

## An excerpt from “The Pemberley Ball” from *The Road to Pemberley*

“It is a lovely evening, Mr. Darcy,” Caroline Bingley intoned in her best society voice.

Darcy’s attention remained divided, but he managed to respond, “I am sure I will find it a memorable one, Miss Bingley. It has been more than a decade since Pemberley has hosted a formal ball.

To his dismay, the lady lingered, delaying those behind her in the receiving line, so Darcy offered Charles Bingley’s sister a brief smile as he brought her gloved hand to his lips for the obligatory air kiss, and then purposely diverted his eyes to his next guest as Miss Bingley bowed prettily, bestowing Darcy with a glimpse of what she obviously thought to be two of her best assets. Noting Caroline’s stifled sigh of exasperation when he did not respond, Darcy extended his hand to Mr. Hurst and a brief bow to Louisa Hurst, Miss Bingley’s older sister and brother by marriage, forcing Caroline to address her greeting to Darcy’s sister Georgiana before entering the ballroom.

The girl fidgeted with nervousness beside him, and more than once she blushed with their guests’ familiar salutations, but it did not slip Darcy’s notice that a year, nay not a month ago, he would never have convinced Georgiana to join him in the reception line. It was *her* influence on his sister. As Elizabeth Bennet had changed him, she had worked her magic on Georgiana, as well. “Welcome to Pemberley, Mrs. Hurst,” Georgiana’s soft voice gave Darcy comfort.

Darcy wondered where *she* was at this moment—wondered what she was doing—wondered if she thought of him as often as he thought of her—wondered how long it would be before he rested his eyes on her again. Only God understood how he had suffered with their separations. He had once thought of himself as an excellent choice for any young woman. He had not realized, however, how arrogant he must have seemed. Darcy remembered with heart-clutching pain how he had wrestled with his principles—with his sense of responsibility to his name and to his estate. But, the void he experience when he thought of *her*—of never having her—taunted him to distraction. He had been terrifyingly out of control.

At Rosings Park, he had followed her with his eyes, drinking in the pleasure of being in her presence—the pleasure of her voice—of their war of wits. He had envied his cousin for securing Elizabeth’s attentions—actually thought of doing the good colonel bodily harm for daring to look *her* way. Then Darcy had delivered his disastrous proposal. Even now, he fought the urge to clench his fists in anger with himself for his insufferable arrogance and with her for her acerbic response. “*You could not have made the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it.*”

“Gathering wool, Mr. Darcy?” Mr. Steventon, the local magistrate asked as he took his turn in the receiving line.

Darcy laughed lightly at his mental beguilement. “Double checking details, Steventon.”

The gray-haired head moved closer. “No worry, Boy. Even a poorly prepared event at Pemberley would dwarf any other the fashionable *ton* offered, but with Mrs. Reynolds, you have no fear. The lady has impeccable taste.”

Darcy’s eyebrow rose in a silent assessment. “You may not steal away my secret ace, Mr. Steventon,” he good-naturedly challenged.

The man blustered and then laughed obligingly. “The lady has too much loyalty to the Darcy family for anyone to tempt Mrs. Reynolds.”

“I shall convey your compliments to my housekeeper,” Darcy whispered before turning once more to a member of the local gentry.

For the next twenty minutes, Darcy automatically responded to each of his guests, saying and doing all that was necessary, but his mind never fully engaged in the process. All he could truly consider was a divine figure—so light and pleasing—and a pair of dark eyes.

The tuning of instruments signaled the opening set was upon them. “We should join our guests, my Dear.” Darcy caught Georgiana’s elbow to lead her into the ballroom. He assumed his hot house held no more blooms for every vase overflowed with floral bouquets. Their scents melded into a nighttime perfume. Every crystal sparkled with reflected light, and Darcy found excitement, as well as a bit of trepidation, pooling in his stomach.

Georgiana’s hand tightened on his arm. “This is my first official ball,” she whispered, lifting her chin to meet Darcy’s eyes.

“So it is,” he breathed the words close to her ear. “It will be a splendid prelude to your society debut.”

Georgiana smiled deviously, another expression Darcy had not seen grace his sister’s face since she was a child, and his own smile responded with true mirth. “Meaning that I may trip over my hem or make the wrong turn in the quadrille, and no one will criticize.”

“You will find, my Dear, that gentlemen rarely care to dance, so despite any mistake a beautiful woman makes, they will be all politeness.” He cupped her hand with his free one and gave hers a squeeze. “So, if you trip or make the wrong turn, you have nothing to fear. Your smile, freely given, would stun even the harshest critics into silence.”

“I suppose that is more promising than a herd of pimple faced youths,” she observed.

Darcy chuckled softly. “Where does one learn such language?” he teased. “Never mind. I have a clear idea from where it came.” His laughing eyes darkened in happiness. “Who shall claim the first set?”

“The colonel.” As she said the words, their cousin appeared and took Georgiana’s hand to lead her to the floor.

Darcy shot a glance about the room. The people invited for the evening were his friends and family. He had specifically ordered Mrs. Reynolds to include his mother’s titled relatives, his father’s distinguished kin, his close companions from his university days, and the local gentry. These were the people with whom he wished to spend this glorious evening. Dutifully, he claimed his aunt as his partner and assumed the position at the head of the line of dancers.

“You appear to be quite content tonight, Darcy. Your uncle and I are pleased to see it. You have caused His Lordship several moments of concern. My husband takes his responsibilities to your mother’s family quite seriously.”

Darcy set her across from him and bowed properly. “I apologize, Aunt, for any uneasiness His Lordship experienced. I promise that Lord Matlock will have no more circumspection on my part.”

