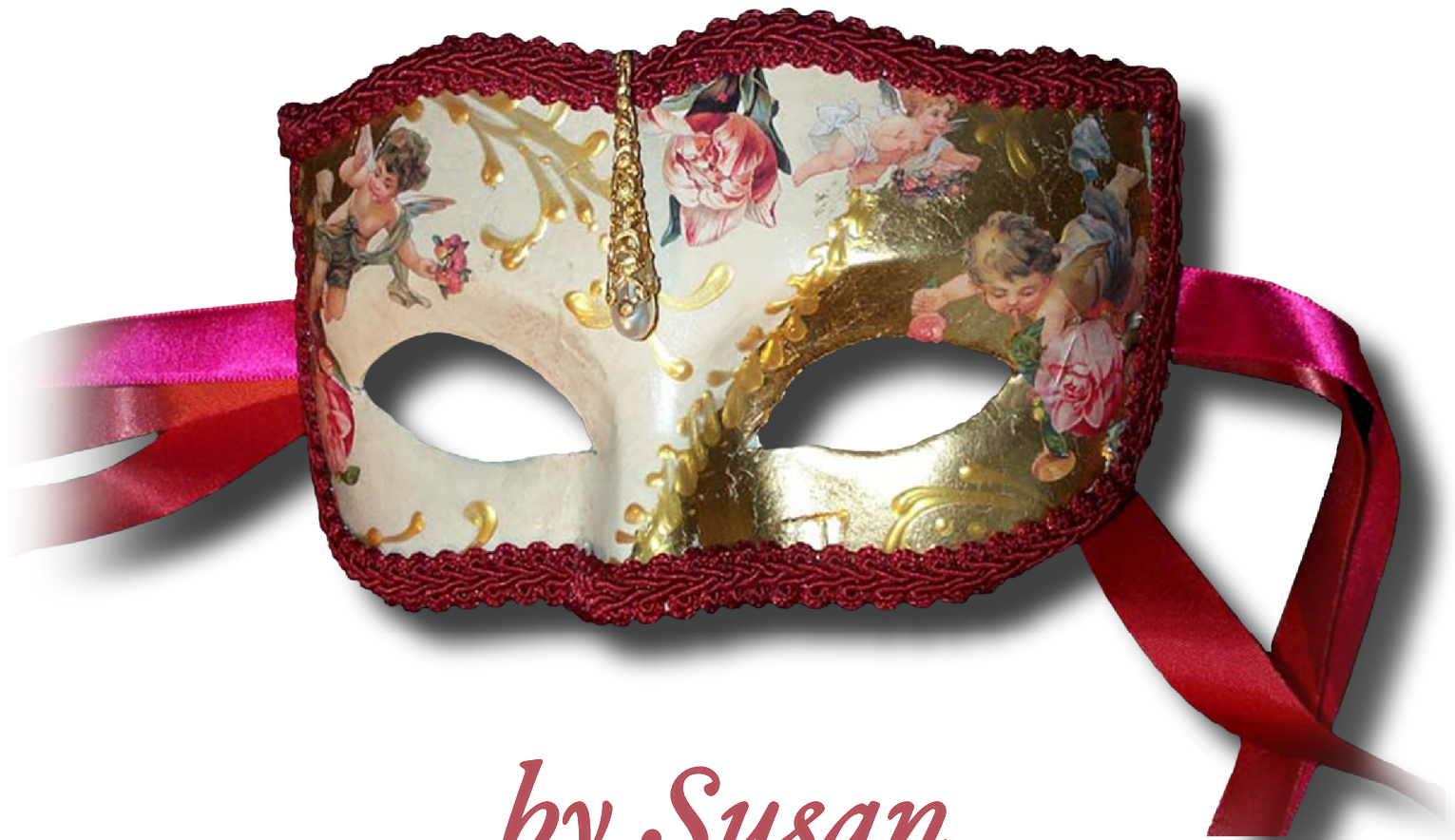


Disguise of Every Sort



by Susan

Book One



Chapter 1

LONDON, JANUARY, 1813

Lord Robert Caldhart walked confidently through the early winter air. His superior countenance was easily observed by those he passed, most of whom he did not deign to recognize with even the barest of civility. He was tall, rich, powerful, and still handsome, and he knew it. Despite his advanced years of one and sixty, time had been a good friend to his Lordship. He had a fine head of wavy silver and black peppered hair, and his steel blue eyes still flashed around his numerous crow's feet. He had forgone the current fashion of long sideburns or mutton chops for a full, though extremely trim beard and moustache. He rather resembled a royal courtier of Richard the Lionheart if one considered it, but the overall look was a man quite dashing if perhaps not in his prime. As far as Lord Robert was concerned, he *was* in his prime, and trifling things such as age and doctors' warnings were not going to slow him down. Naturally, advanced years still took their toll; his waist was not what it had once been, and he really could not partake in any of the more vigorous activities that men of the *ton* fancied. He had last tried to fence almost a year ago and had had to excuse himself rather early in the exercise due truthfully to loss of breath but, to his foe, he sheepishly claimed an earlier forgotten appointment. Lord Robert quickly dismissed such activities as unworthy and continued in his lovely rose-coloured world of utter superiority amongst men and society.

Not that such an opinion was completely unfounded. For Lord Robert was a man envied by most as the luckiest devil alive. He was born to a well-titled family with a fair amount of wealth and no hint of major scandal to blacken the family name. That in itself would have been enough to garner the envy of many but, when his Lordship was barely a man, hardly past many seasons in town, he had gained the attention of a rather plain, though exquisitely dowered young debutante by the name of Miss Emily Spottingham. A short courtship and sumptuous wedding followed four months later. His Lordship admirably performed his duty to his wife and family and, just a few years later, was blessed with two healthy sons. As if the fates could not bestow upon him sufficient kindnesses, he was further gifted with widowhood shortly after the birth of his second son. Thus at just five and twenty, Lord Robert Caldhart was an outrageously wealthy widower with an heir and a spare, his late wife's one hundred and twenty thousand pounds firmly planted in the vaults of his family's banker, and absolutely no need to marry ever again. So *not* marry he did, frequently, and

with passion rarely seen (much less available) to any other man of Society.

Lord Caldhart's mistresses were famous. There was really no other word for it. He had spent a lifetime with the finest woman flesh the world had to offer. Many a man dwelt on his uncanny ability to find a superior lady better than most of them could find their next horse. Over the years, the men's clubs of London fairly buzzed with news of his latest "acquisition." Of course, picking a mistress probably involved more effort than picking a horse, and most men were quick to agree to such a notion, but what most (actually all) of them failed to understand was that Lord Robert was not just good at making such a choice, he was the premier expert.

He sighed contentedly when thinking of his extensive personal history. It was his passion in life; finding *the* woman, the best possible woman for himself. His parameters were beyond high and exacting. He wanted not just beauty, not just desirable physical attributes, but also a mind, and an ability to entertain, delight, and engage for a very long time. He was if nothing else, very practical. To have to rearrange his circumstances every few months simply made no sense whatsoever. A mistress who only lasted six months or a year would hardly suffice for a man who was determined to live a very long time. Good heavens, the attorney bills alone would deplete his excellent fortune under such demands. No, a woman whom he could rely upon for a good many years made much more sense, and so Lord Robert began his personal career: a lifetime of planning, hunting for, and acquiring exquisite, enviable mistresses.

Now after over thirty years of such activities, most people would think his Lordship would slow down, and at the very least, choose an older, quieter companion to share the last, sweet days of his "autumn in life" sedately and out of the limelight that he had commanded for so long. But Lord Robert was not accommodating.

And so it was with no thought at all to acquiesce to the opinions of the good people of England that Caldhart hastened to the newest jewel in London, a cigar shop that his good friend, a Mr. Henry Lloyd, had recommended to him: Johnson's House of Cigars. An excellent cigar was almost as good as an excellent woman of course, and such pursuits were a highly desirable activity for his Lordship.

Entering the establishment, Lord Robert was struck by the elegance and taste of the shop. One felt as if he had just entered his club. There were comfortable leather chairs, discreetly placed away from the street, at the back of the store near a small fireplace; dark, masculine panelling adorned the lower half of the walls while the upper was painted in a rich umber. Nowhere were the typical cases of row upon row of product on display. Only a large gentleman's desk on the side of the room indicated that any business might take place here. One would almost think that one was supposed to actually consume one's cigar on the premises, instead of purchasing said article to return home with. Most sur-

prising of all, instead of a man, a woman approached him, curtsying low before him.

“Good afternoon sir, how may I be of service to you?” she inquired. Her accent was strange, not exactly the London shopkeeper accent he was so used to, but still revealed her lower station, despite the inability to place her origin.

“I beg your pardon, I am not exactly sure how one proceeds in this establishment. I wish to acquire a supply of fine cigars, but I do not see any such things for sale.”

The woman, her head deeply bowed to him, smiled slightly. She stood with hunched shoulders, plainly dressed in a dull and modest grey print gown, no hint of a figure perceptible. She wore a white lace cap, typical of the married ladies of the day, pulled well down her forehead. She also wore a pair of thick spectacles upon her nose. Overall it would have been difficult to say what the woman actually looked like, considering how much of her was not available to be seen. This, combined with her demure habit of keeping her head bowed, did not provide any information about her personal attributes, if there were any that could be discerned. She simply blended into the background of her shop, as if neither female or male—just a person.

“Of course sir; you are new to our shop. Please let me explain how we might be able to help you. Please allow me to ask you questions pertaining to your past experiences of what you found enjoyable, and most importantly, not enjoyable in your cigars. Based on this information, I will be able to recommend a suitable, and I hope highly satisfactory smoke for you.” Lord Robert was quite taken aback. *How unusual!* To find someone who could custom design his own blend based on what he could tell them. He hesitated to reveal such news to a stranger, however slight the importance of what he smoked. Seeing his hesitancy, she reassured him,

“I will blend and make up a short for you, which you are welcome to partake of here, to see if it meets your approval, and then you can decide if you wish to make a purchase.”

“Singular!” he thought. “If she truly has a talent for this, it is an excellent way to conduct business.” He then proceeded to allow the woman to ask a series of ever more detailed questions of his smoking habits. She was patient and thorough, an inherent intelligence showing in her well executed questions. He had not thought much on what he liked and why, but she had a way of extracting detailed information for analysis that he had never really considered. Given how much he liked his after dinner smoke, he considered how ill thought out that really was, but he still left any decision as to whether Johnson’s could provide him with a superior product to purchase to his now anticipated sampling.

She guided him to a seat and excused herself to her workroom, behind a curtain in the rear, to make up his cigar. A few minutes later she returned and he lit up. Unparalleled taste filled his mouth; it was all the things he liked in a cigar rolled into one very delightful concoction. He grinned in

decadent satisfaction, as one who has his favourite dessert served before him.

“Perfection,” he sighed. The lady bowed her head and curtsied again. She left him to savour his new found treasure while she wrote up the details of the blend she had prepared for him at the desk.

He sat relishing the piquancy of his prize, when the bell at the door cheerfully jingled the arrival of several new customers, distracting the proprietress from him. The first gentleman greeted her as Mrs. Johnson and knowing exactly what he wanted, gave her his name and requirements, while she looked up his blend in her record book. She had just glanced up at her other customers, a man and a woman, when Lord Robert heard her sudden sharp intake of breath, and he turned his head, curious to see what had caused such a reaction. She quickly bowed her own, but he could see from the lower position in his seat that her eyes were furiously darting to and fro and her shoulders betrayed her rapid breathing. It was as if she didn’t know what to do, and was fighting unsuccessfully a frantic urge to bolt. He noticed where the proprietress’s stare had been focused: it was on the couple. The man was almost as tall as himself with dark wavy hair and a smug, satisfied air about him that seemed gentlemanly. That is until the young woman next to him spoke. A small, shapely blonde, dressed rather provocatively considering she was out shopping; neither her person nor her speech did anything to raise anyone’s opinion of her. She was most definitely not a lady, and being in her company brought Lord Robert’s opinion of the young man immediately down.

“Georgie, my love,” she squawked, “surely you don’t mean to spend your tuppence on cigars? I want you to take me to shop for a new bonnet. Do you not want to see your best Sally girl in a new bonnet? Think how everyone would be green with envy!”

This “Georgie” smiled sweetly to his lady love and pretended to whisper intimately in her ear, but spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“My dear, they envy you already for being *my* lady.”

He was rewarded with a vulgar squeal and a pair of shocked, raised eyebrows, before the woman eagerly nodded and they both headed out the door. It happened very quickly, but the scene’s effect on the shopkeeper was unmistakable. She was clearly in great distress. She abruptly excused herself on the pretense of mixing the newest gentleman’s blend, and disappeared behind her curtain.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Lord Robert decided to move to the chair closest to the back room, where he could not see, but he could now hear her, even if she was speaking under her breath.

“George Wickham!” she hissed through gritted teeth. “The nerve of that rake, that cad, to come into my shop and flaunt his newest trollop in front of everyone. Smile if you dare, fustian cur, breathe the sweet air while you can, for now I have seen you, your days are numbered. I will find

Chapter 2

LONDON, JANUARY 1813

you, I will find Lydia, and you will pay in every way I can concoct and more that I have yet to devise, but I will make you suffer as we have. I will have justice, and if I am very lucky, your damnable head on a platter.”

Caldhart swallowed hard at having heard such venom spoken, then two thoughts entered his mind almost simultaneously: “*My, she certainly is a fiery woman.*” And then, “*Wait a moment! Where did her accent go?*”

Now this was interesting. She spoke no more, so he rose and moved about before returning to the chair she had originally given him. Moments later she appeared with her customer’s cigars and finished the sale. Lord Caldhart discreetly pretended to not pay attention, hoping to gather any further information on her situation. After seeing the gentleman to the door, she stayed there, perusing the streets attentively, obviously trying to see where this George might be. She stood on tiptoe and frowned hard as if something very far away had caught her eye, and lifting her spectacles off her face, she peered carefully.

This motion had two effects on Lord Robert. The first, was having finally been afforded an unobstructed view of her face, he had to stifle a gasp, as he gazed upon a pair of the finest eyes he had seen in these many years, set in a very handsome woman. The second was a shock, for her dress, which he had previously considered modest and demure, was nonetheless not very heavy, and her position at the front of her shop, with the afternoon light pouring in through the large windows, and his position in the darkened back of the shop gave him an incomparably clear view of the lady’s not at all modest figure, now standing tall and straight. Good Lord! She was magnificent! He felt the blood rushing from his brain to places more able to appreciate such loveliness.

“Damn my traitorous body,” he thought. But his reverie was soon interrupted, as she shrunk back into her former modest self and came to stand before him.

“I am sorry to interrupt you sir; I would not normally do so while a gentleman is enjoying his cigar, but I wanted to let you know to please feel free to take your time, and if there is anything I can get you, or help you with please do not hesitate to ask. I will keep myself busy while you finish and, until you are ready.”

Her accent was back, but her voice betrayed slight tremors as she still struggled for her control. He couldn’t help wondering what her situation was, who was George, who was Lydia, and mostly who was she? Clearly not a lowly shopkeeper; that was obvious. He was determined to learn more.

Almost as much as the excellent dozen cigars he now had tucked under his arm as he left the shop, Lord Robert Caldhart thought he would enjoy discovering the mystery that was Mrs. Johnson.

“Six months.” Elizabeth thought, “It was six months ago today that I last saw him.” She sat at her dressing table, staring into the glass at a woman she no longer recognized. This woman looked plain, dowdy, worn out and very married. She shook her head at her image. She knew she had only herself to blame.

Then she remembered how *he* had looked as he turned the corner of Pemberley, standing directly in front of her, neither of them believing their eyes. How handsome he was. Even with his hair dishevelled, and the grey black dust from the road clinging to the shoulders of his green coat, he took her breath away. She was sure he could tell. She had replayed that beautiful day over and over again in her mind’s eye, along with the rest of that lovely afternoon. She remembered all of it; his civility, his solicitude, his kindness, with sweetness and pain at the same time. Like a beautiful dream it would start with a wonderful beginning, the joy she had felt, the giddy feeling in her heart, the constant blush upon her cheeks, but then came the bitter disappointment, the agony, and later, the despair.



DERBYSHIRE, JULY 1812

THE GARDINERS AND ELIZABETH spoke little on their return trip from Pemberley to the Lambton Inn late that afternoon. Lizzy was too deep in thought over the wonder of seeing Darcy again and the Gardiners were far too surprised at his treatment of their niece and themselves. They arrived well before sunset and were just settling into the dining room when the servant girl came in with the earlier delivered mail. Lizzy had two letters from Jane, the contents of which could not be believed. Her youngest sister Lydia had eloped with Mr. George Wickham. After her outburst and tears, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were given the letters to read for themselves. While consoling Elizabeth as best they could, they arranged for their immediate departure to Hertfordshire. Their concerns over Lydia and the family still reeling in their heads, it would not be until late that night, at an inn far from Derbyshire, that Elizabeth would suddenly recall her failure to leave any word to Mr.

Darcy about their sudden absence, and their inability to be present for his introduction of Miss Darcy. She realized how terribly rude it would reflect upon them. Unfortunate as that was, she also knew in her heart that all acquaintance between them would now be at an end due to the scandal her thoughtless sister had thrust upon her and her family.

“Perhaps it was best,” she thought, “I would never wish to bring such shame to him.” But with that thought she also realized that her desire to protect him and his sister was not out of duty, or even friendship, but from a much more tender emotion. It had budded in her heart, tiny and unnoticed, the day he had given her his letter in Kent. It had begun to grow as she read the letter over and over, and had had the time to reflect on both of their behaviours and most especially her reactions, to him. After understanding her own vanity and how it had prejudiced her against him, she had begun to realize his true value. Finally today, when she had come face to face with him, uninvited at his home, instead of reproach, or anger, he had treated her with every civility, better than she would have thought possible, and she could not help but admire him all the more. It was then she understood that she was in love with him. It truly was the most horrible day of her life.



LONGBOURN, OCTOBER 1812

ELIZABETH WOKE AS THE light of dawn slowly eased the dimness of her bedroom away. The house was yet still, as no one usually stirred this early. She relished this quiet time, before the storm of noise that was her family would rain down upon the house. She knew she must find her peace where she could, as there was little chance of any happiness this day.

Her mother would start the day in high hopes that a letter would come, informing them that her brother Gardiner had succeeded in finding Lydia, that she and Wickham were undoubtedly already married, and that the whole thing had been an unfortunate error of miscommunication. Mrs. Bennet thought if she could will it, it would be done, therefore she would repeat it, out loud, tautologically. Lizzy knew, that as the day wore on, she and her sisters would be required to attend Mrs. Bennet more and more, as her mother's hope would turn to anxiety, and finally crescendo into a crying fit by end of day. She would watch her sisters exhaust themselves trying to appease a woman incapable of being helped, and selfish in her need for attention from everyone in the house. This day would be like all the other days had been for the past two months.

Her father rarely came into any of their presence anymore. Elizabeth would not have thought it possible for him to hide away in his library more often than in the past, but he did manage it. He could no longer bear to listen to his wife's endless effusions and, if he did appear, she would badger him for news that he simply did not have. Soon they avoided each other almost as enemies. Elizabeth suspected that her father was feeling the shame of his neglect in his parenting duties, while her mother was blaming him for her own. The tension in the house was palpable.

Not knowing where Lydia was, or if she was well, was in the forefront of everyone's mind. The unanswered questions of whether she might be ill, hurt or hungry was constantly nagging them. They were concerned, but also furious with Lydia. These two emotions contrasted and fought within each family member's heart. Sadly, the daughters did not know what to do with such feelings. They had no guidance as to how to react to them. Their parent's failures were never more pronounced.

As each day passed, and the reality of the inevitable seemed more and more obvious, they were at a loss as to how to proceed. Not being privileged to the actions their father and uncle were undertaking, the daughters had no idea if they would give Lydia up for missing. Would they try to get on with their lives without her? Should they start to think to their own futures? What futures could they even reasonably consider? The girls were frustrated but, instead of spending any time solving anything, they were required to attend their mother and diffuse the animosity between their parents.

Kitty chose to remain in blissful ignorance of the enormity of the scandal. She whined about trivial pursuits she felt herself denied, and joined her mother's woeful cries each day about how put upon she was.

Mary was happy to continue her self-proclaimed role as spiritual advisor to her family. She smugly considered herself to be personally above reproach, and therefore, entitled, nay, required to set those around her on the path to righteousness. She was not a little vexed when no one heeded her sermons or recitations of Fordyce. Soon she would learn the evil of guilt by association, when no amount of purity on her part would be able to wipe away the stain of her sister's sins that bled onto her.

Jane had assumed her typical role as nurturing peacemaker and, angel that she was, kept up her smiling countenance, which was a boon to all around her. Only Elizabeth was privileged to her true sadness. At night, when the house was abed, they would confide in one another. Jane was determined to stay strong and serene for her family, but it was Lizzy upon whom she relied to open her heart and unburden herself of her sorrow. Jane was no fool; she knew with Lydia's disgrace the future was bleak for them all, and she felt it exceedingly.

Perhaps her family would have been able to bear the stressful situation better with the help of concerned fam-

ily and friends. Unfortunately, they would not know. Soon after Mr. Bennet returned from London without a clue as to where his daughter was, the Bennets began to feel the ramifications of Lydia's foolish actions.

Aunt Philips was the first to inform them of their neighbours' interest in, and shock at, the Bennet's misfortunes. Indeed, according to their aunt, there were few people in all of Meryton and the surrounding countryside who were not talking everyday about everything that had happened in the Bennets' lives. A good many things that had not actually happened were discussed as well, as they made for an even better story. No one could be pleased with being the subject of the town's gossips, but there was little that could be done. Mrs. Philips promised to call every day, and keep them up to date with the latest news.

As the following days passed, the news to be related was mostly confined to their own troubles. Mr. Bennet's unsuccessful endeavours and subsequent return to Longbourn from London was considered the most interesting of all. Some two weeks after this event, Aunt Philips came at her usual time with rather disturbing tidings. It seemed that the evening before, several of the prominent families in and around Meryton, gathering in private council, had together decided that the Bennet's society was no longer considered respectable. The next day at church services confirmed the new status the Bennets had been affixed: no one would acknowledge them. As they entered the church, whispers floated through the air and "scandal, shameful, no decency, and offensive people" could be heard. The buzz quickly grew as most eyes were averted from them while the tongues wagged. They walked home in stunned silence; even Mrs. Bennet could not think to speak. The life they had known seemed to be slipping away; they were now unwanted strangers in their own neighbourhood.

The next week when Elizabeth attempted to call upon Charlotte Lucas at Lucas Lodge, she was informed by the housekeeper the family was not in. This surprised her, as morning calls were a particularly favoured activity for Lady Lucas, and she rarely missed the opportunity to participate. The second time Lizzy tried to call upon the Lucases and was given the same answer, she was effectively enlightened to yet a new aspect of her family's social status. Apparently even her cousin, Mr. Collins, and his new wife found the Bennet's society beneath them.

Mary, Kitty, and Jane all had similar experiences around the neighbourhood. Most of society chose to use the excuse of the family not being at home, though some people were frank enough to allow the housekeepers to tell the girls they would no longer be received. Although difficult to hear such a thing while standing in the hall of a former acquaintance, it at least saved them from bothering with future visits that would be fruitless.

Finally, the most cruel of acts occurred to Kitty and Jane in Meryton. The two had gone to shop for bonnet ribbons in the new autumn colours, and had just entered the

store where two of their neighbours had been speaking with the proprietress. Mrs. Evans and her daughter stopped mid-speech upon spying them, raised their noses into the air, and told Mrs. Hawkins, the owner, they would return to make their purchases at a time when the shop was more suitable for ladies.

Not satisfied enough with this small insult, Mrs. Evans then continued, "Perhaps Mrs. Hawkins, you should consider your clientele more carefully. If you wish people of respectability to continue to give you their custom, then you should serve only those who are worthy."

The Evans party then made a show of walking widely around them lest they somehow should come in contact with the Bennet sisters as they exited.

Jane and Kitty were mortified. Kitty's eyes were already starting to gloss from tears when Jane put a comforting arm around her shoulders. Mrs. Hawkins stood, mouth agape, looking after Mrs. Evans and not sure of what she should say. Quietly, and with as much dignity as she could, Jane led her sister silently out of the shop and back to their home.

Elizabeth would always remember Jane's pale face as she and Kitty returned that morning, Kitty silently weeping into Jane's shoulder, Jane whispering endearments to Kitty, praising her gentility, telling her how she would always be a lady, and that no one could ever take that from her. All the while her voice remained calm, but Jane's face betrayed the trauma she had been through. Only after Kitty had settled and was resting in her room, was Lizzy able to get Jane out to a secluded section of the garden and Jane's long-held composure finally broke. Falling to her knees and covering her face in her hands, Jane sobbed loudly, forlornly, and mournfully for nearly half an hour. Lizzy thought her heart would break. She had never seen her darling Jane so emotional before.

"Oh, Lizzy, I cannot believe the cruelty of people. I did not think such viciousness existed. How are we to endure; what is to become of us; how can we live like this?" She began sobbing again, her chest painfully heaving to allow her gasps of breath in between her cries. Elizabeth knelt down next to her beloved sister and wrapped her in her arms, rocking her as if a child, holding Jane's head to her cheek as she tried to kiss away the pain. Jane cried for all the pent-up sadness she had pushed far back into herself and had not allowed to surface. She cried for the weeks of happy faces she had forced herself to show to the world while inside she had felt such vexation. She cried for a future she feared would be bleak. She cried the grieving, moaning cry of someone who had lost a loved one, and indeed, that was exactly how Jane felt, as though all of them had lost happiness itself.

If Mr. Bennet heard any of his daughters' cries, he did not acknowledge it. Elizabeth knew he could not have missed that morning's drama. His usual routine of ignoring what he did not like was yet another vexation to her. Jane's questioning cry was turning over and over in her mind: how *were* they going to live like this?

No one was more frustrated than Elizabeth. Besides the daily dealings with her mother, she had tried to help her father and uncle in their endeavours. Her father, feeling his inadequacies at finding any evidence of the missing couple, had simply given up and come home, much too soon in her opinion. The last thing his wounded ego could support was a willingness to listen to his daughter's questions, ideas and schemes. Instead of realizing the potential worth of her contributions, he considered her ridiculous for even thinking she could help and dismissed her out of hand more than once. He was mortified to think he should have to bear the disapprobation of one of his own children.

Her shame knew no bounds. That her father would be so selfish as to sit in his manor house, comfortably reading his books, rather than search for his youngest daughter was beyond her comprehension. She was ashamed he would allow her uncle to take up this task, a man with four young children and a business to run, compared to her father with four grown women perfectly able to care for his estate concerns in his absence. She was always aware of his shortcomings, but his indulgence of himself over his family in their time of need stunned her. Her mother's own indulgence was already a matter of practice, but that, now combined with her father's, wounded her greatly.

Her nightly talks with Jane distressed her as well. Seeing her sister's bloom waning under their burdens and knowing that Jane was taking the most responsibility in helping everyone, fueled her anger. It was not Jane's duty to give so much and receive so little in return. She knew if things were left as they were that her parents had the ability to crush her dear spirit until there might not be anything left to give, and happiness might never be possible.

She was furious with Lydia. Furious with her parents for having indulged her all her life. Furious with Colonel Forster and his silly excuse of a wife for not chaperoning her properly. Furious at London for providing the couple with so easy a place to hide. But mostly, she was furious with one man.

She felt the limitations of her sex excessively. If only she were an elder brother; she could be in London, searching daily. She could walk the streets at night without fear. Her inability to be able to do anything was maddening. She wanted to hurt something. She wanted to give pain to something. She desperately wanted to scream and yell, and make someone pay for the unhappiness her family was forced into.

Time is not always a friend. Time can wrought hatred, contempt, and evil in a mind that was once tuned to love, wit, humor, and the ability to laugh at human folly. Time can be most cruel to those who undeservedly are wronged and must endure for days, weeks, months on end, the hopelessness and despair of ever being happy again. Time allows feelings that never before had been known to silently, stealthily and like a deadly cancer, worm their way into the heart and choke the goodness that had once over-

flowed. Time wore on Elizabeth until she no longer saw the good, but rather the contempt of her fellow man, and most especially in one man, the one man she saw as the single reason for her, and her family's unhappiness: George Wickham.



BEFORE THE ONSET OF winter, the Bennet household was blessed with unexpected visitors when the Gardiners arrived. Mr. Bennet did not seem well-pleased to see his brother-in-law and family, much to his daughter's surprise. The girls, however were relieved to have their sensible, much loved aunt and uncle with them. Elizabeth watched her father and uncle's interaction with barely disguised agitation. She knew they would soon head off alone to her father's library for a private conference. She was dying to know what developments might have occurred to bring her uncle to see them from London. After they had adjourned from the ladies, she quietly slipped out from the drawing room and into the hall to try to hear any hints through the impeding door that barred her from the library. Luckily, her father's voice could be plainly heard.

"And what has this Mr. Brooks come up with, Edward? What results has he produced after all the money we have paid out, eh?" Mr. Bennet snidely remarked.

"I'm sorry to say, Thomas, not a thing. Mr. Brooks came well recommended, and I believe he has tried his best, but they have vanished into the slums of London, and no one has heard a word. There is nothing for the poor man to sniff out. Wickham's regiment is on the lookout for him, but they will hardly spare any men to look for a deserter. I'm afraid it's useless, Brother. I have little hope, and I hardly need tell you, little time left. I must attend to my businesses or my family's welfare may soon suffer along with their reputation. I am truly sorry not to bear better news."

"Then it is as I feared; she will never be recovered." She heard the scraping of his desk chair, and then the poker stabbing at the logs in the fire. "I will never hear the end of it from your sister," he spat bitterly.

"Yes, well, Frances never was a quiet girl to be sure, but I would think after almost twenty-five years you must be used to it." Silence again. Many minutes went by without any speech.

Finally, Elizabeth heard a loud bang, something fell upon his desk, and her father's voice, now loud and authoritative. "Then I have no choice left but to accept that Lydia is dead to me."

"Thomas?"

"I will not have her wanton ghost hanging about my neck. She chose her fate, and she will have to bear it alone. I want nothing more to do with her, her memory or her future. I will remove her from my home, my will, and my

mind. Let us return to the ladies, and I will make my announcement.”

“Brother, I have to object!” he protested. “How can you so easily give up on your daughter? Surely you will want to come back to London with me and start up where I must leave off?”

“No, Edward, I have given this a great deal of thought these last weeks without any leads, or new information these past months; I see no future, no success and no reason to continue. My decision is final.”

“But what of your other daughters, and Frances? You cannot expect them to simply stop their feelings for Lydia, stop talking about the situation in which they are all entrenched. You must give them a chance to grieve, Thomas!”

“I have had my ears full of grief!! Every waking hour this house howls with grief! I want no more of it! Lydia is dead to me and everyone here, starting now! This conversation is *over!*”

Elizabeth stood stunned in the hallway. The library door violently tore open, causing her to startle. Her father, scowling and fuming swept past her and subjected the drawing room door to the same punishment.

“Daughters, Sister, Mrs. Bennet,” he began after a deep breath. “Brother Gardiner has no news to deliver. Any and all efforts to find even the smallest hint of Lydia’s whereabouts have come to naught. I believe that all possibilities have been exhausted and any future searches will be futile. She has no desire to be found. She is living the life she wants, not surprisingly, seeing what a silly, useless girl she was, and now we may add stupidity to her accomplishments. Given her shameful and immoral nature, we will no longer be a part of her life.” Lizzy gasped at the doorway, she felt as if a great wind had pushed all the air out of her, and was trying to pull her person to the ground.

Her father continued. “Henceforth, no mention of Lydia Bennet is to be made in my presence, in any part of this house or on my lands ever again. She is dead to us, as if she never existed. I will remove her from my will tomorrow; you had best remove her from your hearts and minds if you ever wish to have peace again. I never want to hear her name again.”

Silence pervaded the room. Mrs. Bennet stood with her mouth agape, desperately trying to understand what had just happened. The girls and Aunt Gardiner were similarly, though less physically affected.

The gravity of his declaration was slowly taking hold in all their minds, when from the doorway Elizabeth fairly shouted, “NO!” Everyone turned, shocked at her outburst, effectively silenced again.

Finally Mr. Bennet found his voice, “I beg your pardon Madam, but I do not believe you possess the authority to speak to me thus,” he responded slowly.

Elizabeth stood as a Fury; brilliant, perilous, daggers flying from her eyes, her fists clenched hard. Her long pent-up rage was about to find a mark. “And pray tell me, sir,

where has *your* authority been languishing lately?” she cried with energy.

His teeth clenched, his breath rushing sibilant across them, he exhaled hard. “You go too far, Elizabeth; you will accompany me to my library, NOW!”

She turned in a maelstrom, reaching the library long before him, flinging the poor abused portal open. He stomped in noisily behind her, but before the door had closed, Elizabeth’s torrent began, “Where has your responsibility as presumed head of this household been hiding? Perhaps here in the library? Or maybe in your brandy decanter?”

He flinched.

“For as strongly as you suddenly announce what we may all feel and think, I have seen no sign of compassion or understanding as to the feelings of any of those over whom you hold authority throughout this fiasco you call a search. I have not had the pleasure of your presence in a room where anyone in your *care* could be called upon to share, confide or most especially receive guidance on their feelings, their apprehensions, or their suffering.

“What I have seen is a man who, after a few paltry days, returned from his search to the comfort of his retiring country house, his wine and his locked library, to hide away from his responsibilities to his family, and most especially to his lost daughter. Then, in an effort to disabuse himself of any guilt, pawned the job off onto his working brother, the father of four small children, while he waited, unencumbered, in his leather sitting chair.

“Now you expect us all to sit quietly, ignore any claim to outrage or grief, simply because you deem it no longer worth the *effort* to try to find your daughter? A daughter whom, despite her living circumstances, is barely sixteen and little more than a child, yet you allow her the position of responsible adult! Indeed if that is the stick by which you measure I can hardly be surprised at your lack of character! I am ashamed, sir!”

“You are unfair, Elizabeth, you do not know what I have done, nor what I feel!”

“Perhaps so, sir, but lack of that knowledge is hardly *my* failing, is it?”

“You had no business knowing what your Uncle and I were doing! It is not a daughter’s place to understand her father’s heart! I have no reason to confide anything to you. I do not answer to you.”

“That may be, but a gentleman would not have continued behaving with such selfish disdain for the feelings of those professed to be his loved ones. I am not a simpleton! You have dismissed me as though a servant! I was mortified to be treated in such a callous and disregarded manner!

“Where is your honour sir? If not you, then tell me *who* should defend our name and our reputation? How long before some other cad tries to take advantage of any one of us, knowing that any consequences will be so easy to overcome? You leave us undefended, without champion, or honor.

Chapter 3

LONDON, JANUARY, 1813

“Where is your compassion? While you might sit happily home alone, your wife and daughters, who like society, sit and endure ostracism from every friend they have ever known. What future do they have? What reassurances have you given them? What plans have you, the *authority* in this house, made for any of them?” Silence was the answer.

Elizabeth turned to the window, trying to regain her composure. After a few minutes, an odd thought suddenly struck her: Mr. Darcy would often retreat to the window. Was it to escape an uncomfortable situation, recompose himself? Yes, she doubted it not, and felt maybe she understood a little more of him. Pushing her thoughts of him back out of her mind, and with a great sigh, she turned back to regard her father.

He seemed older, somehow smaller, perhaps frail, however she did not want to dwell upon it. She now knew in her heart what she wished to do. Reaching slowly behind her head, her lithe fingers grasped the clasp of the golden chain of the heirloom necklace that had belonged to six generations of Bennet brides, daughters and sisters. Elizabeth was given this garnet cross by her great Aunt Thelma on her tenth birthday. She proudly wore it every day as if to reassure herself of her place in her family, in the world. Now her place in her family was in question, her place in the world in peril. She unclasped it, drew it delicately through her fingers and, with a parting glance, handed it to her father.

“I no longer wish to be a part of what this represents,” she said as she laid it across the polished wood of his desk. His brow arched in shock at her declaration.

“It should not surprise you considering I have blatantly disregarded your authority, and wholly without contrition. I have insulted you and treated you with contempt, but I cannot regret it and I will not recant. By your leave, I will return with the Gardiners to London. I will not be returning to Longbourn.” Mr. Bennet was dumbfounded. He was also perchance the most angry he had ever been in his life.

“And what do you think you will do in London? You have no money and shall get none from me! Do you think after all the follies of Lydia I would allow you to go?” he shouted.

Elizabeth, with heightened colour, but in a voice of forced calmness answered, “You are mistaken sir. I am willing to work and earn my living. However, truthfully, you no longer have authority over me; two days hence I came of age. I ask for your leave only out of mere civility. I refuse to sit idly. I refuse to accept this existence. I make my own future. Accept it or not, I will leave.” With quick steps she crossed the room, but just as she was about to turn the door handle and exit, she hesitated, contemplating silently for a moment, then spoke in a low, menacing voice he had never heard from her before, “I do not give up father. I will find her, and more importantly I will find *him* and I will make him pay.”

Suddenly, Thomas Bennet was afraid.

Lord Caldhart entered his home and summoned his butler to bring him his driver and head stable man: Tom Higgins. He was a trustworthy chap that his Lordship knew to be a confidant of most of the stable hands of the finest families in town. Higgins’ true worth, however, lay in his easy mannered affability, which allowed him to worm information out of just about anyone.

Lord Robert had often used him to keep an eye on his mistresses’ activities. More importantly, Higgins was able to discover quite a bit about the young ladies his Lordship had an eye on for future *personal* interest. It had been some time since he had required his special services, but Higgins betrayed no surprise at being summoned once again into his employer’s presence. This time though, he did seem surprised as to the nature of his master’s request.

“Higgins, I would like you to find out as much as you can about a new shop I discovered today near Cheapside. It is called Johnson’s House of Cigars, and is run by a woman whom I assume is Mrs. Johnson. I want to know if she owns the shop, if her husband runs it with her, or if he is, perhaps, deceased. Also, anything you can tell me about who Mrs. Johnson is, and was, before she married. All information will be of interest; do not overlook any detail you can find despite its seeming unimportance.”

The stableman silently bowed and slowly returned to his bunk in the stables.

Caldhart smirked while thinking, “*Yes, I think I have managed to shock even you, Higgins. A shopkeeper’s wife for the great Lord Caldhart?*” And he laughed out loud.



SEVERAL DAYS LATER HIGGINS begged an audience with his master. Standing in front of the stately gentleman while the butler discreetly closed the library door, he stated all the information he had been able to obtain. No, Mrs. Johnson did not own her business. However, city records could not be looked over easily or at least without certain cash considerations. Caldhart decided to investigate that fact himself, and told him so. Mr. Johnson had never been seen in the shop, or talked of, but neither had Mrs. Johnson ever been called a widow, so her marital status was still unconfirmed. The business was very new, though thriving due

to Mrs. Johnson's uncanny abilities to produce a superior cigar. The woman had left her establishment every evening at five-thirty in a coach, accompanied by a gentleman who seemed very friendly with her, but could not be identified as Mr. Johnson—yet. He had been unable to follow where she went but, if he had his master's permission, he could spend the next few days and nights following her after she closed her shop to gain the address of where she lived.

Caldhart was pleased. He suspected the gentleman was not Mr. Johnson, but who could he be? Perhaps some man who had set up his mistress at a shop for her amusement? Unlikely, as it would not leave her available for his use, except at night, when usually wives and families would demand one's attentions. No, he needed more information and the sooner the better, as he was starting to relish the idea of visiting the establishment once more to see what he could find out about her himself. He gave permission for the man to spend the next week following her discreetly.

"I want you to dog her from sun up to down, Higgins. Once you have found her lodgings, get help to watch through the night until she retires. I wish to know where she goes, anyone who visits her, for how long, and how often. I'll pay for whomever you take under your care to help, but one word of caution," he sipped his evening brandy slowly, inhaling the deep fragrance as it swirled in the glass, "no word of this to anyone, and the lady must not know you are watching her or I will deny you, and you will be without reference or job; is that understood?"

He nodded his assent. Caldhart knew he often gave this speech, but he also knew Higgins felt no insult. His Lordship would pay for the extra help required and his servant would no doubt bill him generously, whether any help was hired or not.



THE NEXT WEEKS SAW Lord Caldhart and Higgins busily traipsing around various parts of London in their efforts to uncover the truths about Mrs. Johnson. His Lordship was easily able to gain access to the city business records (once an unofficial "fee" was stealthily paid for under the pair of fine kid gloves he had placed upon the counter). Mrs. Johnson was not the business owner, nor was Mr. Johnson, although their name had been used. The actual owner did not work in the shop, but rather was a respectable and successful tradesman in enterprises all over the city. The clerk was able to uncover several business licenses under his name: Mr. Edward Gardiner of Gracechurch Street, Cheapside. Whether he set this shop up for nefarious reasons or not was yet to be ascertained.

Higgins, in the meantime, had discovered similar findings after following the coach one evening, first to Mrs. Johnson's lodgings, and then to its final destination

on Gracechurch Street several blocks away. It was indeed the master of that house that escorted Mrs. Johnson to her house and then home each evening, and then repeated the reverse act in the morning. So far she had never left her house, though inclement weather and a steady work week would have most likely precluded the possibility. No other persons came or went from her lodgings. Whether Mrs. Gardiner was alive and in residence at Mr. Gardiner's home was not yet discovered. All was reported, shared and mulled over in Caldhart's fine library. Higgins was sent back to take up his observation post for the weekend, while his Lordship thought about his next move.



THE FOLLOWING DAY THE sun shone warm for a winter's morning. A female occupant of the Johnson house, no doubt feeling the confinements of nearly a week of slushy snow and extreme cold, burst forth from the abode to take pleasure in a walk across the nearby park. Higgins saw four children, a maid and a lady venture to meet with her. This second lady looked old enough to be the children's mother, but the first was obviously too young. Where Mrs. Johnson was, he did not know. He was torn between following the group, to try to overhear any tidbits, and staying at the house, to see if the lady of interest would also venture forth. Using his many years of experience to guide him, he easily came up with a suitable solution. He grabbed a nearby waif, offering a prize if the youth would simply stand watch over the house and fetch him in the park if anyone did leave it.

The two ladies strolled happily along. The children clearly were thrilled to breathe the fresh air and noisily ran off the abundance of energy they had undoubtedly stored during that stifling week. The adults laughed at the children's gaiety, while discussing the theatre excursion that was planned for that evening. Higgins learned which play and theatre they were to attend, knowing his master would find it useful. By the time the group headed back, he knew that the lady was Aunt Gardiner, that the other lady was her niece Elizabeth, also known as cousin Lizzy, and that she was quite a lovely young lady at that. Perhaps his Lordship hadn't lost his sensibilities after all. Maybe Miss Lizzy was Mrs. Johnson's younger sister, or even daughter. He wasn't sure of Mrs. Johnson's age, so either was possible. His last expert feat of subterfuge occurred after the family and the young lady returned to the Gardiners home, not far from Mrs. Johnson's. Running down to the fresh markets, he bought a posy of lovely flowers and, returning to the Gardiner's home, he rang at the servant's door. The kitchen maid answered, smiling at the bouquet.

"For Miss Elizabeth Westview, if you please." Higgins said, bowing.

The maid frowned. "I'm sorry sir, our Miss Elizabeth is not a Westview, she's a Bennet." She giggled.

"Gah!" spat Higgins. "Don't tell me I've mixed up again; my employer will have my head." The maid giggled again. "Well," said he with a smile to the girl, "'tis not your fault my lovely, I'll just have to run back and find where I should be. Good day." He turned back down the steps and out into the lane.



THAT EVENING AS LORD Robert prepared to leave for the theatre, he thought about all that Higgins had told him. He was wild to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet for himself. If his powers of deduction were still at all reasonable, he was in a fair way of knowing what her alias might be. His valet had chosen the dark blue coat, which complimented his hair very well. He wanted to look his best, but was aware that his finest apparel would not be appropriate for tonight's venue.

It was not the most luxurious, nor the largest theatre in London: comedies currently experiencing more disinterest than the opposite in these times. He chuckled over the play they had chosen: *The Country Wife*. A scandalous choice for a maiden, and most intriguing. The bawdiness aside, it was still wickedly funny; most young women would blush at the thought of even reading Wycherley yet this lady was brave enough to attend a performance.

"Perhaps she does not realize what she is in for," he conjectured to himself. "Yet how much more interesting if she *does*."



IT WAS AN INTIMATE house, with only a single row of boxes on each side, the main floor and a balcony. Attendees were clearly visible, delighting themselves in the show that played out opposite the stage. One face was taking in a particular visage with great relish. His luck once again running high, Lord Caldhart's box was positioned perfectly for watching the lady, without her seeing him. He hadn't been sure at first. Higgins had given him a fair description of all of them, but it wasn't until their faces had turned, and he was able to see *her* fully, that his breath had once again caught, and he knew, absolutely, that he was looking at Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Mrs. Johnson; she was one and the same.

His memory had not done her justice; she was bewitching. He watched, riveted, as her eyes danced and glittered, and her lips twitched with just the hint of an impertinent smile while she took in her surroundings. Now and then she would peer more intently at someone in concern, as if

to discern something. He wondered if she might be looking for the infamous George in the crowd. More often than not she would stare obtusely off into space, her shoulders rising while she took a deep breath, and her face lost its merriment. He could spend the entire evening discovering the array of those expressions and never tire.

How very different to see her tonight. She had lustrous dark hair that was arranged with ribbons of garnet through the curls that flowed down her supple neck. Her gown was a deeper shade of crimson, which complimented her creamy complexion perfectly. It was not richly adorned, and no doubt would have gathered little attention to the few fashion plates that would have come to this lesser known theatre, but it suited her perfectly. Despite the simplicity, it was elegant, showing true good taste, and he admired her all the more for it. Her gown's neckline revealed the answer to the last question that had plagued him as well.

The lights dimmed and a hush fell over the crowd as the performance began on stage, while in the audience, the evening began for Lord Robert. He thoroughly enjoyed studying Elizabeth. Her eyes sparkled and laughed, her lips sometimes mouthing familiar lines.

"Another mystery solved," he mused. Staring at her unencumbered from the privacy behind the drape in his box was an erotic adventure of voyeurism for him. Experiencing the evening through her eyes, her reactions, her laughter was breathing new life into him, while arousing his passion as well. She laughed with her whole person, she reacted with her hands, her body revealed her feelings as often as her mesmerizing face. He freely allowed his eyes to linger over her bodice, her gown, anywhere he desired with his naked eye, as well as his oft-used opera glasses.

During the first intermission, he ventured out to see if he could get a bit closer to her, perhaps hear her thoughts on the production. Along the way to the foyer, he saw a familiar face.

"Lloyd!" he cried, observing his friend coming over to him. "How are you old man?"

Mr. Lloyd, some 20 years Lord Caldhart's junior, was used to such taunts from him. "Lord Robert, delighted to see you, sir. I am well, and you?"

"Never better, thank you for asking. And I must thank you, my friend, for letting me in on your secret cigar shop. I've never had a better cigar; truly a jewel of smoke," he calculatingly replied. Perhaps if Lloyd had Johnson's in his head, he might prove helpful tonight. They had been walking towards the largest area of the foyer, where most of the patrons were congregating, when Caldhart caught sight of the Gardiner party not far off. He bent his head, hoping to catch some of their conversation, while deftly backing himself and Mr. Lloyd slowly towards them. Lloyd, useful as ever, espied the group and, without hesitating, offered to introduce his Lordship to the owner of Johnson's himself, a Mr. Edward Gardiner. Smiling sincerely, and he hoped not too eagerly, his Lordship condescended graciously.

“Mr. Gardiner, Mrs. Gardiner, how wonderful to see you this evening,” Mr. Lloyd began. After the curtseys, bows, and inquiries into one another’s health had been satisfied, Mr. Lloyd began his introduction. Lord Robert had stood by silently, watching each party intently, reflecting calm and indifference, while his heart beat madly. He could barely restrain his face. He struggled desperately to remember to look at Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and not only Miss Bennet. His eyes had great difficulty not betraying his interest in her, as propriety demanded. It was much too early to raise her suspicions.

“Mr. and Mrs. Edward Gardiner, may I present Lord Robert Caldhart? Lord Caldhart has recently been a patron at Johnson’s House of Cigars, Mr. Gardiner, and was just now thanking me for his great fortune in taking up my suggestion.”

“How very kind of you to recommend it, Mr. Lloyd. I thank you. My Lord, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir.” he said bowing. “May I present my wife, Mrs. Madeline Gardiner, and my niece, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” The ladies and gentlemen exchanged their civilities, while Lord Robert revelled in being allowed to openly view Miss Bennet so closely.

Mr. Gardiner continued, “Am I to understand then, sir, you enjoyed your purchases from Johnson’s?”

“Indeed I did, sir; the cigars are superb, quite outstanding. Is it your talent and expertise to whom I am indebted for my delights?” he asked, knowing full well that Mrs. Johnson was the artist behind it all. He was curious to see what Mr. Gardiner would reveal.

“Hardly!” Gardiner answered jovially. “No, Johnson’s House of Cigars is appropriately named, Lord Robert, for without Mrs. Johnson, there would simply be mediocre cigars. She is the genius. She is the tobacco connoisseur. Quite unusual for a woman, of course, but there is no denying her abilities. It is to her you would give your thanks were she present.”

“Most extraordinary!” Lord Robert exclaimed, all the while keeping at least part of his line of vision on Miss Bennet. “I will be happy to give her all the thanks she is due when next I go to her shop. Please send her my regards in the mean time. But what a unique gift she possesses! I wonder how she, or you, for that matter, discovered it.” He knew he was being sly, but he *was* sincerely curious.

Mrs. Gardiner stepped in. “We have known Mrs. Johnson for many years, your Lordship, and she often would comment, when smelling a cigar, lit or not, on the flavours she could detect in them. She joined Mr. Gardiner and me one day when we visited a cigar shop, and her senses were nearly overwhelmed. She helped my husband pick out his cigars, and they were the best he has ever had. Well, at least until Johnson’s opened, of course.” They all chuckled.

“She also has the same ability with the dishes at table. I have never been able to serve her a meal in which she could not discern every ingredient in every dish. Most dis-

concerting for the cook who began to worry should she inadvertently leave something out.” Miss Bennet, by now, was intently and thoroughly studying her shoes. Although she did laugh with her aunt about their poor cook, clearly she was uncomfortable with so much praise being spoken about Mrs. Johnson.

Lord Robert was enchanted. He addressed her. “And you, Miss Bennet, are you also friend to Mrs. Johnson, and have you also been witness to her abilities?”

“Why yes, your Lordship, I think there can hardly have been a time when I was not acquainted with Mrs. Johnson, and therefore remember many of her,” she hesitated a moment, “her *performances* shall we say? Although I do not know if she would agree with all of your praises, nor believe her skills are something to be envied, as I believe she often finds them to be both boon and bane.” The group requested clarification of such a bold statement.

“I recall once when I was a very small girl, dining with my aunt and uncle at a Mr. and Mrs. Phillips’ house, Mrs. Johnson did not find her talents appreciated, or welcome. We were served a very fine looking trifle for dessert, which everyone enjoyed and after which the ladies started a conversation about the recipe. Mrs. Johnson opined that she preferred her trifle with both wine and brandy, not wine alone, as had just been served. Unfortunately, Mrs. Phillips herself had measured and given the brandy to her cook and was none too pleased to learn it had not made its way into the trifle, but rather into the cook. Poor Mrs. Johnson was mortified that her discerning palate had caused such an uproar. Later, when the cook was discovered in a somewhat inebriated stupor and had almost been dismissed, she confided to me that, sometimes, truth was better held in silence than shared.” She finished with a disarming raise of her brow. Her audience laughed appreciatively.

“What a delightful story, Miss Bennet, and a moral to go with it; how very charming indeed. I no longer shall envy Mrs. Johnson, but merely remain grateful she is willing to share her talents with the rest of us. Certainly we would have fewer delights in this world without her,” answered his Lordship. “And I am still most grateful to you, Mr. Gardiner, for undertaking the task of opening Johnson’s. Congratulations, sir; I hope your trade prospers well and long. I must take my leave now. Thank you all; it was a pleasure to meet you.” With a bow and a flourish, Lord Robert and Mr. Lloyd departed.



HE WAS RELIEVED TO be away from her. The rush of being so close to this newfound treasure was too much for him. It had been a long while since he had felt the first flutters of infatuation and lust, and now, with his advanced years, it seemed to almost overwhelm him. He had been turning

on his well-practiced charm without even meaning to. He didn't want to alarm the Gardiners, nor Miss Bennet; he wanted to plan all his moves carefully like any good strategist. Being in her presence, hearing her clever witticisms, the lilt of her laughter, seeing those glorious eyes flashing, was undermining all his carefully cultivated reserve. This would not do at all. He would not be caught up like some schoolboy admiring his first fancy.

Lloyd was muttering to himself alongside Caldhart, while his Lordship attempted to regain his composure.

"Bennet, Bennet, why does that name seem to remind me of something important?" he was saying. "Something last summer, yes, that was it, gossip about a family named Bennet, from Hertfordshire, I believe. Oh, my," he suddenly stammered, obviously having recalled the entirety of the story. Lord Robert turned with his head cocked to one side, both his brows raised in question.

"Oh, Lord Robert, I do beg your pardon," he spoke contritely, his head bowed, slowly shaking back and forth.

"Good heavens, Lloyd, you act as though Miss Bennet were a convicted axe murderer! Do explain yourself."

"Your Lordship, I would never have introduced you to the Gardiners had I known of the connection to the Bennets. At least, if she is one of the Bennets of which I am thinking. Although, we do not know that for certain, of course. But it does make sense; the family was made up of five beautiful daughters as I recall. Such a pity, such a shame," he babbled.

"Lloyd, will you start speaking coherently and tell me what happened to the Bennets of Hertfordshire? You are trying my patience." The halls were nearly empty now, and the men had relative privacy when they took a place upon a burgundy velvet upholstered bench near the wall.

Mr. Lloyd began in a lowered voice. "Last summer, it was said that the youngest daughter of Mr. Bennet, a gentleman with little fortune though a nice piece of property in Hertfordshire, had eloped with an officer of the militia quartered in Brighton for the summer. She was then but sixteen. Her family traced the couple only to London, and in town, they disappeared. He never intended to marry her of course, no surprise to anyone really. But as none of her elder sisters (and I had heard that the two eldest were particular beauties) had married yet, the silly youngest had ruined them all. Four lovely women off the marriage market like that," he said snapping his fingers.

"What kind of father would let a sixteen-year-old girl go alone to Brighton?" Caldhart asked, incredulous.

"Oh, I believe she was there with the colonel of the regiment's wife, her very close friend, although obviously not much of a chaperone. Now what was that scoundrel's name—Westing? No, something Wendall; dear me, I do wish I was better with names." Lord Robert had no doubt the man's name was Wickham, but let his friend continue.

"They never found her, as far as I know. And now I suppose the sisters will have to be governesses or ladies' com-

panions or some such thing. Perhaps Miss Elizabeth is helping her Aunt at home? Such a nimble mind. Such a waste. Why must the pretty girls always be poor, or ineligible?"

"I wouldn't let your wife hear such statements, old man," his Lordship advised. "You are hardly in the position to be looking for an eligible lady, are you?"

Lloyd coughed, brought back from his reverie. "No, no of course not. I do apologise. And my judgement has been terrible tonight. I should not have exposed you to such a connection. I must apologise for having introduced you to a disreputable woman. I fear I have insulted you, sir."

Lord Robert only chuckled. "You have done nothing of the kind! Dear Lloyd, how can you be so droll and stupid at the same time? My reputation suffer? Not in the least. I have manners, breeding and fortune to spare; I can certainly entertain whomever I want. And I do fancy that I, not others, decide who is beneath my notice, or not. So do not be distressed—if I choose to continue the acquaintance, I am not worried about it sullyng my position in society. If I were you, however, I would not mention it to anyone, lest you suffer a different fate."

Mr. Lloyd's face revealed that the idea had hit is mark accurately. Yes, Lloyd would be easily swayed to do his Lordship's bidding, and keeping this little introduction a secret suited him perfectly. "We need never mention it again, my Lord." He bowed, truly grateful to have such a concerned friend as Lord Robert.

"Then we are agreed. But Lloyd, do not let the Gardiners' connection to the Bennets interfere with your enjoyment of the cigars Johnson's has to offer; that would truly be a shame." The two men shared a chortle.

"I expect you will continue to give them your custom?" Lloyd nodded obediently. "Good, now get back to your seat, old man, and enjoy the play."

Lord Robert lingered in the hall a while longer, reflecting on his evening so far. He was very satisfied with all the information he had obtained. He looked forward to turning his mind to it later, in the quiet solitude of his study. Returning discreetly to his box, he observed Elizabeth for a while longer. He wondered if she had taken any notice of him. Had she detected any of his interest? He did not think so; he had hardly paid her any particular attention. At least he was confident she was not aware of his spying upon her while she watched the play. He leaned forward, covertly gazing for another half hour before departing. His diamond in the rough was a stunning woman that no one had discovered; he could not have been more pleased.

Chapter 4

LONGBOURN, NOVEMBER 1812

Elizabeth turned the corner from the hall after leaving her father and drew a small gasp. There, in the main entryway, stood Jane. She was leaning against the wall; Kitty and Mary were sitting together on the lower steps of the stairway. All three looked up suddenly as she walked in. Jane was the first to move, she quickly clenched Lizzy to herself, Mary and Kitty immediately followed suit. The four stood huddled together, each gathering strength from the other; none willing to let go for several minutes. Tiny sniffles and smaller, nervous, laughing chokes issued from their tightly held mass.

“You truly mean to leave?” whispered Kitty, without raising her head. Lizzy nodded, squeezing Kitty harder.

“Whatever will you do?” added Mary softly.

“I am not certain; I shall have to discuss it with the Gardiners,” she confessed, while laying her head against Mary’s shoulder.

“And will you really look for Lydia?” Kitty asked.

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I will. On that point I am determined.” A relief seemed to come over the sisters. Their grips lightened, the tension lessened. They embraced for several more moments.

Kitty smiled and planted a kiss on her sister’s cheek. “It will be a great adventure, Lizzy!” she suddenly gushed. All heads lifted in surprise.

Elizabeth’s face revealed a stern frown. “No, Kitty,” her voice began gravely. “It will be a hardship, and I fear heartache. I must rely on the Gardiner’s charity until I can find a way to make my own living. I have no reason to hope my future employment will amount to anything vaguely easy, exciting or adventurous. And do not forget; all the while I will be looking for Lydia, whose condition in this world may be dire.” She stopped, unable to deny the lump constricting her throat. “The more time passes until she is found, the more chance of an unhappy outcome. It is nothing to romanticize about; please do not fool yourself into thinking so.”

Kitty nodded solemnly. Elizabeth hoped she had instilled in Kitty some slight appreciation of both the seriousness of her intended endeavours, and the futures the rest of her sisters would some day have to face. She looked around at the three faces, taking in each slowly, committing this moment to that part of her mind where she kept her most cherished memories.

She felt a change deep inside her heart. She somehow knew that nothing was ever going to be as it was this day.

This was the end of her girlhood, her life in Hertfordshire and, likely, soon all of her sister’s lives there... The weight of this revelation was great, and she could not stop the silent trickle of tiny tears that finally flowed down her sweet face.

The stillness of the moment was interrupted by an announcement. “I think I should like to go with you,” Jane said quietly.



THE CARRIAGE RIDE TO London was uneventful in that they were not waylaid by highwaymen, no horse was lamed and all the stops were timely and efficient despite Mrs. Bennet’s assurances to the contrary. There was much to be discussed now that Lizzy and Jane were away from Longbourn and the lack of privacy any conversation that location afforded. The girls were amazed that, in less than three days, their aunt and uncle had managed to have their belongings packed, their parents appeased, and their futures started.

Mr. Bennet, while not pleased, was at least resigned to let Elizabeth return with his brother-in-law to London. But he was truly shocked when Jane declared her intention to join them. It was only through Jane’s gentle, yet forthright conversation with her father that he agreed to give her up as well. She had no need for artifice. The plain facts spoke for themselves; it was time for her to make her own way in the world, just as Lizzy was determined to do. As the two eldest, it only made sense for them to lead the way, hopefully making it easier for the younger to someday do.

The relief the girls felt in finally taking action after so many months of forced idleness was liberating. However, leaving their childhood home was not without its share of tearful goodbyes, sadness and regrets. As the coach pulled away from the house, Elizabeth watched her father waving somberly. Despite being at odds with him, she loved him, and knew that each would feel the absence of the other acutely.

Many miles after Longbourn had disappeared from view, the discussion in the carriage turned to employment. Mrs. Gardiner thought both girls would be well suited as a lady’s companion or a governess if the children and situations were good enough. If any position could be obtained in London, their aunt and uncle could make sure that they were treated well by keeping a close eye on them. Jane agreed to either notion but Elizabeth could not, yet. She reasoned if she were to live in another person’s household, she would not have sufficient time to commit to the search for Lydia. She did not wish to be difficult, but her first priority had to be continuing the effort to find her sister. Her aunt and uncle were sympathetic to her and offered no resistance, but they did ask her to agree not to make any final decisions so early.

“Well, Lizzy, I have many shops that could always use a clever, hard working girl in them,” her uncle offered. “Have you any interest in any of them?”

“Perhaps not interest, Uncle, but I would gladly help you anywhere you might require it.”

“It is too bad that you do not own a shop selling foods, Edward. With Elizabeth’s excellent nose and detections of taste, you could be assured of selling the very finest of whatever goods you wished,” Mrs. Gardiner added lightly.

“Cheeses!” suggested Jane.

“Cheeses? Bah...Chocolates!” said Elizabeth, with a giggle.

“Port!” said Mrs. Gardiner, joining in the laughter.

“Port and cigars!” said Mr. Gardiner, raising the laughter to howls. Slight tears crept out of the corners of their eyes until the merriment at last died down.

“I do not think a lady selling port would be very seemly, Uncle, not to mention it would be difficult to keep the staff from sampling the wares. Nor do I think Mr. Merriweather would appreciate your giving him competition for his cigar shop.” Lizzy admonished.

“While I agree with your assessment of the port shop, Niece, I’m afraid that Merriweather’s will soon be no longer. The poor old man is going to retire and, with no son to continue on, they will be closing up his shop and selling off the last of all his merchandise.”

“Oh, that is sad news; he was a dear man, so patient with me and all my silly questions when I was a girl. You owe a great many years of satisfied smokes to him, do you not?”

“Indeed I do, and to you too Lizzy; it was your excellent suggestions that led to my discovering my favourite blend there, my dear. Mr. Merriweather always said you had a gift for it. A pity you don’t know how to make cigars; we could continue the place, with you running it. Probably put out a better product than Merriweather’s ever thought of, and make us a tidy fortune.” They all nodded appreciatively.

Elizabeth sat quietly, her mind apparently engrossed. Finally she smiled widely. “I do know.”

“Pardon?” her aunt asked.

“I do know how to roll cigars—quite well in fact.”

Mr. Gardiner stared, amazed. “You know how to make cigars, Elizabeth?”

“Yes, she does. She’s been making them for father in the still room, for years,” answered her sister. “I wondered if you were going to say anything, Lizzy.”



AFTER SETTLING IN TOWN, Mrs. Gardiner began to make discreet inquiries among her acquaintances for a position for one or both of her nieces. The superior manners the girls had always displayed made them favourites among the Gardiner’s friends. No doubt an opportunity would present

itself very soon when word got out that two such excellent ladies were available for employ.

Elizabeth, in the meanwhile, had accompanied her uncle to the man who had been helping them search for Lydia: Mr. Brooks. She had to agree with Mr. Gardiner; he had done an admirable job so far. However, she could not help but be disappointed at the lack of results.

It seemed that, shortly after arriving in London, the couple had simply disappeared. No tavern had spotted either, no innkeeper could recall housing them and no gambling hall had had Mr. Wickham as patron. Elizabeth was at least satisfied to finally understand the methods that Mr. Brooks employed in his search. However, hearing the details of the appalling neighbourhoods and buildings that the man had been subjected to walk through mortified her, as well as providing her with a healthy dose of sobriety. She knew that she could never go herself to these places, that such efforts were beyond her ability, as well as simply dangerous. Part of her was angered at the thought of limitations being put upon her, but another was somewhat relieved at not having to brave such dreadful locales. Now she could only try to think of what she could do to help. They agreed to meet again in two weeks while Mr. Brooks continued his efforts.

On the return trip to Cheapside, Mr. Gardiner broached the subject his mind had been turning to since they had left Longbourn.

“Elizabeth, I wonder if you wouldn’t like to keep busy at one of my shops while waiting for a position from your Aunt’s friends.”

“Keep busy, sir? Was there some particular place or position you had in mind?”

“I thought you might find it constructive to work behind the counter in one of the shops, see what it is like to wait on the customers, how the stock is handled, how the entire business runs from the inside.”

Her suspicion already aroused, she chanced an inquiring look at him. “Is there perhaps a more significant motive to my learning this business?”

He laughed. “Nothing I wish to reveal at this time, Niece, but let us first see how you get on, before we aspire to grander schemes, shall we?” They both knew what the other was thinking, but Elizabeth chose to let her Uncle keep his plot to himself—for now. His suggestion had wisdom, and she was also curious to see how well she could get on spending her day in a shop. She cared not if she enjoyed the work, she merely wanted to be useful and provide herself with a living. The exercise would prove to be most enlightening.



THE FIRST DAYS AT her uncle’s clock shop were spent learning all she could about the different aspects of the business.

She quickly took to the information, and was efficient in remembering all the details of the pieces, as well as processes of procurement, accounting and stocking. For three days she worked by his side, learning from him as he answered questions about his timepieces, as well as learning how to treat the patrons. Once he felt she had a good solid understanding, he decided to let her wait upon the customers.

Elizabeth quickly realized that one had to adopt a very different attitude when waiting upon people, especially gentry. The higher the rank, the more they liked to feel above everyone. She was secretly amused by such snobbery and considered it a bit of a game one had to play, like a role upon the stage. Her uncle never lost his gentlemanly ways but, she did notice his demeanour change to a more subservient role when conversing with his patrons. As the patrons seemed to enjoy such attentions, Elizabeth had to conclude this role playing was beneficial to the success of any shop and she would try to emulate Uncle Gardiner and his ways.

Her aunt had recommended a wardrobe that would be fitting for working, which could sometimes be a dirty job. Unpacking the newly arrived clocks and general housekeeping of the shop could get quite dusty. Elizabeth considered her gowns demure and serviceable but, after a week at the clock shop, both she and her uncle began noticing some marked and decidedly unwanted attentions being given to her. The gentlemen and common men who came into the shop seemed to notice her almost immediately. If she waited upon a man, the time they spent was considerably longer than any regular customer would ever spend and unfortunately did not always result in any sale. Often a man would return the next day, still taking up her time but, again, not making a purchase. Her uncle began to intervene and insisted on waiting upon the male customers with her. This seemed to discourage the unconstructive time spent by the men, but her uncle's concern was no small matter.

He had two other workers in the shop, a young man, Mr. Whitaker, who was married with two small children, and an elderly widow, Mrs. Brown. He had never had any problems with unwanted attentions to Mrs. Brown, but admittedly her appearance could not compare with his attractive niece. Elizabeth had a natural, easy rapport with customers, and unknowingly had the ability to charm and interest the males that came into the store; therein lay the problem.

Mr. Gardiner consulted with his wife; they in turn consulted with Elizabeth. All agreed that keeping her working in the shop was important, but keeping her safe from flirting gentlemen was more important.

It was Elizabeth who came up with a most original idea and suggested it to her relatives. "I have often compared waiting upon patrons as something of a role one must play. If indeed I must act as a shopkeeper, then why can I not choose what *sort* of a worker I will be? It seems to me that if I were not a single young lady, and if I were

perhaps not gently bred, I might not bring about so much notice and detract from the business. I think the more innocuous I can be, the better it would be for the shop to prosper"

"And who would you be, Lizzy?" her aunt asked.

"I think I should try to be more like Mrs. Brown, Aunt. I think with the right clothing, a large cap, and some practice at trying to sound more like a Londoner, I could make myself a very convincing matron."

Her aunt and uncle were dumbfounded. "Truly, Elizabeth, you want to do this to yourself? I suspect disguises of this sort are not easy to maintain," said her uncle, skeptically.

"I think I should at least try. I do not see how else I could manage a cigar shop, which would be visited almost exclusively by male patrons, and deal with the ridiculous posturing, flirting men without some sort of subterfuge? Do you?" she asked almost deviously.

Her uncle nearly spit out his tea.

"Elizabeth!" her aunt admonished, but she would not be gainsaid.

"Come now, surely the two of you knew that I would realise what you were training me for? Have you not managed to lease out Mr. Merriweather's building yet, Uncle?"

In less than a month Elizabeth found herself running Johnson's House of Cigars.



INITIALLY THERE HAD BEEN the transfer of the business and the setting up of the workroom in the back of the shop. She had spent many hours poring over tobacco leaves with her uncle, searching out the best products they could find in endless warehouses. Mr. Merriweather had almost everything she needed as far as equipment, and she had his worker, Toby, to help her roll the large supply of cigars that she was beginning to formulate. Mr. Merriweather had eagerly taken her under his wing to supply any missing information she might need to assure her success in her new career. He was the only other person besides her aunt, uncle, and Jane that knew her true identity. And though he did not know of her family's troubles, he was happy to agree to the deception; especially once her uncle took him aside, pointing out her obvious assets, and detriments to successfully running a shop by herself. He saw it as a logical answer to keeping the hounds at bay, while being deeply satisfied with the knowledge that his cigar-making heritage was going to continue, and most likely improve, under her guidance.

It *had* been a bit of an adventure: learning to be a matron, someone who was significantly older than herself, as well as someone who had not been raised as a peer to most persons, but rather a person who was used to serving others. Her aunt had wisely suggested, after her "costume" had

been chosen and perfected, that Elizabeth practice her new role in the park, at the markets, and other places where any mistakes would not be made in front of someone who would question her, nor realise what deception she was attempting. She took to it amazingly well.

She learned not to stand so straight, lest her fine figure be displayed too well. She learned to keep her head bowed; an acceptable sign of her new lowered status. And she finally agreed that her lace cap did not cover enough of her face, especially her fine eyes; they would simply need to be covered. So, the last part of her disguise was a pair of thick spectacles perched upon her nose. Elizabeth had to admonish Jane, who could not look upon her for the entire first day without bursting into hearty laughter at her. She was hardly recognizable, much less attractive. Everyone was very well pleased with her disguise. They spent the better part of that first weekend taking "Mrs. Johnson" all about town, perfecting her new persona.

Her new glasses were her largest problem. She was forced to look over, or below, them in order to see properly, and it was some time before she could move with the same speed she was used to without bumping into something, or someone. Luckily, because of her "role," everyone forgave her as a doddering, aged lady who could not see well, even with thick glasses. She was often reduced to covering her mouth to stifle her laughter in front of helpful people trying to set her back on her feet.

She also discovered a new freedom in being a plain, elderly, matron; she barely drew notice of anyone around her. She could go anywhere, and seem to blend into the background. She was not a vain woman, but she could easily discern the difference in the attention she was being paid as Mrs. Johnson, compared to when she was Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She used this disinterest in Mrs. Johnson to her advantage; she spent her weekends out, all day, pretending to shop or walking in the parks. She hardly heeded the wares in the windows, or nature, but intensely studied the people instead; searching. With her excellent walking skills, and her stealth, she was able to cover large sections of neighbourhoods each time she went out. It wasn't much, nor successful, but at least she felt that someone in her family was still keeping an active participation in the effort to find Lydia.

Her aunt and uncle were not comfortable with Lizzy spending so much time out unaccompanied, determined though she was. However, they soon witnessed for themselves how well she was faring in the throngs, and had to admit there was little danger for her. She only ventured out alone during the daylight, and was never away from crowds. This, combined with never keeping any money on her person left her as safe as anyone could be in London, and they allowed her the freedom to pursue her search for the couple. They did insist when she went anywhere as Elizabeth Bennet she must follow every rule of propriety and was never without a chaperone or maid.

Her Aunt had also decided that removal from Gracechurch Street was in order. Their staff, as well as their neighbours, knew Elizabeth and the Gardiners too well not to question a new elderly lady living with them. Luckily, there was a lodging house of good reputation not far from their home. Elizabeth could live there, have her light evening meals sent over from the Gardiner's, and continue the ruse as Mrs. Johnson without question. If the cigar shop prospered as they hoped it would, it would more than pay for Lizzy's lodging, her salary, and a tidy profit for her uncle as well. Her future seemed now secured.



SHE WAS TIRED. A physical tiredness she had not previously been used to; it was overwhelming and yet felt good at the end of the day. Gently bred ladies had too much leisure time to sit and not exert physically. She was feeling the extra requirements she was demanding of her body as a result of the duties of running her shop, and the time she spent searching for any sign of Lydia or Wickham. She was happy for these body aches that were reminders of all her endeavours; she was finally doing something.

She and her Uncle had met once again with Mr. Brooks. Elizabeth had asked at that time to see all the notes and papers of the investigation he had conducted so far; he did excellent work. He kept fine accounts as well as detailed notations of all that he had done. She could find no fault save the lack of results. Her uncle was just as unhappy and felt it prudent at this time to make some changes. He believed there was an excellent chance that Lydia and Wickham were no longer in London. Mr. Brooks had scouted out every conceivable place they might be hiding, for over four months, with no success. It seemed only logical that he could not find what was not there, and both men agreed.

Elizabeth was at first shocked but, the more she spoke to Mr. Brooks and consulted with her uncle, the more his logic prevailed. Mr. Brooks would not voluntarily turn down a well-paying customer. He felt he had done all that he could and any more work on his part would be futile and not seem honest. This sad revelation was the final straw for Elizabeth. She knew the man was being truthful. She did not like the idea of anyone giving up on Lydia, but she saw the justification in this step.

"I would only agree to this, gentleman, under one condition."

"What do you ask, Elizabeth?"

"That you and I, and Aunt Gardiner, not give up, not stop looking. I can't give her up yet; it is too soon. She might still be saved. We might find her." Her lip trembled as she spoke and her uncle drew her to his shoulder tenderly.

"Of course not Lizzy. We will still look and so may you."

“Thank you.” she whispered from his coat. They thanked Mr. Brooks for all his help, promising to return if any news became available, while he promised to do the same.



NOT LONG AFTER JOHNSON'S was opened, Aunt Gardiner stopped by the shop with wonderful news; she had found a position for Jane! The Parkers were a lovely family long known to them. They lived in town, had two small girls, Helen age eight and Lily age six, both well behaved and now in need of a governess. Mr. and Mrs. Parker were devoted to one another, especially after they had fought so hard to convince her family to allow the marriage. She had been a fairly wealthy lady, he only the fourth son of a landed gentleman and had to make his way in the world. He became a successful lawyer who worked for the rights of the poor. The Gardiners held him in highest esteem. Aunt Gardiner thought the situation ideal.

Elizabeth was delighted for her sister. She would be living in a good neighbourhood, more fashionable than Cheapside, but not too far from them either. Jane was apparently very excited; that evening at Gracechurch Street she could hardly keep seated. Everything about the Parkers had to be discussed. Tomorrow she would meet Mrs. Parker and the little girls at her Aunt's house, then meet Mr. Parker at their home the next day. Elizabeth knew that Jane wanted to make a good impression on them. There were no worries on her part for her sister. Jane's goodness, her gentle ways, were so overpowering to any observer that Lizzy expected at the very least a full employment offer to her sister within the first five minutes, and told her so. The two hugged, laughing.

What followed the next day? Only Mrs. Parker and her daughters becoming thoroughly entranced with the lovely Jane Bennet. Jane's modest gentility won over Mrs. Parker while her angelic looks and sweet placid smile won over the girls in a matter of minutes. By the end of the visit, the little ones were holding Jane's hands, unabashedly adoring her, while they made their farewells.

Her interview with Mr. Parker was thorough without being overwhelming or rude. After questioning her on her own skills, he was satisfied with Jane's capabilities to educate his daughters to the levels he wished. And he could not fault Miss Bennet's manners in any way. When he finally allowed a small smile and extended his hand to Jane at the end of the interview, her relief was very evident. One week later, Jane Bennet would go to live with the Parkers and start her first employment.

Jane settled easily into her new role as governess with the Parkers. The sisters missed one another as Jane now had only one evening off each week. They made a point of meeting whenever they could. Often Lizzy (as Mrs. Johnson)

would join Jane and the girls at a park on the weekends. It gave Elizabeth an excuse to walk to new places while on her searches, and she delighted in seeing Jane blossom with her charges. The women were easing into their lives independent of one another, as well as the Gardiners, and both were satisfied in their new positions.



ELIZABETH HOWEVER, COULD NOT be satisfied with the lack of progress of finding Lydia. Since becoming Mrs. Johnson, she had gone out every weekend, walking for most of the day. Her feet were tired, sore and often blistered, but she persevered. She would put on a cheerful face for her aunt and uncle when she dined later with them, consequently they had no idea how many hours she was devoting to her hunt.

She decided to organize her search in a more structured fashion. She obtained maps of the city and, in her room late at night, she would plan out an itinerary for the next day. She notated where she had been and any potential places that looked promising to investigate. She began to detail the thoughts of her plans, constantly working and then reworking her ideas in her head and then on paper.

After about three weekends, she was convinced that she was not giving enough time to the search. She decided to get up earlier each day, including days she was to work at her shop. She would leave at break of dawn, searching the streets and staying out for several hours before returning to wait for her uncle to pick her up to begin the workday at Johnson's.

Morning was an excellent time to talk to the tradespeople, before customers took up their time. Most sincerely tried to help her, some could be rude, but none could provide any answers. She would pause to look at the gentlemen who were sheepishly leaving clubs, halls or even more decadent establishments. She hoped she might see Wickham leaving some gambling hall after a night of gaming. Sometimes the swagger of a particular man, or the sight of soldier in regimentals, would start her heart pounding as she hoped and dreaded it might actually be him. But it was not to be.

She dared not speak to any of them. She had spent enough time on the streets to know a woman who approached a strange gentleman, no matter her age, could be mistaken for a prostitute. She had seen hundreds of them, in the early morning as often as early evening. They did not accost her as she was neither competition nor did she try to convert or help any of them, as she had seen people doing. Some of the women were truly wretched; these were the ones that haunted Elizabeth the most. She feared that, one day, she would look into one of the faces and see Lydia. An unsettling thought had gnawed at her and would not be ignored: Wickham and Lydia had been gone for almost six

months; how could they possibly be paying for room and board? He would not have been able to draw his salary after deserting the army and Lydia could not have had more than five pounds with her when she ran away. She shuddered to think what either might have done, might be doing, to earn money.

She saw what men had done to those women on the street, and was sickened to think that Wickham might have left Lydia to the same fate. She knew he had it in him to do it. She was desperate to find them both. These thoughts fuelled the anger and desire for vengeance in her more than any other.

The Gardiners and Mrs. Johnson also purposely attended plays together in the more run down areas of London. Elizabeth had speculated that Lydia would likely try to persuade Wickham to take her to an evening's entertainment. They certainly would not be able to show their faces at the fashionable houses, much less afford the tickets. They endured the rough and malodorous patrons of these places in an effort to try to find the couple, but unfortunately had no luck.

Obsession was not a feeling with which Elizabeth was familiar. Only recently had she become acquainted with hatred and vengeance—obsession was not a condition she was prepared to even recognise. Some might have seen the signs about her. Some would have noticed her increasing preoccupation or her altered appearance. She was not as tidy with her person as was her wont. Those who loved her would have been disturbed at how she rarely presented herself as anyone other than Mrs. Johnson. And if anyone had been to her room, especially at night, as she slept in her clothes, notes clutched in her fist, the evidence would have been overpowering.

However, such fixation, despite its owner's fierce determination, was doomed to run into a stumbling block. Elizabeth's undoing was not of other people's making; but of her own.

Almost two months after Elizabeth's move from Gracechurch Street, Mrs. Gardiner called upon her niece's landlady, Mrs. Pratt, to see if Elizabeth's room was being kept in order, and find how she was fairing living there. Mrs. Pratt told an astonished Mrs. Gardiner that Mrs. Johnson had specifically asked *not* to have her room cleaned. She brought her own bedding and towelings down to be laundered and insisted on making her own bed and tending her fire herself. It had been some weeks, in fact, since Mrs. Pratt had even stepped inside Mrs. Johnson's room.

Disturbing as this was to hear, Mrs. Pratt's concern for Mrs. Johnson's health alarmed Elizabeth's aunt more. Mrs. Pratt described, in great detail, all the time Mrs. Johnson spent away from the house, and how most of the tenants worried for her well-being.

Mrs. Gardiner decided to accompany her husband when he returned home with Mrs. Johnson that evening. A short conversation in the coach before arriving at Johnson's

determined a course of action for them both. Elizabeth was surprised to find her aunt in the coach, but was not in the least suspicious. Both studied her very closely now. She did not know they could see the strain in her face. She was determined to be her usual self, but she could no longer hide from them the underlying shadow behind her eyes. As they arrived at her lodging house, Mr. Gardiner stepped down to hand her out and then, to Elizabeth's surprise, Mrs. Gardiner stepped out as well. Mrs. Pratt was on the landing welcoming them all and ushered them inside.

Mrs. Gardiner spoke with obvious purpose. "Mrs. Pratt, thank you for receiving us. I know you understand our wanting to see Mrs. Johnson to her room and make sure she is well settled. We have all been concerned that she is not taking proper care of herself." The last words were spoken directly to Elizabeth. A very resolute look on her aunt's face told her she was not being asked permission to proceed to view her room. She knew she was trapped. They knew she knew, so, resigned, she led the way. She was not prepared for their reaction.

Upon first seeing the room, the party was completely still. Both Aunt Gardiner and Uncle Gardiner slowly walked in, staring intently at the sight in front of them. Elizabeth stood back, gazing around her room as if seeing it for the first time. She realised then her relatives must be in shock.

The walls were barely visible for the maps that she had tacked up on them. Scribbles and arrows indicating her thoughts were drawn on them. The small table she had to take her meals at was un-kept, crumbs covering the papers that were piled there. Indeed most every surface in the room, including her bed, had some kind of paper lying upon it in disarray. Uncle Gardiner picked up two sheaves, staring at her manic handwriting. He saw numbered lists, items scratched out, and questions written but not answered on them.

She could do little else but stare at the floor, embarrassed to be exposed.

"Oh, Elizabeth," her aunt whispered hoarsely.

It occurred to her that she might have been shedding tears by now. Part of her felt she *should* be crying, she should feel guilty, or at least irresponsible, but she did not. She was only annoyed at having been discovered, and the prospect of having her excursions curtailed.

"I believe we should all retire to Gracechurch Street for the evening. Elizabeth, pack a bag—you will be staying with us tonight." Her grave uncle was not making a request.



THAT EVENING, AUNT GARDINER herself acted as ladies' maid to Elizabeth. She had a long hot bath, washed her hair and rested, wrapped in a warm robe, until a tray with her

dinner could be brought up. She knew her aunt was worried over her appearance; she had lost weight, her skin was sallow, her eyes drooped with shadings under them. Worst of all were her feet. The miles she had walked on the hard city sidewalks had taken their toll. Her aunt had gasped at seeing the sores and bruises. They applied a salve to help them heal whilst her aunt warned her that she and her uncle were going to set some stringent demands upon her excursions in the future.

After nourishing herself, and getting into her night-dress, her aunt addressed her again. "Elizabeth, we will speak to you in the morning. Your uncle and I have not had the chance to discuss what has happened, and we would never make important decisions without consulting each other thoroughly. Do you understand we wish to do nothing lightly?" Elizabeth nodded.

"And that we will have your health and best interest at heart?" She nodded again.

"Good! Tonight it is most important for you to get a good night's sleep so you may be refreshed. And so we can all talk rationally on the morrow." She sat on the edge of the bed with a concerned face, while Elizabeth looked a bit like child dreading parental punishment. Her aunt gathered her into a warm embrace,

"We love you very much Lizzy," she cried.

Talking to her relations the next morning was not quite as dreadful as Elizabeth had feared. The Gardiners were reasonable, but had to insist she severely curtail the amount of time she would spend searching the streets. The next two weeks were to be devoted entirely to restoring her health. She would spend both weekends at her lodgings resting and not searching for Lydia in any way. She still had to work at the cigar shop, taxing her already ailing soles, therefore they could not allow her to do any walking in the mornings of the weekdays either. Besides, it was well into January, and winter's cruel breath was daily descending upon them, precluding most people from strolling about at leisure, much less walking for endless hours. The argument was too strong; Elizabeth was unable to put up any resistance.

They further insisted that, from now on, Elizabeth take her midday meals on Saturdays and Sundays with them. They wanted to be sure she gave herself sufficient rest when she resumed her search in a fortnight. They would also inform Mrs. Pratt that Mrs. Johnson's doctor had strictly forbidden her to walk out on weekday mornings. They would inform Toby of something similar as well. She was thus effectively cornered into acquiescing to their wishes. Too many people around her would be able to watch her, and restrict her.

Her face must have shown her disappointment and vexation, for her uncle addressed her kindly, "You take too much upon yourself Lizzy. I know the headache you feel but you have to consider your health first, and we are afraid you have not taken proper care of yourself. Restore your vigour and well-being. Prove to us that you are able to man-

age the responsibility of an independent life, and then we will talk again and decide what is best to be done."

A very dejected Mrs. Johnson returned home that Sunday. She felt as if her purpose had been taken away from her. She felt she no longer had sufficient opportunities to effectively conduct her search. She felt *him* slipping away from her; slipping through her fingers, a futile endeavour, like trying to drink water from a cupped hand. Her repressed emotions still unleashed, she lay down on her bed exhausted and tried to settle into sleep.

Less than a week later, George Wickham would walk into Johnson's House of Cigars.

Chapter 5

LONDON, FEBRUARY, 1813

Lord Robert took his breakfast in the game room. He had not actually named the room thus but, over the years, mistresses, housekeepers and maids alike all seemed to have inadvertently given it the name, so the game room it was. Displayed here was yet another thing for which his Lordship was famous; his chess set collection. He had over 20 boards arranged in the room, purchased from merchants all around the world. Many a man gazed upon them with envy over the years, but no one, save Lord Robert, knew what most of them actually represented. He looked lovingly around him, each perfect square reminding him of times gone by, of women long since passed on. So many boards.

"I *am* a rake of the first water," he thought appreciatively.

It was time to come to a decision. He tried to complete an internal dialog he had been having for the past two weeks. Having finally seen her, spoken to her, and had his curiosity sated, he began the final closing arguments to his own case:

"Is this worth the effort? Is *she* worth it? I know a great deal about her, but is it enough? I know I certainly desire her, but am I up to taking an innocent and teaching her to be all that I would want in my bed? Good Lord, listen to how lazy I have become. A woman such as Elizabeth would never disappoint, I dare say." He took a bite of his toast, appreciating the comforting aroma of the warm bread, even after it travelled down his throat.

"She is a gentleman's daughter and her manners bewitching. She would preside admirably over my table and in my salon. But do I want to entertain again? Do I want to attend another Season?" Hot-house orange slices lay neatly arranged on his plate. He bit slowly into one, sucking up the juices where his teeth had opened a wound.

"She *would* make a glorious ending to my career. The men at White's would be wagering their daughters' dowries that I would fall over dead the first night I bedded her. It might be worth it just to walk in the park with her on my arm the next day, a blush upon her cheek, that teasing smile upon her tender lips." He sat ruminating on his silk covered lounge while slowly sipping his morning tea. The small clock on the mantle ticked merrily along, unaware that an important judgement was being contemplated in the room.

At last he smiled and sighed, "Why do I try to deny it? I want the girl. Does anything else really matter?" The decision was made.

"It is time for a new chessboard," he mused to himself. "This one I think will be different from the rest, for I believe I shall have to commission this set to get it right. Crystal, the finest to be found, set upon that table by the west windows so, when the afternoon light hits it, sparkling lights will be cast from it, reminding me of her eyes. Yes, crystal is perfect for her, and the game will begin anew." He had his new set before the week was out.



IN THE BUSINESS OF procuring a mistress, there were many obstacles to overcome. Finding the eligible lady notwithstanding, the business, the ability to complete the transaction, was sometimes very difficult. Often times the object of his affections had no idea of his plans. Often Lord Caldhart planned it exactly that way. He saw the process as more than a business; to him it was a strategy, a game. He the player, she his object, and the many decisions, the timing, the seduction, all of the process, which he often referred to as *a dance*, delighted, excited, and consumed him.

His passion was finding women's weaknesses. They all had them, and he was a master at exploiting such weaknesses to his advantage. They were all whores as far as he was concerned, the only difference was negotiating their price. Some had to be convinced, while others had to be convinced to be less mercenary. Some needed no convincing at all. He did not mind if a woman was easily procured. By the time he was in negotiations with a lady, there were no surprises concerning his desire for her—if she came willingly, so much the better.

The seduction of Elizabeth Bennet might well be in his realm of possibilities. He was fairly certain he already knew her weakness. He simply had to see if he could obtain what she wanted; could he find the sister, and make her seducer suffer?

Now he needed time, with his new chess set, to plan his moves. He set up the board: himself as the white queen, Elizabeth as the black king. Across the board sat the black queen, George Wickham and his pawn, Lydia Bennet. Elizabeth might not recognize her sister as one of his enemies, but Lord Caldhart knew better. Lydia, lost Lydia, was an obstacle to overcome. She was keeping him from reaching his goal. She was as much his enemy as was Wickham. The other pieces were yet to be named, though he did decide to name her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner as the black bishops since, at the very least, they probably provided moral support and guidance to Elizabeth's sensibilities.

He thought long into the afternoon, and finally came up with a beginning. He called Higgins into his house once again.

"Higgins, I have another task for you. I have learned that Miss Bennet may have had a younger sister who eloped

with a militia officer last summer, but instead only came here to live with him in London. The news of this seems to have been all over town, so ask in general and see what anyone can tell you. The girl's name was Lydia Bennet, the man George Wickham. His militia was stationed in Brighton at the time they ran away. See if you can get the name of the commanding officer. I may send you down to Brighton to see if Mr. Wickham left any enemies behind him."

"Enemies, sir?"

"Yes, Higgins. The more we know of Mr. Wickham, his friends and his enemies, the better chance we have of finding him."

"Do we want to find Mr. Wickham, sir, or just find out about where he brought the sister to in town?"

His lordship sighed. "Both, Higgins, but her family has been searching for the girl all this time and I suspect that we will not do much better. I need names of people he knows, he knew, and those he may have made angry. All information is power, Higgins, power to launch an assault against Mr. Wickham when the time comes, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, information. I'll see to it today, sir."

"Excellent, Higgins."



HIGGINS DID GO TO Brighton. After his London contacts told all they knew of the gossip from last summer, his Lordship sent him directly to the seaside. Being a much smaller community, Mr. Wickham's desertion and elopement were still considered first-rate waggles, and he found many people eager to provide information. He returned only after he had the name of the regiment's Colonel and his wife, the town where the regiment had been previously encamped, the village near where Wickham grew up, and the very long list of people who no doubt his Lordship would consider to be enemies of Mr. Wickham. There were four shopkeepers, three tavern owners, a blacksmith and a poor laundress, all of whom Wickham had conveniently forgotten to pay before leaving town so abruptly. Unfortunately there were also two tradesmen whose daughters had allegedly had a *closer* relationship with the lieutenant. Higgins wrote their names down as well, being sure to mark the offence next to each person. If Mr. Wickham had made any friends, however, they certainly no longer acknowledged it.



HIS LORDSHIP STROKED THE curling hairs of the beard on his chin as he read.

"A decidedly one-sided list, Higgins," he observed.

"Yes, your Lordship."

"Not that I'm surprised. This man knows how to make enemies quite well. However with the lack of friends to call upon, it gives us no clues where he might have gone for help in hiding out here. Well, there's nothing to be done but continue to follow the trail backwards. It's off to...Meryton for you. Is that not in Hertfordshire?"

"It is Sir, I understand it's the largest town near where the lady, Miss Lydia, was from."

"The Bennets live there?" His hand stopped mid-air, Higgins nodded. "You must proceed with great caution then. From what you have told me of how lively the gossip still raged in Brighton, it is sure to be the same in Meryton. I think you would do well not to ask too many questions, but rather let the locals tell you the story in their own time. I do not want the Bennets to know that strangers were inquiring after them. Take great care there, Higgins; this is very important."

He dismissed the servant, turned to his new board and sighed. "Damn, I do not have *nearly* enough pawns."



LORD CALDHART SAT REGARDING his precious new chessboard. Higgins had recently returned from Meryton before heading on to Birmingham, where Wickham had lived before joining the military. All the facts of Lydia Bennet's disgraceful elopement had been the talk of the town. The Bennets lived in virtual seclusion, which many of the plain folk pitied since the daughters, and even Mrs. Bennet, had been so lively before. It was said that the two eldest girls, Miss Bennet, Jane, and Miss Elizabeth, had gone to live in town with their aunt and uncle, and would no doubt find employment now.

Higgins had continued by telling Miss Bennet's history with a wealthy gentleman, a Mr. Bingley, who had leased a nearby estate and who had shown great promise towards her the year before. Everyone was expecting them to announce an engagement when the man had simply up and left, never to return. Lord Robert wondered where Jane, the eldest, was. He had not heard any word about her before, and of course she was not at the theatre that night. He had some small sympathy for the poor girl. She was rumoured to be the most beautiful of all the Bennet sisters, and, if that were true, to be disappointed in love and then have her reputation tarnished forever by the foolish younger sister was a great cruel waste. Lloyd was right; why was it always the pretty ones?

Higgins had heard that Miss Elizabeth also had a suitor the prior year: her cousin, a Mr. Collins. A bigger fop the town had never seen, yet he had one claim to respect; he would one day inherit Mr. Bennet's estate—Longbourn. Apparently he had offered for her, and she had flatly refused

him. Just days later he engaged himself to Miss Elizabeth's dearest friend, and they were married shortly thereafter.

Lord Caldhart was impressed; turning down a comfortable situation in life, and keeping her father's property in the family could not tempt her into a marriage with this cousin. He would have to tread very carefully. A woman who had no desire for wealth or security was not the typical female he was used to dealing with. Elizabeth obviously had standards that most ladies only dreamed they had. A return visit to Johnson's was in order.



SHE STOOD AT THE desk, waiting upon a gentleman, apparently a new customer, as he effused over the excellence of the short cigar almost completely gone between his fingers. She was patient, quiet, demure; a perfect imitation of a working class shopkeeper. He was very impressed. She had missed her true calling; with her face, figure and abilities, she could have had a long career on the stage. The transaction completed, he now braved her attention.

"Welcome back, Lord Caldhart; I trust your first purchase did not disappoint?"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson, I take it? She nodded. "I thank you, and they were superb. I also had the pleasure of meeting your owner, Mr. Gardiner, recently. He informed me that the concoctions are all your doing, your genius. I wish to thank you for your excellence of taste; you are quite the find, Mrs. Johnson." She blushed prettily under her cap while curtsying.

"Thank you, sir, I am most grateful. How may I help you today; another dozen of your blend?"

"Actually no, I'd like to try a new sampling if I may." He was determined to spend some time with her, and needed an excuse to stay in the shop. She still refused to raise her head, the thick spectacles and cap effectively covering most of her. Luckily, it gave him a chance to study what he could see most intensely. Her skin was lovely, strange how he had not noticed it before. The illusion of elderly matron had automatically closed his eyes off to her in the past, a very effective method to hide herself.

"Something stronger? Or perhaps more mellow? If you like to smoke more than one cigar in a sitting a second, more mellow blend, might please your palate," she suggested.

"If you believe it to be so, Madam, then I would try the mellow. I leave my delights in your capable hands, I feel I shall be impressed once again."

"As you wish, sir. Please be seated, and I will bring your short for you."

He chose the seat nearest the workroom, on the off chance she might talk to herself again. She remained quiet however, and brought him his cigar not long after he sat. He lit up once again. A unique, mellow, mild sweetness

filled him. She was correct again. It was the perfect second smoke or perhaps a smoke on a hot day, after eating a mild dinner.

"You are a treasure, Mrs. Johnson," he sighed. "I'll take two dozen of these if you please, and another two dozen of my original blend, if you would."

"Thank you, sir; it would be my pleasure."

"No, Madam, the pleasure is mine in the smoking." He knew he was on the border of outright flirting, but he didn't care. Before she returned to the workroom, he exhaled and asked, "I cannot fathom why your shop is not busier, Mrs. Johnson."

"My Lord?"

"Your product is so superior to anything I have ever purchased in this city, it is a small wonder your business is not overrun with every Lord, Earl and Gentleman in town, every day."

"I hardly know how to answer that, your Lordship. But I would guess we have not been open long enough for word to get round to all those men you suggested."

"But you would like that? You would like your business to prosper, have your fortune made?"

"I do not believe Mr. Gardiner expected to make a fortune selling my cigars, sir, and I know I did not. There is more to happiness than just money, sir." Her voice was no longer friendly, but still civil.

"Indeed, Mrs. Johnson, but money can buy us things not always available otherwise. Money can open doors not previously open, and provide for not just ourselves, but our families and loved ones, can it not?" She curtsied once again, excusing herself to her workroom to make up his order. He did not fail to notice she had not answered.

She returned sometime later with his boxes. He was pleased with the interaction they had had today. He gave her some things to think about, he believed. He now had a very specific purpose for his four-dozen cigars. She would soon understand him to be at least a man of action and power. He wanted to give her a proof of his abilities, before starting a direct attack upon her. He was satisfied that she still thought he did not know who she was. Perhaps she would simply find him a bit whimsical.

"I shall see about introducing these to some of my acquaintances, Mrs. Johnson. I feel that an increase in business might help you, and it would be my pleasure to see it done." Before she could answer more than a "thank you" he was out the door with his packages.



THAT EVENING HE STROLLED into his favourite club, Whites, bearing three boxes.

"My Lords, Gentlemen, I have just had an unexpected windfall, and would like to share my good fortune with

you all. Please join me.” he announced as he opened his boxes, bearing the cigars from Johnson’s. Lord Caldhart being generous in his club was not a common occurrence; it garnered much attention, free cigars garnered even more. Gentlemen seemed to creep out of the woodwork. Soon the room was filled with the haze of nearly three-dozen cigars blooming together. Eyebrows were raised at one another in happy surprise, lips were licked, and all was savoured.

“Yes,” thought Lord Robert as he registered the looks upon their faces, “let these treasures weave their spells on their own. I have no need to push.”

Finally after a few minutes of utter silence someone braved to speak what they all had been secretly thinking, “These are quite good, Lord Caldhart. Where did you say you found them?”

Caldhart turned in the direction of the voice. “Ah, but I did not say! I do not mind sharing these with you gentlemen, but you *do* understand my need to be secretive? If I were to reveal the new jewel of a shop in which I discovered them, why you would all no doubt buy up the entire stock!”

Most nodded appreciatively, but several younger members stealthily eyed the now empty boxes sitting behind his Lordship. One was quick enough to slip in behind him, turn the article over, and reveal the name burned upon the back to those around him: Johnson’s House of Cigars.

“My work here is done,” he thought wryly.



THREE DAYS LATER, MR. and Mrs. Gardiner let themselves into Lizzy’s shop. They had heard her astonishing story of how busy she had been the last two days, and wished to see for themselves what was happening. It was still over an hour until the time to close, but the front door had been locked and the closed sign hung in the window. Elizabeth was nowhere to be seen.

“Mrs. Johnson?” he called out.

“In the workroom, Mr. Gardiner,” she responded. They were not prepared for the sight they beheld. There stood Elizabeth and Toby, dishevelled and obviously exhausted, staring at the empty cases. The barrels around them were all without their lids, and every one of them was empty. Her uncle blinked uncomprehendingly.

“What has happened to all our cigars? Even the raw stock is gone!”

She shook her head. “Not gone, sir: sold.”

“Sold? All of it? That was more than a month’s worth of business according to Mr. Merriweather!”

“Every last thing we could make. We finally had to turn them out, and ask them to return at the beginning of next week, when we could be restocked.” She led him to her

strong box; they had not emptied it since the beginning of the week.

“There must be over fifty pounds in here!” her uncle cried.

“Sixty three pounds and five shillings,” she announced proudly. “Almost all paid cash. All that money in just four days.” They could only stare at the money and empty shelves.

Johnson’s House of Cigars was made. Elizabeth had no doubt who had done it.

Chapter 6

LONDON, FEBRUARY, 1813

The coach headed slowly back to Gracechurch Street, constantly delayed by the throng of the people and their coaches blocking the streets around the closing shops for many minutes. Elizabeth welcomed the chance to sit in the dark, mulling over the extraordinary phenomenon she had experienced that week.

Her solitude was soon interrupted by her Aunt. “Do you think Mrs. Johnson might know to whom she owes her good fortune, Lizzy?”

“Yes, Aunt: Lord Robert Caldhart. He has been a very affable and easy to please customer. I can only assume he was as willing as Mr. Lloyd to share his good fortune with his friends, and help to increase ours.”

“Lord Robert did this?” her astonished aunt replied.

“I believe so.” Despite Mrs. Gardiner’s concern clearly written across her face, Elizabeth continued, “You seem surprised; is something like this so opposite his character? Do you know much about him?”

Mrs. Gardiner peeked at her husband, his face shrugged slightly, and then he nodded his head in assent.

“Lizzy, it would not normally be proper to reveal this to a single young lady but, seeing as you are almost living on your own, it probably would be wise to remind you of all the types of men this world holds.”

