and Darcy said, rather suspiciously, “It sounds like you resented him as well as disliked him?”

The other man frowned at these words and stared at the ceiling, deep in thought.

“I did not resent him, precisely,” he finally said. “We both received what we wanted. I relished good food and fine accommodations, and he enjoyed having a well-spoken associate who helped manage his life for him. But now that he is so unexpectedly deceased, and I am master of my own estate, I am determined to do an excellent job managing it so that I will have a healthy income until I die. I also wish to marry an heiress, and it is easier to find such a lady if my estate is in good condition.”

Darcy regarded him for a moment and then stood up and walked over to a decanter of brandy. “Would you care for a drink, Wickham?”

Wickham’s eyebrows flew up in surprise, and he laughed and said, “I would, yes. I am honored to be considered worthy.”

Darcy poured two cups and handed one to the companion from his youth, and then took a seat across from Wickham. “I confess to significant surprise as to the tenor of this conversation. If you are serious about your intentions, then you will be a far better master of your estate than Lawrence was.”

“That is not saying much, I know,” Wickham remarked, downing his drink. A moment later, the former steward’s son turned his attention on the robust fire crackling away, and his brow knitted. “I acknowledge to being rather unsettled by Lawrence’s death, though it has benefited me in obvious ways. It definitely has caused me to think anew about my own life; obviously one does not know the day or the hour when one will be called to give account. Your brother and I spent many hours, days, and weeks drinking and gambling and carousing, but I never imagined that Lawrence would tumble down the stairs at the age of thirty and break his neck. It is shocking, really. He always seemed to hold his liquor well, and in spite of his weight, was light on his feet.”

“Was he drinking a great deal on the night of his death?” Darcy asked, trying to sound casual.

“Oh yes, we all were,” the other man said, chuckling. “We had just arrived at Pemberley that very morning, you know, and Lawrence was in quite a temper. He mentioned that he found a pile of bills waiting for him. When he was in a poor mood, he drank more and we tended to keep pace with him. I was quite bosky by the time I wandered off to my chamber, where I practically fell into bed. I woke up in the morning with a dreadful headache.”

“It must have been a shock when you learned of his death.”

Wickham sighed. “It was, yes. Again, I did not particularly like Lawrence, and his death benefited me, but it is dreadful to think of the poor man falling down the stairs into the cellar and breaking his neck. The whole thing was so odd, too; why was he in the cellar, anyway?”

“To find a bottle of wine, perhaps?”

“Oh, he never fetched such things himself; that was meant for the servants, or, on occasion, me, if the servants were abed and he did not want to bother summoning them.”

Darcy nodded and glanced at the clock on the mantle. “I need to meet with my steward now,” he remarked, “but I will be certain to send you word about the state of the roads.”

“Thank you,” Wickham replied, setting down the glass and standing up. He took a few steps toward the door and then turned around and said, “Again, congratulations, Darcy, both on the birth of your niece and your succeeding to the estate. We will, I hope, be neighbors for many years, and I would like to bury the hatchet if you are willing.”

Darcy stared at the other man for a long minute and then said, “Given the circumstances, that would be for the best, but I also have no intention of extending trust toward you that has not been earned. I am certain you understand that.”

“I do,” Wickham said. “Of course I do.”

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*Elizabeth's bedchamber*

“Miss?”

Elizabeth opened her eyes and looked around in her confusion. Was it morning? Evening? The middle of the night?

“You asked me to wake you up in time for dinner,” the maid continued, which provoked Elizabeth to sit up immediately and push back the covers.

“Thank you, Grace. I do wish to eat dinner, and have no desire to sleep the entire day away. Have you heard how Mrs. Darcy is?”

“She is very well, and the baby too,” Grace replied cheerfully, hurrying over to the wardrobe. “What do you wish to wear tonight, Miss?”

Elizabeth chose a gown more or less at random, and with Grace’s help, was dressed in short order. She hurried down the stairs toward the drawing room and entered just as Lady Catherine said, “Her name is Helena Catherine Darcy. She is a beautiful child, and while not large, she is not dreadfully small either.”

Elizabeth colored a little as Mr. and Miss Darcy, and Lady Catherine turned to look at her.

“I apologize for being late,” she said, making her way over to Georgiana’s side.

“We would not have blamed you if you had chosen to eat in your room, Miss Bennet,” Darcy returned, and the appreciative smile on his countenance made her heart speed up. “You were awake most of the night assisting our cousin Anne, after all.”

“Yes, and she said you were very helpful,” Lady Catherine declared. “Indeed, given how much Anne likes you, I expect you to spend two or three hours a day keeping my daughter company. It is the least you can do given that you are living lavishly here at Pemberley.”

Georgiana looked scandalized, and Darcy said indignantly, “Miss Bennet is here as a guest, and is not required to do anything at all.”

“But I do not mind spending time with Mrs. Darcy,” Elizabeth said quickly, giving Georgiana’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Indeed, I would find it a pleasure to bear her company.”

This was true enough, as she found Anne a pleasant companion, and she wished to shield Mrs. Darcy from Lady Catherine’s constant presence.

“That is very good of you,” Darcy said, though he still looked unhappy.

The door opened again, and Colonel Fitzwilliam entered, his face red and his dark locks wet.

“How is it outside, Richard?” Darcy asked, moving aside to allow the colonel to take a place closer to the fire.

“The wind has dropped, thankfully, but it is still cold. The lane is impassable for a wheeled carriage, but I think perhaps a sleigh might be able to pass, especially if the snow hardens tonight, which I think it will.”

“I have such fond memories of sleigh rides!” Georgiana cried out. “Do you remember, Fitzwilliam, when I was a child of seven and there was a tremendous snowstorm...”

“And Father took us all to the pond beyond the Home Farm, and we skated for hours and then came home and drank hot chocolate?” Darcy asked, his lips turned up in a smile. “Yes, I remember that well. Have you ever been on a sleigh ride, Miss Bennet?”

“I have not,” Elizabeth said, “though it sounds wonderful.”

“Perhaps we can arrange for a sleigh ride in the next few days,” Darcy remarked, gazing upon his guest fondly.

“That would be lovely,” Elizabeth replied and blushed.





## Chapter 24

### *Anne's Chamber*

“Is the baby asleep, Madam?” Matilda asked.

“Yes,” Anne replied, planting a kiss on Helena’s downy head. “You can put her down.”

“Yes, Madam. You ought to sleep.”

Anne swallowed hard at these words. On the one hand, she was dreadfully tired and sore, and sleep would be wonderful. On the other, she was struggling not to weep. Molly, who continued to be a bulwark of wisdom in spite of her youth, had mentioned that women often felt sad after giving birth, but that did not make her current ordeal any easier.

“Would you like me to ask Miss Bennet to visit you for a few minutes?” Matilda asked, her eyes full of concern.

“Oh, I would not wish to wake her up,” Anne replied, though inwardly she longed for a few minutes of the lady’s cheery presence.

“It is but six o’clock, Madame.”

Anne slewed her head toward the clock on the mantle and managed a slight smile. “I fear I have entirely lost track of whether it is night or day, midnight or noon. Yes, please do ask Miss Bennet if she is willing to visit.”

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### *Dining Room*

### *Pemberley*

Darcy waited for the door to close behind the ladies, and then he looked around to ensure that none of the servants were present either. When he was certain they were alone, he poured two glasses of Madeira, handed one to Richard, and said, "I spoke with Wickham this afternoon."

Richard paused in the act of lifting the goblet to his mouth and demanded, "What about?"

Darcy told him at some length about the conversation in question, and by the end of it, Richard was shaking his head. "So Wickham, after living the life of a dissolute rake for years, now intends to turn over a new leaf? It seems unlikely."

Darcy blew out a breath and said, "I am skeptical as well, but I do not know; Wickham's reasoning was at least cogent. It is not as if he is suddenly sympathetic to the struggles of the poor and needy. He merely wishes to see his estate thrive, and he is sensible enough to realize that cold, hungry, poorly clad tenants will not work as well as prosperous ones."

"That in itself makes him wiser than Lawrence," Richard remarked, taking a sip of Madeira.

"Yes, but it rings true, somehow. I always thought Wickham to be quite intelligent. More to the point, I feel more at ease about Lawrence's death now. Surely if Wickham were responsible, he would pretend that my brother often descended to the wine cellar of his own volition."

Richard quirked one eyebrow and said, "So you are saying that because Wickham said that Lawrence's fall seems suspicious, it was probably merely a tragic accident?"

Darcy considered this for a moment and chuckled. "I suppose I am saying that. Do you think my reasoning is sound?"

The colonel stood up and wandered over to warm himself by the fire, and said, "Regarding Wickham, yes; I believe he is far too intelligent to push your brother down the

stairs and then raise questions about his death. But there are other possibilities, of course. What about the other three men who were guests along with Wickham?"

"There is no obvious motive for any of them to harm Lawrence," Darcy argued, "given that none were mentioned in my brother's will. Moreover, and I did not think about this much before, the guest wing and the family wing are separated by the main body of the house, and once the party broke up, the guests were all in the guest wing, and Lawrence was in his bedchamber in the family wing. Now Wickham ran tamely through Pemberley as a child, and might be able to find his way to the family wing via the attics, but I am confident that if another of my brother's cronies was wandering about in the wee hours when my brother died, one of the servants would have seen him."

Richard considered and then nodded. "That is sensible enough. It seems it was but an unfortunate accident, then, and I confess to being relieved. Far better a wretched misadventure than murder."

"Indeed."

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### *Mrs. Darcy's Chamber*

The maid opened the door to Mrs. Darcy's chamber, and Elizabeth slipped inside. The woman was sitting up in bed with a handkerchief pressed to her face, shoulders shaking with hitching, sobbing breaths. Elizabeth gasped and rushed to her side. "Anne? Are you well? What is the matter?"

Anne hastily mopped her face and set her handkerchief aside. "Yes, yes, I am well. I am so very pleased to have your company, my friend. It is only that, well, I feel quite odd. I do

not know precisely how to explain it, only that I am feeling ... too much at once. But do, please, sit down.”

Elizabeth sank into the chair placed near the head of the bed. “I remember overhearing my mother discussing such things with a friend. I gather that it is similar to the feeling when one is nearing the start of one’s courses?”

“Similar, yes,” Anne agreed with a wan smile. “Considerably more intense, though, I would say.”

Her eyes softened, and she added, “Worth all the pain, though, for the babe.”

Elizabeth made a sympathetic noise and asked, “And how is little Miss Darcy doing?”

Anne reclined on the pillows behind her, face suddenly wreathed with a beatific smile. “She is doing very well indeed, strong and healthy and eating well. I am ... so very glad she is a girl. After my husband died, I prayed so fervently for a daughter, though of course by that time the child was already female. But God’s ways are mysterious, and I thought there was no harm in praying for such an outcome.”

Elizabeth looked at her in no small surprise. “Truly? But I understood that Pemberley is entailed away from the female line,” she said carefully.

“Exactly,” Anne agreed. “Helena is heiress to Rosings, which is quite a large enough estate for one person. My brother-in-law Fitzwilliam is a good man, and a wise one; he will be a good master to Pemberley. If we wish to stay, he will let us stay. All I want, Elizabeth, is a quiet life for myself and my child. Had I borne a son who inherited, I would have spent my life dealing with guardians, with my Uncle Matlock, with my mother, with trusts and wills and legal proceedings. Pemberley is in shambles, as Lawrence spent money like water and plowed very little back into the estate. Now that Fitzwilliam is legally the master of the estate, he will be invested in returning Pemberley to its former glory, and he is

entirely capable. Helena will be able to live quietly and happily.”

Anne trailed off, eyes fluttering with weariness. Elizabeth scooted a little closer. “I can tell you are exhausted, Anne,” she murmured gently. “Would you like me to read to you for a little while?”

The new mother smiled gratefully. “That would be lovely, Elizabeth, thank you.”

Matilda materialized from the side of the room, carrying a book of poems by William Wordsworth. Elizabeth opened to the scrap of silk inserted between the pages and began reading:

*“Five years have past; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
That on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky...”*

Ten minutes later, she glanced up at the bed as she turned the page and saw that Anne had drifted off into a sound sleep.

Matilda stole forward and carefully took the book with a profoundly grateful smile to Elizabeth. “Thank you for coming and talking to her, Miss. You’ve helped her so much, you have.”

Elizabeth nodded and crept quietly out of the room.

## Chapter 25

*The Breakfast Parlor*

*The Next Morning*

Elizabeth stepped into the parlor and found it occupied solely with Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, who was eating toast while reading a document in his hand. Once he caught sight of her, however, he laid aside the papers and stood up. “Good morning, Miss Bennet.”

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy,” she replied, walking over to fill her plate with eggs and toast, and her cup with milky tea. “Please, do continue to read if you like. I do not wish to disturb you.”

“That is quite all right,” her companion remarked, firmly tucking the document under his plate. “I have been reading so many papers in the last few days that my head is spinning, and I welcome a reprieve.”

Elizabeth sat down at the table, took a sip of her drink, and said, “Indeed, sir, you have a great deal on your shoulders. It is a hard thing when one loses a loved one and simultaneously is forced to manage all the business of an estate in turmoil.”

“It is,” Darcy agreed, and turned his keen gaze on her. “I do not know if I have said this before – I am so very grateful for your willingness to accompany us to Derbyshire. I know that both Georgiana and Anne have relished your company. Indeed, while I know I have been a rather absent host, I have thoroughly enjoyed our brief conversations. I also confess to feeling guilty that your sojourn here has been such a tiring one!”

Elizabeth knew her color was heightened, but she said, “Indeed, I am very thankful for your invitation and am glad to

be of use. I find Derbyshire in general, and Pemberley in particular, to be a beautiful place, and I am treasuring my time with your sister and cousin. And you have not been at all a neglectful host, I assure you. I am well aware of the heavy burdens on your shoulders during this transitional period.”

“I am grateful for your understanding,” Darcy said sincerely. “I hope you are not missing your family and home too much?”

Elizabeth chuckled and declared, “Not at all. I love my family, but in a household filled with women, it is often beneficial for there to be times apart. Moreover, I cannot imagine anyone being unhappy in a place with such a magnificent library. I could spend weeks there quite happily, with only the occasional foray out in search of food.”

“So could I,” her companion remarked, a smile forming on his handsome countenance. “I remember glorious days when I was a boy in the library, with my father at my side, searching through the wonders of all those books.”

“I hope that when the situation has settled here, you will have the opportunity to enjoy many happy hours there again.”

“I do as well,” Darcy said, sighing, “though I fear I have a great deal of work to do before I can relax with a good book.”

“I understand that,” the lady replied, and then added impulsively, “I do not know any details, of course, but I understand that your brother left the estate in some disarray. If I may be so bold, I am confident that Pemberley is blessed to have you now as her master, as you are a diligent and intelligent man.”

Darcy felt himself flush, and he smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Miss Bennet. I do confess to feeling overwhelmed with so many tasks undone, but all I can do is work away faithfully and make steady progress.”

“Every little step forward is good,” Elizabeth remarked. “After all, Georgiana did not become an adept on the



pianoforte overnight; she started simply and continued to build on her expertise. In your situation, it is an additional advantage that you have experience in managing an estate.”

“Yes,” Georgiana agreed, sweeping into the room with Richard on her heels. “Furthermore, Bellhaven was purchased only two years before my father’s death, and it had also been sadly neglected. My brother is not only skilled in estate management, he has experience with estates that have not been cared for well.”

“True,” Darcy remarked, standing up to give his sister a quick embrace, “but Bellhaven is one tenth the size of Pemberley.”

“Therefore, Bellhaven was wonderful practice, Cousin,” Richard said with a grin, striding over to the buffet in search of sustenance. “Of course, I can say that cheerfully since I am not the man responsible for all the work.”

“But you have actually been in open battle with the French, Colonel,” Elizabeth said. “Surely that is more difficult?”

This provoked a spirited discussion about the differences between army life and civilian life, which only ended when a servant entered the room to whisper into his new master’s ear before retreating the way he came.

“Simpson tells me that it should be possible to travel to at least two of the nearer tenant farms using the sleigh,” Darcy said. “I intend to take Milton the steward with me to see how those families are after the storm.”

“Might I come as well?” Georgiana asked and turned pink at the sight of her brother’s surprised expression. “I know that I am still young,” she continued shyly, “but I am, I suppose, the lady of the house while Anne is still confined in her room.”

“You are,” Darcy said fondly, and then turned to look at Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet, would you be willing to accompany us on our journey this afternoon?”

Elizabeth's dark eyes shone with excitement, and she glanced outside at the snow. "I would be absolutely delighted."

/

*Noon*

The bells on the harnesses filled the air with a merry jingling as the sleigh glided along the sparkling snow. A freeze the previous night had left a crust that remained unbroken by hooves or sleigh runners, and the snow mounded to either side of the lane, which had been partially cleared the previous day by the powerful farm horses that traveled the path.

Elizabeth was enchanted by the fairyland landscape. The snow shimmered in the rays of the sun, which hung nearly overhead, with only short blue shadows reaching northwards. Every limb was rimmed with ice, which shone like crystal in the milky light. A few hardy, tiny birds hopped hither and yon, leaving no trace of their light feet as they called news and observations to one another.

Elizabeth leaned back against the cushioned back of the sleigh with a delighted sigh, tugging the rug up further over her lap from where it had slipped when she leaned forward. Georgiana huddled closer, tucking mittened hands beneath the heavy wool rug. "Derbyshire is lovely in winter," she laughed ruefully, "but so cold!"

"Indeed it is, Miss Darcy," Mr. Milton, who was seated across from them, agreed. The steward was accompanying the Darcys and Elizabeth out to visit some of the nearer tenants who had been having difficulties of late. "I am certain you will quickly readjust, however."

"I am certain we will," Darcy said.

When they pulled up to the first cottage, Darcy alighted first before handing out his sister and Elizabeth. Mr. Milton

stood, reached under the seat for the hamper placed there, and handed it out to Georgiana as Elizabeth adjusted her pelisse.

Mr. Milton moved forward to knock on the door, which was opened by a grubby urchin some ten years old, who looked up at them from under a ragged mop of mud-colored hair above a threadbare shirt of nearly the same color. He looked startled at the sight of the visitors and stepped back to permit them entry, calling over his shoulder, "Ma! Mr. Milton 'as brought some people to visit!"

Milton introduced the visitors, while Elizabeth looked about in dismay. Icicles dangled inside the eaves at one end of the ramshackle little cottage, an ancient bucket set beneath them to catch drips of water. A little girl, lips tinted blue, huddled as close to the inefficient little stove as she could, while a baby wrapped in thin blankets whimpered fretfully in a cradle.

The children's mother moved forward, face brightening at the sight of the heavily steaming hamper in Georgiana's hands. "Oh, miss, thank you," she breathed, clasping the basket close. "It's a Godsend, it is that. I said to Mr. Leeds I did, I'm sure glad Mr. Fitzwilliam is coming home. Now there's a young man with good sense, I told him, he'll set things to rights."

"I caught a rat t' other day," the urchin who had opened the door informed Georgiana importantly. "It was about t' crawl into Baby's cradle, but I grabbed it by the tail."

"Oh my," Georgiana exclaimed weakly, looking horrified.

Elizabeth, looking at the shivering children in distress, caught Darcy's eye and said softly, "Might we leave one of the rugs from the sleigh for the family? I fear they might die of cold otherwise."

"Oh yes, may we?" Georgiana pleaded.

"You do not think you will be too cold for the rest of the journey?" Darcy asked worriedly.

“We are very warmly clad,” Elizabeth said firmly. “We will be well.”

“By all means, then,” he said. “Would you like to fetch one of the rugs?”

The ladies departed and Darcy exchanged a few words with the tenant farmer himself, a thin, dour man of some five and thirty years, until the ladies returned with a large rug, which they handed over to the farmer’s wife, who wept with joy.

Darcy, after assuring the entire family of his intention to fix the issues in the cottage as soon as possible, guided his own party outside and back onto the sleigh. As soon as the horses were in motion, he turned a furious look on the steward and demanded, “*Rats?*”

“It has been an ongoing problem,” Mr. Milton admitted unhappily.

“There were *icicles* inside the house,” Georgiana fretted. “And those poor children clad in barely rags!”

“At least they will have a good meal tonight,” Elizabeth comforted her. “And the hot food will help warm them, along with the large rug.”

“That is true,” Georgiana agreed, but her brow remained puckered and her blue eyes unhappy at the tenant family’s plight.

The situation was no better at the next house. The fire had been lit in a cleared patch of dirt up near the front door, the chimney no more than a pile of crumbled brickwork. Darcy’s mouth went tight at the sight of it, and he promised the tenant farmer that someone would come repair it as soon as possible, while Georgiana handed over the warm basket of food to the man’s wife and another rug. The woman, heavily pregnant, had to keep wiping away tears, repeating her thanks over and over, while Georgiana gently patted the woman’s shoulder.

Elizabeth crouched down next to a mite of a girl all dirty blonde hair and giant eyes. “Hello, child,” Elizabeth said with a friendly smile. “What’s your name?”

“Mary,” lisped the little girl, looking up at her wide-eyed.

“Really? I like that name,” Elizabeth said warmly. “I have a sister named Mary.”

The tiny face broke into a broad smile before the little girl buried her face shyly in her mother’s skirt.

Darcy pinned the hapless steward with a stern look as the sleigh turned back towards the main house. “It is disgraceful that the tenants of any Christian gentleman’s estate should be in such dire straits.”

Mr. Milton cleared his throat, looking unhappy. “I agree with you, sir, to be sure. I, ah, repeatedly recommended to the previous Mr. Darcy that it would be wise to invest more into the estate but he believed the funds could be put to better use elsewhere, sir.”

“I see,” Darcy said darkly, and he looked out at the snow as the horses pranced homeward.

Elizabeth watched him curiously as the cold wind blew across her cheeks. Her own father had never been cruel to the tenants, and had always approved any expenses in regard to cottage upkeep and emergencies. But he had always left all such business to his bailiff and servants to transact, taking no interest in the tenants themselves, as he far preferred staying in his library with its warm fire and plethora of books. It had been Elizabeth herself, and Jane, and Mary, who had gone out to visit the farmers’ pregnant wives and new mothers and injured tenants with baskets full of food and blankets.

She found herself fascinated by Mr. Darcy, so attentive to the needs of those who depended on the estate for their livelihood, so angered on their behalf. She studied him as he gazed with hooded eyes at the mounding drifts to either side of the road, his brow furrowed and his mouth set, ignoring the

freezing wind nipping his cheeks and nose to redness. A sprig of hair ruffled down over his forehead in the breeze, trembling there and drawing the eye. He was a very handsome man, and his good and noble heart only enhanced his looks.

He turned his head suddenly and quirked one brow at her, and she smiled merrily at him, scarcely abashed at being caught staring. The other brow rose to join the first, then he returned a very faint smile of his own, lightening the heaviness lingering in his eyes.

Darcy watched Miss Bennet for a moment as she looked out at the shivering trees. She made a charming picture indeed, the wind painting roses across her cheeks, her lovely chestnut hair set off by the simple brown wool dress she had chosen, and the dark fur pelisse swathed about her.

He had been pleasantly surprised by her kindness to the little tenant girl. The rich ladies of the haut ton, among whom he had always intended to look for a wife, could hardly be lowered to notice their tenants' existence beyond the most abstract way. He could think of none among the heiresses of his acquaintance who would take time to make conversation with the children of a poverty-stricken tenant.

Were he to marry an heiress, however, her money would go far towards rebuilding Pemberley to its former glorious state. He could ill afford to marry a woman with no dowry.

On the other hand, would it not be better to marry a kind woman? One whom he knew for certain would treat the servants and tenants generously? Georgiana already loved Elizabeth as a dear friend; how much more would she adore Miss Bennet as a sister? He found the lady's pull nearly magnetic, and could easily envision spending hours each day at her side, attending to business as she read a book or plied needle and thread in the drawing room.

Darcy dismissed such thoughts from his head as the sleigh halted before the great doors and well-swept stairs of the main entrance to the house. He had more immediate concerns at the moment.

He shivered gratefully upon stepping into Pemberley's warm front hall. He would need to ride out soon to check on the other farmers, as he strongly suspected their situations were little better. While he could not immediately repair the run-down cottages, he could at least ensure that all the tenants had sufficient food and blankets and fuel to see them through the hard winter. He would have to consult at length with Milton about what could be done immediately to improve living conditions for the farmers and their families. There was so very much to be done, so much that needed money and immediately, so many bills awaiting his attention...

He paused a moment to watch Georgiana and Miss Bennet as they divested themselves of their outermost garments. Already, the two women were making plans to go out in the sleigh again, taking any food and blankets that could be spared out to the tenant families. Elizabeth especially seemed undeterred by the cold, and Darcy was arrested by her shining eyes for a few moments, with Elizabeth flashing one more tantalizing smile in his direction as the two women disappeared into the drawing room.

With a soft sigh, he started up towards the study and the ledgers that awaited him there.

## Chapter 26

### *Anne's Sitting Room*

Anne Darcy looked down at Baby Helena in her arms, her heart full of thanksgiving and worry. Thanksgiving because she had birthed her daughter successfully, and the baby seemed healthy. Worry because babies were so very fragile, and little Helena already owned Anne's heart in a way that Lawrence Darcy never had.

The door to the room opened, and Anne's personal maid entered with Colonel Fitzwilliam at her heels.

"Good morning, Anne," Richard said, and Anne smiled at him and replied, "Good morning, Richard."

"Now do not be staying too long, Colonel," Matilda said in a scolding tone. "Mrs. Darcy needs her rest."

"I will not stay for more than ten minutes," Richard assured the maid, who, after making certain that her mistress did not need anything, withdrew.

"Matilda is something of a dragon," Richard said respectfully.

Anne laughed and said, "Yes, she is, and I am thankful. Even Lady Catherine does not care to cross Matilda when she is in a protective mood, which is more or less all the time now that the child is here."

"Speaking of the child," Richard said, and took a few steps forward to gaze down on the tiny bundle currently sleeping soundly in her mother's arms.

He sat down across from Anne and said, "She is small and beautiful, Anne. Many congratulations."

"I think her beautiful," Anne said, gazing down with a besotted expression, "though I am aware that she is red and a



little crumpled. I adore her, Richard. I never knew how much I could love another human being.”

Richard stared at her in surprise but said nothing, though Anne guessed his thoughts because she continued, “That included Lawrence, of course. I neither loved nor particularly liked my husband.”

“I do not blame you,” the colonel responded in a measured tone. “He was not a model husband nor a good master of the estate.”

“And now he is dead, and with Helena’s birth, Fitzwilliam is master of Pemberley,” Anne said in a satisfied voice. She bent over to plant a kiss on her infant’s bonneted head, and then looked up. “I do not know if you are aware of this, but my mother wishes for me to marry Fitzwilliam when I have completed my year of mourning.”

Richard frowned and remarked, “I had not thought about that, but I suppose it makes sense. She has long wished to unite Rosings and Pemberley together, and since you birthed a daughter with Lawrence, the only hope to fulfill her desire is for you to marry Fitzwilliam and bear a son.”

“Precisely,” Anne agreed, “but in fact, I absolutely refuse to marry Fitzwilliam Darcy. For one thing, it is against church law. For another, Pemberley is likely in dire financial straits due to Lawrence’s excesses, and I wish to be well out of it.”

“So you will return to Rosings, then?”

Anne sighed and said, “Perhaps. I have not yet decided. It depends partly on you.”

“On me? Why?”

“Because I wish to marry you,” Anne said baldly and then added, “when my year of mourning is over, of course.”

Richard stared at her, and his mouth dropped open, which provoked a rather hysterical laugh from the lady in front of him. This caused the baby to open one blue eye and peer at

her mother before closing the eye again and going determinedly back to sleep.

“I am sorry, Richard,” Anne said, still chuckling. “The expression on your face! I apologize for my bluntness, or perhaps I do not. I feel very peculiar, which I will ascribe to recently giving birth. I am also very tired, and I am not inclined to dance around this issue. I have long liked you very much. I do not pretend to be in love with you, but I, at least, do not require a love match. You are strong willed enough to deal with Lady Catherine, which would allow me to return to Rosings, where I would like to live so long as my mother is settled in the Dower House. Of course, if you do not like the scheme, I understand completely.”

Richard had managed to gain sufficient control over his jaw to reply with some semblance of calm, “I do not dislike your suggestion. It is simply that I fear you have caught me entirely unawares, and I must think your ... your offer over.”

“You have plenty of time. I will not marry before I am out of mourning, and in any case, I do not wish to leave Pemberley until it is warm, as I will not risk Helena’s health by journeying a long distance in the cold. Please, do think about it. I know you to be a good man, but if you desire a love match, that I cannot give you.”

“I do not require a love match, Anne,” Richard said, grinning, and then his brow furrowed. “What of Darcy, though? Lady Catherine may well insist that he marry you, and you are a wealthy bride which would be a benefit to Pemberley.”

“I made the mistake of marrying one Darcy at my mother’s insistence already,” Anne said cynically. “I will not make the mistake of marrying another, no matter how much my mother fusses at me. I know that the two brothers are very dissimilar, since Fitzwilliam is honorable and Lawrence was a...”

She clamped her lips shut just as Helena decided, very suddenly, that she was hungry and let loose with an indignant

wail.

Richard, bemused by the offer of marriage, and shocked at the amount of noise emanating from such a small person, hastily rose, bowed, and beat a retreat out of the room.

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*The Office*

*Pemberley*

*The Next Morning*

Darcy briefly glanced at the letter in his hand – yet another note of condolence from a distant relation whom he barely knew – and set it aside with other similar correspondence to be answered later. The sun had finally emerged, and the temperature had risen enough to melt away some of the worst of the snow, and the lanes and roads had been cleared, allowing a packet of mail to arrive early in the morning.

The next letter in the stack lifted his heart somewhat. The address was scrawled in what was unmistakably Bingley's unrefined hand. He slit the envelope open and removed the sheet, opening it. He stared in growing consternation at lines crossed and recrossed in a profusion of enthusiasm. The writing was not cramped, which was a mercy, but nonetheless, he could decipher very little. He was able to discern a word here and there between the blots and half-formed unintelligible letters. 'Jane,' appeared at least twice – doubtless Miss Jane Bennet. Darcy had no doubt the lovely blonde lady was consuming his friend's every thought. He made out 'assembly' 'Caroline,' and something that might have been 'Hurst.'

After some ten minutes of trying to further decipher his friend's scrawl, Darcy sighed, shook his head, and set Bingley's missive aside. A stack of bills awaited his attention

yet, as Lawrence's London creditors were now dunning him for payment. He skimmed through each with growing dismay before propping his elbows on the desk, resting his head in his hands.

Darcy sat like that for a few minutes, his mind spinning in circles as he considered best how to pay off his brother's many debts, how to lift Pemberley back up into solvency, how to see to the long-neglected tenants' many needs. It was a daunting task facing him, growing heavier with each passing hour, and he found himself feeling anxious regarding how he would handle it all.

He was broken from his spiraling thoughts by his stomach growling in a very ungentlemanly sort of way, reminding him that he had taken nothing since arising at six-thirty that morning, save a cup of tea and a single biscuit. He glanced at the clock, noting that it lacked only a few minutes to half past nine, which meant it was time for breakfast.

As he descended the stairs, it occurred to him to wonder why he had, of late, taken to breaking his fast a full half-hour later than he had previously done. He had always been a creature of habit, so what had swayed him to change his schedule so?

A lady stood in the hall below, staring at a landscape painting, and his heart skipped a beat. Miss Bennet turned towards him and smiled brightly.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy," she greeted cheerfully. "I was just considering this glorious landscape before going in to breakfast."

Darcy glanced briefly at the painting – a thin river winding through some trees – a parkland, perhaps – before returning his attention to the vividly lovely young lady before him. "I am also bound thither," he said courteously, and he offered his arm. "Perhaps I could escort you?"

She smiled up at him, eyes bright, and his heart thumped again, as she laid one neatly gloved hand lightly on

his arm. "I should be delighted, Mr. Darcy, thank you."

As they passed into the breakfast room together, Darcy realized he was falling in love with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Perhaps he already had.

"Your letters, Miss," the butler announced as Darcy and Elizabeth entered the room, the documents reposing elegantly on a silver tray. Elizabeth smiled eagerly and took her letters with one hand, and then tucked them resolutely into her sleeve. It would not be courteous to read them with Mr. Darcy in attendance.

"If you would like to read your letters," that gentleman said, "I would be pleased to eat in silence. I am certain you are desirous of learning how your family is doing."

"Thank you, I would like that," Elizabeth replied gratefully, and she quickly filled a plate with toast and eggs, poured herself coffee, and sat down. She took a sip of coffee and carefully separated the wax which was keeping Jane's letter closed.

*26<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Longbourn*

*Dearest Lizzy,*

*I have the most wonderful news! I am engaged to Charles Bingley!*

*Oh, Lizzy, I am so happy. I cannot tell you how very happy I am! My only sorrow is that you are not here to share my joy, though mother's delight at the match is sufficiently noisy that perhaps you already know of our engagement; I would not be startled if the winds carrying her cries of enthusiasm have wafted all the way to Derbyshire!*

*We intend to marry after the New Year, and I hope that you will be back at Longbourn by that time.*

*You will not be surprised to learn that Louisa Hurst and Caroline Bingley both discouraged Charles from offering for my hand. They claimed that I did not truly love him, but merely wished to marry for money!*

*It made me angry that they would claim such a thing, to the point that Charles was rather alarmed by my outrage. He pointed out, very sensibly, that Louisa married in order to raise her status, and Caroline longs to do the same. Both ladies are inclined to assume that other women wed for social and monetary reasons, not genuine love and affection.*

*Oh Lizzy, I am so very happy!*

*With love,*

*Jane*

Elizabeth felt a joyful tear roll down her cheek and impatiently wiped it away with one hand. She was confident that Jane and Charles Bingley would be happy together. She quickly slit open the other letter and began to read it.

*27<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Longbourn*

*Dear Elizabeth,*

*Jane wrote yesterday of her wonderful news, that she is engaged to Mr. Bingley!*

*I write today with news even more dear to my own heart, though naturally I am very pleased for Jane. I am engaged to Mr. Collins! We spent many hours together this last week and this morning, he offered for my hand, and I accepted, and Father gave his blessing.*

*I do wish to thank you for your kind assurances that you have no interest in becoming Mrs. Collins. As I said in my*

*previous letter, I do not think you would enjoy life as wife to our cousin. You are bright and pretty and clever, and while I am intellectually sound, I am not vivacious, along with being plain. I can almost hear you protesting, but you need not, Lizzy. I know what I am. I know that I have been toiling away on accomplishments for many years in a desperate attempt to make up for my lack of beauty.*

*Now I have a new life stretching out in front of me, one where I am mistress of my own establishment, where I may, God willing, have children. A new life where I am not constantly reminded of how beautiful my sisters are. A new life where one day, I will be mistress of Longbourn.*

*Mr. Collins returns to Hunsford in a few days and will return after the New Year for our wedding. In the meantime, I intend to spend many hours with Hill to learn about managing a house, and I also hope to learn to cook at least a little, as Mr. Collins's income is, while good, not sufficient to support a full time cook.*

*But I am rambling. I am so pleased, Elizabeth!*

*Love,*

*Mary*

Elizabeth found herself smiling so enthusiastically that her cheeks ached. Everything that Mary said rang true, and in spite of Mr. Collins's deficiencies, Elizabeth was hopeful that Mary would be happy, especially since she seemed well aware of her fiancé's limitations.

The next letter was from her mother, which was very much what she expected.

*27<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Dear Lizzy,*

*Jane is engaged to Mr. Bingley and Mary to Mr. Collins! Two daughters engaged, and to men of substance. Of course, Mr. Collins is a mere clergyman, but he is also heir of Longbourn. Oh Lizzy, to think that when your father dies, I will not be turned out of my home. Oh Lizzy!*

*Your loving mother,*

*Fanny Bennet*

And finally, her father had deigned to pick up his pen, in spite of his dislike for correspondence, to write his own view of the situation.

*27<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Longbourn*

*My dear Lizzy,*

*You have by now received a letter from Jane announcing her engagement to Mr. Charles Bingley. He is, I think, the perfect match for your elder sister, and I have not a doubt of their doing very well together. Their tempers are by no means unlike. They are each of them so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on; so easy, that every servant will cheat them; and so generous, that they will always exceed their income. Your mother, of course, exclaims that a man of four to five thousand pounds a year cannot possibly outrun his income. Moreover, Jane is not extravagant. Yes, they will be happy.*

*I believe Mary is also writing with her own news. My opinion of Mr. Collins has not altered since I last wrote you; he remains a loquacious chatterbox about his personal interests, which largely revolve around his parsonage and his patroness. Having said that, I do think he and Mary are compatible. Your younger sister is not happy here at Longbourn, which is no surprise given that Mrs. Bennet has*



*always considered beauty the most important attribute in any female. I know now, from bitter experience, that a pretty face is no substitute for a clever and wholesome mind, but ah well.*

*In any case, I am sanguine that Mary will thrive at Hunsford, even if she does share a house and bed with a silly man. I have been pleased and impressed at Mary's enthusiasm for domestic interests and even gardening; it seems that Hunsford has a marvelous glebe and that Mr. Collins is a diligent and zealous gardener.*

*I miss you, Lizzy, and look forward to your return.*

*Your affectionate father,*

*Thomas Bennet*

## Chapter 27

“I hope the news from Hertfordshire is good?” Darcy asked, breaking into Elizabeth’s thoughts.

