

Chapter 1

“You deceive no one, Mr Darcy,” his wife accused lovingly. “You worry for Georgiana’s well being.”

“As do you, Mrs Darcy,” he countered as he lifted the three-month-old Bennet from the boy’s crib and supported the child in the crook of his arm. Whenever the boy was near, Fitzwilliam Darcy felt compelled to hold his special miracle. He had his heir, at last, and he had spent countless hours just staring at the perfection of Bennet Fitzwilliam George Darcy’s countenance. “You cannot tell me that my sister’s lack of correspondence has not rubbed against your curiosity.”

Elizabeth Darcy smiled knowingly. Her husband was a man of honor and of responsibility and of passion. Contentment had softened his grim expression. “Unlike you, my Husband, my curiosity does not paint pictures of invading hordes. I simply wish to share in Georgiana’s happiness. She and Edward deserve this time together, but I admit to being interested in how they have adjusted.”

Darcy took a nearby chair and cradled the child to him. He peeled the blanket from the boy’s face and traced a line along his son’s chin line. He thought he recognized his father’s features in his heir’s countenance, but Elizabeth insisted it was too early to know for certain. “I should not have allowed her to travel alone,” he chastised himself.

“Georgiana is long removed from the school room. Our sister is a married woman. She has a husband to protect her. It is no longer your obligation,” she insisted.

Darcy’s actions spoke of tenderness, but his words possessed a granite resolve. “Georgiana’s safety is forever my obligation. Even Edward cannot usurp my charge.”

Elizabeth moved swiftly to kneel before him. “No one can sever your bond to Georgiana, and I am not simple enough to suggest that you should ignore your responsibilities. Yet, I shall suggest that we permit Georgiana some latitude. Wellington’s last push to rid the world of Napoleon has robbed your sister of the wedding of which she has always dreamed. She and Edward married in a rush before your cousin returned to the battlefields. Georgiana merely wanted time to prepare the Fitzwilliam properties for Edward’s return. She is still discovering what it means to be a wife.”

“I, Georgiana Cassandra Anne Darcy, take thee, Edward Thomas Cullen Fitzwilliam, to my lawful wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”

His sister’s eyes had sparked with the devotion she had offered their cousin. Darcy was slow to admit that Georgiana gloved when she looked upon Edward’s weather worn face. Despite the evidence of the couple’s affection for each other, Darcy had wanted to scream with the injustice of having to give “his” Georgiana to any man—even one as perfect as Major General Edward Fitzwilliam. She was “his little sister”—not old enough to be exchanging her wedding vows and leaving him behind.

“My mind knows the truth of your words, Mrs Darcy, but my heart speaks a different language.” He caressed Elizabeth’s neck. “I have fretted over Georgiana for too many years to no longer give a care.”

“She did send word of her safe arrival,” Elizabeth insisted.

“That was some three weeks prior,” he countered.

Elizabeth leaned in for a quick kiss and then stood. “Must I remind you that Edward was expected the week after our sister’s arrival? Do you not suppose that the Fitzwilliams are enjoying their time together? Allowing themselves the opportunity to discover a new love. A new relationship,” she argued. “Oh, my darling,” Elizabeth coaxed, “you must realize that the Major General is coming to terms with the fact that the girl he protected as a child is now a woman.”

She handed Darcy a wooden dowel that the young Bennet preferred as a teething tool. “Christmastide thrust Edward and Georgiana together for a few days here and there, and just when they had thought to marry and create a life together, Bonaparte’s escape from Elba ripped them apart. They had but three days as husband and wife before...” Elizabeth’s voice trailed off. She blushed thoroughly before adding, “Do you not think that the Major General and Mrs Fitzwilliam are claiming their shared life?”

Darcy’s frown lines met. “That is not an image in which I care to indulge,” he grumbled.

Elizabeth laughed lightly. “Cannot tolerate thoughts of Georgiana enjoying intimacies with her husband?” she taunted playfully.

Darcy rose to place the child on the blanket Elizabeth had arranged on the Persian carpet decorating her sitting room. “I will not entertain such thoughts,” he warned. “Otherwise, I will be on horseback and riding toward Galloway to challenge my cousin to a duel.”

Elizabeth good-naturedly swatted at him as he passed her. “I am just saying that your sister has other things on her mind.”

“I will hear no more of such nonsense.” His hand rested on the room’s doorknob.

Elizabeth smiled mockingly. “Of course, my Husband. Not considering Georgiana’s marital state shall make it nonexistent.” Darcy closed the door behind him, but even through the thick wood he could hear his wife’s soft laughter.

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Elizabeth did not understand. In fact, in Darcy’s opinion, no one understood. His relationship with Georgiana transcended the expected connection between brother and sister. Despite his father’s last request or possibly because of it, Darcy had devoted himself to Georgiana’s happiness. He had given her the best education and the best life imagined. Elizabeth could not comprehend the depth of his feelings for Georgiana—for the small child who lost both of her parents—for the little girl who had clung to him in her grief.

His devotion to his sister had even played out in his choosing of Elizabeth Bennet as his wife. Her affectionate behavior to Jane Bennet while her sister lay ill at Netherfield had formed the basis of his early interest in the second Bennet sister. He had instantly recognized Elizabeth as the type of woman Georgiana needed in her life. His sister had possessed an elegant softness, but she lacked a touch of impertinence, the very quality he had discovered in Elizabeth Bennet. And his opinions had proved correct. Under Elizabeth’s tutelage, Georgiana had blossomed into the perfect balance of femininity.

“I will wait one week more, and then I am to Scotland,” he swore.

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Elizabeth realized her teasing had not allayed her husband’s qualms. They had not assuaged her own, so she was not foolish enough to think that it might dissuade the formidable Fitzwilliam Darcy. She, too, had spent countless hours pacing the floor fretting over Georgiana’s lack of correspondence. It was not typical of her husband’s sister to ignore her family. Even with

hopes of marital felicity for Georgiana, Elizabeth recognized how out of character this situation had become. She had teased and taunted her husband to hide her own angst.