Elizabeth stifled a half laughing gasp. “Good heavens, Aunt, you would have me think his Lordship was a highwayman.”

“Elizabeth, please be serious. Lord Robert is...well... mostly respectable. He is from a very good family. His eldest son will inherit and is very respectable. He married a Lady Ravenshaw; they have quite a few children. His youngest son is, I believe, a brigadier general by now; he’s older than your Uncle, after all.”

“And Lady Caldhart?”

“Oh dear me; Lady Caldhart died shortly after the youngest son was born. She was one of the richest young ladies in England. They say her dowry was well over a hundred thousand pounds!”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Lizzy. “Such a sum!”

“Quite,” replied her aunt. “You can imagine the envy he raised, being so young, having his duty to his family fulfilled. He was richer than most people ever dreamt about, and then had no more obligations.”

“This hardly paints a picture of someone of whom you should warn me, though,” Elizabeth objected.

“Perhaps at the beginning of his life it would be true, my dear. But give a man a large fortune with no future responsi-

bilities and you have put together a perfect recipe—for a rake.” Elizabeth’s brows raised in wonder. “Oh yes, my dear, he is quite famous for it. Your uncle will concur.” Indeed Uncle Edward’s head was bobbing in agreement as she spoke.

“He has spent his entire life living with one mistress after another. A veritable parade of women over the years, they even joined him at his house. When his sons were younger, he had a lovely house in the north end of town, set up for his ladies but, when the sons moved out, his mistress was moved in, and each in their turn has served as his hostess. They never entertained for his family, of course. But anyone who attended a non-family party there always had his mistress as their hostess.”

“How absolutely deliciously shocking, Aunt!” Lizzy exclaimed. “That many women? And none of them ever married to him? He makes Henry the Eighth look like a priest!”

“Elizabeth!” her shocked aunt admonished. “Do remember you are a lady; sometimes you make me doubt it.” Though she could not help but laugh, too. After the laughter receded, Lizzy’s curiosity got the better of her.

“How do you suppose he found them?” she asked.

“I beg your pardon niece?” her uncle replied, with a bit of a choke.

She blushed. “I meant where did he find them? Who were these women? I would assume these were not ordinary, lower class girls if they had the ability to run his house, preside over his table and so forth; how would he find such a woman?”

Her aunt and uncle looked at one another uncomfortably, then conspicuously down at the floor of the coach. Her aunt finally responded quietly. “Most were women not unlike you, Elizabeth. Most were ladies whose families had both once been wealthy and lost all their money, or respectability, or their place in society. There are also families, I am sorry to say, who would sacrifice a daughter to the likes of men like Robert Caldhart, for a chance to regain their social standing, or improve their fortunes. And some ladies choose such a life of their own free will. Better to be pampered by many men, than spend their lives as old maids, I suppose. All of them are still immoral, Lizzy, which is the most important part to remember. It is sad to think a man may make such choices with little repercussions to his social standing, but a woman will always be ruined. We always have a choice in this world. Some choices are more respectable than others. I hope that you will always make honourable, moral, choices in your life, my dear.”

A large lump formed in Elizabeth’s throat as she smiled and nodded reassuringly to her Aunt. She felt ashamed—thinking of the path she had set herself upon many months earlier. She knew that, in seeking revenge against Wickham, she was not making a moral choice, though she did believe it to be honourable.

She tried to lighten things. “I do not believe that we would have to worry about Lord Caldhart making an in-

decent suggestion to Mrs. Johnson, Aunt, do you? He has never indicated that he knows I am her, and *she* is so very plain after all.”

“Not Mrs. Johnson, Lizzy, but do you now understand better why Miss Bennet must always be accompanied by her aunt and uncle in town? Your family’s reputation leaves you vulnerable to the rakes of the *ton* who are always on the prowl for a new conquest. We do not want to see you fall prey to them. You are a very desirable woman, Elizabeth, and, when a man is not looking for a wife, desirability is the most important attribute a woman can offer to him. Do you understand?”

Elizabeth swallowed hard again, and nodded. She understood a little too well, that night at the theatre playing in her mind.



SHE HAD NOTICED HIM.

It was a special night for her. Her aunt and uncle wanted to treat her to a play of her choosing after spending her two weeks successfully convalescing. It was lovely to be at a theatre for pleasure’s sake and not for the purpose of looking for Lydia.

The Gardiners had at first been reluctant to agree to this particular show, but she had convinced them. “Anyone who might be offended at a single young lady attending such a production would undoubtedly not go, therefore we should be able to attend with impunity.” This statement earned her a genial laugh, and an agreement.

Within a short time after the play had begun, she had felt a prickling of the hairs upon her neck. She tried to dismiss it but it persisted, and soon she realized that someone must be watching her, staring at her. Without turning her head, or allowing her eyes to leave the stage, she began a slow perusal of the outer perimeter of her line of focus. Soon she detected an anomaly. Whenever a particularly amusing line was uttered by one of the actors, the audience, as a whole, reacted; heads bobbed back, fans waved, shoulders bounced. In a box slightly to her left, the person sitting in a chair at the very back had reactions that were always delayed by just a few seconds. He (and she could determine it was a man) was reacting to the audience, not the actors. The longer this went on, the more she was convinced that whoever it may be was, in fact, reacting to her. It was not until the house lights went up at the first intermission, that she was bold enough to look over to the box, just in time to see a tall, silver and black peppered head, in a midnight blue evening jacket, exit his box.

Later, when she returned to her seat, she noticed the box was empty. She had no doubt now who her admirer was. She was quite surprised at his boldness, along with his ingenuity, at getting his friend to make the introduction.

He had not been forward to her in front of her aunt and uncle but, combined with his behaviour inside the theatre, his interest in her was obviously very strong. She could not be comfortable with his intentions. She was sure he had to be considerably older than her own father. What would a man so high in society want with the likes of her? Mr. Lloyd apparently had not heard of her family’s misfortunes, else he would never have made the introduction. She wondered if the gossip about them had already died down and, as old news, no longer interested anyone. She dearly hoped so. She wondered if Lord Robert Caldhart was going to continue his game inside the theatre. Would he try to seek her out at other places, as well? And for what purpose? She had no time to reflect upon how she felt about any of these ideas as the second act soon began.

KNOWING LORD ROBERT WAS spying upon her had at first been exhilarating. Now realizing at how much of her person he had no doubt been leering, and learning of his reputation with women, made her queasy. At least she could take comfort in knowing, while he might admire Miss Bennet, he could not have intentions towards Mrs. Johnson. She felt certain that he did not know they were one and the same. Still, his fascination that night puzzled her. She never considered herself beautiful. Jane was the beauty. She was the clever one who sometimes received compliments about her eyes, but that was the extent of what she perceived to be her attributes. She had never considered desirability before.

“*What would be the difference?*” she wondered to herself later in her room. She gazed at her image, still clad in her modest matronly gown. Her body had recovered from the previous torture she had inflicted upon it while walking about half of London in the winter. Her figure was no longer underweight and her health was fully restored, giving her the sparkle her countenance had always displayed.

She began to examine herself. Her hair was good enough. Her curls were a source of frustration to her most of the time, but it was pleasant to never have to curl the wisps around her face. Still, the colour was ordinary, if not a bit strong for her taste. Sometimes she wished she had Jane’s lovely blonde hair, but such was not to be. Her skin was something she was proud of; it was once again bright, clear and creamy; she never saw a hint of a freckle, for which she was grateful. And its bloom had returned, now that she had been taxing herself less for nearly a month.

Then she took in her figure. She removed her gown, and the bindings she wrapped around her upper body to hide herself. She once had wished that she were taller, but did not really mind her height now. Her breasts however, were a different point altogether. She had never been happy with

them; they were much too large. She had developed them at such an early age, and garnered so much attention from the boys in the neighbourhood, that she considered them something of a curse. Fashions of the day favoured the lithe physique, not her own *saftig* one. She constantly battled with the bodices of her dresses, as they had a decided tendency to inch downwards while she would pull them up. Luckily, since coming to London, she had been able to purchase two new gowns, including the one she was wearing that evening at the theatre. She was delighted to have the neckline cut to a level she considered more reasonable. Her mother always ordered her gowns too low cut in her opinion, and she was relieved to return to a more modest look. Of course Mrs. Johnson's gowns were completely modest; *she* bound herself before dressing each morning. But Lizzy actually enjoyed the look of being somewhat flat-chested.

Now she observed her breasts from a different point of view—from a decidedly male point of view. She knew from reading certain books in her father's library, as well as being acquainted with her young male cousins when they were babies, that men and women were physically different—most obviously in two places, though only one of those places was easily observable. It stood to reason that, if the difference was more pronounced in one woman over another, the difference could receive quite a lot of attention. Not any good, wholesome attention, but there it was. Or rather there *they* were.

"Yes, I can see where a man, especially one who had no concerns with my fortune or connections, might find them admirable," she thought and then covered her face with her hands and groaned. "Good God, I'm appraising my breasts like a cow at auction!" She quickly removed her corset, and then her stockings and garters. Standing once again in front of her cheval mirror, she lifted her chemise and stared at her legs. She considered them finely shaped. She knew she had the nicest calves of all her sisters. They had often told her so; a benefit of all her walking.

She lifted her chemise even higher, and turned slightly. Her bottom curved nicely up to her back and below to the upper parts of her thighs. It was well formed enough she thought, but really could not see any sign of better or best in such a thing. She was sure gentlemen did not consider it either. She dropped the silky cloth again and, crossing her arms in front of her, her head cocked to one side, she shook it violently. No, there really was nothing very desirable here she thought. Just a nice looking girl, with a pair of fine eyes.

"I do not think I shall ever have to worry about being propositioned by a rake, much less the likes of the connoisseur of mistresses, Lord Robert Caldhart," she mused to herself.

ACROSS TOWN, LORD ROBERT was sitting at the table by the west windows. His board in front of him, he confirmed the move; white king's pawn ahead two. Satisfied he began staring at the drawing he held. He had a very good eye and a deft hand, he had to admit. His portrait of her was well done. The eyes still needed more work, but at least he now had her lovely face to gaze upon. He grasped it carefully as his other hand slowly crept down below his waist.

"Elizabeth," he softly whispered.

Chapter 7

LONDON, MARCH, 1813

She thought she would see him again. After the shop re-opened, fully stocked and ready the next week, she was sure he would come in and strut like a peacock over his handiwork. But he did not. Nor did he send a note, or have one of his acquaintances send his regards. Strangely, none of the new customers who steadily came in acknowledged Lord Robert's recommendation of the place either. It was as if there was a silent conspiracy among the gentlemen of London to shop at, but not speak of, her shop. She often noticed customers determinedly avoiding the gaze of anyone else in her shop whilst waiting for her to attend them.

Elizabeth could not help but be amused at her secret success. Perhaps she would purchase some paintings for the walls so the gentlemen would have a more practical excuse to stare blankly at them. She was pleased to be able to tell her aunt and uncle that Lord Caldhart had not encroached upon her again.



ABOUT A WEEK LATER however, after Toby had returned from his midday meal, she found a branch in a plain glass jar sitting on the end of the workroom table. She picked up the ordinary vase and inhaled deeply the fragrance given off by the stem's flowering blooms: peach blossoms.

Her head floated in a beautiful cloud of olfactory delight when suddenly she remembered the language of flowers; peach blossom—*I am your captive*.

"What cheek!" she thought, tossing it into the waste bin, embarrassed to have been caught up in the flower's seductive odour. It was no small feat to have a peach blossom at the beginning of March. Anyone sending such a prize would no doubt either have a great deal of wealth, or run his own hothouse. She had a strong suspicion who would qualify, but she preferred not to think about it.

A few days later, a small package, plainly wrapped, appeared on her table. She opened it hesitatingly, eventually revealing a plain, though fine, linen handkerchief. As she turned it over in her palm feeling the softness of the delicate fabric, trying to detect why this, of all things, would be sent to her, her senses were suddenly overwhelmed. A fragrance never before known filled her. Suddenly she was rendered helpless to any other thought but that of drifting once again

along a sensory trip of pleasure. Perfume: light, flowering, pink, spring—all there in its scent. It was several moments before the waking world was once again apparent to her. She was not pleased.

The next day another plain jar, this one holding a perfect white camellia, sat upon her table before the day was through. It gave no fragrance; this message was simply one of visual pleasure and hidden meaning: *perfected loveliness*. Now she was angry.

She turned to her helper. "Toby, can you explain where this flower, along with the other bloom I saw here last week, came from?" she demanded harshly.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, unused to seeing Mrs. Johnson with her ire raised. "Both times, I mean three times now, if you count that little flat package that was given to me, some lad, no one I know, came up to me as I was heading back here, and gave them to me. I didn't think you'd be angry; they were so pretty after all. Did I do wrong, mistress?"

"No, Toby," she did not want the youth to worry, "I merely wished to know how they came to make their way to our workroom. Is it always the same lad who gives you the things?"

"No, ma'am. The first one—I've seen him hanging around at the tavern door most days. But the other two; I've never seen them before."

"And who do they say sent them?"

"No one ma'am. They say a man gave them to deliver to Mrs. Johnson, but left no name. I'm sorry." She dismissed Toby reassuring him she was not disturbed by his actions, much to the young man's relief.

Elizabeth hoped her *interested party* would cease his unwanted attentions. She had to be impressed with his finesse in inconspicuous dalliances. However, why he would think that she, of all people, would be interested in him or his possible offers, escaped her. She only wished she had the opportunity to ask him to stop sending his discomposing presents, but her wishes were not to be heeded.

The following Monday the tiniest box, again plainly wrapped, was given to Toby. She left it in her workroom all day, pointedly ignoring it. When she finally felt driven to open it, she found a single small morsel of chocolate under the tissue. It was perfectly round, and the finish so fine, it shone like a perfectly polished piece of shadowy mahogany. Her masterful skills instinctively took over as she carefully picked it up and, carrying it to her face, filled herself with its heady scent; cocoa, cream, sugar, vanilla, a liqueur of some kind...brandy, and raspberry.

Her tongue could not help but obey her desire and tentatively licked the outer layer of the confection. She allowed the substance to sit upon her tongue, while the aroma it gave up wafted into her ducts. She swallowed the now liquid darkness, relishing in its taste. After repeating this process three times more, she eventually gave in to temptation and popped the entire treat into her mouth. She let it lie inside her while

it slowly turned into molten decadence. Swallowing for the final time, she breathed a deep satisfied sigh. Her eyes still closed, she would have continued in her semi-dream state, as she licked the tips of her chocolate-marred fingers, had she not heard the strangled exhale of her adolescent helper at the door. His eyes, combined with the innocent lack of subtlety in his face, revealed to her the sensuous scene she had unintentionally displayed in front of him.

Gathering all her wits about her, and drawing upon the countless hours of practice perfecting herself as Mrs. Johnson, she calmly turned and demurely asked, "Is there a customer waiting for me, Toby?"

Opening night critics at Drury Lane would have been impressed.



HER SHOP HAD BEEN doing a consistently brisk business since reopening. She and Toby were run ragged for the first few weeks until their bodies were used to the pace. If she had not had the chance earlier in the winter to re-establish her strength and vigour, she would have been in serious trouble maintaining the amount of work now required of her. Her aunt and uncle still insisted that she not walk out before the workdays in the week and she agreed that it was for the best. She continued her searches at the weekends, stopping midday for her rest and meal at Gracechurch Street, as her uncle had commanded. Though she could not be pleased with her lack of success, at least she was contributing to the effort he and Mr. Brooks were once again undertaking. She wondered how they were faring now.

She had panicked when Wickham had walked into her shop two months earlier; she scarcely knew what she was doing. It had happened so quickly that she had completely lost her equanimity. She could only stand frozen with uncertainty and trepidation. Once they had left she had cursed him, and then herself, for not taking action. She had a shop full of customers and Toby was out on an errand. The timing could not have been worse.

After her last customer had finally left, Lizzy had written a note to her uncle. When Toby returned, she had him deliver it immediately. Her uncle had come early that day to fetch her, and together they hurried to Mr. Brooks's office. Elizabeth described carefully what she had seen. She tried to remember as many things as she could—Wickham's clothing, which direction the couple headed when they had left—anything that might provide a clue to his whereabouts. She also described the woman, Sally, to the best of her recollection. Unfortunately, because of her spectacles and having had two customers to wait upon, she had seen her for only a moment.

Mr. Brooks agreed to go out that very night with Mr. Gardiner accompanying him. They searched the inns and

taverns around Johnson's for the couple, but failed to find any hint of them. Mr. Brooks then spent the next two weeks searching furtively, while Elizabeth was recovering her health. He covered vast parts of the neighbourhood starting at Johnson's and continued in an ever-growing circle outwards. Despite it being early February, he worked tirelessly, until Elizabeth and Mr. Gardiner intervened and insisted he be more reasonable in the time he was spending out of doors. Elizabeth's own history had taught them all how dangerous it could be to overexert in the middle of winter. For the last six weeks, Mr. Brooks had been working steadily for them without risking his health, but Wickham had disappeared once again and none of them could find a trace of him.

If only she had seen the woman more clearly. If only she had caught her last name, or could have followed them out the door. She would have found out where they were lodged, and brought her uncle there. However, she had missed the opportunity. While her uncle tried to reassure her that she had done well, she knew better. She realised sadly then that she had not helped much at all. She was severely disappointed in herself. As far as she was concerned, it had been her first chance to truly make a difference, and she had failed significantly.

Why had she been so frightened? Why did she not say something or do something? What difference would it have made if she had exposed herself to him right in front of her customers? The shop meant nothing, Wickham was everything. She chided herself harshly for not being braver.



THAT HAD BEEN OVER eight weeks ago, and still they could not find a trace of Wickham or Sally. Now it seemed she did indeed have one of the rakes of the *ton* preying upon her. More like a full-scale invasion of her senses.

He was good. Very good. He knew exactly what would be acceptable to send and not cause outrage. He would have been pleased to see the ravenous look Toby fixed upon the fruits when they began to arrive, compelling Elizabeth to share them rather than throwing them away. He would have happily paid the lad a salary had he known the unwitting accomplice he had in him.

The gifts were always plainly wrapped; a discreet accoutrement to anyone carrying them. The flowers were always a single bud or stem and arrived either tied by a simple ribbon, or in a plain glass jar. They were chosen for their ability to engage her senses without overwhelming, and to send messages. They feasted on peach, orange, pear, apricot and even a pineapple all flawlessly timed to arrive at peak flavour. Her nose and taste buds were in a near constant state of rapture. He had an innate ability to choose exactly what would best please her physically, if not emotionally.

The following weeks found the deliveries to Johnson's House of Cigars as copious as they were varied. Chocolates, creams, pastries, flowers and the most perfectly ripe fruits, had all made their way to Elizabeth. She had shared the generosity of her admirer with a very grateful Toby when she could. Unfortunately, the chocolates arrived only one at a time, and she was unable to part with a single one of *them*.

No more handkerchiefs had been sent, for which she was thankful. It would not do to keep anything sent by a gentleman to a single young lady; she had not kept the first one. He obviously knew that—everything else he had sent was consumable or perishable, and completely untraceable. By the end of the month, deliveries were being made daily. She wondered when the man had time to attend his personal affairs. He had never used the same delivery boy twice, and they came from many parts of town.

She was convinced of one thing: whoever it was, he must know she who she was. Mrs. Johnson would never turn a man's head, much less gain his affections, therefore he must know Elizabeth was Mrs. Johnson. All rational deliberation pointed to it. There were only two men to have seen her as both persons, but only one had been spying upon her at the theatre. Logic led to the conclusion that Lord Robert Caldhart was her unwelcome suitor.

She wanted to end this. She wanted the chance to confront him and ask him to cease his anonymous flirting or seduction or whatever it was he was doing. This was an all out offensive against her, yet her foe still failed to show his face. It had been over a month; why did he not come forth?

What could he mean having designs upon her? While she might not have an impeccable reputation anymore, it was hardly equivalent to being a kept woman. She was flattered that he had so obviously taken a detailed interest in her preferences; his taste was exquisite and she could not fault him that. Had she been the type of woman to whom worldly comforts were paramount, she would be an excellent candidate for his machinations. However, none of those things mattered to her. She supposed his dissolute life would only understand a mercenary soul; he had, after all, expected her to be wishing to make her fortune. Obviously, he did not know her well enough to realise she was not of like mind or ideals.

She snorted to herself. "If wealth and position had meant anything to me, I would be Mistress of Pemberley right now."

That exclamation turned her mind to another painful subject. She knew that no respectable man would ever want her now. She had only ever had her charms and possibly a bit more sense than some women to attract a husband. Now those accomplishments were effectively put away in a drawer and locked up. Wickham had sealed that fate for her and her sisters. There would be no marriages for them, and especially not for Elizabeth to one particular man.

She tried not to dwell upon futile wishes, but sometimes she could not help herself. Late at night in her bed, when the cruelty of her situation was not forefront in her mind, she would daydream that all their problems were solved, the past forgotten, the future bright and promising. Only then, in an imagined world of tranquillity, would she allow herself to think of *him*. She would daydream of a blissful life married to Mr. Darcy, smiling contentedly as sleep overcame her.

Chapter 8

DERBYSHIRE, JULY, 1812

Darcy woke feeling better than he had in months. The freshly mowed grass under the rising sun scented the air sweetly around his house. Memories flooded his senses: lazy childhood mornings, happy carefree play days of summer, and the scent of many past years of mowed grass—peace. As he lay in bed, he could hear faint stirrings in the hallways; far off someone was whistling a tune, perhaps by the stables. He looked across at the empty pillow beside him. He closed his eyes and imagined her sweet, smiling face, sleep still in her drowsy blinking eyes, as she yawned, demanding herself to wake, and take him into her arms. He hugged the pillow to himself, happily sighing, a satisfied smile crooked on his mouth as he closed his eyes once again to enjoy his daydream.

After dressing and breaking his fast, he summoned Mrs. Reynolds to apprise her of his plans for the day. As soon as Georgiana arrived he wished to go to Lambton to call upon the Gardiners and their niece. Later he would entertain the Bingleys and the Hursts in the east drawing room. The dinner menu had been approved the day before; it only needed Georgiana to give it a final look.

As he related his wishes to the housekeeper, her usual calm mien became rather flustered.

“Is something troubling you, Mrs. Reynolds?”

“Sir, I normally do not concern myself with the gossip that I hear around the kitchen, but when you mentioned going to Lambton, and more specifically seeing the people who visited here yesterday, I could not help but recall some rather upsetting things I heard about them this morning.”

“What have you heard?” He counselled himself to remain calm, but was dreading his affections for Elizabeth had already been guessed, and were now being bandied about.

“Samuel was in the village early this morning and said that the party had left last night, and in no small amount of agitation.”

“They are no longer at the Inn, or in Lambton?” He was starting to panic.

“I’m afraid they have left the county entirely, sir. I believe they are thought to have returned home. I do hope you had not planned on them calling here today, it would have been a pity for them to have missed that. I’m quite surprised, as I believe Mrs. Gardiner was to call on many childhood acquaintances over the next few days. I cannot imagine what would have happened to make them cancel their holiday.”

Darcy was now feeling thoroughly ill. “Does Sam have any other information about this? What did the Gardiners say? Were they upset?”

“I think a trip into Lambton before your guests arrive could be arranged, and highly informative, do you not?” Her voice was heartening.

He looked up at her, real concern and feeling obvious in his face. “Directly, Mrs. Reynolds. See that my horse is saddled, I will be ready in five minutes.”

When he arrived at the Inn in Lambton, a part of his mind refused to believe that young Samuel Reynolds had heard correctly. He desperately hoped she would be there, partaking of her breakfast perhaps. He would apologise for his early call, and invite them to dine that day. Unfortunately, Sam was not wrong.

He spoke with the innkeeper, who suggested Darcy speak with Hannah, the maid who had waited upon the family, and helped them pack their belongings the night before. Hannah supplied all the knowledge he could ever hope to have, unhappy though it was.

“Aye, sir,” she said “They were headed back to Hertfordshire.”

“Can you tell me what happened when they arrived here yesterday afternoon?”

“Well, sir, they came in, seemed well enough. Then, not ten minutes after, I hears Miss Elizabeth crying. Very loud I’d say. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were trying to calm her, but there was little use.” He cringed inwardly, wondering what might have made her cry. Was it him?

“Miss Bennet was crying?”

“Oh yes, sir, I could figure that well enough.”

“Could you hear what she was saying?”

“Only bits, sir. Once she said, ‘*I could have prevented this, I who knew what he was.*’ And another time she said ‘*It is in every way horrible.*’ Those were the only things I heard besides her cries. Her aunt and uncle seemed calm enough, though they could not do the same for her, poor thing. I helped her pack. The dear girl often stopped and sobbed again. I think she couldn’t leave fast enough. They must have been in their coach and on the road in not much more than an hour. She was kind to me; thanked me for all my help, and the meals I had served, even left me a tip. More than some ladies do.”

Hearing Elizabeth’s words devastated him. He felt he was not worthy to listen to the tale of her personal life, but could not help himself.

“She left nothing—no note? No letters from Mrs. Gardiner to any of her friends?”

“No, sir, but I don’t think there would have been any time for such things, it all happened right quick.”

“No of course not, there would not have been any time.”

“I think she was feeling better once they got in the coach. She seemed to cheer up a bit, at least her spirits lifted a bit once she was on the road.” The anguish these simple words caused him could not be measured.

“Thank you, Hannah, I appreciate you telling me,” he said, handing her a coin while he turned his back and stared out the window as she left.

“Yes,” he thought, “Miss Bennet was probably very relieved to be on the road and finally getting away from *me*.”



WHEN HE RETURNED HOME he informed Mrs. Reynolds that the Gardiners and Miss Bennet had indeed left the county, and quietly asked her not to mention it again. He greeted his sister and his guests, then spent the rest of the day trying to hide from them as often as possible.

When he had been refused in April, he had felt angry, insulted, and unfairly treated. Now he only felt sorrow. He had seen her with a lover's eye yesterday; she had been lovely, gentle, sweet. He had never detected reproach or anger from her. He had asked of her, and she had agreed to meet his sister. She gave every indication that she no longer hated him, that she could meet him without disdain or hold the unfortunate words they had exchanged in Hunsford against him. He thought he had a chance. He thought he could show her he was attending to those reproofs with which she had so wisely admonished him. He thought he could make her love him.

“I do not deserve her. She treated me with the utmost civility, even though she was repulsed by me. What creature on earth would have ever been able to conduct herself with such good manners and such superior breeding, while feeling so dreadful? To think I once thought her beneath me; what a fool I was.

What did Hannah tell me she said? *I could have prevented this?* I suppose she should have insisted her aunt and uncle not come to Pemberley. What else? *I who knew what he was.* Yes you did know what I was Elizabeth, only too well. I only wish I had had a chance to prove how different I am trying to be, how I wish to be better; just for you. Then perhaps it would not have been *‘in every way horrible’* to be in my presence again.”

He sat at his desk, staring into nothing. He could not help the tears he shed. Minutes, hours passed by. The butler interrupted him, reminding him the hour for dressing for dinner was upon him. He stood, determined to do right.

“I have lost her forever, but at least I can give her a final gift; I can behave in a gentlemanlike manner and cause her no more distress by leaving her alone, in peace.”



LATE THAT EVENING, DARCY and Bingley sat in his library, sipping their brandies. The ladies had long since retired, Hurst having to be carried up to his room.

“You seem even more taciturn than normal, Darcy. Is there something weighing on your mind you might wish to discuss?” He turned to regard Bingley. There was nothing he would like better than to confide in his closest friend. If only it hadn't been her. If only this were not about the Bennets. He dismissed that possibility, however his mind had also been turning to an entirely different line of thought.

“Bingley, I am contemplating a rather large undertaking, and I think it would be wise to consult you on it.” Bingley's smile snapped shut.

“*You wish to consult me?*”

“Yes, Charles, try not to sound quite so surprised. I know I tend towards having my way in everything, sometimes even where you are concerned, but it is high time I use that excellent brain of yours for my own advantage. I consider you quite clever you know.”

Bingley swallowed and unsuccessfully tried not to look like a boy beaming at his father. “That is quite a compliment, Fitzwilliam. I thank you. Perhaps you would like to tell me your proposal?”

“I think we should all go to Europe,” he stated simply.



TWO DAYS LATER TWO coaches were heading to London from Pemberley. Bingley was sceptical at first, but Darcy was able to overcome any objections. Bingley worried about the coming harvest, but admitted his overseer at Netherfield had just written to him, satisfied with the progress. Darcy offered his own capable steward, Mr Grant, and his son Jacob, who was studying with his father, to take over the correspondence with Netherfield. He would forward any pertinent information or questions requiring Bingley's input, just as he did with Darcy. Bingley finally agreed, and Darcy only had to hint once to Charles that an extra remuneration to the steward would be appropriate.

The rest fell into place. Georgiana had never been; it had been four years since Darcy and Bingley had been, and Louisa and Caroline had only been to Italy, for just three weeks, so felt they had never had the full experience or advantage of a *real* grand tour. The decision was easily settled, and, within a week after arriving in London, they were on their way.



BINGLEY WATCHED HIS FRIEND staring intently over the rail of their ship as it crossed over the channel. Darcy had been

right, Charles did have an excellent brain, and he could see that a change had come over his dear friend.

“He is mournful,” thought Bingley. *“There is a deep wound he is nursing. I have not seen him look so since his father died.”* He watched on.

“What are you running from, Fitzwilliam? Could it be heartache, such as the one I still bear? Do you hope to erase a woman from your heart with this grand scheme?” He sighed: a momentary reflection on a face that lit his soul afire and of times so happy he thought he would burst.

“It will not happen; that I can guarantee. Only time will help to lessen such an ache. But you will never rid yourself of the mark she left upon you.”

Months later he would confess as much to his friend. They would stand in front of a portrait of the Madonna and Child in a museum in Florence, the air thick with history, the future, the immortality in perfection of art, both absorbed in the purity of the piece in front of them. Then he would speak his truth. “She will never leave you. You will always feel her in your heart, though it will get easier. You know that, do you not?”

Darcy turned to his friend, amazed once again at the astuteness of a man so often considered to be simple.

“I know, Charles. God help me, I do know.”

Chapter 9

LONDON, MARCH, 1813

If Mr. Higgins enjoyed travelling, he most certainly would have been pleased with the work he was assigned over the next weeks. His lordship did an admirable job of leaving no stone unturned when it came to discovering George Wickham’s past. Most stones hid a treasure trove of enemies happy to bad-mouth the disreputable Mr. Wickham, as well as eager to have a new ear to bend. If Higgins were required to down a few tankards of ale at each new town, while gathering information on behalf of his master’s wishes, surely no one would deny him that minute pleasure either.

Soon the towns, the taverns and tankards began looking the same. Mr. Wickham’s profligate ways were unfortunately almost inexhaustible as well. There seemed to be no limit to how many tradesmen he was willing to short, no standards or morals by which he consulted when satisfying his lust, and no person he was not willing to befriend, and then betray.

After Higgins had been subjected to essentially a “grand tour” of England, he returned for the final time at the end of the month. Lord Robert sat with piles of notes surrounding him. Names, offences, debts, fairly jumbled his mind. None led to a clue where Wickham might be now. Only one town was absent from the list. Wickham had only inhabited the place for a short while, and none of his acquaintances had been aware he had made the slight side stop. Unbeknownst to Lord Caldhart, Ramsgate was sadly missing. With that deletion, the lack of a key contact: Mrs. Younge.

He carefully noted the offended in the notebook he had begun. One name stood out amongst the commoners; Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire. Wickham’s boyhood friend, and later, patron, had felt the sting of malice from his tongue. Caldhart was surprised at how often Wickham had told the tale in his travels. He could not help but find absurdity at the thought of someone thinking Wickham would have made a good clergyman. Wickham taking orders? Responsible for the moral standards of an entire community? Thank God Mr. Darcy did refuse him the living. He suspected there was more to the story. He toyed with the idea of bringing Darcy into his confidence, but he knew him, by reputation, to be staid and impeccable. Unquestionably, seduction, or even revenge, would be unacceptable to Darcy. No; better not to involve him.

He started to concentrate on the patterns of Wickham’s ways. They were simple enough: arrive, cheat, leave, and

then travel far enough away to the next unsuspecting town. His inconsistency was the constant. They could be assured he would not return to the scene of one of his past crimes. Given enough years, it was conceivable that every town within twenty miles of London would have felt his unwelcome attentions, and one could pinpoint where his next move would be out of lack of any other options. But Caldhart did not have years.

He was beginning to doubt whether his plan could succeed. Wickham was proving too wily, and his patience was wearing thin. He was not worried about the expenses he had incurred so far. Higgin's travels were hardly a trifle, and the gifts he had been sending to Johnsons amounted to little more than pocket change to him. It was his pride that was suffering. He wanted to see Elizabeth. He wanted to begin the dance in person, and here he was barely into the ballroom. He could not approach her without an advantage. She would knock him down, and he might not recover from the blow.

He considered his next move carefully. Perhaps the lack of having the advantage need not cripple him. She did not need to know. She would still think he was merely offering her the usual trappings of mistress-hood. His gifts only hinted at the finer things in life he had to offer, not the prize with which he hoped to entrap her. Could he bluff?



IN THE MONTH SINCE he had been at Johnson's, business had increased considerably. The shop now had a constant stream of customers coming to and fro. Lord Robert stood across the street observing carefully for nearly half an hour, until convinced the opportunity to call upon her while she would be completely engaged by her customers was nigh.

He entered, satisfied his convictions were correct. The shop was full. He patiently waited his turn and, when he finally approached Mrs. Johnson, the fall in her half-hidden face, and the angry flush upon her cheek, was all he needed to confirm; each knew the game was up.

"Lord Caldhart," she said, icicles dropping from her grinding teeth.

"Mrs. Johnson, what a *pleasure* to see you again," was his silky reply. "Your shop seems to be profiting handsomely, Madam. I cannot say I am surprised; such a superior product must be greatly sought after. You must be very grateful for your success." She chose to ignore his self-congratulations.

"I hope the service and product we supply speak for themselves. Their merit, your Lordship, should be obvious and above reproach."

"How true! The quality Johnson's displays is so far above the norm, only a simpleton would fail to see it for the jewel that it is; a 'diamond in the rough' if you will."

"Your Lordship is too kind. We only strive to provide a cigar our customers will enjoy," she replied, and then thoughtfully added, "We have no other aspirations."

"*Touché*," he thought. "Try to warn me off—it will not work."

"So you should not, Mrs. Johnson; your abilities at your chosen work are incomparable. Any gentleman who has been privileged to the sampling of your wares would no doubt agree." She stifled a gasp at his outrageous innuendo, and quickly changed the subject.

"How can we help you today Lord Caldhart; another dozen of your favourite blend?" she carefully directed.

"No, I think I would prefer to try another new blend, Madam. I have been so enraptured with all you have offered in the past, I simply cannot resist the chance to savour another of your delightful goods."

If it were possible for a person to be struck dead from the thoughts of a mere mortal, Lord Robert Caldhart would have found himself skewered with a pike, lanced against the far wall of Johnson's House of Cigars, and choked to death from the simultaneous ingestion of three-dozen specially blended cigars. As it was, he was simply invited to rest his unworthy laurels upon a chair in the rear of the establishment while the proprietress made up a short of a new concoction she henceforth labelled 'Rake's Fate.'

She came back with the short for him. He lit up. It was very good, though he detected an unusual odour hinting at its edges.

"An unusual flavour, Madam," he commented, taking another deep drag.

His face, which had previously been serene, suddenly turned a bright shade of pink. His throat began to burn. He felt himself perspiring heavily from his flush face to his tingling toes.

She did not react to his distress whilst she calmly explained, "I thought someone with such discriminating tastes as yours, my Lord, would appreciate a rare blend. It is only available once a year, in the spring, when the *Lilies of the Valley* are in bloom."

He choked down a large swallow—surely she would not, she *did* not! Lilies of the Valley happened to be the flowers he had sent her that morning, and were notoriously poisonous. They spoke of sweetness, happiness, humility. He was very sure homicide was not one of their messages.

"Thank you," he managed to whisper. As soon as her back was turned, he put out the cigar. Later, when he had recovered his voice, he approached her.

"Would you like a dozen of the new blend then, Lord Caldhart?" she innocently asked.

"Yes, please," he answered, refusing to play the game her way. "And a dozen each of my regular and mild cigars. I cannot seem to keep them in stock. My acquaintances are always inquiring about them and I am happy to oblige them."

"It will take a moment, sir; please be seated."

She made him wait over half an hour. He did not stew, but instead relished the chance to observe her for so long. She steadfastly ignored him, while he admired her more every moment. She handled her customers with expertly crafted gentleness. Those who were unschooled, she lightly guided towards a good product. Those with more discernment she pressed towards her more superior cigars. He marvelled at her natural abilities, and realised, had situations been different, she would have been a great hostess in the world of society.

When the time came to finally pay for his purchase, he handed her a pound note, taking great care to let it drop off the side of the desk unto the floor. They both stooped to retrieve it and, in the act, their hands made contact. She drew her own back quickly.

"I am so sorry," he said, and then added in a whisper, "Miss Bennet." Their eyes met; his challenging, hers infuriated.

"Tis *nothing*, Lord Caldhart, I assure you," she answered. "I thank you for your custom, sir. Please do not let us delay you any further."

"It is always a pleasure to do business with you, Mrs. Johnson. I am sure you will see me again very soon," he answered, determined to get in the last word.

"Your three-dozen cigars should last you quite a while, your Lordship. I'm sure it should be some time before you are here again," she countered.

"I believe you will be surprised at how fast my supply is depleted."

"Then you should feel free to send a servant in the future with any request you might have. We have your preferences noted, and can make up any order and send it with your man. There is no need for you to come here personally."

"On the contrary, Madam, I would never entrust a servant to do something as important as choosing what I desire here. Good day." And with that he nodded and quickly departed.

The music began, the partners lined up; the dance had finally begun.



IN HIS ROOM THAT night, Lord Caldhart sat nursing his brandy. It had been years since he had felt so alive. His body was thrumming, despite his incapacitation. Matching wits with Elizabeth Bennet was one of the most overpowering aphrodisiacs he had ever experienced in his life. What he would have given to have her in the room with him now. He would have taken her on his bed, the settee, the rug, perhaps all three. He felt he had never desired a woman so much before. If he could light the fire she displayed when angry and redirect it to her passion, he would be in paradise. He licked the memories of their tête-à-têtes in his mind.

He was grateful to have had the foresight to bring his walking stick with him. When their hands had met on the

shop floor, his manhood had instantly reacted to the touch. As he stood up, he deftly ground the tip of the stick into the top of his left foot. His body was then forced to attune to the pain he was experiencing, ignore the pleasure his mind was dwelling upon, and relieve his indiscreet affliction. It was only when he feared permanently crippling himself that he begrudgingly bade her farewell. He strode purposefully out the door, yet as soon as he turned the corner, winced audibly and limped back to his waiting carriage. Higgins helped him in and wisely made no mention of his master's injury.

Now, as he thought back on the afternoon, he spied the boxes. He hobbled over to them and picked up the "unusual blend" box, placing it directly on the top of his fire. As the flames eventually engulfed it, he strove to smell the hateful odour he had detected in his short sample. Finding none, his scowling gaze then inspected the other two boxes with no small amount of prejudice. Giving up all pretence of bravery he sighed, and threw them upon the fire as well.

"Yes, my supply was depleted surprisingly fast indeed," he told the cheery mantle clock before he was forced to avail himself of the chamber pot his butler had placed near the sofa.

"Damn, I really thought I would be able to keep at least some of the brandy down," he thought as his stomach wrenched once more.



HE FELT MUCH BETTER the next morning. He was able to take some mild tea and toast and not see it again. The fact she had made him ill did not perturb him in the least. She had only planned to teach him a lesson, not actually harm him (he told himself). There was a fine line between hate and love, after all. Moreover, her strong reaction to him gave him more hope than he had had in weeks. He had needed the boost of confidence, especially considering the paltry results he had achieved during the search for Miss Lydia and Wickham.

Now he regarded his board once more. She had the upper hand right now, and it did not sit well with him. He did not like the idea that she would think he was chastised and chased away. Bluffing turned out to be easier than he thought. He could do it again, but to what advantage? Thinking long and hard, he finally resolved to bring a bit of turmoil to Miss Elizabeth Bennet's life. He decided to show her he was not dismissed. He would make sure her mind was full of him and his abilities before he left her next time. Another white pawn was moved forward.

"Time to play another card."

Higgins had left the detailed schedule by which Mrs. Johnson lived. While he was travelling, his helpers had kept

a close eye on her and the shop. Lord Robert now knew her comings and goings and those of her employee, Toby. His Lordship could be assured that at least part of every day she would be without Toby, as he always took a small amount of time for an afternoon meal in the nearby park. He wished to replenish his cigar supply and have a short, private, conversation with her. Now he simply had to wait for a slow business day, when no customers would interrupt him. His wait was not long.



“LORD CALDHART. WHAT AN unexpected...thing for you to come so soon.” She recovered her composure quickly. “Surely your cigars are not used up already?”

“Mrs. Johnson,” he said bowing deeply. “Indeed they are gone, Madam; they met with a most unfortunate accident in my fireplace the very night I brought them home.” She hid the hint of a smirk.

“Then shall I prepare you another set of your three favourites, my Lord?”

“I think not, Ma’am; I will take a dozen of my original blend instead. That will satisfy me for now.”

She regarded him for a moment and then seemed to come to some sort of decision. She stood a bit straighter and spoke defiantly. “I hope it will satisfy you, sir, *for it is the only thing you may have here*,” she remarked pointedly. They studied one another for several moments. Her glasses were perched far down on her nose and, in looking over them, she could stare at him unencumbered. Neither backed down. The air was tight and static.

At last she spoke. “You have an excellent palate, your Lordship. I commend your fine taste in foods and flowers. Now cease your attentions, sir; they are not welcome.”

“Ah, the frank approach; I do not disapprove.”

“Are we for truths now, your Lordship? Then let me be rightly understood. I do not *like* you.”

He laughed. “Is that all? It matters not. I am not so horrible, Madam. I believe you would come to like me. I think you would find my mind could engage yours as well as any man. I certainly would not want you to stifle your own.”

“I have no desire to engage in anything with you, sir.”

“Yes, but I do. Moreover, you know that. Now I shall be frank. There are two objectives to be considered here. I will want to get all that I can, while spending as little money, effort, or resources that I can. You should be trying to get as much as you can, while sacrificing as little of yourself as possible. It is really quite simple, my dear.”

“You assume I want you, your money, or your status. You have nothing to tempt me with, your Lordship; material things mean nothing to me. We have no basis for negotiation.”

“Yes, I have seen the evidence of your lack of mercenary ways. However, I am surprised at how limited your thinking is, Mrs. Johnson, I had thought you much more clever.”

She ignored his insult. “Limited, my Lord?”

“Yes, limited; you must think beyond material objects. Can you really think of nothing in the world I could acquire for you? No quest I might pursue to win your affections? Think of me as a knight, if you will. I have come on my noble steed, asking of my lady if there might not be some deed I might perform and win you.”

She snorted. “If there is one thing in the world of men I have learned, it is that there is no chivalry. No one does anything for free; no act is completely virtuous. There are no knights; no one wants to save me, except those who want something from me. I refuse to pay the price, or play the game, and refuse to give myself up. I am not for sale. Now oblige me, sir, and leave me alone!”

“There might be something I could tempt you with.”

“Nothing.”

“Even Salome did not ask for money.”

She frowned sternly at him. “Come to the point, Caldhart, your games tire me, and I have better things to do with my time than play cat and mouse with you.”

“Your time—what a fortunate subject to bring up. You spend your leisure time in a most unusual way, do you not?”

She held her breath. They suddenly heard Toby coming into the back room, increasing the tension. She was afraid he would hear their conversation.

Caldhart was afraid the youth might come after him thinking he was assaulting his mistress. Standing directly in front of her, blocking the view to the workroom, he dropped his head near her ear and quickly whispered, “All those days, walking, searching, wearing yourself out, and you never can find her, can you Elizabeth? They *both* elude you, your uncle and Mr. Brooks, too.”

He quickly exited while her mouth stood gaping. She later looked down upon her desk and saw a five-pound note lying there. She had never given him his cigars.



THAT NIGHT HE STARED at the board, willing it to speak to him: send him messages of wisdom and insight into the situation. He was desperate for a windfall, something to break this standoff. He could continue taunting Elizabeth but without real success at finding his quarry, he would never win her.

“Where are you, Wickham? How are you evading me so well? Who keeps you hidden?” he demanded.

He stared at each black piece, naming them silently in his head; Elizabeth, Wickham, Lydia, Aunt, Uncle, merchant and tradesmen pawns.

“Who are your knights, Wickham? Or are they yours, Elizabeth? Do they secretly protect you, and I know not who they are? Do they help Wickham, cleverly, overtly, and out of my sight?” He had no answer.

Then he stared at the rook. No surprises there. The plain rook; simple moves, straightforward, ordinary, common.

Common!

“Oh God,” he moaned.

And no lady, smacking his hands upon his forehead.

“Common you are, and sometimes all the way across the board sitting imperceptibly while I failed to remember you and realise what a threat you are.” He picked up the rook and moved it directly in the line of fire.

“What an idiot I am.” He reproached as he reached for his drawing pad and pens.

Three hours later Higgins strode out of his master’s library. He had to admit his Lordship had a keen eye and a deft hand; the portrait was very well done. It would be a pleasure to gaze upon the buxom blonde as he showed it around town. He folded it carefully and slowly placed it in his pocket.

“Sally,” he mused to himself.



MEET ME AT ST. James’ Park at ten thirty. It was a simple enough request. There would be large crowds on a Saturday; no reason for her to worry about her safety. He wished to talk, unencumbered by the possibility of interruption. He reasoned if her safety were not threatened, she would agree to this meeting.

He arrived early, placing himself upon an inconspicuous bench with a fine view of the strolling visitors. He saw her first, making her way cautiously as she discreetly looked for him. She was disappointingly dressed as Mrs. Johnson. He had hoped to see her as herself. Finally, she espied him and slowly approached his bench. He made no move to rise and bow. She sat upon the far end of the large bench, refusing to look him in the face. They sat quietly for a few moments.

“Miss Bennet.”

“Lord Caldhart.”

“Thank you for meeting with me.”

“I hardly had a choice, sir. You knew the last thing you said to me would compel me to speak with you again.”

“Astute as always, Madam.”

She had had enough. “Stop this ridiculous flattery, Lord Caldhart; I have no stomach for it. I shall be blunt; have you found them? Do you know where they are?”

“Ah, an important point of negotiation, is it not? If I answer you, I might lose my advantage in this skirmish, and that would be very foolish of me indeed. I must always be on the high ground if I wish to succeed, can you not see that?”

“This is no fencing match, sir; we are speaking of people’s lives!”

“Just as one risks his life in a duel; there is no difference here.”

“You seek to distract me from my point, but I will not be waylaid. Do you know where my sister is?”

He considered carefully. “No, I do not.”

She was visibly angry.

“But I could. I have the means to find them. I am the one person you need to accomplish it. I alone could do it.”

“I do not believe you. You have no better methods than the ones we already employ. You have no magic spell to weave over a cauldron and magic my sister to my side. You toy with me and expect me to surrender, when the truth is there is no reason for this conversation, my Lord.”

“Ah, but there you are wrong, my dear. I am not lying. I *do* have something you do not have. I *can* employ a method you are unable to.”

With that, he brought forth a leather folder bound with a strap and opened it carefully.

“This is my portfolio, Miss Bennet. I have spent a good amount of time developing it. Observe the pictures I have drawn over the years. My wealth and the availability of time have been my masters and allowed me to become quite proficient, would you not say?”

She stared at the pastoral scenes his papers held: scenes of the country, perhaps his estate; and then, as he quickly flipped through the pages, he came upon his final drawings: his first trump cards. He played them expertly.

“And lastly, the one thing my hands excel at most: my ability to capture a face, even one I have seen but briefly. I can draw in great detail, and with stark reality, would you not agree?”

There before her was her own face, sometimes smiling, sometimes sad, and then the face of Mrs. Johnson at her store. Finally, he turned slowly to the last page in the his case; a scene of herself as Mrs. Johnson at her desk, and standing in front of her, with their backs tauntingly facing the viewer, were the unmistakable images of George Wickham and Sally.

“Yes, Madam, I was there that day. But I had no customers to wait upon; I had all the opportunity to sit and observe the show in front of me. And, unlike you, I did see—and I remembered.”

She raised her head from the drawing, staring at him wide-eyed like a child. All ability to speak seemed to have left her whilst in her state of shock. He seized the moment to attack,

“One word from you, one whisper. Just say, *Stop, don’t do it. Do not try to find them*, and I will not persist.”

She only stared, apparently dumbfounded by his boast, his offer, and his insight into her secret wishes. He waited several moments.

“Excellent,” he whispered with a triumphant smile.

He bowed his adieu and began walking away until he heard her exclaim, “Wait!”



HE STOPPED IN HIS tracks, and slowly turned back to her. Her expression was completely unreadable due to the myriad of emotions it betrayed; his eyes could barely track their speed. Finally, her gaze concentrated solely upon him. Her eyes commanded him to sit again. He smugly did so.

"I see I have underestimated you, my Lord. Your research is to be commended. Do you also know what I ate for dinner last night?" Despite the humour in her words, her tone was grave.

"You have always underestimated me, Miss Bennet. But, no, I do not know what you had for your repast yesterday."

She regarded him again; a deep frown creased her forehead. "Do you not realise in trying to force my hand you will cause me to rebel against you?"

"I do not wish to dominate you; I mean to demonstrate to you."

"Demonstrate, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Bennet, I am desperately trying to make a point to you, which you steadfastly choose to ignore."

"And that is?"

"You need me."

"I need no one, least of all you."

"But there you are wrong. You have tried on your own and failed, Miss Bennet. I do not wish to cause you distress, but that is the truth of the matter. You need an ally to help you and I am that person."

"Your lack of compassion hardly stirs me to capitulate."

"But you mistake me; I do have compassion for you, along with my passion. I would not have investigated so thoroughly just what you might wish to acquire, if I did not have compassion for you. I empathise with your wretched position, I truly do." He whispered now, caressing her with his rich, deep voice.

"Stop!" she cried. "You suggest starting one life of depravity to save another? What difference would it make to society which Bennet was a mistress? We both would ruin our family's reputation. Nothing would be restored. Lydia would come home disgraced, probably with child, and Wickham might be punished, but in the meanwhile, yet another Bennet daughter would go on to fill Lydia's shoes, only with you! This is no solution, this is ridiculous!" She leapt up, determined to leave his offensive presence.

"Lydia does not have to return home disgraced," he said, stopping her. "She can be restored, Miss Bennet, she can be respectable. I can do this." She stared unbelieving. "You can make it one of the points of negotiation; request I stipulate it legally if you like. Demand I procure proof Lydia and Wickham were married the night they left Brighton. Then your family's reputation would be unstained." He saw the inner workings of her mind; she was trying to fathom how it all could happen as he said while she stood watching him. "I could do this."

"You still have not explained how becoming *your* mistress will fail to throw my family right back into despair, loathing, and disgrace. How can living immorally with you help my family? How can you defend that wish, my Lord?"

"Easily, my dear; they need never know—you would simply disappear from your current life. If you wish it, you may come to me as anyone you would like to be. Pick your name, your history, your country if you like. Then live quietly with me at my estate in Surrey. I have no desire for the Season anymore. Any entertaining I might do would be on such a small scale, and you could have complete authority over the guest list. No one need ever know who you were. Our social circles could hardly have ever crossed, therefore few people you might know..."

"No!" She cut him off, truly agitated now. "Stop speaking as if this arrangement were set! Your nonchalant manners insult me, sir. I have given you no reason to make such assumptions. I do not believe you and your arrogant boasts. I will not give you leave to pursue searching for my sister, Wickham or that Sally woman." She held her head high, as if she were convincing herself of her bravery as she defied him. "Nor will I give you approval through my silence. Your actions are your own, as they always were. Do not seek my opinions or approbations for they do not concern you." And with that, she fled.



"WAS I JUST DISMISSED *again*?" he thought as he stared after her quickly retreating form. He was about to get angry when new thoughts entered his mind.

"But, she did not tell me to go to the devil, and she did not tell me no."

"*I do not believe you,*' she had said. What she had meant was, '*I do not think you capable.*' She has thrown down the gauntlet! It is a challenge. She simply does not think it possible."

What she did not know was he was already searching for Sally. Higgins had spent every day that week combing London with her portrait. With or without her permission, he was continuing his pursuit of Lydia and Wickham.

"Very well, Elizabeth. When we next meet, you will have proof I can do this, and then, we both shall have what we want, and you *will* agree to come to me."

He closed his eyes, daydreaming of the board, studying the pieces in his mind, when suddenly it hit him; the black bishops are not in play! She had not told her aunt and uncle about him. His grin was visible from a hundred paces.

Chapter 10

LONDON, APRIL 1813

Her mind kept telling her: “*Say it—tell him to stop.*” But no words came out. She seemed to be watching the entire scene from far away and had no control over what she was doing. His smug request that she had to say something or it would mean her tacit approval of his actions disturbed her mind greatly. Finally, seeing he was leaving while believing she had somehow agreed snapped her out of her hellish reverie so that she could answer. But the conversation gave her no peace. Quite the opposite in fact, and as a result, she had done the only thing that made sense at the time; she had run away.



WHEN ELIZABETH HAD POISONED Lord Caldhart, she thought that he would take her hint. But it was to no avail. She knew he would only be slightly sick from the lilies. Her own personal history had taught her that hard lesson; when she was six years old she had eaten one of the delicate little flowers and spent the next two days over a bucket. She had cut a tiny sliver of a petal and put it into the end of his sample cigar, knowing full well he would have to take at least two or three inhalations to get to it. It had been most satisfying to see his reaction. If he had been indisposed it obviously did not last long, considering how quickly she had seen him again. She did not think his persistence was a desire for revenge upon her for her wilful actions.

When he next returned to her establishment and revealed the extent of his knowledge of her situation and, more importantly her leisure activities, she was stunned. She had not known that he had been observing Wickham and Sally, nor realised their import to her. Then the scalywag had left abruptly once again, quashing her chance to get more information.

She had tried to put him in his place and show him in no uncertain terms that he should leave her alone. Instead, he rose to every occasion, every insult she threw at him. He thrived on it, and she had unknowingly fed him. She cursed herself for being so outspoken. She was full young to have such decided opinions and her loose tongue had cost her. Her liveliness and impertinence had drawn the attention of an expert rake, which she now could not shake off.

She should never have kept his flowers, nor eaten the gifts. Her kindness to Toby had inadvertently encouraged

Caldhart’s suit. Why had she not thrown them out from the start and told Toby to refuse the future offerings? Did part of her instinctively know that Lord Caldhart might give her the first true reason to hope?

Even more upsetting to her was an occasion she had experienced at her uncle’s house not long after Lord Robert had told her he knew she was looking for Wickham. Her Aunt Gardiner asked Elizabeth if Lord Caldhart had ever returned to her shop, or come to lay claim to their good fortune. Elizabeth had calmly answered that he had come back to replenish his cigar supply, but had never mentioned that he was the person responsible for the increase in their business. She had also added that he had never harassed Mrs. Johnson. She was appalled at herself for misleading her aunt. She chose not to dwell upon the reasons why she did.

His craftiness and intelligence were clearly evident in everything he did. She felt overwhelmed at his onslaught, and almost helpless against it. However, as much as she might like to think of herself as a helpless female who could not fight such a man, she knew it was not completely true. There were few women in her current position. She was a single lady working on her own, who was on her way to being independent. A few years of successful trade at her shop might earn her enough to purchase a small cottage in the country somewhere and live off her earnings.

Sometimes guilt would creep into her thoughts when she contemplated her future. Mary and Kitty sat at Longbourn, suffering with her parents, while she was making a life for herself. Her talents had allowed her the opportunity to be a success, but what future did her sisters have? Would Jane be happy to continue as a governess for the rest of her life? It seemed grossly unfair that a woman as beautiful as Jane should not have the opportunity to be a wife and mother. Elizabeth truly would have loved teaching Jane’s ten children. And there were two more Bennet sisters without the means of supporting themselves yet. How many more years would her father still live? When Mr. Collins came to claim his estate, where would her mother and sisters go? Would they live at Gracechurch Street, or with her Aunt Phillips? Her success was bittersweet in the light of her sisters’ not having a similar source of satisfaction, and the thought kept gnawing away inside her.

It was only more recently that Elizabeth also had given more consideration to the fact that Wickham had been without Lydia, and instead with this Sally woman. She felt a tightening in her middle; a feeling of unease came over her: dread. Her uncle had tried to rationalize where his youngest niece might be, that she might have moved on to another lodging house, and Wickham was merely stepping out. But Elizabeth was not in the least convinced. She knew it did not bode well. She had come to fear that even were she to find Lydia, it would not mean the restoration of her family. She fully expected Lydia to be shamed—that Wickham had never married her.



NOW CALDHART WAS DANGLING the carrot of restored respectability in front of her. He offered her remaining sisters a life they could never have otherwise. The constant reminder of her own inability to restore her family honour preyed upon her. She felt herself falling down the long dark tunnel into which she had descended last winter as, once again, her hatred of Wickham ate away at her very soul. She wanted this torture to end. She wanted to fall asleep at night and not wake up sweating, with her heart pounding and the nightmares of a suffering Lydia tormenting her mind. She wanted the control he had over her happiness, or the lack thereof, to finally end. She cursed George Wickham; he was the bane of her existence.

She feared that, given the lack of any true progress towards reaching her goal, there would be a threat to the standards by which she had previously lived. She might well compromise many of the things she knew to be right, in order to finish what was now an obsession from which she could never turn back.

Finally it had happened: the thing she hoped for and also dreaded. He was the first person with a clue to finding Wickham. He had a skill; he had an ace there in his head and no one else's. He had the ability to find them. She had not thought it possible. She had been unwilling to tell him no, if he wished to try to find them, but she did not think he would. Part of her confidence was based on her unalterable belief that he simply would not succeed. And then today, staring her in the face was a solution.

She thought long and hard, trying to reason out any faults in his logic. Could it really be so easy as to simply walk out of her house one day and into his? She wondered what the effect would be on her family. Too quickly she realised she knew full well what would happen; she had already experienced it. However, this time, the absent daughter would not be known to have eloped with the man she fancied; she would merely go missing. Would they believe her dead? She knew it would hurt her father and Jane the most. But would the benefits outweigh the suffering they were now and, always would be, going through?

She wished he would find them and be persuaded to tell Elizabeth without compromising her. But he was a master at a game she had never played before. She was no match against a man who had so many advantages over her. He had the cunning, he had the money to search, and he had the power and charm to bend all the rules by which she was forced to live. A man, the worst kind of man, and he was right—she did need him. Her only consolation at present was he had not yet found them. She would not agree to help him, but she simply could not close the door on the possibility. She would wait patiently, allowing him to succeed or not. Without success, she would not have to contemplate any future with him. She

only wished this news gave her more peace, but she knew why it did not.



HER SPEECHLESSNESS HAD NOT been from fear. From the moment she had seen his drawing of Wickham and Sally, she was no longer bothered by the man, this seducer, who sat next to her. Though her heart had beaten wildly, and her face had clearly shown Caldhart her mortification, she had not been afraid of him. Something else had disturbed her, rapidly building inside her, until later, when he began to demonstrate how easily she could fall from grace, she knew she had to get away from him, or she would surrender to him then and there.

She had wanted it. Wanted it so very badly, she had to restrain her hand from snatching the paper away. It was only when it had registered the drawing did not show Wickham and Sally's faces, that she was able to control herself. What had disturbed her, what had panicked her out of her wits was that, like an obsessed pirate finally spying the long lost treasure map, she had been blindingly thrilled at having seen, at last, the key to getting to Wickham.

Chapter 11

LONDON, APRIL 1813

When Lord Caldhart spoke with Higgins, he had been very specific with regards to the portrait of Miss Sally. He should not mention George Wickham; merely try to find Sally by herself. Higgins understood the need to make sure that, if they should find her, Wickham must not be alerted to someone looking for him as well. He had spent over a week travelling from one neighbourhood to another, when he began searching in Peckham. He approached the local boys who gathered around the corners, looking to earn the odd coin or two, and someone in the very first group recognised the face. “That’s Pru, that is. Pru Murdock,” a slight waif exclaimed to Higgins. After so many weeks of never having met with success, Higgins had to re-adjust his demeanour before he could calmly speak to the youth.

“Pru?” he said, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” said the lad, “She’s barmaid at the Fox and Badger, just over the bridge and on the left.”

“And her name is Pru?”

“Well, I heard it’s really Prunella, as she come out all purple when she was born.” The boys snickered at this juicy tidbit. “But now she goes by Pru most the time, though some calls her Sally. She likes it when they calls her that.” Higgins smiled appreciatively, and tossed the boy a coin as he left. His next stop was the Fox and Badger, where he settled himself in for a long day.

Late that night, a very proud Higgins was able to report to his master that he had finally met Sally, or Miss Prunella Murdock as she was also known. After sharing a well-earned brandy with his master, they agreed to visit the tavern again the next night. Lord Caldhart borrowed suitable clothes from one of his staff, to blend in with the locals more easily, and left his jewels, silk handkerchief, and other finery at home. It was agreed that Higgins would do all the talking.

They arrived close to eleven o’clock, when more of the patrons would be full of their wine, and more likely to let their tongues wag. Higgins pointed out Sally to his master and the two settled into a corner where they could observe and speak occasionally, without being overheard. Eventually Sally spotted Higgins, recognising him from the night before as he had left her a thruppenny bit and made her way directly to him.

“Hello, rich lad,” she flirted with Higgins. “I sees you brought a friend tonight. Is he as nice as you?” Caldhart winced at hearing that awful voice once again. How Wickham put up with it, he had no idea.

“Aye, Lass, and happy to make your acquaintance, I dare say. What say you bring us two glasses and buy one for yourself as well?”

“Ooooh, now that I’d be happy to oblige you in, my pretty.” Caldhart nodded his approval to Higgins as Sally headed to the bar to get their drinks.

After several hours, and many more rounds bought, Sally finally had time to sit with the men and talk a bit. Higgins had tried repeatedly to get her to sit on his lap, but she had refused, though with a bit of regret.

“I can’t, love; I’ve got a man who wouldn’t like it. Though I dare say I might have,” she sighed.

“Well, I don’t see him here, and he wasn’t here yesterday! I say if he can’t bother to be around for you, what’s keeping you true to him?”

“Oh, but he can’t help it!” she exclaimed. “He’s working right now, else he’d be here, I know it.”

Higgins snorted. “*Working*, yeah, I’ve used that one with my old girl. Every time I stepped out on her, I told her I was *working*.” He started laughing.

“No, not mine. He’s no saint, but at least he only has one girl at a time. I wouldn’t go with him ’til he got rid of his old one. She hung on him like a leech. But he’s smart and tricked her in the end and finally got rid of her. Since then it’s just been him and me.”

“I’d like to know how to trick a girl and get rid of her, my last three girls would never take the hint. I had to wait until they found someone they liked better ’n me before I could move on.”

Sally snorted. “Yer not half as quick as my man, then,” she proudly boasted. “He has wits to spare, along with being so handsome!”

Higgins and Caldhart stayed silent. Sally had been waxing for a while and every time she turned from one of them, they would pour their drinks into her cup, keeping it relatively full for most of the evening.

“I may well believe that, love, but there is nothing so wily as a woman not willing to shove off,” Higgins challenged. “She probably just found a better beau.”

He and Caldhart laughed together, sending Sally into an indignant snit. “She did not! He was ever so clever. He won passages to America one night, you see. Had the papers and all, and showed it to her when he got home. Told her they were going to start a new life in the colonies, where they could live cheaply like kings. She was so taken in. He told her to sell her jewellery so they could take the post to Portsmouth, and she did! Then at the last minute, he told her he had the chance to make some extra money here in town and that she should go ahead of him and they would meet the next day at the ship when he had his pockets filled. Stupid daft cow! She went of course, and he sold the passages that very day. So she was stuck in Portsmouth and he and I started up here. That were almost six months ago, and we’ve been together ever since.”

“Except when he isn’t here,” Higgins interjected.

Sally rolled her eyes and swatted his shoulder. "That's enough from you, rogue! You want another round?" She then turned to Lord Robert. "How 'bout you Granddad?" she asked.

Caldhart had to lower his head to keep her from seeing the outrage on his face as he shook it. Higgins had wisely invented a large object to be caught in his throat and took several minutes to dislodge it.

When he finally stopped coughing, Sally asked her new favourite customers, "Will I see you gents tomorrow, then?"

Higgins looked to his master, who gave him an almost imperceptible shrug. "Don't know if we can make it again this week, but we will be back. Will you be here?"

She rolled her eyes. "Here, just the same as the last four years, love. Be seein' you."

Higgins tried to pat her backside as she rounded the table, and just missed as she spotted him and dodged his hand, laughingly calling him "cheeky" as she headed for the bar.

As they drove home Caldhart made his plans. Lydia had to be their first concern. If she was still in Portsmouth, they had to find her. Wickham could wait, as it did no good to the Bennets to go after him, without the daughter. He could easily arrange to have a watch over Prunella/Sally while they searched Portsmouth.

Higgins asked as he was handing his Lordship out of the carriage, "Will I be heading to Portsmouth tomorrow then, my Lord?"

"Us both, Higgins." he replied.



BEFORE THEY LEFT FOR the coast, Caldhart had Higgins install a man at the Fox and Badger to keep an eye on Sally and be on the lookout for Wickham, should he finally show up. Higgins then packed for another long haul, and brought the carriage round for his master to travel the seventy miles to Portsmouth.

They quickly found out which ships had been bound for America in October and November. There were only six that had set sail, and two were currently back in port. Lord Caldhart chose to speak to the captains himself, while Higgins began searching the inns, to see if Lydia was currently in residence, or at least had been at one time. After all the places he had searched in the past, Portsmouth was easily covered in a few days. Unfortunately, none of the innkeepers, taverns or even boarding houses had heard of Lydia Bennet or Lydia Wickham.

Lord Robert had better success. He could not find evidence that Lydia had sailed on or even attempted to board one of the ships. However, he did strike a bit of gold with one: Captain Gregory, of the sailing vessel *Adventure*, remembered George Wickham. It seemed that he had re-

ceived a letter from Mr. Wickham, stating his intention of sailing with his wife, Lydia, on the *Adventure* late last autumn. Captain Gregory had added their names to the list of passengers, but, when sailing day arrived, two men from London had shown up with the documents and a letter from Wickham stating he had legally sold his passage to the two. So the young men went in their stead. Lord Robert studied the manifest, his mind calculating. Before disembarking, he was well pleased, if not a little bit lighter in his purse.

Higgins' disappointing results, however, effectively barred his Lordship's ability for a complete triumph. After spending nearly a week in Portsmouth, with no further results, Lord Caldhart decided to return to London, to work upon Miss Sally. He also instructed Higgins to continue to try to find clues as to whether Lydia was there in Portsmouth.

About half-way to London his coach stopped to give his horses a much needed rest and refresh himself. He looked about him, observing all the travellers, thankful to be out of the stuffy confines of the post coach, when he was suddenly struck with an inspirational idea. Before he left the posting inn he had sent an express back to Higgins, instructing him to spend three more days in Portsmouth, but if he did not have any success, he was to ride slowly back to London, stopping at every town, and especially every posting inn along the way and inquire if possibly a Miss Bennet, or a Mrs. Wickham had got off. He had no concept how fortuitous his inspiration would be.



AFTER SETTLING BACK IN town, Lord Robert headed once again to the Fox and Badger. Sally was there and served him his ale. He spent most of the evening quietly observing her, tipping her well and smiling sweetly whenever she brought him his drinks. Later that night, when the crowd had thinned considerably, she came and sat next to him, inquiring after his rich friend. He told her his friend was visiting family for a few days and would return soon, which seemed to please her. Caldhart then inquired after her, once again, absent lover.

"He's not running away from me; he's driving the post to Carlisle! He won't be back till Wednesday, seeing as he can't fly, you dolt!"

Caldhart laughed again. "A post driver! Seems your man ain't so clever as you say, if he can only drive a carriage."

"It's honest work. What do you do?" she retorted. Caldhart answered in his best humble stable hand accent.

"Not working right now. But I still got money for my drinks, don't be worried about that." Sally smiled at him. As long as the old man had money for drinks and her, she would never be worried.

Caldhart had a difficult time keeping his jubilation in check. He tipped her once again, and headed home. His mind was calculating wildly as the coach headed through London.

“A post driver. Well, that answered the question as to why no one could find him. He was only in Town one day every fortnight at most. The rest of the time he was a moving target.”

Wednesday was only four days away, yet that was more than enough time to set his spies up in the tavern, and, later, arrange for one of his men to travel the post line with Wickham. He needed to get the High Road Tables tomorrow and see if he could post a man along the route to ride back into London with Wickham that week. There would be enough time for a single rider and fast horse to meet the coach along the way. Then they could track Wickham when he arrived in London, and they would know his future whereabouts at every moment. He would set up a web that any spider would be proud of.

He spent the next three nights at the tavern, sometimes bringing his new men along, though he did not have them sit with him. By the time Wednesday came around, Sally and her co-workers were used to the three, and thought nothing of them hanging around for hours on end.

Lord Robert had prepared carefully for the evening. He had made extra drawings for his men, to acquaint them as well as possible with Wickham's face. He did not want to have to point out the man if he finally showed himself at the tavern. Everything must look calm, and ordinary on the outside. Unfortunately, he was anything but on the inside. It was like waiting for the king to make an appearance. He worried that people around him would be able to perceive his nervousness. He drank slowly, often spilling out his mug by small bits on the floor. He wanted to keep a clear head tonight.

His men were equally nervous, he noticed; often glancing to him, as much as to the others in the room. There was little he could do but return a stern scowl to try to bring them in line.

The man he had sent ahead on the post line had not reported back to him, though he had not expected him to. His job was to stick to Wickham, and until he could pass on the responsibility, or get into town to forward a note to Lord Robert by messenger, he would not be communicating with his Lordship.

The evening wore on, the hours ticking by slowly. Luckily Sally was in a good mood, bringing hope to him. She let it slip that she expected her man tonight, and he felt confident that she was not to be disappointed. After midnight, while the patrons were well on their way to inebriation or sleep, Caldhart was still watching the door like a hawk, when he spied a familiar face under a pulled down hat walk in. It was Taylor, the man he had sent to meet the coach. Taylor passed by his table and, catching Lord Robert's eye, indicated the back of the room, near the kitch-

en, with a swift tilt of his head. He needn't have bothered. The next moment, a loud squeal, one Lord Robert could not have forgotten from before, could be heard as he turned in time to see Sally throw herself into the arms of George Wickham.

The spider was very pleased.



THE NEXT NIGHT, AFTER Lord Caldhart had finished his dinner, and his men had reported on Wickham's whereabouts and activities for the day, his butler interrupted his quiet time at his chessboard. An express from Lophook, a small town on the post circuit to Portsmouth, had just arrived. It was from Higgins. An unusual thing for him to spend extravagantly for an express, Lord Robert tore into it expectantly with greed. He read it through twice, in disbelief. Higgins had found Lydia Bennet.

He picked up the black pawn, rolling it slowly between his smooth fingers.

“Damn, what am I to do now?”



HIGGINS STOOD OUTSIDE THE inn, his head bowed before his master, who was pacing furiously to and fro.

“Have you made any promises on my behalf, which I do not know of already?”

“I told them that as she was part of your household, and a good sort of girl, you would want to pay for a headstone. She hasn't got anything over her right now, you see.”

“Yes, yes, I will see to that. What of her personal effects? Did she leave behind anything? I may need to prove what we know.”

“Yes, my Lord. They still had her bag, and most of her clothing; I took the liberty of offering to pay for it on your behalf. Told them her Mum would want her last things. They were very helpful.”

“You have no reason to suspect foul play on their part?”

“No, your Lordship. Not at all.”

“And the child? Was it not viable?” Higgins frowned, clearly confused.

“Could the baby have lived?” he asked.

“Oh, no, there wasn't a baby, that is, she was just barely along, Sir. Not more than a month or two. They said she didn't even know she had it to lose. Just that afterwards, well, the bleeding never stopped. She soon fell asleep and died before morning when the midwife could get here.”

Caldhart stood looking towards the little church, and past it at the graveyard. He shuddered involuntarily. Of all the possible outcomes, including ones quite unsavoury, this

was one contingency on which he had not counted. He had a great deal of thinking to do.

They spent the night in the little inn at Lophook. The owners showed themselves to be good, respectable people. His Lordship, like his driver, was convinced that their story of Lydia Bennet's death was true. The next morning Higgins prepared the team to drive back to London. His Lordship came out later than expected, his countenance grave. It was obvious he had had very little sleep.

"Back to London, sir?"

"No, Higgins, we are for Portsmouth," he told his astonished driver.



HE WAS NOT A master at chess for nothing. The matter of bribing a sea captain to falsify a marriage record for a woman already deceased, and a man of whom Caldhart at least had told the dear captain was deceased, was child's play. Play with fifty pounds in notes attached to it, but successful play in the end. He now held in his one pocket the key to restoring the Bennet's reputation. Captain Gregory would swear to anyone who asked that he had indeed performed the ceremony uniting Lydia Bennet and George Wickham in holy wedlock. Even in July, four full months before he had ever heard their names.

In the other he held the proof for Elizabeth that he had found her sister. All he needed to do now was carefully word everything he would tell her about her sister. If she learned of Lydia's demise, he was sure that she would not give in. He had committed far too much of his time and himself, financially and emotionally, to give her up now. She was already his as far as he was concerned; he merely needed her approving signature on the documents to confirm it.



WHEN HE RETURNED TO London, Lord Robert did not immediately run to Miss Elizabeth Bennet's side. One would think that he would present the marriage certificate and the small personal effect of Miss Lydia Bennet to his amorata, and demand his rights to her. But, where many an amateur rake would have done just that, this consummate seducer knew he had to perfect one final cog in his machinations. After reading through his correspondence, his next order of business was to visit a certain tavern.

Unlike the times past when Lord Caldhart had given the Fox and Badger his custom, this visit was hallmarked by his lack of hiding his gentry accent or manners. When Miss Sally brought him his ale, she almost fainted when her

sweet old granddad of a customer revealed himself to be significantly more.

"I should've known," she later admonished. "I said yer hands was much to pretty to be common. You never did a hard day's work in yer life, have you then?"

"Indeed not, Madam," he answered.

"So, Master high and mighty, what do your want with the likes of me?" she asked, her suspicion clear.

"I have an offer to make to you, Miss Murdock."

"Ha, know that too, do you? I see you're a clever one, you are."

"Perhaps clever, but so are you, and when you hear a good deal, I do not think you will be foolish enough to turn it down."

She regarded him for a few moments. "Well?" she finally demanded, with a questioning shrug of her shoulders.

"I want Wickham," he stated simply. Her mouth dropped, as she shook her head.

"Oh, no! You won't talk me into that! Your rich friend already tried! What makes you think I would give in to the likes of you?"

"Have you ever heard of a girl by the name Henrietta Scroggins?" he calmly asked.

Her face instantly betrayed the sting his barb had inflicted. "No, Henrietta is gone! There ain't nothing between them. He told me so himself."

"You are correct, Miss Pru. Henrietta is gone from London; but what your faithful lover failed to inform you is that she is now living, and keeping house with George, in Carlisle. A girl on each end of the line; very convenient for him, I must say."

She slammed her tankard of ale onto the tabletop, a slew of curse words spewing from her in a most unladylike manner. When she had finally stopped, and her breathing began to return to some semblance of order, she spoke directly to him again. "What do you want me to do?"

Chapter 12

LONDON, MAY 1813

“Today is too important to be flustered!” he chafed while picking at an imaginary thread on his coat. Lord Robert regarded himself once again.

His valet had done well, yet still he was nervous and for good reason: this afternoon he would attempt to finalize all the things he had set in motion so long ago.

Arrangements with Pru Murdock had gone completely to plan. His spies sent letters daily, detailing Wickham’s moves. His victim had no idea he was being monitored at all times and, luckily, was sticking to his regular routine. All the pieces were lined up. The final assault was to begin.

He had Mrs. Johnson followed earlier that day and, after she had her midday meal with the Gardiners, he arranged to come upon her several blocks from their home on a street where there were fewer pedestrians to overhear them. He approached her, followed by the maid and footman he had brought along with him.

“Mrs. Johnson, please forgive this intrusion upon you, but I would ask if you could spare me some of your time?” She stood immobile, but nodded slightly to allow him to continue. “I have some important news to convey to you, and feel that it would be best if we discuss this at my home.”

“You wish for me to accompany you to your house, *alone*, sir?” she asked incredulously.

“Please, Mrs. Johnson; I have brought my footman and maid to accompany you. We can take my carriage and, after it has dropped me at the front of my house, the three of you can continue to the stables and enter in the rear. No one need ever know you came to my house. Please, I have news of the utmost importance of which I must speak with you, and swear upon my honour you will be safe.”

He spoke sincerely, and well he knew it. He had no intention of trying to seduce her against her will. Her acquiescence was everything to him. Winning it was his real interest. He gestured to a plain, though fine, carriage further down the street.

She thought for a few moments. It was torture to him; without a chance to speak at length to her, he would have serious problems reaching an agreement with her. Finally she pursed her lips tightly together and answered. “Your servants had better attend to their master’s promises as well, sir. Or I promise *them*, I will not be merciful if you deceive me.”

The two stood astonished at the lady’s bold statement, but Lord Robert immediately stepped in. “You heard the

lady. Do you understand your responsibility to her and to her safety, then?”

“Yes, Madam!” they both answered. And the group was off.



ELIZABETH REFUSED TO LOOK out her window, lest someone look in and see who rode in the coach with his Lordship. She, along with the maid and footman, sat opposite him, closely studying their laps. Lord Robert was deposited, and the coach brought around, before she dared to look up and see the house he had. It was a very large house for town, quite richly adorned outside, and the gardens were well kept and elegant. After being handed out and guided toward the doors in the rear, however, she no longer had a mind to pay attention to her surroundings. She was directly shown to the drawing room, though it took some time due to the size of the house. Lord Robert already awaited her. He dismissed the servant and locked the door behind him. Then, in an extraordinary show of gentlemanly behaviour, and before she could protest about the door, he walked directly to her, bowed, and handed her the key.

“Miss Bennet, we have started a course in the recent past of perfect frankness. I would like, with your permission, to continue in that vein. I find it extremely inconvenient, not to mention tedious, to have to speak in innuendo or metaphors, so I ask your permission to be plain.”

She nodded slowly, while turning the key over and over in her hand.

“Good, excellent. Miss Bennet, please understand that, no matter what you may be thinking, I have never, and will never, force a woman against her will. I will not force you to do anything you do not wish, and you are completely safe from my person while you are here. Do you understand?”

She nodded again, her fine eyes never leaving his face.

“However, I will use everything in my power to make you want to follow my wishes.” She coughed slightly as this bold statement caught her off guard. “Make no mistake, Madam; I will not give in to tears, empty promises or foolish notions of marriage vows. My terms are simple: I want you with me as my mistress. The length of time can be negotiated later, but certainly not less than five years.”

Her face was once again incredulous, twice in less than an hour. She spoke softly. “Why not offer marriage? You are a single gentleman. I am a single lady. You could offer for me.”

He burst out laughing. “What possible inducement could make me want to marry again?”

“You could do it, if for nothing less than making the object of your affections more willing to come to you.”

“My sons would have my head! Besides, my offer is good enough without the inducement of matrimony.”

She shrugged her shoulders. They stopped once again, assessing one another.

“Well?” she finally demanded. “You did say you had news of utmost importance, my Lord. Do you not think it is time to share it?”

He reached into his breast pocket and carefully removed his prize. Unfolding the plain linen handkerchief, he revealed a finer lace trimmed one. He carefully handed it to Elizabeth, who reached for it with trembling hands. The initials in the corner were clear.

She stroked it tenderly over and over again. No tear fell, no sigh, no flood of emotions came forth from her, which puzzled Lord Robert exceedingly. “Have you seen her then?” she asked.

“No, one of my men found her.”

“And what has happened to her? Is she here in London? May I see her?”

“I cannot tell you where she is or let you see her yet, now can I?”

Elizabeth looked up at him, frowning.

“Come now, Miss Bennet, this is no time to forget where you are, and to whom you are speaking. If I merely told you that I could restore your sister’s reputation and would make everything right, would you believe me? Of course not! You hold in your hand the proof that I have found your sister and the evidence that I indeed can do what I promise. A very necessary part of our negotiations, is it not?”

“You back me into a corner and leave me with no other choice.”

“You always have the ability to say no.”

“But you hold all the cards!” she said exasperated.

“Yes, my dear, such is the way of a good player, is it not?”

“How do you propose to restore Lydia?”

“I will procure proof that your sister and Wickham were married the night they left Brighton.”

“Is that true?”

“No. But I can make it the truth.”

“What is the truth?”

He hesitated as he decided what to tell her. “Wickham abandoned her several months ago.”

Her face dropped and the weight of that statement showed heavily in her eyes. She sat for a long while pondering over all he had said so far. Several more minutes passed until she finally spoke. “Why would Wickham agree to such a thing? She has no money to tempt him, even to lie to a false marriage. Our family would advertise it to the entire world, and he would never be able to marry the rich heiress he wants to.”

“I do not believe Wickham would object were he no longer in England to hear the rumours about his marriage.”

“You would send him away? How would you get Lydia to agree? Would she go with him?”

“I think it could be managed for both of them to no longer be here,” he answered carefully. He was very hope-

ful; she had gone from unwilling to bargain, to starting to argue the details.

Elizabeth stared once again at him. He could tell she knew he was hiding more information than he was divulging, but she knew he also would not play all his cards at once. He was a superior player, after all.

“I am still not convinced that becoming your mistress will not affect my family’s respectability. How can living with you, possibly bearing your children out of wedlock, fail to hurt my family?”

“As far as children, I feel that would not be an issue; none of my last three mistresses ever conceived, so I would think it hardly likely.” She looked startled at such a frank admission, and then relieved, too relieved for his ego as he answered rather forcefully, “Make no mistake, Madam, you would share my bed and I would be your lover. However such pleasures never guarantee offspring.” She blushed furiously, but chose to ignore his last remark. “And I have already told you, you can come to me as Mrs. Johnson if you please, or any name that you like; your family would never know.”

“Leave my family?”

“You cannot live both lives; you would have to choose.”

She stopped, and looked into the blazing embers in the fireplace before her. Several minutes passed. “What would I tell them? They would surely try to look for me.”

“You could leave a note saying that you are well, that you chose to leave, and that you do not wish for them to find you. However, I do not recommend it. I would advise you to simply walk out one day. They cannot be tainted by your actions, if they, along with the rest of the world, do not know what you do. They would eventually give up their search for you; they gave up on Lydia, did they not?” Elizabeth winced at his words.

He saw the surrender in her face, the lack of defiance in her stature and, like a predator sensing the final victory, he moved next to her, speaking intimately to her, caressing her insecurities and coaxing her. “There is so little a woman can do in this world, is there, my dear? You have so few freedoms—choices that are not given to you—even the choice of pursuing an injustice against your family. Your hands are tied by the men in your family, the authorities that make the laws, and the men who walk the streets at night and might cause you harm should you venture out. All these things men do against you, yes?”

“Yet without the aid of a man, you will not succeed in that which you most desire. You will not find Lydia, and Wickham will go on to the next unsuspecting victim: another girl to ruin, a shopkeeper to cheat, a debt to dishonour.” She choked back a sob. “No one will stop him without a man to intervene. Only one man, Miss Bennet: me. Only I can undo all the evil the man has wrought. Only I can see your desires to fruition.”

Her body leaned ever so slightly towards him as she quietly said, “Never to see them again? Never to see Jane?” Her face now turned up to him.

Chapter 13

LONDON, MAY, 1813

He knew she had no idea what a submissive picture she presented. He was very close now. "Yes, it is the only way."

She suddenly caught herself again, her shoulders straightening back up and the defiance once again gleamed in her eyes as she spoke more loudly. "No, my Lord, it is the only way if I agree to come to you."

He was no longer worried; he had the final card here, and was now ready to play it. His voice rose to her level. "Yes, it is the price I ask. You must live with me and everything you suspect that encompasses. And in return, I shall wipe away Lydia's shame, give your sisters their chance at a future, give your mother and father their respectability back, and I shall give you the satisfaction of having what *you* want the most."

"What *I* want?"

"Yes Miss Bennet, what you most desire."

Her brow arched, as if to challenge him. "What I desire? And what would that be?"

"The one thing you have yet to voice, the one thing you pretend to ignore but dream about most waking moments. The one thing that only a rich, powerful man without morals or standards, who is willing to bargain with you, can provide. The one thing only I can provide. It is time to lay out all your cards; name your price, Madam."

Silence.

"Say it Elizabeth! Make the request!" Their eyes locked.

At last she spoke without the least hint of emotion. "I want George Wickham dead."

"Yes, you do."

Elizabeth stood staring once again into the small flames that helped to keep the spring coolness at bay in the lovely drawing room. This visit had finally afforded her the chance to take in her surroundings in more detail. The room had lofty ceilings, beautifully painted with brilliant frescos. The furnishings, while not new, were of the highest quality; elegant instead of ornate. She had to admire the man at least for his excellent taste; it reflected in his person, as well as his home. She wondered if his Surrey estate would prove as handsome. She could hear Lord Robert and the two men conferring quietly across the room. Finally he crossed to her and directed her to sit, while the attorneys kept their counsel out of hearing range.

"Miss Bennet, there are some points in the document I wish for you to be clear about before we proceed," he said hesitantly. "If you do not agree to any of these, you must tell me now, so we may change anything needed before finishing."

"I understand, sir."

"It cannot be stated legally that you request for me to lie or forge a document for you." She started, but he stayed her words with a raise of his hand. "The law however, like most things, is easy enough to manipulate to work to both our advantages. We simply will state that I must provide you with proof of the marriage between your sister and Mr. Wickham last July. I only wanted you to realise how it must be worded."

"I thank you."

"There is also a small settlement of two thousand pounds, which I have made upon you, should I expire while we are still living together. You are, of course, free to keep any jewels, gowns and gifts I give you during that time. In addition, you will have an income of twelve hundred pounds per annum while you live with me, excluding your living expenses and, most especially, your wardrobe."

"That is very generous, sir. However, I hardly need twelve hundred pounds if I am living in your home, and you are providing for my clothing."

"Then consider me overly generous, as the issue of your wardrobe is not negotiable. I have very specific standards, and I know from experience a woman will try to economize for the sake of pocket change, or to increase the number of gowns she owns. Therefore, I insist on footing your dress bill."

"As you wish, your Lordship. I thank you."

"You are most welcome. There is another point, more precarious I fear." He pursed his lips.

"Wickham." She answered for him.

He lowered his voice. "Yes. You must know having a written document detailing any harm to him would guarantee a bleak future for us both. I must ask you to trust me on this point; for, though my intentions towards you may not have been honourable, they have always been honest. I ask you now to trust that I will deliver him to you, but it cannot be in this document."

She had *not* been worried he might renege on any of his promises, but his last words, rather than comforting, began to worry her, indeed. He sought to assuage her anxiety.

"Miss Bennet, understand me; think of my history. I do not desire a reluctant woman, I want you with me of your own volition, and satisfied with the arrangements. How could we spend the next years together if we started out on such an unhappy footing? I will do this, I promise you."

She did not have to think long. He was right. She dare not ask for such a clause. The attorneys might feel obligated to reveal the document, should anything happen to Wickham. She wanted no one else involved now that she was so close to seeing her hunger for revenge satiated. She no longer cared if she had to take a leap of faith with Caldhart. He had fulfilled everything he had promised so far, and her desire for revenge was now so great, she allowed herself to fall deeper into the abyss. It was remarkably simple.

"Yes, I believe you, Lord Caldhart." She took a last resolved breath, and plunged. "I am ready."

Half an hour later her fate was sealed: the document signed, witnessed, and copied for all interested parties to file wherever they may. He locked the door behind the departing men, and returned to her at the sofa.

"May I make a request?"

"I believe you have every right now, sir."

He frowned and sighed. "No, Elizabeth. You have agreed to my terms, but I have yet to fulfill them. You are still your own mistress. Now, may I make a request?"

"Very well."

"Will you remove your cap and glasses until it is time for you to return?" She shook her head in mock disapproval, then stood and removed the offending objects in front of the mantle mirror. Her hair was swept up into a functional knot, not fashionable, but preferable to her matron's cap. She caught his gaze in the mirror and he nodded his approval before she returned to the sofa.

"We have much to discuss. I must tell you the manner in which your sister's marriage is to have taken place, as well as how I will effect the consequent discovery of it." She had not expected things to move quite this rapidly.

"Mr. Brooks will be receiving an anonymous tip that Captain Gregory, of the sailing ship, *Adventure*, currently docked in Portsmouth, married your sister and George Wickham late last July while sailing for the American

colonies." He looked apprehensively at her, yet she did not flinch. "As you already know, this did not actually occur."

"Yes, and the Gardiners and Jane will want to know what Wickham was doing back in London last January," she calmly added.

"Who else knew Wickham was then in London?"

"I do not know if anyone informed my father. I, that is, we no longer communicate. I suspect not, for I would have heard of it from my uncle. Do you have an alibi for Wickham's presence?"

"Actually, I do not believe we should try to excuse it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think we should let your relatives think Wickham sailed with Lydia to America, and then several months later returned without her. Whether he abandoned her completely or not, is not for us to determine, and I dare say the Gardiners would not want to pursue it further. As it stands, he *will* be Lydia's husband; what quantity of a husband is not important in the grander scheme. Your sister and your family will be restored. As long as Lydia does not care about her present circumstances with her reputed husband, the rest of the world will not be concerned.

"The pressing point is when the marriage becomes known, you must arrange for anyone who knew Wickham was here in January to swear not to tell anyone else in your family. If news of a possible rift between them leaks out, the validity of the marriage might be questioned."

Elizabeth thought of her mother's propensity to tell any of their neighbours her joys as well as her vexations. She knew there was little chance her mama would keep her daughter's troubled marriage to her self. She could see the wisdom in keeping Wickham's winter sojourn to London from everyone at Longbourn.

"Lydia has agreed to this?" He swallowed hard and, looking her directly into her eyes, *lied*.

"Yes, she has agreed to the false marriage. And...I have convinced her to take the trip to America. I will set her up with a sufficient income to live on. Perhaps one day she might even marry."

"America!" said Elizabeth, astonished. "Will I be able to see her before she leaves?"

"Are you sure you wish to, my dear?"

"I may never see her again!"

"True, but do you think you can lie to her? Do you think you can deflect any questions she would ask about where her Wickham was, why he was not sailing with her? Can you speak to her, and not betray your hatred of the man you are bent upon for revenge?"

His concerns were fair enough. Her emotions *were* difficult to conceal. Part of her was still furious at Lydia for all she had forced Elizabeth to endure. However, a larger part of her was concerned for Lydia, and felt someone in the family should see her one last time, make sure she was well, before she travelled so very far away.

“Yes, my Lord, I believe I am capable, and I do wish to see her.”

“Will you not call me Robert?” He asked unexpectedly. She turned away, too shy to look at him.

“I am sorry, Lord Caldhart. Perhaps someday, but you ask too much at present.”

“It is no matter, a trifle. You will be able to see her, but it will have to be done after the marriage has been revealed, and before we two see Wickham.”

“But what of Wickham? Will he not object after hearing of his own marriage?”

“Perhaps he would, but I do not think he will ever hear. Do you, my dear?” The implications of his statement and his manner chilled something inside her. Someone who could seem so cold and calculating over such important issues made her shiver.

“Yes, I see.” She stared into the flames once more. “The timing must be very precise.”

“We have but a few days between your family discovering the marriage, and our ‘meeting’ shall we say with Wickham.”

“You have seen him then? You know where he is?”

“Yes, to both.” A small smile crept upon her face; it was tiny, yet disturbing. Her eyes were unfocused, deep in another place. When she spoke, her eyes did not look at him; they looked through him.

“When?”

“Very soon; next week if the weather holds.”

“The weather?”

“For travelling, there are many miles to traverse.”

“For me?”

“No you shall remain here, and continue to work at your shop. You must still be there when the news of the marriage arrives. I want you to see that deed done by me. I can arrange for you to see Lydia after that, but you must also stay in town until we meet with Wickham. Your whereabouts must be accounted for, Elizabeth.” She slowly nodded again. “In the meanwhile, I suggest you reflect about what you will wish to do with your business.”

“The cigar shop?”

“Yes, your Toby and the Gardiners have an investment in the place. I believe you would be distressed if they went into debt over losing the artist that creates their products, or if Toby was left without a position, would you not?”

“I have given it a great deal of thought of late. Two months ago I began compiling more detailed notes of my customer’s preferences, along with explanations, similar to recipes, of the blends I have made. When finished, I shall have a comprehensive manual of my techniques and practices at the shop. I think Mr. Gardiner and Toby could manage admirably with it. There is only one concern I have; the choosing of the leaves. My uncle has no talent for it.”

“What of Toby?”

“Yes, Toby’s senses have been having quite an education of late,” she said with a pointed look at Lord Robert. “I

believe if I took him with me, and focused on training his nose to what is quality and not, he could become a good substitute for Mrs. Johnson in a short time.”

“Is your business busy enough to justify hiring another employee? If you had someone to take over your position at the desk, it would leave you more time to train Toby in the ways of your artistic talents, and leave a functioning business behind when you left.”

“Yes, my Lord, I may be able to do it all.”

“Excellent! You have eleven days.”

“Eleven days!”

“Within a day or two, yes.” He mentally calculated again. “Best to use eleven. When your family learns of the marriage, your uncle may well suggest you give up the shop. So it is of little consequence.”

This man amazed her. All of these transactions, as if they were selling ribbons and cheese. If he had not been born to his wealth and his title, she thought he would have been a clerk somewhere, in an austere office, pushing his pen up and down columns, moving numbers on a page as easily as he was now moving people’s lives around. Had she ever have a chance against him? It mattered not now, but saddened her all the same. Another involuntary shudder claimed her.

“My dear, you are cold,” he said as he slid close to her. Her automatic reaction was to back away from him; the result of years of proper lady-like training. He chuckled.

“I am sorry, sir. I cannot undo the years of my mama’s training in one afternoon.” His eyes betrayed his obvious ardour, but he made no move again towards her person. She calmed a bit, and decided to forge ahead to the point she was most curious about.

“And when shall we...” She struggled for the correct term. “When shall I come to you?”

“I believe it will be Saturday the fifteenth, if I have fulfilled all your terms by then. Have you decided on how we shall address you? Do you wish to be known by your rightful name, or Mrs. Johnson?”

“No, sir, I do not wish my name to be known to any here. I have chosen a new identity.”

His brows lifted in anticipation.

“I will be Chantal Moreau, a refugee from France. I have no family left after the Terror and Bonaparte’s conscription of my last living relative, my oldest brother Jean, who died two years ago. My family was of little consequence in society, but wealthy enough to provide for their children’s education, and allowed me to be raised as a lady, such as I am. Do you approve?”

“Hmmm...‘Dark Songstress’ Chantal Moreau.” He allowed the name to roll over his tongue like a fine vintage. “Yes, I like it very well, indeed. And do you sing, Miss Moreau?”

“Please, you must not address me as such now. I am here as Mrs. Johnson, and I do not wish the servants to be confused or hear my new name until I enter here without

Chapter 14

LONDON, MAY, 1813

my disguise. But to answer your question, yes, my Lord, I sing and play, though very ill I'm afraid; I would not wish to excite your anticipation."

"Would you play for me now?"

"I think not, sir. My repertoire is not so vast, and I do not wish to play something the staff would recognise again later. Please forgive me."

"Of course." He leaned forward, slowly taking in her hair and the features of her face in detail.

She was nervous at finding herself so scrutinized.

"Have you ever been kissed?" he whispered. Her mouth gaped open.

"You are very forward!" she admonished.

"On the contrary, if I was very forward I would have asked if I *could* kiss you. I merely wish to know if you *have* been kissed."

She looked at him, all astonishment. "Yes," she finally said.

He frowned. "By a man?"

"Yes."

"And you were grown, not a girl?"

"Yes."

He pouted. "What was his name?"

"Thomas." Now he looked perturbed.

"And his last name?"

"Bennet."

He rolled his eyes. "I should have known better." He sat for a few moments then finally asked, "Elizabeth, have you ever been kissed by a fully grown man, who was not related to you in any way, after you were the age of say, sixteen?"

She thought a moment and began to answer when he quickly intervened, "And not on the hand!"

This made her stop, and she shyly bent her head away again, and shook it.

"Excellent."

The reflection that returned Elizabeth's gaze from the confines of the battered mirror in the old inn was enough to make any young woman startle. She had never worn a pair of breeches before, and was surprised to see her figure so blatantly displayed. Grateful to have bound her breasts that morning when setting out as Mrs. Johnson, she decided some extra padding around her stomach would be necessary to properly proportion her hips to her waist. She simply looked too womanly without it. Finally satisfied with the shape of her figure under her coarse shirt, she buttoned everything up and then took up the small cravat. Luckily, she had taken an interest when she was a young girl in her father's cravats and now, with nary a trouble, she tied a simple configuration under her chin. A knock at the door warned her to be expedient. She had a trying time with her hair; there was a great deal and it was very difficult to tuck it all under the cap but, in the end, she succeeded. Looking over herself one last time, she determined that, just as when dressed as Mrs. Johnson, too much of her obviously feminine face was visible and she reached once again for her glasses before she left her room.

Lord Caldhart's eyes betrayed his wonder and amusement as he inspected her when she finally opened her door. He nodded his approval of her newest disguise and they headed down the hallway to begin the journey in his coach. Elizabeth thought back on the last days as his driver slowly made his way into the roughest parts of London.

She had stealthily been giving Higgins small packages containing the few precious articles she insisted upon having with her in her new home. There was not much, mostly nostalgic items and a few personal effects she did not wish to part with or replace. She had also sent two day dresses and a few personal undergarments to tide her over until her new wardrobe could be purchased. Her letters she would bring with her on Saturday, as she did not trust anyone with those most treasured possessions.

The instructions she had started to compile in March were now completed. Mr. Whitaker, her coworker from Mr. Gardiner's clock shop, was working out splendidly as the newest addition to Johnson's. He was trustworthy and experienced and Elizabeth now felt confident, albeit still guilty, her uncle could keep Johnson's going strong if he wished to do so after she disappeared, although it would not be easy.

The last two days had been quite tumultuous. Mr. Brooks had returned from Portsmouth with the news of the

marriage, and of Lydia and Wickham's travels to America. Elizabeth had been quick to suggest the Gardiners host a conference with Mr. Brooks and have Jane included. It was far easier than she would have thought to suggest that, although the Wickham's were now married, the status of their questionable happiness need not be told to the rest of the Bennets. The men questioned Elizabeth once again on what she had witnessed between Sally and Wickham. Had she thought he had abandoned his wife, or was he merely back in London enjoying himself, though not respectably? She owned either was possible, but as it was, they were not able to prove any conjecture, therefore, what good would come of telling her father and mother? All agreed to spare her parents and other sisters' feelings and, more importantly, not risk the reputation which was about to be repaired.

As Lord Robert had predicted, her aunt and uncle had brought up the futures of Elizabeth and Jane. Elizabeth stated emphatically she did not wish to give up her employment, nor return to Longbourn, while Jane said she would want to think on it. Jane knew the Parkers should not be completely abandoned until a replacement for her could be found, and she was dearly attached to her two little wards. For the time being, she wanted to remain where she was. Therefore, the discussion of the futures of the sisters was postponed.

Mrs. Johnson had not gone to her cigar shop today; the first time since its opening. It was a strange feeling spending the entire day at Gracechurch Street, never once searching the lanes. She had claimed fatigue to her aunt in the late afternoon, while the sun was still low in the sky. With a basket packed full of her dinner, she set off for home. Soon after she arrived and had eaten her meal, she headed back out for the long walk to the rendezvous point with Higgins. She was very surprised to see Lord Caldhart waiting for her inside the plainest of coaches. She was even more surprised to see him dressed no better than Toby.

"Are you for disguises then, my Lord?"

"Tonight we are both, my dear. We shall have to stop and have you change as well."

"I am already in disguise, sir."

"True, but it would be better for you if you dress as you will soon see."

She was shocked after being told she would be dressing as boy of no more than fourteen. He had explained the area they were going to was not safe for most women, not even the dowdy Mrs. Johnson, and he wished to take no risks with her. They were to go to an inn first, where she could make the change, and then continue on to their final destination. As they were only accompanied by Higgins, and had no other protection, she had no choice but to trust him. She wondered in what squalor Lydia must be living for his Lordship to be this worried. Having not seen Lydia, he perhaps had only his men's word as to her conditions.

Now thoroughly disguised, they at last stopped on a dark street. The noises and smells spoke worlds to her of

the quality of the neighbourhood. They walked for several minutes before they came to a large tavern at the end of the street.

They entered through the back of the establishment, but not before Lord Caldhart had also donned a large hat, pulling it well down over his face and raising his collar up, sufficiently hiding most of his features. A rough man nodded to Higgins, and then led them to a small room, little more than a storage closet, in the rear. Caldhart motioned to Higgins to stand guard outside the closed door while he sat Elizabeth upon one of the low-lying casks. He took her hand; a deep frown crossed his face. Several moments went by, until Elizabeth began feeling a very strong premonition; he was trying to impart some very bad news to her. She finally could not stand the tension he was creating.

"Tell me." He looked into her face, startled at her perceptiveness, and nodded.