She looked up from her father’s letter, beaming so brightly that it quite took Darcy’s breath away.

“Indeed it is!” she cried out, “I just received the most wonderful news from Longbourn! Jane is engaged to Mr. Bingley, and my sister Mary to Mr. Collins, the heir to the estate!”

Darcy could not help but grin back, and he said heartily, “Congratulations! I am delighted for both of your sisters and am also overjoyed for my friend. I received a letter from Bingley this morning, but his writing is difficult to decipher at the best of times, and when he is overflowing with excitement, his writing is almost illegible. I have no doubt that he and Miss Bennet will be happy together.”

Elizabeth laughed and glanced at Jane’s letter again. “Jane’s penmanship is a trifle less readable than usual,” she remarked, “though I have long experience in reading her handwriting. But yes, she is ecstatic over her engagement. She and Mr. Bingley have a great deal in common.”

“They do. Do Bingley and Miss Bennet have a chosen date for the wedding?”

“Sometime in January,” his companion explained, taking a bite of toast. “Jane wishes for me to return to Longbourn in time for the wedding, and I hope that will be possible.”

Darcy felt his stomach lurch in disappointment at these words but said immediately, “Of course it is possible, and we will make the necessary arrangements.”

“Thank you,” the lady replied, her fine eyes glowing like twin flames. “I would be terribly disappointed to miss my sisters’ weddings. I know you have a great deal of work to do

here at Pemberley, but if you have any reason to be in Hertfordshire in January, I am confident that Mr. Bingley would be very pleased to have his closest friend in attendance at his wedding.”

Darcy immediately turned his mind toward possible reasons for journeying to Hertfordshire in the middle of the winter, and was thankful when an idea occurred to him instantly.

“I do have business in London,” he said, as casually as he could manage. “Darcy House needs to be inspected, after all.”

“Darcy House?”

“Our family’s mansion in London,” Darcy replied absently. He realized that he had not devoted even a quarter hour’s thought to Darcy House, which was in Kensington. It was, as part of the entail, his possession now, and he cringed a little at the thought of what he might find inside. Lawrence had shown himself to extremely careless in the upkeep of Pemberley; would Darcy House be equally neglected?

Perhaps it would not, though. Lawrence had much preferred London to Derbyshire, and had thus spent much of the year in Darcy House. The man had always been devoted to his own comfort, and thus it was likely that the London house was in far better condition than Pemberley. He could only hope so.

“Good morning,” Richard Fitzwilliam said, stepping into the room with Lady Catherine on one arm and Georgiana on the other.

“Good morning, Lady Catherine, Georgiana, Colonel,” Elizabeth said excitedly. “I have wonderful news! My sister Jane is engaged to Mr. Bingley, and my sister Mary is engaged to Mr. Collins, my father’s heir!”

There was a chorus of congratulations from Georgiana and Richard Fitzwilliam, and Lady Catherine said, “That is indeed excellent news, Miss Bennet. I hope that your sister

Mary is an active, useful sort of person, one who can make a small income go a long way?"

"She is, Madame," Elizabeth said, her pink lips quirking up in amusement. "She is also very devoted to the Holy Scriptures, and I believe she will make a wonderful parson's wife."

"That is very good, very good indeed. It seems that Mr. Collins has chosen well, though I pity you. As you are older than Miss Mary, you might well have been Mr. Collins's first choice since the eldest Miss Bennet was already being courted by Mr. Bingley."

"As to that, both Jane and my father sent me letters declaring that Mary is far more suited to Mr. Collins than I could ever hope to be. I am overjoyed for her and not sorry in the least."

"Well, that is very gracious of you, though more than a little foolish. Given your antecedents, and your lack of dowry, it is unlikely that you will ever receive an offer as advantageous as either of your two sisters has."

Darcy opened his mouth indignantly, but Elizabeth said hastily, "Indeed, Madame, you may well be correct. I can only be delighted for both my sisters, and if I never wed at all, I intend to be the best possible aunt that I can be!"

Lady Catherine's expression softened, and she said approvingly, "An excellent attitude. Now if you will take my advice..."

Richard, confident that his aunt's attention was on Elizabeth, slipped a letter to Darcy and murmured, "Go ahead and read this so that you are prepared."

Darcy, frowning, did so.

*The Sun and the Star*

*28<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Richard,*

*I do not know whether this letter will arrive before I do. Not surprisingly, this terrible snowstorm halted my journey northward. I am currently staying at the Sun and the Star and hope that by tomorrow the way will be clear to continue onwards. I see horsemen are already making their way north today, but I am too old to gallop on a snow swept road; I much prefer my well sprung carriage.*

*In any case, you and Fitzwilliam are both reliable men, and can well handle any short term difficulties at Pemberley. Nonetheless, I hope to see you soon. I am well aware that your cousin Lawrence left the Darcy estate in a fine mess, and I am confident that I can be of assistance in sorting out any confusion.*

*Sincerely,*

*Adam,*

*Earl of Matlock*

Darcy blew out a long breath and looked at Lady Catherine, who was still holding forth. He knew that the Earl of Matlock and Lady Catherine, both strong willed individuals, often disagreed with one another. It was a sad reality that once the earl arrived, Pemberley might well turn into a genteel war zone. He was not looking forward to that.

But at least Miss Bennet would be here to brighten the situation.

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*Two Hours Later*

Georgiana hurried out a side door of Pemberley with Elizabeth at her heels, shut it behind them, breathed in a lungful of cold, crisp air, and heaved out a deep sigh of relief.

“Tired, dear friend?” Elizabeth asked in amusement.

“Very tired! I had no idea how much work was required in the still room!”

“Yes, and Lady Catherine is so very energetic!”

Georgiana chuckled as the two girls turned a corner and began walking along the paved path which led to Pemberley’s now slumbering rose garden. The servants had managed to clear much of the lanes and paths which made their circuitous ways around the house, and Elizabeth and Georgiana, both eager to exercise, strode side by side as the noonday sun shone down from above. The air was crisp and cold, but the sun’s rays were melting snow from the eaves, producing brilliant icicles which sparkled and glittered in the light.

“Of course, I am not nearly as tired as Fitzwilliam,” Georgiana remarked. “I worry about him.”

“Because he has so much work to do?” Elizabeth suggested.

“Yes, exactly,” Georgiana said, “He has not shared overmuch with me, but I have lived with him for many years and am aware that he is both anxious and exhausted.”

Elizabeth had known Mr. Darcy for less than two months, but she too had noted the growing shadows under the gentleman’s eyes.

“He is running a long race, not a sprint,” Elizabeth remarked. “Perhaps he needs to rest more?”

“I think he does, but then he does not ask for my opinion. When we first moved to Bellhaven in Leicestershire, it was a similar situation, except that Bellhaven is so much smaller than Pemberley. But my father had purchased the small estate shortly before his death, and a great deal needed to be done. Fitzwilliam toiled for many hours a day trying to

repair and renew what had been left in disarray. I fear he is doing the same thing here, but on a far larger scale. Of course, given the dreadful state of those two tenant cottages, I understand that he feels he must work as hard and rapidly as he possibly can.”

“At least he has substantial experience managing an estate,” Elizabeth said in a comforting tone, and then she stopped to look around her with interest. “Are these plants all roses?”

“They are. My mother was very fond of roses, and this garden was her solace and joy during the last years of her life. I vaguely remember walking around here while my mother sat under a shaded parasol. Of course, it has almost certainly been neglected since Lawrence never had much use for roses, but even so, it will be lovely in the summer.”

“I am certain it will,” Elizabeth agreed, and two girls continued on their path, which took them through the rose garden and around a stone wall.

“Shall we visit the puppies?” Georgiana asked, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, and Elizabeth laughed and said, “By all means!”

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### *The Office*

Darcy had called a council in his office, determined to bring relief to his suffering tenants as quickly as possible. Richard was present, along with Mrs. Reynolds the housekeeper, Mr. Milton the steward, and Mr. Pembroke the butler. Lady Catherine was, mercifully, elsewhere; she would not be pleased at his decision to give much of the fine bedding in the mansion to his needy tenants.

“I have had the maids strip the bedding from half of the bedchambers in the guest wing,” Mrs. Reynolds said. “That should provide blankets and sheets for most of the tenant farmers.”

“Excellent,” Darcy said, his eyes flicking down a page with a list of all the tenants’ names. “I hope that some of the cottages are in reasonably decent shape, but we need to assume that all of the families are suffering in this cold.”

“I think that a change is coming,” Colonel Fitzwilliam remarked from his place by the window. “I predict that it will warm up tonight, and by tomorrow, the snow will be melting.”

“That will be a blessing for those poor souls in drafty hovels,” Mrs. Reynolds declared.

“True, but if all this snow melts, it will turn the lanes and roads into mud, which will make it difficult to travel. I believe we should send out servants on horseback as quickly as possible with blankets and baskets for the nearer tenants, anyway.”

“I can arrange for that, sir, if you like,” Pembroke said.

“Thank you both,” Darcy replied, and watched as both servants hastened out of the door. Darcy walked over to take his place next to Richard, and he immediately caught sight of Elizabeth and Georgiana marching vigorously toward the kennels.

“I am very glad that you invited Miss Bennet to Pemberley,” Richard remarked. “She is a wonderful friend to Georgiana.”

“Yes, she is,” Darcy agreed, feeling a surge of heat in his face. “She is a remarkable young lady.”

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“The puppies are absolutely darling,” Georgiana enthused, snugging her pelisse tighter about herself.

“They certainly are,” Elizabeth agreed, glancing briefly towards the stables as the strong smell of horse washed over her. She and Georgiana rounded the corner of the building into a hive of activity, some dozen horses standing heavily laden with saddlebags, with servants and stable hands milling about.

“Oh,” Georgiana remarked, regarding the cluster of men and horses with interest. “Fitzwilliam must be sending out food and blankets to the tenants.”

“I see,” Elizabeth murmured, her admiration for Mr. Darcy’s care for the tenants renewed.

“Miss Darcy?” a voice suddenly called from their right.

Elizabeth turned, her eyes widening at the owner of the voice. He was one of the most handsome men she had ever seen, with a fine figure and an open, friendly face. His fine coat had plainly been made by an excellent tailor, the cut and color of it both carefully chosen to show his figure in the best possible way. His shapely hands held the reins of a fine bay gelding, which was walking sedately at his side.

“Mr. Wickham?” Georgiana stuttered out, her blue eyes wide with astonishment.

“Miss Darcy!” the man repeated, and bowed dramatically. “It is truly an honor to see you again after so many years. You have changed from a little girl into a lovely lady since last we met!”

He smiled at her, displaying white teeth, and scanned the girl from head to toe and back again before saying, “Beautiful and very grown up!”

Georgiana’s brows puckered in distress, her blue eyes clouding over. “Oh, ah, that is very ... very kind of you,” she murmured, clasping her hands tightly together.

Wickham turned his attention on Elizabeth now, and the result was that in spite of her pelisse and woolen hat and scarf,

she felt slightly underdressed.

“I do not believe I have met your friend, Miss Darcy,” Wickham said. “Would you do the honor of introducing us?”

Anger rose in Elizabeth’s breast at the man’s lascivious stares and bold speech. How dare this man approach Georgiana and upset her, on the grounds of her own home, in the midst of such turmoil!

“She will not,” she snapped angrily, taking a step forward. “Mr. Wickham, I do not believe that Mr. Darcy would wish you to speak to his sister.”

“Indeed, the master wants you well away from Miss Darcy,” the stable master declared, striding forward to pin Wickham with a forbidding stare. “Now get on with you. The road is clear enough for you to return to Timbreline; you are no longer welcome on Pemberley lands.”

“As you wish, of course,” Wickham said with a smirk and bowed again. A moment later, he swung onto his horse’s saddle, touched his heels to the horse’s flanks, and trotted away.

The stable master folded his arms, glowering after the departing back, and Elizabeth took a deep breath and said, “Thank you, Mr. Jenkins.”

He turned and nodded to her. “Glad to be of service, Miss Bennet, Miss Darcy.”

He vanished back into the stables, and Elizabeth turned to her friend and frowned in concern. “Georgiana! Are you well? You are pale and shaking!”

“He startled me so badly,” Georgiana admitted in a small voice. “I know that no close friend of Lawrence’s could be a good man. But I have not seen Mr. Wickham since I was but a child, and he was so kind to me then! We used to play games together, and he was such a cheerful soul, and now he is so very handsome and charming! It is hard for me to accept that...”

She huffed and gave Elizabeth an unsteady smile. “Thank you for your kind intervention, my dear friend. I do not know how I would have handled that without you and Jenkins.”

“You are most welcome, of course,” Elizabeth said warmly, taking the other woman’s arm. “Come, let us go inside.”

The two walked in silence back to the house, arm in arm. Elizabeth gazed absently into the distance, pondering the man with the handsome face and roguish heart, urbane voice and illicit appetites. It was, she thought, a good lesson in remembering that outward appearance did not necessarily reflect the heart and character of a man.

## Chapter 28

### *The Next Morning*

The clock in the hall tolled six times, and Elizabeth groaned aloud. For unknown reasons, she had woken very early, and in spite of her best efforts, had been quite unable to go back to sleep.

It was not so very early, of course, and she might as well get up and get dressed. Breakfast would not be served for three hours, but she had letters to write to her family and friends back in Hertfordshire. She could go to the library and write until her hand was tired, and then pick out one of the many thousands of books waiting there.

That decided, Elizabeth climbed out of bed, washed her face and hands in the available pitcher and basin, donned a warm woolen blue dress, put her hair up in a simple knot, and wandered over to push the curtains aside, the better to stare out the window into the darkness. She could see nothing but rain drops rolling down outside the window pane, reflecting the soft fire light. As predicted by Colonel Fitzwilliam, the outside temperatures had warmed significantly, leading to this steady rain which would rapidly melt the snow and turn the roads into mud. Elizabeth grimaced, closed the drapes, and left the room, turning to the right toward the staircase.

The family wing of Pemberley was extensive, and thus most of the bedchambers were currently unoccupied. She was therefore startled to hear feminine sobbing coming from the bedchamber three doors down from her own. She paused outside the door, uncertain of what to do. On the one hand, she did not wish to intrude discourteously. On the other, well, she also did not wish to leave a maid or servant girl suffering unnecessarily.

She noted that the door to the bedchamber was not entirely closed, and she found herself pushing it gently, sufficiently that the door pushed open a few inches. Her eyes, adjusted to the darkness, immediately picked out the black clad form curled up on a small couch a few feet from the door, a white bundle in its arms. The bundle squeaked, and the figure lifted its head, revealing, in the wavering light of a single candle, the tear streaked face of Mrs. Darcy.

“Anne?” Elizabeth asked, her surprise outweighing any concerns about interfering unduly.

The woman’s face crumpled more under Elizabeth’s gaze, even as she tightened her grip on the sleeping baby in her arms.

“Anne!” Elizabeth repeated, hurrying into the room and pushing the door behind her. “My dear friend, you ought not to be in here without a fire. It is terribly cold!”

“I cannot ... I cannot do this!” Anne gasped, rocking the sleeping child in her arms. “I ... I thought I could ... I could just pretend it did not happen, but I cannot. Oh, Helena! Oh, it is my fault!”

Elizabeth hastily sat down next to her friend and put a slender arm around the woman’s shivering form. “My dear Anne, please, do come into my bedchamber and warm yourself. You would not want the child to catch cold!”

Anne looked at her slumbering babe and nodded, though her face remained contorted in distress. “Yes, you are right, I must ... I must warm the child. I cannot...”

“Come along,” Elizabeth coaxed, pulling her friend gently to her feet. She shepherded her down the hall back to her own bedchamber and settled her in the chair nearest the fire. She wished for a servant to bring tea, but it was very early, and it did not seem safe to leave Anne alone while she hunted for a maid.

Instead, she threw two logs on the fire, stirred it up vigorously until the flames reared up with enthusiasm, poured

a glass of water from the pitcher, and handed it to Anne.

Anne took the glass with her shaky right hand and drank it down, her tear filled eyes fixed on the sleeping infant.

“How can I tell her when she grows up?” she murmured. “How will she ever forgive me?”

“Anne, what are you speaking of?” Elizabeth asked, rummaging through her clothing in search of the black shawl that Mary had leant her. Once she had found it, she hurried over to wrap it around the widow, whose shivering had lessened somewhat.

“I ... I am partially responsible for her father’s death,” Anne said, and burst into renewed tears. “I did not save him!”

“What?” Elizabeth asked incredulously.

“I must tell you!” Anne cried out. “I cannot live with this secret, no matter the consequences!”

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*Pemberley*

*13<sup>th</sup> November, 1811*

*Anne Darcy woke with a faint gasp, blinking bemusedly into the darkness of her bedchamber. She had snuffed the candles upon lying down, and with the new moon, no light slipped in through any crack in the curtains. Only the banked fire glowed softly in the blackness.*

*She shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position, and her growing baby responded, squirming and then delivering a very solid kick to her ribs. A moment later, something hard bumped into a nerve that sent lightning and fire all the way down from waist to lower calf.*

*Anne swallowed a cry and rolled ponderously over to shove herself into a sitting position. She panted a moment on the edge of the bed and pushed herself upright, reaching for the dressing gown she knew remained draped over the nearby chairback.*

*She was still tying the sash of the wool gown across her swollen stomach when sounds from the corridor caught her attention. A short sharp scuffle and a man's low murmur, followed by a young woman's sharp cry of fearful pleading.*

*Anne knotted her sash hastily and rushed towards the door, pulling it open and gazing in dismay into the hallway. The candles in the sconces along the walls had been left burning, plainly illuminating her husband, his hands fast about the wrists of the young maid Grace, dragging the weeping girl down the hall towards his own chamber as she struggled to free herself.*

*"Lawrence!" Anne cried out. "What are you doing?"*

*The master of Pemberley turned a furious look on his wife and said, in a slurred voice, "Go to bed, Mrs. Darcy! This is none of your concern."*

*Anne stared at him incredulously and hurried forward. "What are you doing to Grace?"*

*"A comely thing, is she not?" the man mumbled, spewing out brandy fumes. "Astley told me that you had acquired a lovely little maid since I was last here. That was foolish of you if you did not wish for her to share my bed. You have done your part in conceiving a child; leave me to my pleasures, and I will leave you alone!"*

*"No! Stop! Stop!" Anne cried out, just as another door opened and Matilda, Anne's private maid, hurried out of the sitting room where she slept.*

*"Madam, are you well? What is...?" Matilda began, and then broke off as she took in the scene.*

*"Both of you, go back to bed," Lawrence ordered in a growl and took another step down the hall, jerking Grace after*

him. The terrified girl let out another sob as she lurched forward.

“Let go of her!” Anne cried out, lumbering forward and seizing her husband’s arm, trying to pry his grip off of the maid’s wrists.

Lawrence Darcy gave a bellow of rage, releasing the maid with one hand to backhand his wife away from his person. Anne cried out, staggering back a step and falling. She cried out again as her right arm collided hard with the wainscoting, and she tumbled to the ground.

Matilda dashed into the fray, eyes fierce as she grabbed Lawrence’s other arm and yanked. Anne pushed herself to her feet, her entire body humming with shock and pain and a newfound fighting spirit.

“Get off of me, wench!” Lawrence yelled, swatting at Matilda, and gave Grace another mighty tug towards his bedchamber. Anne launched herself back into the struggle, scarcely noting the stairs behind her husband as she was leant strength by desperation. At last, she succeeded in ripping his hand away from the young maid. On his other side, Matilda gave a ferocious tug.

Face contorted by terror and dawning fury, the young girl backed up a step, lifted one leg, and kneed Lawrence Darcy in the stomach with all the strength her panic could lend her.

Overbalanced, unsteady, his reflexes impaired by drink, the man took one large step back, arms flailing, and went over backwards down the staircase with a sharp cry.

Matilda gasped, and Grace stifled a little shriek into her hands. Anne watched in frozen shock as her husband tumbled down the stairs to the main hall below, something snapping audibly halfway down. He landed in a crumpled heap on the carpet below, staring up at the three women with wide unblinking eyes, arms sprawled out to either side, head at a terribly unnatural angle.



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“Matilda checked him immediately, of course,” Anne said dully. “He was dead from a broken neck. We did not truly know what to do. To tell the truth would cause a great deal of gossip, and poor Grace did not deserve the rumors about her. Moreover, if everyone knew that I had been involved in his death? The scandal would have reverberated from one end of England to the other! Matilda and Grace managed to drag his body into the wine cellar in the hopes that everyone would think he fell to his death down there. It was a miracle, really, that we managed to move him without anyone noticing, but it was very late at night, and the wine cellar is directly below the family wing. We thought there would probably be suspicious questions, since Lawrence *never* went in search of food and drink for himself, but it worked. The verdict was accidental death, but I cannot forget the horror of his fall! I fear it is all my fault...”

She trailed off and Elizabeth, who was shaking in fury, said, “None of this is your fault, Anne. None of it. Your husband was a despicable human being who thought nothing of ruining an innocent girl, and when he attacked you – thank God you and Helena were not harmed!”

Anne looked down at her daughter and sobbed, “How could he do such a thing to me, to my child?”

“He was a lecherous fool, and apparently drunk as well,” Elizabeth said angrily.

“Oh yes, he was very drunk,” Anne agreed, wiping her face with her left arm. “He was rarely that inebriated in my presence, but he was in a foul mood that day. He and his friends had just returned to Pemberley from London and there were a pile of bills waiting for him, I know, and something was amiss in his bedchamber. When I went down for dinner, he was already in a bad temper, and he and his cronies always

drank lavishly into the evening. But oh Elizabeth, I feel so guilty that Helena will never know her father. If I had done something else, perhaps he would not have died!”

“Anne,” Elizabeth said sternly, putting a hand on the lady’s slim shoulder. “You are *not* responsible for your husband’s death. It was an accident brought about by the man’s horrific decision to ... well, I cannot put into words how disgusted and furious I am at his actions. I have seen Grace working, so I assume she was not physically harmed?”

“She and Matilda were both unharmed except for a few bruises, thank the Lord. My arm was wrenched badly from being knocked to the floor, and I was afraid perhaps it was broken, but it is not. But Elizabeth, while I did not mean to kill my husband, I did attack him. Will God forgive me for my part in his death?”

Elizabeth stared at her friend, praying for wisdom, and then said carefully, “I remember a verse from the Holy Word, “*Deliver the poor and needy; rid them out of the hand of the wicked*”. Mr. Lawrence Darcy was at fault in attacking an innocent girl, and you, to your credit, rushed to defend a woman far below you socially. The easier thing would have been for you to return to your bedchamber and ignore your husband’s wicked actions, but you did not.”

Anne gulped, nodding, and at this moment, Helena opened her blue eyes and began wailing indignantly. Anne hastily shifted the infant and opened her dress, allowing the child to begin suckling, while Elizabeth looked away.

“I wonder if Lawrence has committed such a villainous act in the past,” Anne finally said in a low tone. “I am not aware of any such thing, but we have spent much of our marriage apart, and in any case, everyone knows me to be a weak willed woman. I daresay any servant girl ruined by my husband would have thought it pointless to talk to me about it.”

Elizabeth shook her head and said decidedly, “You are *not* a weak willed woman. Such a woman would have

retreated in the face of Mr. Darcy's evil acts. When you saw what he was doing, you rushed to the rescue. That was extremely courageous."

"Thank you," Anne said, and sighed deeply. "I do feel much better for having told you about it. It has been eating away at me to the point that I have had trouble sleeping, even when Helena allows me to sleep, that is."

"I am confident that God does not blame you for your husband's death," her friend said stoutly, "but if you wish for more assurance – is there a parson that you trust?"

Anne stared at her in surprise and then nodded. "Old Mr. Sievert is rector of the tiny parish of Pemberley. He did the burial service for my husband and lives in a small cottage just beyond the chapel. He is a wise and kindly man, and I am certain would not share my confession with another."

"I am sure he will keep anything you say entirely in confidence," Elizabeth said, and she carefully leaned forward to embrace her friend. "I am awed at your courage, Anne. I truly am. I know you did the right thing in rescuing Grace."

"Thank you, Elizabeth," Anne replied, blowing out a slow breath. "You have brought me such relief."

Silence fell between the two women for a few minutes, broken only by the soft sounds of the baby enthusiastically suckling.

"Fitzwilliam is very different," Anne said suddenly.

Elizabeth turned a surprised look on her friend and said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you need not be worried that the current master of Pemberley is anything like the former. Fitzwilliam has all the honor, generosity, and temperance that were missing in his older brother. He will be a caring, honorable, and faithful husband."

Elizabeth felt herself flush, and she said, "Oh, that is, I do not necessarily think that Mr. Darcy is..."

Anne laughed softly, and the baby released her latch and looked up in surprise. Anne took this opportunity to pick Helena up, pat her back until she belched, and then shifted her to the other side so that she could eat more.

“The servants have been talking, of course,” Anne said once the baby had once again applied herself to the important business of eating. “They see how my brother-in-law looks at you. I would be delighted if you and Fitzwilliam made a match of it, and I am confident that you would find my cousin a wonderful husband.”

Elizabeth put her hands to her cheeks and was unsurprised to find them hot to the touch.

“I ... do not know whether ... oh Anne, how do you truly know that the current master of Pemberley is a good man?” she asked. “I admire Mr. Darcy, and I respect him, but we have only been acquainted for a few weeks now. I do not pretend to know him well. How can one be certain that a man does not have hidden, dangerous qualities which he conceals while in public?”

Silence fell for a full two minutes, and then Anne said reluctantly, “I suppose one cannot ever know another being with complete certainty, but I think that ... well, Fitzwilliam is both shy and awkward in company at times, but no one has ever impugned his honorable character. He was always a solemn person, even as a child, and Mrs. Reynolds and Mr. Pembroke think the world of him. I believe servants generally know the truth, since they see an individual during his or her unguarded moments.”

“That is true,” Elizabeth mused, though there remained a trickle of unease where there had once been only admiration. Not because of anything that Mr. Darcy had done, but because his older brother had been such a rogue.

“In any case,” she said, shaking off her melancholy, “It is not likely that your brother-in-law will make me an offer of marriage. I am but the daughter of a country gentleman, and

thanks to the entail and my mother's limited marriage portion, I will be a poor bride."

"That latter consideration may weigh on Darcy," Anne agreed, and sighed, "not that it ought to, but Lawrence left the estate in a wretched state."

Elizabeth, considering the crimes of the man in question, shook her head. It was terrible that the former Mr. Darcy had left the estate in such a disastrous financial state. It was worse that the man, drunk with alcohol and lust, could have killed his own child in his anger. She praised God that Anne, Helena, and Grace had been spared.

## Chapter 29

*The Library*

*An Hour Later*

A fire crackled off to Elizabeth's left side, as her lips silently formed the words of the sonnet she was reading.

*My glass shall not persuade me I am old,  
So long as youth and thou are of one date;  
But when in thee time's furrows I behold,  
Then look I death my days should expiate.*

On the third restart of the poem, with no more success at focusing on the words than before, Elizabeth looked up from the slim volume and stared into the fire, Anne's confidences still resounding in her ears.

It was early, not yet eight o'clock, and the great house was silent save for the hustle and bustle of the servants. She felt tired, not from physical exhaustion, but from the overflow of emotion regarding the loathsome gentleman who had been formerly master of this great estate.

It was horrible to imagine having to live with, work for, or be married to a man who would think nothing of forcing himself on a maid. Elizabeth could scarcely comprehend such depravity.

Lawrence Darcy's death was well-deserved, she thought with a vicious little stab of satisfaction. Never again would the man molest maids or hit his wife.

But that left its own problem in Elizabeth's mind, that of the character of the second Mr. Darcy.

Anne said, as did many others, that the younger brother was completely unlike the older. From Elizabeth's own observation, Darcy had a heart as kind as his face was handsome, with the intellect to match. It was wonderful to see his diligence towards the estate and the tenants who had so recently become his responsibility. His kindness to his sister, his sister-in-law, and his niece was notable, but he saw his duty to his dependents as of great importance as well. Elizabeth could not even imagine him raising a hand to a servant girl or his wife.

And yet...

Her own parents' marriage was not a happy one. Her father, a clever, intellectual, cynical gentleman, had fallen passionately in love with the lovely Miss Frances Gardiner and offered his hand in marriage. Fanny Gardiner had, of course, accepted. She, as the daughter of a mere solicitor, had been overjoyed to wed a gentleman who was master of his own estate.

Within years, maybe even months, of the marriage, Thomas Bennet realized that he had made a mistake. The new Mrs. Bennet was as silly as she was handsome. She also had not been trained to be mistress of an estate, and she was often overly excitable, and sometimes vulgar, in company. The arrival of five daughters in a row had transformed the lady into a fretful mass of nerves as she awaited the death of her husband and the subsequent loss of her home. Mr. Bennet, an indolent man, had chosen to laugh at his wife and her fears rather than comfort her or instruct her in her duties.

No, the Bennets did not have a happy marriage.

But her parents' experience was nothing – *nothing* – compared to that of Anne Darcy, who had unknowingly married a violent man who thought nothing of ravishing a maid while in his cups.

When a woman married, she fell under the authority of her husband. Elizabeth thought that Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was a good man, but what if he was not?

Elizabeth had always prided herself on her discernment, on her ability to understand the hearts and minds of others. Certainly she did not have the overly optimistic viewpoint of her sister Jane, but now, with the knowledge of what had come to pass only a few weeks previously here at Pemberley, she was filled with fear. She had never comprehended how terrible a marriage could be if the husband was wicked and cruel.

Many a woman married because there were no alternatives, and indeed, until recently there had been a great need for at least one Bennet daughter to marry well. But now with both Jane and Mary engaged – in Jane’s case to a genuinely rich man – the rest of the Bennet ladies would certainly not starve, and would likely have a reasonably comfortable life even if they never married.

She found herself worrying about Mr. Bingley and Mr. Collins. Could they be violent as well? She thought not; indeed, she was quite confident that Mr. Bingley, at least, was a good tempered man, but how could one be absolutely certain?

“Elizabeth?”

She jumped and looked over in surprise to see Georgiana standing a few feet inside the library, a puzzled expression on her face.

“Georgiana! I apologize for my inattention.”

“That is quite all right. Are you all right?”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth replied. It was not a lie, precisely; she was distressed in spirit, but physically she was well enough. “Oh, it is later than I realized. I have not yet broken my fast.”

“Neither have I. Shall we?”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth replied, reaching out to take her friend’s arm in her own. She resolved to set aside her concerns for now, to display a cheerful face and happy demeanor to Georgiana and the other occupants of Pemberley. Tonight, in



the privacy of her bedchamber, she could think more of what she had learned today.

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### *The Office*

#### *Two Hours Later*

Darcy leaned back in his creaking chair and stretched his aching back, his eyes wandering slowly around the room. He had been toiling over accounts all day, save for a brief period after tea – which he had taken in the office – while he had spoken with Mr. Milton. He was weary, his hand was sore, and his eyes hurt after deciphering so many tiny marching columns of figures.

He looked back down at the books and could not prevent a groan from escaping. He realized that he needed a break and rose from the desk. A short walk through the house was in order to stretch his legs and chase away the ennui of long sitting.

The halls of Pemberley brought comfort to his jaded, restive soul. Memories, happy and sad and bittersweet, surged through his mind as he wandered up and down the familiar corridors, hands clasped loosely behind his back. He found himself near the library and cast the door a single longing glance before turning away, then halted at the feminine voices raised in laughter that filtered into the hall.

Darcy cracked the door open, peeking inside before stepping in. His sister and Miss Bennet sat close to the hearth, bathed in firelight as they played a game. He stepped closer and realized that it was Fox and Geese, with Miss Bennet playing as a very wily fox.

Both women looked up with bright faces to greet him. “Brother!” Georgiana cried. “I am afraid I am losing quite

dreadfully!”

Darcy laughed. “Pray do not let me interrupt your defeat, then,” he teased, and strolled over to look out the window.

Raindrops pattered against the glass like the tapping of a thousand tiny fairy-feet, running races down the panes to the sashes where they puddled. The ground below had been turned to slush by the sluicing rain, the drifts of snow melting away into muck that bogged down anyone who dared attempt to move across it. The servants were finding their duties that much more difficult, and the roads were nearly impassable. Darcy worried for the tenants whose roofs remained unrepaired, who must be both cold and wet.

But right now, the fire was warm on his back, and two congenial ladies were laughing nearby, Georgiana ruefully and Miss Bennet in delight, and he was finding peace for the first time that day.

He turned back towards them as Georgiana remarked, “I must say, Elizabeth, you are certainly a dab hand at this game. I have not been beaten so soundly by anyone save Fitzwilliam!”

The lady looked up at him, eyes bright and mouth pert. “You play, Mr. Darcy?”

“I have always enjoyed the game,” he admitted, quite unable to keep from smiling back.

“I should dearly like to see you play one another,” Georgiana remarked, almost mischievously. “I do not know which one I would care to back!”

Elizabeth laughed again, bright and clear. “Come, Mr. Darcy,” she invited playfully. “Will you join me for a game?”

He vacillated a moment, his mind speeding to the study and the account books awaiting him there, the mountain of correspondence and the urgent business. But then he looked into Miss Bennet’s merry eyes, and he decided that he could afford the time for one game.

“Very well,” he agreed, and took Georgiana’s across from his charming guest. “Do you wish to play again as fox?”

“Oh do,” Georgiana encouraged, “I should like to watch Fitzwilliam and learn from him how I could better have trapped you!”

“As you wish,” Miss Bennet acceded with twinkling eyes, and watched as Darcy reset the game board.

Conversation flowed light and easy between the three of them, punctuated by much laughter, as Darcy sought to trap Elizabeth’s decidedly clever fox. Only once he had lost some half of his geese did he finally pin her piece to one wall, but a few lines away from victory.

“So you can be bested!” Georgiana teased.

“Indeed I can,” Elizabeth agreed with mock sorrow. “It was a most enjoyable game. Thank you.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Miss Bennet,” he assured her. It was true; he had enjoyed their match a great deal, refreshing his mind and spirits. Regretfully, he rose, taking his leave of his sister and their friend. But as he turned his steps towards the study once more, he found himself able to face the prospect of the waiting work with restored equanimity.

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### *The Next Morning*

Elizabeth looked in the mirror and grimaced at the dark circles under her eyes. She had slept the previous night, but not particularly well, disturbed by peculiar dreams.

She had not dreamed of falling down the stairs, or the cries of a maid, or anything of the sort. She had, instead, dreamed of trying to climb up her favorite oak tree on Oakham Mount in a ball gown, and Jane; gentle, sweet Jane; had yelled

at her because she was supposed to be at the church in Meryton for Jane's wedding...

She sighed and then smiled into the mirror, determined to present a sunny countenance to the world. She would never betray Anne's confidences, of course, and did not want to distress Georgiana or her brother by showing a long face. She found the black shawl that Mary had leant her, wrapped it around herself, and opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, whereupon she cried out in surprise.

Lady Catherine stood a few feet away, a haughty expression on her face, with anger snapping in her chestnut brown eyes.

"Lady Catherine!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "How you startled me!"

"I must speak with you," the lady said, "at *once*."

Elizabeth blinked and said, "Of course, Lady Catherine."

"In private," Lady Catherine clarified, looking down her patrician nose at Elizabeth. "You will come to my sitting room, and we will speak there."

"Very well," Elizabeth said meekly, following the other woman down the corridor and around a corner to her ladyship's sitting room.

Lady Catherine hurried within, with Elizabeth at her heels, and shut the door firmly. The lady barely waited until Elizabeth had seated herself before saying, "You can be at no loss, Miss Bennet, to understand the reason for my summoning you here. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why."

Elizabeth looked at her with astonishment. "Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam; I have not been at all able to account for your desire to see me."

Lady Catherine harrumphed and said, "A report of a most alarming nature reached me this morning from the lips of

my personal maid. I was told that you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet will, in all likelihood, be soon united in marriage to my nephew!”

Elizabeth frowned and asked, “Mr. Darcy, Madam, or Colonel Fitzwilliam? They are both your nephews.”

The lady waved a gloved hand irritably and said, “Darcy, of course; Richard is of no concern to me. It is really quite dreadful of you to captivate my younger nephew, Miss Bennet, though perhaps you are not so very much to blame. You are a handsome and charming woman, and Anne is, regrettably, rather worn out from the pregnancy and birth of her child. It is not surprising that Darcy has been enchanted by your beauty. But alas, you are not related directly to the nobility, and you have a minimal dowry, and thus are not worthy to be the mistress of Pemberley, even without considering the rights of my daughter. Let me be completely understood. This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never. Mr. Darcy is engaged to my daughter. Now, what have you to say?”