Could the Major General have been delayed? Worst yet, could the couple have found little in common upon which to base their relationship? Elizabeth had recognized Georgiana's idyllic admiration for her cousin, and she now wondered if Darcy's sister had rushed into a "safe" marriage. "If that be so, Georgiana shall need to discover a ground upon which to build a successful joining. I shall wait a few more days for word from Mrs Fitzwilliam before I encourage my husband to seek an answer in Scotland."

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"I do not think this is wise," Darcy had told Georgiana when she had informed him of her desire to change the date for her joining with their cousin Edward. The Major General had arrived with other family members for the christening of Darcy's heir and had brought the news of his immediate deployment to the Belgium front. "Why can you not wait for the Major General's return?"

"What if Edward does not return?" she said softly. "What if this is the last time we see him?"

Darcy's heart had lurched with dread at the possibility. Although he understood his sister's worst fear, his own need to protect her had prevailed. "All the more reason to wait. I would not see you in mourning as a new bride."

"I would be in mourning for our cousin even if the Major General and I never married. I would grieve for Edward for the rest of my natural days." She touched her handkerchief to her eyes. "Please, Fitzwilliam, you of all people must comprehend my agony. Do you not recall your anguish when you thought to never know Elizabeth as your wife? That is my fate with Edward. I have loved our cousin for well over two years, but unlike your quest to earn Elizabeth's love, mine remained unspoken. I could not give voice to my desires. I have waited in the shadows—agonizing over Edward's safe return to the family. Now, I must snatch my moments with him while I may. Before it is too late. Do you not see? If we do not marry before Edward leaves for the Continent, I might never know the happiness that you have found with Elizabeth. Would you deny me this, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy slid his arm about her shoulders. He nudged her into his embrace, needing to once again hold the small girl whose world had rotated around him. Suddenly, he had realized his real objection to his sister's marriage: Georgiana's joining with Edward would mean that she would no longer require his advice. His protection. Especially with Edward as her husband. If Georgiana had chosen another, Darcy might continue to influence her, but their cousin was as good a man as Darcy could ever hope for his sister. And Edward had served as a joint guardian for Georgiana. Together, they had protected and guided her since the passing of Darcy's father. And now Georgiana would prefer the Major General to Darcy. He would no longer play a dominant role in his sister's life. Despite the real sense of loss choking him, Darcy's love required that he do the right thing. *It is not about my needs*, he had chastised himself. "When do you wish to marry?"

His sister launched herself into his embrace, and he tightened his grasp. She clung to him. "Thank you, Fitzwilliam," she murmured.

With his fingertips, Darcy lifted her chin and kissed the end of her nose. "No more tears," he said softly. He had whisked her tears away with his thumbs. "What do you require of me? How may I give you what you desire?"

“The Matlocks and Rowland’s family shall be at Pemberley tomorrow for Bennet’s naming on Sunday. The Major General and I would marry on Monday. Mr Winkler shall call the banns for the third time during Sunday’s services. Edward rides for Hull on Thursday.” A pink tint spread across her neck and face, before she added, “Might we have the dower house for privacy?”

Despite his best efforts, Darcy frowned. The idea of his sister enjoying the marriage bed bothered him more than he cared to admit. With a deep sigh, he said, “I will see to the details for the breakfast and the dower house. Send Edward to speak to Mr Winkler.” She had spontaneously hugged him, and Darcy fought the urge to keep her in his embrace forever. “Be off with you now,” he said as he purposely released her. “There are many details and little time.”

“You are the best brother a girl could ever have.” She kissed his cheek before scurrying from the room.

Darcy had stood looking after her. “And you are the sun to my Earth,” he whispered to her retreating form.

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“Good Morning, Father Bennet.” Elizabeth’s father had returned with them to Pemberley after Mary Bennet’s marriage to Robert Grange in April. The couple had thought to marry in February, but Elizabeth’s Uncle Philips had taken ill and as Mr Grange apprenticed in Philips’s law firm, the family had thought it best if they postponed the nuptials until Grange’s benefactor had recovered. “You were up late.”

“Good morning.” The man greeted him with the smirk of amusement that Darcy had found so beguiling when Elizabeth had sported the emotion on her luscious lips. His wife certainly had inherited her father’s mannerisms. “Too many books. So little time. If could take up residence in Pemberley’s library and never leave the room, I would die a well-satisfied man.”

Darcy chuckled. “The Pemberley library has been the work of many generations. I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these.” He accepted the tea the footman poured for him.

“I seriously doubt that you have ever neglected any detail of your life,” Mr Bennet observed wryly.

Darcy thought of his current neglect of Georgiana’s happiness and flinched as if struck. No matter how often he told himself that there was no reason for concern, he could not shake the feeling that there was something amiss. “And you, Sir, are you pleased with my propensity to do so?” Darcy openly roused himself to make polite conversation. “Keeping in mind, of course, that if not so, I would neglect your favorite daughter and the grandson bearing your name.”

“Point taken, Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet said. They dined in silence for several minutes, each man immersed in the newspapers Darcy had delivered to Pemberley as part of the regular post. “Last evening, I was reading the biography of Earl David of Huntingdon and his rise to King David II of Scotland,” Mr Bennet mumbled as he turned the page. “Possible ancestors?”

Darcy folded over the page he read. “Probable rather than possible,” he answered without looking up. “Says here that a volcano erupted on an Indian Ocean island in April. Some scientists are concerned about the amount of ash in the air.”

Mr Bennet put down his paper. “Really? That could cause problems. I read a report, which speculated on the devastation from an earlier New Zealand eruption. I cannot remember the exact source, but it spoke of widespread famine. At the time, it seemed a world away. Is it possible that the ash will reach England?”

“No one seems to know.” Darcy’s eyes scanned the article for the facts. “The Dutch have a colony near the eruption, but it has only been three months since the explosion. Still too early for accurate reports. Takes months to sail around the Horn. But we should be aware. Can Longbourn sustain potential losses?” He asked in honest response. Over the past few months, he and Mr Bennet had spent countless hours discussing their estate management plans.

“I remain indeterminate. We have known some setbacks of late,” Mr Bennet said cautiously.