"We have not come here tonight to see your sister. I have received word today," he hesitated again, closed his eyes and all at once said, "Elizabeth, Lydia suffered a miscarriage and has died."

She blinked at him as though not understanding. The last words, "a miscarriage and has died" played over and over in her head. She could feel a rush of energy fill her body, making her heart pound at what seemed like a thousand beats per minute, yet her face remained stoic. She did not know it, but her hand was gripping his almost painfully. She finally released it, standing quickly then taking a deep breath she turned to him, and demanded, "Why are we here?"

He moved to the door and opened it wide, then nodded to Higgins and indicated the door across the hall. Higgins opened it and revealed a larger, more spacious room. There in the centre, tied heavily to a chair, gagged and blindfolded, was George Wickham.



THE ROOM WAS DANK and stark at best. There was no fire, or windows, and surprisingly little noise could be heard from the main room of the tavern below. A large wooden table, cut and scraped over the years, bore several bottles of wine, mugs, old plates with crumbs and a lamp. On the far end, lying upon a large opened sailcloth were a dagger, a foil, a length of rope and a small, pearl handled pistol.

Elizabeth slowly entered the room, her eyes never wavering from Wickham. Finally, she looked down and noticed the table and its contents. She looked over each one, in between raising her head at Wickham, as though he might somehow be gone if she did not keep a close eye on him. After perusing the entire room, her hand reached for one of the wine bottles while she grabbed a mug with the other and filled it to the top with the heavy red liquid. She hesi-

tated but an instant, before allowing the stinging substance to drain down her throat with one very long drink. She coughed slightly when the empty mug was once again set down, causing Wickham's head to cock, trying to ascertain whom he was hearing.

"Shall I see about getting you some food?" Caldhart asked her, with a rough accent. She shook her head, still staring at Wickham. Neither Higgins nor his master had moved an inch since she walked into Wickham's "jail cell." Both men regarded her curiously, if not a bit warily. She moved about the room like a predator; they both recognized it.

She soon noticed her audience as well and, perturbed at being considered a performance, spoke, "Leave us, now."

Caldhart was taken slightly aback, but agreed. "If you need anything, we shall be standing guard directly outside the door."

She nodded again, turning back to Wickham whose head was once again straining to hear his captor's voices, no doubt try to guess their identities.

She found another wooden chair in the corner and pulled it up in front of him, inspecting him closely. His hands were tied behind his back, his legs spread open and each tied down a leg of the chair with many coils. His chest had many rings of rope around it, and the high back of the chair kept his head in place as well, completely incapacitating him. Whoever bound him knew what he was doing; he could not move a muscle.

They sat in silence for many minutes until she finally spoke. "Wickham. How I have dreamt of this very moment." She suddenly stood up and walked quickly to him. Sticking out a single pointed finger, she touched his collarbone where it was exposed thru his shirt. She could hear his sharp breath as his torso stiffened with her touch, and realised that he had no way of knowing if she was brandishing a weapon, or not. She looked back to the table, and moved to examine the instruments laid out for her.

The dagger called to her. She picked it up and turned it over in her hand. She had used many knives before, both in her shop and in the stillroom, but this dagger was heavier, it's purpose only too obvious. She strode back over to Wickham and placed the edge of the knife into his hair. She could feel him tense up, and it made her smile. Then with a quick flick of the blade, she lopped off a chunk of his hair, and the blindfold that bound his eyes. Like a dog yelping at seeing his master's hand raised, Wickham had yelped as well.

"Coward," she hissed.

She was standing behind him, giving his eyes a chance to accustom themselves to the light of the lamp. She slowly walked back and faced her adversary. He had no recognition on his face. She was not concerned, nor in a hurry; he would know soon enough who she was. She sat back on the chair, and poured herself a second glass of wine.

"You are a coward, Wickham; one of the worst cowards I have ever heard of, much less known. Did you run away when you were working in the army? Did you retreat in

your exercises when the slightest bravery had to be shown? I suspect you did. I suspect you had your so-called friends make up alibis for you. You were always so good with words. It is a pity you never studied the law as you once lied and claimed you wished to. You might have been a good barrister had you lived." He winced upon her mentioning his life. She paid it no attention.

"Wickham the Coward. Cowards flee. That is their trademark, you see. Never make a stand, never take responsibility, never show bravery, and always abandon. And that is what you do, Wickham; you run away. Now I must take the responsibility; I must make sure everyone knows with whom they are dealing. I must be the man for you." She suddenly burst out laughing.

"How ironic that a woman must do that for you!" She fairly cackled as she stood once again and in a swift motion lunged at the foil, firmly grasping it in her hand. She quickly turned back upon Wickham and with a large sweep of her arm, drew the blade swiftly yet firmly across his stomach.

"Better to rule in Hell, than serve in Heaven, wouldn't you say?" He, however, was not listening, as he was loudly screaming while watching his blood turning his lawn shirt to red.

"Cease whining like a mongrel. Even you should have been able to tell the blade had not run deep, fool." And she was right; soon the blood, which had quickly seeped onto his shirt, had ceased its spread.

"Now you are branded! 'Here stands a coward,' your scar will say." She still stood in front of him, pointing the foil at him, turning it back and forth with a flick of her wrist, studying the instrument.

"What method should I use, Wickham? The foil is so elegant a weapon; it seems a shame to waste it on a whore such as yourself. You are that as well; a man-whore. There is nothing you wouldn't do for money, including selling yourself, I think. Just like a whore.

No, I think running you through would not be right. I prefer something which reflects your character more. Hanging would be good; you are as common as any criminal in Newgate, but you are too large for me to pull up on the rafters." She looked up into the ceiling, as if calculating the possibility. Wickham's anxious gaze went up as well.

"No, cannot hang you. Cannot possibly have you drawn and quartered either, though I can think of more than a few people who would pay to see it." And she started laughing once again. She grabbed her mug of wine, and slowly sipped it this time. Her nose wrinkled in disgust at the drink's foul taste.

"Selling tickets to Wickham's execution! Oh Lord, how I have fallen! My wit is simply not what it once was. Lydia would laugh, though; she always enjoys a good joke." She guffawed but then suddenly sobered, realising her error. "Always enjoyed a good joke." She threw the foil into the corner behind her and grabbed for the pistol, inspecting it carefully.

“No, I wish for no witnesses, merely to make you suffer. How many bullets does this little weapon hold? Enough to slowly bleed you, hole by hole, like Lydia bled?” His eyes suddenly went wide.

“You do not know, do you? You still have not discovered who you are dealing with, nor why, have you? Such a pity, we were always friends, were we not? You told me so. But you do not recognise me, because I did not want you to. Let me help you now, and we will have a lovely chat before I fill you with holes.” She replaced the pistol, stood in front of him and wrenched off the cap, her long dark hair spilling to her waist, as she removed the thick spectacles which hid the last bits of her. She bowed in front of him,

“Good evening, Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth Bennet, here to serve you.” And she smiled a smile he had never witnessed before; a dazzling smile full of energy, power and malevolence. He had to close his eyes from it.

“You sit there, and I will sit here, and we shall talk about why you should no longer live.” She then proceeded to give Wickham an account of all her family had suffered because of him. She droned on and on, making Wickham fairly dizzy from all she told him. She left nothing out, between her swills of the wine, dwelling acutely on how her inability to find him had made her suffer so. Then she triumphantly told him of how seeing him once with Sally had been the means to finding him at last. She mentioned no names with regards to his Lordship, or Higgins: merely calling them friends who were helping her.

“And lastly, Wickham, we made sure you were married to Lydia. You were married last July on your way to America! I am quite certain my family will never hear from you again, as it is so very far away. But at least my mother will have the pleasure of bragging to her neighbours of her good fortune of having a daughter well married.” Her cheery demeanour then took a decided turn.

“Would that my poor sister had the same rights. But sadly, I was informed tonight she anticipated you in the hereafter, and you are, for a short time, a widower. I would feel sympathy for you and extend my condolences had my sister not suffered her fate at your hand.” His eyes popped and he tried to shake his head “no” quite vehemently.

“Yes, Wickham when you run away with a sixteen-year-old girl, and she dies losing the baby you put into her, the fault falls to you. It is your responsibility. Must we review the lesson of cowardice and being a man?” she said menacingly, while fetching the discarded foil and starting towards him. She could hear his screams against the gag as his head attempted to move back and forth again. The foil was thrown back into the corner.

“Good, because I no longer have a stomach for you. I want this to end.” She picked up the pistol, cocked it with her thumb and with confident determination pointed the weapon directly into his face. His chest was heaving, the sweat pouring down his face and onto his shirt.

“No one should ever have to know the evil that you cause,” she pronounced. She stood strong and powerful in front of this man who had hurt so many. She knew anyone would tell her the action she was taking was justified. She had the right to judge him. She had the right to exact her punishment.

She held the gun nearly touching his temple, for how long she did not know, but her hand began shaking, trembling. He was crying now, pleading with her through the gag for his life. His chest would shake with his sobs, as his breathing still remained laboured. Still she held the shaking gun to his head.

The thought then occurred to her if she did this, if she executed this scoundrel, what would that make her? For all the evil the man had wrought, he had never taken a life directly. By serving as his judge and executioner, she would become worse than him: a murderer.

Worse than Wickham. The gun slowly lowered as she resignedly muttered, “No, not your pretty face, George. Let someone else have that pleasure.”

She turned away from him, suddenly feeling all the sweat her body had drained as they two had faced each other down. She could hear his whimpers of relief behind her as she continued to catch the breath she had not known she was short of. The gun was un-cocked and placed next to a large, full bottle of wine on the table. She stared at it and the bottle, until slowly her fingers encircled the thick neck. Had he been able to see her, he would have seen a calmness come over Elizabeth, combined with a glow of happiness as she then inverted both her hands around the bottle’s neck and quietly spoke the last words she ever said to George Wickham.

“This is for Lydia, and to ensure no other woman can ever suffer the same fate.”

She raised the heavy bottle high over her head as she turned, oblivious to the muffled screams in the room, and smashed it down upon her foe where his breeches met the chair.

Chapter 15

LONDON, MAY, 1813

Elizabeth carefully tucked her hair up into the cap, feeling cautiously for any stray hairs that would give away her sex. Taking one last large sip of wine, she replaced her spectacles upon her nose and opened the door to the rest of the tavern. The two men jumped at her sudden appearance, but did not hesitate to look into the room. They saw Wickham unconscious; the line across his belly was already drying and brown. His lap was covered in broken glass, wine and fresh blood. Elizabeth's breeches too, were splattered with wine. Both men looked at one another and swallowed hard.

Higgins quickly traversed the room, put his hand to the man's neck and verified, "He's still alive."

Elizabeth looked agitated. "Yes he's alive!" she hissed. "If I had wanted him otherwise, he would not be!" She turned on Caldhart. "May we leave, please?"

He directed her this time through the main room and out the front door. Elizabeth kept her head down, but could not help but be strangely distracted by the men in the tavern. They looked out of place. Most had their ale mugs, but their dress was wrong: too good, actually. And she distinguished many different accents across the room. She could not account for it. However, as there was no time to stop and investigate, she put it out of her mind.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, George Wickham awoke. He was surprised to find he was no longer bound to the chair in any way, though his hands were still tied behind his back and the gag was in place. A large burly man and a smaller round man were now sitting at the table, drinking some of the wine.

"Ah, finally woke up, did ya, pet?" said the larger of the two. "Lovely, lovely, got some people who've been asking after you, they have. Come out 'n' meet 'em." He grabbed Wickham roughly by the neck and lifted him up. Wickham groaned in pain as the cut across his middle stung and the remembrance of where the bottled had landed announced itself to him with each agonizing step.

"Oh, try to be a man now. You may not have use of yer balls no more, but where yer going, you won't need 'em." They headed towards the main room in the tavern. As they passed out of the small hallway and into the large room,

a hush fell over the crowd. Wickham hesitated for a moment, confused. He was certain he did not look very well but, surely not so bad as to make an entire room silent. The gruff man spoke from behind him, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"You might be having some trouble thinking straight right now, seeing as yer bleeding out some new holes." Several snickers floated around. "But ya needn't worry, Wickham, *everyone* here knows you, and they can't wait to re-acquaint themselves. Now you go right out and enjoy this reunion. I knows several people have been waiting years to see you again. Each and every one will want to have a moment of your time."

Wickham concentrated hard on the faces in front of him. Slowly he began to see straight and started to discern that the men who stood in front of him could only be described as a history, *his* history. His mouth opened wide as he screamed and attempted to run back through the hallway, only to be blocked by the burly man and his companion. He turned back, panicked to see the menacing crowd closing in upon him.

Behind him a man spoke quietly into his ear. "Hello, Wickham. You won't remember me, since I was just a boy when you took my sister Jenny down to the old mill in Lambton for your romps, but I remember *you*."



SHE HAD NOT SPOKEN since leaving the tavern. She changed quickly at the old inn and they returned for the trip to her home.

"You could not do it?" he finally asked, as the rickety coach ambled slowly thru the streets.

"No."

"Do you wish it still?"

"You mistake me. I meant no, I could do it. I merely chose *not* to do it."

"You wish for him to live?" he asked surprised.

"I did not wish to take his life." She stared out of the dark window. "He begged me, he begged for his life through that gag. I heard it as plain as our speech now. I realised that, in becoming his executioner, I would be guilty of greater crimes than he himself had committed. I chose to be a better person than that. I hope I am." He nodded sympathetically.

They drove on for some time in silence, when something inside Elizabeth's calm demeanour finally gave way. She looked over to him, tears glazing her eyes. A deep primordial wail escaped her throat, like the sound of a mother mourning her babe, and the torrent of tears came while her hands flew to bury her face.

"It is over, I have failed! There is nothing left I can do and my poor little sister, poor Lydia is dead! It was all for naught!" she sobbed.

He moved beside her and quickly took her in his arms, while she poured out the emotions pent up all these months into his shoulder. The coach had somehow stopped while she continued.

When at last he could bear it no more, he removed her head, cradling it in his hands, and spoke with great feeling. "I cannot agree with you. You have done everything that could be done. Your family has been restored and your sisters have a chance to find happiness. **You** have done this. If you had not been searching for them, we would never have met and I could never have helped you. Lydia still would have died, and your family would be more wretched than ever. You have given so many a future, Elizabeth. Will you not admit to yourself that you have done them good?"

Her snuffles jerked her body in his arms; a deep frown creased her forehead. "But Lydia?"

"Could not have been helped by anyone. Once she chose to leave with Wickham last summer, her fate was decided. Had you found her earlier, you would not have had the means to falsify a marriage, and she still would not have lived because of the child; you know this to be true." He could see her testing the reason of his statements. She started to calm, as her acceptance took hold.

"Her death was of her and Wickham's making, Elizabeth. You are not responsible." She nodded slowly, her lower lip quaking sweetly, as her tears quietly rolled down her cheeks. She accepted it. She could mourn the loss of Lydia, but she would not blame herself. She lay her head back down upon his arm while she wept silently for her sister. They sat for hours while he patiently comforted her, and she gave her emotions free reign.



"HOW DO YOU FEEL?"

"Extraordinarily tired, but relieved. I think I may finally sleep tonight."

"You do not sleep?"

"Not since coming to London have I enjoyed a restful night's sleep," she answered flatly.

"In what manner are you relieved?"

"Because I am finally done. There is nothing more I can do for my family, and the burden I have felt this past year no longer enslaves me. The outcome has not been a happy one, but it is an ending."

"And are you satisfied?"

"Sir?"

"Do you believe the terms of our arrangement have been satisfactorily carried out? Is there any part I have not fulfilled?"

"No, my Lord, I...I thank you for all you have done. As you have often stated, I could not have done this without you."

"You are very welcome. I have another request, please forgive me if it sounds inconsiderate given the turn of events this evening, but I think you would find it a sound idea once I have explained myself." He hesitated, deciding how to broach the subject. "Elizabeth, you will have to conceal your sister's death from your family."

Her eyes once again brimmed with tears. "I know, I have been thinking the same. Unfortunately, I cannot fathom a way to reveal her passing without undoing all that we have done."

"My dear, I am truly sorry that you must bear this terrible knowledge by yourself. I cannot disagree with you. There is no story we could concoct to justify Lydia being in England, with her husband and with child, and not contacting your family; nor of Wickham's failure to write to your mother and father of their daughter's passing.

"I propose a slight alteration to our plans. Would you be willing to dine early with me tomorrow? I know our agreement starts on Saturday, which would mean that one minute after midnight tomorrow would be the start of our new life, but I should like to have the pleasure of your company during the evening. I think the opportunity to distance yourself from your family during this difficult time might prove easier for you in the end. I know it will not be easy for you to leave them, but now, with this wretched situation, I think it would be torturous to spend an extended time in their presence having to act cheerful. If I am mistaken, please do not feel obligated to rush yourself."

Her shoulders drooped, sadness written plainly upon her face. "No, my Lord, you speak sense." She considered his proposal. It did not escape her that he would benefit from an earlier rendezvous, but he was correct. It was going to be difficult tomorrow while in her aunt and uncle's presence. Seeing Jane, however, and knowing that she must keep Lydia's death from her dearest sister, *would* be torture.

"I will come to you tomorrow evening. Will you make the arrangements with Higgins to visit an inn before I come to your door? It will be time for Chantal Moreau to make her appearance in your home at last."

He raised her hand to his lips, bestowing upon it a gentle, though prolonged kiss.

"It will be my pleasure, my dear."

Chapter 16

LONDON, MAY 14TH, 1813

Her final day as a free and independent woman was spent with those Elizabeth treasured most in the world: her loved ones. She arranged to meet with Jane and the Parker girls in the morning at the park, then stayed with her aunt and uncle for the rest of the day and played with her little cousins till she had exhausted them.

The Gardiners had commented on her strained face; the remnants of the tears that had fallen the night before, and her sad parting with Jane earlier. She reassured them she had simply been so overwhelmed by their great good fortune, she gave in to her pent up emotions and had herself a good cry. Unfortunately, it was just before she fell asleep the night before and thus the swollen red eyes this afternoon. They humoured her good naturedly, and did not question her further after seeing her complexion improve throughout the day. She bid them farewell in the late afternoon, trying hard not to allow her embrace to linger too long, nor allow her eyes to betray her emotions at this painful adieu, just as she had with Jane earlier in the day.

She perused her room, satisfied the place looked well. Gone were the maps, notes, and scribbles she had poured over the past six months. They had all been burned along with any trace of the obsession she had given into. Her clothes were clean and neatly stored in her chiffarobe. The bed was made, the furniture dusted, the entire room was neat and tidy. She gathered her bag, in which she had placed her letters, combs, brush and the gown she meant to change into for this evening's dinner, and with one last look, left her room for the final time to begin her new life.



HIGGINS MET HER NEARLY a mile away, where prying eyes would not know her, driving one of his Lordship's unmarked carriages. He informed her that after she had changed her gown at the inn, they would be meeting and transferring to a second, finer carriage in another part of town, and then finally make their way to Lord Robert's home. His Lordship's care in concealing her identity was gratefully accepted by the lady.

When Elizabeth had emerged from the door of the inn, dressed in the gown she had once worn to the theatre so

long ago, poor Higgins could not help but gape at the loveliness before him. She shyly bowed her head.

"I had forgotten you have never seen me as myself, have you, Higgins?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have actually; ages ago in the winter. I once saw you with your aunt and cousins, playing in the snow, but, well, you didn't look like you do now. I must say his Lordship has once again proven his ability to find beauty where most folks would not have thought to look." He suddenly looked aghast for having voiced his opinion. "Beg pardon, Miss Bennet."

"You are forgiven. However, from now on I am to be addressed as Miss Chantal Moreau by his Lordship's staff. And I would not mention your observations in future if I were you; rest assured, I shall not."

"Yes, Miss Moreau. And ma'am, you should know, I have served his Lordship all my life, and have kept all his secrets as well. I just want you to know, well, Mrs. Johnson and all that, only me and the attorneys know, and I will keep your secret safe, too."

Her surprise was evident. She extended her hand and, shaking his, she sincerely answered, "Thank you, Mr. Higgins. Your promise means more than you can know." He swallowed hard, quite taken with this remarkable young woman. "And when do we leave for Surrey?" she asked, lightening the air.

"I believe on the morn, Miss Moreau. For now, the carriage awaits you, ma'am," he said, bowing with deepest respect.



THE STAFF TRIED VALIANTLY to not peek out the windows every few moments, intent on looking busy, when all they wanted was a chance to spy his Lordship's latest conquest. More than one gentleman in town had given standing orders that, should a footman of Lord Caldhart's learn of a new mistress at his home, the well-placed, early conveyance of said information would be worth a fair bit of tuppence. Unfortunately, only a select few servants had been in on the secret of his newest acquisition. And it was only a matter of an hour earlier that the entire staff had been informed; therefore, none could leave their posts in time to collect the reward.

His Lordship proudly greeted the beautiful Miss Moreau and welcomed her to his home. His staff were introduced to their new mistress, nervously curtsying and bowing to her. He then conducted a tour of the house, whereupon she was honestly able to express her wonder at the place. They were to partake of a very early dinner, which surprised Elizabeth until his Lord Caldhart explained himself more fully.

"My dear, I have a rather unusual request to make of you this evening."

“My Lord?” she questioned.

“Tonight a ball of some import is to take place. The Blakely’s have hosted it for years and it is the highlight of the end of the Season. It is a masquerade costume ball, and is always attended by the *crème de la crème* of the *ton*. I would ask, as a personal favour to me, and not as a stipulation of any agreement we have entered into, you accompany me tonight, so I may have the pleasure of showing you off to society before we retire to Surrey.” He saw her startle and panic.

“Rest assured Miss Moreau, your costume will allow you the anonymity you have always sought. Your own mother would not recognize you.” She was not pleased. He attempted to assuage her fears.

“Chantal,” he began sweetly, “allow me to tell you some things about yourself. Your beauty does not strike most men in the usual way. It is your essence that attracts: the aura, spark and vitality which emanates from you. You have a stark sensuality in all you do, every move you make, every sentence you utter, which attracts a man and draws him to you. Then your beauty in all its variations ensnares them. Without the hindrance of looking for a wife, a man wishes for a woman exactly like you—a woman to stir his loins, a woman he would make love to all night without thought to his health; that is what you are. You were made for love, Chantal, I knew it the first day I saw you.

Tonight the men at this ball will know who you are. You are my new mistress and as such you will create such a stir, such an interest, only the king or the regent will have known the like. You can do as you please, talk to whom you please, flirt with whom you please. This one night *you* will be the elite of society and everyone there will seek you out with a vengeance. Would you not find it amusing that the proprietress of Johnson’s House of Cigars will be the belle of the largest ball London has ever seen?” She looked at him earnestly, trying to find deception in what he said, but she could see none. He tenderly grasped her hand and beseeched her, “You are the flame the moth is drawn to, and men are the moths. Will you not agree to come tonight and be my flame? Would you not find it diverting and help to assuage the sadness you are suffering?”

She informed him that, providing her costume proved adequate disguise, she would go.



SHE SAT IN FRONT of her dressing table, wearing only a heavy silk robe. She watched the rose hues in the garment play off the warmth in her complexion under the soft flickering candlelight as she thought about how triumphant dinner had been. His Lordship had obviously gone to great lengths to please every possible taste bud on her tongue and could not have been more successful. Her exquisite costume had

proved more than adequate to disguise herself, and now she sat in her new dressing room, getting ready for the Blakely’s ball.

Gemma, her new maid, had just unwrapped the towel she had used to keep her hair from getting wet in her bath, when the adjoining door opened. Elizabeth looked into her mirror and startled at the sight of Lord Robert gazing steadily back at her.

“That will be all for now, Gemma. Your mistress will summon you when she is ready to finish dressing.” The maid hurried out of the servant’s entrance door. They stared at one another through the confines of her mirror. He slowly approached her; his eyes were searching her face, looking for fear, and seeing none, smiled down at her. She smiled nervously back.

“Your obvious...interest in my person makes me slightly unsettled, my Lord. Please forgive me.” There was a charge in the room, not unlike their encounters in the cigar shop, yet not tension, it was merely an energy; unsure where it should go.

“Without an ‘interest’ in you, our bed would be very dull indeed, but I can stimulate *your* interest as time goes on, and make the experience very enjoyable for you. You have to be willing to open your mind to new ideas, and toss out all the warnings your mother no doubt told you. The world would not be populated if all ladies kept their knees locked, Chantal. Maidenly modesty will have no place in our bed.”

A deep blush spread instantly across her face and neck as she whispered, “You speak of such things as if they were nothing, like talking of the weather.”

“It is perfectly natural for lovers. Would it not be better to be open and easy, conversing on the subject? I would never bring it up but when we two are alone. I mean to educate you.”

“I see. I suppose it only makes sense, as you...have the experience.”

He laughed lightly. “Yes, I do have the experience. I shall be happy to impart all I know in improving your education.” He moved nearer, close enough for her feel to his breath against the back of her hair, the sound of his clothes rustling next to her. Now he spoke quietly, endearingly, seductively, “I have always admired your superior tactile senses; use them. Allow them to open up those parts of you not yet awakened.” He stood behind her still watching her in her mirror. It was as though she was in the theatre, watching someone else be touched and spoken to. It was not an unpleasant experience. She felt movement in her hair as he picked up the heavy length of it.

“Your hair is a cascade of rich dark chocolate.” He buried his face into its mass, breathing deeply. She observed him, fascinated, as he rubbed the length of it across his face, as she had once seen a cat do to a soft pillow. His eyes were closed, seemingly relishing in the feel, the texture of her tresses as he repeated the action once again.

"It smells of rosewater, and feels like warm silk." He moved closer, she could feel the warmth of his forearms at her ears, his breath on the top of her crown. She watched as he took both of his large hands and, starting at her temples, his inverted fingers ploughed deep furrows into her head, moving towards the back. He then grasped his fingers hard; her curls still imprisoned, and held them there for several seconds. She thought she would feel pain, but instead, felt relief as the tension flowed out her body and into his strong hands while he repeated the act over and over. Her eyes closed involuntarily; it was heavenly.

"I have something for you," he whispered into her ear, his hands still clenching her, his lips almost touching her. "I wanted my first gift to you to be special, memorable, and something I knew you would appreciate above all things." Her eyes opened, mesmerised at the sight of this man still entwined in her locks, his face next to hers as they both looked at each other in the glass. He languidly drew his fingers down the length of her curls until he was finally free. Then he drew a small jeweller's box from his clothes and set it in upon the dressing table in front of her as he knelt next to her. "Please, open it; I think you will like it."

She took the box in her hands hesitantly. She had little enjoyment of jewels, and wondered how she could keep her face from betraying her indifference and embarrassment. Still, he had made an effort on her behalf, and he was trying to please her. She could draw from that. She slowly opened it and could not help the laugh which escaped her. "It is truly exquisite, my Lord. A more perfect effort I could not imagine."

He grinned and reached for it. "May I?"
"Yes, please."

He then cautiously picked up the delicate little ball and held it tantalisingly in front of her lips. They were both watching the morsel and then looked up into one another's eyes at the same time. He silently pleaded for her to do what she already desired. She licked the dark chocolate as he held it, relishing once more in the delight it afforded. He watched her, fascinated, as she took her pleasure at his fingertips, still never touching him.

He finally held it back, and she obeyed his request by opening her little mouth and he placed it upon her tongue. She waited for the joy of the confection melting in her mouth while watching as he sensuously licked the chocolate remaining on his fingers. He looked back to her and finally saw the beginnings of desire stirring within her as she regarded his actions.

"Close your eyes," he softly entreated. He licked one chocolaty finger and drew the wet digit slowly across her bottom lip. He then watched her, knowing her automated reaction would come. Indeed, she had little conscious knowledge of what she did, when her own tongue started across the span of her velvety lower lip, taking up his offering of the food he had already had in his mouth. He shuddered.

"Keep your eyes closed," he begged. He stood up behind her, and folded the cuffs of his dressing gown back several times, baring his lower arms. Slowly he ran his smooth inner forearm across her upper and lower lips.

"Skin touching skin. There is no other sensation like it. Use all of your senses, smell it, feel it on the sensitive patches of your face." He ran his flesh gently across the tip of her nose and her chin, before moving back to her lips, settling his wrist against them.

"Press your lips against it, do you feel my blood?" She opened her eyes, to find his locked onto her face. She was surprised at the intensity in his look. She tentatively did as he asked, and could feel the strong beat under her lips.

"Your beauty makes my heart race," he confessed. "Taste me. Allow your tongue to feel my pulse."

She started breathing more rapidly now, worried he was going to consummate their relationship right there in her dressing room.

He must have seen her panic, for he assuaged her worry. "Do not be afraid, my dear, we have years to explore all the ways of lovemaking. It is no small undertaking, I assure you. You have already read some upon the subject, I dare say, but practical experimentation is the only way to learn its lessons. Before we join, I promise you will be ready and willing, and feel great pleasure. Now close your eyes, and let your tongue, with all its sensitivity, taste its first man, and feel my blood's song."

He swept the fingers of his other hand gently down her eyes, closing them carefully and sighed as he felt the warm wetness of her shy tongue tentatively meet his wrist. His skin was soft and tasted slightly salty. She could smell the faint remnants of spices, no doubt from his bath. His pulse beat strongly against her tongue, and she was surprised how intimate it felt to touch him thus.

His other hand grasped the length of her hair, and twisted it gently around his wrist, then laid it carefully up over her shoulder and neck to eventually fall across her breast down to her waist. She could then feel his fingers at the base of her neck, slowly pulling the collar of her robe down her back. It had no tie and therefore the more he pulled, the more the front of it inched up her body. The feeling of the smooth silk sliding across her bare breasts underneath was exhilarating and she could not help the breaths which came more quickly now. He continued pulling until a fair portion of her back was exposed and, although hidden by her dressing table, her legs and feet were now exposed to the air in the room, which she noticed was decidedly warmer than when she had left her bath.

He removed the wrist she no longer was tasting to attend to her newly exposed skin. She stared blatantly at him in the mirror, though his gaze was completely devoted to the beauty of her exposed flesh. She felt his fingers, a mere whisper of a touch, along her spine. Her shoulders drew back involuntarily—setting her even straighter. His hands were supple and warm, and knew where to touch her to

best make her feel so...lovely, yet he seemed to barely make contact with her. How could such limited contact make her feel so many wonderful sensations she did not know, but all of her skin seemed attuned to him each time his fingertips came near.

“Massage is the art of rubbing or kneading the body to lessen pain or stiffness. However, when the body is not in pain, and when the artist applies his hand to bring pleasure to the subject, in a much lighter, much more sensual manner, that is different. The French have a word for it, which I forget at this moment, especially when I gaze upon the glory your skin is. You have a beautiful back, Chantal. It is strong from all the exercise you give it, but it is also strongly feminine, it curves and sways, it moves to its mistress’s ways, and even sitting still, it is uniquely you, and devastatingly appealing.”

He then drew up and gazed upon her image one last time in the mirror. Her eyes were now closed, her lips were parted, her chest rising in rapid waves. Lastly, her breasts, so lovely, so full and high, were poised, beckoning, tight and straining against the soft silk of her robe. He took a deep, restraining breath. Lowering himself slowly down, he placed his hands around her small waist, and his nose brushed over the indents exposed at the bottom of the small of her back, as he inhaled her essence deeply into him. Then, directly over her naked spine, her lifeline, he softly kissed her for the first time.

The next sound Elizabeth heard was Gemma asking her about the manner in which she wished her hair to be done. She looked around the room; Lord Robert was nowhere to be seen. If not for the disarray of her robe and her hair, she would have thought it all an erotic dream. She also saw a box upon her table not previously there. She opened it to reveal a magnificent ruby and diamond choker and earrings with a note:

Please forgive my presumptions, but I thought my second gift should at least try to live up to the standards my first brought you. I think they will compliment your gown tonight beautifully, but all the accoutrements are nothing compared to the woman wearing them. —R

“A rather expensive speculation.” she thought as she admired them. They were obviously made in the eighteenth century; their style was a perfect accompaniment to the period costume she was to wear. She briefly wondered what he would have done had she not agreed to accompany him this evening, but quickly dismissed it. When had Lord Robert not gotten what he wanted?



HER MAID HAD EXHAUSTED herself putting up her hair in an elaborate style, then powdered her locks completely. They struggled getting her into her corset and panniers, then finally the decadent silk gown. Elizabeth was not used to the large protrusions at her hips, and spent many minutes walking up and down her chamber to accustom herself how to move. Turning was the largest problem, but she soon discovered how much room she needed to allow to do it without knocking into the furniture. She and Gemma giggled at her efforts.

She sat one last time to adorn her throat and ears with her jewels. The rubies were beyond anything she had ever seen, much less worn. He had chosen well; the colour was perfect for her and set off the dark red hues of her dress. The final touch was a Venetian mask covered in rose silk that covered most of her face. Only her fine mouth, chin and jaw were exposed. Her eyes could still see be seen and see perfectly well, though a little of her peripheral vision was obscured. They finally secured it into her hair; enabling her to spend the night with her hands free to move. She almost jumped at his voice.

“From the time I saw you that night at the theatre in your garnet gown, I knew I wanted to drape you in rubies,” he said from the connecting door to their chambers.

Gemma curtsayed and disappeared.

“You are stunning. I fear you will break many hearts this evening.” His pleasure was evident in his gaze.

“I believe you will be well pleased if I do, will you not, my Lord?”

He laughed at her boldness. “You begin to understand me, enchantress. I do indeed relish the idea of other men envying me. Come, I have one thing more I wish to share with you,” he said as he led her through to his chambers. He retrieved two glasses from the table near a handsome leather sofa, and bade her drink. Bubbles tickled her nose while she took in the pleasure of the fragrant cool liquid. She giggled and he joined her.

“The finest French champagne that could be smuggled out from under old Bonaparte’s nose. A decadent luxury I can only indulge in occasionally but I thought it appropriate to welcome you with a bit of your home, my dear Chantal.” Her brow rose in the playful, impertinent manner that so bewitched him.

“Merci beaucoup,” she responded, with a surprisingly good accent.

“Ha!” he laughed. “I should have known you would not pick France without a command of the language, am I to assume you have no worries over your skills in that area?”

“Non, aucun,” she answered easily.

“My dearest Chantal, you will simply have them eating out of your hand.”

Chapter 17

LONDON, MAY, 1813

The night air was warm for mid May, but the gentlest of breezes kept it from being stifling. Elizabeth fidgeted in Lord Caldhart's luxurious carriage, a fact he did not fail to spot. He took her silk gloved hand in his. "My dear tonight is *your* night. You can say whatever you want. No one will expect a prim and proper lady. They know me and they will wish to know the woman I bring with me. If it pleases you, indulge yourself to the fullest. Imagine such freedom, such entertainment and such power!"

It was an exhilarating proposition. The freedom to be whomever she wanted, free to say and do for one evening, and then disappear, and never be held responsible, this piqued her vanity. A small, wicked grin began at the corner of her mouth.

"Very well, my Lord, for your sake and the sake of my 'education,' I shall perform for you this evening. Though I guarantee no success, only earnest effort." He laughed again.

"Chantal, you have never failed me yet." He raised her hand to his lips, kissing it and then gently pulled. His head bent ever closer to her until he was almost at her mouth, when the door suddenly flew open. They had stopped at the entrance to the Blakely's and had not noticed. She shyly smiled and he straightened back up, disappointment plainly written upon his face, before he grudgingly descended from the carriage and then turned to hand her out. Many gasps could be heard around her as Chantal Moreau made her first appearance in London's highest society.



"HAVE YOU SEEN HER yet?"

"Who?"

"Look, over there, in the circle of men. The French woman."

"My word!"

"Hmmm...mmm."

"Who is she?"

"Caldhart's."

"No!"

"Oh yes."

"Again? How does he do it?"

"You are assuming he *does* do it."

"I'm surprised he doesn't have an entire boy's school of bastard offspring."

"You are assuming, again, the first two *legitimate* ones were his. How do you think he got the nickname, 'Lord Me Balls...Falls'?"



"HAVE YOU SPOKEN WITH her?"

"Yes, she's a fiery one. Be careful not to arouse her ire; she has quite a bite. But clever as the devil."

"I hear there's a bet going around that no one can stump her. It is already over two hundred pounds."

"I wish you luck! The short time I was near her, I heard her remark in her native French, then German and Italian, on subjects from Napoleon to Cowper. She even corrected one gentleman's biblical quote."

"A bluestocking?"

"Hardly! And even if she were, who cares if she can fill a dress so enticingly." Both sighed.

"I thought the parts she was *not* wearing were enticing."

"I suspect stumping her is not the only bet going around."

"Shall we stop for a write up in the book at White's later tonight, then?"

"Indeed! Death, or incapacitation?"

"Does it matter?"



"ONE OF THE FIRST times I ever met her, she tried to poison me."

"Surely you jest?"

"Oh, no! I am quite serious."

The gentleman bowed his adieu and left Lord Caldhart to chuckle over his great good fortune. That rat would no doubt spread this juicy bit of gossip around the room faster than the North wind blows.

He had been vastly amused at the conversations overheard in the packs of wolves that lined the ballroom. The women were equally fascinated with his lady as well, but were careful to keep their bites to themselves, for now. He knew the drawing rooms would be full tomorrow of dull, rich women trying desperately to tear his lover to shreds.

"Let the old crows fight," he thought. "My jewel stands out above them all, and they know it." He had his glass refilled and took a spot upon a nearby chaise where he could watch the show progress at leisure.



SHE WAS BEGINNING TO understand the lure of power. The men who encircled her seemed willing slaves to her every whim. Even those who had been sent or came of their own accord to best her eventually succumbed to her wiles. It was a feeling she had not known before, and quickly realised its potential to destroy a person's soul, should they become a slave to it.

She continued on through the evening, enjoying herself more and more. Eventually, she noticed one man, always on the outskirts of her growing entourage. He never spoke to her, and if she tried to meet his eye he looked away. He was tall, with long dark hair, much longer than what most gentlemen wore. The tips of the curls could be seen peeking out under his hood and mask. His skin was very dark and she pondered if perhaps he was a Spaniard, or an Italian? She hoped he would speak with her, as he was increasing her curiosity every moment.

Her chance came later, when her admirers were momentarily distracted and she bravely strode directly to him and, curtsying, said, "Buenos noches, señor."

He looked shocked, then amused, and shook his head.

"Buona sera signore?"

He shook his head again.

"Excusez-moi, but I do not speak Greek, only read it; perhaps I could write it down for you?"

"Good God, you think I am Greek?" he exclaimed in perfect English.

She laughed delightedly. "Not anymore," she slyly replied, while looking up at him through her thick lashes. Their eyes met for a moment until, feeling heady under his intense gaze, she sought to distract herself from the flutters she felt.

"Forgive my bad manners, but your skin, I have never seen an Englishman so dark. Your mother, she was perhaps Spanish or Italian?"

He looked down at his hands as if seeing them for the first time, and the truth of her observation. "No, I have just returned from the Mediterranean. I spent long days in the hot sun there and have become unusually tan."

"And will you not join your fellow Englishmen in conversation? I notice you stand away; you listen, but you do not talk."

"Forgive me, I did not mean to be rude."

"I do not think I said you were rude, Monsieur. Perhaps you are merely shy?"

"I confess I do not conduct myself well with strangers."

"I am a stranger, and you are conducting yourself very well."

"Thank you, I am trying to improve. And if I may be so bold, Mademoiselle, you make it very easy."

"It is a very foolish woman who does not like a compliment. And I can easily return the favour for you have been a delightful partner to converse with, and seem at perfect ease."

"No, that will not do for a compliment. My dearest friend has often chided my habit of standing by myself

in a stupid manner, when I had much better dance, or at least converse. I am afraid my fastidious habits have often robbed me of the pleasures of good company. Label me a beginner, and tell me I am learning well, but I know I have not mastered this skill, nor behaved in a completely gentlemanlike manner."

He spoke lightly, laughing good-naturedly at his own deficiencies. But he would not have continued had he paid closer attention to his partner. He would have stopped his self-admonishments had he noticed Mademoiselle's face drain of all colour and the panic set upon her as she attended his hands more closely. He would also have kept quiet and offered to be of service to her when her legs began to give way and she tottered dangerously towards the floor when she noticed the telltale signet ring upon his finger.

Instead, he was only able to help her when she finally grabbed his arm in panic, knowing she could no longer support herself.

"Good God! What is the matter?" he cried as she crumpled against him. He helped her to a nearby bench, around the corner and out of the main ballroom. He snatched the fan that hung from her waist and applied it to her face and neck. She knew he would be wondering what she could possibly be thinking while she looked at him with such intensity, yet she could not stop herself.

"How can I help you. Shall I fetch you a glass of wine?" he asked in real concern. She slowly shook her head. After several agonizing minutes she seemed to finally calm, and was able to answer him with some semblance of composure.

"No, I am well. I was just, the heat, it is overwhelming. And this costume..." Her hands flitted in front of her. "I am afraid I am not used to such things to torture women, or so much...much...dress."

He chuckled. "How can you make light, when you nearly fainted just now?"

"How can I remain serious when I see you waving a laced fan in front of me?"

He laughed again. "May I know the name of the lady I have rescued this evening?"

"It is a night of masquerades, Monsieur, we need only share what we wish." She held out her hand to him. "Chantal," she said simply.

He took her hand and pressed his lips to the back of it. "Enchanté, Chantal. Mon nom est...Will," he finally decided.

She smiled beautifully, her eyes softening, radiating the love she felt, but knew he would not recognize. "Will," she sighed lovingly, thrilled that for once in her life she was able to address Fitzwilliam Darcy, the man who owned her heart, by his Christian name. His face betrayed happy confusion when she had practically caressed his name. He stayed by her for most of the evening, contributing to the conversations occasionally, but mainly watching her, studying her, and making her fall even more in love with him.



AT ONE POINT, A group of ladies stood near her, and she could hear some of their conversation. Two dressed in Elizabethan gowns and draped in jewels started, "Really Louisa, this is just madness. I cannot tell one gentleman from the next, and so many of them refuse to use their proper names. I have met two William Shakespeare's and even a Sophocles tonight. How is one to know where one's proper set is?"

"Caroline, do not distress yourself. Enjoy the night for a change. I do not believe Darcy is even here. I'm sure Charles is not. Meet new people, see if you can find a partner for a dance. You tire me out with your complaints, and I am sure they can do you no good. You are developing a large frown line through your brow, you know." Caroline gasped and excused herself to look for the line. Elizabeth laughed to herself. Perhaps this evening would prove more entertaining than she had expected.



LATER, WHEN SHE STOOD among her male harem she saw the two women again nearby and, feeling the effects of her power, began her revenge. She turned to the unsuspecting gentleman staring puppy-eyed next to her.

"What do you Englishmen do when you find a woman who is really a man?" she innocently asked. There were several coughs, and some snickers, until one man braved to ask her to explain herself.

"In France, we have men who enjoy wearing the clothes of a woman. Sometimes they will come to a ball trying to pass themselves off for the whole of the evening as a woman. I have seen such a man tonight, and wonder how you Englishmen find them?"

"How do you know she was really a man?" another asked.

"I could tell right way as she was so, like a lamppost, oui? We French have little use for women who are, who resemble the Milo stalk. You see, they are not suited for love, I fear. But this woman, despite her jewels and her orange gown from Shakespeare, was definitely a man. I am sure I saw..." she pointed at Will's cheek, where his sideburns showed slightly beyond his mask. "Comment appelez-vous ceci?"

He blushed. "Whiskers," he whispered.

"Oui, yes. I am sure I saw whiskers on her, his cheek." Elizabeth could hear a shocked squeak behind her as she delivered her final insult. "He would do well to grow his whiskers better and find 'imself a good wife or a mistress. He does *not* make une dame très...appétissante."

Darcy hid his laughter behind the back of his hand, while the other men, with blank looks on their faces, stared

at him. He whispered to the man next to him, careful that *should* Caroline Bingley actually be there, and nearby, she should not hear his voice and recognize him.

"Appetizing woman," he told him. The secret soon made its way around the circle of her admirers and the laughter then began in earnest.



THE BALL WAS HARDLY begun, yet half the men in the room were indeed already in love with Lord Caldhart's newest mistress. She danced when she felt like it, and refused more than one man when she felt like it. When one dim-witted fop protested she would have to forgo dancing for the rest of the evening if she refused him, she laughed gaily and asked why.

"Proper English ladies do not dance again once they have refused a gentleman for a set."

"Ah I see! Thank you for this information. 'ow fortunate I am not an English lady, nor proper, Monsieur; it is most advantageous for me, is it not?" He stormed off in a huff, amidst the sniggers of the men who swarmed round her.

At one point, when they found themselves in a moment without others, she whispered to her new friend.

"I see you do not dance, Will," she questioned, her face very near his again.

"No, I find little pleasure in it most times, but tonight, in particular, I do not wish to dance."

"Should I feel insulted?"

He cringed at his obvious faux pas. "I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle. I truly did not mean to imply... I simply, that is, I do not wish to draw attention to myself."

She frowned at him and he blushed under her scrutiny once more. Suddenly understanding dawned on her. "You are hiding from someone."

His blush deepened. "Yes," he confessed. "A woman. She chases me relentlessly and I am at my wits end to be rid of her."

"And she is here tonight?"

"I believe so."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

He leaned into her face, very close, and with a hushed voice said, "Not unless you have a *foil* under so much... much dress."

Her mouth dropped open. Was he flirting with her? She had not thought it possible. Her fan flew open as she giggled sweetly behind it; a dark blush stained her throat.

"If I did, *you* would be the only one I would allow to borrow it," she teased back. "How long were you away from England?" she asked. He looked away, pained. He felt her small hand on his arm. "I am sorry, I am too personal?"

"No, of course not. I have just returned and am simply not used to answering questions about my trip. I was gone

over nine months.” She calculated quickly; he would have left in early August.

“Nine months! But you would have been travelling in August, how miserable that would have been.”

“We actually started out in July from the north, then eventually crossed the Channel by early August.”

“You did not go alone?”

“No, I brought my sister, and my closest friend and his family. I am afraid I learned the truth in the old saying, ‘if you wish to know the true character of someone; travel with them.’”

“Your friend was not what he seemed?”

“Yes, he was himself as always, it was his family whose presence tormented me and unfortunately my sister as well.”

“I see. I pity you and your sister. I hope your trip was not completely ruined?”

“No, we made arrangements to spend time apart from them. My sister and I enjoyed our private time together very much. I have come back a much happier man.”

“You left because you were sad?” she asked, her voice almost betraying her heartache.

He weighed his reply carefully. “I left because there was no more reason to be in England at the time.”

She nodded sympathetically. “I understand. You need not say anymore, my friend. I too, have known loss, both a loved one, and the loss of my true love.”

“But Caldhart...”

“Ah, no...he does not ask for my heart, and I could never give it. Nor does he give me his. Such is the way sometimes.” She sighed heavily. “I wish for some fresh air, and solitude, I think.” She turned to him, dismissing him. “Thank you, Will,” she said with sweet aching sadness. And then she left.



THE STONE BENCH IN the garden was cool, but the heat of the evening and the pain in her heart made her hot and uncomfortable. Her tears were silent and stoic, and fell as much for herself as for Fitzwilliam or Lydia. She was glad she had seen him. She was grateful fate had allowed her the chance to stand in his presence, speak with ease and friendliness and especially with the tiny bit of tenderness she felt they had shared. She held on to the precious memory and willed herself never to forget.

Caldhart had come to her, and asked if she needed anything. She had told him she was merely a bit overwhelmed and needed some minutes to herself, to which he readily agreed. She looked up to the vivid moon, a fat slice, beaming down to her. She felt suddenly very small, and not at all powerful. Another noise at her side brought her out of her reverie. She looked up and saw Fitzwilliam Darcy standing before her.



HE HAD TAKEN OFF his mask and hood, and now she could see him clearly for the first time. He was startlingly handsome. He had let his hair grow out far longer than she had thought; never had she seen a man with hair that length. His face was indeed very tan, but it gave him a beauty she had not considered possible in a man. Her hand involuntarily reached for his jaw, touching it with just the tip of her finger.

“You are very beautiful,” she said without thinking.

He returned her gesture. “Not when compared to you,” he whispered, as he ran his fingers down the exposed edge of her jaw. She jumped at the contact, panicked, and immediately ran down the path deeper into the garden.

He followed closely behind, alarmed. “I am sorry, Chantal, I should not have done that,” he pleaded after her, until she finally stopped.

“No, no, I did the same. I can only claim losing my wits for a moment as an excuse. You were perfectly right in believing I was giving you permission. Only,” she sighed, “I am not alone tonight.”

“Why are you with him?”

“We come to it at last,” she muttered.

“Yes, please, I want to know.”

“Always, a man wishes to know why a woman has fallen. The intrigue of why she has chosen, it seduces, no? He thinks up stories in his head, imagines many kinds of tales to bring her to such a state. He maybe thinks he would have saved her too, if he could have been there. My tale is just such a one. My story is as wild as any in your head. But you were not there, and he was.

“I am here because he provided me with what no other could: revenge, *mon Cher*, revenge against the man I hated most in the world. The man who ruined my family, and enjoyed it. A man who taught me to be cruel and turned my heart to black when he tortured me with his actions. A man whom I would have been happy to watch die.”

Her eyes were on fire. They sparked and flamed and tore through to any soul near her. Her chest was rising and falling so quickly he could see it straining against the confines of her daring dress, as her venomous speech against her enemy continued unabated. It was as if her confession and hatred opened a new door to her spirit and, though in evil conceived, the energy fully enveloped her like a sensual devilish halo.

He stood mesmerized at the sight of her. She watched his face, trying to read him, when she finally plainly saw something she had never recognized in him before; desire, white hot, burning desire, *for her*.

For the rest of her life she would never understand what instinct took over at that moment. She did not know that, like every woman throughout time, the knowledge of the power she suddenly held over the man she loved, the man

she herself desired, spurred her needs into involuntary action and her lips spilled without effort, "Vas-tu me détester maintenant?*" Does this make your blood burn in your veins and make you wish to strike me?"

She paused, letting him consider.

"Or do you burn to do something else? To feel my lips against yours? To touch my skin? Does it make you want me less?" Still they stared at one another, their chests rising in unison, quickly, painfully, almost hyperventilating. Breaking their locked eyes, she turned her head away and, daring him to take the final step, in the most delicate of whispers she added, "Do you burn even half of how I burn for you at this moment? Will you..."

But her next words were never heard. He grabbed her hand and in one fluid motion spun her around and instantly into his arms and under his mouth. His hand was like a vice on her back, smashing her hard against the length of his body, his other hand at her jaw forcing her head to meet his assault, his fingers on her neck and into her hair touching the smooth finish of her mask.

He kissed her as though he wanted to exorcise the demon that filled her with such passion. His tongue filled her mouth, thrusting and sucking at her as though trying to capture the spirit threatening to take him down with her. Her first real kiss. Not a kiss on the hand, not a kiss on her back, but a kiss on her welcoming mouth by a man with whom she was desperately in love.

She suddenly had to see his face; imprint this glorious memory firmly in her head. She grabbed his face in her hands and wrenched him away. They looked intensely into one another's eyes, their breath still ragged, until, satisfied she finally begged, "Please! Encore une fois!" And he took her mouth in his.

They heard voices heralding someone coming from the house, causing Darcy to withdraw from her. He grabbed her hand and dragged her to the back of the garden, where the trees grew thick and tall and dark. There he found an alcove, sheltered on three sides, covered in thick vines and pushed her into the wall, claiming her mouth once more. She whimpered at the feeling of his lips upon hers, the velvety softness of his tongue when he sucked her lower lip into his mouth and ran it over her.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked, concerned at her sounds.

"If this is pain, I will gladly endure it forever." she sighed. He chuckled but then heard the voices gaining closer on them. Soon, they were obviously just a few feet away. He looked around, desperate for a hiding place, and seeing none, took a dreadful risk and plunged down.

"Mademoiselle Moreau, can we be of any assistance?" asked Mr. Blakely and his wife as they turned the corner an instant later. "You surely are not lost out here in our garden, are you?"

"No, Madame, Monsieur. I am finding the need for some solitude and rest before returning to your guests. I will not be long, but I thank you for your concern." She

spoke with certainty and the Blakelys returned, satisfied with her safety and comfort.

She tried to remain calm, waiting for Darcy to come out of his hiding place. But he did not come. Instead, she felt the warmth of his hand upon her right knee, tracing circles first over the cap, and then maddeningly behind. His other hand was just as busy on her left. How she was to remain standing with him doing such things beneath her skirts, she did not know. He, however, was just beginning. She closed her eyes, using her imagination to visualise what his actions would look like.

He drew his circles ever widening up her leg until the lucky fingers met with the edge of her delicate stockings and garters. She heard his sigh, and felt it against the silky softness of her inner thigh as he finally met her bare skin. He continued his ministrations of circles, then changed them to dips and waves as he moved farther up her thigh until he reached a place of newer discovery.

She held her breath as she felt his hands move behind her and, firmly grasping her in each of his hands, squeezed. He repeated this in various forms, sometimes lightly, then softly caressing, then very firmly while he groaned his appreciation against her now enflamed skin. His sensuous actions were causing devastating results to Elizabeth's now foggy mind. When she thought she could not endure another moment, his hands drew away, and she sighed with deep relief and no small regret. Little did she know her fog was about to return with a vengeance.

His hands now moved to the front of her and, instead of moving down her legs, she felt them move towards the apex. Slowly, tantalizingly, his fingers slid towards her. She could feel his breath upon her and distinguished how excited he was by how much faster he was breathing than she. But soon she caught up to him, as his fingertips finally found a point that, unbeknownst to her, held her ultimate pleasure. She shuddered.

"Your scent is so sweet, Chantal," he whispered, his warm moist breath continuing to sweep her. "I wish, I want to..."

"Yes," she hoarsely choked out. No sooner had the word begun to leave her lips, when she felt his mouth upon her. She groaned and tensed from the decadent shock that coursed through her body. She tried to concentrate on what he was doing to her, trying to fathom what she was experiencing. Her mind was flooded with so many messages: all astounding pleasures that assaulted her senses at once. She could do little but lean her head back into the thick vines and moan her pleasure quietly.

Soon her body was yielding to the cadence he was setting; she thought she had never known such pleasure. She did not know the panting she was making, nor realise the way her undulating hips were aiding him. When at last he was moving in tandem with her, she relaxed her mind, forgetting her fear and modesty and gave herself up to him completely. The pleasure was building up so swiftly inside

her she was caught unaware as her body surrendered to her first searing climax and he groaned fiercely against her core.

She cried out, as the intense rush came over her. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes from the strength of the emotions she felt. She could hear his growls against her as he stayed his hand and his mouth while her body convulsed around him. When she had finally calmed enough to speak through her trembling, she pleaded, "Will, please! Come into my arms!"

He retreated slowly, kissing her as he left her, and finally emerged from under her skirts, hot, and moist and full of the scent and taste of her. She threw her arms around his neck and clung to his frame, still shaking from the aftermath of her extraordinary experience.

"I want to die, I want to die," she cried.

He held her tightly. "No you don't, you want to live to feel this again."

"I never knew! I never knew such pleasure existed. And now I will never know it again."

"No, do not say that. Let me give you more, there is more for us."

She looked up to his earnest face, so torturously beautiful, and knew in that instant there *was* something they could share, something she could give to him. The one thing no shame could take away and the only thing a woman truly owned. She only had this to give to one man, and she knew that now she had the chance to bestow it upon him, she would. She leaned forward and just before she connected with the lips that carried her essence upon them, she whispered happily, "Yes, Will. Take me." And she kissed him fiercely.

His hands left her back and moved around to her front to hungrily possess her. She gasped at his roughness, his strength, his all consuming need to take her. She knew they had no more time for shy explorations. If she was going to have one time with Darcy it would have to be here, now, passionate, intimate, urgent, but without comfort, and with no more tenderness or delicacy, despite her innocence. And she didn't care. Now was her chance to give Fitzwilliam her virginity, and she was not about to stop.

She had to think like a courtesan, not like an innocent, think of what a worldly woman would do in this situation. However, having little experience to draw on, this did not serve her well, so she did the only thing which made sense; she stopped thinking, and started feeling.

She revelled in the sensation of his hand as it dipped into the front edge of her neckline. Surprised with wonder as he drew her out of her dress, feeling the cold night air on her as he relished in the delight of her exposed in front of him, before moaning and covering her with his mouth. She no longer had to think of what to do; it was coming quite naturally.

Her corseting pinched at her exposed flesh and at the slightest movement or touch her body ached, however, it

was also extremely arousing. He turned his attention to the newly exposed areas and, smiling at her boldness, he attacked his new prey. She felt his tongue on the outsides of her, sucking the delicate skin hard into his mouth and across his teeth over and over; her skin painfully tingled from his assault but it fed her desire even more.

She watched in growing awe at the sight of his beautiful head upon her chest and, no longer wishing to be passive, she drove her hands and buried her face into his curls, drawing in his heady scent. His hair was soft and warm, her fingers exploring their lengthy mass, her face stroking his crown. She brought his head up for another long demanding kiss, this time she took the lead and softly touched her tongue to his lips. His ardor significantly stronger than hers already, he responded by his own tongue swiftly diving into the depths of her mouth with a growl as his hands kneaded her soft skin.

She loved the feel of him. She thought the way it aroused her to be quite overwhelming until he stopped his grapple, and pulled away from her mouth. Then staring deeply into her eyes, he took the most delicate parts of her between his fingers and abused them with a fervour. Her eyes started to roll up into her head, her lids becoming heavy; she wanted to close them. A small frown creased over her left eye and her lips parted as she started to pant heavily; she was heaven bound once again.

"No," he commanded. "Look at me. This time I wish to see your pleasure." Her eyes flew open and he kissed her again, both kept their eyes open, not willing to let the connection break. The stimulation of his fingers was like a life-line of passion directly into her, and every spike of her nerves sent an identical one to that place he had newly helped her discover. She leaned into him and, daring to finally taste his flesh, swept her tongue slowly along his jaw, often stopping to swallow the taste of him and then continuing. She covered one side of his fine line and then moved to his neck, suckling his salty flesh, satiating her hunger on the moisture she discovered he was covered in, and relishing in the unique flavour that was him.

She heard some laughter from inside the building reminding her of how precarious their situation was. He then brought her deeper into the thickness of the branches and wall hiding them from all. She knew they did not have long, that she must be bold, so making up her resolve, she lowered her hands between them and pressed against him. She could not help but gasp at the feel of him straining against his breeches. She had no idea what to expect, but surely not so much of man. He groaned into her ear,

"Oh, yes. Touch me."

Darcy smiled against her face, they both pulled their heads back and looked deeply into one another's eyes. Slowly she nodded, slowly he nodded, and in the next moment hands flew.

She was quickly learning where a man's buttons were located as he was lifting up her not insignificant skirts. The

buttons undone, Elizabeth Bennet received one of many shocks that night when her virginal hands beheld their first man. She thought she might never have seen anything quite so magnificent in her life. Unfortunately, innocent as well, she did not realize she had said her last thought out loud. Luckily, her lover was only more aroused by such a declaration and not at all offended.

“Allow me to wield it where we may both find pleasure,” he whispered.

He stayed her busy hands with his own and leaned her against the wall. Then, bringing himself under her, he placed one hand around her lower hips and lifted her up easily into his arms.

“Yesss,” she hissed into his ear, as her arms snaked around his neck. “Make love to me now and make me yours.” She sighed in pleasure as he touched her gently; preparing her for him. Then with one swift movement, he changed their lives forever.

She knew to expect pain. She held her mouth closed tightly to stifle any cry she was afraid she might make, and she was right to have done so. A tear crept out of her eye as she tried very hard not to scream out. Fortunately, Darcy’s head was next to her ear so he could not see her face, concentrating on what he was doing instead.

“You are so petite, I fear I am causing you pain.”

He had paused briefly, affording her a few moments to recover and relax. She nodded her approval for him to continue. Slowly her body began to conform to him as he began a cautious, yet exquisite dance within her.

Thankfully, the pain seemed to subside very quickly and was being replaced with other sensations. Darcy, finding his balance, had moved his free hand between them and applied his skills to her, causing Elizabeth to feel sensations even greater than his earlier loving. They moved unhurriedly at first; an undulating, swaying rhythm like that of a sapling in a summer wind. A dawning was occurring to her body, stronger and quicker than before, and more exciting now that she knew what was happening and the ecstasy that would soon overtake her. She could feel the tiniest nuance of every movement he made; her body blossoming and striving to be one with him and his actions. If she had thought their earlier activities had been intimate, it was nothing compared to being face to face, buried inside one another and sharing this most personal of moments with him. In the swiftest of flashes she realised how this act would bind her to him for the rest of her life.

Darcy likewise was experiencing a fulfillment he did not think was possible from this woman who was so wonderfully responsive. He heard her laboured breaths and the tiny exhalations, whimpers and cries above his own laboured groans of pleasure as he moved powerfully within her.

Her hands and arms held him to her like a vice, her entire body taut like a bow, signalling how speedily she was moving again to the brink as he increased his movements to a near frantic pace.

Finally, when he did not think he could hold himself back one moment more, he saw her face contort in glorious agony of pleasure and she cried out to him, “Oh, Fitzwilliam, my love! Oh, God, yes!” And he spilled himself into her with a violence which shook his whole body as their completion continued together while he cried out to his own deity.

Elizabeth lay against his shoulder, trembling from the aftermath of their momentous pleasure and the torture of her heart’s sorrow.

“Forgive me, Fitzwilliam. I love you,” she meekly whispered, still gasping for her air.

Darcy was finally beginning to come out of his own haze, his brain starting to register just what had happened and what this lovely seductress in his arms, was saying to him. *Forgive her?*

His memory was reminding him of what she had been saying just a few minutes before. *I love you...Fitzwilliam...forgive me...*and most disturbing of all, Madam’s French accent was no longer there. Indeed, a very English accent was in fact replaying in his head, a dreaded whisper was creeping over his conscience: he knew that voice. Startled, his head flew up. He looked squarely at her, attempting to discern exactly who he was looking at. Her white hair piled upon her head, her lovely silk mask covering her face, and her eyes, her fine eyes with their long thick lashes, now shrouded in deep concern as they gazed back at him. Like a carriage speeding to run him over, his next actions and thoughts occurred as in a blur, he could not stop what he was thinking or doing, however horrifying to him it might be.

“No, no it cannot be...”

His hands moved of their own accord, as he violently tore the offending shell off her face.

But there she was, tears in her eyes, as he dropped them together to his knees, there was his love, his Elizabeth in his arms, indeed he was still inside her body.

“Oh, my God!” he cried, whilst thinking, *“My lover! But no, not mine, she is Caldhart’s mistress. What was she doing?”*

“Why? Why would you do this?” his voice choked with emotion. Holding himself in check was taking every ounce of his strength.

“I love you,” she hushed. “Please forgive me, please forgive me, I love you, Fitzwilliam, truly I do.” He brought his arms around her and held her shaking to his chest. Her tears fell unabated.

“Elizabeth, what have you done?” he sighed. They sat there holding each other for several moments. Her tears finally stopped, as she realized they could not stay as they were; each moment brought the possibility of discovery closer. Elizabeth carefully replaced her sleeves, which had fallen off her shoulders, and shyly avoided his gaze as she began to replace her dress. He caught her chin, and gently, lovingly, kissed her lips.

“You are so beautiful, so magnificent,” he whispered.

Together they righted her dress to its original condition. Elizabeth almost began to cry again at his tenderness with her body. Finally, it was time. They both dreaded the moment, excruciatingly. When he left her, it would leave them both so empty, neither was willing to start.

He lifted her skirts once again, and slowly completed the task. Elizabeth could not help the tears that fell again, or her wincing as the pain of her newly destroyed maidenhead, caught up with her. Darcy frowned to see her face in such obvious agony, and then, he stared at the place where they had been joined. There it was directly in front of him; the evidence was irrefutable. Once again his mind replayed the recent past; her sweet scent and taste as he knelt before her, yet when he entered her, he thought she was merely having trouble adjusting to him, had she not stifled a cry?

Elizabeth quickly covered herself over, embarrassed by what she had seen. She had no idea that he would have been able to discover her secret. He looked up to her, the tears now running down her cheeks again.

"How can this be? How could you have been a maiden? Is it true, am I really the first...?"

"It is what I wanted, Fitzwilliam. It was the only thing of worth I could give to you. I gave you my virtue; it always belonged to you, along with my heart, and it is the last decent thing I may ever do. Tonight was like a miracle for me, to be able to give you this. I cannot regret this, but I do regret if I have hurt you. Please forgive me, Will."

Darcy was trying to make sense of it all. Lord Caldhart was known for his mistresses, how could he not have consummated his relationship with Elizabeth? It did not seem possible.

However, he would not lose her now. If Caldhart was too weak to make Elizabeth his, he no longer cared if he stole the man's mistress right from under his very nose.

"Elizabeth, you must come away with me! This moment! You are by rights now mine. Please say you will come! You do not have to continue under his protection. I love you, Elizabeth. I always have."

Elizabeth's head was spinning, here was Darcy, her one great love, telling her he loved her, he always loved her! Her eyes betrayed her elation to him as she looked up to him while he made his plea.

He was so overjoyed he hugged her fiercely against him as he cried, "Thank you Elizabeth, thank you so much! Thank God you have accepted me at last! I swear I will never let you regret this moment for the rest of your life. Perhaps someday we may be brave enough to tell our children the story of their parent's extraordinary marriage!"

And suddenly Elizabeth's spinning ended with a dull thud. The future. Their future. Fitzwilliam, their children, Georgiana Darcy. With Elizabeth connected to them, there was no future, there was only estrangement, shunning, vicious gossip, whisperings and shame. Anyone connected to her would share in the shame her family had already experienced; Lydia was barely recovered and decent. As a lowly

family the Bennets were bound to marry clerks and lawyers, no one would wonder or care much at the hint of scandal now conveniently covered up, but as the illustrious wife of Fitzwilliam Darcy, they would snoop.

Lord Caldhart alone could ruin her reputation with the sweep of his hand. She was his mistress, she had signed a contract and even now, some of her things were in his townhouse. She may not have consummated their relationship, and she may be incognito, but what did it matter?

And what of Wickham, what if he chose to come after her? If she were married to Darcy, he would not hesitate to blackmail her or her husband. He could have her thrown in prison for what she did to him. No, she could not have him; she could not hurt him, or his family in such a way. There was no future possible with him.

Now she had to do what she had only just claimed she did not mean to. She had to break his heart, refuse him, and truly make him hate her. The only way to do that was to go where she had already promised herself. She had to become Lord Calhart's mistress in truth tonight, and stay with him as long as he wanted. She had made her demands and he had acquiesced to them all. She had her revenge, she had her family restored, her sister's death avenged, and now she had to pay the piper. Her price had never included a future for herself, it was always meant to benefit the rest. Now that the possibility of her own happiness was sitting before her, unattainable, it was a bitter moment.

She swallowed hard and in as calm a voice as she could muster she said, "Fitzwilliam, you have honoured me more than you can ever know, but I cannot marry you." His embrace froze, he pushed her roughly back and stared hard into her face, his own flushing red as his breath was held. She continued, "I am bound to him and cannot leave him; I have made a promise which I intend to keep."

Darcy could not believe his ears. His temper raged so quickly his body began to shake. "Keep your promise to him?" he snarled as his hands squeezed her rib cage. "You did not keep yourself for him tonight!" He was so angry, he needed to lash out and Elizabeth was about to bear his full abuse. "Even in dealings of ill repute, it seems you have no honour," he spat at her.

"Our arrangement begins on the fifteenth of May, which is tonight, at midnight. He, he wanted to show me off before returning to his home tonight. I had made no promise as to my...condition when I finally came to him."

"A thin excuse for a clear betrayal. You have used me ill, Madam."

Elizabeth was starting to get angry herself. "You thought I was his mistress, and yet you did not hesitate to take advantage of me! You used me for satisfaction of your lust, thinking I belonged to another man!"

"Advantage? *You* seduced me and then say *I* took advantage of *you*? Oh no, I assure you, your arts are well tuned, Madam, your allurements on fine display." His hands indicated her breasts. "No, I did not seduce you. And now

Chapter 18

LONDON, MAY 15, 1813

you dare refuse me? Now you deny us, and start your new profession as whore? How dare you speak to me of love! What profit did you hope to achieve with this? Does Lord Caldhart not give you enough allowance? Did you hope to gain another benefactor on the side and improve your situation even more handsomely?"

His venom cut her to her very core, but she knew she also deserved every insult.

"Yes, my love, use your emotions! Deny none of the strength of that hatred and use it to cast me off; it is the only way," she thought. She wished he would strike her, put her in her place. She was a whore, and not good enough to wipe his boots. She had to make him leave, give her up, and never regret her, so she struck back with the one thing she knew he would never forgive her.

"He is the only man who would have me after finding me with Wickham," she spat.

Slowly he rose to his feet. He straightened his clothing silently, never taking his eyes off her. The bile rose in the back of her throat, and she fervently prayed he would leave, as she could not keep from sobbing much longer.

Finally he looked away shaking his head, back and forth, finally broken, his voice barely above a whisper and she thought she saw a tear in his eye as she watched his profile.

"I know not how you came to be with him, I no longer care. But I warn you; never seek me out or speak to me again."

He walked away, never stopping, never looking back. When the door into the ballroom closed again, Lizzy was free to let her emotions run wild, and her racking sobs did not stop for what seemed an eternity. She finally re-emerged, her dress straightened, her mask back in place, her French persona etched into her brain. She immediately sought out Caldhart and asked if they could retire for the evening. He was smugly happy at the invitation of his impetuous new mistress and happily led her to their carriage.

**Do you hate me now?*

The carriage ride was frustratingly short in Elizabeth's opinion. She had kept her head turned away from him for its duration, thankful for the mask that hid her red eyes and swollen nose. Her mind was in a constant state of turmoil, her complexion a ruination from excessive emotions, and now she had to face a night in the bed of a lover. For the first time in over six months, she suddenly longed to be at Longbourn. She was startled out of her thoughts by his taking of her hand.

"My dear Chantal, you are trembling," he said, concerned.

She could only nod.

"You are nervous about me, about us?"

"Yes, of course," she whispered, still not daring to meet his eye, lest he see her clearly.

"My darling girl, I am a patient man. Take all the time you need tonight. Do not feel anxious. I promise this night will end happily for us both. When we arrive, I suggest you retire directly to your rooms and bathe. At the very least, you will want to rid your hair of that dreadful powder."

To this she could not help but give a slight laugh, grateful for the chance to lighten her mood in any way. "Thank you, my Lord. I should like that very much."

"You need only ask, and your wishes will be attended to, my dear. Do not forget your role in my household or with myself. We are a couple, not master and servant. I want you to act as mistress of my home; it is now your right." She bowed her head, acknowledging his generosity.



GEMMA HELPED HER OUT of her dress first, in an effort to keep the powder off of it. She began to undo the laces down the back of the heavy silk gown until it was finally removed. Elizabeth groaned and stretched her arms. She was desperate to feel some freedom again, but could not until her corset was removed. Next the maid removed the pins that held her hair, and brushed out as much of the powder as she could onto a linen sheet spread around the floor of her mistress' pretty dressing room.

As the maid carefully began to untie her, the corset creaked, straining to be unleashed.

"It wants to be removed as much as I wish it," replied Elizabeth.

Finally, the last lace pulled, it dropped down and into her maid's waiting hands, who had looked up and gasped at her mistress' back. There on her side, was a deep purple bruising of a large handprint, clearly marking her. Her mistress turned to see what her maid had gasped at and saw it too.

"That will be all Gemma," she said quickly. "You may draw me a bath, and then leave. In half of an hour you may then return to empty it. I will bathe, and then later finish dressing myself, alone. Thank you."

The maid curtseyed and left hurriedly. Elizabeth walked to her mirror; examining herself.

"What am I to do now?" she whispered.



SHE FOUND A BOX waiting for her when she returned from her bath. Inside, it revealed an exquisite negligee of finest pale pink silk, nearly the colour of her skin, and a matching dressing gown. She donned the pair, relieved to see it was not as immodest as she had dreaded. The sensuous feel of the softest material she had ever known was lost to her, as her anxiety increased with every moment that passed. Finally, resolved to allow this to agitate her no more, she reached for the handle to the adjoining room.

Caldhart sat on the sofa in front of the fire in his room. He wore a dressing gown of brocade silk in sapphire blue which suited him admirably. Had she any notion of trying to feel anything for the man, such agreeable sights would have helped tremendously.

"You are a vision," he said simply.

She rounded the sofa and sat hesitantly on the far end.

"There is more champagne, still sparkling. Would you care for another glass?"

"Yes, thank you. I believe I would."

"I have also had some strawberries brought up. They compliment this libation very well, and I think you would appreciate the delicate nuance the combination affords." He handed her a tiny red fruit, encouraging her to partake. She did so, and as soon as she had swallowed, she realised she was quite famished. So much had taken place that night, so many emotions spent, she barely had strength left and needed to replenish herself. He seemed to understand her needs as he then uncovered a large platter upon the low lying table in front of her; cold meats, cheeses, fresh bread, blueberries, strawberries and the ever seductive chocolates greeted her. She sighed in grateful relief.

"I thought you might need something of this sort."

"You are very attentive, my Lord. Thank you. It is exactly what I would have wished." She spent the next minutes satiating her hunger with a vengeance. He was right, the strawberries, and then the chocolates proved to be a superb combination with the champagne. He sat observing her devouring

the plate, seeming to take delight in each bite she took. She was too hungry to be embarrassed by his stares. She finally gave a great sigh and closed her eyes; her body finally satisfied and ready to obey its mistress' commands without complaint. She delicately wiped the corners of her pert little mouth when his voice cut through her contented air.

"George Wickham is dead," he said.



HER NAPKIN HOVERED IN mid-rise.

"No, that is impossible; he could not have died from my blow."

"You are correct my dear, that did not kill him."

She studied him. He sat still as stone; no hint of emotion on his face, while her own heart hammered in her chest. "But you know how he died. You are not in the least surprised."

He did not answer.

Her mind went immediately back to the tavern, how he had acted, as well as his behaviour in the coach afterwards. "What are you keeping from me? When did he die? How?"

"He died this morning, or yesterday morning as it is now Saturday, from injuries he suffered in a fight." He was once again leaving whatever information he wanted out.

Images of that night flew like sparks from a bonfire through her head as she spoke her thoughts. "The men in that tavern, I thought I recognised two of them. Were they merchants from Meryton? Who were the others that were there?"

"I suspect many of them were merchants, my dear. Some others were tradesmen, from many different towns; all of them had one thing in common."

"Wickham."

"Yes, Elizabeth, they all were very well acquainted with Wickham."

She shivered thinking of how full the tavern had been. "You made him the pawn; you knew what that mob would do to him."

He did not answer.

"You lied to me." She swallowed hard, recognising the bitter truth of what he had done. "You *knew* he would never leave there alive. It seems I have been too naïve in some ways, and not enough in others. You led me to believe that you agreed I had chosen a more noble path; that I had walked away from damning my eternal soul by not taking his life! His death is on your head—it was because of you!"

"No, Elizabeth, it was because of *you*!" His voice rose. "You made the request! Have you forgotten so soon? Your obsession with revenge against him facilitated my enabling you to indulge it. We two are bound by the fate he suffered. It was your price to be paid, and it was my efforts that led you to gratify it."

“How can you be angry with me over this? I would not have expected this reaction. Did you feel you carried no guilt as to what might happen to him? You have never inquired once about him since we left. As far as you know, he could still be sitting tied to that chair, bleeding his life away. We are both guilty and you know it. We are bound together by this, and nothing you can say will change it.”

“You twist the truth to suit your needs, sir,” she cried. “If I had asked for ten thousand pounds and then reduced it to five thousand, you would not have paid the ten. *You* had the ability to save him. *You* alone could have gotten him out of the tavern without further injury. *You* kept the truth of his destiny from me, and therefore *you* sealed his fate!”

He grabbed her roughly but she kept on, “And Lydia! I wonder now, when did you find out Lydia was dead? Did you really just discover it that night? Did you know about it before? Days before, weeks before? Tell me!”

He released her and answered calmly as if she had enquired after his health. “I found out in April a few days before I had met with you and given you Lydia’s handkerchief.”

Elizabeth gasped, shaking her head. “Did you ever see her? Did she ever know her rescue was imminent?”

“Higgins found her grave in Lophook. She had died last fall of a miscarriage on her way to Portsmouth, thinking she was meeting up with Wickham to sail to America.”

She groaned aloud, distressed and angered beyond all her reason. “Lies, all lies and deceptions. You never showed your cards. I should have known. I should have been more clever. I was always frank with you. I played this game of yours fairly. But your premeditated contempt for my morals was too much for you. You wanted me to kill him! You purposefully goaded me with my sister’s death in the hopes I would exact my revenge! You wanted me to be as evil as you are. Damn you! Damn you to the devil!! You do not deserve anything you have, least of all me!”

“Are you backing out on our agreement?” He was very angry now.

“Our agreement is void sir; you have violated every written and unwritten aspect of it. You have failed to acquire that which I desired; you have not fulfilled your end of the bargain. You have no honour even among whores, thieves and murderers.”

“Your sister’s reputation is restored; she is believed to be a married woman.”

“My sister is *dead!*” she screamed. “You merely bribed a ship captain to lie and say she was married to a rake.” She grabbed her jewellery box off her dressing table. “How much does it take for something as simple as a wedding license to be obtained: twenty pounds, thirty?”

“Fifty pounds: a year’s income of your precious dowry.” He spat.

She threw the money at him.

“And before you accuse, that is *my* money, I earned it making your filthy cigars! Anything more? Higgins did

all your dirty work for you, didn’t he? His salary cannot amount to more than 20 pounds a year, here is six months salary for him, then,” she hissed while throwing another wad of bills at him.

“Did you pay for the mob to be at the tavern? Somehow I cannot imagine you giving them all transport into London.”

“No. I merely sent letters advising them where Wickham would be and when. They came of their own accord.”

“Fine” she said, throwing more bills at him, “For the post.” She seethed. “You are the most despicable person I have ever had the misfortune to meet. Wickham seems almost honourable compared to you. I did not think my contempt for another human being could be greater than for him, but you, sir, are the lowest. I rid myself of you. I will not stay, I choose my freedom. I leave *now*.”

“You are *mine* and only I can say when you may leave.”

“How wrong you are; I have repaid my fees, and given you none of my person. I am not yours. I choose who I will share myself with, and you, Caldhart, will never be one of them.”

“Oh, very good! The virgin whore refuses her first conquest! How quaint. Do you think you will get to pick and choose who will lie between your thighs after I tell them who you really are? You will be lucky to even know the name of the man who next takes you, after I have broken you.”

“I hardly think anyone will listen to the rantings of a criminal from Newgate Prison, do you? Enabling a murder must carry a rather stiff sentence, would it not?”

He shuddered.

“As for breaking me, *my Lord*,” she fairly hissed, “You are rather tardy in your attentions, I have already granted that privilege to one a thousand times more worthy than you.” And with that, she opened her peignoir and negligee, giving his Lordship an incomparable view of her heavenly form, before she tied it back up. For a brief moment he was awestruck; he had never seen such a siren of seduction before. But quickly it turned to unmitigated rage, for all over her were the signs of lovemaking; the whisker burns around her upper thighs, the purple bruising of a man’s hand prints about her rib cage, and over her breasts, the unmistakable signs of a mouth that had sucked deep and hard against her pale ivory skin.

“You SLUT!!” he screamed as he lunged for her.



THE SERVANTS IN LORD Caldhart’s home had often been called upon to attend to matters of unusual requests, and at unusual hours. However, nothing could have prepared them, nor accustomed them, to the sight and sounds of his Lordship and Miss Moreau fairly flying through the house,

in such a state of undress, and screaming such words of venom at one another. They had no idea what to do under these circumstances.

They felt their first loyalty was, of course, to their master. But as he brandished a whip and tried unsuccessfully to use it upon their new mistress, they could do little else but stare in horror, and try to stay out of the way, lest they themselves be struck. Their only respite would come when the lady, who was significantly faster than the gentleman, would duck into an unoccupied room and quiet would seem to once again reign over the household. Unfortunately, it did not last long, as either the shouts of one, or the screams of the other, would be followed by a quick departure from the sanctuary.

The noise reached a fevered pitch when the unlucky lady ventured into the game room, with his Lordship close upon her heels. His misplaced strikes rendered many pieces of his precious collection to ruin as he chased her around the room. They ended in front of the windows which, unbeknownst to her, happen to face full west and daily allowed the brilliant blazing afternoon light to illuminate the room and the fine crystal chess pieces that now stood between her and her attacker. She hesitated and he lunged once again, sending the prized set shattering to the floor. He took a brief moment to register the destruction of his favourite possession, unheeding of the significance of the act, before racing after her retreating figure as it sped out the door.

“Who is he?” he yelled at her.

“A far better man than you!” she retorted as she started the climb up the grand staircase.

“You will not find better!”

“I would find a man I love.”

“You love no one, save yourself, you jezebel. Now tell me his name, so I may skewer him later.”

“I will go to my grave, before I tell you that.”

“You will suffer the same fate as any harlot, you stupid chit!”

“At least I will have known a man who did not deceive to get me into his bed!”

“You are mine, and no other’s.”

“I am his, and I will never be yours! Not now, not ever!” They were both upon the staircase now. He started the ascent at the bottom while she spat her contempt as she backed up quickly, keeping him always in her sights.

“You have lost, Caldhart! You have no more grievances with me. In all your finite dealings, your manipulations of everything to suit yourself, all your compulsive attentions to details, **you** failed to stipulate under what condition I would come to you. Your inflated ego could not comprehend that I would be anything but a maid for you to baptise on the font of your hedonistic, whore-ridden bed! But I get the last hand. I move the last piece. The game is over. Checkmate, Robert. *I win!*

She shouted her last words while her chest heaved from the run. As she stood towering above him, daring his retort,

his eyes suddenly bulged in his head. They had run from one end of the house to the other, no small feat for her, but impossible for a man just turned two and sixty. He stood on the landing between the two sets of grand staircases he had chased her up, and drew a strained breath. The servants above and below them in the great hall stared in disbelief as he grasped his arm, his face twisted in wretched pain, and fell to his knees, then slumped to the floor in a heap.

“Doctor,” Elizabeth whispered, then recovering somewhat, she yelled, “Someone fetch the doctor!”

They stood like frightened sheep, alarmed at her fury. She pointed to the nearest footman. “YOU! Go fetch the doctor, NOW!” she screamed, as she flew down the steps to him.



CHARLES BINGLEY SETTLED GRATEFULLY into the soft comforting leather of the chair at Whites. He was exhausted after his futile attempt to persuade Darcy to remain in London. After staying up half the night with him, he had risen early to sadly see his friend off to Pemberley that morning. Darcy was in quite a state. Despite Bingley’s entreaties, he could not get him to confess the source of his obvious distress, nor agree to any ideas of continued fellowship with him there in London. He did not think it a good idea for Darcy to go off alone, but there was nothing to be done. He had seen his friend despondent before, aloof certainly. But this time he seemed to be both dejected and keeping a surging anger just below his outwardly composed countenance. Bingley wisely decided to leave the man to himself.

He stared sleepily into the fire, wishing to wipe the unpleasant memories from his head, when a commotion was heard in the hall. It started small, but grew quickly to a large ruckus. By the time he had turned in his seat, he saw many men, shouting and moving together towards the famous betting book. Many looked cheered, yet some were obviously perturbed. A servant passed by his elbow, and he stopped him to inquire what this tumult was about.

“Haven’t you heard, sir? Lord Robert Caldhart is dead!”

End Book One



Book Two



Chapter 19

The coach slowly ambled through the streets of London gradually heading northward. The passengers adjusted themselves, trying to vie for a comfortable place among the others. Michael Dunbarton looked anxiously out the window.

Sitting across from him, a kind, elderly lady saw his agitation and tried to comfort him. "It can be a bit overwhelming, Lad, can't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"And where will you be going to?"

"Lambton. Do you know it?"

"No, I have never been that far north. And did I hear yer ta say you were going to family?"

"Yes, my cousins, whom I have never met."

"Still, that should be a comfort to you to be with family."

"It is. I thank you." He closed his eyes then, his lack of sleep the night before finally catching up to him, and fell into a fitful rest for the next several hours. At the various stops he woke and stretched his legs, then went back to sleep as soon as he was back inside. That night, he took a room at an inn, but was still up an hour before dawn and could not find sleep again. The coach continued its passage northwards for the length of the next day. At the end of the long journey, after seeing many different passengers come and go, the coach pulled into the final stop for the night: Lambton. Bidding farewell to the drivers who had been helpful and hard working, Michael then slipped off into the night, away from the bright little village.

There were no Dunbarton cousins in Derbyshire, but the story of their existence proved helpful to his peace of mind. People would be less likely to bother a boy who had relatives awaiting his arrival. Following the instructions he had been given, he walked to the smithy and finally spotted the trail that headed west. He knew he had a long trek ahead of him, and was at least a bit lucky in there being a half moon to help light the way.

Almost four hours later Michael finally arrived, nearly exhausted, in Oak Hill. There was a small inn, strangely named The Crow's Nest, where he took the cheapest room. The innkeeper had a bit of food and ale left over to sell him, for which he was grateful. It was hearty and filled his empty stomach. The name of the inn soon became apparent while he sat eating as the walls were covered in sailing paraphernalia: a tribute to the unfulfilled dream of the innkeeper. He finished his ale and went to bed.

The next morning was crisp and clear; the sounds of farm animals in the distance could be heard, making him smile. Fresh clean air and the relative quiet of the country was not something he was used to after living in London so long, but now he rejoiced that he had the leisure time to

relish in the calming effect it had upon him. He bid the lady of the inn a happy good morning on his way out the door, intent on exploration and search for employment.

He walked through Oak Hill, inspecting the shops, inquiring if they had need of a worker, but was unsuccessful. Market day was set up at the town centre, and he joyfully perused the carts, purchasing ripe fruit and vegetables that could be washed and eaten raw, and would serve as his mid-day meal.

Later, while he ate his goods, he watched the people of the town. He could be anywhere in England right now, he conjectured; the towns and the business of its people did not change. Only the names and faces were different than other places he had seen.

One of the vendors, whom he had avoided earlier, was in full voice, coaxing a hesitant woman to buy his fruits and vegetables. Michael had not shopped at the man's cart for he had discerned as he walked by that the produce was not as fresh as others. The lady had her empty basket, and the man was quickly beginning to bargain with her, appealing to her purse, instead of her taste buds. The woman hesitated still, and soon the seller was starting to lose his patience, grabbing the woman's arm and insisting she buy something, now that she had wasted so much of his time. Michael did not hesitate.

"Leave this good woman alone!" he berated as he stepped between the two. "She has every right to turn down your goods, and right she is to have done so. You picked those carrots more than a week ago, and those squash are even older, your apples were plucked too early and your celery is already dry on the inside. If you want to do a brisk business, start with the quality of your goods and tend your fields and orchard better."

A small crowd had gathered around him, always happy to witness a good fight.

"You know nothin' about my fruits and vegetables, so blow off, and mind yer own business."

"He's right, Taylor," answered one of the bystanders. "I seen you out last week digging carrots, and you ain't been in yer field since."

"Well, how can I harvest more, when I ain't sold this lot, eh?"

Michael sighed and rolled his eyes. "Sell your goods today for half price. They are only good for a bad stew now, so think of who will be willing to buy them."

The man stared back at the youth, astonished at his advice.

Michael continued, "Accept the loss and tomorrow, pick a small amount of what your fields have and only the ripest and best. You can ask more money for better goods, and you will not have to break your back carting them into town. More money, less goods to have to sell, and you will not be forced to feed any of your cash crops to your pigs. Do you understand?" He looked around, suddenly cognisant of the faces staring back, astounded.

Finally Taylor, the fruit and vegetable farmer, swallowed and answered, "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!" He looked on the young man with wonder. "But, if you please, sir, how did you know about my goods?"

The young man smiled and merely tapped his nose as he turned to the elderly lady. "Can I be of any assistance, Madam?"

She smiled brightly at him, and gestured into the market. "If you would indulge me, lad. Would you be willing to help me with my shopping?" He laughed and agreed.

They slowly walked back and forth along the rows of carts. She inquired after his name and situation, then informed him of hers. Michael picked up items as they strolled, feeling them and breathing in their fresh aromas. She gave him her requirements, and he delighted in filling her basket. When they were done, she inquired what had brought him to Oak Hill. He explained that he had only just arrived, and was staying at the inn while searching for work. When she asked if he should like to come back with her to Fairhaven Manor where she worked as cook, and partake of the goods he had helped her procure, he was happy to agree.



MRS. KEANE HAD BEEN employed by Mr. and Mrs. Thurgood of Fairhaven Manor her entire life. She had slowly worked her way up the rungs of the ladder of seniority that existed in kitchens, from lowly scullery maid, scrubbing pots all day, to head cook. In its day, the house had been a bustle of activity. Mr. and Mrs. Thurgood often entertained, and the kitchen staff was large and industrious. Now, with Mr. Thurgood gone for so many years, and Mrs. Thurgood's advancing age, the kitchen staff, as well as the entire household was significantly diminished. She enjoyed her work, especially the ties with her fellow servant, Mrs. Edwards, the housekeeper, her closest friend in the world and her sister.

As Mrs. Keane studied this handsome youth across from her, she was struck with desire to see if there might be a place for him at Fairhaven Manor. After their conversation in the market and travelling to the great house, she regretted his skills with consumables did not extend to any knowledge in the kitchen arts. The staff was setting up for afternoon tea, and she bid Michael join them all. Her sister was introduced, and she delighted in watching the reactions the young man was having upon the housekeeper. Several hours, inquiries and teapots later, Michael was finally allowed to return to the village. Mrs. Keane knew her sister would be bubbling to have a private conference after he left. She did not disappoint.

"Edwina, wherever did Mr. Dunbarton come from?"

"I have not been able to winkle it out of him, Sister, but is he not a find?"

"I believe so! He is very fine, despite his clothing. I wonder what his story is."

"He claims only to be looking for honest work, though I dare say he has not seen too hard of times. Did you notice his hands? He has never had to do rough work. I'm sure he is a gentleman, Constance. You should have heard him in the market today, defending me, and helping that nasty Mr. Taylor at the same time. The old codger was put in his place and yet had to thank Mr. Dunbarton."

"He defended you? Were you threatened?"

"Good heavens, no, Sister! I merely meant he very gallantly came to my aid."

"So curious!"

"Indeed." They both sighed.

"How I wish we could keep him," Mrs. Keane stated simply.

"But what could we do with him?" The housekeeper thought for a moment. "We do not have a position for him to fill. He is too clever to be a footman, not to mention too slight. And Mrs. Thurgood's steward is more than capable."

"I know! It vexes me to think some other family or place will snatch him up." Constance kept thinking.

"Mrs. Thurgood is most in need of a companion. If Miss Richardson had not left so abruptly, we could have a replacement already here."

"Well, one can not hate Miss Richardson for falling in love, my dear."

"Maybe not, but I can still be angry she has left me in need, as well as given me extra work."

"True."

Constance was suddenly inspired and exclaimed, "What if we presented Mr. Dunbarton as a personal secretary to the mistress?"

Edwina laughed. "You mean like some Grand Duchess who needs someone to arrange her social calendar?" she asked.

"Exactly! If Mr. Dunbarton can sit through an afternoon with Mrs. Thurgood, and not mind the mutterings of ladies, he would do quite well. And if he is half as clever as we think, he could also help the steward with his business, or at the very least, help Mrs. Thurgood understand it."

"And could I still have him to go to the market with me? I do not exaggerate his skills there. Think of what he could do to improve our table!" the cook added jubilantly.

"Sister, I believe we may have found our solution."



THE NEXT MORNING, MICHAEL was surprised to receive word a messenger had arrived and asked if Mr. Dunbarton would come to Fairhaven Manor at his earliest convenience. The innkeeper and his wife were quite impressed with their

guest who had garnered an invitation to Mrs. Thurgood's home and now treated him deferentially.

He presented himself at the kitchen door of the great manor house later that morning.

"Mrs. Keane, how may I be of service to you?" he inquired, bowing to her.

"I believe I may be of service to *you* today, young man," she answered happily.



MICHAEL HAD NEVER BEEN interviewed for employment before. Now faced with the prospect, he felt a fluttering in his stomach he was not typically subject to. He chastised himself inwardly and, after taking some deep calming breaths, finally affected a serene countenance and entered the drawing room containing Mrs. Cecily Thurgood.

Her housekeeper and cook had practically waylaid her the evening before, singing the praises of a youth they had found who was looking for employment. The mistress was a good judge of character, and though the sisters had a tendency towards some silly outbursts, they could be full of good common sense and values as well. If the two had seen something above the ordinary in this young man, at the very least she would take the time to be acquainted with him to see if there was a place for him in her household. Among the three ladies there would be enough opinions to make one sound judgement.

Mrs. Cecily Thurgood was a lady who, even upon introduction, made one smile. She was very petite, with round spectacles upon her nose, which matched the roundness of both her cheeks, as well as her middle. It was not her penchant of resembling a tiny pumpkin that pleased and made one at ease with Mrs. Thurgood; it was the smile that always graced *her* features and made her dark blue eyes twinkle when she looked upon you. She was simply a woman not made for unhappiness and beaming came as naturally to her as breathing. Therefore, within minutes of meeting the mistress of the house, Michael was at perfect ease, and completely contented to be speaking with her.

Mrs. Thurgood as well, could sense the intelligence of her prospective employee, as well as the comfort he felt in her presence. After an hour's conversation, the two felt a bonding of kindred spirits between them, for her kindly deportment did not belie an underdeveloped mind. Quite the contrary, she was well read, and enjoyed stimulating conversation, which Michael was all too happy to provide.

The only fault she could find in him was the young man's unwillingness to be forthcoming with regards to his personal history. He dodged, evaded and circumvented the subject with expert skill, much to the fine lady's discontent. However, she felt whatever circumstances had led him to leave his family or situation, he was not of malicious or

dangerous tendencies, and felt no fear or anxiety in having him around.

"Well, Mr. Dunbarton," she exclaimed as she started summarizing the situation. "What do you think you could do for me here at Fairhaven Manor; how would we keep you busy?"

"I would be happy to do whatever you ask, Mrs. Thurgood. However, I think I would be most useful to you as an assistant or companion to you each day. I know it is out of the ordinary to have a gentleman wait upon a lady, but my youth would perhaps excuse the 'bending' of society's rules shall we say?"

"I see. Then you admit you are a gentleman, do you?"

He realised his error, and now was unable to correct it. "I...I was raised as a gentleman, Madam, though I have not had the benefit of a university education. I regret I am unable to expound my history any further than I already have. Please believe me when I say in earnest that attending you would in no way be out of the ordinary for me. I think we two would get on quite well in that regard. I am happy to read whatever you might like, and provide whatever conversation in which you would care to endeavour. I can also help Mrs. Keane with her marketing, as well as act on your behalf with your steward, if you should ask it of me. I should like to learn more about the running of an estate. I have had some minimal experience with it and can always benefit from more knowledge, especially if it would help you in anyway."

Mrs. Thurgood's smile grew wider as the young man's speech continued. As he spoke with such unabashed sincerity and honesty, she knew that spending her days with this interesting youth would provide her with a contentedness she had not felt for some time. Her housekeeper and cook had been surprisingly astute; here was a true find. "If that be the case, Mr. Dunbarton, I think you should return to The Crow's Nest."

"Madam?"

"You will want to pack your things as soon as may be if you are to start working for me immediately."

Michael broke into a smile which matched his new mistress' as he stood and thrust his hand rather impetuously at her, and then shook her hand vigorously. "Thank you Mrs. Thurgood! Thank you very much, indeed!" he gushed.

She laughed at his youthful exuberance. "Go on, now. Be sure to stop by the kitchen and let Mrs. Keane know you are coming to live with us, though if I know her, she and her sister are standing outside the door as we speak." Her last words rose in volume, and slight shuffling could be heard outside the room. They both looked to the door, and then back at one another and shared a knowing chuckle.



IN THE FOLLOWING WEEKS, Mr. Dunbarton became Michael, and Mrs. Thurgood was affectionately called Mrs. T. Laughter often rang out among the quiet halls, and the staff at Fairhaven manor rarely let a day go by when they did not bless the day that Michael Dunbarton met Mrs. Keane.

Michael was content beyond his expectations in his new situation. He quickly came to care a great deal for Mrs. T. and there was nothing he would not do for her, often thinking up things on his own to please and amuse her. She was equally delighted in the youth, and was often caught staring intensely at him, something he at first was disconcerted by, but later came to accept as an odd habit of hers. Together, over the summer months they became very close. His attentiveness brought a calming effect to the staff, who never worried over their mistress anymore, as she was in the very best hands.

The effect of spending so much time in anyone's presence allowed each person to understand the other to a degree not found with other acquaintances, for Mrs. Thurgood noticed an underlying melancholia to her youthful companion. She sensed a sadness that he kept well hidden, but would surface, just barely perceptible, when they spent long hours of peaceful idleness together. She often watched his face, studying the array of emotions playing across it, and tried to decipher him. She knew he had a past history that he found impossible to share with her. She wanted very much to help him, but without his disclosure, she was at a loss as to how. There was also a nagging thought in the back of her mind about him which she could not place. Somehow, she thought she might have seen Michael before. A part of her mind knew he belonged somewhere...different. She realised that until she could remember where or when she might have seen him, the nagging idea would not go away.

For Michael, the time he spent with Mrs. T. allowed him to intimately understand her routines, her moods, and her personal habits. It was no surprise then, after several weeks in her company, he began to detect Mrs. Thurgood was hiding something from him and her staff. As he began to catalogue the anomalies to her routine, he sadly realised she was hiding an illness. He decided for now to let her keep her secret. She was having no troubles in her day-to-day existence, the summer weather was perfectly suited to all their endeavours, and until an episode of obvious need or distress presented itself, he thought it better to keep his suspicions to himself.

It was therefore a surprise when, less than a week after his decision not to ask his mistress about her suspected condition, it presented itself in a most alarming way. They had been out walking in the gardens, heading for one of their favourite stops; a bench under an enormous elm tree, when suddenly Mrs. T. was stricken in the side with a debilitating pain. Michael instantly helped her to the bench, alarmed at her face, which was contorted in terrible agony.

"Mrs. T., allow me to call the doctor, you are not well!" he cried. But she stayed him with her hand.

"No, Michael. I am well." Her breathing started to slow down as her pain was obviously easing.

"You are not! Please do not ignore such a pain, it might portend to something very serious."

"Michael, you will obey me in this. No doctor will be sent for." He studied her face. Her colour was returning, and her breathing was almost normal again. She seemed to have little concern for what she had just experienced. They sat quietly for several minutes.

"You have not been well for some time." he finally replied, now understanding. "Am I right to think the doctor has already seen you, then?" She gave a slight nod, turning away, embarrassed. He took up her hand gently,

"What has he advised you to do?" She seemed to be studying the leaves of the elm above her head. He waited.

"There is nothing to be done, Michael. There is nothing that will stop the inevitable. I take solace only in knowing I will soon be with my dearest Harry. And I am thankful for the happiness I currently have spending my days with you." Michael could not help the choke and tears that followed her heartbreaking confession. She drew his head onto her shoulder, as he cried for the thought of losing this woman who had become so dear to him. Soon she straightened his head up and looked him straight in the eyes.

His spectacles had fallen into his lap, and she realised, she had never had the chance to see him thus as she spoke, "Now, we'll have none of that, dear boy. My happiness stems from you sharing your youthful exuberance, your laughter and your wit. If you do not provide me with it in abundance, I will turn you into the first gentleman scullery maid!" He laughed lightly, but his face still betrayed his sorrow.

They eventually made their way slowly back to the house. She promised to let him help her whenever the pain came back, and he promised to keep her secret until she was unable to hide her condition. As she entered her chambers, thinking back to their conversation under the great elm tree, she felt suddenly struck with a realisation, as if she had seen a blast of light that revealed the truth.

"Oh, good heavens!" she exclaimed as she sank to the edge of her bed.

Chapter 20

PEMBERLEY, SEPTEMBER, 1813

Georgiana Darcy had lived through many difficult times in her young life. The general populace considered her to be a lady of uncommon good fortune, in terms of dowry, as well as situation and connections. However, if asked today, the lady would not agree. What were lovely gowns and carriages, grand homes and fine horses, without the happiness of sharing them with loved ones? After suffering the loss of both her parents, and the foolishness of a failed elopement with a man to whom she had briefly given her heart, Miss Darcy's only source of constant love and devotion came in the form of her most beloved brother. Now, that all important source was being threatened, and Georgiana was at a loss as to how to preserve it.

He had arrived at Pemberley in a mood unlike any she had ever witnessed in him before. Though never open and easy with each other, for the first time in her life, Fitzwilliam had completely shut her out. It had been over three months since he had returned home, and she hardly had the chance to speak with him, save the barest of conversations. Her meals had been taken alone in the dining room, her afternoons spent at her pianoforte without his ever looking in on her. At night, she could hear his outbursts and pacing in his library or in his room, but she was simply too intimidated at the prospect of seeking out the man whom she looked upon almost as a father, and demanding he explain himself.

Mrs. Reynolds was well aware of the amount of fine wines, brandy and port that had been brought up from the cellars over the past months, but could hardly confer with a mistress of just seventeen years as to what to do.

Darcy's steward, Mr. Grant, was also not pleased at his master's complete disinterest in the estate's business, and complained bitterly to the housekeeper the master needed to control himself and stop his drinking. He had not looked at his correspondence since arriving. He had simply told his steward to make the decisions to the best of his abilities and he refused to even hear of the concerns of his estate.