Elizabeth’s forehead creased, her nose wrinkled, and her eyes narrowed in consternation.

“Mrs. Darcy is engaged to Mr. Darcy?” she repeated in utter bewilderment.

“Yes,” the lady said impatiently.

“But Mrs. Darcy was widowed less than a month ago! Surely she is not thinking of remarriage already!”

Lady Catherine again waved a hand. “The engagement between Mr. and Mrs. Darcy is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy, my daughter and Lady Anne Darcy’s son have been intended for each other, and indeed, all seemed properly en train when Lawrence Darcy wedded Anne some five years go. It has always been the desire of every member of their respective houses that Rosings and Pemberley be united in one family. Unfortunately, Mr. George Darcy was foolish enough to put an entail on Pemberley, and thus little Helena is not heir

to this great estate, though she is heiress of Rosings. Obviously, therefore, Anne must marry Fitzwilliam when her mourning is completed, so that she can bear a son.”

Elizabeth shook her head in protest and said, “But Mrs. Darcy is Mr. Darcy’s brother’s widow, and their marriage is forbidden by ecclesiastical law!”

“Nonsense, Miss Bennet. Nonsense! I daresay that a family like yours might have a difficult time arranging for a man to marry his brother’s widow, but the Darcys and the de Bourghs and the Matlocks are very highly connected in the church. I assure you that there would be no difficulty in arranging for the wedding of my nephew to my daughter, and certainly no one would successfully void the marriage.”

Elizabeth blinked again. “I see.”

“I am glad you do,” her companion said, a supercilious smile pinned firmly on her lips. “Now, I assume that you are not engaged to Mr. Darcy at the moment?”

“I am not.”

“Good! Do you promise to refuse any offer that Mr. Darcy makes to you in the future?”

“I will make no promise of the kind, Madame,” Elizabeth said calmly.

The great lady stared in astonishment, as if she could not believe her noble ears. “You will not? Why not?”

“Because I respect and admire Mr. Darcy very much. Now, I do not know him well enough to accept an offer of marriage, nor has he given me any indication that he considers me anything more than a friend of Georgiana’s. However, I will not promise to refuse him in the future.”

Lady Catherine now reminded Elizabeth of her mother’s favorite pug dog, whose eyes always seemed to protrude when excited.

“I am appalled at your behavior, Miss Bennet!” she exclaimed. “After my nephew was kind enough to invite you

to Pemberley, you dare to ingratiate yourself into the household like a serpent?"

The door to the sitting room swung open at this moment, catching the attention of both ladies, and Fitzwilliam Darcy swept in, his countenance set in a hideous scowl.

"Lady Catherine, you will cease your abuse of Miss Bennet at once. I invited Miss Bennet to Pemberley as Georgiana's friend. You have no right to drag her here and berate her!"

"She wishes to marry you!" Lady Catherine cried out indignantly. "That is not to be borne!"

"Does she?" Darcy asked, surprised but by no means displeased.

Elizabeth, blushing furiously, explained, "Your aunt wished for me to promise that I would never accept an offer from you, and while I have no expectation of such a thing, I refused to render that promise. Not that I think that we will, that is..."

"I am glad," Darcy said sincerely, his own color heightened. "This is an awkward conversation, but I know that you are an intelligent and charming lady, and while we do not know one another well enough at this juncture..."

"You are engaged to my daughter!" Lady Catherine bellowed, lifting both mittened hands to tug on her gray locks. "You are engaged to Anne, Darcy!"

"I am not," Darcy said concisely, his eyes fixed on Elizabeth's face. Elizabeth found herself struggling with a bewildering array of emotions; amusement at the ludicrous nature of Lady Catherine's demand, pleasure that Mr. Darcy admired her, and fear, because she was still shaken that Darcy's elder brother had attacked his pregnant wife and a young maid.

A moment later, she shook her head to clear it. There was no need to worry at this juncture. It was enough that she

liked Mr. Darcy, and he liked her. They were, she thought, friends. Any further intimacy was reserved for the future.

Lady Catherine was still raging when the butler slipped into the room and, showing a regal indifference to the lady's fury, whispered into his master's ear.

"Lord Matlock is here," Darcy announced and held out an arm to Elizabeth. "I daresay he will wish to freshen up, but after that, I would like you to meet him, Miss Bennet. Shall we go downstairs?"

"Certainly," she replied.

"I am not finished speaking with you both!" Lady Catherine snarled.

Darcy looked down at Elizabeth's small hand and turned to look directly at his aunt.

"Yes, you are," he said sternly, and guided his guest out of the room and down the corridor to the great stairway.

"I do apologize for my aunt's behavior," he said as the twosome walked down the stairs.

"That is entirely all right," Elizabeth said in an amused tone. "I am not intimidated easily, and I was more amused than distressed."

Darcy, who had seen grown men pale and quiver in the face of Lady Catherine's wrath, gazed down at the lady's piquant face with admiration. She was a brave and stalwart woman, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.



## Chapter 30

The vestibule bustled with activity, with footmen and other servants trekking in and out carrying trunks and boxes. The wood floor near the front was nearly hidden under a thick layer of mud, as footsteps crossed footsteps until all blurred together into a sticky brown carpet across the parquet.

The Earl of Matlock stood in the very middle of this scurry of activity, looking worn and tired. He handed over his caped greatcoat to his manservant and reached up an absent hand to adjust his cravat as his son approached.

“Good morning, Father,” Richard said, holding out his hand.

The Earl of Matlock heaved out a deep sigh and shook his son’s hand. “Richard, it is good to see you.”

“I know that I should ask about your journey, but I dare not, as I know it was challenging.”

“It was,” the earl agreed with a sigh. “We left the inn at the very first hint of dawn, for we feared the roads would only grow muddier if we waited and the rains began again.”

“Would you like to freshen up in your room?” Mrs. Reynolds inquired courteously.

“Very much,” the earl said.

“I will show you the way,” Richard said.

The earl cast a look of surprise on his son but nodded, and together the two men climbed side by side up the stairs and into the family wing, to a large corner room which was filled with heavy furniture, and decorations which were restrained and masculine.

“What do you wish to tell me?” the earl asked as the two men stood just inside the open door.

“I was not certain whether you yet knew that Anne birthed a daughter a few days ago.”

Matlock’s eyebrows rose, and he shook his head. “No, I did not know that. So Fitzwilliam Darcy is the new master of Pemberley.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Brother!”

Lord Matlock grimaced and turned toward his sister as she hurried toward him along the paneled corridor, her face twisted in outrage in the light of the candles in the sconces.

“Catherine, I hope you are well?” he asked wearily.

“I am not well at all!” the lady cried out, her eyes bulging with outrage. “Darcy is planning to marry a penniless nobody instead of Anne! You must do something! He must marry Anne!”

The earl looked at his son, who shook his head and rolled his eyes expressively. “Catherine, I arrived only minutes ago, and I need to refresh myself and then eat breakfast. Can we possibly wait an hour to discuss your concerns?”

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*Breakfast Parlor*

*Later*

“Good morning, Uncle!” Georgiana cried, hurrying into the room to greet the earl.

The man rose to his feet, held out his hand to take hers, and looked down on her with a fond smile, “Good morning, Georgiana. You have grown since last I saw you.”

“I have,” she agreed, smiling shyly.

“Brother, if you are quite finished with your meal, we have important business to discuss!” Lady Catherine said, her angry eyes fixed on Elizabeth, who was calmly eating toast.

“Business?” Georgiana asked, looking around in bewilderment. “What business?”

“It is no concern of yours,” Darcy said, smiling to take away any sting in his words. “There are some issues to settle now that our uncle is here.”

“Perhaps, given that it is still muddy outside, we could enjoy some time on the pianoforte?” Elizabeth suggested, looking at her young friend.

“I would like that,” Georgiana said happily.

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*Southwest sitting room*

*One hour later*

Darcy stepped into the room with his aunt, uncle, and male cousin at his heels and looked around him. It had been hastily opened and dusted upon Darcy’s order, but the room was small and unprepossessing, a fair distance from the main rooms of the house, and clearly neglected. As he had explained to Richard Fitzwilliam, it was well out of the way of any listening ears.

It was plainly one of the rooms that had been ignored under the previous master. The furniture was quite out of date – most likely left over from the mastership of Mr. George Darcy – the curtains shabby, the rugs faded and worn. The expressions on the occupants matched their surroundings; the earl looked tired, Richard exasperated, and Lady Catherine outraged.

“Shall we sit down?” Richard suggested and turned a limpid look on Lady Catherine. “Perhaps you would care to take the chair near the fire, Aunt?”

Lady Catherine compressed her lips and stalked over to the chair in question, sitting down with a resentful huff, while Lord Matlock took a position on the chair across from his sister, Richard another chair, and Darcy sat down on a small settee.

“Will Anne not be joining us?” Lord Matlock asked.

“Of course not,” Lady Catherine said impatiently. “She gave birth to little Helena only a few days ago, and she has not yet left her rooms.”

Matlock sighed and remarked, “Then I fail to see why you are discussing her potential marriage to Darcy since she is not even here to discuss it, nor is an engagement at this juncture appropriate given that Anne is newly a widow!”

“My daughter need not be present because she will do as she is told,” Lady Catherine said coldly.

“She is a grown woman, the mother of a child, and quite capable of deciding her own fate,” Richard said indignantly.

“Anne is not the concern here!” the lady replied angrily. “She is, as you said, in mourning. The concern is this beautiful viper that Darcy has been fool enough to invite into Pemberley!”

Darcy leaned forward, his face twisted into a fearsome scowl, and said, “You will not insult our guest, Lady Catherine, or I will evict you from Pemberley. Do you understand?”

“You would not dare!”

“You may choose to think that, but I recommend you do not test me in this,” Darcy said coldly.

“Darcy, Catherine,” the earl said in a weary tone. “Please, let us try to be civilized with one another. Without a doubt the last weeks have been difficult ones for us all, and

especially for you, Nephew. We have a great deal to discuss, but let us start with your aunt's ... concerns. Are you indeed engaged to this Miss Bennet?"

"I am not," Darcy said promptly.

"Well then, I do not think..."

"But he intends to make her an offer," Lady Catherine interrupted, "which is not remotely acceptable! Miss Bennet is, without a doubt, a pretty girl, but not worthy to be mistress of Pemberley, even if Darcy was not already engaged to my daughter, which he is!"

"I am engaged to no one."

"You are! You must be! It was your mother's greatest desire, and mine, that Rosings and Pemberley be united..."

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*Anne's sitting room*

*An Hour Later*

Richard stepped into the sitting room and halted just as an elderly gentleman, clad soberly in black, stood up from his place across from Anne.

"Mr. Seivert," Richard said in some surprise. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," the rector said, his gentle, wrinkled face smiling up at the colonel. "It has been some years since I have seen you at Pemberley, sir. May I express my condolences on the loss of your cousin?"

"Thank you."

"Mrs. Darcy," the parson continued, turning to smile down at the pale lady seated by the fire, "keep your faith in God, who loves and cares for you."

“Thank you for your comforting words, Mr. Seivert,” Anne said gratefully. The old clergyman bowed again, and Richard bowed back and waited until the older man had departed before taking the seat across from Anne. The fire was built up well, and Richard relished the heat.

“Is Helena sleeping?” he asked.

“Yes, she is napping and probably will do so for at least another hour,” Anne said, and then she chuckled. “Unless, of course, she does not. Babies do not exactly eat and sleep on a strict schedule.”

“You look tired,” Richard said, gazing with concern into his cousin’s face.

“I am exhausted,” Anne admitted, “but I am more at peace than I have been in some time.”

“Mr. Sievert was a comfort?”

“Yes,” Anne said, and sighed. “Very much so.”

“Good. You have had a very difficult month with the loss of Lawrence and while the birth of Helena is a gift, I know it was difficult.”

“Yes, it has been a very difficult month,” Anne agreed, her eyes dark with sorrow.

Silence fell for a minute and then Richard said, “Anne?”

“Yes?”

“You asked me to marry you a few days ago.”

Anne blushed and said, “I did. I confess that I have felt self-conscious...”

“If the offer remains open, I accept,” Richard interrupted and then smiled at the look of shock on the lady’s face.

“You truly wish to marry me?” Anne asked after taking a moment to collect herself.

“I do, very much. Not immediately, of course, but when you feel the time is right.”

Anne tilted her head and gazed at her suitor gravely. “Why do you wish to marry me, Richard?”

The colonel’s brow furrowed, and he said, “I will not pretend that I am seized with a sudden passion for you, Anne, but I like and admire you, and I care deeply for you. Bluntly, I am also attracted to your fortune. I wish to leave the army, and given my circumstances, I must marry a woman of wealth to do so. If any of my reasoning is repugnant to you, please deny me, and I promise I will not hold it against you in any way.”

Anne turned toward the fire, and Richard was horrified to see a tear run down her pale cheek.

“Anne, oh, Anne!” he exclaimed in distress. “I am sorry! I had no intention of hurting you with my words.”

“It is not you, but me,” the lady replied in a low voice, and turned back to face him, her face set with determination. “I wish to marry you, Richard, very much, but I cannot truly accept your offer until I tell you the truth.”

“The truth about what?” the colonel asked in utter bewilderment.

She reached out her gloved hands to take his hands in her own, and she said, “The truth about what really happened to Lawrence.”

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### *The Music Room*

Elizabeth was only half-listening to the music behind her. There was no doubt that Georgiana played with great skill, as the composition was a difficult one. Elizabeth herself would

have made a dozen mistakes by now, but her friend played flawlessly.

She leaned towards the window a little more, wishing she could feel the wind upon her face. The weather outside matched her mood precisely; restless and uncertain, leaden clouds scudding across the sky and bare branches tossing like horses' manes in the wind. The thin overcast light turned everything a sullen gray, with mud painting the ground below a drab brown.

The pianoforte behind Elizabeth fell silent, and she turned, struggling to recall what she had just heard. "You do play so very beautifully, my friend."

"Thank you, I have practiced a great deal," Georgiana replied and ran a rueful hand lightly across the keys. "I do think my playing would be more pleasing to the ear if the instrument were tuned, however."

"I scarcely noticed it was not," Elizabeth admitted, "I made so many mistakes when I played it."

Both women glanced around the room – moth-eaten and threadbare and outdated, only very recently dusted – and Georgiana murmured, "I do not think the music room was a priority for Lawrence."

"It would not appear so," Elizabeth agreed and glanced out the window at the landscape once more, while Georgiana rose and crossed to stand beside her, looking down at the bare colorless flowerbeds below.

"What is wrong?" Georgiana asked suddenly.

Elizabeth turned a startled gaze on her friend and felt her cheeks flare pink. "Wrong?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Oh come now, I know you well enough to realize when you are worried or distressed about something. Is it Lady Catherine? She seemed angry at the breakfast table."



Elizabeth considered what to say and then decided on partial honesty. She could not, of course, tell Georgiana about the actual cause of her brother's death, but she could tell the truth about Lady Catherine.

"Shall we sit down by the fire?" she suggested, and at Georgiana's nod, she guided the girl over to a settee by the fire, which had burned low, leaving the room somewhat cold. Elizabeth took a minute to throw in a log and poke the fire, which revived under her attentions. She then sat down next to her young friend and said, "Lady Catherine was angry, and maybe still is, because the servants have been gossiping about me and your brother."

"You and Fitzwilliam? What about?"

Again, Elizabeth felt her cheeks heat, but she said with tolerable composure, "There is apparently a silly rumor floating about that Mr. Darcy is planning to make me an offer of marriage."

She heard a gasp from her side and turned to see Georgiana looking upon her with obvious disappointment. "It is only a rumor? It is not true?"

"It is not."

Again, Georgiana sighed, and she said, "That saddens me. I would like you very much as a sister."

"Oh, Georgiana!" Elizabeth cried out, and reached out to embrace the girl. "That is very kind of you, and I would love to have you as a sister too. But..."

"But you do not admire Fitzwilliam?" Georgiana asked, her brow puckered in bewilderment. "I thought you liked him well enough."

"I do, very much," Elizabeth replied immediately. "I do. But we have not known one another very long."

"You have known one another for almost two months," the girl argued. "Your sister Jane and Mr. Bingley were

engaged in less time than that, and your sister Mary to Mr. Collins.”

“That is true,” Elizabeth agreed, and again felt a stab of fear for her sisters. She turned to Georgiana and forced herself to smile at the younger girl. “But keep in mind that my sisters and their fiancés were not coping with the loss of a brother, and a journey north, and problems with tenants, and wills, and a funeral, and mourning, not to mention an aunt who is easily outraged.”

Georgiana blew out a long breath and nodded reluctantly. “That is true enough, I suppose. Fitzwilliam has been terribly busy.”

“He has, and I admire him for that. It is greatly to his credit that he is spending hours toiling away to bring the estate back to solvency. And that is another issue, of course; it is an unfortunate reality that a man in your brother’s circumstances wishes for a wife with a substantial dowry, and I will bring only fifty pounds a year as a dowry.”

Georgiana’s eyes flared wide in disbelief. “Oh Elizabeth, is that all?”

She then turned bright red and choked out, “I am so sorry! How terribly rude of me!”

Elizabeth promptly pulled her close again and said softly, “That is quite all right, dear one. The truth is that my mother’s marriage portion was reasonable for her position in life, but no one expected her to birth five daughters and no sons. The estate will go to Mr. Collins, and my sister Mary will be mistress of Longbourn when my father dies, which stabilizes our family’s situation substantially, but no, I will not bring a fortune into my marriage.”

Georgiana wiped her eyes to keep the tears from falling and then frowned. “But why does Lady Catherine care? It hardly concerns her whom my brother marries.”

“I am inclined to agree, but in fact she cares very much. She informed me this morning that your brother is pledged to

marry your cousin Anne when her time of mourning is over.”

“Anne?” Georgiana gasped incredulously. “Why?”

“Because Pemberley is entailed away from the female line, and thus little Helena is not heir; it is very important to your aunt that a son be born who can inherit both Rosings and Pemberley.”

“That is a completely ridiculous reason to push my brother and sister-in-law into marrying!” Georgiana cried out indignantly.

“I totally agree. But I do beg you not to concern yourself unduly, my friend; your brother is entirely capable of managing Lady Catherine.”

Georgiana relaxed and said, “That is true enough. Now Elizabeth, would you care to go for a walk with me now? I feel quite unsettled at all that is happening, and I always feel better after a brisk walk.”

“Is it not very muddy?”

“We can walk the paved paths of the rose garden, at least, and perhaps the higher ground near the kennels will be dry enough.”

“I would love a good walk.”

## Chapter 31

*Office*

*Pemberley*

The Earl of Matlock, seated behind the polished desk, looked up from the neat pile of documents in his hands and said angrily, "Lawrence was a complete and utter fool."

Richard, sitting by the fire, guffawed at these blunt words, and Darcy, who was pacing back and forth on the threadbare oriental carpet, sighed and said, "Yes, he was. As you can see from those papers, I have been working hard to determine how much debt Lawrence racked up in these last years, but it is definitely substantial. Moreover, the tenants have been suffering due to my brother's refusal to spend money on the estate's needs."

Matlock groaned, closed his eyes, and considered. When he opened his eyes again, he stood up and walked over to Darcy, who halted in place and waited for his uncle to speak.

"Lady Catherine is correct about one thing," the earl said gravely. "You need to marry a woman of substance, and Anne is available."

Darcy rolled his eyes and said, "Uncle, I know that Lady Catherine is obsessed with uniting Pemberley and Rosings, but you are not, and you know that the marriage of a man to his brother's widow is not acceptable to the church."

The earl waved a casual hand and said, "You need not concern yourself with that, my boy. We have enough influence with the archbishop of Canterbury to prevent anyone from voiding your marriage to Anne. It is done often enough."

"And if someone *did* successfully void the marriage, our children would be illegitimate!" Darcy argued. "I would never

take such a chance, even if I did wish to marry Anne, which I do not.”

“Nor does Anne wish to marry you, and she is in fact no longer available,” Richard said calmly, turning his gaze on his father. “She accepted my offer of marriage a few hours ago.”

This provoked both his father and cousin to turn with twin expressions of shock, and after a moment of silence, Matlock croaked, “*What?!*”

Richard laughed, rose to his feet, and wandered over to the decanter of brandy on the desk. “To be completely transparent, Anne more or less proposed to me a few days ago. I thought the matter over and decided that I would be pleased to marry her when her time of mourning is completed. Today I offered my hand, and she accepted.”

He casually poured three glasses of brandy, handed two of them to his father and cousin, and lifted his own glass in a toast.

“To Anne!” he said.

Matlock, who had finally comprehended that his son was soon to be master of the great estate of Rosings, eagerly responded, “To Anne!”

A second later, Darcy feebly managed to toast Mrs. Anne Darcy, but his mind and heart were not on his sister-in-law, but on Elizabeth Bennet. With Anne no longer even a possible option, perhaps he *could* ask Miss Bennet to marry him?

“That is wonderful news!” Matlock cried out, clapping an enthusiastic hand on his son’s shoulder, “and very wise, too, as it will prevent any issue with ecclesiastical law. Do not worry, Darcy, we will find a wealthy bride for you in London!”

Richard cast a sympathetic look at Darcy and said, “Now Father, I do have a request for you, and that is to carry your sister away from Pemberley as soon as possible. I am confident that we would all find life easier if Lady Catherine

was back at Rosings, especially since if she stays here, she will likely create a great deal of noise and trouble over our engagement.”

The earl pursed his lips thoughtfully and then said, “I believe I can arrange for that, yes. Now, if you do not mind a little prevarication, I suggest that you do not yet announce your engagement to Anne, Richard.”

“Disguise is abhorrent to me, uncle,” Darcy said uneasily.

“It is, of course, your prerogative to tell Lady Catherine the truth,” Richard said, “but if you do, I expect you to be willing to throw our aunt out of Pemberley. Anne is both a new widow and a new mother; she will not have her peace cut up by her termagant of a mother. Nor can she safely leave Pemberley so soon after Helena’s birth.”

Darcy considered this at some length, sighed, and said, “You are correct, of course. I will continue to oppose any idea that I will marry Anne, but I will not reveal your engagement.”

“Very good, very good,” Matlock said and released a chortle that surprised both of the younger men. He slapped his son on the shoulder again and said, “Your mother will be very happy to hear the news, when the time comes, of course. She always worries when you are in the Peninsula, and to have you safely in Kent, master of Rosings – it is a wonderful thing. Well, if you will excuse me, I will go hunt down your aunt to calm her down and work on convincing her to return to Rosings.”

“How will you do that?” Darcy asked, genuinely curious.

The earl chuckled and said, “Now, now, my boy, I have no intention of revealing my secrets!”

He then withdrew from the room, and Darcy, bemused, wandered over to pour another glass of brandy.

“I am happy for you, Richard,” he said, turning to face his cousin, “if rather startled.”

“I am happy as well,” his cousin said, “but I fear I have some difficult news to share with you.”

The master of Pemberley frowned at the suddenly bleak expression on Richard’s face. “What news?”

Richard took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then said, “I have Anne’s permission to tell you what truly happened to Lawrence on the night of his death.”

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### *Lord Matlock’s Sitting Room*

“I insist that Miss Bennet be sent away from Pemberley *immediately!*” Lady Catherine snapped as she paced up and down her brother’s sitting room.

The earl lifted a glass of Madeira to his lips and took a sip, disdaining to show any obvious reaction at his sister’s outburst. He had just enjoyed brandy in the office and was generally careful not to over imbibe, but dealing with Catherine was not a pleasant thing, and the Madeira was excellent. He would drink slowly.

“By all means, tell that to the master of Pemberley,” Matlock drawled, and took a seat on a wingbacked chair by the fire. “That would, at least, settle the issue of Darcy marrying Anne.”

The lady turned sharply on her heel and demanded, “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that if you harass our nephew about Miss Bennet, he will *not only* refuse to evict the lady from Pemberley, but *also* will make a firm decision to never marry Anne.”

Catherine de Bourgh’s eyes flared wide, and her mouth dropped open. “What? Why would he do that?”

The earl sighed and said, "Sit down, Sister. Your pacing is wearying."

She did so and reframed her question. "Why would our nephew refuse to marry Anne if Miss Bennet is sent away?"

"Because Fitzwilliam Darcy is a stubborn gentleman, Catherine, and far too honorable to send a guest away merely because you have a foolish concern that he will marry her."

"It is not foolish! Have you seen the way he looks at her?"

"I have not, but in any case, I have confidence in Fitzwilliam's intelligence and sense. He knows as well as I that Pemberley needs a hasty infusion of cash, and he must marry an heiress."

"Yes, and Anne is the perfect heiress!"

The earl turned away to stare at the burning logs in the fireplace so that his sister would not observe the joyful expression on his face. It was Richard who would soon be master of Rosings, not Darcy. Perhaps in a generation or two, it would be Rosings and Matlock joined by an advantageous marriage!

He schooled his expression into appropriate calm and turned back. "Be that as it may, your presence here is not helping matters at all, Catherine. Make no mistake, Fitzwilliam is nothing like his brother."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"I mean that while Lawrence was pleased enough to accept a substantial sum each year in return for allowing you to rule Rosings as you deemed fit, Fitzwilliam is very different."

Now it was the lady's turn to stare into the fire for a moment as she gathered her thoughts.

"Anne is far too sickly to manage Rosings," she finally said.



“And Lawrence was too lazy to manage Pemberley well, much less Rosings too. You did very well by Anne’s marriage, Catherine.”

“I have worked very hard to oversee Rosings!”

“I have no doubt you did, and I am confident that you ruled far more sensibly than Lawrence would have. But if Fitzwilliam does marry Anne, he will not permit you to control Rosings as you do now. No, he will likely install a trusted steward and send you away to the Dower House...”

“He would not dare! In any case, there is so much to be done here at Pemberley that I doubt Darcy will bother himself with Rosings for many years.”

“You may find that to be wishful thinking,” Matlock replied drily. “Now, I confess to being fatigued and wish to rest. I will see you at dinner.”

Lady Catherine opened her mouth in indignation, snapped it shut, and marched out of the room.

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### *The Office*

The ticking of the mantel clock was suddenly entirely too loud in the silence, with only the crackling and popping of the fire for competition. Richard waited, watching his cousin’s face. Darcy’s eyes were wide with shock and upset, mouth pursed and face pale. Richard could well imagine the grimness settled over his own visage.

“Dear God,” Darcy murmured, breaking the silence.

Richard blew out a breath and gazed compassionately at Darcy’s anguished countenance. “I know.”

“Dear God on High,” Darcy repeated, and his voice was suddenly hoarse with anger and grief, “how could my brother, my own brother, do such a thing to an innocent maid and to his own *wife*?”

“He was a lecher, a glutton, and apparently at times, a violent drunkard,” Richard said. “I am sorry.”

“I am sorry too,” Darcy replied, rubbing his forehead with one unquiet hand. “Thank God that Anne and the child were not harmed, or the maid.”

“You are not angry at Anne?” Richard asked carefully.

“Angry?” Darcy repeated, turning his head to stare up into his cousin’s face. “I am so thankful, so proud, so *impressed* that she was brave enough to help the girl. There is far more to Anne than I realized.”

“I agree,” Richard said and then wagged a finger at Darcy. “But do not imagine that you can now step in and marry Anne. She is engaged to *me*.”

Darcy managed a slight smile at this attempt at humor, and he stood up and walked over to join the colonel. “I believe you and Anne will be happy together, and while you do not need it, of course, you have my blessing.”

“Thank you,” Richard replied, and took a sip of brandy before continuing, “Are you angry at me for telling you the truth about Lawrence’s death?”

“Of course not! Why would I be?”

“Well, I think some men would be. It would have been easier if you had gone to your grave thinking that Lawrence’s death was but a tragic accident.”

“And it *was* an accident, brought on by my brother’s despicable actions toward an innocent servant girl. I am glad to know the truth, no matter how much it pains me. I need to be certain that no other woman here at Pemberley was attacked by Lawrence in the past, and I will also need to be very certain that all is well at Darcy House in London.”

Richard grimaced and said, “I think it more likely that there will be trouble at Darcy House, actually. I do not pretend to know Mrs. Reynolds well, but I do not think she would stay silent if she knew that her master was attacking servant girls.”

“She would not, but perhaps she merely did not know?”

“I think it more likely that Lawrence was more drunk, more angry, and more tired than usual, and behaved uncharacteristically.”

“I hope you are right,” Darcy replied and wandered over to the window to stare outside.

It was a cheerful scene that met his eyes; the sun shining brightly down to slowly dry up the loathsome mud, servants and tenants from the closer farms scurrying around busy as ants in the welcome warmth and light. The industrious vigor and cheer of the scene was so incongruous to his own turmoil that watching felt vaguely surreal.

“Who knows the truth?” Darcy asked, turning away from the window to face his cousin.

“Anne, of course, and the two maids involved in the attack, Mr. Sievert, the rector here at Pemberley, me, you, and Miss Bennet.”

Darcy choked and his eyes flared wide. “Miss *Bennet* knows?”

“Yes, because she came across Anne weeping bitterly two days ago in the early morning. Anne has been struggling to forgive herself for Lawrence’s death, and Miss Bennet was a great comfort. It was she who suggested that Anne speak to Mr. Sievert, who assured my fiancée that she was entirely innocent of your brother’s death.”

Richard frowned at the stricken look on Darcy’s face and said, “I am certain Miss Bennet can be trusted to keep this dreadful affair a secret.”

“Oh, I am too, Richard. There are few people on whose secrecy I can more confidently depend, but at the same time

there is no one whose knowledge of a brother's villainy distresses me more."

Richard blinked. "You care for Miss Bennet very much, then?"

"I do," Darcy admitted, and he ran both hands down his face. "But she is poor, and in any case, would she marry a man whose brother tried to rape a maidservant?"

"You are not your brother," Richard said sternly, "and Miss Bennet is an intelligent woman. I am confident she does not hold your brother's sins against you."

"I hope you are right," Darcy said and then, at the quirk of the other man's eyebrows, said, "Even if I cannot marry her, I at least wish for Miss Bennet to think well of me."

## Chapter 32

### *The Dining Room*

### *A Few Hours Later*

Richard Fitzwilliam nodded cordially to his aunt next to him as he sat down. His cousin Georgiana was seated across from him, looking nervously down at her plate, with the Earl of Matlock at the nearest end of the table. He caught Miss Bennet's eye, where she sat beside Georgiana, and smiled.

Elizabeth smiled back before surveying the table. They were in the small dining room again, as Darcy still wished to ease the burden of the servants as much as he could. Partridges and pheasants sat among potatoes and asparagus and white soup. The birds had been shot earlier by servants; Darcy had no time for such leisurely pursuits as hunting.

Elizabeth cast a surreptitious glance around the table. Mr. Darcy, at the head of the table, looked stressed and preoccupied; Lady Catherine, across from Elizabeth herself, looked huffy and irritable. Richard Fitzwilliam was watching everyone keenly, and at the other end of the table, the Earl simply looked tired.

Beside her, Georgiana was staring at the dishes set before her and avoided looking at the other diners. Elizabeth glanced once more at Lady Catherine's forbidding mien and braced herself to protect her gentle friend from the lady's vituperative mood. She was more than a little bit startled when Lady Catherine addressed her quite civilly.

"Miss Bennet, I hope you are enjoying your time here at Pemberley?"

Elizabeth swallowed a bite of potatoes and said, "I am very much, Lady Catherine. It is a beautiful place, and even in

the midst of grief and difficulty, the company has been delightful.”

“I am certain that my niece is very grateful having you here,” Lady Catherine said, her gracious tone belied by the pinching of her lips.

Georgiana lifted her face from her plate and said, rather breathlessly, “Yes, I find Elizabeth’s presence a great comfort.”

“I fear you do not find Derbyshire at its best,” Lady Catherine continued, “though perhaps if you stay long enough, you will experience early spring, which is beautiful.”

“Oh, I will not be able to stay that long, Madame,” Elizabeth replied. “My sisters Jane and Mary intend to marry in January, and I must return to Hertfordshire before that.”

“Are they indeed?” Lady Catherine remarked, and relaxed noticeably. “I quite approve – there is no reason to delay weddings and Mr. Collins needs to install his wife at Hunsford as soon as possible. He is a very good sort of man, Mr. Collins, but the parsonage and the parishioners need the benefit of a woman’s touch, do you not agree?”

“I do,” Elizabeth replied, a bite of beetroot waiting patiently on her fork. She was not certain whether she would be able to eat if Lady Catherine kept bombarding her with questions, but she would delay eating if it helped shield Georgiana.

To her relief, the lady now turned her attention on Darcy and said, “Nephew, I have some questions about your estate in Leicestershire. I understand that it was not in a good state when you inherited it?”

“That is correct,” Darcy agreed, eyeing his aunt warily.

“What kind of changes have you made in the last years since you inherited Bellhaven?”

Elizabeth placed her fork in her mouth and chewed, relishing the flavor, and then, confident that Lady Catherine

was engaged, turned to Georgiana and said, “This pickled beetroot is wonderful.”

Georgiana shuddered dramatically and said, “Oh, I hate beetroot. I cannot bear the taste!”

“My poor friend, you are missing so much!” Elizabeth returned with a grin, and took another bite of the red root vegetable.

“I do not think so!” the girl replied with a chuckle. “The only thing I admire about beetroot is the color. It is a lovely reddish purple.”

“It is. I wonder if one could use it to dye cloth or something.”

“Perhaps?” the younger woman said doubtfully. “Though I hate beetroot so much that I would not even wish to wear a garment if I knew it had been in contact with it.”

“Beeroot is better than snails, at least,” Lord Matlock commented, surprising both ladies, who turned toward him.

“Snails, sir?” Elizabeth asked in confusion.

“Yes, back in Biblical times, purple dye was extracted from a kind of snail, and was more valuable than gold!”

Georgiana’s eyes widened a little and she said, “Snails? As in sea creatures?”

“Yes,” the earl continued. “That is why purple was long considered the color for royalty, as only the very wealthiest in the land could afford it.”

“I wonder what dye is used to make the redcoats for the army,” Richard remarked. “Whatever is used, it must not be terribly expensive, as there are so many of us.”

“I believe it is obtained from madder plants,” the earl remarked.

The conversation about dyes continued and branched out to Indian sprigged and striped muslins, with Elizabeth contributing substantially to the conversation, as her uncle

Gardiner was a tradesman with ties to the East. The conversation was lively and interesting, and Elizabeth listened only occasionally at Darcy and Lady Catherine, who were discussing, or perhaps debating, the best way to manage an estate. She was not surprised to hear Mr. Darcy arguing in favor of the newest agricultural systems, and for Lady Catherine to insist that old fashioned methods were for the best.

It was obvious that Mr. Darcy was well read on the subject, and equally obvious that he would not be overborne by his autocratic aunt.

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### *Anne's Bedchamber*

#### *Two Hours Later*

Anne sighed in contentment, leaning back on the plush cushion of the couch as Helena nursed at her breast. The room was dim, lit only by the fire at her side, and Anne relished the peace. Helena snuffled a bit and Anne looked down, watching the tiny hand clutch and splay and curl up again. She took a moment to stroke her own fingertip tenderly down the baby's minuscule fingers, wondering at the massive difference in size.

A crack of light from the door drew her attention, and her heart sank as her mother marched into the room. Lady Catherine's brow was knit and her eyes were stormy with perturbation, and Anne miserably braced herself for confrontation. Instead, Lady Catherine sank down onto a chair nearby, glanced briefly at her daughter and the baby, and then gazed gloomily into the fire.

A few more minutes passed in silence before Helena's rosebud lips fell slack and her head lolled. Molly, hovering in the shadows beside the fireplace, hurried forward to take



Helena tenderly into her arms, cradling the small downy head on her shoulder. Anne pulled up her dressing gown and melted back against the back cushion of the couch with a deep sigh, exhaustion creeping over her.

“She is a beautiful child, Anne,” Lady Catherine said, watching the maid carry the baby away.

“She is,” Anne agreed, and yawned discreetly behind her hand. To her surprise, this did not bring down a tirade of indignation from her mother, who usually scolded her for yawning in front of her.

“You must be exhausted,” Lady Catherine continued, which startled Anne even more. “I will not keep you from your bed, but I merely wanted to... well, I had a long talk with Darcy at dinner this evening and I think that ... that you should give up any idea of marrying him.”

Anne gaped in astonishment and then coughed a few times to allow herself time to think. “You do *not* wish for me to marry Darcy?”

“No,” her mother replied, her restless fingers fidgeting with her fan. “Not, of course, that you *could* wed him soon, as you must mourn at least a full year before you marry again.”

“Of course,” Anne agreed, her mind working busily. What had caused this remarkable change in her mother’s attitude toward Fitzwilliam Darcy?

“He has a great many newfangled notions about estates and tenants and the like,” Lady Catherine said suddenly, her brow now furrowed with indignation. “It is quite absurd, and nonsensical, and foolish! He is not even thirty years of age, and hardly knows more than *I* do about Rosings! I fear he would do a great deal of harm if he were master of the estate.”

Anne battled a chuckle and managed to turn it into another cough before saying, “Yes, and I suppose he does not really know much about Kent, either. Bellhaven and Pemberley are both a long way north of Kent, after all.”