“Before Miss Bennet’s wedding next week, we should spend time developing contingencies.”

Mr Bennet nodded. “You are a God send. Should we include Mr Bingley? He and Jane will arrive later today.”

Darcy’s eyes returned to the page. “That appears prudent. I will ask Bingley to join us.”

“Unfortunately, we will be beset with houseguests tomorrow. My peace will come to an end. Mrs Bennet will marry off the last of our daughters to Mr Winkler next week, and I will become her focus. My world will collapse to a daily dose of frills and lace.”

Darcy chuckled. “Maybe your prediction will not be so dire. You could always send the lady to visit with Mrs Wickham or to a European city...”

“Or a long stay at Pemberley,” Mr Bennet taunted.

Darcy barked out a laugh. “Although Mrs Darcy would welcome her mother’s company, how would that affect your sojourn in my estate’s library?”

“Again, point taken, Mr Darcy.”

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“And Mrs Bingley has agreed to this?” Darcy asked one of his closest friends as they sat in Darcy’s study.

Bingley shrugged. “It was Jane’s idea. Once Kitty marries, Mrs Bennet will be anxious to visit with her other daughters. My wife recalls all too well her mother’s interference in our lives while we were still at Netherfield. With the twins and young Jackson, my dear Jane simply has no time to pacify Mother Bennet’s nerves, and I will not have my wife exhausted by her need to please everyone. Therefore, I have pressed her to deny Mrs Bennet’s less than subtle hints for an invitation to Marwood Manor. Mrs Bingley’s solution was for us to take a holiday. If we are not in Cheshire, we cannot entertain the lady.”

“Although I appreciate how Mother Bennet tended to Elizabeth’s bruised soul when the Bennets visited Pemberley during Christmastide, I understand your reluctance at renewing the lady’s tendency to intrude on your wife’s easy nature. If our wives’ mother was a bit more sensible, it would be less of an imposition.” Darcy refilled Bingley’s glass. “I suggested to Mr Bennet that a journey to Carlisle might be advisable. It would seem that Mr Wickham should share in entertaining Mother Bennet.”

“God only knows that both of our wives have sent enough of their pin moneys to the couple to sustain Wickham’s lifestyle,” Bingley observed. “The man’s debt accumulates.”

Darcy did not mention how much he had settled on the Wickhams to guarantee their joining and to save the other Bennet sisters from ruin. “Then tell me of your destination.” Darcy turned the subject.

“My father’s brother held property between Dalry and Newton Stewart. It is a simple manor house, but more than adequate for the Bingleys of Cheshire. My uncle invested heavily in the Leswalt salt mines and in the Loch Ryan oyster beds.”

Darcy sipped his drink. "If Mother Bennet insinuates herself into your lives, you could deposit the dear lady in Wickham's lap on your way north."

"There is that." Bingley smiled with amusement.

"Will Mrs Bingley be well enough to travel so far after her confinement?" Darcy inquired.

"Jane is quite hardy in that respect. And it is another sennight before we depart. We will see Kitty wed and then take our leave."

Darcy thought of the delicate looking Jane Bingley and how she had easily delivered three children and of the robust appearance of his Elizabeth. Their joining had produced two stillbirths before finally knowing the happiness of holding Bennet in their arms. Appearances were deceiving. "I wish you a safe journey, my friend."

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"Charles and I would be pleased if you and Mr Darcy joined us," Jane Bingley told Elizabeth as they shared tea in the Pemberley nursery.

Elizabeth smiled as the wet nurse cradled Bennet in an intimate caress. Elizabeth had liked Mrs Prulock from the moment of their first meeting. "You plan to avoid the return of our mother's *nerves*," Elizabeth teased. "It is bad form, Jane."

Her sister blushed thoroughly. "Oh, do not say as such, Lizzy. I have anguished over this decision for weeks. Do you truly believe it selfish of me to consider this holiday so soon after our sister's wedding?"

Elizabeth chuckled. Her eldest sister held the kindest heart among the Bennet daughters. On more than one occasion, Elizabeth had envied her sister's goodness. It was Jane who had believed that George Wickham had married Lydia because he had held "a real regard for her." Jane had declared, "We must endeavor to forget all that has passed on either side. I hope and trust they will yet be happy. His consenting to marry her is a proof, I will believe, that he is come to a right way of thinking. Their mutual affection will steady them; and I flatter myself they will settle so quietly, and live in so rational a manner, as may in time make their past imprudence forgotten."

Of course, Jane had been completely in error. The Wickhams still held in spite of everything, the hope that Darcy might yet be prevailed upon to make Mr Wickham's fortune. It had been evident to Elizabeth, from the beginning, that such an income as the Wickhams possessed, under the direction of two persons so extravagant in their wants, and heedless of their future, must be very insufficient to their support. Whenever the Wickhams changed their quarters, either Jane or herself were applied to for some little assistance toward discharging the couple's bills.

"Dearest Jane," Elizabeth assured, "you have no guilt to own for our mother's care. Foremost, you have responsibilities to Mr Bingley and your children. You spent a twelvemonth at Netherfield before removing to Marwood Manor. Our mother's disposition and that of all our Meryton relations affected even Mr Bingley's amiable nature. Our husbands own our first loyalties." Elizabeth paused to gather her thoughts. "I no longer resent our mother's manipulations. She did what she could to place her daughters in the way of eligible young men, and despite the personal mortifications I experienced at the time, I understand her motivations. When Papa passes, Longbourn reverts to Mr Collins's care. Our mother has done her best to see to our futures."

Jane nodded her agreement. "Other than Lydia's joining, our family has exceeded expectations."

Elizabeth smiled knowingly. "That does not mean, however, that any of us would be comfortable entertaining our mother on a permanent basis. Our parents are set in their ways. There cannot be two mistresses of the same house. Therefore, I have asked Mr Darcy to invest in a small cottage close to Meryton, which my husband will make available to Mama upon our father's passing. She might keep Mr and Mrs Hill if she likes."