Mrs. Reynolds finally decided a suggestion to the young Miss to seek out her cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and ask him to attend her would be a wise move. One week later he arrived.



GEORGIANA HAD BEEN SOFTLY playing her instrument in the music room, when the doors opened and her cousin greeted her warmly.

"Richard! Thank goodness you have come!" she cried as she flew into his arms.

"My goodness, Georgie! Whatever has come over you?" he replied as she sobbed into his coat.

"Richard, you cannot know how worried I have been. He refuses to see anyone. He never comes to his meals, and I know he has had far too many bottles from the cellar brought to him. I am scared of what he is doing to himself, and why he will not let anyone near him. Please, Richard, will you try to discover what ails him? He will listen to you; you are older, and I know he looks up to you."

He assured her he would go directly to Darcy after changing. This gave her some relief and he was able to leave her in a much calmer state. He suggested she retire for the evening and have her dinner sent up to her, as he did not know how long he would be with his cousin, and more importantly, he did not want the possibility of Georgiana hearing things that would only upset her, should Darcy wish to put up a fight. She started, surprised for a moment.

"Be well, Georgiana. I only meant we may have to resort to raised voices. It has been ages since I have tried to put my younger cousin across my knee, and success can no longer be assured, considering your brother's great size."

Before entering the dreaded room, Richard had frank discussions with the housekeeper, butler, valet and the steward, reassuring them as best he could he would try to restore their master to his former self. Armed with little useful information, but genuine concern, he finally entered the library



DARCY SAT IN A deep chair facing the fire. Though it was still full light outside, the curtains were drawn, and the room smelled of having been closed up for several days at least. The colonel was all too familiar with what he was looking upon. He had seen plenty of men over the years on a binge. No doubt a woman was behind it all. They usually were. Darcy sat in his shirt, waistcoat and breeches. His face was not dirty, but was badly in need of a shave. The glass was half-full in his tottering hand.

"Good afternoon, Cousin. Are you not happy to see me?" he cheerfully greeted him as he slammed the library door.

Darcy turned slowly, scowling upon seeing him, and uttered a simple, "No."

"Good! That means you have something to hide, and I mean to ferret it out, Darcy. You have spent enough time wallowing in self-pity."

"Go away, Richard. You are wasting your time."

"Sorry, *Fitzwilliam*. I shall not leave until things are set to rights here." He made himself comfortable on the large

leather sofa, directed a footman to bring him his tea, and settled himself in for the evening.

Later, he instructed the butler, Ferguson, to bring dinner to them in the library and insisted Darcy eat. He also removed the offending bottles which were placed about the room, ignoring Darcy's rantings and threats.

"You ARE going to get sober, Cousin. I have had plenty of experience with men in your position, and I warn you now: you will do as I command and stop this cowardly escape. You have duties to attend, Master of Pemberley." Darcy sneered at him; the colonel ignored him.

"You have had almost an entire year to clear your head and your heart in Europe. And now, you are hardly back on English soil, when you fall headlong into a binge. Your sister is worrying herself into illness, and your staff are at a loss what to do. It is time for you to return to the living, Cousin."

Darcy continued his scowl unabated.

"That look never did work on me, so you can cease your attempts at intimidation, *young man*."

The rest of the evening continued in much the same vein. Richard attempted to get Darcy to sober; Darcy barked or scowled at Richard. They both ended the night sleeping in the library, which suited the colonel perfectly as it gave him the chance to keep a close eye on his cousin.

In the morning he met with Darcy's valet, and advised him to clear the bedroom of all spirits. He further notified the shocked man he would be attending his cousin night and day for the next week at least, to help insure the master's sober state, and to ease the pain the staff would no doubt be suffering through. He checked on his cousin's snoring repose and, satisfied the man was yet unconscious, he left to find Georgiana at breakfast.

She had retired to her rooms like a dutiful young ward, but she had not stayed the entire night. Several times she had felt compelled to stand outside the library door, needing the reassurance that both men were still inside, and that her cousin was trying to work upon her brother. She had peeked in very early this morning, pleased to see the two men sleeping, and silently thanked Richard for being both brave enough and willing to make the effort.

As he walked into the breakfast room, she rose from her chair, and went to him. Instead of throwing herself into his arms like the child she was yesterday, today she calmly reached out and cupped his cheek tenderly, then grasped his large hand in both of hers and squeezed while softly telling him, "Thank you, Richard. Thank you for all you are doing. You are the very best of men, and the dearest relative I have next to him."

He swallowed hard, amazed at the change in her.

As if she could read his mind, she answered, "I am sorry for my outburst yesterday. I fear I was no longer in control of my emotions and acted quite like a child. Perhaps if I did not love him so much I would have been more reserved, but you know what he means to me, and I was simply at my wit's end to help him."

Richard nodded, patting her hands with his, and they then sat at the table. "The road ahead is long, my dear, but we have made a start. He will have to stay clear of any spirits, even with his meals. I am afraid he will suffer for a long while, as the poison takes many weeks to leave his body. I suspect right now, he is made more of wine than flesh. If we can get him to take up his role of master and encourage him to be active, he should have the chance to fully recover."

"You speak as if he has an illness, Cousin."

"Indeed! That is precisely how one should approach this. His body is suffering from the abuse he has given it. As far as his head..." He raised his brows and shoulders, indicating the lack of any answer.

"Then you still do not know what has caused him to do this to himself?"

"I do not, but I can conjecture, Georgiana. Most men who have been in similar positions are usually crossed in love."

Her mouth fell open. "A woman? But we have been together nearly every day for over a year! The only women in our constant presence were Charles Bingley's sisters and, while he would never say it, I feel I can guarantee he has never had the least interest in either. Good heavens, one is married! No, it cannot be them; we even made plans to separate from them while on the continent, neither of us like them. Oh! That was rude of me. I..."

By this time Colonel Fitzwilliam was laughing openly at her, and she joined him in the moment.

"You need not apologize, Georgie dear. I have met the ladies myself and understand you perfectly. Be patient, and we will find out what ails him; then we can help him heal."

She agreed.



WHEN DARCY WOKE THAT morning, nothing could make him feel better, not even the cheery countenance of his cousin's face directly in front of him. Richard warned him before he could even open his mouth that more strong drink was not part of the menu offered at Pemberley anymore, and that he, Darcy, would have to buck up and suffer through the pain that was going to be his companion for many days.

"Have some little mercy, Richard, and at least close the window coverings," he pleaded.

Thus the pattern of the following weeks was established. The colonel concentrated on the task of ridding his favourite cousin of the poisons that flowed in his veins, all the while looking for a chance to get Darcy to open up his heart to him, and reveal what had started this irresponsible behaviour.

At the beginning, Darcy had been annoyed with his cousin's constant presence, primarily because it interfered with his ability to procure alcohol. But as the days went on,

and he was sober longer, he found the man's close proximity a comfort to him, as though with Richard near him, he need not fear being lured back to a bottle to make him forget his pains. Finally, after several weeks, he once again began to be annoyed with Richard's constant insistence he tell him the reasons for his desire to drink, as well as perturbed that he was still not working on his estate business. He felt he was ready to take on his responsibilities once again, and the Colonel and his steward should acquiesce to his desires.

"You wish to resume your former duties?" the colonel inquired one day, when Darcy had finally come to the end of his tether.

"Yes, Richard!" he said exasperated.

"You feel you no longer might be tempted to return to your former ways?"

"No! And I find your lack of faith in me discouraging as well."

"Fine, Darcy. Prove to me that you are worthy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You shall wait here until I return," Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of His Majesties Army commanded. Will sat dumbfounded, but obediently remained.

He returned with a tray, two glasses and a bottle of the finest brandy Pemberley had. He sat down upon his now favourite leather sofa, and motioned for Darcy to sit across from him.

He then poured out two large glasses of the fragrant amber liquid, picked one up, swirled it slowly, sniffed it carefully and, sipping it, said, "Kindly tell me what this is all about, or pick up that brandy and descend again into your self-made hell."

They sat in silence for nearly an hour. Finally, Darcy sighed. He knew this side of his cousin. The man was like a bull terrier; if he got his bite around your neck you were doomed as he would never let go. He thought on how to get rid of Fitzwilliam, without revealing his dreaded recent past and finally concluded to answer simply, "Wickham."

The colonel's face dropped and then a grave foreboding crossed it. "Wickham is causing you problems?" he questioned, disbelieving.

"Yes, Richard!"

"Then I believe I can solve your problem, Darcy."

"I do not appreciate humour at this moment!"

"No humour, Cousin, only the truth: Wickham is dead."

Darcy guffawed at the statement. His look was one of such astonishment as to make his cousin worry on another point.

"Darcy, surely you did not have anything to do with his death?"

"What do you mean, Richard? How could I have anything...? Good God! You mean he was murdered?"

"Yes, he was beaten to death. The details have been sketchy at best, but from what we have been able to find out, he was attacked by a rather large number of people,

who have been amazingly silent upon witnessing or participating in the event."

Darcy was dumbstruck.

The colonel continued, "Did you know he had deserted from the army in the summer before last?" His cousin shook his head. "No, I would think not, it happened just before you headed over the channel as I recall. The army had been looking for him, though not too hard. Last June we began to hear small rumours of his possible death. You can imagine how thrilled the powers that be would have been to announce one of their own had been brutally murdered after deserting. They knew he had several enemies. He had left enough debts within the ranks of the officers alone to warrant many a duel. Once they were able to confirm that he was truly dead, the nasty business was entirely hushed up."

Darcy could barely think straight, but part of him was beginning to make some startling realisations and he managed to ask, "When did this happen?"

"We believe early May."

"And where?"

"Where else? The black holes of London, naturally. Where else could this kind of activity be hidden so well, and people bribed to ignore it? Darcy, do you know anything about it? Were you involved?"

"No, Richard, I was not involved in any way, I assure you. This is the first I have ever heard about it."

The colonel was satisfied his cousin was telling the truth. God only knows what he would have done if he had to cover up involvement in a brutal murder. "I believe you. And though I would wish such a demise upon no man, I am glad to be rid of the scoundrel. I cannot imagine his debtors are glad to see him gone, nor his wife, but you can at least be assured that he will no longer bother us."

"Wife? He was married?" Darcy was beginning to feel truly ill.

"Yes, last summer, when he deserted, he took some young woman with him and married her on a ship bound for America."

"America? Where the devil would he get the funds to go to America?"

"No idea, just that he went, and left his wife there."

The inside of Darcy's head was beginning to complain. "Richard, do you remember what his wife's name was? Can you recall her first name?" He was dreading hearing his cousin's next words.

"Heavens, Darcy, I can try to think. I saw the report. No one knows where she is in America, it will be unlikely that word of his passing will reach her anytime soon, if at all. Was it Laura? No, I think Lydia."

And there it was. The pieces to the puzzle suddenly fell into place; Lydia Bennet had run away the previous summer with George Wickham.

"Did the army know he had married?"

"No, we knew he had run off with some girl, but only discovered where they had gone and that they had married,

around the time we learned of his death. Her family had found out through the captain of the ship, as I recall, else we would never have known it." Will's head was suddenly pounding. His fingertips flew to his temples as an almost instantaneous headache came over him, and he groaned.

"Darcy, are you well?" his cousin asked, concerned.

"There is nothing the matter with me, Richard."

"You obviously have something to do with this whole Wickham business. I demand to know what it is. If you are in trouble, I am sure I can be of assistance."

"I appreciate your concern, I truly do. I am telling the truth when I say I had nothing to do with George Wickham's death. Nor did I have anything to do with his marriage or the trip to America. I am only distressed upon learning the news." He continued rubbing his temples attempting to dissuade the fierce pounding that was not listening to his fingers' silent plea. "Richard, I cannot help but feel had I made more of my personal history with Wickham known, much of what you have told me has happened might have been avoided. No guilt falls directly onto my shoulders for what has occurred, but allow me to examine myself and see that my inactions may have started the course of events which have led to such an unhappy conclusion."

"If you insist cousin, but I think you take too much upon yourself."

They sat for several more minutes. Darcy was in no hurry to reveal any more details about his obvious distress.

The colonel finally lost his patience. "Are you telling me I should now believe that you have been drinking yourself into a daily stupor these past months because of something a man, who has been dead all this time, did to you?"

"Indirectly, but yes." He spoke no further.

The colonel let him stew for a few more minutes, but would not relent. "You are not going to tell me about her."

A furious glare and growling clearing of the throat was his answer.

"Just promise me it was not Wickham's wife," the colonel pleaded.

Darcy almost choked. "Good God, no!"

They sat in silence; each in his own protected bubble of unshared intimacies.

"Fair enough, then. I will have to be satisfied; though I think you will regret not unburdening yourself. However, my concern right now is more important: Georgiana. I know she is still young, but she is no longer a child. You cannot continue treating her like one. She is nearly of age, and soon will have to make her way in the world on her own merits and skills. How is having a brother who barely acknowledges her existence helping her to grow and mature into the woman we both hope she will become? You have done her a great disservice these past months. Surely the two of you grew closer on your Grand Tour? I believe she would benefit more from a brother, instead of a father, do you not?"

Darcy was taken aback. "Your words are wise beyond what I would have expected, Richard. I confess I had not

given Georgiana much thought these last months, and your admonishments are well deserved. I love her very much, and must think to put her first. I owe it to her. I owe it to my family. I am sorry for the way I have been treating her. I swear I will not let her, or you, down again."

"Good! Now, if you think you can manage to find your bed, may I suggest in the morning you and I start through the pile of letters you have allowed to stack up? Then you can reacquaint yourself with the running of your estate. Afterwards, we can devote ourselves in the afternoon to teaching you how to beg Georgie's forgiveness."

"Yes, Richard. I want no more spirits. Thank you, for all your help. I know I am not as easy and open as I could be, but you must know how deeply your care of me these past weeks moves me."

Both men coughed nervously, and fidgeted until Darcy managed to see the humour in the evening. "However I must say it was damned inconsiderate of you to drink my best brandy in front of me."

The colonel grinned. "Perhaps, but if you plan to re-enter society, you will have to endure the nightly ritual of cigars and brandies after every dinner, Will. No time like the present to learn to deal with it," he said as he placed his now empty glass upon the tray and picked up the second full glass in one hand and the bottle in the other, then grinning harder added, "Good night, Cousin. And congratulations; you did very well."

"Thank you, Richard. You are quite correct. However, if I am to suffer through gentlemanly traditions in future, I think I shall have to teach myself how to appreciate a good cigar."



DARCY STAYED AWAKE, THINKING ON all he had learned that night.

Elizabeth must have left Derbyshire because her younger sister had eloped. It had been well over eight months between that fateful day at Pemberley and when the news of the Wickham's marriage had most likely been made public. If the Bennet's had not known Lydia and Wickham were married all that time, they must have been shunned from Society and their reputations would have been in ruin. Elizabeth would have suffered horribly and all because he had allowed his pride and feelings to be hurt! He had run away to nurse his wounds. How she had suffered because of him! His bitter tears ran unheeded down his face.

He thought back to what she had told him when she was still disguised as Chantal Moreau. She had said that Caldhart had provided her revenge. He heard her words again in his mind: her hatred so sharp as she spit the words out against her enemy. Now he knew that enemy was

Wickham. She had become a man's mistress and the price was revenge against Wickham.

But why? If he and Lydia were married, then her family was restored. Was she so spiteful she merely wanted him to suffer for her family's distress over the past months? Unless...he groaned to think of it.

Wickham had not married Lydia. It made perfect sense. She had no money, nothing to tempt him. He had used her for his pleasure and then who knows what. Elizabeth did not fall merely because of the desire for revenge. Richard said they found out about the marriage just before his death.

Elizabeth's price had been the restoration of her family's reputation by Caldhart arranging her sister's marriage, then revenge against the man who had, in truth, first *ruined* her sister and, subsequently, her entire family.

He had been furious at her when she had told him Caldhart had found her with Wickham. But now he doubted the truth of her declaration. Suspecting all that he did now, he reasoned she was grasping for anything to say that would make him give her up. With a heavy heart, he sadly agreed she was right to have done so.

He could never take her as his wife after all her family had been through. The circumstances of her youngest sister's elopement would open his family to censure and ridicule. He could never subject Georgiana to the humiliation of having George Wickham as his brother-in-law, albeit dead. Who knows if Lydia had any child by him? To have to acknowledge a child of Wickham as niece or nephew would be too cruel to do to her.

He also realised he could not have her as his mistress, either. Elizabeth had chosen to go with Robert Caldhart with good reason as she had many secrets to hide. She was bound to him; she told Darcy so. Caldhart had every possible advantage in keeping her for himself. He shuddered to think that Elizabeth might have been involved in the murder of another man. If Darcy tried to take her away, there was more than honour at stake; the woman he loved could be sent to prison if she had been an accomplice in Wickham's death.

And Caldhart could ruin her family again so easily by revealing Elizabeth as his mistress. Now he understood why she called herself Chantal Moreau; she had to hide her situation from her family and society.

Darcy cried more tears as he realised the hopelessness of his situation. He loved her. She loved him. Those words he had so desperately hoped to hear from her lips, she had said them, and now he did not doubt she had meant it. She had nothing to gain. She wanted nothing from him but his love. She had given herself to him, and been willing to suffer the consequences of what Lord Caldhart might do, should he find out. He shuddered once again to think of his Lordship's reaction upon finding her sullied. He was fairly sure he had left marks upon her delicate breasts. The thought of that man touching her turned his stomach until he could not breathe.

He had failed her in every way possible. She had suffered, and all the while, he could have prevented it. He could have saved her. He could have been the one. And she could be his.

And then, the bitterest truth stood before him. She might not be his, but he was hers. There would never be anyone else. His future no longer included a wife or children, for he was now bound to a woman with whom he would never share a life.



HE WALKED TO HIS study and examined the legacy he had left these last months: letters piled high in the corner of his study, unread newspapers folded neatly into varied stacks on the floor around his desk. He was disgusted by his own inattentiveness.

He needed to come to a decision. He had to allow himself to decide, though most of the matter was completely out of his hands. He could not have her, but he also could not bear the thought of possibly seeing her in London, or hearing of Caldhart and his latest mistress' escapades. It was too much to ask of any man. He thought long and hard, examining the deepest parts of his heart, and then scrutinizing the practical aspects of any plan he tried to make.

Several hours later, he looked out at the sky, now turning a lovely shade of pink trimmed with blue; the colours for new babes. Satisfied with the writings on the sheets of paper in front of him, he rang the bell. The yawning footman startled at the sight of the master half-dressed but fully awake and energetic.

"Barnes, I want you to take all those newspapers out and have them burned, then find my steward and arrange for him to meet with me at nine o'clock this morning. Also have my cousin informed of the meeting, as he will wish to attend.

"Very good, sir. Is there anything else?"

"No, nothing more, thank you."

The footman turned to leave when Darcy called to him once more. "Oh, Barnes! Is there any news these last months? Is England at war with anyone I should know about?"

Barnes looked startled, unsure if his master was serious. "No, sir. But I would be happy to leave the newspapers if you would care to get caught up on the current events."

"No, no. That will not be necessary. If there was anything of import, I am sure I would have heard of it."

Chapter 21

DERBYSHIRE, OCTOBER, 1813

Michael stood at the window silently staring at the woods beyond the house. The trees had lost most of their leaves, and the few left were straining to hold on in the stiff cold wind that blew. The thick blanket of clouds high in the sky gave the earth an ugly monochromatic pallor, which suited his mood perfectly.

"I wish for no colour today. Colour means life to me, and I feel lifeless," he thought. The occasional snuffles of a passing servant could be heard out in the hallway, adding to the sad demeanour the entire house had taken on. Today Fairhaven Manor had buried its beloved mistress, Cecily Thurgood.

Many hours later the staff would gather in the great hall, where Mrs. Thurgood's attorneys had called them, and slowly, item by item, they read her last will. Every member of the staff was bequeathed an amount by her. Mrs. Keane and Mrs. Edwards in particular were provided with an income that would serve the two of them until their deaths, should they wish to retire. Many more sobs could be heard as the list continued, demonstrating Mrs. Thurgood's boundless generosity.

The Manor house would fall to a great-niece of Mr. Thurgood's, of whom none of the staff had ever heard. The attorneys comforted them, saying that Fairhaven's staff would stay intact for anyone who wished to stay on. After the exhausting reading, the group was dismissed and each headed for their private mourning. As Michael headed toward the drawing room, the attorneys approached him and asked for a private conference.

"Mr. Dunbarton, the will we just read to the staff was incomplete." Michael looked surprised. The attorney continued, "In order to fulfil all of Mrs. Thurgood's last wishes we need to ask you something. Please do not take offence but, would you be so kind as to tell us your name?"

"My name is Michael Andrew Dunbarton," he answered, frowning. "Can you tell me what this concerns, gentlemen?" The two looked at one another and then, nodding toward the leather case, one of them opened it and withdrew a thick letter, addressed to Michael.

"Sir, if you would be so kind, Mrs. Thurgood asked specifically for us to withhold this letter from you, until we had asked you your name. If you had answered as you just did, we were to give you this." He handed Michael the fat missive. They indicated for him to read it, while they discreetly backed into an unobtrusive corner, quietly conferring.

Michael sat himself down at the pair of chairs that he and Mrs. T. had often used to enjoy the sights of the woods outside the windows. He carefully opened the letter, at first surprised when a thin gold band fell out of its centre and into his lap. As he began the first line, the first of many gasps spewed from his mouth as he read these three words,

"My Dearest Elizabeth,"



FIVE MONTHS EARLIER; LONDON, MAY 15, 1813

THE MAID HELPED HER out of her dressing gown and into her simple morning dress. The doctor had dismissed her quickly upon arriving into his Lordship's bedroom, and she gratefully accepted the opportunity to defer to his authority. She sat and waited while he attended his patient. Gemma paced nervously in the dressing room, and she could hear the mutterings of various servants outside her rooms. Finally a knock was heard from the door to the connecting room which she quickly answered.

"Miss Moreau," the grave doctor said as he bid her enter. "I am sorry, my dear, but there was nothing to be done. His age and his heart were simply not strong enough."

There lay Lord Robert Caldhart in his bed. He was still dressed in his fine blue silk dressing gown and his hands already placed over his chest in the traditional pose of the dead. Elizabeth felt light-headed. She slowly walked to him, unable to answer yet.

"Miss Moreau, I know some of the circumstances surrounding his Lordship's end. There were many witnesses to the argument you had. There were also many witnesses to the fact that his Lordship had raised a whip to your person, leaving you little choice but to flee him, lest you be my patient now, instead." She turned back to him, surprised.

"It was Lord Robert's choice to chase you. An argument alone would not have done this; it was his hunger for violence that was his undoing. Every creature on God's earth has the right to defend itself." She looked at him, uncertain of his judgement. He took his hand gently in hers and patted it reassuringly.

"You were not responsible for his death. It is that simple." She finally let go her breath.

"Thank you doctor. I...I was afraid it was my doing."

"Nonsense, Madam. He knew he had a bad heart. I had warned him for many years about trying to act like some young bull. But he would have none of it. He ignored what he did not like to hear, and it proved his folly in the end. Now, I suggest you get some rest, before his sons descend upon the house. It will not be long, I assure you. I will in-

form the housekeeper and the staff of the cause of his death, as well as the new Lord Caldhart in the morning.”

The housekeeper came to her, and asked if she could be of assistance. Elizabeth inquired if any note had been sent to his Lordship’s sons, to which she replied it had not yet. They conferred and decided a messenger would be sent at first light. As his Lordship’s condition could not be changed, there was no need to awaken the family in the middle of the night. Elizabeth gave the housekeeper the jewels she had worn that night, and asked her to place them in safety until the new Lord Caldhart arrived in the morning and could be given them. She firmly told the shocked servant she had no intentions of keeping them for herself. When she had finally left, Elizabeth sat back down on the little divan in front of her fire. She had held up remarkably well considering the past three-day’s events. But rather than looking forward to a restful nights sleep, she had her entire future to contemplate.



HER FIRST INSTINCT WAS to run. Her situation was so very different this morning from the one she had previously awoken to, that her every fibre was telling her she should leave Caldhart’s home and leave London. She feared repercussions from Lord Caldhart’s death. What if his sons were not convinced of her innocence in their father’s death? They was no money to be gained from her, but the circumstances of his death would no doubt stain the family name for a time, and she already knew the Caldhart family was capable of revenge. Would they try to have her incarcerated or publicly humiliated? Her real name would undoubtedly come up. If she disappeared, they would not be able to get to her and, hopefully, her family.

She also feared for her freedom and safety because of Wickham’s death. Lord Robert might be dead, but what if anyone connected her with his involvement. Higgins had promised to keep her secrets, but now he might be without employment. Would his pledge hold if he was faced with his own lack of means to support himself?

There was also the problem of his Lordship’s will. He had just recently changed it to accommodate a settlement upon her, in the event of his demise. The attorneys would no doubt come looking for her. If she stayed in London, and worked as Mrs. Johnson, she would be taking too many risks for her peace of mind. She felt leaving was the safest course of action.

Now that she had made the decision, she was forced to consider how she could make her escape successfully. Without the protection of his Lordship’s secluded Surrey estate, Elizabeth would have a hard time finding a place to hide. Her family would look for her, and it was even possible Darcy might try to find her. She sat for a long while,

thinking about how she could facilitate her wishes. She rose from her sitting area and walked into her dressing room, to stare at her things, looking for inspirations. She could not leave as Mrs. Johnson. Her Uncle was too smart, and would be sure to ask if anyone had spotted a lady, or an old lady, anywhere they searched, she was sure.

Suddenly she spied something unusual in the back of the closet. There were the clothes she had worn that night in the Tavern. The breeches, which had luckily been dark, and the shirt had both been freshly laundered and, though still no more than working clothes, they looked acceptable. She fingered the material while her mind quickly assessed the possibility of this disguise. She held up the shirt under her chin, satisfied until she turned her head and spotted the large form of her abundant twist on the back of her head. She remembered the struggle she had experienced trying to hide her telltale female locks up under her boy’s cap.

Her heart beat wildly as she contemplated. Then, before she could lose her nerve, she quickly rifled through her table drawers and pulled out a pair of long shears. Unpinning her twist and taking the heavy length of it in her one hand, she placed her lifetime of growth in between the blades, shut her eyes, and closed the scissors sharply down. The tail sprung free and her hand flew out from the force. She gasped to feel the heavy length in her outstretched hand, while her head felt strangely light. She looked over the beautiful tresses, amazed at seeing them in front of her. Before she could allow herself to be swept up into the emotions of her actions, she quickly crossed into her sitting room and, wrapping the mass up into a coil, placed it in the centre of the flames.

She returned to change into the clothing, ignoring the odd feeling of air upon her neck. She found her old wrappings to bind her breasts, and padded her mid section to even out her appearance. This time, her hair fell easily around the cap, luckily hiding more of her face, though she decided to don her spectacles for good measure. She wished she had a second change of clothing to take with her, but reasoned she could always purchase some if need be.

She looked around her bedroom. There on the floor was the money she had thrown in his Lordship’s face; her repayment to extract her from her contract with him. She considered the possibility of her surviving without means to shelter and feed herself. She also considered her financial obligations to a man now deceased. Her survival won.

As she was packing the few personal articles she thought she could not do without, she espied her letters from her family. She knew she could not leave them behind, and there were too many to take with her, not to mention they might prove to reveal her true identity to someone who read them. She considered carefully, and drew out the last note she had received from Jane. It was light-hearted, and only talked of everyday, ordinary things. There was no direction, and it was simply addressed ‘Dearest Lizzy.’ She knew she would treasure this personal item for years to come.

She sadly threw the rest of the letters along with personal papers, her contract with Lord Caldhart among them, onto the fire and watched the flames erase the evidence of her being there. She then checked her dressing room for any other personal affects and burned them along with the small amount of clothing she had brought with her. She had just determined to try to stealthily make her way out of the house, when a quiet knock at her dressing room door caught her attention. She made her way quietly over to it, and asked who was there; she was not prepared for the answer.

“It’s Higgins, Miss.”



SHE OPENED THE DOOR cautiously and stepped back to let him in. He turned back as she closed the door and gasped slightly at her appearance.

He seemed to come to some sort of conclusion before he inquired of her, “May I speak frankly to you, Miss Moreau?” he pleaded. She nodded.

“I think you are right to leave, ma’am. There can be no good from your being here when the sons show up. And even less if you stay in town.”

“I agree, though I know not where I will go.”

“Miss Moreau, I made you a promise once, not too long ago, I know, but I will hold to it. Your secrets are safe with me.

“News of his Lordship’s death will make the rounds at the gentlemen’s clubs, I fear, and your reputation as a dangerous woman is going to go along with it. The family is going to be very angry, even if you did not cause him to die. They will most likely try to make you suffer for it, though. And, pardon the idea, Miss, but no one else is going to come along to, well, to try to rescue you, if you get my meaning.” Elizabeth blushed.

“I understand Mr. Higgins. I can assure you, I have no interest in finding another...situation similar to the one his Lordship and I entered into. I have my money I earned from my cigar shop, and I think it will tide me over until I can find some other kind of employ.”

“Don’t forget your jewels, ma’am, and I am sure his Lordship will have taken care of you in his will; he was always a generous man, if a little lost in his ways.”

“No, Higgins. I want nothing to do with anything of his money. We both know I never, I mean, I do not believe I deserve any of it, and it would be wrong of me to take any of it. You can tell the family that later if you like. They will never hear from me again, I assure you.”

“Yes, ma’am. May I ask what you intend to do?”

“I shall take the post coach out, and get as far away as I can.”

“As a lad?” She nodded. He thought it over for a moment. “I think there are some things you best know, then.”

He started and for the next hour he filled Elizabeth in with the details of living in the world as a man. She had been embarrassed by some, grateful for almost all, and not a bit doubtful that most would come in very handy to her. He had also left for a short while and returned with another set of boy’s clothing and undergarments. She had insisted on leaving some money for whoever had involuntarily donated his clothes to her, and Higgins agreed and informed her of a fair price. He then continued her lessons on the practical world.

“Just remember the two places where a bloke is most tender. If you hit either you will give yourself a fair chance at running away from any bad situation, and that is always the best thing to do, when you’re not a fighter.”

He also gave her a suggestion for a town where she might go. He had grown up in Oak Hill and told her it was a fine enough village. The people were good, hardworking, honest folk, and she had as good a chance there as any to find work. She would have to walk at least eight miles from the nearest posting coach stop, but she assured him the walk was nothing, and he new it to be true. The distance from the coach stop made it more inviting, since no one would look for her in a town without a post stop. His last act of kindness to her was seeing her out of the back of the house safely and walking her down to the posting station. As they came up to the ticket agent, he told the man to sell him one passage for his son, to Derbyshire, Lambton stop. Elizabeth almost backed out of the entire scheme.

“Are you sure that is the nearest stop?” she asked, panicked. He led her away from the few people waiting for the dawn to break.

“Afraid so. The other stop is nearly thirteen miles, much too long to walk without staying some place, and it would just be Lambton you would have to stay at anyway.” She could barely think clearly, due to her distress.

“But Oak Hill is eight miles away? And to the west you say, correct? Please! Tell me it is to the west.”

“Yes! he answered attempting to calm her while keeping his voice lowered, “Please! You must not get upset. It is due west of Lambton; you heard me say so. You have to walk the western trail to get there, just past the smithy. You will have no trouble, I am sure.”

“Thirteen miles! Only Thirteen miles from Pemberley! Lord, how am I ever going to do this?” she thought. They waited nearly an hour while the sun finally rose, and the horses were brought out and hitched. He walked her to the coach and, purposefully speaking much louder, bid her adieu.

“Now you be a good lad, and mind yer manners at yer cousins. I want to hear good reports of you being a hard worker, mind ya.” She nodded obediently, aware of his intent to lay claim upon her, and chase away anyone who thought she was without a friend or relation.

Suddenly she found herself enveloped in a fierce embrace, while he whispered faintly to her, “God speed and good luck to you, child.” And the next thing she saw was

his back as he quickly strode away. She entered the carriage still staring after him.

“Your first time away from your Da? Asked a kindly looking lady across from her.

“Yes, ma’am,” she answered in nearly a whisper.

“And where are you headed, Lad?” She drew a great breath.

“Derbyshire.”

Chapter 22

PEMBERLEY, OCTOBER, 1813

The morning meeting with his steward and the Colonel had gone well, despite there being much to be done after five months of absence. They first concentrated on the larger issues of the estate that needed to be addressed, with a plan to go over all the decisions Mr. Grant had made on behalf of his master during his incapacitation. Schedules were drawn up and, Mr. Grant’s son was suggested to help for the next weeks until Mr. Darcy and the running of the estate would once again be performing at their usual efficiency. The master looked determined, interested and bright-eyed. The Colonel and Mr. Grant were greatly relieved.

Both men felt Darcy was well on his way to his previous attentive work habits and would once again take up his role as Master of his estate admirably. Richard had intended to stay on another week complete, and then return to his duties to King and country. He conferred with his cousin and, though unhappy at their imminent parting, both knew the time had come to cut Darcy from his cousin’s apron strings.

“I would not be at my present state of recovery, if not for you Richard,” he said. “I will never forget your rescue, nor your hard taught lessons of what happens to a man who loses sight of his responsibilities as well as his sensibilities. I will make this up to Georgiana and the family. My promise of last night I will not take lightly; I intend to never again risk our good name or bring shame upon them with my actions.

“What nonsense, Darcy! We are proud of you! You only lost your way for a short while, but I have no doubt you are your old self again.”

Darcy shook his head. “No, that is not true, I will never be what I once was,” he said resignedly. “However, I will be a better man; on that I am determined. I think we should now find my dear sister, for I have much to impart.”



GEORGIANA WAS IN THE drawing room, quietly reading. She had missed her brother at breakfast and had gone out riding when she learned he would be sequestered with his steward most of the morning. A tiny sense of hope had blossomed in her when she heard he was meeting with Mr. Grant again; perhaps her brother might be healed after all. She prayed

it would be so. The book held little interest to her and she found herself, more often than not, looking out the window, and breathing a large sigh, not knowing her loved ones had just entered and were observing her from the doorway.

Darcy saw the sighs and suddenly understood the situation his beloved sister had been forced to endure these past months

"How many days might she have passed alone in a room, with no comfort or even companionship? My selfish behaviour has been atrocious!" he admonished himself. With a determined air, he walked in, startling his sister, who rose instantly to her feet. As he came to stand in front of her, he gently touched her shoulders, directing her back down upon the sofa, and then to her and Richard's amazement, he dropped to his knees, took her hands in his, and kissing each softly said, "Georgiana, I have been the greatest of fools in so many ways, but the worst is in what I have done to those I love. Please, I beg you to forgive your brother's behaviour these past months and let me prove myself worthy to you."

It was simple, and perhaps incomplete, for Darcy could never tell her everything he had done, but it was completely from his heart, and neither of the two listening doubted his sincerity for a moment. Georgiana removed her hands and taking her brother's face in them, kissed his forehead tenderly, giving him the absolution he so wanted

"Always, dearest Fitzwilliam," she whispered as she cradled his head to her shoulder.

Richard could hardly swallow, after witnessing such an affecting scene and finding his throat strangely constricted. He quickly schooled his thoughts to his upcoming arrival back to camp and looked out the window to distract the unwelcome warmth he was feeling; a soldier did *not* lose his check on his emotions.

Soon the Darcys had settled next to one another on the sofa with her brother's comforting arm around Georgiana's shoulder while he whispered his thanks and endearments of love to her. They all were enjoying the peace and contentment of the moment when finally Darcy spoke up again.

"Thank you for your forgiveness Georgie, though I suspect Richard is disappointed you did not let me suffer long or at least atone for my transgressions. Perhaps I should not speak of it or he might be tempted to re-acquaint you with the tale of the Twelve Labours of Hercules, and fill your head with ideas for my penance." He chuckled, while Richard smirked and Georgiana looked quite surprised, which her brother did not fail to notice.

"Yes, Sister, I do have a sense of humour, though in my folly I have been censoring it around you. Such practices, however, will no longer be employed." He straightened himself up, and sat very still. Then, somehow not satisfied, he stood, wrenching his cravat once or twice and began pacing in front of the two, who waited patiently for his obviously forthcoming words of import.

During the months of his depression he had dwelled upon the thoughts of disreputable people trying to take ad-

vantage of those he loved. Now, when he had finally recovered, a sense of duty and retribution had set into his mind. Elizabeth's fall into shame, and Georgiana's past with Wickham had shown him how any woman, even the best of women, could become a victim in this world. Last night, when he learned of George Wickham's fate, he had come to a decision that would change both siblings' lives forever. Elizabeth might be lost to him, but if he could, he would teach Georgiana to be a woman no person could ever hurt again. Now he struggled to explain to her and her guardian, what he wished to accomplish.

"After our talk last night, Richard, I did not retire. Instead, I reflected on many things, not the least of which was you, Georgiana. I realised our elder cousin was right; I have failed you in many ways. I have spent most of my life following the excellent morals and values our parents taught us, but in conceit, vanity and pride. I allowed you to see my poor example and did nothing to correct it. I hid behind a mask of shyness and indifference and I fear oftentimes I did it without consideration to the feelings of others.

"I had always thought I abhorred disguise of every sort, yet in some ways, I employed that very thing to wilfully avoid social situations I was uncomfortable in, or society I considered beneath me. It was wrong, Georgie, and I learned the truth of it in a very painful way. I hope I can teach you not to make the same mistakes and suffer as I did.

"I also came to realize one can never tell what you may find in society, be it in town or a small country village. There are hidden treasures to be discovered wherever you might go, and keeping yourself open to the joys of such a possibility will make your life much richer, Dearest. I promise to help you with this and I will practice the same. Our wealth might allow us to travel in higher social circles, but it does not make us less responsible to treat everyone with kindness and respect."

Richard interjected, "What do you propose, Darcy? Georgiana has finished her studies with her governess, and we shall soon be arranging her presentation at court."

"I think Georgiana's coming out should be postponed."

His sister gave an audible sigh; confirming her agreement with him.

"She will be eighteen this winter, more than old enough to be out."

"True, Richard, but young ladies are presented up until they are twenty-one, and are not considered too old to come into society."

"Fitzwilliam, what is it you wish us to do?" his sister asked.

He took a deep breath and proceeded. "Georgie, you are a very accomplished young lady. You are charming, although a bit shy, lovely to behold, and your singing and performance at the pianoforte are rarely rivalled. Combined with your fortune, you are a woman who will be well sought out when you enter society. If you were to remain exactly as you are, no doubt you might find a man

who could someday make you happy, or at the very least content in marriage.

"But I am hoping you will admit this is not enough for you, that you might wish more from your life. I am hoping if you had the chance to improve yourself in ways much greater than most young ladies are ever offered, you would be intrigued, and then happy to accept the inducement put before you."

"What improvements do you mean, Darcy? What accomplishments are left for a lady to learn that Georgiana does not already know, if not master? Who would teach her? You certainly do not know how. And I think it only fair to mention her needlework is beautiful, and her French is very good as well."

"*Merci*," said Georgiana.

"You are welcome," replied the Colonel with a nod.

"I am not speaking of ladies' accomplishments, Cousin! I mean to guide Georgiana into adulthood, not make her a worthy prize to be married off." Here he hesitated again, knowing the radical idea he was about to propose would most likely alarm his sister and cousin.

"I speak of knowledge of the world, knowledge normally only open to a man. The knowledge *I* have after living in the world for so many years, opening up *my* mind and history and sharing it, no teaching it to her. We would study Latin, Greek, philosophy, history, science, higher mathematics, literature, politics and geography. All that I learned at Cambridge, I would be eager to impart to her."

Their countenance betrayed that neither could believe what they were hearing.

"You would turn her into a bluestocking!" exclaimed his cousin.

"No, Richard, I would give her the education to let her decide what she wanted to be; bluestocking, or blueblood's wife, it does not signify. She would have the basis in her life's experiences and knowledge to make any decision about herself, wisely."

"A Cambridge education for a woman! She will be far more clever than most men of the *ton*; they will not take to that lightly."

Georgiana giggled.

"She is already brighter than half; we would simply work on the other half." Now Georgiana laughed outright. "I also mean to teach her to shoot, to ride better, and to fence, if she will let me."

"Fencing!" Georgiana cried, while Richard sat, shocked.

"Yes, fencing," Darcy replied calmly. "The impact on the body and crispness fencing adds to the mind is well worth the effort. And I know several young ladies have taken it up in London; I have seen them myself at my fencing club." Now it was Richard and Georgie's turn to be at a loss for words as he continued pleading his cause.

"Allow yourself to reap the benefits of my own experiences in society and the world, Sister. The rules we live by

are rigid and controlled, and those rules force most women to few choices. I believe a woman of superior education, accomplishments and understanding would have the most or at least the finest choices in her life, including who her husband would be or the role she would take up in her marriage. Only a foolish man would wish for a silly, stupid wife, I think only a man of the highest excellence would want a gem of a woman; the woman you might become."

Georgiana did not look pleased though she barely uttered, "It sounds as if you *do* wish to make me the worthiest prize of all for the marriage market, Fitzwilliam."

"No, my dear, quite the opposite. In fact, considering your fortune, and my willingness to aid you in any way, I can tell you sincerely, should you choose to never marry, you will have no cause to repine because of anything I might say or do.

"However, *should* you someday choose to marry, by the time we are finished you will be quite a formidable woman and only the very best and worthiest of men would dare ask for *your* hand."

He then proceeded to show Richard and Georgiana the papers he had written up the night before showing the curriculum he was considering for their studies, and the ways he thought they would employ their time.

"I have been so much older than you for so long, almost like a father, but now you are growing into a capable young woman and we are becoming more equal. I think it is time for us to be brother and sister. I know I wish for, no, I need a sister in my life to love and support me, as I will her." At last he summed up all he thought with a single quiet plea.

"I think your life could be extraordinary, Georgiana, if you only choose for it to be."

Georgiana could do little but sit. At first she hardly could believe such extreme views were coming from her conservative brother. She was convinced he was surely jesting. However, as Darcy began to outline his timeline and goals for her, the expression on her face turned from mirth to true astonishment. He was *serious*! The thought of spending several more years in what amounted to more schooling did not, at first, appeal to her in the slightest, until he began to speak about all the things he wished to share with her. She was speechless as he laid before her his offering of opening up his mind and giving her any of the knowledge he possessed; the offering of entering what was typically only a man's world.

Richard voiced some concerns over turning his sweet, innocent, dutiful Georgiana into a force to be reckoned with. Soon enough though, he admitted her character was well established and the essentials could no longer be changed, but her sense and education could certainly be improved upon. In the end, he told her she must make the decision which would affect her life so greatly.

Both men now looked expectantly at the astounded young woman. She almost laughed when realising they

thought she could make a decision of such magnitude instantly. Instead, she drew on the careful tutoring she had already received as a properly bred young lady and addressed the two calmly.

“Fitzwilliam, I thank you for your offer. Richard, I appreciate your words of wisdom regarding this endeavour. Bearing in mind the enormity of what you propose, I know you will both understand it is not an undertaking I should enter into lightly. Therefore, I should like to ask for time to consider all you both have said.”

Darcy went to her smiling and drew her up and into his arms, embracing her tightly.

“Already quite wise, I dare say,” he stated quietly.

She spent the night with little sleep, in deep thought over the challenge now sitting enticingly before her. It was overwhelming, it was exciting, and quite easily, it was the single hardest thing she had ever tried to resist. Late that night, she laughingly admitted to herself her brother was correct; she did wish something more from her life, though she did not know exactly what. However, her instincts told her Fitzwilliam’s tutoring would certainly be the means to discovering it.

Though not completely confident their endeavour would meet with success, or moreover, in her abilities, the next morning she entered the breakfast room, extended her hand to her brother, and accepted his offer.



WHEN THE DAY CAME for Colonel Fitzwilliam to leave, he and Darcy had one last conversation, out amongst the last of the falling leaves of the trees that sheltered the pond in front of Pemberley. It was a crisp day, the wind blowing steadily, stripping the last of the foliage from the great old oaks, while the sky was blanketed with a high thick cover of grey. Richard turned back, gazing upon the impressive façade.

“She will make a fine Mistress of Pemberley, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy’s heart skipped a beat as he stared, incredulous at his cousin.

“Did you think you were the only man who has given up?” the Colonel asked.

“Given up?”

Richard gave Darcy his best look of disapprobation. “No games, little cousin. Did it not occur to you that one who had already suffered would not recognise it in someone else? When one does not have an estate to pass along, or a fortune to inherit, people pay less attention. If that same said person had lost his one true love, and decided never to pursue the matrimonial state again, few would notice it. You did not.” Darcy was touched by his admission, and instantly bonded with his cousin’s suffering.

“I am sorry for your loss, Richard.”

“As I am yours, Darcy. Is there truly no hope?”

“She refused me.”

“Perhaps...”

“Twice, Richard,” he quickly interjected.

“Ah, I see. Yes, well, we have even more in common then.”

A flock of birds flew overhead, their dark bodies contrasting against the gloomy sky. At last Richard spoke again.

“So to satisfy your obligations to family you seek to make Georgiana heir to Pemberley, after first recasting her into your own image?”

“No, I do not seek to make another Fitzwilliam Darcy. I only hope to help her become a woman who can manage the role of running the estate successfully, safeguard herself financially and have enough insight to keep her heart from being hurt should she choose to love again.”

“You cannot teach sagacity, Darcy, nor can you protect her forever.”

“Perhaps, but still I mean to do everything in my power to give her all the wisdom, however wanting, I possess. You need not worry, I mean for her to make her own way when we are done and I promise to some day let her go.”

“And it gives you something to do with your life for now.”

“Georgie and Pemberley, Richard. I always have Pemberley. I mean to be the very best of masters.”

“I do not doubt you will succeed. You always seem to, when you set your mind to it.”

“Not always,” he whispered.

“No, quite. “I have one last piece of advice to give, Fitzwilliam. I ask you do not dismiss it too hastily, for I have given it a tremendously large amount of thought. I believe you should tell Georgie of your heartache. You need not impart the details, but I think she has a right to know what set you off last spring; especially as she was in no way to blame. More importantly, you seem to have forgotten she shares the experience.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If Wickham had truly loved her, he would have fought for her; done anything possible to be with her. But in essence, his leaving her was no different than a refusal. Young though she was, her heart was still wounded and you both now share this. I think you need to be honest with her, if she is to blossom the way we both hope, and if you are truly sincere about wanting to change the way you interact. Brothers and sisters console one another, you know.”

Another flock headed across the great expanse of lawn near the northern edge of the house and they watched for a long while.

“Does the army have any idea what they have in you, Richard?”

“I sincerely hope not, Cousin. I might have to work!” He clasped his larger cousin heartily upon the shoulder and together they headed towards the Colonel’s awaiting mount.

Just before he was to depart, he stopped suddenly and snorted, "I just realised your admission will give Georgiana great relief." He laughed

"How so?"

"She worried you might be pining after Caroline Bingley which cannot *possibly* be the case since you were refused."

Chapter 23

PEMBERLEY, OCTOBER, 1813

Fitzwilliam and Georgiana began a series of studies few ladies had ever likely attempted. Darcy knew his sister had a quick mind, but until he became her mentor, he had no idea how astute she truly was.

They began with basic knowledge of the running of Pemberley. She was already serving as hostess of his house and mistress to his needy tenants, but Darcy was determined she understand every aspect as he knew it. Though he would not confess it to her, Richard had been correct; he intended to make Georgiana, or her child, heir to Pemberley. He knew his own future no longer included a wife or children, and he would do everything to help his sister be successful.

Darcy committed himself to his work with an enthusiasm not previously seen. His estate prospered more than he would have thought possible, and all his staff and tenants reaped the benefits of his efforts. Daily meetings consisting of Darcy, Georgiana and their steward became routine.

Afterwards Darcy gave one of two lessons; riding or fencing. He trained her both on side saddle, like any proper lady, as well as astride. At her first lesson Georgie came to the stable wearing the soft leather breeches beneath her very proper riding dress as he had requested. When she saw what he had in mind, she was taken aback but, only meekly questioned him.

"Astride?"

"Yes, astride," he answered, in a way she knew meant not to oppose him. However, her temper was quickly flaring; an occurrence she rarely allowed herself to indulge.

"What possible reason could a woman have for sitting upon a horse in such a way?"

Darcy's eyebrow raised slightly, as he cautiously regarded her. This was a crucial moment for brother and sister, and an important lesson for her to learn. He needed her to dismiss some of the notions of the proper deportment of a lady in order to embrace what he wished to teach her.

"Georgiana, surely you cannot have failed to notice the diversity, if not the departure from more...genteel practices upon which we have already endeavoured? I do not mean for you to stop being a lady, but some of the physical aspects of our studies will demand you put aside some of your modesty and trust me as to what is best learnt and *how*."

Now it was Georgie's turn to raise her brow. "You evade the question, Brother."

"Protection, speed, and balance," he answered quickly.

Her head cocked slightly to one side as a reply.

“Sitting astride allows for better balance, especially should you be drawing a pistol or shooting. Astride also allows for much faster riding should you ever need to outrun another horse, or an animal. Lastly it affords you better protection in any instance, for you would have more options as to where to put your body—” Here he blushed. “—in a defensive situation.”

The horse stomped his approval, and then waited patiently many moments for the lady to mount.

Georgiana was not pleased. His mentioning shooting a pistol (again) had not escaped her notice, nor quelled her anxiety. Some of the stable hands were beginning to lose interest in their tasks, and gathering within easy hearing range of the much more fascinating event going on in the yard where the master stood speaking with his sister. She knew she had little choice, at least for today.

“Will I qualify for an army commission when I have learnt all, Fitzwilliam? I think I should like to ride next to Richard into battle,” she teased.

“Move to the mounting block, impertinent girl,” he growled. The lesson continued throughout the afternoon.



NOT LONG AFTER RICHARD had departed, Darcy found the courage to speak to his sister of his heartache. It was late one evening, after the two had spent a satisfying hour reading and discussing Donne’s works. Darcy picked up the page and read the last stanza of *A Feaver* aloud.

*Yet t’was of my minde, seising thee
Though it in thee cannot persevere
For I had rather owner bee
Of thee one houre, than all else ever.*

“It is a beautiful sentiment; to feel one would rather have loved one hour and lost, then never to have loved at all,” Georgiana reflected quietly.

“Do you agree, then?” her brother asked tentatively.

“I, I am not sure of what you mean.”

He took her hand gently in his. “Despite the outcome, would you have rather not cared for Wickham; never had your heart touched?” He felt her flinch at the mention of the name, but she remained calm.

“I sometimes wonder if I ever truly loved him.”

“I would not discount the possibility, Georgiana. Nor would I chastise myself for having feelings that were natural at the time.” She nodded, then turned her head to study the fire.

“I think if I had truly been attached I would not have recovered so easily.” She spoke softly.

“You believe had your feelings been stronger you would have behaved differently?”

“Yes.”

“More wretchedly or perhaps irresponsibly?”

“Perhaps.”

He gave her hand a squeeze and with a grimly set mouth contemptuously replied, “You might have locked yourself away from the world in your room or the library and indulged your heartache for months with the help of strong spirits?”

Georgiana’s hand flew to her mouth as a look of horror spread across her face. Her tears filled her eyes, as she whispered to him, “Oh, Fitzwilliam?”

Darcy nodded.

Georgiana quickly moved to sit closer and soothe him in her arms. “Richard once told me brothers and sisters console one another.”

He spoke at last against her hair. “I wish I had learnt that lesson earlier; I could have benefited greatly from the comfort you give me.”

“You have always comforted me, Brother. It is high time I reciprocate, and happily so.”

“He also reminded me we now share broken hearts, and could help one another heal in our camaraderie.”

She looked up at him with a tremulous smile. “And so we shall.”

They sat for long contented moments in one another’s arms, until Georgie finally pulled away and turned to face him directly on the sofa. “I will never ask you about her, or your pain, again if you desire, and no word of it will ever be spoken to anyone else on earth. However, tonight, I think we should both open our hearts, and perhaps by sharing our misfortunes, our anguish can be lessened.”

“We will swear never to tell another? Not even Richard, or if we marry, our spouses?”

She took his large hands in hers. “Not another living soul, Fitzwilliam. I swear it on my life.”

“I swear it also, then,” replied her brother.

Georgiana took a deep breath and started first. “I did love George Wickham with all that I could feel at the time. I know I gave him my heart entirely, and even to this day, it is bitter and wonderful.”

Darcy nodded. Now that it was his turn, he suddenly felt vulnerable, as if when he spoke of his beloved something would change, or he might lose something. However, he shook off the feeling and proceeded slowly.

“Her name I cannot tell you, but I love her with my heart and my soul, and if I should live to see a hundred, I know I will never know the like again.”

Georgiana nodded, a sour pain stuck in the back of her throat but still she managed, “Tell me about her.”



SEVERAL HOURS LATER BROTHER and sister walked serenely up to their chambers. The physical exhaustion of having spent such an emotional evening was making its presence known with each step. Darcy bid his sister a good night and sweet dreams, which she knew would be a command easily fulfilled.

He walked into his dimly lit bedroom, and sat on the edge of the bed. He had spoken as frankly as he could to-night, but had left out the sordid details of his liaison with Elizabeth, and her family's situation. He was glad his sister now knew of his lady, but also wished for her to like Elizabeth, even if she would never know her.

He knew it would be a long while before Georgiana truly believed he had been as rude, insulting and unfeeling a person as he told her he was the day he first proposed. Yet someday, she would no doubt agree her brother probably had indeed acted as abominably as he professed.

He had been careful as to what he told his sister for fear Elizabeth's identity might somehow surface. He told her he had to leave out places, dates and names of acquaintances to protect his love, and she did not question him. Part of him worried that someday she might figure out the mystery, but for now, especially with their mutual promise of absolute discretion, he felt secure.

He then realised what the fear he had felt before he began speaking to Georgie about Elizabeth had been; a fear of losing his pain. He no longer had the charge of grieving by himself. He no longer had to suffer in silence and alone over his broken heart. He could begin to be free of the shackles of anguish he had wallowed in these past months because he had finally shared it with his sister.

Richard was possibly the wisest man in the world.



GEORGIANA UNDERSTOOD HER BROTHER wished for her to know his distress had not been caused by her in anyway. He promised he would not let his disappointment hurt him anymore and that indeed, he was grateful to the lady for she had taught him to understand himself in a way he never had before, and he had determined to see to her reproofs.

For the first time, she felt her brother valued her as an adult; not a ward, or child. The simple, yet powerful exchange between the siblings the night they opened their hearts to one another, boosted her confidence and self-esteem greatly and she threw herself into her studies with unabashed energy and enthusiasm.

Darcy found he thrived teaching his sister. He spent his nights reviewing his Cambridge classes, deciding what could be of use to her. He would collect his books from his student years and plan his lessons for her accordingly.

His dry wit he never held back, but he did encourage her to develop her own opinions on any situation and speak

her own mind, and was more than willing to debate the merits of either opinion. He often cautioned her to realize that, while he was pleased to share his mind with her, she still had to rely on her own head in the future, and to learn to exercise as much of it as possible.

Her intellect was excellent; she had the ability to absorb all he presented to her with ease and they truly enjoyed their hours spent in learning. She especially excelled in mathematics and language, not surprising considering her mastery of music. Eventually, Darcy and his steward came to use Georgiana for her accounting abilities and translating skills.

The first time they truly had a difference of opinion on a subject and debated it enthusiastically was another milestone for Georgiana. Darcy wisely recognized the situation for what it was and refused to either back down or let her give in without a fight. She stumbled and tried to compromise, but in the end she fought bravely and won her point.

He stood abruptly, causing her a brief moment of alarm; thinking he was angered. Then he bowed deeply. "Madame," he said seriously, "you are perfectly correct, I concede the point. And may I add how very proud I am of you?"

"For having stood up to you?" she asked, shocked.

"No, my dear, for having stood up for yourself!" The exhilaration and triumphant smile upon her face was a memory Darcy held fondly for the rest of his life.



WHILE HIS SISTER WAS willing and happy to use her intellect in the classroom, the physical aspects of her other lessons were harder to accept. If music was her first love, fencing was her first abhorrence. Darcy explained that lack of skill with a sword did not keep one from being injured or killed by it.

She learned the threat of harm was what disabled most persons. The ability to defend oneself in a variety of ways helped one's confidence, as well as serving to protect one's self in the instance of an actual attack. Her brother was careful to explain he did not expect her to ever be in such a situation, however the importance of what such skill did for the entire body as well as the mind, could not be overrated. If Georgiana was going to improve as an individual, this part of her education could not be ignored.

"Besides," he jested, "What sister would not like the opportunity to repay an elder brother for all the teasing he did when she was little?"

Although she was reluctant at first, Darcy's logic wore down her natural timidity. This, combined with the absolute trust she felt in him and the appeal of retribution for all the various deceased creatures of multi-legged species she found placed in her toy chest when she was a child, allowed her to finally agree.

Her natural grace made the lessons easier than she expected, but her sweetness and shyness restricted her ability to be aggressive in her routines. Eventually as her confidence in all things improved, so did her fencing and the day (admittedly several years later) she pinned her brother against the wall in the grand ballroom at Pemberley was a day *Georgiana* remembered fondly all the rest of her life.

Under Darcy's tutelage, she became a superior horsewoman in addition to her considerable fencing skills, and her brother also eventually convinced her to learn to shoot. She knew how to handle a shotgun and duelling pistols, but only felt comfortable with the small pearl-handled pistol Darcy presented to her one day as a celebration of her successful target practice.

She no longer felt hesitation in taking on any activity her brother challenged her to undertake. Darcy gained the added benefit of having a companion for all his favourite activities and they grew even closer as a result.



EACH DAY THEY WOULD study the newspaper. Georgie learned of world politics as well as the social aspects of the *ton*. Darcy told her everything he knew about anyone who was mentioned.

One of their episodes of reading the social column, however, brought news of a more serious nature for Fitzwilliam. Georgiana was reading out loud when she began an article about Lord Caldhart's son who, having recently graduated from Oxford and returned from his Grand Tour, was anticipated to be the catch of the coming Season, for he stood to someday inherit his father's vast fortune and title.

"That cannot be correct." Darcy interjected. "His lordship's son is well older than I am."

"It says the young man is but three and twenty, Brother, I can hardly see the paper mistaking his age by more than ten years!"

"Lord Robert's son was born ages before me, Georgiana, I have met the man. They must be speaking of his grandson. The paper will surely rue this stupid mistake."

"Not Lord Robert, the current Lord Caldhart: Lord Henry Caldhart and his son, Frederick."

Her brother's face fell.

"Lord Robert is no longer living?" he whispered, disbelieving.

"Good Heavens, Fitzwilliam! How can you not know? His death was the scandal of the spring of last year. It was in the papers for weeks!" Darcy cringed.

"What did they say?" he asked. Georgiana was surprised, as gossip was not typically to her brother's liking.

"The usual innuendo of Miss This and Lord That of course, but the gist of the tale was he had an argument with a mysterious lady. They insinuated it was a closer rela-

tionship than mere friendship, of course, but it resulted in his having had a heart attack and dying. She was instantly dubbed an infamous woman, however no trace of her ever surfaced again. The mystery of her and her disappearance was of great interest; hardly a day went by without its being mentioned in the papers." Suddenly recollecting how her brother had spent the spring, summer, and greater part of autumn that year, she made to apologise, but Darcy was quicker.

"No, do not say it! You need not apologise for my lack of knowing the goings-on in the world during that time." Both siblings were silent, briefly remembering that unhappy period. Darcy was determined not to wallow in the past, and returned to the subject at hand, almost cheerfully. "Was there any resolution to the gossip?"

"She was never found, if that is what you ask. Eventually, with the lack of any new information, the interest and the articles died out. I must say you surprise me brother; usually such sordid gossip is not to your liking."

Darcy collected himself. "Indeed you are right, my Dear. However lack of such simple knowledge has already had a ramification: I did not know who the present Lord Caldhart was! I can not forgive myself for committing such a serious faux pas!" Georgiana giggled, and Darcy was satisfied he had circumvented more inquiry into that which gave his heart great pain.



NOW HE WONDERED WHAT might have happened to Elizabeth. He had no doubt that she was the mysterious lady who was with Caldhart when he died. He lost no opportunity in planning a trip to town, and engaging the help of an investigator.

He did not ask the man to find the whereabouts of Miss Chantal Moreau. Rather, he told him he was hoping to find a Miss Elizabeth Bennet. He explained the she was an acquaintance of his from several years past, and he wished to renew the friendship. However, he was unsure of how he might be received, so rather than call upon her family himself, he wished to find out if the lady were still unmarried, where she currently resided, etc. He provided the names of her family and location in Hertfordshire, as well as the names of her aunt and uncle and their street in London.

Less than a week later, the investigator, Mr. Smith, reported that Miss Bennet had in fact, disappeared almost a year earlier. Her family was deeply disturbed at her unexplained absence and was known to have launched a full scale search which had yielded few results. They were still looking for her, or any word of her whereabouts.

Darcy could not help the look of surprise and worry upon his face when told Elizabeth had gone missing. He

asked Mr. Smith to investigate Miss Bennet's disappearance more thoroughly. Any information that could be uncovered was to be reported, no detail omitted. When Mr. Smith was finally gone, Darcy fretted.

He was unwilling to meet with the Gardiner's for fear his liaison with Elizabeth would somehow be revealed. He also knew that disclosing his meeting with her at the ball, besides bringing her family shame (considering what her situation had been that night) could also possibly connect her with his Lordship's or Wickham's demise. He was convinced it would only put her in peril and would not help anyone to discover her current whereabouts.

His largest worry had been his own lack of confidence in his ability to remain composed in front of the Gardiners if they were to inform him of more dire news. He knew he could not hold his emotions in check if they were to tell him anything had happened to her, if she were married, or if her situation with Lord Caldhart had been discovered.

Over the next weeks, Mr. Smith's further inquiries yielded little results. Darcy travelled often to London to meet with him, always returning quickly to Pemberley to continue his sister's curriculum. They now knew Miss Bennet had last been seen on the afternoon of May the fourteenth and her family, while still looking for her, did not seem to fear that foul play had been involved. In fact, by small hints here and there, both the investigator and Mr. Darcy began to believe Miss Bennet had purposely run away.

Darcy made a point of visiting his clubs, especially Whites, to see what the current gossip regarding the Caldhart affair was. The infamous betting book proved interesting to say the least. The number of wagers on the evening of the Blakely's ball was astounding, as were the payouts that had been demanded. There were many more speculative wagers as to the lady, her eminent discovery, and who might next lay claim to her, but none of them had come to fruition, and those bets remained unclaimed. Part of him was disgusted to see Elizabeth's fate speculated so crudely, but he was equally happy that no man had had the satisfaction of seeing the gossip and guesswork resolved.

It also had not escaped his notice that Lord Robert had in fact died the very night of the ball. He wondered whether Elizabeth had been forced to consummate the relationship before his Lordship's demise. Without knowing what had become of her, such vain wishes were hardly appropriate; she might now be living under a hundred different circumstances, many of which could be just as dismal as her living with Caldhart.

The thought that Elizabeth might only have been his, filled him with a happiness which could only be described as foolish male ego. He chastised himself inwardly for thinking it and put it out of his mind.

It seemed the current Lord Caldhart was eager to put his father's sordid past behind him, and there was very little said by any of the gossips at the clubs on the subject. His Lordship's household had behaved admirably, and infor-

mation regarding the night of Lord Robert's death had not been bantered about by the servants. It seemed the newspaper's articles were truly based on rumour and gossip alone and, without solid facts, the interest had thankfully died away.

One unusual point of note was the discovery some time later that Miss Bennet had disappeared the day before an employee of Mr. Gardiner's, a Mrs. Johnson, of Johnson's House of Cigars, also went missing. The investigator was familiar with Johnson's and told his employer of their excellent reputation as well as their success. He also informed Darcy it was universally acknowledged that Mrs. Johnson, who ran the shop, was the secret behind the quality of the shop's product. It seemed the Gardiner family was searching for Mrs. Johnson, as well.

Darcy was curious about this Mrs. Johnson and went himself to visit the shop soon after. He was pleasantly surprised at the interior furnishings of the place, and impressed with Mr. Whitaker, who waited upon him. When queried about his cigar preferences, Darcy was regrettably unable to give much useful information, as he hardly ever partook in them. However, Mr. Whitaker was able to ask him about his taste preferences in foods and, based on those inclinations, had a short made up for him to sample which he truly relished.

While enjoying his cigar, he asked about the proprietress of the shop. He was told Mrs. Johnson, for whom the shop was named, sadly had left them a year before. Darcy extended his condolences for their loss, after which they informed him Mrs. Johnson had been lost to them; not passed on. He inquired if foul play were suspected, but both Mr. Whitaker, and later Toby, coming out from the back room to join the men, informed him that Mr. Gardiner did not believe her to be a victim of any kind.

Toby had felt the loss of Mrs. Johnson greatly. He had become quite attached to the dear old lady, and ever grateful to all she had taught him, as well as the kindness she had shown in her shop. Now any opportunity to bemoan his loss was always eagerly taken advantage of. Darcy was taken aback by this boy who was obviously mourning her absence greatly.

"You must have worked with her since you were a small boy, then," he asked sympathetically.

"Oh, no, sir. Johnson's used to be Mr. Merriweather's shop, and when he retired, Mrs. Johnson took over. She knew Mr. Merriweather for years and he was so happy when she agreed to continue the shop for he didn't have no sons, ya see, no one to pass his learning on to, but she already had more in her head than he did, and she was kind enough to pass it all on to us before she went missin'."

"Pass it on?"

"Yeah, she left us a book. Only Mr. Whitaker can read it, course, but she wrote all her secrets for us. Made sure if anything happened to her, we would all know how she done it, and be able to run the shop. We wouldn't have such

a good business if not for her. It was all her and that nose of hers." There were faint shadows of tears in his eyes as he spoke of his beloved mentor.

"Would it be too much to ask to see this book of which you speak? I promise you I am not here to abscond with your secrets. It is just that your description of this extraordinary lady has piqued my interest and I should like to see the legacy she left behind." Mr. Whitaker nodded to Toby who fetched the volume and presented it to the gentleman.

Darcy thumbed through the missive, surprised at the quality of the hand which was very fine, and the inherent intelligence obvious throughout. He would have loved to study the article thoroughly, but knew such intense scrutiny would sadly not be possible.

"It is exceptional!" he praised sincerely, as he handed it back after only an insufficient minute of perusal. "I suggest you have copies made to preserve the knowledge she has bequeathed you."

Mr. Whitaker smiled. "An excellent idea, Sir. Thank you! If anything were to happen to this, I'm sure we should be lost. We shall have copies made directly."

Darcy paid for his box of cigars and went home very puzzled. Neither he, nor later Mr. Smith, could discover the connection between the two women. They wondered if Mrs. Johnson had somehow helped Miss Bennet run away and was even now helping to hide her. Unfortunately, Mrs. Johnson's disappearance had been as thorough as the younger lady's and neither woman could be traced.



WITH THE EFFORTS OF the brilliant Mr. Darcy, and the excellent work habits of Mr. Smith, the search that was endeavoured upon could justifiably be compared to the old saying 'leaving no stone unturned'. Between the times the Darcys went to London, and the many more individual trips by the brother, an impressive amount of time dedicated to searching for the illusive Miss Elizabeth Bennet had been tallied, albeit unsuccessful. By the time Darcy was finally willing to give up his search, almost a year later, it was only because he was convinced she had left of her own accord, and did not wish to be found.

Over the following years he did intermittently continue the investigation with Mr. Smith, but she had been far too clever. His results mirrored her family's: no trace of Elizabeth Bennet or Mrs. Johnson could ever be found. He kept his ears open to news of various men's new mistresses, but all the lady's backgrounds were well known. He was glad of this, and at least told himself that wherever she had gone, it was hopefully to a better life than the one she had almost lived with Lord Robert. He reasoned that until Elizabeth wanted to be found or word of her whereabouts was heard, there was little he could do.

He continued to give Johnson's House of Cigars his custom, the young men always welcoming him warmly whenever he visited and speaking affectionately of the dear lady they all admired.



THE YEARS DURING GEORGIANA'S instruction found the siblings almost always at Pemberley. They rarely ventured to town except for purchases, and the occasional discreet outing to the theatre, concert hall, gallery or museum. They planned their stays to last not more than a day or two, therefore, before anyone had a chance to call upon them, they were returning to Derbyshire.

When Darcy went to town for purposes of his investigation, he never made his residency in his town home known. He learned to arrive on horseback late at night and enter through the rear of his home. His carriage arrived separately and was unloaded near the servant's quarters. He enjoyed the anonymity his subterfuge afforded; he found he never had to bother turning away callers as they never knew he was there. Eventually, he became quite proficient at stealthily entering and leaving his home.

They completely shunned the Season, and while the rest of society felt put out, Darcy knew, and told his sister as much, that all would be forgiven when they did venture back into society. Two wealthy, eligible Darcys would always be welcomed back with open arms when they returned, he solemnly pointed out with a laugh.

Because of their reclusive nature, social appearances by either Darcy were almost non-existent. Charles Bingley wrote regularly, and Darcy was happy to re-establish correspondence with him. He felt badly about not issuing an invitation to Charles to come to Pemberley, but he and Georgiana had spoken honestly about it, and they knew Bingley would not be able to come without his sisters.

Georgie no longer felt compelled to hold her tongue about "those dreadful women" and she proceeded to give her uninhibited opinion of them both, including deadly accurate and wickedly funny imitations. This caused her brother to laugh until tears were forming at the corner of his eyes, and she happily joined him. The servants were quite used to the lively conversations the master and his sister had and their gay laughter was no longer out of the ordinary.

However, in December of the year eighteen fourteen, little more than a twelve month after their self-imposed seclusion, Bingley paid a visit to Pemberley, unannounced and thankfully, unaccompanied. He was beginning to doubt Darcy's existence, he explained, and begged for a room and a brandy. The Darcys welcomed him heartily, and enjoyed a fortnight of his society before he was called away by his sisters in town.

While he was there, Darcy and Georgie suspended all her lessons, but continued to do their estate business together and ride daily, accompanied by Bingley, of course. The evenings spent together were lively and witty and Bingley privately marvelled at how much “little” Georgiana had altered and matured. She still had her sweet and caring side, but the interaction with her brother, as well as the conversations she had with him, were nothing short of astonishing. He wisely kept his observations to himself until the last night of his stay after she had retired for the night and he and Darcy headed to the library.

There Bingley commented on Georgiana’s remarkable liveliness, grace and wit. Darcy was terribly proud she had made a good impression on Bingley. He knew Charles was the perfect person for her to begin her re-entry into society. She was comfortable with him, and her true self had shone through while he was visiting them.

“Darcy, I do not know what brought her out of her shell, but I think I now understand why you spent so much time crossing wits with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. They are very similar in their turn of minds, their humour, and their liveliness, do you not think? You must have seen a kindred spirit to your sister in her. I am glad to see her be able to blossom and reveal her character to the world. You will certainly have your hands full when she is presented. I think she will break many a heart, my friend.”

Darcy almost fell off his chair.

“*Good God!*” he thought. “*What a revelation! Is that what I am doing: making my own version of Elizabeth?*”

He sat stunned for several moments while he quickly considered Bingley’s words. Soon enough he was able to dismiss the notion; it was not true. He and Elizabeth were well-matched in most things, and in teaching Georgie to be more like him, it made her similar to Elizabeth. He breathed a large sigh of relief, however he conceded to Bingley that perhaps he did like crossing wits with Elizabeth Bennet.

This now opened a subject Bingley was hesitant to bring up, but he continued on. He confessed to Darcy he planned to return to Netherfield. He had given it a great deal of thought. He had not hidden himself in society since Jane Bennet, but still he had never found a woman her equal, nor had he feelings for anyone else since Jane.

In short, Bingley had come to announce his intentions, not to solicit Darcy’s opinion. Bingley had become his own man, and in the year and a half of his friend’s absence he had begun to trust his own judgement and was going to follow his heart.

Darcy felt keenly all the shame of his past deception to Charles. He had been unfair, especially when considering his greatest motivation for encouraging Charles to abandon Netherfield was to avoid the company of one Elizabeth Bennet. He decided then and there to correct his error, and confessed all he had done in the past (though he did not mention his interactions with the sister of the object of Bingley’s affections). He ended his speech with a heart-

felt apology and a solemn promise he would never again presume to know what was best for his friend, instead he hoped that someday he and Miss Bennet could find it in their hearts to forgive his arrogance and interference.

He knew he could not tell Bingley about Elizabeth’s fall from grace or her disappearance. The Bennets might very well still be the respectable family of Longbourn they had been two years earlier and Darcy would not ruin the happiness of Jane Bennet or any of her sisters due to anything he would say about Elizabeth.

Bingley stood, mouth agape, hardly believing the words he had heard. His face showed all the anger he was feeling, as well as the hurt. He questioned Darcy on his role, his sister’s accomplice and the times they had lied. Darcy never hesitated to answer truthfully, or say how utterly and completely wrong he had been.

If Darcy thought he would have to suffer a long and hard fought battle to win back Bingley’s trust and regard after the wretched way he had treated him, he could not miscalculated the kind heartedness of his friend more. Before the two retired for bed that evening, Bingley had forgiven him completely, and asked if Darcy would give his blessing to him, though he did not need it; he would simply like it.

“Charles,” he said, “I wish you a speedy journey, all the luck the world holds and, from the very bottom of my heart, my blessing and joy to you, my friend; you deserve it more than anyone I know. I am not worthy of the friendship you have always shown me, but I do desire it, and will never again take it for granted.”



MR. BINGLEY RETURNED TO Netherfield in January with a heartfelt apology and a not insignificant quantity of bouquets. After several weeks of daily calls to Longbourn, he was granted the right to formally court Miss Jane Bennet, under the very constant, watchful eye of her father.

No proprieties were breeched and every formal rule and bit of etiquette was followed so that no stain would fall upon the couple. Two months after courtship had ensued, Mr. Bingley petitioned, Miss Bennet accepted, and Mr. Bennet consented and bestowed his blessing.

Darcy was pleased to read the letter bearing the news of Bingley’s engagement to Jane Bennet in the spring. That is to say, the parts he could decipher were read with joy. He and Georgiana sent their sincere congratulations to him.

Bingley’s sisters had decided a happily married Charles was much easier to bear than a Charles whose temper flared at the least mention of any disapprobation on their part of his actions, his choice of bride, or his new connections.

His sister, Caroline, had recently married a foreigner from Austria, Mr. Hans Wiegrieffe, whose family owned several prosperous ironworks. He had come to England to

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PEMBERLEY, SEPTEMBER, 1815

find a refined wife who, frankly, would improve the gentility of his family's breeding line and, in view of her recent decline of reputation, his lack of understanding in the nuances of the English language had worked greatly in her favour. With few people to speak with, he and Caroline had entered instantly into a delightful and animated conversation in German.

Unbeknownst to the Bavarian gentleman, it seems that after the night of the Blakely's ball, Caroline had a decidedly difficult time in attracting the attention of any man in society. They were willing enough to speak to her in a group setting, or if seated next to her at a dinner, but she was never sought out in a drawing room when on her own, asked to dance at a ball, or shown any particular attention by a gentleman.

She had all but given up on finding a match when Mr. Wiegrieffe had been introduced to her. Grateful for the attention of a man at last, Caroline had allowed herself and, more importantly, her heart to become quickly attached to the stout moustached man whose height allowed him to look her directly into her eyes when standing close. He wasted no time with silly courting and flirtations, and she wasted no time in accepting the man who had endeared himself to her so speedily.

Now, with Caroline's future secured and her removal to Vienna imminent, and the Hursts permanently in residence in London, the news of Bingley's forthcoming marriage was all that was disinterested, insincere and wholly expected. The liberation from the lack of the Bingley sisters' involvement in their brother's life would afford the couple many years of contented peace.

After a four-month engagement period, Jane and her Mr. Bingley finally married in Longbourn chapel, on August the fifteenth, eighteen hundred and fifteen, fulfilling a lifelong dream of the mother of the bride. The absence of the bride's dearest sister was quietly noted but not dwelled upon by any of the guests, and the absence of the groom's youngest sister and new brother-in-law, was noted with sighs of appreciation. The presence that day of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and his sister Georgiana added to the felicity of the entire wedding party.

Several weeks after the Bingley's wedding, Darcy and his sister began to talk of Georgie's coming out. In the past, he would have simply told her when it was to occur, taking control of the entire dealings. Now, they sat down to rationally and logically decide what would be best. Georgiana admitted to having no illusions as to her role in a marriage and certainly had no desire to hurry into the state, but also knew that, until she did come out, certain pleasant experiences would be denied to her.

The two came up with an answer to appease all: Georgiana would be presented to the king in the winter season of her twentieth year. However, she would only indulge in the balls and parties in which she truly was interested and not feel pressured to accept invitations she did not wish to. She had no desire to make a splash, be the talk, or any other social column fodder. She simply wished to meet people and see if anyone interesting might be found among the dregs.

Six months later, Georgiana Darcy was presented at court: another significant milestone in her life. She had just turned twenty years of age and, whether she meant to or not, her entrance into society was indeed a great success. The sight of two single Darcys, magnificently turned out, and most especially the return of the eligible gentleman after an absence of nearly four years, was nearly overwhelming for the mothers of single ladies and gentlemen alike.

Georgiana's aunt, Lady Matlock, had happily sponsored her niece and had also stealthily concealed the fact of the lady's entrance into society until the last possible moment. It was with great satisfaction that she witnessed the reactions in the room when her dear Georgiana's name was announced. She knew full well the reputation her niece had as a shy and reticent young woman.

"Just wait until they speak with her," she laughingly mused behind her fan.

By the end of the evening, more than a few tails of unsuspecting young bucks were bruised when they dared enter the seemingly sweet realm of Miss Darcy. She was never cruel, nor unwelcoming to those who would seek an introduction, but she would not suffer fools gladly. With a brilliantly placed word, comment, or witticism, she quickly scared away those not worthy of a second look. The next round of possibilities often succumbed and gave up as well, but Georgiana did not have to dwell upon them. By the end of that first ball, she had danced every dance, and a few

intelligent, sincere and interesting people, both male and female, had found their way to her and her brother. Thus they could both say, with honesty, the evening had, thank heaven, been very worthwhile.

Her aunt could not agree more. Though Darcy had acted similar to his habits of past, in that he only danced with his sister and his aunt, she had seen a softening and ease in his interactions with others that had not previously existed. While she hesitated to call it friendly, it was certainly friendlier than Darcy had ever been in the past. However, Georgiana had been the real star that evening. Her debut was an unmitigated triumph. She was beautiful, confident, brilliant and charming and she would no doubt have the pick of society if she wished it.



HER FIRST SEASON WAS a delight to Miss Darcy. Her brother supported her decision to only attend dances and events she wished to, and the diminished social schedule allowed her to relax and relish her first experiences.

One of the most telling conversations Georgiana had early on in the Season was also, unbeknownst to her, overheard. She had been resting at the side of the dance floor, when the very wealthy, very large, very meddling Lady Ravenshaw cornered her. Georgie was not worried. Lady Ravenshaw had finally married off her last eligible son the previous Season and Fitzwilliam had assured her the elderly dowager had no prospects to try to push upon her. With an imperceptible sigh, she smiled and greeted the lady who immediately tried to determine if there were any gentleman who had caught Georgiana's fancy yet.

"I am not looking for a husband, Lady Ravenshaw, I assure you."

"Not wanting to marry? Why ever not?"

"I am wealthy enough to support myself, your Ladyship; I have no need for someone to put a roof over my head."

Lady Ravenshaw harrumphed loudly, "Then why come out in society at all if you are not looking to make a good match?"

"I seek something else, Madam."

Her ladyship looked dumbfounded at Miss Darcy.

Georgiana leaned in conspiratorially and whispered loudly, "Treasure, Lady Ravenshaw!"

The lady frowned. "You wish for jewels?"

Georgiana stifled a giggle. "No, but I seek jewels amongst society; people who are treasures to befriend, life-long companions to enrich my life," she answered confidently.

Lady Ravenshaw shook her head quickly, her curls flying from one side to the other with her movements, "I do not understand, Miss Darcy. Oh, I see Mrs. James. I simply must pay my respects. Pray excuse me."

Georgiana laughed at the quickly retreating lady. "No, Lady Ravenshaw, I am quite sure you will *never* understand."

However, a gentleman who had heard the entire conversation understood very well. The very next day he called upon the Darcy town home, and requested a private audience with the master of the house.

The most astonishing discourse Darcy could recall having in years then ensued. Mr. Patrick Kevin Louis McNally had come to tell Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy he intended to marry his sister, Georgiana.

However, he had no wish to be introduced to the lady. He had no desire at the time to receive Darcy's permission for marriage or even courtship. He merely wanted to state his intentions honourably, give his reasons, and put forth his own personal history, fortune, and situation, for the express purpose of allowing Darcy to know the man who would *one day* pay his sister attentions, thus ensuring he would not be alarmed.

At first Darcy *was* somewhat startled. Mr. McNally was not a man of diminutive stature. Darcy was already considered a great tall fellow, but Mr. McNally made him feel, for the first time since his boyhood, small. Moreover his height was only a small portion of his size. He had the strapping shoulders and back of a coalminer to match. His face was not immediately handsome, but he was not plain either and he was blessed with a head of thick jet-black hair that any man would envy. Darcy could not help but admire the man's physique, it was obvious he must partake of a great many physical sports or amusements to be so healthy. Luckily McNally's open demeanour and speech soon made him forget his previous worry.

"I have spent four years in London, Mr. Darcy. Four years of attending each new Season, looking over all the young ladies coming out, meeting them and speaking with them, trying to find someone I could admire and love, and someone who would love me in return. I know it is not fashionable to marry for love. But I have no desire to take a wife merely to provide me with an heir to whom I will pass along my fortune. I wish to share my life with a woman who is my equal in affection and intellect.

"I apologise if speaking frankly offends you, or if my views are too radical for your tastes. But I have seen enough of the ways by which society lives, and most of it would make the commoners stone them.

"I want a partner in my life, not a trinket. Most ladies I have met barely have the mettle to be more than a trinket." Suddenly the man let out a hearty laugh from deep inside his person as he realised his joke. "Ha! Mettle, trinket."

Darcy was instantly charmed by this unassuming hulk of a man who laughed so easily at himself, and joined with him in his mirth. He *had* noticed him recently. It was indeed hard for Mr. McNally to be unobtrusive and Darcy had seen him hanging around the fringes of their circle as they spoke to people at various events.

"I have been observing your sister, Sir. More importantly, I have been listening to what she has to say. Most people, I think I can confidently say, have not actually been listening to her. I have often observed the conversations young men have with her, and most of them simply want to hear their own voices, instead of learning what opinion she might have on a subject. I cannot tell you how delightful her opinions have been to me and, if I might be so bold, so in line with my own. I know you do not know me yet. I would be happy to start an acquaintance with you so that you might get to know me better. But regardless of whether you wish to or not, someday I *will* be applying to you for permission to court Miss Darcy."

"Mr. McNally, I must confess to being intrigued by you, but I feel I must first ask the obvious and demand to know why you do not actually wish to be introduced to Georgiana yet."

"She has just come out!" he replied, surprised.

"Yes, I am certainly aware of that fact."

McNally began to roll his eyes, but then thought better of it.

"If I were to court your sister, if she and I were to begin a friendship right now, it would essentially be the end of her Season."

"You are worried that as a courted woman, or an engaged woman, Georgiana would miss out on the entertainments?"

"Yes, of course! She only has the chance once in her lifetime to be a debutante, Mr. Darcy. I would never deny her the enjoyment and carefree life she will live these next months. If she were to attach herself to me, I think she would always regret having missed it, though she might never voice it."

"But what if she meets with another man and attaches herself elsewhere? Would you not be angry?"

"I think you already know the answer, Sir. Nevertheless, I will take what hand fate deals me."

"Miss Darcy and I will be introduced by this summer, and I hope that when we do meet, she will have the memory of many a young man in her head, and know what it is she wants from a man she might accept." McNally smiled wryly, his green eyes twinkling in mischief. "Can you see some of the logic in my thinking now?"

This man might talk simply, but his words hid an intellect much more cunning than most would realise. Darcy would never admit it then, but he liked Mr. McNally exceedingly.

"I think I understand you perfectly, sir," he answered with his own smirk. "Now I would ask you a personal question."

"I will answer anything you wish to know."

"Do you fence?" Darcy queried.

THE DAY FINALLY DID come in which Mr. Patrick McNally was introduced to Miss Georgiana Darcy. He had lived the last five months in the shadows around her: a fleeting glance of him on the edge of a ballroom, his retreating back espied after she sensed his presence near her while she conversed.

She had lived with the constant excited ramblings of her elder brother about the new friend he had made, yet who never dared show his face. Darcy and McNally fenced together, rode together, met for dinner at their club, but never had the elusive man ventured back to the Darcy's town home since the fateful March day when he introduced himself to the brother.

By the time McNally announced he was ready to meet Miss Darcy, Georgiana's curiosity, not to mention her considerable interest in this mysterious man of whom her brother was so fond, was at a peak. Therefore, when the two at last actually laid eyes on one another, rather than its being a shy uncomfortable moment, it was almost a relief.

The usually outspoken Georgie did blush a great deal under the heated gaze of Mr. McNally, but her silence grew from an earnest stare that she did not seem to be able to keep herself from participating in with him. Darcy stood back in silence for most of it, completely caught up by the sight of two people who were almost instantly falling in love. He retreated to the end of the room to give them a chance to speak in privacy.

"Miss Darcy, how lovely to meet you at last! I have heard so much about you."

Georgiana smiled sweetly. "As I have about you, Mr. McNally. You have won yourself a loyal and praising friend in my brother."

"If I have, Miss Darcy, I assure you it was friendship offered sincerely. Your brother is the very best of men and I am proud to call him friend."

"Then you share that sentiment most earnestly with him, I assure you."

They continued to stare unrelenting at one another during the entire exchange, seemingly unaware of the propriety they were both happily breaking.

"I suppose it would only be fitting to acquaint ourselves with the basic facts of our existence, Madam. It is considered the polite way to conduct oneself in the instance of an initial meeting, is it not?"

Georgiana laughed lightly, and answered impertinently. "Perhaps, sir, but truly, is there anything about my connections, fortune or accomplishments that you could not possibly know?"

McNally burst outright. "I dare say, not, Miss Darcy!" he laughed. "And you—are there any details of my situation that have not been sufficiently explained to you?"

Georgiana's face suddenly became serious. "Actually, yes, Mr. McNally, I do have questions with regards to your property in the North. Is it a large estate?"

McNally was momentarily taken aback, and replied cautiously, "Large and small are relative terms, Miss Darcy."

I find it a manageable-sized estate. Some might find it large, and yet others might consider it quite small.”

“I see, and what is the approximate acreage, Mr. McNally?” she asked most directly.

Now he hesitated visibly. “I have approximately seven thousand, three hundred acres, Miss Darcy,” he replied shortly.

“The north can be quite rugged terrain, Mr. McNally, is all of the land farmable?”

His eyebrow raised in a disarming manner, rendering his face ruggedly handsome in almost a rakish fashion. He was obviously very interested in where this conversation was being directed by the lady. “No, you are correct. We run sheep upon nearly half of the land; less than four thousand acres can be farmed.”

“An excellent usage, Sir. What are your crops then? What do you grow?”

“Wheat, barley, turnips, clover, oats, some vegetables in small quantity, mostly for the benefit of my tenants; they are not cash crops and we are very far north, after all.”

“Excellent, Mr. McNally. Can I assume you practice crop rotation and allow your fields to fallow as well?”

Here Patrick broke out in a wide grin, now on to her game. “We do indeed, Miss Darcy. I read everything I can find of the latest farming techniques and animal husbandry as well.” He lowered his voice. “Sometime you must allow me to tell you of our methods to induce our ewes to always produce twins.”

Now Georgiana grinned. “Perhaps, someday, Mr. McNally; but I think for now, *that* conversation needs to be postponed.”

“Quite so. I must say it is refreshing to speak to a lady about one’s estate concerns. Most women I speak with would only be interested in the details of the income my estate produces, not the crops.”

Georgiana nodded her agreement. “If there is such a thing as a gentleman farmer, then I am a *lady* farmer, Mr. McNally. My fortune comes from, and is dependent upon, the prosperous running of my family’s estate, the success of which falls to both my brother and myself. I do all that I can to secure its continuity and all aspects of the venture interest me exceedingly.

“While I often come to town for the amusements, they are to me just that, amusements, not real life; not my life now, or in the future. I live in the country, amongst the verdant green fields, and the wilds of the forest, riding, walking and enjoying the clean air: the healthful habits of a farmer’s life and an active participation in the running of our estate with my brother. Do I make myself clear, Sir?”

“Indeed you do Miss Darcy and, if I may be so bold, I agree with your predilections and could not be more pleased at hearing your future plans.”

They stared, unfazed at one another, yet again.

“And if I may be so bold, Mr. McNally, I would be very pleased at hearing *your* future plans.”

He gasped.

“For your estate, of course,” she demurely added.



WITHIN THE MONTH, THE gossip of how Mr. Patrick McNally, who had previously been known to rarely have more than one conversation with *any* eligible lady, had been calling *steadily* upon Miss Georgiana Darcy, and the apparent pleasure with which the lady had been receiving these attentions was all over town. After five weeks, Mr. McNally officially requested permission to court Georgiana and was happily granted that right by the lady, her brother, and her guardian cousin.

The next two months were spent in utter bliss by the two doves who could barely turn their heads to anyone else in the room. Patrick opened any dance they attended together with her, and always closed the same with his lady. She spent little time in the company of other gentlemen and, though always polite, the eligible young men of society soon learned that to try to engage Miss Darcy for a dance, or more importantly, engage her attention away from her suitor, was fruitless.

She was dubbed a hopeless case, as was her lover, and soon society resorted to trying to find fault in the match, no matter the futility. The greatest hopes of the matchmaking mama’s of society were solidly dashed when it was formally announced Miss Georgiana Darcy and Mr. Patrick McNally were engaged to be married. The wedding was set for six weeks hence, and was to take place, to the horror of all, at the bride’s home, Pemberley, in Derbyshire, and *not* in town.



PATRICK’S FORTUNE PROVED TO be one of the great misrepresented facts of the London *ton*. It was common knowledge that he was master of a large estate in the North, at the very edge of the Scottish border. The general consensus, egged on by McNally’s own boast, of an income of eight thousand pounds a year, was sadly incorrect. What none of society had known was Mr. McNally’s family, coming primarily from Scotland, and, most unfortunately, Ireland, had left the eldest and only descendant from both his mother and his father’s sides, all their holdings. The properties his parents had inherited and passed on to him had not only been vast, but also highly profitable. McNally had wisely preferred to keep as many of them in the original family names, so as not to draw attention to himself.

When the day came to draw up the marriage settlement papers and confess his worth to Fitzwilliam and Richard,

the look upon his future relatives' faces made the deception worth every moment.

Darcy had held the paper in his hands, quickly skimming the rhetoric and coming to the pertinent numbers. Richard held his own copy and had almost simultaneously come to the same astonishing calculation before the two cousins's heads snapped up to stare at one another.

"Patrick!" Darcy turned to his future brother, incredulous. "You...that is, are you sure? I mean, you intend to settle," here he was forced to stop, shake his head and blink hard at the paper, "*seventy thousand pounds* upon Georgiana?"

"It is an appropriate amount for my wife, Darcy. I think it correct, do you not?"

Richard, who had continued reading the document, interrupted, "Good God, McNally—you own a fair part of Ireland and Scotland! How can none of us have known this?"

Patrick smiled good-naturedly. "You, along with the rest of the world, have only known what I wished them to, my future cousin. I could hardly find a good woman if such a ridiculous fortune were known, now could I?"

"Does Georgie know?" Darcy asked, truly concerned over the ramifications of her being mistress of such an overwhelming array of properties.

"She does, Darcy. From almost the beginning, I wished for her to know what she was getting herself into before her heart was beyond retrieval, should she change her mind. But being the extraordinary woman she is, do you know what she said?"

Both cousins shook their heads together as they listened, mesmerized.

"She asked, 'Will you be with me always, to weather through whatever is necessary to manage it all? For if you will share our burdens and your life with me, I would not care if you were a pauper, as long as you were by my side.'"

All three men nodded appreciatively at the sentiment.

"At the beginning?" Darcy remarked, now realising how intimate a conversation they must have had early on in their relationship.

McNally grinned sheepishly. "Yes, I'm afraid there have been aspects of your sister's and my interactions about which we have not been completely forthcoming."

Darcy was about to get angry, but Patrick appeased him quickly. "No proprieties were breached, my dear future brother! I have never imposed myself upon your sister in any way. I only speak of what we have said to one another. You see," here he stopped, eyes glazed, staring blankly with a hint of a smile whilst remembering, "I actually proposed to your sister three days after we were introduced. She accepted happily, and we agreed that, while we both knew our hearts were true, society would never understand the connection and deep abiding love we already felt for one another. We decided we would continue our acquaintance with all the proper decorum, propriety, and time lines that soci-

ety dictates. Therefore, five weeks: courtship, two months later: engagement, and six weeks later: wedding."

"You decided *beforehand* on the date you would come to me and ask to court her, and when you would say you proposed...all of it?" Darcy asked amazed.

Patrick grinned. "We did. Actually, your sister chose the dates. She was very methodical on deciding when we would begin each step. She has a great capacity for numbers; I merely agreed to her choices."

"Yet had you both had your way, you would have been married two months ago?" Richard asked, snickering.

Patrick laughed, too. "No, I think for the sake of all proper deportment, and for our children's futures, their Mama and Papa must have an entirely proper courtship to present to the world."

Darcy and Richard could do little else but shake their heads, still dumbfounded.

Patrick, however wished to reassure his new relations of his devotion to Georgiana. "Fitzwilliam, Richard, never doubt that Georgiana is the reason my heart beats happily and the only woman whom I shall ever love. I know it is highly improper to say it, or not the current practice, but I will never break my vow of fidelity to her; no woman but my wife, on that oath I will swear."



LATER, AFTER McNALLY HAD left, Richard and Darcy sat, still slightly dazed in his study.

"I wish I still drank spirits," Darcy said solemnly.

Richard immediately was disturbed. "What has you so riled?"

"I am trying to get my mind around the amount of money Patrick has," Darcy muttered.

"Some would say the same about you," Richard retorted. Darcy gave him a scowl. "What is really rankling you?"

Darcy pouted. "Do you have any idea how many times at our club he has made *me* pay for our dinner?"



THE NIGHT BEFORE THE wedding, the Darcys, Fitzwilliams, McNallys and Bingleys were happily gathered in the blue drawing room of Pemberley. Lady Catherine had meant to attend with Anne, but they had both come down with putrid throats and, combined with the bad weather necessarily associated with December, had cancelled the trip at the very last moment. The bride and groom as usual had no eyes for anyone else, but they did manage to thank their friends and relations now and then for the heartfelt good wishes that were being bestowed upon them.

Darcy was to give the bride away the next morning and was having a difficult time not feeling melancholy about the bittersweet day ahead. He was overjoyed at seeing the deep and abiding love his sister had found with Patrick. Part of him tried to take credit for the match, but he chuckled to himself at his obstinate pride. It was all Georgiana's doing. She was the woman who attracted such a fine man. The very best of men he had wished for her, and now she had found him. His wealth was immaterial; Patrick's excellence of character was based upon everything *in spite* of his fortune. How happy he was to call him brother. Tomorrow would be the day for speeches, and teary farewells, tonight the excitement of the wedding called for happiness and love.

He caught Richard's eye to stay behind as the guests bid their host goodnight. Soon only the betrothed couple remained and they, uncharacteristically, actually realised the room had gone silent.

The two men then stood in front of the couple; Richard nodded to Darcy, who took both their hands in his and put them together, just as he would the next morning at Pemberley chapel and said, "Patrick, Georgiana, tomorrow will be a whirlwind, I have no doubt, so I wish for this one moment to extend my sincere blessings to you both. Everyone will be saying it tomorrow, but no one will mean it more deeply than myself when I tell you I wish you joy. I wish you joy in every day you spend with each other, and I do not doubt you will be able to discover it together.

"Your betrothed is a frank man, Georgiana, and I know if you both are frank and honest with one another, and remember to cherish this rare gift of love you share, you will be very happy all your lives. For me, it is everything I could ever wish for you, Sister."

He patted their hands gently and stepped back, whereupon Richard, not expecting anyone to look at him at the moment, and resembling a bright Christmas ribbon, coughed nervously, nodded his head, and replied, "Yes, well said, Darcy; I feel quite the same."

The couple stood, laughing through their misty eyes while embraces, handshakes and smiles were exchanged. Darcy and Richard then looked significantly at one another and then purposely turned their backs upon the couple and made to leave. Richard, now recovered, turned as they started to close the door and stated, in his best commanding voice, "You *will* leave this room in ten minutes time, no longer. Heaven help you both if I have to come back in here." Then he grinned like the cat that ate an entire field of mice, while quietly closing the door behind him.

Georgie was in Patrick's arms before the latch had clicked.

SOMETIME LATER, AFTER THEY had once again caught their breaths, Georgiana was firmly seated in her fiancé's lap, playing with his thick hair while nuzzling his strong neck. His hands were thoroughly taking stock of his beloved's bottom, and he was pleased to note the strength of her haunch.

She giggled. "Do you think I shall be fair breeding stock, sir?"

He pinched her, twice. "Aye, Lass. I think at the very least you will be that." He moved his mouth to her ear and licked the soft lobe while whispering, "And I plan to practice breeding with you as often as possible."

She gasped, then bit his neck in retaliation for his cheek. "You should be ashamed, but I can see from your smile you are not the least repentant for your bawdy words! What manner of man is it I am marrying?"

"Besides a man who is deliriously in love with you, he is also a man who is being driven wild with desiring you. Oh, Georgie, just think what we shall be doing this time tomorrow!" he cried as he began kissing her throat.

She moaned her approval, while grasping at the expanse of his shoulders. She giggled when he began to nibble on her, breaking the heat of their passion and showing, once again, his deep respect for her by not taking too many liberties.

"I try not to think about it too much," she answered.

He withdrew frowning but she instantly sought to soothe him by taking his face into her hands and drawing him back to her lips.

She spoke between kisses. "Not because...I am...frightened...my love...it is...my own...desire...I seek...to avoid."

He groaned at her admission of desiring their union and she found herself held tightly against the great mass of man that he was.

"Oh, my girl, how I shall love you tomorrow!" he cried as his mouth covered hers possessively. She finally broke free from his searching lips and tongue and rested her head against his forehead. They looked into each other's eyes and smiled, then laughed together.

"Tomorrow," she said happily through her panting breaths.

"Tomorrow night," he replied with a grin. "Though that does bring up one subject I think would be worth mentioning. As you have no mother, my dear, and usually brides are...advised on all aspects of their marriage by their mother..."

"Yes, Patrick?" she asked innocently.

He gave a great sigh. "I wondered if there were any questions you might have, or any information you might wish for me to impart to you, before...before tomorrow."

"I cannot think of what you might mean," she answered.

"Georgiana, has your aunt, or maybe Mrs. Bingley or even Mrs. Reynolds spoken to you concerning the duties of a wife?"

"Goodness me, Patrick! I am mistress of Pemberley and have been hostess for my brother for almost five years. I think I know my duties."

Patrick now sighed even harder, but continued on. "My love, I do not speak of household duties, I am speaking of duties, well, the things a husband and wife share."

She looked at him blinking lightly with confusion upon her face.

"What a husband and wife share in the marriage bed, Georgiana," he finally blurted out.

At that point, Georgiana could no longer keep up the ruse and started giggling.

"You Minx! You knew all along to what I was eluding?"

She nodded, pulling in her bottom lip.

"And am I to assume you have no questions?"

She shook her head.

"Did your aunt tell you everything you wish to know?"

She shook her head again.

"Mrs. Bingley, then?"

When she shook her head a third time, he winced.

"Mrs. Reynolds?"

She shook her head yet again.

"Then whom?"

Now she had to cover her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"All of them," she managed to squeak out. "And that information was in addition to the books my brother hides at the top of the library shelves. I found those years ago; quite edifying, really."

He pulled her back into his arms.

"I think I shall always have to thank your brother for deciding you should be educated so thoroughly," he growled as his lips trapped hers once more.

"Mmm," she murmured. "Thank me first."



MR. McNALLY'S PERCEPTION IN realising how perfectly matched he and Georgiana would be in intellect, temperament and affection, turned out to be completely justified; they married exactly five months to the day from whence they first were introduced: December the fourth, eighteen hundred and sixteen, and lived a life filled with love, if not perfect peace. She was, after all, a Darcy.

Chapter 25

LONDON, APRIL, 1817

Jane Bingley sat in her drawing room, quietly reflecting over her correspondence.

"Things do not change," she thought as she read her Mama's letter from her girlhood home. She daydreamed about what they would all be doing right then; Papa in his library, a good book snugly grasped in his hand. Kitty, who was now Mrs. Fletcher (having married her Uncle Philips' law partner a twelvemonth earlier) no doubt visiting Longbourn, while her mother would be playing sentry at the windows to see who else would be calling. Mary might be going over the household accounts or visiting a tenant's family.

Well, there was one change: Mary had come into her own and provided the common sense and economy her family had always lacked. She had slowly taken up the role as mistress of Longbourn in all the ways that truly mattered, and neither her mother, who really only wanted to be the hostess of her parlour and table, nor her father, who preferred to be treated as a guest, objected in the least to her active running of the estate. Jane smiled thinking how much happiness and peace of mind Mary had brought to them all. God bless dear Mary!