“Yes, quite! And yet the boy argued with me, and debated with me, and told me that I was wrong, and my steward is too old, and any number of things. It was quite shocking for a young man to speak in such a way to me, his aunt!”

Anne yawned again, openly this time, and was pleased when her mother stood up and said, “Really, Anne, you must go to bed at once! If you insist on suckling your own child, not that I approve of it, mind, but if you do, you had best sleep when the baby sleeps!”

Anne nodded at Matilda, who had been hovering nearby, and smiled drowsily. “I do wish to sleep. I hope you also sleep well, Mother.”

“I hope I do as well, though I probably will not,” Lady Catherine said, standing up and stalking toward the door before turning back to say, “Now do not despair, Anne. I will find you a much better husband than Darcy, though not for a year, so there is not any great hurry. However, I intend to leave Pemberley directly after Christmas and hurry home, and I can begin searching for the appropriate bridegroom.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Anne said, and was thankful when her Lady Catherine made her final departure, and Matilda closed the door behind her.

Rather to her own surprise, she burst into giggles when Matilda turned around, which provoked a grim smile on the maid’s face.

“She will be surprised when you marry the colonel,” Matilda said softly. “Now let us get you between sheets, Madame.”

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*Breakfast Parlor*

*Pemberley*

*The Next Morning*

Elizabeth took a sip of coffee and looked down at the letter in her hand.

*Longbourn*

*4<sup>th</sup> December, 1811*

*Dearest Lizzy,*

*Mary and Mr. Collins plan to marry on 9th January in the new year, and Charles and I plan to marry two weeks after that, on 23rd January. Mary maintains that she does not mind too much if you are not here for her wedding, but truly, I think she does care. It is, of course, your decision as to whether to come home by then. Moreover, if the weather is too bad, you may well be unable to journey south.*

*I do hope and pray you are able to arrive by my wedding, dear one. I would be most unhappy to wed my darling Charles without the presence of my dearest sister.*

*But enough of that. As you well know, the militia is still settled here, and Lydia and Kitty..."*

“Good morning, Elizabeth!” a voice cried out. Elizabeth set down her letter and looked up to see Georgiana standing at the entrance to the dining parlor. The girl’s eyes fell on the paper, and she said quickly, “I am so sorry for interrupting you. I did not realize that you had a letter.”

“It is entirely all right, I assure you,” Elizabeth replied, picking up a piece of toast. “Do come in and eat. It looks pleasant outside today, does it not?”

“It does, and my brother told me last night that he would like to inspect the conservatory today, and wondered if

you and I would like to go with him.”

“You have a conservatory?” Elizabeth asked in surprise.

“We do,” Georgiana said with a smile. “It is connected to the guest wing of the mansion. It is on the other side of the house from the stables and kennels, and you cannot see it from your bedchamber. My brother has been so busy he has not yet inspected it, and indeed it may be in dreadful condition, but I do have fond memories of it. Oh, I hope it is not too bad!”

“If it is, the first step is to determine what is lacking,” Elizabeth said practically.

“That is true. I hope you will come, then?”

“I would not miss it!”

## Chapter 33

### *The Conservatory*

#### *Pemberley*

Elizabeth looked about curiously as Darcy opened a side door into the conservatory. A wash of warm damp air flowed out to meet them as they all stepped inside, before Darcy hastily shut the door to preserve heat. Georgiana stifled a yelp as she strayed too close to a bright green plant that seemed to be made entirely of spikes. Elizabeth eyed it in some astonishment and asked, “What is *that*?”

“A pineapple plant,” Georgiana said ruefully, as she bent to rub the tender spot. “I hope I did not poke a hole in my dress!”

“It would seem pineapples continue to bear a grudge against you, Sister,” Mr. Darcy teased, his eyes lightening in a smile, and Georgiana flushed.

“I very much was not expecting the taste the first time I ate pineapple,” she explained to Elizabeth, who was looking on curiously.

“She cried out, ‘Oh! It is biting me!’” Darcy recounted, eyes twinkling.

Elizabeth politely smothered laughter, but could not resist a smile of her own.

“You are not fond of pineapples then?” she asked Georgiana.

“I am now, on those very rare occasions when I have the pleasure of tasting them,” Georgiana said merrily. “But perhaps they are not equally fond of me!”

Elizabeth put her handkerchief up to her nose, now aware of a strange smell in the room. Darcy chuckled and said,

“I suggest we move into the main portion of the building to get away from the noxious odors.”

He walked to the end of the small room and opened a door, and the ladies quickly followed him out into the main portion of the building, where the air was a trifle cooler and a great deal cleaner.

“What was that smell?” Elizabeth asked, casting a glance toward the pinery.

“Tan pits,” Georgiana explained. “The young pineapples require a constant temperature for many months, so they are placed in pits which include, among other things, manure. It ferments slowly and produces the steady heat, but it does not smell the best. It is worth it though.”

“I confess that I have never tasted pineapple,” Elizabeth remarked, looking around with interest. Slender trees reached up towards the sloping glass ceiling, half-leafless branches drooping in graceful repose.

“If you ever get the chance, do so,” Georgiana said eagerly, and together the two girls followed Darcy further down a path paved with white gravel.

“It would seem Lawrence kept the conservatory in good condition,” he remarked, examining the orange tree beside him. “I am not too surprised, actually, as he was very fond of fruit.”

“I am glad that he did,” Georgiana remarked, pausing to lay one hand on the bark of a pear tree.

Elizabeth halted further along the path, where another crossed it. Space had been cleared around this intersection and a small pool, fed by a pipe from an outside stream, bubbled in the middle, providing humidity to the plants. Darcy watched her for a moment before turning to look at his sister.

“Georgiana,” he said, “would you mind if I spoke privately to our guest for a few minutes?”

Georgiana looked surprised, then delighted, and said, “I will go ... erm, look at the orange trees again!”

She scampered away quickly toward the southern side of the conservatory, and Elizabeth turned a puzzled, blushing look on her handsome companion.

“I apologize for making you uncomfortable in any way, Miss Bennet,” Darcy said softly, “but I wished to thank you for comforting my cousin Anne when she was in such distress.”

Elizabeth suppressed a gasp of surprise, and said carefully, “I was very pleased to comfort her, as she has had a difficult time of late.”

“Yes,” Darcy agreed, and he turned to look out the great glass windows toward the icy fields to the north. He breathed in and out and then said, “I promise you that I had no thought, no idea, not even the wildest speculation, that my brother could be so evil as to attack an innocent servant girl.”

Elizabeth relaxed a little; it seemed that Anne had spoken openly to Mr. Darcy, and that the gentleman’s sympathies were entirely with Anne and the servants.

“You are not your brother’s keeper, sir,” she said gravely, her own eyes now fixed on a large pond shimmering in the distance. “Indeed, I understand from Georgiana that you were not in company with Mr. Lawrence Darcy often these last years.”

“Yes, we were on very poor terms. In retrospect, perhaps I ought to have tried to be more involved here at Pemberley, but I did not wish for Georgiana to be exposed to the licentious behavior of my brother and his cronies.”

“You had no power at Pemberley until your brother died,” Elizabeth declared. “You ought not to blame yourself for doing your duty, which was to care for Georgiana and oversee Bellhaven.”

Darcy sighed deeply and said, “I know you are right, but it disgusts and revolts me that my brother...”

He trailed off and Elizabeth felt a sudden, strong urge to take the gentleman's gloved hands in her own. That was, of course, entirely inappropriate, and she felt her cheeks warm at the thought.

"Miss Bennet," Darcy said, turning abruptly towards her, "I have long known that I am awkward in company, and I have difficulty conveying my thoughts clearly without being rude. I confess to being very nervous about trying to express what is in my heart."

Elizabeth pivoted to face him and lifted her eyes to meet his. "Mr. Darcy, I prefer honest speech to evasive remarks."

Darcy nodded, gulped, straightened his broad shoulders, and said, "Miss Bennet, I think that I may be in love with you, but even if I *am* in love with you, I am not certain whether I ought to marry you."

Elizabeth stared at Darcy in wonder, torn between an inclination to chuckle and cry. There were so many emotions fighting for supremacy right now; anxiety, attraction, love, fear, and shades of resentment.

"Thank you, sir," she finally managed to say. "I appreciate your willingness to speak truthfully. I certainly understand your uncertainty as to whether you love me; we have only known one another for two months, after all. May I inquire as to why you are reluctant to make an offer regardless of your feelings towards me?"

Darcy groaned and turned back toward the window, his gaze now fixed on a small stone cottage in the distance, whose thatched roof was noticeably collapsed on one side.

"My brother left Pemberley in a dreadful state, financially and structurally," he said somberly.

"And you need to marry an heiress," Elizabeth said sorrowfully.

"Perhaps I do," Darcy said unhappily. "The earl certainly thinks so, and when I look out at the broken fences, and the sodden fields, and the dilapidated cottages, I wonder if



he is right. But Miss Bennet, I do not ... I do not wish to marry for money. I wish to marry a beautiful, bright, intelligent, kind woman from Hertfordshire..."

His eyes were blazing ardently now, and he reached forward impetuously to take her hands in his own. "I *am* in love with you, Miss Bennet. I am. But I do not know ... I am in such wretched indecision over whether to follow my duty or my heart!"

Elizabeth felt her breath quicken and her heart beat faster at the passion in that deep voice, and she found her gaze drifting down to fix on the gentleman's lips. What it would be like to embrace Mr. Darcy? To feel those strong arms around her? To kiss him? To run her hands along his lean cheeks?

"Mr. Darcy," she said softly, and deliberately withdrew her hands and took a step away. "I admire you very much as well. I have, indeed, wondered whether I am in love with you. But we have known one another for a mere two months, and during that time you have lost a brother, welcomed a niece, succeeded to the position of master of Pemberley, discovered that the estate has been neglected and abused, and learned that your brother was a villain. Too much has happened for you, and for me, to make any decisions at this juncture. There is no reason to rush anything, is there? You are in mourning and will be for some time yet. I must return to Hertfordshire in the next few weeks to attend my sisters' weddings. I am honored by your expression of admiration – I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your words, sir! But let us both pray for wisdom and refrain from making any commitments in haste."

He gazed down at her solemnly, and she thought she saw a hint of moisture in his dark eyes. A moment later, he said, with a shaky smile, "Who would have thought that I, long considered overly rational and sensible, would need to be reminded to wait on making vital decisions. You are entirely correct, of course. We have time – time to grow in our friendship, to learn about one another, and to seek God's will. For that matter, I still do not know the situation at Pemberley."

Perhaps the situation is not as dire as I currently believe it to be.”

“I pray that it is better than you think,” Elizabeth said.

“Thank you,” he replied, and heaved out a deep sigh. “We should join Georgiana, I believe.”

She nodded as he held out his arm to her and she, feeling shy, took it. They began walking down the path which led to the orange trees, where Georgiana was waiting in the sunlight which streamed through the great glass windows.

“You mentioned your sisters’ weddings,” Darcy remarked. “When are they to be married?”

“My sister Mary will wed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, and Jane two weeks later. So I will need to leave within the next few weeks in order to be home in time.”

“Oh Elizabeth, you are going home?” Georgiana cried out, having overheard these last words.

“I fear yes, Georgiana,” Elizabeth said and released Darcy’s arm in order to pull the younger girl into a hearty embrace. “My sisters are marrying shortly after the New Year, and I must be there. But I can stay for at least another two or three weeks. However, I must make arrangements to return to Longbourn; perhaps my father can send a...”

“We will arrange for you to return home,” Darcy interposed. “In fact, it is possible we will journey with you, as I have a great deal of business to do in London, and I need to inspect Darcy House.”

Georgiana’s obvious disappointment transformed to joy, and she beamed at her brother and said, “Oh, Fitzwilliam, I do hope we can return south with Elizabeth. That would be wonderful!”

## Chapter 34

*3rd January, 1812*

*On the Road to Longbourn*

Elizabeth leaned back comfortably on the plush seat of the Darcy carriage. Though the current Master of Pemberley lived with sensible frugality, there were some few luxuries left over from his predecessor. Lawrence Darcy had valued his own bodily comfort highly, and his carriage was one of the very best; well-sprung and even more well-padded.

The Darcys, Richard Fitzwilliam, and Elizabeth had departed Pemberley some three days prior. The weather had been blessedly mild, and the journey itself had so far gone entirely smoothly. Mr. Darcy had sent ahead to arrange lodgings at posting-houses along the roads; none of them fancy, such as the nobility would use, but Elizabeth had been well-content at each of them with their cleanliness and simple comforts.

She was a bit tired. All three nights, she and Georgiana had shared a room, and all three nights, they had been unable to resist staying up until quite late, whispering together and giggling until they had to muffle their faces in their pillows lest they wake those in the rooms around them. Elizabeth cast an affectionate glance at the girl on the seat beside her. She was so very fond of Georgiana Darcy.

She would be sad to not see the Darcys anymore, who would be proceeding on to London while she remained at Longbourn. Elizabeth had missed her father, and her sisters, and even her flighty mother, and she was overjoyed to be part of her two sisters' weddings. But she would miss talking to Georgiana every day. As for Mr. Darcy, she would greatly miss his intelligent conversation, his steady presence, and dry humor.

She acknowledged to herself that her attraction to Mr. Darcy had only flourished in the past weeks, along with her respect for the man as he worked to renew what had been lost at Pemberley. But sometimes, in the darkness of night, her thoughts would linger on Lawrence Darcy, a brutish lout of a man and a drunkard, and her heart would quail within her. Of course Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was not his brother, and indeed, had never shown himself as anything other than honorable and solicitous towards those around him, but she had not known him long, after all.

Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Darcy where he sat across from her looking out the window, and followed his gaze towards the landscape unrolling beyond them. The familiar, undulating fields of Hertfordshire unfolded before her eyes, looking bleak and drab under their brown winter grass, no blanketing white snow to cover the dead foliage and drooping sticks. Her mind traveled back to the wilder hills of Derbyshire, their harsh edges eased by small drifted mounds of snow.

There had been no more major storms during her stay, and for the week leading up to their departure, she and Georgiana and Mr. Darcy, often accompanied by Mr. Milton, had driven all over the estate bearing hampers of food and thick warm rugs to Pemberley's tenants who were in need of such assistance. At other times, she and Georgiana walked down to various ponds, with slivers of ice shivering in the water that flung back fairy-land reflections of a snowy winterland. On those occasions, it had been delightful to return to hot cocoa.

Many of the rooms in the house had been entirely closed off so that they would not need to be heated, saving fuel for the drawing room, a few sitting rooms, the kitchen, the small dining room, the servants' quarters, and the bedchambers in the family wing of the house. Elizabeth had noted that Pemberley was so huge that she did not feel confined at all in spite of much of the house being essentially uninhabitable in the winter cold.

Elizabeth would miss her time there, would miss the wilderness and beautiful paths and grounds of Pemberley. Her own homelands looked tame and uninteresting in comparison, and she hoped she did not find her old beloved trails stale.

Her eyes slid back to Mr. Darcy. He was looking at her, and he smiled as she returned his gaze. She smiled back, feeling just a hint of color touch her cheeks. She and Mr. Darcy had agreed not to speak of their feelings for one another, and she had spent many long hours in her bed praying for wisdom for both of them in navigating their attraction. Her feelings for him were only growing stronger, and she hoped that his would not fade either.

“Are you eager to return home, Miss Bennet?” Colonel Fitzwilliam asked, breaking the silence.

“I am,” she said, “though I am also a little sad. I have enjoyed my time with you all at Pemberley very much.”

“I will miss you,” Georgiana said, her lips drooping disconsolately.

“We will be at Netherfield in a little more than two weeks,” Darcy assured his sister. “I would not miss Bingley’s wedding to Miss Bennet for the world.”

“I am very glad of that,” Elizabeth said sincerely, finding herself blushing at the intent look in Darcy’s eyes. Flustered, she turned to Richard Fitzwilliam and asked, “Will you also be accompanying your cousins to Netherfield?”

“Sadly, I will not be able to do so,” the colonel replied. “I need to return to my regiment.”

“Oh Richard,” Georgiana said, a look of alarm on her face, “you will not be sent to the Peninsula, will you?”

The colonel hesitated, glanced at Darcy, who nodded, and then turned a beaming smile on his younger cousin. “No, I will not. The truth, my dear, is that I am selling out.”

“Can you afford to do that?” Georgiana blurted out, and then turned bright red as she looked down at the floor. “I am

sorry, that was incredibly rude.”

“It was not,” Richard assured her, reaching over to touch the girl’s hand. “I have some exciting news, though I ask both of you to keep it a secret for the time.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said quickly, and Georgiana, eyes wide, murmured her agreement.

“The truth,” Richard said, lowering his voice even though no one could possibly hear him from outside the vehicle, “is that our cousin Anne and I are engaged to be married, though Lady Catherine does not yet know it.”

“Many congratulations, Colonel!” Elizabeth said promptly, her eyes sparkling, while Georgiana, once she had fully comprehended the news, could not help crying, though her beaming smile showed that they were tears of joy.

“I am so happy!” the girl exclaimed. “I was so afraid that...”

Again, she trailed off with heightened color, and Darcy said, “That Lady Catherine would insist that Anne and I marry? Neither our cousin nor I wish to wed, and indeed, the Earl of Matlock managed to discourage our aunt from such a union anyway.”

“How?” Georgiana demanded, which pleased Elizabeth as she was too courteous to ask, but dearly wished to know.

Darcy chuckled and said, “He intimated that I would likely insist on overseeing Rosings directly and send our aunt to the Dower House, which alarmed Lady Catherine sufficiently that she told Anne that she ought to give up any idea of marrying me.”

“That was very clever,” Georgiana remarked, grinning in a rather unladylike way.

“Of course, when I marry Anne, I will become master of Rosings, and I fully intend to force our aunt to move into the Dower House,” Richard said, “but there is no need to tell

her now. We intend to wait until Anne's mourning is over before we wed."

"I think you will be happy together," Elizabeth said, and she meant it. She found that she was not terribly surprised at the news, as Anne had often spoken Richard's name with a particular gentleness, and Richard had often visited the lady in her sitting room. Richard would undoubtedly be a good stepfather to little Helena. It was a very good match.

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### *Drawing Room*

#### *Longbourn*

Elizabeth stepped into the drawing room, and her eyes searched eagerly. To her delight, the only person present was Jane, her favorite sister, who looked up at her entrance and beamed.

"Dear Lizzy!" the eldest Miss Bennet exclaimed, leaping to her feet and rushing over to embrace her sister. "Oh, how I have missed you!"

Elizabeth returned the hug with enthusiasm and then stepped back to regard her sister intently. "Oh Jane, you look marvelous!"

Miss Bennet did indeed look wonderful, with her blonde hair shining, her blue eyes sparkling, with her cheeks pink and her rosebud lips parted with happiness.

"I am truly happy, Lizzy," Jane said, her eyes now brimming with tears. "Charles is so wonderful, and I can barely believe that I will soon be his wife."

Elizabeth smiled lovingly at her favorite sister, even as a trickle of worry stirred within her. Jane and Charles Bingley had only known one another for a few months, after all...

“Elizabeth!” a deep voice called out, and she turned as her father hurried into the room, his usually sardonic expression replaced by genuine pleasure.

“Good morning, Father,” she said, stepping into his arms. “I am so glad to see you again.”

“And I am glad to see you too, my Lizzy,” her father remarked, releasing her in order to step back and study her face. What he saw obviously pleased him, because he said, “You look very well, my dear.”

“I am well,” Elizabeth assured him, and then turned as her mother and three younger sisters entered, all crying out their own greetings. The subsequent conversation was noisy and complicated, as Mrs. Bennet asked about the roads and eligible men at Pemberley, Lydia spoke of the handsome militia officers, and Kitty piped in occasionally about an upcoming ball in Meryton. Jane, Mary, and Mr. Bennet, none of them desirous of competing with the tumult, retreated out of the room. Elizabeth did not mind; she would have time this evening to speak with each of her sisters, and she looked forward to an early visit to the library in the morning.

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### *Elizabeth's bedchamber*

*Later*

Elizabeth settled onto the old familiar chair as she looked around her bedchamber. It had not changed at all since her departure – even the book she had been reading was left on her nightstand – though there was not a speck of dust to be seen and the bed linens were fresh and crisp.

Elizabeth knew that she had changed, though. Her heart had been captured by a fine and upstanding gentleman, while her mind reeled with the cruelty of her love's depraved



brother. She had long been aware of her own father's indolence towards his estate and his family, but now she realized how much worse it could be. Thomas Bennet was not a heartless man, though he was often sardonic, and often shamefully indolent. However, he did not force his tenants to suffer in privation for his own comfort, and he had not allowed his estate to fall into insolvency. He certainly did not hit his wife or daughters, nor did he behave barbarically towards the maids and other servants.

A log shifted in the fireplace, sending a flurry of sparks upwards and a wash of heat into the room. Elizabeth looked over gratefully, basking in the warmth. She had become accustomed, at Pemberley, to being a little chilled. But there was no need at Longbourn to ration wood or coal for the sake of freezing tenants or frugality, and she relished the wonderful heat.

There was a gentle tap on the door, and Elizabeth called a welcome. Somewhat to her surprise, her visitor was not Jane, but Mary.

“Elizabeth? May I come in, or are you too tired?”

“I am not tired at all yet. Do come in, my dear, and sit with me by the fire!” Elizabeth replied, gesturing for Mary to take her place on one of the chairs set by the crackling flames.

Mary did so, and Elizabeth took her time sitting down, her keen gaze noting that Mary had gained a few needed pounds in the last weeks, and that her skin was a healthy pink instead of a dreary sallow. Her dark hair was now dressed in a flattering style, and her lips seemed inclined to curl upwards naturally.

“You look happy, Mary,” she said.

“I am very happy, Lizzy. I know you will not understand that when you meet William. He is not very clever and can be rather a bore, but he has a kind heart and will treat me well. And oh Elizabeth, I cannot tell you...”

Here Mary's voice halted for a moment, and she hastily wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her dress before continuing, "I have always been Mamma's least favorite daughter because I am not beautiful. Now I will be Mrs. Collins, and when Father dies, Mamma will be able to continue living here at Longbourn. She is so grateful – you cannot imagine how much!"

Elizabeth smiled and reached over to pat her sister's arm. "Then I am happy for you."

"I do feel guilty sometimes," Mary confessed, turning to face the fire and holding out her hands towards the warmth. "I know that Mr. Collins would have preferred to marry you over me. You are far more clever and handsome than I am."

"No, he would not have wanted me as a wife, because Lady Catherine already does not like me very much, and she would like me less if I were installed in the parsonage."

"Oh Lizzy, is she dreadful?" Mary asked fearfully.

Elizabeth laughed and shook her head. "No, she is not. She is autocratic and overbearing, but she is not vicious. Furthermore, you are far more serious, and far less impertinent, than I am, and I am certain that she will approve of you. I will give you some ideas about how to manage her, but first, I do have a question."

"Yes?"

"You said that Mr. Collins is kind. How do you know that?"

Mary wrinkled her brow at this question and pondered for a moment before saying, "Do you remember Cocoa?"

"The stable cat?"

"Yes. She had kittens while you were gone, five of them, and one was a runt. Mr. Collins likes cats very much, and he was particularly concerned about the little gray. He kept going out to the stables to check on the gray kitten, and

even made sure that the kitten was eating properly until he had to leave for Kent. Is that not kind?”

Elizabeth considered this, smiled, and said, “It is, and also charming. I like cats too.”

“So do I,” Mary said and blushed. “We have been corresponding regularly since his departure, and we have agreed to bring the kitten, whose name is Beatrice, to Hunsford with us. Mr. Collins says that the kitten will be a comforting reminder of home for me.”

“That is kind,” Elizabeth agreed.



## Chapter 35

*Darcy House*

*London*

The light from the main thoroughfares did not reach all the way down the street to Darcy House, which sat shrouded in darkness, the moon veiled behind layers of clouds. Darcy squinted at the mansion as the carriage rolled to a stop and the footman leapt down from the coachman's seat to open the door.

Darcy was glad that they had not stopped at Netherfield after leaving Miss Bennet at Longbourn. Dusk had already been falling when they arrived in London, whereupon they had journeyed directly to Matlock house. After a very congenial dinner, they had left Georgiana with her female cousins and Lady Matlock, while Darcy and Richard had set out through the gloaming to Darcy House.

Now he observed the front of the house as he alighted and waited for Richard to join him. The knocker had been removed from the door, of course, without the master in residence. But though he could not tell well in the dark, he did not think there was any black crepe hung anywhere about the premises, indicating that the house was in mourning, which did not bode well of the diligence of the servants.

Richard stepped up beside him, looking up at the house. "Well, cousin?"

Darcy proceeded up the steps without another word, lifting his cane and using the head to hammer on the great doors. There was only silence from within the house as he and Richard waited, and after a minute, he lifted his cane to knock even harder.

Finally the door opened a crack, edged around with wavering candlelight. A maid, who might have been comely were she not so disheveled and unbathed, peeked out at them through the gap. “We ain’t accepting visitors,” she snapped. “Mr. Darcy ain’t here.”

“I am Mr. Darcy,” Darcy said dryly. “Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, heir to my brother Lawrence who has passed away.”

The maid’s eyes widened, and she leapt back, jerking the door wide open. “Mr. Darcy, sir!” she gasped, flustered, and her eyes jumped to Richard and back again. She hastily set down the candle on a nearby table as the gentlemen stepped inside. “We weren’t expecting you – I’ll go get Mr. Yount and Mrs. Wilbury at once!” She turned and scurried down the hall, slippers flapping loudly.

“I would not say this is promising,” Richard murmured.

“No,” Darcy agreed. “My brother replaced all the servants here in London within the last five years, so we will see how they comport themselves.”

A shuffling from down the dark hall drew the attention of both men. An older man and a woman hove into view, both visibly dismayed. The butler’s clothes were awry and his hair disheveled, as though a nightcap had just been removed. The housekeeper’s dress was garishly hued and her apron stained. They both halted in front of Darcy and Richard, bobbing nervous bows and curtseys.

Darcy listened to their stammered apologies and excuses patiently for some minutes before cutting across them.

“I understand that I will not find all in readiness when I neglect to send word ahead. Would it be possible for a room to be prepared for me for the night? And as my valet will not arrive until tomorrow, I will require the assistance of a footman tonight, as well.”

“Yes, yes, of course, Mr. Darcy,” the housekeeper stammered. “Will your companion need a bedchamber prepared as well?”

“No, I will be returning to Matlock House,” Richard remarked. “My mother, Lady Matlock, is eager to spend time with me.”

“Yes, sir,” the woman replied, lifting her hand nervously to her bonnet, which was still askew. “I will work on your chamber immediately, Mr. Darcy.”

“Would you care for some brandy or wine in the east sitting room, sirs?” the butler asked. “None of the main rooms had fires lit today, so they are all cold, but the sitting room warms up the most quickly.”

“Start the fire in the sitting room,” Darcy ordered, “while my cousin and I inspect the main and first floor of the mansion.”

“Yes, sir,” the butler said, his expression dark with worry. “I do hope you will not be too ... well, we are rather understaffed, sir, and...”

“Do not concern yourself, Mr. Yount,” Darcy said. “I am well aware that the house is not prepared for my arrival.”

“Thank you, sir,” the butler replied, and he retreated in haste.

“Well,” Darcy said softly, “shall we see how bad it is?”

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*Two Hours Later*

*The Sitting Room*

“What do you think?” Richard asked, pouring them both a measure of brandy and then holding one glass out to his cousin.

“It could be worse, much worse,” Darcy admitted, accepting the drink and sinking into a chair. “The house itself

is in much better repair than Pemberley, which is a blessing. Something must be done about all the dust though.”

“What of the furniture?” Richard asked as he also sat down and leaned back in his chair.

Darcy sighed deeply, thinking of the improperly placed Holland covers and the dusty mess he and Richard had found in half the rooms. “I hope it is all salvageable and simply in need of a deep cleaning.”

“Plainly Lawrence did not value industriousness in his servants, any more than he did in himself, and allowed them to slack,” Richard remarked cynically.

“It may well be that some of them will object to stricter duties,” Darcy agreed. “But perhaps not. I will give them a chance to prove their worth.”

Richard hummed acknowledgment and sat gazing into the fire and sipping his brandy.

Darcy yawned and said, “I believe I had better go upstairs before I fall asleep in my chair. It has been a long, fatiguing day.”

“And I had better return to Matlock House if I am to have any hope of speaking with my mother, who is very eager to speak to me about Anne.”

Darcy nodded and set aside his glass, forcing himself upright. He walked with Richard to the door, watching as his cousin collected hat and cane. “Thank you for coming, Richard. I will see you again soon.”

“Goodnight, Darcy.”

“Goodnight, Richard.” Darcy shut the door behind his cousin, smothered another yawn, and moved towards the stairs.

Firelight spilled out of an open door some ways down the upstairs corridor and Darcy entered and looked around. A massive fire blazed in the fireplace, the mantel hastily and thoroughly dusted, the opulent furniture equally clean. Darcy



eyed one of the heavily carved oriental tables with distaste before sighing and crossing towards the velvet-draped bed.

A manservant stood near the doorway, scarcely better attired than his superiors, but quiet and respectful as he assisted Darcy to undress. Darcy slipped into the bed, the linens unaired but clean, and relaxed onto the pillow. By the time the mantel clock struck midnight, he was fast asleep.

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*Longbourn*

*Midnight*

“Lizzy?”

“Jane!” Elizabeth exclaimed, “do come in!”

Jane hurried into Elizabeth’s bedchamber, shut the door behind her, and took her place next to her sister on a settee near the crackling fire.

“I do apologize for coming here so very late,” Jane said. “Mamma came into my chamber more than an hour ago to besiege me with questions about the wedding breakfast. Well, they were not truly questions; it is more that Mamma has her own ideas about what to serve, and I disagree, and she hopes that by haranguing me, I will change my mind. But she is wrong about that!”

Elizabeth arched one eyebrow in surprise. Jane was usually calm and serene, and it was odd to see her so upset.

“What does she wish to serve?” she asked.

“It is not what she wishes, exactly. The problem is that she wants my wedding breakfast to be far fancier than Mary’s, because Mary is wedding a clergyman and I am wedding a

rich man. I will not have it, Elizabeth! Mary deserves just as much celebration as I do!”

“She does,” her sister agreed, putting an arm out to embrace her sister. She understood now; Jane had a finely honed sense of honor, and she greatly disliked it when her mother treated her preferentially.

“In any case, I do not wish to speak of Mamma right now. Oh Lizzy, I am so happy about my upcoming marriage to Charles. If I could but see you as happy! If there were but such a man for you!”

A face appeared instantly in Elizabeth’s mind, that of a handsome gentleman with brown eyes, and dark hair which ruffled pleasingly in the wind.

She shook her head to clear it and said cheerfully, “I think that two weddings in the family are enough for now. Poor Mamma would go quite mad if yet another of us found a bridegroom in the near future!”

“There is some truth to that,” Jane agreed. “She is overjoyed, of course, but is also a mass of nerves over our dresses and the wedding breakfasts.”

“Are there plans to see Mr. Bingley tomorrow? I would like to congratulate him.”

“He and his sisters are currently in London, actually, but they plan to return home tomorrow. I intend to journey to Netherfield in the morning to look over the mistress’s suite before they return. Charles evicted Caroline from the suite a few days ago, and I would prefer to consider the current arrangement without her hovering over me irritably.”

“Poor Caroline,” Elizabeth said drily.

“She is quite tedious, really,” Jane said to her sister’s surprise. “I told you in a letter that both she and Louisa tried to convince Charles that I was only interested in his fortune, which was exasperating. Louisa has, to her credit, accepted me fully now that I am engaged to her brother, but Caroline still

makes snide comments about my lack of money, and my unfashionable clothes, and that sort of thing.”

Elizabeth heard a strange noise and realized that it was her teeth grinding together. “She had best not say such things when I am around.”

Jane laughed and said, “You need not concern yourself, Lizzy. Charles has said more than once that he will send Caroline away if she bothers me too much. He is very protective of me.”

“He loves you,” Elizabeth said gravely.

Jane’s expression grew soft and joyful and she said, “He does, and I adore him in return, so very much.”

The lady sighed happily and then shook herself. “But enough of me, Lizzy. Do tell me about your time at Pemberley. Your letters sounded cheerful. I hope it was a pleasant time for you?”

Elizabeth thought of the library, and the puppies, and the great snowstorm. She thought of Anne Darcy, and the knowledge of Lawrence Darcy’s perfidy. She thought of Georgiana and long walks. She thought of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and the intent look in his dark eyes as they stood across from one another in the conservatory.

“It do not think that pleasant truly describes it,” she mused. “There was good, and there was bad, and joy, and sorrow, and I know that my time at Pemberley has changed my life.”



## Chapter 36

### *The Library*

### *Longbourn*

Elizabeth wandered slowly around the library, her fingertips brushing the spines of the books as she passed. The room and its contents were intimately familiar to her given the many hours she had spent here reading, talking with her father, and engaging him in games of chess and backgammon.

She settled into a chair by the fire, her gaze continuing to drift across the room that had for so long felt like home to her. It still did, in many ways, and yet, she felt ... odd. Her time at Pemberley had changed her. Her understanding of the world and the people within it had been shaken and was now resettling into new patterns.

She missed, too, her companions and friends from her visit. Already she had turned to say something to Georgiana at her elbow, only to find that Georgiana was not there. But it was Mr. Darcy's absence which had created an ache in her heart that, rather than ebbing, seemed to grow stronger by the hour. She had been home for less than a full day, and yet she found herself eagerly anticipating the next time they would be in company together.

The opening door broke her from her thoughts, and she looked quickly over as her father entered the room, his face brightening as he saw her.

"Lizzy!" the master of Longbourn exclaimed. "My dear, I did not hope to find you here so early given that you were traveling these last days."

"I thought I might sleep in," Elizabeth agreed, standing up and hurrying over to embrace her father, "but I woke early, perhaps because I was so eager to spend time with you."

Her father returned the embrace and then guided her over to the fire, where they took seats across from one another.

“I have missed you very much,” her father remarked, leaning back against the padding of his wingbacked chair. “It has been rather a madhouse here at Longbourn, as you can well imagine, with Mary’s wedding in only a few days, and Jane two weeks later. Your mother is extremely excited, of course.”

“I am happy for both of my sisters,” Elizabeth said. “I spoke to both of them at length last night, and both are enthusiastic about their marriages.”

“Yes, I am pleased for both Jane and Mary. Mr. Bingley is a fine young man, and while Mr. Collins would have driven you insane, I think Mary will deal with him well. But enough of that, my dear. I know you wrote regularly of your time at Pemberley, but I would hear more. I understand it to be a most impressive estate.”

“It is, though Mr. Darcy’s elder brother was not a diligent man, and thus the mansion and the land are not in the best condition. But the library – oh Father, you would adore the library. It is at least four times bigger than this one.”

“Four times! Do you suppose Mr. Darcy might invite me to Pemberley some day?”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush as her mind filled with an image of herself and Mr. Darcy, walking down the aisle of the church at Meryton. If she was Mrs. Darcy, she would be able to invite her father to spend as much time in the Pemberley library as he wanted.

“You look quite conscious, my dear,” her father said, observing her keenly. “Is it possible that you have lost your heart to one of the gentlemen at Pemberley? Mr. Darcy, perhaps?”

Elizabeth felt a sudden urge to cry, but she swallowed hard and produced a smile. “I do admire Mr. Darcy very much, but I fear that he needs a wealthy bride.”

Mr. Bennet looked uncomfortable for a moment and then shook his head and said, “Do not distress yourself, Lizzy. If Mr. Darcy is worthy of you, he will desire you regardless of your lack of fortune. But enough of that; would you care to play a game of backgammon?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, forcing herself to speak cheerfully. “I would like that very much.”

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*The Mistress’s Suite*

*Netherfield Hall*

*A Few Hours Later*

Elizabeth looked around the bedchamber, fighting the desire to laugh heartily. The sensible wallpaper had not been changed in the last year, but all the textile furnishings had been done up in a vibrant and fashionable purple that very much did not suit Jane. Elizabeth could allow that it probably suited Miss Caroline Bingley, but beside the fairer Jane, it simply looked garish.

“At least it is better than the crimson in the sitting room,” Jane said from the doorway, and Elizabeth chuckled and said, “How poorly these colors suit you!”

“Indeed,” Jane agreed, wandering into the sitting room, with Elizabeth following. “But it is only that there is too much of them. I will change what is easier to replace. The curtains and bed drapes can go to a guest room, perhaps, and the doilies and cushions must be replaced. It would be absurdly extravagant to change the carpets, however.”

“Quite,” Elizabeth agreed, wandering over to study a scarlet runner across a side-table in the sitting room. Her mind flitted back to Pemberley and its disgraceful state. There were

so many necessary repairs to be done that anything cosmetic must necessarily be relegated to a later date. A section of her bedroom's peeling wallpaper had flopped dismally over during her stay, startling her considerably. Mr. Darcy had been embarrassed when he heard of it, but he simply could not afford to have it repapered at the time.