"That is an excellent idea. I shall speak to Charles about setting aside an annual sum for our mother's expenses. If nothing else, our mother knows how to practice economy. She has shown a real knack for entertaining with limited funds. A place of her own to live out her days with dignity and not having to depend upon Mr Collins for her support is a true act of generosity. It is a great kindness that Mr Darcy offers."

Elizabeth placed her teacup on a low table. "You should enjoy your time in the Scottish countryside without thought to our mother's plight. You should concentrate on recovery from Jackson's delivery, and you, dear sister, deserve time with your family. Mayhap, we anticipate only the worst and will receive the best. I suspect it is Papa's turn to experience our mother's ministrations," Elizabeth said teasingly. "I believe Mama just might badger him enough to convince him to take a place in London."

Jane's eyes widened in mock horror. "Oh, poor Papa. Our mother shall invade his study and inundate his days and nights with the latest gossip!"

"Our father has neglected his wife for too long," Elizabeth observed. "But we shall face that possibility when it occurs. For now, I want to hold Cassandra and young Charles and consider all the milestones Bennet has yet to achieve."

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Edward Fitzwilliam stared out over the English Channel. Finally having received his orders yesterday, he had boarded the ship some five hours earlier. Actually, he should have departed the Continent a fortnight prior, but he had refused to leave his duties until he was assured of Captain Roman Southland's recovery. His aide had suffered a severe wound to his left forearm, one that had resulted in the captain losing part of his arm.

"At least, Roman will never have to face the battlefield again," Edward told himself. Southland had sustained his injury when he had stepped between Edward and an advancing French cavalryman. Bonaparte's devotee had brought his sword down with a vengeance and had ripped away part of Southland's muscle and bone.

"How do I express my gratitude?" he had told the man as he sat beside Southland's bed in a makeshift hospital. "You have saved my life on two different continents."

The captain rolled his eyes upward to stare at the draped bedding. "I promised Mrs Fitzwilliam that I would see you safely returned to Derbyshire."

"And I promised my cousin Anne the same for you to Kent." Men did not speak of their fears, but Edward recognized his aide's angst. "Would you care to tell me what bothers you?" he said privately.

A long silence followed before the captain's eyes caught his in a steady stare. "Will Anne think she has received the short end of our agreement? I know nothing of the aristocracy. Now, I am less than a man."

Edward swallowed hard. If not for Southland, he could be maimed worse than his aide. Or he could be among the thousands lying in shallow graves surrounding a Belgium forest. He had wondered if Georgiana would turn from him if he had suffered Southland's injury. Somehow, he did not think it possible. *His* Georgiana, on first glance, appeared fragile and delicate, but he had

learned otherwise. She possessed a will and a resolve of granite. She would welcome him home with open arms. And so would Anne with the captain.

Edward leaned forward to press his point. "You, Sir, are more man—even with one arm—than a pack of fop-heavy toffs. You are what my cousin needs. Anne requires a man who is not afraid of adversity. A man who has an honest regard for her well-being. A man who will not judge her. She carries your child, Roman. You will be a father, and your children will not care that you lost your left hand in this crazy war. They will care only that you scoop them up with your right and hold them tightly on your lap. You have given Anne a reason for hope. She has a husband and a child on the way and a better understanding with her mother. You have given Mrs Southland a family—something she has not known since her childhood under Sir Lewis's care."

With scarcely any private fortune of which to speak, Southland had wooed a vulnerable Anne De Bourgh, but not so out of malice. The captain had envisioned a connection to the De Bourgh family long before the couple had struck up an acquaintance during last December's festive days. The circles in which they moved so distinct that one would think their joining an impossibility. In fact, Edward had at one time discouraged Southland's attentions. And although Anne possessed a temper remarkably easy and indolent, upon meeting Southland, his cousin had taken it upon herself to marry, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family by fixing on a Lieutenant of the Cavalry, without education, fortune, or connections; she did it very thoroughly by being purposely caught in a compromising kiss by her mother, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, his family's paragon of propriety. Within weeks, his once spinster cousin had become a happily married woman. Now, with child, Anne had achieved her dreams when she married Captain Roman Southland.

"Do you honestly believe so, Sir? Anne is your family; you know her better than I. If you want to offer me a debt of gratitude, tell me true of how Anne will react to my injury."

"I speak plainly, Roman. Anne has her faults, but her kind heart is not one of them. My cousin will not disappoint you. She will welcome the hero that you are."

Again a long silence stretched between them. Finally, Southland nodded his agreement. "Then I will return to Rosings Park and make my wife thankful she has chosen me."

Edward laughed lightly. "Anne has no idea how lucky she is to have such a man in her life. When next I see her, I will sing your praises." Edward leaned closer to whisper. "Go home, Roman. Take your wife to bed and show her the height of your regard. Make lots of babies and enjoy your life."

Southland's eyes danced with mischief. "And you, too, Sir. You have a beautiful wife. Join Mrs Fitzwilliam in Derbyshire and make a few babies of your own."

"I am not certain that Mrs Fitzwilliam is in Derbyshire. A letter found me yesterday. My wife planned to open the Fitzwilliam property outside of Galloway. We have never had our wedding trip, after all. When I received my orders, Georgiana insisted on our advancing the nuptials. We wed on Monday, and I departed on Thursday. I have known my wife less than two and seventy hours." Edward winked at the man. "When I reach England, I will first determine whether Mrs Fitzwilliam is in Derbyshire or Scotland. Then I will seek her out immediately. I am ready to know my wife fully. I plan to have her in my bed for, at least, a fortnight."

Southland chuckled. "I have never heard you sound happier, Sir. More satisfied than I could imagine."

Edward looked off as if to see something his aide could not. "A dozen years, Southland. That is what I have spent in service to my country. It is all I have known. Now, I will embark on

a new life—that of a country gentleman, and Georgiana will wash away the dirt and the blood buried in my soul.”

“If anyone can, Sir, it is Mrs Fitzwilliam.”

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“Should we be sendin’ notice to the lady’s family in Derbyshire?” the caretaker asked.

“Didnae see where we be havin’ another choice.” The housekeeper recovered the furniture in the main parlor with dustsheets. “They be not happy, but I be tellin’ the gel repeatedly that she cudnae be traipsin’ about the countryside alone.”