Jane was happy, she had her Charles whom she loved and by whom she was loved in return, and she had her quiet life in the country and here in town. She and her husband participated in few of the social activities of the *ton*. They mostly enjoyed a very comfortable existence with each other and their close family and friends. Yes, Jane had very little about which to complain with one very important exception: she had lost the person most dear to her next to Charles. Almost four years earlier Jane had lost her Lizzy, and no matter the happiness the rest of her world afforded, she still felt that loss keenly, as if part of her was missing.

It was on this lovely April day, the sun shining with a light warm breeze announcing spring was well and truly here, that the servant brought in his tray with a card upon it to his mistress. She picked up the card which read:

Mrs. William James Cartwright

Jane frowned; she knew no such person and was about to tell the butler to inform the lady she was not at home, when he discreetly cleared his throat, indicating she should look more closely. Turning the card over she saw, in a hand she knew almost as well as her own:

Jane, please see me.

E.

She ran, almost knocking into the poor startled butler, but never slowed her pace until she reached the front door. There, standing in the sparkling afternoon light with the dust particles floating magically around her like a dream, was Elizabeth. They flew into each other's arms crying and smiling and squealing like two young girls again.

They could not release each other, though neither one cared. Most of the servants could not help walk past them as if their duty somehow demanded they cross the front hallway, but still the sisters did not stop their embraces.

Later, Mrs. Bingley would think it odd seeing the upstairs chamber maid and the scullery kitchen maid in her front hall, but she did not comment to them. She knew the usually calm and level-headed mistress wailing in the doorway was enough to garner the interest of her servants and she wisely decided not to further the talk with explanations.

"Lizzy, Lizzy, my dear sister! How I have wished for this day! How I have missed you!" she cried, her tears still not abating.

"Jane, dear Mrs. Bingley, how wonderful you look! You are well, yes?"

Jane nodded mutely. "And you, Lizzy, you look lovely; you are well, too?"

"Yes, Jane, I have never been better, especially now I am with you." Tears started flowing again: happy tears, welcoming tears of joy and relief for both women. Eventually they calmed down somewhat and Jane led her sister into her house.



THE BUTLER USHERED THE gentleman in.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Bingley this afternoon, Jacobs, is he in?"

"Not yet sir, but I'm sure he will be home shortly if you had established plans. May I escort you to his study to await him, sir?"

"Thank you, yes."



THE TWO SISTERS SAT under a lovely shaded area in the back of the house, relishing the fresh air, and the dear company they both were keeping. After the initial excitement had died down, they were able to inquire more thoroughly into one another's health and happiness. Jane was more forth-

coming than her sister with her life's details, but Elizabeth did not hesitate to assure her sister of her complete felicity.

Not long after they had been sitting, the maid came and delivered a message to Mrs. Cartwright.

Elizabeth looked up with an impertinent sparkle in her eye and asked, "Jane, may I introduce you to someone?"

"Of course, Lizzy! I did not know you had brought someone with you! I wish you had informed me; I would not have hesitated to let them into my home. Oh my, they have not been waiting in your coach all this while, have they?"

"Not at all, he has been exploring the lovely park across from your house. I assure you he was very happy to do so and will be most content to call upon you here in your delightful garden." Jane then entreated the maid to bring the visitor to them.



A BOY RAN ACROSS the garden followed by his nurse. He was very young, but quite a tall and sturdy fellow.

The ladies could hear him calling, "Mama, Mama!"

Elizabeth smiled. "I am here, William," she answered, as he hurriedly scampered to rush into her skirts. She sighed and tousled the thick dark curls on his head as he hugged her.

"You have a son!" Jane exclaimed happily. Elizabeth nodded with a radiant smile upon her face.

"William, do not forget your manners. There is a lady present." He shyly peeked out from the folds of the fabric, stopped and quite obviously stared at the vision next to his mother. Elizabeth cleared her throat pointedly and William, remembering himself, jumped up tall, placed his feet properly together and bowed slowly and deeply, a large dimpled grin on his face as it was raised to his aunt. Jane gasped, not for his forgetful manners; it was the face in front of her which made her catch her breath.

"My God, Mama!" he cried. "She is exactly as you said; an angel, a very angel!"

"Son, have we not spoken of using that phrase?" she admonished back.

He bowed his head and sheepishly replied, "I am sorry, Mama, I have been reading and the words still stick inside my head. I will try not to use them again."

"Very well, but you must apologise."

William turned back to Jane and spoke humbly, "Please except my deepest apologies, my dear Lady Angel."

Jane stared blankly at him. Their entire discourse had been in French.

"In English, my love," his mother said softly.

William repeated himself, and bowed once more.

"Your apology is accepted, sir and I am pleased to meet you. My name, however, is Mrs. Bingley, not Lady Angel."

“William Bennet Cartwright, my Lady, at your service.” Jane giggled.

“You are a very proper gentleman, Master Cartwright. I think your mother has done a fine job raising you.”

“Thank you, my Lady. I cannot help but concur,” he said, not realising the obvious compliment he was in fact, paying to himself.

“I think your house is very beautiful, but I cannot help wondering if...” He stopped to innocently look up at his mother.

Elizabeth laughed. “My dear Jane, this is William’s way of being coy when he wants something.”

“And what would that be?” inquired Jane, puzzled.

“Your library!” they both exclaimed together.

“Why, Master Cartwright, you do not mean you take after your mother and read the day away? Besides, you cannot be more than three years of age.”

“Mama says I take after her and my father in that way. My birthday was three months ago, Mrs. Bingley. I am now...” He stopped to think. “...three and seventy-seven three hundred and sixty-fifth’s years old,” he declared proudly. “And I have been reading for over a year now.”

“How extraordinary!” exclaimed Jane, while Elizabeth tried very hard not to beam as she stroked her son’s head.

“Yes, Jane, William is as voracious a reader as can be. He delights in discovering treasures in anyone’s library.”

“Then you must see Mr. Bingley’s library, William. Shall I have the maid take you directly? Will you go with her?”

“Of course, Lady Angel. I am not afraid.”

Jane smiled. “Of course you are not, Master William; I never thought you would be.”

The maid went off with William and his nurse after he graced Jane with a heartfelt thank you and another beautiful smile. Jane’s eyes betrayed her thoughts immediately. She turned to Lizzy who had not missed the look upon her sister’s face.

“Will you tell me his true name now, or must I say it?” she asked softly.

“William Bennet Cartwright,” her sister answered without thinking.

“Lizzy.” Jane was not going to allow her to escape this. Silence hung between the two sisters.

Finally, she drew a great breath and sighed, “William Bennet Cartwright ...”

“Yes?” Jane raised her brows to signal her to continue.

“Darcy,” she breathed out slowly, staring blankly at the ground. “I have not said that name out loud since January the twenty-ninth, eighteen hundred and fourteen; the day he was born.” A silent tear ran down her left cheek without her realising it.



INSIDE CHARLES BINGLEY’S STUDY, Fitzwilliam Darcy sat motionless on the sofa next to the open window over-looking the Bingley’s garden. A silent tear ran down his left cheek, the owner completely unaware of it. Time froze, and he was cognisant of the ticking of the clock, and the slight humming of insects in the garden. How long he remained immobile he did not know until he heard the maid coming down the hall with the lad on their way to the library. He was torn between hearing Elizabeth speak again and the mad desire to see this child. His son! He had a son, his and Elizabeth’s! His mind was racing, as was his heart. He had no time to think; instead, jumping up quickly but quietly, he very nearly ran down the hallway to the library after them.



“IS IT SO OBVIOUS, Jane?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Like looking into a mirror that turns back time, Lizzy; he is the picture of his father, like no other son I have ever seen,” she answered solemnly. “And his smile! Oh my, he has the Darcy dimples!”

“Yes, I know. You cannot imagine my shock the first time as a baby he smiled at me,” she replied with a slight laugh. “But he does not know his real father; he may never know, I have not decided. I have not told him you are his Aunt. I am afraid he believes you are merely my friend. Please forgive me, but I must ask you to agree to keep this secret.”

Jane nodded her reluctant agreement while Elizabeth continued, “William is unlike any other boy. He is not the same for many, many reasons, not least of which is his mind.”

“Whatever do you mean, Lizzy?”

“He is not just clever; his brilliance goes far deeper. He has an intellect which is truly gifted in ways I could not have thought possible in a person, much less a young child.”

Jane looked concerned, but encouraged her to continue.

“When William was not yet nine months old, he started speaking, putting crude sentences together very quickly, never forgetting anything once he had learned it. He quickly started speaking whole sentences, and sang entire songs, often in other languages, if he heard me sing them.

“He continued by playing with all the puzzles in the house, and very quickly mastered them. I started to make up new games and challenges for him every day. His ability to master anything I set to him was astounding. Around the age of eighteen months I began seeing how interested he was in my books, and let him see the pages and the print. Soon after, we started studying his letters and then his num-

bers as well. I rarely had to tell him any fact twice. His mind absorbed everything with a keenness I could hardly believe.

“Before the time he was two, he was reading. He progressed so quickly, soon all the children’s books I had acquired, and afterwards the lending library books as well had been read several times over. Also at age two he started adding and later subtracting his numbers.

“He began asking me about languages. His nurse is French, and together we started teaching French to him. William now speaks it far better than I do, but it does not stop there. He found a book on Latin at the vicar’s parsonage, and started studying it on his own.

“I have continued teaching him all I know of mathematics, and we started learning geography and history recently. Unfortunately because he is still so young, he cannot write well, so most of his studies are conducted through speech alone. This makes the schooling progress very fast, but Jane, I will have to stop William’s lessons soon.”



DARCY’S HAND HESITATED AT the library door. He knew what his heart wanted, but he also feared it. Taking a deep steadying breath, he turned the handle slowly and stepped into a new world.

William was there, standing at a row of books, the shelves lined upwards from him for what seemed like several stories. He seemed so small, not more than a babe to Darcy, who was not accustomed to such small children. They had not heard him enter and Darcy took advantage to observe in great detail, as was his habit.

“*My son!*” he thought. He looked earnestly for those telling details that would prove him the son Darcy so desperately wanted him to be. The boy’s hair was a mop of mahogany curls, which he quickly discounted as both he and Elizabeth had such. However on closer inspection William’s hair was more like his. Her hair was much thicker and wavier compared to Darcy’s. This boy’s hair, his curls, were much more to his own than to his mother’s. His profile, Darcy concluded, was undecided, he had a fine nose, like both his parents, and a good chin, but he could not see more resemblance from a mere side view at twenty paces.

Then suddenly William spied a book he liked. His previous frowning curiosity as his fingers tread lightly across the spines was replaced with a beautiful wide grin of discovery and delight. As the grin spread across his little face, the sides were suddenly graced by two sweet indents which Darcy immediately recognised and he drew a sharp breath.

The nurse and William turned at the sound, and upon seeing the gentleman standing there, he bowed politely and, smiling, he spoke. “Sir, this is a most excellent library. I hope you do not mind my looking.”

Darcy walked slowly up to him, his gaze never leaving the boy’s face. The closer he got, the harder his heart beat. He did not know the smile upon his face made William feel very welcome and immediately relaxed any anguish he might have felt from the failure of the gentleman to address him. Darcy could not help but be deeply moved. William’s face was like a ghost to him: his own ghost of the boy he once was. Only a blind fool could not see Fitzwilliam Darcy in this child.

“Our son,” he thought again. He sighed so deeply it made the boy frown a bit. Remembering himself, Darcy determined to not waste this precious time.

Standing directly in front of him, he bowed, a deep, deep bow, at the bottom of which he looked directly up into William’s eyes and winked.

He then stood up to his fullest height and with an air of authority said, “Sir, any gentleman with enough good sense to appreciate this library, and give it such fine praise is always welcome. Your taste does you credit.”

“Ha!” laughed the lad. “I think you are having a bit of fun with me.”

Darcy immediately let out his breath and laughed along with him. He then knelt down to William’s level. “What do you find here that makes you smile so, young master?” he asked, studying the books in front of them. He had almost let slip out “young master *Darcy*” but caught himself in time.

“I have found a few good books I have already read and two good books I have been wishing to read!”

“And what do find that you wish to read?”

“Beowulf and the Canterbury Tales, sir!” he replied excitedly.

“My, those are very exceptional pieces of literature; whatever made you think to read them?”

“Well,” he started, but then gave his ideas some contemplation before continuing, “Mama says if I wish to study philosophy, and higher mathematics principles, I must first learn to have fun and read about exciting adventures and classic stories. Then later, when I look at the whole of an idea, I will have much more than my simple life in Derbyshire to draw from. What say you, Sir? Do you think I should know more?”

Darcy was mulling over his answer when suddenly, he was cognisant of what this child was actually asking, then replaying over in his mind what William had told Jane; it did not make sense. This child is but three years old, he told himself. How can a child, nay almost a babe, be thinking like this, can be contemplating Chaucer and poetry, and speaking of his education at such a tender age to include philosophy and higher mathematics?

“Master William,” Darcy began, “How came you to think of studying such advanced subjects?”

“Because Mama says we will begin those subjects when we get to university, sir.”

“You do not continue your studies at home with your mother?” Darcy questioned frowningly.

“We have nearly finished those, sir. Soon it will be time to learn more,” he answered, a bit exasperated. Darcy’s frown continued. The boy turned to his nurse and once again in French asked her, “*Mademoiselle, please tell the gentleman Mama has announced her teaching is nearly complete, for I think once again we have an adult who does not believe what I say.*”

Darcy turned a knowing look to the Nurse who nodded her assent. He then addressed William, “That will not be necessary, William, for I can see you are in earnest. Please accept my apologies if you have been offended in any way. I can only say you are truly the most extraordinary young man I have ever met.”

“I accept your apology, sir. But you need not worry; if I took offence to every new acquaintance who found my interests and studies unusual, I think I would be a very gloomy chap indeed!” he replied, laughing at his own good sense.

“You have the right of it William, and no improper pride, I dare say,” said Darcy affectionately. There was something about the boy’s small face that he could tell was not his own and, finally having the chance to seriously study it, recognition came over him; Williams eyes. They were the exact shape as his, but their colour was Elizabeth’s brown, and the lashes much thicker and lovely, like hers. He admitted they made an improvement over his, and laughed lightly to think how young ladies would one day swoon over such fine eyes.

“Now tell me about your home; you live in Derbyshire?”

William proceeded to tell his father about his beloved county of Derbyshire, the beauty he had known there through his mother’s careful tutelage, and their carefree rambles through the country walks. He spoke of the village he lived in, Brampton, and the entire goings on, the vicarage and school where he and his mother worked each week with other children and helped the less fortunate members of their community. William very seriously told him his mother believes everyone needs kindness and that we all need to help others.

Darcy knew the place well; it was just off the main road between Pemberley and London, not thirty miles from his own home. How often these last three years would he have passed near Brampton and not known that two of the three most important people in his life resided there?

William spoke well; his words, though coming from a child’s mouth were full of the vivacity, and spirit of life Elizabeth had always exuded. Darcy had only been in his company for ten minutes, but already in that short time, this boy, this tiny little man, had completely enraptured him. His heart was so full, it took every ounce of his control to not kiss his dear son and hug him tightly.

“Well, sir, if I might have your permission, may I take these two volumes to the garden where my mother is sitting with your lady? I promise not to let them touch the ground or get soiled in any way before I return them,” William asked sweetly.

Suddenly Darcy realized his son thought he was Bingley. This was not his library, and he did not have permission to give the boy anything. He was not meant to be with him. He was not sure if he should reveal his identity to William. Knowing now just how intelligent his son was, he was sure the boy would remember his name, and there was no way to gauge how Elizabeth would react to his having been introduced to William. He desperately did not want him to leave. He needed time to think, and he did not have that luxury.

Sadly but resignedly, he knew what he must do. He turned to William, and spoke very softly, “I know what a very clever boy you are and you are still very young, but I think, William, I would trust you with the most precious things I possess. You may keep the books for your own, for providing me with such delightful conversation as I have not had these past four years. I only ask a small favour; will you kiss my cheek in thanks?”

William looked at his father, wide surprise across his face. “Keep them, sir? For my very own?”

“Yes, William, give them to me, and I will make them yours forever.”

William clasped his hands and jumped in joy, acting like the young three-year-old boy he still was. Then, seeing the smile on Darcy’s face, he took it in his tiny hands, and observed him intently for several moments. He kissed his father’s cheek, threw his arms around his neck and thanked him over and over. Darcy hugged his son tightly and choked back his emotions while enjoying the bittersweet moment. William released him and handed him the books. With that, Darcy brought the two volumes over to the desk, took out the pen and ink, and inscribed each book.

A smiling boy left the library; his treasures tucked safely in his hug. His nurse reminded him he needed to take his meal, and that books were not allowed at table, therefore he deposited them next to their things in the hallway, and proceeded down to the kitchen. The maid picked up the books and looked at the inscription, smiling. It read:

For My Dearest William



IN THE GARDEN, JANE asked Elizabeth to explain why she would no longer be teaching William.

“He will very soon be beyond my knowledge; less than a year, I am sure. And I am not alone in my assessment; our Vicar, Mr. Awdry, who also has been teaching William this past year, agrees. He will need excellent tutors to keep his mind growing. He also wants to start the study of music soon, and I only play quite ill, not at all qualified to teach.”

“What will you do, Lizzy? Jane asked. “I can not imagine such a young child at Cambridge, or any university in England for that matter!”

Elizabeth laughed. "Yes, you are correct; Englishmen hold tight in their conventions of education. No lad may be ready for any subject unless he has traversed the same road as everyone else. It is a sad truth, but one my son will not have to suffer through if I have any say in it."

Just then the servant arrived with tea and lemonade, cakes and fruit to refresh the ladies. They began serving the tea, chatting about the lovely day, and the delicious treats in front of them. Later the maid returned and informed Mrs. Cartwright that the young master and his nursemaid would be taking their refreshments below stairs and were doing fine. She thanked the girl, relieved to know of her precocious son's whereabouts.

"He is the most amazing boy, Madam!" the maid exclaimed. "The cook and housekeeper are heartily discussing things with him I've no get up about! And he seems so young, but he must be older than he looks."

"Thank you, Annie, but Master William is only three years old, despite his cleverness, and we must remember to keep him safe while he is here," Jane replied.

The maid excused herself with this interesting bit of information, hardly able to keep herself from sharing with the first serving person she met in the house.

Darcy had by this time re-established himself in the small study, eager to hear more, and feeling not a little guilty about his eavesdropping. The two women were laughing.

"Is that usually the way of it?" asked Jane.

"I fear it is," her sister replied. "Fortunately William does not see it as something to grow vain over, he simply enjoys life too much to bother dwelling on what others think of him. I hope his good nature and easy manners stay part of his countenance when he is grown." She then began describing how she had planned for William's future.

"I have a tidy sum from dear Mrs. Thurgood, which I have invested in several places such as Walters and Elliott, the Bartswith Shipping Company, a few smaller businesses. I am proudest to say I am an anonymous partner in Uncle Gardiner's warehouses. He runs an amazingly profitable place!"

Jane conceded, "I certainly thought as much from how lovely Aunt Gardener's gowns always are!" The ladies giggled appreciatively.

"From the profits of my investments I have run our household and purchased the necessary books and materials William has needed so far. But there is so much more yet to come. I will have to start paying wages for tutors, masters and the like. I must keep our money safe, and profitable enough to secure William's future. I never knew the difficulties that come with providing for a household."

"This is all too remarkable to me; hearing you talk of investing and profits. Wherever did you learn it all?" replied an overwhelmed Jane.

"Necessity! There is nothing like it to get one to take action. I had also learned some bookkeeping, investing and rudimentary skills of running an estate from father. It is

no different with my investments; the numbers are simply different.

"However, caring for our fortune is but a small part of my plans. William needs the opportunities to seek out the great minds and thinkers of our age. I need to learn who is the most reputable. I need to find out who can teach him, guide him and with which people I can trust him. I cannot, will not, take any chances with what is most precious to me.

"What William needs is connections to the thinking world; hang fine ladies and dandies. Unfortunately, many of them are actually part of society." Here she laughed. "The very people whom I would gladly shun the rest of my life, I now need. How ironic life can be."

"You cannot be so light-hearted about this, surely?" Jane suddenly became concerned; she knew her sister's habit of brushing off serious issues in jest.

"No, of course not. I try to keep my spirits up for my darling boy, of course; that is all."

"You seem very taken, Mrs. Cartwright," Jane consoled her. Elizabeth beamed.

"He is my reason for living, my love, my light, and my redemption for being a fallen woman. I cannot say it clearer." Jane gasped.

"When I discovered I was with child, I was so frightened. How I suffered and tortured myself with my emotions, then ended up making myself physically ill. I tried to punish myself for having been such a fool. I did not wish to go on; but one day Mrs. Thurgood, my employer, said something to me. I do not know if she knew my shame, but never the less, it was so poignant, I knew her words were pointing the way for me. She said, 'We are not always happy with ourselves, not proud of our actions, or our feelings, but what never will change is that we do not go through our lives *alone*. We, each of us, have someone, somewhere to answer to.'

"I knew she was correct. What I was doing to myself, I was doing to my babe as well, and I could never live with hurting my child. So I stopped and decided to live for my child and myself.

"Once William arrived the rest was simple. He was so easy to love. So easy to feel blessed. I may have given up my soul to have him, but I will not spend his soul to release mine."

Jane reached over and clasped her hand in understanding and sympathy. At length she replied, "Perhaps if you were to marry again? Might you fall in love and wish to, Lizzy? Then you could find happiness again and William would have a father in his life."

Elizabeth stared openly at her sister, her amazement clearly written on her face. "Goodness, Jane! How could you say such a thing? Can you really not know? I am in love, and in my heart I am married, and always have been, to Mr. Darcy! There could never be any question of another."

"But Mr. Cartwright?" Jane asked alarmed.

Elizabeth sighed, "My late husband..." Her mind suddenly drifted off as she remembered the day she was given

the letter from the attorneys that was forever to change her life.



MY DEAREST ELIZABETH,

For dearest you have become to me in these short months I have come to know you. I write to you now with the knowledge I will have passed on as you read this. Be well, my dear, do not despair, for I have seen what no other has yet to, and I am here to help you, even if no longer in person.

I know you are Elizabeth Bennet. I saw you once, over a year ago, in Lambton with your Uncle Edward and Aunt Madeline Gardiner, nee Walker.

Mrs. Doris Walker was one of my dearest friends and her daughter Madeline is dear to me as well. We were to meet that summer, did you know? I suspect not, since you did not recognise my name when we met. It was several months before I recognised you for who you were. Madeline had often written to me about her two favourite nieces, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. The day we first spoke of my illness under the great elm was the day I recognised you for who you really were.

Later, I recognised something much more serious about you: I know you carry an unborn child. I know that whatever has come between you and your baby's father has not been resolved, and I fear that it may never be. Can you not tell him? I seem unable to help you in this, but I will not dwell on it. The two of you are grown adults, and you must make your peace as you see fit. However, your babe cannot. I see your spirit waning daily as you fret over what is to become of you and my resolve is set. I am sorry to give you pain, but I must be frank with you, as you were most often with me.

You cannot keep this child without a great deal of deception. I am sorry that it is the way of the world, but it is so. You cannot be an unmarried woman with a child and have any hope to live in peace.

I have therefore undertaken to find you a suitable husband. A suitable, deceased husband, of course. You must be his widow, and no one must ever be able to trace your history. Therefore, I am pleased to tell you, that you are the widow of a Mr. William James Cartwright, a soldier in the regulars, who was stricken and died of influenza while serving his majesty's army in Spain. He was a real person who was known to me, an orphan with no family to trace. His dear new "cousin" has left his widow, Elizabeth Cartwright, six thousand pounds and a small cottage in the south of Derbyshire, in the town of Brampton. The money was my dowry, and the cottage

belonged to my family. My husband's great niece will inherit Fairhaven and its fortune, but my legacy I pass happily onto you. I have written a letter that can be sent to the vicar there instructing him to welcome my cousin's wife and the child she is soon to have. It is up to you to direct my solicitors to do so.

I know you do not like to have anything forced upon you, Elizabeth. I know you will be at first furious with me for making so many presumptions and taking on tasks which might seem mortifying to a lady. Please believe me when I say to take the opportunity I lay before you. My good name and your new relationship to me will serve you well, my dear. Your respectability will remain intact, and you will have the financial independence to do with both your lives as you want.

I cannot tell you the pleasure it gives me to think you might do this. I envy you your freedom if you do; I hope you can see this as just that. To know you and your child could be happy and healthy living in the country, growing up under your excellent tutelage, truly puts me at peace with my fate.

Consider carefully, my dearest friend, and do what is best for you both. If you truly cannot reconcile with the father, then do what is right for yourself and your child. All you have to do is tell those two toady attorneys of mine your real name is Elizabeth Cartwright...



"MY LATE HUSBAND...WAS A slight acquaintance of Mrs. Thurgood. He left for Spain just before I went to work for her. I never met him. She was kind enough to honour me with his very deceased hand, adopting him in the process thereby making me, and subsequently William, her legal heirs. She then set us up in a lovely country town, where I have been respectably keeping my widow's cottage these past three and a half years. It was all her doing. I knew none of it, until after her death. She cared for me even after she left me. I will never forget her kindness. William knows to whom we owe our good fortune; I make sure he knows who gives of themselves and their hearts."

"You were never married, then? Oh, this is somewhat disturbing news. But Lizzy!" she exclaimed. Finally understanding the full weight of what her sister had revealed, she ventured, "You loved him, you *are* in love—with Mr. Darcy?"

"Of course," she answered, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I could no more stop loving him than stop breathing." However, seeing her sister's beautiful face now brimming with tears she tried to lighten the mood. "I would not be Elizabeth Bennet if I were not doomed to love a man who hates me"

"Hates you? Oh no, I'm sure he does not hate you."

“You did not see him, Jane, you did not see his eyes, and you did not hear his voice. We hurt one another so much, our tempers raged at their fullest, and we each inflicted our worst. No, he will never forgive me. I know this. Once his good opinion is lost...” She suddenly hesitated, cringing at using his words.

“It would not change, He could never change,” she quickly ended. “So you see, Mr. Darcy and I are not the best of friends,” she said, trying to brush off light-heartedly that which plagued her every day of her life. Several moments of silence passed, before Lizzy became serious again.

“He has my heart, but I have lost any share of his. That is my penance; my burden is to know I have cut off and flung from me the only man I have loved, and the only man with whom I could have been happy. Lydia’s foolishness, next to my own, pales. She had dreams; I never allowed them for either of us.”

“But why? Why did you leave him? Why did you turn down his offer in Kent if you loved him?”

“You know the reason I refused him then; I did not love him, only after, when I read his letter, when I saw the pain of what I had said to him; how unjust I had been. How I had so easily thought ill of him because he had wounded my vanity. I never knew myself until then, and I never knew the man I had refused. I had acted despicably to another human being and I felt the bitterness of my shame. And justly so. I began to read his letter, over and over, truly searching out the man I knew not. Slowly it came unto me: who he really was, and what I felt. I did not know my own heart until we met again at Pemberley the summer Lydia eloped. However, what began there, ended in London. I ended it. I alone was at fault.

When we met in London... I cannot tell you all of it; it would not reflect well on either of us. After...after Lydia...” Small tears, a regretful trickle started down her face. She knew she had already shed enough tears for her loss, but there still seemed to be a few determined reminders of her folly.

“Forgive me, I have never spoken about this before.” She wanted to confess this; she knew she needed to make sure someone knew what had happened.

“About nine months after Wickham and Lydia eloped, while I was living on my own in London, I met him one night, and I...I made a decision.” She paused, thinking over how much she should reveal of her plots, intrigues and shame. Deciding nothing would be served by confessing to Jane all that she had done, just how low she had sunk, she chose a highly edited version, though still grave in its outcome.

“I gave him myself of my own free will; he never coerced me. I wanted him, and I swear, I did not know then how much I would hurt him. I only knew I was meant to be with him and I did not wish to stop and think of why I was making the choice. What will you think of me, Jane? Please do not be disgusted, but I do not regret what we shared that night. I cannot regret such love and passion, such a night!

I wished to have such a memory to secretly keep with me forever. To make up for the empty years I knew would be ahead of me.” She sighed, not sadly, but resignedly. “But it was not to remain secret; unbeknownst to us, we had made my beloved William.

“I had dishonoured myself, and I knew I could not live with him, knowing what he would think of me. I refused his hand, yet allowed him to...” She shook her head.

“I had fallen from grace and from his esteem forever. So I left, meaning to never see him again, and determined to make sure he would never try to find me. I could not bring my shame and the shame of our family to him, so I ensured that he would hate me. I said words I knew would seal our fate, not knowing what the future had in store for me. It mattered not; all I ever wanted was to secure the safety and futures of those I loved.”

“He has not married, Lizzy; surely he must still be in love with you. Else would he not marry and start a family?”

“But I am not the same. I am no longer respectable and worthy of marriage. I would never marry him and bring upon him the humiliation of being connected to me. If he takes a bride, I will never begrudge him his happiness. I want him to find it; I pray for it. I am bound to him, dearest, I cannot help it, but he can never be bound to me.”

“Then why not tell him? Why not give him his son? Or let him at least share in him?” Jane cried.

“My dearest sister!” she exclaimed heartily. “How strong you have become!” She hugged Jane to her. “I could not be prouder!”

“Do not put me off,” Jane whispered, her anger rising, her face flushed. She pushed Elizabeth back slightly, setting her back to her place, to make her finish.

“No, Jane,” she said sadly shaking her head. “For you, only the whole truth. That is not the end of it, of course.” She dropped her hands absently in her lap and stared steadily at her motionless fingers.

“He alone can hurt me above all others. Fitzwilliam is also the only man of whom I have ever been afraid. The only man who ever stood up to me, the only man to best me, the only man I have ever loved. I also makes him the most dangerous man in the world to me. He alone has the power to destroy that which is most dear to me.

“I am not speaking of merely taking my son from me, but from the *world*. Can you understand? William is not here just for me to love or Darcy to raise. I cannot be so selfish. His mind, Jane! He has a mind that only comes along once in a generation. Like Mozart or Aristotle, he thinks even now so far beyond me, I am humbled and tremble at the responsibility I have to the world to give him every chance to contribute. I know it seems impossible, but I assure you, I am not alone in this assessment. We have been to see many men; they all agree with me.”

Jane slowly shook her head, trying to comprehend an idea so far removed from Longbourn, Netherfield, or her life with Bingley.

“But I see you do not understand why I cannot let his father know him. It is really very simple. I cannot take the chance that William might become Master of Pemberley. I cannot let him idle his life away on something as worthless as society. I could never risk the chance of him growing up spoiled, thinking the rest of the world is beneath him in any way. He might never be humble, he might never be benevolent, or do anything for the greater good of humanity. He would always have to think first of his family, his property, his place in society. These encumbrances would hinder him so much. In the end, he would become a portrait in the gallery of Pemberley: William Darcy, the twenty-second master of Pemberley, with ten more masters on either of his sides. How could I waste him so? Do you not see? Truly?”

Jane shook her head. “No, Lizzy, I do not! He has a father who has a right to see his son. It cannot be right!”

Elizabeth’s eyes filled once again with tears, new tears, born from this new idea, a new hurt upon which she did not like to dwell.

“I do not know if I can ever involve his father in his life. As painful as it will be to Mr. Darcy, and as hurtful as it may be someday to William, I must take the chance of making the two people I love most in the world hate me forever. I hope and pray it is the right thing to do and for all the right reasons. But please know, dearest, that in my heart, in my heart as his wife, I do want Fitzwilliam to know and love his son someday.” Lizzy wept silently to herself, Jane gave her some privacy while she cleared the tea things unto the tray. When she had at last composed herself, she explained her reason for visiting Jane.

“I came to ask something of you. I want you to tell Papa you saw me and you know I am well. I want you to tell him not to worry anymore, and most importantly, I want you to tell him to stop looking for me. I know he does this, and I cannot tell you how, only that he must stop. I want to ease his pain and his heart, and reconcile him to realising that, while I will always love him, I can no longer be his daughter.”

“But you are respectable, Lizzy; you have your husband and your story.”

“No. Father is no fool and can count numbers and look up dates as well as the next man. I will not add injury and insult to his pain. I love him too much. When William finishes his studies this year, we are going away. We must find the best there is for his education, and that is on the continent. I think we will be gone a very long while. And I am certain...” Elizabeth choked on the words as they left her mouth, “...I will never see Papa again.

“I want him to remember me as I was: when I had not a care in the world past the next bend in the footpath. That is the Lizzy he loves. He deserves to keep that Lizzy with him. Not me. Will you do this for me; will you assure him in every way possible, without revealing William or my situation?”

“But what have you told me, Lizzy? I know not where you live, where you will go, or how to write to you if anyone needed you?”

Elizabeth smiled slightly. “Dear Jane, I was never needed. Lady Catherine de Bourgh once told me if my mother did not need me then my father could spare me; daughters can always be spared, and it is true. I can be spared; I only wish to not be a burden as well. I must go where I am needed, and my son needs me most.

“I will write, but not often; perhaps on William’s seventy-seven three hundred and sixty fifth’s birthday every year. It will be the anniversary of our lovely afternoon together, and I would always wish to mark it.”

“You are leaving? Oh no! Please say you will come again, please do not leave me again!” Jane was sobbing now, and poor Elizabeth could not hide her emotions, though she tried hard.

Through her tears she said, “I left four years ago, remember? I left you all to find your lives, your loves and your dreams, and now that you have found it, it makes my own happiness complete. I love you dearest sister, nothing will ever change that.”

“Lizzy, wait! Please do not leave yet. I have something, something I was told to give you, should you ever come to me. Will you wait while I fetch it?” Elizabeth agreed and soon Jane returned with a large envelope in her hands.

“I know this will come as a surprise to you, and perhaps it will not be pleasant, but Lizzy, *Father* gave this to me many years ago. He hoped that one day it would find its way into your hands. I do not know what it contains, but he did not deliver it in anger. Indeed I believe he offered it in the most tender of regards to be passed on to you. Will you accept it? I know it would be of great relief to him, and perhaps, when I speak to him of your desire for him to give up his search, he would be more likely to agree.”

Elizabeth’s eyes gleamed with more tears. To know that her father had not abandoned her completely, gave her great comfort.

“Yes, Jane. I will accept it,” she whispered. “Tell father, that no matter what it contains, I am glad to have it.”

They hugged each other tightly again. Finally after many minutes they both had calmed down, and with their arms around each other, Jane called the maid to get William and his nurse.

As William came to his mother’s side, Lizzy whispered to Jane “I’m sure you will see him again Jane, I feel it in my heart, and it warms me that he will know you throughout his life.”

William gave his Lady Angel a lovely kiss on each cheek and held her face for several moments, as if trying to commit it to memory. Then after thanking her quite sweetly, ran off with his nurse to the door.

Jane smiled and frowned questioningly at Elizabeth.

“He sees things as we see a painting,” she said. “When he wishes to see you again, he will merely close his eyes, and

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the picture of you in every detail will come into his mind: every curl, the lace on your collar, your beautiful smile, they are all there directly in front of him, for his asking. It is an amazing gift and I envy him it. He is very selective in his “picture making” as we call it. He says he will live to be very old, so he should not waste the canvases.”

Then she and William left.



JANE STOOD IN THE garden as a light breeze blew softly through her hair. She knew she should feel alone, but something crept upon her countenance. Turning around suddenly, she saw the drapery in Charles’ study silently floating upwards and twirling around in a lazy dance upon the breeze. Sitting stoically on the small sofa next to the window, Jane saw Fitzwilliam Darcy, the father of her nephew, staring at nothing particular, yet steadily.

“You heard her?” she gasped.

He did not answer, but turned to her slowly, a deep, heavy pain shadowing his face.

“You heard everything!” she cried, her voice breaking as she realized the import of the wretched situation, and her sobs returned unabated.

Jane Bingley’s sudden burst into tears had broken the solitude of shock that he had felt, and instantly plunged Darcy into a rarely felt panic. He had an intense urge to leave the Bingley’s house immediately. However, to abandon Mrs. Bingley sobbing in her garden would be unforgivably rude, especially considering he was, in part, the source of her discomfort. He had just settled next to her outside, attempting to give her relief, when Bingley appeared.

“Good God! What is the matter?” he cried.

“Bingley! Thank heavens you are here. Your wife needs you and I must away.” Jane’s sobs seemed to increase, despite her being gathered into her husband’s arms.

“Darcy, what has happened?”

“There is much to impart, but I cannot stay. I must go. Please ask your wife; she will tell you all,” he answered while attempting to excuse himself. Bingley scowled and his anger began to boil.

“Have you done something to cause my wife’s distress?”

“No, not directly. That is not what...” He heaved a great breath, accepting he must explain something of what had occurred. “Charles, Elizabeth Bennet was just here.”

“Lizzy was here?” He took Jane’s face in his hands. “You saw your sister? She is alive and well?” Jane nodded through her tears.

Darcy continued, “There is so much more, but I cannot stay to tell you. Mrs. Bingley, please, I think he deserves to know *everything* we two learned today. Will you tell him?”

Jane’s bottom lip trembled as she once again nodded her agreement.

“Thank you. I know it will not be easy. I promise you both I will call again tomorrow, but for now, I really must go.” He stormed out after his quick bows.

“Oh, Charles, what wretched chaos this day has been!” Jane cried through her tears as she embraced her husband fiercely.



DARCY STRODE WITH DETERMINATION away from the Bingley’s house, heedless of anything around him except for the need to escape the prying eyes of those who would look upon him and judge him with their stares.

“Georgie,” he thought. “I must see Georgie.”

His ordered life had not often been disrupted. He relished the control he was afforded by his position both as master of his grand estate and head of his family. His vast knowledge of his world and the success of his endeavours gave him the sense of security he wanted, and one of only two sources of happiness he knew.

Now, in one afternoon, his carefully constructed control and the comfortable world he had built around himself was sifting hopelessly through his large graceful fingers. His tightened fists could do naught to stem the tide.

At last he stood upon the doorstep of his sister's town-home. The late afternoon sun was setting behind him, encouraging the onslaught of the crisp spring night air of April with its impending absence. His great agitation was barely concealed. The butler brought him immediately to Mrs. McNally, who was luckily alone, for as soon as the door to the drawing room closed behind the servant, he fell to his knees at her feet, his shoulders wracked with the sobs he had been forced to hold in as he cried, "Oh, Georgie, I have a son!"

She sat, startled and helpless to assuage his grief, and could think of nothing to do but hold her brother tightly to her as he wept.

Georgiana's calm in the storm of his woe was a blessing and a necessary part of his attempt to be collected once again. He was aware of her stroking his hair, and whispering endearments to him, just as his mother had once done. The siblings were again supporting one another in whatever way each needed.

At last he began to settle. He knew he could trust his sister's judgment and sense in advising him what he should do with his situation. Whilst trying to think of the words to begin, Georgiana spoke first.

"Are you feeling any better?"

"I think I am. I apologise for such an outburst."

"I think it perfectly understandable; considering the circumstances."

"Thank you, Dearest."

She leaned over and kissed the top of his crown. "You are most welcome." They sat embracing while tranquillity began to descend upon the room. "Was she the woman you spoke of that night, all those years ago?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry, Brother."

He nodded silently.

"What do you intend to do?"

He looked up earnestly at his sister. "Georgiana, my head is so full of thoughts right now, I do not think I could draw a straight line with a pen."

"I think I understand. How can I help you in this?"

"I could use the peace of home at this moment, however, I am uncertain of my ability to convey myself hither."

"Stay here then; I will make the arrangements, and Patrick and I will accompany you home."

Her brother's face instantly darkened.

"I do not keep things from my husband, and as this involves *family*," she emphasised the word, "he has every right to know," she stated firmly. She then clasped her brother's hand. "Do not fear; Patrick loves you as I do, you know." He nodded and agreed.



"DARCY, DO YOU WISH for us to stay the night here at your town-home? It would be no trouble, and if you have need for counsel from either of us, we would be readily available."

"Thank you, Patrick. I know there is no finer friend in this world than you, and now we are brothers it gives me every hope that with your and Georgiana's excellent advice, I can find a satisfactory solution to my predicament."

Georgiana had returned from meeting with Darcy's staff and informed the men a light repast would be provided in the drawing room a short time later as they took their seats.

"I believe in order to make any sense of what has happened, I need to speak to you of what I have learned," Darcy began.

"Tell us what you see fit to share with us, Fitzwilliam; we will not press you."

"I promise you will not regret taking us into your confidence," Patrick added solemnly. Darcy thanked them for their solicitude and began.

"Her name is Mrs. Elizabeth Cartwright, and our son is William. He is just three years old, and I can tell you a more unique person in the world you would be hard pressed to find."

"You have met him?"

"I have," he answered, while a slight smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"What does he look like?" Georgiana asked the obvious.

Darcy rose and went to the wall where some half dozen small portraits hung near the mantle. He lifted one off, and brought it to his sister who smiled tenderly upon seeing the image of her brother as a child.

"He looks exactly like me."



SEVERAL HOURS LATER GEORGIANA and Patrick retired to their rooms, exhausted from having spent such an emotional evening with Darcy.

He had shared everything he could about Elizabeth and William, with the exception of her involvement with Lord Caldhart and her possible involvement in Wickham's

death. However, he knew the unfortunate time had come to finally reveal Elizabeth's and the Bingley's connection to Wickham.

He told of meeting Elizabeth at Pemberley with her Aunt and Uncle several years ago, and the subsequent departure she had made that very night. He was none too proud to admit the scheme for their Grand Tour was actually a ruse to cover his escaping what he thought was another refusal of his affections on her part.

"Unfortunately, in my vain blindness I failed to discover the reason for her family's expedient departure was of a much graver nature. Her youngest sister, who could not have been more than sixteen years old at the time, had eloped with George Wickham."

Georgiana paled, and Patrick's face was one of concern for his wife as he took her hand firmly in his.

"Her youngest sister?" Patrick asked.

"Lydia, Lydia *Bennet*," he frowned then grimaced, aware his next words would shock, "Mrs. Cartwright is the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"Mrs. Bingley's lost sister?" Georgiana gasped. Patrick's arms were now firmly around her shoulders.

"Darcy, did he, did he...?" Patrick could not ask the unthinkable. Darcy hesitated but an instant to lie to his loved ones, but knew he had little choice, especially as he did not know for certain that Wickham had *not* married Lydia Bennet.

"They ran off to America and were married on board the ship they sailed."

"Oh, thank goodness he married the poor girl!" Georgie cried as she let out a held breath. "But why has Mrs. Bennet never mentioned it?"

"The Wickhams are now in America. And I believe she was more interested in the new Mrs. Bingley the day you met her. Bingley is aware of my...dislike of Wickham, and has been kindly keeping his name out of any conversation," Darcy answered.

"Patrick knows about Mr. Wickham, Fitzwilliam. You do not have to hide it from him." She gazed at her husband with unabashed affection. He returned her look with one of deep admiration. "Were the Bingleys trying to protect my feelings as well?"

"I believe they may have, Georgie; you see, Elizabeth knew of Wickham's attempt to elope with you." Georgiana grew flushed.

"I wished to correct the lies he had been spreading to her about us, and I told her everything many years ago. Considering how close she and Mrs. Bingley were then, I suspect she might also have told her sister. I apologise if you feel your privacy has been violated."

"I understand, Fitzwilliam. I think you may be right. The Bingleys have never mentioned Mr. and Mrs. Wickham to me. I think I am glad to know, and can be thankful I have them watching over me." She then bit her lip, not wanting to acknowledge what might have been.

Darcy was never prouder than in the moment he watched his sister composedly ask the difficult questions about the Wickham's elopement, the family's shame, the tryst with Elizabeth and how he had discovered all today at the Bingley's home.

Georgiana had already told her husband of her past history with Wickham, yet Darcy had not known until that evening. He realised he should have sensed the strong bond between them could only have been forged with great honesty towards each other. Patrick was there to support his wife as well as Darcy, and once again he was humbled by the depth of love his sister shared with her husband and was grateful for their willingness to support him as well.

He knew that while Georgiana no longer considered him like a father, the confessions he had made tonight and the sins he had laid before her would lower her and Patrick's esteem of him. However, if they were going to be able to aid him, he needed for them both to see as much of the harsh reality of truth he dared to divulge.



HE LAY ON HIS bed in his nightshirt, the fire blazing warmly as he reflected upon all he had heard Elizabeth say. The first thought that came to him was her heart-wrenching confession she loved him and considered him, in her heart, her husband. With that nearly happy thought also came the sadness Elizabeth believed his good opinion of her was lost. Her words came back to haunt him:

"He will never forgive me. I know this."

Inside his turmoil began. He had never allowed himself to think on her actions, and his feelings regarding them. Was he unforgiving towards her for being with Caldhart? If they had indeed consummated their relationship, would he allow it to lower his opinion of her? Another part of him secretly hoped she had never had to succumb to his Lordship. He knew the man's death the night of the ball made the possibility she might only have been his very likely. Yet she had told Jane she did not believe he would forgive her. Was it forgiveness for being with another man to which she was alluding?

He thought of his own romantic history in which he had had relationships with women who were not his wife. His stubborn pride argued it simply was not the same for a man as it was for a woman. His conscience however, had other plans.

"Why is it not? Does Elizabeth not answer to the same God as you? Will you not both be accountable for your actions someday? How is it different for a man? Does a woman lack feelings and desires now?"

"Do not mistake right and wrong with social acceptability. Most men treat women as little more than playthings or breeding stock. You have spent enough time in society to see that blatantly revealed and you know it."

He attempted to squash the truths of his own argument.

"Did she know it was you she was with?" he asked himself.

Yes.

"Yet you did not know it was your Elizabeth."

No.

"So despite the immoral gravity of the activity, she was choosing to be with the man she loved, and you were with a virtual stranger."

That sat bitterly in his mind.

He claimed to have desired her above all others and yet never hesitated to take Chantal Moreau, another man's mistress, into his arms. He stood and walked to his mirror; the man who stared back was not one he was proud of.

"You see the scorn in your face, Fitzwilliam Darcy; do not try to deceive yourself. Your pride was hurt. You thought she had chosen him over you. Did you ever stop to think of her situation alone, and not what it had done to you? Her fate had already been cast before she had met you that night."

Now he could only feel contempt at his foolish emotions. Did it matter whether she gave herself to Lord Caldhart? Could he truly feel respect for Elizabeth for keeping her promise to his Lordship, even if it was to do a sinful thing?

He had thought she had treated him ill, used him, but in reality she had given herself to him, sacrificed her virginity as a precious gift to the man she loved.

Sacrifice.

He thought of the meaning. When had he ever really sacrificed anything? When had he ever acted in a wholly unselfish way? Some might cite his giving his sister her advanced education, but he had ulterior motives; he wished to continue his estate successfully and it gave him a purpose, something to keep himself busy for years.

But Elizabeth was different. Long ago she had nursed her sick sister in a home with people who practically scorned her to her face. Then she had given up everything a woman has and had made a deal with the very devil himself, but had done it to repair the good name and place in society of her family and to allow her sisters to have a future. She had angered him on purpose to drive him away the night of their illicit affair to protect him from whom she had become. She had wished him a wife and family to love.

"What have you done for her?"

He had put his pride before anyone else's concern and caused Elizabeth's very fall into damnation. If he had not kept Wickham's character secret, none of it would have happened. He was as much to blame for her situation as Wickham's despicable actions. Yet instead of hating Darcy, she loved him, she had told him over and over. He had thought it was only the French seductress encouraging him in his amorous pursuit of her body, when it was Elizabeth confessing her feelings to him; her love. Even now still she loved him and prayed for his happiness.

She thought she was dishonourable, that he would think less of her for committing her person to him as she had her heart. He shook his head at her words and his foolishness.

Never a particularly religious man, he was surprised when his mind suddenly turned to a biblical passage he had often read, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.'

The walls of prejudice which had built up without his even realising it fell to a crumbling heap inside him. He would treat her with the equality of guilt that he himself owned. They were, neither of them, irrefragable.

"You have never fallen from my esteem, Elizabeth," he whispered to no one. "There is nothing for me to forgive, and I shall not judge you."

He thought he understood a little better the love his sister and Patrick shared. His love for Elizabeth had little time to grow, as they had rarely spent time together. But deciding to embrace her despite any faults or misdeeds and face the truths of all of it, yet still choose to love her—this was the first step.

He now realised a great task was set before him. His mind tried desperately to catalogue all he would need to do, but his weariness told him the time for such plans must be put off. He would need days, weeks even, to work. But for now, he must rest, and then tomorrow he could start. Tomorrow, he would find her. The last thought in his mind as sleep finally overcame him was a determined wish he meant to fulfil no matter what the difficulty,

"I cannot lose her."



THE MORNING CAME EARLIER than he would have liked, but as soon as the light of dawn broke through the heavy brocade curtains in his room, his mind was instantly alert and flooded with a hundred different thoughts. He repressed most as he prepared for the day, lest he become overwhelmed by them, and instead concentrated on the most important. He decided he should travel to Brampton as soon as possible and by the time he had finished his morning ablutions he had determined he would leave that afternoon.

He made his way to breakfast, slowly treading down the grand staircases of his town-home, when as he made the last turn upon the wide landing, he looked up to see his ancestor sitting upon his stallion, staring blankly back at him.

"He would end up a portrait in the gallery of Pemberley..."

He heard Elizabeth's haunting voice in his head. He stared silently at the painting, unaware Georgiana had come up behind him.

"Does Great-Great Grandfather impart any words of wisdom to you?" Darcy jumped as his sister spoke. He shook his head, and turned to see her amused expression.

He gathered his wits once more, reining in the strong desire to put his hand to his frantic heart, and answered as calmly as he could, "He is strangely silent this morning. Apparently he is expecting me to find my own wisdom."

"And what success have you found so far?"

"Very little wisdom, I fear, and more decisions before me than I would have thought possible. Yet, the first has already been made; I must first find out where they live." She nodded her head. They continued to the dining room where Patrick was already tucking in to a large plate when they entered, and continued their conversation.

"Will you travel to Brampton?"

"Yes, as soon as possible. It is the only source I have to find whether she is living here in London or still in the north."

"I agree. Do you mean to present yourself to her eventually?"

"I had not thought on it. Do you think I should not?"

"She said she fears you, Brother. Seeing you might cause her to flee again."

"I agree, Darcy," Patrick joined in. "You should not risk it this soon without first knowing what her plans are." Darcy's face fell.

"I must go to Brampton if I am to find them; they may even be there now. How am I to discover them if I do not go?"

Georgiana glanced to her husband first before directing her speech to her brother.

"Fitzwilliam, it is not a question of your going, it is a question of *how* you go."

"I do not understand your meaning."

Patrick coughed slightly, and spoke up. "Georgie and I spoke last night and we both feel that in order for you to ascertain much of the information you will no doubt try to find, you are going to have to do so under the guise of someone else. You, your name and wealth are far too well known, especially in Derbyshire, to allow you to travel anywhere without stirring up great interest. How would you ever be able to inquire after a simple widow and her son without people talking? Just the sight of the Darcy coach rolling through a village is enough to stir up gossip."

Darcy sat thoughtfully. His brother-in-law was correct. He would never be able to be discreet. He groaned.

"Disguise of every sort is my abhorrence," he weakly protested.

"I know it is, Fitzwilliam. Yet, I see little choice in the matter, at least for what you hope to accomplish in Derbyshire. Your only other option would be to send someone else."

"No!" He cut her off abruptly. Her mouth snapped shut, surprised at his outburst. "I am sorry, Georgiana, but do you have any idea how much of the tangled web that is my current situation is due to lack of real information, and inaction on my part? I am determined to find out every possible fact of anything of importance in these circumstances.

If I fail in the future, for once it will not be for lack of trying, or inability to discover the whole truth.

"I am for Brampton. I must see if I can discover her address from her friends in her home village. Then I may keep a watch on them both. It is much easier than searching blindly."

Suddenly a great commotion was heard in the hallway. A loud voice trying to be appeased by the servant's mumbles could be heard through the thick doors, when suddenly the occupants clearly heard, "I do not care if he is entertaining the King, I *will* see him NOW!"

"I believe your son's uncle has come for a visit, Darcy," Patrick said quietly. The doors flew open as a man strode determinedly through them.

Bingley had arrived.



DARCY HAD JUST ENOUGH time to stand, turn and recognise his friend before his world went black.

He next remembered feeling a shooting pain in his left jaw before he felt the cold marble floor of his dining room beneath his cheek. Jane and Charles Bingley both stood over him, Jane angrily chiding his ridiculous behaviour to his dearest friend. Bingley was barely listening while his hands were still clenched tightly, a sign his ire was not yet assuaged. Patrick and Georgie were at his side attempting to help him up. Patrick put himself between Bingley and Darcy in obvious defence, when Charles' tirade began.

"How dare you, Darcy! You cad! She ran away because of you! All these years her family has suffered. Jane has been tormented not knowing if her Lizzy were alive or dead, and you knew!"

"I want to know what kind of man compromises a woman and then abandons her. I want to know what kind of man attends my wedding, eats at the Bennet's table, and never tells them he knows what has happened to their beloved daughter.

"Have you seen my father-in-law? Have you seen the sadness behind his eyes every waking moment? Can you think of how you would feel if *your* sister had disappeared like that? This was his *child*, Darcy! You have a son now; try thinking like a father."

"Charles, please," Jane hissed. "You are not helping the situation."

"I am not trying to help. I want satisfaction. And that rake will give it to me before I leave."

Darcy began to stand, the throbbing in his head increasing with each moment as Jane spoke, "Charles, Elizabeth confessed she did not wish to tell Darcy about their son. She kept his existence and true parentage a secret all these years. And she also admitted," Jane blushed brightly, "she was not forced."

He stared, disbelieving, at his wife. Then he looked at Darcy. "She agreed?"

Darcy nodded.

"Then you are merely a damnable seducer, not a brute," he replied in a huff.

"Charles Bingley!" Georgiana's rarely raised voice sounded over them, already tired of the posturing males. "Remember your claim to being a gentleman and conduct yourself with appropriate manners in this home, sir."

He looked around, as if suddenly conscious of where he was and with whom.

"Mr and Mrs. McNally, I must apologise for my outburst." He bowed slowly, while Jane curtsied to them. He drew a great calming breath, then turned back to Darcy.

"Now in a rational and calm method, I will ask the bombastic villain who is my nephew's father to explain himself."

Jane gasped, while Georgiana bit her lip and stared decidedly at the floor and Patrick used his linen to keep his tea from ruining the fine polish of the cherry-wood table.

"I love her," Darcy answered simply. "Charles, I know you have no reason to, but I beg you to believe me. I swear I love Elizabeth Bennet with all my heart and always have. I have proposed to her twice and each time she has refused me."

Bingley's shocked face was enough to prove Jane had never betrayed her sister's secret that Darcy had offered Elizabeth marriage.

"I could not tell her family of our relationship, for fear of how badly it would reflect upon her, and how it might ruin their reputation should the facts ever become known to the world. But most importantly, the fact of our connection does not alter the truth that I had no idea where she was.

"I have searched for these past three years relentlessly. I am convinced the only reason I could not find her was she did not wish to be found. I believe she planned her escape from London to the last detail with the purpose of never being traced. Whether or not the Bennets knew of our assignment had no bearing upon being able to find her. Yesterday was the first day I have seen her since our fateful night together, and the first time I had ever heard we have a son.

"But now I *have* seen her again, and seen and met our son, I give you my blood oath I am going to do everything in my power to help them both in every way I can."

Bingley still frowned. He did not acknowledge Darcy's explanation, but he did remove himself to one of the chairs and sat with some little calm.

"You met William?" Jane asked, surprised.

Darcy smiled. "I did. I went to your library while he was there with his nurse." He then proceeded to tell her of his encounter with his son, including revealing William now thought that he was Bingley, and apologising for having given the boy two of Bingley's books.

"And my meeting him has been a boon to us in addition. Your sister was careful not to reveal her situation to

you, Mrs. Bingley, but William was not as covert. He told me he and his mother have been living in Brampton, in Derbyshire."

"Brampton!" Bingley exclaimed. "That cannot be more than 30 miles from Pemberley!"

"But I believe she and William are residing in London, Mr. Darcy," said Jane.

"Yes, I think you are right, but she still has property in Brampton, and William mentioned she was friends with the vicar. I am sure someone in the village is taking care of her concerns at her home, and reports them to her in London. They will have her direction here in town. To search the whole of London without a clue would prove fruitless otherwise"

"Are you saying Elizabeth is planning on living in secret again?" Bingley inquired.

"Yes, it seems she wishes to continue to live incognito. And, unfortunately, she still has no wish to be known to her family or former acquaintance, or me." All but Jane were surprised. "She wants nothing to do with me; she admitted she was afraid of me, of what I was, and what William, as my only child and heir, might become."

Jane reached out for his arm and made to soothe his hurt, but he stopped her.

"She did not mince words, Mrs. Bingley. I heard her clearly. She fears nothing more than the chance our son would grow up to be Master of Pemberley, grow up...to be me."

Jane smiled tremulously, her tears softly flowing down her cheeks. "You have a mountain to move, Brother," she whispered kindly to him as she squeezed his arm.

"Brother?" he asked.

"Yes, I think the man who is in love with my sister, and with whom my sister is in love, and the father of my nephew, is my brother, do you not?" Darcy smiled kindly at her.

"Thank you."

"Jane," she said decidedly.

He smiled. "Only if you will call me Fitzwilliam," he answered. She nodded her agreement.

"I think you are all being too kind to him. You have not earned *my* pity, *Brother*," Bingley growled.

"You are right, Charles, I do not deserve such tenderness. I deserve rebuke and admonishment. If you wish it, I will give you satisfaction in any way you deem necessary."

Jane gasped and clenched Darcy's arm tighter as she hissed, "Charles Bingley, if you make my nephew an orphan, I swear by all that is dear to me, you will rue the day for the rest of your life."

Three heads turned in great surprise at the outburst they had just witnessed. The tension in the air was so thick, Georgiana thought she might actually swoon.

Jane's eyes never left her husband, who returned the glare with a strength Darcy had never before witnessed in his friend. His arm was begging to be released from her torturous hold when Bingley's voice finally broke the stalemate.

“Darcy, it seems you have yet another Bennet to admire and be indebted to.”



THE NEXT HOURS WERE spent talking of William and his wondrous abilities, and later Jane decided Elizabeth's history of living on her own, and opening up Johnson's Cigar Shop for her uncle, should be revealed. The family could hardly believe Elizabeth would agree to dress up day after day as an old woman and wait upon the gentry of London. They listened, rapt, to Jane's description of her sister's incredible abilities of taste, and smell. They were impressed at her efforts and success with the cigar shop.

“I have been to the shop. The products are considerably better than any other I have ever found in the city,” Patrick declared.

“I know the shop well, Jane. When I first started looking for Elizabeth, I discovered Mrs. Johnson had also disappeared and wondered if I might find a connection. I went there to find out more about her disappearance and made friends with Mr. Brooks and Toby. Now I understand when they spoke of her nose. They even showed me the book she wrote to guide them after she was gone. If I had but been familiar with Elizabeth's hand I might have recognised the missive as hers.”

“I do not think it would have helped you find her, Fitzwilliam. I believe you are right in thinking she did not wish to be found. My father and uncle searched for her, but I sometimes heard them speaking and I now think they, too, thought she had planned to leave.”

Georgiana bravely decided to confide to the Bingleys that they need not hold their tongues about Jane's youngest sister's marriage to Mr. Wickham. Jane and Bingley replied compassionately, assuring Georgiana that, while they would never say anything to bring her pain, Mrs. Wickham no longer corresponded with her family, and there was simply no news to convey or withhold.

Broaching that subject, however, did allow Jane to confess the pain and humiliation her family had suffered when they were shunned from society, and, more importantly, how much it affected Elizabeth. Her heartfelt tale could not be listened to by the others without deep emotion. Darcy's fear the Wickham's marriage had not been discovered for an extended time was sadly confirmed, along with the suffering his beloved and all her family had endured because of it.

Darcy announced his first priority had to be discovering where Elizabeth and his son were now living. He promised he would do all he could for them, but did not know all that would entail. The business of finding them was paramount.

When the clock struck one, each person was tired to the very marrow of their bones; the emotional upheaval had taken its toll. The assembly broke up with one last promise.

Darcy felt a weight had been lifted from his shoulders on one hand, but the new danger of having so many people aware of his and Elizabeth's indiscretion gave him worry. He also knew what he ought to do, something he had rarely ever done in his life: he needed to ask for help.

“There is little of my life, nor Elizabeth's, you do not all know now; I am concerned at having so many people part of this conspiracy. But I must put my trust in all of you. Please take great care with what you all know. I may call upon you in the future to help me, to help Elizabeth or to help our son. Are you willing to come to our aid?” Everyone nodded their agreement.

“You are all my family now. I willingly declare before all gathered here, that William Bennet Cartwright Darcy is my natural born son, and heir. You are my son's aunts and uncles, I charge you all with protecting him, and helping him if ever I cannot.

“I will do all that I have sworn today to take care of him and his mother; but, in so doing, I fear the discovery of my involvement could make her run. We all know she can disappear if she wants to. She has shown us her expertise at the skill already. I do not think I could suffer through another four years without her, or without my newly found son.

“I ask each of you to swear to me that none of the information which has passed between us today will ever be shared with another soul. There is more at stake than a matter of family honour, and I feel compelled to ask for your oaths.” All heads stared in concern at his statement, but one by one they swore their oaths of secrecy and help to his loved ones.

When Darcy finally left for Derbyshire that afternoon, he did so with purpose, resolve and anticipation for all that lay ahead of him. Once more the idea that had sent him to sleep the previous night pervaded, with one significant difference: this time as he nodded off to sleep in the corner of his coach he thought,

“I will not lose...*them*.”

Chapter 27

APRIL 1817

The carriage rolled into a small village in Leicestershire, just south of Derbyshire. The driver, Riley, was eager to provide rest for his horses and to procure for himself and his master fresh drinks to soothe their parched throats, now filled with the dust of the road. Darcy entered the inn, paying little attention to anyone else, intent on quenching his thirst and eating his midday meal instead. Later, when he was finally sated and able to clear his head, he heard a conversation outside the doors.

"Them's some horses, all right. Very fine. And the carriage as well. Who's is it, do ya say?"

"My master is Mr. Darcy who lives in Derbyshire."

"Darcy you say? Think I've heard o' him. Tall bloke, yes?"

"Yes," his driver replied quickly, obviously busy with the team.

"Well, that will give them something to talk about fer the next week at least. We don't get too many rich folk stopping here. They like the inn up in Merryvale; nicer they say."

This conversation mirrored one he had heard the day before and was enough to confirm what his relatives had feared: his presence was never going to be discreet if he was to travel as he was now. He spent the next hours on the road, and that evening at another small inn, planning how to remedy the situation.

The next morning he instructed his driver to stop at the posting town, about 10 miles to the north of Brampton, and not more than a few hours ride from Pemberley. "When we arrive there, Riley, we will be taking rooms at the inn, but I wish for you to saddle up one of the team, and ride on to Pemberley. I will have a set of instructions for my staff and they will have a trunk for you to bring back. I also wish for you to return with the gig, and two horses from the stable: Honey and Patches."

"The Hay Burner and The Bucket?" his surprised driver asked.

Darcy laughed. Honey was over seventeen hands tall, and not a fine horse, rather a worker. His one claim to notoriety, however, was no other horse on the property could eat as much as he could. Luckily he was willing to work off all he ate, so was in very good, though worn, condition.

Patches was an older gelding who, although cursed with one of the ugliest coats a poor horse could have, had an excellent disposition. When Darcy and Georgiana were younger, Patches was their choice to use for play and was

one of the first full-grown horses Georgie ever rode. Darcy remembered when he and Richard were teens, they had backed the docile creature up to a small rise and tied him in place so they could run down the hill and jump onto his back like wild men. They called the game, 'drop in the bucket' and the horse was 'The Bucket' ever since.

Since Patches had seen better days Darcy felt compelled to ask, "Do you think Patches can make the trip back to London?"

"Oh, yes sir. He's not too old, just slow. It will do him good to get some miles under his feet."

"Excellent. I will need Honey first. Please send him along with one of the stable-hands ahead of you, and mind they do not overwork him. I will be doing some riding later today and need him able."

"Wouldn't one of your regular mounts be better for you, sir?"

"Not for what I wish to do, no."

Riley's face showed his bewilderment. His master's stallions were envied throughout the county and a much better ride than Honey, but he knew his employer long and well, and was not going to question him. "The roads are still dry; so we should make the town by eleven. I think Honey could be back to you by four; would that suit?"

"Yes, thank you, Riley. It would be wonderful." They loaded up the last of their things and headed north.



MRS. REYNOLDS HAD SEEN her fair share of unusual requests from Mr. Darcy. In fact, after the day she was told the mistress of the house was to be fitted up with fencing pads so she might learn the sport from her elder brother, she thought she was well prepared for any whimsical orders she might receive. But there it sat in front of her, in very plain black on white, begging to be disbelieved:

Have a footman search my dressing room and prepare the oldest garments he can find. I am thinking specifically of the things I wore at Cambridge, but if anything older can be found, even better. If by some bad luck the clothing is no longer available, ask Barnes if I might have one of his waistcoats and jackets. I will gladly pay for him to have a new set made, but he is the only servant who is my size, and I must have the garments straight away. Please make sure my older worn boots are included in the trunk...

If that wasn't disturbing enough, her master had further asked her to employ the tailor in Lambton to make him three new complete suits of clothes and a travelling suit and coat. The request alone would not have been too disturbing, but Mr. Darcy had specifically requested the garments be made in the fashion of essentially a tradesman, and not

even a well-to-do one. He had specific types of fabrics, as well as instructions on complete lack of decoration. She shook her head at it all.

There were also several books requested, reference as well as pleasurable reading, which also took her by surprise as Mr. Darcy's London home was filled with pleasurable reading materials, while Pemberley's library was oriented more towards learning and reference. Still, she knew *Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf* were classics and perhaps he simply wished to read them whilst travelling, as she was sure the house in town had copies.



RILEY RETURNED TO THE inn later that evening with the gig, Patches and a large trunk for his master. Darcy was already off riding Honey when he arrived, and discovered his master had procured the room for him and the coachman while he had been at Pemberley. The two men settled in for the night, waiting for their next instructions.

Darcy, in the meanwhile, had been circumnavigating the area around Brampton. The small village had an inn and tavern, a church with a small school attached, a blacksmith and acres of fine woods surrounding it all. He tried to imagine which house might be Elizabeth's but could only hazard a guess. He wished to have a fair knowledge of the area before he came into it the next day. He dared not show himself in his fine clothes from London, and made a point of never coming too near anyone today, lest they be able to distinguish him on the morrow. Luckily, Honey drew little attention, and he was grateful to have thought of using the workhorse instead of one of his usual mounts.

That night he went through the trunk sent from Pemberley. He was unprepared to find himself sentimental as he looked through his old clothing. He could not help but remember what his life had been like when he wore some of the items. His clothes from Cambridge brought a slightly painful memory, as he had learned of his father's illness when he had almost completed his studies. He would lose him just two years after graduation.

The next morning he packed a small bag and asked Riley to hitch up the gig with Honey. He then told his driver and coachman he might not return to the inn that night, but they were to stay there until receiving word otherwise and to keep his room ready each night in case of his return. He informed them he simply had business in the area and was not sure where he might be sleeping. If their master's attire was unusual or alarming, neither Riley nor the coachman, dared to comment upon it.

Darcy had been worried when he dressed that morning. Two pairs of his breeches proved too tight to fit comfortably. Luckily the third pair fit well enough. In addition his old coat and boots were so perfectly stretched to accommodate

his figure and feet, he was consequently more comfortably dressed than he had been in years.

"I should allow my regular clothes to be worn out to this level of comfort," he mused.



WHEN HE ENTERED THE village of Brampton, he could not help but think of Elizabeth and William walking the same road he was on. He kept his head down for fear they might actually be somewhere nearby, and he did not wish to risk their seeing him. His first order of business was to go to the inn, take a room and stable his horse. The many years working with his horses and the more recent years in which he had taken an active part in his estate, served him well as he unhitched Honey quickly as if he had been doing it his entire life. He wished to gather information and assumed the tavern below his room was the best place to achieve it.

He sat down at one of the tables near the fire and ordered a mug of cider. There were only two other patrons present who regarded him curiously at first and then shrugged and went back to their own cups. Darcy frowned. He needed to speak with people, but did not seem to encourage it.

"*I should smile,*" he thought suddenly. He remembered Elizabeth's admonishments of how his air often bespoke of disapproval of those around him. He was doing it most unconsciously, but he knew he was doing it all the same. He shook his head and laughed lightly to himself. With his smile still upon his face he looked up to notice the two other men now looking at him once again. He drew a breath and determined to be more friendly.

"Forgive me, gentlemen. I think I needed to get rid of a bad mood before I was able to be amongst company. Good day to you, sirs," he said, raising his mug to the pair in salutations. To his great surprise they both broke out in smiles and raised their mugs back to him.

"Welcome to Brampton, Mr...?" the larger one asked.

His mind quickly engaged and he answered the man, "Sheldon, John Sheldon," not knowing where the name had come from, but grateful he could think swiftly on his feet. The men introduced themselves, and the three talked for a good deal of the afternoon.

Several hours later, after many mugs of ale had been purchased for his new friends, he had learned the aging vicar was Mr. Awdry who also taught in the school along with members of the community who helped him with his duties. Mrs. Cartwright had been one of the citizens mentioned as helping in the school but he dared not ask anything specific about her. The school was only open three days a week, today being the last.

He inquired about the general trade and prosperity of the area until the smaller man he was speaking with com-

mented, "It sounds as if you are thinking of settling around here, Mr. Sheldon."

He considered the question and the implication he might garner more information of the neighbourhood and, more importantly, the *citizens* of Brampton, if answered in the affirmative.

"I am interested in the area and perhaps discovering if there are any potential places to settle," he replied cautiously. The words had no sooner passed his lips, however, when he realised he would never be able to live here himself, and this particular deception might be hard to continue.

He determined he might be able to say he was looking for another party and acting for their interest with few repercussions, therefore added, "I have a client who is seeking to find a place to settle quietly. I am scouting the area on his behalf."

The two men nodded. "There might be some properties available, Mr. Sheldon. I would enquire at the vicarage to Mr. Awdry. He acts as many things for us here, including dispute settler, legal advisor and even land agent, if need be. If anyone had thoughts of selling or leasing a property, he would know it."

"Thank you, gentlemen. I think I shall do just that."



DARCY HEADED OUT INTO the warm spring air, a lighter feeling to his step, but still kept his head down lest he be seen by his quarry. His mind was racing, thinking on what the man had just suggested to him. If Elizabeth and William had already settled in London and if she planned to educate their son on the continent, there would be almost no call for her to return to Brampton for years!

He walked out of the village and into the surrounding fields, lost in his preparations for his conversation with the Vicar. As he made his way back, his thoughts were abruptly stopped when he found himself already past the churchyard. He meant to retrace his steps and collect himself better before speaking to Mr. Awdry when the man himself was nearly bowled over by Darcy's imposing figure turning.

"Whoa, steady there, young man. I am sure it cannot be so urgent a situation that you must run."

Darcy looked down to see a gentle face smirking at him. Mr. Awdry was indeed aging. His round clergyman's hat betrayed mere wisps of white hair peeking out, and his hands shook as he leaned on his cane. His back was very rounded from his advanced age, but his eyes were an amalgam of blue, green and brown, and shone bright and keen.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I did not mean to knock into you."

"No harm done. Come to see me, did you?"

Darcy hesitated; he wished for more time to formulate some sort of plan but could not see any way around speaking

now with the Vicar. "I came to inquire about many things; and, after speaking to some local gentlemen in the tavern, I have learned you are the source to get answers from."

"Ha!" he snorted. "That would be old Jeffries, I'll wager. He is really nothing but the town gossip, though you never heard it from me. Well, come in, come in. Let us find some tea and we shall have a nice chat, Mr...?"

"John Sheldon, sir," Darcy replied, bowing.

"Mr. Everett Awdry, at your service." The vicar returned the bow and they headed to the vicarage.



THE TEA SERVICE WAS nearly cleared, and the two men sat chatting amiably about his interest in a property. Darcy could not help but scrutinize the face of the man who was his son's first tutor. He was very well pleased that such a man would have taken William under his wing. He saw similar traits in their senses of humour, as Mr. Awdry did enjoy laughing over anything including his own mistakes.

"Did you have a specific size property in mind, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Yes, something on a small scale, suitable for a man living alone, and his cook, housekeeper and a manservant."

"Is your client a gentleman, then?"

"He is, but a man of moderate means and habits. He desires a place of solitude to do his work in peace and yet enjoy the simple aspects of country life. The excellent woods surrounding Brampton would be a bonus as well."

"And would this be for purchase or lease?"

"Definitely lease. My client is not looking at this time for a permanent situation, but certainly long term, several years if possible."

Darcy could see the wheels of the vicar's mind turning. He desperately hoped he was describing Elizabeth's cottage perfectly. He sat, attempting not to look nervous, wishing against all odds the man would think of it. He had no doubt leasing her home would never have occurred to her, considering it would be of small size and not a typical property to be sought after.

"I think there may be a place your client would find suitable, sir," the vicar finally replied. "One of our citizens recently vacated their property and is not expected to return for some years. The house is a good-sized cottage, with two bedrooms and rooms for the staff. It has been maintained very well and might suit your needs."

"However, I know the thought of leasing the place had never occurred to them. Brampton is not known for attracting much attention and a cottage is not a typical property to be sought after. I know the family well, and my recommendation would go far towards securing their agreement. I also know having someone living in their home would bring them great contentment, and the extra income would always come

in handy.” Darcy nodded slowly. The man had yet to divulge a name, but everything he described could be Elizabeth’s situation. “Would you care to view the property?”

“You are certain the family is not at home? I should not like to intrude upon their privacy.”

“No, no, they left last Tuesday week for London. I saw them to the post coach myself.”

Darcy’s heart beat faster. “Then by all means, I would appreciate the chance to see it. Does it have a name?”

The vicar cocked his head and smiled. “Now how did you know it had a name?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Just a notion, I suppose. I had no idea otherwise.”

The vicar did not answer, but instead smiled again as they gathered their things to walk out. Despite his bowed back and cane, Mr. Awdry could move rather quickly; he was merely a bit tipsy. Darcy felt compelled to attend the man’s elbow more than once on the walk to the cottage which lay some ten minutes walk away.

He expected to somehow see something different in the home Elizabeth might have kept, yet when it came into view it was simply a typical lovely English cottage, very traditional in all ways. The flowers of spring were blooming in profusion in small tidy beds all around the front path. He spied a swing hanging from a large oak tree near the back, and his heart beat harder once again as he smiled.

The vicar caught where his line of view was directed and laughed. “There was a young child living here and you will see signs of him no doubt. If your client is offended by such objects as swings or playthings, they can be removed and stored with little trouble.”

Darcy flushed when Awdry mentioned the child and then nearly gasped when he said the word ‘him’. Each little clue brought the reality of this house actually being Elizabeth’s closer and made him more excited.

Mr. Awdry produced a key, explaining *he* was in fact, overseeing the house while they were gone. As he unlocked the front door, he turned to Darcy and said with a twinkle, “Welcome to Asile, Mr. Sheldon,” and swung the door open.

“Ah-zeel?” Darcy repeated, trying to recall his French vocabulary.

“Sanctuary, or refuge if you like. Mrs. Cartwright is the widowed owner and gave the house its name. I shall be curious to know later if you agree with her judgement of the place,” the vicar explained.



IT HAD BEEN DIFFICULT to hold his emotions in check when he walked into Elizabeth’s home. He felt horribly guilty for being there under somewhat false pretences, though he fully intended to lease her house if she would let him. He was also strangely nervous, feeling that at any moment

she might appear in the doorway and expose him for who he really was. It took many minutes before he could calm himself and listen more attentively to the facts the vicar was relating about the property.

“Mrs. Cartwright’s son was an overwhelming presence in this house,” he laughed when espying so many things belonging to the young man. William’s room itself was a contrast; one half clearly brimming with books, papers, and a variety of apparent experiments on which he had been working, the other had toys typical of a small child and seemingly just as worn as their more studious counterparts. “I am sure it would be no trouble to clear away his things and make the home more accommodating for a single gentleman.”

“It would be very much appreciated, Mr. Awdry,” Darcy answered, remembering he was supposed to be representing another. His desire for more information, however, was very strong, and he could not resist asking, “Though I do find the young man’s belongings fascinating. They seem to be a contradiction: books for studying next to amusements meant for a very small child. Are you sure there were not two sons living here?”

Mr. Awdry laughed. “How very accurate a description of my young protégé, sir. He *is* quite the contradiction, for you see he is a boy of just three years with a mind of a young man nearly five times as old.”

“How is that possible?” Darcy asked, hoping his open question would encourage the vicar to talk more.

“Oh, my good boy, I could fill your ears with tales of my dear William, but I think first we had best finish our tour, and then tomorrow I can tell you stories of Mrs. Cartwright’s wondrous son. I wish to write to her this afternoon and, if my letter is to make the final post call, we should continue here. It would mean an answer much faster for you as well, which I am sure your client would appreciate, would he not?”

Darcy agreed.

Their last stop had been to see the master bedroom. The two men simply stood at the doorway and looked in, aware propriety demanded they treat the room as if the lady were in residence. There were few personal belongings on display, which was understandable as Elizabeth was not expected to return for some time and would have taken most things with her.

But on the small dresser under a window near the side, he saw a series of framed drawings which he instantly recognised as her mother and father and, on the end, her sister Lydia. It struck him as odd that none of her other sisters were represented anywhere in the house, especially her beloved Jane, but Lydia was. Perhaps with Lydia so far away in America, she felt she might never see her sister again, and needed to draw her so as not to forget her face.

As they slowly made their way out of the house he was struck by the manner of her decor. The furnishings were of very good quality but more importantly they were obviously chosen for their comfort. He was enchanted by the additions

she had added to many things. Places to sit featured embroidered cushions or pillows, and the sofa featured at least six of them. The draperies were unique as well, for he noticed she had stitched many of them with decorative patterns. Most tabletops featured handmade runners as well. Clearly she had had a great deal of time these past years to add her personal touches to her home. He gently smiled to see the proof of her quest for things that would soothe her and her son.

Overall, he would be hard pressed to say what one thing made the house so restful and inviting. It might be the warm colours she had chosen for the walls, or the sweet smell of the dried flowers she had so liberally placed around the rooms. In the end, he supposed it was all the things that seemed to come together and do their magic upon a visitor.

He stood upon the threshold, looking over the place one last time before leaving, when Mr. Awdry's voice broke the peaceful solitude. "Do I hear your agreement in your sigh, Mr. Sheldon? Is it truly Asile?"

"Indeed it is, Mr. Awdry," he happily replied.

Darcy left the vicar at the cottage door with a promise to call again on the morrow. He had made a very generous offer for the lease, hoping it would entice Elizabeth all the more. It was not a sum so large as to make them question his genuineness, but it was enough to allow him to feel he would be making a first step towards helping his new family.



LATER IN THE DAY, Darcy was pacing the floor of his room attempting to design a plan whereby he might see the letter Mr. Awdry would be sending. However, as intrigues and deceptions were so very foreign to him, he was having a difficult time of it. He was furious with himself for not being able to come up with any ideas. It was such a simple task; he needed only to see the front of the thing, yet how to get to it escaped him. He noted the time and realised he had better hurry to intercept the carrier or his own letter to his attorneys in London would not be sent. He was apprising them to expect letters under the direction of one Mr. Sheldon, an agent he had hired to find a lease property on his behalf. They were to forward any correspondence addressed to Mr. Sheldon directly to him.

He spied the man carrying the post and called to him, requesting his letter be included. His frustration was high though his outward demeanour remained calm, the key to his future lay within the grasp of his fingers and he could not think of how to touch it! There was little left to do but send his own letter on.

He was opening his purse to retrieve payment at the same time the carrier opened his leather pouch to insert Darcy's letter, when the answer he sought came to him. The next moment he almost smiled as he simply spilled his purse over into the pouch and onto the ground, causing the man

to drop everything, and the coins and letters to scatter. They spent the next minutes finding all the lost papers and coins, but it was sufficient time for Darcy to spot the vicar's letter among the few the man carried and, more importantly, clearly read the name and address on the front.



THAT NIGHT DARCY WROTE to the Bingleys and McNallys, advising them of Elizabeth's address in town. If anything should happen to him he wanted his relatives to know where they were. He was no longer willing to take any chances on William's, nor Elizabeth's, well-being and safety.

He fought the urge to simply head straight back to London by reminding himself Mr. Awdry would not have written to Elizabeth if she was due back to Brampton, or if she was planning to leave London anytime soon. The next morning they were scheduled to finalise his offer, 'Mr. Sheldon' was to leave his attorney's address with the vicar for future correspondence and, most importantly, Mr. Awdry had promised to tell him tales of his son.

He took the opportunity to reflect on his first attempts at disguise, shaking his head at his nearly inept methods. Now, with the deeds done, he analysed what had worked best. Simplicity seemed to be the most effective. He was not used to living by his wits, and had foolishly been trying to think of some intricate plan to extract information, yet it was listening to those around him that provided him with a method to find it. He could not contrive a way to obtain an address, until a simple distraction of the post carrier allowed him to see the pertinent letter from Mr. Awdry. He would tuck this important lesson of simplicity into the recesses of his mind and use it again if needed.

He now contemplated how he was going to watch their moves in London without her knowledge. He reconsidered presenting himself to her and William, but Patrick's words warning she might flee brought him true panic. He could not allow her to disappear again.

Once he arrived in London, he could do one of his old sets of clothing and seek out her street. However, what he would do there he was not certain. He could not spend his entire day watching her and be of much use, but he did need someone to do it. He considered whether hiring his private investigator again would be wise, but he feared the man seeing his son and making conclusions he did not wish made at this time. Perhaps at the beginning he could simply pay one of the street urchins to watch her comings and goings. He smiled inwardly when he realised the simplest method was, once again, proving to be the best.

For the first time since leaving the Bingley's house, he felt he was making some headway. Now he could concentrate on the one thing he had not allowed himself to consider lately: Elizabeth's involvement in Wickham's death.

Chapter 28

LONDON, APRIL 1817

The possibility of her guilt in that event precluded all hopes he had ever dared to have. Her absence these past years had taken the edge off his worry, but now, having seen her and William, the fear of prosecution was brought to the fore. If there was ever to be a future for Elizabeth living as herself, without disguise or false names, her innocence in the matter must be proven. He struggled with how to go about it.

In the end, the only action which made sense was to involve Colonel Fitzwilliam. He would have eventually told his cousin of William's existence at the very least, and with his announcement would have come the revelation of the Bennet's connection to Wickham. For now he decided to simply write to explain the recently discovered connection of Wickham and the Bennets and Bingleys, and to ask Richard to look into Wickham's death more thoroughly, under the pretence of ascertaining whether to tell the Bennets of the man's demise.

He did not wish to tell his cousin about Elizabeth and William yet, and certainly not in a letter. He ventured that if Colonel Fitzwilliam had no idea of the familial connection to the late Lieutenant, he would be better able to root out information and details as his emotions would not be in play. Later, Darcy would visit the man and deliver his other news in person, preferably after Richard had discovered all the information he could. An hour later a letter to Richard had joined the others.

He rose early the next day and prepared to leave Brampton later after visiting the vicar. He would take his gig back to Riley and settle his bill at the second inn before finally making the return trip to London with coach, gig, a team of four horses, Honey and Patches. He laughed when thinking of what an odd caravan they would make, but he needed them all to set the stage if he was to disguise himself again in the future.

Late that night he crawled into his rented bed on the road to London with daydreams of his dear son in his head. Mr. Awdry had not exaggerated his ability to fill his ears with tales of the boy.

If the vicar had been surprised at his guest's apparent inexhaustible curiosity in hearing stories of his favourite topic, he did not say. Instead the old man seemed to relish the opportunity to rattle on unopposed in his speech to such an appreciative audience. Darcy only wished he could have stayed in Brampton several more days, and coaxed every story Mr. Awdry had of William out of his head. However, London loomed in just two days time, and the opportunity to perhaps see his boy with his own eyes again was a greater draw.

He fell asleep believing he had won great treasures on this trip. He had Elizabeth's address, he might be able to lease her house and provide her with extra income and, most precious of all, he had stories of his son told to him by a man who loved the boy and knew him well.

Though he had travelled the route from Pemberley to London dozens of times, never had the trip seemed as interminably long as this particular ride back. He arrived at his home in the early evening, anxious to share all he had learned with his family. Fortunately, his sister and brother-in-law were of the same mind, for when he entered his drawing room after bathing and changing, they were already there.

Georgiana rushed into his arms, flushed and exhilarated. "I am so glad you have returned. We have such news! We have seen them!"

"You have seen...?"

She cut him off, "William and Elizabeth! Just this afternoon at the park near their home. You were correct, Brother; he looks so much like you! I could barely keep my countenance nor restrain myself from rushing up to embrace him."

Darcy's surprise changed to one of worry. "Georgie, you did not risk my precarious position? Surely you must have known that you might scare them?"

"Not at all, Brother," Patrick reassured him. "My wife and I were not so daft as to take any risk. In fact we made a point of working very hard not to draw attention to ourselves in any way, least of all to your new family."

Georgiana was keen to tell the tale. "It was quite the adventure! I borrowed a dress from my maid and Patrick wore a set of working clothes he uses on his estates. We knew we would have to wear more appropriate clothing if we were to walk about the neighbourhood without seeming out of place. Of course, as Elizabeth has never met us, we did not need to hide our faces from her or William.

"First we walked far away from our house until we could hire a hackney cab without anyone recognising us. Then we rode to her neighbourhood and sat in the park near her street for what seemed like hours, just waiting. Late this afternoon, we saw a mother and son approach from her street. We made sure to face one another to enable us to keep a constant eye on them. I was so very excited thinking it might be them, especially upon seeing the boy who looked so much like you as a child." Georgiana's enthusiasm was making her glow as she spoke, her hands gesturing quickly.

"Then the lad threw the ball he was playing with too far away and started to run after it, when his mother called out his name, and we knew." Her excited smile matched her husband's as they looked to Darcy for his reaction.

"I... That is...extraordinary." He struggled for a few moments, taking in the importance of all she had told him. He felt his sister's arm upon his and, turning to her, saw the questioning look of concern upon her face.

"No, I am well. This is excellent news. It means the address on Mr. Awdry's letter was correct." He stopped and shook his head ruefully. "I have spent the past two days speaking with a man who knew Elizabeth and William intimately, and now you and Patrick have seen them, and my foolish sensibilities are at odds with my common sense. Please forgive me; I cannot help feeling a bit envious of you both."

Georgie threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Fitzwilliam, do not be dismayed! If Patrick and I saw them today, I am sure you will see them tomorrow. You can stand watch over the house all day if you like!"

Darcy returned her embraced tightly. "Always the wise woman, Georgie. Of course you are right. Now, tell me what you thought of them."

"She is a lovely, handsome woman, Darcy. And your son *is* a copy of you and quite a handful I suspect," Patrick said with a smile.

"I thought her vivacious," Georgiana added. "So very different from her sister, Jane, of course, and not just in looks. Mrs. Bingley is so composed, while Mrs. Cartwright is so lively. She and William spent so much time merely laughing and enjoying the day. I felt as if I were watching pixies at play."

Patrick nodded his head. "I quite agree, my love; a very good likeness, indeed."

Darcy merely smiled. "Thank you. I cannot help but concur with all of your opinions. Now, shall I tell you what else I have discovered?" They readily assented.

An hour later the three were discussing what would be done if Asile, Elizabeth's house, were to be let. He petitioned Patrick to inquire if there were anyone who might fit the bill as a gentleman looking to live a retiring life in Derbyshire for a few years. Patrick assured his brother he would make inquiries around to see if anyone might be interested.

"How much are you asking for the lease?" he asked.

"I had not thought to seek recompense; I was merely going to offer it gratis."

"I would not recommend it, Darcy. Better to have a tenant who has some investment in the place. They will take better care of the property, and you would not be in trouble with Elizabeth in future."

"Yes, I will set a price. Once again your advice is exactly what I need. Tomorrow I intend to spend the day in her neighbourhood. I have clothing to disguise myself, and I will make a point of not going too near her home, lest she or William spot me. I do not know yet how I shall manage to watch them in the future, but I have every hope that some way will make itself known to me. For now, I merely wish to see them." He stifled a yawn behind his hand, and murmured his apologies. Patrick and Georgiana then seemed to

notice how tired he truly was. They agreed to meet again soon before the couple departed.



THE NEXT MORNING DARCY was up with the sun and heading out before most people had begun their morning routines. He walked quickly out of his own neighbourhood, taking the rear servants' entrance to keep prying eyes from perceiving the master of the house, dressed in shabby clothes, skulking off into the city. He hired a hackney cab almost a mile away and began the journey to his destination near Lambeth, Elizabeth's new address.

When the hack finally stopped and he alighted from the cab, he looked around to view their new neighbourhood. He was satisfied with the quality of the surroundings. They were neither overly fine, nor in disrepair. He suspected most of the community would consist of tradesmen on their way up the social hierarchy and retired naval captains and other such gentlemen and their families.

His first stop was to see the house she had taken. This might be the only time of day he would have to get a good look at it, before the household arose; therefore he hastened to it immediately.

Her street featured the rows of terraced houses popular in the area. As he walked quickly past he dared a covert glance across to see her house, number twelve, and then diverted his view back to the pavement and continued. When he got to the end of her street he turned and, after he had passed the side of the building blocking the view to her house, he stopped and looked about to see if anyone had noticed him. Few were paying attention to the surroundings, as they seemed to be heading off in particular pursuits of their own. He then casually walked to the edge of the building and peeked slowly round the corner. Now, with the shrubbery hiding most of him, he allowed himself the luxury of staring openly at the building that housed his new relations.

He spent the next hours walking nearby and ascertaining which vantage points around Elizabeth's house would allow him to watch without being noticed. The park Georgie and Patrick had earlier described had proven practical, as there were at least two benches he could sit at and, though very far away, still spy her front door. He watched for signs of either of them venturing forth, but he also kept looking for boys he might potentially pay to watch the house.

Much later in the day, he had sought refuge from the spring sun under a fine tree, keeping one eye always on number twelve, when he saw the door open and a flurry of light coloured skirts standing in the doorway. A maid was affixing a small jacket onto a young boy, and two ladies were raising their parasols to the strong rays. As soon as the mother held out her hand to the young lad, a river of

warmth spread over Darcy's chest for he recognised his lover and son.

They were obviously making their way to the very park he was lounging in and, while sufficiently large enough to hide most persons, his great height and the severe lack of trees and shrubbery for cover made him realise he would have to quickly retreat to a safer spot should he wish to watch them without being discovered. He strode directly opposite from them, to the corner of the park and down the street, until he could find a building which to position himself behind and still spy upon them.

It was exactly as the McNallys had said; they were a lively group, especially with the addition of the French nurse he recognised from the Bingleys' library. He smiled unconsciously as he watched William play among the two women, racing up and back at full speed, purposely falling into the grass and rolling about. His mother laughed at his antics, while his nurse fussed over his clothes. The ladies eventually made their way to the bench he himself had occupied earlier in the morning, and he gazed as they watched his son frolic around them for the next hour.

At one point William was running around a large tree with his hand trailing around the trunk as he tried to make himself dizzy with his circles, when Darcy heard the boy exclaim loudly and run suddenly to his mother, holding his left hand out. She immediately took him into her arms and onto her lap, kissing his brow and examining the offended digit, which had obviously felt the sting of a splinter from the now horrible tree.

He could see William's shoulders stifling the cries he wanted to let loose while his mama treated his wound. She reached deftly into the bag they had brought and Darcy momentarily caught the glint of a small metal object in her hand. She seemed to ask the boy's permission and he nodded slowly while she carefully worked upon his open palm. He saw the boy wince slightly, but keep his composure while Elizabeth finished the dreaded task.

Darcy could not understand the sudden wince he too had experienced, nor the ghostly feel of pain in his hand as it clenched involuntarily while he watched his son suffering. His eyes were strangely pricked while he witnessed this small rite of passage all boys endured. Why he had never been affected before he did not know but, watching now, as mother and son held each other tight, and seeing her kiss William with unending affection, touched his heart more deeply than he would have thought possible. It was at that moment he realised he not only loved Elizabeth, but he had also fallen in love with their son.



THAT NIGHT HE SAT in his room, pleased with many aspects of how the day had turned out. He could not help the smile

which graced his face for the rest of the day after the trio had returned to their little terraced house. He merely had to stop his train of thought for an instant and the vision of Elizabeth kissing William in her lap brought him sweet solace.

He had only stayed for a short while once they had retreated, for it was soon after he found a likely waif to watch over the house. The boy's name was Oliver, and Darcy promised if he could be given a satisfactory report upon his return the next day, another coin, the same as was given today, would be the boy's reward. There was little more he could hope for at present, and it gave him some security to know his interests were being attended to, albeit unprofessionally.

Seeing Elizabeth that day had set his blood on fire as well. He had caught glimpses of her at the Bingley's house but only through the cracks in the draperies in Charles' study. Today he had the first opportunity to see her plainly, in full sunlight, and relish in her visage once again. She looked as lovely as ever, though perhaps more womanly in her figure and carriage. He would be hard-pressed as to what was different about her, perhaps more confidence, but overall, it was a siren's call to his lonely heart and body. He had never had a thought for another woman after their ill-fated night together and now, seeing his lover so close, yet untouchable, had been exquisite torture.

He felt ashamed that part of him was envious of his son, who could claim her entire affection, yet part of him was instantly saddened as he realised he could not share their bond. He wanted nothing more than to sweep them both up and carry them away to Pemberley for the rest of their lives.

Elizabeth's blunt words then came back to haunt him and his pride began to ruffle once again. He could not remember hearing her say being the master of Pemberley was a waste without being wounded.

He attempted to discern: what was wrong with thinking of one's family, property and place in society? Generations of Darcys before him had done the same. Was his family not one of the oldest, most distinguished, in the country due to their diligence in adhering to these important values? How would that hinder his son? He would have a massive fortune at his disposal. He could study anywhere in the world, travel at his leisure, and never have the worries he and his mother had already encountered.

Just then he looked to his desk. Some of his correspondence which had not been earlier attended to, lay neatly piled; invitations, letters from his steward, drafts from his attorneys. He knew what was contained therein; it hadn't changed since the day of his father's death. Downstairs, in his private study, even more papers would be awaiting him.

It made him think how different his own life might have been had his father lived another ten years. It would have been long enough for Darcy to learn the business of running the estate more thoroughly with his father's help,

instead of having to struggle with his steward to make sense of it all.

He did not begrudge the duties he had to undertake. Yet, thinking back to when he was a young man of four and twenty, and all that he was suddenly master of, he was struck with the truth of Elizabeth's assessment. William would be encumbered, just as he had been. How many years did he essentially have to excuse himself from the usual pursuits a young man would have been enjoying to attend to his responsibilities? What might William have to sacrifice in order to take his father's place if he were needed? There was no way to tell when Darcy might die. It might be fifty years, but what if it were fifteen? How would his son, at only eighteen, weather the responsibility?

He did not care for the answer.

Admitting to himself he was hardly going to fall asleep yet, he put on his woollen robe, took up a candle, and headed towards his library. On the way down the grand staircase of his family's home, he stopped once again in front of the larger than life vision of his great-great grandfather, Harold Darcy. Elizabeth's stinging words of being another portrait in the gallery came back to him.

"There is nothing wrong with being a good master of your estate," he thought indignantly. But then he looked to the portrait.

"Were you a good master? I know nothing about you, though your blood runs through my veins. I only know you sired my great grandfather and he my grandfather, and then my father. Who were you? Did you love your wife? Your son? Did you play at cards, like to fish or ride your horses?"

"Should I be sorry you did nothing to distinguish yourself, or merely grateful you did not burn the house down, or squander the family fortune?" The picture refused to answer.

"Are you proud of me, your descendant, for being the same?" He truly wondered. He thought of his own fine portrait hanging in the centre of the great gallery of Pemberley. He imagined his own descendants standing before his likeness in a hundred years.

"Will my great-great grandchildren know nothing of me as well?" He then asked the dark question which troubled him most. "Will I be worthy of being missed?"



WHEN HE AWOKE THE next day he was determined to solve at least one problem. He made his way to his favourite bookshop and, less than three minutes later, left with his purchase.

"Dodds," said the bookshop owner, "was that Mr. Darcy I saw leaving just now?"

"Yes, Mr. Hardamon, Sir."

"Was he unable to find what he was looking for? Or did he place an order for some new book?"

"Neither, Sir. He made a purchase."

"So quickly? What was the book?"

"No book, sir. He purchased a large journal, the large red leather-bound one we thought would never sell."

The owner nodded appreciatively. "Excellent work, Dodd," then went back to his work.



THE NEXT WEEKS SAW a flurry of activity for Darcy. He travelled to Lambeth daily to receive reports from young Oliver, who proved to be attentive enough for his new employer. He also had the opportunity to see Elizabeth and William in the park nearly every day.

A steady stream of new faces had been seen regularly at Elizabeth's door. Most were gentlemen, dressed well, though not richly and most stayed for longer than a social visit would demand. Darcy had seen some of them too, and suspected they were being interviewed and hired as tutors for William. Soon enough, the variety of men dwindled and there seemed to be only four who came regularly. Oliver kept an excellent watch on them all and soon he had the names of the men. With this information, Darcy was able to assemble a crude schedule that William's studies seemed to be following. One of the names, however, caught his attention immediately; a Mr. Von Humboldt. The chance that two such men would be living in London, and giving lessons, could not be coincidence. He had been Georgiana's music master, and he no doubt was now training William. He suspected this connection would be useful someday.

Mr. Awdry had finally written him, informing him his offer to lease Elizabeth's house had been accepted at the offered price. Neither he, nor Patrick, had found a tenant yet, however he decided to begin the lease as soon as possible to provide the Cartwrights with the extra income.

Darcy had just returned from one of his excursions to Lambeth to see Elizabeth and William when Patrick arrived to confer with him as how to best handle the paperwork of the lease.

"Give me a month, Darcy. I am sure I can find you a tenant, and a name to put upon the papers. I would not be concerned about the time it might take. She had not expected to let the house, therefore you have no competition for the lease."

"Quite true. I suppose I am only anxious to get the money to them."

"Very admirable, but you must be patient. All your tasks will get done, in good time. Now, I have been thinking, how do you plan on watching them here in London? Do you think you can trust the local boy to continue doing so discreetly?"

“Frankly, no. I worry about his ability to keep his new job to himself. Oliver is a good lad, but I also fear this is too much to ask of him. In addition I have no information as to what Elizabeth is doing or planning, other than knowing, or guessing rather, at what their daily lessons schedules are. If she were to hire a coach and travel very far, I would have no way to know where she might go.”

“True, Brother. What you really need is someone in her household reporting to you.”

“Would that it were possible, Patrick. If only it was my house she was letting, I could set up my own staff at her disposal. I would not worry about the quality of the work they would be giving my family, and I could know her every movement.”

Patrick nodded his head in agreement. “Unfortunately, if Elizabeth found out a Darcy owned her house she would no doubt run again. Your owning it would not help your situation.” The two men sadly shook their heads.

“You could buy it, Patrick!” Darcy suddenly exclaimed.

“Me?”

“I would provide the funds of course, but you could purchase the entire row of houses. There are four in all, and in very good repair. Then you would act as the new landlord.” Darcy’s mind was racing. “Good God, I could make improvements to her house, her furnishings and change the staff to suit my purposes.”

“You would have to improve them all, Darcy. It would look suspicious if only one house was upgraded in any way; you must be equal with all your tenants.”

He looked a small bit discouraged but not defeated. “You are correct, of course. I could use your excellent input as to how to handle the property, Patrick, beginning with a good manager. I have never been a landlord for a London property.”

“Nothing easier, I will have a name for you before week’s end.”

“You do realise it will mean having to go into Lambeth again and look over the place, you may even meet them officially, though I think it would be better if the manager met with the tenants. We may need you, or you and Georgie together, to meet Elizabeth and William under other circumstances.”

Patrick laughed. “Of course I would happily travel to see the building. But what ‘other’ circumstances are you suggesting?” he wearily asked.

“You and Georgiana are the only family of mine Elizabeth has never met. I may need you both to interact with her in future, though I have no fixed plans or specific ideas. That is all.”

A feminine voice at the doorway startled the two men. “As long as you intend on conferring with *us* if you do come up with some sort of scheme,” Georgiana reproved.

She then took in her brother’s choice of raiment. “Is this what you wear when you go to see them?”

Darcy looked down, studying his clothes. “Yes, or something similar. Why, do you think it unsuitable?”

Georgiana took her time appraising his garments with a more critical eye. “They are old, but still very fine. Do you find anyone regarding you in particular when you are in Elizabeth’s neighbourhood?”

“I must confess I had not paid close attention. However, I would say I do not draw any pronounced notice. And in another week I should be receiving new clothes I had the tailor in Lambton make for me. They are all very plain, and the material more appropriate to lower classes.”

Georgiana nodded, though her head was obviously still engaged in deep thought. “Good, I think it might help you in your endeavours,” she answered, snapping out of her reverie.



DARCY RECEIVED A NOTE from his sister the next week and duly appeared at her doorstep in the late morning. He had no sooner been announced in her drawing room than she nearly dragged him back out again.

“Fitzwilliam!” she chattered. “Thank goodness you have arrived at last. We must make haste, for we have an appointment, and I should not wish to be rude by being late.” He found himself donning his hat and gloves and back out the door in moments. In the coach she finally had the chance to explain her rush.

“I know I am acting like a foolish girl, but I am very excited to see the inner workings. I feel as if someone has given us the keys to a jewel vault.” She giggled nervously.