"You are fortunate, Jane," she remarked, moving on from the table to continue looking about the room.

"Netherfield has been well cared for, even *in absentia*. The tenants are prosperous and content, and the house has been well-maintained. I think you will be pleased to live here."

"I will be," Jane agreed, settling gracefully onto a settee. "It will be an adjustment, of course, but yes, I will be happy."

"I am glad," Elizabeth said simply, coming to sit across from her sister. The chair was designed more for looks than comfort, and she suspected that the next time she was in the room, a well-padded chair would be in its place.

"Speaking of adjustments," she said, "when do Mr. Bingley and his sisters return?"

"Any moment now, actually," Jane replied. "We are expecting them at some time this morning, at any rate, although I suppose it depends on how early they rose."

"The weather is fine for traveling," Elizabeth began, and then both women looked up as the door opened and Caroline Bingley stepped in, clad in a fur lined pelisse, with a bonnet well decorated with dyed goose feathers on her head.

"Jane, dear Jane!" Miss Bingley cried out. "How lovely to see you. And oh, if it is not Miss Elizabeth! I had not realized that you had returned from the wilds of the north!"

"I returned only yesterday," Elizabeth said, "but please, we will soon be sisters. Will you not call me Elizabeth?"

She managed to keep from smiling as Miss Bingley's eyes half closed in irritation, but the lady said, with rigid courtesy, "Of course. And you must call me Caroline."



“And I beg you to call me Louisa,” Mrs. Hurst remarked, stepping into the room behind her sister. She unwrapped and set aside her fur pelisse, displaying her neatly-cut tawny traveling dress beneath.

“Louisa, I hope you are well?” Elizabeth said, smiling at the older woman.

“I am very well,” Louisa replied. “It was a quick, easy journey from London, which is not always the case in winter.”

“That is true,” Jane said. “Now I know I am not yet mistress of Netherfield, but I am certain you are both worn and in need of some refreshment. Caroline, do you mind if I ask Mrs. Scofield to make tea?”

“Not at all,” Caroline said through gritted teeth. “Thank you, that would be delightful. I will change into something more suitable and join you in the drawing room in, perhaps, twenty minutes?”

“Pray do take your time,” Jane said solemnly.

Elizabeth waited for the two sisters to leave before saying softly, “Well done, Jane!”

“She needs to realize that I will be mistress of the estate soon,” Jane said, her beautiful eyes narrowed with determination. “But come, Lizzy; let us go downstairs and I will give the orders for tea. I cannot wait to see Charles again!”

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### *The Drawing Room*

“Jane!” Charles Bingley cried out, rushing into the room.

“Charles!” Jane replied, turning from the window and stepping boldly into his arms.

“I missed you, my darling,” Charles murmured into the lady’s ear, and Jane tightened her grasp on him and said softly, “I missed you very much too.”

Elizabeth, while she did not wish to stare, could not help but peek at the warmth on Charles’s face, and felt any lingering concerns melt away like mist in the noonday sun. Mr. Bingley was a good man, an honorable man, who adored Jane and would treat her well. Elizabeth was certain of it.

“Miss Elizabeth!” Charles said, pulling away from his bride to be and turning to face her. “I apologize for not greeting you immediately. I know you have been gone for some weeks.”

“That is quite all right, and I do believe you should call me Elizabeth. We will soon be brother and sister.”

“You are quite correct, of course, Elizabeth, and you must call me Charles.”

The door opened at this moment, and the servants entered with tea. Jane took her place next to the tea service and began pouring. A moment later, Charles took his cup from her with a word of thanks and sat down next to his Jane, while Elizabeth took her own cup and sat down on the chair across from the couple.

The door swung open once more, and Caroline entered, now dressed elaborately in a maroon silk dress with an ivory overdress, with Louisa, wearing a green woolen gown, trailing in her wake.

“Let me pour you some tea,” Jane said and gestured toward the two chairs nearest the fire, “and please do sit down and enjoy the heat. It is a cold day outside.”

“It is, but of course my brother’s carriage is, along with being well sprung, very well constructed. We did not suffer in the least, I assure you,” Caroline said brightly.

“That is excellent,” Jane replied, handing the cups to Bingley, who carried them over to his sisters before returning to his place.

“Elizabeth,” Louisa said before her sister could speak again, “how was your journey back from Derbyshire? I hope the roads were good?”

“Thankfully, they were. While I was at Pemberley, a terrible snowstorm hit and nearly a foot of snow fell. The roads were well nigh impassable for several days. I was very grateful to be safely inside at the time!”

“I have heard that Pemberley is a most impressive mansion,” Caroline remarked.

“Yes, it is,” Elizabeth agreed.

“Is it larger than Netherfield?”

“It is substantially larger; I think at least half again larger, and perhaps more.”

“Well, Mr. Darcy’s new nephew or niece is a very fortunate child,” Miss Bingley said.

Elizabeth frowned and Jane said, a trifle reproachfully, “The child, who is a little girl, lost her father only a short time before she was born. I do not think her fortunate, precisely.”

Caroline had the grace to color a little but said, “Well, yes, that is tragic, but little Miss Darcy will be mistress of both Pemberley and Rosings in Kent. That is why I said she was fortunate.”

“But she is not,” Elizabeth said, setting down her cup of tea. “Little Helena Darcy is heiress of Rosings, but Pemberley was entailed to the male line. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy is now master of Pemberley.”

A shocked silence fell until Caroline turned an outraged look on her brother. “Charles! Is that true?”

Bingley wrinkled his brow and said, “I do not ... if Miss Elizabeth says it is true, I am certain it is. It hardly matters,

does it?”

“Matters? Matters? Of course it matters! Your friend is now master of one of the greatest estates in the land, with an income of ten thousand pounds a year, and you say it does not matter?!”

“I suppose that is correct,” Bingley agreed, and smiled at Elizabeth. “I have been so overjoyed at my own good fortune in winning your sister that I have been neglecting my correspondence, though I am not certain Darcy has written recently.”

“He has been very busy with the estate,” Elizabeth said. “Naturally there is a great deal to be done given that his brother died unexpectedly.”

Caroline, who had been staring intently at a random wall, swung her attention to her brother and said sharply, “I do hope that you have invited him to your wedding, at least. He is your closest friend!”

“Oh yes,” Bingley said, and then his brow furrowed. “I did, of course, when I sent a letter about our engagement, but I am not certain that it was legible.”

Caroline’s face took on the charming hue of a plum, and Elizabeth interposed quickly, “I know that Mr. Darcy intends to be here for the wedding. He is currently in London at Darcy House inspecting it and has a great deal of business to conduct, but he assured me that he and his sister will be here for the wedding.”

“Darcy House?” Caroline asked faintly.

“Yes,” Elizabeth replied, gazing innocently at the woman who would soon be her sister by marriage. “Georgiana told me that it is Kensington, and is also included in the entailed property.”

“Well, I do hope that he and Georgiana are indeed able to be here for our wedding,” Jane said, pouring herself more tea. “The Darcys are such good friends of yours, Charles.”

“They are,” her fiancé agreed.

Elizabeth sedately sipped her tea and hid a smile. It was amusing to watch Miss Bingley come to grips with the wealth and influence of the man she had formerly considered beneath her notice.

## Chapter 37

*London*

*Several Days Later*

Mr. Caleb Harris, solicitor, served many wealthy and gentle clients, and his office was decorated in the luxury to which they were accustomed. Though his desk was solid, practical oak, it was also intricately carved across the front and legs and highly polished, thus reflecting the light of the roaring fire and myriad candles set about the room. Some half a dozen leather-upholstered chairs sat scattered around the room; the one nearest the desk was claimed by Mr. Darcy, who was bending over a stack of papers on the desk's shiny surface. Mr. Harris glanced out the window at the fat flakes of snow drifting down and moved one candelabra a bit closer to himself and his client.

"I have no intention of paying off Lawrence's gambling debts," Darcy announced abruptly.

Mr. Harris, who had been examining sums, lifted his head and said, "You have no legal requirement to do so, sir, though there will probably be significant pressure, especially from some of the larger creditors."

"If they were fool enough to accept Lawrence's vowels, that is on their own heads," Darcy said grimly. "I will not use funds which are needed for fixing cottage roofs and walls and fences to pay off my brother's dissolute friends."

Harris nodded and said, "I certainly agree with the wisdom of your decision; I merely wished to warn you that there may be some righteous indignation from those who believe that gaming debts are more important than anything else."

Darcy huffed and then turned his attention back to his papers, running his eyes up and down the final tally of assets and debts, and then decisively set the documents aside.

“It seems that I am not ruined, though money will be in short supply for at least a few years.”

Harris cast a surprised look at the younger man, hesitated, and then said, “I fear that your current assets do not match your brother’s debts at the moment. Are you planning to borrow money?”

“No,” Darcy said calmly. “I wish to rid myself of the debt, not to change its form. I will sell Bellhaven, and I also have three livings for which I can sell the next preferments. The Kympton living has quite a young rector, but the other two have elderly clergyman who will retire or pass on in a few years, so both are particularly valuable.”

Harris’s face had been growing longer and longer throughout this declaration, and he said, “Mr. Darcy, I think it would be a great pity to sell Bellhaven or the parish presentments. If God wills it, you will be blessed with a wife and many children, and given that your brother bequeathed Timbreline to Mr. Wickham, it would be beneficial if you kept Bellhaven for your second son.”

Darcy swallowed hard and, for at least the hundredth time since he had reached London, his mind’s eye pictured the lovely face and form of Miss Elizabeth Bennet. He had, of course, wondered if his attraction for the lady was but a passing fancy. The answer was obvious now. While his days were filled with business, his dreams were equally filled with the light and pleasing figure of the woman who had captured his heart.

“Ideally, yes,” Darcy said, suddenly aware that Harris was staring at him in confusion. “However, the reality is that if I can clear Pemberley of debt, with perhaps a few thousand pounds to put back into the land and her people, I will be content.”

The older man grimaced and asked, “May I ask a ... a delicate question, sir?”

Darcy lifted his eyebrows and nodded. “Certainly.”

“Forgive me for discussing your, erm, private business, but there have been rumors circulating that when the time of mourning is over for Mrs. Anne Darcy, you intend to marry her.”

Darcy shook his head and said, “Those rumors are incorrect. I am not marrying my cousin.”

“I see,” the solicitor remarked. “It would have been a rather unusual marriage, given that you are the widow’s brother, but I had hoped ... in any case, there are many wealthy ladies about town who would be pleased to marry the master of Pemberley. Obviously a substantial dowry would be of great help at a time like this.”

Darcy turned and gazed out of the window at the snowflakes dancing and swirling in the gentle breeze.

“Yes,” he agreed sorrowfully. “Yes, it would.”

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*The Office*

*Darcy House*

Darcy stared dully out the window, hands clasped behind his back, for once completely ignoring the stacks of papers on the desk behind him. The view of the tiny garden outside was not a cheering one, as the small layer of slushy gray snow did little to improve the dead brown of the grass and shrubs poking through.

The sight matched his mood almost exactly. He felt as bleakly desolate inside as the garden appeared. Lawrence’s



dissolution had left his affairs in a depressing shambles and picking up the pieces was wearisome and disheartening work. Nor was Darcy House the home that his country mansion was, even though Pemberley was but a shabby imitation of its former grandeur.

Part of his dull mood, he knew, was missing Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Her cheerful good nature had done much to brighten his and Georgiana's lives, her quick wit and ready smiles coaxing answering smiles out of them. He wished she were still with them, and he knew well from Georgiana's droopy, downcast demeanor that she did, too.

The door opened, and Darcy turned in surprise, which immediately transformed into pleasure.

"Richard, good morning," he said, striding forward to shake his cousin's hand. "What brings you here today?"

"I have good news," the other man said, returning the shake heartily and then wandering over to toast himself by the fire. "I have sold my commission, and with your permission, plan to travel back to Pemberley in a few days to be with Anne."

Darcy frowned and said, "Given that you are engaged, that is, perhaps, not entirely proper given that there is no chaperone at Pemberley."

"Our engagement is a secret as of now, and in any case, neither Anne nor I care a jot whether there is gossip about us. Anne needs support, and since you are engaged here in London, I will go to her."

Darcy glanced at the piles of papers on his desk and said reluctantly, "If you truly need me, I can..."

"I do not need you," Richard interrupted, taking his seat on a wingbacked chair, "and nor does Anne. You have enough troubles of your own without taking responsibility for my fiancé."

Darcy sat down across from his cousin and sighed. "You are correct that I have a great deal of business to transact."

“I know you saw Mr. Harris recently. How bad is it?” Richard asked bluntly.

“It is ... well, it depends a great deal on...,” Darcy stuttered and then, at the surprised look on the former colonel’s face, continued, “If I sell Bellhaven and the next preferments on three livings, I will be able to pay off all the debt my brother left, with at least a few thousand pounds left over. There are other things I can sell as well; some of Lawrence’s horses, of course, and a carriage or two. I do not mind that, but your uncle and my solicitor both think I should pursue an heiress as a wife so that I do not need to sell off Bellhaven and the livings. But...”

He trailed off and Richard leaned forward in his chair and said, “You love Miss Elizabeth Bennet and want to marry her, not a vapid heiress.”

Darcy felt his throat clog at these words, and he swallowed hard, coughed, and said, “Yes, I do, very much. I love her. I miss her.”

He paused and swallowed again, and then continued passionately. “I want to marry her, Richard. I want to marry Miss Bennet so very much. But my mind says that I owe it to my tenants, to Georgiana – it will take a great deal of scrimping and saving to have thirty thousand pounds set aside for her dowry by the time she is ready to marry. When I think of that, I believe that I must set aside this love, this passion, for Eliza ... for Miss Bennet and settle down with...”

“Some boring, tonnish, society woman with a fat dowry,” Richard finished drily.

“Yes.”

Richard stared at his cousin’s miserable countenance and then stood up, walked over to the brandy, poured two cups, handed one to Darcy, took a sip from his own glass, and said, “That is completely stupid, Cousin. You should marry Miss Bennet.”

Darcy's eyes lit up, and he turned quickly in his seat to stare at his cousin, sloshing his brandy out of his cup in the process. "You truly think so?"

"I am entirely certain," Richard declared. "Darcy, if you were in a position wherein you would lose Pemberley without an heiress for a wife, I might, reluctantly, admit that you should not marry Miss Bennet. It would not be fair to her or your children to be entirely destitute. But that is not the situation, and you know it. Yes, you will need to live a somewhat frugal life for a few years, but Pemberley's land is excellent, and your brother was only master for five years. There is much that is still in good heart from your father's time."

Darcy was rubbing his tan breeches with a handkerchief, attempting to soak up the brandy before it stained. He scrubbed for a full minute and then set the kerchief aside and looked up at Richard.

"You are telling me exactly what I want to hear," he said. "But I do not know, Richard. Surely it is my duty..."

"To be unhappy?" Richard demanded and snorted. "Darcy, I understand you very well, probably more than you understand yourself. Lawrence was an unpleasant, ungodly, lazy, unprincipled man from the age of fifteen. Given his character, or lack thereof, you were forced to take on heavier duties than you should have, especially regarding Georgiana. You have been accustomed to sacrificing for the sake of others, and thus you feel genuinely guilty at the thought of marrying for love, not money, given that the estate has been neglected."

Darcy considered this at some length, and then he said quietly, "You are correct, or course. But given that I am master of a great estate, with tenants, servants, my sister, and even the good people in Lambton all dependent on me, should I not marry sensibly?"

"Yes, and you *are* being sensible. Miss Elizabeth Bennet is not wealthy, but she is intelligent, charming, kindly,

and already a wonderful friend to Georgiana. You know that the servants like her and respect her. She would be a perfect mistress of Pemberley. Far better that than a woman who dislikes the country, who insists on lavish parties, and whom you do not love! There are many who do not need a particularly compatible wife, but you are not one of those men.”

“You truly believe that.”

“I do, with all my heart. Come, Cousin; look what happened when our esteemed Regent was forced to marry apart from his own inclination! His marriage to the Princess of Wales has been an utter disaster from the start!”

Darcy, who had been struggling to keep his passion for Miss Bennet locked away deep in his heart, suddenly felt a surge of longing, of desire, so strong, so pure, that he felt moisture gather in his eyes. “Thank you, Richard. I am most grateful for your wise advice.”

## Chapter 38

*Dining Room*

*Longbourn*

Elizabeth ate her food in quiet, delicate little bites, avoiding her father's sardonic eye, which she knew kept traveling back and forth between her and the guest at the table. It was difficult enough to keep a straight face as Mr. Collins, who had arrived at Longbourn some few hours earlier, spoke at great length from his spot next to Mary.

The variety of dishes on the table were proving far more interesting than their cousin's conversation. While at Pemberley, Elizabeth had rather missed her mother's perpetually well-set table, and with company staying, Mrs. Bennet insisted on an even greater spread than usual.

She took another small bite of roast beef and savored the flavor of it, briefly paying attention to Mr. Collins's inane monologue. He was, once again, expounding on the glories of Rosings, and she took a moment to observe him. Thomas Bennet had described him in a few short, waspish, but incredibly evocative sentences, and save for a more few inches in height than she had imagined, Elizabeth was wryly pleased to discover Mr. Collins to be almost identical to the image she had formed from her father's letters. He was a cheerfully garrulous man, with a fawning respect for Lady Catherine de Bourgh that bordered on worship and a tendency to discuss any subject at all and few of them with any expertise, and displayed a deeply impressive appetite. Even as she watched, he shoveled another bite into his mouth, chewed rapidly, swallowed, and resumed his discourse, in little more time than it would take her to pause for breath. He must, she thought humorously, be very impressive indeed behind a pulpit.

She returned to her meal, only to have her attention caught by her cousin some few moments later. Mr. Collins dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, turned a beaming smile on her, and said, "My dear Elizabeth, and I do hope that you do not take it amiss that I call you by your Christian name, as I will be joined in Holy Matrimony with your wonderful sister in but two days. I had the opportunity of speaking to my patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, whom you had the honor of meeting at Pemberley last year, and she told me of your friendship with Miss Darcy, which is a great privilege."

"Indeed it is very..." Elizabeth began, but had scarcely gotten the first words out before Mr. Collins started rattling on again. She shared an amused smile with her father and resumed her dinner, letting her mind wander from her cousin's speech.

Some six months ago, she would have found Mr. Collins intolerable and been unable to imagine a worse fate than marrying him. Now though, she was painfully aware that there were much worse fates than to marry a foolish but good-hearted man. She herself, should she marry Mr. Collins or his like, would atrophy from sheer boredom and annoyance. But Mary was of a very different temperament than Elizabeth, and Mr. Collins openly seemed admiring and affectionate towards his fiancée. It was quite likely that her sister would be contented, and even happy, in her marriage.

"My dear Mary, did I tell you that Lady Catherine has expressed her eagerness to meet you?" Mr. Collins asked, turning to his bride.

Since he had, in fact, mentioned this three times already, Elizabeth was impressed when Mary said patiently, "You did, William, and I am so looking forward to my introduction to our esteemed patroness. Pray tell me again about the glazing at Rosings?"

Elizabeth suppressed a smile as her future brother-in-law began expounding about the windows of Rosings, and then she turned her attention to her younger sisters, who were

seated on either side of Mrs. Bennet, who sat in her usual place at the foot of the table. Not surprisingly, Kitty and Lydia were speaking about the officers of the militia regiment currently stationed in Meryton. The three eldest Misses Bennet had long deprecated the behavior of their two youngest sisters; Lydia was headstrong, forward, and aggressively flirtatious, and Kitty, even though she was two years older than Lydia, always followed in her younger sister's antics.

Elizabeth had been anxious in the past, given that Lydia and Kitty were so bold, so indelicate in company, but now, listening to stories about the younger girls spending time with the officers at various parties and during encounters in the shops and streets of Meryton, she felt a twinge of genuine terror. She had always assumed that a gentleman would not take too great advantage of a lady, but she knew better now. What if one of the officers was like Lawrence Darcy; greedy, lascivious, and entirely focused on his own carnal desires?

And yet, there was little that she could do. Her mother, who had won Mr. Bennet by being flirtatious and forward, encouraged Lydia in her boldness. Her father, an indolent man, was content to laugh at his younger daughters instead of reining them in.

It frightened her. It frightened her very much.

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*Jane's Bedchamber*

*Longbourn*

A wash of navy blue fabric piled and tumbled over Elizabeth's lap, her needle, threaded with a lovely sky blue, dipping in and out swiftly. Mary's wedding dress was almost severely practical and plain, for she, as a parson's wife, would need sensible frocks that would not show stains. But Elizabeth

was determined that her younger sister would marry gowned in a beautiful garment, and had determinedly sat down to embroider the hem of the dress in lovely patterns.

Mary sat next to Elizabeth, her needles clacking with equal industry as she knitted a scarf for her betrothed. Across from Elizabeth, Jane sat beneath yards of pale off-white silk, which shone in the sun pouring through the window opposite of Elizabeth and Mary.

Elizabeth sat up straight and stretched out her back, which was aching. She was nearly done, which was a good thing, as Mary's wedding was less than a full day away. She blew out a breath and sighed and then bent over the dress again.

"Are you well, Elizabeth?" Mary asked in concern.

"Oh yes, of course. It is merely that my neck aches a bit, but I have almost completed my work."

Mary set down her knitting and twisted her head in order to see the hem of the dress. "Oh Lizzy, it is beautiful! I am most grateful for your kindness."

"I am very pleased to do it," Elizabeth said warmly. "You will be a beautiful bride."

Mary smiled, rather painfully, and said, "I will at least be less plain than usual, but truly it matters not; Mr. Collins likes my looks well enough."

"You *are* prettier now," Elizabeth remarked, considering her sister thoughtfully. "You have gained a little weight and you are smiling more. I like the way you are doing your hair, too."

Mary blushed and lifted her hand to her hair, which was up in a knot with a few casual curls cascading from it. In the past, Mary had always worn her hair in a tight bun, which was not nearly as attractive.

"You *are* attractive," Jane said firmly. "Mamma prefers blue eyes and blonde hair, so she tends to prefer my looks and



Lydia's to the rest of us, but you are pretty."

"Thank you," Mary said gratefully, "but truly it does not matter a great deal. I do not need to be beautiful to be a good mistress of the parsonage at Hunsford. But enough about me – Elizabeth, are you quite certain that you are well? You have seemed a little unhappy since you returned from Derbyshire."

Elizabeth turned her gaze back onto Mary's dress and said airily, "Oh, I am entirely well, I assure you!"

Silence fell for a full minute and when Elizabeth dared look up again, both Jane and Mary were staring at her, their work cast aside.

"What is it?" she demanded, a trifle truculently.

"We are worried about you, Lizzy," Jane said softly, her blue eyes filled with concern. "You have been noticeably quiet and somber, and that is very unlike you."

Elizabeth lifted her eyes to the ceiling and considered while her sisters waited patiently, and finally admitted, "I miss Mr. and Miss Darcy, and especially the gentleman. I like ... I admire Mr. Darcy very much."

"Oh!" Jane and Mary sighed together, and Jane, her eyes now filled with sympathetic tears, said, "Dear Lizzy, do you think he admires you at all?"

Elizabeth blew out a breath and forced herself to smile. "Yes, I know that he does admire me. However, his deceased brother left an enormous pile of debts, and everyone expects Mr. Darcy to marry a wealthy heiress. So you see..."

She trailed off and gulped miserably, and Mary cast aside the scarf and reached over to wrap her arms around her. "My dear Lizzy," she murmured. "I am so sorry."

Elizabeth accepted the embrace for a moment, and then gently pushed Mary away so that she could hunt for her handkerchief. She blew her nose and said, rather unsteadily, "There is no reason to talk about it, which is why I have not. But sisters, I am worried about Lydia and Kitty. Mr. Darcy's

older brother, Lawrence, was ... well, a very dissolute man with no honor. I hear our younger sisters going on and on about officers, and they seem to be meeting them everywhere, with little to no oversight! Do we know whether these men are virtuous? In the past, I would have assumed so, but..."

She trailed off as Mary lifted a hand, and Jane said, "Mary and I are equally concerned, I assure you. Father refuses to do anything, of course, and Mother encourages the girls in their volatile and vulgar behavior, but now that we are to be married, Mary and I are confident that we will be able to intervene and keep them, if not entirely safe, a good deal safer."

"Kitty is not as spoiled and heedless as Lydia," Mary said, picking up the thread of the conversation, "and I think will improve when she is separated from our youngest sister. Thus, she will be visiting us in Hunsford in the spring time and has agreed to stay for a long visit."

"And Mr. Collins is pleased with this plan?" Elizabeth asked cautiously.

"Oh yes! He fears that I will be bored and lonely as he works on sermons and the like, and has encouraged me to invite my sisters for company. Indeed, I hope that you will visit, Lizzy, if it is convenient."

"As for Lydia," Jane continued, "I intend to carry her off when Charles and I go to London for the Season. She will be far better off with us in London than here with the militia officers."

"And she agreed to this?" Elizabeth asked.

Jane laughed and said, "She did, of course, because she thinks that she will be going to balls and parties and the like. Once she is in Town, she will learn differently, but for now, she may imagine what she likes."

"That is very devious of you, Jane," Elizabeth said in surprise.

Jane's face turned pink, and she said, "Sensible, not devious, Lizzy. I have spoken to Father of our plans, and he has given us his blessing. He may be too lazy to take Lydia in hand, but he is, at least, aware of the deficiencies in her character."

"I see," Elizabeth replied, and turned her attention back to her work. It was painful to realize that her father, intelligent and observant, was so indifferent to his children that he would far rather shuffle them off elsewhere than rein in their aberrant behavior. It was ironic that Mr. Collins, foolish and sycophantic, was a better man than Mr. Bennet in that he was willing to take in a difficult sister-in-law.

## Chapter 39

### *Matlock House*

Darcy took a careful spoonful of white soup, grateful that the ladies seated to either side of him were, at the moment, distracted by their dining partners on their other sides. Both ladies were wealthy, young, single heiresses, and he knew the dining arrangements by his aunt Lady Matlock were no accident. The earl and his wife were determined to assist Darcy in finding a moneyed bride and had proven blithely indifferent to his mourning attire when they invited him to what they had termed ‘a small family affair’.

Almost the entire Matlock family was present, with the viscount, heir to the Matlock fortune, next to his father, and with Richard across the table between his sisters Rebekah and Rachel, while Lady Matlock sat at the foot. Some half a dozen other families were lined up along both sides, each one with an unmarried and well dowered daughter.

Conversation was polite and easy, and Darcy found it all deadly boring. There was none of the haughtiness or condescension or indifference to which he had become accustomed as the modest master of mere Bellhaven. But neither was there the cheerful banter, lighthearted teasing, and earnest conversation as provided by Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Only the same old tired polite phrases and carefully modulated laughter that conveyed no real meaning or amusement.

The food, at least, was wonderful. Darcy had acclimated, of late, to subsisting on very plain fare and sometimes not quite enough of it. But Lady Matlock’s dinner parties were neither cheap nor mean, and what Darcy found wearisome in the company was made up for by the excellence of the roast beef and roast vegetables and apple pies and savory soups. Candelabras marched up and down the snowy

linen and lace tablecloth, throwing their light across fine gilt-edged china and glittering silverware.

The lady to Darcy's right, a Miss Windeslow, turned and offered him some smiling inanity. Darcy returned a brief answer, just courteous enough not to be curt, and returned his attention to his soup, wishing once more that he had Miss Elizabeth's sparkling conversation here tonight. The party was certainly solidifying his resolve to offer for her, though he could only hope that, with her knowledge of his brother's heinous actions, she would accept him on his own merits.

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*Longbourn*

*9<sup>th</sup> January, 1812*

Elizabeth glanced around the drawing room where she presided over the drinks table, ready and waiting to offer coffee or tea to the myriad guests filling Longbourn. She could see through the open doors into the dining room, where the well-laden tables lined the walls. Mrs. Bennet, faced with the choice of making Jane's wedding breakfast simpler or Mary's more elaborate, had naturally opted to give her third daughter a very grand breakfast indeed.

The white tablecloths had almost vanished beneath dish after dish of ragout and beef roast and steaming hams and cakes and pies and ratafia cakes and biscuits and a gleaming silver bowl of oranges, all polished carefully by the cook's assistants that morning and arranged to best advantage within the bowl.

Elizabeth's attention was drawn by old Mrs. Long, approaching for more tea. The older lady chatted for a few minutes before being drawn into conversation with Lady

Lucas, leaving Elizabeth to provide coffee for some smiling militia-man whose name she could not recall.

The flow of the swelling crowd cut off her sight of the dining room, and instead she glanced across the drawing room to the couch where Mary and her new husband sat. Mary's face was bright, and her eyes sparkled, her joy plainly apparent. Beside her, Mr. Collins was beaming across his entire rotund face and speaking incessantly. Elizabeth found herself glad that the hum of the crowd between them prevented her from hearing more than snatches of his conversation. But even as she watched the new couple, Mr. Collins glanced over at his bride with open pride and affection, and said, Elizabeth thought, something about "My dear Mary."

The drawing room door opened, and Elizabeth glanced briefly over to see Jane entering, looking faintly perturbed, followed by Bingley. Elizabeth felt a twinge of concern, but Jane's face cleared as she watched, and the eldest Miss Bennet smiled graciously as Sir William Lucas stepped forward with booming joviality to greet the couple.

Bingley spent a moment in polite conversation before detaching himself and moving towards where Elizabeth sat. She smiled politely up at him and asked, "And what would you like to drink?"

"Coffee, please, with milk," he replied with his usual bright smile, and she poured a cup, leaning forward slightly to hand it to him.

"Elizabeth," Bingley said, accepting the cup of steaming coffee, "I am so pleased for Mary and Mr. Collins."

"I am as well. I think they are very well matched."

"I entirely agree. I will admit to a strong degree of envy this morning at church, along with a sense of bewilderment as to why Jane and I were not standing up there with them. I find myself quite irritated that we are waiting two more weeks before marrying!"

Elizabeth laughed and said, "I am certain the next two weeks will pass quickly, Charles."

"I hope so," her future brother-in-law said gloomily, and then he brightened and said, "Of course, one reason for the delay was that I hoped Darcy would be able to attend the wedding, and I received a letter this morning confirming that he and Miss Darcy will be coming a week from today."

Elizabeth felt her heartbeat quicken, and was certain that her face was flushed, though she hoped that might be ascribed to the warmth of the room. "That is wonderful," she declared and was pleased that her voice was steady. "I am so looking forward to seeing Georgiana."

"You are a wonderful friend to her," Bingley said heartily and then turned a besotted gaze toward Jane, who had gently disengaged from Sir William. "Jane, my dear, would you like some coffee?"

"I would," Jane said, "but I think perhaps I should take Elizabeth's place. You have not eaten yet, have you, Lizzy?"

"I have not," Elizabeth admitted.

"Well, go on with you, and Charles and I will manage the coffee and tea urns."

"Thank you," Elizabeth replied, stepping away from the table. She walked into the dining room, collected some food on a plate, slipped into the hall, and then crept up the stairs to her own bedroom, where she took a seat near the window.

It was not entirely courteous for her to sneak away from Mary's wedding breakfast, but given how many people were filling Longbourn, and that Mr. and Mrs. Collins were the guests of honor, she was confident that no one would notice her brief absence.

A week from this day, Mr. Darcy would be back at Netherfield, and Elizabeth realized that she was almost sick with apprehension as to what would transpire. Would he make her an offer, or would he tell her that he had decided to marry an heiress? And if Mr. Darcy *did* ask for her hand in marriage,

should she accept? She loved him, she adored him, she admired him, and she wanted to be his wife, but did she know him well enough to truly be confident of his character? She thought that she did. She felt in her heart and soul, and most of her mind, that he was an honorable man. But how could one be certain before taking such a serious step as marriage?

She picked up an apple tart from her plate and took a bite, shaking her head at her foolishness. It was likely that the master of Pemberley had already decided that he could not afford to wed a penniless bride, and she was making herself miserable for nothing.

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### *Elizabeth's Bedchamber*

*11 o'clock*

Elizabeth was nodding over *Macbeth* when a soft tap on the door gave way to the sound of the door opening. Elizabeth looked around and smiled up at her eldest sister. "Jane."

"Elizabeth, I was not sure whether you would still be awake."

"I am, though only barely. Do come in and sit by the fire."

"Thank you," Jane said, and walked over to sit down by Elizabeth, whereupon she leaned back against the settee with a groan of exhaustion.

"It was a taxing day," Elizabeth murmured.

"It was," Jane agreed, and sighed. "A good day, but a tiring one. I hope that Mary and William reached the inn in Rayling before sundown."



“I am certain they did,” Elizabeth mused, turning to look at her sister. “They left in plenty of time, after all. But Jane, is everything all right? I noticed you looked rather upset when you and Charles came into the drawing room during the wedding breakfast.”

“I *am* upset, but only because I learned of something quite awful today.”

Elizabeth turned and stared worriedly at her sister. “Do you wish to speak of it?”

Jane hesitated, her beautiful lips compressed, and then nodded. “Yes, though I beg you not to speak to anyone else in this matter. Mr. Darcy wrote Charles and ... well, I hate to even say the words, but I need to tell someone! Apparently,” and here Jane lowered her voice further and leaned a little closer, “apparently Mr. Lawrence Darcy ruined several of the maids at Darcy House, and left two of them with child.”

Elizabeth bit her lip hard enough to cause a spike of pain. “That is horrible.”

“It is *revolting*, Lizzy. How could a gentleman do such a thing? Those poor girls!”

“Yes, it is dreadful,” Elizabeth said and then, after a moment of hesitation, continued, “I am disgusted and sickened, but not entirely surprised. There were rumors at Pemberley of Lawrence Darcy’s depravity. But why did Mr. Darcy tell Charles about it?”

“Oh, Mr. Darcy asked Charles whether the two girls in question could stay in Netherfield’s hunting lodge until their babies are born, at Darcy expense, of course. Mr. Darcy hopes that he can find husbands for both women, but it will take some time, and it is terribly difficult for them in London, with everyone knowing they are pregnant and unwed, and near Pemberley – well, there are servants who serve at Pemberley who know both women, so it would not do to send them there either.”

Elizabeth felt tears form in her eyes, and every possible concern she had regarding the character of Fitzwilliam Darcy was swept away as if by floodwaters. What a wonderful man, with so many problems and difficulties, to take time to not only provide support for these two women, but to send them to a place where they would not be subject to gossip and harassment!

“What did Charles say?” Elizabeth asked huskily.

“He asked me my thoughts, and of course I said that those girls are welcome at Netherfield for as long as needed. Indeed, we might find ourselves taking them on as maids after they have the children, though how that will work ... well, in any case, I urged Charles to write Mr. Darcy, *legibly*, and send the maids here as soon as possible.”

“Oh Jane, you have such a kind heart,” Elizabeth said fervently and reached over to wrap tight arms around her sister. “A very kind heart indeed.”

“Charles and Mr. Darcy do as well, my dear.”

“Yes, they are both very fine gentlemen.”

## Chapter 40

*On the Road to Netherfield*

*One Week Later*

*Late Morning*

Darcy looked out the window of his carriage, which was rolling along quickly and smoothly. There was little snow on the roads and the small snowy patches were easily avoided by an adroit coachman, and the dirt had been frozen hard and smooth.

It was very cold outside, but a hot brick warmed the feet of Darcy and his sister, who were scrunched close together on the plush seat beneath their rug. Both were dressed warmly in wool and fur, and Georgiana's mittened hands had disappeared inside her muff.

"I am so excited that we will soon see Elizabeth!" Georgiana cried out, leaning against her brother. "It is hard to believe that it has been weeks since we have seen one another! I have missed her so much."

"As have I," Darcy thought but did not say. He had resolved to offer for Elizabeth but even now he was not entirely certain that she would *accept*. Thus it was better for him to keep his own counsel so as not to raise Georgiana's hopes unduly.

"Do you think that Elizabeth will be at Netherfield when we arrive?" Georgiana asked.

"Oh, I think that unlikely," Darcy replied in as nonchalant a tone as he could manage. "We left London rather late today, and she probably would not wish to impose herself upon us when we might be expected to be tired."

“It is only five and twenty miles, and I will not be tired at all!” Georgiana said indignantly and then laughed. “I do apologize, Brother; I am complaining. Well, I hope we will see her tomorrow.”

“I am certain we will,” Darcy replied, and felt his face heat up. Tomorrow he would see her again, his precious Elizabeth, either at Longbourn or Netherfield. He was determined to see her and to ask for her hand in marriage. Perhaps, by God’s grace, he would be engaged to his beloved in four and twenty hours.

“That will make this evening easier to bear,” Georgiana said with a sigh, distracting him from his anxious hopes.

“This evening? Why will it be difficult?” Darcy asked.

“It will be uncomfortable because Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst will fawn over me and ... but oh, probably they will not! How delightful!”

“What are you speaking of, Georgiana?” Darcy demanded, gazing at her with perplexity.

“Oh, you know,” his sister said, adjusting her scarf, “they wanted me to marry Mr. Bingley because of my large dowry. Miss Bingley used to mention how much her brother admired me and the like, you know. But now Mr. Bingley is engaged to Miss Bennet, so they will probably largely ignore me.”