The man lifted the chair and carried it across the room to place it with the others. “Then ye see to it today?”

“I will tell the lady’s husband that his bride be dead.”

Chapter 2

“Pardon me, Mrs Darcy.” The Pemberley butler had interrupted Elizabeth and Jane’s afternoon with the latest fashion plates. “There is a gentleman wishing to speak to Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth looked up with a frown. She and Jane had spent the morning considering ways to adapt the too frilly gown Mrs Bennet had chosen for Kitty’s joining to a more stylish affair. Poor Kitty had pleaded with them to intercede, and they had agreed upon seeing Kitty’s rendering of the “odious” garment. “Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley shall not return for, at least, an hour.” She noted the servant’s unease. “Should I speak to the gentleman while he waits for Mr Darcy?”

The butler’s face relayed his approval. “I explained to the gentleman that Mr Darcy was not available. He then asked of you, Ma’am.”

Elizabeth appreciated the protective nature of Darcy’s servants. “Does the gentleman have a name, Mr Nathan?”

“A Mr Matthew Joseph, Ma’am.”

Elizabeth was out of her seat immediately. “Matthew Joseph? Conduct the gentleman to the main drawing room, Mr Nathan. I shall be there in a brief moment.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Matthew Joseph? The man whose child you delivered?”

Elizabeth turned to the door. “Come, Jane. I wish to extend your acquaintance to Mr Joseph.” Elizabeth raced through Pemberley’s halls to enter the drawing room on a rush. “Matthew,” she called as she extended her hands to him and ignored the obligatory curtsy. “Please tell me your visit does not bring ill news.”

The young man smiled at her. “Nothing ill, Mrs Darcy.” He caught her hands and brought one of them to his lips. “Mary and young William thrive.” He took a leisurely look at her. “You appear well, Mrs Darcy. Such news will please my wife.”

Elizabeth looked up to see Jane’s entrance. “We have much of which to speak, but, first, permit me to make you known to my eldest sister. Jane, may I present my dear friend, Mr Joseph. Matthew, my sister, Mrs Bingley.”

“It is my honor, Ma’am.” Joseph bowed in greeting. “Mrs Darcy has spoken so kindly of you that I must claim a prior acquaintance.”

Jane smiled easily. “My sister has a tendency to exaggerate.”

Elizabeth snorted. Her sister’s “serious innocence” always brought a touch of laughter. “Just as I told you, Mr Joseph. Mrs Bingley speaks the truth even if she destroys my ego in the same breath.” She motioned him toward a cluster of chairs. “Come join us. I would hear of young William and of Mary.” Elizabeth nodded to the butler. “Mr Nathan, please see to refreshments, and inform Mr Darcy of Mr Joseph’s visit upon my husband’s return.”

The butler made an efficient exit. When they were settled, Elizabeth asked, “What brings you to Derbyshire, Mr Joseph?”

“Mary and I are removing to Newcastle. My mother’s illness tarried longer than expected, and I have given up my living in Stoke upon Trent. I have accepted a position in Mr Parnell’s firm.”

Elizabeth covered her surprise. “Oh, Matthew, I am grieved to hear it. You took such pride in your calling.”

The man acknowledged her words with a simple nod of his head. “My first calling is to my family. Besides Mary and William, I have two sisters, who require my guidance.”

“I suspect that our dear Mary has declared that God holds a different plan for you,” Elizabeth said.

Joseph sighed deeply. “You understand my wife’s nature. The forever romantic. The complete optimist. Personally, I cannot imagine how my writing shipping orders will impact people’s lives, but Mary continues to say that God provides us with what we need when we need it.”

“I suppose it might be what one shipped, Mr Joseph,” Jane observed. “I imagine the world could live without Oriental silks or Egyptian artifacts, but shipments of corn or coal changes how we live. Your influence may be stronger than you believe.”

Joseph reluctantly agreed. “Your sister, Mrs Darcy, should be related to my Mary. They are cut from the same cloth.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “It is quite likely, Mr Joseph. Especially in hindsight. I see my immediate affinity for Mrs Joseph’s company as a desire for Mrs Bingley’s closeness.”

Mr Nathan returned with the refreshments. Joseph accepted the tea before saying, “Pemberley is certainly everything I have heard it to be.” His eyes took in the room’s grandeur. “Mr Darcy has a great legacy to leave his son.”

“My husband works tirelessly to secure Bennet’s future,” Elizabeth observed.

Joseph cleared his throat. “I have no doubt of Mr Darcy’s business aplomb. But speaking of your son, I hope you will allow me the pleasure of young Bennet’s acquaintance. If I report to Mary that I was at Pemberley and did not see Mr Darcy’s son, my wife will take me to task.”

Jane said, “I shall bring Bennet down, Lizzy. Enjoy Mr Joseph’s company.”

“Thank you, Jane.” Elizabeth motioned a maid to the room before returning her attentions to the man. She said brightly, “I give you full reign to brag on young William. I wish to know it all.”

Joseph laughed lightly. “You mistake me for Mrs Joseph,” he teased but immediately began a litany of his son’s accomplishments.

“That is delightful,” Elizabeth said. “I feared William would suffer from his early appearance in the world.”

“Mary says he is still a bit behind for children his age, but my son has steadily gained weight and appears quite hardy.”

Cradling the cup in her hands, Elizabeth sipped her tea. “And Mary is truly well?”

“My wife oversees the packing of our belongings. Her father will see to the transportation of our property to my parents’ home.”

“Mary is in Staffordshire? Why did you not say so before? She must stop at Pemberley on her return to Newcastle. My family arrives tomorrow for my sister Kitty’s wedding, but I would be so pleased to have you and Mary join us. Please allow me to send a Pemberley footman to escort her and William to Derbyshire.”

Joseph informed her, “My sister Ruth travels with Mary.”

“That is of no consequence. There is more than enough room at Pemberley to house your sister along with Mary and William,” she assured.

Joseph smiled widely. “It would please Mary to have your company again, Mrs Darcy, and I do have business to conduct in Father Parnell’s name with your husband.”