Darcy merely frowned at her. “Georgiana, you are making no sense.”

She regarded him curiously, as if she could not have been plainer. “We are going to the Haymarket Theatre.”

“The theatre? At eleven o’clock in the morning? Whatever for?”

“Training of course. You need to learn how to disguise yourself properly, and, I dare say, are in sore need of some acting lessons.”



THREE HOURS LATER IT would be appropriate to say Fitzwilliam Darcy was not a happy man. Indeed it might be more accurate to say Mr. Darcy was irate and bordering on violent tendencies.

“No, no, Mr. Sheldon,” came the exasperated voice once more. “You must stop thinking like a young society gentleman. If you are going to convince those around you that you are an old man, you must *think* like one. Surely you have imagination enough to pretend.” Mr. John Liston’s arms flailed out above his head in grand gestures. He too,

had thoughts bordering on violent tendencies, however the lady and her brother had paid him good money for his time, therefore he would keep at this, no matter how dreadful his student's abilities.

"I am no actor," Darcy, or rather 'Mr. Sheldon', grumbled.

Liston rolled his eyes. "A fact none of us have failed to notice, sir. However, I do have a reputation to uphold. I expect you to make a greater effort than I have seen so far. You must allow yourself to be free from this resistance to my suggestions." Darcy huffed.

Mr. Liston tried another tactic. "Stop for a moment." Darcy sat down immediately. His back ached from leaning over his walking stick in his attempt to make himself look smaller, more frail.

"I want you to think carefully about what you are doing. I know it must seem embarrassing to you, but think about the circumstances under which you will be... well...performing. You will not be on a stage. You will not have an audience who knows your real name, where you live, or even what your true face looks like. They will see you as however you present yourself. If you tell them you are an old man, if you look like an old man, and if you act like an old man, then that is what they will believe.

"However, if you show mortification or any embarrassment as you play your role, those around you will sense it, and the game will be up. Do you understand?" Darcy agreed.

"Good! Now, let me see you walk across the room, greet your sister slightly and return. And do it with the confidence you are a poor elderly man."

Darcy took a deep breath and, ignoring the presence of the two watchful eyes, he stood and told himself he was Mr. Awdry, the vicar from Brampton. He put the vision of the old man in his mind, and proceeded to act just like him as he cautiously walked back and forth across the room. Georgiana clapped in delight as he sat back down.

Mr. Liston raised his head and brows then bowed his head ever so slightly in approval. "*Now* we are making some progress."

He later called for the costume mistress who appeared slightly dishevelled and rather perturbed for being disturbed once more. "It is time for Mr. Sheldon's next costume change, Martha. Would you bring Marston's costume from the second act of tonight's play?" Martha looked surprised, than snorted and shook her head as she went for the costume.

"Mr. Sheldon, your type is difficult to disguise, Sir. Your height makes you a particular challenge and, of course, it does not help you are rather handsome as well. It would be much easier to assume a different character if you were more plain."

"There is little I can do about it, Mr. Liston."

"Too true," he sighed. "Would that I were cursed with your bad fortune, young man. But I am a comedian, and

more so for my silly face. Now we must do what we can with your pretty one."

Darcy was quite put out by the actor's continual comments, which were far too intimate for a new acquaintance, but knew he was also making headway, not to mention gathering valuable information on disguises from the man.

"My suggestion would be to see if you can affect a common accent. If you can, then you can dress significantly poorer. The lower your class, the less others will notice you. Wearing a gentleman's hat adds nearly a foot to you already, and it makes you stand out even more, if possible. If we can get you into a plain cap, or perhaps a parson's flat round, it would help. Do I need to write any of this down?" They told him it would not be necessary.

"I will also give you the direction of the shop where you can obtain some of the face paints we used today. The aging lines are simple enough. If you practice and are sparse with your application, I think you will convince most people. Hiding most of your face with your wig was most effective as well, I believe. Do you agree, Mrs. Reynolds?" he asked, looking directly at Georgiana.

The three walked to the mirror in Mr. Liston's dressing room. Darcy was once again shocked to see himself looking thirty years older. The actor's talents were very valuable indeed. All three agreed his disguise was well done.

Just then, the costume mistress returned with the wardrobe and laid it across an empty chair before leaving. Georgiana had to stifle her laughter with her entire fist, while Darcy attempted to control his rage, rather unsuccessfully, as his entire face was a burning red.

Mr. Liston stopped him with his hand before he erupted. "Allow me to say two things, Sir. Firstly, you may very well find this particular type of disguise might be your only option at times, therefore you would do well to keep an open mind and allow yourself to be properly trained in its use.

"Secondly, before you even attempt the blatant refusal that is sitting upon your lips, I will add you have an annoying habit of raising your brows each and every time you have lied to me today, *Mr. Sheldon*," he emphasised Darcy's false name shamelessly.

Darcy's mouth, which had been poised to deliver his outrage, snapped shut, while Georgiana became suddenly interested in the patterns of the carpeting. Deception being new to both of them meant their skills at subterfuge were not well honed. They had little choice but to admit guilt through their silence and continue the lesson.

"Excellent. I appreciate your willingness to cooperate. As you both have assured me your new talents will not be used for nefarious purposes," here he looked once again for confirmation from the two people sitting across from him who did not hesitate to give it to him, "then I, too, am willing to continue and hopefully complete your education."

He lifted the costume up and sized it against Darcy's frame. "Now, shall we put this on?"

MUCH LATER THAT DAY the siblings travelled back to the McNally residence together.

“You do realise I shall never go to the Haymarket Theatre again?” Darcy, still sulking, groused.

“Why do you think I chose it in the first place? I know you do not like it as well as others. Now you have a perfect excuse to never attend a performance there again.” She looked out the coach window, biting her lip and attempting to curtail the jovial picture she knew her face would betray.

“Indeed I do. How shall I ever thank you?” he replied sarcastically.

“Hmmm,” she said, considering his offer carefully. “Perhaps could you play the part of the beggar woman again?” she asked and then burst into laughter.

LONDON, APRIL 1817

Elizabeth tucked William into his bed, eyeing the books he had received earlier. She had been surprised when he told her of meeting Mr. Bingley that day in the library. She was also disappointed she had failed to see her brother-in-law.

“Was he as jolly a fellow as I remember?”

“Yes, I think I would call him jolly; he certainly smiled a great deal. But also, I think he was a little sad.”

“Sad?” Elizabeth asked, concerned.

“Yes, sometimes I thought I saw a little sadness in his eyes, but he was very agreeable. I enjoyed speaking with him.”

“I am glad you are acquainted with him, William,” she said, as she deposited a kiss upon his sleepy brow.

“So am I, Mama.”



ELIZABETH SAT ON THE edge of her bed, the envelope Jane had given to her now in her trembling hands. She had carried it all night in her apron pocket, the gentle thumping at her hip reminding her of its presence. Now, with William asleep in his bed, she felt she was prepared to read the only words her father had communicated to her in over four years. Inside, she found two separate, smaller envelopes. One was clearly labelled with her name, and a request to be read first. She opened it and began.

Longbourn, November 14, 1813

Dear Lizzy,

I write to you this evening, hoping someday this missive will reach you. I do not know if it is possible, but my heart wishes it very much, and I am moved to follow the desires of my emotions for a change. I will leave this with your sister Jane, as I feel if you ever contact a member of your family again, she would be the one mostly likely to receive that honour.

It has been more than a year since I have had the pleasure of looking upon your sweet face. I know at the time we did not part under the best of terms, but believe me, my dear girl, I miss you fiercely.

For the past six months your Uncle Gardiner and I have searched for you, to no avail. I do not tell you this to cause you pain; I merely wish for you to know what we have done and have ascertained.

I know now you do not wish to be found. Your Uncle and I speak of it as fact, and the preparations we discovered you had made prior to your disappearance confirm what I write.

The day he discovered you missing was very trying for him. He sent an express immediately to Longbourn, and I arrived later in the afternoon. Speaking with him that day was one of the most difficult conversations I have ever had.

I learned what lengths you had gone to in the winter and spring, and of how you had risked your health and well being in pursuit of finding your sister. I learned you had suffered through the indignity of seeing your brother-in-law with another woman. I also learned it was your recommendation that kept the shame of that knowledge from your family at Longbourn, and society at large, in an effort to protect the fragile reputation we were just beginning to recover.

He told me of what extraordinary steps you had taken to make his cigar shop a success. Hearing all you had accomplished made my heart soar with pride for you, and curse in ignominy at myself for not helping and, most importantly, not acknowledging your abilities, labours, and results. I learned you essentially had taken on the responsibility of defender of your family. My disgust with myself was well deserved.

However, before I could begin to wallow in my own self-pity, my brother Gardiner insisted it was no time for personal introspection, and we needed to begin our search for you. Thus the hunt began.

Your Aunt Gardiner joined us at your lodgings to search your belongings, hoping for a clue as to what might have happened to you, or where you might be. We interviewed your landlady and the neighbours, but none could provide us with any insight as to your whereabouts.

However, what we did not find was as revealing as any outright clue. When we first inspected your rooms, your Aunt and Uncle were quick to reveal what they had seen the last time they had been there, and the significant change in your, shall we say, décor? The room was too neat and tidy; it was the room of someone who had no plans to return. It was then we first suspected no foul play was responsible for your disappearance; rather, you had in fact been planning to leave.

We next went to your shop, to search for any insights, and to question Toby and Mr. Whitaker if they had any ideas what might have happened to you. There, we found further proof

you were planning to flee; the missive you so thoughtfully left behind.

I was very impressed at how explicitly you noted your methods, recipes, and practices. I further marvelled after trying one of your custom blends when Toby offered it to me. I congratulate you, my Dear, on a truly superior product. The existence of the manual, along with the knowledge of your having taken Toby under your wing while teaching him the last valuable skill to running the shop, choosing the leaves, led both your Uncle and I to believe you were planning, with stealthy skill, an escape.

Our interview with the boy also provided us with some very startling facts. I will not recount to you what he told us. You lived through it all, and I am sure are in no doubt of what we learned. Toby was not completely aware of the practices a man bent on pursuing a woman might employ, and to this day he believes a secret admirer, who never revealed himself, was your benefactor.

Your aunt and uncle, however, were able to expound a great deal more upon the possible identity of the gentleman in question. We only had speculation, but a large body of circumstantial evidence pointed to one obvious man. This conjecture was, sadly, later confirmed when later a pair of attorneys presented themselves to your uncle, searching for a beneficiary of a settlement of two thousand pounds from their lately deceased client.

He took it upon himself to deceive the attorneys, declaring our Elizabeth Bennet lived in Hertfordshire, had not been to London for months, and had never had contact with their client. He further suggested their lady in question had simply picked an alias to use, which happened to be your name. They were both satisfied with the explanation, and have never attempted to contact us again.

I am deeply grieved to think you may have suffered, Elizabeth. I do not care about the breaking of proprieties and rules, only for your well-being. The scandal surrounding that gentleman's passing was fodder in the papers for weeks. I understand the need one might feel to escape such a nightmare. It has been more than six months since the incident, and no names that would be familiar to any of our acquaintance have ever been discovered by the press. I believe the gentleman's heirs are happy to have the interest in their personal family matters no longer at the forefront, and the past shall remain in the past. I hope you will find peace someday, and know I wish it for you with all that I am.

Dearest Lizzy, you are the truest Bennet there ever was; you have shown loyalty, bravery, and sacrifice for your family. You have done it all; restored our good name, restored your sister's reputation, protected your uncle's investment and

brought no further shame to your family. I swear to you I will not let your efforts be wasted, and I shall endeavour daily to become the father you had hoped I would be. Your sisters will be safe and guided in the ways they always should have been, on that you have my word.

I thank you, my dear daughter, but I cannot help but wonder what price you paid; I hope to God it was not too dear. I pray you are well and wish to assure you, if I ever have the fortunate chance to meet you again, you will never know judgement nor condemnation from me and I will remain forever,

Your loving father

Thomas Bennet

Her hands still shook as she opened the second, smaller envelope, where, delicately wrapped in a fine piece of silk, lay her garnet cross necklace. Before her tears could fall over the return of her precious keepsake, a heartier piece of gold was discovered under it, attached to a small tag which read:

Please, you deserve it most.

Her breath hitched as she slowly pushed her father's signet ring onto her finger.



THOUGH HER UNCLE AND father were clever men, she had not expected them to discover her compromising situation with Lord Caldhart. That her father would then write to her of it, claiming he would not judge her actions or condemn her, left her stunned. It was not a letter from which she would soon recover. She had never expected anyone to forgive her fall into shame, him least of all. Now it seemed he not only gave her his forgiveness, but also granted her the title of defender of their family and still loved her.

Despite the measure of relief that part of her father's letter brought her, she could not find peace with herself, or reconciliation with her family. There was a boy sleeping in the next room, whose age and looks betrayed her further indiscretions. Perhaps someday, when he was grown and his exact age could not be so easily determined, she might be able to seek out her family. But her meeting with Jane today had proved beyond any doubt that William's existence must be kept secret at all costs.

No one in her family would believe she had met a man, fallen in love, married and conceived in the space of the month after she left London. Most particularly when her offspring so clearly resembles *another* gentleman of their ac-

quaintance. She thought of her sister; Jane would not betray William to anyone.

She also knew her involvement with George Wickham's death would taint her for the rest of her life. She often had time to reflect on those three days. She wondered if any investigation into his death had been launched. Higgins would never betray her confidence, of that she was certain. He had as much to lose by implicating her as she did. The men in the tavern had no idea who she was, nor that she was a woman and not a young man. The only other witness, Lord Robert Caldhart, was now long dead.

She had never seen the papers. Mrs. Thurgood did not take the London papers, and gossip of the *ton* was hardly a regular topic of conversation in Oak Hill. Therefore, she had no idea the ball and his Lordship's death had been such fodder. She wondered what people had said about her. What name had been used in the papers, or in the chatter of the elegant salons of London's high society? Her father had obviously kept a close ear to the news, or he would not have reassured her that her name had not been discovered.

She sighed. The burden of keeping so many secrets weighed heavily upon her. Normally, she did not dwell upon them, yet sometimes the scope of all she had done forced itself to the surface of her consciousness, and she was unable to deny the multitude of sins she had committed. Those days were the hardest for her. She took the solace in the only form of comfort and happiness she knew: William. He was perceptive enough to notice her melancholia and called them 'Mama's Sad Days'. He tried to cheer her on those days, and Elizabeth loved her little son all the more for his tender care of her when she suffered.

She folded the letter carefully, and put it in her desk. She was glad to know her father though better of her, yet nothing had really changed. She must continue on as she had been doing, providing for her son and his future as best she could, and trying to conduct herself as the parent she knew she needed to be for him.



THE NEXT WEEKS WERE a whirlwind for Elizabeth. Her days were filled with settling herself and William into their new home, and beginning the search for proper instructors. She had several sources to draw upon from Mr. Awdry, and in turn more names had come forth for her to investigate. She would soon discover which were the best candidates to tutor her son. In the end, she hired four different men: one for Latin and German, one for history and literature, a mathematics and science tutor, and a music master.

Elizabeth had started teaching William on the tiny pianoforte they had in Brampton, and he had taken to it immediately. His small fingers did not allow him to play the large chords he wanted to, but the scales and arpeggios he

tackled eagerly. The repetitive exercises necessary to increase his abilities seem to fascinate and capture him. Elizabeth laughed thinking of how she herself had dreaded practicing, yet William seemed to almost relish in it and found relaxation out of the work. She would often catch him with his eyes closed as his fingers struck the keys over and over.

One day she could not help but interrupt him and he startled as if waking from a dream.

“Where were you just now? Your fingers were playing the scale, but your face seemed as if it was in some far away land.”

He smiled. “I was far away, Mama. I was still in the music, but surrounded by numbers.”

Elizabeth struggled to understand. “How can one be surrounded by numbers?”

“They were there before me, and also behind me and next to me and the music made them move and jump and I saw the equations and their answers and then more equations and more answers farther down there.” He had by now closed his eyes and in his mind was seeing everything before him, for he would point into the air at the places he was obviously looking.

“How long are the equations?” she asked, fascinated. They had just recently delved into the rudimentary principles of the unknowns, a subject she did not much care for, but William had been instantly caught up by it.

He looked to her curiously. “They do not *end*, Mama.”



THUS THE ROUTINES OF *two* households were set. William and his tutors met daily for lessons, while Darcy was arranging the financial tasks of leasing Asile in Brampton and purchasing the building of her terraced house in London. He also corresponded daily with his steward at Pemberley, his mail arriving in large pouches, full of the business of running a successful estate.

He still travelled nearly daily to Lambeth to watch for the afternoon respite William took from his lessons. Sometimes the nurse would bring him, but often it was Elizabeth, and Darcy would once again be transported into near heaven to look upon her.

There was one final aspect of Elizabeth’s finances Darcy wished to address, but he would need the Bingley’s help. They arranged to meet one afternoon at his home; the first time they had seen one another face to face since the morning he had made his confession.

Jane smiled sympathetically, while Bingley merely seemed apprehensive, as they were announced. The two men met in the middle of the room, unspeaking and stiff, until Bingley offered out his hand and patted Darcy’s shoulder with the other. He nodded confidently as they shook hands “It is good to see you, Brother.”

Darcy smiled at Bingley’s acceptance of him. “I have missed you a great deal, Charles; and you, Jane. You are both well?” The group confirmed the general good health of one another.

Darcy then began to recount all the tasks he had endeavoured to achieve the past weeks. He had written to them several times; however, this was the first opportunity to speak in person to Elizabeth’s relatives and tell them all he was trying to do.

“Fitzwilliam, I am overwhelmed. To think you have taken all this upon yourself for my dear sister. I must thank you. I know Elizabeth does not know to whom she will owe her good fortune,” Jane exclaimed.

“If you must thank me, let it be for yourself. Elizabeth can never know I was involved. However, if I have given you some peace and assurances for William and his mother’s future, then I shall be happy.” He took up her hand and kissed it.

She smiled sweetly at him. “I do thank you.”

“What further help do you require, Darcy?” Bingley asked.

“There is the matter of her investments, Charles. She mentioned several companies she has put her money into, and I mean to do everything I can to see she enjoys a good return, and can never lose her capital.”

“That is no small order!”

“No, indeed. Nor will it be as easy as I would like, for at the very least I will not be able to invest personally in all of them, as Elizabeth might learn of my involvement.”

“You are speaking of my uncle’s warehouses, Fitzwilliam?” Jane asked.

“Yes, exactly. I do not know if Elizabeth could ever learn about my putting money into them, but your Uncle could, and I do not want to draw attention to myself. I must be an anonymous partner, just as she is. That is where the two of you can help me. I propose to put up the money; however you and Charles will be listed as the actual investors. I think the same can be done for Walters and Elliott, and the Bartswith Shipping Company.”

Charles’s eyes rose at the names. “Excellent choices!” he observed.

“Indeed,” Darcy agreed. “I own a fair share in Bartswith already. However, I would like to see the percentage increased enough to have complete availability of any information with regards to their profits and, more importantly, any potential losses.”

“You wish to become a part owner?”

“I do.”

“Darcy you might need tens of thousands of pounds.”

“I should be surprised if I could buy a partial ownership for less than a hundred, Bingley.”

Charles coughed and was nearly too frightened to ask, “Walters and Elliott?”

“I plan to purchase them outright. I want nothing to do with the running of the business; their expertise and

management is without parallel. I have already spoken to the owners, and told them I wish to own the business in a financial capacity only. They are very interested in my offer.”

“A hundred thousand pounds, plus another business bought *and* investing in my uncle’s warehouses? Fitzwilliam this is too much.”

“It is not as inconvenient as you might suppose, Jane.”

“Darcy, you are known for your fortune of ten thousand a year. Surely a capital outlay this large will weaken even your financial state.”

“I appreciate your concern, Charles, but...” here he smiled deviously, “...reports of my fortune have been grossly...miscalculated.”

“Miscalculated?” Charles asked with a frowning smile on his face.

“Misconstrued?” Darcy tried. Charles shook his head.

“Perhaps ‘extraordinarily underestimated’ would be more appropriate,” Darcy offered.

“Define ‘extraordinary,’” Bingley countered.

Darcy grinned mischievously. “By a factor of three.”

Bingley sputtered. “Thank goodness that fact is not generally known to the matchmaking Mamas. You *have* been busy these past years.”

“And I hope your sister and nephew will someday reap the benefits. Now will you agree to be the name behind the investment? If Elizabeth found out, you have the perfect excuse, for she told Jane herself about investing in them. You could simply say you wished to help her and William and invested your own funds for their sake. It would not be far off the truth.”

Jane looked to Charles, who read her wishes perfectly. “Allow us a few minutes in the library, Darcy. My wife and I should like to discuss this together before making a decision.”



WHEN THEY RETURNED NEARLY a half hour later, Darcy was taken aback by their suggestions.

“We agree to use our names as investors in Walters and Elliott, and the Bartswith Shipping Company. However, Jane I and wish to be the investors in Mr. Gardiners warehouse, both financially and in name.”

“I would provide the money, Charles. You do not need to risk your own.”

“We know we do not need to invest our own funds, Darcy. Jane and I wish to help the Cartwrights as you do. We are all a family now, as we agreed in April, and we would like to help our family. We also believe the risk for us would be less than what you are going to hazard. Jane’s uncle is a shrewd businessman, and clever as anyone I have met. I think we shall do very well by our investment with him.”

Darcy considered briefly, then nodded. “I agree, then. Charles you always were a smart man, but I think with Jane by your side, you have become wise as well. Perhaps in another ten years I might add ‘clever’ to the list.”

Jane giggled, while Bingley shook his head. “Perhaps in another ten years, we might be able to add ‘amusing’ to your accomplishments, Darcy. For the present, you have no hope.”

Darcy then turned solemn. “Thank you both. I cannot tell you how much your support of my undertakings means to me. You both have my deepest regards.”

He then turned to Jane. “I wished to inquire, that is, I wanted to ask you what has been done to inform your father of Elizabeth’s situation, if it is not too difficult of a subject.”

Here Jane hesitated. Bingley moved next to her and took her hand in loving support. “I wrote to my father soon after the day Elizabeth came to see me. I simply told him Elizabeth had come unannounced to see me and reassure me she was in perfect health and well, but could not see any of the family,” she sniffed slightly, “including me.”

“Two days later, Papa arrived at our house. He was not happy with the lack of true facts about how Elizabeth was living. I gave him every reassurance I could that she seemed happy, and well. I told him she claimed to have the means to support herself, and she had specifically asked he stop looking for her.” The tears had started as Jane spoke the last words.

“He was so broken-hearted. I told him she wanted him to remember her as she was at Longbourn so many years ago, out on her walks in the fields and woods. He seemed to understand better, then. But I will never forget the hopelessness in his eyes, when he heard Elizabeth’s request to be left alone. I wished I could give him more reassurances, but there was little knowledge I could impart without betraying so many. He only seemed to rally when I told him Elizabeth now had his letter. Then his face brightened and he said ‘Good, she will at least know.’ though I do not know to what he portended.”

She laid her head against her husband’s shoulder, and he gently embraced her. Darcy was struck by the resemblance to Georgie and Patrick at that moment; husband and wife drawing strength from each other when needed. A twinge of jealousy ran through him and, for a moment, he would have given anything to share such intimacy with his beloved Elizabeth.

“I am sure it must have been very difficult, Sister. I thank you for your loyalty to all of us. I know asking you to deceive your father has been a strain on you. I would never ask it unless absolutely necessary. Please forgive me for requiring it.”

Jane smiled timidly. “It is difficult, Sir, but not impossible. I assure you I am up to the task of keeping up the ruse.” He thanked her sincerely.



WITHIN THE NEXT MONTH, Patrick had found an excellent tenant for Aisle: an artist who was nearing retirement and wanted the chance to create a few more paintings in the pastoral countryside and fine woods that surrounded Brampton. Darcy was delighted the area his son grew up in might be persevered in oil, and asked McNally to purchase any good pieces the man might create as a future present to little William. It was a day of great satisfaction when he finally signed the lease and paid the money to his attorneys. Despite everything he had already undertaken, it was not until this first task was completed that he truly felt he was aiding his new family.

He was invited to the McNallys for dinner to celebrate and was pleased to see the Bingleys in attendance as well. After dinner, the group began to discuss the final parts of the purchase of Elizabeth's building. He was once again unprepared for the examples his relations would show of their love and generosity.

"Fitzwilliam, Patrick and I have an announcement we wish to make." Georgiana began. "The building Elizabeth and William are living in has already been purchased. The transaction was completed last week and the papers have been signed and recorded. Patrick and I are now the owners."

"Why would you do this?" he asked, truly overwhelmed.

"Because you are not the only relation William has, Darcy. Georgiana and I are his aunt and uncle, and we have a right to provide for him as well. You see, we have amended our wills and an entailment now states when we pass from this world, William Bennet Cartwright will be the owner of the building. It is our way of aiding you, and doing our part to help William in future. He need not act as landlord, and may sell the property one day if he wishes, but we wanted to leave something for him, something that would be his alone," said Patrick.

"I hope you can forgive us this small bit of subterfuge, Brother. We felt you would never agree to allow us to use our own funds to make this purchase, and therefore made the transaction ahead of schedule," Georgiana pleaded. "If anything should happen to you or Elizabeth, the boy would have something to live upon, and it would not countermand his mother's wish of not being master of Pemberley.

Darcy was still speechless. He stood shaking his head, a bit bewildered.

"If it will make you feel better, Darcy, you may use your own funds to make the improvements to the property or the furnishings."

Darcy turned to his brother, still greatly moved. "I...I think I must insist upon it, Patrick."

Georgiana drew her brother in a tight embrace as her husband patted his shoulder. He looked to Jane and Bingley, who were also caught up in the moment. "I believe you all have once again proven to be excellent friends as well as excellent relations. No man could ask for better. Thank you all." He was dreadfully close to tears.

Georgiana made to lighten the mood immediately. "I think I feel the urge to play; would anyone like to hear some music?"

Jane immediately jumped to her request and the two ladies made their way to the pianoforte. Bingley moved over to join the two men.

McNally began to chuckle. "I believe we have managed to do something unique tonight, Charles. We have outwitted Fitzwilliam—no small feat." He slapped his brother heartily on the shoulder this time. "Come, Darcy; consider it a large repayment for all the dinners I made you buy before I married your sister." The men laughed heartily and the mood lightened considerably.

"Have you considered how you get your servant into her household?" Patrick asked.

"I think the more difficult question is *who* should be placed there," Bingley suggested. "Anyone on your staff would see the resemblance betwixt you and William, Darcy. And, unfortunately, many of my staff have met the boy before."

"I may have a solution," said Patrick. "My housekeeper at Branmoor, my mother's home, has a widowed daughter who would delight in coming to London, especially for a temporary position which would allow her to return to her mother in a year or so. She has been working as cook with her mother these past ten years and could easily handle the position as both housekeeper and cook for Elizabeth. I have known both women since I was a boy, and she and her mother are devoted, reliable people. More importantly, I think she would be willing to pass along information to me. The McNally name would not be used in her references, only my mother's family name: Ferguson."

"Would she spy for you?" Darcy asked.

"I hesitate to use that term. I believe as long as your requests were reasonable she would be willing to keep us updated on the goings on in the house."

Georgiana and Jane had stopped speaking, and Patrick now looked over to his wife for support. She nodded her head in encouragement.

"I must caution you though, Darcy, no person should be made to spy upon another. You will need to curb your curiosity where your son and his mother are concerned. I think it will be hard not to want to hear every minute detail of their lives; however, they deserve their privacy. Should she learn of your imposing on her do you not think she would feel violated?"

"I had not thought on it, Patrick."

"How would you feel if someone were telling *her* your daily movements? What sort of trust would you feel towards Elizabeth under those circumstances?"

Darcy nodded, deep in thought. "I would feel hunted; like prey."

"I think you would as well."

"You need to decide what you would *need* to know from your informant, Darcy. Not merely what you would *like* to know," said Bingley.

Chapter 30

“These are excellent suggestions, Brothers. Most of the things I wished to provide to them are being accomplished. Now I must decide what the future holds for the three of us, what role I will fulfill in their lives.”

“And your brothers and sisters as well, Darcy. We will all be affected by whatever your plans are.”

“Indeed. I have much to consider.”



AND SO IT WAS that Elizabeth's house had a new landlord. She liked the new manager who introduced himself to the families occupying the four homes in the building. The man was extremely thorough in examining the interiors of each home, taking notes on anything that needed repairing or updating.

Her new housekeeper was a competent, jovial lady who quickly became very attached to her new mistress and the young master. Mrs. Cartwright did not know the woman was also telling the new owners pertinent information with regards to any plans she was making for herself and William. The housekeeper only had one afternoon each week free, and Elizabeth never suspected she spent those afternoons with Mr. or Mrs. McNally, divulging the household goings on.

Darcy had taken his brother's advice, and only asked for information with regards to any new acquaintances they had made, if Mrs. Cartwright's finances seemed to be in order, or if any travel plans were being made. The new housekeeper did not consider her mistress' privacy or safety were being compromised, especially when the McNally's continually reassured her of their concern for the Cartwrights welfare alone. All parties were happy, with peaceful existence that pervaded for many months.

Elizabeth was continually astonished at the excellent care the new owner was putting into his investment. She knew the quality of the new furnishings, and the painting and repairs that had been done to the place, had rendered it worth much more than the current money she was paying. However, as the landlord had no inclinations to raise the rents on hers, nor her neighbour's homes, she was very happy and grateful indeed.

It was nearly three months after initially receiving Darcy's letter before Colonel Fitzwilliam made any headway in the investigation into George Wickham's death. Richard was not worried about the amount of time which had passed, nor the lack of true progress he made. He knew the army well enough; if one allowed enough time and persistence, something was bound to happen and provide him with the answers he sought.

His good fortune came in the form of a superior officer, General Tippington, who had a penchant for fine liquors, jovial conversation and cards. Tippington was also cursed with very bad luck when he imbibed in all three. Richard was well aware that this particular General's offices were the ones who had the responsibility to look into the errant officer's disappearance and then subsequent demise. His evening proved to be both lucrative and informative. He wrote to Darcy to expect him soon with new information.



LONDON, JULY, 1817

WHEN THE TWO COUSINS finally met up, they wasted little time in getting to the business at hand.

“I am afraid I have little new information, Darcy. Most of what I had heard before was the extent of the army's knowledge of the affair, save one fact: I now know the name of the tavern where he was last seen alive.” Darcy's spirits lifted immediately. “I have no doubt you will wish to go as soon as you may, but I strongly suggest you and I change clothing before venturing into that part of town if we wish to make it safely back home.” The two were off soon after dressing themselves appropriately.



NEITHER FELT COMFORTABLE in the place. They settled in at a table, observing quietly for some time. The rough customers paid them no mind. Eventually the two decided the only person who might provide any information worthwhile would be the barman. They waited until closing when nearly all the patrons had left, then made their way to the man.

He seemed chary of being approached by two men who were clearly not drunk. Darcy realised there were few reasons for someone to ever come to this tavern, and if a man

did not drink, he probably was not to be trusted, therefore they proceeded cautiously.

"We're closing. You two need to find yer ways out."

"We should like to speak with you first," Richard began. "Then we shall be on our way."

The barman eyed them warily. "It's my place, and talk's not free here."

"Undoubtedly," Darcy answered calmly, while laying his coin upon the bar. The man picked it up and pocketed it immediately. He then stood still, waiting for them to play their hand.

Richard began first. "We seek information. Specifically, anything which has not already been...*shared* with certain authorities about an incident which happened in this area in May of 1813."

The landlord stood unmoving, silent as the grave.

"The incident in which a certain former officer was last seen in this tavern alive, yet was not so the next day," Darcy added.

The man did not budge.

"We are interested to know whether you might have recognised any of your patrons that evening," Richard asked.

"I rarely know the men who come in here for a drink, exceptin' for a few regulars. But my regulars aren't always around every night, and maybe on the night you are thinking, they weren't here at all," he finally said.

Darcy looked to Richard, who replied, "What would keep your regulars out of your establishment for an evening?"

The man looked expectantly at the two for some time, until the rules of this game finally dawned upon Darcy. He brought another coin out and laid it upon the counter. The man looked insulted, until a second coin joined the first. Both were quickly swept up by the barkeeper's battered hand.

"If someone was to pay enough money for the place to be closed to all but certain of his friends, we would turn the regulars away."

"Would the man have a name?" Richard asked.

"No."

"Would the man happen to have been...not at all young?" Darcy offered a more convoluted way to get his information.

The man stared with his now familiar 'expectant' face. Darcy laid three coins upon the bar.

"Not young at all."

"Did you know any of his friends who came that night?" Richard asked, placing his coins upon the bar.

The man snorted. "Hardly; none of them were from 'round here, nor even London, I'd wager."

"Strangers?" Darcy asked, laying more coins out.

"They might not have known each other, but there was *one* man they *all* knew."

Darcy paled at the thought.

"Caught in his own web," murmured Richard.

The barkeeper nodded.

Richard jingled his coin purse "Is there anything else you can add, or I should say earn?"

He shook his head sadly. "But I will tell you what I told the rest, the man was alive when he left my tavern, on that I swear."

Darcy and the Colonel nodded, satisfied. They had almost reached the door when Darcy hurried back to the bar.

"The elderly gentleman: he did not have a woman with him, did he?" Darcy uttered emotionally, before he could contain himself. From the door Richard's head whipped around as he discerned the word 'woman'

Before the barman could make his request a pound note was slapped upon the wood; it disappeared instantly.

"No women there at all, just two men with him. Well, a man and a youth."

He swallowed hard. "The youth, can you describe him?"

The barman's face betrayed he was considering bargaining further.

"The note covers the rest of our conversation," Darcy added with finality.

"I never did see his face. He was a small lad, but I'd still say sixteen or seventeen as he didn't walk like no little boy.

"And what did you see him do?" Darcy demanded.

"I didn't *see* anything."

Darcy began to fume.

"I pour drinks and *don't* see, understand? Just like I didn't see you two dandies walk in here tonight and I didn't answer any of your questions. I only was willing to talk to you 'cause I knew you wasn't trouble the second I laid eyes on you. I told you all I'm going to. The rest you can figure yourselves. Now, we're closed, Gents. Get out."

As the coach pulled away, Richard began to speak, but Darcy stayed him with his hand.

"Not until we are home, Richard. I wish for as much privacy as possible, if you would." His cousin conceded with a nod.



THEY ARRIVED TO A sleepy butler and footman, who did not grumble, but were clearly not happy to have been required to attend at such a time. Darcy dismissed both to their beds and asked his valet be sent to bed as well. He and his cousin would attend to their own needs when they retired.

They then repaired to Darcy's private study, which was smaller and more intimate a setting for a conversation that needed to be discreet above all else. Richard poured himself a brandy, while Darcy lit up a Johnson's cigar.

Richard, the commanding soldier in him taking over, did not hesitate to engage. "I believe you know much more

of the story of Wickham's death than you have previously led me to understand."

Darcy drew a great breath. "Sit down, Richard. I did not lie to you when I told you I was not involved in Wickham's death in any way. I did not even know it had occurred until you told me at Pemberley. However, I find I now wish to know the truth of his end for many reasons."

Darcy started pacing the rug.

"The woman I love so very dearly..." He paced once more. "I have never mentioned her name because you are acquainted with the lady, and I could not bear the thought of your teasing me after she refused me." Richard nodded, remembering the conversation they had outside Pemberley that cold November day.

"Before you think less of her, I must tell you my declaration was probably the single most haughty, cruel and thoughtless set of words which have ever passed my lips. I do not exaggerate. Not only did the lady rightly refuse me, but, in my arrogance, I demanded she tell me her reasons for turning me down, and received the soundest thrashing of my life."

He then went on to briefly explain more of his history with the lady, the same as he had once explained to his sister and brother-in-law. At last he came to the dreaded revelation of the lady's departure from Lambton because of her youngest sister Lydia's elopement with George Wickham. Richard, having made the connection with surprising alacrity, had to grasp his legs to keep from bounding out of his seat.

"You were in love with Elizabeth Bennet?"

"No, Richard. I am in love, and will always be in love, with Elizabeth Bennet."

"She is Wickham's sister-in-law?"

"*Was* his sister-in-law."

Richard's mind was reeling. "Tonight at the inn, you asked if the man who paid to have the tavern closed was elderly; do you know who it was?"

"No." Darcy answered easily, for he did not know for certain if it was Lord Caldhart.

"But you have an idea who it may be?"

Darcy stared unfazed at his cousin, and would not answer. Richard tried to read his face, unsuccessfully.

"Do you think Elizabeth Bennet had anything to do with Wickham's death?"

Darcy flinched. "I do not know," he answered carefully.

Richard studied him again. "No you do not, but are you frightened she might somehow have been involved?"

"There is much more at stake." He looked longingly at Richard's brandy, wishing he could feel the heat of the liquid down his throat to spare him the anxiety of telling all he needed to impart. Instead, he was forced to once more, slowly and painfully, reveal meeting Elizabeth again at the masked ball and their secret tryst.

"That night, she gave herself to the man she loved, while I took a woman I thought worldly; a virtual stranger."

Richard frowned, a startled dawning creeping across his face. "Darcy, surely you do not mean she was a...that she had never..."

He nodded.

"When I discovered who she was, I begged her to run away with me, but she would not agree. We spoke such harsh words to one another, but only later did I realise she was merely trying to get me to give her up, and all for my own good. She was protecting me from the scandal of her sister's elopement, which had sullied the family's reputation."

Richard was confused. "Surely there might be some gossip from an elopement, but not enough scandal to ruin you, Darcy."

"The marriage was not discovered until many months later; almost a year. The family was ostracized and shunned because of it. I did not know of any of their scandal. Therefore, I could only think she was once again refusing me."

"The very next day I ran away again, this time to Pemberley, and a never-ending parade of bottles. She ran away the same day, to live I do not know how, but once again I was not there to help her. I had failed her again."

"She had never been heard from until the day, three months ago, when fate bid me sit and wait for Bingley in his study overlooking the garden, and I heard her sweet voice, and then her tiny sobs, as my heart wrenched in silent witness to all her confessions and sufferings to her sister, Jane."

He leaned heavily against the mantle at the fire, "We have a son, Richard."

For once Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was speechless. Eventually the question Darcy knew Richard would ask formed on his face. He was cut off by his cousin before he could ask it.

"I have met my son, and believe me when I tell you, not a soul on this earth would doubt the boy is a Darcy. Jane Bingley saw him and immediately recognized him as mine, without ever having known Elizabeth and I had been together. He also revealed his birthday, which is almost exactly nine months after our assignment. I do not doubt his parentage, and neither will you, Cousin."

Richard numbly nodded. Darcy went on to explain Elizabeth's new name, her rise in fortune, and her current address.

"You said you learned of your son's existence three months ago, but you did not say you are in contact with Miss Benn...Mrs. Cartwright. Is this fear of Wickham's murder foreshadowing your ability to reconcile with her?"

"It is one of many reasons. I must find out if she played a part in the actions."

"And you feel responsible for not revealing the scoundrel's character so many years ago, and protecting the ladies he encountered from him, including her sister?"

"I *am* responsible; it has nothing to do with my damned feelings! I sought to protect my sister, without regard for

the greater good of the rest. In essence, I lied to protect Georgiana, as though I had no responsibility to the other women in the world, as if I had no duty to them!

"I did not feel he would bother the Bennets, as they have no fortune, conveniently forgetting a man can steal more than a woman's money. Am I right in thinking Lydia was not the first girl without money he might have ruined? What of shopkeepers' daughters and the like?"

Richard nodded.

"My prideful ways helped him. My silence may as well have been permission. The money I gave him enabled him to travel to places to find new victims, and my silence gave him no opposition.

"Elizabeth's admonitions have never rung more true; if this is not proof I have behaved with the selfish disdain of the feelings of others, then what is? I considered the actions of that viper were beneath my notice or interference because his *victims* were beneath my notice. If this is not the actions of a guilty man, then I do not understand its meaning."

"I see." Richard answered carefully.

The two sat thinking for a long while. "Do you at least know *why* she might have been involved?" Richard finally asked.

"I can only conjecture; I have no proof. I believe our dear childhood friend had *not* married her sister. I suspect the marriage was false. I suspect Elizabeth had been moved to revenge. I know, had it been me, I would have done the same. Georgiana was almost forced into the identical position."

"Not quite. Wickham would have been sure to marry her, to get at her money. But where is Mrs. Wickham? How is she living without a husband to support her?"

"I have no idea. Perhaps she did sail to America. If she had passage only one way, she could never return to be a burden to him."

"What do the Bennets know?"

"The same as you did three years ago; Miss Lydia and Wickham sailed to America together, and were married on the ship. Jane Bingley speaks as if both are still in America, and mentioned they never write to their family here."

"We know why Wickham does not write. I wonder what has become of the girl?"

"We may never know. If he did not marry her, and she sailed without him, she would hardly write to her family, for they would learn of her shame. Perhaps she is living the lie of being his wife in America. We can only hope she does not return."

"What do you wish to tell the Bingleys and the Bennets with regards to Wickham's death?"

"I feel we should not reveal it. Do you agree?"

"I do. I can see no good coming from telling them. Too many secrets are dependent upon his death being unknown. This is a bad business, Darcy. I do not like the idea of Mrs. Cartwright's or your son's freedom being jeopardized by a loose tongue."

"You and I are the only ones who know, Richard. Can I trust you?"

"Of course."

"Because you have not only me to answer to, but your new cousin as well."

"Yes, I have a new cousin. What is the boy's name?"

"She named him William."

"Darcy, while I can not completely agree with your assessment of your accomplice in all that has happened, I can certainly understand it. But now I think the more important question is: what are you going to do about it?"

"Everything."

"A rather large order, even for you."

"I agree. Luckily, I do not go through my life alone."

"Sorry?"

"We are not always happy with ourselves, not proud of our actions, or our feelings, but what never will change is that we do not go through our lives *alone*. We, each of us, have someone, somewhere, to answer to."

"Who said that?"

"Two very wise women. Richard, I am going to need your help."

Richard rolled his eyes. "How did I fail to see you were going to ask me for something more?"

"Because you have lived as though you were alone too often. Will you help me?"

"You know I will."

"Thank you, Richard. With your help, and the McNallys and the Bingleys, I may just be able to accomplish all I wish. They know everything about Elizabeth and William, though no one knows of what I have told you about the Wickhams."

"And do you know what you wish to accomplish?"

"Not completely. I will need a great deal more time to think, but, for now, knowing my family can support my endeavours gives me great faith that all will end well."

"You will not reveal your plans?"

"They are still being assembled, Richard, I assure you. But I will tell you what I have accomplished so far." He explained all he had undertaken that spring and summer. By the end, Richard was amazed at his cousin's fortitude and determination to help William and his mother.

"What do you wish me to do?"

"I was wondering if there was any way you could make discreet inquiries as to whether the army or the London authorities are still investigating the...incident. And...I need to find a witness to that fateful evening's events."

"Anything else?" the colonel asked, clearly daunted.

"I know it is a great deal to ask. Any success you have will be appreciated...and thank you, Richard."

"You already have enough tasks to take on, Darcy. I am glad to relieve you of some of the burden."

Chapter 31

LONDON, JANUARY 1818

The routine set the previous summer continued through the autumn and following winter in the Cartwright and Darcy households. William continued to excel in his studies, while his mother began her search for ideal situations and contacts on the continent to continue his education.

Darcy was also searching for information on the educational institutions of Europe. He had written to several of his Cambridge professors, and had made the journey three times to consult with his old masters as to the best course of action for the 'friend' he had described to them. Eventually, a list of possibilities and contacts was made, and he now pondered how to get the information to Elizabeth.

It was his clever sister who came up with the idea. She had re-acquainted herself with her old music master, Mr. Von Humboldt, after learning he had taken on William as a student, and quickly engaged him to begin lessons for Patrick, enabling her to see him each week.

Patrick was game to allow the lessons, and eventually began to enjoy his new skills. Georgiana had secretly hoped her husband would come to love playing. The thought of someday indulging in duets together might have spurred her to exaggerate her praise to her husband a tiny bit; however, it was in the name of a good cause.

Mr. Von Humboldt was pleased Mrs. McNally took such an interest in his work, his other students, and even went so far as to offer to sponsor those he deemed worthy. The two often sat after her husband's lessons talking of music and eventually other things.

Many months later, he would not think it at all strange to be discussing the educational systems of his motherland versus the surrounding countries. Mr. Von Humboldt had a preference for his beloved Viennese institutions, as their superiority in music and the arts were well known. The McNally's were just as adamant the Universities of Greifswald or Rostock were also excellent choices, as were Padua or Pisa. They further suggested that even Bonn, where the Prussian king was rumoured to be setting up a new university, would be appropriate, if one was not bent on a purely musical education. The three deliberated the merits of all, many times, and Mr. Von Humboldt was indeed impressed with his new patron's extensive knowledge of European universities.

The McNallys later showed no signs of surprise when Mr. Von Humboldt asked if they would be willing to share the information and contacts they had spoken of with his

young protégé, a Mr. Cartwright. They generously acquiesced.

The Cartwright's housekeeper later confirmed several letters had been written to, and received from, the continent. By the end of winter, it seemed the boy's future had been decided. Elizabeth and William would be moving to the newly established kingdom of Lombardy and Venetia, ruled by the nephew of the late Marie Antoinette, Austrian Emperor Franz I. The University of Padua was to be his new home.



LONDON, APRIL 1818

LITTLE MORE THAN A MONTH remained until the journey to Padua was to commence. Darcy had been busy making the arrangements with all his business interests, attorneys and steward as to how he was going to keep in contact. The McNally's would act in his stead if a situation arose which required personal attendance, and all other decisions would be made via post whenever possible.

He had found a villa to lease on the banks of the Brenta canal, and could only hope it was not one of the monstrosities which he had seen on the riverbanks near Venice years ago. It would not do to be talked of; he wished to slip into the city quietly, without notice.

His Italian lessons continued daily, and he was pleased with his progress in the language. He had picked it up when on his tour four years earlier, as they had spent a great deal of their time in the southern part of the country. Now, he was grateful to have at least some working knowledge of speaking it, and was learning to read and write it as well. His German was excellent, and he felt he would have no trouble with any Austrians he might encounter in the city.

He planned to return to England regularly, for the thought of not seeing his beloved sister and brother-in-law, the Bingleys or Pemberley for years was not an option he was willing to entertain. Though giving up Elizabeth and William, and this half-life they shared, was something he could not do either. He decided he would be able to arrange a system to watch over the Cartwrights within a year after they had settled, enabling him to make the trip back soon. Georgiana and Patrick promised to make the trip to see him someday as well.

As he thought of what he was leaving behind, Darcy began to dwell upon what Elizabeth and William were giving up. As well as their home and their language, more important was the fact that, with William's education likely to last as long as fifteen years, they were, in a way, also giving up their loved ones.

It had been the portrait of his ancestor in the grand staircase of his town home that convinced Darcy. Great-Great Grandfather Harold had made him realise his family and loved ones were the single most important thing in his world. He knew if William had disappeared and had a child...he could not finish the thought. It was right; all his convictions told him so. Now, with the imminent departure to the continent, and no return date considered, he felt Mr. Bennet was due what might be his only opportunity to meet his grandson.



THE BUTLER HAD USHERED the new house guest into Fitzwilliam Darcy's private study. The air was ripe with nervousness as Mr. Bennet regarded the usually stoic man's now obvious lack of composure.

"Mr. Bennet I thank you for accepting my invitation. I know it was no small favour to ask, and I appreciate your willingness to come to town."

"Mr. Darcy, I do appreciate the hospitality you have offered me this week. However, your purpose for bringing me to London eludes me. As I am no longer a young man, I would appreciate it if you would speak openly, frankly, and, if at all possible, expeditiously.

"As you wish, Sir. I would, however, strongly recommend a brandy and my sofa. What I have to impart is not of short duration, nor joyful."

"Now you have me worried, young man. Please do not make me suffer needlessly."

"I apologise, sir. I do not mean to say I have specific ill tidings to impart, but that I have a very long, pertinent story to tell you, regarding myself, your family, and your daughter, Elizabeth."

Mr. Bennet paled. "You have seen my Lizzy? Has any harm come to her? Is she well?"

"I have not spoken to her, Sir. However, I have often seen her, and I can assure you she is in perfect health, and finds happiness in her life. It is my history, our history, of which I wish to speak. And I wish to consult with you about the future of many."

Mr. Bennet regarded this man before him. He had not seen Darcy for many years, but from the times he had, he discerned the edge had come off of him; he had softened a bit. Not friendly of course, but not the disdainful man that he, and so many others, had thought him so many years ago.

"Very well, Mr. Darcy, tell your story."

"Thank you, Sir. I believe I should begin in Meryton, in the autumn of 1811."

Mr. Bennet groaned. "Not the night you slighted Lizzy? There simply cannot be anyone on this earth who does not know you said she was tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt you."

Darcy's face lost all colour so quickly, Mr. Bennet thought the great man might actually faint. "She heard me?" he whispered.

"Good God, man. Can you really be so thick? Yes, she heard you, and told everyone in the town of your appallingly bad manners." Mr. Bennet chuckled slightly. Darcy was not amused. "I apologise for taking delight in another's misfortune, Mr. Darcy, but you brought it upon yourself. Luckily Elizabeth laughed over your ill-chosen words, but I know it jaded her opinion of you from that point; she did not care for you one jot."

"I never knew. She never told me." Darcy shook his head. He admired her all the more knowing now she had never brought up his shockingly bad behaviour or berated him directly for it. He felt like a fool now, but would go on.

"Despite my utter stupidity of saying such a thing about your daughter, Sir, much less within her hearing, no sooner had the words left my mouth, when I realised her face was actually very appealing to me. I can honestly say that, by the time Bingley and I had left Hertfordshire after the Netherfield ball, I had fallen utterly and completely in love with her.

Mr Bennet's shock was clearly visible. "I believe you offered me a brandy earlier, young man. I should be very grateful if you now would renew the offer."



UNFORTUNATELY, 'GRATITUDE' COULD EASILY be said to have been the last thing on Thomas Bennet's mind as he stood in front of Darcy after his speech. Shock, grief, bitterness, disgust and fury would have been more likely. Not unlike most persons when faced with such an amalgam of overwhelming emotions, Mr. Bennet did the only thing which seemed rational at the time: he sat down heavily in the chair beside him and broke down.

Darcy allowed the man his time alone and retreated behind his desk.

When Mr. Bennet finally seemed composed, he tried to offer his help. "If it brings you any relief, I had the same reaction when I learned of William's existence," he said, as he refilled Mr. Bennet's brandy.

"I find it hard to fathom *your* ever losing control, Mr. Darcy."

He contemplated the elder gentleman's perception of him for a moment. "Perhaps the Darcy who once silently stalked the edges of your drawing room, Sir. But I gave that man up many years ago. The man who stands before you now happily claims to have feelings of great depth. When I learned of William, I cried like a babe; in my sister's lap, no less. I have a great sympathy for your own suffering, and I mean to prove it to you every way I can."

Mr. Bennet looked sceptical, yet still managed, "You certainly do not bandy words about, I will give you that. Very well, Sir; you may begin to state your case."

Several minutes later, Mr. Bennet had found little relief. He stared silently into the fire, not for the first time that day, while Darcy allowed him to find his composure once more. "Wickham dead. I cannot believe it."

"My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, can verify all I have said. It was he who informed me of the man's passing several years ago. The army wishes to hush it up, considering the circumstances."

The elder man stood up and began pacing. Darcy was surprised to see an imitation of the habit he displayed in time of stress.

"Do you think she had anything to do with Wickham's... fate?"

"I do not know. I can only tell you I intend to find the truth. Without absolving her of guilt in Wickham's death, I have no hope of a future with her."

Mr. Bennet regarded him a long while, finally venturing, "And if the truth is not to your liking? If it is in any way...dangerous?"

"Wickham's ending was not so different from what I had often contemplated inflicting upon him. I would also point out it was well deserved."

"While I cannot argue that merit, it still does not explain what your actions would be."

"I would try to protect them in every way. If I could, I would advise another...residence, exactly what they are already planning."

"I see. What if your quest for all truths should prove to uncover information which was...less palatable?"

"There is very little I expect to be surprised at," Darcy answered cautiously.

"But if there were? Are you willing to pursue this? Would you still be willing to aid them, even if you were to discover more...things which might not reflect well upon Elizabeth's character?"

Darcy resented this posturing. "What do you know, Mr. Bennet?"

"There was another name associated with that time. It now seems it may have been pertinent, though I did not think so then, owing to the gentleman no longer being alive. Of course, I did not know Wickham had been... Perhaps the authorities felt, if this gentleman's involvement in the activity were proved, his fate would have been the same, therefore, further investigation would yield the same results. As far as they might have been concerned, all parties were now satisfied."

"In what way do you think this is important?"

"The 'other party's' demise was only a few days after the first party's departure."

"Yes?"

"All of this activity took place in mid May."

"Yes?"

Mr. Bennet grimaced and shook his head. "Blast it, Darcy! He was at the Blakely's ball the night he died. A night which was witnessed by hundreds, bet upon by many, and scandalously written about in the gossip for weeks, mostly due to the fact that, when he passed into the next world, he was not *alone*."

"Please, stop," Darcy's quiet voice pleaded.

Mr. Bennet saw the pain upon his face. "I am not telling you anything you did not already know, am I?"

Darcy shook his head.

Now it was his turn to pace. Realising there was no turning back, he began. "I attended the Blakely's masked ball, where I met an extraordinary French woman. She had a bevy of admirers around her all night, and I was next to her for most of it. I am not proud to say she captured my interest immediately and I was quickly enamoured of her in an...ungentlemanly manner. We had the opportunity to be alone at one point..."

Mr. Bennet's face was still as he listened to Darcy's story. His face betrayed no surprise as the man continued his painful confession.

"Sir, the woman with whom I had this...encounter was Chantal Moreau. She had been spoken of openly as the new mistress of Lord Robert Caldhart.

Mr. Bennet's head dropped. "Elizabeth."

Darcy nodded. "But there was worse to come. I did not realise it at the time, but she had recognised me. She had not merely attempted an assignation, she had, in fact, sacrificed her virtue to me; the man to whom she later confessed she was in love.

"It was the first night... She had only moved into his Lordship's protection that day. The ball was his own perverted attempt to show her off, and to make his fellow gentlemen envy his newest possession. Consequently, their relationship had not yet been consummated.

"She did not reveal herself until we had... You cannot know how sorry I was, thinking she was another woman, a woman I did not love, and then have it revealed to me she was the very woman who owned my heart." Darcy choked upon his confession. "My disgust and shame in myself has been well deserved."

He then went on to reveal his second proposal to Elizabeth, and her subsequent refusal and the reasons for her doing so. Mr. Bennet's tears spilled slowly as he heard the tale of his daughter's trials.

"I believe his fury over finding her sullied later that night resulted in his attempt to bring harm to her, and the subsequent fight, which I believe all of England has read about.

"Apparently, she then refused to go through with their arrangement, and he was unwilling to let her go. In the end, the decision was not left to him."

Mr. Bennet slowly dried his face. "Caldhart must have found Wickham."

"He had the means."

“And the motivation, Mr. Darcy. It seems he had been pursuing my daughter for sometime.” Darcy’s surprise was evident. “At the cigar shop, he deduced who she was and began his seduction weeks, if not months, before. Perhaps she thought she could rebuff him on her own. She cared not for worldly goods, but, in the end, he held the key to the things she wanted most.”

“Revenge and restoration of your family’s reputation,” Darcy said. “At the ball, she said he could provide the one thing she wanted: to see the man who had made her and her family suffer, dead. No,” he corrected, suddenly remembering clearly. “She said she would have been happy to see him die, not that he was dead. There may be hope.”

“We must believe in the possibility, I think. However, there is still one more unanswered piece to the puzzle. If Caldhart found Wickham, then where is Lydia? Why did she not come back from America with him?”

“I have not been able to ascertain anything about Lydia’s whereabouts, but I have a theory. I am afraid it is not pleasant.”

“Nothing about this day has been pleasant, Mr. Darcy. I think you had better tell me all you know, as well as what you suspect. Perhaps together we can fill in more missing pieces.”

Darcy once again continued the convoluted tale, including his conjecture that Wickham had never married Lydia, and of her being abandoned in America. He held back nothing, and the complete story was finally told.

“Damn Wickham...and Caldhart! And damn you, too!” Mr. Bennet cried. “If I did not blame myself so greatly for having raised such a silly, worthless daughter in Lydia, I would call you out, or shoot you where you stand.” He shook his head. “I know it would serve no purpose. I know I would never survive a duel with you.” He buried his face in his hands. “I feel as useless as an old woman.”

“I brought you here to give you the opportunity to meet William, and to make my confession. I will accept whatever punishment you see fit to give.”

The only noise in the room was the occasional snap of the fire in the grate as Mr. Bennet was once again thrown into meditation. “I cannot force you to marry her. Your fame in the society makes you an easy target for scandal and investigation. It may as well be a sentence to Newgate. Anyone seeing the two of you together with William would instantly recognise the boy’s parentage, as well. No, I cannot see any way for you to marry her. However, I cannot forgive your actions. You compromised my daughter, and she has suffered as a result.”

“I do not seek your forgiveness. I cannot regret loving her; I cannot regret the extraordinary child we have created. It is only Elizabeth’s forgiveness I someday hope to earn. She is the one who has truly suffered on my account, and I intend to do all I can to make it up to her. My oath to you is that she and your grandson will be taken care of in every way possible.

“However, you seem to have forgotten the other objections; the lady herself wants nothing to do with me, or to involve me in William’s life. Our situation is one bound by the precarious danger surrounding it, but also by the limitations she has set. I bow to her will in this. But I swear to you, despite the separate way we are living, and though it might seem shocking, even blasphemous—to me she is, and always will be, my wife.”



THE TWO ELDERLY GENTLEMEN made their way slowly across the stretch of green. The day was bright and warm, and throngs had gathered in the park to take advantage of the fair spring weather. Eventually they found an unoccupied bench and sat quietly, only occasionally commenting to one another.

The elder of the two noticed a small boy running across the shorn grass with his nurse following behind, and pointed him out to his younger companion. The younger was immediately on his feet, but, before he could leave, the elder stopped him, and pleaded with his hands and his voice.

“Please, could you...that is, would you bring him to me, and introduce me?” he asked with warbled voice. The younger frowned, but did not answer before hurrying away to intercept the youth.

William had been playing with his ball, attempting to make it touch the sky, when the disobedient toy once again got away from him. This time the errant sphere happened on a man, who picked it up and returned it to him with a mischievous smile on his face.

“I believe this may belong to you, young man,” he said a little roughly.

William’s countenance fell, not sure if the gentleman was offended, or perhaps even injured, due to his neglect.

“I apologise, Sir, if my ball has harmed you.”

The man looked surprised. “Harmed? By a mere ball? I think not. I may be old, my lad, but I certainly can cross swords with your ball and come out unscathed!” he challenged. “If you would allow me, perhaps together we can see just how stern of stuff your ball is made,” he invited.

He then turned to the lady. “With your nurse’s permission, of course.” She smiled and nodded.

“Excellent! May I have the privilege of knowing who my companion is, Sir?”

The move now nearly perfected, William stood straight, brought his feet carefully together, and bowed before him. “William Bennet Cartwright, Sir,” he answered as he grinned happily.

The elder man returned the bow. “I am Benjamin Thompson, Master Cartwright, and very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The two spent the next half hour finding out how much abuse 'Ball', as they had decided to name it, could weather. William's energy seemed to have an endless source, but Mr. Thompson, though laughing heartily throughout, soon lagged, and the nurse suggested the gentleman needed a well-deserved rest.

"Thank you, Mademoiselle; I believe you are correct." He looked up then, finally remembering his companion who sat as a silent sentinel to the entire proceedings on the bench not far off.

"Master Cartwright, I did not come to the park alone today, and would very much enjoy introducing you to my companion. Will you permit me?" William happily agreed.

They walked to the benches, finally allowing the boy and his nurse to see the other gentleman more clearly. He was much older than William's new playmate. His hands trembled lightly as he leaned heavily on the cane between his legs while he sat. His head sometimes rested upon his folded hands even in the short time it took them to make their way before him. When they finally stood in front of him, Mr. Thompson made the introduction.

"William Bennet Cartwright, please allow me to introduce you to my father, Mr. Will Thompson," he replied. William bowed once again as the elder Mr. Thompson nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"You must forgive me, Master Cartwright, for not standing to receive you," he began with shaking voice. "My son insists I walk each day, but it is an arduous task for me, therefore I try not to expend any extra energy when I reach the halfway point, for fear I will never make it to the final destination: home." William laughed at this amusing man.

"You have provided me with some excellent entertainment today, young man, for it has been many a year, I dare say, since my son has run about like a boy. More than forty years I should think, Benjamin."

"Yes, Father. Though I believe I still ran about quite a bit even when I was fourteen or fifteen," he chuckled.

"I am pleased you have had your exercise for the day as well, my son," said the elder. "Master Cartwright, how do you like this park, then?"

"Very well, Sir. I come here most every day, along with Mademoiselle and Ball."

"Ball? Who is Ball?"

William held out Ball to the old man and they both shared a laugh.

"Ball seems a very dependable sort of friend. Rarely complains I expect, and never runs away," the elder Mr. Thompson remarked.

The younger Mr. Thompson coughed conspicuously. "I would not go so far as to say that Ball is above running...er, rolling away every now and then, Father." Young William suddenly looked guilty. "But, if he did not, I would not have been introduced to Master Cartwright, and that would have been a great shame," he said with a distinct twinkle in his bright, though lined, eyes.

"Indeed it would have," said the elder, with significant feeling in his voice and face.

The nurse declared it time to return home, and, with a sad face, William turned to his two new friends to bid them farewell. Both men eagerly held out their hands to shake, and a delighted William was happy to indulge. They promised to try to see one another again sometime if the weather was fair, and the elder Mr. Thompson could manage it.



AFTER THE BOY AND his nurse had departed, the two sat in silence for some time. The elder Mr. Thompson could hear the tiny snuffles of his son next to him and, understanding the sentiment completely, did not comment.

"A most wonderful lad," the younger finally managed to say.

"He is."

"I know I have no right, as I have never had anything to do with his upbringing, but I feel compelled to say I am prodigiously proud of that little boy."

"As am I," said the elder. "The only thing I probably have a right to be proud of as well."

"Now you are too harsh and I cannot agree. You can be proud of everything you have set your mind to. Anyone who has seen what you have done would agree," said the younger.

"Perhaps," he sighed. "But those things do not signify. Only two things matter to me: that boy and his mother."

"I will be grateful to you for that until the day I die, Darcy. Elizabeth and William are fortunate to have you watching over them. It is the only reason I can find a modicum of peace in this situation. I hope for all our sakes my daughter and grandson can someday join together with you as a family."

"As do I, Mr. Bennet; I pray for it daily," Darcy said sadly. "Now, I could not help but notice how much you exerted yourself playing with my son, Grandfather. Are you as tired as I suspect you may be?"

"Strangely, no. I suspect I will feel the effects of running about like a four-year-old tomorrow. However, at this moment, though sad to say goodbye to my grandson, I am also strangely jubilant. I should have no trouble making our way back to a cab."

"You could lean on me if you need to. It will look like you are helping me if we place ourselves just so."

Mr. Bennet laughed. "You have entirely too much expertise at this, Darcy. Who would have ever thought you would turn out to be such a fine actor."

"Certainly no one at the Haymarket," Darcy retorted without thinking.

"Eh? The Haymarket Theatre?" Mr. Bennet asked.

Darcy groaned. "A very long, painful and embarrassing story."

"Excellent! He replied with a grin. "I was hoping for some entertainment over brandy tonight." As they stood up to leave, Mr. Bennet grabbed the elderly looking gentleman's arm, stopping him.

"Thank you, Darcy. I think you understand how much it has meant to me to meet him. I know the extraordinary courage it took for you to send for me. I am sure I did not profess it that night, but truly, Son, thank you." Darcy nodded, patting the man's hand with great tenderness.



THEY STOOD ONCE AGAIN in his study. Mr. Bennet's traveling coat lay aside, waiting for him to begin the trip back to Hertfordshire. Darcy was glad for this week he had spent with the man. It had taken several more days of talking, combined with showing all the papers, proving all he had already done to insure the Cartwright's financial safety and his continual love for them, before there was any sign Mr. Bennet would relinquish his anger and accept the man who had truly earned his respect for his actions, save one.

Together the two had come to terms with the conception of William, and Elizabeth's role in Lord Caldhart's life. When they realised they each had separately already forgiven her for her transgressions, they knew they could not be enemies considering the love they both felt for Elizabeth and William. Mr. Bennet, however, had felt the need to threaten that, should Darcy change his mind about accepting Elizabeth's past actions, he was not above hunting the large man down and making use of his pistol.

Mr. Bennet's sharp mind and wit had delighted Darcy, as it made him feel closer to his beloved to speak with the man. Now that he had her father's agreement on his chosen course of action, he felt relieved at not having to carry the burden alone. Together they decided not to mention Mr. Bennet's trip, or introduction to William to the Bingleys or McNallys. They felt, for now, it would be easier on Jane to not keep more secrets, as she was expecting her first child.

They could hear the sound of the carriage pulling up to the front of the house.

"Darcy," Mr. Bennet began. "Never in my life have I been so glad to have been so grievously mistaken about a man's character than I have with you. I hope someday to call you son, just as you wish for me as a father-in-law. I know the path you have chosen is not an easy one. God help you on the day Elizabeth learns all you have done. I would not expect her to be grateful, nor silent on the subject," he chuckled. "I suspect 'spectacular' might do."

Darcy was continually surprised at the Bennet's habit of making light during serious conversations, but had come to

accept it with this man. "I only hope it will not be revealed until I have cleared her name."

Mr. Bennet nodded. "I expect you to be a faithful correspondent. You are the only line I have to my loved ones. I hope you will not deny me the pleasure of hearing of their exploits. I only wish you could draw, so that you could send me pictures as my grandson grows and changes."

"Perhaps I may learn. I will be in the heart of the land where great artists are born. Perhaps one will take pity on a very old student and teach me well enough to grant your wish."

"You are ever attentive, Darcy. We may not be family, but I hope I can now call you friend. I would be privileged if you would think of me as such."

"Fitzwilliam," Darcy answered with a genuine smile and an outstretched hand.

Mr. Bennet nodded back. "Thomas," he replied and, taking the offered hand, pulled it to him and embraced the man.

"God bless you, Fitzwilliam, and all the best of luck to you."

Chapter 32

LONDON, APRIL 1818

Colonel Fitzwilliam sauntered slowly along the path near the water in Hyde Park. His mother leaned lightly on his arm as they enjoyed the unusually warm spring day. He was happy for the moments of peace after recently having spent two weeks at Rosings. His month's leave was nearly up, and he wished to have some pleasurable memories to tide him over when he returned to his regiment.

"Our dear Anne's health is failing even more?" his mother asked.

"Yes, I fear it is so. She must be carried down to receive visitors with her mother and often drifts off to sleep in the middle of the day."

"How awful for Catherine to watch her child slip away," Lady Matlock reflected with tenderness.

"I am sorry to say I do not believe my aunt is aware how precarious my cousin's situation is. She still talks of the marriage between Anne and Darcy as if it were to happen anytime now. She even had the audacity to mention how she was looking forward to seeing her grandchildren someday."

"Heavens! How sad to be so disillusioned. Darcy will never offer for her; everyone knows it."

"Indeed, though I do not believe her mother's constant effusions of weddings bothers Anne. She seemed to pay her no mind. We did have many opportunities to talk. I wish circumstances were different and she was more often in company with us here in town."

"She could hardly endure the travelling, Richard."

"Oh...I only meant if she lived here in London permanently. It would afford her more society than what she has in Kent. I enjoy Anne's company, but would prefer to see her without my aunt in constant attendance. She is, I suspect, rather lonely at Rosings."

"She has her mother."

"She is two and thirty years old, Mother. I hardly think she wants her mama with her at all times. I am speaking of younger people with whom to converse. Despite the circumstances of her health, she does not deserve to live in the tomb of a home my Aunt runs, listening to talk of organizing pantries and the proper raising of pigs. I had to keep from nodding off myself. The situation is barely tolerable for her."

"And if Anne were to come and stay with your father and I for an extended time? What are you hinting at Richard?"

"Please stop where those thoughts are going, Mother. I only meant I would wish to give Anne some happiness in what may very well be her last days."

"There are many forms of happiness. Are you sure you are aware of them all?" his mother hinted with a smirk.

"And I thought only Darcy had to put up with match-making mamas. I never believed I would have to duel one in my own family."

"Very well, Son. I shall sheath my foil for now. But be warned: if you ever show any inclination to speak of serious paths for yourself again, I will be forced to draw it out, and I will show you no mercy."

They both laughed heartily when, suddenly, Richard heard another laugh seemingly joining theirs from a bench not far from them. He turned, automatically drawn to the sound, while something tugged at his memory. A couple sat on a bench behind some shrubbery near them, and it was the lady whose laughter had drawn his attention. His mother turned to sit upon a bench, and Richard placed himself standing in front of her where he could watch the couple in the distance.

Lady Matlock was commenting upon the variety of people in the park when he saw the lady and gentleman rise. He heard her laughter once again and suddenly was aware of who he might be looking at. The height was correct; even her form would be about right. He struggled to catch a glimpse of her hair colour under her lace cap and bonnet. At last she turned sharply around, her attention caught by a boisterous group of children off to his right and he could finally get a good look at her face.

"*Clever girl, the lace and bonnet certainly hide a good deal, and the spectacles even more, but I recognise you now, Elizabeth Bennet,*" he thought before quickly averting his face lest she see him.

They spoke a few more minutes, when Richard saw Elizabeth bow her head and shake it adamantly. The man stepped very close to her and Richard felt a brief panic set in as he saw the man reach out and tip up Elizabeth's chin. Her face showed a sadness he had never seen in her before. The man stroked her cheek, briefly speaking to her once more, and she nodded to him. Then he saw the man raise her hand to his lips, kiss it and depart. Elizabeth watched his departure a long while. Then he saw her heave a great sigh and head off in the opposite direction.

"Hardly your type, Richard." His mother's voice woke him from his reverie.

"I...I thought I recognised someone."

His mother raised her brows. "And I am sure your father gave you the speech about dallying with chamber maids."

Richard laughed. "Of course he did, Mother. You have nothing to worry about, I assure you." He escorted her back home, all the while wondering how on earth he was going to tell Darcy.



DARCY ENTERED THE ROOM and immediately could tell something of consequence had happened. Richard's happy demeanour was forced and he looked distracted. It only took a few minutes of civilities before Darcy felt he had had enough. "Well?"

Richard faltered.

"Please tell me. Your hesitation makes my imagination leap to horrifying conclusions, and I would much prefer the immediate truth," he demanded.

Richard then haltingly explained what he had seen. He knew his cousin preferred his truth unvarnished as well, so did not leave out he had seen the man touch Elizabeth.

Darcy sat quietly lost in thought for many minutes. "If you had to hazard a guess, what would you say the man's age and occupation were?"

A surprised Richard answered, "Perhaps five and fifty years old, and considering where he was, and how he was dressed, I would spot him for some servant from one of the grand houses nearby."

Darcy nodded, his head once again in thought. "Do you have any idea if they plan to meet again?"

"I am sorry, Cousin. I heard nothing of their conversation. However, their parting did not seem to indicate finality; I believe they may well meet up again."

"And the day and time indicate a traditional servant's afternoon off," Darcy added.

"I must say you are taking this remarkably well."

Darcy frowned. "Did you think I would assume she was having some sort of assignation? She has lived for many years away from me, when she could have no doubt married if she wished. Added to which she told her sister she believes herself tied to me. No, Richard, I do not believe this elder man to be a suitor. Who he is, and what he is to her is indeed a mystery, and I plan to discover where the truth lies as soon as may be. I think I shall take up a temporary residence at the park."

"You will be recognised, Darcy."

"No." He shook his head with a grimace. "I shall not."



"*DAMN ALL ACTORS TO HELL,*" he thought happily. Simply thinking the intemperate words made him feel slightly better. It would take an entire hour of bathing at the end of the day before he knew he would truly feel well. He was sitting, once again, in Hyde Park. Today, at least, was not as brutishly cold as the first days had been almost two weeks earlier. The chill winds of winter still teased the tip of his nose and threatened to make it wet. He was grateful, albeit very reluctantly, for the extra padding wrapped around his torso for it kept him from being too cold during the long hours he sat perusing the visitors in the park.

He was beginning to question the wisdom of his attempt to lie in wait for Elizabeth or her friend when some-

thing caught the corner of his eyesight. He turned and there she was across the corner of the Serpentine, having found a likely resting place in a well-placed bench. He had an excellent view across the edge of the water to the proceedings. He attempted to view as many men in the area as possible to see if he could determine who might be her friend and, more importantly, the direction from which he had come. Soon a likely candidate came into the park from his side of the lake. He crossed in front of Darcy and made his way directly to Elizabeth.

The couple finally separated an hour later after being in serious conversation the entire time. Darcy had curbed his jealousy when Richard had described the scene of tenderness at the last parting these two had made; however, its strength was nothing compared to actually witnessing Elizabeth showing affection for another man. His fists clenched and a rash of heat rushed over him as he watched the man gently embrace her before leaving. He swallowed hard and looked away, attempting to regulate his breathing and struggles.

After the man had passed him, he started a cautious pursuit, following him south towards Belgrave Square. Soon he saw the man duck into the Nags Head, a pub in a former mews, and followed him in.



HE KNEW HE HAD made a mistake as soon as the door closed behind him. The noise of the greetings that had met his quarry instantly faded when Darcy entered. He attempted to walk calmly to the bar, but it proved difficult as all eyes were upon him.

"Yer money first," the gruff barkeeper warned him. He produced a coin. The barkeeper nodded and poured out a mug of ale. The hum of the room slowly returned.

"You know him, Higgins?" came a voice from his side. The man, Higgins, slowly shook his head. For the next two hours, Darcy slowly sipped his ale and kept his head down. He had rebuffed the attempts of anyone who tried to engage him in conversation.

Eventually the tones of the largest group, who had been drinking with Higgins, began to rise as they bid farewell to their friends.

"Caldhart expecting you back soon, Higgins?" Darcy nearly dropped his mug.

"No, his Lordship is staying in for the evening. If he has need of me, I have a new stable boy who wants to get into my good books and knows where to find me. He will come for me if the family wishes to go out."

"What a life you lead! Such luck to work for a man who is so very dull. Not like the last one, eh?"

"'Tis wrong to speak ill of the dead, Jack. I will not and neither should you."

“True, true. Sorry ’bout that.” His friend apologised as the group departed.

The tavern was now threadbare of customers; the only others were a pair near the fire who looked half in their cups. Darcy’s head was still spinning at the news Higgins worked for the Caldhart family when a tankard of ale was pounded down on his table, and the man himself suddenly plopped down onto the bench across from him, in none too good a mood.

“You ready to tell me why you are following me now?” he asked, crossing his arms in front of him.

Darcy’s faced dropped, too stunned to reply.

“If you are some poor beggar man then I am Henry the eighth. I saw you at the park and not for the first time.” He took a swig from his mug. “What would a poor man be doing sitting in Hyde Park all day, I had wondered. Then you were there the next day and the next and not looking too poorly fed, I might add.”

Darcy was still trying desperately to organise his thoughts when the man grabbed his hand roughly and splayed it out in front of his face.

“Good costume, but you forgot about your pretty hands. Gentlemen always do. They forget the working class notice things: like hands that aren’t battered about, or someone who smells as if he bathes everyday. Next time best to get some old gloves at least.” He threw the hand back.

Darcy had not expected to be on the receiving end of an interview with the man; he had expected to conduct it. He was inwardly cursing himself for not being better prepared when Higgins began again.

“I see I will have to provide some answers, then. You sit for days in the park talking to no one, until today, when for some reason you suddenly are interested in *me*. Not too unusual, I suppose, except I have been in the park many times over the last days, and you paid me no mind then. What could have made you follow me today, of all days? What was different?”

The two sat in stalemate, locking eyes with each other.

“Could it be because today I was finally not alone?”

Darcy knew a threat when he heard one and was not a man to back down. He laid his palms down carefully on either side of his mug and leaned forward until his face was mere inches from Higgins’ before he warned in an eerily calm voice, “If I find you are trying to harm her in any possible way, I will make you suffer like no other. If you wish to avoid my wrath, you will never communicate with her or come near her again.”

Higgins’ face was a mask of control, showing not the least bit of fear. Suddenly it changed drastically; but, instead of looking afraid, he seemed completely shocked. He dropped all pretence of bullying and danger, squinting at the stranger as though seeing him for the first time. “It was **you!**” he sputtered.

Darcy was confused. Higgins’ countenance had suddenly turned calm, even relieved. “What are you to her?” he demanded.

A well-recovered Higgins snorted. “Well now, that’s the prize, isn’t it? What are you to her, and what am I to her? But we will not get far asking questions and not giving any answers, will we?” Higgins smiled at him and Darcy suddenly realised this man was no longer a threat. A hand extended across the table. “Tom Higgins.”

If he had believed in the occult, he might later have reflected he had had a flash of intuition at that moment, for he did not hesitate to feel he could somehow trust this man. Darcy took the offered hand, surprised at the strength, warmth and sincerity it seemed to be offering as he replied, “Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

“No! Really?” A now shocked Higgins exclaimed. “From Derbyshire?” Darcy nodded. “Well, damn me if that isn’t the best thing I have heard in nearly five years! Well, Mr. Darcy, you already know my name is Higgins, but what else do you know about me?”

“I heard your friends say you work for the Caldharts. I know you had a long conversation today in the park. I know you seem to be very closely acquainted with the lady to whom you were speaking.” He hesitated, searching the face across from his for any hint of deception. “I think you mean her no harm.”

“Right on all counts,” Higgins answered lightly, taking another long drink while Darcy did the same. Higgins smirked slyly as he waited for his companion to fill his mouth before he said, “How long have you been in love with her?”



IT TOOK DARCY SEVERAL moments and many slaps upon his back to stop coughing and clear the sour ale travelling down his windpipe. When he finally could breathe clear, Higgins began.

“Your face shows what you feel for her; and, even if it had not, I would know what you are to her because *he* looks exactly like *you*, doesn’t he?” Darcy gasped.

“Yes, I know about him.” Higgins shook his head. “Like looking at the same painting—you two.” He slammed his palm loudly upon the table. “It was you that night who outfoxed Caldhart!” he cried, as his thoughts came together. Darcy could see the wheels turning in Higgins’ mind; putting together the puzzle pieces of his relationship to Elizabeth as his face flashed a hundred different emotions. The final look upon Higgins’ face was, curiously, one of admiration.

“He was furious. Tried to beat her, you know.” Darcy’s mouth slid open in shock.

“Chased after her with a crop. She wouldn’t have any of it—was not about to stand there and let him hurt her, so she ran. Good legs from walking all around London, looking for her sister, I expect. Then he went after her, which was

his big mistake. She had the youth and the strength, and he had a bad heart and his anger to push him; and, in the end, it was his downfall.”

He regarded Darcy, who had gone pale once more. “She said you were a far better man. Said she loved you right to his face, she did.” Higgins watched for the reaction.

“How can you know all this?”

“Haven’t figured it out yet?” he chuckled. “Well, perhaps you are a better man than he was; you certainly are not as devious, else you would know who I am.”

“Deviousness implies being underhanded. I have no evil intentions.”

“No, too true. I could tell from the first. I have worked most of my life in the service of the Caldharts. Lord Robert until a few years ago. Now I work as driver for his snivelling son.”

“How would a man’s driver have such extensive knowledge of what goes on behind closed doors in his house?”

Higgins laughed. “Ah, now you’re using your noggin. I was much more to Lord Robert: snoop; spy; seeker of information, gossip and rumours. For years I was his Lordship’s eyes and ears to anything his mistresses were up to. Sometime he used me for the ladies he was looking to add to his collection.”

Darcy’s eyes went wide. “You found her for him?” he gasped.

“No! I am no panderer! He saw her and wanted to know more about her. I merely trailed her to get the information.”

“Why would you now befriend her? Why would she want anything to do with you?”

Higgins was indignant. “I am her friend; I kept all her secrets, did I not?”

“You are spilling them readily to me, now.”

“Did you not listen to what I said about my past work?” He lowered his head towards him. “Lord Robert is gone now; my loyalties lie with her. I promised her five years ago when she was forced to run away. I was the one who told her to go to my old village, Oak Hill, in Derbyshire.”

Darcy gasped again.

“Ah, I see you did not know she was so near to you.” His eyes diverted to the floor as he struggled with a memory. “I remember her panicking when I told her it was only eight miles from Lambton, she worried what direction the village lay.” He nodded to himself. “She wanted to make sure it was farther from Pemberley, not too close to you.”

“I had no idea.”

“No, you were very good at being absent, I noticed.” Darcy fumed. “If you had come along, he never would have had a chance with her. Why did you not help her then? She was so miserable all those months, suffering so. What made you stay away and not help her?”

Higgins could not know how those words tore apart Darcy’s heart. To hear she had needed him, desperately needed him; and he was sitting on an Italian beach, letting

the warmth of the rich Mediterranean sun soothe his broken heart, and tan his smooth pale skin.

Guilt permeated his being and compelled him for the first time in his life to open his heart to a near stranger as he uttered the complete truth. “Because a greater fool there has never been. Because my damnable pride compelled me to turn tail and hide when I thought she had rejected me.

“I mean to spend the rest of my life making it up to her. If I can ease her existence in any way, I will see it done. I will not allow any harm or distress come to her again, nor ask anything of her. If you can see it in your heart to tell me all you know, I swear on all I hold holy I will only use the information to bring her happiness.”

Higgins blinked. “Blimey, I wish I had known a love like yours,” he could not help but utter.

Both men rearranged themselves uncomfortably.

Higgins finally continued. “You were the one to finally beat him at his own game. He thought about bringing you in on the plan you know, but thought you were too good a man for revenge and seduction. Ha! Little did he know.”

“He was immoral and you helped him.”

“I was his servant, not his priest,” Higgins immediately retorted. He regarded him once more. “You have a child, Mr. Darcy; do you think none of your servants know about him? If they did, would they not work for you, or do whatever you asked? Tell me: when is a servant’s place to tell their master what is right or wrong?”

“I had not thought on it.”

“No, I daresay you have not. But despite the wanton ways of his Lordship, I had never seen him turn violent until then.” Darcy’s eyebrows raised, his face clearly disbelieving. “I was in the house, and watched it happen; but I swear to you, if he had touched her with his whip, I would have stopped him. It was not his Lordship’s way.”

Darcy stared at the man, attempting to see the truth in his eyes. Finally, he decided to take a chance. “Then explain the Black Mare tavern.”

Higgins started. He had not heard the name of the wretched place since leaving it with his Lordship and Miss Bennet so many years ago.

Darcy continued. “I do not care what role you played; I need only one thing: to know there was nothing for her to be...blamed.”

Higgins lifted his cup, but found it empty. Darcy pushed his mug to him, and gave him a nod. Higgins gladly took it. He then spoke in a low voice. “She did not kill him. The man was alive and would have recovered from any wounds she had given him, I am sure.” He sniggered. “Though I suppose he walked a bit unusual after what she did to him.”

He leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered the next words after he took another large swig. “I saw him. I felt his neck and he was alive as anyone. She had sliced him across the belly. I saw the blood already drying. Not a deep wound. Not deep enough. Then his breeches, well, you get

the idea. She wanted to make sure no woman would ever suffer like her sister had. So she took care of him. Did a right proper job of it, too.

"Then she stopped herself—didn't finish what anyone else would probably have. She is too good by half, you know; certainly better than him, or Caldhart or even me."

Darcy exhaled loudly. He could have shouted with joy, but curbed his happiness. His curiosity, however, was too strong and wished to be sated in the end. "Then how?"

"Not me. I'm no fool and will not do such a thing for any man." Higgins crossed his arms once more. "I have nothing to answer for. I brought her and his Lordship to the tavern, stood guard outside the doors and drove them back home afterwards."

"What of the man who was never violent?"

"He would never stain his gloves. However, perhaps he knew of people who would be willing to meet up there. Maybe he would have written them and told them of where and when they could find a certain person. Then he would not have to do anything at all. Just make sure the fly was sitting there, waiting for the spiders that would finish the job for him."

Darcy shivered.

"If I had said anything afterwards, what purpose would it serve? They were both gone just two days later. He never told me his plan, just used me when he needed information. His Lordship got those names from *my* travels to find the man for whom he was searching. I live with some guilt, Mr. Darcy."

"It was not your responsibility how the list was used."

Higgins nodded. "True, but it brings me no peace."

Darcy sat staring at this unusual man. "Are you in love with her?"

Higgins began to laugh. It started as a slight giggle and grew to a full out gale before he finally drew a calming breath.

"Your jealousy does not suit you, Sir. How I feel about her matters not; it is with *you* she is in love. There is no reason for your suspicion; I am not in love with her. I only care for her the way a man would for a daughter. She no longer can go to her family, so I am a bit of a guardian for her."

"You are protecting her," Darcy sighed, closing his eyes.

"We both, Mr. Darcy," Higgins replied.



THE TWO HAD SAT a long while sharing the past, present and even a small amount of what they perceived to be the future. Darcy was surprised Elizabeth had told Mr. Higgins about their plans for the continent. Higgins was surprised Darcy would think she would hide it from him. Higgins could at least justify his tender parting with Elizabeth that afternoon; it was an embrace from a man who doubted he might ever see her again.

As the light waned, Darcy received some insightful words from his new acquaintance.

"She is not a woman to be coerced into anything. *He* tried to force her and she turned on him for it. Barging in on her like the great master of Pemberley is likely to get you thrown out on your ear. If you are ever to win her, you must appeal to her sense, her heart and her reason."

"Her reason?"

"Yes. If you think hard enough, you can find logic for why you should be together. I am not saying it would be easy, but if you entreat her, using all of these things, you may have a chance.

"Good luck to you, Mr. Darcy. No matter what road you choose to travel, I do not think it will be easy. Yet, the greatest prizes are only for the bravest, true?"

"How is it you are but a stableman, Higgins?"

He shrugged. "I like horses," he answered simply.

"You do not like the new Lord Caldhart?"

"Known him since he was born. Not an ounce of wit nor interesting bone in his body." He snorted. "Lord Robert at least kept me on my toes. Now I grow fat."

Darcy had to laugh. He had met Lord Henry and his servant's character sketch was aptly drawn.

They parted under much better terms than they had met. Each willingly shook the other's hand and before returning to his home, Darcy felt he had made a new and valuable friend. While he was satisfied with the information they had shared, he was not aware Higgins had spoken the truth about keeping Elizabeth Bennet's secrets. He had not divulged Lydia Bennet's death, and unless Elizabeth instructed him to do otherwise, he would take the secret to his grave.

Chapter 33

LONDON, MAY 1818

Darcy was conflicted over whether to see Elizabeth and William the next morning or make the trip to see Colonel Fitzwilliam and discuss his findings. He needed to consult with his cousin on his next course of action and did not wish to delay as he was due to leave for Padua in two weeks time. The trip to the regiment would take three days, and he needed to be back in London quickly to finalise his arrangements before crossing the Channel. However, now knowing Elizabeth was innocent of Wickham's murder brought him one step closer to a future with her, and his heart yearned to at least see her, even if from the shadows near the park. In the end, he decided to do both; he would stop in Lambeth and hope to catch a glimpse on his way to Richard's encampment in the north.

It was much earlier than he normally arrived in Lambeth. Dressed now in his travelling clothes, instead of the dusty working clothes he usually wore there, was a different experience for him. He felt at ease in the neighbourhood, as everything was familiar after nearly a year of spending his time there, but now people looked up to him as he strode along, nodding their respects to him. He was used to the bowed heads of passers-by never bothering to look at him even briefly. Just as he was about to school himself for the need to be less obtrusive, he was quite violently barrelling into by a small, speeding blur that immediately found itself propelled backwards onto its nether regions after meeting with Darcy's mass.

"Master William!" came the servant's admonishment from behind.

"Master Cartwright?" Darcy gasped at the now upturned head.

"Mr. Bingley!" cried William.

"I am awfully sorry to have knocked into you!" William smiled brightly with little hint of repentance. No doubt the gentleman's utter lack of movement after the impact made the little fellow confident he had done him no harm.

Darcy leaned down to help his son up. "You are well, Master William? You were not hurt from your fall?"

"No, Sir. I hope I have not wounded you?"

"No, no, I am completely uninjured." The two looked at one another, then, helpless to stop it, broke out in raucous laughter.

"I was in a hurry to see if my friends will be in the park this afternoon. I am afraid Mama will be cross with me for running near the street again."

"You may assure her I was not offended by you."

William smiled. "Thank you, Sir. I shall." He turned to the servant. "This is Mrs. Barnes, our housekeeper." Darcy nodded to her. "Mr. Bingley and his wife are friends of my mother, Mrs. Barnes," he added. The lady nodded her acceptance of the relationship and curtsied to Mr. Bingley.

"She said I could accompany her today to the shops while she does her marketing. My good friend's family run them, and I can sometimes see them there."

"Ah, a chance to have a social visit and get work done; very commendable." Darcy smiled. "How tall you have grown since last we met! I might not have recognised you now."

William beamed. "I have! I am now taller than my friends Jack and Peter Miles are! And they are both older than me!" he boasted.

"No doubt a tribute to your cook."

"Mrs. Barnes is both cook and housekeeper, Mr. Bingley. I think the credit would go to her."

Darcy turned to nod his approval to the woman when he was taken aback by her obvious scrutiny of him. He nodded while her eyes betrayed she was quickly coming to an unwanted conclusion. Thankfully, William interrupted their thoughts.

"But I am afraid we must keep to our schedule if I am to return in time for my morning lessons. I should not like to delay Mrs. Barnes." His brow suddenly arched in an all too familiar way. "Would you care to accompany us, Mr. Bingley? We could chat a bit before I have to return home. Or were you coming to my house this morning?"

Darcy knew the longer he stayed with William the greater the danger and possibility Elizabeth might happen upon them. He considered himself forced to answer, "Sadly, no. I was just out on some business in this area before I leave town this morning. I must take my leave of you if I am to make any headway as I travel to the west."

Now William's brow furrowed. His small fist clenched as he struck his hip in frustration. "I would have liked to spend some time with you Mr. Bingley. I understand your need to be on your way. I...I hope we shall have the chance to meet again."

Darcy could see an underlying sadness in William's face, and realised his son was thinking of how he would be going to the continent soon and would not have the opportunity to see 'Mr. Bingley' again. He also realised William had not spoken of the upcoming trip. Elizabeth had no doubt schooled him not to reveal their plans to depart to anyone. He pitied the poor lad who was distressed over giving up the fledgling friendship they had. He knelt down to look his son in the eye, hoping to obtain a bit of privacy as he told the boy, "I would have welcomed the chance, William. I hope some day we are not restricted by our responsibilities and can spend a great deal of time together. I truly would like to know you better." He smiled, trying to encourage his son to be brave.

"Thank you, Mr. Bingley. I hope we shall, too."

Darcy half-expected William to throw his arms around his neck, as he once had done. Instead, he was surprised at the young man's maturity when he held out his hand and, a little more strongly than would be considered polite, shook hands heartily with his father.

"Farewell, Mr. Bingley. God speed you on your trip," he said.

Darcy was once again taken aback by such an adult blessing. Nevertheless, he managed to smile and nod. After his farewells, he added under his breath to himself, "God speed you and your mother, my son."



RICHARD'S ENCAMPMENT PROVED TO be a bustle of seemingly disordered activity. It had been many years since Darcy had visited him at his work, and he had not remembered the experience clearly, for now he felt a bit overwhelmed. A young lieutenant, apparently recognizing the look of confusion of a visitor, approached him and provided him with the directions to find Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Richard's head was bowed over the papers on his desk as Darcy approached. He stood in front of him and, giving in to an impulse of effrontery, clicked his heels together and addressed him.

"Major Fitzwilliam?" He could see Richard's hand still, and could feel the anger rise off the man. It was simply all he could hope for.

"I hope you like the stockade, Lieutenant, for you will be intimately acquainted with it before I am through with you," he said as he raised himself, his head and his ire.

A very satisfied Darcy burst into laughter when Richard's eyes finally met his face.

"Damn you, Darcy! Are you twelve years old again? You are lucky I did not set a guard upon you without looking up." This proof of how well his jest had been played only set his cousin into guffaws.

"Someday your whimsies will get you into trouble."

Darcy had finally calmed down enough to answer. "Perhaps, Richard. However, I am certainly enjoying the indulgence today."

They quickly made their polite inquiries into one another's health and familial news. Richard declared his surprise upon seeing him as they had said their farewells a se'night before. Darcy's demeanour turned serious.

"I have found a witness, Richard." He need not say anymore, his cousin understood him perfectly.

"Give me an hour to arrange it, and I will be at your disposal this entire afternoon, Darcy. We will go where we cannot be disturbed."



THE TWO HORSES REGARDED each other briefly before attending the grasses beneath their hooves while their masters sat nearby against the trees.

The colonel was not completely satisfied with all that Darcy had told him. His horse whickered softly at him, clearly perceiving the tension in his owner.

"You say you trust the veracity of this witness' statements, and are willing to risk everything on one man's tale, yet you will neither reveal his name to me nor his situation in life?"

"I do."

"Can you tell me why you feel the need for the secrecy at least?"

"To protect Elizabeth and myself."

"Do you feel I am so little to be trusted?"

"This is not about whether you are worthy, Richard. It concerns my duty to her alone, including anything she would not wish to be known to anyone else."

"She has not spoken to you about Wickham's death; how can you know her wishes?"

"You will forgive me if I claim a superior knowledge of what her best interests are. If I thought any good could be served by sharing this new knowledge, I would reveal all, but you must trust me in this. The man responsible for the mob being there is dead, and I do not know who any of the participants were. I cannot help to bring about any justice for the crime and we must both be satisfied that its mastermind has already met his end."

"You are asking me to put a great deal of faith in a stranger's account."

"No, Richard, I am asking you to put your faith in me."

The Colonel sat quietly for some time. "Very well. Assuming all you have told me is true, you no doubt now wish for my advice as to how to proceed."

He nodded. "We are balanced on this knife's edge and I hesitate to step off."

Richard sat for some time in contemplation before continuing. "What are you hoping for?"

"Everything: marriage, more children, Pemberley."

He nodded his head. "I realise her innocence has allowed you to overcome an important hurdle, but can you truly envision marriage?"

Darcy began to fume. "I will not have her disparaged, Richard."

"I meant no offence to you or the lady. I merely cannot fathom your being able to marry her. Tell me, how you would explain the existence of a step-son who looks exactly like you?"

His cousin winced.

"Your son is the impediment. The proof of your sins is written upon his face; you could never be seen together. The boy is too young to be on his own, and I cannot imagine his mother would wish for her to be separated from him. She may never wish to be away from him until he has reached adulthood."

"She is utterly devoted to him. I daresay she feels the responsibility to raise him as penance for her fall."

"If you took that away from her, how do you think she would feel about you or your relationship? Perhaps at first she might accept it, but do you not think she would come to feel guilty? She would have given up her son for her own happiness. I do not think it would make for a felicitous marriage."

Darcy sighed. His cousin's wisdom was never more unwanted.

"Of course this is all merely conjecture; for, unless I am mistaken, you told me the lady had no desire to marry you."

At this Darcy scowled. His cousin was right, but to hear it so frankly spoken was difficult. "She believes herself unworthy of marriage to anyone, least of all me. She fears what I might do to her or that I would take her son and destroy this life she has built with him."

"Which is exactly what you are contemplating doing."

He could not help but cringe. They could not keep William with them if they were to marry. Not only would Elizabeth never agree, but also, in truth, Darcy did not wish for them to be estranged from their son. His stomach turned in acknowledgment of the hopelessness of the situation.

"You do not wish to take her son from her, do you?" Richard asked gently.

"No."

"You are even now supporting the way she wishes to raise him in every way possible, are you not?"

"Yes. I have been able to manipulate every situation to my liking and provide them with everything I had hoped."

"Everything except living a life *with* them."

"A look, a glance, a stolen afternoon as voyeur into their lives; this is what I share of their life. They share none of mine."

"Do you really see yourself living like this in ten years, twenty? What will happen when you are old and grey and cannot creep around like a stealthy cat?"

"It is my happiness we speak of, Richard. How can you expect me to give up the little I have? Yet, someday William will be grown and perhaps Elizabeth and I could grasp our happiness. There would be no need for her to hide."

"Then Georgie is once again to be responsible for providing an heir to Pemberley?"

"I never expected to have a wife, as you well know. I will accede to Elizabeth's wishes and not leave Pemberley to William, though I will leave him plenty."

"Is it enough for you, then?"

"I know my heart would never recover if I was to let her or William go. This is my predicament. Do I go back to Pemberley, dying in obscurity because I merely chose to dedicate my life to increasing my family's wealth and improving our property like every other gentleman who lives in my time? Or do I go on as I am, living this half-life with them? She once said she never allowed us dreams, but our

reality is already cast, and she has dreams for our son. I wish to be part of those dreams. I want to enable him in every way to become whatever he can. I want to see his future as it happens."

"You are speaking of William's abilities?"

"Yes. I think I had discounted her judgement of his abilities at first. Yet, each man who teaches him sees the truth in her original assessments. She said she felt humbled at the responsibility of having to raise William in a manner which would allow him to contribute to the greater good of the world. Such ominous, great words. I now wonder at how accurate they will prove to be. Only time will tell the final outcome of her endeavours, but for now, I have to consider the consequences if what she said were the utter truth. What if he could be a man to contribute significantly to the greater good of more than just his friends and family? Should I act beyond the confines of my position in society, turn my back on it and take an action that might bring disapproval from so many but might change...everything?"

"It is not right to risk censure or scandal for them both, merely to keep you from being estranged with them."

"No, as much as it pains me, I have to agree. I do not see any sort of life I can make with them. However, I think I can be as brave as she was and, without knowing what the future has in store for me, try to secure the safety and futures of those I love. I can do all this, yet still adhere to the confines she has fixed. I cannot marry her without exposing who she and William are, yet I can still be a part of their lives from a distance in this stalemate."

"You will follow them to Padua and continue as you are?"

"I think I must."



ELIZABETH HELD WILLIAM'S PRECIOUS books in her hands, about to place them in the trunk bound for Padua in two weeks time. How often she had found the two volumes next to his bed. They seemed to be two of his most treasured possessions. This was curious, as books generally did not hold quite such a distinction for him. Perhaps the memory of meeting Charles that day rendered them special to him? She sat in the chair near the fireplace and opened the Chaucer, flipping through the pages quickly until the first page, lastly arrived, stared plainly into her shocked face. Her heart beat wildly as her mind tried to get round Fitzwilliam Darcy's handwriting clearly sat before her, as she read, *'To my Dearest William'*.

Had Darcy truly met their son? He might have been there the very day she met Jane so long ago. Had he known about her and William all this time? What if he had heard any of the conversation she had with Jane?

“William, Mr. Bingley gave you these volumes did he not?”

“Yes, in his library at Lady Angel’s home a long time ago.”

“And this same Mr. Bingley you met today?”

“Yes, it was the same man. I remembered him instantly, for I have his picture in my head.”

Her panic was impossible to stop when her son spoke the next words.

“Mama, how is it I look just like Mr. Bingley?”



ELIZABETH SAT IN THE little park, grateful for the overcast skies that threatened rain, and kept potential visitors snug in their homes. She did not wish for witnesses to what she might say to her sister.

She had sent the note over half an hour ago, and still Jane had not come to her. As she waited, her patience wore thin. She was both angry and fearful of the confrontation she planned to have. At last, she saw her sister slowly make her way to the corner where Elizabeth sat. Jane’s pleasure in seeing her seemed genuine and she could not detect any hint of worry in her countenance. After they shared their embraces and good wishes, Elizabeth began her inquiries into her brother-in-law’s whereabouts.

“Charles would have loved to have seen you, Lizzy. Unfortunately, he is in Scarborough, visiting his aunt.”

“I am sorry to have missed him, is he to return soon?”

“Unfortunately, no. His visit is not social but rather an obligation, for the lady is not expected to live much longer. He left last month to be with her at the end and will stay on afterwards to fulfil his aunt’s wishes as executor of her will. I miss him dreadfully.” Jane looked truly forlorn.

Elizabeth had her answer. Charles was not in town, and had not been for some time. The man her son had met the day before must have been Fitzwilliam Darcy. Now the question was: how much had Jane told him about her son? Was he planning on coming after her? Were they still safe?

Before she could try to ask these questions, Jane asked after William. Elizabeth tried to detect any hint that her sister may have seen William or knew of their circumstances, but could find none. She seemed sincerely disappointed William had not accompanied her on her visit and inquired in great detail after his growth, his studies and their happiness. They had just exhausted the subject when Jane went on to explain her delay in getting to the park.

“I apologise for not coming to see you more quickly. I am afraid it was difficult to leave the house, for you see Mama and Papa are visiting. I did not want to risk them seeing you, and it took me some time before I could get away safely.

“Lizzy, I am afraid my reassurances to father of your well being and safety last year did little to comfort him. He seemed so broken hearted, and his face so hopeless. He did say something about being glad you finally knew, but I do not know what he meant by it.

“It has been difficult keeping the news from Mama; luckily, she has been concentrating her energies on me lately and is not as wont to complain about losing you.”

It took Elizabeth several moments to understand the underlying message in Jane’s words. When the truth finally dawned upon her, she congratulated her sister enthusiastically.

“Oh, Jane! You are increasing?”