“I am sorry you were subject to that,” Darcy said in low tones.

“Oh, it did not matter,” Georgiana replied immediately. “It was annoying, but I knew that you would never permit me to marry for at least a few more years. Oh!”

“Oh?”

“It occurs to me that you are now master of Pemberley, and Miss Bingley may well set her sights on you, Brother!”

Darcy snorted and said, “I am confident that Miss Bingley will treat me with the reserved courtesy that she

always has. In spite of the fact that her fortune derives from trade, she has her sights very high. I am confident that she has no interest in the master of a rundown estate in the wilds of Derbyshire.”

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*Netherfield*

*An Hour Later*

The two Darcys hurried through the front door of Netherfield, sighing in pleasure in the comforting warmth of the vestibule. A footman closed the door behind them, and the butler and a maid stood nearby, ready to take their outerwear. The siblings began unwinding scarves and removing hats just as the sound of rushing feet portended the arrival of one of the inhabitants of Netherfield.

“Mr. Darcy, and dear Miss Darcy as well!” Caroline Bingley exclaimed, rushing into the entryway, her face wreathed with smiles. “It is so very good of you to come all this way for Charles’s wedding. Mr. Darcy, I know that Louisa and I are both so *grateful* for your kindness all these years. You are such a wonderful friend of the family!”

Darcy stared at the woman, who was clad in a pale yellow muslin day dress which was elaborately embroidered with golden thread on hem and sleeves, and did not know what to say. Miss Bingley had always been largely indifferent to him – was it possible that Georgiana was right and that the woman was now interested in him as a potential husband?

“We are delighted to be here,” Georgiana said, casting an amused look at her brother. “Indeed, I am so very fond of Miss Bennet that I cannot imagine missing her wedding!”

“Oh, yes, Jane,” Miss Bingley said, suddenly looking very much as if she had bitten a lemon. “Such a delightful

lady! We are all so very, erm, happy...”

At this moment, Charles Bingley appeared in the foyer and exclaimed, “Darcy, Miss Darcy, we are so very pleased you are here. I hope your journey was a good one?”

“Yes, very good, thank you,” Darcy said, turning away from Miss Bingley and reaching out to shake his friend’s hand. “I know I have said this by letter, but many congratulations, Bingley. I am certain you and Miss Bennet will be very happy.”

“I know we will,” Bingley said with a beaming smile. “But come, I am certain you wish to refresh yourself. We are keeping country hours, so dinner will be at five o’clock. I hope that is agreeable?”

“Yes, of course,” Darcy said.

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*Dining Room*

*Netherfield*

Darcy swallowed down a very impolite huff as, across the table, Georgiana flicked him a mischievous glance from where she sat enjoying an amiable conversation with Louisa Hurst. Beside him, Miss Bingley tittered at something he had said, or that she herself had brought up; he could not quite recall. She leaned forward; only a very little but also entirely unnecessarily, unless her aim was to show off her lace-covered décolletage. Which, he thought a bit uncomfortably, it might well have been.

He sighed internally as he fielded yet another thinly-veiled, probing, simpering question about Pemberley’s annual income, and he thought wistfully of the days when Miss Bingley had been polite but disinterested in his person and his

doings. She had obviously set her cap on the master of the grand estate of Pemberley and its ten thousand a year income, with no knowledge of its true state. Darcy himself had little interest in making public knowledge of how poorly Pemberley's affairs currently stood.

"Darcy," Bingley said, speaking hastily before his younger sister could ask another question, "I believe your latest letter mentioned that your cousin, Mr. Fitzwilliam, is leaving the army?"

"Yes, he is selling out, which pleases us immensely," Darcy said, turning deliberately toward Bingley. "He has done his duty for King and country, and we are relieved that he will be settled safely at home."

"Will he be staying in London with his father, the Earl of Matlock?" Miss Bingley asked, obviously bent on being part of the conversation.

"No," Darcy said. "He will be going to Pemberley soon, as will Georgiana and I. There is a great deal of work still to be done there after my brother's unexpected death."

"Oh, what a pity!" Caroline exclaimed. "Well, I do hope that you will always know that you are welcome at Netherfield Hall!"

This, given that Jane Bennet would soon be mistress of Netherfield, was rude in the extreme, but he merely said, "Thank you, Miss Bingley, that is very kind."

"I would very much like to see Pemberley someday," the lady continued brightly.

"Yes, well, I am certain that Darcy has enough to do for the next months without dealing with guests," Bingley said. "Now, Darcy, the hours have been crawling by as I wait for my wedding day, and I wonder whether you might be interested in going out shooting with me in the next few days. It will provide some distraction."

"Yes, I would enjoy that very much," Darcy said, and then after an appropriate pause, continued, "I do wish to visit

the Bennets on the morrow, though; Georgiana and I both wish to congratulate Miss Bennet on your engagement.”

“Jane and Elizabeth intend to visit here tomorrow morning,” Bingley said happily. “You can congratulate my darling Jane then!”

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### *On the Road to Netherfield*

#### *The Next Morning*

Elizabeth and Jane Bennet sat side by side in the seat facing forward as the Bennet carriage carried them toward Netherfield. Jane was quite pleased with how the events of the morning had unfolded. Kitty and Lydia had both wished to accompany their older sisters to Netherfield, but Jane had spoken at some length about a tour of the kitchen and pantry with Mrs. Scofield, which had been sufficiently discouraging that they had chosen to stay at Longbourn and work on pulling apart bonnets and remaking them.

“How do I look?” Elizabeth asked suddenly, lifting a hand to straighten her already straight bonnet.

“You look wonderful, Lizzy,” Jane replied, and she took her sister’s gloved hand in her own. “Your green dress brings out the viridescent flecks in your eyes. Mr. Darcy will not be able to take his eyes off you.”

“Oh Jane,” Elizabeth responded and blew out a breath, “do promise me that you will not say a word about my ... attraction to Mr. Darcy.”

“I will not,” Jane promised in a contrite tone. “I did not mean to cause you pain.”

“It is not you, of course, but the situation. Oh, how I wish that I was well dowered, or that Mr. Darcy did not need a



rich bride. But I have no choice but to accept the situation as it is.”

Jane, only a week away from marrying the love of her life, found herself praying fervently that her favorite sister would find her own happiness with Mr. Darcy.

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### *Netherfield*

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” the butler intoned solemnly to the five residents of the drawing room.

Georgiana, who had been waiting eagerly, rushed forward and threw her arms around Elizabeth, who returned the embrace enthusiastically, even as her eyes sought out the taller man in the room.

“Dear Georgiana,” she said, kissing the girl on the cheek. “I hope you are well?”

“Yes, I am very well now,” Georgiana replied. “I missed you, Elizabeth.”

“I missed you too,” Elizabeth responded and then gently disengaged as Mr. Darcy approached her, his dark eyes glowing.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said huskily, “I am very pleased to see you.”

“And I to see you,” Elizabeth replied, and in spite of herself, could not help but feel her heart leap with gladness. Surely Mr. Darcy, an honorable man, would not look upon her with such open affection if he had no intentions?

“Elizabeth, how delightful to see you today,” Caroline Bingley said, making her way over to stand by Mr. Darcy. “I

do hope that you did not get too chilled on your journey here from Longbourn given that your carriage is so old.”

“We were pleasantly warm,” Jane promptly replied, her eyes on Darcy, who stood with his eyes fervently fixed on Elizabeth. “Now Charles, Caroline, I was talking to my younger sisters recently, and they are eager to have a ball here at Netherfield, and I think it would be delightful to do so, perhaps in a month or so? I realized yesterday that I have no more than glanced at the ballroom here. Perhaps we could go inspect the room and discuss possible decorations?”

Bingley looked bewildered and said, “Are you certain you do not wish to drink some tea first, my love?”

“Later, my darling, later,” Jane said with a beaming smile and a steely gaze. “I would like to see the ballroom *now*.”

Her darling blinked and then nodded obediently. “Of course, now would be an excellent time to inspect the ballroom. Caroline, shall we?”

“Really, Jane, I do not know why you need to look at the ballroom at this very moment,” Caroline said in exasperation, standing as close as was remotely courteous to Mr. Darcy.

“Oh, that is quite all right,” her future sister-in-law said cheerfully. “You have such excellent taste, but Charles and I do not truly need you. I was thinking perhaps we could decorate with yards of pink silk and...”

“Pink silk? You must be joking, Jane!” the lady cried out indignantly. “Pink silk is so very vulgar!”

“Well, what do you think would be better?” Jane asked innocently.

“Hothouse flowers, perhaps, or a multitude of candles,” Caroline said, striding toward the door. “Do come along, both of you.”

Jane grasped her fiance's arm and began to pull him toward the door, and then paused to say, "Georgiana, Mrs. Hurst recently acquired a harp, and I understand you to be quite gifted on that instrument. Perhaps you could show her the harp, Louisa?"

Mrs. Hurst, who had been watching the entire scene with amusement, rose immediately and said, "Yes, of course, Miss Darcy. Would you do me the honor of playing on my new harp and telling me what you think of it?"

Georgiana looked in confusion at Darcy who said, "Yes, my dear, please do try out the harp."

The girl nodded obediently and followed Jane and Mrs. Hurst out the door, leaving Elizabeth and Darcy alone.

## Chapter 41

Elizabeth, who had watched Jane's machinations with a mixture of incredulity and embarrassment, forced herself to say, "Mr. Darcy, I do apologize for Jane's ... erm..."

"I have never been so grateful to anyone in my entire life," Darcy said promptly and stepped closer, his large hands reaching out to take her smaller ones in his own. "Miss Bennet. *Elizabeth*. I have missed you every waking hour since last we were together, and I know with all my heart that I want you to be my wife. I know we have not known one another long, and given that my brother was a reprobate, I understand if..."

"You are nothing like your brother," Elizabeth interrupted, her cheeks flushed. "You are kind, intelligent, honorable, and the best man in the world. I love you very much."

With this encouragement, the master of Pemberley tightened his grip on the lady's fingers and asked, "Elizabeth, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said immediately, her eyes brimming with joyful tears. "Yes!"

"My darling," he responded softly, his eyes blazing with joy, and lifted her hands to his face and pressed fervent kisses on them. "You have made me so happy!"

Elizabeth, in a move that startled herself as much as her new fiancé, raised herself on her toes and kissed Darcy firmly on the lips. The subsequent embrace ignited a great deal of enthusiasm in both parties, and after thirty seconds, they drew apart by mutual consent, both breathless, their gazes fixed on one another.

"Perhaps we could be married soon?" Elizabeth asked shyly, which provoked Darcy to laugh and say, "Yes, I would like to wed soon. Indeed, I purchased a special license in

London in the hope that we could marry quickly which was, I know, rather presumptive.”

“I can only be thankful for your presumption,” his love informed him with a dazzling smile. “I was so afraid, you know. I thought that you would tell me that you must have a rich wife. You cannot imagine how anxious I was this morning. I have never understood my mother’s nerves, but perhaps now I can.”

Darcy chuckled, kissed her again, this time quickly, and then guided Elizabeth to a settee, where both sat down. He felt slightly dizzy with joy as he relished the feeling of her hand in his.

“I am thankful to say that the financial situation is not so very bad,” he said, gazing down at her lovingly. “I will be selling Bellhaven, among other things, and will emerge with Pemberley entirely unencumbered and at least five thousand pounds available for necessary repairs. The land is still good, and with thrift and hard work and appropriate restraint, I have confidence that Pemberley will be on excellent footing within a few years.”

Elizabeth frowned and stared at him searchingly. “Are you quite certain that you will not resent such privations? I hate the thought that my lack of a dowry would be a source of frustration for you in our marriage.”

“The only thing I want,” he said, stroking her fingers with his thumbs, “is to be married to my beautiful, bright, beloved star from Hertfordshire. You must remember that until my brother’s death, I was owner of a small estate in Leicestershire. I never imagined I would be master of Pemberley. When we spoke at the conservatory at Pemberley, I did struggle with my duty toward the tenants and to my sister, as I feared that Lawrence’s debts were so great that I would not be able to discharge them in a decade. Fortunately that was not the case. If it had been – well, I might have forced myself to let you go because you deserve a husband who can support

you and ... and children. This is the best day of my life, to have won you as my bride, my precious, treasured Elizabeth.”

She kissed him again, more gently this time, and then leaned her head against his arm and said, “You need to speak with my father, Mr. Darcy.”

“My name is Fitzwilliam, and yes, I do. Will he give me his blessing, do you think?”

Elizabeth smiled. “He may tease you a little, but he will give you his blessing. He is well aware of my attachment to you and my hopes.”

He was tempted to kiss her again, but the sound of a raised feminine voice restrained him. Both gentleman and lady turned toward the door, just as it burst open and Miss Bingley marched in, exclaiming, “The floor will need to be polished, and perhaps the walls painted. I had not realized how badly the ballroom ... Elizabeth! What are you doing here with Mr. Darcy and not a hint of a chaperone! It is quite shockingly improper.”

“It is not improper in the least,” Darcy said, standing up and helping Elizabeth to her feet. “Miss Bennet, Miss Bingley, Bingley, I have marvelous news. I have asked Elizabeth to marry me, and she has accepted.”

Jane lurched forward with a cry of joy and threw her arms around her sister. “Oh Lizzy! Oh Lizzy!”

“Darcy!” Bingley exclaimed, his own face bright with happiness, “I had no idea – how absolutely marvelous! Many congratulations to you both!”

“Fitzwilliam needs to speak to Father,” Elizabeth said, “but he brought a license from London. Do you think, perhaps, that we could...”

“Marry on the same day as we do?” Jane finished, her eyes dancing with excitement. “Oh Charles, do say they can. I would love it above all things!”

“Of course, of course!” Bingley replied, looking dazed. “Though that is only a week away. What about the marriage settlements?”

“I have already given the settlements some thought,” Darcy said. “I believe, Elizabeth, that your uncle in Meryton is a solicitor?”

“Indeed he is, and I am certain that Uncle Phillips would be glad to assist.”

Caroline Bingley was still standing stock still near the door to the drawing room, watching, with a strange feeling of unreality, the tableau before her, of Elizabeth Bennet, impertinent, impoverished, hardly even pretty, standing all too close to the master of Pemberley, whose income was reputed to be ten thousand pounds a year. How could it be that *she* would be the new Mrs. Darcy? It made Caroline want to scream!

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*Longbourn*

*The Library*

“You have my blessing, of course, Mr. Darcy, though I will miss my Lizzy, who is the quickest of all my daughters.”

“I am well aware of her intelligence and wit, Mr. Bennet,” Darcy replied, relaxing now that he had obtained the desired permission.

“I hope that I will be permitted to visit her at Pemberley. I understand that the library is magnificent,” Bennet said, standing up and walking over to pour Madeira for himself and his guest.

“You and your family are always welcome, sir,” Darcy replied, and he waited until he had taken the wine before

continuing. “As for the library, it is large, well-stocked, and the work of many generations.”

“To the future Mrs. Darcy,” Bennet said, raising his tumbler in a toast.

“To Elizabeth,” Darcy said passionately, and both men drank.

Bennet set his now empty glass down with a thump and took a seat across from his guest. “When do you wish to marry my daughter?”

“Well, as to that, I purchased a common license before journeying here, and Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet have told us that they would be delighted to share their wedding day with us.”

Bennet jerked and stared at him in astonishment. “In a week, you mean? You wish to marry Lizzy in a week?”

“With your permission, yes, sir,” Darcy replied, eyeing his future father-in-law nervously. A week was not much time at all, and given that Bennet adored Elizabeth, perhaps he would refuse.

“Is there a reason for such haste?” the older man demanded.

Darcy sighed and said, “I must return to Pemberley soon, sir. My brother died less than three months ago, you know, and he left the estate in some disarray. I will be able to support Elizabeth well, I promise you that, but I would prefer to carry her north with me within the fortnight. If you require us to wait, we will, of course, submit to your decision.”

Bennet sighed deeply, and then his lips quirked up in a wry smile. “*You* might submit to my decision, but Lizzy would argue with me, and rightly so. You love one another, and I know you to be an honorable man. There is no reason to delay such a happy occasion.”

“Thank you, sir,” Darcy said, heaving out a breath in relief.



“You are still in mourning for your brother, I believe?”  
Bennet continued, eyeing Darcy’s gray gloves.

“Georgiana and I are both in half mourning now. We were not close to our brother.”

“I see. Well, I have no issue with the propriety of marrying during half mourning; indeed, in my view, strict mourning customs are rather foolish.”

“So if I can arrange for the marriage settlements by next Thursday, we have your blessing to marry?”

“Yes,” Bennet said gloomily, and then brightened. “Mrs. Bennet will be caught between delight at another daughter well married, and sorrow that the two eldest will be sharing a wedding breakfast. I find that a delightful prospect myself.”

“I confess that I am pleased to avoid weeks of bother over the details of the wedding,” Darcy declared.

“You are a sensible man.”

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*Louisa’s Sitting Room*

*Netherfield*

“Eliza Bennet!” Caroline Bingley snarled, stalking up and down the maroon and gold oriental carpet which covered the polished wooden floor. “She has no dowry, she dresses unfashionably, and she is not even particularly pretty! How could Mr. Darcy have chosen *her* to be his bride, and on such absurdly short notice?”

“It is not absurd in the least, Caroline,” Louisa said from her position near the fire, where she was knitting a sock for the unborn child she was now quite confident was on the way. “Elizabeth and Georgiana have been good friends for

many weeks now, and Elizabeth was at Pemberley with Mr. Darcy after his brother died. I am not surprised in the least that he is in love with her.”

“In love?” Caroline spat. “We are not peasants, to marry for love. She must have enticed him, or perhaps even entrapped him! Yes, that must be it! Jane arranged for them to be alone, and she compromised him, and Mr. Darcy, being the gentleman that he is, offered for her.”

“That is utterly absurd,” Louisa said. “Mr. Darcy loves Elizabeth, and she loves him. Anyone with half an eye can see that. Nor do I understand why you are so upset about the engagement.”

“Surely it is obvious?” her younger sister fumed. “Mr. Darcy is handsome, the nephew of an earl, and now master of a great estate in Derbyshire and owner of a fine house in Kensington! If only I had known! Elizabeth was clever indeed to ingratiate herself with Georgiana!”

Louisa suppressed a sigh and finished turning the heel on the infant sock, and then said, “At any rate, nothing can be done about it now. He asked, she accepted, and he is far too honorable a gentleman to renege on an engagement.”

“She is an odious, manipulative minx,” Caroline snapped angrily.

“You may think that all you wish, Sister,” Louisa said, “but I advise you to hold your tongue in Charles’s presence, and Jane’s as well. Neither will appreciate you insulting Elizabeth’s character or Darcy’s choice of wife.”

Caroline turned on her sister with fury in her eyes, but Louisa met the gaze squarely and said, “I am serious, Caroline. Charles is an easygoing brother, but he is devoted to Jane and will not permit you to cause trouble here at Netherfield. I advise you to accept both upcoming marriages with as much enthusiasm as you can muster.”

Caroline glared at her sister, opened her mouth, closed it, and then spun around and marched out of the room. The

unpleasant truth was that Louisa was right on every count. A gentleman did not break an engagement, and short of Elizabeth Bennet willingly giving up her prize of a fiancé – a most unlikely scenario – she had lost her chance to become mistress of Pemberley.

## Chapter 42

*Mrs. Bennet's dressing room*

*Longbourn*

*After Dinner*

Elizabeth took a deep breath, braced herself, tapped at her mother's dressing room door, and stepped inside when her mother called her in. The lady of the house was fussing around by the mantle adjusting some figurines, and she turned a frowning look on her second daughter.

“Lizzy, I do hope you are not going to tell me anything dreadful. My nerves are quite to pieces with readying everything for Jane's wedding.”

Elizabeth could not help but smile at her mother as she said, “It is not dreadful, but wonderful. Mamma, Mr. Darcy asked me to marry him, and I have accepted!”

Mrs. Bennet froze in astonishment and then turned hastily toward her second daughter, her eyes nearly starting out of her head.

“You are engaged to ... to Mr. Darcy?” she gasped, before delight suffused her countenance. “Engaged! Well! Gracious me! Goodness gracious me! How wonderful!”

She fluttered back towards her dressing-table a moment before turning back towards Elizabeth, who stood patiently waiting, an amused expression on her face. “That is wonderful, Lizzy! Oh! How rich you shall be! Ten thousand pounds a year! You shall have even more pin money and jewels than dear Jane! How well dressed you will be! Why all the ladies in Town shall envy you. Town! Lizzy! A house in Town!”

Mrs. Bennet took a deep rapturous breath while Elizabeth considered disabusing her mother of these notions of

great wealth, and then dismissed such an idea. She could hardly expect her mother to understand the debts under which Pemberley labored without explaining the spendthrift actions of Lawrence Darcy, and that she would not do.

“Oh, oh! It is so exciting, but I truly do not have time to think about your wedding now. Once Jane is safely married, dear Lizzy, we will run...”

“Mamma,” Elizabeth said.

“...up to London so that you can be fitted for your bride clothes. Given that you will be wedding a man of such great fortune...”

“Mamma,” Elizabeth interrupted more firmly, holding up a staying hand, causing Mrs. Bennet’s excited discourse to sputter to a halt.

“Fitzwilliam needs to return to Pemberley as quickly as possible because there is still much to be done because of his brother’s unexpected death,” Elizabeth said. “He purchased a license before journeying to Hertfordshire, and we are planning to marry at the same time as Jane and Charles.”

Not surprisingly, this announcement produced a flurry of protests and complaints from Mrs. Bennet, who was horrified at the idea of combining two such marvelous matches into one ceremony and one wedding breakfast. As for Elizabeth’s wedding clothes, well, she was shocked and horrified and grieved at the very thought of foregoing such a ritual.

“My dear Lizzy, you simply must have wedding clothes made up! My dear, what will the neighbors say if you are married without new dresses, and gowns, and handkerchiefs! It will be as if you are not truly married!”

Elizabeth could not help but laugh at this contention, and she said warmly, “We will be married in church before God and man, and when I sign the register, I will be Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, even if I am married in my oldest gown. Dear Mamma, Fitzwilliam lost his brother less than three months

ago, and his niece is but an infant. He really must return to Derbyshire in great haste as there is still so much to be done. I could, of course, wait to be married, but that would hardly be wise, would it, to delay the marriage for an unknown amount of time?"

The very thought of indefinitely delaying her second daughter's marriage to an extremely eligible man was galvanizing to the matron, and she said, "I do see what you are saying, Lizzy. Of course! Well, I am determined that we will obtain a new dress for you. Indeed, we must be off to Meryton tomorrow morning to see the dressmaker. And you will need a new hat, too!"

"Very well," Elizabeth agreed in amusement.

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*23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1812*

For Elizabeth, her wedding day was like a dream, starting from the moment her eyes opened, whereupon she observed the winter sun pouring through her window, reflecting off of the polished floor of her room. It was hard to believe that she would never again sleep in this chamber – if she and her husband visited Hertfordshire in the future, they would probably stay at Netherfield. Even if they stayed at Longbourn, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy would doubtless inhabit the best guest chamber.

She would miss Longbourn, of course, and her family, but she was also full of excitement and delight and yes, passion, at the thought of marrying her Fitzwilliam. He was, she knew, the man for her – intelligent, kind, and honorable, and also a handsome man, a man who had captured her heart in a way she had never imagined to be possible.

She was, in spite of the rather unnerving discussion with her mother only the previous evening, very much looking forward to the wedding night.

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### *The Church at Meryton*

In later years, the families of Meryton and the surrounding environs were prone to say, some with pleasure, some with envy, that there had never been such a double wedding as the one in which Jane Bennet married Charles Bingley, and Elizabeth Bennet married Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Both brides were gloriously beautiful – Jane dressed in blue silk with an ivory lace overdress, and Elizabeth exquisitely gowned in green with the finest of white lace at neck, sleeves and hem. The latter garment had been labored over by the local dressmaker and her willing assistants over the course of a few busy days, and was a resounding success.

The gentlemen waiting at the front of the church, one dark haired, one ash blond, both handsome, both dressed in evening dress, both with perfectly tied cravats, were equally arresting to the eye. It had been many a year since such handsome couples had stood up alongside one another, and more than one matron was almost tearful with envy at the good fortune of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, who had managed to marry off three daughters to eligible men in one short month.

Bingley, who had long been drawn to blue-eyed blondes, was in wonder that this particular angel was not only enchantingly lovely, but also kind, intelligent, and gracious. Jane, in return, had thanked God above many times that such an honorable, generous gentleman had taken Netherfield Park and had chosen her to be his bride.

As for Elizabeth and Darcy, their relationship had been forged in the furnace of fire and difficulty and grief and even horror, and had grown only stronger in the interim, as carbon strengthens iron, as zinc strengthens copper. It had been an odd way to fall in love, but all the more solid because of its peculiarity.

They would face other challenges in the future, but on this day, both were beaming with the enthusiasm of new, devoted, passionate love.

Mr. Allen, the rector, smiled down on both couples and turned to the correct page in the Book of Common Prayer.

*“Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony...”*



# Epilogue

# Chapter 1

*6<sup>th</sup> January, 1813*

*Pemberley*

Elizabeth Darcy opened her eyes and frowned into the semi darkness, and she then reached out a hand toward the other side of the bed. Her questing fingers found nothing, which meant that her beloved husband was already awake and up. She sighed, preparing herself, and then rolled over to her other side, which provoked a shooting pain in her bulging abdomen. She gasped, which caused her husband, who was sitting by the fire, to leap up and hurry over. “Elizabeth, are you all right?”

She threw aside the covers and took his hand, using it to shift to a seated position, and then said, “Of course I am. I am merely growing ridiculously great with child.”

Darcy, inspecting his beloved wife, could not help but agree. The child was not due for another three weeks, but given Elizabeth’s size, he would not be surprised if the baby chose this very day to make his or her appearance. He hoped not, as it would be dreadfully inconvenient, but babies were regally indifferent to scheduled weddings.

“Please do come over to the fire,” he said. “It is rather chilly this morning.”

Elizabeth, warmed by the child wiggling and squirming in her womb, was not cold in the least, but she knew that her husband was a mass of nerves over the pregnancy, and thus allowed herself to be assisted into a comfortable wingbacked chair by the fire.

“What time is it?” she asked, looking at the window, whose curtained panes were backlit with cool winter light.

“It is not yet seven o’clock,” Darcy replied. “Shall I ask Molly to bring you some tea and toast?”

“Yes, please.”

Darcy walked into Elizabeth’s adjacent sitting room where Molly, Elizabeth’s personal maid, had been sleeping for the last weeks. Given that the girl had helped in delivering little Helena Darcy, it had been a great comfort to Darcy to know that the maid was nearby in the event of a sudden labor.

He came back into the room a minute later and took his seat next to his wife, who was gazing into the fireplace, though she turned her attention on him as he settled himself.

“Molly will bring food and drink momentarily,” he said, reaching out to take his wife’s delicate hand in his own.

“Thank you, Fitzwilliam. You are spoiling me, you know. I am quite capable of waiting for breakfast.”

“Nonsense, dear one. You are eating for two. Moreover, I suggest, though do not insist, that you wait to come down until it is time to go to the chapel for the wedding.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and said, “Oh, surely I must be in the dining room for breakfast. Poor Georgiana is rather anxious about all the guests here today.”

“Georgiana will have me, Richard, Jane, and Charles to protect her, and in any case, I am confident that the earl will keep Lady Catherine in check.”

Elizabeth chuckled and said, “Poor Lady Catherine!”

“I do not pity her, but it is true that her life will be changing very substantially in the next few months, and she knows it. Not, of course, that she will suffer greatly at the Dower House. It is a fine building in excellent condition, but she will despise no longer being in command of the estate.”

“Mary is looking forward to the transition with enthusiasm,” Elizabeth said. “She has managed to stay on Lady Catherine’s good side this last year, but Richard and

Anne will be far more sensible about caring for the tenants and the like.”

“Yes, they will,” Darcy agreed, and sighed. “Certainly Rosings is in better condition than Pemberley was when my brother died, but Lady Catherine is not particularly generous with the poor, nor has she proven willing to embrace new agricultural practices. I am confident that the whole estate will thrive under the Fitzwilliams.”

Elizabeth nodded and leaned back against the chair, just as a contraction seized her sufficiently that she had to suppress a moan. To her relief, Molly appeared at this moment with her tea and toast, which distracted her dear, anxious husband from her discomfort. It was, she knew, common enough for women to have many contractions, some of them painful, for weeks before labor began.

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*Dining Parlor*

*An Hour Later*

“Good morning, Georgiana!” Jane Bennet exclaimed as her sister by marriage entered the room.

“Good morning, Jane, Charles,” Georgiana replied.

Charles Bingley, who had been chewing and swallowing, said, “Good morning, Georgiana.”

The conventions out of the way, Georgiana walked over to peer out of the window, where the thin winter sun was shining on a few inches of hard packed snow, the trees glittering like diamonds and the ground sugar-frosted. “Well, it looks like the weather is good today.”

“It is beautiful,” Jane agreed, spreading honey on her toast. “One could not ask for a better wedding day.”

“Oh, surely not!” Georgiana protested. “Would it not be nicer to marry in the summer so that one could have the chapel filled with flowers?”

Jane looked fondly at her husband, who grinned at her, and said, “I suppose that would be pleasant. Both Elizabeth and I were eager to marry as soon as possible, and since it has been almost a year since our marriage, we both feel that winter is an excellent time for a wedding. But who knows, perhaps you will wish to wait until summer or, if you are very fortunate, will fall in love in summer!”

Georgiana laughed and said, “When the time is right, I will endeavor to do exactly that.”

The door opened again, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh stalked in with the Earl of Matlock at her heels.

“I am merely saying, Brother, that given that Richard has never been master of an estate...”

“Catherine, not now,” the earl said sternly, and then shifted his attention to the others. “Good morning, Mrs. Bingley, Georgiana, Mr. Bingley.”

“Good morning, Uncle,” Georgiana said, and Jane and Bingley chorused their own greetings.

“Has anyone seen Anne and Elizabeth yet today?” Lady Catherine demanded.

Jane shook her head and said, “I do not believe that Anne will be coming down until it is time to leave for the church, and Elizabeth has not been sleeping well, so I expect it will take her some time to descend as well.”

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*Anne's Bedchamber*

“The day is finally here, Helena,” Anne informed her daughter. “I am marrying one of the finest men in the world, and you will have a stepfather who will be far more caring and kind than your own father ever would have been.”

Helena looked up at her, blue eyes wide, and burred a wordless question, and then toddled over to beam gummily up at her mother before trundling off again, pausing in the very middle of the rug on a patch of red color to bob up and down in a gleeful little dance.

Anne’s attention was drawn from her daughter by a tap at the door, and Matilda stepped inside. “It is time to dress for your wedding, Madam,” she announced, with a restrained smile towards the happy little girl.

Anne nodded, and Matilda moved to the wardrobe, retrieving the confection of pale rose satin and old ivory lace that was the wedding dress. After attiring, Anne turned to look at herself in the mirror, with Matilda hovering behind her.

“If I may say so, Mrs. Darcy, you look beautiful,” she said decidedly.

Helena looked up and announced, “Mamma boo!”

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### *Richard’s bedchamber*

Richard studied his own reflection in the mirror. He was in civilian clothes now, of course, and was dressed in a snow-white shirt, well-starched, over black breeches and a black coat, with a neat but uncomplicated cravat, white as his shirt and equally starched, at his neck. A black top hat lying nearby would complete the ensemble.

His face, long disciplined to stillness, showed little of his excitement at the prospect of his imminent marriage, but

his eyes were bright. He was fond of both Anne and little Helena, and looked forward with eager anticipation to his wedding and marriage.

Anne's mourning had finished some weeks previously, but Richard had wanted to sort out the legal affairs of Rosings before proceeding with the wedding. He and Anne planned to travel to the estate promptly after their wedding and take control of the estate. Richard knew well that Lady Catherine would kick up a fuss, but he remained grimly confident that he would be able to handle her tantrums and shield Anne.

He finally turned from his own reflection to pick up his hat, examining it in the light from the window and taking a deep breath. There was a knock at the door, and his valet walked over, opened it slightly, spoke softly, and then turned to say, "Sir, Mrs. Darcy is ready to depart for the church."

"Thank you, Perkins," Richard replied, and he could not help but grin.

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### *Chapel*

*Eleven o'clock in the morning*

Mr. Sievert looked down on Richard Fitzwilliam and Anne Darcy, standing side by side in front of him, and he smiled approvingly.

Mrs. Anne Darcy looked much, much better than she had the last time she had stood before his altar, as Miss Anne de Bourgh; flush with health, bright-eyed with joy and hope, and peace in her smile. The man beside her now was a decided improvement on the selfish and cruel Lawrence Darcy. Richard Fitzwilliam was an honorable man, who would be good to Anne and her daughter.

Mr. Fitzwilliam was also a clever and intelligent man, very decisive and adept at weighing acceptable risks and priorities. He had spent a considerable part of the previous year at Pemberley, lending his own gifts to Mr. Darcy in restoring Pemberley to solvency and profit, and in turn learning about management of an estate. Rosings would be in competent hands when Richard Fitzwilliam took the reins.

The rector's eyes wandered around the small chapel. Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, her form very round with child, sat close to her deeply adored husband on the front pew, with Miss Georgiana Darcy seated on her brother's other side. Opposite them were the Earl of Matlock, looking quite pleased, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, looking rather less so.

The last occasion this chapel had witnessed was the holding and interment of Lawrence Darcy's body. Then, the coffin had sat for a few days before the very altar where Anne Darcy and Richard Fitzwilliam now stood, before being buried in the nearby graveyard. So much had changed since then, and only for the better. Now when he went among the tenants of the estate, they were not lean and sick from hunger and cold, but flush and replete and happy, with only praise and joy on their lips for the second Mr. Darcy. He especially rejoiced to see small fat children tumbling happily around in place of thin babies whimpering and wailing.

Two young women had arrived at Pemberley in the last year, both with small children, and Mr. Darcy had confided to the rector that the children were bastard daughters of his elder brother. Mr. Sievert had been horrified but not surprised, given the behavior of Lawrence Darcy toward the young maid Grace, but he had been pleased and relieved at Fitzwilliam Darcy's actions; both women had been provided a reasonable monthly allowance to support themselves, and Sievert was in the process of finding kindly husbands for both girls.

The land itself had grown green and fertile over spring and summer, as though rejoicing in the new master who cared for it so deeply. The house servants were happier, with no



pinched look of fear and distaste in their eyes. All of Pemberley was glad for its new master.

Mr. Sievert pulled out his pocket watch, checking the time, and tucked it carefully away again. With a deep breath, he smiled down at the assembly below him.

*“Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony...”*

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*Elizabeth's Sitting Room*

*Pemberley*

*Some Hours Later*

Elizabeth winced as another contraction seized her, and she clenched her teeth until the pain released its grip on her abdomen. She then turned her attention back on the letter in her hands.

*1<sup>st</sup> January, 1813*

*Hunsford*

*Dear Lizzy,*

*I hope you are feeling well, dear sister, as the time for your confinement approaches. Mary, Mr. Collins, and I are enjoying ourselves thoroughly now that a certain lady is currently residing at Pemberley. Of course, our gain is your loss. I do hope that Lady Catherine does not cause too much trouble for you!*

*I am being impertinent, and I know it, but truly I have wanted to scream at times when we have been summoned to*

*Rosings for a long dinner and cards when it is obvious that Mary is not feeling well.*

*Regarding that, she has entered her fifth month and is now feeling substantially better. Mr. Collins is so very excited that he will be a father in a few short months, and has repeatedly said that he does not care whether the child is a boy or a girl, though he assumes, since our mother birthed girls, that the child will be female.*

*I do not think it quite works like that, does it, Lizzy? It seems to me that Mr. Collins is overly confident in many things.*

*Lydia sends me the occasional letter complaining about how dull it is at Longbourn with no officers stationed in Meryton now. Mary has offered to have her here, but she refuses, and I am devoutly relieved. I do love Lydia, of course, but I have always been in her shadow and am enjoying living away from her for a time. Furthermore, I find myself very happy here. I like the feeling of being part of a household, of helping with cooking, baking, and even cleaning on occasion. It feels very satisfying to be of genuine help to someone. Mary really was terribly ill for some weeks with this child. I do hope your early pregnancy was not so difficult.*

*I had best get this finished and prepared for the post. A very blessed new year, dear Lizzy. Do give my greetings to Jane, Charles, and Fitzwilliam as well. We look forward to hearing of your safe delivery in a few weeks.*

*With much love,*

*Kitty Bennet*

There was a tap on the door and Elizabeth called out a welcome, which trailed away into a gasp as another contraction tightened like a steel band around her middle. Jane entered the room, and at the sight of her sister's obvious distress, she demanded, "Lizzy, are you all right?"

Elizabeth grimaced and then managed a shaky smile. “I am having quite a few pains today, but I am certain it is nothing, really.”

Jane frowned and sank down next to her favorite sister. “How often are they?”

“Oh, I am not certain ... oh...”