“Who has business with me?” Darcy called as he strode into the room, his hand outstretched to Mr Joseph. His smile said how pleased he was to entertain Matthew Joseph under Pemberley’s roof.

Joseph scrambled to his feet to accept Darcy's hand. "Mr Darcy, I apologize for not sending notice of my visit."

Darcy slipped his arm about Elizabeth's waist. "As I am certain that your appearance has brightened Mrs Darcy's day, I hold no objections." Darcy gestured to the chairs. "Please let us sit."

"Mr Joseph has joined Mr Parnell's firm," Elizabeth shared.

Darcy nodded his understanding. "Parnell informed me of his desire for you to join him. However, I was unaware of your acceptance."

"Mary desired William's knowing his grandfather, and my sisters required my assistance."

Darcy said nothing. He recognized Joseph's sense of honor. Although the man preferred to follow God's orders, Joseph would abandon his living in Stoke upon Trent to meet his family obligations. Darcy respected such devotion.

"I have asked Mr Joseph to join us for several days, and I would seek your permission to send someone to escort Mary and Mr Joseph's sister to Pemberley. Mrs Joseph arranges their removal to Northumberland."

"Again, I hold no objection. Send Jasper. He is familiar with Mrs Joseph."

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam," she said softly.

"I do have business to discuss, Mr Darcy. Father Parnell has entrusted me with a venture in which he would have your involvement."

Darcy's eyebrow rose in curiosity. "Really? I had thought my business with Parnell finished with our last shipment out of Hull."

"It is a new rail opportunity," Joseph shared.

Darcy noted Jane's entrance as his wife said, "Yet, before you gentlemen sequester yourselves in Mr Darcy's study, Mrs Bingley has returned with Bennet. I expect you to rain praise upon the Pemberley heir's head, Mr Joseph," she teased. Darcy sat straighter to accept his bundled son from Jane Bingley. The boy stretched and yawned as he settled the child on his lap. "As one may observe, Mr Darcy has a calming effect on Bennet's disposition." Elizabeth smiled broadly at him. "However, my husband must often compete with my father for the privilege of reading to the boy in the evening."

Joseph sported a wry smile. "If I recall, you claimed your husband's voice brought you peace, Mrs Darcy."

"So it does," she agreed.

Darcy turned the sleepy child to where Mr Joseph might admire the boy's countenance. "What color are his eyes?" Joseph asked as he lightly touched the boy's cheek with his fingertip.

"At the moment, they are still blue, but Mr Darcy believes they shall be green," Elizabeth said softly.

Darcy's smile turned up his mouth's corners. "More hazel than emerald. Not as pronounced as Mrs Darcy's."

Joseph sat back in the chair. "Your son favors the Darcys in his facial features," the man observed. Silence filled the room for several moments as each adult admired the child's countenance. "Would you object to my offering a prayer for Bennet's well being?" Joseph said quietly.

Elizabeth quickly said, "Certainly not."

"Eternal God," Joseph began, "to our children giveth thou mercy. Protect them from harm. Nourish their bodies. Allow them to see the strength of your hand. Grant them the truth of

your words. Brighten their hearts that they may ever reflect your glory. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” Darcy and Elizabeth repeated together.

“Thank you, Mr Joseph,” Darcy said solemnly.

Elizabeth rose and took the child from Darcy’s arms. “I shall leave you gentlemen to your business. If you will give Mr Darcy the directions, I shall send Jasper on his way to Staffordshire.” She gave both men a brief curtsy. “I shall see you at supper. I am most anxious for you to become acquainted with my father and with Mr Bingley.”

* * *

“Parnell wishes to finance the Duke of Portland’s public venture?” Darcy asked as he surveyed the maps resting on a broad table near a bank of windows. “Where is Portland in these negotiations?” he continued.

“An Act of Parliament authorized the railway in 1808. It began as a fifteen-kilometer, double track gauge, horse-drawn wagon way. It uses cast iron plate rails with an inner flange.”

“And this is the line between Kilmarnock and Troon Harbor?” Darcy traced the route on the map with his finger.

Joseph pointed to key cities on the adjoining drawings. “Father Parnell believes we could easily connect Glasgow to Carlisle or even all the way to London.”

Darcy let out a low whistle. “It would change the face of both Scotland and England, but I do not imagine it would come easily. It would take major innovations. My previous knowledge of Portland’s lines says that the duke used it purely for carrying coal from the Kilmarnock pits to Troon Harbor on the Ayrshire coast.” Darcy could not remove his eyes from the geographic renderings. “What does Parnell hope to accomplish with this venture?”

“Mary’s father has suggested that if the line could strictly limit the number of trader wagons it permitted to use the line, we could control the flow of supplies.”

Darcy eyed Joseph carefully. The man grimaced when he explained the manipulations of his wife’s father. Joseph’s honest nature made him question the plan. “Parnell visualizes a monopoly?” Darcy asked cautiously. “I would have no qualms in blocking our competitors. If I have financed the line’s development, I should reap the rewards. However, if Parnell plans to limit supplies to drive up prices, I will not participate. I refuse to create a legacy for my heirs earned with my cottagers’ broken backs.”

Joseph expelled a deep sigh. “Thank you, Mr Darcy. You have given a voice to my thoughts. I admire Edgar Parnell for his business sense, and I appreciate his creating a position for me in the firm he built from the floor up, but I question my ability to follow through on Father Parnell’s vision.”

Darcy purposely refused to look at Joseph. “Who says you must parrot Parnell’s words? It has been my experience that people respond best to those who treat them with dignity and respect. Instead of fighting Parnell or begrudgingly executing the man’s orders, why do you not take Parnell’s tasks and make them your own? Likely, Mary will inherit her father’s many business establishments, which means they will eventually fall to you. You must decide what face those businesses will present to the public. You can change small things, giving your name to many of the negotiations. Changing one element affects other parts of the contract.”

After a long silence, Joseph said softly, “You have given me much to consider, Mr Darcy. I will pray for guidance.”