Jane blushed and nodded. “At last. You cannot know how relieved I am to finally give this to Charles. We had all but given up hope we would ever have children.”

Elizabeth saw the worry in her sister’s face as she wished her well. She could not imagine the pains poor Jane had no doubt gone through these past two and half years of her marriage while hoping for a child.

She also knew her mother would hardly bring comforting advice. She remembered well enough Mrs. Bennet’s endless prattle of how difficult bringing her children into the world had been. Jane’s face betrayed all her anxieties clearly to the sister who knew her best. She reached for her hands, intent on reassuring her, when Jane suddenly spied Elizabeth’s finger.

“Father’s ring!” she cried. “I had wondered why he never wore it anymore.” She continued staring at it, then began nodding her head. “The package father left for you. This is what it contained.” She squeezed her sister’s hands tightly, then, without raising her face to Elizabeth, she whispered the only words which might betray what she knew. “He was right to give it to you. You were our champion, Lizzy. I thank you.”

At that moment, Elizabeth knew she could not indulge her desire to lash out over Darcy’s possible interference with her son. Jane might know some of it, but she would not risk her sister and her unborn child with an argument. She decided to put aside her own wishes to help her beloved Jane. The decision of what to do about Darcy would come later.

“When I finally decided to accept my fate and my condition, I found I loved the time I was carrying William. Shall I tell you everything I experienced during my confinement?” she asked quietly.

Jane’s relief was palatable. “Oh, Lizzy, would you?”



DARCY CHOSE TO ENTER his house by his old scheme of riding on horseback to the rear of the building and allowing his coach to follow along later. He had perfected the method of keeping his residency from his inquisitive neigh-

bours so long ago, and now the system seemed ingrained into his habits. He mostly enjoyed the control it afforded him, since none of his friends or acquaintances would make any demands on him, and his first days would be at leisure until his presence was known.

Therefore, he was greatly surprised when he entered his drawing room and found Georgiana, Patrick and Jane awaiting his arrival. He had notified all three of his trip, but their attendance on him now was foreboding at best. The three faces they presented to him confirmed it. He stood stock still, waiting for one brave soul to speak.

Patrick stepped forward, placed his large hand upon Darcy's shoulder in comfort and said the words.

"She has fled, Fitzwilliam."

End Book Two



Book Three



Chapter 34

PADUA, JANUARY 1819

Signor Bergonzi carefully placed his *sfogliatelle* and *pasticciotti* into an ordered line in the spotless glass case. His waddled fingers belied his ability to handle the sweets gingerly so as not to mar their delicate surfaces. By the end of the day, the case would be empty; only a spattering of sugar dust on the papers would hint of the treasures that had once lay inside. His tongue swiftly lapped the residue of cream and caramel off his fingertips before he swept them across the expanse of his mottled apron when his first customer of the day walked in.

“Signor Smith! Buongiorno, buongiorno! Come sta?”

“I am well. Ah...*Molto bene. Grazie.*”

“Your Italian is getting very well, Signor.”

Mr. Smith smiled. “*Grazie*, Signor Bergonzi. I will never speak it as well as my son, but I am trying to learn.”

“Si, he is very good at his *Italiano*. I think perhaps because he is not an Englishman?”

“Gustov? No, he is Austrian, as was his mother. She died when he was very young, but I think he has her accent as well as mine.”

“*Si*, I hear both accents when he talks. Now it make *senso*. I am sorry to hear of your wife, Signor.”

“Thank you.”

“I think your Gustov is a very smart young man, *si*?”

Smith grinned again. “He is.”

“He must be to study at the *università*. They would not take a student who was not *intelligente*, and not at his age. Is he a good *studente*, does he do well?”

“He is doing very well. His masters are pleased with his progress and he enjoys his studies very much.”

“*Eccellente!* I hope we will get to see what he has learned some day?”

Mr. Smith smiled. “Perhaps. Now, I dare not return home without some of your *eccellente pasticcini*.”

“Of course. What would you like today?” Signor Smith was one of his best customers, and he knew there was always a good sale to be made when he came to the shop.

“I would like...oh,” he corrected himself and continued haltingly, “*Vorrei quattro...sfogliatelle, e trenta...pignoli, per favore.*”

“*Trenta?*”

Mr. Smith answered sheepishly, “Yes, thirty.”

Signor Bergonzi had just finished tying the string on the boxes when he looked over to see another customer coming into the side door of his shop.

“Ah, here comes Signora Cartwright, she like my *pasticcino* almost as much as you, Signor Smith.”

When he turned back, the money lay upon the counter however, the boxes and Signor Smith were nowhere to be seen.



HE WALKED AS QUICKLY as he dared without breaking into a run. He knew better than to attempt such a thing; it would draw attention to himself. God knows how many people would stop and stare at the sight of an old man running full out on a pleasant winter morning. When he at last made it back to their modest apartments, he removed the grey wig which irritated his shaved head, and immediately sought out his son.

Gustov had finished breaking his fast, the daily paper in his hands as he sat in their simple dining room. “Good morning, Father. What treats have you brought us this day?”

“I stopped by Bergonzi’s this morning,” he acknowledged, raising the boxes. Then in a much lower voice added, “But I nearly ran into a spectre.”

Gustov immediately addressed their cook, who stood nearby arranging the dishes. “Signora Ariberti, I will take these things to the kitchen later; you need not concern yourself with them. Go and enjoy your *colazione*.”

The old woman smiled her nearly toothless smile at him and patted his cheek. When she stood next to him at table, he could look her directly in the eye, so tiny was she. “So good to me, Signor Gustov. Tonight I going to make you *Baccalà*. You going to eat like an *italiano, si?*” she said as she shuffled out to her kitchen.

“What a treasure she is. An excellent cook, and damn near deaf to boot. I thank our lucky stars we found her.”

“Enough, Higgins, what happened this morning?”

“I almost met her at the *pasticceria*, Darcy.”

“You know she likes to shop there! You could have undone all we have established by such foolishness!”

“I beg your pardon, but I didn’t go looking for her. It was she who ran into me. I went to the shop as it opened, specifically to avoid the chance of running into her. I know her habits as well as you, and she normally does not buy her sweets so early. She must have had other errands to run today.”

Darcy shook his head violently. “I am sorry, please forgive me. You know how I fluster when there is any possibility she might discover us.”

Mr. Smith extended his hand to the younger man’s shoulder, reassuring him. “We are in this together. There may be near mishaps, but the two of us combined are more than a match for her; all will be well.”

“So I tell myself each day, but the nightmare of the evening I learnt she had left England keeps preying upon my

serenity. If she had not stuck to her original destination, God only knows if we would have ever found her again.”

“Come, Son. Dwelling upon the past serves no purpose. She has no reason to suspect I would be in Padua; she would be looking for you. Why don’t you take up your post in the back room and watch for her return? It is Tuesday, and her son will be starting his lessons soon. Then you can go to *Professore* Carrera’s without fear of seeing her on the streets.”



“WHO WERE YOU SPEAKING to, Signor Bergonzi?” she asked, confused.

He looked around and laughed. “Signor Smith was here, buying his *pasticcini*. But I think he is very shy. He is always not talking to strangers. I think it is very sad. Maybe because he lost his wife?”

“I do not know him, or of his wife, Sir. Is he an Englishman?”

“Si, yes, he come to Padua with his son, who is *Ultramontani*, non-Italian, at the *universita*. Very smart man, his son, but also shy like his father. Gustov Smith is his name and he is Austrian.”

He leaned over and whispered conspiratorially. “Very sad. I have heard his mamma was a contessa in Austria and Signor Smith was a servant she fall in love with. Her family, they throw her out and she later die having little Gustov.”

Elizabeth’s eyes went wide. “How awful!”

“*Si, si, una tragedia grande*,” he said sympathetically.

“If I have the good fortune to meet him, I will be very kind to him.”

“Of course, Signora Cartwright. You are always so kind. If you would be looking for a husband, maybe you would like Signor Smith?”

She nearly choked. “Oh, no, no, Signor Bergonzi. I am married!” she cried. “I came with my son William for the university and its *professore*. If my husband could be here, he would be.”

“Ah, I see, *Signora. Mi scusi, per favore*. I did not know you husband is not dead. You dear son, he is *brillante*. All the people talk of him. And such a bello bambino. You must be *molto* proud with him.”

“Si, I am. *Mille grazie, Signor Bergonzi*.” She turned the subject to her business. “I think we would like two of the *pasticciotti* today, and I would like to place an order for a cake for the end of the month. Signorino William is having his birthday.”

“Ah! You must tell my little *Guglielmo ‘buon compleanno’*—happy birthday from me. Here, you take this *golosessi* to him for his birthday. I do not make them very often, mostly for carnival, but people are asking me for them, so I start making them more and more.” He handed her a small

stick, covered with lumps in a rich brown glaze. “You see, this is fig, and...and...apri-cats, and over all of it; caramel! Mmmm, *delizioso*.”

She stifled her laughter and accepted the dear gift. “*Mille grazie, Signor*. William will be delighted; he loves everything you make.”

Signor Bergonzi sighed. “You know I do anything *per te, bella Signora*.”

She blushed. “*Grazie, Signor*.”



THE APARTMENTS DARCY HAD taken were several streets away from hers, but on higher ground. When they had toured the rooms originally, it was the elder gentleman who realised one of the bedrooms in the rear had a perfect view of her front door. They had leased it immediately.

Darcy’s irrational fears had abated somewhat since they had managed to establish themselves into Padua without raising any interest. However, he relied upon Higgins to reassure him at every opportunity when their business did not go smoothly. He stroked his full beard absently as he watched above the rooftops, hoping for any sign of her.

At last he smiled when he saw her approach, the familiar brown box from Bergonzi’s in one hand, some sort of greenery in the other. How typical of his love to wish for fresh plants in the dead of winter. At least it was not as cold as Derbyshire, and fresh flowers were sometimes available.

He donned his hat and spectacles and looked into the glass. His facial hair, combined with his distinctive Austrian wardrobe left him looking nothing like Fitzwilliam Darcy, Englishman. He had never been outside his lodgings without his complete disguise since arriving in Padua. He left soon afterwards for his day of lessons.

In the evening, he sat by the fire reading the letter from Georgiana once again.

“How is dear Mrs. McNally? Are her spirits recovered, do you think?” Higgins asked.

“She seems happier, less melancholy. I think only time will heal her heartbreak.”

“Aye, and another child.” Darcy frowned. “None can replace the one she lost, but those two were meant to be a mother and father, mark my word. They will make fine parents, and their children will be the best of both of them.”

“I hope you are right, Tom.”

“Plenty of time. She is very young still.”

“Yet very wise. I owe her so much.”

“I think the cleverness runs in your family, Darcy. You were the one to change all the arrangements so quickly. We could never have slipped into town without your preparations.”

“True, but time was on our side. Once we knew Elizabeth was still bound for Padua, I could take more time prepar-

ing, and give them the chance to feel no one had followed them.”

“I cannot complain. I had always wanted to see the world, and Vienna and Prague were sights to behold. Your idea later of coming here by the eastern route certainly made for a good strategy to keep them unawares as well.”

“Yes, we were very lucky indeed.”

“Hang luck. You make your own luck. If you had not done your work, you would not have succeeded. Surely time and life have taught you so.”

Darcy smirked. “I think they have. I am going to work on the sketch for Mr. Bennet. It has been months since I sent him one, and not only have my skills improved, but my son is going to be five years old in a few weeks, and I wish to remember it with a drawing.”

“Good. His grandfather will welcome it very much.”

“Yes, I think he will. May I ask you also to be available on Saturday? I have a little surprise to show you.”

“Why Darcy, I had no idea you cared. I think I may have a cry.”

Darcy snorted. “Why do I put up with your insolence, Higgins?”

“Why indeed?”



AS ELIZABETH SLOWLY MADE her way home, she could not help but glance furtively over her shoulder. She had never entirely recovered her fear that he might follow her to Padua. She had briefly caught sight of Mr. Smith retreating this morning, and was relieved his height and weight confirmed he could not possibly be Fitzwilliam Darcy. Each time she had been introduced to, or heard of, an Englishman in Padua her fear of discovery would return. It had been a risk to only change the timing of their trip and not their destination, and she often worried if she had made the right decision.

Mrs. Barnes, her housekeeper in London, had given her much needed relief when she described Mr. Bingley’s lack of wonder as to where they lived or any of their business. Indeed, the housekeeper assured her Mr. Bingley’s meeting them appeared entirely accidental, and he had not pressed them for any personal information. Both she and William corroborated the story of his apparently leaving town on business, and therefore could not spend even a short amount of time with them.

This seeming detachment on Darcy’s part, and the truth he had never approached her in all the time they had lived in London, convinced her that her plans to go to Padua were either unknown to him, or held no interest. However, despite having lived peacefully in the town for over seven months, she could not feel completely liberated from all her worries over him.

She had concocted the altered history of her now living husband soon after leaving England, when the men she had encountered had shown her too much interest. She had convinced William to allow her to say his father was still living. He understood his mother did not like the attentions of the gentlemen who looked upon her quite intently and agreed that saying she was still married would stop their pursuits.

Convincing William who Mr. Bingley was had been a bit more difficult. In the end, she told him Mr. Bingley was his father’s twin brother, and therefore his uncle, hence the striking resemblance. The brothers had quarrelled many years earlier, which was why the Bingleys had never visited them, or acknowledged their relationship to him. William was happy he had relations, especially such a handsome aunt as Lady Angel, but being the clever fellow he was, demanded to know why they were Bingleys if his father was a Cartwright.

“Mrs. Thurgood adopted your father as her heir. Our home in Brampton, and our fortune come from her family’s side, and they were Cartwrights. Changing your father’s name to theirs was one of the requirements for him to have the inheritance,” she offered simply.

He had thought on it a while, eventually decided her answers made sense, and bothered her no further on the subject.

She arrived at her house where William greeted her at the door, thrilled to see she had visited his favourite shop. He began to babble excitedly at her, inquiring after the pastry chef, who had she seen at the flower shop, when she managed to stop him.

“William! You must slow down, I cannot hope to follow your conversation, much less answer your questions when you talk so quickly, and more importantly, when you are speaking Italian!” she cried, exasperated.

It had been this way within a few short months after they had arrived. William, immersed in the language, picked it up so thoroughly his first thoughts now came to him in Italian instead of English. It was an excellent aide for his studies, as none of his teachers, save one, spoke English, but his mother had yet to catch up to him.

“*Scusi, Mamma*. How was your morning?”

She laughed and ruffled his hair. “Come, impertinent boy. You may have one of these before your first lesson if you are quick about it.” She was heading to her room when she heard the squeals of her son and their cook from the kitchen.

“*Golosessi!*” they cried.



ON SATURDAY, DARCY AND Higgins headed out of the city in a hired coach. The day was crisp without being too cold, and both men were grateful for the chance to breathe the

sweet air of the countryside. They headed south on the main road until Darcy turned westward.

“Abano?” Higgins inquired.

“Yes, and the Euganean Hills. I think you will like it.”

“If it gets us out of the city, I will.” Darcy smiled.

Their horses soon pulled up to the surprise: a small villa Darcy had acquired. Higgins grinned at the sight of the simple, yet handsome stone building. It was not large, nor ornate, instead showing excellent repair, and a communion with the nature around it that appealed immediately.

The Po Valley lay beneath them, a charming, pastoral sight to behold from the windows, and rising behind the home was a vast forest of oak and chestnut, heading up into the hills. Nearby was Abano, a popular town for tourists who came for the spas and beautiful natural environment which abounded in the area.

“Only one thing missing to make this perfect.” Higgins slyly challenged as he stood on the front steps. In the next instant, a boy came round the front of the villa, two fine horses trailing after him, both saddled and ready for a ride.

“Ah, Son. Now you are going to make me cry,” Higgins said with feigned emotion.

“I suspect I may too, after seeing how you ride,” Darcy challenged.

“Oh, ho! If it is a proper fancy gentleman’s seat you would have me show you, you are wasting your breath. But if you want a real man’s race, I think I can teach you a thing or two, my lad.”

“A pity I know the area better than you, *Papa*.”

“An advantage you will only have once, *figlio mio*.”

They took off at a gallop not long after meeting their mounts.

When they later returned, they decided to spend the night in Darcy’s new home. They sent the stable boy into Abano for some fresh breads, meats and cheese for their supper as Darcy had not hired any other staff for the place. He felt no hurry to do so. He liked the privacy this arrangement afforded them, and with Higgins’ help they were able to keep the house sufficiently tidy, and the dishes clean and *somewhat* unbroken.

He turned to watch Higgins swirling his deep red Grappa in a glass in front of the fireplace of the simple drawing room. The fellow was a bit of a puzzle to Darcy, but he had to admit he counted the man as one of his good friends.

When he had gone to him after learning of Elizabeth and William’s departure to the continent, he was unsure of his welcome. Scarce moments had reassured him of Tom’s pleasure in seeing him again, and not ten minutes later had he been overwhelmingly relieved when the man agreed to leave the position he had held most of his life to accompany Darcy to Padua, posing as his father.

It was Georgiana who had come up with the idea of Darcy not travelling alone, and Higgins was the first man who had come to mind. He had never expected him to con-

sent so easily. Most surprising of all had been Higgins’ one stipulation before agreeing to the scheme.

“I will not go as your servant, Mr. Darcy. You may pay my way and feed me; Lord knows I could never afford to do so myself, but I will not take wages from you. I go as your friend, or companion or I won’t go at all.”

Thus, their friendship had begun. At first, they spoke to one another in hesitant ways, testing out the comfort of easy banter between them. Darcy soon learned Higgins had a mind as sharp as a tack, though sadly uneducated. The things he did know, however, proved to work in concert perfectly with Darcy’s strengths. Tom had been right; the two of them combined were no match for Elizabeth. They had taught each other a level of stealth his majesty’s government would have been lucky to draw upon.

They had re-negotiated Elizabeth’s lease, cutting her cost in half, with ‘Signor Smith’ absorbing the other half in secret. William’s masters had all received a stipend through an unidentified benefactor, interested in educating Signora Cartwright’s *brilliant* little boy, and all had charged her a mere pittance for their services.

Little William had not yet received permission to attend the university. However, each of his masters held titles at the prestigious school, and had no qualms about tutoring the young boy in their leisure time. In truth, his studies were not quite to university standards. However, his professors in math and science admitted William’s studies would reach those levels within a year or two. His father, determined to be as educated as possible on his son’s favourite subjects, now studied with them.

After nearly seven months residence in the region, both men felt they could now take the time to relax and enjoy the riches the Northern Provinces had to offer. The secluded location of the house allowed Darcy the rare opportunity of freedom from the disguise he always felt compelled to wear while in Padua, while its easy distance to their city apartments ensured they would be able to visit the retreat often.

Over the next weeks, Darcy taught Higgins how to ride like a proper gentleman and Higgins began to teach Darcy everything he knew about horses. Darcy was surprised at how much more he could learn about one of his favourite subjects. He should have known Higgins’ declaration of liking horses had been the basis of his insatiable desire to learn all he could. The Caldharts had been very foolish not to use the man’s extraordinary talents in the past. If the chance presented itself, he would see these skills not go to waste in future.

They chose to hire only the stable boy and a woman to come and clean the villa while they were away in Padua, and therefore had very secluded, restful visits when they were in residence.

Chapter 35

PADUA, FEBRUARY 1819

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of February, with the icy rains of winter beating against the windowpanes of their modest apartments when someone rang the bell. Few visitors ever came to see Signor Smith and his son, and, as none were expected, and the cook rarely heard the bell, Signor Smith himself answered the door. Darcy could hear the man in the small entryway.

“Well, what a sight are you two! Welcome, welcome! Do let me take your things and bring you to the warm fire.”

He rose from his comfortable chair and waited impatiently for his guests to come in to their small parlour. When they rounded the corner, nothing could have prepared him for the burst of joy in his heart as he saw them.

“Georgie, Patrick!” he cried, as his sister rushed into his waiting arms.

*T*he unexpected arrival of his sister and brother-in-law brought Darcy more happiness than he would have guessed possible. He had not realised how much he had missed them. Unfortunately, he did not communicate his initial delight in seeing them as eloquently as he might have preferred, nor as good breeding would have dictated. In fact, his first words to them might have been something about their utter foolhardiness in crossing the Channel and Continent in the dead of winter; followed by questioning whether they had lost all the reasonable sense they were born with. Luckily, such spirited assertions could only be construed as the verbalisation of the highest form of regard the orator had for his victims, and was not considered insulting in any way by the lady or gentleman.

When he had calmed enough to thank them for coming the long way to see him, Darcy had a difficult time not holding his dear sister’s hand continuously, as if she would disappear if he did not anchor her to the sofa next to him. They exchanged all the news, both real and gossip, about their families and friends. Georgiana took every opportunity to tease him about his beard and moustache.

Darcy was thrilled to learn they had seen the new Miss Emily Bingley and she was very much the beauty her relatives had speculated a Bingley baby would be. Anne De Bourgh was firmly ensconced with her Aunt and Uncle Matlock and no amount of pleading, threats or cajoling on the part of her mother would convince her to return to Rosings Park. They had seen her often, and the McNally’s conjectured their Cousin Richard’s frequent attendance to Anne might have done much to lift her spirits.

That afternoon, Darcy suggested he and Patrick should secure rooms at a hotel in town, and they ventured out into the downpour. As soon as they had departed, Higgins turned to Mrs. McNally, just as she was beginning to ask him about her brother. They smiled in understanding of their shared concern over him.

“How is he, Mr. Higgins?”

“As well as a man who has nothing he wants can be, I suppose. From what I understand, I believe he is very much like what he was in London.”

Georgiana’s face betrayed her disappointment. “I do not think he lived very well in London,” she whispered sadly.

“Exactly, Mrs. McNally. Now he has even less. He will not go out of doors without the disguise you saw him put on, and he rarely ventures out just for his pleasure. I do not

think the amount of time he spends simply watching for her or his son from the back window can be good for him.

“His papers from his steward and attorneys keep him busy some days, and thank goodness he has his two classes at the university, but other days he only lives for the tiny bit of time he sees them from the window. The only time I think he finds peace is when we venture to the house in the hills. It is not right. A man ought to be more, to have more purpose I think.”

She nodded. In the brief time she had seen him she had been struck by his lack of vitality. He had never been a boisterous man, but he had at least always been strong and vigorous. Now he was a man withdrawing into shadows. Higgins’ assessments had been very accurate. While he was not unhappy, seeing the pathetic amount of joy he was able to muster from this paltry existence he was living was making her angrier by the moment.



LATER IN THE EVENING, after dinner had been enjoyed and Signora Ariberti finished fussing over the handsome relatives who had come to visit her employers, Higgins announced his intentions of retiring early, knowing the family would wish to speak of more personal matters than had already been discussed in front of him. Georgiana gave him a kind smile and nod, silently thanking him as he departed.

She was bold enough to suggest Darcy should write his Aunt Catherine, telling her of his plans to reside in Europe permanently, with no chance of returning to England. He was about to deflect this request of what would be considered an open declaration of war when Georgiana countered, suggesting if his aunt knew of his intentions of never offering for Anne, it might give her and Richard a chance at happiness. At the very least, Anne would be free to pursue marriage with someone of her own choosing if her mother no longer considered her to be engaged to Darcy. He told her he would consider taking her advice. She was satisfied he was at least taking her suggestions seriously.

She then assured her brother of her continued good health, but could not help her tears when she finally came to the tale of her baby son who had come too early that autumn. They had named him Patrick, after his father, before he was buried. While her health had recovered completely, she did not try to lighten the grief both she and her husband felt. Darcy comforted her as best he could, and told her he had been moved greatly by the loss of his nephew as well. Her grief was natural, and she should not attempt to hide from it, he reassured her.

They ended the evening discussing his life in Padua, what he had done for Elizabeth and William and his studies at the university. Georgiana watched him carefully as he explained all he had been doing. He reminded her of Mrs.

Reynolds, when she sometimes felt melancholy and would talk of her late husband. Part of her heart was breaking to see her brother in such a state, but a larger part was growing even angrier over the stalemate he had put himself in. She was determined to talk to Patrick at length to try to discover a way to end this unacceptable situation.

The couple left quite late, needing a good night’s rest before either could spend their usual hours dissecting all they learnt that day. The next morning they had a chance to share opinions on Darcy’s state of mind and health, and had just begun to try to find some solutions when Higgins came to their door. He apologised for intruding so early, but Darcy had come down with a very bad cold in the night, and was feeling miserable this morning. Signora Ariberti was not capable of tending a man nearly twice her size, besides having a very difficult time going up and down stairs, and Darcy did not like to ask the lady who cleaned for them to do such a personal job.

Georgiana understood her brother’s reluctance. His servants at Pemberley and in town had been with them most of their lives and his ease with them was pronounced against his nervousness with strangers, especially in the sick room. She immediately offered to nurse her brother. Patrick would be along shortly, and keep both the kitchen, and the sick room supplied along with Higgins’ help.

Darcy spent the next few days suffering with chills, aches, coughs and sniffles, while Georgiana did her best to keep him company and entertained when he was actually awake. She encouraged Patrick and Higgins to go out in the city and see the sights when the weather turned better three days later. Higgins begrudgingly donned his old wig once again, and escorted his guest into the city.

Darcy was sleeping peacefully for once and his breathing was much easier than it had been of late. She ventured downstairs to find something to read. She could not help but be disappointed by the limited choices her brother’s modest apartments afforded, yet she understood he did not wish to be bogged down with too many possessions to move, should he have to leave quickly to follow Elizabeth. She had all but given up hope of finding something good to indulge herself in when she spied a thick book peeking out of the centre drawer of his desk. Part of her flushed to think her brother might have purchased another one of his more...enticing...pieces of literature, given he was clearly hiding it away. However, she was not prepared for what she found when she opened the heavy red leather binding.



ELIZABETH SAT QUIETLY MENDING a shirt in the window seat, relishing the sun’s recent return that morning. She could hear the occasional voices of William and his teacher in the room across the hall, lulling her as they methodically

went through his lessons. She had not realised her inattentiveness to the rest of her surroundings, until her housekeeper interrupted her solitude by bringing her a calling card with an unfamiliar name,

Mrs. Patrick McNally

Elizabeth was intrigued over this stranger calling upon her. She stood to greet her guest, though later was still confused as to who she might be even after their introduction.

"Thank you for receiving me today, Mrs. Cartwright." Georgiana began as the two women eyed one another carefully.

Elizabeth could not help but be impressed by the lady's fine garments and sophisticated air. However, her visitor showed not the least sign of haughtiness. Surprisingly, Mrs. McNally's face exuded a warm regard for her. They were about to take their seats after answering each other politely when a hard knock was heard upon the door followed by William bounding happily into the room.

"Signora told me you have a lady visitor, Mamma, and I have been given a short leave from lessons to come and greet our guest." He turned to Georgiana, who took the advantage to stare at her nephew while his mother shook her head in dismay.

"William, this is Mrs. McNally. Madam, my son, William Cartwright, who likes nothing better than to meet a pretty lady."

William blushed to his roots, but could not keep his eyes off the lovely Mrs. McNally. Georgiana laughed heartily as she curtsied to his bow. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance and I thank you for the compliment, Mrs. Cartwright. What lessons am I keeping you from, Mr. Cartwright?"

"It is mathematics; I do not mind."

"You do not enjoy your mathematics lessons?"

"No, you do not understand, Ma'am. They are my favourites along with the sciences, and I study them constantly even for pleasure. Therefore, I can spend time with you and not get behind in my studies."

"How happy you must be to near the university where Galileo himself was *professore, si?*

William's eyes lit up. "*Si, Si, Signora!* Do you study physics? Have you read his works?" he asked excitedly.

She laughed lightly. "I did have some lessons in physics, but my master was not well versed, and I had to give it up. I did enjoy much of what we were able to learn, though. Are you planning on studying it?"

Elizabeth stood silent, enchanted by this fine lady who was taking such an eager interest in her son. He made friends easily, however fine English ladies were not typically interested in reciprocating the relationship.

"Perhaps someday, when I have studied longer. I want to study so many things; I do not know what I will choose."

"Of course, Master William. You are very young and have years before you will need to decide." She then gave him a rather longing smile with a barely perceptible sigh,

which reminded Elizabeth of the amount of time that had passed.

"I think your leave has come to an end, William," his mother gently reminded him.

He smiled at both women. "I hope you will come again, Mrs. McNally. Mamma does not get many visitors here in *Padova*, especially English ladies. I hope you will be her friend."

"Thank you, Master William, I would like to visit you again. It was delightful to meet you."

He bid them both adieu and left the ladies alone. Mrs. McNally continued to look to the door he had exited through, deep in thought. "He is a beautiful boy. You are very fortunate," she said sincerely.

"I...thank you." Elizabeth answered, attempting to understand her visitor's sudden melancholy.

"I expect you must be confused as to my purpose in coming here."

"I must admit to being a little muddled, Mrs. McNally. Can I be of help to you in some way?"

Georgiana smiled ruefully. "You could be, Mrs. Cartwright. However, whether you will, is quite another matter. Please allow me to introduce myself more properly, I am Mrs. Georgiana McNally formerly Miss Georgiana Darcy."

It took several minutes' time for Elizabeth to speak again. "Why?" she managed to say.

"Why am I here?" Elizabeth nodded. "He is my nephew, Mrs. Cartwright. I want to know him and help him."

"You know?" Her hands began to tremble.

"Nearly two years."

Elizabeth sat stunned, breathing heavily. Then she became angry. "Jane! I would never have thought my sister could be so little trusted."

"You are wrong. Your dear sister said nothing. I am afraid it was you, Mrs. Cartwright."

Georgiana nodded knowingly, as the truth began to dawn over Elizabeth. "Yes, my brother was at the Bingley's house the day you came to see your sister and he heard your every word. He even managed to meet William in their library."

Elizabeth sat shaking her head back and forth, as if she could will these truths to disappear. She knew he had met William, but did not know what extent of her conversation with Jane he might have overheard.

Mrs. McNally continued. "All this time he has known everything, and yet he has left you alone, made no attempt to take your son from you or force your hand."

Elizabeth's emotions were torn between wishing to burst into tears and venting her anger now that her world was collapsing with each word his sister spoke. Her anger won out. "I would hardly expect him to acknowledge me or his son, Mrs. McNally. Our acquaintance ended years ago. That will never change."

"You believe he had no desire to contact you again?"

Elizabeth's defiant face was resolute.

Georgiana replied with steady conviction, "I assure you, Madam, you could not be more wrong."

Elizabeth could barely ask the next question. "Is he here?"

"Yes."

She gasped, and started shaking her head again. "He should return to his home. I cannot see him." Then without thinking she added, "Is he well?"

Georgiana bit back her smile at Elizabeth unwittingly showing her affections were still engaged. "He will not leave, Mrs. Cartwright, for he no longer lives in England; he has lived in Padua for nearly a year. As for his health, I am sorry to say he has recently been taken ill."

"He is in no danger?" she could not help blurting out.

"It was a bad cold and fever, but he is already recovering. I expect he will be up and about by tomorrow."

Elizabeth suddenly realised the impropriety of asking into the concerns of the man. "I apologise, I have no right to ask."

"Do you think I would be here, telling you about him, if I did not believe you had any rights? I am sorry for the pain this interview will bring, but I must tell you: I know everything. My brother and I share confidences, and I know he loves you. I think you love him as well."

"But I am not worthy of his regard, much less anything more! If your purpose in coming here was to persuade me to speak with him, I must refuse."

"Why can you not? What are you not worthy of?"

Elizabeth refused to answer her.

"Or is it easier to hide behind your martyrdom and take up your role as mother, forsaking all others or the pursuit of your own happiness? Are you truly living, Mrs. Cartwright? What example of adult life are you teaching your son? What will happen to you when William grows up and leaves you? What life will you have after *his* has begun?"

"I cannot let Will disgrace himself, or you and your husband! He would lose everything he has, all that he is and cares for. You do not know what it is to live in a society that shuns you, whispers behind your back and holds you in contempt. Why would I wish it upon someone I love?"

Georgiana shook her head. "You do not know him. I see that now. He has spent so long in your shadow and knows you so well, but you have not seen him these past six years. You have no idea what he has become. You have no idea what he values most in the world. Can you imagine what it does to him to know you use professors and masters as substitute fathers to the son he would happily embrace?"

Elizabeth gasped. "I will face the penance for my sins someday, but I refuse to let people of whom I ask nothing to sit in judgement of me. You have no idea what I suffer. You cannot judge my actions."

"You are worthy to be forgiven for most of your transgressions, Mrs. Cartwright, and I would happily give it if you asked.

"However, there is one thing you have done which cannot be forgiven, for you do not repent it, and continue in its abuse. You have forbidden my brother his free will. You think you cannot marry him, yet you do not give him the opportunity to choose. If this is not cruelty, I do not know what is. You see; the choice was not yours alone to make, yet you did make it, and without knowing everything.

"If you were a gentleman I would call you out for your arrogance."

Elizabeth flinched.

"Yes arrogance, Mrs. Cartwright. You presume to know what is best for many; I suggest you do not."

Georgiana brought forth her satchel, removed a thick tome and dropped the book heavily upon the table. "I will save you the pain you might have suffered under my foil."

Elizabeth looked shocked.

"Oh, yes. Fitzwilliam spent years teaching me to master fencing. One of many examples of what you do not know about him.

"Instead I challenge you to an emotional, no...an intellectual duel. I give you *this*," she gestured to the book, "as proof of your folly and lay it out before you, Madam. Read this in its entirety and then come to me and justify your actions and wishes. If you can prove to me their righteousness, I will never bother you again."

Georgiana then leaned in closely to Elizabeth's face. "But if your heart can be opened and you can see the justice in what I accuse; then I demand satisfaction."

She faltered, shocked at this brave woman who confronted her. "What...what satisfaction would you require?"

Georgiana smiled. "Ah, Mrs. Cartwright, this is no time to feign ignorance. You know exactly what I would expect. If I am proved correct, the demand is both reasonable and, if I may be so bold, highly desirable to myself."

"You would want me for a sister?"

Georgiana put a comforting hand on her arm. "I would, and I would want a life enriched by the presence of my nephew in it. Most importantly, there is an extraordinary boy who deserves the best life possible, not due to material wealth, but because he has two loving parents willing to raise him together."

Elizabeth's lip trembled at hearing the one argument she could never reconcile herself against.

"Now, I suggest you have a great deal of studying to do and should start. My brother was a difficult taskmaster the years he taught me, but I suspect you will not shirk from learning this particular lesson he needs to teach you. Be brave, my Dear."

Georgiana had nearly reached the door when Elizabeth's cry stopped her.

"Mrs. McNally!"

Georgiana turned. Elizabeth lifted the heavy journal. "Does he..."

"He does not know I am here, Mrs. Cartwright. Nor that I have brought you the book. It is a transgression I will

have to beg *his* forgiveness for. I hope you do not make me regret my actions.”

Chapter 36



GEORGIANA ATTEMPTED TO CONTROL her heavy breathing in the cold February air. She had to stop more than once to calm herself on the short walk back to her brother’s apartments. Despite her bold and brave statements, the fear she had made a terrible mistake began to take hold in her heart. She entered the modest rooms and immediately went up to check upon her brother. He was awake and surprisingly lively. His illness was at last abating.

She fed him a goodly portion of soup laced with plenty of meat, and he at last showed himself to be an accommodating patient. He bade her spend the night with her husband as she had shown Patrick so little attention the past few days. She did not hesitate to agree, relieved to escape his scrutiny lest he notice the guilt in her countenance.

Georgiana climbed the steps to their hotel. She felt worn like an old leather strap. Each rise took the remaining shreds of energy out of her. When she at last saw her beloved Patrick, she broke down in his arms, confident he would take care of her, now that she was with him.

“Oh, Patrick! What have I done?”



ELIZABETH HAD SPENT MOST of the day reverting to an old habit she had forgotten she possessed—avoiding the uncomfortable. She had left the book on the table of her sitting room and proceeded to keep very busy the rest of the day. Her duties often brought her into the vicinity of the fine leather-bound missive, where she would often watch it. Once she was forced to move the object to another resting place in the late afternoon and she took the opportunity to further inspect it, without opening the pages.

Late in the night, after the household was fast asleep, she crept down with her candle, curled up on her sofa and apprehensively turned to the first page.

My name is Fitzwilliam Darcy and I love nothing more in the world than Elizabeth Bennet and our son, William Bennet Cartwright.

Georgiana and Patrick awoke late the next morning, relishing the absence of duties. Her face was first one of complete relaxation, until the reminders of the previous day played clearly across her face.

“My darling, why do you doubt yourself now?” Patrick asked, attempting to calm her.

“What if it all comes to naught? What if they cannot see past their misconceptions, and reconcile?”

“You have done what needed to be done and broken the stalemate. They might have continued on forever had no one interfered. If I may say so, Georgiana, you have finally made the last transition; your metamorphosis is complete.”

“Metamorphosis?”

“Yes, you are finally a completely female incarnation of Fitzwilliam Darcy; charging in to save the day. Congratulations, my Dear. Shall we get you outfitted for breeches now?”

She slapped his chest playfully. “I am no knight in shining armour.”

He wrapped his long arms around her as he chuckled. “No, your figure is too magnificent to belong to a knight. However, you need only ask, and I will draw forth my lance to aid you in any quest.”

She was about to chide her husband for his scandalous words when a knock was heard upon their bedchamber door, and the servant called for him. Patrick returned with a note for Georgiana.

She swallowed hard and read it. “My brother requests my presence as soon as may be.”

“As you knew he would, when he discovered the diary missing.”

She grimaced and nodded.



My name is Fitzwilliam Darcy and I love nothing more in the world than Elizabeth Bennet and our son, William Bennet Cartwright.

Such are the words I wish to write first in this book, for they encompass the most important thing I would wish you, the reader, to know about me. Most diaries are mere accounts of a person’s daily life, thoughts and experiences, but I wish for this journal to be more.

Last night I stood and contemplated my ancestor’s portrait and told myself he was a good man, a fair man, a loving man; but in truth, no one knows if this is correct, least of all

me. I am now determined that the thoughts and actions of my life should be laid forth in this book. Whoever reads this, perhaps even my grandchildren, can judge me and my worth after I am gone by what I have written. I hope I will be worthy of your esteem and plan to work hard to earn it...

Elizabeth stopped and attempted to steady her heart. Her guilt at having started the journal had quickly abated when she realised she was not reading Will's diary; she was reading his autobiography. She was completely undone by this intensely private man's wish to leave a written legacy of himself.

She continued reading page after page, held rapt by the unaccustomed honesty with which he described his history, actions, hopes and dreams.

Her fingers had been absent-mindedly stroking the smooth edges of the fine leather as her eyes devoured each word he had written. The clock struck six, breaking the trance she had been in for the past several hours as she came to his final entry,

Georgie's recent letter gave me hope that her heart may someday reconcile itself to her grief over the loss of her baby son. I cannot begin to know what they two have suffered, but when I think of the possibility of being separated from William, my heart constricts and pain grips at my chest. Georgiana's sorrow must be a thousand fold. I am determined not to be grieved over living apart from William. I am blessed. I see my son each day, and provide for him and my beloved in every way possible.

She had cried, gasped and bitten her lips until they nearly bled as she read this insight into the man she had not seen in almost six years. Such pursuits came with a high price: she was physically and emotionally exhausted.

Just then her cook and housekeeper came in, surprised to see their mistress sitting in the near dark, neither ready for breakfast nor dressed. William ran in behind them, and Elizabeth could not help but choke back a sob as she grabbed him in a fierce embrace.

"Signora Cartwright, you are well?" her housekeeper asked.

"Please do not be concerned," she managed to say with a small amount of calm. "We will be in to breakfast directly."

The two left the room slowly, eyeing the mistress the entire time with frowns upon their faces, clearly unconvinced she was well.

As soon as the door was closed, Elizabeth took her son's face in her hands.

"My Love, you know everything I have ever done was to make your life better, to help you in any way I could?"

"Mama?"

"My darling boy, I am not a perfect woman; but please remember, I wanted to be the best mother I could be for you."

William frowned and kissed his mother's cheek. "Is this one of your sad days, Mama?"

Her eyes glistened from emotions running too high. "No, William, but it has been difficult. I promise you; I am not sad. Now let us see to our breakfast."



GEORGIANA DID NOT HURRY her morning ablutions, or her pace in walking to his lodgings. She steadied herself for the onslaught she knew was coming with each step until at last, confident in her purpose, she was upon his doorstep. Unsurprisingly, he was in the doorway before she had lifted her hand to knock. He opened it wide and bade her enter by cocking his head. She looked boldly into his apprehensive eyes, and quickly entered.

"I am glad to see you up and about; do you feel yourself recovered?"

He was momentarily taken aback. "I...yes, I feel very well today, if only a little fatigued. I thank you for all you have done these past days in nursing me."

"It was my pleasure, Brother. You are very welcome."

"Where is it?" he suddenly spurted out.

She drew a great breath. "I do not have it."

He closed his eyes and frowned hard. The next voice was one she had never heard before. It was small, frightened and pleading. "Please, tell me you did not give it to her."

At first Georgiana was touched by a motherly instinct to help him and wanted nothing more than to reach out and take him in her arms and soothe his worries. But quickly she recognised the example of what she had seen these past days. This was not her fault; it was his and Elizabeth's. They had carefully orchestrated events over the years to put each of them in this impossible sham of an existence.

She steadied herself and answered in a voice she hoped brooked no opposition, "I did the one thing you were not brave enough to do, yet had to be done. Yes, Fitzwilliam, she has your diary."

"You have taken my life!" he cried.

"No! I have given you a chance to finally have a life!"

"You have no right to decide what is best for me."

"You would be right, if you were acting as a reasonable man. However, I have seen your reason turn to trepidation. You live the life of half a man. Look at you! You hide yourself away from the world. The only joy or happiness you have comes from observing people you are too afraid to claim for yourself. You cannot bind yourself to a painting!"

"This is your opinion of me? After all I have endeavoured to do for those I love, you hold my life in such contempt?"

"You do not have a life with them. You are no more to them than a patron to an orphanage!"

"How dare you compare me in such a way!"

"I dare for I am my brother's protégée. If you wanted a quiet, demure woman you should never have sat me astride that horse! You turned me into the woman I am and that woman does not back down.

"You once told me it was fear itself that cost people their lives when up against an enemy, not their skills. The fear of taking the final step to Elizabeth has crippled you. You are not brave enough to try to make her yours."

"It is not possible!"

"Yes, it is!" she countered forcefully. "If all you truly desire is to marry and have a family with Elizabeth, it is possible. What would either of you have to give up? Your place in society? You have not moved amongst society in over two years. I no longer need your name or connections in the *ton*; if you wish to turn your back on them, I shall have no cause to repine.

"You can return to England every year to keep your claim on the estate and when William makes his way in the world, return with Elizabeth and live out your days. The shades of Pemberley will hardly have noticed your absence."

"Forgive me for refusing, but I have not been used to submit to any person's whims."

"You are so obstinate and headstrong, Fitzwilliam! This is no whim! I say if you are willing to live anonymously as a pauper, you can certainly do so while married to her."

"No! This match to which you presumptuously wish me to aspire can never take place!"

He rose and took up his accustomed post at the windows, his hand twisting the signet ring on his finger. In another meek voice he revealed his true worry. "She will not have me."

Georgiana was caught by his honesty, but refused to treat him with pity. "She might not have wished to marry the man she knew six years ago. Tell me what of that man still exists?"

"What if she can only love the man she knew? What if she can no longer love the man I have become?"

"Do you think you have not improved? Are you in any way less than you once were? I think you are so much more now, but she does not know you."

"Exactly! What makes you think she would give me the chance to court her, to allow me into her life long enough to win her again? The last time I spoke with her I told her never to seek me out or speak to me. I told her she had no right to tell me she loved me. I am afraid, Georgie! Afraid she will run and then the pittance I have will once again be lost to me."

"You refuse to oblige me then? I came to try you. I hoped to find you reasonable, but I find you too caught up in your self-pity and fear.

"But you are not my only concern; William is estranged from his true father. She has done this, and you support her deception by staying away. Your son suffers unknowingly because of the lie the two of you live. Every child deserves

its mother **and** its father. My true contempt comes from watching the two of you, with a living, breathing son who deserves better, yet is treated as if he does not exist. You scorn God and his gift to you by cheating William of his due." She choked out her last words. "You do not know the blessing you have been given."

"Oh, Georgie!" He opened his arms to comfort her.

She held out her hand abruptly. "No! I do not want your pity! I want you to take action and do what you should have done two years ago!"

He hung his head. "I can only act in a manner which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness."

"Untrue," she admonished bitterly. "You can act for someone other than yourself."

He scowled at her and stormed out of the room. Moments later her shoulders flinched as she heard the front door slam and saw his shadow pass by the front windows.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER HIGGINS came in to find a worried Georgiana awaiting. She briefly explained the circumstances under which her brother had left and her concern of his poor health being compromised in the inclement weather. Higgins agreed he should not be out this long in the cold and departed immediately to fetch Mr. McNally and begin a search for Darcy.

By sundown, Georgiana was beginning to feel the effects of the guilt at having caused the rift between herself and her brother. Not normally one to give in to flutterings and imaginings, each passing hour tried her nerves greatly. Her relief was quick when she heard voices upon the front steps and the sounds of the men entering. Sadly, only Higgins and Patrick rounded the corner.

The two had searched the city, including inquiring at Mrs. Cartwright's house, without success. Fortunately, Higgins had suggested they see the man he and Darcy had often used to hire horses and coaches for travelling to the house in Abano. Signor Smith had indeed hired a horse in the early afternoon.



AS THEY NEARED THE small town, a chill winter fog descended, making the journey more difficult and adding to Georgiana's worries.

"I am sure he is merely nursing his wounds in front of the fire at the villa," Higgins attempted to reassure her.

She gave a small smile. "I hope you are right, Mr. Higgins. I can only hope he will be willing to speak to me when we arrive."

“He is a good man, Ma’am. When his anger wears off, he must come to see you have done the right thing. I will be happy to support your campaign.”

“Thank you, Sir. You are a good friend to us both.”

Georgiana’s fears were unfortunately for naught. When they finally arrived at the villa, the group was disappointed to find the horse in the stable, but no sign of Darcy.

It was nearly an hour later before the stable boy was found. He had not seen their arrival due to the dense mist, and was contentedly sitting in his parent’s small cottage when Higgins found him. He confirmed that Darcy had arrived earlier, then sent him into the village for some provisions for dinner. When the boy returned in the late afternoon, Darcy set out for the woods. He had not been seen or heard from since.

“Can you help us look for him?” Higgins asked.

“*Si, Signore*. I will have my Papa and brother come, too.”

Patrick addressed Georgiana. “We will find him, Lass. Higgins and I will light the fires and you must keep them going while we are gone.” Georgiana nodded obediently. “I would put on the water for tea or coffee. If we are out long, we will need to eat and get warm when we can.” A lump formed in her throat which she tried to quell.

“You shall do admirably, Mrs. McNally. Now show me the formidable woman I know you to be, and take charge here. If the lad’s mother comes by, you ask her for help without hesitation, yes?”

“I will. Please be careful, Patrick. The hills are steep and the weather is so cold and damp now...”

“Take heart, my Love. We will find him and you will not lose me, I promise.”

Chapter 37

As soon as the men had left, Georgiana perused the house. She was determined to find any supplies she might need for whatever situation might arise later but was sadly disappointed at what the house had to offer. The lack of a woman running the place was grossly apparent although she eventually managed to locate the most basic items.

The next hours moved slowly as she attempted to keep busy. She sat in the rustic drawing room, occasionally stoked the fires throughout the house, stood guard at the windows and regretted not having better employment to distract her nerves.

When she heard the sound of horses and wheels nearby, she ran to the front entrance before the bell had rung. Throwing the door open expecting to see the mother of the stable boy, she was instead startled by the face before her.

“Mrs. Cartwright!”

Elizabeth stood unsure upon the front threshold. “Mrs. McNally, I apologise for intruding upon you at such a late hour. I went to your brother’s lodgings this evening and his cook told me he had gone missing. She said you were hoping to find him here and I...I wished to confirm he is well.”

“Oh God!” Georgiana blurted. “I am so sorry, he has not been found.”

Elizabeth’s hand flew to cover her mouth as she stifled her moan. “What has been done, what has been attempted to find him?”

“The men are out searching the woods as we speak. We know he arrived here earlier and went out in the late afternoon but he has not been seen since. I take it he did not see you today?”

“No, not at all.”

“They have yet to return or send word. Would...would you consider staying here for the night? I would welcome the company whilst I wait, and I suspect you could be of great help when they return.”

Elizabeth’s hesitation was obvious.

“Please. I could not send you back to Padua so late and surely you will desire to see for yourself he has come to no harm?”

Georgiana then noticed the couple behind them in a small carriage, obviously concerned for Mrs. Cartwright’s well-being and welcome into the house at such an unseemly hour.

Elizabeth saw where her eyes were directed and explained. “My cook and her husband were kind enough to offer to bring me here tonight. She is very protective of me and worries easily.”

“Please reassure them I am happy to receive you. Oh, but your son! Is he travelling with you?”

“He is at home with my housekeeper, who is looking after him. I thank you for your invitation, Mrs. McNally, but do not wish to intrude upon you further; I merely came for my peace of mind.”

Georgiana had nearly come to the end of her fortitude and reached out a trembling hand to Elizabeth’s forearm. Her voice betrayed her anxiety. “Please, I cannot bear this waiting alone. My brother and my husband are out in this dreadful mire and the quiet of this house preys upon my feelings. Please, Mrs. Cartwright, I could bear this torture if only you would stay with me.”

Elizabeth’s eyes softened instantly. “Then I shall stay,” she stated quietly, and Georgiana whispered her sincere thanks.

The two women later sat in the drawing room, sipping the tea Georgiana had, with Elizabeth’s help, made in the great fireplace of the kitchen.

“It is a lovely home, despite the lack of furnishings,” Elizabeth remarked nervously.

“I believe its simplicity is what drew my brother to it.”

Elizabeth set her teacup down. “I am sorry if his disappearance today was due to me,” she said solemnly whilst studying her hands clasped in her lap.

“No, it was not you. We did not see eye to eye on the subject of the two of you, Mrs. Cartwright. The conversation was long overdue, I am afraid. Yet, it gives me little comfort. The fault is mine, the danger he may now be in is...my doing. It was a risk to bring you his journal. He did not wish you to have it, but I was willing to gamble, and have risked something infinitely precious to him. He may never forgive me.”

Georgiana took another sip of her tea. “Have you read it?” she asked, while her lips perched at the edge of the rim.

Elizabeth nodded, unable to meet her eye.

“Then you know it all. I have not read it. I merely saw the first page and knew what my brother intended it to be, so decided you should have it. You have seen into his mind and heart and know what he wants. Is it not time for you to put aside your fears and trust in him and his abilities? I would rather see him give you both up than continue living as the shadow of a man he has become whilst following you.”

Elizabeth fidgeted. “You are very much like your brother, Mrs. McNally,” she said while wringing her hands. “You argue just like him.”

Georgie laughed. “You cannot know how much, Mrs. Cartwright.”

“Actually, I...I do. He wrote about your years at Pemberley...”

Before Elizabeth could finish, they heard the shouts from far off, full of urgency and approaching quickly. Georgiana said a small prayer of thanks before rushing once again to the door. The stable boy had run ahead and reached them first, chattering quickly in Italian as he came in.

“They have found him, but he is wet and very cold. He says they will need dry clothes and a warm bed for him at once,” Georgiana translated. She was hastening down the hallway to the bedrooms before she had finished the sentence.

Elizabeth thanked the boy for all his help and asked if Signore Smith was walking back to the villa on his own. The boy’s mouth went grim and his dark eyes widened as he told her the big man was carrying the gentleman. She was unable to translate one word he kept repeating until its meaning was made dreadfully apparent.

Higgins approached while carrying a lamp to light the way for Patrick, who struggled with the cumbersome load over his shoulder. A limp human form hung from him. ‘*Addormentato*’, the boy had been saying; ‘asleep’. Darcy was unconscious.

Within minutes, the men had carried him into the bedroom. Patrick and Georgiana removed his wet clothing and dried him as best they could before covering him with a dry nightshirt and placing him in the bed.

Georgiana had sent Higgins to fetch the blankets off the other bed in an attempt to warm him up. When he returned, the McNallys were sitting next to Darcy, holding his cold hands in theirs. His face was a sickly shade and his lips a pale blue. There had been no injuries to him when they found him. Apparently, he had simply lost his way, exhausted himself in the night and finally collapsed. Now they could only try to warm him up and hope he would awaken. They took turns placing their ears to his chest and listening for his heartbeat.

“It is so slow, Patrick. I am worried how slowly his heart beats.”

“He was out in very cold weather a long time, Georgiana; I think his body decided it was best to rest until he could warm up again.”

She nodded her head.



HIGGINS HAD GONE OUT to the empty drawing room but heard noises in the kitchen. When he entered, he found Elizabeth acting as hostess to the three who had helped in the search. They stood and bowed to Higgins and thanked Elizabeth for the food and hot drinks. Before they departed, Elizabeth assured them they should return the next day after resting, as no doubt the master would wish to thank them for their help.

She and Higgins regarded each other tentatively until she held out her hand and he took it firmly.

“Hello, Mr. Higgins.”

“Ma’am.”

“How did he find you?”

“He saw the two of us talking in Hyde Park.”

She nodded, lost in thought for several moments, then without hesitating asked, "Did you betray me?"

"I have kept your secrets, save one; I told him you didn't kill your brother-in-law, Wickham, when he thought you might have. Tell me, did I do wrong?"

She looked to the floor and shook her head.

"I don't owe you anything, but still I kept your secrets. He doesn't know them all but I think you should tell him, including about your sister."

Her face betrayed her surprise and her rising anger.

"You think your son is so sharp from only your wits? You don't know Darcy, then. He is every bit as clever as you ever are, maybe even more so. Look at all he has done without your knowing, and pulled it all off just the way you wanted. You get his son, you get the love and the chance to be with that boy and he sits back and gives it all to you. Because it was what you wanted and no other reason.

"The only thing he ever asked was to be able to watch. To look at you like some fine painting in a gallery but never touch you, or talk to you, or live the life he wants so badly with you and that boy he loves so much. So before you run, or rant at me or him about how angry you are, or whether anyone has betrayed you, think about what others have done for you and for your son. You are not the only one, Miss Bennet."

He turned his back on her and walked back to Darcy's room. There he found Georgiana and Patrick, still holding their brother's cold pale hands.

"Does he seem to be warming?" he asked. Patrick looked up and shook his head. Higgins approached and examined Darcy closely, touching his skin and assessing his progress. When he had finished, he called Patrick into the hallway.

"Mr. McNally, I have seen people exposed to the cold too long before, some gone as much as Darcy. In Derbyshire, we have an old remedy we practice when nothing else is available. I fear it will never get very warm in this stone house and we should try this other...method. You could see it done while I ride into Abano and find the doctor. I'm sure we could use more help if I have your approval."

"Certainly, Higgins. Please explain your idea."



HIGGINS LEFT SOON AFTERWARDS while Patrick sought out Mrs. Cartwright to bring to his wife. Elizabeth agreed to enter Darcy's bedroom, as she had little choice with Mrs. McNally refusing to leave it.

She slowly walked into the brightly lit room. The cheerfulness from the fire sharply contrasted the danger for the man in the bed. She did not take her eyes off his pale, unmoving form.

Patrick drew Georgiana to the door, embraced her tenderly and told her what Higgins had said. He did not try to

sweeten the threat to Darcy, and Georgiana's eyes betrayed the worry she had been stifling.

"Now, Lass. Your brother needs you," he whispered quietly to her. "And he needs her, too. The both of you have it in your power to save him. You have to convince her."

Georgiana looked to him, glassy-eyed.

"You are the bravest woman I know but you also have the biggest heart of any person on earth. Show her, Georgie, be sister to her and convince her to be wife to him."

He dismissed her with a kiss to her forehead, and told her he would wait outside until she called, before closing the door firmly behind him.

Elizabeth looked up from her stolid vigil at the end of the bed. "What has happened? Why have the men left?"

"Higgins has gone to find a doctor and my husband is in the hallway should we need him."

Georgiana took a deep breath, sat down on the edge of the bed, and began to remove her boots and then her stockings. She stopped for a moment, observing Elizabeth calmly.

"The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding go out to meet it," she said steadily as she stared at the woman her brother loved.

She then felt into her hair and removed the pins, placing them methodically on the stand next to Darcy's bed.

Elizabeth frowned while watching her odd movements steadily. "I do not recognise the quote."

"Thucydides, a wise Greek whose words we must heed tonight." She shook out her long dark tresses. "Higgins has told us of a method which may help my brother. I am willing to try it, but in truth, it is not *my* place to do so."

"I beg your pardon?"

Georgiana ignored her as she unbuttoned the front of her dress. "Fitzwilliam is nearly frozen through. This room will never be warm enough and we have no bath to put him in to try to bring his body temperature up. The common folk have a practice, apparently used for generations whenever such a situation arises. It is very simple; one uses the application of body heat against the patient. The warmth of the healthy skin against the cold skin is very effective." The dress was now carefully removed and placed over the chair in the corner.

"Could you help me with my corset and stays, please?" Georgiana asked without pause. Elizabeth absently went to her and helped her remove them, along with her petticoats until she stood only in her thin chemise.

Georgiana could see the shock on Elizabeth's face. "I am more than willing to throw aside convention, propriety and modesty to help my brother, but it would be more effective, as well as your place...to join me."

Elizabeth sputtered. Georgiana grasped her hands firmly before she could move away.

"You know how he feels about you; he has long considered you his wife. He will never give you up, surely you know that now? Can you not take your place by his side?"

“I...I am unsure.”

“Has he not proven himself worthy enough for you to help him? How much more must he sacrifice to satisfy you?” Georgiana’s face was pleading with all her heart, a heart that shared the blood of Elizabeth’s beloved, and for a brief moment Will’s face became hers, asking Elizabeth to save them both.

“I have been my own master for so long...” She looked down at Darcy, eyes filling, then pulled her hands out of Georgiana’s grasp and clutched them to her bosom as she turned away and strode to the fire. Georgiana spoke to her back.

“Have faith, Elizabeth. Have faith in him, his love and all the family who have supported you and William. Give him the chance, but first come to him and help him.”

Georgiana could see her shoulders shaking but refused to comfort her. She knew Elizabeth must be standing on the precipice of her final decision and must be allowed to make her choice by herself.

She turned finally, tears streaming down her cheeks. Georgiana feared she was about to refuse to capitulate and leave, when Elizabeth took a deep breath and, shaking her arms violently, pitched her dress to the floor in a heap.



DARCY WOKE BEFORE DAWN to find something tickling his nose. He tried to shake his head to dislodge the annoyance from his face, to no avail. When he attempted to raise his hands to move the object, he found they were bound by some unknown force holding him tightly. When he tried to pull them free again he realised they were grasped strongly to a person’s body.

“Be still,” a warm, yet sleepy voice admonished. He froze. A woman’s voice.

He moved his fingers tentatively against the warmth surrounding them to discover a thin layer of silk and soft bare skin under his touch. He began to withdraw his fingers slowly and had them almost freed, when she, in her semi-conscious state reached out and purposely placed his hands back to their original position; which Darcy could now comprehend was crossed over her breasts, and tucked under her arms. Satisfied he was now in the correct position, she patted his wrists gently, sighed lightly and quickly fell back asleep.

“Elizabeth?” he whispered disbelieving.

“Hmmm?” she answered, still falling into her sleep.

He had to stifle his cry. He was mad for a candle. He felt if he could not see her face, it might not be true. Perhaps he was dreaming her—here in his arms, purposely taking care of him.

He looked to the windows, the barest of change evident in the indigo of the night sky now becoming lighter. He turned back to the angel in his arms. He leaned his head

forward, now welcoming the mass of waves in front of him and breathed in her scent deeply. Roses. She always smelled of roses.

An annoying twinge in his feet reminded him of his folly the night before. Georgiana must be sick with worry over him. She might not know of his whereabouts. Two choices lay before him; to wake Elizabeth and be apprised of all that had happened and make sure his relatives knew he was well, or possibly extend his family’s suffering by languishing in the arms of his lover until the morning came.

In the end, the choice was not left to him. He had been unconsciously stroking the smooth skin of her ribs and the sides of her breasts as he lay thinking. Just as he had determined to indulge himself and stay with her, he nuzzled her ear and murmured, “Elizabeth, my dearest.”

She was instantly awake, and rolled over in a flash. “Will? Oh, you are awake!” she cried, throwing her arms around his neck. Their bodies moulded against one another as he threw his leg over her hip and crushed her tightly to him. She seemed to suddenly remember his pains, and searched his face earnestly while her hands took stock of his shoulders and arms, as if feeling them would allow her to assess his good health.

“Please tell me, are you well?”

“I feel well, except my feet tingle.”

She was immediately up and lighting a candle before he could stop her. Darcy was shocked when he realised he was wearing a nightshirt and nothing else, and she was in the thinnest chemise, her body only too plain for him to see. He was about to protest the loss of her warmth when she threw the bedding back and positioned herself at the end of the bed. She did not hesitate to send his hem past his knees and position each foot back under her arms again, this time covering the rest of his feet with her own arms.

“I need you to position the rest of the blankets around us both, especially my chest. My warmth will help your feet recover. They were very nearly frozen, Will.”

His face fell. “You are here,” he indicated the bed, “because of my injuries?” He tried not to sound disappointed, yet failed miserably.

He saw her hold back a tiny smile at his obvious disappointment and shake her head. “Would that every man had a lady friend so willing to come to his aid.”

She absently stroked his ankles while her breathing began to increase. His feet could feel her heart beating faster inside her ribs. It was both comforting and arousing.

She seemed to find the courage she needed as she leaned her head down against the arch of his elegant foot, hugging him to her. “No, Fitzwilliam Darcy. I am here because this is where I belong.”

He stopped breathing.

She could not meet his eye as she whispered, “You have only to request it, and I shall never leave you again.”

The cry that left his throat startled her and she looked up again in time to see him lunging forward, dislodging

his feet from under her and trapping her against the foot of the bed under his great mass. His unshed tears allowed his eyes to speak the volumes he still had not uttered. He stroked her face with trembling fingers and she mimicked the action and tears.

"You are my only love," he whispered to her and kissed her lips with reverent tenderness. Heaving a great calming sigh, he pressed his forehead to hers.

"Never leave me, Lizzy, not for as long as we live?"

She closed her eyes in sweet relief. "Until death parts us then, Will."

Chapter 38

The log in the fireplace cracked in half, exposing new flesh to fuel the blaze, but neither of the occupants of the room noticed. The two softly cocooned under the bedding, completely caught up in the tender joy of rediscovering the feel of their beloved's skin under their fingertips while gently exchanging kisses when desired. Their ministrations were slow and purposeful, anchoring each in the truth of the other's presence and dedication.

During the last two days, Elizabeth's heart had been pinpricked a thousand fold, splintering the shields she had built around her. Now, being the recipient of Will's loving smiles and ardent gazes, along with the physical connection to him under the counterpane, the gates ruptured and a surge of intense emotions flowed into the breach. She knew she was inextricably committed to him and, in acknowledging that truth, was moved to open her heart to him.

"I have loved you since that day at Pemberley, but it was nothing to what I felt yesterday and only half of what I feel now in your arms. I have been a great fool, but my heart has always been yours."

"Shhh..." his fingers swept across her lips, "do not speak of regrets."

"I...I cannot help it. I am so sorry, Will." Her voice trembled. "I have cost us so much. All these years..." He drew her firmly to him and she wept against his chest.

"My darling, we have both made mistakes. If we stop to catalogue them all we will never get on with the business of starting our lives together. The past errors do not sit upon your shoulders alone. I am sorry I was not clever enough to find you. Two years ago I should have come to you and been brave enough to try to win you. Will you forgive my failings? Can we make a truce to learn from our mistakes, but not dwell upon them or allow them to overshadow the happiness we have now?"

She sniffled sweetly and wiped the tears from her cheeks, nodding. "There is nothing to forgive. I was mistaken about many things, most of all you. I was wrong to think I could not allow you into our lives."

He shook his head. "Neither of us is without fault; let us agree on that and let the rest fall by the wayside." She nodded.

He slowly searched her face, then reached over for her hand, kissed her palm deeply, and set it against his face. Outside the sun was finally rising, filling their room with a lambent glow which reflected the spirit in their hearts. Darcy looked about, then back at her. "We finally love in the light, Elizabeth. No disguises, no lies, just the two of us, our true selves, bared to the world. Hmmm...bared."

He sat up and drew his nightshirt over his head, then looked to her, seeking permission. She was staring at the

sight of his bare torso until she saw him regarding her, reddened, yet acquiesced. The two sat nude amongst the sheets and simply looked at one another in the streaming gold.

He then reached out and cupped her face in his hands. “You are so beautiful. I have not seen you so for so long and now I look upon you and...your eyes are so alive and full of love...I cannot breathe.”

A single tear crept out of Elizabeth’s shining eyes. He caught it before it disappeared into her waves which tumbled artlessly over her shoulders and breasts. “I think this is a happy one,” he whispered, as he inspected the little bubble.

“It is.”

He looked back to her face as he brought the tear to his lips and kissed it away, never moving his eyes from hers.

“I want to be there to kiss away all your tears, Elizabeth. I want to be there when William needs his tears kissed away, and I want to be there when our last tears are shed, when we are old and our bed is the only place we live. I want that right as your husband.” He smiled timidly, but suddenly pulled her firmly into his lap. She wrapped her legs tightly around him and he took both her hands in his. “I dearly hope this is the last time I shall ever do this,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Elizabeth, you have breathed life back into my hands. It only seems fair they be claimed by you, now. Will you do me the honour of accepting my hand?”

“But how...?”

He shook his head and put a finger to her lips. “I will find a way. All I ask now is your acceptance. Please, Elizabeth? Marry me?”

“Yes, Will.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, Si, oui, per sempre, zawsze tak. Forever yes, Will.”

“The most beautiful words I have ever heard you say, my Love,” he said, as his lips met hers once again.



A MOURNING DOVE LAMENTED outside the window, awakening Georgiana to the budding light of day. Her foggy mind trailed behind her eyes and both forced themselves to alertness. She willed her aching body to rise, knowing she should look in on Elizabeth and her brother and confirm they were both resting. She could sleep again later.

She smiled and fetched her shawl while she remembered Elizabeth in her arms earlier, bemoaning her fears for the fate of the man who was so precious to her. The walls the woman had built up to protect her from relying on anyone else had been rigid and almost infallible, but when Elizabeth determined to let them fall, she did so like all her other pursuits in the world—with unrestrained passion.

The night before...

“I cannot lose him now.” Elizabeth cried in her arms. Georgiana attempted to calm her, and seemed to be successful when suddenly the elder woman scrambled out of her arms and turned her back abruptly on her. She was shocked at the move, about to voice her indignation, when Elizabeth lifted her hair.

“Please, Mrs. McNally, I cannot reach the top lacings,” she said, as she indicated her corset.

Georgiana laughed. “Elizabeth, I stand here in my shift, divesting *you* of your clothes; do you not think it is time to call me Georgiana?”

The laughter seemed to take Elizabeth aback, but then she too, began a nervous giggle, as her ties were unlaced and the last of her things removed. “Indeed, I do. How do you propose we go about this, Georgiana?”

“His extremities are the largest concern, according to Mr. Higgins. We must be careful to attend them diligently. I would suggest setting him on his side, one of us in front to warm his hands, the other wrapped around his back and feet.”

Georgiana was very grateful the choice of sides was not left up to her, for Elizabeth immediately climbed into the bed and rolled Fitzwilliam towards her. There were several more attempts at positioning before both women could be comfortable, yet keep Darcy secure. Only when the two agreed they had found the ideal positions, did Georgiana finally call out to her husband.

Patrick came in and beheld a sight unique in his lifetime: Darcy in bed with two beautiful, nearly naked women, yet unaware of his great good fortune.

His wife apparently was well acquainted with her husband’s jovial predilections as she interrupted his thoughts almost immediately.

“I will trust your good breeding and excellent gentlemanly manners preclude the necessity of my extracting your promise of never telling another soul what you are witnessing,” Georgiana admonished before her husband could make a single joke. He cleared his throat and looked guilty. Elizabeth, despite only her face peeking out from the blankets, blushed.

“Please examine us closely and see if the bedding covers all of him, and us. He is so chilled, I fear it will be quite some time before Elizabeth and I feel warm again.”

Both women shivered as they attempted to nestle up to the cold body. Georgiana had her brother’s feet wrapped in her arms and began rubbing them without thinking, as Elizabeth did the same to his hands. Patrick supplied them with hot tea for the next hours and slowly the patient began to warm. Unfortunately, as Darcy’s temperature rose, and some of his consciousness began to return, the uncomfortable feelings in his fingers and toes pained him and he began to thrash about. They struggled to restrain his limbs and attempted to soothe him.

The doctor arrived not long after his unpleasant outbursts started and examined Darcy while the two ladies

took a much-needed respite to refresh and attend to personal needs after so much tea. The doctor was well pleased with Darcy's recovery. He agreed the ladies' attendance to his person was paramount and seemed unconcerned about the patient's lack of consciousness. He attributed it to the exhaustion of having just recovered from an illness and too much walking while he was lost. He assured the family that the man merely needed to sleep and not to expect him to awaken fully until late morning.

By the wee hours of the morning, Elizabeth and Georgiana had nearly exhausted themselves keeping Darcy in the bed and warm, and with talking to one another. His body eventually showed signs of complete thawing; his skin temperature stayed warm, his colour returned and his jerking motions finally ceased. Around four in the morning, Elizabeth suggested Georgiana seek some much-needed sleep.

"I had the advantage of a very long nap yesterday afternoon, while you were no doubt fretting over your brother. I must insist you get some rest now. He is calm, and I think one of us is enough to keep him warm."

Georgiana agreed, and was about to leave the bed when she felt a hand reach out to her. Soft fingers entwined with hers and she looked up to see Elizabeth regarding her with great tenderness. "I shall not leave him," she whispered quietly.

Georgiana knew Elizabeth was referring to more than the present moment. She squeezed her hand and both women murmured "Thank you" at the same time, before sharing a knowing smile.



GEORGIANA NOW MADE HER way down the ever-brightening hall when she espied Higgins coming in.

"Are you only just arriving, Mr. Higgins?"

"Yes, Ma'am. My final journey from Padua. I think I have everything we need; anything else can be purchased later today."

"Dear Mr. Higgins! How much we owe to your efforts. May I express my thanks for all you have done?"

"You are very welcome, Mrs. McNally. I was happy to help Darcy. But if I may say so, fetching the linens from our lodgings serves us all; now I have a decent bed to rest in as well."

"Oh, of course! You must be anxious to avail yourself of it at last. I was about to enquire after my brother before returning to my bedchamber. Shall we see how the patient is faring?" Higgins nodded.

As the two approached Darcy's door, they both became embarrassingly aware of certain noises emanating from the room. An unspoken communication directed the two quickly past the door without stopping. Georgiana finally spoke when they had turned the corner.

"I daresay we can probably wait to see him until later. If Elizabeth needed anything, I am sure she would not hesitate to ask."

"Yes, I think staying out of that room right now is a very wise decision," a very nervous Higgins replied.

Neither dared look the other in the eye as they swiftly departed to their respective rooms.



INSIDE THE PATIENT'S ROOM, Darcy was attending his nurse's lips with great enthusiasm.

She moaned against the feel of his succulent, hot skin. "You have no idea what your kisses do to me," she whispered as he changed angles and they repeated their actions.

"Tell me."

She darted her tongue across the line of his bottom lip. "I taste your flavour which is like the sweetest nectar to me. My mind shuts off all other thoughts but to continue delving into the savoury dish set before me. My mouth demands I never stop."

He groaned and clenched her tighter to him.

"While my taste buds are being taken to another world of existence, the rest of my body makes itself known in a most violent manner." She could feel him smile while trying to kiss her.

"More..." he whispered as his tongue drew in her lip to suckle upon. They continued for several minutes. He released her and laid her back upon the bed, laying himself on top of her. His lips began to swipe along her hairline, and nip at her ear.

She giggled, then gasped and wrenched his head away. His face showed his confusion until she began to trace her fingers along his jaw.

"You have a beard. And a moustache."

He smiled. "I know."

"It tickles my skin when you kiss my neck." He arched his brow, to look the question. "I think I like it very much." She smiled and her fingers rummaged deeply into his whiskers.

His eyes closed tightly and she stopped. "Do I hurt you?"

"Not in the least. You can be as rough as you like, and I shall never complain. Quite the opposite." He began a new onslaught upon her delicate clavicle.

"Oh! Yesssss, that feels wonderful."

He stepped up his assault and lingered for some time.

"Speak to me, Elizabeth. Let me hear your voice. Tell me how I make you feel."

"Wanton," she replied without thinking, then felt him chuckling as his tongue continued where his lips had left off.

"In what manner?" he demanded. Now it was her turn to smile. Of course, it made sense he would wish to hear her

voice. He had spent the last years only able to watch her and now wanted his other senses to be touched by her love. She was thrilled to tell him how much he made her desire him.

“Your slightest touch makes me yearn for your hands upon my skin.”

“Like this?” He grazed her lush breasts, then gently hefted one in his hand. His thumb barely skimmed over her petal pale centre while he watched her reaction.

She nodded while her eyes slowly closed. “My mind is in conflict when I feel what your hands are doing and,” her fingers indulged themselves on his back and glided over the firm curve of his buttocks, “I also desire to do similar to you.” She stopped and grasped his taut muscles while pressing herself against him. He groaned loudly and replaced his hand with his lips, giving the lovers new sensations to relish.

While Will’s touches were all she could have desired, Elizabeth found herself continually distracted by the stimulation of his skin against hers. She no longer wished to be merely a recipient and boldly took his head in her hands, stopping him.

“May I...that is...” she cursed her sudden timidity, “I desire to touch and explore you. Will you allow me?”

The smirk he bestowed upon her could not be mistaken. She thought to punish his impudence, but frankly her lust was much too overpowering at that moment. She ungraciously pushed him off and settled him beside her where she could finally feast her eyes upon his form.

“Men are very different from women.”

Darcy laughed. “Have you only concluded this just now?”

She ignored his teasing and ran her hands across the top of his shoulders. “These bones and muscles are so much more pronounced, but lovely to feel.” She leaned forward to sweep her dry lips from his neck all the way to his arm. “Your skin is so soft despite the firmness beneath it.” She nuzzled her nose against him, caressing him with long drawn-out strokes and taking even longer whiffs of his aroma. She wanted to immerse herself in every nuance of his body, involve every sense in her endeavours.

She was on all fours, her mind completely focused on the temptation under her hands and face, unaware of the sensual picture she presented with her hair tumbling around them both and every inch of her undressed form leaning over him, open for his perusal.

In her mind, the process of discovering Will was taking on the semblance of a dance. There was a rhythm to her touches, a cadence to the brushes of his skin with her mouth, her nose, her chin. She thought she almost could hear music in her head as she made love to him.

Her fingertips and lips sated, her hunger and thirst were now making themselves known. “*Does my mouth have a mind of its own?*” she wondered as her tongue finally laved his skin.

She moaned at the taste.

“You are delicious,” she said, “and I am so very lickerish,” causing Darcy to snicker. She continued with her tongue, then suckled at his neck and shoulders until she had had her fill. She lifted up, intending to move to his broad chest when she felt the unmistakable coolness of liquid upon her chin and her hand quickly flew to stop the telltale dribble from her mouth. She looked at him, mortified.

He only had amusement on his face and she could not be angry with him as he softly asked, “Enjoying your breakfast, my darling?”

Not one to let him have his teasing way all the time she replied, “Ardently,” and stopped his cheer when she immediately descended upon his nipple and gorged with a vengeance. His laughter was replaced with very satisfying hisses and his hips rose repeatedly, seeking her out. She pushed his eager torso down and insisted, “Not yet, sir. I am not through with my quest.”

“Quest? You have a mission in mind for your actions? Whatever can it be?”

She smiled at him and shook her head as her hands travelled down his hip and to his legs. “These are wonderful,” she said and buried her face against his thigh while breathing in the scent of him again. “So very different from mine. Strong, well muscled and very masculine.”

“I beg to differ. You would have me let you think your legs are weak or not lean and that is far from the truth.” Her legs and bottom were near his head and his hand had crept up the back of her thigh and was gently fondling the length of her. “Your legs are exquisite. Absolute perfection to me, and I would like nothing more than to have them wrapped around me every night.”

She giggled but knew she had to take control again, or she would soon lose her opportunity to finish. Purposely, she moved her hips out of range of his hands. Before he could protest, she whipped her hair over the very centre of his hips and drew her tresses down over his sex and the sides of his inner thigh, effectively cutting off any coherent thought in his head. She repeated the action for good measure and, finally satisfied he would no longer interrupt her undertakings, worked her way back up his legs.

She bent over his hip and ran her lips against the bone there, then rubbed her face across the skin along the sides of his waist. He squirmed beneath her. She kissed the spot, then lay next to his thighs and dropped her head next to his core. She knew full well the back of her hair was tangled among the curls which surrounded his manhood, and no doubt was tickling and teasing him with each rise of her breath. Her hand reached out to where the bone met his side, where his skin was silkiest, yet unequivocally male.

“Here,” she pronounced. “Here is my place, my favourite place on your person. I claim this place as my own, and decree no one else may touch it for it belongs solely to me.”

He snatched her hand and brought it to his lips. “Only this place?” She nodded. “You need not limit yourself, my love. After all, you have only seen one side of me.”

She laughed. "Such cheek! I would never have expected it."

"Best to accustom yourself to being surprised, then. For I shall do so often, I promise you." He thumbed the swell of her tempting lips and gave her a lascivious stare.

"Are you sure you have finished what you started?" he asked sheepishly. "There is nothing else you would wish to...discover?"

"Now you mention it," she began, then rolled her head back slightly against the solid throbbing next to her ear, "there is something I wish to reacquaint myself with..."



AGES LATER, DARCY'S BODY glistened in the sunlight as the exertions of being the recipient of his lover's thorough attentions, yet holding back his reciprocal contribution, had proven energetic. When she finally fell back against the sheets, a grin of decided opinions graced her flushed face, and she felt no compulsion to wipe the remnant dribble from her delectable banquet. He sprang forward and showed his betrothed that his sense of fair play was such that he was *very* willing to participate in a game where no losers were possible.

She later confessed that while his palate was not as sophisticated as hers, his finely honed work ethic was of such a high standard, it easily enabled her to overlook any shortcomings. Again and again.

Even later, the room echoed with the increasing whimpers and moans of the physical delight they both were experiencing, when he ceased his attentions. "Lizzy, if you do not wish..." he began.

"If you dare stop now, Will Darcy," she panted in complete seriousness, "I swear I will never speak of my desires again." A hearty frown splayed across her face yet she continued, somewhat unconsciously, to press herself against him each time he touched off the sparks of her body's pleasure points.

Still he hovered above her, concerned. She thought she might know the source of his distress and moved to assure him. "Only you, Will. In the moonlit garden first, and never another since. I have always been only yours."

His face betrayed his wonder at her confession, then he amazed her further when he whispered gently to her, "I would never have asked you, Lizzy, but I thank you for telling me. I promise you I will never hold your past against you."

He suddenly blushed, a rare occurrence in Elizabeth's acquaintance with him and then revealed, "I have been faithful to you in heart and in body since that night as well, my dearest. I only stopped out of consideration for you. I suspected you might have only loved once, and in some ways, today would be like your first time again. I do not wish to give you undue pain."

She gasped a small "oh" and then smiled shyly at him. "I have borne your son, Will. I think I can tolerate your attentions quite admirably; I am no china doll."

She drew her hand slowly up the length of his tumescent member, making him shudder. "Now Mr. Darcy, I believe I was telling you how wanton you make me; is it not time to prove my theory?" she teased as her hips rose to meet his own descending ones. After that, all speech was limited to one, though sometimes drawn out, syllable.



GEORGIANA ROSE SOME HOURS later to find herself alone in the bed. She could tell it must be nearing midday by the sunshine and washed and dressed herself quickly. She fully expected to find her husband in the kitchen and hoped that Higgins was continuing to sleep, as he had not retired for bed until the sun was rising.

She never imagined she would turn the corner of the hallway to find the two men leaning against the wall on either side of Darcy's door, staring at the floor while making no attempt to hide their smiles or bouncing shoulders as they boldly eavesdropped. Both men nearly bolted out of their shoes when they heard the loud single stamp of Mrs. McNally's foot and saw her standing, hand on hips with a furious countenance directed at the two guilty parties. She silently pointed to the kitchen and her scowl never faltered as the two sulked, then quietly walked to their punishment.

All three, however, suddenly had to clasp their hands over their mouths, and double their speed for, before they could leave the hall, the combined chorus of two lovers in the pinnacle of their bliss sang out clearly to the heavens, and to every occupant of the villa.



HE COLLAPSED IN A heap on the pillow next to her, panting heavily. She quickly covered his side with her own body, still heaving from the excitement.

"I think I would like to do this until we exhaust ourselves. You will not mind, will you?" he said between breaths.

"I had no idea one could do it so often as we already have, I hardly think I can have an opinion. Well..." she smiled, "other than thinking it is the most exquisite thing I have ever known."

He chuckled sweetly, then kissed her nose and hugged her to him. "I think it to be the most exquisite thing I have ever done as well." Then without warning, he was unable to stifle a huge yawn.

“Will!” Elizabeth admonished. “Your exhaustion will come sooner than you realise if you do not get more sleep. Much as it pains me to have to say this, you must get several more hours rest right now or I shall leave this bed.”

He simply smiled. “No, you shall not.”

“You must rest!” she cried.

“I will, but you will not leave. You promised to never leave me again. It is printed here,” he touched his heart, “and I have your word. Therefore, you will not leave this bed.” She rolled her eyes.

“However, as I fully intend to enjoy you again today, I will happily agree to seek more sleep.” He nuzzled his face into her crown. “I must rest if I am to perform admirably for my lover, for her cries of ecstasy I cherish above all other sounds.”

Elizabeth squelched the urge to hide herself under the bedding in embarrassment. Part of her knew the two of them were not noiseless as they moved together, but she had not dwelled upon it, nor reflected who was making which sounds nor when. Now that Will had let her know she had specific and apparently regular cries when he touched her, she wondered if she could ever lie with him again without turning red from mortification. And what of the others in the house? Her entire body blushed as she groaned.

“What distresses you, my Love?”

“I think I shall never live this down.”

“Do not be shy around me, Elizabeth. Every gasp you utter tells me you approve of what I am doing, and your unbridled passion is everything I could wish for. This is nothing to be embarrassed over.”

“Perhaps I could accept I apparently act like some wild heathen in our bed and that you enjoy it, but...”

Darcy laughed aloud. “Wild heathen? Why ever did you think a lusty appetite for me was wild or heathen? Good Lord, no! Elizabeth, the Italians know a voracious desire for one’s spouse is a blessing, just as it will be for us. Please do not think I want you to change how you respond to me. It shall be a gift to us both, and the envy of other couples, I assure you.”

“Some may envy us already.” Elizabeth let slip out.

“Who...what? How can anyone envy us?”

“We are not alone here, Will. Your sister and her husband and Higgins are all staying in the house.”

Now it was Darcy’s turn to burn bright red. “Why did you not say anything before?”

Elizabeth smirked. “Let me say my mind was more agreeably engaged and leave it at that.”

Darcy burst into laughter. “An admirable sentiment, my little wife-to-be. Well there is nothing to be done for it. They have no doubt heard us. I expect no small amount of teasing when we finally face them again. At least I no longer have to feel guilty for not telling my sister of my whereabouts. I am afraid the temptation of you in my bed quite overtook my responsibility to her.”

Elizabeth giggled sweetly at this Darcy who was romantic and playful with her. Suddenly her jovial mood was interrupted by the terrible memory of when she had entered his house the night before, and all she had suffered before he woke in the morning. Her emotions had been wreaking havoc with her, not unlike when she carried young William in her womb; one moment deliriously joyful, the next overwhelmingly saddened. She buried her head into his neck as her arms wound around his head.

He felt her shake, as sobs overcame her. He found himself soothing her, stroking her hair and trying to reassure her as they held one another.

“I was so worried. I thought I might lose you,” she cried. This only made him tighten his hold upon her as she continued to weep.

“I swear you will never lose me, Elizabeth. I will never leave you and we shall be together always.”

“No, please. Do not speak of this. Not yet. I want to tell you all of it, Will. I want you to know all of me before you say that. I do not have a diary for you to read, but I want you to know my history, my hopes and dreams, too. Then tell me we shall never be parted, and I will know you can have no doubts or apprehensions, nor live to regret choosing me. Please? Will you hear me out?”

He took her little hand in his, and raised it for the lightest of kisses. “I will listen.”

She could not bear to see his face while she spoke, choosing to stare at their joined hands instead. His disapproval was now the only thing she feared in the world. She took a shuddering breath and began.

“George Wickham and my sister Lydia never married. My poor sister died in October of 1812, losing his bastard child.”

His hands gripped hers tightly. “When did you learn this?”

Her lip trembled again and the tears fell slowly. “That night, after the Blakely’s ball...”



WHEN THE TALE WAS done, and her heart and soul lay completely bared to him to do with as he pleased, she finally dared to look upon his face. A new torrent of emotions swept over her as she saw the expression of his eyes overflowing with love and tenderness and when he spoke, he did so with earnest devotion.

“Dearest, beloved, Elizabeth. We shall be married as soon as may be and never be parted again. Please trust me.” She nodded slowly and returned to the sanctuary she found in his arms, at long last confident in their love and the future.

Eventually their breathing began to fall in unison, their hearts beat together in time and they drifted off into a deep

slumber which only comes after intense loving and heart-wrenching confessions.



THE THREE SAT UNCOMFORTABLY in the kitchen, meticulously attending the food which did not merit such regard. Georgiana had had no chance to give admonishments to the mischievous gentlemen when they finally made it to the kitchen, as Higgins had not stopped there. Instead, he continued out the rear door of the villa and apparently several hundred more yards, for much later she and Patrick heard what was obviously uproarious laughter, from a distance very far away. The couple merely chuckled quietly to themselves.

“Do not consider yourselves absolved because of my amusement,” Georgiana warned. “The two of you should still be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Patrick obediently replied, then drew her into his arms and kissed her forehead soundly before giving her a loving squeeze. He attempted to soften her.

“You should be happy we have proof your brother is feeling much better.”

She slapped his arm. “Some proofs a sibling can do without. And before you allow that smug look upon your face, imagine if it was your sister in that room with her lover.”

Gone was the smugness.

Much later, after Higgins had returned, they finally found their voices and discussed the future of the couple they all held so dearly in their hearts.

“How long should we let them stay in there?” Higgins ventured.

“They will need to come out for food.” Patrick offered. “Eventually.”

Higgins stifled a snicker in the form of a cough.

“Well, I trust Elizabeth to make a sound decision as to when they will emerge, but I must put my foot down at some point. We have a wedding to plan and attend, and it cannot happen if the bride and groom insist on taking their honeymoon first.” Now Patrick and Higgins felt permission for laughter had at last been granted and freely indulged.

Georgiana merely sighed at the propensity males had of turning into schoolboys. “This house is also in desperate need of many things. After we finish our meal, what say you to going into Abano and purchasing some supplies as well as some much-needed household items? We could try to furnish as much as possible today and present it to the newlyweds as a present!”

Georgiana’s enthusiasm for shopping was well known to her husband, as well as her brother and every shrewd shopkeeper in London. He knew better than to thwart her efforts or her schemes. She was not easily gainsaid.

“I think it a wonderful idea, Mrs. McNally.” Patrick approved. “We shall leave directly after our meal. Now, let us think upon the best way to get these two married.” All agreed.

“It should not be here, or in Padua.” Higgins offered. “I think a trip to Verona would do nicely. Less society people are likely to be there, compared to Venice, and it’s far enough away that no one from Padua would know Miss Bennet or Darcy. They could merely be tourists who wish to get married.”

“Verona!” Georgiana squealed. “The city where Romeo and Juliet lived and died. How romantic!”

Higgins swallowed uncomfortably. “Yes, well, it is a good distance away and serves the purpose, Ma’am.”

“Perhaps when we are in Abano today, we may enquire how one procures a marriage licence in this country and hopefully the process will be the same in Verona,” Patrick added.

Georgiana clapped her hands. “Excellent, gentlemen. This is coming along better than I would have imagined. We have the beginnings of a wedding, and I thank you both for your ideas.”

“The harder question is, how do we explain William to the world if the Darcys have just married?” Patrick asked.

“Actually, I have an idea about that,” Higgins started. “I will first need some information from you, Mrs. McNally.”



THE TRIO ARRIVED BACK late in the afternoon, followed by two carts being driven by local merchants and filled with the luxuries Mrs. McNally considered essential while they all were to stay at the villa. Patrick had merely smiled and produced his purse at every shop. The men quickly delivered the goods into each room they were meant for and made to set up the two new beds and mattresses which had been purchased. Unfortunately, one man had gone to the wrong room and Georgiana and Patrick had intercepted him before he opened the door to Darcy’s room.

Georgiana nearly shouted to him. “No, that room is locked,” she lied in Italian. The truth, however, was quickly revealed as a new round of noises began to reach their ears from within. The worker merely smiled knowingly, “*Si, si, Signora,*” he said and joined his co-workers down the hall, but she had not taken three steps before she heard him remark to them, “*Dove ci sono le donne innamorate, è inutile tenere le porte serrate.*”

Patrick saw the amused expression upon her face when she turned the corner. “What did they say?”

“It is an old Veneto saying, ‘When women are in love, locking the door is futile.’”

“How very wise,” He wagged his eyebrows.

“Fortunate for me we share the same room. I would hate to have to break your lock,” she retorted back with a smirk.

Georgiana spent a considerable part of the afternoon arranging the new dishes and the larder supplies, happy to know they would not have to rely on the stable boy as often. She found evidence someone had been in the kitchen while they were gone; a half empty pot of tea sat on the table, and the loaf of bread and cheese were missing.

"It seems our mice have found a source for sustenance while we were out. I daresay unless we demand it, they might not come forth at all."

Patrick chuckled. "Are you sure you wish to force them to come out? I imagine Darcy is recuperating very well. He has his warmth, and now some food, and his heart will have been healed by his companion. Why bother him at all? We could head back to Padua and wait for them to return."

Georgiana was exasperated. "Because they should not wait to marry! We will be aunt and uncle again before Christmas if history repeats itself, and I for one do not want anyone counting the days!"

Patrick laughed at his wife. "You want a wedding, just like every other woman, Georgie. Do not try to fool me."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I should like to see my brother married..."

"Go and knock then. But make sure they hear you. I do not want to hear you are struck mute because you dared to walk in on them."

"You are incorrigible," she said, though she headed immediately to the bedchambers. She stood hesitantly at the door, then, with a mischievous smile, she mustered all the strength she could and knocked as though the house itself was on fire.

"Elizabeth, I should like to check on Fitzwilliam!" she shouted. "May I come in?" A large amount of movement could be heard, small giggles and laughter and a decidedly large kiss being bestowed before the door was opened by a radiant, smiling, Elizabeth, fully clothed in her dress from the night before. Her brother was positioned, most properly and covered, in the bed.

"He is awake, and I think well recovered, Georgiana," she said happily.

Georgiana hugged Elizabeth tightly, then, keeping her arm around her shoulder, walked to the bedside. "You are looking much better. How do you feel?"

"Considering my folly last night and the pain in my feet earlier, I am feeling remarkably well," he answered jovially.

"From what we have been hearing I would say you are feeling miraculously better. At least I know now your senses have recovered," Georgiana retorted.

The guilty parties blushed pink. "Mrs. McNally, if you were younger I would put you over my knee."

"You can save such pleasures for your lady love, brother. As the matron in this room, I will be the one to say if any punishment shall be meted out."

"Well said, my love," Patrick concurred as he strolled in. "High time to repay your stalwart brother for all the evenings I spent sitting next to him instead of sneaking a stolen

hand squeeze from my betrothed under the pianoforte." He stopped next to Darcy and patted him on his shoulder. "I am glad to see you both looking so well."

Darcy nodded, and then grimaced. "I am heartily sorry for my foolish actions yesterday. Mrs. Darcy-to-be tells me it was you and Higgins who found me and *you* who carried me home, Patrick. It seems I am to be ever indebted to you, and now it is with my life." He reached out his hand towards his brother but Patrick would have none of it and gave him a hearty embrace instead.

"Thank you," Darcy said, greatly moved.

Georgiana suddenly understood her brother's not very sly hint. "Mrs. Darcy-to-be? Oh, Fitzwilliam! Have you proposed? You have been accepted? Please tell me all is settled between you!" she effused.

Darcy laughed, "I have."

Elizabeth added, "He was."

The lovers looked at each other and nodded their assent. "It is."

Chapter 39

ABANO

Early that evening, Will and Elizabeth stood in the doorway of his villa. He held her hands tightly whilst kissing each slender finger thoroughly.

Elizabeth attempted to look at him sternly. "I shall return in a few hours," she gently chided.

"This is our first parting. I wish to make it memorable."

She laughed lightly. "My love, the last twenty-four hours have been more than memorable. I have only to think back on it and I shall be desperately longing to be here. Mr. Higgins will take very good care of me."

"I have no fears for your safety. I only wish I could see our son with you."

She bent her head round to look up into his face with deep compassion. "Surely you can bear two more days?"

"Of course. Will you...will you give him these for me?" He lavished kisses over her eyes and cheeks, causing her to giggle sweetly. "I have seen you do such things to William before, but this time, give them from me?"

Her heart was once again pierced. "I shall deliver your gifts, dearest Papa."

The endearment made his breath hitch and he smiled tremulously. "Thank you."

Over Elizabeth's shoulder, Georgiana called to her brother. "Enough, Fitzwilliam! Elizabeth and I have much to do! We would like to be able to return before midnight!"

He took her hand once more and gallantly kissed it. "Goodbye, best beloved."

"Until later, sweet Will," she returned.

In the coach driven by Higgins, Georgiana quickly laid out all she wished to accomplish. "Did you bring the list of things to pack?"

"Yes, I have it, and the information to leave should anyone in my household need to reach me."

"Excellent! Goodness, I do hope we can accomplish it all in time to leave tomorrow. If my brother had not been so obstinate we might have left at least an hour earlier."

Elizabeth laughed when remembering his flat refusal to allow her to leave the villa. It was only the painful truth of William having never been parted from her before, along with her need to see he was well and bearing their separation in good spirits, that convinced Darcy to allow her to go.

"He may prove an implacable husband," she answered Georgiana. "Perhaps he only allowed my leave knowing you would be happy to act as best man and assure him of my attendance at our wedding."

The two ladies fell into a fit of gaiety.



WILLIAM LAY ON HIS little bed, a single candle burning next to his mother while she covered his faces in kisses.

"Those were from someone who loves you very dearly," she whispered, smoothing his curls. "I will tuck you into your bed tonight, but tomorrow you will have Cook to put you to bed and she will be in the house all night with you. I shall come again on the evening after. Will you be well?"

"I shall miss you, but I can bear it, Mama. I am glad you are friends with Mrs. McNally. I like her."

"She is a wonderful lady; I think you two shall be very happy knowing each other. Now, what say you to a story?"

William nodded enthusiastically and Elizabeth began their nightly ritual eagerly. Much later she kissed his dozing head and went to see how her housekeeper's packing was faring. She had given the instructions regarding her absence and they had just finished their work when the bell rang. Mrs. McNally was on the doorstep to return Elizabeth to Abano. As the two settled in for the ride, Georgiana's enthusiasm could no longer be contained.

"Just think! This time tomorrow you shall be my sister!" she cried.



PALAZZO DELLA RAGIONE, VERONA

SIGNOR TODERINI, *UFFICIALE DI Stato Civile de Verona* stood proudly in his office. He had served the city for over thirty years and joining couples in matrimony was the one area wherein he felt his oratory skills were superior to all men who attempted the ceremony, including the *Cardinale's* nuptial mass in the cathedral. Even Padre Magratho had once commented the Church would never have been the same had he joined the priesthood instead of choosing civic duty.

With little regrets for the holy fathers' deprivations of his natural gifts did he happily prepare to join the handsome couple in front of him. These were the days he enjoyed his employ the most; no nervous, tittering bride, no irritated relations, but two mature people, obviously deeply in love and ready to commit themselves to one another for all eternity. He sighed. Yes, these two would appreciate the efforts he had put into his masterpiece on the perfection of love, the beauty of the connubial state, and the duty to God and country, which he had agonized over and now

perfected into one magnificent hour-long recitation of great significance.

“Elizabetta, e Guglielmo...,” he began.

Georgiana stood silently by as her brother fulfilled his fondest wish. Despite her whirlwind activities of the morning, and seemingly endless energy, this ceremony would take its toll. She felt Patrick’s hand creep into hers and pull her against him. He always could read her moods. She looked into his handsome face, willing all the love in her heart to shine through her eyes. His face softened instantly and he nodded in comprehension.

“And I,” he answered softly.

Her brother stood handsome and tall in his plain brown suit of clothes. She could just make out the tiny bump of iron in his breast pocket, there to ward off the Italian *‘mal’occhio’*—evil eye. His face was one of perfect contentedness as he gazed upon his bride. Georgiana was glad Elizabeth had agreed to the local custom of wearing a lace veil upon her head. Her simple gown was brought to life by this old fashioned bridal tradition, and its ability to render the bride even more beautiful to the groom had made the frantic search through the shops worth Georgiana’s temporary panic. She felt a tear slip as she took in the glow upon Elizabeth’s fearless face. Her new sister’s happiness was plain for anyone to see and she was satisfied that it matched her own.

Patrick watched the scene with much the same sentiment, though he focused on his beloved wife’s presence. A wedding heralded the beginnings of many things and this particular joining would bring an end to the sufferings of many, his darling Georgie included. He loved his brother, and knew the relationship with his wife was closer than almost any sibling could boast, yet he could not help but be grieved at how deeply Georgiana felt her brother’s pain. Darcy’s marriage to Elizabeth and the joy which would now surround him would surely allow Georgiana to relieve herself of her pathos to his past sorrow. It was time for her to pass on Fitzwilliam’s care to his new wife, and concentrate on her own happiness. He hoped to have a chance to speak with the newlyweds on the subject before they left Italy.

The bride and groom were radiant before him. The grandiloquent official was in high voice. He could make out descriptors every now and then and certain words being repeated, however he soon gave up trying to understand as it was obvious that the man neither required, nor cared, if anyone paid him any attention. His own voice was apparently enough to please him enormously.

The last witness, Higgins, watched on with smug satisfaction. He was not a man who dwelt upon his past, but could not help feel some responsibility in this particularly happy event.

He had been honoured when Elizabeth had asked if he would give her away. Darcy had once asked if he was in love with her, and perhaps he may have been at first. But some part of him always knew she was never for him, and an-

other part knew he wanted to protect her, be her friend. As soon as his mind had made that judgement, Elizabeth had become like a daughter to him, and he knew she was in the right place in his heart. Giving her away as a father would, had brought him great happiness. She had smiled brightly at him and squeezed his hand tightly the moment before he placed her hand into Darcy’s.

He saw the glint of light as Darcy brought the jewellery to his bride’s finger. He was oddly touched at this medieval custom they had chosen to use. A circular ring, without end, and given in love. A stone the Italians believed to be cast by the flames of love, unbreakable, and more brilliant than any other. Yes, that was his dearly loved Darcy and Elizabeth. The little ring was the symbol of them, and what they would always be together. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Elizabeth tried to concentrate on the words binding her to the only man she had ever loved. She worried she would be unable to contain her tears this day, as she had never attended a wedding in which she was *not* moved to shed them. She had attended funerals where she was not compelled to weep, yet weddings always brought them on. Now she silently chided herself, for as she stood in front of Will, her hand in his as he repeated Signor Toderini’s words, she felt no tears, only euphoria. This was what she was meant for, she and Will, hands clasped together and vowing their love and fidelity until they perished. The rightness of the act, and their future, were as solid as the diamond he was placing upon her finger. She felt the dependability of his love with every blink of his warm eyes and the strong mooring of her hands in his. The way ahead was with the man in front of her.

Will marvelled at the woman he was marrying. He could see the trust in her eyes, the simplistic happiness radiating from her face and the love in her heart as if it were script to be read. How few days ago was she living a completely different life, and now, because of knowing him and the truth of his heart, she was willing to give herself over to him completely. He suddenly felt the weight of his role in honouring, cherishing and loving her for the rest of their lives. No fear accompanied the insight, merely the magnitude of what they were doing and how much he welcomed it.

As the man droned on Will took the opportunity to study her in depth, and felt he could not be more pleased with each tiny nuance of her person, until his eyes alighted upon a new spot. Her lovely bridal veil fell softly around her lustrous curls and even the good luck tear in the delicate covering, the sight of which the Italians had all approved, was considered precious to him.

Soon however, their vows having been said, the ring having been placed and the minutes having slowly ticked by, he became aware of the content, not to mention duration of what the civil ‘parson’ was saying. He wondered what in the world Dante and Beatrice had to do with a happy mar-

riage, but the man had quickly continued on to more wise anecdotes from the ancients.

When Darcy clearly heard Niccolo Machiavelli's name he was about to intervene but the official had already begun his mistake.

"He who wishes to be obeyed must know how to command," he quoted in Italian, with a significant nod of his head to the groom.

The silence that followed, combined with the fury most obviously being directed at Signor Toderini by two formerly demure members of the wedding party, caused the registrar to forget the tribute he had once written to each and every one of his favourite historic authors and suddenly draw a complete blank for the rest of his speech.