“Elizabeth!”

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### *The Birthing Suite*

*8<sup>th</sup> January*

*In the very early hours*

“You may come in for a very few minutes, Mr. Darcy,” the midwife informed the master of Pemberley.

“Thank you,” Darcy replied, and stepped cautiously into the room where his wife and infant son were waiting for him.

Elizabeth, who was holding the sleeping child, looked up, her face drawn with weariness and pain. He knew he looked a sight as well, as he had been entirely unable to sleep during Elizabeth’s labor.

“My darling,” he said, taking a seat and reaching out to clasp her left hand in his own. “How tired you look.”

“It was ... difficult,” she said in an exhausted voice, but he was reassured to see the sparkle in her eye and the small smile quirking up her lips. “Do look, Fitzwilliam. Is he not beautiful?”

Darcy looked down at the red, squashed face of his son and smiled back, nearly weak from relief that mother and child had survived the birth. “He is amazing, my love, and so are you.”

## Chapter 2

*The Nursery*

*Rosings*

*April, 1816*

“Bock! Bock!” Joshua Collins yelped, pointing under a small table next to the settee where his mother was sitting. “Bock!”

“It is *block*, Joshua,” Helena Darcy corrected, lowering herself to the floor and then crawling underneath the table in order to retrieve the wooden block in question. “Here you are, Joshua.”

“Tank oo! Tank oo!” Joshua replied and ran over to his mother, Mrs. Mary Collins, and waved the block close to her face. She gently seized his arm before he could strike her on the nose and said, “You were very polite to Helena, Joshua.”

“Plite!” he screeched and then dropped the block on the floor and ran over to mount a wooden rocking horse set against a window.

“He has so much energy,” Mary said to her friend and patroness, Anne Fitzwilliam, who was seated on a rocking chair next to the fire.

“He does,” Anne agreed with a chuckle and then said to her daughter, “My dear, you were very helpful to Joshua.”

“Thank you, Mamma,” four year old Helena replied, very precisely. The daughter of Anne Fitzwilliam was a serious child who had learned to speak early. “Do you think Papa will be here soon?”

Anne glanced at the clock on the mantle and said, “Yes, he should be here in a few minutes.”

“Joshua, do not climb up that!” Mary cried out, standing up and pulling her son off of the knobs of a chest of drawers which were, apparently, all too enticing for the boy. “Do play with the blocks.”

The boy, reminded of the blocks, darted off to play with them, and Mary sat down, touched her rounded belly, and said, “I have no idea how I will manage when I have two children to care for!”

“You should hire another nursemaid,” Anne said, “and if you do not have the funds, I will provide them for you.”

“Oh, we have the funds, but I already have a nursemaid for Joshua, and given how well the tenant wives manage without servants, I feel rather guilty at needing another maid to help with our children.”

“You are the parson’s wife and responsible for the well-being of the parishioners, along with Mr. Collins, of course. In any case, I think it dangerous to compare one’s circumstances with others. I am much healthier than I was even two years ago, but I was sadly unable to do much at all with Helena during the beginning of this pregnancy.”

“But you feel better now?” Mary asked anxiously.

“I do, much better, thankfully.”

The door opened at this juncture and Richard Fitzwilliam strode in, which provoked squeals of enthusiasm from both his daughter and little Joshua. The former colonel greeted his wife and Mary with a few words, and then dropped on all fours and spent a few minutes allowing the children to climb on his back as if he were, as little Helena said, a camel. It was only when Joshua fell off for the fourth time and began wailing in frustration and fatigue that Richard stood up and said, “My dear Mrs. Collins, I apologize for exciting your little son and then rushing off, but Helena and I need to spend time with a pony. Shall we, dear one?”

“Oh yes, Papa!” Helena cried out happily, and she and her stepfather departed hand in hand.

“I had better go as well, Anne,” Mary said, rising ponderously to her feet. “Joshua desperately needs a nap.”

“I will come with you,” Anne said, also standing up. “I will summon the carriage for you.”

“Oh, that is not necessary. Joshua and I can walk.”

“Nonsense, Mary,” Anne said, stepping out into the hall and hooking her arm in her friend’s arm. “Your son might well fall asleep halfway home, and then what would you do?”

Mary laughed and said, “That would indeed be difficult.”

The two women walked down the stairs, each clutching a hand rail, with Joshua holding his mother’s available hand and jumping dramatically down each step. When they reached the bottom, Anne gave the necessary orders for the carriage and then accompanied her guests out to the vestibule.

“I understand that Mr. Collins is visiting my mother today?” she said softly.

“Yes,” Mary said, keeping an uneasy eye on her child. In the years since Lady Catherine had moved to the Dower House, Rosings had changed a great deal. Much of the furniture had been stored away, and most of the valuable bric a brac had been removed from the common areas. Nonetheless, Joshua was so vigorous, so energetic, so insane, that she was always worried that he would find something to climb, eat, or generally destroy.

“It is kind of your husband to visit my mother,” Anne said, and she nodded at a footman, who opened the door. Mary took Joshua’s hand and hurried out, whereupon she released a sign of relief. The child would be safe enough on the steps, so long as he did not fall down them, of course.

“Mr. Collins has a kind heart,” Mary said to her friend. “He has never forgotten that Lady Catherine awarded him the Hunsford living, and he will always be grateful to her, even if he does not venerate her as he used to.”

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*Office*

*Netherfield*

Jane Bingley looked up from the household ledger as the housekeeper entered and said, “Mrs. Bennet and Miss Bennet are here to see you, Madame.”

“Thank you,” Jane said, setting the ledger aside. “Do you know if Luke and Peter are awake yet?”

“I believe they are still sleeping, Mrs. Bingley.”

“I am not surprised,” Jane said, standing up. “They had a very vigorous morning playing with the puppies.”

“Yes, they did,” the housekeeper replied fondly and withdrew from the office with Jane following behind her. The two women walked together until Jane took a right turn onto a paneled corridor, which allowed her to enter the drawing room from the side entrance.

She was pleased to see that her husband was already in the room speaking with Mrs. Bennet and Kitty, and Jane beamed at the sight of him. She and Charles had been married four years now, and they continued to be a committed and compatible couple. Given the struggles of many of the couples in their orbit, she felt all the blessing and good fortune of such devotion.

“Jane!” Mrs. Bennet cried out upon spying her eldest daughter. “Oh Jane, you must speak to Kitty! She is telling me that she does not wish to go up to London for another Season, which is absurd...”

“It is *not* absurd, Mamma,” Kitty said, her dimpled chin set in a position of mulishness. “I had my Season last year and disliked it excessively, and you know it! There were far too

many people at the parties, and I did not know many of them, and it was so uncomfortable and awkward. In any case, I am not even certain if I wish to be married!”

She said these last words with desperate courage, and Jane, caught between amusement and awe, turned an eye on her mother, whose faded blue eyes were wide with shock, and whose mouth was now hanging open.

“You need not marry, Kitty,” Bingley began, only to be interrupted by his mother-in-law, who cried out, “Not marry? Not marry? What are you speaking of, girl? You must marry! You have essentially no dowry...”

“Kitty has three sisters whose husbands are well able to support her in the future,” Charles said sternly, and then turned a gentle smile on his sister-in-law. “Truly, Kitty, if you do not wish to marry, that is quite all right.”

“Indeed it is,” Jane agreed.

“Oh, thank you, Charles, Jane,” Kitty said breathlessly. She cast a nervous glance at her mother, whose eyes were now bulging with outrage, and said, “I like helping with children, but I do not necessarily want to *have* children. I love helping Jane and Mary and Lizzy with my nephews, but it is delightful to leave one home and travel to another, to see different views and people. I also like the freedom to read and draw and paint and write poetry. Especially the latter! I know that I am not terribly good at it, but oh, how I treasure writing poems. Besides, I am only one and twenty. I do not need to marry yet.”

“If you do not marry soon, you will be on the shelf like poor Charlotte Lucas!” Mrs. Bennet raged.

Jane and Charles exchanged glances at this statement; Charlotte Lucas, currently staying with Elizabeth at Darcy House in London, was being courted by a wealthy middle aged widower with two young daughters, and would likely be wed within six months.



Jane lifted a questioning eyebrow at her husband, who nodded, and then turned to Mrs. Bennet, “Mamma, I do have wonderful news. I am expecting another child.”

Mrs. Bennet’s expression shifted from outraged to joyful, and she hurried forward to embrace her eldest, most beautiful daughter. “Oh Jane, that is wonderful news! I do hope that you have a daughter this time after two sons. Indeed, it seems quite impossible that all my grandchildren are boys so far, but it is so...”

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*Drawing Room*

*Darcy House*

*London*

The sun filtered through the light lace curtains hung at the windows, dappling the floor in spots of brightness and shade. The white of the lace matched the clouds outside dotted across a cerulean sky, smiling down on blossoms of pink and white and yellow in the backyard garden. It was a glorious spring view, somewhat at odds with the lingering nip in the air.

This chill was easily driven away by a merrily crackling fire in the fireplace of the drawing room. Little had been changed in the room in the years since Darcy and Elizabeth had wed; the furniture was all solid and of good quality, even luxurious. Some few of the heavier pieces had been sold, uncluttering the room and bringing in a few welcome pounds. Elizabeth had whisked most of the knickknacks away into storage upon the birth of their son, knowing well she would want her children to come into the drawing room with her. Only the pieces on the mantel remained, as anything lower would not be safe from small, curious hands.

No sign of dust or dirt showed about the room, and the cushions were all fluffed and neatly arranged. Many of the servants who had worked there under Lawrence Darcy's tenure had departed; some were lazy and let go, a handful dishonest, and some few had resigned in discontent at the Darcys' management of the house. All of them had been slowly replaced with servants who were both industrious and dependable, and the house looked all the better for it.

Elizabeth reached for the teapot set in the middle of the low table beside a vase of daffodils, and she poured a cup of tea that she passed to her Aunt Madeline, seated adjacent to her on the loveseat.

"Is your friend Miss Lucas here today?" Mrs. Gardiner inquired, taking the cup with a smile of thanks.

"She is visiting Mr. Grayson's married sister today," Elizabeth said, taking a sip of her own tea. "Fortunately, Mrs. Jamison very much approves of Charlotte. I am hopeful that Mr. Grayson will make an offer to Charlotte within the next weeks."

"I am very happy for your friend. She seems a pleasant, sensible young woman."

"She is, yes. She will be wonderful with the little girls and hopefully will have a child of her own. She has always longed for a home and family."

"Speaking of family, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, well enough," her niece replied, caressing her swollen abdomen. "The first three months were unpleasant, but I feel well enough now."

"How long will you and your family be staying in London?"

"We will be here for at least two months of the Season," Elizabeth replied, "but when we return to Pemberley, I hope you and Uncle Gardiner and the children will join us for an extended stay."

“Thank you, my dear. You know how much we treasure our times at Pemberley, and I have so enjoyed having regular visits with my old friends in Lambton. Will the Bingleys be visiting as well?”

“Perhaps, depending on how Jane is feeling. I received a letter today informing me that she is with child also.”

“Oh, how lovely!”

“There was another piece of news too,” Elizabeth said with a dramatic flutter of her eyelashes. “My sister-in-law Caroline Bingley is finally engaged to be married.”

“Is she? It is about time, I suppose. She must be four and twenty?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth agreed, and poured another cup of tea into her aunt’s cup. “Yes, she was hoping for a minor member of the nobility, but alas, despite her substantial dowry and good looks, she was quite unable to garner an offer from such a man. The past months she has been courted by another gentleman and finally accepted his offer.”

“Do I know of the gentleman?”

“Yes, you have even met him. Caroline is engaged to Mr. George Wickham of Timbreline.”

Mrs. Gardiner gasped and said, “Truly? That seems unwise.”

“I think so,” her niece agreed, “but Caroline is very different from you and me. She is not looking for a marriage of love, but of position. I think both she and Wickham are entering the marriage as a contractual arrangement, though I am hopeful that there is at least some genuine attraction as well. Mr. Wickham is a very handsome man, after all, and has a great deal of surface charm, and Caroline is handsome as well.”

“I see what *he* gets from it,” Mrs. Gardiner said thoughtfully. “Twenty thousand pounds is a substantial dowry. What does *she* get from it?”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and said, "She will be mistress of an estate, of course, and, well, I am quite certain that Caroline has never quite forgiven me for marrying Fitzwilliam, and while Timbreline is not Pemberley, it is adjacent to Pemberley. As for Wickham, after his marriage to Caroline, he will be a distant connection of the Darcys, which I think he greatly desires."

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head. "It sounds dangerously convoluted."

"I agree with you, but Caroline is old enough to make her own decisions, and she is eager to wed. At any rate, Jane tells me that Wickham is agreeable to a very strict set of marriage articles. Caroline's dowry will be tied up such that he only has access to the interest."

"Well, that is good, anyway."

"Yes," Elizabeth said. "Wickham has actually been a responsible neighbor these last years. Fitzwilliam told me that Wickham confessed to being taken aback by Lawrence Darcy's sudden death, and was prepared to turn over a new, more reasonable leaf."

Any further conversation was prevented by the sudden arrival of Lydia Bennet and Georgiana Darcy, who hurried into the room arm in arm with Georgiana's companion, Mrs. Annesley, a few decorous steps behind them.

"Lydia, Georgiana," Elizabeth said, setting aside her needlepoint and rising to her feet with some difficulty. She had been surprised when it had taken her almost three years to conceive again after the birth of her son Christopher, but she was now into the seventh month with her second child, and feeling large. "Did you enjoy yourself today?"

"It was very long," Georgiana replied and dropped gracefully, if dramatically, onto a nearby settee.

"But it was wonderful!" Lydia Bennet added, taking a place next to her sister-in-law.

Elizabeth took a moment to study them both, in many ways alike and yet so very different, and she was surprised anew at the close and rather unlikely friendship between the two girls. High-spirited, outgoing Lydia had drawn the shy Georgiana inexorably out of her shell, even as Georgiana's more elegant manners had slowly influenced Lydia. Elizabeth and Jane had both kept their youngest sister with them as much as possible, removing her from their mother's disruptive effect, and exerting themselves to teach her control and propriety.

Their efforts had not been in vain. Though still boisterous and lively, Lydia was no longer vulgar and embarrassing in company. From time to time, when strictures and reminders of her reputation were insufficient, her elder sisters had resorted to promising extra pin money should she behave at some reception or party.

Now Lydia and Georgiana were bosom friends, each benefiting from the other's personality, each charming in her own way. Both were lovely, and often took advantage of their similar coloring – fair golden hair and bright blue eyes – to match the color of their dresses and accessories. They made a striking picture, Georgiana's slender figure beside Lydia's fuller one, both wearing blush pink with demure bonnets and white gloves.

"I am so very grateful, Lizzy, to you and Fitzwilliam," Lydia said in a rush of enthusiasm. "I was fitted for six gowns today and so was Georgiana. Six each! I had no idea a few years ago that Kitty and I would both have the opportunity for a London Season!"

"We are delighted to host you for the Season," Elizabeth said warmly, and Georgiana added, "And I am so relieved that you are coming out at the same time as I am, Lydia! I would die of terror if I were forced to manage balls and assemblies without you."

"You know that I will love every minute of it," Lydia said happily.

The door opened again, and Fitzwilliam Darcy entered with his son in his arms and Mr. Gardiner at his heels.

“Mamma!” Christopher cried out, and Darcy lowered the boy so that he could rush over to climb onto his mother’s bulbous form.

“Christopher,” Elizabeth said and then nuzzled the child on the neck, causing him to shriek with enthusiasm.

“I was informed that our son did not take a particularly long nap and that he is a trifle on the irritable side,” Darcy said to his wife, who laughed and said, “That is, I believe, quite normal given his age.”

“Christopher, would you like to play with toy soldiers?” Lydia asked.

This provoked a scream of delight from the little one, who promptly hopped off of Elizabeth’s lap and hurtled over to a chest sitting in the corner. Lydia, who was nearly as energetic as her nephew, was close behind him, and she lifted the top and pulled out the precious toy soldiers.

“How are you feeling, my dear?” Darcy asked, pulling Elizabeth’s attention to her husband as he sank into the seat next to her.

“I am well,” she replied, and felt a familiar glow of happiness in her heart as she looked at her beloved aunt and uncle, now seated next to one another conversing softly, and then at Georgiana, who was watching Christopher and Lydia with a fond eye, and finally to her dear Fitzwilliam as he gazed upon her with loving care. How very fortunate she was to be Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy.

## Chapter 3

*Netherfield*

*May, 1823*

It was, Mr. Thomas Bennet thought, very useful to be considered eccentric.

Mrs. Bennet had been startled and confused when her husband had informed her, only a few weeks previously, that he wished for a birthday party to celebrate his tenure of nine and fifty years on this earth.

“Why now, Husband?” she had demanded. “Why not wait a year until you are sixty?”

“Our daughters are all within easy distance of Meryton at the moment, with Mary in Kent and the four other girls all in London for the Season,” he had replied. “Next year, they may be scattered farther afield, or one of the girls may be with child again and unable to travel.”

Mrs. Bennet was always eager for a party, and she had accepted this explanation with gratifying enthusiasm. Indeed, within an hour of his request, the Bennet matriarch was on her way to Netherfield in order to discuss the matter with Mrs. Jane Bingley.

Now, a few weeks later, the carefully tended lawn behind Netherfield was filled with people both young and old. He, as the guest of honor, was seated on a wooden chair under a great elm tree, which shaded him from the early May sun.

The lawn in front of him was filled with his multitude of relations. Jane and Charles Bingley were here, of course, with their four sons and one daughter. Bennet could not help chuckle to himself; his four married daughters had birthed sixteen children between them, and there were only four granddaughters in the entire lot.

Bennet adjusted the scarf around his neck a little – he was often cold these days – and turned his attention on Mary and William Collins, who were sitting side by side on a bench some feet away from him.

That marriage had been surprisingly successful. Bennet still thought Collins rather silly, but the man had definitely improved with the change in leadership at Rosings. Bennet had never met Lady Catherine, but he knew from Elizabeth and Mary that she was autocratic and arrogant to the point of absurdity. Richard and Anne Fitzwilliam, now the parents of two daughters and two sons, were far more reasonable folk, and Mr. Collins had improved substantially in his ability to hold a pleasant conversation in the last decade. He would never be a genius, but he could be quite palatable company nowadays.

Of course, Mary and William would soon be living at Longbourn; he had very little time left, after all. He acknowledged to himself that he had never been a particularly devoted master of his estate, especially after he realized that he would not be succeeded by a son.

Longbourn would be in good hands, with Mary and William as mistress and master, and Jane and Bingley nearby at Netherfield. Furthermore, given that the Collinses had produced four sons, there was every reason to believe that Longbourn would remain in the family line for many generations. It was a gratifying thought.

“Oh, Aunt Kitty,” a young voice cried out. “I loved your poem about sunflowers!”

This drew Mr. Bennet’s attention to his fourth daughter, the only one unmarried, who was standing next to a rose bush filled with vibrantly red blooms, with Arabella Darcy, Elizabeth’s only daughter, standing nearby.

Bennet knew that Kitty had been the recipient of more than one offer from eligible gentlemen, but she had elected to stay single. To the surprise of almost everyone, Catherine Bennet had proven a gifted poet, and she had thus far had three



volumes of poetry published. The moderate income from those books, along with the support of her sisters, had allowed her to live a comfortable and happy life.

“Mamma!” a young voice shrieked, and Lady Lydia Lacey hurtled across the lawn to swoop up her youngest child and only daughter, Emily, who had fallen over and was wailing indignantly.

Mrs. Georgiana Lacey, married to Lydia’s husband’s younger brother, hurried up to Lydia with her own young son in her arms. The two friends, now sisters by marriage in two ways, carried their offspring toward the mansion. It was probably time for both toddlers to lie down for a nap.

“Father, how are you?” a feminine voice inquired.

He turned and smiled up at Elizabeth, who was gazing down at him with a mixture of love and concern.

“Sit down, Lizzy,” he said, gesturing to the chair beside him.

She did so and reached out a hand to touch his own, rather skeletal one. “I hope you are not in too much pain today?” she asked.

“I am very well,” he replied and patted her hand fondly. Of all his daughters, only Lizzy knew all the grim details of his trips to the doctor in London in the last months and the reality that he would not survive to his next birthday. It was, he knew, a heavy burden to place on Elizabeth, but he had sworn both her and Darcy to secrecy. Mrs. Bennet, while she was definitely calmer than when she had five daughters unwed, was still prone to the occasional attack of nerves. He did not wish his last months of life to be filled with wailing and gnashing of teeth.

He had not been a particularly good husband, he knew that, but at least he had sired responsible, kindhearted daughters who would ensure that his widow was well cared for.

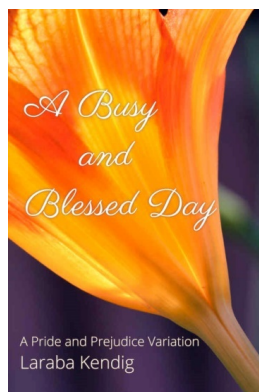
“I am very well,” he repeated, waving a hand at the lawn filled with daughters and sons-in-law, and grandchildren, and extended relations. “I am blessed, Lizzy. So very blessed.”

***The End***

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## **Sneak Peek of *The Talented Daughters of Longbourn***

**Mr. Bennet is dying. Can Elizabeth and her sisters find success and love in the midst of upheaval and sorrow?**

# Chapter 1

*Cheapside*

*October, 1811*

A cheerful fire crackled behind its screen in the drawing room. It was a warm and equally cheerful room, if spare; bare tables with rounded corners reflected on a gleaming wooden floor. The curtains were dark and sensible, hiding any dust they might collect, matching the equally practical upholstery in the cushioned chairs.

Elizabeth Bennet sat with her back to the window, allowing the sunlight to fall upon the letter in her hands.

*Longbourn*

*October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1811*

*My dear Lizzy,*

*I regret the necessity of writing this letter, but I fear that you and Jane need to return to Longbourn as soon as possible. I know we had originally planned that you would stay with your aunt and uncle through the end of October, but my health has taken a turn for the worse, and you are needed here.*

*I have no doubt that my words are alarming, but I selfishly relish that I can speak honestly to you and Jane on these matters when your mother continues to bury her head in the sand. I have tried to tell her the truth, but she refuses to listen, and at this point, I am too weary to battle such deliberate ignorance.*

*My brother Josiah will likely ask whether he should accompany you – the answer is, ‘not yet’. I do not believe I am at death’s door, but I am greatly fatigued and need more*

*rest, and your mother, while she sets an excellent table, is not capable of managing other vital duties for the estate.*

*I would suggest that Jane stay in London, but your mother is writing a letter to her even now, insisting that she return to meet our new neighbor. Yes, Netherfield Hall is let at last, to a single man of large fortune named Mr. Bingley. I have not met the man as I have been too unwell to call, but I hear that he is a pleasant young gentleman.*

*My hand grows weary.*

*With love,*

*Thomas Bennet*

Elizabeth bit her lip and felt a tear travel down her cheek, which she wiped away impatiently.

“Is your father very unwell?” a gentle voice inquired from her right.

Elizabeth turned to look at her aunt by marriage, Mrs. Charlotte Bennet, and nodded. “Yes, he is feeling worse. You might as well read this.”

She rose and walked over to Charlotte, who looked perturbed and asked, “Are you quite certain your father would wish me to read the letter?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said steadily, “for when Father dies, you and Josiah and the children will be greatly affected as well.”

Charlotte nodded and took the letter, read it carefully, and then handed it back.

“I am very sorry,” the matron said softly.

“I am as well,” Elizabeth agreed, taking the letter and returning to her seat. “But I confess I am not greatly surprised. Mary mentioned in her last note that Father has been even more absent than usual from the dinner table. I should have gone home earlier.”

Charlotte turned back to her work – namely, knitting a baby sock – and said, “Pray do not think that way, Eliza. Your father knew that he could summon you at any time. He obviously wished for you to enjoy your time with us for as long as he was able to manage Longbourn. We have treasured your weeks here and will miss you.”

“We have had a lovely time,” Elizabeth said, smiling fondly at her aunt by marriage, “and we will miss you as well. I fear Jane will be greatly disappointed as she and Uncle Josiah have been working so well together. Mother is sure to throw Jane at this Mr. Bingley’s head, which will annoy Jane a great deal.”

“I know you do not like to hear it, but your mother is correct in one sense. Mr. Bingley of Netherfield is wealthy and single, and he might well prove a pleasant husband to one of you girls.”

The swish of skirts caused both ladies to turn their heads toward the door, and Jane Bennet strode into the room, dressed in a blue woolen dress whose severity was mitigated only by the fine lace at the collar, a letter gripped in one shapely hand. Elizabeth smiled up into her sister’s face, noting that the lady’s indignation had caused her already beautiful face to flush becomingly. Jane Bennet was blonde and blue eyed, with a perfectly formed nose and rosebud lips. Her height was neither too tall nor too short, and her figure was elegant. She was, in fact, one of the most handsome women in all of England, if her mother was to be relied upon.

“I think the whole thing is absurd,” Jane declared, sinking into a seat next to her sister. “Yes, Mr. Bingley is reputedly rich, but for all we know he is an unpleasant, irritating sort of man. I see no reason for me, anyway, to rush back to Longbourn to show off my face when I have so much work to do here!”

“I fear there are other reasons for us to return,” Elizabeth said, handing her own letter over. Her elder sister frowned as she opened it and read it, and her anger faded as

tears formed in her eyes. "Oh, poor Father! Yes, we must return to Longbourn at once."

"I am certain arrangements can be made for us to return to Hertfordshire tomorrow," Elizabeth said.

"Well, at any rate, with Father ill, we ought not to be dancing and visiting others in an attempt to win a husband!" Jane said, her cheeks reddening in indignation.

"On the contrary, Jane," Charlotte said, "given that your mother refuses to accept Mr. Bennet's poor health, it would probably be a blessing for you to live your normal lives. Not that you need to try to win the man, but if you ignore Mr. Bingley, your mother will be loudly upset, which cannot be good for your father."

Jane sighed and said, "That is true enough."

"My father has met Mr. Bingley several times," Charlotte continued. "Sir William assures me that the gentleman is courteous and genial."

Another set of steps approached the sitting room, heavier ones, and all three ladies turned toward the door as a man of some thirty summers entered with a two year old boy in his arms.

"Mamma!" the child squealed excitedly and wiggled out of his father's grip to rush forward and grasp his mother's legs around the knees. "Mamma!"

"Hello, Samuel," Charlotte said, lifting her son into her lap, though the movement was a trifle difficult given that she was within three months of delivering another baby. "Did you have a good nap?"

"His nurse says he had a very good nap," her husband, Josiah Bennet, said, walking over to sit down next to his wife. "Jane and Elizabeth, you look quite upset. What is wrong?"

"Our father is worse," Elizabeth replied quietly, handing over the letter.

Josiah took it from her hands, read it, and sighed. "I am so very sorry. I see that my brother does not wish me to come to Longbourn yet, but please know that I will come at any time, day or night, if you need me."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said gratefully.

"As for this Mr. Bingley, I believe my father-in-law has met the man and he is reputedly charming," Josiah commented. "I hope that you will not dislike spending time with him."

Jane wrinkled her nose and complained, "But I am not done with the horse or the elephant!"

"My dear niece," Josiah said, his eyes now crinkling with merriment, "I do beg you not to distress yourself. Of course, at your tender age, it is normal for you to be dreadfully impatient..."

He broke off as Jane stooped over to grasp a wooden top lying abandoned on the floor, and threw it at her uncle, who caught it with ease. Charlotte and Elizabeth laughed, and little Samuel squealed and climbed down to grab the toy from his father's hand.

Jane, smiling in spite of herself, said, "I merely want to complete the sculptures."

"Can we not take them back to Longbourn so you can finish them there?" Elizabeth asked practically.

Jane looked at Josiah and lifted an eyebrow. "Well, oh greybeard, what do you think? Are we far enough along that I am able to continue my work without your august, guiding presence?"

Josiah, who was only ten years older than his eldest niece, nodded and said, "Without a doubt, Jane. You have made an excellent start, and with Elizabeth's memory and her sketching, I am confident that you can proceed well without my oversight."



“Very well, though I do hope that our mother is not too ... well, you know how she is! I imagine that she will push me toward Mr. Bingley, which will be exasperating.”

Samuel was, by now, trying to spin the top on the wooden floor and failing, so Elizabeth dropped down next to the little boy to show him the correct way. This too, provoked cheerful yelps from her little cousin, which prompted Charlotte to ask, “My dear Jane, are you truly opposed to marrying and having children?”

Jane smiled down on the little one and said, “No, I am not opposed, certainly. But I refuse to pursue a man merely for his wealth. After all, I am not impecunious myself!”

“But Mamma does not know that,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“I know, and I wish we could tell her,” Jane replied, obviously exasperated. “But of course we cannot, because she would tell everyone that I am selling my sculptures and wood carvings for good prices and then it would get out and would draw the ire of local society, since ladies are not supposed to earn their keep in such a way. But it is frustrating.”

“Perhaps Mr. Bingley will have an interesting face,” Elizabeth suggested.

Jane brightened at these words, and her cerulean eyes took on their usual distant gaze when she was thinking about her work. “That is a good thought, Lizzy. Perhaps he will.”

Charlotte chuckled and said, “I am confident that Mr. Bingley would not be so rude as to take Netherfield if he were a boring or ugly man.”

“Well, as to that, I rather like ugly men,” Jane declared. “Many so called ‘good looking’ men are dull.”

“Jane, Elizabeth,” Charlotte said abruptly, pulling her son close to her and stroking his blond head, “I do wish to say that if Longbourn becomes untenable for the younger girls, I beg you will send them here.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said immediately. “Indeed, that might be necessary, though given Lydia’s passion for acting, she might well run off one day in the hopes of winning a role at Covent Garden.”

“Oh, Elizabeth, do not say such a dreadful thing!” Charlotte cried out in dismay.

“Lizzy is quite right,” Jane continued solemnly, though her eyes were twinkling. “Lydia wants nothing more than to act in a Shakespearean comedy or tragedy, and it is your husband’s fault, Charlotte!”

“My fault!” Josiah echoed with dramatic indignation.

“Of course!” Elizabeth said, thankful to find her spirits rising in spite of her father’s illness. “It was you who introduced Jane to sculpting and wood carving, and me to sketching, and Kitty to the rabbits, and Lydia to acting. I suppose we must be thankful that Mary has embraced music; that, at least, is a respectable accomplishment for a lady!”

Josiah grinned at these words but then he grew serious and said, “I am very proud of all my nieces, and rejoice in your varied interests, though of course my dear wife is correct; it would not do at all for Lydia to become an actress!”

“Of course it would not,” Jane agreed, “and Charlotte, we are only teasing. Lydia knows that.”

“We hope,” Elizabeth added wryly.

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*On the Road to Meryton*

*The Next Day*

Fitzwilliam Darcy leaned against the squabs of the carriage and closed his eyes. As usual, he had not slept well the previous night and the vehicle was sufficiently well

sprung, and the road sufficiently well maintained, that the movement was enough to nearly lull him to sleep.

Nearly...

*The Darcys' footsteps clicked down the beach-worn boards of the Ramsgate boardwalk. To their left, children darted shrieking about in and out of the waves, up and down the sand, while harried nurses chased runaway toddlers and windblown clothes alike. Nearby, a bathing machine rattled down into the water, drawn by a patient plodding horse. Shadows ghosted across the beach, the sailing clouds above casting their shapes onto the sand below.*

*"It is beautiful, is it not?" Darcy asked, patting his sister's arm gently. He had spent the previous two weeks in London which was, at this time of year, incredibly hot and, in some areas, smelly. He was thankful that his business with his solicitor had taken less time than expected, and thus he had been able to steal away from Town to visit his dear sister at Ramsgate.*

*He came to a halt and stared out at the distant ocean, with its dark blue shifting to lighter blue shifting to aqua and finally to clear water, beneath which Darcy could see rippled sands.*

*He felt a tug at his arm, and he looked down into Georgiana's face. She was a pretty girl, his little sister, though she was not, in fact, so very little now. She had grown even in the four months since they had last seen one another. She had always been a shy girl, but now there was a strange look on her countenance, one of ... dread? Fear? Anxiety?*

*"Is something wrong, Georgiana?" he asked, concerned.*

*She stared up at him, her cornflower blue eyes filling with tears, and she gasped, "Oh Brother, I ... I..."*

*Now he was truly worried. "My dear, what is it?"*

*She gulped and reached out to take his hands in her own. "Brother, I am afraid you might be angry, or perhaps you will not. I do not know. But I feel I must tell you ... I am in love."*

*Darcy froze with a mixture of bewilderment and anger. In love? His little sister? What an absurd statement! She was but fifteen years of age! But she looked so frightened, so distressed, that he knew he must tread gently and slowly.*

*"In love?" he repeated, as kindly as he could manage. "With whom, my dear?"*

*Georgiana Darcy, only daughter of Mr. George Darcy, with a dowry of thirty thousand pounds, dropped her head to stare at her brother's well shined boots.*

*"I am in love with George Wickham," she whispered.*

*"Darcy! Darcy!"*

As was common when Darcy was coming out of this particular memory, it took him a moment to reorient himself. When his eyes had opened, and his vision had settled, he observed his cousin, Richard Fitzwilliam, seated across from him, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Yes?" Darcy asked, and, upon realizing his voice sounding foggy, cleared his throat and repeated, "Yes?"

"You were mumbling," his cousin explained, shifting in his seat.

"Oh," Darcy said, and grimaced, "I apologize."

Fitzwilliam gazed at him thoughtfully and asked, "Ramsgate?"

Darcy gritted his teeth and nodded. "Yes, and Wickham. I should not have allowed him to escape without repercussions."

His cousin shook his head. "You made the right decision in sending Wickham a letter and immediately removing Georgiana from Ramsgate."

“I wish I had tracked him down and punched him in the nose,” Darcy said truculently.

“And he deserved it,” Richard said patiently. “But Georgiana was your primary concern at the time, and you could hardly leave her alone and find Wickham in the no doubt vile boarding house he was hiding within. Mrs. Younge had betrayed us all, and you needed to stay with Georgiana and help keep her safe and secure.”

Darcy sighed and looked out at the countryside, his mind drifting back to his previous vision.

“You are right, of course,” he confessed, “but oh, how I wish I had been able to knock a few of his teeth out!”

## Chapter 2

### *Longbourn*

“Jane! Elizabeth! Thank the Lord you are here!” Mrs. Bennet shrieked as her two eldest daughters stepped into the drawing room of their family home. The mistress of Longbourn threw her shawl aside, leaped to her feet, and rushed forward to grasp her eldest daughter by the shoulders. “Let me look at you, my dear! Oh, you are as beautiful as always though ... oh my, you are a little bit tan. Have you not been using your parasol?”

“Jane is as beautiful as she always is,” Lydia, the youngest of the Bennet daughters, declared, hurrying into the room to embrace her two eldest sisters. “I am so glad you are both back! Did you bring any beautiful gowns from London? Oh, did you hear – a regiment of militia officers is coming to Meryton! Kitty and I are so excited!”

“I am certain you are,” Elizabeth replied, her eyes twinkling merrily.

“Officers are generally a very handsome group,” Mrs. Bennet agreed, “what with their red regimentals and polished boots. But come now, girls, I daresay you need to freshen up and soon it will be time to change for dinner. You arrived later than we expected!”

“It was hard to say good-bye to Uncle Josiah and Aunt Charlotte,” Elizabeth said gravely, being careful not to look at Jane; her elder sister had insisted on spending two hours discussing sculpting and wood carving with Josiah before they left this morning, which had delayed their departure.

“Aunt Charlotte,” Mrs. Bennet repeated in exasperation. “She is but five years older than Jane!”

“But she is indeed married to our Uncle Josiah, and thus is our aunt,” Jane said gently.

“I know, I know,” Mrs. Bennet said glumly, “and when your father dies, not that he will any time soon, well, the former Charlotte Lucas will be mistress of this house. It is quite dreadful.”

“Where is Father?” Elizabeth asked, determined to change the subject.

“Oh, he is in his sitting room, I suppose. His gout is acting up again, and he often stays upstairs all day and even eats his meals there. I do not expect him for dinner.”

“Well, I will go see him now for a few minutes,” Elizabeth declared, and at her mother’s indignant expression, added, “but only a few minutes, and I will be certain to be at the dinner table on time.”

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Elizabeth knocked on the door of her father’s sitting room, and a moment later opened up the door at the sound of his voice.

She scarcely noticed the heat that washed out, her eyes tracking to her father. He was easy enough to find, as he was the obvious focal point of the spartan room.

Two wingbacked chairs were drawn close to the roaring fire, with a footstool drawn close to one. Mr. Bennet was laying aside a leather-bound Bible, taking care as he placed it on the simple wooden side table beneath the unlit candelabra. Elizabeth swallowed her horror at how thin her father’s hands looked.

Mr. Bennet eased his right foot to the floor and unwrapped the blanket from about his shoulders. The thinness continued, the strong shoulders frail and bony, the cheeks hollowed and sunken over the skull, the skin papery and gray-

tinted. His movements were slow and careful, as he folded back the edges of the blanket and grasped the leathern armrests of his chair.