Darcy smiled knowingly. "Just do not forget that God often answers prayers without fanfare or divine intervention. Sometimes, guidance presents itself in an unsuspecting manner." Darcy gestured to the drawings. "So, what part does Parnell expect me to play in this venture? I mean, besides the financial obligations."

Joseph set his shoulders to the task. "Although this transaction is all speculation at the moment, Father Parnell would like to anticipate the direction the line will take and to develop businesses to supply the rail's completion, as well as to sustain its growth."

Darcy's mouth set in a firm line. "This is not something I would take lightly. I need time to examine the documents you have brought to my attention. Plus, I would seek the counsel of my friend, Mr Bingley. This could be a moment of genius or of folly. I will not gamble away Bennet's heritage. *Speculation* is not a game I practice."

* * *

"I am not certain that I approve, Fitzwilliam." Elizabeth placed her long tresses in a soft plait.

"Mr Bingley and I have discussed it. If I choose to examine the area personally, it should be now before the weather changes. Summer does not tarry in Scotland's southern uplands."

"But you would be from Pemberley for weeks," she protested.

Darcy came to sit behind her. They often held conversations as such. She at her dressing table. He sitting on the trunk at her bed's end. Speaking to each other's reflections in her dressing mirror. "I would not wish to be parted from you or from Bennet for more than a few minutes, let alone days or weeks, but this is a prime investment, one which could guarantee Bennet's financial security. It would be foolish to ignore the opportunity; yet, before I invest heavily in this scheme, I would wish to possess all the answers to my questions. My initial dealings with Parnell tell me the man can be ruthless in business matters, and I would not finance his schemes. I would, however, not turn my back on an excellent opportunity."

Elizabeth looked closer at him. "What does Mr Joseph say?"

Darcy smiled at her. "I should have known that you would recognize the source of my qualms. Joseph and his wife's father hold different approaches," he explained.

"I see," Elizabeth said slowly. "Mr Joseph possesses some questions of his own."

"None that he has voiced," Darcy shared. "However, I have listened carefully to what Mr Joseph does not say. I also asked Bingley to hear the man's proposal, and Charles agrees: Joseph is not totally sold on this transaction."

Elizabeth came to sit beside him. "Is Mr Joseph afraid that Mr Parnell offers a false face or is Matthew's objection his dislike for anything but his call to orders?"

"You have aptly summarized the situation. Matthew Joseph has admitted that he often finds Parnell's business maneuverings less than ethical. Is that Joseph's self-righteous pride speaking again? We experienced the man's implacable nature first hand when we sought to bring comfort to Mrs Joseph at Prestwick's Portal. Business dealings are never clearly black or white, and Joseph's character does not easily recognize that shades of gray are sometimes necessary." He caught Elizabeth's hand in his and brought the back of it to his lips. "Exclusive control of the rail line is possible, but does that mean that the area will suffer? Parnell and his business partners could control the price of everything shipped on the line, as well as in and out of the Scottish ports."

Elizabeth snuggled closer. "That huge? I had not suspected it possible."

"I am honored that Parnell has sought me out as a partner in this endeavor; yet, my caution stands tall."

Elizabeth sighed deeply. "Then it is best that you see it through. At least, you may stay with the Bingleys while away from home."

"I have spoke to Mr Bingley about his investing in the venture, as well. Your sister's husband is anxious to learn more of what is planned." He stood to lead her to their shared bed. Darcy rarely slept in his own bed. He had spent a few lonely nights there when Elizabeth first delivered Bennet, but he finally ended up making a pallet on the floor beside her bed because he could not bear their separation. Her steady breathing as she slept brought him an unidentifiable satisfaction. "I suppose that means that you have no desire to join the Bingleys."

Elizabeth caressed his jaw line. "I would enjoy our time together, and you are aware that I shall not accept our parting with any degree of passivity. Yet, it is not likely that our houseguests will depart before you must take your leave. I cannot abandon my family to Pemberley while I trail after my husband. Even if I am tempted to do so." She went on tiptoes to brush her lips over his. "You will need to leave after Kitty and Mr Winkler's ceremony."

"I was considering the day following the nuptials." He untied her wrapper's closure and slipped the silky garment from her shoulders.

"I suppose there is no other alternative," she observed as she slid her arms about Darcy's waist and pulled herself closer. "However, I shall miss your warmth terribly. How shall I sleep without you, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy kissed her temple and then allowed his lips to slide slowly across her cheek and down her neck. "I cannot fathom the emptiness," he murmured.

"At least you may spend a day's ride to Alpin Hall to visit with Georgiana and to assuage your fears." She gasped as his lips sought the soft spot at the base of her neck.

"Perhaps, we could finish this conversation in the morning, Elizabeth." His breathing had become shallow, and his voice was low and sensual.

She placed her hands of either side of his face. Lifting his chin to where she could reach his lips, she pressed her mouth to his.

As always, his wife's passion was Darcy's undoing. He had long ago accepted his inability to resist her. She walked into a room, and Darcy had to be by her side. She was his true north. His hands tugged at the hem of her gown as his tongue teased over hers—a challenge to meet his desires.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth's fingers worked at the loose knot of his belted robe. "Fitzwilliam," she groaned when he deepened the kiss.

Darcy swept her into his arms and dropped her onto the bed. His need to feel skin upon skin controlled him. He divested himself of his clothing and then removed Elizabeth's. His mouth returned to hers. "I never want to leave you," he whispered hoarsely. "You are the breath of my life's blood."

Arching to him, Elizabeth responded to his touch. "A clarion bell," she said as her hand slid down his back. "I cannot resist your call."

"I love you, Lizzy. More than life. You and Bennet are my world."

* * *

Elizabeth looked up to see Mr Winkler strolling along Pemberley's entrance lane. She had brought Bennet out for some air. She held her young son in her lap and playfully teased the child with a colorful rattle. Bennet cooed and actually smiled at her. Elizabeth's heart sighed in contentment. "Mr Winkler," she called, regretting having to share this moment with any other soul besides her child. "Have your parents arrive safely, Sir?"