"Ah...ah..." he stammered, and then threw up his hands in defeat.

"You *sposato*—*marito e moglie*."

"Husband and wife!" exclaimed Georgie.



THE HAPPY WEDDING PARTY gratefully departed out into the piazza and the waning sun. Darcy and Elizabeth only had eyes for one another and would have announced their intention to retire for the evening, despite it only being five o'clock, but Higgins made an announcement. "While Mrs. McNally was preparing the wedding this morning, Mr. McNally and I have prepared the wedding feast."

General exclamations of delight resounded with the exception of Patrick who was deep in thought.

"What disturbs your happiness?" Georgiana asked.

"That man! That...until now, I had no idea someone could permanently delude himself into honorificabilitudinatus."

The two ladies held their tongues until their eyes met and then the two burst into giggles, while Darcy and Patrick shared a laugh and Higgins looked bewildered.

Several minutes later, they arrived at the entrance to Ristorante 12 Apostoli near the Piazza Erbe. As they walked into the old establishment, Darcy and Elizabeth were inundated with good wishes, handshakes, and much to Darcy's perturbation, kisses on his new bride's cheeks by what seemed like every man in the place. Patrick and Higgins shared a knowing smile, as the owner had warned them earlier that tradition called for the bride to be kissed to make her new husband jealous. The owner had also warned it was expected of the best man to provide the guests with generous libations, and Patrick had happily provided a hefty down payment towards the *pleasure* of the wedding festivities.

The staff and lucky guests dining at 12 Apostoli that night toasted the newlyweds for many hours, happy to join in the party, as well as the free Soave the groomsman was

providing. Musicians showed up no less than an hour after the wedding party had arrived and serenaded everyone through the night. Soon the restaurant was turning away customers, as the neighbourhood had obviously heard a rich Englishman was footing the bill of his brother's wedding banquet. Neither the McNallys nor the Darcys had ever attended a celebration more overflowing with simple happiness and joy.

Elizabeth was beaming with love at her bridegroom, while he was grudgingly admitting to enjoying himself, if not the constant attentions paid to his new wife. When the clock struck eight, she rose and looked pointedly at her groom, intent on departure to their hotel. A look of pride and smug superiority could not be denied from his face as he slowly stood and looked around, daring any man to deny who was truly the best man in the room.

The Veronesi were hardly able to contain themselves, and as soon as the newlywed's backs were turned, yet still in the room, they applauded, whistled and began throwing out remarks (which Darcy had thought were only common in the wild norths of the Derbyshire countryside) as they headed out the door.



"I MUST SEND THE staff another case of fine wine in the morning for giving me some very creative ideas for my wedding night," Darcy whispered in her ear while they made their way across the piazza.

"I must commend my new husband on his excellent understanding of Italian. Thank goodness I could pretend not to comprehend what they were saying. Though I wonder at some of the suggestions being physically possible!" cried Elizabeth.

"I believe the attempt to disprove them might be very enjoyable."

He stopped her behind the shadows of a deteriorating stone column, stealing a luxuriant kiss and then slowly removed her bridal veil, folding it carefully and placing it in his pocket. "I would rather not give the hotel staff any more information than is necessary, *Mrs. Smith*."

She smiled and nodded her approval.

They ignored the looks they were given as they entered, clearly raising many brows that seemed surprised any couple would retire to their rooms at so obviously early an hour. The two were laughing as they entered their chamber at last.

She turned to him and pressed her hand gently against his chest. "My husband," she whispered softly, petting the front of his jacket.

Instead of a tender reaction, Will grasped her roughly and drove his lips down onto hers in a fierce kiss. He continued to her neck, nipping at her and sucking hard against her

skin in a blatantly territorial display. She was sure his efforts would be highly visible in the mirror the next morning.

"My wife," she heard him mumble against the strong beat at her throat. His hands were in her hair, haphazardly drawing out any pins he came across until her thick cascade tumbled to her shoulders. He did not stop to play in their folds but immediately set to the ties at her back, not hesitating until she felt him pulling on her sleeves to allow it to drop to the floor. She continued to hear him whispering her new title against any newly exposed skin as he worked quickly to strip her nearly bare.

"I believe you may not appreciate the finer points of Italian wedding traditions."

She heard him grumble an incomprehensible reply against her skin. He made to take her lips once more but she tipped her head away and arched her brow at him in question.

"From now on, *Mrs. Smith*, the only men who will be kissing your cheeks had better be either relative, or me," he growled then stopped to remove his outer garments.

Elizabeth contemplated her suddenly possessive husband and decided such strong feelings should not be denied, nor indulged in alone. "Fair enough, *Mr. Smith*. As long as you realise you married a woman who will not tolerate anything less from her husband," she countered and quickly made short work of his simple cravat. Within seconds she had untied it, and soon after his fine shirt was sailing through the air to points unknown. Will began to laugh until his wife lunged forward and latched onto his breast with a vengeance. Soon Elizabeth heard his amusement turn to gasps as she taught her beloved how well she remembered his own methods of lovemaking. She tarried long and diligently, struggling to secure her claim upon her spouse's skin and providing him with tangible evidence of just whose body she worshipped.

He looked down at her handiwork when she finally released him and gave her a sly smile that instantly flushed her body from head to toe and made the room feel as if the fire had suddenly roared.

"I expect this may fade with time," he spoke seductively whilst gently caressing his breast and the angry mark she had left. "Will you promise to renew this brand you have left over my heart?" She had no idea how enticing it could be to see him lay his hand upon his own body and nodded absently.

He apparently did realise her interest in his movements for he increased his attentions to his skin, staring at her intently. She watched, entranced, as his other hand began to stroke the long sinews of his thighs and then tantalize the arousal which strained against the front of his garments. Without thinking, she slowly began to rid herself of the last of her underthings while he kicked off his shoes and then unbuttoned the final piece, his trousers, and let them slide to the floor.

Her brow arched once again; challenging.

"On the bed, temptress," he commanded.



ELIZABETH ATTEMPTED TO CATCH her breath while her husband slowly lowered her ensnared hips back to the mattress. He spoke softly to her, stroking her misty abdomen, carefully untangling her legs and then lying over her. He placed feathered kisses against her jaw and cheeks, mindful not to cover her labouring mouth.

"Let go of the bed post, love," he whispered.

She looked back over her head at her taut arms and hands, their clenching had not yet registered in her mind. The blood quickly flowed back into them as she released the well-worn column. It had proved a useful anchor to push against her husband's driving forces.

She smirked. "I am beginning to have a great appreciation for the sturdiness of Italian furniture." He began to laugh as well, prompting Elizabeth to gasp in shock when she realised her husband was not in the process of retreat, but rather had reserves to call upon for continuing his campaign. "You are still...!"

He nodded. "Oh, yes. I have many more delights I wish to indulge in tonight." His hips moved lightly against hers, circling slowly, before pressing firmly against her and stopping.

Her body cried out in protest of his halted fervour. "Will!"

"Have I brought you back from your libidinous heaven? I wanted to make sure you have recovered," he asked innocently.

This time his wife pursed her lips and once again, the brow arched in challenge. He smiled a feral grin and removed himself from her.

"On your knees, wife."



"MMMM," ELIZABETH HUMMED. "THAT WAS..." her breath still ragged, she attempted to speak. "That was..."

"Good?" came the voice behind her ear. "Exhilarating?" He planted kisses down her spine and licked the salty glow off her flesh on the way back up. "An excellent lesson in Shakespeare?"

She laughed. "Shakespeare?"

"Making the beast with two backs, dearest—Othello." He gently reached forward and slowly peeled the fingers gripping the footboard. "We need to pay closer attention to your absentminded hands."

She giggled sweetly and sighed as he stroked the outline of her hips and waist. "Seeing you from here is exquisite.

You are like the finest viola and I am your bow.” He reinforced his vision by moving his bow inside her again.

“You cannot be?” she began, bewildered.

“And yet I am,” he countered.

“Surely you do not mean for me...I do not think...” She turned and looked him straight in the eye. He raised his brow in challenge now to her. Elizabeth turned back and thought quickly. She then pulled herself away and moved to the edge of the bed to give as good as she had received.

She pointed behind her. “On the floor, lover.”

“What does my lady have in mind?”

“There are many different-sized creatures in our world. I rather liked mimicking them.”

He stood behind her, circling the soft lushness of her bottom and brushing the firm thighs so conveniently positioned for him. His tongue was drawing delicate lines up the back of her neck and anytime she leaned back against him, he ravished her ears sending shivers down to her toes. He handed her the largest of the pillows. “Lay your cheek down upon it.”

She did so and presented her bridegroom with an unparalleled vision. “Oh Elizabeth,” he moaned.

Minutes later she was once again transported to the place that only Will could take her. She did not think about how she might look with her knees spread wide, her backside in the air like a cat in heat. She felt no embarrassment as her husband pulled her mane roughly, drawing her head back for him to lap at the shimmering rivulets along her neck. She could only think of his relentless cadence, his deft fingers dancing against her, and his voice, grinding out each time his body hammered against her flanks.

“Mine...you...are...mine!”

“Yours,” she answered, before she cried out and fell once more into the glorious abyss this time with him.



ELIZABETH WOKE SLOWLY AS the new day dawned. Despite their rather rumbustious evening, she felt amazingly rested. Her body began to twitch and she moved to stretch her limbs and felt her new husband extend his legs and yawn. She was about to greet his handsome face when they both heard as clear as if someone was in the room with them,

“Are you awake, Geoffrey?”

They froze like frightened deer.

“I am, my dear. I shall be ready for breakfast in ten minutes. Will you have sufficient time to finish with your maid?”

“Certainly, I am nearly ready myself. Are you sure you do not need more time? You look quite dreadful this morning. Did you not sleep well?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose. You finish and I shall tell you over breakfast.”

They looked horrified at one another, blushing as red as a rose.

They heard a door close and some minor shuffling until a few minutes later ‘Geoffrey’ apparently finished his ablutions and vacated his room.

Elizabeth was the first to grab a pillow and cover her face as she burst into hearty laughter. Will was not as light-hearted about the matter. When she had finally calmed, he whispered softly to her.

“You may laugh, *Mrs. Smith*. Nevertheless, we have to leave this room at some time. We have yet to hear our neighbours on the other side, nor what they might have heard. Are you sure you would be able to hold your head up high and walk through the entryway knowing someone might have heard you last night?”

“I cannot imagine anything I might have said that I should be ashamed of,” she whispered back.

His face showed his disbelief, then his mischief. “Are you sure you were never moved to utter anything last night which might be considered in baaaaaaad taste?”

Her face had just recovered only to flush brightly once more. “I did?” He nodded.

“Will, how are we ever going to escape?” she hissed.



IF ELIZABETH HAD EVER thought her very proper husband could not surprise her with original and shocking antics, watching him perched with his eye at the keyhole, spying for signs of their neighbours in the hallways, with not a stitch of clothing on, would certainly have changed her opinion. She dressed in silence while he took the first watch, then reciprocated the gesture for him when she was done. An hour later, they were finished, packed and ready to attempt to leave. They had never heard anyone in the next room, and could only hope it had remained empty the night before.

Darcy cautioned her to be as quiet as could be with their bags, which luckily were small, as they had only spent a single night away. They had left the room and were making their way down the stairs when an elderly couple coming up the stairs began to speak.

“I think it best you rest before we go out again, Geoffrey,” the lady said. “Surely that pair will have gone by now, or at least will not indulge so loudly in the middle of the morning.”

The gentleman was not listening to his wife; instead, his attention was drawn to the lady with the healthy glow, now blushing, and the virile man who accompanied her coming down the stairs. Before he could attempt to hear their voices and confirm the identity as the amorous pair who had kept him, most interestingly, awake the night before, the fellow spoke.

Chapter 40

PADUA, FEBRUARY 1819

Darcy had not missed the look, nor the fact they had most likely been caught out but decided to try to save his beloved's dignity by saying, in a voice considerably higher than his own,

“Sono molto stanco, Giacinta. Il tuo padre ha bevuto troppo ieri sera e mi ha mantenuto svegliato fino a sta mattina. Poi dopo, il bambino si e svegliato. Non mi sono dormentato quasi per niente.”—I am very tired, Hyacinth. Your Papa drank too much last night and kept me up late. And the baby awakened me. I hardly slept at all.

Elizabeth looked to him with raised eyebrows as he guided her down the stairs away from *Geoffrey's* prying eyes and ears. She quickly surmised the situation and abruptly wrenched her elbow out of his hand and answered angrily in a voice rich in resonance from her nose and high in its pitch as well. *“Sie un austriaco. Pensavo che tu potrebbi tollerare il tuo vino.”*—You are an Austrian. I thought they could tolerate their wine.

“Chi ha detto che ho bevuto il vino?”—Who says I drank wine?

“L'odore sul vostro alito, il mio marito caro.”—The smell of your breath, my darling husband.

By now, they were on the street and looking for their carriage and the rest of their party, but still enjoying themselves a great deal.

“Do you think we managed to convince Geoffrey we were not the ones to keep him awake last night?”

“Dearest Giacinta, I sincerely doubt it.”

Elizabeth watched her jubilant son looking out of the window of their carriage as they headed to Darcy's house in the hills. They had had few opportunities to travel outside of the city and his enthusiasm for this trip to stay with Mrs. McNally and her husband, the story he had been told, delighted his mother.



“I AM PLEASED TO meet you at last, Master Cartwright.”

William's eyes went wide as he peered the long way up to Mr. McNally's cheerful face. “I...I thank you for inviting me, Mr. McNally, Mrs. McNally.” He returned the bow but stared up at Patrick until his mother nudged him slightly. He blushed and apologised. “You are a very large man,” he stated the obvious. The adults chuckled.

“Indeed, I have heard it thus said. But it does not follow that being a great, tall fellow means I have the temperament of a giant,” Patrick answered cheekily.

William laughed. “I am glad to hear it, sir.”

Elizabeth then introduced him to Mr. Higgins. Their ease and friendliness were almost instant, especially after Higgins offered to show the lad the horses later. Soon the group split up, tending to the business of unpacking from their trip to Verona, and seeing to the dinner for the evening. Mr. Higgins had a special task to attend to, for in two days time, he would be making a long journey.



WILLIAM SAT ON THE bed dangling his feet off the edge while his mother unpacked his belongings. She observed how her son could be both child and young man at once, but then reminded herself that no matter his age, she would always be his mother, and he was going to need his mother very much over the next hours. She sat down next to him to have the conversation she had been dreading since his birth.

“I have always told you that your father died before you were born, but it was not true. My dearest son, your papa lives.”

“My father is alive?” William asked, shocked.

She nodded. "Before you were born, your father and I had a terrible argument. Though we loved each other very much, we...no...I did not think we could have a life together and I sent him away. He did not know he was going to be a father yet or he would never have let me banish him. After you were born I hid us from him, and he never knew that you existed or where we lived."

William's face fell. "You kept me from my father?" His voice faltered. "Why?"

"There were things which had happened to me and to my family which I thought would hurt your father and I did not want anything to happen to him. At the time, I decided the best thing to do was to stay away. I was wrong, William."

"But Papa would have been your family, too. Did he not look for you?"

"He did, as did my own family. For you see, I also hid from the rest of my family as well."

"You told me you have no family!" His voice was laced with judgement.

"I am sorry, William. It was wrong of me to keep them from you. I felt if I was to be successful hiding from your father, I must also hide from my relatives. All of it was wrong, and I never should have done it."

"What sort of relations do I have?" He stopped himself. "Is that why Mr. Bingley does not call me his nephew? Because of the quarrel you and my father had so many years ago? Is that the disagreement he had with my father?" He looked to Elizabeth, confusion and hurt plainly in his face.

She tried to help him understand. "No, William. The man you met was not Bingley. His name is Fitzwilliam Darcy and...he is your father."

"My father was William Cartwright!" he cried, frustrated. He jumped down from the bed and ran to the window, hugging his arms around him tightly.

Elizabeth struggled to contain her tears. "Dearest William, please forgive me, but I had to make up a father for you to keep us hidden. Mr. William Cartwright was a friend of Mrs. Thurgood, but he died before ever knowing you or me. It was Mrs. Thurgood who gave us his name and our home. She wanted to help me hide." She could hear his snuffles and watched his bowed head tremble while his tears fell.

"You lied a great deal, Mama." He scowled at her. "All these lies to protect my father?"

"Yes, and us. It is done, however, and it was done for the best. I know now how wrong it was, but please believe me, at the time, I thought I was doing the best thing for all of us."

"But that day at Lady Angel's house. I saw him there. He gave me my books. Did he not know I was his son?" he asked.

This was what Elizabeth had dreaded, explaining the separations of the past two years. She could see the sense of rejection on her son's face and it caused her great shame to know she had inflicted pain upon her darling boy.

"William, when your father and I parted, I told him I would not stay with him. When we went to see Mrs. Bingley that day, your father heard me speaking to her of this, and thought I still did not wish to be with him. He also heard me say... I said I did not wish you to be his heir, William. I did not wish for you to be raised in the same manner as he."

He frowned. "What manner?"

"Your papa owns a great estate, and is its master. He is also a very important man in England. Many demands are made of him because of these responsibilities. If you were to one day take his place, your time would be filled with many obligations."

He stopped and concentrated hard. His mind now occupied, his tears ceased. "You worried if I had a great house to care for I would not be able to continue my studies?"

"I believe you were meant to do more than run an estate or be a member of society. It would be very difficult for you if you were to be his heir. I am sorry to say your father heard my opinion that day and I had been very...thoughtless in the words I chose. Because of this, he did not speak to me, only you. He could not leave without meeting you. It was the first day he knew of your existence and he thought you were a wonderful boy. I think you said he was very kind to you."

William nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. He smiled whenever he spoke to me. He gave me the books and asked me to kiss his cheek. I remember. I have his picture in my head."

"I am glad it is a happy memory for you. However, I did not know that he had met you that day, or that he had seen me. I thought we must still hide and that is what we have done."

She pulled him into her lap and dried his face with her shawl. "I have since learnt your father has not stayed away. He has been helping us since that day. In every way he could he has been caring for us, my love. His sister and brother purchased the building we lived in while we were in London. He arranged to have our house in Brampton rented and even our lodgings here in Padua are partially paid for by him. Nothing was to be done that he did not do himself. Anything that could ease our way and improve our life has been done, in secret, by your father these past two years. All the while, he has watched us."

"He has watched over us?"

"No, dearest. I mean he has watched us. He has lived in our shadows these two years without us knowing it, both in London, and here in Padua. I believe he has had the chance to see us nearly every day. He draws pictures of you, and knows all your likes, and what vexes you. He studies with your professors at the university to keep abreast of your subjects."

"My father is here? In Padua?"

"Yes, he lives here now, since we are here."

"But what will he think when he learns we know he is here?"

“He already knows. I have spent the last two days with him.”

William stopped and thought for a moment. “Does he want to see me?”

“He does. More than anything, he wishes for us to be together as a family and I wish it too. He loves you, William. He has had the chance to know you secretly these two years, and he loves you very much. Now he wishes for you to know him, and come to love him one day.”

His face brightened and he threw his arms around his mama’s neck. “I should like that, mama,” he exclaimed. “But how shall we explain to the Signoras? What will you say about Mr. Cartwright?”



A LONE FIGURE RODE slowly through the late afternoon streets of Padua. He stopped often and asked in a friendly manner for directions to the address he held tightly in his hand. If anyone had observed him carefully, they would notice he was also absentminded, for he had barely travelled around the next corner before he would stop and happily ask directions once again.

Near the town centre, he paused outside a fine pastry shop and ventured inside. He asked politely after the items he saw within the cases and made several purchases.

“You are new to Padua, Signor?” the owner asked.

“Yes, but I plan to live here now,” the tall stranger answered.

“*Eccellente!* You like my *pasticcini*; you come here to Bergonzi’s to buy it, *si?*”

“I am sure I will, sir. My wife and son have often written to me how much they enjoy your delightful sweets. Good day.”

The newcomer mounted his horse again and continued through the streets. At last he alighted after inquiring a few houses away from his final destination. He knocked confidently at the door and when the housekeeper answered, he found it very difficult to fight the urge to grin.

“Good Afternoon. I am Will Cartwright. Have I found the home of my wife and son?”



ELIZABETH PACED NERVOUSLY in the sparse drawing room. They had arranged for her to leave Padua with time to spare for her conversation with William and for Will to go through the town and announce himself at her lodgings. Now that her part of the plan was done, and she and her son were waiting for Darcy, she could not contain her anxiety.

They both heard the rider approaching at full speed. William jumped from the sofa and intercepted her at the edge of the fine rug. She looked down to his face, his kind concern plainly etched there. They returned to the sofa, William placing his little hands in hers, calming her nerves.

Darcy entered the room and watched William carefully, trying to discern any animosity or anger from the boy. When he finally smiled shyly at his father, it was all the invitation Darcy needed to sweep his son immediately into his arms in a fierce hug.

Elizabeth bit back her happy cry as she watched her boy wrap his arms and legs tightly around his father while the two embraced each other. Will’s eyes were clenched as he swayed to and fro with his precious bundle. She could no longer stand idly by and joined the two, enveloping them in her arms and setting her head next to her husband’s. She reached out and stroked his smooth cheek, surprised at how much lighter the skin which had been covered in beard that morning now looked.

William peeked out and smiled at his mama. His father kissed his top and then did the same to her. The little family stayed bound together for quite some time.

When the time came to finally sit, the three did so as a whole. William sat between them while Darcy’s arm lay across the back of the sofa so he could gently stroke Elizabeth’s shoulder as they spoke. She was glad for the comfort his touch gave her, for it had been a difficult day.

“William,” Darcy began. “I know your mother has told you a great deal today, but I want you to know I truly do love you,” he looked to Elizabeth, “and your mama. We mean to live as a family and never be parted again.”

William nodded. “I would like to have a father, you for a father I mean.”

“He *is* your father, William,” Elizabeth gently reminded. William nodded but was now frowning.

“What disturbs you?”

“What if you vex one another again? I hear our cook sometimes. She and her husband shout at one another and they are married. What if you and Mama argue? Will you run away?”

Darcy’s hand grasped Elizabeth’s shoulder, but she quickly intervened. “No, my love. Neither of us will run away again. It is true that married people sometimes quarrel with one another, and I daresay you might hear your father and me do so, but we have promised to love and keep one another and you, for the rest of our lives, arguments or not. The promise we have made will never be broken, William. Do you understand?”

“You promise to keep me, as well?”

“You and any other children that come along,” Will answered. “You might someday have brothers and sisters. Should you like that?”

William’s eyes lit up. “Brothers and sisters? Oh, that would be delightful!”

Darcy hesitated when asking the next question. “Did your mother tell you what we will tell people about our lives, William? I am sorry we must ask you to tell a falsehood, but it must be done to protect all of us. Do you understand the reasons?”

William’s face fell slightly. “I do understand, sir. I know that people would be...upset if they knew you and Mama were apart for so long.”

Elizabeth squeezed her son’s hand gently. “When we speak to those who know us, they will be told your father and I came to Italy six years ago. No one can know about our living in Derbyshire. We must tell them you and I have been in Europe since you were born, and your father only visited us occasionally.”

“Will I ever be called by my right name?” William asked.

Darcy and Elizabeth looked briefly at one another. “Someday, you can be known as William Darcy if you wish it. For now, if we wish to stay in Padua for your education, it will be better if I say I am Mr. William Cartwright. Then you and your mother will not have to move, and we can stay here for your education. The story is not far from the truth, I am your father and I am your mother’s husband. It is only our surname which we will change.”

William nodded again, lost in deep thought as if finally deciding whether he would agree to the whole scheme. Elizabeth frowned and began to fidget. Darcy gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze and she looked up to see him regarding her with great tenderness, but also a great deal of confidence. She drew upon his confidence, acknowledging the three of them would weather these difficulties together and managed to smile back at him.

Neither had noticed William looking between the two of them, a much softer, happier expression upon his face. “May I...may I call you ‘Papa’?” he asked shyly. Elizabeth let out a short breath of relief.

Darcy’s lips pursed together to keep from breaking into a huge grin and risk the boy misinterpreting his reaction. He gathered his boy into his arms once again and kissed his worry away.

“I should treasure hearing you say it, Son,” he answered honestly.



HIGGINS’ TRIP HAD LASTED over a month after which he returned to a hero’s welcome. He carried with him a much lighter purse, and a document that would prove infinitely valuable to the two people he had come to care about most in the world. He happily presented the Darcys with a marriage license for them, dated the sixteenth of May, 1813, the day after Elizabeth had disappeared from London. The document was signed by the captain of the good ship *Amberly*, a passenger vessel which travelled between ports of the Channel. Their alibi was sealed.



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, MANY of Padua’s finest gossipmongers were buzzing with the news of the return of the lovely Mrs. Cartwright’s long absent husband. More than one man’s secretly harboured dreams were dashed when Mr. Cartwright, whom Signor Bergonzi could attest, turned out to be not only handsome, but in perfect health and of significant height and breadth. Their hope of one day comforting a *widowed* Mrs. Cartwright would apparently never come to fruition.

Chapter 41

Longbourn, April 1819

Thomas Bennet left his library, the occasional snuffle still refusing to allow him his complete dignity. He asked his housekeeper and butler to turn away any visitors for the remainder of the day and verified Kitty and her husband, Walter, had arrived from Meryton and were waiting with the rest of the family in the drawing room. She assured him they were there, along with the Bingleys, and that his granddaughter Emily was upstairs in the nursery with the nursemaid. He tapped his pocket, sure that his wife's smelling salts were secured and ready.

"I have received a most astonishing letter today, with wonderful news for us all," he began. "Elizabeth," there were gasps all around, "has written to us to announce that she is not lost, or perished, but is in fact alive, living in Italy and has been married these six years past to...Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy."

The smelling salts were out before his wife's form slumped to the carpet.



MR. BENNET CONTINUED THE story much later. "And so despite her initial refusal of him in Kent, he never lost his affection for her and would have offered for her again in Derbyshire, had not Lydia and Wickham's foolish actions separated them. Luckily for Elizabeth, when he returned from the continent, he sought her out again. By that time, she knew she had fallen hopelessly in love with him and happily gave her consent, whilst he convinced her he could not wait another moment. They were married on the ship they took to cross the Channel."

Bingley glanced briefly at Jane.

"But why the secrecy? Why not stay in England and marry here?" his wife whined.

"Because of your thoughtless youngest daughter, Mrs. Bennet. Lydia's elopement had tainted our name and they feared Darcy's family would prevent their union. Would you have risked them never being able to marry, just to appease your desire to see their wedding performed?"

Mrs. Bennet owned she would not.

"The Darcys decided to keep the marriage secret until they deemed it safe to announce it."

"What made them choose to announce it now?" Walter asked.

"I believe their staunchest enemy was none other than his aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh. She was convinced Mr. Darcy would marry her daughter and nothing would move her from her opinion. However, the daughter, Anne, is now living in town, away from her mother. Darcy knew he had to declare he was never going to offer for Miss De Bourgh if she is ever to find a husband.

"Lizzy writes she is very sorry for the suffering she has put us through, but promises to correspond regularly now that her husband has finally joined her and," he slyly added, "their son, permanently."

Mrs. Bennet's eyes went wide. "A son? My Lizzy has a son?" The happy tears fell unabated when her husband nodded.

"Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. I would never have guessed. Do you suppose he was in love with her when he and Charles lived at Netherfield?" Kitty asked.

"I dare say, yes. Else how would he have come to propose to her at Hunsford?" an astonished Mary answered.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Bennet. When shall we see them? I long to see how great my dear, sweet Lizzy is. He had ten thousand a year as I recall, and it's very likely more now. Oh, Lord! I shall go distracted!"

"I am afraid it will be some time before we see the Darcys. Elizabeth states clearly they have no intentions to return to England for several years at least."

"But what of my grandson? Would they deny him to us?"

"Of course not, my dear. I believe they have simply chosen to not live here."

"Not live in England? Not live on that great estate of his in Derbyshire? My brother said there were few places its equal in the whole country!"

"And yet they choose Italy. Best to reconcile yourself to it, Mrs. Bennet. Lizzy writes that her husband can draw; perhaps we can persuade him to send us some sketches of the child."

"Oh, yes. That would do nicely. And what of our grandson? What is he called? How old is he?"

"His name is William Bennet Darcy and he is five years old."

Thus ended the group discussion and began the intimate gatherings of smaller groups in the drawing room. Mrs. Bennet's happiness dissipated over the length of the evening as she slowly realised that, despite Lizzy's overwhelming good fortune, without her now favourite daughter's presence, she would have little proof to show to her neighbours.

Mr. Bennet approached Jane and Charles. "Despite your best attempts, I could not help but notice your surprise did not match your relatives', Jane. Nor have I failed to notice how fortuitous it is that you and Bingley arrived this week, unannounced, and mere days before your sister's letter came."

Bingley gave his wife an apprehensive look and turned to answer his father-in-law when Jane spoke up.

"I think you will find, Father, that should anyone in our family require it, Charles and I can be relied upon to provide help with the utmost discretion and earnestness," she answered without backing down.

Mr. Bennet stared at her in deep contemplation for some moments. Finally, he nodded. "You forgot devotion and tenacity, my dear. Our family, *all* our family are fortunate to have the two of you in it."

Mrs. Bennet's effusions rang out above the room, drawing everyone's attention. "Well at least Mary and I can rest easy now."

"Mary?" Mr. Bennet inquired. "How so? How can this affect dear Mary?"

"After you are dead and buried Mr. Bennet, which could happen any day, we shall no longer wonder what is to become of us!"

"I am sure Mr. Darcy's wealth, while not unwelcome, would hardly have been necessary to sustain you, my dear. Charles and Walter both have said they would help you when that solemn occasion requires it."

"Mr. Darcy? Good heavens, Mr. Bennet, what are you talking of? Mary and I will not need his help. The Collinses have only a *daughter*. After her horrible lying in, Lady Lucas says Charlotte refuses to let her husband near her again. Lizzy's son will inherit Longbourn!"



LONDON, APRIL 1819

COUSIN RICHARD HAD RECEIVED *his* letter a week prior to his relations, in order to prepare him for the coming storm. Richard had also wisely advised Anne that Darcy was about to announce he had married six years earlier and watched carefully to see if he could detect any signs of dashed hopes.

Far from it, Anne seemed almost relieved at knowing her cousin was no longer eligible and asked Richard for any details he knew of the lady. As per Darcy's instructions, he said he knew of the marriage, but had been asked to keep it confidential. However, he truly astonished Anne when he announced their new cousin was none other than the former Elizabeth Bennet.

When his parents later stormed into the library, letter in hand, he was ready for the onslaught.

"How could you, Richard!" his father, the earl bellowed. "All these years married, and a son as well. Darcy married with an heir and you did not tell us?"

"It was not my responsibility to inform the family, Father. It was Darcy's. As he specifically asked for my secrecy, I do not see how you can be angry with me. I believe it is your

nephew who deserves the rebuke and I do not appreciate being the whipping boy on his behalf."

His father was taken aback by Richard's counter, but rightly acknowledged his son's truth. "'Tis true, Richard. I am angry with Darcy. I apologise for rebuking you. This woman he has married—Elizabeth Bennet—we know nothing of her. She could be the greatest fortune hunter in England. What shall we do?"

"She had fortune enough, father. A property in the north, and several thousand pounds, so Darcy says. From what Georgiana writes, the lady is delightful, and she is thrilled to have her for a sister. Both of the McNallys commented the Darcys do not live extravagantly at all, quite simple by most people's standards. If the woman was after his fortune, why would she hesitate to spend it while so conveniently removed from his family and censure for all these years? I think there must be true affection between them."

Lady Matlock intervened. "Affection? I hardly expected such a thing from Darcy. You truly think there is a real attachment between them? It would explain a great deal. But why hide the woman? Why not bring her and the boy to England?"

"I believe they had some struggles in the beginning. You remember the episode I had with Darcy at Pemberley in the year thirteen?" His father nodded. "The result of an estrangement they had early on. Darcy decided to educate Georgiana and see her married and settled before joining his wife again. He managed to get to the continent a few times a year, but it was difficult for the two of them to be apart so much."

"No wonder at his behaviour when Georgiana came out," his mother remarked. "He was always present at any function she attended, but never gave a glance to any lady. Even your father commented upon it. So he was married the entire time. Well, I think I must agree with your assessment; it must be a love match, for no man could have resisted the charms of all those lovely young ladies around him."

"You do not give Darcy much credit. He has always been an honourable man."

The earl snorted. "Honourable, yes. But no monk, Richard."

Richard's voice rose. "I think should you be able to look inside Darcy's heart, you would find a man who has been completely faithful to his wife, father. Be careful you do not insult your favourite nephew by intimating anything less virtuous on his part."

Surprise registered on his father's face. "She must be an extraordinary woman."

"On that, sir, I believe we can completely agree. However, as they have chosen to remain on the Continent, you shall have to take his, my and Georgiana's word for it. For now, he merely wished to inform the family and expects us to keep it to ourselves. He has no desire to put an announcement in the London papers."

Suddenly the earl groaned. "We must tell Anne..."

“She already knows.”

“She is not upset?” his mother asked, incredulous.

“Not in the least. If I interpret her correctly, I would say she was quite relieved to have Darcy off the marriage market. I believe his announcement was timed specifically to help aid her. I think he and Anne hope her mother’s illusions will perhaps cease.”

Lady Matlock smiled.

The earl groaned again. “Good God. Catherine.”



THE NEXT DAY, LORD and Lady Matlock, Richard and Anne set off for Kent. They did not wait to hear from Catherine. No doubt some baleful letter was already making its way to Matlock Manor, but they had no qualms about missing it.

Richard and Anne told them what they could of Elizabeth based on the short acquaintance they had had with her many years ago. They also spoke of what the inevitable reaction from Lady Catherine would be. They were not prepared for what greeted them when they arrived at Rosings Park.

The housekeeper solemnly informed the family what had occurred the morning before. Lady Catherine’s reaction to Darcy’s announcement had been everything they had feared. Her rage had been great and long-winded, until her age, temper and exertion had culminated and turned against her, striking her down with an apoplectic seizure.

The doctor had been called, but the episode had already taken its toll. Her body now significantly crippled, she could no longer speak, nor even communicate her wishes through shaking her head, nor move her hands with any purpose. She was able to walk with assistance but did not seem to know where she was going. The only good that had come from her ailment was she seemed to be generally content. She was happy to see her servants when they entered her room, and she ate whatever was fed to her without fussing.

The housekeeper failed to say, once the shock of their mistress’ ailment was overcome, that the staff had rarely spent a more pleasant day attending their employer.

Richard had grasped Anne’s hand the moment the word seizure had been spoken. He looked to her often, prepared to comfort her in her distress, but only saw determination on the part of his cousin. When the housekeeper had finished, Lord Matlock stood to speak, when Anne began in a voice which brooked no refusal.

“Thank you, Mrs. Riley. I am sure the staff have been doing their usual admirable job. Please inform them of my sincere thanks on behalf of my mother. I will see her directly, and I am sure the rest of the family will wish to as well, but later.

“Please see to arranging our rooms for us. Lord and Lady Matlock will want the blue and green suite, while my

cousin Richard, I am sure, would appreciate his usual suite of rooms. Would that be acceptable to you Aunt, Uncle?” They nodded, shocked at Anne taking over so decidedly.

“Inform cook I would like dinner at half past six, for we are tired from the road and will probably retire early. Oh, and do tell her not to prepare any of my usual dishes. Send the menu to me in my mother’s room, but tell her I expect her to come up with simple fare for adults. I no longer keep to my former diet.” She turned to her subdued relatives.

“I will see mother now; shall I send for you in an hour? Will that be sufficient time to refresh yourselves?”

Lady Matlock shook herself out of her daze first. “Yes, my dear, that would be fine.” She exited with her husband trailing behind, leaving Richard and Anne still sitting on the couch. He still had her hand in his and was staring unabashedly at her.

“What?” she asked impertinently.

He raised her hand to his lips and bestowed a soft kiss upon it, lingering much longer than could ever be considered proper. “I... You have just managed to render my father speechless. Do you have any idea the enormity of such an event? Anne, dearest Anne, you are a heroine!”

She rolled her eyes. “I appreciate your attempt at levity, but it is not necessary, Richard. Mama is nearly three and sixty, I knew her days were numbered and I am not shocked she is finally infirm. This is my home, and I am now its mistress. I mean to take charge in my own way from the very first; you are merely observing me in my new position.”

He gave her hand another squeeze. “You handled yourself exceedingly well, Anne. Please let me say how much I admire you at this moment. It was not only a treat to witness you come into your new role, but seeing you in this light has been...well, rather provocative.”

Thus said, Richard Fitzwilliam did two things Anne had never seen in her life; he blushed, then slowly leaned over and kissed her cheek softly, brushing it lightly with his thumb before quickly excusing himself from his startled cousin.

Anne’s hand flew to her cheek. She stared slack-jawed towards the door for some time. Finally, her mouth clamped shut, but then slowly expanded into an ever widening smirk.

“Finally, Richard. You certainly took your time noticing!”



THE YEAR WAS SIGNIFICANT for the families of Matlock, Fitzwilliam and De Bourgh for many reasons. Lord Matlock lived long enough to see his youngest son, Richard, finally wed to his beloved niece, Anne, and witnessed by his sister, and mother of the bride, Catherine.

A month after they were married, the family had gathered at Rosings to celebrate the return of the honeymoon-

ers. The earl had tenderly whispered in his sister's ear that Richard would prove an excellent husband to Anne, and that she should not have another moment's worry for them.

Apparently, Lady Catherine took the statement as a release of her duties to her daughter and her family, for she died peacefully in her sleep that night. The earl followed his sister not a month later at the age of five and sixty. Lady Matlock proved her enduring attachment to her husband by joining him in his heavenly reward before the year was out, the last of their generation.

The Fitzwilliams settled happily into Rosings Park, eventually opening the house to more of the social circle in Kent than ever before after their mourning period was over. Richard was pleased to see his Anne now happy as mistress of the house that once had nearly imprisoned her. Letters from the continent were regular and always a happy occasion to be read aloud and wondered over.



LONDON, APRIL 1819

THE LAST LETTER SENT was written to the Gardiners. It had been six years since Elizabeth had had any contact with them. She remembered all her aunt and uncle had done for her: their selfless help in opening their home to her and her sister when they had left Longbourn, and her uncle's support in starting Johnson's cigar shop to provide her with employment and independence. She owed them so much and yet had treated them so poorly. She alone had betrayed their trust and injured their precious relationship.

With a heavy heart, full of contrition, she did her best to convey her remorse for the suffering she had inflicted upon them. She did not trivialise the pain she knew she must have caused them by running away. To have the young woman they loved and cared for almost as a daughter disappear while under their authority must have caused them a great deal of guilt all these years. They would have been thinking they had failed her and her family by not protecting her.

The sombre letter begged for their forgiveness, and soberly announced her marriage. She wrote of her son, and their life in Padua. Lastly, she wrote her sincere thanks to them for all they had done for her when she had been estranged from her father.

Weeks later the reply came. They were at the house in Abano when Darcy noticed her absence and went looking for her in the nearby woods. She sat at the base of a great evergreen, seemingly calm until she raised a stricken face to him.

"What has happened?"

"It is from my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. There is nothing to be alarmed about, it is simply..." Her lip quivered and he was instantly at her side taking her in his arms.

"Oh, Will. How it pains me to receive such a letter!" His grip tightened around her and he whispered words of comfort and love to her until she began to compose herself.

"Did they rebuke you?"

She shook her head. Her eyes glanced over the paper once more. "I am sure some would read this and not be disturbed in the slightest, but I know them better. I know what it was like between us in the past." She gave him the letter.

Dear Elizabeth,

Your uncle and I are very happy to learn you are well and married to Mr. Darcy. Please accept our felicitations on your marriage. I am sure your mother and father were greatly relieved by your news, and we are pleased you have reconciled with them and, though not in person, are returned to your family.

Your uncle and I do not hesitate to forgive your actions of so many years ago. We can rest easy now knowing nothing terrible had befallen you.

Your Mr. Darcy is an excellent man. We have had several occasions to meet him at the Bingley's home in the past and think it a very good match for both of you. We are sure you will enjoy being mistress of Pemberley.

Please send your husband and your son, William, our kindest regards and best wishes for future happiness.

Sincerely,

M. Gardiner

"Oh, my sweet wife. I am sorry."

"I knew how it would be. I betrayed their trust and now they cannot reconcile themselves to open their hearts to me again."

Darcy nodded. "But there is no resentment. I do not see resentment, only caution, and the need to protect themselves. Surely you can understand that?"

"I do, but I mourn the loss of the intimacy we once had shared. The easy, close and deep affection that had once flowed between us must be gone."

"I recognise their reaction; I used it often myself. They are putting distance between you, to keep themselves safe from the pain of caring too much."

Elizabeth agreed. "I regret having caused yet more loved ones pain. I deserve this. I deserve a letter that could have been written by Lady Lucas instead of a most beloved aunt. My father once asked what price I had paid to bring

Chapter 42

PADUA, APRIL 1819

about the family's respectability. I think this is it. I have lost their good opinion. This letter proves that as much by what she has written but also by what she has not."

"Darling, give them time. Allow them to have their pains eased over time."

Elizabeth disagreed. "I do not think it will change. There is no mention of anything personal here. They do not share their lives or feelings with me, nor do they ask about mine. There is no future wish of ever seeing one another. They are lost to me, Will, and I have no one to blame but myself." She began to cry in earnest, and Darcy could only hold his grieving wife and give her tender attentions until she had at last quieted.

In the future they did see the Gardiners again, but the relationship never developed the closeness or warmth both Elizabeth and Will knew they might have had. The two of them were ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the Gardiners and strove to comport themselves as better persons in honour of the two people who had given so much to Elizabeth when she was most in need. However, the pain in Elizabeth's heart would never completely heal and she would always regret the suffering she had caused her loved ones.

Soon Padua was gossiping once more; this time about Mr. Smith, who was making plans to return to his native England after his son Gustov had been called back unexpectedly to Austria. His landlord and cook were sorry to see him go, but understood that, without his son, Mr. Smith no longer had ties to Padua, despite his love of the local pastries.

Mr. Smith, or Mr. Thomas Higgins, happily returned to his home county with a new and important position: he was to manage the start of a horse-breeding venture at Pemberley. Darcy had sent him back with several horses they had chosen in the spring, their little Italian stable boy and a clearly defined plan: the idea of raising the best horses in Derbyshire.

Both the Darcys and the McNallys were sorry to say goodbye to him, but it was Elizabeth who was the most affected. With a teary farewell did she finally let him go, riding a fine mount and a happy smile upon his face despite his saddened heart. Over the years, he would often see Mr. and Mrs. McNally at Pemberley, happy to learn of all the news of the Darcys from abroad.

Elizabeth and Georgiana had spent the brisk spring months learning to love one another as true sisters. Georgie was struck by how different Elizabeth was from Mrs. Bingley, but soon was grateful the fates had given her this particular Bennet for a sister. Their temperaments were both playful, their minds quick and witty and their devotion to their new family unwavering. Elizabeth relished having a woman to confide in and a sister she now loved as well as her own. Their parting was very difficult.

The McNallys stayed on in Padua until the spring ended in June. They also promised to one day visit the continent again.

Georgiana was brazenly smug that she had predicted the newest Darcy's existence before anyone else. She made Elizabeth promise to write to her of all she experienced during her confinement. She also confided to her new sister that Baby Darcy would be welcomed only two months before Baby McNally would be introduced to the world. Elizabeth was thrilled for Georgiana, and begged her to tell Will before they left. Thus, a merry party gathered the night before their departure; two radiant young wives, glowing from motherhood, two beaming husbands, deliriously proud of the beauties who had given them their hearts, and one very delighted young boy who was happy to make many canvases in his mind.



PADUA, ONE YEAR LATER

THOMAS PATRICK DARCY SAT happily upon his Papa's knee while his elder brother played a rollicking game of peek-a-boo with him, much to the delight of the five-month-old. He gurgled and laughed while a steady stream dribbled from his mouth.

William frowned. "Why can he not keep that in his mouth?"

His parents laughed.

"Perhaps when he has enough teeth he will," answered his father.

"Be glad it is not his midday meal coming up," said his mother. William grimaced. He had seen enough of his baby brother's meals already.

A carriage pulled up to the front of their lodgings, sending the elder sibling to the windows. Darcy brought the baby to his mother and sat beside her, waiting to see who would be calling. Nothing prepared Elizabeth for the sight she beheld.

"Jane!" she cried and ran to her sister. They instantly began chattering while Thomas squirmed as he was pressed between the two.

Behind her Bingley entered and at the sight of him, Elizabeth caught her breath. It had been over eight years since she had last seen him.

"Mrs. Darcy. I thank you for receiving us," he said shyly.

"Oh, Charles!" Elizabeth cried and embraced him carefully trying not to squash her son. Bingley laughed and Thomas started babbling from the cacophony of noises filling the room. Jane was greeting Darcy and William, while Elizabeth was trying to introduce them as well as baby Thomas, and all of them were enthusiastically inquiring after one another's health.

Suddenly Will stopped speaking and then Jane stopped as well. When Elizabeth finally stopped her talking due to the strange silence, she frowned at her husband who moved quickly to relieve her of their baby son. She looked confused and then turned to where his gaze lay. Her eyes filled instantly with tears and she flew to the man in the doorway.

"Hello, Lizzy," Thomas Bennet said.



WILLIAM SAT UPON THE sofa watching the scene around him. He was not sure how he felt about his young cousin, Emily Bingley. She was a pretty little girl; however, as far

as William was concerned, little more than a babe, like his brother Thomas, with the exception that she could walk and occasionally say a word or two. He was glad she had a nursemaid to look after her, as he did not think he was up to the task.

Mama and Papa looked very happy talking to his aunt and uncle, and with a sigh, he had to admit his dear Lady Angel was as beautiful as ever. He liked his new Uncle Bingley. He smiled a great deal, and seemed pleased with all that he saw. Lastly, he looked at his grandfather, who was, surprisingly, looking back at him. He nearly burst into laughter when the man winked at him, but then stirred uncomfortably as the gentleman approached him.

"William, would you like to walk out with me? I have been in the carriage since sunrise and could do with a bit of a stretch."

He looked to his mother who smiled and nodded her head.

"You look very much like your father, William," Mr. Bennet said after they had been walking for some time in silence.

He smiled. "Most people say that. I hope I will be tall like him someday."

"I think you shall, son." Mr. Bennet continued gazing. "You have your mother's eyes," he observed out loud. "An improvement over your papa, I think."

William laughed. "I hear ladies say Papa is a handsome man. They forget I can understand them." He smiled sheepishly. "I do not laugh when they are saying things about him so they will continue to talk."

Mr. Bennet laughed. "You understand a great deal if you know when to pretend such things, William. Tell me about your studies, son."

For the next hour William told his grandfather of life in Padua, his professors and the subjects that interested him most. Lastly, he spoke about his beloved Mama and Papa and his new baby brother, Thomas.

Mr. Bennet told William about Longbourn and his grandmother and Aunt Mary. Then he told him about his Aunt Kitty and Uncle Walter and his other cousins who lived in Meryton. Mr. Bennet had the satisfaction of hearing how truly attached his grandson was to his father and brother—a point he had worried about after all the years William had spent being the sole recipient of his mother's love. His memory of his grandson from their afternoon in the park in London three years earlier had not done the boy justice, and Mr. Bennet relished every moment spent with him.

"You seemed to have developed a close relationship with your grandson rather quickly, Papa. I am glad you have had the chance to see him once again," Elizabeth later remarked.

Her father motioned to the bench next to him and she happily sat beside him. He gently took her hand; a motion he had repeated often since arriving. "He is a remark-

able child, Lizzy. I am prodigiously proud of him, and his mama." He raised her hand to his lips and gently kissed it.

Elizabeth laid her head upon his shoulder. "Thank you, Papa," she answered simply. There was no need to elaborate. All the words of regret, apologies and forgiveness had been written long ago. Now there was only the need to be close to each other, to allow the last of their healing to come through the physical reinforcement of holding a hand, or an arm around a shoulder. Elizabeth and her father spent the majority of his month-long visit thus.

"What news from home, then?" she asked much later.

"I suppose of greatest import is the news that my cousin William Collins has passed on."

"Oh, poor Charlotte!"

"Indeed, she and her daughter have returned to Lucas Lodge and her parents. My cousin luckily left her with some money to live on. You might recall he was of a particularly thrifty nature with his household allowance. In addition, your husband's cousins the Fitzwilliams have given her a small legacy for her husband's years of service as the parson at Hunsford. She will not be a burden to her parents. I dare say Sir William will soon be spouting his great good fortune in having a dutiful and sensible daughter there to nurse him in his last years.

"However, the ramifications of Mr. Collin's death are of particular interest to you, Lizzy. I plan to spend the time and money and break the entail. If the Bingleys have no son, Longbourn will fall to William."

"I am sure the Bingleys have not finished increasing their family, Papa."

"True, but both she and Kitty seemed to have inherited the Bennet propensity for producing girls. Kitty has just given Walter another daughter."

"Oh, dear. That makes three?"

Mr. Bennet affirmed it. "Perhaps you have some advice you could pass along to help your sisters out of their unique predicament?"

Elizabeth tried to scowl at her father but gave up laughing. "If I had a clue I would gladly share it."

"I thank you for the honour you have bestowed in naming young Thomas after me. He is as fine a lad as any I have seen. I think the hearty Bennet breeding and the noble Darcy line merge rather well, do you not? I have rarely seen two more beautiful, robust children, other than my own girls, of course."

Elizabeth laughed. "Thank you, Father. A completely unbiased judgement of how handsome my sons are is always appreciated. We were very happy to name Thomas after you."

Her father kissed her forehead. "If I do not return without a trunk full of pictures of the four of you, I best not show my face on the doorstep of Longbourn. I shall have to petition your husband heartily these next weeks."

"I think Will has something in mind for you to ease your way, Papa. But I will not spoil his surprise."

"Very well. Keep your secrets if you must. I shall instead change the subject smoothly by telling you we recently had the honour of your sister and brother McNally calling upon us, not a month before I left."

This visit had to be poured over in detail for a full half-hour. Elizabeth was wild to hear of the new Miss Victoria McNally and her parents. Her father reassured her of her niece's beauty and excellent disposition, as well as Mrs. McNally's apparent good recovery from the birth.

"Your mother had the infinite pleasure of having not only Lady Lucas in her drawing room at the time, but Mrs. Long as well, when the McNallys were announced. Though I am not normally interested in ladies fashions, the elegantly attired Mrs. McNally was truly a treat to behold," he snickered. "Mrs. Long could not utter a word and sat with her mouth gaping like a trout. Lady Lucas simply nodded stupidly and your mother was in her element and never so happy in her life.

"I must admit I expected her to become overwhelmed, but once again I was surprised when she behaved like a society hostess used to entertaining the likes of the wealthy Mr. and Mrs. McNally every day," he chuckled.

"Your dear sister-in-law said so many wonderful things about you and Darcy, and your son of course, that your mother has not so much as frowned nor had an attack of nerves since. The gossips believe every boast she makes, and even some she improvises. I think being the undisputed leader of the first circle of the neighbourhood has helped her health immensely. I shall ever be beholden to your excellent relations.

"Mrs. McNally also gave me leave to tell you that an acquaintance of both of yours, a Mr. Thomas Higgins, was soon to be married."

"Higgins, married! Oh good gracious! Whoever is he marrying?"

"He is marrying a local lady, a widow he had known as a girl in his childhood and had not seen for some thirty years, a Mrs. Constance Edwards. Apparently he is to marry her, and bring her widowed sister, a Mrs. Keane, to live with them as she is quite a good cook."

Elizabeth was speechless. Higgins marrying one of the dear sisters from Mrs. Thurgood's household! She began to giggle. Thank goodness she looked so different now and it would be some time before they returned to England. At least she did not worry the sisters might recognise her. She could think of nothing that could please her more than to know that three of the people who had helped her had found happiness, and were well taken care of. She would apply to Will for a lovely wedding gift.



LATER THAT NIGHT, IN the privacy of their chamber, Elizabeth detailed the story of the housekeeper and cook at Fairhaven Manor. Darcy was enchanted by Elizabeth's tale of the silly, yet warm-hearted sisters who had come to her aid. As they prepared to go down to breakfast the next morning, Darcy shocked his wife when he made his suggestion for Higgins' wedding present.

"It will be many years until we live at Pemberley and many more after that before I expect you to need it," he said, as he sat on the edge of the bed attending his stockings and garters. "What say you to giving Higgins and his new family the right to live in the dower house at Pemberley?" His last words were smothered by a wife who met his lips and body as she bowled him back onto the mattress. He laughed at her passionate response.

"My, if this is how you are going to react to my generosity, I may give away all of Pemberley."

She silenced him with more enthusiastic kisses. "You are the very best of men. The best I have ever known."

"Having your love makes me what I am, Lizzy." He stroked her beaming face and soon all thoughts of Higgins, or breakfast, were left behind.



THE MONTH THAT PASSED would be one fondly looked upon the rest of their lives. Their responsibilities were few, the weather fine, and the love and pleasures the Bennets, Bingleys and Darcys shared were boundless.

Mr. Bennet had been surprised when Darcy requested he return with a number of parcels, several of which were to be sent on to Pemberley. The family sat in the small drawing room one evening, when Darcy literally unveiled the precious cargo. There sat three magnificent portraits.

Mr. Bennet was first drawn to Elizabeth's. She sat in a glorious sunlit garden. Flowers and greenery surrounded her, complimenting the woman who was at her best in the middle of nature. Her happiness effused from her face. Her delicate hand was positioned lightly over her middle, no doubt hiding her precious baby Thomas for the modesty of the painting. The brilliance of her eyes and her natural elegance had been captured perfectly. He was speechless. Bingley and Jane sat dumbfounded as well.

"I have had smaller versions made for Longbourn," Will reassured him. "But if you wish to display this, or any of the three for some time before sending them on to Pemberley, I will certainly understand."

Mr. Bennet nodded. "I think our family would be very grateful to you for that, Will. It is exquisite."

Next was a fine portrait of William, standing easily, with a mischievous look in his eye, and a clear struggle with trying not to smile upon his mouth. It was a wonderful rendition of a look his grandfather had often seen this past month. He chuckled.

"Well done!" he proclaimed.

Lastly was a family portrait, so obviously recent by Thomas' age in it, he expected the oil to be wet still. The grouping was set in a very fine drawing room, rich wallpapers along the walls and a silk damask sofa in the middle. A happy Darcy sat on one end, his arm around an equally happy William, both dressed very finely. Next to him sat a joyous Elizabeth in a gown of shiny silk and a beautiful pearl choker around her neck. Darcy held her hand in his and Thomas sat in her lap in an elaborate laced christening gown, a jovial smile upon his little face. Mr. Bennet looked at the details of the large work and noticed Will and Elizabeth's grasped hands lay upon a red book, untitled—a strange decoration to be sure. He also observed the painting behind the family. It was a masquerade ball from at least a hundred years ago. If Mr. Darcy preferred to place apparently sentimental clues in his paintings, Mr. Bennet was not going to comment upon it.

The significance of Darcy placing William next to him, and his hand upon the boy was not lost on Mr. Bennet. Darcy was making his claim to his son clear. If anyone ever had a thought to challenge William's legitimacy, his father was stating his beliefs and wishes quite plainly.

"These are truly beautiful, Will. Are you sure you do not wish to keep them a few more years?"

"I have the original subjects, sir. I also had smaller versions done for us as well. And a miniature of my Lizzy of course." He smiled and kissed his wife's cheek unashamed. "I wish for the master and mistress of Pemberley's portrait to be hung in its rightful place in the grand gallery. If we can not be there in person, I wish at least our images to watch over the place."

"Then we shall be happy to deliver them."

"If you wish to make the delivery yourself, sir, I have prepared a letter for my housekeeper to instruct her to open the house to you; and more importantly, the library, should you wish to take a short respite of say a week or two before returning to Longbourn. I would certainly appreciate hearing my book collection was being used while I was away. Of course, my wine cellar would be at your disposal as well."

Mr. Bennet was near to tears. "My boy, you know you already had my blessing for your marriage long ago. I can only assume a true affection on your part from such an offer. Thank you, son. I could not have given my Lizzy up to someone less worthy, and I am excessively pleased that you have found such happiness as well. You both deserve your good fortune."

The end of the month did come and with many tears, the families parted. Mr. Bennet happily took up his son-in-law's offer and eventually delivered the portraits to Pemberley in person. He spent a blissfully peaceful three weeks appreciating Darcy's hospitality and estate. It was sadly the only time he made the trip.

In the years to come, many people came to apply to Mrs. Reynolds to see inside Pemberley. If she noticed an

increase of visitors after Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy's portrait and the Fitzwilliam Darcy family painting had been hung in the gallery, she made no mention of it. Nor did she comment when an odd couple, who suspiciously resembled Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, once requested a tour.

Chapter 43

LONGBOURN, ELEVEN YEARS LATER, 1831

The gardens had changed, the trees were larger and some plantings of new flowers were arranged in the beds. As her family exited the two carriages, Elizabeth circled around slowly and was struck with the urge to laugh out loud at seeing her sons and Will in front of her parents' home. What an imposing group they made.

Darcy rang the bell and an unfamiliar face greeted them. Elizabeth had not considered that Hill would have long since been gone, and that new people would be waiting upon the Bennets. They had just entered when Mary exited the library and gasped to see her home completely filled with strangers.

"Lizzy!" she shouted as she noticed Elizabeth and quickly swept her sister into her arms for a happy reunion.

Mary glanced past her sister's shoulder and observed her brother's muttonchops and the silver streaks that tinted the edges of his curls. "Darcy, you have certainly changed, but so have we all!" she laughed. "Are these my nephews? What a handsome family you have, Elizabeth! I congratulate you. If one must have children, it is always so much wiser to have good looking ones."

Darcy and Elizabeth stood with mouths agape. Will knew for certain that he had never heard more words uttered from Mary in all the years he had known her, while Elizabeth was amazed at her sister's good sense and wit.

Mary laughed at their faces. "Oh, do not be so droll! I have always had a sense of humour, I simply misplaced it several years back."

The little boys and their older brothers giggled, then sheepishly looked to their parents to make sure they were not being rude. Luckily, their Mama and Papa were snickering right along with them.

Elizabeth then introduced her sons to their aunt one by one, each boy bowing politely, and three of them smiling sweetly, showing off the dimples they had inherited from their father. When Elizabeth came to William, her sister interrupted, saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you at last, William."

"At last, Mary?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, I have been corresponding with this young man for many years now, and am glad to finally put a face to the name. Though I wish you had told me I need only think of your own father's face when he was younger and saved me the wonder. Goodness, but you are the spitting image of him."

"Thank you, Aunt," replied William, who stood as tall as his father did.

"Well, I believe you should see Mama, should you not?"

Elizabeth nodded, her countenance grave. "How is she, Mary?"

"Oh, she is well. She is content to sit with her cat, or sometimes she will ask for needle and thread and start a little fine work. She never finishes, but often starts anew several times a day. Most days she sits quietly and watches out her window. It has been so wet this summer she could not enjoy the garden much, I am afraid."

"Will she recognize me?" Elizabeth asked tentatively.

"I hope so. You have changed a great deal, Elizabeth." Mary's brow raised and indicated the roundness her sister had taken on.

Elizabeth laughed. "I fear having so many children does very little to aid a lady in keeping her girlish figure. However, I have no complaints as my husband does not object in the least."

"Wise man, Darcy."

"I have learnt a great deal these past years," he retorted.

"Mama sometimes forgets about your marriage and your children. You will have to be patient with her. Will my nephews be able to behave themselves in our absence? I would not like to hear the china had been broken nor the plants upset."

William spoke up, "Would you mind if we trample in your gardens, Aunt? I know my younger brothers could use the chance to exercise their limbs after the carriage ride."

"An excellent suggestion, big brother," Mary replied. "Should there be a ball or stick and hoop among your things on the carriage, I strongly suggest you bring those out as well. Just mind the flowers, boys; it would not do to give the gardener more work."



THE STAIRCASE SEEMED STRANGE to Elizabeth, so much smaller than she remembered. The lack of her mother's loud shrilling no longer ringing through the house also made it seem a bit sadder. Unexpectedly, the recollection of her father's absence began to prey upon her. She felt a sudden warm hand upon her arm.

"Are you thinking of your father?" Darcy asked concerned.

She nodded quickly with a grimly set mouth. "His presence invades my senses. I have never been here when he was not and it is almost overwhelming. I feel like I have gone back in time, but so many are missing."

They had reached her mother's door, when Darcy stopped her and took her into his arms while tenderly kissing her head.

"I feel it too, my Love. How can I help you? Is there anything I can do to relieve you of your pain?"

Elizabeth sighed into his shoulder and shook her head. "No, it is not necessary; I am better already simply hearing your soothing voice." He tightened his arms around her and rested his cheek against her hair.

"Holding you helps me as well. I must thank you also."

She pulled reluctantly away, and smiled slightly, "Always, Will."

Mary had stood off to the side, waiting for Elizabeth to regain her composure. They both looked to her now, and she smiled a knowing smile; they each felt the loss of the missing that day.



MRS. BENNET SAT NEAR the fire affectionately petting her cat. She looked much frailer than Elizabeth had expected. Her lovely rich curls were now simple wisps of white sticking out from under her lace cap and her face was lined with many wrinkles. Mary went immediately to her and told her that she had visitors come to call. Oblivious to the two who stood by the doorway, she now turned and, upon spying Elizabeth, her face contorted from frowning, then recognition, then instant tears as a fragile voice came from her worn body.

"Elizabeth, is it really you?" she cried gently. "Oh, do come and give me a kiss."

Elizabeth went to her mother's side, enveloping her gently in a warm embrace. "Hello, Mama, I am so glad to see you."

"Let me look at you, Lizzy. You certainly look very well, but so much older. My, how many years have passed! Goodness! My Lizzy come back to me!" she said again, as she continued to kiss and hug her daughter. Her movements were shaky and Elizabeth was surprised at how weak her embrace was. She now clearly understood the delicacy of her mother's health. Mrs. Bennet seemed on the verge of an attack of nerves, but she calmed upon looking slightly past her daughter. "Who have you brought with you, Elizabeth?"

"Mama, I would like you to meet my husband, Mr. Darcy."

Mrs. Bennet's eyes went wide. "Your husband? Truly, Lizzy?" Elizabeth nodded. Her mother sighed, and smiled sweetly, closing her eyes. For a moment, Elizabeth thought she might have fallen asleep, but soon her eyes fluttered back open.

"I am very glad for you Lizzy; you shall want for nothing and I shall not have to worry about you any more."

"I am sorry if I made you worry, Mama, truly I am. But please do not fret ever again. Mr. Darcy and I are very happy."

Her mother smiled. "I am glad. Well, Mr. Darcy, you must come and give your Mama a kiss, too. It won't do to have you standing about like a stranger." Darcy laughed

and did as he was bid. As he leaned over his mother-in-law, she took a good look at him.

"You filled out nicely as well, Mr. Darcy. I believe you and Lizzy must have a very good cook. I am glad to see it; I do not like it when people do not enjoy their food. It is not right." Lizzy shook her head and laughed lightly.

The boys were apparently enjoying their games outside, for soon their clamour made its way even into the upstairs bedrooms with the windows closed. Her mother exclaimed at the noise and rose slowly with the help of her cane and Mary's arm for support, and proceeded to her window to see what could be causing such racket.

"Wherever did all those boys come from?" she wondered out loud, as she sat, now exhausted, in her window seat.

"Those are my sons, Mrs. Bennet," answered Mr. Darcy.

"I see. My goodness, so many! And they are all yours, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy frowned. "Yes, of course they are mine."

"Did their mother pass on then?" she enquired.

Elizabeth finally realised her mother's confusion. "Mama, I think you misunderstand my husband; *all* of the boys are mine as well. They are *our* children."

Mrs. Bennet was speechless. She turned back to the group playing on the lawn by the drive, obviously trying to assess their potential ages and began counting. Suddenly she started to giggle. "I have *six* grandsons!"

Elizabeth looked to Darcy who was also starting to see the humour of the situation. Poor Mrs. Bennet! Jane had given her two granddaughters and Kitty three more. Now Elizabeth, whom she had forgotten was married, had shown up suddenly on her doorstep, with one of the wealthiest men in the land, and six strong sons by him. Yes, it was a very happy and humorous thought indeed.

Suddenly Mrs. Bennet stopped laughing. Her face showed great concern and Elizabeth was worried her mother had gained a talent for mathematics. "Lizzy! Please do not tell me that Mr. Darcy's estate is somehow entailed away to only the *female* line of his family!" she asked, truly worried.

It took but a moment for Darcy to comprehend the odd route by which his mother-in-law's mind travelled. He quickly reassured her, "Not at all, my dear Mrs. Bennet. I can assure you Elizabeth and I have six sons from our own choice, not to fulfil any obligations of heredity." She relaxed visibly.

"Would you like to meet them, Mama?" Elizabeth asked.

"Oh, yes, Lizzy, but dear me, this room is not nearly large enough for such a group. Mary, do you think I might go down to the drawing room today? We could ask Louise and Carol to come and help me down the stairs."

"If you would allow me, Mrs. Bennet, I would be happy to carry you to the drawing room when you are ready. Would that be acceptable?" Mrs. Bennet beamed at her new son-in-law.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy! That is most kind of you. I would be very grateful to you, Sir."

"Madam, it would please me greatly if you would call me Fitzwilliam or at least Darcy. I am family after all."

Mrs. Bennet giggled again. "Goodness me, I do not think I could call you by your given name. I have known you far too long as Mr. Darcy. I think Darcy will do nicely, though. Thank you...Darcy."



WHEN THE DARCY BOYS were lined up to meet their grand-mamma, Mrs. Bennet became overwhelmed. She smiled faintly, her lip began to tremble and then a tear fell from her eye.

"Dearest Lizzy, I do beg your pardon, but you see, there was a time when this is what I wished for your dear papa more than anything. Seeing your handsome sons here in front of me, reminds me so much of my dear Thomas and what we had hoped to achieve. Please do not think less of me; I am very happy that you have these dear boys to call your own."

"Your own as well, dear Mama. They are your grandsons, too, do not forget."

"No indeed, they *are* my grandsons, just as much Bennet as they are Darcy."

Elizabeth began the introduction with her eldest, William, who was seventeen at the time. Next came Thomas Patrick, a sensible boy of eleven who, of all the Darcy sons, resembled his father most in character. William's studies and thoughts tended to keep his mind occupied no matter where he might be, therefore Thomas had easily slipped into the role of eldest brother when it came to responsibilities and being an example to his younger siblings.

Next, she introduced Harold George, nearly ten, and named after his Darcy ancestors. Harold was the gregarious member of the family. He was wild for any sort of gathering, kept his sleeves and knees impeccable and was already disturbingly aware of any pretty lady who might be in the vicinity. Elizabeth and Darcy would never admit it to each other, but they both assumed Harold would be the first of their sons to wed.

Eight-year-old Richard Edward stood silently as was his nature. His quiet composure and stealthy speed made him the unofficial guardian to the almost twins, Charles and Andrew. While the two younger boys were rumbustious as could possibly be, Richard's calm demeanour never failed to capture their attention, and they dutifully minded him, nearly all of the time.

"I am not a Bennet, I am a Darcy," huffed an indignant four-year-old Andrew, when his turn to bow came.

"Be quiet or you will upset *Oma*," chided his older, yet shorter brother, Charles.

Darcy looked to Elizabeth to see her reaction to her second youngest calling his new grandmother such a sweet

endearment. Charles had spent his early childhood speaking German and English together, and to this day, he, along with several of his brothers, bore accents from the country in which they were born.

Richard also tended toward the German, while Harold and Thomas had a decided Italian lilt to their English. William, when pressed, could both speak Italian with a perfect northern dialect, and change his English accent into an astoundingly thick Italian rendition, much to his brothers' delight.

Andrew's accent was undecided. He had spent a great deal of time in Germany and France; however, being the youngest of such a boisterous brood had a distinct disadvantage if one wished to voice an opinion. Consequently, Andrew rarely voiced anything.

In fact, when he was a small babe, his thumb proved the only receiver of any attention from his mouth, with the exception of a great quantity of food. Having five elder brothers who often stood in as nursemaids to him, proved very convenient to baby Andrew; he had only to point and grunt before instantly being rewarded with whatever he desired. Hence, he was already taller than his eleven months older brother, and would one day outgrow his entire set of siblings, his father and even his Uncle Patrick.



DERBYSHIRE, SIX WEEKS LATER

THE CARRIAGES DREW CLOSE to the beautiful home and Darcy could feel his heart pounding. His sons were chattering excitedly, knowing the last miles were being traversed. He called to his driver to stop both coaches, just as they made the well-known turn and the house itself was now in full view. He could hear the collective gasps from his family, and the staff who accompanied them.

Elizabeth leaned her head onto his shoulder. "A finer prospect I have never seen," she whispered sweetly into his ear.

Charles, Andrew and Richard clamoured to get a better look.

"Is that *our house*, Papa?" Richard asked.

Darcy chuckled. "It is. Welcome to Pemberley." He opened the window and shouted at his older sons behind him. "Welcome to Pemberley everyone!" An eruption of happy noises emanated from both carriages and they continued on to the house.

All the Darcy boys tumbled out of their confines the moment the horses stopped and eventually stood silent, waiting until their father finally stepped down from his coach, turned and handed his wife out.

Elizabeth looked around her and smirked at her husband. "Now I know why you insisted we stop so early last night. I wondered why we did not complete our journey to Pemberley yesterday."

Darcy merely gave her a mischievous smile and pulled strongly on her hand causing her to fall into his arms.

"Elizabeth, I have dreamt of bringing you here as my wife for so many years." He kissed her soundly then, in front of his sons, the complete staff of Pemberley lined up in their smartly cleaned uniforms, the tenants of the estate, their families and then what seemed like half of Derbyshire, all present to welcome the long absent master and mistress. When he at last released her lips, he had the good manners to blush, though he could not contain his smile.

He turned to the gathering. "Good people, it is with the utmost happiness that I present to you all my wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy, Mistress of Pemberley."

The next hour was spent in a receiving line, with all of the Darcys meeting the local populace, Will often giving a history to his family of the people they were meeting. When they finally got to the end, the master announced another surprise: an invitation to everyone for the combination of a welcome home celebration and harvest feast that very night.

"I did not want you to have to suffer the planning of such an event, dearest. I apologize for not informing you ahead of time. Will you forgive me for wanting to show you off?"

Elizabeth laughed lightly, nodded and the two walked into their home.

"Georgie! Patrick!" she exclaimed when she entered.



LATER THAT EVENING, AS the harvest moon was rising like a great glowing orb over Pemberley, Darcy watched with immense satisfaction as his wife chattered with his sister and Jane in the corner. They had seen the Bingleys only a fortnight ago at Longbourn, but Darcy had secretly brought them to Pemberley for the homecoming and another surprise he had planned.

After the bounty of food had been consumed, musicians had appeared at the end of the meal and began to tune up. At a nod from the master, they suddenly stopped, as did the rest of the throng when Darcy cleared his throat rather loudly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, twenty years ago today I made the most grievous mistake of my life and tonight, I mean to correct it." He turned to the family table, where his sons sat rosy-cheeked and happily taking in all the amazing sights surrounding them in their new home. "My sons, you might not appreciate the lesson I am about to pass on to you now, though you might be old enough, William." the crowd

snickered appreciatively. "However, I will ask you heed my words and remember that anything that comes out of your mouth should reflect the very best of what you can be. Always assume the world can hear what you say, so that you will always say something worth hearing."

With that, he looked to his brother-in-law. "Bingley?"

Bingley stood and came to him, then began in a very wooden, yet loud voice, "Darcy, I must have you dance."

"I certainly shall not, Bingley."

"Behind you is one of Miss Bennet's sisters, who is very pretty, and I dare say, very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you." Several people giggled.

"Which do you mean?" Darcy then turned and looked directly at Elizabeth. "Bingley, I think I may have once thought to put you off by giving such a woman no consequence, and indeed, I may have once thoughtlessly said she was not handsome enough to tempt me to ask her for a dance."

The crowd gasped and Elizabeth laughed, yet her eyes were glazed.

He turned to his friend and clapped him soundly on the shoulder, "However, with time comes wisdom, and I can only answer," he turned back to his wife, "yours is a brilliant suggestion. I can think of no greater pleasure than dancing while looking into a pair of fine eyes in the face of the handsomest woman I have ever seen. I shall do exactly as you suggest." He gave an imperceptible nod to the musicians who started their introduction quietly while Darcy walked to his wife's side.

"Miss Bennet, will you do me the great honour of dancing with me?"

Elizabeth smiled sweetly through her tears. "Mr. Darcy, I think I should be delighted to give you my hand."

With that, the master and mistress of Pemberley waltzed onto the floor.



41 YEARS LATER, 1872

WILLIAM SIGHED AS THE carriage pulled up to the grand entrance at Pemberley. He slowly stepped out and stretched his weary legs which had been cramped for two days in various coaches, trains and ships. He could see some of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren on parts of the property, along with his sisters-in-law and the nannies.

He met Andrew first. A shadow passed over his face, startling him, when his youngest brother caught him in an embrace.

"About time, old man," he chided William. "Thomas has been at his wits' end, which was not a far distance to travel."

William rolled his eyes at him. Andrew's clever wit and his imposing size were, in William's opinion, the two biggest factors that got him elected to Parliament. He could not deny that Andrew was an overpowering presence. "How is Abby?"

"Quite well, she is concentrating on my eldest daughter's presentation at court." William frowned. "No, you have not gone mad, Annabel is only thirteen yet her mother thinks it is never too early." They both laughed. "Come, I think most of us are playing billiards."

He was correct; all but Thomas were escaping the bustle of all the children in the house. William greeted his second youngest brother, the honourable judge, Charles Darcy, hoping that he and Andrew would make it through just one day without arguing with one another. Charles found himself defending most of his beliefs and thoughts when in the presence of his youngest brother. Andrew, at least in William's eyes, merely did what he could to get a rise out of his stoic elder.

Richard and Harold were obviously in deep conversation with one another when William entered, no doubt carrying on a serious discussion about their respective properties. Harold had been gifted years ago by his parents with none other than Netherfield Park, when he announced, after only one year in society and only four and twenty years of age, that he wished to marry a pretty, yet very silly heiress whom all the Darcys knew had captured his fancy. Daphne Weston was equally smitten with her dear, clever Harry and doted upon him these last twenty-seven years. They were also the first to present grandchildren to Will and Elizabeth.

Richard's fortune had come just as early in life. When he was merely a boy, his father's cousin had come to stay with them for an extended time after his wife's death. What young Richard had not known was how much the elder cousin had come to pay attention to the cast off remarks the boy had always made under his breath, reminding him of Mrs. Darcy's father in wit, and endearing Richard to the elder gentleman for life. Several years later, when Richard Darcy graduated from Cambridge, he learnt he would one day inherit Rosings Park from Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. Richard, like Harold, thrived on his estate and raised an entire brood of happy children with his excellent wife, who married him because of how he could always make her laugh.

The brothers all greeted William and soon enough, Thomas Darcy, now master of Pemberley, entered. He embraced William heartily.

"I am very glad you are come, William," he said with great emotion.

"The estate looks splendid as always, Thomas. I always knew you were the one who should have it, that you were the one who could take care of our legacy properly."

"I owe it all to you, William. I shall never forget your sacrifice, or the good fortune you bestowed upon me."

"Nonsense!" his eldest brother scolded. "We both did what was right. I never want to hear talk of debts from you, young man."

They all laughed lightly, but the truth of Thomas' words rang true. The younger brothers did not remember the event, but the story of the argument their parents had, so soon after returning to England, was family legend. It apparently had lasted for days until finally their mother had conceded. Father and William rode out onto the property, and when they returned, they called Thomas into the library where William told his brother he had decided he did not wish to inherit Pemberley and would legally sign over his rights as first-born son and heir to the estate to the next in line. William left for France the next year and Thomas was now heir to Pemberley.

William knew what he said was true. He still remembered vividly his brother's face that first week they arrived in Derbyshire. Thomas was home. Since that day, Thomas rarely left the estate unless forced.

Thomas brought him out of his reverie. "How soon can you be ready to go up?"

He shook his head clear. "Let me change and make myself presentable, and I shall be with you in half an hour."



THE ROOM WAS BRIGHTENED by the sun pouring into the windows as it started its descent into the west. William trod carefully, making sure not to be noisy, lest the inhabitants be napping. They were, of course, despite the plenitude of light. His father was propped up by many pillows, yet his head was still tilted to the side where it rested on top of his mother's. They each had an open book in their laps, and their spectacles still sat upon their noses as they slept.

William sat in the well-worn chair next to them and watched carefully. He wondered if he and his dear Sophie would one day live to see their age. Would they be content to live out their days in a bed? He could not imagine his little spitfire of a wife ever settling down so; her grandparents *were* McNallys, after all. And, as the aching joints in his back reminded him, she was twenty-five years younger than he was. His inadvertent groan awakened them. His mother grasped his father's hand quickly as she uttered her surprise.

"Oh, William! My dear boy, here you are at last."

Darcy woke up and slowly turned to his son, smiling sweetly and closing his eyes again. Elizabeth moved to prod him but he stopped her with his words.

"I am not asleep; I am just taking my time in waking. Put that finger back." They all giggled.

William kissed them both and they caught up with all the news until the family gossip had been well and truly worked over.

"I have something wonderful to show you both," he said with glee. He carefully brought out a small box and un-

wrapped a card inside. He turned it so the afternoon sun shone directly onto it, as if it were a specially made lamp just for his presentation. His parents sat in awe.

"Is that...?" his father asked first.

"It is," William answered with no small amount of pride. "Taken six days ago. I am sorry I could not be here sooner, but we were so close, and I had hoped to be able to bring something like this back with me..."

"Oh, my love. Do not apologise; of course you wished to finish your work!" Elizabeth cried. "I am so happy for you. I am so proud of you! Oh, William! Your dream!" her tears fell unabashedly.

William embraced his parents. "I never could have done this without all you have done for me, all you have given me."

"No, son. This is your accomplishment. We are so proud you have made this happen. So many will benefit from what you have set in motion."

"This is yours," William said, handing it to the both of them.

Darcy took it in his hand, his head slowly shaking back and forth from amazement as he inspected it. "No, Son," he turned to Elizabeth, "this should be given to your mother. Without her sacrifices, as well as her wisdom, many things would have been different. It was she who decided to take the chance and move you to London, and then to Padua. She is the bravest person I know and also the most loving, for she did it all never knowing if there would ever be a day like today. She believed in your genius, William, and your spirit."

Elizabeth's brows rose despite her tears, reminding him of the young woman from sixty years earlier. He took her hand and gently raised it to his lips. "Bella Elizabetta," and placed the treasure in her shaking hands.

"I will take it for us both, then, dearest Will. For I should like to see the proof of my son's triumph when we wake each morning." She examined the treasure very cautiously. "I hope this means you will take some time to rest, my son. What are your plans?"

William smiled. "I plan to go home to Longbourn and make an heir."



HE STAYED THE WHOLE of the afternoon in their room until they once again had nodded off to sleep, his mother's head coming to rest upon his papa's shoulder and then his papa's head slowly lowering until touching hers. The sun was low in the sky throwing fiery gold into the room and illuminating the sleeping pair perfectly. William sat watching a long time, making cherished canvases of his parents in his mind.

Epilogue

Longbourn

LONDON, BLENDHEIM'S FINE ARTS AUCTION HOUSE,
131 YEARS LATER.

Nigel Worthington-Smith sat quietly at his desk staring at the picture on his computer screen. He quickly paged back through his notes to see what he had written from his initial phone call with the client, Mr. Jason Murdock.

American

inherited his great-uncle's estate, Longbourn, Hertfordshire

looking for valuables—drawn to this

needs estimated value

He looked back at the screen and attempted to stop the pounding in his heart.



“MR. MURDOCK, I NEED more information on the item you just emailed me. Can you tell me where it was discovered?”

Nigel's manager and the director of his division stood next to him while he spoke.

“I see...were there any other similar items in the trunk?”

He nodded his head enthusiastically at his bosses.

“Are any of them dated by any chance?”

He frowned.

“I'm sorry, did you say 1843? Are you sure it isn't 1893, the four is perhaps a nine? I see...excellent...pardon?” He quickly scribbled on his notepad. “Are you sure that is the title?”

His hands began trembling. He flashed his note at his manager who grinned wide.

“Yes, I believe Blendheim's would be very interested in seeing them, all of them, I suspect.”

The director pointed to the calendar.

Nigel raised his brows, but he nodded. “Would you be available to allow us on the estate tomorrow?”



JASON MURDOCK LOOKED ON with amusement at the men gathered in his uncle's attic. They wore crisp white gloves as they delicately handled each item being withdrawn from the trunk. He felt slightly guilty at his own haphazard methods of going through those same things just a week ago, but took comfort in knowing he had not truly damaged anything inside. Several grunts and non-committal “hms” had been uttered as something new was brought out, described, catalogued and packed for shipping.

When the trunk was finally empty, and the other workers were storing away their personal belongings, Mr. Worthington-Smith approached him.

“Mr. Murdock, allow us to thank you once again for taking up so much of your time. We have made a list of the items we wish to investigate further, and it is ready for your approval, along with our insurance certificates. But before we finish, we should like to get more information about your family, sir.”

Jason was surprised. “My family?”

“Yes, sir. The man who left you this estate, Victor Darcy, he was your great-uncle?”

“Yes, my late Grandpa John's older brother.”

“I see, then your mother married an American, named Murdock?”

“Actually, no, it was Grandpa John who married the American. The marriage caused quite a fight since his father and brother didn't approve of my grandmother's family.”

Mr. Worthington-Smith pushed, “Please, go on.”

“My grandmother was Sally Murdock. Of the Westport Murdocks?” Mr. Worthington-Smith shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

“Her family was very wealthy, which should have made his father happy. But Grandma Sally's family fortune had been made by an ancestor, also called Sally Murdock, when she emigrated from England as a widow in the early 1800's and opened one of the most profitable brothels in Boston. She was rumoured to have been one of the founders of the infamous Ann Street, the most notorious red-light district in America at the time. The Murdocks had since gone into respectable businesses by the time Grandpa John was around in the forties of course, but that stain was apparently too great for the Darcys in spite of all grandma's money.

“Grandpa was so angry, he moved to America, changed his name from Darcy to Murdock and hardly spoke to his family again. I think he never did reconcile with this father.”

“Your great-uncle had no children?”

“Uncle Victor never got married. He was supposed to have been some sort of spy in the war, and lost his leg. When he came home and Grandpa left with Grandma Sally, he just sort of withdrew. The neighbours here have told me he lived a very quiet life.”

“Do you happen to know the name of John and Victor’s father?” Mr. Worthington-Smith asked.

“It was Frederick. Gramps had four aunts and his father, Frederick, was the baby. I guess he was a surprise since the sisters were so much older. Gramps talked about his four very prim and proper old aunts. I don’t know who Frederick’s father was though. I’m sorry. I may find it when going through more of the family papers later.”

“Yes, please. If you could provide a family tree to us, it would be very helpful. I would love to tell you we shall be contacting you very soon, but authenticating is a tedious business. We stand behind everything we say, so must be very careful before making promises. We will get to the bottom of your little mystery, however, and provide you with an estimated value if you decide you wish to sell at auction.”



SIX MONTHS LATER

JASON WALKED INTO THE elegant building of Blendheim’s London on Oxford Street and was startled to find himself directed to the offices of the owner. A large conference table commanded the centre of the room, set with fine china and an ornate sterling silver tea service. Nigel Worthington-Smith was soon introducing him to the director of the division and then the owner himself.

“This is my second favourite part of my job, Mr. Murdock, informing our customers of the value of their pieces,” he said enthusiastically.

“What is your favourite part?” Jason asked.

Mr. Worthington-Smith looked at him incredulously. “Selling them, of course.”

Soon the meeting was called to order and Jason took a seat in a plush leather chair. There were several people seated around him to whom he had not been introduced and his curiosity was piqued as to why so many were sitting in on his meeting.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to start by introducing you all to our client, Mr. Jason Murdock, whose excellent eye caught this exquisite piece.” He gestured to the glass box at the head of the room, which sat in a perfect beam of light from above, obviously a commonly used display location for their works of art. Inside was Jason’s photograph.

“Our first priority in evaluating any piece of art is to determine what it is, who made it and when it was made. You can imagine it is not always a simple procedure to find any of these answers.

“The piece in question is extremely similar to a very famous photograph, to which we could easily compare it.”

The wall behind Mr. Worthington-Smith opened up to reveal a screen and an enlarged version of an image, nearly identical to Jason’s, appeared. “As you can see, it looks exactly like yours, sir, with the exception of the addition of the two men in the lower left corner, standing on the hill.”

“They must have taken this directly after or before mine,” Jason said.

“A possibility we very much wished to prove, Mr. Murdock. Therefore, our next priority was to identify the men. The smaller man on the right was easily recognised. He is Louis Ducos du Hauron, the man who took the famous photograph. He had a partner, Charles Cros, who is also well known, however the man standing next to Hauron is not Cros.”

“Why do you think he is important? Maybe he’s the guy who drove them out to the hill.” Jason asked nonchalantly.

Mr. Worthington-Smith laughed lightly, “No, Hauron knew this particular image could be very significant and would not treat the subjects in it lightly. This man’s presence was intentional. We were convinced early on that discovering his name was paramount. Which is why we turned to the contents of the trunk where you found it. We often find the location the objects are found in helps in identifying them and your trunk eventually proved useful, yet also raised even more questions.”

He motioned to the side and several men brought in four easels with large frames which featured many of the other photographs Jason remembered from the trunk. They placed the frames around the room facing the conference table. There were many murmurs among the people there. Jason sat bewildered.

“These are not what you might have originally thought, Mr. Murdock. Although photography had taken off by the 1860’s these are much earlier, circa 1840’s. They were captured by a method known as the Calotype process invented by William Henry Fox Talbot here in England in the late 1830’s. The process was difficult to do and the general populace had very little chance to use it due to Fox Talbot’s patents which were prohibitively expensive. That makes these particular pieces very rare.”

“Forgive the interruption, Nigel. But the one with the reclining man looks amazingly like the famous Fox Talbot photograph ‘Henneman Asleep,’” said a lively woman across from Jason.

“You also have an excellent eye, Valerie. We have indeed been able to confirm that it is Nicolaas Henneman.”

The room was filled with whispers. Nigel pressed a button and the screen behind him showed an enlargement of an image of a man sleeping in a chair. “This is the famous ‘Henneman Asleep’ by Talbot, circa 1843.”

He turned his back to Jason, “Henneman was an odd character. He was Talbot’s assistant and Talbot even set Henneman up in London to do photography years later. However, he was originally the man’s valet.” Jason was frowning hard causing Nigel to laugh slightly. “Yes, to

this day it remains an oddity. Henneman was Dutch, yet trained in France and then came here to work. Why Talbot trained someone with a servant's education as his assistant, no one could guess."

Heads were turning back and forth furiously until Nigel clicked to the next slide. The two enlarged images sat side by side. The second, Jason's picture, showed the same man in a slightly different pose. His legs had moved and his hand had come to rest on the arm of the chair.

"An original Fox Talbot! Congratulations, Mr. Murdock!" the man to Jason's left exclaimed.

"Um...thank you," he replied.

Nigel smiled once again. "Yes, we believe it is most certainly a Talbot."

"It seems I had an ancestor who collected early photos."

"Possibly, but the men who took these photographs would not have parted with them for mere money. Which leads us to yet a third set." He nodded once more and another set of easels and framed photos were brought out. The whispers grew enormously.

"These were taken by a third process called Wet Collodion. It was invented in 1849 here in England by a young man named Frederick Scott Archer who lived in London as a photographer. He did not patent his invention, and he also did not introduce it to the world until 1851 when he published an account of it in a chemical journal."

Jason was nodding, trying to understand the consequences of the numbers Nigel was throwing at him. Once again, an enlargement came on the screen, this time of a gentleman reading a newspaper on a bench in the park.

"This is one of the Collodion images from your trunk, sir." He clicked again and the screen zoomed onto the date on the newspaper: May 24, 1850.

"Could he just be holding an old newspaper?" Valerie asked.

"Fortunately, we do not have to prove the date." The photo zoomed back out. "Do you see the building in the background? The Lancaster Theatre? It burned to the ground in October of 1850.

"We were able to date this one, and later authenticate that the others are not reproductions. The fact that these are original Archer Collodions, taken at least a year before the rest of the world began to produce them in great quantities means their value is increased dramatically." The people in the room were nodding enthusiastically.

"However, our original problem was not yet solved; we still wanted to know who the man in the Hauron photo was. In addition, a larger question now loomed before us; how did all these important pieces of history come to be in your family's possession? To answer that, we asked you for your family tree and later, we tried to match which ancestors would have been living at the time the different photos were taken. Only one person fit the time frame; your great-great grandfather, William Bennet Cartwright Darcy."

"How did he get them?"

"How indeed, Mr. Murdock? To find the answer to that, we began to research William Darcy. Do you know much about him?"

"Not a thing. I don't believe my Grandpa John ever knew him."

"No, he would not have. He died long before your grandfather was born. William Darcy was really an extraordinary man. His father, Fitzwilliam and mother, Elizabeth lived in Italy when he was a boy. Our investigation found out that William was admitted to the University of Padua when he was only eight years old. He received what you would call a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics, chemistry and physics before he left at only twelve years of age."

Jason was stunned.

"He went on to the University of Bonn to continue to study all three subjects and received the equivalent of a Doctoral degree in each by the time he was seventeen."

"A child prodigy."

Mr. Worthington-Smith nodded. "Without a doubt. His family returned to England after he graduated from Bonn, but he then left for Paris and continued to study and eventually taught chemistry there."

"How did you learn all this? I can't imagine it was easy to find out about my ancestor's going to European schools?"

"Ah, that is where your trunk proved invaluable." He clicked on the screen again and a photo of a worn leather book appeared.

"Did you happen to look through this at all, Mr. Murdock?"

"I did look through it briefly, yes. It appeared to be a diary of some sort. It was rather hard to read the fancy writing."

Nigel clicked to the next page; there on screen was a page from the journal. He sighed. "It is a very elegant hand, but if you are not used to the style, it can be difficult to read. This journal was written by William's father, Fitzwilliam. This is where we learned of William's education and much more.

"However, it was *these* diaries," another book came on screen, "that provided us with answers we didn't even know we were looking for." A page came on screen, this time in a different hand.

"Is that Italian?" someone asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. It is Italian, however if anyone here is fluent, I am sure they have already concluded that this seems to be nonsensical. It is, of course, because it is written in *code*."

Several eyebrows shot up.

"Someone had something to hide?" Jason asked.

"Someone did not want to be found out, is more the truth, Mr. Murdock. After knowing the man's genius, it did not take much on our part to conjecture these were written by William Darcy. Handwriting analysis comparing it to letters we found in the trunk confirmed William had written them. Normally we might not have pursued such a challenge had we not made a startling discovery."

Here Mr. Worthington-Smith's division director stepped in. "The discovery was yours, Nigel. You were the one to notice the similarities and start us down the path."

Nigel blushed. "Thank you, sir. After we made our discovery, we spent some time having the diaries deciphered. William Darcy was brilliant at codes and gave us quite a hard time of it. Interestingly, it was William's *father* who provided the answer to breaking it. Apparently, William often wrote to his father in code and Fitzwilliam put the key in his journal. The rest then fell into place."

"Get on with it, Smith," complained the owner. The company laughed.

He clicked on the next photo. "Do you recognize either of these paintings, Mr. Murdock?"

"The family picture is the one that hangs in the drawing room at Longbourn."

"Yes. The individual portrait is young William Darcy and the other is the Fitzwilliam Darcy family. William is standing next to his father; the baby is his brother Thomas, who would one day inherit his father's estate, Pemberley, instead of the eldest son, William, an occurrence practically unheard of at the time. William Darcy would instead inherit Longbourn from his mother's father."

"Why wouldn't William inherit Pemberley, too? Did he and his father have some sort of estrangement?"

"Not in the least. According to Fitzwilliam's diary, William gave up his birthright to his younger brother of his own volition when he was eighteen years old."

The Englishmen around the table gasped. "Whatever for?" one astonished man asked.

"Perhaps because he knew he was going to be too busy to be a proper master to such an enormous estate."

"Busy doing what?" Jason asked.

"This," Mr. Worthington-Smith said triumphantly. The screen then focused on the face in the painting of young William Darcy and it began to change before the viewers.

"Age progression technology," someone whispered.

Slowly William's face began to age through childhood, his teen years and then into a young handsome man, very similar to his father. The progression stopped there, and the words

1842, age: twenty-eight

flashed across the bottom of the screen. The picture then moved to one side and another face slowly came into view. Jason could hear the gasps around the room when finally, side by side, were the faces of Henneman sleeping in the chair and the young William Darcy. They were the same man.

The room erupted in noises. Nigel spoke up to be heard above the crowd. "The age progression you watched was done by an independent laboratory that had no idea who we hoped William would look like."

"Were there no other images of William Darcy?"

"None that we could find. We suspect he was quite determined to stay hidden. Fortunately for us, age progression allows us to make pictures of him at any age. If these photos had been discovered as recently as twenty years ago, we would not have had the technology to prove our theories."

"Hennemann was really an English chemist!"

"What of Archer? How does he fit into this?" Valerie asked

"They met in London, after Talbot set up Darcy, as Hennemann, with the photography studio. Darcy collaborated with Archer and helped him discover the newer process that was much quicker and cheaper.

"Darcy had the chemistry experience Archer, and we suspect Talbot, needed. He also talked Archer into not patenting the process, unlike Talbot, and that meant thousands of people could finally afford to have photographs made."

"All this was in Darcy's journals?"

Worthington-Smith nodded. "It was."

Jason could hear the two behind him in heated discussion beneath their whispers. "The Gustave Le Gray photos from 1857, went for over a quarter million pounds each."

"I cannot imagine what the Talbots and Hennemans would go for these days. Nor the Archers. The 1842 Girault de Prangey sold earlier this year set the world record for a photograph—over five hundred thousand pounds."

Jason felt a large lump in his throat. He looked around at the quantity of photographs and quickly started to add the potential worth in his head while Nigel Worthington-Smith continued.

"Ladies and gentleman, we are not quite finished, if you could be patient for one minute more." He pressed the button again and William Darcy continued to age, until at last he was an elderly man. Once again, the age progression stopped and the words read

1872, age: fifty-eight

When the picture moved to the side, most knew what was going to appear in the empty side.

Jason's photograph of the two men on the hill came into view. The colours were weak by modern standards, yet the green hues of the grass, the trees behind them, the blue of the sky and the yellows and browns in the stone church in the village below were breathtaking compared to the black and white photos seen before. The screen then slowly zoomed in on the face of the taller man.

"Ladies and gentleman, I present to you a very modest man, who tenaciously avoided recognition for his achievements. A wily character who did his best to remain disguised as a simple scholar and never as the enabling mastermind behind modern photography. I give you a new face for the annals of the history of photography: William Bennet Cartwright Darcy."

The room exploded in applause for several moments.

“Mr. Murdock, as interesting as this fascinating story has been for us all, I am sure you would like to know the potential value of your photos. Based on recent prices at auction, and the incomparable consequence of your collection, we would value them as follows: the Talbot and Hennemann photos together could fetch somewhere between six and eight million pounds; the Archer photos are slightly less rare as they are not as old, so would fetch between two and three million pounds. Lastly, the Hauron photo, the prize of the collection because of its historical significance, we feel would bring in between two and three million pounds. This means we believe the entire collection would sell for a minimum of twenty million pounds.”

The applause began again. He sat shocked as *twenty million pounds, twenty million pounds*, drummed into his head. Suddenly he stopped and asked, “What is the historical significance of the Hauron photo?”



SEVEN YEARS LATER

JASON MURDOCK WALKED CAREFULLY up the myriad of stone steps to the Royal Academy of Photographic Arts and Sciences, making sure his young son did not trip. They quickly got in line and soon were entering the exhibit Jason had waited so long to show his son.

A huge portrait stood before them.

“Is that my grandfather?” the wide-eyed boy asked.

“It is, but the picture is bigger than he really was.”

He nodded, relieved.

The exhibit was set up in chronological order, starting with the first time William Darcy was involved in photography. Jason read to his son,

“Summer 1826, William Henry Fox Talbot visits Lake Como, Italy and meets twelve-year-old Darcy who is on holiday with his family. Talbot is taken aback by this enthralling young boy, and the two have an in-depth conversation about the camera obscura, and camera lucida to aid in drawing. The conversation is one that Talbot would remark on throughout his life as the inspiration years later for developing the Calotype process of photography.”

“He was only twelve?”

“Yes, he was a very smart boy. He had already been going to college by then and studied things that only adults usually studied.”

“What does the next part say?” he asked.

“When William was eighteen he went to study chemistry in Paris and that is where he learned about photography. There were two Frenchmen who had made a photograph

that lasted. Before that, any picture would fade away very quickly on the paper.

“William thought the photos were very good, but it took a long time to take them. Too long for most people to sit. He worked for a few years on experiments to see if he could make it easier and quicker to make the pictures, but it wasn’t possible. So he moved back to England and went to work for Mr. Talbot.”

“The one he met at the lake when he was a little boy?”

“Yes, but now he was grown up, he didn’t tell Mr. Talbot that he was the little boy. In fact, he pretended not to be English and got a job as a valet—like a butler.”

“Why would he want to be a butler?”

Jason laughed, “He used it as a way to get close to Mr. Talbot and see how well he was making his photos. Eventually Mr. Talbot allowed William to work with him on the photos, and he became his assistant. He learned a lot, and became a famous photographer. See these pictures? Those are your relatives. That is a picture of your great-great-grandparents.”

“Grandma has pretty eyes.”

Jason cocked his head and smiled. “She certainly does. The rest are all of William’s brothers and their families. They are all your uncles and aunts.”

“Then what did he do?” the boy asked, now excited about this adventure.

“He moved to London to take more pictures and met a young man by the name of Frederick Scott Archer. He helped Mr. Archer develop another way to make photos, called the collodion process. It is pretty much the way we make all photographs now.”

“Is that the end?”

“No. He stopped for a while and got married to his cousin.” The boy made a face, causing his father to laugh. “Not like your Aunt Ellen’s daughter. He married his Aunt Georgiana’s granddaughter.”

“Wasn’t he really old?”

“Not really. Less than ten years older than I am.”

He shrugged off his interest. “What next?”

“Well, after they had four little girls, he took another trip to France, this time to work with a man who wanted to make colour photographs.”

“You mean they could only make the black and white ones at first?”

“Yes, and making colour photos was very hard: nobody had done it. William worked a long time with a Mr. Du Hauron until they finally made these two pictures.”

They had come to the last part of the exhibit, and there was a copy of the famous photo Nigel Worthington-Smith had shown him so many years ago, and Jason’s real photo next to it.

“The tall man is your grandfather, the shorter is Du Hauron. They took these pictures, the world’s first two colour photographs, one right after the other.”

“Are you sure that is William? It is hard for me to tell with his beard and the glasses.”

“It is him. The men here at the museum had to work like detectives to prove it was him, but they did it.

“Do you see this?” Jason pointed to a glass case at the end, where three books lay open inside. “The first book, the red one, is a journal written by William’s father, Fitzwilliam. When they read it, they found out about how smart William was and how he went to college when he was only eight years old. Later they learned about all the places William traveled, because his father wrote about it in the book. That is how they started thinking maybe William was the man in the photograph. The next book belongs to William’s son, Frederick.”

“Frederick, like Mr. Arch?”

“Mr. Archer. Yes, William named his son after his friend who he missed very much. Mr. Archer died when he was very young. William’s son wrote about all the things that his father had done, too.

“The last book belongs to William. He wrote about working with all these men who were trying to invent photography and he also wrote about why it was important to him to help them be successful.”

“Why was it important, Dad?”

“Because William had a very special mind. He had a gift that allowed him to make a picture in his head, without a camera.”

They had turned the final corner of the exhibit and there, standing tall was the image of a page from William’s secret coded diary and next to it, in a fine cursive hand that looked identical, was the translation. “How about if I read to you what William said about why he wanted to succeed?”

His son stood touching a large brass plaque and looked up to his father. “Yes, please. But first read this.”

“It says all the photos and artifacts in this exhibit were contributed by the Murdock-Darcy Family Foundation in honour of their benevolent ancestor, William Bennet Cartwright Darcy.”

“Hey! That’s my name!”

“It sure is, William. Want to hear this last part?”

William nodded, and his father read the following:

France, June 14, 1872

Hauron, Cros and I went to Agen yesterday and took two photographs on the hill on the south end of the town. The breeze was non-existent, the colours glorious and the sun cooperative. It was as if the hand of God reached down to us and gave us the blessing to finally, finally, copy what has always been inside me. Louis and Charles laughed later when we had the proof in our hands and I could not help my tears. My head aches today from all the wine we drank but I cannot be sad. I feel I have finally come to the end of my journey and it has been well worth my effort. Tomorrow I leave for Pemberley with my little prize in my pocket, my colour photograph.

I dedicate my achievement to my bella mamma, Elizabeth Darcy. She wanted me to contribute to the greater good of the world, to give something to humanity if at all possible. She said my intelligence was a rare gift and should not be wasted, yet I never felt pressured by her, despite those great ominous words. She loved me, and taught me, yet was never envious of my supposed genius. There was only one thing of mine she ever wished for, and I have spent my life making sure she, and everyone else, could have a small bit of it. My dream was to give others the joy of making pictures, and never have to worry over wasting the canvases.



*“Henneman Asleep”
by William Henry Fox Talbot*

The End