The music began, and a lively country-dance opened the evening’s entertainment. Yet, for Darcy, the minutes crawled by at a snail’s pace, as he counted them off second by second in his head. He schooled his face to not betray the pure satisfaction of the moment. This was Pemberley, and he was its master. He had at age eight and twenty finally ascended to his esteemed father’s position, no longer railing against the responsibility for which he was groomed. Over the past few weeks, he had come to terms with how much of good or evil must be done by him.

As the set ended, Darcy returned his aunt to where Lord Matlock stood discussing business with their cousin Baron Prestwick. He exchanged a few brief pleasantries before saying, “Excuse me, Your Lordship, Baron, but I must secure my partner for the second set.”

“A waltz so early in the evening, Darcy?” Lord Matlock questioned with a bit of amusement. “Are you setting your own standards, my Boy?”

“Yes, Uncle.” Darcy’s smile reached the corners of his eyes. He bowed his exit. With a determination not often found in his step of late, he crossed the dance floor toward the main entrance—a man with a purpose. He paused briefly to whisper to Georgiana, “Wish me well.”

“You know that my heart is always with you, Fitzwilliam,” she murmured.

As he walked on, he heard Caroline call, “Mr. Darcy,” from where she stood with the Hursts. He recognized her agenda, but Caroline Bingley would not be the woman he held in his arms this evening. Therefore, he feigned ignorance of her presence and continued on for his part—finally assured of his heart’s desire. And then she stepped into the entrance arch, the light of a thousand candles framing her in all her glory. Wearing a simple, but alluring gown of forest green silk, Elizabeth glided a few steps forward to meet him. The gown, trimmed in a delicate close-stitched lace, clung to her slim figure, and Darcy thought her the most handsome woman of his acquaintance. The emerald and diamond teardrop necklace complemented the gown’s low décolletage. She actually glowed with contentment. She belonged here. Just as his mother had belonged here.

Instantly aware of her grace and beauty, Darcy extended his arm, and Elizabeth placed her hand in his. With a look of shared secrets, she gifted him with an intimate smile as Darcy brought her hand to his lips. He took note of the silence as an overly interested tableau formed behind him, but Darcy had planned this moment’s every detail, even the silence. He thought he heard Miss Bingley’s sob of recognition, but his heart could not accept anything besides the extreme happiness coursing through his veins. With lamprophony, he spoke, “Ah, there you are, Mrs. Darcy.” He said the words slowly and distinctly, telling the room that Elizabeth Bennet was *his*. “You are just in time for our wedding waltz.”

“I hope I have not kept you waiting, my Husband.” He could hear the joy tripping through the words.

“It is not a ball at Pemberley without an estate mistress, my Dear.” He turned and led Elizabeth to the floor’s center and then nodded to the musicians. With the violin’s first note, he swung Elizabeth into his arms, a place he knew instinctively that she belonged. It was a magical moment. They moved as one—in perfect union, one for which he had waited all his life. They circled the floor one full turn before anyone else joined in.

Darcy edged her closer, pushing the lines of propriety even for a married couple. “Happy, Mrs. Darcy?” he murmured close to her ear.

“Absolutely, Mr. Darcy.” She allowed her fingertip to brush the side of his neck before settling her hand more firmly on his shoulder. “I suppose you are quite proud of yourself,” she taunted. “You have surprised everyone with this display.” They looked deeply into each other’s eyes.

Darcy had never enjoyed the waltz until this moment. His countenance softened, while his gaze intensified. “I am content, Wife. I have secreted you away for a fortnight, and now I must share you with family and friends.” He tightened his hold. “Are you prepared for the onslaught of questions when the music stops?”

“If you believe in me, Mr. Darcy, I shall persevere.” She said the words, but Darcy observed her bottom lip trembled.

He spoke only for her hearing. “I will not leave your side.”

“I am depending upon that fact, Sir.” Elizabeth glanced about her as they swirled through the intricate steps. “Have we done the right thing, Fitzwilliam, by not telling everyone of our nuptials?”

“Some will disagree,” he conceded, “but most will celebrate the fact that I am content, at last.” He was silent for a moment as they danced on through a kaleidoscope of color. “Those in attendance tonight are the ones, I believe, who will welcome your presence in my life. I would not open my doors to possible censure of you as my wife,” he confided. She nodded her head in agreement, but he saw Elizabeth’s confidence waver. Had he made a mistake in exposing her to so many people at once? Had he created a platform for public disdain?

As the music wound to a close, Darcy turned her to where the Matlocks and the colonel stood, but Elizabeth caught his arm to stay him. “Tell me you love me,” she whispered frantically.

Darcy chuckled lightly, as he raised their clasped hands to his lips and kissed the back of hers. “This from the woman who dared to thwart Lady Catherine’s tactics,” he whispered back, his eyes dancing in amusement; but noting her apparent anxiousness, he confessed, “By all the truth with which we have always spoken to one another, you must understand the clarity of my feelings. My greatest happiness lies with you. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my days loving you and raising children with you.”

As if his words washed over her, Elizabeth tilted her head, a hint of a grin touching her mouth. She felt the pride of knowing she was his. “You are either crazy or are the bravest man in the world,” she challenged.

“Although I admit, Sweetheart, that you have nearly driven me insane over the past year, I am neither crazy or brave—simply a man in love. There is no Fitzwilliam Darcy without you.”

Aristocratically, she wound her arm through his and raised her chin in that act of defiance, which he now cherished. “Then it is time I met my new family.”

Darcy’s breath caught in his throat, simple joy taking hold. They came to a halt before his uncle. “Your Lordship,” Darcy bowed properly, “may I present my wife, Elizabeth Bennet Darcy.”