“Father,” she said, forcing herself to smile. “It is wonderful to see you.”

“I am very glad to see you as well, Lizzy,” the master of Longbourn replied, pushing himself to his feet and holding out his arms. She came to him immediately and melted into his embrace, even as her heart quailed at his fragility. She could feel how sharp his shoulder blades were through his coat, and she swallowed hard.

“I look a sight, do I not, Lizzy?” her father asked as they separated.

“You look very thin, Father,” she said truthfully.

“I know. Do sit down, my dear,” her father instructed.

Elizabeth did so, choosing the chair farther from the fire. It was very warm in the room.

“Do you not wish to eat?” she asked.

Her father sighed and nodded. “I fear my appetite is greatly diminished, and . . . well, I do not wish to complain, but your mother is reluctant to order the purchase of food and drink that *do* sound appealing.”

Elizabeth’s eyes flashed angrily, and she said, “Mamma will not purchase foods that you like? How could she? And why?”

“She believes the only thing that ails me is gout,” her father replied with a mirthless laugh. “She is wrong, of course, but it is, perhaps, an understandable conclusion on her part as my leg and foot pain me greatly. Mr. Jones is quite certain it is not gout, however.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and said, “What does he think, Father?”



“He thinks that it is cancer, and spreading,” her father replied wearily. “Dr. Reeve thinks the same – he is a doctor from London with an excellent reputation, and he visited me last week while your mother and sisters were visiting your aunt Phillips in Meryton.”

His favorite daughter swallowed hard and quavered, “How ... how long do you have?”

“That neither the doctor nor apothecary can say,” Mr. Bennet said. “It might be weeks, it might be months. Probably not a year, but even there we cannot be certain. Perhaps I will rally somewhat. Perhaps it is not cancer, but some other mysterious malady. In any case, I will almost certainly survive until the new year, especially if my eldest daughters can prevail upon Cook to provide me with lemonade and beef broths and other soups that sound appealing, but which Mrs. Bennet believes are bad for gout.”

Elizabeth clenched her jaw and said, “You should have called us home earlier, Father! We would have come if we had known the situation here.”

“And I wanted you and Jane to have a few weeks with Josiah and Charlotte, Elizabeth,” her father returned. “Your sketching is remarkable, and Jane is a gifted sculptor who can only improve under the tutelage of my brother. After I am gone, your work together will provide a certain degree of economic freedom for both of you and, by extension, your mother and sisters.”

Elizabeth stared at her father in confusion and growing dismay. “Do you ... are you uncertain ... do you believe that Uncle Josiah will not provide for us?”

“Oh, I am certain he will, to the best of his ability,” Mr. Bennet said hastily. “Josiah is a very good man and fond of his nieces. But he is also father to a son, and he will soon have another child. He must be concerned about his own house and legacy, after all. Furthermore, your mother will not be pleased to yield her position as mistress of Longbourn to the former

Charlotte Lucas. It may well be that when I am gone, you will find it best to move into a cottage or something like that.”

Elizabeth bit her lip as the tears welled in her eyes again. Mr. Bennet looked at her with concern and said, “I know it is hard for you to hear me speak so boldly of my death, but I rely on you to assist me in administering the estate in the next weeks and months until I pass on. I am sorry, Lizzy; it is a burden you should not need to carry, but I fear that it is necessary. I should have saved more, of course; I also should have hired a steward to assist in managing Longbourn. But I spent so many years hiding in my library ignoring my possible demise, and now it is too late to make substantial changes.”

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, and then asked boldly, “Do you have any debts, Father?”

“No, none. I did manage that. Your mother has always been a spendthrift, but I have, at least, kept the estate out of debt.”

“I am glad,” she said.

Silence fell for a minute until Elizabeth asked, “Are my sisters aware of your situation?”

“They are not,” he replied, “and I think it best that you do not tell the truth yet.”

“Why not?” Elizabeth demanded indignantly.

Mr. Bennet leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. “As I said earlier, I do not know how much time I have left. The doctor believes it is cancer. Perhaps it is not! The doctor thinks that I have less than a year. Perhaps he is wrong. I would not wish for you and your sisters to put your lives on hold waiting for me to die. You can tell Mary, if you like, but the younger girls – well, Kitty would be full of fear and Lydia would argue furiously with your mother, trying to convince Mrs. Bennet of the gravity of the situation. That would not be good for anyone in Longbourn.”

“That is true enough,” Elizabeth agreed unhappily. Her youngest sister Lydia was indeed a strong willed girl, and Kitty was delicate and prone to anxiety

“When you get worse...” she began, and her father finished, “I will tell them, yes.”

Elizabeth stared at her father’s thin face, his brow etched with pain, and she asked softly, “Are you afraid, Father?”

Mr. Bennet looked down at the Bible in his lap and his pale lips quirked up a little. “Of dying, my dear? No, I am not. Mr. Allen has been visiting me once a week, and I find great comfort in our Savior’s death on Calvary. I am an imperfect man, my dear Lizzy, but I am saved by the blood of Christ.”

“We will miss you very much.”

“I know you will,” he agreed, “but in the end, we are all but dust, of course. Now run along, Lizzy; it is nearly time for dinner, and I wish to take a nap. And mind you, I do not wish for you to walk around in a cloud of grief. You have always been a happy, joyful person, and the best thing you can do for me is to enjoy these last weeks, months, or years together.”

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### *One Hour Later*

Elizabeth looked around the boisterous table, her heart a strange amalgam of gratitude and sorrow. It was good to be back at Longbourn, even with the sad news that her father’s health was failing. She always missed her sisters and parents when she was away. Kitty and Lydia chattered and giggled together as Jane and Mrs. Bennet discussed the latest fashions in London.

The spread was as generous with variety and complexity as it always was. Elizabeth surveyed the assembled dishes thoughtfully, silently contrasting them to what was served at her aunt and uncle's house. There was no want or privation at the younger Mr. Bennet's table, but Charlotte's natural frugality did not lend itself to unnecessarily elaborate dishes or waste.

Elizabeth knew that Charlotte's outlook was superior. Longbourn was far from impecunious, at two thousand pounds per annum, but Mrs. Bennet was undeniably extravagant. Given that Mr. Bennet would soon die, and the estate, which was entailed away from the female line, would pass on to her uncle Josiah, it was most unfortunate that her mother was not more sensible regarding clothes, food, figurines, knickknacks, and wax candles.

A burst of laughter from further down the table drew her attention, and she looked over to her next younger sister and asked, "Have you learned any new pieces, Mary?"

"I am working on a section of Mozart's Piano Sonata Number Eight," her sister replied. "It is in a minor key and thus difficult."

"I will not attempt it, then," Elizabeth replied cheerfully. She enjoyed playing the pianoforte, but did not have Mary's dedication or skill.

"Do you wish to work with Mr. Turnball this week?"

Elizabeth grimaced and replied, "No, for he would be terribly disappointed in me. You know that Uncle Josiah does not own a pianoforte, and therefore I am dreadfully rusty. I will make some time to practice in the coming days, and perhaps I will dare to meet with Mr. Turnball next week."

Mary laughed. "You know he is not like that, Lizzy; he will not scold you."

"Yes, he is a charming and kindly man."

"Indeed he is," Mary replied, and Elizabeth, noting her sister's flushed countenance, could not help but smile. Mr.

Turnball, who served as curate in a nearby parish, earned extra money to supplement his meager income by providing music lessons. The man was in his twenties and a gifted musician, and he and Mary were becoming more than friends.

Given Mr. Turnball's poverty, Mrs. Bennet had not bothered to throw her daughters in his direction, and Elizabeth was rather of the opinion that her mother had no idea of the burgeoning love between her third daughter and the young curate. But Elizabeth knew that Mr. Turnball was next in line for a valuable living in Kent, and that the current holder of that living was an elderly gentleman in his sixties. She also believed that love and respect were vital for a successful marriage. She was hopeful that Mary and her admirer would make a match of it, and soon.

"Now girls!" Mrs. Bennet cried out, drawing the attention of her daughters, "after dinner we must determine exactly what you will wear at the assembly tomorrow night. Lady Lucas tells me that Mr. Bingley will be there with a large party of gentlemen from London! If I could see one of you married to Mr. Bingley and mistress of Netherfield, and the others equally well married, I would have nothing left to wish for!"

"Well, I do not think Mr. Bingley is anything special," Lydia said with a toss of her blonde head. "He does not even wear a red coat!"

"He is rich, Miss Lydia," Mrs. Bennet declared, "and given that none of you are boys, and that Longbourn will go to your Uncle Josiah when your father dies, you need to marry well!"

"But surely Uncle Josiah and Aunt Charlotte will allow us to stay here?" Kitty asked fearfully.

"Of course they will," Elizabeth said quickly. "Indeed, Uncle Josiah assured me that we will always have a home at Longbourn."

“He says that, yes,” Mrs. Bennet said darkly, “but the proof is in the pudding, as they say. When your father passes on – not that he will any time soon, because the Bennets have always been long lived – but when he does, well, Charlotte may insist that your uncle cast us into the hedgerows.”

Kitty was now pale and Jane said indignantly, “Charlotte would never do that, Mamma!”

“You may think that, my dear,” her mother said ominously, “but you know what happened to my cousin Amelia’s husband’s aunt’s step-daughter! She was the second wife of a Mr. Dashwood and bore him three daughters. When her husband died, the entire estate went to the son born to his first wife, and the young man, urged by his greedy wife, threw his stepmother and her daughters out of the house.”

“Charlotte is not greedy, nor is she cruel,” Elizabeth said sternly. “You need have no fear on that score, Mamma.”

“Well, even if we do stay here, I daresay you will not much like it, Kitty,” her mother continued resentfully. “Yes, you will have a roof over your head, and clothes on your bodies, and food to eat, but you know what Charlotte is like; she works in the kitchen baking pies and the like, and will expect you to do the same! I declare that my servants know how to do their own work. And Charlotte’s dresses! I know that Josiah does not have a large income, but I would be ashamed to be seen in those dowdy gowns!”

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged glances. Yes, Mrs. Bennet, daughter of a solicitor, would never dream of helping with the cooking, baking or dusting, nor had she trained her daughters in those skills. This was unfortunate because Mrs. Bennet’s marriage settlement was only five thousand pounds, which was not enough to support Mrs. Bennet and her five daughters in the style to which they were accustomed.

It was just as well that the Bennet girls had a source of income that Mrs. Bennet knew nothing about.

## Chapter 3

*Longbourn*

*That Evening*

Silence settled like an old well-loved blanket over the slightly dusty room. It had been the nursery, many years ago, but when Lydia had outgrown it and moved into her own room, Mrs. Bennet had converted it to be dedicated to her daughters' accomplishments. The pianoforte was downstairs in the music room, but easels sat about on the threadbare rugs, and paint-pots on chipped tables emitted a faint odor into the air. An old sofa upholstered in an eye-watering chartreuse had been pushed up near the fireplace where a stack of wood and tinder stood waiting. A polished spinning wheel sat patiently in one corner.

The door flew open and silence gave way to bustle and conversation. Mary hurried over to ignite the wood and kindling in the fireplace, while Lydia used her own candle to light four wax candles in a candelabra on a small wooden table. It was dark outside, but the room contained several mirrors which reflected light from fireplace and candles, and thus it was easy enough to see.

“Are they under there?” Mary asked, gesturing toward a white cloth which was lying on a large table in the center of the room. The cloth was humped in two places, obviously concealing something.

“Yes,” Jane agreed, and carefully lifted the cloth off and stood back.

Silence fell for a full minute and finally Kitty said, rather timidly, “I know the one on the left is a horse, but what is the one on the right?”

Elizabeth chuckled and said, “An elephant!”

“Truly?” Lydia asked, wandering in a circle around the table. “I have seen pictures in books, of course, but...”

She trailed off and Jane reached out with slim fingers to lovingly trace the head of the beast. “It is not finished, of course, but the elephant’s trunk is here, curled up. Do you see?”

“I do,” Lydia said.

“May I touch it?” Kitty asked and, at Jane’s nod, reached forward to delicately stroke the white marble. “Oh, this stone is wonderful!”

“Is it not?” Jane asked, her eyes glowing with pleasure. “Our Uncle Gardiner purchased it from a fellow tradesman who purchased it from Italy. It will be luminous when it is done.”

“It will,” Mary agreed, and Lydia said, “I am certain it will fetch a pretty price.”

This was said with a certain emphasis, and Jane turned a wry gaze on her youngest sister. “I am certain it will, Lydia. What do you want?”

The youngest, tallest Bennet clasped her hands together and said dramatically, “Oh, dear Sister Jane, will you use some of your great wealth to purchase a book of Christopher Marlowe’s poems for me?”

Elizabeth turned a puzzled gaze on the girl and asked, “Are you certain Father does not already own that book?”

“No, for he does not like Christopher Marlowe’s plays. In truth, I do not much like them either; *Tamburlaine* is dreadfully dark and sad. But some of his poetry is delightful, and Kitty and I wish to read and recite them.”

“I will buy the book for you,” Jane said.

“Thank you!” Lydia declared and hurtled forward to hug her sister even as Kitty chimed in with her own thanks.



“Now,” Elizabeth said, shivering a little, “perhaps we can all move closer to the fire? I very much wish to catch up on all the local news, but it is chilly up here.”

This suggestion seemed good to all, and within a minute, the girls were curled up on chairs and the long, comfortable, elderly couch. Mary, who was very fond of children, started out the conversation asking about their uncle Josiah and his family.

“They are well,” Elizabeth said, relishing the heat of both the fire and her sisters on either side of her. “Charlotte’s next child will be born in about three months, and Samuel is a charming little man, full of energy and yes, mischief!”

“Poor Charlotte will be quite worn out when the baby is born,” Mary mused.

“Does she not have nursemaids and the like?” Kitty asked.

“She does,” Elizabeth said, “but she is a very involved mother, nor is Uncle Josiah’s income as large as Father’s. His portraits are fetching increasingly higher prices, so perhaps in a few years his income will rival our father’s, but not yet.”

“I still think it is peculiar that our father’s half-brother is only a few years older than you are, Jane,” Lydia remarked.

“It is a trifle odd,” Elizabeth agreed, “but we all have reason to be thankful that our grandfather remarried when Father’s mother died. If he had not, and if Uncle Josiah had never been born, Longbourn would have eventually gone to a distant cousin named Collins.”

“I have never heard of Mr. Collins,” Mary remarked, rising to her feet, adding a log to the fire, picking up a poker, and pushing the wood about to encourage additional flame and heat.

“The older Mr. Collins was Father’s second cousin, I think,” Jane remarked. “He and Father quarreled. The elder Mr. Collins died many years ago. He had a son, but we have never met him, nor do I anticipate that we will ever do so.”

Uncle Josiah is heir to Longbourn, and he has sired a son, so Longbourn will remain within the family.”

“And Charlotte is one of our oldest friends,” Elizabeth continued warmly. “Our aunt and uncle will ensure that we are never without food and shelter. Of that you can be certain, I *promise*.”

These words were directed specifically to Kitty, who smiled and said, “I believe you, Lizzy. I do not know why Mamma does not trust our aunt and uncle to care for us.”

Jane sighed and said, “Mamma has never gotten over her disappointment at failing to birth a son, and she has adopted a pessimistic outlook on life.”

“Furthermore, she will not like giving way to Charlotte,” Elizabeth said drily, reaching her hands out toward the fire to warm them. “Our aunt will be a wise, diligent, generous mistress of Longbourn, but it is hard to give up the reins of power, so to speak.”

There were soft murmurs of agreement, and Lydia said, “But if Mamma has her way, she will not need to remain at Longbourn after Father dies; we are to marry rich men, and she will have her choice of houses in which to stay.”

There was a communal laugh at these words and Elizabeth said, “Yes, I am certain that Mamma is hopeful that Jane will enchant Mr. Bingley and win an offer in short order. Netherfield is a fine estate.”

This, naturally, provoked a terrific scowl on Miss Bennet’s face. “Well, I refuse to marry a man who falls in love with my face,” she declared, and then added magnanimously, “But if one of you girls falls in love with the man, and he with you, that would be acceptable.”

“Well, I for one am far too young for marriage,” Lydia declared, “and Kitty is as well. Mary is in love with Mr. Turnball, and so that leaves you, Elizabeth!”

Her second oldest sister rolled her eyes and said, “I too will not marry a man whose sole interest is my appearance. I

encourage us all to enjoy the assembly tomorrow night without worrying about finding a husband.”

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### *Billiard Room*

#### *Netherfield*

Darcy relished the warmth of the fire at his side as he idly watched the flickering light play over the polished oak of the billiards table and the sideboard beyond, where the crystal decanters glittered brightly. Heavy brown curtains shot through with amber brocading kept the firelight in, and brass candlesticks gleamed in the light of their burdens. Darcy sat in a chair between the fireplace and the table itself, elbow propped on one dark-upholstered arm.

His eyes traced the carvings on the table, shields and scrolls and ribbons, as his mind drifted. It felt good to sit and relax. He had been so terribly busy all summer, consulting his steward and seeing to the needs of the tenants and the home farm, and of course, dealing with the ramifications of Ramsgate.

The accustomed throb of guilt went through him. His dear innocent sister, entrusted to his care, and he had thrown her heedlessly to the wolves. He had not even bothered to check Mrs. Younge's references, trusting to the woman's word, charming speech, and ladylike appearance. Poor sweet Georgiana was still in anguish over all that had transpired.

He had checked his sister's new companion very carefully and thoroughly. Mrs. Annesley was neither more nor less than what she represented herself as being, and he knew that Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper at Pemberley, would be watching the woman as well. Still, he would be glad to have Mrs. Annesley under his own oversight when she and

Georgiana arrived shortly. How glad he would be to see his sister again!

A ball clattered into the pocket nearest him and Richard straightened, chalking his stick with a smug air.

“I will go, Bingley,” Richard said, breaking into Darcy’s thoughts, “but I am not certain about Darcy.”

Darcy blinked in bemusement and scowled at his cousin, who was grinning. Bingley merely stared back looking hopeful.

“Go where?” he demanded, rising to his feet and sauntering over to pour another half glass of brandy.

“To an assembly in Meryton tomorrow night,” Bingley explained. “They have an assembly once a month, and I am quite looking forward to it. All the local families will be there!”

Darcy openly winced and said, “You know I do not like dancing with strangers.”

“I know,” Bingley agreed. “It is quite all right; I will not be offended if you decide to stay here while Fitzwilliam and I dance the night away.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said with obvious relief. He really did not like crowded rooms and dancing with unknown ladies.

Richard coughed dramatically and Darcy shot him a confused look. “Do you wish to say something, Cousin?”

“I was merely wondering whether Miss Bingley might feel it is her duty to stay here with you, Darcy,” Richard said solemnly, but his eyes were dancing with devilry. “After all, you are an honored guest, and I wonder if Bingley’s devoted and conscientious sister would be entirely at ease with leaving you home alone. That would not be the height of courtesy.”

Darcy turned a horrified look on Bingley, and he saw the same spark of amusement in his friend’s eyes.

“Fitzwilliam is entirely correct,” the man said gravely. “Caroline is eager to prove herself an excellent hostess. But I daresay you can discuss Shakespearean plays or something of the sort, and we will only be away for a few hours.”

Darcy gulped, pondered, and made the only choice he could when faced with either spending a few hours in the company of the locals, or staying at Netherfield with the avaricious Miss Bingley, who wished above all else to win the position of Mrs. Darcy.

“I will come to the assembly,” he sighed.

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*Elizabeth's Bedchamber*

*Longbourn*

Elizabeth slipped gratefully between the warm linen sheets of her own familiar bed, robe and nightgown snuggled close about her. She reached up to adjust her nightcap as it slid askew against her pillow and then relaxed into the puffy down as she looked around her room.

All was just as she had left it when she departed for London. One corner of the cheerful gold-and-pink rug was flipped back. The rose-colored curtains had been drawn almost completely across the windows, holding in the light of the newly-lit fire just licking at the logs and starting to tentatively flare up into heat.

Out somewhere in the thin strip of dark sky visible between the rose curtains, an owl hooted. Crickets chirped, wind rustling through leaves and grass, and a nocturnal bird trilled his cheerful song. Elizabeth soaked in the quiet sounds of the country, so far removed from the rattle of carriages and the calls of chair-bearers, the drunken laughter, and the sounds of the Corinthians boxing the Watch. All the noises that hallmarked the streets of London and permeated the modest house in Cheapside.

Elizabeth dearly loved visiting her aunt and uncle, but she loved her home in the country even more. She adored the breeze that teased at her hair, the hills and brooks and grasses, the clean fresh smell. London had its attractions, but its pervasive aroma was certainly not one of them!

Elizabeth glanced briefly to her nightstand, where a little cunningly carved shepherdess sat next to a book whose title, *Lady of the Lake*, was emblazoned in gold across the

spine. She pondered picking it up, but decided not to read tonight. She had too much on her mind to fully enjoy the story.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Elizabeth called out, "Come in!"

The door opened to reveal her sister Mary, also in her night clothes, who stepped in and asked, "Elizabeth, may I speak to you?"

"Of course!" her sister said, shifting over in bed. "Do climb into bed, Mary; it is cold in this room."

Mary did so with alacrity, and within a minute the two sisters were snuggled together, enjoying the shared warmth.

"Is something wrong?" Elizabeth asked, observing the worry on her sister's face in the flickering light of the candle on the nightstand.

"I fear there is," her sister said with a sigh. "You saw Father today?"

Elizabeth wrapped an arm around Mary and said, "Yes, I saw him, and I know, he is very thin."

"Too thin. Do you not think ... I know that Mamma says it is only gout, but it seems like it must be more than that."

Elizabeth hesitated and then tightened her arm around her sister before saying, "There is more, yes. Jane and I have been aware for some months that Father has not been well, and he called us back from London because he is doing even worse now."

Mary swallowed hard and her eyes filled with tears. "I know he has seen Mr. Jones. Does he have any idea why our father is ill?"

"Father has seen both Mr. Jones and a doctor from London, and both believe it is cancer that is spreading."

Mary gasped at these words and cried out, "So is Father ... is he...?"

“Dying?” Elizabeth said, and pulled her sister closer still. “Father thinks so, yes, though not next week, or next month. No one is entirely certain. As to his emaciation, well, he says that Mamma is certain it is gout, and has a most bizarre set of beliefs about what Father should or should not be eating, and the soups and broths that sound pleasant are, in her view, unhealthy. He does not have much of an appetite anyway, so has not been eating much. Jane and I talked to Cook today, and we will arrange to have beef broths made and will ensure that Father can eat whatever he likes, which should help.”

“I wish to help too,” Mary said, blinking back tears.

“Thank you. Between the three of us, we will make certain that he is provided the food, drink, and peaceful company that he needs. Now Mary, Father does not wish Kitty and Lydia to know the truth yet. Kitty will worry and Lydia will be angry at Mamma for not accepting the truth that Father is seriously ill. We do not need screaming and arguing at Longbourn, for Father’s sake.”

Mary blew out a breath and said, “That ... makes sense. I tried to hint to Mamma that Father was perhaps suffering from a severe malady but she insisted that it is merely gout, and the more I protested, the louder she became.”

“She is terrified of Father’s death and refuses to accept the truth,” Elizabeth said starkly.

Silence fell for a few minutes, though Elizabeth could tell that Mary was deep in thought; her body kept shifting to one side and another, and she could see, in the candlelight, that Mary’s forehead was creased.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“Mr. Turnball wishes to marry me.”

Elizabeth turned a little more to stare intently at her sister’s profile. “I am not surprised, Mary. I have long thought that he is in love with you.”



Mary heaved out a sigh. “It is rather surprising given that I am plain.”

“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised,” Elizabeth quoted, and then continued, “Your Mr. Turnball is a wise man to fall in love with a lady who is kind, godly, and shares his interest in music. But it is not your suitor whom I am interested in, but you. Do you love Mr. Turnball, Mary?”

The girl turned away, and Elizabeth saw her shoulders shake, just as she heard a soft sob. “I am in love, I am, but oh Lizzy, I do not know because I am poor and Mr. Turnball is poor! I wonder if perhaps he should find another woman with a larger dowry.”

Elizabeth huffed indignantly and declared, “He would be a fool to set you aside for monetary reasons, especially since he has been promised the living in Kent, which will fall vacant soon, I believe?”

Mary turned around now and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “Yes, the current rector for that living is in failing health, but it could be six months or a year or two years, and how can we live on two hundred pounds a year? We can wait to marry, of course, but Mr. Turnball is eager to wed and oh, I do not wish to sound heartless at all, but if Father dies we will be in mourning, that would delay our marriage longer, and...”

“I understand completely,” her sister interrupted. “Mary, you should wed Mr. Turnball. The man has excellent expectations in the near future, and until he receives the living, Father can provide at least fifty pounds a year, perhaps one hundred. Jane and I can also provide some assistance – we both have money set aside...”

“Oh Lizzy, no! I would not dream of taking your hard earned money, or Jane’s!”

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth responded. “Mr. Turnball is a wonderful, caring man, and you and he are perfect together. Jane’s sculptures and carvings are selling well, and I promise

that both Jane and I want most of all for our sisters to be happy in marriage.”

Mary turned and suddenly reached forward to hug her tightly.

“Thank you, Lizzy!”

## Chapter 4

*Assembly Hall*

*Meryton*

*The next evening*

The assembly was, if anything, even worse than Darcy had imagined it would be.

Sweat ran under his collars, the room sweltering with the heat of the crowd. There were no windows in the hall, and the lack of ventilation only made the atmosphere more stifling. The light of dozens of candles – wax candles instead of foul-smelling tallow candles, thank God for small mercies – shone brilliantly from carefully-arranged mirrors.

Across the room a table had been set up with pitchers of lemonade and a bowl of arrack punch, with biscuits and ratafia cakes piled high on plates next to the drinks. Dames and matrons sat along the walls, gossiping busily, while their husbands sat around bored or clustered together in smaller groups near the potted plants. A corridor off to the right probably led to a room for the gentlemen interested in cards.

The generous floor was awash with color; the clothes of the dancers in many hues. There must be at least twenty local families here, a generous mixture of fathers and mothers and daughters and sons.

More daughters than sons. But that was no great surprise, really. The war against the Corsican tyrant had drained so many young men from the villages and towns, the cities and estates.

The people dancing and talking were typical of a place like Meryton. They were dressed in muslins instead of silks, and their behavior was not that of the truly fashionable

members of the haut ton. They laughed too loudly and ate too much in company.

Worst of all, of course, were the mutterings of the matrons of the place and their simpering daughters.

“Mr. Bingley has five thousand pounds a year!”

“Mr. Darcy has ten thousand pounds a year and a large estate in Derbyshire!”

“Mr. Fitzwilliam is the son of an earl!”

Darcy grimaced to himself as he led Mrs. Hurst, Bingley’s older sister, into the last movement of the dance. He would dance the next set with Miss Bingley, and then he intended to hide in a corner for the rest of the night. Bingley and Richard could please the local ladies by dancing with their daughters. He refused to do so.

As he approached Miss Bingley to ask her to dance, he noted that there was one truly lovely lady amongst the dancers, a blond girl of some twenty summers, with blue eyes, an exquisite countenance, and a perfect figure. Bingley was radiating enthusiasm, which was no surprise, as the younger man had always had an eye for blondes, and this woman was incredibly lovely.

Not that Darcy was interested in the woman. He would dance with Miss Bingley and consider his duty complete for the evening.

Miss Bingley was, he quickly learned, as displeased as he was with the entire affair. She hissed vindictively into his ear during the cotillion, making remarks about the clothing of the other dancers, and their lack of skill in dancing, and the poor taste in music, and the vapid decorations. He agreed with her, of course, but did not enjoy hearing her whine.

As his body performed the appropriate movements of the dance, he considered a letter he had just received from his steward at Pemberley regarding a tenant who had broken his leg only a few days before the man’s wife had birthed a fifth child. The family was struggling, and Darcy took seriously his

responsibilities as master of Pemberley. He would order his steward to arrange for baskets of food and...

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy, that was entirely delightful,” Miss Bingley said coyly.

Darcy blinked and looked around. The dance was over, and his best friend’s unmarried sister was hanging on his arm with the determination of a limpet.

“Thank you, Miss Bingley,” Darcy said, forcing himself to focus on his partner. “Might I fetch you a glass of lemonade or punch?”

“Oh, punch, to be sure,” Miss Bingley replied, “thank you, Mr. Darcy. I do hope that these yokels are able to make a decent punch.”

He winced at these words, which were spoken all too loudly, and guided Miss Bingley over to a chair near her sister, Mrs. Hurst. He then fetched a glass of punch for each of the ladies, whereupon he slipped away and tried to hide unobtrusively behind a large potted plant. He was only partially successful; he was a tall man, and the richest of the single gentlemen in attendance. He was painfully aware of the regard of the older women sitting on the chairs and of the young ladies swirling around on the dance floor. Some of the gentlemen were glancing at him too.

He knew what they were thinking.

*“How wonderful to have ten thousand pounds a year! To be related to an earl!”*

He *was* fortunate, he knew that. He and Georgiana would never go hungry, would never be cold or poorly dressed. Yes, they were blessed.

But he was also burdened by tremendous responsibilities. He was, at age eight and twenty, master of an enormous estate, with dozens of tenant farmers. The local town of Lambton, filled with people very much like those who populated Meryton, also depended on Pemberley since the

inhabitants of the estate purchased many of their goods and foodstuffs from the town.

Last, but definitely not least, he was weighed down with concern over Georgiana. His little sister, more than a decade his junior, had lost both father and mother before she had turned twelve years of age. Darcy was more father than brother, but realistically, he was *not* her father. He was intelligent and hard-working, but that had not been enough at Ramsgate.

He wished, again, that he had been able to knock out a couple of George Wickham's teeth.

"Darcy!"

Darcy jerked in surprise and stared at Bingley, who had, now that the set was completed, left the dance floor and was staring at him with merry eyes and a slightly flushed countenance. Darcy guessed that Bingley had enjoyed at least two cups of punch already, and while the man was not generally prone to getting drunk, he was probably especially cheerful.

"Yes?" Darcy asked in a forbidding manner. He knew Bingley; the man was the best of friends, but he was also outgoing and energetic. It was all too likely that Bingley would try to provoke him into dancing. When Bingley was flush with alcohol, he could never remember how much Darcy disliked dancing with strangers.

"Come, Darcy," said Bingley, "I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance."

Darcy grimaced, sorry to be correct about Bingley's purpose. He said, "I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this, it would be insupportable. Your sisters are not available, and there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with."

“I would not be so fastidious as you are,” cried Bingley, “for a kingdom! Upon my honor, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them, you see, uncommonly pretty.”

Darcy looked rather desperately to the left and caught sight of the blonde haired angel, who was standing with her hand on the arm of a young gentleman in a blue coat.

“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” he said, lifting his chin toward the blonde.

“Oh, she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.”

“Which do you mean?” Darcy demanded, looking around at the young lady sitting in a chair nearby. She had chestnut hair and dark brown eyes. His dour mood prompted him to ignore that she was quite lovely, and he said coldly, “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.”

At this moment, two things happened in succession. First, the girl in question turned and lifted one eyebrow. He felt his chest clench within him; had she heard his insulting words?

Second, Richard Fitzwilliam, younger son of the Earl of Matlock, Darcy’s cousin, and to some degree his handler, abruptly appeared in Darcy’s field of view and glared dangerously. Darcy swallowed and felt himself straighten. He had rarely been at the receiving end of Fitzwilliam’s ire, but he recognized the authority in those gray eyes. Nor did he have any confusion about why his cousin was angry with him.

“I am sorry,” he muttered. “I spoke too loudly.”

“Loudly and rudely,” Fitzwilliam murmured back, continuing to peer sternly at the master of Pemberley. “Now, you will immediately ask Bingley to introduce you to the lady you just insulted so egregiously, and ask her for a dance. Is that clear?”

Darcy winced at these words, but nodded obediently. After all, this was exactly why he was effectively paying his cousin to look after him; Richard Fitzwilliam was the soul of courtesy and Darcy, with his penchant for distraction, and his stiff demeanor, often caused offense.

“Very well,” he said with a sigh. “Bingley, will you kindly arrange for me to meet the young lady behind us?”

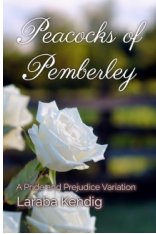
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**- Laraba**

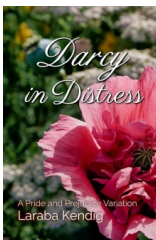


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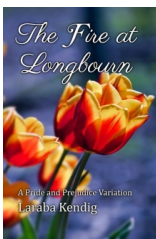
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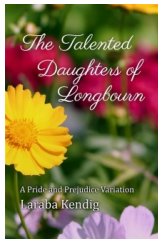
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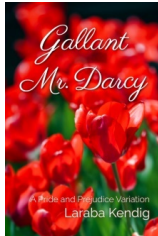
[The Banished Uncle](#)



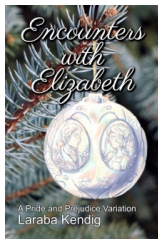
[The Fire at Longbourn](#)



[The Talented Daughters of Longbourn](#)



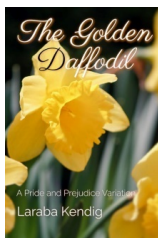
[Gallant Mr. Darcy](#)



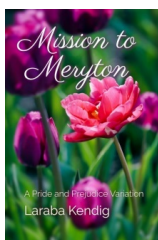
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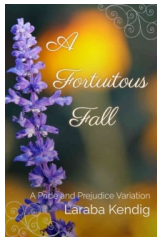
[Longbourn's Son](#)



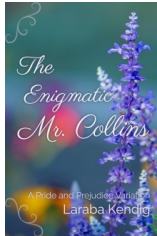
[The Golden Daffodil](#)



[Mission to Meryton](#)



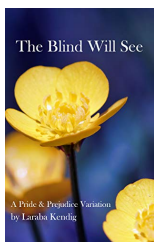
[A Fortuitous Fall](#)



[The Enigmatic Mr. Collins](#)



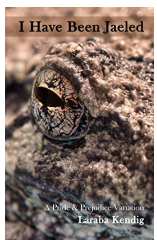
[Darcy Sails After Her](#)



[The Blind Will See](#)



[I am Jael](#)



[I Have Been Jaeled](#)

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## Author's Note

A plot point in this book is that Lady Catherine wants Darcy to marry her daughter Anne after Lawrence Darcy, Anne's first husband and Darcy's elder brother, dies. Interestingly enough in Britain during the Regency, a man marrying his brother's widow was legal but not permitted under ecclesiastical law. Any such marriage was in danger of being voided if someone with influence pressed hard enough on the matter.

That seems bizarre to me in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why would that be a problem? They allowed first cousins to marry, why not a man to his brother's widow? According to an interesting article by Rachel Knowles, the reasoning for forbidding such a marriage was based largely on Biblical interpretation at the time. Well, readers, that makes even less sense! In the Old Testament, a man was *ordered* to marry his brother's widow so that the dead man's line would not be cut off!

Incidentally, some 300 years before the Regency, Henry VIII, he of the six wives, tried to obtain a legal divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she was married to Henry's elder brother Arthur, before Arthur's untimely death at the age of 15. Yes, Arthur married his wife, who was about his age, at the age of 15. Too young, I say! Too young! Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon were married for more than 20 years before Henry ditched Catherine in favor of Anne Boleyn. I think it almost certain that if Catherine had succeeded in providing a healthy son or two, she would not have been sent away, but alas, she had numerous children but only one healthy child, and that was a girl (Mary).

There is, in my view, no reason why a woman can't be a fabulous monarch. Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II were good queens, and so was Queen Victoria. One issue is that women in those days often died in childbirth and indeed Princess Charlotte, who was heiress to the throne during most of the Regency, died in childbirth in 1817, and her child with her. So sad! Of course, Henry VIII wasn't thinking about the dangers

of childbirth. He was thinking women were inferior. He was a lousy human being – divorced two wives and executed two others.

By the way, during the Regency, no less a personage than Jane Austen's brother married two sisters (not at the same time, of course) so obviously such marriages did occur. In 1835, laws were passed making such marriages entirely illegal, and those laws were not repealed in their entirety until the 1920's!

I have a book suggestion for you, *Civil Contract*, by Georgette Heyer. There are some similarities to my book and hers, in that the male hero finds himself master of an estate burdened with heavy debts. Fortunately for Mr. Darcy in this book, he was able to sell off a few things and save Pemberley. In *Civil Contract*, the hero, Adam Deveril, succeeds a spendthrift father and is in danger of losing everything if he does not marry for money. He does and ends up loving his wife very much. It is a charming, well written book.

As usual, I am enjoying writing very much, largely thanks to my loyal and faithful readers. THANK YOU for giving me a chance to share my ideas for the Pride and Prejudice world and our dear characters.

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my wonderful husband Kevin, who has sacrificed and served me and our children for so many years, and to our children, who make each day special.

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