The man reached where she sat comfortably in the shade. "They have, Mrs Darcy." He bowed politely. "I left them my gig for their usage and hitched a ride with Mr Foxmour. He came to fetch Mavis, Nell, and Tavia from the school."

"How go the studies?" She asked looking up into the sun and shadowing her eyes with her cupped hand.

Winkler leaned over to play the child. "We have eight to ten students each day. Not always the same students, but I am pleased with our progress."

"You are a bit early," she teased good-naturedly. "My Hertfordshire family has not yet arrived."

Winkler blushed. "I hope my presence is not an encumbrance." He straightened as Elizabeth gathered the child to her and stood.

"Of course, not." She laughed lightly. "I fear that Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, and Mr Joseph are sequestered in my husband's study and are dissecting some detestable business matter; however, Mrs Bingley and my father are in the library. I am certain they shall welcome your company." She started toward the house. "Come along. We can wait for Kitty's return together."

In silence, they walked along the carefully groomed path. Finally, Winkler said, "I am too transparent."

"Absolutely not," she declared. "You are simply a man in love. As the object of your affection is my younger sister, I am delighted by the news."

Winkler confessed, "I have missed Miss Bennet desperately."

As she shifted the child in her arms, Elizabeth smiled up at the man. "I had not considered that Kitty was the last of us to be called as such. As Jane and I shared our wedding date, I was only Miss Bennet for a few brief moments. And then Lydia had married before Jane and never knew that title. Mary has abdicated it. Now it is Kitty's."

"Only until Monday," Winkler observed.

"Yes. Yes. Then our Kitty shall be the new Mrs Winker," she taunted. "Shall you be satisfied when that occurs?"

Winkler sighed deeply. "I have waited for our joining for nearly two years. I feel quite foolish when I consider how long I have planned to claim Miss Catherine."

"We are all fools in love."

* * *

Within the hour, the Bennet traveling coach came to rest in the circle before Pemberley. The Darcy household waited on the entrance steps to greet them. "Even though it has only been since Twelfth Night when they were here, I am pleased to see my family again," Elizabeth whispered as Darcy supported her on the steps.

"Let us see if you have the same opinion by this time next week," he murmured. "Your dear family will all want to hold Bennet. Your private time with our son just disappeared."

Elizabeth amusedly acted shocked by the revelation. "Then you must send them all away immediately, Mr Darcy," she taunted. "I refuse to share my child with anyone but his father."

Darcy caught her hand to his side. "I knew you to be a sensible creature, my Dear." His smile widened.

"Too late," Elizabeth shuttered her words. "The footman has let down the step."

"Do not say I did not warn you," he murmured into her hair.

"Mrs Bennet." Her husband supported her step on the coach's ladder. "I am pleased you have arrived safely."

“Thank you, Mr Bennet. It is good to be at Pemberley again. When I was last in Derbyshire, the grounds were covered in ice and snow. It is pleasant to see it at its best.”

“Later, we will tour Mr Darcy’s gardens if you are not too tired from the journey.”

“That would be enjoyable.” The woman turned to her waiting family. “Ah, Jane,” she gushed. “I have so longed to see Jackson.” She held her oldest close. “And Mr Bingley,” she said in welcome. “It is delightful to see you, Sir.”

“You look well, Mother Bennet.” Bingley embraced the woman.

As if overheated, she fanned her face with her handkerchief. “I shall be complete, Mr Bingley, when our Kitty becomes Mrs Winkler. A mother’s task is to see to her daughters’ futures.”

“And you have excelled in your endeavors.”

“Mama.” Elizabeth had waited patiently. She and her mother had rarely found congress, but they had spent an enjoyable Christmastide together, and this had given Elizabeth hope that now that she too was a mother, that they would develop a deeper understanding.

“Ah, Lizzy. Your father writes often of your Bennet.” Elizabeth received a lukewarm hug, very different from the one Jane had experienced only moments earlier, and over her mother’s shoulder, Elizabeth saw the corners of Darcy’s mouth dip downward.

She maneuvered her mother in Mr Darcy’s direction; her husband bowed over her mother’s hand. “I am pleased for your return to Pemberley, Mrs Bennet.” He handed her off to Bingley. “I am certain that, Mr Bingley will show you into the drawing room. Mr Nathan has arranged for refreshments.” Mrs Bennet curtsied and then allowed Bingley to escort her to the house. “No words of thanks,” he grumbled under his breath.

“My mother is likely exhausted from the details of first Mary’s and now Kitty’s wedding,” Elizabeth said from beside him.

“Mrs Bennet found enough energy to greet your sister with enthusiasm,” Darcy countered. “I will not have you snubbed, Lizzy, even by your mother.”

Elizabeth shrugged in exasperation. “I shall have Papa speak to her.” Then with a renewed smile, she greeted her sisters. “Mary.” She caught the girl in a hearty embrace. “Let me look at you. How does marriage life treat you?”

“Mr Grange is quite kind,” Mary said softly.

“I am pleased to hear it.”

Darcy shook the young lawyer’s hand. “Pemberley welcomes you, Mr Grange.”

“Mrs Grange and I thank you for receiving us.” He placed Mary on his arm and followed Jane Bingley into the main foyer.

Elizabeth turned to see Winkler lifting Kitty to the ground. His hands rested on her sister’s waist for a few extra seconds, and their gaze intensified. Elizabeth diverted her eyes and shared a knowing smile with Darcy.

“Miss Bennet, I have waited for this moment for weeks,” Winkler rasped.

Kitty blushed, but she managed to say, “As have I, Mr Winkler.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “Then may we take this homecoming inside?”

Winkler laughed self-consciously. “Of course, Mr Darcy.”

Kitty caught Elizabeth about the waist as they walked toward the open door. “Has Georgiana departed for Scotland already?”

“I am afraid so. Mrs Fitzwilliam regretted missing your wedding, but the Major General was due a fortnight ago. Georgiana wanted the house open and waiting for her husband. She left a personal note and a wedding gift in your room.”

“I appreciate both, but I shall grieve for Mrs Fitzwilliam’s absence,” Kitty declared.

“As shall we all,” Elizabeth assured.